

Introduction and User Guide

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1. Background: Benchmarking with a focus on Graduate Employability: Why, how and with what?

Introduction: a new emphasis on standards and benchmarking in Australian Higher Education

The Australian government has recently announced a clearer and more direct focus on clear minimum quality benchmarks (standards) which will be funding-driven requirements of all higher education institutions by 2011 (Gillard, 2010). The government has called on universities across the sector to “to take stock, assess what needs improvement and to develop the plans and tools to lift the quality of teaching, lift the engagement of students and lift the expectations and performance of teachers and researchers (Gillard, 2010).” To drive this agenda, the Government is replacing the Australian Universities Quality Agency and establishing a new national regulatory and quality agency for higher education, Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA), an independent body with powers to regulate university and non-university higher education providers, monitor quality and set standards. In the interim (that is, in 2010), the Australian Learning and Teaching Council has the task of facilitating and coordinating discipline communities’ definitions of academic standards—that is, learning outcomes described in terms of core discipline knowledge and core discipline-specific skills. This includes the negotiation of up to six high level core learning outcomes (threshold academic standards) at Bachelor level in key disciplines, and subsequently up to 10 at each university (Australian Learning and Teaching Council, 2009).

Benchmarking in Australian higher education: practice to date

The emphasis on standards naturally leads to benchmarking, “a process of articulating standards” at a institution-wide, national or international level (Bell, 1999). Benchmarking is a process that allows universities to *assess* their performance and *improve* their practice (Garlick & Pryor, 2004). It is a cyclical process that involves feeding back information for further improvement (Henderson-Smart, Winning, Gerzina, King, & Hyde, 2006). Benchmarking fits with broader quality frameworks currently in place in higher education, such as Quality Assurance (QA) and Quality Enhancement (QE) (Henderson-Smart et al., 2006). Even so, higher education institutions have been slow to take up benchmarking as a quality improvement process (Weeks, 2000). Benchmarking in higher education to date has mostly focussed on processes outside of the classroom, such as electronic student services, because it is easier to determine the process than quantify classroom practices (Epper, 1999). Ramsden and colleagues have recommended establishing benchmarking partnerships in order to identify and share best practice of recognising and rewarding good university teaching (Ramsden, Margetson, Martin, & Clarke, 1995) even though learning and teaching are generally considered to be the most difficult area to benchmark in higher education because of difficulties in arriving at a consensus for the scope (Henderson-Smart et al., 2006). In addition, the lack of quantitative measures to judge an institution’s performance in teaching and learning, let alone the preparedness of graduates, is a limiting factor in benchmarking in Australian higher education.

Graduate employability as a focus for benchmarking

Along with academic standards and accountability, graduate employability has become an increasing focus of Australian higher education and is an area in which collaborative benchmarking might well assist in improving evidence, outcomes, and practices. In this Fellowship, the term *graduate employability* means more than the attainment of employment. It draws on a widely accepted definition: ‘a set of achievements — skills, understandings and personal attributes - that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy (Yorke, 2004). In this Fellowship, the focus is on developing **capabilities**, an umbrella term which implies integration, confidence and future performance (Stephenson, 1998), and more specifically, the ‘capabilities that count’ for early professional success (Scott, 2005; Scott, Coates, & Anderson, 2008) so that new graduates ‘hit the ground running rather than limping’ (Knight & Yorke, 2004, 2006). It is proposed that a 360-degree evidence-based approach to key capability development is a useful mechanism to assure and enhance the quality for graduate employability (Oliver, 2009) as shown in Figure 1 overleaf. This 360-degree approach focuses on six aspects, culminating with benchmarking:

1. Determining the capabilities that count for early professional success
2. Mapping where those capabilities are assessed in the formal curriculum
3. Supporting their achievement through work-integrated learning experiences
4. Having students self- and peer-assess, in reflective practice through ePortfolios
5. Gathering stakeholder perceptions of achievement—do new graduates demonstrate the capabilities that count?, and
6. Engaging in benchmarking for continuous improvement of the curriculum.

