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## Background

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. In keeping with this, ECU requires that all courses (coursework and HDR) are comprehensively reviewed (via a Major Course Review) **every five years**. Major Course Reviews must include external benchmarking against one or more appropriate higher education providers/institutions. The University encourages benchmarking with comparable institutions nationally and internationally.

## Related Documents

- [Curriculum Evaluation and Review Policy](#)  
This states the requirement for each of ECU's courses to undergo a comprehensive review every five years.
- [Major Course Review and Re-accreditation Procedure](#)  
This provides guidance on the process for conducting the Major Course Review, including the required benchmarking and external referencing.
- The [Major Course Review and Re-accreditation Template](#) and [Guidelines](#)  
This steps Course Coordinators through the process including benchmarking and external referencing activities which form part of the comprehensive review of their course.

## Process

### 1) Data comparison

Data comparison involves analysing the data contained in the Institutional Benchmarking Course Report document provided by Academic Quality and Standards (AQS). It does **not** require a benchmarking partner or desktop review. This kind of benchmarking is found in question 7:

**Question 7: Student Progress and Outcomes** - analysis of the *Institutional Benchmarking Course Report* (provided by AQS) on the following student progress measures:

- course retention
- success rates
- course completions

Compilation of the Institutional Benchmarking Course Report document involves two steps:

- At the beginning of the MCR process, AQS will provide the Course Coordinator with a list of institutions which offer similar courses (within the same nominated field of education). The Course Coordinator will be required to select up to ten institutions (depending on availability) to benchmark against.
- Once the benchmarking group has been agreed, a report (the *Institutional Benchmarking Course Report*) will be generated by AQS and provided to the Course Coordinator. This report will include results for the ECU course as compared to:
  - the benchmarking group,
  - ECU average; and,
  - ECU targets.

### 2) Desktop review

A desktop review involves going to the website of comparable institutions with similar course offerings and looking at the information they have published to see if ECU's course offering is consistent with the sector. This does **not** require a benchmarking partner. When deciding if an institution is comparable, the following relevant points should be considered: size, courses, disciplines, cultural similarity and performance standards. A desktop review is required for the following questions:

**Question 4: Course Learning Outcomes** - desktop review of similar courses to see if our Course Learning Outcomes (CLO's) are consistent with those across the sector.

Course Coordinators are required to select **three comparable courses** offered by other higher education providers, search their respective websites to locate the CLO's for these courses (usually published in their handbook), and compare with our course.

Tip: an efficient way to undertake this analysis is to create a table with a column for each institution and enter the CLO's for each course. The CLO's can then be coded and tagged to identify similarities and differences. Coding involves identifying the key knowledge and/or skills addressed in each outcome. An example is below:

# Academic Quality and Standards

## Benchmarking for a Major Course Review (MCR) How-To Guide

ECU CLO	University New England CLO	Griffith University CLO
1. Apply broad social science knowledge to a range of practical and theoretical contexts [application of knowledge]  2. Think critically to interpret and analyse complex social science knowledge and issues [critical thinking]  3. Think creatively to generate and challenge knowledge in the social cultural space [creativity and problem solving]	1. apply quantitative research techniques to real-world empirical data through statistical analysis and/or survey methodology and will judge the suitability of given methods to given applications; [research techniques] 2. apply qualitative research techniques to real-world empirical data through a grounding in a range of qualitative methods and will judge the suitability of given methods to given applications; [research techniques] 3. research and present a clear, coherent and independent exposition of knowledge and ideas	1. Graduates of the Bachelor of Social Science will have a broad and coherent body of theoretical, methodological and practical knowledge [application of knowledge] as well as the critical thinking skills [critical thinking] to engage with the nature of humans, their relations to each other and the social structures they have created and within which they live. The Social Science program develops critical thinking, civic engagement, global learning, and intercultural knowledge outcomes for students. [global outlook, social justice]

**Question 8: Course Quality: Entry Standards** - desktop review of the entry standards of three comparable courses offered by other higher education providers to see if our course's entry standards are consistent with those across the sector.

