PATHE

The principles and practice of benchmarking in Foundations of University Teaching programs

A Background Paper

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Cameron, A; Harvey, M and Solomonides, I.

Sub-project team:
Marina Harvey, Peter Looker, Coralie McCormack, Ian Solomonides, Craig Turnbull, Lisa Westcott and Heather Smigiel

Researcher:
Alison Cameron
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1. Introduction
The Australian Learning and Teaching Council funded project Preparing Academics for Teaching in Higher Education (PATHE) is a national multi-phased project. In 2008 the project commissioned five sub-projects, each investigating a specific focus of Foundations programs across Australian universities. The *principles and practice of benchmarking in Foundations of University Teaching programs* is one of these projects. These projects provide a seminal opportunity for systematic review and investigation of Foundations programs in Australia, together with the strategic identification (via the sub-projects) of a set of targeted foci working towards achieving outcomes such as literature reviews, data collection, new conceptual models and processes and tools (including those for benchmarking).

Foundations programs are considered to be “formal programs that induct and develop university teachers with the aim of fostering and supporting the quality of teaching and learning in the university” (PATHE, 2007, p1). There has been a call for quality assurance of these programs (Fraser, Dearn, and Ryan, 2003) with accreditation and the process of benchmarking being some possibilities. This report focuses on benchmarking.

The first stage of this sub-project has been the production of a background paper which provides a summary of the types of benchmarking currently used, before outlining the role of benchmarking in universities. Australian and International benchmarking projects and models are reviewed. The reviews are drawn upon to inform the future development of principles and practice of benchmarking in Foundations programs. Key recommendations are presented for implementation in subsequent project phases.

2. Benchmarking
There are a number of approaches to quality assurance. The ISO system, for instance, provides sets of normative standards in a wide range of areas; conformity with them represents an international consensus of best practice in the relevant area. Processes of peer review have long been important in university cultures, as applied to research and increasingly to teaching activities. The system of using external examiners to assess student work is another widely accepted example of quality assurance in higher education. This paper
focuses on benchmarking, which is a process gaining increasing currency in universities internationally.

Benchmarking is process by which organisations evaluate current practice against previously determined reference points. The points of reference can be, inter alia, past practice, trend data, an industry standard or examples of best practice. The reference point is often determined by the purpose of benchmarking, which may include Quality Assurance, Assessment or Enhancement.

The purpose of the benchmarking activity will determine which type of benchmarking is used. Woodhouse (2000, cited in Stella and Woodhouse, 2007) has categorised benchmarking into the following types:

- Internal benchmarking - where comparisons are made against another unit within the same organisation;
- Public information - publicly available data about another organisation is used; there is no need for the other organisation to agree or to be formally designated a benchmarking ‘partner’;
- Sector benchmarking - benchmarking partner or partners in the same sector are selected. Comparison extends to information known only within the organisations and may focus on an aspect of operation, or the organisation as a whole;
- Generic benchmarking - comparing processes and practices regardless of the nature of business of the partner, and
- Best practice benchmarking - where the comparator selected is believed to the best in the area to be benchmarked.

Benchmarks may also be criterion referenced or quantitative (McKinnon, Walker and Davis, 2000; cited in Woodhouse, 2007). The criterion reference approach defines the attributes of good practice in an area; the benchmark may be, for instance, a checklist of essential attributes which constitute good practice. Quantitative benchmarks can distinguish where practice is quantifiably different between organisations.

An alternative categorisation scheme, which has much in common with the above, is provided by Alstete (1996):
• Internal benchmarking - internal to the institution, so that departments, campuses or sites may be compared to identify best practice, without necessarily having an external standard against which results are compared;

• External competitive benchmarking - information from competitor institutions is used to compare performance in key areas;

• External collaborative benchmarking - usually involves collaborative comparisons with a group of institutions who are not immediate competitors;

• External trans-industry benchmarking - looks across multiple industries to find new practices, and

• Implicit benchmarking - where external factors - such as market pressures of privately produced data, coordinating agencies or central funding agencies - lead to benchmarking activity within higher education (Alstete, 1996; cited in Schofield, 1998).

