FINAL REPORT TO ACODE

BENCHMARKING PROJECT

EVALUATION REPORT ON WORKABILITY OF THE FRAMEWORK

REPORT PREPARED BY

CHRISTINE GOODACRE
ANGELA BRIDGLAND
PATRICK BLANCHARD

WITH SUPPORT FROM
KAYE GOLDENBERG

FOR THE PROJECT PARTNERS

Monash University
RMIT University
University of Melbourne
University of Queensland
University of Southern Queensland
University of Tasmania
Victoria University

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BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

What is benchmarking?

Benchmarking is a quality process used to compare the performance of an organization with the performance of other organizations involved in the same activity. Fielden [1] has defined it as 'very simply a means of comparing one's performance with ones' peers.' Benc [2] has defined benchmarking as:

> a business excellence tool for finding, adapting and implementing outstanding practices in order to achieve superior performance. Benchmarking comprises measurement (the what) and practices (the how). And it tells us how well we are performing, defines how good we need to be (a practical vision), how to get there (a roadmap) and it needs to link to our mission, vision and values.

The purpose of benchmarking is to improve the performance of the area or service unit. Benchmarking contributes to accountability, provides a tool for learning, provides a basis for research for improving practice, allows for better understanding of operational systems and processes, and energises the need for continuous improvement. Perhaps most important of all, however, is that benchmarking helps to establish priorities for change and resource allocation and it contributes to goal setting.

How the project came about?

There is a dearth of benchmarking data in the area of teaching and learning. This is in part because units of this kind have a varying range of responsibilities, making the collection of benchmarking data challenging.

Benchmarking for quality assurance and improvement has recently become common in universities. Two key references in the higher education sector (The McKinnon, Walker, Davis manual and the Business Excellence Framework) [3] have been used in some institutions. They have provided useful reference points but have not worked at the organizational unit level, to support the benchmarking of services for quality improvement purposes.

In 2003, in response to this need for a framework to benchmark services at the unit level, Christine Goodacre, Head, Flexible Education Unit (FEU), University of Tasmania and Angela Bridgland, Head, Teaching, Learning and Research Support (TELARS), University of Melbourne, collaborated to develop such a framework. The work of Inglis,

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[1] Fielden, John (1997). *Benchmarking University Performance*. CHEMS paper No 19. Page 1.
http://www.acu.ac.uk/chems/onlinepublications/930914591.pdf

[2] Benc, Anton. Managing Partner, Benchmarking Partnerships, *Business Excellence Australia: Managing Benchmarking Expectations.* Presentation given at the University of Melbourne, Nov. 18, 2003.

[3] McKinnon, K.R., Walker, S.H. & Davis, D. (2000) *Benchmarking: A manual for Australian universities*, [PDF Document] Higher Education Division, Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs. Available: http://www.deet.gov.au/archive/highered/otherpub/bench.pdf [2001, 12 November].

Business Excellence Australia *Business Excellence Framework*,
http://www.businessexcellenceaustralia.com.au

Ling and Joosten '[4] provided a useful resource. A literature review was conducted and a paper developed to provide context to our work. This is contained in the Toolkit attached to this report (Attachment 1) and an earlier version was provided to partners in the project as a supporting document.

Funding was obtained from ACODE to further develop the framework and trial it. The topic for the trial was 'Professional/Staff Development for the effective use of technologies for teaching and learning.'

Seven institutions participated (identified through ACODE). The participant institutions represented a good range of pilot sites, comprising a mixture of large and small institutions, some with overseas campuses, some research intensive and some excelling in teaching and learning:

- Monash University
- RMIT University
- University of Melbourne
- University of Queensland
- University of Southern Queensland
- University of Tasmania
- Victoria University of Technology

The ACODE funded project had the following outcomes and objectives.

Outcomes

1. A workable framework for benchmarking for quality improvement purposes in the learning and teaching higher education sector.
2. Collaboration across institutions to improve the quality of support and services for advancing quality learning.
3. A contribution to the body of knowledge in the area of quality assurance and the use of benchmarking as tool for quality improvement.

Outputs

1. For ACODE, a report on the usability of the framework, with a revised version as appropriate.
2. For participating institutions, a confidential report on benchmarking outcomes against the agreed indicators.
3. For the sector, a paper or workshop, at EDUCAUSE for example, on the exercise.

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[4] Inglis, A., Long, P. and Joosten, V. (2002). *Delivering Digitally: making the transition to the knowledge media*, 2nd edn., London, Kogan Page.

