

Guidelines for Improving Learning and Teaching through Collaboration, Benchmarking and Alliances

Preamble

The University of Sydney aspires to be included as one of the world's leading universities. Collaboration, alliances and benchmarking have the potential to contribute to the necessary quality enhancement processes to achieve this aspiration. These Guidelines have been compiled to encourage collaboration and benchmarking at all levels of the university in order to broaden the current awareness beyond 'benchmarking as measurement' towards 'benchmarking for organisational learning'.

Current Benchmarking Activities

As part of its sectoral membership requirements, the University reports its inputs and outputs to DEST. This reporting results in comparative figures across the higher education sector, which the University uses as comparative benchmarks/indicators of quality. While internally, the same role is played by SCEQ and the SREQ data.

This "Numerical Benchmarking" or performance benchmarking provides the University with some information as to ranking, based on the assumption that these figures are indicators of past performance in University goal areas, and that data are collected from a "level playing field".

Other forms of benchmarking used across the University focus on quality assurance and marketing. Some of these external processes mirror those undertaken internally with the Academic Board Review process. These may focus on various levels of analysis including:

- External marking and the use of external examiners on Boards of Examiners and for research qualifications;
- Disciplinary benchmarking projects;
- Peer review of entire programs to quality assure academic standards in teaching;
- Professional accreditation for an entire program;
- International accreditation of an entire school or faculty; and
- Alliances and collaboration to jointly achieve quality enhancement in defined areas.

A list of faculty benchmarking projects is included in Appendix 1.

Changes in Federal Government policy provide an opportunity for the University to move away from "ranking" and "quality assurance" to a more engaged learning approach to collaboration and benchmarking:

Institutions need to be given maximum opportunity, consistent with public accountability and social responsibility, to develop innovative responses to rapidly changing environments in teaching and learning, in the direction and commercialisation of research, and engagement with industry, research institutions and other education providers.¹

¹ Nelson 2003, p.10.

Obviously ‘numerical benchmarking’ will continue, due to sectoral requirements and for federal government funding. However the University will have the opportunity to engage with these existing data sets in a new way; moving away from the measures as an end in themselves, to an evaluation of what these measures mean to build improvement.

Collaboration and alliances for performance improvement

With the new strategic plan, Strategic Directions 2005-2010 the University is establishing some Key Performance Indicators around pillars necessary to achieve the University’s performance goals of 1:5:40²:

- Research and Innovation
- Learning and Teaching
- Student Experience
- Community Engagement and Alumni Relations

From the Numerical Benchmarking mentioned above it is clear that the University generally has to achieve increases in performance to achieve its 1:5:40 ambitions. However, comparative data on past performance (“lag indicators”) are unable to inform the University where and how it can raise its performance to achieve its 1:5:40 ambitions.

A deeper more interactive form of collaboration and benchmarking is required – undertaken with the specific aim of producing positive change (in the form of learning and change of practice resulting in performance improvement). These Guidelines are compiled with the aim of increasing the benefits of current benchmarking exercises and any new collaborative and benchmarking activities undertaken in the future.

Definition

In order to facilitate a successful benchmarking or collaborative partnership it is necessary for both institutions to have a shared understanding about what benchmarking is.

The Policy and these Guidelines are framed in the context of benchmarking as a verb, rather than benchmarking as a noun. The aim of the process is not to determine a benchmark; rather it is one of quality enhancement and improvement. A definition of benchmarking, as a framework for continuous improvement is provided by Jackson and Lund³:

² 1:5:40 has become the colloquial shorthand for:

- Clear leadership as Australia’s premier university
- Acknowledgement and ranking as one of the top five universities in the region, and
- Recognition and ranking in the top forty universities around the world

³ Jackson and Lund 2000 p. 6

Benchmarking is, first and foremost, 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.

For the University this means the comparative analysis between benchmarking partners to identify, adapt and apply processes, the improvement of which will impact positively on the achievement of the pillars listed in the University's Strategic Directions plan, e.g. what does a faculty or university do to achieve superior student progress rates or increase Category 1 research grants per FTE?

