Utilising benchmarking to inform decision-making at the institutional level: A research informed process

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Presentation Overview

- Types of benchmarking
- International trends in benchmarking
- 2009-2012 UTAS benchmarking activities
- Lessons learnt
Benchmark: surveying to denote a mark on a survey peg but recently acquired a more general meaning as a reference or criterion against which something can be measured (Jackson, 2011).

Benchmarking ‘first and foremost, [is] a learning process structured so as to enable those engaging in the process to compare their services/activities/products in order to identify their comparative strengths and weaknesses as a basis for self improvement and/or self regulation’ (Jackson & Lund, 2000).

Types: implicit/explicit; independent/collaborative; internal/external; vertical/horizontal; inputs/process/outputs; quantitative/qualitative, self-referencing against standards or expectations (Jackson, 2011).

Managerial, pragmatic tool research process to inform decision making.
International Benchmarking Trends

- **US in early 1990s**: defining benchmarks and benchmarking surveys (Epper, 1999)
- **UK early to mid 1990s**: introduction of benchmarking
- **UK 2000**: subject benchmarking and external examiner process (Epper, 1999)
- **Australia 2000**: Benchmarking: A manual for Australian Universities (Mackinnon, Walker & Davis, 2000)
- **Europe 2000 onwards**: setting performance targets – move from numerical data to a focus on university processes (Swahn, 2004)
- **Australia 2007-2008**: ACODE & Australian Quality Assurance Agency (AUQA) Cycle 2 recommendation: What explicit benchmarking has there been to compare standards?
- **2010 onwards**: benchmarking associated with league tables (Burquel & van Vught, 2010)
- Desktop-review of Cycle 2 AUQA audits (Booth, 2011)
- Types of benchmarking proposed by AUQA auditors:
  - Benchmarking data (e.g. CEQ, GDS, ISB, student load, research performance, international services, finance, equity etc.)
  - Standards-based benchmarking
  - Sector benchmarking
  - Whole-of-institution benchmarking
  - Discipline-specific benchmarking
- 3 stages of benchmarking development:
  1. **Early implementation**: Urgently consider the development and implementation of a benchmarking framework; processes and partnerships
  2. **Further refinement and alignment**: Beginning to develop benchmarking processes and partnerships; but further refinement is required
  3. **Establishment**: Established benchmarking frameworks, processes and partnerships and extensive use of external reference points and benchmarking
2009-2012 UTAS: 7 benchmarking activities:

1. Sector Benchmarking
2. Process and Academic Standards Benchmarking
3. Information Benchmarking
4. Process and Outcomes-based Benchmarking
5. Standards Benchmarking
6. Discipline-Specific Benchmarking
7. International Institutional Research Benchmarking
Benchmarksng Activity 1: Sector Benchmarking

2009- Pilot project with UOW- Academic Transition Support:

- AUQA Cycle 1 Audit recommendation
  - UTAS in 2008: 22,600 students; 3 regional campuses, faculty structure and discipline
  - UOW in 2008: 24,413 students; 5 regional campus, faculty structure and discipline areas
- Sector Benchmarking: occurs when benchmarking partners in the same sector make comparisons either as a whole organisation or an aspect of the organisation (Stella & Woodhouse, 2007)
- Aims of Pilot Project:
  - Develop knowledge and experience in the benchmarking process
  - Compare current processes and practices
  - Identify areas for improvement and areas of best practice
Benchmarking methodology based on ACODE (2007)

**Performance Indicator:** identify key performance areas that would indicate realisation of good practice (ACODE, 2007, p.6)

10 Performance indicators (PI):

1. Aligned plans and policies are in place and implemented
2. Planning and delivery of programs/activities are coordinated
3. Programs/activities are informed by recognised pedagogical principles
4. Processes are in place and used to support students at their point of need
5. Programs/activities are promoted to, accessible to and used by students
6. Programs/activities meet student needs
7. Programs/activities are resourced
8. Professional development and support is available to staff, accessed and informs practice
9. The effectiveness of programs/activities is monitored and evaluated
10. Evaluation of feedback and results is integrated into planning for continuous improvement purposes
Performance Measures: statements that represent progress toward good practice (ACODE, 2007, p.6)