The methods used for each type may vary, but common approaches summarised by Schofield (1998) are:

• Ideal type standards - a model is created based on idealised best practice. Institutions are assessed on the extent to which they fit that model.

• Activity-based benchmarking - a typical or representative selection of activities is selected for comparison with selected institutions. Results may be considered in relation to the specific activities or may be used as a proxy indicator of an entire institution’s performance.

• Vertical benchmarking - examines costs, workloads, productivity and performance of a defined functional area. Benchmarks may be either qualitative (eg successful practices) or quantitative (eg ratios).

• Horizontal benchmarking - focuses costs, workloads, productivity and performance of a single process across an institution.

• Comparison of performance indicators - uses publicly available information such as privately collected and published league tables of performance.

A further classification is

• Regulatory Benchmarking, generally undertaken for accountability purposes. It generally focuses on quantitative indicators, and can be used for comparison across
diverse institutional areas, wider groups, and potentially the entire sector. This commonly forms part of the Quality Assurance cycle.

- Collaborative Benchmarking, which focuses on the process as an aid to collaborative learning and self-improvement. This commonly forms part of the Quality Enhancement cycle (Jackson, 2001).

3. Growth of Benchmarking in Universities

A 1998 Commonwealth Higher Education Management Service (CHEMS) study noted the growing private sector interest in quality enhancement, which eventually spread to similar public sector initiatives. At that time most higher education benchmarking activity was found in the USA, although it was noted that much of what was described as ‘benchmarking’ in American higher education was in fact mostly the generation of management information to produce performance indicators, seldom extending to identification of best practice or progress towards continuous improvement (Farquhar, 1998). Schofield in the same study suggested that the methodology of benchmarking, with its ‘conceptual emphasis on openness of analysis, organisational learning, and an examination of processors rather than narrow focus on input or output data’, fits a university culture quite comfortably (Schofield, 1998 p.6). The (1997) Dearing Report recommended that a new UK quality assurance agency should look at benchmarking academic standards (HMSO, 1997).

In the late nineties (1998) benchmarking was gaining a profile in Australian higher education in response to government quality initiatives, and also as funding circumstances tightened and there was a need to ensure efficient use of funds. Surveying benchmarking projects in Australian universities, Massaro (1998) concluded that generic benchmarking exercises were less successful than those focused on addressing a particular problem, where benchmarking is used as a tool to resolve the problem. This encourages staff to engage with the additional workload imposed by the benchmarking process. Responses to the US-based National Association of College and University Business Officers (NACUBO) benchmarking project, in which some Australian universities participated during the 1990s, suggest that any benchmarking project for universities needs to be higher education-based (not transferred from another industry) and also readily translatable to the Australian higher education context. Benchmarking must also be seen as part of an institution’s core business (Massaro, 1998).
4. Benchmarking in Australian universities
Attention to benchmarking in Australian higher education is growing, partly under the influence of factors such as the AUQA quality audits (Stella and Woodhouse, 2007). Benchmarking has become a popular tool used in monitoring institutional performance against targets but, according to AUQA audit reports, it is used with mixed success. The quality of data collection and its use for feedback and improvement purposes has been criticised and AUQA audits note that benchmarking exercises are rarely systematic nor seem to lead to improvement. There is evidence of internal and external benchmarking, and some institutions have also been advised by AUQA to consider benchmarking with international peers. Stella and Woodhouse note that in general universities seem to have considered benchmarking their specific areas of focus; however, while benchmarking information technology and libraries seems well entrenched, for a number of staff and student-related matters AUQA panels ‘found no evidence of external measurement against well-chosen external benchmarks’ (p.7). They also note a need for greater consistency and coordination of benchmarking efforts within individual institutions, and stronger oversight of implementation at faculty/division/school levels. These findings support the need for the development of well-chosen benchmarks for Foundations programs.

