

Benchmarking as an Instrument for Continuous Improvement in a Regulated Higher Education Quality Assurance Environment

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Benchmarking by higher education institutions (HEIs) has been evolving for some time in Australia and New Zealand. Earlier efforts were focused on improving reputation, but now benchmarking has become a required component of higher education quality assurance, or regulatory compliance schemes. ACODE's benchmarking framework and the ACODE Benchmarks provide Australasian HEIs with the ability to review their technology enhanced learning (TEL) practices and decision-making against what is considered "good" practice. The ACODE benchmarking framework and its benchmarks also allow HEIs to inform quality audit, or regulatory compliance reporting by HEIs to maintain institutional recognition and demonstrate performance against threshold or other specific performance standards. ACODE's benchmarking framework and benchmarks are recognized as influencers in benchmarking practice. However, there is a need to generate empirical data to demonstrate its leadership role and review the benchmarks for present purposes and to determine how they are used by HEIs. Thus, in effect, this case study represents a view of the increasing

importance of benchmarking in higher education quality assurance schemes—at least in some national sectors—through the lens of benchmarking the benchmarks. The case presents the ongoing efforts, providing available data from one completed round and a still to be completed second round of what has become a biennial exercise. Findings so far suggest increasing interest in using the ACODE benchmarks to assist in determining performance within HEI TEL-related issues and in HEI participation in the benchmarking the benchmarks exercise as a means of learning from each other's practice.

ORGANIZATION BACKGROUND

As per ACODE (2014), the mission of the Australasian Council on Open, Distance and e-learning (ACODE) is to 'enhance policy and practice in Australasian higher education around technology enhanced learning and teaching.' Originating from the 1993 *National Conference on Open and Distance Education* (NCODE), the name change to ACODE in 2002 occurred to more closely reflect its mission and membership that is currently comprised of 48 HEIs in Australia, New Zealand and the South Pacific. It meets its mission by disseminating and sharing knowledge and expertise with HEIs and regulatory bodies; supporting professional development and providing networking opportunities for HEI staff; investigating, developing and evaluating new approaches to TEL; advising and influencing key professional and regulatory bodies in higher education; and promoting best practice. These activities are advanced through networking meetings and course workshops, the Pearson and ACODE Award for Innovation in Technology Enhanced Learning, the biennial Learning Technologies Leadership Institute (LTLI) and the ACODE benchmarking exercise performed every other year. Membership is by institutional nomination. However, non-member HEIs or other interested organisations with formal educational programs utilising TEL can participate in ACODE activities by agreement, or by affiliate membership.

SETTING THE STAGE

Benchmarking was adapted for use in higher education first in North America in the early 1990s, then Australia, the UK and continental Europe by the year 2000 (Jackson, 2001). The beginning of the 21st century saw benchmarking being used more systematically in Australian higher education as a continuous improvement (CI) tool in response to the introduction, by the federal government, of early quality

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