Benchmarking Units

External Referencing Guidance

<div align="right">Excerpt from TEQSA Guidance Note</div>

External Referencing (including Benchmarking)

WHAT: external referencing means a process through which a higher education provider compares an aspect of its operations with an external comparator(s) e.g. comparing the design of a course of study and/or student achievement of learning outcomes with that of a course from another provider.

WHY: providers inform their own operations, particularly teaching and learning, through external comparisons. This provides an insight into the standing and quality of a provider and its offerings within the sector in one or more respects. It also provides a rational evidence base to guide and focus improvement initiatives. A provider that does not undertake external referencing, aside from not meeting the requirements of the HES Framework as required by the *Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency Act 2011* (TEQSA Act), is at risk of being increasingly insular and inward-looking with a diminished evidence base to inform decision making.

HOW: A number of approaches and techniques can be used for external referencing, such as benchmarking, peer review and moderation. Benchmarking is perhaps the most elaborate form of external referencing and typically consists of focused improvement through relationships with a benchmarking partner or partners, but can also include comparing course design against publicly-available information and market intelligence.

Benchmarking:

- a structured, collaborative learning process for comparing practices, processes or performance outcomes. Its purpose is to identify comparative strengths and weaknesses, as a basis for developing improvements in academic quality or performance.

- purpose is not to standardise all courses and all assessment outcomes, but to reveal variations, and establish whether those variations arise from the individual nature of the courses or the student cohorts, or from variations in quality or academic standards.

- typically conducted via a mutually beneficial relationship with one or more institutional partners on terms agreed by the parties involved. Such relationships are typically envisaged to be enduring rather than confined to a single comparative exercise.

- involves more than the comparison of data. It is a process of continuously monitoring and evaluating the quality and effectiveness of a provider's operations

<div align="right">See full document at:
https://www.teqsa.gov.au/latest-news/publications/guidance-note-external-referencing-including-benchmarking</div>

External moderation and review of academic standards

(57)   External assessment moderation and review processes will occur in tandem with other benchmarking and peer review activities within a course or School.

(58)   External assessment moderation and review processes will be undertaken for selected units within a course on a rolling cycle and at least once every five years such that this occurs within the 7 years course review cycle.

(59)   Where a course is externally (or professionally) accredited, the Course Coordinator in consultation with Unit Assessors will ensure an appropriate cycle of external assessment and moderation is undertaken within the external accreditation cycle.

(60)   The external moderation process for each unit will include:

    a.   comparison of assessment methods and the nature and degree of difficulty of assessment tasks in equivalent units;

    b.   comparison of criteria and performance standards relative to equivalent assessment tasks;

    c.   analyses and comparisons of student achievement of learning outcomes and grading;

    d.   comparison of overall assessment load in an equivalent unit; and

    e.   double-blind marking by an external assessor of a sample of marked scripts, followed by a documented dialogue that clearly explains any differences and variations in grading between institutions.

(61)   External moderation and review processes, along with any resulting actions, will be recorded and reported to School Boards and Academic Standards and Quality Committee (ASQC) and incorporated within the unit and course reviews described in the Course and Unit Accreditation Policy.

Source: https://policies.scu.edu.au/view.current.php?id=00255

Benchmarking – Unit Design and Assessment

Considerations

1. Scope the benchmarking activity: number of units within a course to be reviewed, what units should be selected (e.g. year level / vertically integrated set etc.).
2. Frequency of benchmarking: how often a unit is reviewed.
3. Depth of benchmarking: amount of assessment materials to be reviewed.
4. Compatibility of the benchmarking partner
   a. Experience in a similar teaching context
   b. Subject matter expert
   c. Qualifications
5. Success drivers of benchmarking:
   a. Clear accountability and deadlines
   b. Training materials/ calibration / guidance notes for sender and assessor
   c. Mutual benefit - to ensure a. and b. are met, there usually needs to be either a barter system, or monetary exchange.

Submission 'Bundle'

1. Overview of the situation: which clearly explains the purpose of the review, whether it is due to student performance, or part of the benchmarking plan, accreditation, etc.
2. Unit Outline: including mapping of Course Learning Outcomes (CLOs) and Unit Learning Outcomes (ULOs).
3. Assessment materials: task descriptors/rubrics/model answers
4. Sample of Student work (HD/D/C/P/F).

Types of questions could include:

1. Are the Unit Learning Outcomes (ULOs) aligned with the relevant Course Learning Outcomes (CLOs), and Professional Competencies (if applicable)?
2. Are the ULOs appropriate? Are they pitched at the right level, or too hard / too easy? Relevance to subject?
3. Alignment of assessment task/s to ULOs? Can the assessment effectively test student achievement of relevant ULOs?
4. Reliability and validity of assessment instruments (e.g. assessment item (case study or exam etc.) marking guide, marking criteria, assessment rubric etc.) appropriate to the specified ULOs and CLOs?
5. Do the marks awarded reflect the level of student attainment?

See CTL resources for questions specific to the scope of the benchmarking activity

Recommendations might be provided for each question.

Provide an appropriate scale (not at all/somewhat/adequate/well/etc.), and open text for questions requiring comment. This will depend on how you intend to use the data. A scale means you can more easily compare the unit reviews over time or with other units in the course, and makes the process easier for the sender and receiver.

Need to consider how the feedback will be reported, reviewed and action items determined, implemented and evaluated. The feedback loop and action plan is important to track improvement.

Benchmarking Units/Courses - Generic – hours may be different

Overview of Process:

1. Each Unit Assessor (UA) is allocated 10 hrs for Benchmarking as part of workload allocation annually.

2. UAs complete the unit report for the Committee of Examiners (which includes a tick box on benchmarking).

3. Course Coordinator completes the course report for Committee of Examiners (which includes a tick box on benchmarking across the units).

4. The team holds an accountability process at an agreed time during the year where the benchmarking information is fed back to the group (e.g., by completing a report and discussing in a benchmarking team meeting). The meeting is held by the Course Coordinator and/or Discipline Lead. This process is documented and can be used to inform course-level/unit-level changes due in November each year.

Process for Unit Assessors:

- Determine if you are going to:
    1. partner/work with another institution (e.g., someone teaching an equivalent unit at a different institution) to complete **a full benchmarking activity**, or
    2. undertake **a partial benchmarking activity** such as desktop comparison of publicly available materials from another institution

- Identify the university you are going to benchmark against (this may vary across units based on what other universities teach):
    o Aim for a similar university, i.e. regional / online delivery etc.

- The component of the course/unit to be benchmarked will include:
    o Outcomes
    o Assessment
    o Content/Delivery.

- Determine the questions to ask (see *Types of questions* on page 3 and/or *CTL Resources*)

- Access the necessary documentation/data (see *Submission Bundle* on page 3*)*

- Comparison/Analysis
    o Respond to guiding questions

- Reporting
    o Team to meet at the agreed time to discuss benchmarking for each unit and identify any actions in preparation for delivery the following year.