The above definition of benchmarking implies:

- Identification of the process to be improved and prioritising of it as worthy of focussed energy and resources and a commitment to change by senior staff;
- Identification of potential benchmarking partner/s – a faculty (or other organisational unit) or university exhibiting good practice in this area with the potential to offer a learning opportunity;
- Formalisation of an agreement including time period and a code of conduct that includes a commitment to confidentiality of the outcomes to the two parties and a process by which approval may be sought to publish outcomes;
- Analysis and documentation of what is involved in achieving the current output;
- Sharing of the analysis with the benchmarking partner on an equal basis, including mistakes that have been integral to improved processes;
- Identification of alternative approaches and practices that can be adapted to improve current performance in the different contexts;
- Ongoing development of relationships beyond the signatories to include those responsible for actioning new processes; and
- Adequate resources are available for both undertaking the benchmarking and implementing the improvements learnt through the collaboration.

As the University is clear that benchmarking will be one of the learning tools employed to achieve its quality improvement strategic aims, it is necessary to add a sense of continuous improvement to the above dot points:

- Planning and data collection – establishing clear goals (including what and with whom to benchmark), roles (staff with skills and responsibilities for analysis, planning and implementation) and identifying with whom to benchmark;
- Analysis – reviewing and questioning the current situation both internally and in the benchmarking partner;
- Strategic Planning – integration of learning into the University;
- Implementing – compilation of the equivalent of a mapping document;
- Reflection and Review of Progress; and
- Learning for continuous improvement.

Possible levels of focus

Collaborative agreements and benchmarking partnerships can occur at different levels of the University and are not necessarily external to the University.

Level of Focus	Examples
<p>Institutional:</p> <p>Contact: Dr Rob Ellis r.ellis@vcc.usyd.edu.au</p>	<p>Collaborations with the Open University in the UK and ANU in the area of eLearning</p> <p>Aim: To improve the way the universities involved embed eLearning in the teaching and learning system with a view to improve the student and staff experiences of eLearning.</p> <p>Method:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The exchange of documents, visits and ideas - Comparison of a clearly defined process that is likely to lead to a realisation of the aims - The process in this case is the unit of study design, development, teaching and evaluation process. The benchmarking question for this process is; <i>How can a university sustainably support the different stages of the process in order to improve their quality for student and staff outcomes?</i> <p>Outcome:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Improvements to how USyd supports staff in deciding and designing to integrate eLearning into UoS design - Improvements to how faculties are provided with resources to embed eLearning in course design - Improvements to the operationalisation of the University eLearning helpdesk - Improvements to the types of evaluation instruments used in the University's student evaluation system - Acknowledgement from the disciplinary-related bodies through publishing the outcomes of the benchmarking relationships.