Tools for Benchmarking in Australian Higher Education
Three contemporary benchmarking tools that have been developed specifically for the Australian Higher Education context are now outlined so as to inform the reader as to what has been achieved to date. Each tool is also judged for its potential role in contributing to the benchmarking of Foundations programs. Additional detail is provided on the third tool as it offers the most relevant direction for informing a Foundations benchmarking process.

4.1 Benchmarking: A Manual for Australian Universities (McKinnon, Walker and Davis, 2000). This manual was designed to provide a ‘robust, well-tested benchmarking manual’ (McKinnon, Walker and Davis, 2000, ix), with the objective of finding ways to benchmark the most important aspects of university life. The project was funded by the Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs (DETYA).
The most relevant benchmarks in this manual, for potential benchmarking in Foundations programs, are those for Career Development (or Professional Development) of Staff (11.4, p.140), and Teaching Environment (6.4, p.80). The underlying rationale for benchmarking Professional Development is that an institution can increase its effectiveness and performance by building staff capacity. The rationale for benchmarking Teaching Environment is that better quality teaching is created when staff are skilled, supported and enthusiastic. Good practice is outlined, and includes consistent and timely recruitment processes and a planned induction programme linked to university goals for all new staff. However, what these involve is not properly outlined in the self-assessment scale and there is a focus on the existence (rather than the quality) of such programs.

This manual has been criticised for being focused on accounting for performance and thus being of limited value to universities seeking to continually improve their practices (Garlick and Pryor, 2004).

4.2 Benchmarking the university: Learning about improvement (Garlick and Pryor, 2004).

Following the development of the Benchmarking Manual (McKinnon, Walker and Davis, 2000) the Federal Government through its Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) commissioned another benchmarking project. This project had two initial objectives: to add new elements to Benchmarking: A manual for Australian universities (McKinnon et al., 2000); and to suggest more effective uses of benchmarking given pressures and changes affecting the sector. The project explored the response to the Manual and addressed the issues raised by universities, particularly its failure to meet stakeholder needs and limited user-friendliness. The authors proposed an approach to benchmarking which involves five phases:

- comprehensively reviewing the current situation and environment as it relates to the targeted function
- undertaking a process of strategic planning targeted at improvement
- a program of implementation with the resource commitment of senior management
- a process of review to establish the degree to which improvement has occurred
- a recognition that learning from the previous phases can lead to further improved approaches in an ongoing process.
“These five phases see an approach to benchmarking as a holistic and ongoing process leading to real improvement through learning, connectivity and leadership commitment. It is an intrinsic and ongoing part of the operating environment and not a one-off statistical exercise based only on the collection of comparative performance indicators” (Garlick and Pryor, 2004, p.46).

4.3 ACODE Benchmarking Project (ACODE, 2007)

The Australasian Council on Open, Distance and E-Learning (ACODE) has funded the development of benchmarks for the use of technology in learning and teaching, with the aim of supporting continuous quality improvement. The benchmarks cover eight separate topic areas around the use of technology in learning and teaching, including institutional policy and governance, professional and staff development, and staff support.

The guidelines provided by ACODE for use of the benchmarks are a useful overview of the process, and suggest that they could be readily transferable to other benchmarking exercises (ACODE, 2007).

The ACODE benchmarking framework was trialled across seven Australian universities, each with centres for learning and teaching (Goodacre, Bridgland and Blanchard, 2005). While the benchmarking focus was online learning and teaching, both the process and tools developed may be transferable to Foundations programs.

