Benchmarking with a focus on Graduate Employability: Why, how and with what?

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This paper is an exploration of benchmarking with a focus on graduate employability, an issue of increasing interest in the Australian higher education sector with the advent of the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA). Benchmarking is not a new concept in higher education; however, evidence suggests it is largely conducted with a focus on the provision of services (eg ICT), using quantitative national indicators, and competitively (usually in a ranking system). A degree curriculum may be required to meet standards for accreditation, and this in itself is a form of benchmarking against a minimum standard. Beyond this process, it appears that benchmarking between higher education providers is rarely undertaken at the level of degree programs, and even less often through the lens of the employability of graduates. This paper centres on the activities currently underway within an Australian Learning and Teaching Council Fellowship: *Benchmarking partnerships for graduate employability* is designed to engage course leaders in collaborative benchmarking with a focus on graduate employability. It is built on a 360-degree evidence-based approach to capability development. The benchmarking partnerships are undertaken with mutual respect and within agreed confidentiality boundaries, within which course leaders responsible for similar degree programs agree to share reflection and evidence as a starting point for ongoing and mutually beneficial planning, implementing and monitoring of enhancements to effect enhanced graduate employability. The process described in this paper—centering on Goals, Inputs, Outcomes and Enhancements—is designed to enable course leaders and their teams to explore curriculum enhancements with trusted partners, and may go some way towards building collaborative networks as well as scholarly evidence-based reflection on the outcomes of teaching and learning. It also provides a mechanism for evidence of effectiveness of the optimum amount of work-integrated learning in the curriculum.
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Introduction: a new emphasis on standards and benchmarking in Australian Higher Education

Since the Australian Government's response to the Bradley Review of Higher Education (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008), the terms 'standards' and 'benchmarking' have rapidly become more prevalent across the sector. In the United Kingdom, there has long been a focus on employability, often expressed as personal development planning (PDP) which grew out of recommendation 20 of the 1997 Dearing Review which directed higher education institutions to develop the 'means by which students can monitor, build and reflect upon their personal development' (Jackson, 2001). The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), established in 1997, monitors how well universities safeguard standards. It also seeks to identify good practice and make recommendations for improvement, and publishes guidelines to help institutions develop effective systems to ensure students have high quality experiences. In particular, QAA has worked with the sector to develop "a set of nationally agreed reference points which give all institutions a shared starting point for setting, describing and assuring the quality and standards of their higher education courses" (Quality Assurance Agency, n.d.). These reference points include the Subject Benchmark Statements which define what can be expected of a graduate in terms of the abilities and skills needed to develop understanding or competence in the subject (some combine or make reference to professional standards required by external bodies) (Quality Assurance Agency, n.d.). This is an example of benchmarking against a minimum standard, as many Australian degrees are required to do for accreditation purposes.

The Australian government has recently announced a clearer and more direct focus on related issues: widening participation (equity) and clear minimum quality benchmarks (standards) will be funding-driven requirements of all higher education institutions by 2011 (Gillard, 2010). The government has called on universities across the sector to "to take stock, assess what needs improvement and to develop the plans and tools to lift the quality of teaching, lift the engagement of students and lift the expectations and performance of teachers and researchers" (Gillard, 2010). To drive this agenda, the Australian Universities Quality Agency will evolve into Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA), an independent body that will regulate university and non-university higher

education providers and monitor quality and set standards. In the interim (that is, in 2010), the Australian Learning and Teaching Council has the task of coordinating discipline communities' definitions of academic standards—that is, determining up to six high level core learning outcomes (threshold academic standards that describe core discipline knowledge and core discipline-specific skills) for degree programmes such as undergraduate Accounting (Australian Learning and Teaching Council, 2009). This type of 'standards matching' seems not dissimilar to the UK model of using Subject Benchmarking Statements.

Benchmarking in Australian higher education to date

The emphasis on standards naturally leads to benchmarking, described as "a process of articulating standards" (Bell, 1999). Benchmarking is a process that allows universities to assess their performance and improve their practice (Garlick & Pryor, 2004) in a cyclical process that involves feeding back information for further improvement (Henderson-Smart, Winning, Gerzina, King, & Hyde, 2006). It therefore involves both Quality Assurance (QA) and Quality Enhancement (QE) (Henderson-Smart et al., 2006). Until about ten years ago, Australian higher education institutions had been slow to take up benchmarking as a quality improvement process (Weeks, 2000) and efforts had mostly focussed on processes outside of the classroom because it was easier to determine process than quantify the outcomes of practice (Epper, 1999). This is particularly true in relation to teaching and learning: in 1995, Ramsden and colleagues recommended establishing benchmarking partnerships in order to identify and share best practice of recognising and rewarding good university teaching (Ramsden, Margetson, Martin, & Clarke, 1995) even though learning and teaching were (and still are) generally considered to be the most difficult area to benchmark in higher education because of difficulties in arriving at a consensus for the scope (Henderson-Smart et al., 2006) as well as a lack of quantitative measures by which an institution's performance in teaching and learning could be judged.

