ENHANCING OUR UNDERSTANDING OF THE POTENTIAL OF INTERNATIONAL PEER REVIEW BENCHMARKING FOR QUALITY IMPROVEMENT

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This paper will provide an overview of an international benchmarking project with seven universities across Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom (UK). Ako Aotearoa commissioned a proof-of-concept project to specifically enhance understanding of peer review process benchmarking for quality improvement purposes. This aligns with the aims of New Zealand's Academic Quality Agency's (AQA) quality assurance processes and is a useful tool which universities may choose to employ.
The aims of the benchmarking project were to:
- Compare five key performance indicators:
  1. Support for priority learners and pathways into higher education;
  2. Teaching quality;
  3. Curriculum quality;
  4. Assessment; and
  5. Support for academic staff;
- Identify areas of good practice, areas for improvement/or further development and areas for sharing; and
- Enhance understanding of process benchmarking for quality improvement purposes.

Outcomes from the face-to-face peer review workshop in New Zealand will be discussed as well the lessons learnt from the comparison of international strategies in learning and teaching.

Key words: benchmarking, teaching quality, quality improvement, quality enhancement, external referencing

Introduction

Universities are increasingly moving towards using benchmarking for quality improvement and quality enhancement purposes, particularly being able to compare academic standards across the higher education sector. This has been a repeated recommendation in Academic Audit Reports conducted by the Academic Quality Agency for New Zealand's Universities

(Cameron, 2015) with an implicit concern that the self-review processes undertaken by New Zealand Universities risk being too self-referenced.

Benchmarking can be defined as:

'A learning process structured so as to enable those engaging in the process to compare their services/activities/products in order to identify their comparative strengths and weaknesses as a basis for self-improvement and/or self-regulation.' (Jackson & Lund, 2000)

Having followed with considerable interest the work being done on peer review benchmarking in Australia, Ako Aotearoa, New Zealand's National Centre for Tertiary Teaching Excellence commissioned an international project using the process benchmarking methodology developed by the universities of Tasmania, Deakin and Wollongong (Booth *et al.*, 2011). Ako Aotearoa wanted to trial 'a proof of concept' benchmarking process not only across New Zealand universities but also involving universities in Australia and the United Kingdom. There were three key reasons for this: the process is highly formative, compliance requirements are relatively low and, thirdly, the opportunity to explore international comparisons might add a new dimension to the work.

The specific aims of the international benchmarking project were to:

1. Compare approaches to the priorities raised by New Zealand's Tertiary Education Strategy with respect to the participation and success of educationally disadvantaged groups to approaches to equivalent issues in Australia and the UK;
2. To compare approaches to improving teaching quality, curriculum quality and assessment;
3. To identify areas of good practice, areas for improvement/or development and areas for sharing;
4. To identify any common issues across institutional and national boundaries
5. To enhance our understanding of process benchmarking for quality improvement and quality enhancement purposes across Australia, New Zealand and United Kingdom.

Seven universities accepted an invitation to participate in the international benchmarking project:

- Auckland University of Technology, New Zealand;
- Birmingham City University United Kingdom;
- Lincoln University, New Zealand;
- Swinburne University of Technology, Australia;
- The Arts University Bournemouth, United Kingdom;
- University of Tasmania, Australia; and
- Victoria University, Melbourne, Australia

We had active support and participation from AQA, the Office for Learning and Teaching, Australia and the Tertiary Education Quality Standards Agency, Australia. The Higher Education Academy facilitated the participation by the two universities from the UK.

Methodology

Work on the project was from November, 2014 to September, 2015 and involved six phases:

1. Development of key performance indicators, good practice statements and key performance measures;
2. Self-review phase (using the University of Tasmania's online benchmarking tool);
3. Peer review phase (face-to-face workshop held in Wellington, July 2015);
4. Post- validation phase (Workshop summary sent to participants for verification);
5. Reporting phase including a summary of workshop outcomes and recommendations for improvement, and;
6. Evaluation.