Performance indicators developed in this project which may be applicable to benchmarking of Foundations programs include:

- The staff development provision model is resourced to effectively deliver unit/organisational goals.
- Professional/staff development programs can be delivered flexibly and address differing skill levels.
- Where applicable, a mechanism is in place for the coordination of staff development programs with other service units.
- The unit has processes in place to: (a) identify organisational staff development requirements; (b) identify individual staff development needs; and (c) to evaluate staff satisfaction with their training (Goodacre et al., 2005, p.11).
To assess or rate the developed indicators, a number of performance indicator scales were developed. The most relevant for Foundations programs is:

1. No processes in place.
2. Processes in place for some (e.g. to identify individual needs and staff satisfaction) and no feedback loops to planning and practice.
3. Processes in place for all and feedback loops in place for some.
4. Processes in place for all and feedback loops to planning and practice for most.
5. Processes in place for organisational, individual needs and to evaluate staff satisfaction, and feedback loops in place to planning and practice for all (Goodacre et al., 2005).

The project involved participants working together to develop a range of indicators and measures. Participants completed a self-assessment template and then worked with a partner institution to prepare action plans for performance improvement. Feedback from participants on the process employed suggested a need for strong project management, the importance of shared definitions, and the need to develop agreed, robust performance indicators if a benchmarking project is to be successful (Goodacre et al., 2005).

These ACODE benchmarks were successfully employed in a 2007 IRUA group project on e-learning, part of which was to benchmark professional/staff development for effective use of technologies for learning and teaching (Gosper, 2007). The purpose of this exercise was to provide the participating institutions with a snapshot of their strengths and weaknesses in the benchmarked areas, and thus to provide leverage for improvement strategies.

5. Current practice in Foundations programs in Australia
The majority of Australian universities have established a teaching and learning centre or institute, and/or a professional development centre or online portal with resources available to staff and students. A range of online support services such as teaching tips and lesson plans, in addition to performance assessments with constructive feedback, forums and seminars, appears to be available to support newer teachers. Most universities have opportunities for peer review and consultation with members of the teaching and learning centre. Many
universities also offer a graduate certificate in higher education/tertiary teaching or a similar post-graduate degree program (Hicks, 2005).

Stage 1 of the 2005 round of the Learning and Teaching Performance Fund required that universities show evidence of ‘systematic support for professional development in learning and teaching for sessional and full-time academic staff’ (DEST, 2005). This, along with an increased focus on quality of learning and teaching, is supporting a trend for professional development programs to improve the practice of established academics, and induction or foundational programs to prepare new academics for their teaching responsibilities. These Foundations courses and other induction programs have developed relatively independently according to university context, priorities and resources and this has resulted in programs of diverse content, design and, possibly, varying quality.

Given this growth and the increasing recognition of the importance of such programs in fostering excellence in learning and teaching, it seems an apt time to consider quality issues in relation to Foundations programs. As benchmarking has been used across universities with some success in other projects which have a professional development aspect, it may be an appropriate process to support quality enhancement of Foundations programs.

6. Benchmarking Foundations programs

While a range of benchmarking projects has been carried out in Australian universities (Stella and Woodhouse, 2007), it is not easy to find evidence of benchmarking activities in relation to professional development programs, or more specifically, Foundations programs. Some examples are provided in the following section to illustrate where benchmarking (in its broadest sense) has been explored in relation to Foundations programs or their nearest comparable program (staff learning and teaching programs and ongoing professional development). Australian examples are firstly presented, followed by international examples.

6.1 Preparing Academics to Teach in Higher Education Project

The most relevant project is the Preparing Academics to Teach in Higher Education (a Foundations Colloquium project, funded by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council), the project for which this report has been prepared. The project includes mapping of current
practice and reporting exemplary approaches to preparing academics to teach in higher education. It ultimately aims to devise a framework for foundational learning and teaching programs that will benefit the sector by promoting a set of shared expectations and understandings about the nature of university learning and teaching, and locating these programs in that wider context. An earlier survey included an exploration of Foundations Programs within Australia (Flinders University, 2003).