Course Coordinators are required to select **three comparable courses** offered by other higher education providers and search the websites of the selected institutions.

The higher education providers and respective courses chosen for this benchmarking exercise should be discussed at the first Self-Assessment Team (SAT) meeting. The below table (found on the SAT Agenda) can be used for recording the courses and institutions selected:

	Name of comparable course	Name of institution
Course 1		
Course 2		
Course 3		

The table below shows the data relating to entry standards that should be collected as part of the desktop review:

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.

The [Entry Standards Benchmarking Form](#) is a template that has been developed to assist in capturing and presenting the findings of the Entry Standards benchmarking activity and should be appended to the Major Course Review and Re-accreditation Template.

**Question 9: Course Quality: Assessment Methods** - desktop review of the assessment methods of three equivalent core units offered by other higher education providers to see if the course's assessment methods are consistent with those across the sector.

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.

The units chosen for this benchmarking exercise should be discussed at the first SAT meeting. The following table (found on the SAT Agenda) can be used for recording the units selected:

	Name of Unit
Unit - first year	
Unit - middle year	
Unit - capstone	

The table below shows what data relevant to assessments should be collected as part of the desktop review:

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?

The [Assessment Methods Benchmarking Form](#) is a template that has been developed to assist in capturing and presenting the findings of the Assessment Methods benchmarking activity and should be appended to the Major Course Review and Re-accreditation Template.

### 3) Benchmarking Partner

This type of benchmarking requires Course Coordinators to identify and contact a **peer (partner)** in another higher education institution and enlist them to review the grades awarded for selected assessment tasks throughout your course to see if ECU's grading methods and judgement are consistent with that across the sector.

This type of benchmarking is found in question 10:

**Question 10: Course Quality: Calibration of Assessment Grading** - peer review (by benchmarking partner) of grades awarded for one assessment task from three key units of the course.

It is recommended you select one assessment task from a first year, middle year and capstone unit (3 assessment tasks in total). You must provide four de-identified student samples for each of the three assessment tasks - a *PASS*, a *CREDIT*, a *DISTINCTION* and a *HIGH DISTINCTION*.

The units and respective assessment tasks chosen for this benchmarking exercise should be discussed at the first SAT meeting. The below table (found on the SAT Agenda) can be used for recording the units and assessment tasks selected:

	Name of unit	Assessment task	Sample
Unit - first year			<input type="checkbox"/> PASS <input type="checkbox"/> CREDIT <input type="checkbox"/> DISTINCTION <input type="checkbox"/> HIGH DISTINCTION
Unit - middle year			<input type="checkbox"/> PASS <input type="checkbox"/> CREDIT <input type="checkbox"/> DISTINCTION <input type="checkbox"/> HIGH DISTINCTION
Unit - capstone			<input type="checkbox"/> PASS <input type="checkbox"/> CREDIT <input type="checkbox"/> DISTINCTION <input type="checkbox"/> HIGH DISTINCTION

The Peer (partner) will be required to complete and return the [Calibration of Assessment Grading Partner Response Sheet](#) for each task.

The questions that are asked of the benchmarking partner in this exercise are summarised in the table below:

Questions
To what extent are the Unit Learning Outcomes (ULO's) clear and appropriate? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Are the ULO's aligned with the relevant Course Learning Outcomes (CLO's)?</li> <li>Are the ULO's at the right standard and year level in relation to the AQF?</li> </ul>
Does the assessment task enable all students to demonstrate attainment of the ULO's and the CLO's?
To what extent are the assessment requirements, marking criteria and ULO's aligned?
Is the method of assessment capable of confirming that all relevant specified CLO's and ULO's are achieved?
Do the grades awarded reflect the level of student attainment?
What can be done to improve the assessment of the unit?

The considerations and recommended steps for conducting this benchmarking exercise are outlined below.

#### Establish a partnership

Considerations for selecting a benchmarking partner(s) are:

- established or existing relationships (note: ECU has an existing Benchmarking Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with Deakin University. Other MOU's are currently being negotiated);
- 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.