THE PROJECT

Process

As part of ACODE funding a research assistant/project manager was appointed, to convene meetings, take notes and provide general administrative assistance. Ms Kaye Goldenberg was appointed to the role and she developed and maintained the project plan, evaluated outcomes and process and drafted the final report. This was a six month assignment.

In total, 5 teleconferences were conducted and a face to face workshop was held to develop performance indicators for the chosen topic

 "Professional/staff development for the effective use of technologies for teaching and learning"

In summary, the project timeline was as follows.

1. Finalise performance indicators, with reference to institutional differences – face-to-face workshop.
2. Institutions complete self-assessments
3. Partners selected for benchmarking purposes
4. Action plans completed, including strategies for priority areas
5. Project evaluated and the report written,
6. Angela Bridgland and Chris Goodacre present a paper on the project at the 2005 EDUCAUSE conference.
7. Submit report to ACODE.

Resources/tools

1   A Task Plan for project tasks was developed.

2   As part of the project the draft Framework was refined – see Figure 1 for the Framework used for the project. (The revised Framework and a worked example can be found in the Toolkit (Attachment 1 (Templates))

Figure 1 - ACODE Benchmarking Framework

1. Institutional context – reference to strategic goals and mission.
2. Purpose of benchmarking exercise – a general statement of scope for the specific unit involved in the exercise.
3. Scope and focus – contextual statement of the aspiration of the unit/library and service areas for which it is responsible.
4. Principles underpinning service delivery.
5. Support strategies for each service area.
6. Benchmarking priorities for the particular unit – for the year ahead, or perhaps a planning period such as a triennium – and organisational arrangements/policies etc
Sections 1-6 are completed at the institutional level and shared with potential partners. Once partners are identified for priorities (could be different partners for each) they work together on the remainder of the template.

7. Indicators for priority areas. This includes a statement of scope, rationale and a performance checklist, agreed by partners who wish to benchmark in the area.
8. Self-assessment/ranking. Each institution completes a self-assessment of practice against the indicators using a five point scale, with a short statement justifying the evaluation. (This could be more elaborate but we agreed on this approach as one which balanced effort against outcome.)
9. Comparative matrix of strengths and weaknesses against indicators. This section takes the form of a table arranged by indicator and with a list against each for institutions with self-identified strengths and weaknesses.
10. Action plan. Each institution then discusses the final table with potential partners and identifies benchmarking partners with strengths in areas where they are weak, and the process begins in earnest!

3   A Self-assessment Template was developed as part of the workshop for use by partners in the self-assessment process. It can also be found in the Toolkit, with a worked example. The Self-assessment Template has the following structure.

- Topic Statement
- Good Practice Statement
- Performance indicators (we had eight)
- Performance measures for each indicator
- A numerical rating reflecting self-assessment for each indicator
- Rationale
- Sources of evidence

4   A further template, a Partnering Action Sheet was developed with details of the indicator chosen for action, intended outcomes and strategies for achieving them.

Project Steps in more detail

September 2004

- **Finalising performance indicators, with reference to institutional differences.**

A one-day workshop was held at RMIT University on 15 September 2004 at which an external facilitator, Helen McDonald, lead the participants through the development of indicators for the chosen benchmarking topic (Section 7 of the ACODE Benchmarking Framework) and associated issues such as use of a common nomenclature. At the end of the workshop agreement had been achieved on the indicators, measures and a project plan.

- **Complete self-assessments.**

After the Self-assessment Template and performance indicators were finalised, participants undertook the self-assessment process at their institution. (Sections 1-6 of the Framework). This involved completing the Benchmarking Self-assessment Template.

November 2004

- **Peer review of assessments, partners selected for benchmarking purposes and action plans completed for priority areas.**

The Project Manager devised a Chart and Spreadsheet on which to record the ratings. These were then completed and circulated to the group and were brought to the teleconference that was held on 15 November 2004 for the purpose of conducting a peer review exercise, considering strengths and weaknesses and identifying inconsistencies among the results.

Institutions approached potential partners and followed up individually to collect data and devise strategies

December 2004 to March 2005

- **Individual institutions prepare their analyses of area for performance improvement
  with implementation strategies.**

Following the teleconference participants worked on the selection of benchmarking partners and devised an action plan for their unit that focussed on one or two performance indicators that they wished to work on identifying outcomes they wished to achieve as part of the Pilot Project.

The partnering exercise concluded with the submission of individual reports to the Project Co-ordinator, using the Partnering Action Sheet (see the Toolkit) to describe outcomes and further actions. It also included comments on the value of the process.

