

Guideline for External Referencing and Benchmarking of Units and Courses

Section 1 - Purpose

(1) This Guideline assists faculty members to undertake external referencing and benchmarking of units and courses at the University of Canberra (University).

Section 2 - Scope

(2) This Guideline applies to all University units and courses.

(3) This Guideline is to be read alongside the [Course Policy](#) and has the same scope as that Policy.

Section 3 - Principles

(4) The purpose of external referencing and benchmarking of courses and units is to:

- a. provide evidence of the quality and standing of a provider's operations
- b. meet the [Higher Education Standards Framework \(Threshold Standards\) 2021](#) for external referencing and benchmarking standards for units and courses
- c. support the achievement of the University's [Strategic Plan](#) and its associated strategies and operational plans
- d. offer an external evidence base as context for the development of internal improvements, especially to student outcomes
- e. establish and foster collaborative improvement efforts across providers
- f. generate ideas and develop innovative approaches to quality enhancements, and
- g. evaluate and improve units and courses as part of the University's commitment to continuous improvement in its course and unit development.

Part A - Types of benchmarking

(5) External benchmarking can comprise a multitude of activities whereby there is external referencing outside of the course and/or unit. This can therefore include activities inside the University, as well as involvement of other institutions and professional bodies.

Courses

(6) External referencing and benchmarking of courses to measure the success of student cohorts against comparable courses of study include comparisons of:

- a. course structure, mode of delivery and course learning outcomes
- b. progression rates and completion times compared across different delivery locations

- c. how assessment methods are related to the course learning outcomes
- d. specific requirements from a professional accrediting body if required.

Identification of courses

(7) All accredited courses of study are subject to periodic (at least every 7 years) comprehensive reviews, which includes external referencing and benchmarking activities. Faculties may prioritise the review of courses by considering the following characteristics:

- a. Courses with high student numbers
- b. Courses with varied progression rates, including high failure rates and a large number of high distinctions in the first year
- c. Courses with low completion rates and times
- d. Courses that have low to moderate student numbers that are not increasing
- e. Courses with low to no student feedback results
- f. Courses that need to be benchmarked to maintain professional accreditation.

Units

(8) External referencing and benchmarking against comparable units may include review of:

- a. unit sequencing within the study pattern, mode of delivery and unit learning outcomes related to course learning outcomes
- b. the alignment of assessment methods to the unit learning outcomes
- c. whether student grades for selected units are clearly articulated to the assessment rubric or assessment information (for example, in relation to specific assessment items)
- d. assessment items and grade distribution.

Identification of units

(9) Units suitable for undergoing external referencing and benchmarking activities may include:

- a. a capstone unit
- b. a unit that supports students to transition into their university study
- c. a required unit in a core or specialisation major in an undergraduate course
- d. a unit with high student numbers
- e. a service unit with a diverse student cohort
- f. a unit that the Unit Convener or faculty wishes to have externally reviewed.

Part B - Identifying and using benchmarking sources

(10) Before undertaking external referencing and benchmarking activities, appropriate agreements between the University and the corresponding external provider(s) need to be in place that address the risks associated with sharing University data and intellectual property (see 'Administrative processes' section below).

(11) Suitable sources for benchmarking courses and units include industry practice, academic research and data. This section includes a list of useful resources currently used by the University.

External professional accreditation

(12) External professional accreditation refers to accreditation of a course through a relevant professional

accreditation body.

(13) External professional accreditation typically involves a review of course design, assessments, learning and student outcomes, and graduate attributes. Courses are reviewed by external expert practitioners and academics.

(14) Course reviewers will typically assess courses against external standards and/or professional competencies, drawing on their knowledge of courses at providers external to the University and/or good professional practices in industry or the profession.

(15) The specific process involved in external professional accreditation will be dependent on the professional accrediting body. Therefore external professional accreditation may form a substantial component of the external referencing and benchmarking activities undertaken in the course and its associated units, but it may also need to be supplemented by other benchmarking sources as outlined below.

Innovative Research Universities Academic Calibration Program (units only)

(16) The University is a member of the [Innovative Research Universities \(IRU\) Academic Calibration Program](#). This program provides an approved avenue to undertake unit reviews in collaboration with members of the IRU program from other universities.

(17) The calibration process aims to provide a comparable review and constructive feedback for selected higher education units on:

- a. unit learning outcomes mapping to course learning outcomes
- b. assessment design and how they relate to the unit learning outcomes
- c. review of student assessment outputs and how they demonstrate the student meets the unit learning outcomes.