<p>Faculty/School</p> <p>Contact: Prof Kim Walker musdean@usyd.edu.au</p>	<p>Sydney Conservatorium of Music and Griffith University; Princeton, Rice University and Indiana University, USA; Royal Northern College, UK</p> <p>Aim: We will work with a selection of European and American Educational institutions, with the aim of improving our programs and learning in the areas of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assessment • Post-Graduate Education • Undergraduate Core Curriculum <p>We shall also explore what modern curriculums are incorporating in recent years with such massive shifts in technology and global exchange.</p> <p>Method: Decide on the depts or programs to be studied. Benchmark distinct programs within a department. Benchmark U/G and P/G programs separately. List things that each program does well and influences its effectiveness, stature and quality. Identify desired outcomes – distinguish outcomes from processes. Develop outcome-focussed questions. Use the questions to learn who is successfully achieving each outcome.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. All Units selected 3 peer institutions and 3 aspirational institutions. 2. A project manager was appointed to coordinate as we develop questions. These have now been reviewed by the academic committee were agreed. 3. Four collaborative partners were identified: Rice University, Princeton, Royal Northern College and Griffith. 4. Areas to be benchmarked were agreed upon: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Assessment b. Post-Graduate Education c. Undergraduate Core Curriculum 5. First conceptually, and then based on what the literature indicates is ‘good practice’, quality indicators within each area were developed and questions formed. 6. Criteria to qualitatively assess ‘good practice’ and compare approaches has been developed and set out to review the content of the degrees and diplomas, Process of the award for both UG and PG studies. A third area of review involves musicology and composition departments and finally Opera schools.
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<p>Course</p> <p>Contact: Ms Cheryl Henderson-Smart cherylhs@med.usyd.edu.au</p>	<p>Dental PBL and assessment with the Faculty of Dentistry of the University of Adelaide</p> <p>Aim: To develop a model for benchmarking learning and teaching in Dentistry as a means of internally validating a new graduate program in dental education.</p> <p>Method:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. A collaborating partner was identified: The University of Adelaide Dental School. 2. Areas to be benchmarked were agreed upon: PBL and Assessment. 3. First conceptually and then based on what the literature indicates is 'good practice', quality indicators within each area were developed. 4. A structure for describing different levels of achievement in these 'quality indicators' was developed. Criteria to qualitatively assess 'good practice' were developed and set out in three 'levels of attainment'. <p>Outcome:</p> <p>A methodology for an approach to benchmarking teaching and learning processes, applicable to a wide range of HE programs where the main purpose of benchmarking is self-regulation and quality improvement in teaching and learning, was developed.</p> <p>This is the basis for an on-going collaboration, the next step of which is Implementation.</p>
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<p>Unit of Study</p> <p>Contact: Assoc Prof Samir Samman S.Samman@mmb.usyd.edu.au and Jennifer McArthur</p>	<p>First year Chemistry and Biology with the University of Melbourne</p> <p>Aim: To develop and trial a methodology that identifies discipline agreed specific nutritional science benchmarks. To gain some consensus on the core elements of nutritional science programs that will enable fundamental comparisons to be made between courses. To develop a database increasing our understanding of the nutrition studies available to students of this discipline.</p> <p>Method: Design a series of questionnaires to elicit consensus on the specific demands of nutrition using established language, definitions and benchmarks. The focus is on the leading and learning indicators of benchmarks and not past performance (outcomes). Design a database not limited to the discipline of nutrition.</p> <p>Outcome: Some agreement on nutritional science program content across Australia. A methodology that can be utilised by other disciplines trying to make benchmarking tangible. Identification of partners for further benchmarking activities. A database not limited to the discipline of nutrition.</p>
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<p>Teacher/Student e.g. Professional development of tutors</p> <p>Contact: Dr Amani Ahmed a.ahmed@econ.usyd.edu.au</p>	<p>Collaboration in professional development of tutors (in the Faculty of Economics and Business) with the University of Melbourne's equivalent faculty</p> <p>Aim: To develop online training resources for tutors by filming both real and scripted tutorials To share a discussion about the different forms of feedback provided to tutors (peer feedback at Sydney; expert feedback at Melbourne)</p> <p>Method: The collaboration was developed in meetings between the parties. Funding for the online resources at USyd was obtained via a TIF Grant. The discussion between tutors at the two universities was conducted via videoconference.</p> <p>Outcome: Tutors & program coordinators found value in discussing the different forms of feedback (expert and peer). The online video resources will be available for tutors at the beginning of Semester 1, 2006.</p>
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Choosing Benchmarking Partner/s

Collaboration with the aim of improving performance implies that the benchmarking partner selected has best practice, or an interest in developing best practice, in an area. In the case of external collaborative benchmarking projects it may ease the establishment of a relationship if the University already has a formal agreement with the faculty, college or university. Good working relationships are an essential ingredient for success.

An Appendix to the University's Annual Report lists all University-wide and Faculty/College Memoranda and Exchange Programs signed or renewed during the year. The University Annual Report can be found at:

<http://www.usyd.edu.au/about/publication/pub/annual/index.shtml>

The International Agreements Coordinator in the International Office will be able to provide further information. Other opportunities for alliances, benchmarking and collaboration can be found amongst the University's major international partnerships such as APRU and AC21, sectoral disciplinary groups such as groupings of Deans and CAUL, and professional associations.

Principles for Collaborative Relationships

- Collegiality
- Reciprocity
- Respect and trust
- Transparency

- Openness to learning
- Openness to change in the areas of both quality improvement and quality assurance

Getting Started: questions to ask prior to commencing a collaborative exercise

Collaboration for the purpose of learning is an iterative cycle. The following questions should be asked before beginning to establish any collaborative project:

1. What is driving the need to establish a benchmarking or collaborative arrangement? What is missing from existing data collection exercises?
2. How will the collaboration contribute to University or faculty priorities?
3. How will it be done?
4. What resources will be needed? Where will they come from?
5. How will colleagues be involved in the learning resulting from the collaboration?
6. What is the methodology? How will data be collected?
7. How will the project and its findings be reported and communicated, and to whom?
8. Who will be responsible for carrying out the required changes?
9. What will you use your learning for?
10. How will the changes be embedded so that they continue beyond the life of the benchmarking team?
11. How and when will the collaboration be evaluated? How and when will the changes implemented as a result of the collaboration be evaluated?
12. What was the learning/value-add? What was absent? Who should this be reported to?

