

# Benchmarking and External Referencing Procedures

## 1. Governing Policy

These procedures outline how the Institution undertakes benchmarking and external referencing in order to assure and evidence the quality of its courses, subjects, teaching and assessment methods, academic integrity, student progress, completions, graduate outcomes, student experience, and institutional performance and practices more generally.

Benchmarking and external referencing provides an insight into the standing and quality of the Institution's offerings, provides an evidence base to drive and focus improvements and offers a framework to the monitoring of student success.

## 2. Scope

These procedures apply to all higher education and non-award courses (i.e. ELICOS, Foundation), and all staff involved in the interim monitoring, evaluation and review of courses, and the continuous improvement of all aspects of the Institution's operations.

## 3. Definitions

*See the Glossary of Terms.*

## 4. Procedures

### Overview

4.1 Benchmarking (through internal and external referencing) is a tool used by the Institution to assure the quality of its courses and subjects, and more generally, to improve performance of processes and operations across the Institution.

4.2 Benchmarking is used to compare aspects of the Institution's performance or operations against both internal comparators (internal referencing) or external comparators (external referencing).

4.3 The Institution undertakes internal benchmarking against any relevant benchmarks, for example reporting on course performance across the year for various courses is against educational key performance indicators (KPIs).

4.4 The Institution undertakes a range of regular and systematic benchmarking and external referencing to measure and evidence the success of its student cohorts against comparable courses of study, including but not limited to:

- a. course design, structure, delivery, learning environment and resources;
- b. the assessment design, methods and grading of students' achievement of learning outcomes for selected subjects within courses;
- c. academic integrity, at course or institutional level;
- d. the analyses of progression rates, attrition rates, completion times and rates and, where applicable, comparing different locations of delivery;
- e. graduate outcomes;
- f. aspects of student experiences, through internal surveys and other tools, that are linked with learning and development outcomes; and
- g. policies, procedures and other operational practices.

4.5 Benchmarking aims to:

- a. identify and monitor standards and performance in order to improve outcomes, processes and practices;
- b. identify areas of good practice;
- c. identify areas for improvement;
- d. report on the results and analysis of benchmarking through the internal governance processes;
- e. create action plans for improvement and track the outcomes of the implemented actions;
- f. identify areas for sharing and collaboration; and

g. mitigate future risks to the quality of the education provided, and to guide and evaluate continuous improvements.

4.6 Benchmarking is undertaken systematically at various intervals including:

1. when a new course is proposed;
2. during course development, design and approval;
3. during interim monitoring and evaluation;
4. during comprehensive course reviews;
5. as part of formulating submissions or responses to professional accreditation bodies,
6. during course re-accreditation processes;
7. when developing or reviewing new policies, procedures and key processes, and the learning environment;
8. when a need is identified to qualitatively measure the Institution's performance.

### **Course quality assurance**

4.7 Benchmarking activity is undertaken systematically throughout the accreditation cycle for continuous review purposes, typically, one core subject and one specialisation subject (if applicable) from each year level of a course per year. The data gathered informs improvements for that year to the subject/course. For example, the improvements might include amendments to subject learning outcomes, assessment weightings, or other elements of the subject outline, etc. The data gathered from the subject reviews are aggregated as data sources for the comprehensive course reviews (CCRs).

4.8 To ensure a systematic approach, there are four phases involved in benchmarking to assure the course quality:

- a. planning and design;
- b. evidence collection and analysis;
- c. reporting recommendations and implementation; and
- d. monitoring and review (closing the loop).