(18) Academics within the University can volunteer to undertake a unit review of a unit submitted by another IRU member. Conducting a review provides the academic with a professional learning opportunity to find out about educational practices at other Universities.

(19) Learning & Teaching coordinates unit and reviewer submissions to the IRU Academic Calibration Program.

Partnering with other higher education institutions

(20) Partnering with one or more higher education institutions is typically conducted via a mutually beneficial relationship on terms agreed by the parties involved. Partnerships are typically envisaged to be ongoing rather than confined to a single comparative exercise.

EXAMPLE:

The University of Canberra and Charles Darwin University (CDU) has a signed short form deed to enter into reciprocal arrangements for reviews to be undertaken at a course and/or unit level. Initially commencing with Technology units submitted by the Faculty of Science & Technology.

HES Analytics Academic Quality Benchmark Project (courses)

(21) [HES](#) has invested in a sector wide solution to meet the current and future needs of institutions to measure course performance against reliable benchmarks; course performance measures including attrition rates, completion times and rates, progression rates, and entry standards.

(22) The University has provided its data to HES (in November 2023), which will be part of a subsequent release of the HES Academic Quality Benchmarking Platform, allowing the University to trial the usability of the platform to form a part of the dataset for course monitoring, review and improvement.

External expert reviews

(23) Engaging external experts provides impartial and independent assessment of units and/or courses. An external expert can undertake reviews at a course and unit level particularly looking at learning outcomes, unit and/or course design and assessment activities. An external expert can also be engaged to undertake a competency alignment with professional accreditation requirements.

(24) The external expert provides recommendations on how the unit and/or course could be improved to enhance the student experience. Faculties review and implement relevant recommendations and document outcomes.

EXAMPLE:

To meet professional accreditation requirements, the University and Deakin University have signed a short form deed for an expert to undertake an evaluation of the Master of Optometry capstone unit. This arrangement entails conducting interviews with staff, observing an exam process, and providing a written report on findings.

Stakeholder feedback

(25) Stakeholder feedback can help faculties identify any problems, opportunities or risks that need to be addressed. Gathering feedback from a range of stakeholders provides valuable insights into how the quality of a unit and/or course can be improved. Stakeholder groups may include:

- a. professional accreditation bodies
- b. Course Advisory Groups (CAG)
- c. discussions with counterparts in Australian and International universities and private higher education institutions covering various aspects of course curriculum.

(26) Details of changes made to the unit and/or course to improve the quality based on stakeholder feedback, must be documented.

EXAMPLE:

Collecting stakeholder feedback can be achieved using many methods and tools such as, surveys, interviews, focus groups. Ensure objectives and questions are defined clearly, and encourage honest and constructive feedback. Record stakeholder feedback and document changes made to the unit and/or course. Ensure stakeholders are notified of action taken following the feedback provided.

Part C - Administrative processes

(27) An Agreement or Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) must be finalised before any external referencing and benchmarking activity is undertaken in collaboration with other providers.

(28) The Agreement must include the scope, timeframe, intended outcomes and any expectations of reciprocity of the referencing activity and ensure confidentiality of shared data.

(29) All agreements must be prepared in consultation with the University Legal team and with the support of Learning

& Teaching.

(30) If the University is approached to undertake an external referencing and benchmarking activity, the formal agreement that is provided to the University must be reviewed by Legal before signing.

(31) A copy of signed formal agreements developed by external referencing and benchmarking partners must be provided to Learning & Teaching for record keeping.

Part D - Documentation and compliance

(32) Effective documentation of external referencing or benchmarking activities of a unit or course is critical to achieving quality assurance requirements of the [Higher Education Standards Framework \(Threshold Standards\) 2021](#). This includes documenting:

- a. the date the activity was undertaken
- b. the stakeholders that completed the review
- c. the type of review undertaken
- d. the type and link to feedback provided and a link to the feedback, if appropriate
- e. any action plan developed following external referencing or benchmarking activities.

(33) Faculties are encouraged to use the following table to document their external referencing and benchmarking activities, to ensure that Standard 5.3.7 of the [Higher Education Standards Framework \(Threshold Standards\) 2021](#) is met.