Benchmarking: when the University initiates the relationship

To undertake this more interactive form of benchmarking, benchmarking partners need the freedom to share private information under a regime guided by documented procedures⁴.

- **Privacy**
Findings of the benchmarking study should not be extended to another faculty or university without first obtaining the permission of both the benchmarking partners (via the nominated contact).
- **Sharing between Benchmarking Partners**

⁴ These benchmarking procedures are based on those developed by the International Benchmarking Clearinghouse (a department of the American Productivity & Quality Center).

The type and level of information shared should be equivalent between benchmarking partners.

- **Communication**
Early in the benchmarking relationship communication should be honest and open to clarify expectations, avoid misunderstandings and establish trust.
- **Use of Information Gained**
Information gained through the benchmarking study should only be used for the agreed purposes of the benchmarking study. Permission should be sought to use the information gained from the benchmarking study for other purposes.
- **Nominated benchmarking contact**
Work within mutually agreed procedures. Contact should only be made through the nominated contact person. Obtain permission to broaden contact beyond the nominated contact person.
- **Be Prepared**
In order to gain full benefits from the benchmarking partnership, prepare before each benchmarking contact. Prior to any benchmarking visit, an agenda and purpose for the visit should be mutually agreed.
- **Follow Through**
Any commitments made should be followed through in a timely manner.

Benchmarking Procedures: when another university initiates the relationship

1. Question, beyond corporate good citizenship, what the University will gain from participation in the benchmarking exercise.
2. If the learning is unbalanced, consider alternative areas of focus.

Benchmarking Guidelines

Planning

1. Ensure that there is management support for the benchmarking exercise. The changes identified by the benchmarking team must be supported by management to be implemented.
2. Ensure that there is an agreed recognition by all stakeholders that practice can be improved and change is possible.
3. Ensure the benchmarking exercise has adequate resources and technical support.
4. Be selective about what to benchmark. Benchmarking partnerships are resource-intensive. Choose processes and practices which are of strategic importance.
5. Be selective about with whom to benchmark. Choose a partner with the best practices or processes in the area you have identified for improvement. Undertake research to identify those with a reputation for best practice in the area of interest.

6. Be specific and targeted about what to benchmark. Develop discussion questions and data collection protocols in advance. Ensure the current situation is recorded so that there is a baseline for evidence that improvement has resulted.
7. Develop a project management plan to implement the desired changes, including nomination of a person responsible for driving the change.
8. Ensure the project management plan includes a timeframe fixing the term of the relationship. Three to five years is suggested. The plan should also establish the timeframe for project review.
9. Be aware that sustainable quality improvement does not result from short-term projects. Effective benchmarking, focussed on quality enhancement and improvement, is aimed at building a sustainable organisation and results from a commitment to continually review and implement findings.

Implementation

10. Ensure both benchmarking partners are clear about what data will be shared, including an early agreement on the format and summary of the benchmarking findings.
11. Use collegiality and build a cross-functional team, including a functional expert or person responsible for implementation, to conduct the visit. To ensure the inclusion of all required skills, nominate team members rather than relying on volunteers. Likewise, request cross-functional participation from the benchmarking partner. Include in the group some of the future leaders from across the university.
12. Clarify the roles of the team members.
13. Make sure current processes and practices are understood and identify constraints and positive and negative influences that impact on the way things are currently done. Often an improved understanding occurs when a benchmarking partner asks how or why a current process is so successful.
14. Plan the visits well. Distribute an agenda and questions in advance so that both partners are prepared.

Data Collection

15. Be clear about any quantitative data required. Also, be prepared for some messiness in understanding the reasons why and whether they can be transposed.
16. Look not only at what the partner institution does, but how they do it. Understand why the practice/s works so well in their environment and anticipate how and why they will or will not work at the University of Sydney. Establish how partner institution influenced their discipline/faculty/college/ university to accept change.
17. Be clear about how to summarize the findings of the benchmark visit and who should do the writing. Assign someone to consolidate the data and findings.
18. Analyse the findings – the environment at Sydney is different to that of the partner institution; assume that some adaptation will be required rather than a simplistic transfer of processes and practices.

