

How to Benchmark for a Major Course Review

A Guide to implementing the Curriculum Evaluation and Review Policy and Procedures

As a self-accrediting institution, ECU has an obligation under the Higher Education Standards Framework to ensure it maintains high standards of performance and has processes in place to support quality assurance and continuous improvement. The University has a well-established process for external benchmarking that is consistent with the sector. This process is facilitated through BenchMARC, our online combined application and database that:

- provides a consistent approach to benchmarking at ECU;
- guides you through the benchmarking process from beginning to end;
- creates a record of your benchmarking activities; and
- provides a facility for sharing good practice in benchmarking.

Major Course Reviews must include external benchmarking of student cohorts and course quality against one or more appropriate universities. The University encourages benchmarking with comparable institutions nationally and internationally. The first step in the Major Course Review is to select comparable institutions with whom we wish to benchmark.

Benchmarking Partners and Methodology

Establishing a partnership

Considerations for selecting a benchmarking partner(s) are:

- established or existing relationships*;
- comparability (as relevant, including size, courses, disciplines, cultural similarity, performance standards);
- likely transferability of strategies between benchmarking partners; and
- willingness to share information and commit to the exercise by relevant staff in the benchmarking partner institution.

*ECU has an existing Benchmarking Memorandum of Understanding with Deakin University. Other MOU's are currently being negotiated.

Methodology

The methodology proposed for the benchmarking exercise needs to:

- clarify the scope of the exercise (determined by the requirements for the Major Course Review);
- agree and articulate expectations, roles and responsibilities, expected mutual benefits, and timeframes;
- clarify confidentiality arrangements for data sharing and storage;
- confirm intellectual property of benchmarking findings/results;
- finalise measures to ensure meaningful comparisons can be made;

- determine milestones and key dates; and
- clarify associated costs.

Before finalisation, the proposed benchmarking partnership agreement must be discussed with the relevant Associate Dean Teaching and Learning and with Academic Governance Services.

Benchmarking Student Progress and Outcomes

Externally benchmarked data for each course can be obtained from the Strategy and Performance Team in Strategic Governance Services. As a minimum, the following data must be provided as part of a Major Course Review:

- course retention;
- progression rates;
- course completions; and
- graduate full-time employment.

In addition, other externally benchmarked course data may be requested, e.g. continuing studies.

Benchmarking Course Quality

Course Quality is assured through provision of benchmarked data at both course and unit level.

While it is not practicable to externally benchmark all units in the course, it is expected that, as a minimum, one core unit from each year of the course would be benchmarked in detail. This would translate to at least 3 units from a standard undergraduate course.

Data should be obtained in relation to:

1. entry standards (generally publicly available);
2. assessment methods (types) used across units in the course (often publicly available); and
3. grading.

1. Entry Standards

Entry standards for courses should be benchmarked against courses at similar institutions to gain insight into the likely level of student preparedness for the course.

The following components of entry standards should be reviewed:

Data	Questions
ATAR (domestic)	What is the minimum ATAR score for direct entry to the course?
Alternative entry (domestic)	What alternative entry pathways are available to domestic students? E.g. portfolio entry, Certificates or Diplomas.
English Language (domestic)	What are the English Language Requirements for domestic students? E.g. minimum STAT scores for Written English, successful completion of ATAR English, English Literature, EALD or equivalent.
Cost (international)	What is the cost of the course for international students?
English Language (international)	What are the English Language Requirements for international students? E.g. overall IELTS band score of 6.0, with no individual band less than 6.0.

Variations between students' background knowledge and skills across benchmarking partners can be an important factor in evaluating course design and determining adaptations to course design that accommodate differing entry levels while maximising student success.

2. Assessment Methods

Confidence in the validity of assessment is enhanced by interrogating the alignment of assessment methods with course and unit learning outcomes.

Data	Questions
Course learning outcomes	Do the course learning outcomes require the same cognitive demand across the domains of knowledge, skills, and application of knowledge and skills?
Task types	Is the range of task types used across the course likely to elicit valid evidence of student achievement of course learning outcomes? Are the task types used in the core units selected for benchmarking appropriate for assessing student achievement of unit learning outcomes, and appropriately aligned to course learning outcomes assessed in the unit?
Unit assessment tasks	Do the assessment tasks within the selected core units clearly specify what is required to demonstrate achievement of learning outcomes at the appropriate standard?
Marking criteria	Do the marking criteria align with both task requirements and learning outcomes, i.e. are we marking what we asked for and what is required to demonstrate achievement of learning outcomes, and nothing else?

3. Grading Methods

Confidence in the reliability of assessment is enhanced by interrogating grading methods and grading judgement.

Data	Questions
Marking exercise	To what extent do the marks given to our student work (written or performed) by benchmarking partner(s) align with our own marking? How well does our marking of partner(s) student work align with that of our partner(s) staff?
Marking criteria	How do our marking criteria compare with the marking criteria of our benchmarking partners, for example in terms of clarity, level of detail and specificity, consistency of interpretation?
Grading	Do benchmarking partners agree on grading processes and judgements? Do we agree on grade cut-off points where numerical marks are used?

Recommendations from a review of course quality

Consideration of entry standards, assessment methods and grading will influence recommendations about the improvement of course quality, which may include recommendations to:

- change entry standards, or changes to course structure to accommodate entry standards;
- change the range and selection of task types to improve validity of assessment;
- change marking criteria and/or re-calibrate grading judgement.

Recommendations will be documented in Section C of the Major Course Review Template and accompanied by Action Strategies and Timeframes.

Major Course Review

Completed by Self Assessment Team led by Course Coordinator

