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## **Final Report**

### **Encouraging benchmarking in e-learning**

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## Executive summary

*Encouraging benchmarking in e-learning* supported the dissemination of e-learning benchmarks developed by the Australasian Council on Open, Distance and E-Learning (ACODE). Dissemination activities, including provision of web-based information and of training, were required to enhance the accessibility to the sector of the benchmarks and the guidelines for their use.

### *Workshops*

ACODE ran interactive workshops in five capital cities: Brisbane, Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide and Perth. Christine Goodacre (co-leader of the ACODE-funded benchmarking project) facilitated the workshops. A workshop evaluation was completed by 82 per cent of participants; of these 96 per cent felt that workshop outcomes had been realised and 86 per cent of respondents indicated their intention to use some or all of the benchmarks (54 per cent within the institution only and 46 per cent with partners).

### *The Innovative Research Universities of Australia (IRUA) sub-project*

Training was provided for a group of staff from the IRUA group of universities in the use of the benchmarks and a case study developed that was disseminated as part of the workshops and on the ACODE website <http://www.acode.edu.au>.

### *Communities of practice*

It was the original intention of the project that communities of practitioners be established and supported via web-based communication tools. Given the time delay in embedding benchmarking initiatives in the planning process, and the fact that their early use was largely for internal self-assessments, the need for collaborative tools to facilitate work with benchmarking partners did not arise during the course of the project. However, 90 per cent of national workshop participants indicated they would consider joining a community of practice to further benchmarking work.



## Background and context

ACODE, the Australasian Council on Open, Distance and E-Learning, is the peak Australasian organisation for universities engaged or interested in open, distance, flexible and e-learning. In one form or another, ACODE has existed since the mid 1980s.

ACODE's mission is to enhance policy and practice in open, distance, flexible and e-learning in Australasian higher education. ACODE seeks to influence policy and practice at institutional, national and international levels through:

1. disseminating and sharing knowledge and expertise;
2. supporting professional development and providing networking opportunities;
3. investigating, developing and evaluating new approaches;
4. advising and influencing key bodies in higher education; and
5. promoting best practice.

The ACODE e-Learning Benchmarks were originally developed as part of an ACODE-funded project in 2004-5, after being identified by members as being an area that needed a specific benchmarking approach/instrument for their functions within higher education institutions. There are eight benchmark areas and performance indicators for each. Detailed information about each of the benchmarks can be found on the ACODE website at <http://www.acode.edu.au/>.

The approach to benchmarking in e-learning reflects an enterprise perspective, integrating the key issue of pedagogy with institutional dimensions such as planning, staff development and infrastructure provision. The focus is e-learning in universities, an emerging area and one that is mission-critical for many universities. The term 'e-learning' is used as a catchword, to cover the broad use of technology in learning and teaching whether in an online or multi-modal delivery approach.

Each benchmark area is discrete; for example, staff support for the use of technology in learning and teaching is the focus of one benchmark and it can be used alone or in combination with others. Benchmarks can be used for self-assessment purposes (using one or several benchmarks), or as part of a collaborative benchmarking exercise. As the benchmarks may be used either collectively or individually, there is some duplication across the benchmarking topics. It is expected that any benchmarking exercise would take place over a period of years and in any given year no more than two or three would be addressed; the areas selected reflecting institutional priorities for quality improvement. The benchmarks can be used in conjunction with other benchmarking tools.

The ACODE e-Learning Benchmarks are designed to be used for continuous improvement and quality assurance purposes. Use of the benchmarks can provide a basis for research for improving practice, resulting in a better understanding of operational systems and processes and contributing to accountability requirements. The benchmarks have been developed for use at the enterprise level or by the organisational areas responsible for the provision of leadership and services in this area.

The benchmarks have been internationally reviewed by Professor Paul Bacsich, a UK consultant specialising in benchmarking, costing, and historical aspects of e-learning.