6.2 The TALDU Benchmarking Project
In 1995 staff of the Teaching and Learning Development Unit (TALDU) at Queensland University of Technology developed a benchmarking project which compared their own Graduate Certificate of Education (Higher Education) with identified examples of best practice in Australia, the USA and UK. The purpose was to improve the way in which university teachers are prepared for their teaching roles at QUT. It is not clear how ‘best practice’ examples were defined or identified; however ultimately the exercise leaned most heavily on the accreditation requirements of the UK Staff and Educational Development Association (SEDA) (Weeks, 2000).

6.3 Monash equivalency determination
Monash University has determined a list of qualifications recognised as equivalent to the Monash University Graduate Certificate of Higher Education (GCHE) (Monash University, 2006). Equivalence is established based on whether a qualification is of the same level and duration as the GCHE and is judged for the purpose of deciding whether new appointees are required to complete the GCHE program when they commence employment at Monash. There is no process of quality measurement or ongoing improvement involved.

6.4 The Higher Education Academy (HEA) program accreditation (UK)
The Higher Education Academy (HEA) was established to improve the student learning experience in the UK. As part of this role it accredits learning and teaching training programs as well as continuing professional development schemes offered by UK universities. The reference point for accreditation is the UK Professional Standards Framework for Teaching and Supporting Learning in Higher Education (UK PSF) (HEA; 2006). This Framework was developed by the HEA on behalf of Universities UK, GuildHE and the four UK higher education funding councils after consultation with the higher education sector and provides a set of external, national-level standards. The Framework consists of ‘three standard
descriptors each of which is applicable to a number of staff roles and to different career stages. The standard descriptors are underpinned by areas of professional activity, core knowledge and professional values’ (HEA, heacademy.ac.uk/ourwork/policy/framework).

For accreditation to be achieved, a professional development activity must be explicitly aligned with the UK PSF. The accreditation process explores a range of issues, including institutional interpretation and application of the Standards Framework, how the professional development activity requires participants to demonstrate knowledge and understanding of subject pedagogy, and what the demonstrated institutional-level commitment is to supporting staff with ongoing professional development.

The accreditation process is designed to be a collaborative and developmental one which enables institutions to share ideas, share institutional and other contextual constraints and opportunities, and share ideas on future professional development opportunities and requirements.

The HEA (2008) suggests that benefits of participation in the accreditation process include:

- support to institutions for professional development and recognition of their staff
- a means of promoting and sharing good practice in professional development
- a means of demonstrating to students and other stakeholders national calibration with the UK PSF (p. 1)

Recommendations from a 2006 review of the accreditation process point to the need for an effective process to emphasise an integrated and developmental approach; facilitate the creation of ‘bespoke’ institutional processes; and meet the needs of different discipline areas and teaching roles (Palastanga, 2006). The review also suggest that the HEA should evaluate the impact of the accreditation process by undertaking and encouraging further research into the impact on the student learning experience of the development and professional recognition of teachers and the accreditation of programs.

**6.5 The Bologna Process, specifically the Erasmus Programme**

The Erasmus Lifelong Learning Programme aims to enhance mobility of students and staff across Europe (Official Journal of the European Union, 2006). Staff have the opportunity to apply for a grant
to support their work or training in other countries that have an Erasmus University Charter (EUC), with the idea that good practice and knowledge are shared, skills are transferred and opportunities for professional development are maximised. The reference point is the EUC, which sets out fundamental principles and minimum requirements with which a higher education institution must comply when implementing activities under the Erasmus program. These requirements relate to the quality of implementation of the scheme and recognition for those involved in it. Charters are awarded by the European Commission on the basis of information in formal applications supplied by universities.

To receive a Charter universities must be benchmarked against an external reference point (or perhaps rather demonstrate compliance with it); however, the actual developmental activities in which staff participate do not appear to be regulated or measured in any way (Official Journal of the European Union, 2006).

6.6. The ‘Tuning’ Project

The ‘Tuning’ project was designed by a group of universities operating in the Bologna context, where programs of study are expected to be sufficiently transparent and comparable to facilitate mobility and recognition. The name ‘Tuning’ was selected to reflect the goal of achieving points of reference, convergence and common understanding, rather than uniformity (Gonzalez and Wagenaar, 2003).