#### Establish the methodology

The methodology proposed for the benchmarking exercise needs to:

- clarify the scope of the exercise (determined by the requirements for the MCR);
- 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 should be discussed with the relevant Associate Dean Teaching and Learning (ADTL) and with Academic Quality and Standards (AQS).

#### Engage a benchmarking partner

##### Option A – Direct approach

- i. Contact prospective benchmarking partner(s) via email requesting their participation (an example email is available [here](#)).
- ii. For Australian partners, including higher education institutions or industry or subject experts, ECU will **NOT** require a formalised agreement (MOU/Confidentiality Agreement), however the Course Coordinator/Schools will need to ensure that they mark-up the documentation shared with the partner to the effect that it is 'Confidential' and note it in their email correspondence.  
For International /overseas higher education institutions or industry or subjects experts, ECU also does **NOT** require a formalised agreement (MOU/CA), however **DOES** require agreement in writing, which can be in the form of an email exchange **AND** requires the ECU academic to complete the [International Compliance Review](#) in consultation with the Senior Complaints, Compliance and Integrity Adviser ([Deon Van Der Westhuizen](#)). Course Coordinators/School will need to ensure that they mark-up the documentation shared with the partner to the effect that it is 'Confidential' and note it in their email correspondence.
- iii. Select samples for the assessment tasks (one core unit from each year of the course should be chosen, with one assessment task from each and four samples per assessment task).
- iv. Establish and communicate:
  - scope of the exercise (providing the [Calibration of Assessment Grading Partner Response Sheet](#) will give a clear indication of the expectations);

- agree and articulate expectations, roles and responsibilities, expected mutual benefits and timeframes;
  - confidentiality arrangements for data sharing and storage; and
  - confirm intellectual property of benchmarking findings/results.
- v. Prepare and package up the materials and supporting materials, including:
- student assessment samples, ensuring all references to a student's personal details are de-identified in the samples provided;
  - the [Calibration of Assessment Grading Partner Response Sheet](#);
  - unit plans; and
  - marking criteria/ rubrics.
- vi. Confirm with the benchmarking partner how the documentation and feedback is to be delivered (i.e. Box, One Drive)
- vii. Send all relevant materials via the agreed delivery method to the benchmarking partner.
- viii. Follow-up to ensure you receive the completed [Calibration of Assessment Grading Response Sheet](#) and the materials provided have been returned/destroyed appropriately.

#### Option B – Peer Review Portal

An alternative is to use the [Peer Review Portal](#) to enlist a partner. The Peer Review Portal is a cloud-based review management system approved by TEQSA as an optional online support mechanism which can be used in meeting national and international standards in external peer review. Refer to the [How to Guide - Peer-Review Portal](#) or contact your AQS adviser for further details on this.

#### 4) Industry Feedback

Course consultative committees ensure that the University receives external validation, advice and information from industry, employers and the community on all ECU undergraduate and postgraduate coursework awards; which leads to improved outcomes for students.

In accordance with the [ECU Excellence Framework Policy](#), each course requires feedback and input from a consultative committee. The following should be discussed each time the course consultative committee meets:

- ECUonQ
- Professional Accreditation
- Reviews/Evaluations
- Design/Development of the curriculum
- Assessment Standards
- Quality and Enhancements
- Graduating Standards
- Student Feedback
- Industry Feedback
- Workplace Integrated Learning
- Research/Creative Activities
- Policies and Procedures

It is important that the Course Consultative Committee contributes to the Major Course Review and by providing an external reference point or industry perspective on the course design and assessment regime how well it prepares students for employment after graduation.

A Course Consultative Committee should be scheduled during the Major Course Review process, ideally early in the drafting process. It is suggested the following questions are provided to the consultative committee members and the answers collated and fed back into the Major Course Review and Re-Accreditation Template where appropriate as evidence of external validation of the course:

- How is the Course viewed in the industry?
- How could graduates be better prepared for the transition to the workplace?
- How are current and future industry capabilities reflected in the course structure and content?
- How do assessment task samples reflect authentic requirements of the workplace?
- How can student readiness for WIL placements be improved?
- How can industry preparedness for WIL placements be enhanced?