Since 1999, with the development of the Australian University Quality Agency (AUQA), universities have been required to determine what "quality" actually is and take responsibility for the quality of what they do (Henderson-Smart et al., 2006). In 2000, a benchmarking manual was produced by the Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs (DETYA) for use in Australian universities (McKinnon, Walker, & Davis, 2000). Its focus was on the whole university, rather than individual courses and programs (Henderson-Smart et al., 2006). It was widely used but also subsequently criticised for its focus on quantitative and competitive nature (Garlick & Pryor, 2004). Benchmarking has been a particular focus of AUQA since its establishment: it has frequently been mentioned in AUQA audit reports, though more than two-thirds of the references are recommendations for improvement (Stella & Woodhouse, 2007). This highlights the developmental nature of benchmarking in Australian institutions to date: AUQA audit reports have frequently commented on the following as 'needing improvement' (that is, as Recommendations): the need to use a set of key teaching and learning indicators to internally benchmark; benchmark accreditation processes against those used by Australian universities; and benchmark criteria used for supervisor selection. International benchmarking has generally been found to be weak across the sector (Stella & Woodhouse, 2007).

This analysis of institutional AUQA reports suggests that there is more development needed if higher education providers are to use benchmarking to improve practice and outcomes. Garlick and Pryor (2004) suggested that collaborative rather than competitive benchmarking is more likely to be conducive to improving quality in higher education, even though initiatives such as the Teaching and Learning Performance Fund have subsequently pitched universities into fierce competition. The literature also suggests that benchmarking in higher education is most likely to be successful when:
- Academic staff have ownership of the benchmarking process (if it is seen as a silo activity or not rewarded and recognised, benchmarking is likely to be superficial and seen as "just another task" that academics must squeeze into their busy schedules) (Garlick & Pryor, 2004);
- It is kept relatively simple (Garlick & Pryor, 2004) and used to trigger for internal review and improvement, rather than external accountability (Henderson-Smart et al., 2006) or an indicator of competitiveness (Garlick & Pryor, 2004; Weeks, 2000);

- Universities seek partners beyond those institutions that most resemble themselves within a sector or discipline (Epper, 1999).

Graduate employability as a focus for benchmarking

Along with academic standards and accountability, graduate employability has become an increasing focus of Australian higher education and is an area in which benchmarking might well assist in improving evidence, outcomes, and practices. In the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) Fellowship that is the focus of this paper, the term *graduate employability* means more than the attainment of employment. It draws on a widely accepted definition 'as a set of achievements — skills, understandings and personal attributes - that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy (Yorke, 2004). In this Fellowship, the focus is on developing graduates' 'capabilities', an umbrella term which implies integration, confidence and future performance (Stephenson, 1998). More specifically, it is focused on graduate achievement of the 'capabilities that count' for early professional success (Scott, 2005; Scott, Coates, & Anderson, 2008) so that new graduates 'hit the ground running rather than limping' (Knight & Yorke, 2004, 2006).

The Fellowship proposes a 360-degree evidence-based approach to capability development for graduate employability. To encourage engagement by teaching academics who have direct influence on the curriculum, it is deliberately focussed at the degree level, rather than department or institution. It is also a confidential process, well away from league tables and other competitive strategies. The process is intended as a 'trigger for internal review and improvement, rather than external accountability'. The central questions behind this framework are straightforward and focused directly on the preparation of graduates for employability: when we design degree curricula, we need to reflect on:

Goals: What are the capabilities that count for early professional success?