Monitoring and Review

19. Schedule an initial review of progress, to enable the alliance to be halted and redesigned if it is unworkable or unpredictably resource-intensive. This initial review should occur after the first year.
20. A final review and evaluation should occur at the end of the scheduled life of the alliance. This may provide an opportunity to recommend an extension of the relationship.
21. Establish a way to communicate the findings to others.
22. Evaluate and demonstrate the results of benchmarking.

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Benchmarking Partners	Period of Agreement	Nature of / Goal of Benchmarking	Name of USyd contact person
Faculty of Dentistry and University of Adelaide	2004+ TIF Grant 2003 – Developing formal benchmarking	<p>PBL Process:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student induction • Tutor training • Curriculum design (integration, alignment) • Facilities, delivery <p>Assessment:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Development • Assessment Criteria • Marking • Progression decisions • Validity and reliability • Authenticity • Feedback from formative assessments • Remediation policy and practice 	<p>Team:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dr T. Gerzina • Dr S. Gonsalkorale • Dr D. Russell
Faculty of Dentistry and University of British Columbia	2003+	<p>Postgraduate teaching in Oro-facial pain: We are trying to develop common online ‘didactic’ material and then use local expertise to deliver clinical components and competencies, which will be ‘tweaked’ for local dental accrediting bodies</p>	Assoc Prof Chris Peck

Benchmarking Partners	Period of Agreement	Nature of / Goal of Benchmarking	Name of USyd contact person
Faculty of Nursing and Midwifery	TIF Grant 2005	International Benchmarking (Rec 1 of the AB Phase 2 Review)	
Faculty of Economics and Business and University of Melbourne	Informal. Commenced 2003 with small scale TIF Grant (2002) focussing on standards of honours degrees and dealing with students at risk	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Benchmarking between CALEB and Melbourne's Teaching and Learning Unit in Faculty of Economics and Commerce – common activities to support student learning and academic development of permanent staff and casual tutors. In 2005 developing resources in common e.g. streamed videos of scripted scenarios for professional development of casual tutors. We are also sharing our Online Academic Honesty Module. • We plan for the whole teams to meet in 2005 to expand opportunities for benchmarking. • Wish to explore ways of improving the benchmarking process so it can expand to the disciplines for either curriculum development e.g. internationalisation, or assessment e.g. peer reviewing standards 	Assoc Prof Mark Freeman
Faculty of Economics and Business and ?	TIF Grant 2005	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tutor training 	
Sydney Conservatorium of Music	TIF Grant 2004	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Benchmarking Conservatorium practices 	

Benchmarking Partners	Period of Agreement	Nature of / Goal of Benchmarking	Name of USyd contact person
Faculty of Architecture and Uni of Melbourne, RMIT, UWA, Curtin University QUT + plan for some form of International benchmarking	TIF Grant 2003	Purpose: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Comparison of architecture programs, particularly design, computing and professional practice units • Studio teaching, incl physical facilities & apportioning of student space • Selection & use of commercial software which conforms to industry expectations • Structure of P/G courses 	Prof Tom Heneghan Dr Harry Margalit Ms Katina Dimoulas
Faculty of Engineering and University of Melbourne and University of Queensland	Dec 2003+ TIF Grant 2001 – Benchmarking Engineering’s teaching & learning performance TIF Grant 2004 – Australian and International Teaching & Learning Benchmarking	The improvement of T&L policy and practice To examine the development, delivery and management of undergraduate T&L services (AB Review recommendation)	John Currie Frances Zaballa

Benchmarking Partners	Period of Agreement	Nature of / Goal of Benchmarking	Name of USyd contact person
School of Molecular and Microbial Biosciences and other institutions teaching Nutritional Science	TIF Grant 2004	Benchmarking Undergraduate Nutritional Science courses, with the aim of achieving: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nutritional Science resource database • National agreement on curriculum content • Identify partners for further benchmarking • Assessment tool to improve teaching & student outcomes • Sharing of experiences • Benchmarking methodology 	Assoc Prof Samir Samman Jennifer McArthur
Faculty of Science and University of Melbourne	TIF Grant 2004	Collaborative evaluation of the teaching of First Year Chemistry and Biology Aim to identify best practice and establish a process of benchmarking in a large faculty	Assoc Prof Mary Peat Dr Adrian George