5 point scale
1. Not at all
2. Limited
3. Moderate
4. Considerable
5. Comprehensive

Benchmarked AUSSE (2008) survey

Self-review Faculty/Centre workshops

Institutional self-review workshop to validate at the institutional level

Peer-review workshops
UTAS:

- UTAS is comparable in performance standards with UOW on academic transition support—many examples of good practice
- 11 areas for improvement (UTAS) (resourcing/staff development)
- UTAS rated extremely well when comparing AUSSE results (2008)
- Staff contracts in PASS were short-term (UTAS)

UTAS and UOW:

- Increased understanding of benchmarking
- Lack of evidence
- Challenged with supporting equity groups such as students with English as a second language; students with learning disabilities

Collaborative Actions:

Define role for first-year coordinators; develop a first year transition framework; develop administrative processes for at risk students; comparison of library programs; professional development on first year transition; comparison of International Services

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Assessment Policies and Processes (Jan 2010-Nov 2010):

- UTAS, UOW and Deakin
- Reference Points: ACODE and ALTC Project Teaching Quality Indicators Project (Davies, 2008)

3 Performance Indicators:

- Assessment purposes, processes and expected standards of performance are clearly communicated and supported by timely advice and feedback to students
- Assessment practices and processes are fair, reliable and valid and produce marks and grades that represent the standards achieved by students
- Assessment policies and procedures are developed, implemented, reviewed and improved in accord with policy principles

Performance Measures:

- Ratings changed to encourage conversation between staff – Yes; Yes, but; No, but; No
- Evidence was necessary to support ratings
UTAS, UOW and Deakin used different methodologies

- UTAS’ chief research instrument was an online survey to staff (n=336) which used the benchmarking framework but rephrased into questions for more meaningful responses
- 7 postgraduate students and 1 Research Fellow analysed survey data and validated findings with each Faculty through interviews
- Self-review process by Associate Deans (Learning & Teaching) at institutional level
- Benchmarking of Assessment processes with Academic Senate Chairs

UTAS Findings

- UTAS demonstrated that the implementation of criterion-reference assessment (CRA) was critical in aligning learning outcomes, graduate attributes and assisted in demonstrating student achievement standards
- Associate Deans (L&T) lacked time and resources to drive quality improvement
- 4 factors affected the timely return of feedback- working in an online environment, moderation, large student cohorts, multi-campus sites
- 27 recommendations – Assessment Benchmarking Working Party

Collaboration

Online subject outline templates; best practice case studies on group work; online training manual for assessment; UTAS Graduate Attributes Project; Deakin Faculty Learning and Teaching Funding Model; Postgraduate Research
Institutional information benchmarking exercise (Nov 2010- Jan 2011):

- Inform development of Benchmarking Policy and Procedure
- Survey of UTAS staff perceptions of benchmarking

**Findings:**

- Clarify distinction between benchmarks and benchmarking
- Library, ITR and Support Services strong in benchmarking (functional)
- Benchmarking does not include membership on committees, staff born overseas, visiting scholars, conferences, informal conversations, networking groups

- Information benchmarking informed policy and procedure;
  - Data comparison process and more investigative process
Benchmarking Project on HDR programs (Mar 2011- Mar 2012):

- UOW, Deakin, UTAS
- **Performance Indicators:**
  - Policy and Governance
  - Selection and Admission Processes
  - Student Learning Outcomes
  - Supervision
  - Examination Processes
  - Academic Support-including mentoring and career placement
  - Non-academic support and resourcing
  - Monitoring student performance and feedback data
- **Data comparison:**
  - Student load, post-graduate coursework, HDR EFTSL, staff FTE
Activity 4: Process & Outcomes-based