The international benchmarking project is underpinned by the ACODE benchmarking methodology (2014) which is based on process benchmarking. Process benchmarking is a form of benchmarking that focuses on *how* results are achieved. It aims to examine, compare and improve performance of processes used in operations (Stella & Woodhouse, 2007). Benchmarking methodology includes Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), Good Practice Statements, Key Performance Measures, ratings, rationale and evidence. Universities had a choice of focus areas to benchmark. These could be any one (or more) of the Performance Indicators. Each Performance Measure provided structured questions under each of the KPIs. The institutions were not required to respond to every KPI, but there had to be a comparator (at least 2 institutions) for each KPI. The topics for benchmarking include:

1. Strategies for increasing participation of priority (or non-traditional or disadvantaged) learners in tertiary education;
2. Provision of professional support for teaching staff;
3. Teaching quality;
4. Curriculum quality; and
5. Peer review of assessment.

The self-review phase involved universities making a preliminary self-rating against each measure. To facilitate the self-review process, questions were provided under each measure to clarify their scope and provide guidance for the self-review teams. These questions were designed to elicit specific information to enable processes and practices across participating institutions to be compared (Appendix A). The ratings for the performance measures are between Level 4 and Level 1, with Level 4 being the most evident of quality outcomes and Level 1 showing the least amount of the evidence of quality (Table 1). Each institution was assigned a unique username and password for uploading the self-review data onto the University of Tasmania's online benchmarking tool. Final self-review reports were sent back to each university for validation and checking.

Table 1. Performance measures: ratings against self-review guiding questions

Level 4	Yes	Effective strategies are implemented successfully
Level 3	Yes, but	Good strategies in place, some limitations or some further work needed
Level 2	No, but	This area hasn't yet been effectively addressed, but some significant work is being done
Level 1	No	No effective strategies e.g. not addressed, addressed only in isolated pockets, notionally addressed by major barriers to implementation

In preparation for the peer review workshop, a peer review workshop document was prepared which included a summary of key performance indicators, self-ratings and measures across all universities and areas of good practice, self-identified areas for improvement/development and areas for sharing. The peer review workshop documentation was sent out by email to the participating universities prior to the peer review workshop in preparation for the workshop. A face-to-face peer review benchmarking workshop was held over two days in New Zealand to benchmark the five KPIs, processes and data. At the workshop universities were asked to provide presentation on their individual institutional contexts and rationale for being involved in the benchmarking project. A summary of the peer review workshop outcomes was recorded during the workshop and presented in draft form for all participants in the last session of the workshop. An evaluation of the workshop was undertaken at the end of the second day of the peer review workshop to elicit areas of good practice and areas for improvement in benchmarking methodology.

The post validation phase gave all participants the opportunity to review and revise the peer review summary outcomes following the workshop. Following the peer-review discussions at the workshop and reflections on self-review data, participants were invited to alter their own ratings, supporting statements and add any additional evidence. Workshop participants were invited to review and comment on a draft final report. Participants were provided with the report and their institution's self-review report (results from the online tool) and encouraged to consider the recommendations and determine an implementation plan for their institution.

Findings

The peer review workshop discussion produced the following findings at the institutional level for each of the KPIs: 1) areas of good practice; 2) areas for improving and/or further development; 3) areas for sharing. For example, under Key Performance Indicator 3: Teaching Quality, the participating universities were: Birmingham City University (BCU), Swinburne University of Technology, University of Tasmania (UTAS) and Victoria University (VU). Each university had identified these areas of good practice:

- Appropriate strategies, plans and policies in place for student achievement, academic standards and teaching quality;
- Internal teaching awards;

- Alignment of internal teaching awards to national awards;
- Resources for online teaching;
- Internal and external surveys to evaluate teaching;
- Performance monitoring in annual and course reviews.

Individually, some of the identified areas of good practice include: 1) BCU has a L&T Manifesto (short strategic document) for students and staff which has statements which talks to students [for e.g. You won't sit in lectures all day long, you will sit with other students]; 2) BCU has a target that all full time staff involved in learning and teaching will be HEA accredited by 2020(80% by 2017); 3) Swinburne has changed their internal surveys to be much shorter which has three questions; 4) UTAS has a comprehensive framework of teaching expectations which now includes rubrics and it will be available online; and 5) VU has mobility plans in place to enhance teaching quality and the University is systematically expanding the international experience of staff.