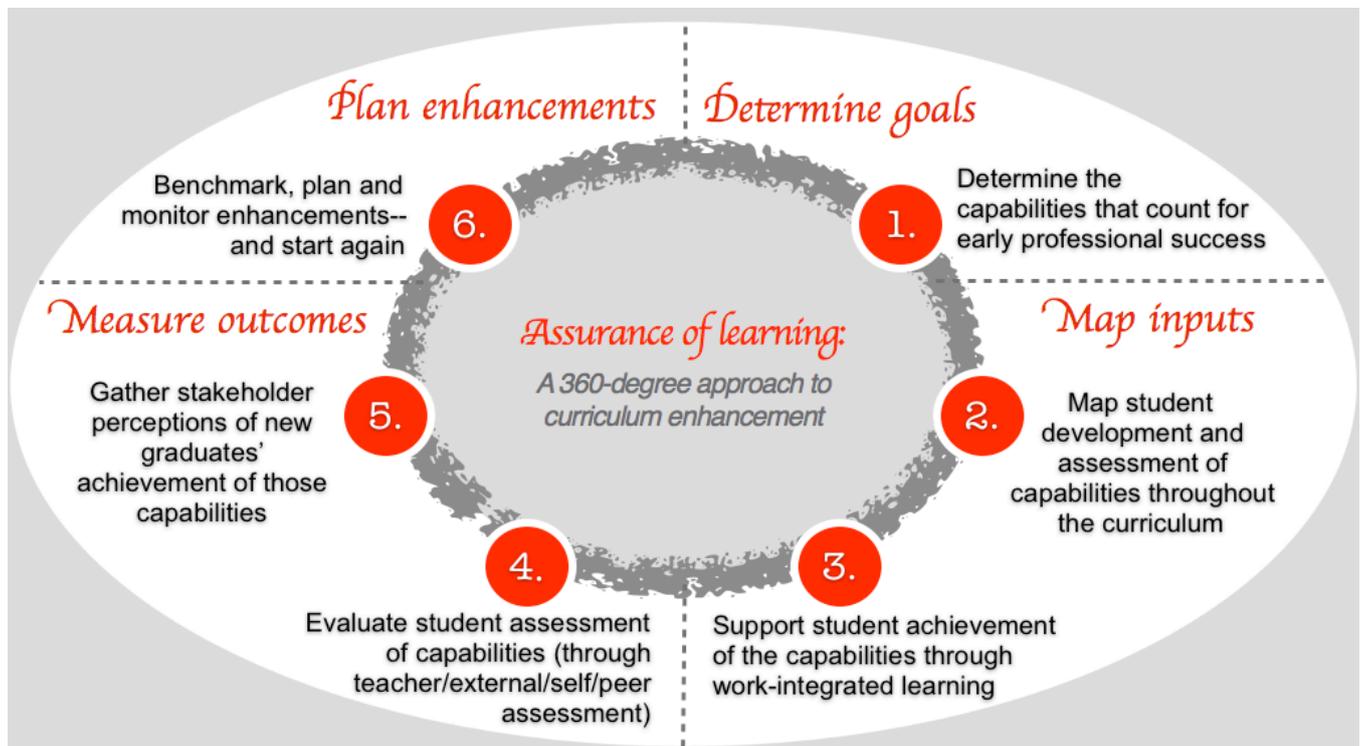


Figure 1 A 360-degree evidence-based approach to capability development for graduate employability

The Fellowship seeks to engage teaching academics, particularly those responsible for course quality, in a **collaborative approach** to benchmarking through partnerships undertaken with mutual respect and within agreed confidentiality boundaries. Within these partnerships, course teams agree to reflect on the evidence of their course's effectiveness in producing capable graduates (using a Benchmarking Evidence Portfolio), then share a summary of evidence (the Benchmarking Portfolio Summary) as a starting point for ongoing and mutually beneficial planning, implementing and monitoring of improvements to effect enhanced graduate employability.

This process will be trialled at a National Forum in November 2010 (see <http://tiny.cc/boliver>) with course teams in undergraduate Accounting, and possibly Law and Nursing. Other disciplines are welcome to participate, or to register interest in participating. From the pool of those who express interest in benchmarking, universities will only benchmark with their selected and agreed partners.

The focus in this Fellowship and in these materials is benchmarking between partners from within Australia. Materials in this document will be adapted for international benchmarking in due course.

