

External Referencing: Program Benchmarking - Procedures



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1. Purpose of procedures

1.1 Benchmarking of programs is undertaken as a quality assurance and improvement initiative to compare the University's programs against equivalent programs at other institutions. The benchmarking process provides insight into the standard and performance of the University's programs when compared with equivalent programs or discipline standards across the sector and provides an evidence base to guide and focus improvement initiatives. Program benchmarking is a requirement of the *Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2015*.

1.2 These procedure provides a method for program benchmarking, including via desktop benchmarking and that conducted in partnership with another institution.

2. Scope and application

2.1 These procedures apply to all undergraduate and postgraduate coursework programs and courses, with a particular focus on program and course design, assessment methods and student performance data.

2.2 These procedures do not apply to national benchmarking activity undertaken by the Strategic Information and Analysis Unit.

3. Definitions

Please refer to the University's Glossary of Terms for policies and procedures. Terms and definitions identified below are specific to these procedures and are critical to its effectiveness:

Benchmarking: a quality process used to evaluate performance by comparing institutional practices to identified good practices across the sector. Benchmarking can be undertaken collaboratively with another department or institution, as a desktop exercise using publicly available information about another organisation or against external standards.

4. Principles

4.1 The following principles apply in the conduct of Benchmarking activities:

(a) Effective

Enables the benchmarking of university activities against external reference points or other higher education providers. Supports both the quality enhancement and quality assurance of programs, courses and university operations.

(b) Efficient and sustainable

Provides a streamlined, efficient and sustainable process for Benchmarking that can be operationalised and used routinely by USC and partner institutions.

(c) Transparent

Engages multiple perspectives and facilitates critical discussion between USC staff and with staff from other institutions.

(d) Capacity building

Contributes to the professional development of participating staff and the formation of networks and contacts with staff from other institutions.

5. The Benchmarking Process

5.1 The purpose of the benchmarking activity is to assess the standard and performance of a program, by comparing the program against an equivalent program at another university, and/or against national discipline data/standards (where this is available at sufficient granularity), and to use this information to guide improvements where appropriate.

5.2 Benchmarking can be undertaken collaboratively with a partner university, and/or against national data as a desktop benchmarking exercise.

5.3 A schedule for program benchmarking will be developed by the Quality Office for approval by the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic).

APPROVAL AUTHORITY

Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic)

RESPONSIBLE EXECUTIVE MEMBER

Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic)

DESIGNATED OFFICER

Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic)

FIRST APPROVED

25 June 2019

LAST AMENDED

15 July 2021

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18 June 2024

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Active

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5.4 The steps below refer to the process for collaborative benchmarking. The same process should also be followed for desktop benchmarking, except that the steps relating to communication with a partner should be omitted.

5.4 Phase 1: Concept and Scope

5.4.1 All coursework programs must benchmark:

- (a) progression rates, attrition rates and completion times/rates, including where applicable rates for different campuses and mode of delivery; and
- (b) expected program learning outcomes (except those programs which have undertaken such benchmarking over the previous five years as part of the professional accreditation process).

5.4.2 It is recommended that coursework programs also benchmark graduate outcome data. Schools may also elect to benchmark additional aspects of the program where this would be beneficial.

5.4.3 During this phase, the first step is to identify and document:

- (a) the leader for the benchmarking project;
- (b) whether any additional performance indicators will be benchmarked;
- (c) the possible partner(s) for collaborative benchmarking;
- (d) the relevant discipline standards and/or national data to be used for desktop benchmarking; and
- (e) the proposed timeframe for the project.

5.4.4 Programs which are professionally accredited may use the relevant discipline standards to benchmark expected program learning outcomes.

5.4.5 To encourage collective buy-in for the project, ensure that key staff who teach into the program are consulted in discussions as part of Phase 1. The Quality Office can also provide guidance, advice and templates for use in the project.

5.4.6 Identify potential benchmarking partners by considering:

- (a) those institutions which are most comparable to this University in terms of size, profile, and any other relevant factors; and
- (b) those institutions which are perceived as having good practices or which achieve at a higher level in the area identified for benchmarking

5.4.7 Obtain approval from the Head of School or relevant line manager to begin informal discussions with contacts from potential partner organisations.

5.4.8 Establish a shared commitment and understanding of the benchmarking goals with the proposed partner(s).

5.5 Phase 2: Plan and Design

5.5.1 In this phase, agreement is reached with the partner(s) regarding:

- (a) the inclusion and wording of any additional performance indicators to be benchmarked;
- (b) the timeframe for completion of the project, with a date for holding the peer review workshop;
- (c) whether the Peer Review Portal will be used to facilitate the project;
- (d) use of a Memorandum of Understanding to be signed by all partner organisations (where student performance data is shared);
- (e) the data or information required by each organisation;
- (f) a process for self-review at each organisation to review the data;
- (g) the type of scale to be used for assessing each performance indicator (see 5.3.2) below); and
- (h) holding of a peer review workshop to discuss the findings with the partner organisation(s).

