

Benchmarking Policy and Procedure

1. Introduction

The Benchmarking Policy and Procedure outlines the processes for undertaking benchmarking activities at the Australian Performing Arts Conservatory's (APAC) and the type of activities that will occur. This policy and procedure acknowledges the overview of benchmarking provided in the 'TEQSA Guidance Note: External Referencing (including Benchmarking)'.

1.1. Purpose

This policy and procedure serves to promote best practice via comparisons with external referencing and/or agreements with partners to foster continuous improvement across all aspects of educational offerings delivered by APAC.

1.2. Scope

This Policy and Procedure applies to all staff, contractors, consultants and to members of decision-making and advisory groups.

1.3. Principles

APAC will engage in:

- External referencing, including benchmarking, to assure the quality of APAC's provision of education.
- regularly comparing teaching and learning outcomes against other higher education providers (HEPs).
- regularly benchmarking higher education courses to ensure that they are innovative and remain current.
- continuous improvement to strive for best practice.

2. Policy Statements

APAC is committed to consistency with the requirements set out in the Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2021 (HESF).

The types of benchmarking that APAC will engage in include:

- **Operational Benchmarking**, involving benchmarking APAC's operations at the organisational level.
- **Course and Student Performance Benchmarking**, involving the benchmarking of course and unit design, learning outcomes, and student performance.
- **Policy and Processes Benchmarking**, involving the benchmarking of APAC's policies and procedures and their efficacy.

2.2. Operational Benchmarking

Benchmarking of operations and performance will be undertaken in accordance with an established schedule, led by the Director of Higher Education and CEO (as appropriate),

who will prepare relevant reports for consideration by the Academic Board and Board of Directors. External referencing and benchmarking to support operational benchmarking will be undertaken where possible against comparative providers (or through benchmarking consortia) and may include but is not limited to:

- Staff ratios;
- Criteria for academic appointment and professional equivalency;
- Market demand for educational offerings; and
- Financial information (such as course, unit and administration fees).

2.3. Course and Student Performance Benchmarking

2.2.1 Course and Unit Monitoring and Reviews

Course and unit reviews are undertaken in line with the *Course Development and Review Policy and Procedure* and according to an established schedule. External referencing and benchmarking to support course and unit monitoring and review activities require that a comparative analysis is undertaken against other similar courses and/or units, including but not limited to:

- Course structure;
- Course admission criteria;
- Course curriculum, pedagogy and assessment (which may include peer review of assessment or marking activities);
- Course resources and learning facilities;
- Academic Outcomes, including student achievement of learning outcomes and cohort analysis of student performance data;
- Student engagement and responses to internal and external surveys;
- Matters identified from student performance data and student and staff feedback;
- Graduate outcomes (including salary medians, percentage of graduates in full-time employment and further education outcomes); and
- Other data to inform the course benchmarking exercise, including unit-level comparisons.

The Strategic Plan and Teaching and Learning Plan should also be considered to inform this exercise, taking account of the strategies and measures listed in those Plans, and to determine if recommendations to review the Teaching and Learning Plan should be escalated to the Academic Board, taking note of findings arising from the course review process.

2.2.2 Student Performance (Course and Learning Outcomes)

Benchmarking of student performance outcomes will be undertaken in accordance with an established schedule, led by the Director of Higher Education who will prepare relevant reports for consideration by the Teaching and Learning Committee, Academic Board and

Board of Directors. This activity may, but is not required to, align with course and unit review activities as outlined in the *Course Development and Review Policy and Procedure*, but will otherwise include (and is not limited to) tracking student cohort data:

- Attrition;
- Retention;
- Progression;
- Completion rates and times;
- Student engagement and responses to internal surveys; and
- Graduate outcomes (including salary medians, percentage of graduates in full-time employment and further education outcomes).

Benchmarking may include participation in external benchmarking consortia or similar activity. The aim will be to compare teaching and learning outcomes from a range of higher education providers and use the results to identify areas for improvement and acknowledge good practice. The results will be analysed to compare trends and variations, and to inform analyses on causal factors, including variations arising from the individual nature of the course(s), student cohorts, or from variations in quality or academic standards.

The findings from benchmarking outcomes will be analysed in conjunction with the strategies and measures in the Strategic Plan and Teaching and Learning Plan, particularly in areas relating to student satisfaction survey measures and attrition, progression, and retention rates.

2.4. Policies and Processes

Informal benchmarking via desktop review will be undertaken by the Admissions and Compliance Manager or nominee (as determined by the Document Owner) during the development and scheduled review of policies, procedures, or documents. The process will include reviewing the policies, procedures or documents from comparable providers against APACs in line with APAC's *Policy Framework*.

Desktop reviews and formal agreements with comparable providers will occur as a part of APAC's ongoing monitoring and review practices.

A formal Benchmarking Report is not generally required for the benchmarking of policies and processes, unless requested by a governing body, the Document Owner.

3. Procedures

3.1. Planning

A Benchmarking and Review Schedule will be developed by the Director of Higher Education in conjunction with the CEO to ensure regular and consistent benchmarking is undertaken on an approved cycle. The Benchmarking and Review Schedule will be endorsed by the Academic Board and approved by the Board of Directors.

Depending on the nature of the benchmarking activity (academic, non-academic) either

the Director of Higher Education (academic) or Chief Executive Officer (non-academic) will maintain oversight of the project and prepare relevant Benchmarking Proposals and Benchmarking Reports, or a Project Manager may be appointed to undertake these functions.

In preparing the Benchmarking Proposal, relevant stakeholders will be engaged to assist in identifying benchmarking, including the scope and objectives of the proposed activities.