2. Benchmarking partnerships for graduate employability: the process

One of the aims of this Fellowship is to design and trial the process, then refine it based on participants' feedback. The process has eight proposed steps, designed to draw on lessons from the literature, and based on a reflective approach to curriculum enhancement. The eight steps are designed for an efficient but comprehensive experience with due regard for confidentiality and institutional approval. The focal participants in the process are the benchmarking partners: each partnership consists of a course team represented by at least one course leader, ideally the person responsible for the quality and delivery and curriculum enhancement of the course. Benchmarking partners engage through these **eight steps**:

1. **Express interest** in participating in this benchmarking process by contacting Beverley Oliver. When you 'express interest', you and your course go into the 'benchmarking pool'--that is, a group of all those who have expressed interest to date. You are encouraged to network and bring appropriate partners into the pool. *You may withdraw from the pool at any time and for any reason.* DEADLINE: 15 August 2010
2. **Complete and email the Benchmarking Info Checklist** (see page 7 of this document) which includes preliminary details, contact information, and 'in principle' agreement from the appropriate Executive staff. DEADLINE: 15 August 2010
3. **Engage course stakeholders**, especially head of school; advisory board or accrediting or professional body if appropriate; the course team (full-time, part-time and casual staff); students, graduates and other appropriate stakeholders (this engagement with peers is key);
4. **Initiate the [Graduate Employability Indicators](#)** (highly recommended), online surveys designed to gather graduate, employer and teaching staff feedback on graduate attainment and importance of key capabilities;
5. **Prepare the Benchmarking Evidence Portfolio** (see summary overleaf, and full text commencing on page 8 of this document) by reflecting with the course team and appropriate others, and decide on the content of the **Benchmarking Portfolio Summary** (that is, which parts of the Portfolio will be shared with selected partners). The **Benchmarking Evidence Portfolio** includes reflective (soft) evidence and quantitative (hard) evidence of the course inputs (eg where key capabilities are assessed in the curriculum) as well as the course outcomes (where is the evidence that graduates of this course find employment, and that they have the 'capabilities that count?').
6. **Confirm the benchmarking partners and event** (time, place and mode) and confirm Executive support for the evidence that will be shared with these partners. In early September, you will be informed of those in the benchmarking pool in courses similar to yours. You will then have the opportunity to negotiate (1) which partners you will choose to benchmark with, and (2) which evidence you will choose to share with each. *You may still withdraw from the pool at any time and for any reason.* DEADLINE: for partnerships to be agreed 1 October 2010
7. **Engage with partners at the benchmarking event**, sharing your Benchmarking Portfolio Summary; DEADLINE: You may choose the benchmark at a time and place suitable to both partners. However, it is envisaged that many partners will opt to attend the Benchmarking event in Melbourne on 4 November, and stay on for the [National Forum](#) on 5 November. Unfortunately ALTC funds are **not** available to fund travel to this event.
8. **Share the outcomes of the benchmarking event** with internal and external stakeholders, including Executive, and secure strategies, funding, timelines and indicators to provide evidence of future success.

Minimising the limitations of this approach to benchmarking

There are many forms of benchmarking. This one invites peers to compare inputs and outputs, learn from each other, and improve. While this can be a helpful process, it would be even better if partners could not only compare themselves to each other, but to a national or international benchmark standard (eg a national average, or a national threshold standard). Such benchmarks will be sourced by the Fellowship team wherever possible. Not all courses will be able to provide evidence in every category. The aim is for benchmarking partners to draw on evidence that is common (this will largely be from national indicators), and to use the materials from the other categories to flesh out a more holistic picture of the student experience.

Benchmarking Evidence Portfolio: A summary overview

1. The key capabilities

What are the graduate attributes, graduate qualities, professional competencies or course learning outcomes that are the stated goals of this course? Comment on the degree to which the course is governed by these capabilities, and what you see as the strengths and weaknesses of your current approach.

2. Evidence showing where, when and how the capabilities are assessed

Provide evidence showing where, when and how the capabilities are assessed in the course, particularly within work-integrated learning. Provide details of any systematic work-placements, simulations or authentic tasks (assessments which emulate professional tasks). Comment on what you see as the strengths and weaknesses of your current approach.

3. Student self- and peer assessment of capabilities

Some courses ask their students to self- and peer assess capabilities. If you have access to student self-assessment data, describe the outcomes here. Comment on what you see as the strengths and weaknesses of your current approach.

4. Evidence from indicators canvassing stakeholder perceptions

4.1 Students

- Commencing and total Headcount and EFSTL
- First year retention rate
- Course annual retention rate
- Course Student Load Pass Rate
- Unit Pass Rates

4.2 Graduates

- Australian Graduate Survey:
 - Course Experience Questionnaire (Good Teaching, Generic Skills, Overall Satisfaction);
 - Graduate Destination Survey (Proportion of Respondents in Full-time and Part-time Employment and Undertaking Further Study)
- Graduate Employability Indicators—Graduate Survey: Graduates of up to five years perceptions of the extent to which their experience during their degree contributed to their development of the capabilities, and their overall work-readiness (quantitative items); the importance of each capability to the early professional success of new graduates of this degree (quantitative items); and the best aspects of the degree in helping develop capabilities for employment, and suggestions for improvements (qualitative items).

