

Subject	Maintaining Quality within the Institution
Module	External Reference: Benchmarking and Quality Agency Audit
Topic	4.2 Benchmarking

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1. Introduction



Benchmarking is one of the most misused words in the quality lexicon. It starts from the premise that in order to gauge the quality of any activity or operation, it makes sense to compare it to similar activities and especially activities already considered to be performing well. This is generally referred to as gaining 'external reference'. The external referent may be another institution or entity, or a part thereof. Perversely, it may also be internal, which is what happens when one faculty compares itself with another (e.g. the student unit evaluation and unit monitoring examples discussed in the previous module) and is called 'internal comparison.'

This topic discusses the difference between information comparison and benchmarking including choosing institutions or sub-areas for information comparison and for benchmarking. This topic also considers the development of standards.

Objectives: Benchmarking

Upon completion of this topic, you should be able to

- identify the difference between information comparison and benchmarking
- list the types of benchmarking

2. Benchmarking

The simplest way to compare an activity (or an institution) with others is to obtain information that is readily available and in the public domain. The key performance indicator information illustrated in the previous module is a good example of this at institutional level. At activity level, information is regularly shared and published by a number of support services although this is not normally in the public domain. In Australia, for example, various support service associations produce 'benchmarks' of performance for their contributing members over a large number of variables (e.g. TEFMA, Tertiary Education Facilities Management Association; CAUL, Council of Australian University Librarians; CAUDIT, Council of Australian University Directors of Information Technology). As with nearly all information, it is important to note that there are contextual issues meaning that it is not simply a matter of presenting the information in order to see which institution or activity is performing best. For

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example, it is no simple matter to compare institutions which are: medium-sized, old and inner city; small, regional and mainly distance education; large, international and multi-campus. In each case, the data may need to be interpreted by people knowledgeable in the area.

None of the activities considered thus far constitute 'benchmarking' as properly defined and would be better termed 'information' or 'data' comparison. What separates benchmarking from information comparison is purpose and process. The explicit purpose of benchmarking is improvement and in order for this to be achieved, an explicit process is planned. Information comparison may or may not have an explicit purpose but more often than not it is viewed as an interesting adjunct to reporting, rather than a purposefully planned process explicitly leading towards improvement. In summary, comparison information usually ends with what has been achieved, whereas benchmarking is also fundamentally concerned with how the performance and data has been achieved.

Bogan and English (1994) recognise 4 kinds of benchmarking:

- Internal (between divisions within the same organisation);
- Competitive (with direct competitors);
- Industry (within the same industry but not with a direct competitor);
- Generic (comparing process and practice irrespective of the industry).

Source: Bogan, C E and English, M J (1994) *Benchmarking for Best Practices: Winning Through Innovative Adaption*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

The Quality Cycle discussed in Module 1, Context and Approach, presents a good model for undertaking benchmarking in that benchmarking needs to be carefully planned and implemented; the results evaluated and improvements applied. In terms of evaluation, both quantitative and qualitative information is generally required: quantitative measures to capture performance and demonstrate improvement, qualitative information to describe 'how' processes work and the changes that are required. The process of benchmarking usually demands staff from each institution visiting and getting to know staff of the benchmarking partner. This may lead to long-term relationships and significant and wider opportunities for continuous improvement.

In terms of selecting a benchmarking partner or group, a common practice is to identify an activity within Institution A that needs to be improved and another Institution (B) where it is known that performance is superior in this particular activity. Institution B is then approached to identify an activity in Institution A from which they could learn.

It is probably fair to say that the higher education sector has not systematically taken up benchmarking (i.e. developmental comparison for improvement) to the degree that might be expected. For example, in the Australian context, AUQA observes:

The audit reports show evidence of an emerging sophistication of benchmark initiatives in the sector, although many institutions have not yet fully bedded down their benchmarking strategy. AUQA audits have identified room for improvement in the integration of benchmark strategies with overall quality assurance frameworks. Audits have revealed very little systematic use of external benchmarks to measure and monitor progress and only a few institutions have been commended for this aspect. (p 39) [Benchmarking in Australian Higher Education: A Thematic Analysis of AUQA Audit Reports](#), Occasional Publications Series No: 13.

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3. Discussion

Discussion: Benchmarking

Consider the following key questions regarding benchmarking at your own (or choose one) institution:

- What benchmarking activity has been undertaken (provide an example)?
- Is the activity benchmarking or information comparison?
- What would constitute a valuable benchmarking exercise for the institution? Outline why this would be valuable and briefly sketch out the process.

4. Standards

Standards fall within the domain of external reference. In Australia, standards have assumed a predominant position with the dissolution of the 'fitness for purpose' based Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA), absorbed and replaced by the standards based Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA). While TEQSA has much to do to become active in the sector, its creation signals a significant move in Australian higher education and is being closely watched in other countries.

Instead of 'fitness for purpose' audits based on the unique and variable missions of institutions, TEQSA is a regulatory authority, checking the standards of institutions that receive public support (universities and private providers) according to standards determined by a Standards Board within TEQSA but reporting directly to the Minister responsible for the sector. In particular, standards will be developed as follows:

- Provider Standards (including Threshold Standards that have to be met in the areas of: Registration, Provider Category and Course Accreditation);
- Qualification Standards;
- Teaching and Learning Standards;
- Research Standards;
- Information Standards;
- Others (to be developed).