The proposal will identify:

- the purpose and scope of the benchmarking activity, including if the activity is ad hoc or being undertaken as a scheduled activity;
- specific areas of performance or compliance to be examined/benchmarked against;
- the planned approach and methodology, including a schedule for submission of Benchmarking Reports to relevant governing bodies;
- project timings;
- resources required to complete the activity (e.g. equipment, staffing); and
- whether a benchmarking partnership and an associated Memorandum of Understanding is required with a comparable higher education provider.

If external partners are required, a Memorandum of Understanding is to be prepared in addition to the proposal for approval by the Board of Directors. Memoranda will be prepared by the Director of Higher Education (for academic agreements) and by the CEO (for non-academic agreements).

The proposal must be endorsed by the Academic Board (for academic matters) and approved by the Board of Directors (for all matters) before any formal benchmarking activities may commence.

3.2. Collection of information

A benchmarking template will be used to measure key metrics and practices within business areas, against competitors, industry peers, or other providers.

All information gathered as part of benchmarking activities, including Benchmarking Reports, is to be treated as confidential. Permission should be sought and granted from the Director of Higher Education (for academic matters) or the Chief Executive Officer (for non-academic matters) before any external communication relating to benchmarking outcomes is made.

3.3. Analysis and Reporting

Benchmarking Reports will be completed on an agreed template to ensure consistency of comparison and reporting. The report will be prepared by the responsible officer as

recorded in the Benchmarking and Review Schedule (or their nominee), or as otherwise outlined in the Benchmarking Proposal.

The Benchmarking Report will include:

- The purpose and scope of the benchmarking activity;
- A summary of the approach taken to complete the benchmarking activity, including methodologies;
- A summary of stakeholders consulted to obtain or analyse data and findings;
- The approved benchmarking activities and relevant findings, including any identified deficiencies in performance, areas of risk or noncompliance, and areas of best or improved practice that may exist or be adopted; and
- An Action Plan to ensure continuous improvement activities are implemented, compliance gaps rectified and that there are sufficient resources in place to facilitate required improvements.

Benchmarking Reports will be circulated to relevant governing bodies as required, however any academic benchmarking activity must be submitted to the Academic Board for consideration and endorsement of identified recommendations and improvements. All Benchmarking Reports must be submitted to the Board of Directors for oversight and final approval.

3.4. Monitoring

The Board of Directors is ultimately responsible for ensuring scheduled benchmarking activities are performed in accordance with the Benchmarking and Review Schedule; and that, in particular, recommendations arising from benchmarking activities as they pertain to lapses compliance are addressed and improvements put in place.

Where relevant, the Academic Board or Board of Directors may forward Benchmarking Reports to relevant business functions to guide and evaluate continuous improvement activities.

4. Responsibilities

4.1. The Board of Directors

The Board of Directors is responsible for:

- the approval of formal Benchmarking Proposals;
- the approval of Memoranda of Understanding (MOU) with other entities or organisations; and
- the review and oversight of Benchmarking Reports, including monitoring of continuous improvement activities.

4.2. The Academic Board

The Academic Board is responsible for:

- having oversight of academic benchmarking activities;
- endorsing formal Benchmarking Proposals and Benchmarking Reports;
- monitoring continuous improvement activities, specifically as they relate to academic matters.

4.3. The Director of Higher Education

The Director of Higher Education is responsible for:

- initiating academic benchmarking activities,
- the identification of benchmarking partners for academic activities,
- the facilitation of Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) between benchmarking partners for reporting and Academic Board endorsement.
- ongoing monitoring and reporting to the Academic Board on relevant benchmarking activities and practices.

4.4. The Chief Executive Officer (CEO)

The CEO is responsible for:

- initiating non-academic benchmarking activities,
- the identification of benchmarking partners for non-academic activities, and
- the facilitation of Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) between benchmarking partners for reporting and Board Approval.
- Ongoing monitoring and reporting to the Board of Directors on relevant benchmarking activities and practices.

4.5. Admissions and Compliance Manager

The Admissions and Compliance Manager is responsible for:

- Undertaking desktop review to facilitate the benchmarking of policies and processes under development or review.

4.6. Staff

Staff have a responsibility to contribute to quality assurance and quality improvement, including participating constructively in benchmarking activities.

5. Relevant Documents

- APAC Benchmarking and Review Schedule
- APAC Course Development and Review Policy and Procedure
- APAC Policy Framework
- APAC Quality Assurance Framework
- APAC Strategic Plan
- APAC Teaching and Learning Plan
- Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2021
- Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency Act 2011 (TEQSA Act)
- TEQSA Guidance Note: External Referencing (including Benchmarking), April 2019.
- Privacy Act 1988 (Cth)

6. Definitions

- **Benchmarking** is recognised as a means by which an entity can: demonstrate accountability to stakeholders; improve networking and collaborative relationships; generate management information; develop an increased understanding of practice, process or performance; and garner insights into how improvements might be made. Its purpose is to identify comparative strengths and weaknesses, as a basis for developing improvements in quality. Benchmarking can also be defined as a quality process used to evaluate performance by comparing institutional practices to sector good practice. ‘Internal benchmarking’ against other relevant programs offered by the provider may also be undertaken.
- **Desktop Review/Survey:** is a benchmarking activity that involves gathering and analyzing data from existing sources, such as a website to evaluate and compare performance, practices, and processes of different organizations or industries without physically visiting them. It is a cost-effective way to gather insights and identify opportunities for improvement or best practices.
- **Memorandum of Understanding (MOU)** is a document that records the common intent of two or more parties where the parties do not wish to assume legally binding obligations. An MOU provides a framework and set of principles to guide the parties in undertaking a project or working arrangement.

Version Control and Document Owner

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