## Project goals and outcomes

The overriding aim of this project was to support the dissemination of the benchmarks and provide training in their use to assess university performance and improve practice. The project deliverables focus on the two dimensions of dissemination: awareness or familiarisation with the benchmarks and uptake or use of them within institutions.

Project deliverables are listed below:

- One workshop in each capital city to introduce the benchmarks and the benchmarking process.
- An introductory workshop and follow up for staff of the Innovative Research Universities of Australia (IRUA) universities in the use of the benchmarks and benchmarking for comparison.
- Development of supported communities of practice among university staff responsible for the provision and support of technology-mediated learning and teaching.
- Development of a website as an information resource for those wanting to find information about the benchmarks and how to use them.
- A final report documenting the case study of the IRUA universities' comparative benchmarking and the range of strategies employed by participants in responding to the results of benchmarking and the various ways that universities have applied the benchmarks.
- Initiation of other e-learning benchmarking activities across the sector.

## Workshops

ACODE ran interactive workshops in five capital cities: Brisbane, Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide and Perth. Christine Goodacre (co-leader of the ACODE-funded benchmarking project) facilitated the workshops.

Seventy-three people attended the workshops, representing all but three Australian universities, including private universities. The VET sector was represented in two states and two consultants in higher education also attended.

An evaluation was completed by 82 per cent of participants. Of these, 96 per cent felt that workshop outcomes had been realised, and 86 per cent of respondents indicated their intention to use some or all of the benchmarks (54 per cent within the institution only and 46 per cent with partners). Value was placed on the usefulness of the peer review process for sharing evidence of practice.

## The Innovative Research Universities of Australia (IRUA) sub-project

The proposed benchmarking activity between IRUA universities was completed. Training was provided for a group of staff from the IRUA group of universities in the use of the benchmarks and a case study developed that was disseminated as part of the workshops and on the ACODE website. The IRUA group used teleconferencing, email and a site visit to Griffith University to share practice. The case study describing the work of the IRUA group can be found at <http://www.acode.edu.au/>.



## Communities of practice

It was the original intention of the project that communities of practitioners be established and supported via web-based communication tools. Practitioners could use these tools to maintain contact and discuss and reflect on the results of their application of the benchmarks in their own context, particularly during the partnering process.

The initial intention was to support communities of practice through the development of collaborative tools as part of the ACODE website. With the development of the ALTC Exchange this was rethought. ALTC Exchange tools have therefore been promoted for use in the benchmarking partnering process, rather than developing competing tools. As the ALTC Exchange tools were not available earlier in the project, the IRUA group used collaborative tools within their institutions, such as email and teleconferencing, to share evidence and facilitate the partnering process.

Given the time delay in embedding benchmarking initiatives in the planning process, and the fact that use to date has largely been internal self-assessments, universities have not yet progressed to the point where they need collaborative tools to facilitate work with benchmarking partners. However, 90 per cent of national workshop participants indicated they would consider joining a community of practice to further benchmarking work.

## Website for the benchmarking initiative

In 2007, ACODE developed a website as an information resource for those wanting to find information about the benchmarks and how to use them. A register was set up for those using the benchmarks and workshop participants encouraged to record their use of them. This website was an important resource. From July 2007 to December 2008 the site received 5278 hits, with 486 hits on the page with the complete set of the benchmarks, 343 hits on the guidelines page, 284 on the PDF download page, 647 on the page providing details of the workshop and 136 on the 'register use' page.

## Reports and evaluation

An independent evaluation of the project was undertaken. Seventy-three people attended the workshops in 2007, representing thirty-four institutions of higher education and two consultants in higher education. A follow-up survey was devised and emailed to each of the workshop participants. Fourteen participants completed and returned the survey via email. The main findings from the evaluation were:

- Almost 30 per cent of those surveyed have used the ACODE benchmarks in one way or another;
- The benchmark covering professional/staff development was the most widely used among those respondents who had undertaken a benchmarking exercise, followed by the benchmark relating to institution policy and governance;
- Two-thirds of respondents who had undertaken a benchmarking exercise had done so for internal, self-assessment purposes, with the remaining respondents benchmarking in collaboration with partner institutions;
- Those surveyed were primarily motivated to benchmark by a desire to review and improve practice. The survey identified upcoming Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) audits as a secondary motivation among some respondents;
- All respondents felt that they had been sufficiently well-prepared for the exercise and reported that the workshop had been effective and insightful in laying the foundations for using the benchmarking tool;



- Of the respondents who had benchmarked, most had not yet taken action based on the results of the activity, citing time and staffing constraints, but all expressed a desire to implement changes in the future;
- The majority, or 71 per cent of those surveyed, had not undertaken a benchmarking exercise, with most blaming a lack of time, resources and commitment from senior management. However, those respondents expressed keen interest in using the benchmarks if and when such challenges can be overcome;
- Major restructure, resignations, new appointments and policy changes were cited as primary reasons not to benchmark by 38 per cent of those surveyed; and
- The 93 per cent of respondents who had not undertaken a benchmarking activity nevertheless expressed satisfaction with the way the workshops had prepared them for the process of benchmarking.

## Other e-learning benchmarking activities

Ten universities (including the seven IRUA universities) have used the benchmarks either within their institutions for self-assessment purposes and/or partnering with other universities for self-improvement purposes. For example, Flinders University and The University of Adelaide have used some or all of the benchmarks for internal self-assessment purposes and the Australian Catholic University has used the benchmarks to inform strategic planning for learning and teaching.

At its meeting in 2007, ACODE used Benchmark 5, on Staff Development, as a framework for sharing practice at a workshop of 36 participants. Workshop feedback was again positive.

The New Zealand Ministry of Education invited ACODE to provide a half-day workshop on the ACODE e-learning benchmarks at the IMS 'Summit on Innovation in Learning Technology' held in Queenstown, New Zealand, 7-9 November 2007 (funded by the Ministry of Education). Twenty-two people attended the interactive workshop, which was well received across the tertiary and school sectors. The Ministry has encouraged the development of a proposal to undertake further work using the benchmarks in the tertiary sector in New Zealand and this is in process.

## Impact on, and value to the sector

Two factors emerged as critical to the success of utilising the e-learning benchmarks. The first is that the benchmarking instrument provides a framework within which most higher education institutions can make assessments of their capability and performance in the e-learning sphere regardless of the particular organisational structure that is used to deliver e-learning policy and practice. Secondly, the fact that the e-learning benchmarks can be used in multiple ways further enhances their usefulness to those working in the e-learning sphere. For example, individuals or teams may choose to use all or some of the benchmarks to audit their current activities and use that as a basis for continuous self improvement. Alternatively, institutions can choose to use all or some of the benchmarks to undertake more formal comparisons between their institution and other institutions (either those with a similar profile or from within other institutional networks e.g. Group of Eight, IRUA, Australian Technology Network of Universities).

The release of the ACODE e-learning benchmarks was timely. Benchmarking is on the agenda for almost all universities with 86 per cent of national workshop participants indicating this was the case. Reasons vary but the AUQA audits are cited most often in workshop feedback.





This project has added value to the higher education sector and it will be important to chart future impact. The dissemination project has made accessible to the sector the benchmarks and the guidelines for their use. An objective of the project was to develop a process that was affordable and manageable. The ACODE-funded trial concluded that this was the case and feedback to date confirms this.

The benchmarks address the need to develop standards for performance and the project has allowed the broader development of skills in self -assessment and the development of strategies to address identified weaknesses. Use of the benchmarks will increase understanding of the value of evidence-based approaches to improving practice. From the student perspective, improvements in performance in the benchmark areas should result in improvements in the student-learning environment.

In summary, benefits for institutions using the ACODE benchmarks include the following:

- Identification of strengths and weaknesses - for planning and priority setting;
- An improved understanding of strategic and operational requirements;
- A framework for quality assurance purposes;
- Recognition of areas of achievement;
- Generation of ideas and a reinvigoration of practice; for example, the development of strategies for improvement in areas of need;
- Collaboration is facilitated – across areas within the institution and with partners; and
- Communities of practice can develop, providing opportunities for staff professional development, project work, staff exchanges and secondments.