The project members consider quality, particularly in the design, implementation and delivery of curricula. The approach is based on the following features:

- an identified and agreed need
- a well described profile
- corresponding learning outcomes phrased in terms of competency
- correct allocation of European Community Course-Credit Transfer System (ECTS) credits to program units
- appropriate approaches to teaching, learning and assessment (Gonzalez, Isaacs, Sticchi-Damiani and Wagenaar, undated, p.2)

The focus is on quality enhancement, and the process emphasises competences as the basis of curriculum.
The initial phase of the project developed a model for designing a program of study. As many of the steps described may be of relevance of benchmarking of professional development programs they are reproduced in full here:

- Necessary resources must be available;
- A need must be demonstrated and be established through a consultation process of relevant stakeholders;
- The degree profile must be well described;
- A set of desired learning outcomes have to be identified and expressed in terms of generic and subject specific competences;
- Academic content (knowledge, understanding, skills) and structure (modules and credits) must be established and described;
- Appropriate teaching, learning and assessment strategies to achieve the desired learning outcomes must be identified;
- An appropriate evaluation and quality assurance and enhancement system focussing in particular on the consistency and implementation of the curriculum as a whole must be set up (Gonzalez et al., undated, p.3).

7. Conclusions: Advantages and Disadvantages of Benchmarking

Benchmarking can be used at any development phase; identifying, planning, monitoring, evaluation and review. Benchmarking has the potential to identify strengths and weaknesses, indicate areas in need of improvement, promote areas of achievement, generate ideas and develop networks. Benchmarking is a tool for quality improvement and forms part of the quality cycles. It may be most useful to engage in Quality Assurance benchmarking, to identify areas of strength and weakness, and follow this with ongoing Quality Enhancement benchmarking within these areas. The literature also provides useful guidance on factors to consider when planning any benchmarking.

When benchmarking is used primarily for Quality Assurance it can enable a study of a wide range of indicators at various levels; allow for a comparison with partners/competitors, and, if these partners are international, provide an efficient process to enable this; assist to identify priorities and make weaknesses apparent. Disadvantages can include the difficulties that may
arise including: the process of developing indicators (Flowers and Kosman, 2008), with defining and collecting data, and that the process often provides direction but minimal information for further enhancement and development.

Benchmarking for Quality Enhancement can focus on issues that increase effectiveness; create opportunities for organisational development; enable a detailed exploration of drivers necessary for success and efficiency, and increase acceptance of subsequent changes. A main disadvantage of this process is that it is time-consuming and resource intensive.

In general, a range of factors should be considered when planning to undertake any benchmarking process in Higher Education. It is necessary to have a very clear idea of why a benchmarking exercise is being undertaken, what the intended outcomes are, and what process will be followed. Ideally, appropriate amounts of time should be spent determining and defining indicators, data collection and collation methods, but it is important that measures are not over-emphasised. To achieve the best outcomes from benchmarking activities, an institution must explore and be aware of its own systems and processes before comparison, and indicators of excellence or high impact should be selected over those considered achievable or convenient. The design and strategy for benchmarking should allow sufficient time and room for improvement, and include a system for prioritising issues, to avoid both random selection, and overzealous attempts to ‘fix’ everything at once. Most critically, benchmarking exercises should be embedded with quality systems, be perceived as ongoing and necessary processes, and reflect contextual diversity.