- **Examples of good practice- All**
  - Comprehensive policy; multiple modes of communication of policies and procedures to staff; orientation and induction processes; annual review processes and examination processes

- **Examples of areas for improvement- All**
  - More systematic use of data for quality improvement; monitoring English language entry requirements; clearer articulation of learning outcomes aligned to AQF; more systematic English language support; HDR student career development

- **Collaboration**
  - Fast track supervision program (Deakin); Head of Postgraduate Studies (UOW) and GRC (UTAS) position descriptions; Brazilian Consortium to build international HDR collaborations

- **External Peer-Review:** Edith Cowan- ALTC HDR BPF
Activities 5 & 6: Standards & Discipline-Specific Benchmarking

- **National Teaching Standards Framework (2012):**
  - Led by Macquarie- Phase 2 of project in testing online version of the TSF (Sachs & Kosman, 2011) ; 12 institutions
  - Complete self-review- institutional methodology; validity of TSF
  - Bachelor of Education (Primary); Faculty of Arts (first year)
  - UTAS framed performance indicators as questions
  - Learnt software methodology for benchmarking/standards

- **ALTC Inter-University Peer Review Moderation Project (2012):**
  - Led by UWS (Krause et al, 2010)
  - UOW, UTAS, Deakin – chosen for strong benchmarking relationship
  - 1st semester, 2012
  - Economics, Journalism, History and Nursing
  - Project ongoing- identification of unit level moderation processes for benchmarking

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HEA Benchmarking Project on Promotions Policies and Processes (2012-2013):

- HEA-funded research project
- Leicester, Newcastle upon Tyne (UK); UOW and UTAS (Aust)
- Aim:
  - To produce resources to guide and improve academic promotion policies and processes; External evaluator, HEA representative; surveys/interviews; promotions data
- **6 Performance Indicators:** Planning and Policy; Leadership and Culture; Decision-Making Structures and Processes; Application Procedures; Training and Support; Outcomes, Evaluation and Review
- Self-Review; Peer-Review Workshop
- Dissemination;
  - Satellite Event- Universities Australia Higher Education Conference 2013
  - Workshop- UK (TBC)
- **Research outcomes focused**
Lesson 1: Benchmarking has to be translated into institutional research

- Identify issue(s) benchmarking is trying to solve (Longden & Yorke, 2009)
- Matrix used in institutional research adapted for benchmarking
Lesson 2: Benchmarking has to become the way things get done at universities (Hossler, Kuh & Olsen, 2001, p. 212)

- Benchmarking is justified by driving operational outcomes that improve processes
- Institutional process for organisational improvement and resourcing

- **UTAS:**
  - Reflected in Strategic and Faculty Plans
  - Establishment of Student Evaluation, Review and Reporting Unit (SERRU)
Lesson 3: A rigorous methodological and theoretical approach is essential

- **9 Phases in Benchmarking Methodology**
  1. Determine areas to benchmark
  2. Identify benchmarking partners
  3. Determine type, and level, of benchmarking
  4. Prepare benchmarking framework and documentation
  5. Design benchmarking process
  6. Implement process
  7. Review results
  8. Communicate and report results and recommendations
  9. Implementation of improvement strategies (Booth, Melano, Sainsbury & Woodley, 2011)

- **Develop theoretical framework from literature (for e.g. Assessment, HEA Promotions Project)**
  - A lack of a theoretical framework for benchmarking distinguishes effective from ineffective efforts (Moriarity & Smallman, 2009)

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Lesson 4: Benchmarking becomes a Community of Practice

- To be successful there has to be bottom-up empowerment (Ellis & Moore, 2006)
- Collaboration and openness (Sciulli, Smith & Ross, 2009)
- Shared conversation and a form of peer development (Leppisaari et al, 2011)
References


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