April 2005

- **Evaluate the project and write the report written for ACODE. Angela Bridgland and Chris Goodacre present a paper on the project at the 2005 Australasian EDUCAUSE conference in Auckland, New Zealand**

EVALUATION

Methodology

The project has been evaluated by assessing the adequacy of the group's activities in achieving the aim of the project, that is:

> a workable framework for use by organisational units, to compare performance in priority areas with that of their peers (benchmarking), for quality improvement purposes (comparing present performance with past performance).

This was achieved through interviews by the Project Manager and comments in the Partnering Action Sheet.

FINDINGS

In general, feedback from participants has been positive. All completed an action plan and while time was an issue, participants appreciated the opportunity to collaborate, exchange information and to build relationships.

The Framework and Templates

The Framework was found to be useful. Comments for improvement focused on the following.

- The need for a set of templates, or a toolkit, to support exercises of this kind. These have been developed and are included in Attachment 1, with worked examples.
- Section 7 of the Framework requires further expansion to include the development of performance measures for each indicator. Participants felt strongly that a facilitated, face-to-face workshop was required at an early stage, to develop indicators and performance measures. This is reflected in the Framework document included in the Toolkit.
- Section 9 of the Framework, dealing with the comparison of strengths and weaknesses, needed an additional step to allow for validation of self-assessment, through peer review. This is also reflected in the Framework document included in the Toolkit. This is a potentially sensitive process but worked well with our group. We felt strongly that one reason it worked well was that the group had met face-to-face early on and developed a good working relationship.
- The Self-assessment Template worked overall but some had difficulty with the fact that some indicators had multiple measures. The two examples below have multiple components and measures addressed this in different ways.

Example 1
Performance Indicator 1 – 'All of the organisation's e-learning obligations to students and staff and vice versa are clearly stated in its strategies, policies and practice.'

PERFORMANCE MEASURES

(Level 5 indicates good practice)

Level	Obligations Covered	Clarity	Communication
1	none	muddy	none
2	limited	minimal	limited
3	some	partial	general
4	extensive	mostly	substantial
5	full	crystal	full

HOW DO YOU RATE?   1_____2_____3_____4_____5

Example 2

Performance Indicator 2 – 'A process is in place to identify organisational requirements, staff development needs at the individual level and to evaluate staff satisfaction with their training.'

PERFORMANCE MEASURES
(Level 5 indicates good practice)

1.   No processes in place.

2.   Processes in place for some (e.g. to identify individual needs and staff satisfaction) and no feedback loops to planning and practice.

3.   Processes in place for all and feedback loops in place for some.

4.   Processes in place for all and feedback loops to planning and practice for most.

5.   Processes in place for organisational, individual needs and to evaluate staff satisfaction, and feedback loops in place to planning and practice for all.

HOW DO YOU RATE?
1_____2_____3_____4_____5

- The inclusion of a rationale for an institutional rating was considered essential for assessment and peer review purposes and has been added to the Self Assessment Template. This supported the listing of evidence and is illustrated in the worked example in the Toolkit.

Process – Findings

The partners worked their way through the task plan, developing templates as they progressed. We concluded that the process would have been improved by the use of just one hypothetical worked example rather than the two real examples used for the project. The Toolkit includes a worked example from a hypothetical institution to support future projects.

Feedback from partners on the process can be summarized as follows.
- The group agreed that projects of this kind require good project management methodology, including a set of tasks and timeframes agreed at the beginning of the project.
- Continuity of project team membership is important in a complex project of this kind.
- A project of this complexity requires a project manager.
- It is important at the outset to allow time to develop shared definitions and common understandings. This is best done face-to-face, as part of the recommended workshop.
- We noted that a particular challenge for this project was the need to develop tools as we progressed.
- Central to the success of the project was the development of agreed, robust performance indicators through a face-to-face workshop. External facilitation was key to successful outcomes.
- Compliant use of the templates and tools in full is important for success in achieving comparability

A key issue for the project was to choose a topic that had relevance for all partners. Partners' units had differing roles and responsibilities in the support of teaching and learning in their institutions and in one case responsibility was across units. This added authenticity to the project.

Once the topic had been agreed we worked through the Framework process. A major change involved the rewording of the Good Practice Statement to its current form. Prior to the workshop some suggested Performance Indicators had been proposed for discussion and these were further developed by the partners at the workshop.

For example, there was discussion around the formatting of Performance Indicator 2.