8. Recommendations for benchmarking Foundations programs
Several key suggestions, to guide the development of a benchmarking process for Foundations, can be drawn from the review of literature and past projects. Any benchmarks developed, together with the process to support their implementation, need to be Higher Education based as it has been argued (Massaro, 1998) that they can not be transferred from other industries. These benchmarks need to be well chosen, used consistently and in a coordinated and strategic manner (Stella and Woodhouse, 2007). The ACODE project (2007) successfully used and generated benchmarking indicators together with a criteria or rating
Internationally, the Professional Standards Framework for Teaching and Supporting Learning in Higher Education (HEA, 2006) supports the possibility and efficacy of the development of a national framework for benchmarking Foundations. The Framework also demonstrates the successful application of using standard descriptors. The conceptual rationale underlying the Tuning project being that of “tuning” into an achievable point of reference (Gonzalez and Wagenaar, 2003) offers a fundamental paradigm of flexibility. This flexibility should also provide relevance to any benchmarking process as organisations can fine tune the process in response to their identified contextual needs.

8.1 The Approach
The current project aims to use benchmarking as a peer review process to assist in quality assurance and quality enhancement of preparation or development programs for newer university teachers. Benchmarking offers the potential to allow a point of comparison for preparation programs nationally, and ultimately the possibility of an external validation process.

In order to meet the aim of quality enhancement as well as quality assurance, it is important to develop a process which can be an aid to collaborative learning and self-improvement. We propose that the approach known as sector benchmarking (Woodhouse, 2000) is the most likely to meet this requirement. That is, benchmarking partners should come from within the higher education sector, and will work together cooperatively on the process.

The advantages and benefits of this method include

- comparing like with like: that is, programs from similar environments, with similar goals, and
- sharing of knowledge for mutual benefit.

Issues to be aware of include:

- the need for strong central coordination;
- the need to ensure that benchmarking partners are appropriately selected;
• need for common will to achieve stated aims, and
• the labour intensiveness for all participants.

For such a process to be successful, it is essential that partners are clear about the intended outcomes from the exercise and the process to be followed; the process requires very clearly defined parameters. We recommend adopting the philosophy of the ‘Tuning’ process discussed earlier, where the goal is to achieve points of reference, convergence and common understanding, rather than uniformity (Gonzalez and Wagenaar, 2003).

As for method, we propose that the aims of the project will best be met by the development of an ideal type standards model based on idealised best practice (Schofield, 1998). However, in the context of benchmarking Foundations, we recommend modifying this to the use of good practice statements or standards. Institutions and programs can then self-assess against negotiated standards and identify areas in which they might work towards improvement. This model also provides a framework for assessment or comparison of institutions through an external assessment process, if that is considered desirable.

Advantages and benefits include of this particular approach include:
• ability to reference these ‘ideal standards’ against existing international frameworks, standards and guidelines, such as those from the UK Higher Education Academy and those developed by the EU Tuning project;
• degree of flexibility as institutions can select standards relevant to their own activities;
• institutions may use standards for self-assessment purposes or choose to engage in a broader activity with one or more institutions;
• sharing comparative data and information in a truly collaborative fashion would allow institutions to develop improvement strategies based on each others’ practice, and
• institutions can refer to standards in an ongoing way, to foster continuous improvement and to monitor progress towards best practice.

Possible pitfalls include the difficulty / labour intensiveness of negotiating the standards. It is necessary to agree upon appropriate indicators and ensure that they are well defined and measurable. It is also necessary to understand the reasons why these are the reference points for best practice in the area of Foundations programs.
8.2 The Process
The guidelines developed by ACODE for use of their benchmarks provide a useful structure for any proposed benchmarking process which will use previously-determined performance indicators. The guidelines can be used within an institution, or to develop comparative data between institutions. Summarised briefly the steps are:

- Secure commitment for the exercise, from senior staff and from colleagues
- Carry out a self-assessment process
- Share these assessments with the benchmarking group
- Carry out peer review assessments
- Identify priority areas for improvement
- Select partners for improvement purposes
- Develop strategies for improvement based on the partnering process
- Prepare action plans for self improvement  (ACODE, 2007, pp.7-8)

Before this stage is reached, it is necessary to develop statements of best practice with performance indicators. To underpin these we recommend that the project draws on a meta-analysis of data collected relating to Foundations programs in Australian universities (for example, Goody, 2007; Hicks, 2005) to direct the generation of standards. This data can be compared and moderated with the international points of reference mentioned above to develop a series of draft best practice statement, and would also serve to provide institutions with a preliminary snapshot of the extent to which they are meeting best practice. Two partner institutions (initially nationally) need to be identified from the project team to work towards refining the standards and piloting their application.

