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## Policy on Benchmarking

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<b>Definitions:</b>	<b>Benchmarking</b> is a learning process structured so as to enable those engaging in the process to compare their services/activities/products and thus identify their comparative strengths and weaknesses as a basis for self-improvement and/or self-regulation.
<b>Review Period:</b>	Three years
<b>Revision No:</b>	3
<b>Date of Revision:</b>	12th June 2010
<b>Purpose:</b>	The purpose of this policy is to define a comprehensive and workable benchmarking system so that the EIT services, activities or products can be compared in an objective way and so allow for self-improvement and self-regulation.
<b>Scope:</b>	This policy is relevant for all EIT administrative and academic staff as well as past, present and prospective students.
<b>Overview:</b>	To establish this policy, members of the Governance Board and Academic Board undertook a review of the Australian Universities Quality Agency report on Academic Governance and Quality Assurance: Good Practice for NSAs which was their basis for developing a detailed policy on benchmarking. It outlines the key performance indicators that will be used by the EIT. These indicators tie in with the development of EIT's Strategic Plan.

### Essential Supporting Documents:

*Academic Governance and Quality Assurance: Good Practice for NSAs.* (2010). Melbourne, Australia: Australian Universities Quality Agency.

McKinnon, K.R., Walker, S.H. & Davis, D. (2000). *Benchmarking: A manual for Australian Universities.* Higher Education Division. Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs.



*Guidelines for Improving learning and teaching through collaboration, benchmarking and alliances.*(n.d.). Retrieved September 10, 2010, from

[http://sydney.edu.au/learning/quality/docs/guidelines\\_for\\_benchmarking.pdf](http://sydney.edu.au/learning/quality/docs/guidelines_for_benchmarking.pdf)

**Related Documents:** - Quality Assurance and Improvement Policy

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## 1. Introduction

The goal of benchmarking is to provide key personnel, in charge of processes, with an external standard for measuring the quality and cost of internal activities and thus to help identify where opportunities for improvement lie. In some respects, benchmarking is equivalent to the human learning process and it is possibly a method of teaching an institution how to improve.

In a simple way, benchmarking can be understood to work towards answering the following questions:

- What particular parameter do we want to improve?
- How well are we doing compared to others?
- Who is doing it the best?
- How do they do it?
- How can we learn from how they do it better to us, to our institution?

There are other forms of benchmarking such as:

- External marking and use of external examiners
- Peer reviews of entire programs to quality assure academic standards in teaching and research
- Professional accreditation for an entire program
- Alliances and collaboration to jointly achieve quality enhancement.

The challenge for the EIT is the general lack of equivalent institution data to benchmark against. In addition, in the competitive commercial environment, it is difficult to share what is often confidential and strategic information.

However, nevertheless, benchmarking is a key part of the EIT's quality assurance processes and it is critical to consider and evaluate ' the quality of outcomes achieved (including rates of student retention, graduation, and employment or transition to further education) where appropriate by benchmarking these against appropriate comparators' (Academic Governance and Quality Assurance: Good practice for NSAs, 2010, p.25). Once this comparison has been achieved in a realistic way by discounting any confounding variables, the next step is to improve these outcomes, where possible.

The key issues with benchmarking are:

**Reliable comparative data.** The data from the benchmarking process must be reliable, valid and consistent.



**Trust and building relationships.** It is vital to establish long term mutually beneficial relationships between higher education providers; even if there is an element of “co-opetition” (competition-co-operation) in the relationship. The key principles in establishing collaborative relationships include: collegiality, reciprocity, respect and trust, transparency, openness to learning and openness to change.

**Benchmarking for improvement.** The end game of benchmarking has to be an improvement in overall quality of the EIT. This requires an understanding of key performance indicators which can be improved and tracking of the results to ensure that changes do indeed result in an improvement in quality.

**Demonstrating improvement.** A demonstrable improvement in quality of results at the EIT has to be the end result of the benchmarking process from identification of the appropriate key performance indicator, comparison with another similar institution, recommendations, an action plan and finally demonstrated improved results against that before the benchmarking process..

## **2.0 Performance Indicators and University Distance Education**

In general, most performance indicators (sometimes referred to as Key Performance Indicators or KPIs) have been developed for comparison with conventional residential campus type institutions. Hence, care has to be taken in interpreting these performance indicators.

The reasons why there are differences in the interpretation of performance indicators between distance and residential type higher education can be summarised as follows when one considers that students in doing distance learning are generally:

1. Studying part time
2. Older more mature
3. Probably already possessing a job
4. Find it considerably more difficult to complete a degree or diploma due to the physical isolation

This will mean that performance indicators such as participation/access; completion/retention; financial ratios; space utilisation; student satisfaction; employment; employer satisfaction; community service and economic impact and research are necessarily completely different.

Specifically, some issues need to be examined carefully. These include student contact hours (SCHs) may need modification to student effort hours (SEHs). Indicators of cost should be differentiated due to the totally different cost structures in a distance learning environment. Participation and access need to be examined, as distance learning provides easy access to many previously disadvantaged groups.

### **Suggested benchmarks or Performance indicators**

While is impossible to immediately embrace all the benchmarks recommended by McKinnon, Walker& Davis (2000), it is worthwhile listing them and to systematically add them as part of a continuous quality improvement process.



- Governance, planning and management (Governance & Leadership/University-wide planning/clearly defined lines of responsibility/organisational climate)
- External Impact (reputation/competitiveness)
- Finance and Physical infrastructure (operating result/commercialisation:Net Return on Equity/Strategic Asset Management/Space Management/IT&T Infrastructure)
- Learning and teaching (learning and teaching plan/Fitness of course/Student satisfaction/Employability of Australian Graduates)
- Student support (Student Administrative services)
- Research (Research HD completions per academic staff/weighted research publications per Academic staff/Research Impact)
- Library and information services (Contribution to teaching & learning/Provision of support for research)
- Internationalisation (culture/balanced onshore international student programme)
- Staff (Strategic HR Planning/Career Development & Staff Effectiveness)

There are sixty-seven benchmarks in total but this can be reduced to twenty-five core benchmarks (as listed above).