> **PERFORMANCE INDICATOR #2**
> *A process is in place to identify organisational requirements, staff development needs at the individual level and to evaluate staff satisfaction with their training.*

with the following:

> **PERFORMANCE INDICATOR #2**
> **The unit has processes in place to:**
> (a) **identify organisational staff development requirements;**
> (b) **identify individual staff development needs; and**
> (c) **to evaluate staff satisfaction with their training**

Other textual changes were considered and acted upon, with the following providing an example:

PERFORMANCE MEASURES

1. All of the ~~organisation's~~ **institution's** ⇐[✓**accepted by the Group**] e-learning obligations to students and staff and vice versa are clearly stated in its strategies, policies and ~~practices~~ **procedures.** ⇐[✓**accepted by the Group**]

3. Educational and technical expertise is available to develop and support quality **staff development** ⇐[✓**accepted by the Group**] programmes and resources which address staff needs, including those with special needs.

5. The staff development provision model is ~~resources~~ **resourced** ⇐[✓**accepted by the Group**] to effectively deliver unit/organisational goals.

7. **(Teaching)** ⇐[**X not accepted by the Group**] Staff evaluate the impact of technology on teaching and learning practices.

8. **(Teaching)** ⇐[**X not accepted by the Group**] Staff evaluate effectiveness of e-learning aspects of projects and/or subject/unit design, development and delivery.

Figure 2 provides an overview of the Topic, Good Practice Statement and Performance Indicators. The worked example in the Toolkit provides a complete set of indicators and their Performance Measures.

Figure 2 – Summary of Topic and Performance Indicators

TOPIC
  Professional/staff development for the effective use of technologies for teaching and learning

GOOD PRACTICE STATEMENT Quality teaching and learning is engendered where people are expert, enthusiastic, skilled and well-supported, and learning experiences are designed to engage the learner, employing a multi-modal approach.

PERFORMANCE INDICATORS

1. All of the institution's e-learning obligations to students and staff and vice versa are clearly stated in its strategies, policies and procedures.

2. The unit has processes in place to: (a) identify organisational staff development requirements; (b) identify individual staff development needs; and (c) to evaluate staff satisfaction with their training.

3. Educational and technical expertise is available to develop and support quality staff development programmes and resources which address staff needs, including those with special needs.

4. Where applicable, a mechanism is in place for the coordination of staff development programs with other service units.

5. The staff development provision model is resourced to effectively deliver unit/organisational goals.

6. Professional/staff development programmes can be delivered flexibly and address differing skill levels.

7. Staff evaluate the impact of technology on teaching and learning practices.

8. Staff evaluate effectiveness of e-learning aspects of projects and/or subject/unit design, development and delivery.

ACTION PLANS—OUTCOMES OVERVIEW

Figure 3 provides a summary of benchmarking goals for the partner institutions and strategies identified from the partnering exercise.

Figure 3 - Summary of partner goals and strategies

PARTNER	PI	GOAL	STRATEGIES
University 1	6	To define strategies and approaches for the provision of more flexible training and professional development for e-Learning at University 1; and more specifically, for the mainstream adoption of our Learning Management System (LMS).	• Work with other units, ITS and Faculty representatives to actualise outcomes above. • Strengthen our faculty presence. • Expand the specific LMS training role of the e-Learning Team to incorporate academic development on online learning.
University 2	2	To establish strategies and approaches to better identify organisational and individual requirements for staff development in the use of e-learning, and to view other instruments for assessing satisfaction with PD, so as to provide more organisationally and individually effective staff PD.	• Develop process for obtaining estimates of training requirements for professional development, based on estimates of e-learning development activity. • Develop instrument to assess individual staff capability and needs.
University 3	4	The overall goal was to seek to improve practice as a result of partnering with institutions that have encountered similar issues by sharing strategies and contextualising them for use in our institution.	Where applicable, a mechanism is in place for the coordination of staff development programs with other service units.
University 4	3	To identify strategies for overcoming the problems experienced by Unit when the demand for educational and technical expertise exceeds supply.	To do a detailed comparison of the ways in which partner units are resourced to satisfy Performance Indicator 3. if it is found that the Unit is under-resourced in comparison with similar units within the partner university then a submission will be prepared to redress the differences.
University 5	2	Improve current arrangements within University 5	To be decided. We want to know: • how do they identify instruments and planning processes? • how do they provide feedback to stakeholders? • what are the barriers and critical success factors?

University 6	7	Identify strategies for improving usage of a range of evaluation tools beyond the formal student evaluation instrument.	Recommend a new goal for inclusion in the 2006 Teaching & Learning Development Plan akin to Goal X in the partner university T&L plan. – about ensuring a T&L feedback loop.
			Extend our annual reports on Faculty teaching performance, against internal Teaching Performance Fund indicators, include more guidance to faculties about how they can improve performance. (Ref the partner university Teaching Quality Appraisal process.
University 7	1	Better definition of strategies, policies and practice	Meeting to discuss issues. Follow-up telephone conversation.