Some areas for improvement and further development which were discussed include: 1) reduce the number of strategies [all]; 2) BCU support for staff with poor quality teaching is a work in progress; 2) Swinburne is about to commence data modelling to identify unit metrics that can be used for course quality; 3) UTAS will undertake a mapping exercise with all teaching and learning policies to identify gaps; and 4) VU needs to consolidate and complete work on policy renewal. Areas of good practice and individual institutions recommendations for self-improvement are summarised in Ako Aotearoa's full report (Booth, 2015).

The peer review workshop also identified areas for sharing across the KPIs. Some examples were: 1) UK PSF Booklet [BCU]; 2) Committee on University Academic Programmes (CUAP) policies on approval, development and review [AUT and LU] and; 3) national teaching standards extend discussion with the UK, Australia and NZ. Each university was also provided with individual recommendations to follow up within their own institutions.

The peer review workshop discussion also noted a number of key similarities and differences across three countries. Often the differences were differences in approaches to solving common problems. Some of the shared theme areas included:

- University strategic plans rely heavily on analysis of internal and external data with some data not being available for 3 years;
- Lack of consistency in approach between strategic and operational plans;
- Partnerships with schools are an important part of assisting students' transition into university, although current ability to track students' progress through the whole system (from school through higher education) varies;
- Focus on blended learning in professional development of academic staff;
- Access to teaching surveys for quality assurance purposes is a challenge; and
- Importance of external referencing for programmes is essential for credibility and validation.

Another area of similarity across New Zealand and Australia has been the emerging interest and implementation of a the UK Professional Standards Framework (UK PSF), which is an internationally recognised framework for benchmarking success within HE teaching and support which can be applied to personal development programmes at the individual or

institutional level to improve teaching quality and recognise excellence. A majority of UK universities have the UK PSF in place within their institutions.

In terms of shared similarities, both the Australian and New Zealand governments' strategies focus on increasing access and participation, however, they do not cover all students in relation to funding. Australia's Higher Education Participation Programme (HEPP) supports students from disadvantaged backgrounds but does cover international students, whilst New Zealand's Tertiary Education Strategy does not cover students from refugee backgrounds. Both Australia and New Zealand have universities which are using Advancement via Individual Determination (AVID) which is a university readiness system with primary, secondary and tertiary programs. The program enables low socio-economic students with the academic, social and emotional skills to be successful at university as well it supports school leaders with professional development to assist students to have aspirations to university. Another similarity between Australia and New Zealand is that school students have a unique identifier which stays with them for their whole life. In Australia it is the Commonwealth Higher Education Student Support Number (CHESSN) which provides information on the HECS- HELP loan and Commonwealth Scholarships. In addition the State of Victoria in Australia has a unique student identifier which applies to all school students. New Zealand has a similar process called a unique education identifier, a National Student Number (NSN), which applies to all students so as to track their progress and participation in educational activities.

The participating universities also identified common themes which differed across each country. These themes were:

- Language in national policies on equity and access is slightly different. Australia and the UK focus on social inclusion for different cohorts, New Zealand for instance, is focused on priority learners (Maori, Pacifica, under 25's) and recognising diversity. In UK the language is about inclusivity and the policies more issues based. Unpacking the reasons and impact of these different policy agendas provided some useful discussion;
- Core professional development programs for academic staff [optional vs mandatory];
- Funding for teaching quality varies across universities [varies between $70K a year to $3M];
- Another key difference between jurisdictions relates to the consistent use of external survey instruments. Australia is in the process of developing a suite of new national indicators in learning and teaching quality through Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching (QILT). The surveys include the University Experience Survey, the Graduate Outcomes Survey and the Employer Satisfaction Survey. In New Zealand each university runs their own experience/satisfaction surveys, but all universities are participating in the Graduate Longitudinal Survey. Several NZ universities in the past also opted to use the Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE), but this is no longer available. UK universities place more emphasis on institutional targets for the NSS than Australia and NZ;
- Language is different around courses/programmes/papers/subject/unit/modules;
- Only New Zealand has a co-ordinated process of programme approvals (through CUAP, the Committee on University Academic Programmes).