Source: <http://www.deewr.gov.au/HigherEducation/Policy/teqsa/Pages/default.aspx>

Each standard will be further elaborated, for example Provider Standards in terms of the following areas:

- Provider standing;
- Financial viability and safeguards;
- Corporate and academic governance;
- Primacy of academic quality and integrity;
- Management and human resources;
- Responsibilities to students;
- Physical and electronic resources and infrastructure.

Perhaps the most difficult standard to define will be that for Teaching and Learning. Although a start has been made on this with a paper published by TEQSA titled: [*Developing a framework for teaching and learning standards in Australian higher education and the role of TEQSA.*](#)

The advent of 'standards' probably foretells an ongoing discussion similar to the one that occurred when the 'quality' discourse arrived in higher education; there is certainly some variation in definition and meaning attached to the word 'standard.' For example, AUQA (2009) defines an academic achievement standard as:

- an agreed specification or other criterion,

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- used as a rule, guideline or definition,
- of a level of performance or achievement.

This definition has two key features. First, a standard refers to a level that is preset and fixed. After that, it remains stable under use unless there are good reasons for resetting it. In higher education this would mean that the standards are not reset for each cohort of students, or for each assessment task. An academic standard is therefore a big-picture concept that stands somewhat apart from particular assessment tasks and student responses. Second, agreement on the specification must be by authority, custom, or consensus, as standards are not private matters dependent on individuals but collegial understandings shared among academics and other stakeholders (p 8).

Source: Australian Universities Quality Agency 2009 Setting and Monitoring Academic Standards for Australian Higher Education: A Discussion Paper
<http://www.auqa.edu.au/qualityenhancement/academicstandards/>

The paper goes on to propose an elaborate process for the development of statements of generic skills and discipline-specific academic attainment requiring extensive review, analysis, modelling, consultation, documentation, new techniques and practices for the measurement of student learning.

For AUQA's replacement TEQSA, the discussion paper on Teaching and Learning Standards identified above offers the following:

- *those dimensions of curriculum, teaching, learner support and assessment that establish the pre-conditions for the achievement of learning and educational outcomes fit for the awarding of a higher education qualification*
- *the explicit levels of attainment required of and achieved by students and graduates, individually and collectively, in defined areas of knowledge and skills. (p 3)*

An alternative view is provided by Harris and Webb (2010) as follows:

*In each area, one could make explicit the **value** underpinning the activity; the **approach** to be adopted; the **standard** which should be attained and the **standard measurement**. To illustrate this, we will take the example of the evaluation of teaching. In defining good practice in this area, an EQA (External Quality Agency) would be able to articulate certain values that underpin the activity such as, for example, that those experiencing an activity are uniquely placed to give comment/feedback on aspects of the activity. In undertaking an institutional evaluation, the EQA could assess the degree to which such values are embedded within an institution's approach (e.g. in a policy which might state that there should be a variety of inputs to the evaluation of teaching, including from students). The standard could then relate to the instruments used to gather student evaluation of teaching, ensuring they reflect appropriate levels of validity and reliability; that results are monitored through documented processes and required improvements identified; and that actual improvements are monitored and reported. In determining the standard measurement and range of performance, it could be stated that on an item assessing 'overall quality' of a unit using a five point Likert scale, units with a mean satisfaction rating below 3 for two consecutive deliveries should be designated for improvement action and improvements monitored over the following two delivery periods. Using this approach, an EQA's assessments of institutional performance would be based on explicit shared values about key indicators of the institutional quality management system and its outcomes within an agreed range of accepted performance.*

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Source: Harris, R. and Webb, G (2010) Auditors' perspectives on Quality in Higher Education. In Leadership and Management of Quality in Higher Education S. Nair, L. Webster & P. Mertova eds Chapter 7, 109-119. Cambridge UK: Woodhead Publishing Ltd

Whatever the outcome of the debate on standards, if the quality discourse generally moves from 'fitness for purpose' auditing to 'standards' evaluation, it will significantly change the conception of external quality assurance that has been in place in many countries over the last 20 years. In particular, because of a new ability to audit against pre-determined standards, it is likely that audit may develop in the direction of desktop compliance checking with the more discursive (interview) based aspects of quality audit reserved for sector wide 'theme' audits, once again with a 'standard' developed as the starting point.

5. Summary

This topic covered the following main points:

- Comparison information usually ends with what has been achieved, whereas benchmarking is also fundamentally concerned with how the performance and data has been achieved.
- Whatever the outcome of the debate on standards, if the quality discourse generally moves from 'fitness for purpose' auditing to 'standards' evaluation, it will significantly change the conception of external quality assurance that has been in place in many countries over the last 20 years. In particular, because of a new ability to audit against pre-determined standards, it is likely that audit may develop in the direction of desktop compliance checking with the more discursive (interview) based aspects of quality audit reserved for sector wide 'theme' audits, once again with a 'standard' developed as the starting point.