Discussion

The collaboration on improvement strategies was a critical part of the process and a template was developed to support this– see the Partnering Action Sheet in the Toolkit. This activity took place early in 2005, at the busiest time of the year for many units. Because of this and the fact that this was a central element of the project partners believe it would be useful to repeat this section of the process.

It is worth noting that approaches for collaboration varied according to the strategy being actioned. These ranged from teleconferences, use of email and websites to share information and documents, and face-to-face meetings when appropriate. A mixture of approaches is generally desirable.

ELEMENTS OF THE PROCESS PARTNERS FOUND PARTICULARLY USEFUL

15 September Workshop

The purpose of the workshop was to finalise the benchmarking indicators and the project action plan/timeline.

Partners found the workshop very useful for the purpose of developing the performance indicators. The fact that there was a representative from each of the partner institutions present ensured consistency and the future usability of the process. The workshop was also effective in that the benchmarking topic, good practice statement, performance indicators and measures were fully examined through the use of brainstorming activities done by the group as whole and in individual work. It was also good for 'buy-in' to the project. The external facilitator paced the workshop effectively and content and technical details were appropriately pitched.

The importance of a good facilitator cannot be over emphasised.

A question remains for the partners about how many should ideally participate in the workshop – all institutional staff who are to be involved in the project or a representative group of more senior staff? A balance needs to be achieved between a group which is not

so large as to be unable to achieve outcomes and the need to be inclusive in the development process so that the exercise is 'owned' by institutional members of the team.

Self-assessment and Peer Review

A teleconference was held after the self-assessment had been completed by pilot participants to assess the validity of the ratings results by comparing and contrasting the results and looking for inconsistencies. This was where the need for a rationale for the self-assessment score became particularly relevant. Members also considered the next step in the project that of partnering and the creation of an action plan for their unit.

Partners agreed that group peer review was important and increased the reliability of the final institutional rating. This process needs to be handled sensitively and it is important that a good working relationship exists for this to be achieved. The face-to-face workshop played an important role in relationship building.

CONCLUSIONS

In summary, participants agreed that the project provided a framework for collaboration for quality improvement in common areas of service delivery.

With reference to the outcomes and outputs detailed in the funding proposal we found that the Framework was workable, although it is important that participants are realistic at the outset about time commitments. Continuity in membership of the working group is also an important factor for success and the differential experience of members in exercises of this kind needs to be taken into account. Overall, partners felt that the collaboration had been worthwhile and relationships developed for future work, in this and other areas.

This project has progressed work in the area of benchmarking services at the unit level and we believe that it has generic application; that is, it can be used for any service area, even when responsibility is spread across organisational units.

With regard to outputs, this report provides an account of findings on the usability of the framework and contains a set of templates and tools for its use. Participating institutions have provided a confidential report on benchmarking outcomes against the agreed indicators and a summary of outcomes is provided as part of this report. A paper was given at the April, 2005 Australasian EDUCAUSE conference and a copy is contained as an appendix to this report.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER WORK

The project partners make the following recommendations for future work.

1. Partners be asked for a six month progress report on action on identified strategies
2. A second ACODE exercise of this kind be undertaken to confirm the methodology and tools developed as part of this project

3. That ACODE explore the possibility of using the New Zealand 'Determination of New Zealand E-Learning methodology[5] as a tool which could be used with this Benchmarking Toolkit, perhaps as a first step.
4. That ACODE should consider running workshops on the use of the Benchmarking Toolkit.
5. ACODE explore the possibility of a partnership with the Carrick Institute and NZ equivalent) regarding the use of the Benchmarking Framework.

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University of Queensland – Alan Holzl
University of Southern Queensland – Alan Smith and Dorothy Bramston
University of Tasmania – Christine Goodacre
Victoria University– Alistair Inglis

ATTACHMENTS TO REPORT

1. Benchmarking Toolkit
   Guidelines

   Literature Review and context

   Master templates
   • Framework summary
   • Self-assessment Template
   • Partnering Response Sheet

   Hypothetical example

2. EDUCAUSE paper

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[5] Marshall, Stephen. (2005). *Report on the E-Learning Maturity Model Evaluation of the New Zealand Tertiary Sector: executive summary*. Available:
http://www.utdc.vuw.ac.nz/research/emm/Documents.html#sector_report