Improving learning and teaching through collaboration, benchmarking and alliances

Approved by: Academic Board on 14 December 2005
Date of effect: 15 December 2005

1. Policy

This policy has been developed to assist the University, its Colleges, Faculties, Schools and Disciplines to use benchmarking as a strategy for collaboration for organizational learning and quality enhancement in learning and teaching.

2. Background

The University of Sydney aspires to be regarded as one of the world's leading universities. Collaboration, alliances and benchmarking have the potential to contribute to the quality enhancement processes necessary to achieve this aspiration.

3. Coverage

This policy has been developed for use across the University by those involved in learning and teaching at all levels of university activity: the individual student and teacher, the Unit of Study, degree program, faculty or school, through to the University as a whole.

4. Definition

The Policy is framed in the context of benchmarking as a process for continual improvement. 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 Lund[1]:

> *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:

[1] Jackson and Lund 2000 p. 6

- 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 and reciprocal 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
- resources are available for both undertaking the benchmarking and implementing the improvements learnt through the collaboration.

5. Benchmarking: when the University initiates the relationship

To undertake this more interactive form of benchmarking, benchmarking partners need to have freedom to share private information under a regime guided by documented procedures[2]:

- **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**
  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.

6. Benchmarking Procedures: when another university initiates the relationship

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

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.

7. 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

8. Authority

(1) Development/consultation

This Policy and its accompanying Guidelines was developed by the Pro Vice-Chancellor (Learning and Teaching) in consultation with a Reference Group with membership from all Colleges.

(2) Management responsibility

The Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Education) has overall management responsibility for the Policy.

(3) Monitoring and Compliance

The Chair, Academic Standards and Policy Committee has responsibility for monitoring compliance with the Policy.

(4) Review

This Policy will be reviewed in 2010 by the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Education).

9. Related information

(1) Related University legislation, resolutions, policies and procedures include:
   (a) N/A

(2) University policies superseded or replaced by this policy:
   (a) N/A

(3) References and additional information include:
   (a) Guidelines for improving Learning and Teaching through Collaboration, Benchmarking and Alliances