8.3 Performance indicators
We propose the following rubric structure (Table 1) which includes some preliminary and indicative best practice statements for discussion. It may be that not all statements are relevant for all organisations at all times, so selected statements may be used in a benchmarking process. It may also be desirable to establish an organising structure for statements - for instance grouping those relevant at institutional level, departmental/ faculty level, and program level; or grouping by such headings as Policy Issues, Curriculum Issues and so on. Indicative level descriptors are also provided for three of the statements for illustrative purposes.
## Table 1. Best Practice Statements

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<th>Statement</th>
<th>Standard</th>
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<td></td>
<td>Level 4</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(Yes)</td>
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<td>The institution has clear, well established and understood policies and</td>
<td>Clear evidence of a policy which mandates completion of a Foundations</td>
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<td>processes to support new teachers</td>
<td>program or recognition of</td>
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<td>prior learning, underpinned</td>
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<td>with processes to support</td>
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<td>new academics</td>
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<td>The program models a scholarly approach to teaching.</td>
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<td>and operation, is framed by</td>
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<td>and exemplifies a sustained</td>
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<td>scholarly approach to</td>
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<td>learning and teaching.</td>
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<td>The program has a clear set of desired learning outcomes</td>
<td>A set of clearly articulated</td>
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<td>learning outcomes which are</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>achievable, measurable and</td>
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<td></td>
<td>appropriate to the level of</td>
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<td></td>
<td>study</td>
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<tr>
<td>Program documentation refers to curriculum organisation and design</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic content is clearly described</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appropriate resources are available (staffing, financial, information)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appropriate teaching, learning and assessment strategies to achieve</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>desired learning outcomes are identified</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>The program is linked to university goals</td>
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<tr>
<td>The program is linked to university policies</td>
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<td>(on professional development; promotion; performance)</td>
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<tr>
<td>An appropriate evaluation and quality assurance and enhancement system is</td>
<td></td>
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<td>established</td>
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</table>

(Adapted from Solomonides, 2008.)
8.4 Summary of Recommendations

We recommend:

8.4. recommendation 1

*Sector benchmarking* (Woodhouse, 2000). Benchmarking partners should come from within the higher education sector, and will work together cooperatively on the process (members of the sub-project team).

8.4. recommendation 2

adopting the philosophy of the ‘Tuning’ process where the goal is to achieve points or reference, convergence and common understanding, rather than uniformity (Gonzalez and Wagenaar, 2003).

8.4. recommendation 3

that the aims of the project will best be met by the development of an ideal type standards model based on *idealised best practice* (Schofield, 1998). However, in the context of benchmarking Foundations, we recommend modifying this to the use of good practice statements or standards.

8.4. recommendation 4

that the guidelines developed by ACODE for use of their benchmarks be adopted as the process for the benchmarking of foundations (hence ensuring quality assurance and quality enhancement).

8.4. recommendation 5

the development of statements of good practice with performance indicators which are informed by a meta-analysis of data collected relating to Foundations programs in Australian universities.
9. PATHE project phase 3 and 4 implications

This background paper provides direction for the PATHE (Colloquium) sub-project *the principles and practice of benchmarking in Foundations of University Teaching programs*. Implications for Phase 3 of the PATHE project include the implementation of the five key recommendations. The development of statements of good practice with performance indicators will be strengthened with the involvement of all team members. It is then anticipated that Phase 4 will consist of piloting the statements of good practice between partner institutions (initially nationally) and generating case study resources of the process of benchmarking to support the good practice indicators for university teaching Foundations programs in Australia.
References