The benchmarks have been used in conjunction with other benchmarking tools. This has been explored in a preliminary way in the New Zealand workshop, looking at the e-Learning Maturity Model (eMM) developed by Stephen Marshall of Victoria University of Wellington.<sup>1</sup> ACODE has also funded a project regarding the e-Learning Maturity Model, and as part of this it will explore ways in which the two benchmarking tools can be used in a complementary way.

Given the nature of the project most of the linkages made have been at an interdisciplinary level. There has been particular interest in the ACODE e-Learning Benchmarks from those generally involved in the learning and teaching arena as well as those associated with both library and IT sectors. Other linkages to international individuals and organisations include the Open University of the UK (Professor Denise Kirkpatrick) and the IMS Global Consortium.

## Issues and challenges

There was a clear indication that benchmarking in e-learning is something that the vast majority of individuals working in the teaching and learning arena in higher education believe are needed and are important to developing appropriate policy and practices across institutions and in the sector.

Three or four issues emerged during this project and have been confirmed in the workshops and discussions with those using the benchmarks in their universities.

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<sup>1</sup> Information on this initiative, which is being used in New Zealand and the United Kingdom can be found at <http://www.utdc.vuw.ac.nz/research/emm/>



They are common to many projects and are noted here.

- The need for a senior sponsor and ownership if the project is to succeed;
- Allied with this, the allocation of sufficient time and resources;
- The importance of discussing concepts and ensuring a common understanding of terms. This is particularly important in relation to the performance indicators; and
- Ensuring group involvement in discussion of the structure of the project, appointing a project manager and identifying collaborative tools and timelines for tasks; in essence, ensuring good project management.

Major factors that impeded the success of the project seemed to result from the many changes occurring in the higher education sector. Consequently, the priorities of institutions and key individuals varied significantly according to whether or not an organisational restructure was imminent or occurring; the financial position of the relevant institution; the attitude of key senior staff toward benchmarking in this area or benchmarking generally; whether or not the institution was preparing for an external audit (e.g. AUQA) or other such major influences.

## Final general comments

This project was highly effective in creating awareness of the benchmarks and in guiding participants through their use. Those participants who went on to conduct a benchmarking exercise reported being well prepared for the exercise. Those who did not conduct benchmarking still regarded the benchmarks highly and were positive about the prospect of using them in the future.

The limited use of the benchmarks as a collaborative tool reflects the considerable time and commitment required to undertake such an activity. However, a number of those respondents who conducted benchmarking for internal purposes expressed a commitment to benchmarking as a collaborative exercise in the future.

*I was very satisfied with the workshop but would just recommend that the timeframes for undertaking these exercises be linked more to a realisation that those involved in the academic development of learning and teaching do have to find the time. The difficulty was that whereas it might have been easier for those participants whose job it was to be engaged in this field specifically were able to respond a lot sooner, the process tended to be a bit too rushed for those of us who had other things on our plate.*

*My only reservation about the benchmarks is that some universities tend to view the notion of flexible learning a little more broadly than the technology-based model implied by the term e-learning. Although the benchmarks may be modified to suit the local context, the focus on technology management can potentially be seen as an adjunct to the teaching and learning rather than supporting and complementing it.*

*We thought it was an excellent tool. We were in a state of change and were basically trying to redefine ourselves and knew we had issues because we had lost a lot of staff. We knew without having done the benchmarking that we were travelling badly in regards to e-Learning. So we thought we would use this to highlight what some of the issues are. We did that and it was very successful. The effect is that we have had approval to fund four temporary positions to act as a transition team to free the rest of us up from doing basic support. There was also a recognition that we needed to be freed up to focus on the strategic. We have started a planning process now to redefine what our mission is and the benchmarking results will be central to that.*





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