5.5.2 Advise the Quality Office on a regular basis of progress relating to the benchmarking project.

5.3 Self-review

5.3.1 Liaise with the Academic Support Unit to obtain data relating to progression rates, attrition rates and completion times/rates for the program, including where applicable rates for different campuses and mode of delivery.

5.3.2 Make an assessment of achievement against each performance indicator. This could be undertaken using:

- (a) a four-point scale, with achievement levels of: Yes, Yes but, No but, No; or
- (b) a five-point scale, with achievement levels of: Not at all, Somewhat, Adequately, Very well, Completely.

5.3.3 Identify everything that contributes to the current performance outcomes (whether positive, negative or neutral in their impact).

5.4 Phase 4: Peer review

5.4.1 Hold a peer review workshop with the partner organisation(s) to compare processes and outcomes, with the aim of identifying:

- (a) whether the trends for attrition, progression and completion times/rates for the program are consistent with those of the partner organisation(s), including where applicable rates for different campuses and mode of delivery;
- (b) whether the expected learning outcomes for the program are consistent with the level and field of education of the qualifications awarded;
- (c) whether and how each partner uses data on student performance to inform remedial action where required, in relation to admission criteria and/or approaches to program design, teaching, supervision, learning and/or academic support;
- (d) areas of good practice which contribute to the above;
- (e) weaknesses and gaps in performance or process;
- (f) reasons for differences between the partners; and
- (g) areas for sharing and collaboration.

5.4.2 Ensure that:

- (a) each member of the project team has prior permission to use and share information from their institution; and
- (b) other institutions' information is not disclosed beyond the project team

5.4.3 This may be the final stage of the collaborative benchmarking process, with individual institutions taking independent action to develop a report outlining the key findings to their own institutions.

5.4.4 Alternatively, the project team may choose to rate and score each institution against the whole set of indicators and criteria, and to develop a report accordingly.

5.5 Phase 5: Develop report and implement improvements

5.5.1 Develop a brief Benchmarking Report which:

- (a) outlines the process and methods used for the benchmarking project;
- (b) provides an assessment of the program for each performance indicator;
- (c) identifies the priority areas for the program to address – including weaknesses, gaps and areas of strength to build upon;
- (d) includes recommendations for action; and
- (e) does not include any information designated as confidential that was provided by any benchmarking partner.

5.5.2 Develop and implement a brief Action Plan to address each recommendation in the report. The Action Plan must be capable of being implemented in a reasonable timeframe. The Action Plan:

- (a) identifies specific actions, who is responsible for each action and the target dates for completion of each action; and
- (b) should be supported by the benchmarking team and all those who have specific responsibilities within the Plan.

5.5.3 Submit the Benchmarking Report and Action Plan to the Quality Office, which will provide the documents to the Head of School for consideration and approval.

5.5.4 Wherever possible, include the Action Plan or components of the Plan in operational plans for the various areas of the University that have responsibilities for specific actions.

5.6 Phase 6: Evaluate and report progress

5.6.1 Develop a Progress Report within 12 months of the initial report and submit to the Quality Office for consideration and approval by the Head of School.

5.6.2 Evaluate the effectiveness of the benchmarking exercise, including how the process could be improved.

6. Reporting

6.1 The Benchmarking Report, Action Plan and Progress Report will be provided to the Head of School via the Quality Office.

6.2 Program benchmarking reports will also be provided to the School Board for noting and included in the information provided to review panels as part of the program review process.

6.3 An annual report on key themes from the program benchmarking activity will be provided by the Quality Office to the Academic Board for noting.

7. Records management

7.1 Schools are responsible for creating detailed records of all benchmarking undertaken, including the method used, comparators employed, conclusions drawn, and the outcomes or improvements made.

7.2 The Quality Office is responsible for ensuring all records are captured on the relevant program file in the University's records management system, in accordance with the Information Management Framework – Governing Policy.

END

RELATED DOCUMENTS

Assessment: Courses and Coursework Programs - Academic Policy

External Referencing - Academic Policy

External Referencing: Peer Review of Assessment - Procedures

Information Management Framework - Governing Policy

LINKED DOCUMENTS

External Referencing - Academic Policy

RELATED LEGISLATION / STANDARDS

Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2015 (Cth)