4.3 Employers and industry

- Graduate Employability Indicators—Employer Survey: Employers' perceptions of the extent to which new graduates (from any university) demonstrate each of the capabilities, and their overall work-readiness (quantitative items); the importance of each capability to the early professional success of new graduates of this degree (quantitative items); and what skills, attributes and personal qualities are most useful for new graduates in this field, and which can be prioritized for improvement (qualitative items).

4.4 Course teaching team

- Graduate Employability Indicators—Course Team Survey: Teaching staff (fulltime, part-time) perceptions of the extent to which new graduates demonstrate each of the capabilities, and their overall work-readiness (quantitative items); the importance of each capability to the employment success of new graduates of this degree (quantitative items); and their confidence in teaching and assessing the capabilities (quantitative items); their role in assisting students to develop the capabilities, and the main incentives and disincentives for doing so (qualitative items).

Comment on what you see as the strengths and weaknesses based on the evidence in this section.

5. Overview reflective questions

Overall, what do you see as the strengths, weaknesses, threats and opportunities for graduate employability of this course? What issues do you hope to collaborate on with your benchmarking partner(s)?

3. Roles and behaviours of the participants in this process

The participants in this process are:

1. The Benchmarking Partner Team Leader, normally the staff member responsible for the quality and enhancement of the curriculum of a course (such as the Bachelor of Science (Nursing)).
2. The Benchmarking Partner Team, normally those who teach in the course (such as the Bachelor of Science (Nursing)). Teams are also strongly encouraged to include students, graduates, employers, accrediting bodies, and so on.
3. Those who authorise Benchmarking Partnerships within a University: the sharing of business intelligence such as course performance data is usually subject to authorisation by a Head of School, or a Dean, and Senior Executive. Each Benchmarking Partner Team Leader is expected to seek the appropriate authorisation from within their own institution.
4. The Fellowship Team provides the framework for the process, can assist with compiling data for Benchmarking Evidence Portfolios, facilitating benchmarking events which occur during the National Forum, and evaluating and refining the process. Findings will be published in the Final Fellowship Report, as well as other scholarly publications in due course.

Three behaviours are expected of all participants:

1. Active engagement in all stages of the process, including attention to deadlines and requests for information;
2. Complete confidentiality in relation to all evidence and discussions shared or observed before, during and after the benchmarking occurs. **Specifically, any partner information shared during this process can be used formally or informally, or communicated in any way or for any purpose. Agreement to maintain confidentiality is a condition of participation.**
3. Provision of feedback on the benchmarking process.

All partners participating in benchmarking through this Fellowship will be named in the Fellowship Final Report. This will include information about the course (programme) which is benchmarked, the names of appropriate stakeholders, particularly course leaders, and de-identified outcomes as a result of the benchmarking. No benchmarking evidence (that is, reflections or course performance data) will be shared in any way that identifies universities or their courses.

4. Incentives for participating course leaders

All participating course leaders:

1. will be invited to submit a one page evaluation of this experience--best aspects and how the process could be improved. With due ethics clearance, the results of the evaluation will be published in a peer-reviewed journal article in which contributing course leaders will be acknowledged.
2. will be acknowledged with a letter of thanks in the context of the ALTC Fellowship.
3. are strongly encouraged to use this experience to **publish** a co-authored peer-reviewed paper in a special edition of the [Journal for Teaching and Learning for Graduate Employability](#) in 2011, and /or **present** an individual or team poster or paper at the [National Forum](#) on November 5 2010.
4. will have the opportunity to network with colleagues, and have foundational input into a process which is likely to become more common as the sector adopts a clearer focus on standards.

5. Glossary of terms

The term	indicates
Benchmarking	A systematic way of comparing evidence of course performance drawing on appropriate evidence.
Graduate Employability	a set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that makes graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy (Knight & Yorke, 2004)
Course	A degree programme
Unit	A semester-length learning experience, also commonly called subject or module
Capabilities	In general, the “skills, understandings and personal attributes” that count for early professional success.
Graduate	Someone who has graduated from the course in the last five years
Employer	Someone who directly employs or works with graduates of courses
Benchmarking Partner Team Leader	The staff member responsible for the quality of a course (programme) and its curriculum
Benchmarking Partner Team	The fulltime, part-time or casual staff who teach a course (programme)
Authorising manager	Name, position and contact details of the staff member who will authorise participation in the benchmarking Partnerships (Head of School, Dean, Senior Executive)

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