*Stage 1 - planning and design*

4.9 Benchmarking and external referencing activity must be appropriately planned and designed, including:

- a. The development of a Course and Subject Review Plan (Plan) which includes a course benchmarking and external referencing plans by Dean/Associate Dean to cover a five-year cycle period, which culminates in the CCR, reaccreditation or professional accreditation of the course.
- b. The Course and Subject Review Plans include the proposed referencing activities for each course, the proposed timeframes of each activity, who will undertake the activity, expected timelines for completion, deliverables and, if known, potential partners. These plans are implemented by Program Managers.
- c. Subjects are selected for review (and therefore subject to benchmarking) on the basis of one or more of the following considerations:
  - strategic importance;
  - the number of enrolments in the subject;
  - high number of academic misconduct cases; and/or
  - the subject is taught across multiple courses;
  - high failure/low progression rates;
  - capstone subject; and
  - the annual review cycle

4.10 Each subject must be reviewed at least once every five years as per the Course Development, Review and Approval Procedures. The Institution determines how the results of the reviews are aggregated into subject and course changes.

- a. The Plans clearly identify the information being benchmarked and/or externally referenced, strategic indicators, parameters, methods and proposed data comparison sources prior to undertaking the activity.
- b. Data comparison sources may include:
  - the HES Analytics tool (a sector-wide benchmarking tool that has been developed to allow the higher education sector to freely share information, compare performance and develop best practice);

- external peer review, usually through the Peer Review Portal or by contracting a suitable individual or partner;
- external professional accreditation body requirements;
- PowerBI to internally compare the performance of different cohorts and levels.

c. In the instance of external peer review, a suitable individual or partner must be identified offering cognate courses and disciplines and meet the TEQSA requirements of reviewers. Individuals and partners should not be selected solely on the basis of existing professional connections between staff members.

d. Where courses have no or few direct peer courses, comparable courses may be in the same discipline and related subject areas, or may be in different areas if teaching and assessment methods are similar enough to allow for worthwhile comparison.

e. The individual or the partner(s) and the Institution must agree on the scope, timeframe, intended outcomes, and expectations of payment or reciprocity of the referencing activity.

4.11 External peer review of assessment design and moderation can be conducted periodically, both as a stand-alone activity for the interim monitoring and as part of the CCR.

### *Stage 2 - evidence collection and analysis*

4.12 Benchmarking and external referencing activity involves the collection of data as follows:

a. Evidence must be collected in accordance with the Course and Subject Review All evidence must draw on relevant, reliable and recent data and information (see paragraph 4.10c above for data comparison sources).

b. Self-review activities must be undertaken to analyse relevant information and data.

c. Relevant assessment artefacts and reciprocal marking should be included in the external validation and moderation of assessment in accordance with the *Assessment Procedures*.

d. Where partners are involved, peer review activities, such as a workshop, can be undertaken to compare and analyse data and processes and identify areas for sharing and collaboration.

### *Stage 3 – reporting recommendations and implementation*

4.13 Benchmarking and external referencing activity is reported and implemented as follows:

a. Each external and internal referencing activity should lead to recommendations for action. These recommendations should either be collated into a separate action plan for improvement or incorporated into other governance reports where appropriate for further action.

b. The results of the course benchmarking must be compiled and reported to the Deputy Vice Chancellor (Learning and Teaching), the Course and Subject Committee (CSC) and Academic Board (AB) and may be included in the Comprehensive Course review report.

### *Stage 4 – monitoring and review*

4.14 Progress of the implementation of the action plan is monitored by CSC at regular intervals of no greater than 12 months. This process includes the evaluation and effectiveness of the external referencing exercise towards the intended objectives of the improvements.

## **Institutional quality assurance**

4.15 The Institution undertakes the following types of benchmarking and external referencing to assure institutional performance as part of its continuous improvement activities:

a. Partnered benchmarking – a reciprocal comparison exercise conducted via the HES Analytics tool or via a mutually beneficial relationship with one or more partners. It may include benchmarking of institutional performance as a whole periodically as identified by the Chief Quality Officer or Deputy Vice Chancellor (Learning and Teaching).

b. Desktop benchmarking – a broader, less detailed, exercise conducted by researching and comparing publicly available information of comparative

institutions in a particular area. This type of benchmarking is incorporated into daily activities and undertaken on an as needs basis.

c. **Benchmarking with external bodies and quality networks** (e.g. IHEA, HEPP-QN) – a centrally coordinated and facilitated exercise that requires commitment from the participating institutions. This type of benchmarking, which includes a project scope that specifies the aims of the project, resources, methodology, projected outcomes, deliverables and how the data would be used, is agreed between participating institutions in advance of the exercise.