TABLE 1: Results of External Referencing and Benchmarking Activities

Date	Provide the date this activity was undertaken
Stakeholders	Provide the details of who you worked with.
Data	Provide links to reports/advice/feedback.
Analysis	Provide commentary/analysis on the data.
Risk Mitigation	Provide the details of how the external referencing and benchmarking activity has enabled decisions to be made to mitigate future risks.
Outcome	How has this activity impacted on the course? What are the resulting actions taken to improve the quality of the unit or course. Provide action taken following this activity.

(34) Each external referencing and benchmarking activity should lead to recommendations for action. These recommendations can be built into other reports (for example, Interim Monitoring Course Reports (IMCR) and Comprehensive Course Review (CCR) reports, or professional accreditation submissions) where appropriate, or may give rise to a separate action plan for improvement.

Section 4 - Responsibilities

(35) Roles and responsibilities are the same as noted in the [Assessment Policy](#) and the [Course Policy](#), with some additions:

WHO	RESPONSIBILITIES
Director, Education & Student Experience (DESE)	• Determining the process by which advice is provided to Academic Board on course-related matters. • Providing direction and advice on curriculum and course quality matters.
Associate Dean, Education (ADE)	• Identifying and selecting courses and units for external referencing and/or benchmarking. • Managing the comprehensive review, professional accreditation, and monitoring, review and improvement of courses and units in their faculties. • Monitoring moderation and external referencing/benchmarking activities to ensure that suitable processes and reporting mechanisms are in place at unit, course and/or program level.
Learning & Teaching (L&T)	• Providing relevant templates to faculties undertaking an external referencing/benchmarking activity. • Providing advice to the faculties on the requirements of the governance bodies and the legislative requirements. • Providing support and training to Academic Staff interested in undertaking external benchmarking activities. • Liaising with institutions/faculties/schools to match reviewers if requests for external referencing and/or benchmarking come through L&T.
Executive Dean	• Assuring the quality of courses offered by the faculty. • Ensuring courses are designed, delivered, developed, monitored, reviewed and closed in accordance with relevant legislation and university policy and procedures. • Implementing improvements to courses and to their delivery.
Program Director (or equivalent)	• Ensuring courses are designed, delivered, developed, monitored, reviewed and closed in accordance with relevant legislation and university policy and procedures. • Monitoring and acting on course and unit benchmarking and/or referencing outcomes. • Incorporating external referencing and/or benchmarking feedback into course monitoring, review and improvement plans. • Identifying appropriate reviewers to undertake external units/courses benchmarking and referencing activities.
Unit Convener	• Providing Program Directors with information required to undertake an external referencing and/or benchmarking activity. • Monitoring and act on unit benchmarking and/or referencing outcomes. • Incorporating external referencing and/or benchmarking feedback into unit quality procedures with a focus on continuous improvement. • Developing (where appropriate) and delivering units in accordance with relevant university policy and procedure.

Section 5 - Definitions

TERM	DEFINITION
Assessment	Has the same meaning given in the University of Canberra (Student Conduct) Statute 2015 and includes Bachelor Honours Degree types as described in the Course Procedure: Courses and Course Components.
Benchmarking	A structured formal comparison of course activities with a benchmarking partner/s to obtain evidence to inform improvement initiatives. It can also include comparing course design against publicly available information and market intelligence. (Standard 5.3.4 of the Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2021)
Course	A course of study and instruction, leading to an award, provided under Rule 5 of the University of Canberra (Courses and Awards (Courses of Study)) Rules 2023 .
External Referencing	A collaborative review of an aspect of a course e.g., comparing the design of a course of study and/or student achievement of learning outcomes as a way of generating ideas for improvements. (Standards 5.3.1, 5.3.4 and 5.3.6 of the Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2021)
Interim Monitoring	Regular interim monitoring is a term used in the Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2021 (see Standard 5.3). It describes a range of activities a university is expected to undertake to inform and support comprehensive review of a course. The requirements for interim monitoring, for the purposes of this procedure, incorporates University of Canberra specific activities and data.
Professional Accreditation	Accreditation of a course by a professional body demonstrating the course meets the body's standards to prepare students for entry to the profession and, where relevant, registration as a member of the profession.
Study Pattern	An individual plan for a student or group of students which lists the units and their sequence to enable the student or group of students to complete a course within the standard duration.
Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA)	Australia's independent national quality assurance and regulatory agency for higher education.
Unit	A unit that is designed to include a sequence of structured learning that leads to the acquisition of knowledge and skills. This includes a unit that includes a Major Research Component.

Status and Details

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