Benchmarking in Learning & Teaching @ USQ

What is USQ's definition of benchmarking?

Benchmarking as defined in the USQ Academic Calendar, 9.2 USQ Quality Policy at http://www.usq.edu.au/corporateservices/calendar/part9.htm:

> "A strategic and systematic learning approach of continuous comparative and evaluation processes against organisations, both national and international, to gain information which will help USQ to take action to improve its performance and excel."

How does the definition translate to benchmarking in learning and teaching at USQ?

The Quality Policy and Benchmarking Framework recognise that benchmarking activities are an on-going and systematic approach of comparing practices and performances for continuous improvement or enhancement purposes. All benchmarking activities would contribute to continuous improvement of the University's processes, performances and outcomes. This positioning recognises Jackson and Lund's (2000, p. 6) concept of benchmarking for higher education where benchmarking is an ***organisational learning process*** which aims to contribute to ***continuous improvement***.

In simple terms, benchmarking in learning and teaching (L&T) at USQ is proceeded by learning about the good practices of key processes through the investigation of these processes in 'other' organisations, building on the evaluation and learning of relevant performances in own and others' organisations and making improvement in own organisation.

In a USQ context, benchmarking projects or exercises in L&T are about:

- a systematic, strategic and continuous process of improvement of L&T. It's identifying how to improve intended performance, making improvements and then re-measuring.
- organisational learning, collaboration and discussion among the benchmarking partners, nationally and internationally, so as to understand how to further improve.

What are the key elements of a benchmarking project or exercise in learning and teaching?

- Reiterative cycle or process of self-evaluation and self-improvement
- On-going and systematic approach of comparing practices and performances
- Dynamic and action-oriented, rather than a passive activity of comparing metrics or indicators
- NOT a comparative or competitor analysis
- About collaboration and learning from others

What are the types of benchmarking?

- ***Internal benchmarking***
  This involves looking within USQ to learn and improve. It would compare similar department/units or processes. e.g. Turnaround time in marking to provide constructive feedback to students of a course/ program within various departments/ disciplines of a faculty.

- ***External benchmarking***
  This involves looking outside the University to learn how others are meeting similar outcomes using processes that may be more efficient and/or effective. e.g. Retention of first years, at risk students in course/program XYZ with other organisation's course/ program XYZ.

Who are USQ's preferred benchmarking partners?

If you are conducting an external benchmarking exercise, the benchmarking partners in the first instance (and where possible) should be from the Distance Education Intensive Universities (DEIU) grouping:

- Central Queensland University
- Deakin University
- University of New England
- Charles Stuart University
- Southern Cross University

How to initiate a benchmarking project?

- ***One-to-one approach***
  This approach is about a benchmarking process where one 'model' organization acts as the standard while the other learns how to emulate this model standard. At its simplest, this approach is achieved by conducting an active institutional and desk review or research by systematically comparing and investigating **relevant** data available or publically published, such as the AUSSE report, LTPF indicators (CEQ indicators – good teaching, generic skills, overall satisfaction, Unistats – progression and retention rates, GDS – full-time employment). The purpose is a comparison to produce a report for improvement.
- ***Collaborative or engagement approach***
  This approach of benchmarking occurs between more than two organizations, in which ideally all partners serve as best practice for others and as organizations to emulate. This approach is encouraged as it offers further networking possibilities and professional development between peers from different organizations, thus reinforcing the learning aspect of the benchmarking activity aimed at continuous improvement and performance excellence.

What to investigate for your benchmarking project?

- The purpose of a benchmarking project must be clearly defined from the outset. What do you want to find out? Why? What do you want to do with the results? What can you adapt? How can you improve?
- The choice of WHAT to investigate is about having a clear understanding of the problems at hand and prioritizing to have a realistic and meaningful benchmarking project. Most importantly, it should be aligned with USQ's vision, mission and strategic plans.

Are you ready for Benchmarking?

Contact Dr Megan Kek for a benchmarking readiness tool to identify what you need to do before you start your benchmarking exercise or project.

Enquiries on how to establish an efficient and effective benchmarking project, please contact Dr Megan Kek at megan.kek@usq.edu.au

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