Exploring ways of supporting educationally disadvantaged students through pathways was a common theme for all participants, but each noted that there was no common approach and differences are often at the subject level within the same organisation.

The peer review workshop included an evaluation session which asked participants to consider the value of the benchmarking process for quality improvement within their own institutions as well as areas for improvement. Feedback was also sought through an online survey [2 responses]. In terms of benchmarking methodology some participants found the self-review phase valuable, such as 'Very useful exercise, particularly the information gathering in the self-review phase and 'I think the process of seeing how the information comes together and then meeting has been really useful'. A number of participants saw the value in using the benchmarking methodology as an evidence-based approach to influence strategic thinking and change and also saw the potential of the methodology to have many applications across the HE sector. Many participants valued the opportunity for collegial discussions on emerging areas of good practice. A critical point agreed by representatives in HE quality assurance agencies was, '[The] Devil is in the follow up, we will be looking to see if collegial discussions took place and were followed up by actions.' Participants also identified the following areas for improvement such as questions were repeated in the benchmarking template and less KPIs for discussion to allow more time to discuss areas in more depth.

Conclusion

This 'proof of concept' benchmarking project commissioned by Ako Aotearoa was a collaborative learning process to identify areas of good practice; areas for improvement or further development and areas for sharing across 5 KPIs. The benchmarking exercise did in fact enhance participants understanding of the potential of international peer review for quality improvement purposes. Three key lessons emerged from this project:

1. The importance of unpacking differences in terminology used by different countries and the tacit national assumptions we make about developing processes and services for the benefit of the learner;
2. The value of collegial discussions as an external reference point from which to re-evaluate the internal assessment and develop ideas for further action; and
3. The value of external partnerships to undertake more comparative work in identified areas for improvement.

The last lesson points to the importance of universities building capacity at the national and international levels to work with HE agencies, such as Ako Aotearoa, the OLT and the HEA as well as quality assurance agencies, to undertake some sort of external referencing and benchmarking exercise for quality improvement purposes in areas of shared strategic priority. One participant noted,

> '*Having two days to talk about excellence in teaching in such depth with such openness was an inspiration… I did have a deep belief that collaboration, particularly across institutions and internationally, is what builds innovation and leadership for innovation and I saw all that here today.*'

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Appendix A: Benchmarking Framework Example

PERFORMANCE MEASURES	RATING [Four point scale] Yes, Yes BUT, No BUT, No	RATIONALE [Use dot points to identify practices that support this rating]	EVIDENCE [Provide name and web reference, data sources]

PI#1: Strategies to increase successful participation of priority learners in tertiary education
The New Zealand Government has introduced the Tertiary Education Strategy 2014-2019 to assist tertiary education and its users (learners and businesses) towards a more productive and competitive New Zealand. Tertiary education encompasses all post-school learning, including higher education, applied and vocational training, and training in foundation skills. These learning opportunities occur in a range of settings, including workplaces, universities and polytechnics. It is recognised that all individuals from all backgrounds have the opportunity to realise their talents through tertiary education. Key features of increasing participation of priority learners in New Zealand include evidence of strategic planning; strategies to improve participation of priority learners and collaborative networks.

PERFORMANCE MEASURES	RATING [Four point scale] Yes, Yes BUT, No BUT, No	RATIONALE [Use dot points to identify practices that support this rating]	EVIDENCE [Provide name and web reference, data sources]
1.1 Strategic planning for stakeholder needs Consider and address: a. How does the institution meet stakeholder needs in the Strategic plan (prospective and enrolled learners, communities, employers and industry? e.g. Māori, iwi, Pasifika, Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander, other) b. How does the institution address career guidance and support for students in the Strategic Plan? *e.g.* initiatives that are in place to support priority learners. c. Are the Equity and Diversity Plans in place to address the needs of a diverse learning community? d. How often are these strategic plans and initiatives evaluated? **1.2 Strategies to improve successful participation of students** Consider and address:			

a. What Strategies are in place to improve successful participation of students from different backgrounds and different learning experiences? b. What information, support and advice are given to school students about their study choices, tertiary transition and benefits of moving to higher education? c. What mentoring and outreach programmes are available to support them in their transition to higher education?			