4.16 Institutional benchmarking and external referencing may include:

a. **Organisational benchmarking** in which comparisons are made at the organisational level (institution, faculty/department) .

b. **Process benchmarking** involving comparisons of particular processes and practices e.g. of cycle times, efficiency.

c. **Outcomes benchmarking** relating to the comparison of outcomes data, especially student outcomes such as attrition and completion rates and student experiences.

d. **Best-practice benchmarking** in which the provider selects a comparator thought to be at the forefront in the area to be benchmarked.

#### *Stage 1 – planning*

4.17 Benchmarking and external referencing must be appropriately planned and designed, including:

a. The development of an Institutional Benchmarking and External Referencing Plan by the Chief Quality Officer to cover the Institution's registration period. The Plan includes the proposed referencing activity, the proposed timeframes of each activity, who will undertake the activity, expected timelines for completion, deliverables and, if known, potential partners.

b. clearly identify the information being benchmarked and/or externally referenced, strategic indicators, parameters, methods and proposed data comparison sources prior to undertaking the activity.

c. Data comparison sources may include:

- the HES Analytics tool (a sector-wide benchmarking tool that has been developed to allow the higher education sector to freely share information, compare performance and develop best practice);
- via partners through the Higher Education Private Providers Quality Network (HEPP-QN), Independent Higher Education Australia (IHEA) or the Higher Education Quality Network; and
- Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching (QILT) results.

d. Partners should not be selected solely on the basis of existing professional connections between staff members.

e. The partner(s) and the Institution must agree on the scope, timeframe, intended outcomes, and expectations of reciprocity of the referencing activity.

### *Stage 2 – evidence collection and analysis*

4.18 Benchmarking and external referencing activity involves the collection of data as follows:

a. Evidence must be collected in accordance with the Institutional Benchmarking Plan. All evidence must draw on relevant, reliable and recent data and information (see paragraph 4.17c above for data comparison sources).

b. Self-review activities must be undertaken to analyse relevant information and data.

c. Where partners are involved, peer review activities, such as a workshop, can be undertaken to compare data and processes and identify areas for sharing and collaboration.

### *Stage 3 – reporting recommendations and implementation*

4.19 Benchmarking and external referencing activity is reported and implemented as follows:

a. Each benchmarking exercise should lead to recommendations for action. These recommendations should either collated into a separate action plan for

improvement.

b. The results of the institutional benchmarking must be reported through the relevant governance committees.

## **5. Data reporting**

5.1 The Institution participates in the annual QILT survey and uses QILT data for course and student experience purposes.

5.2 The Institution undertakes annual reporting on student performance at an institutional level comparing its performance against sector averages.

## **6. Roles and responsibilities**

6.1 The Chief Quality Officer has executive oversight of the implementation of these procedures and is responsible for monitoring all benchmarking activity, advising on activity at the institutional level and identifying areas of risk.

6.2 The DVC (Learning and Teaching) is responsible for overseeing course benchmarking.

6.3 The Academic Board is responsible for setting and monitoring institutional benchmarks for quality and outcomes.

6.4 The Course and Subject Committee as a committee of the Academic Board is responsible for the management, monitoring and reporting of all external referencing activity across courses offered by the Institution.

6.5 The Dean/Associate Dean are responsible for developing five-yearly Course and Subject Review Plans, which include benchmarking (both internal and external referencing), and reporting through governance.

6.6 Program Managers are responsible for implementing the Course and Subject Review Plans, which include benchmarking (both internal and external referencing).

## **7. Related documents**

*Course and Subject Policy*

*Course Development, Review and Approval Procedures*

*Subject Development, Review and Approval Procedures*

*Course Monitoring and Evaluation Procedures*

*Assessment Policy*

*Assessment Procedures*

*Policy Development and Review Policy*

*Policy Development and Review Procedures*

**Approved by the Learning and Teaching Committee on 7 March 2024**