Inputs: Where are those capabilities developed and assessed within and beyond formal learning, including in work-integrated learning experiences?
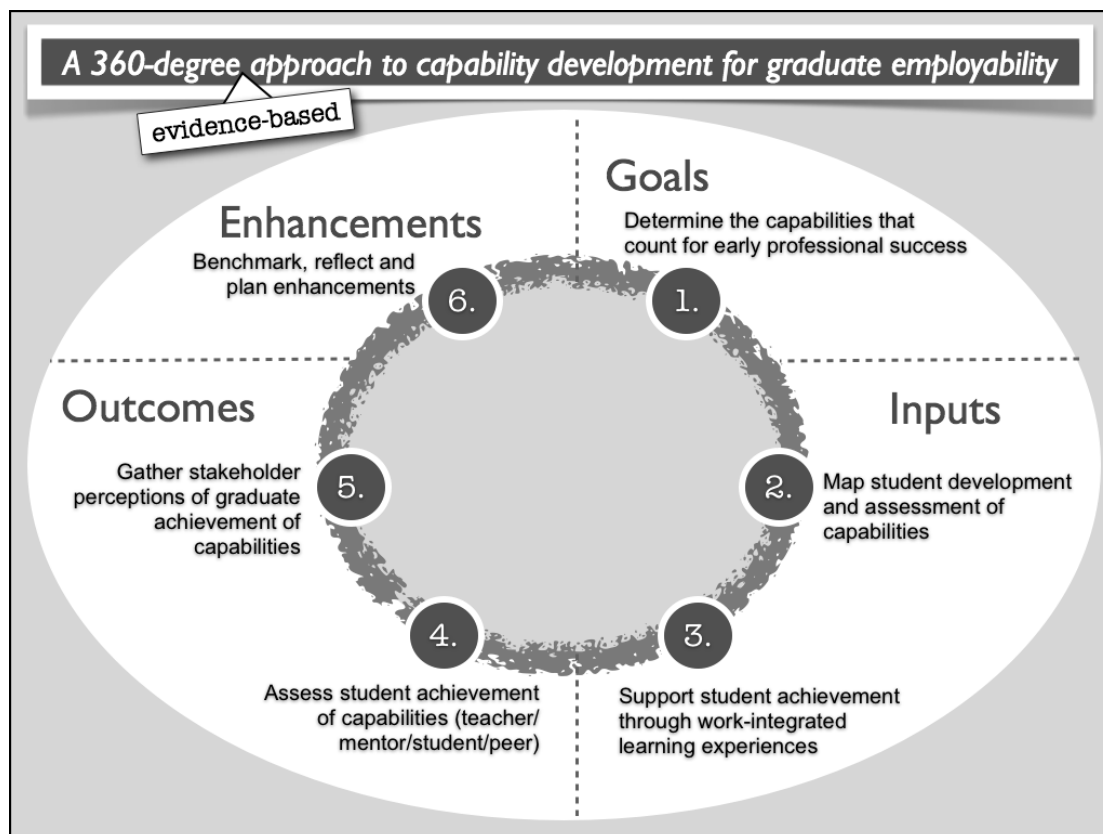
Outcomes: Where is the evidence of success? How does formal assessment indicate the standards of achievement of the capabilities? What are students' perceptions of their own and their peers' achievement of the capabilities? Beyond graduation, what are the perceptions of employers, teaching academics, and graduates) about demonstrated achievement of those capabilities in the early professional years?

Enhancements: How can we share our goals, inputs and outcomes with 'fellow travellers' who can assist us to determine how we might enhance those goals, inputs and outcomes? And how do the enhancements inform our reflections on the capabilities that count for early professional success?

These aspects of the ongoing quality improvement cycle are illustrated in Figure 1, overleaf.

This paper focuses particularly on the fourth aspect: Enhancement through collaborative benchmarking. The Fellowship programme seeks to engage course leaders responsible for degree quality in benchmarking partnerships that are undertaken with mutual respect and within agreed confidentiality boundaries. In this process (described in greater detail in the section that follows), course leaders develop a Benchmarking Evidence Portfolio, then share a summary of that Portfolio as a starting point for ongoing and mutually beneficial planning, implementing and monitoring of enhancements. This process will be trialled at a National Forum in November 2010 (see http://tiny.cc/boliver) with a range of degree programmes including undergraduate Accounting, Nursing, Hospitality and Public Relations. One of the aims of the Fellowship is to design and trial the process, then refine it based on participants' feedback, and report the findings in the literature.

Figure 1: Four aspects of a 360-degree evidence-based approach to capability development for graduate employability: Goals, Inputs, Outcomes, Enhancements

Benchmarking partnerships for graduate employability: the process

The benchmarking process has eight proposed steps, designed to draw on lessons from the literature, and based on a reflective approach to curriculum enhancement. The eight steps are designed for an efficient but comprehensive experience with due regard for confidentiality and institutional approval. The focal participants in the process are the benchmarking partners: each partnership consists of a course team represented by at least one course leader, ideally the person responsible for the quality and delivery and curriculum enhancement of the course. Benchmarking partners engage through these eight steps:

1. **Express interest** in participating by contacting the Fellowship team;
2. **Complete the Benchmarking Information Checklist** which includes preliminary details, contact information, and 'in principle' agreement from the appropriate Executive staff member(s) and signed confidentiality agreements from all;
3. **Engage their colleagues as appropriate**, especially head of school; advisory board or professional body if appropriate; the course team (full-time, part-time and casual staff); students, graduates and other appropriate stakeholders (this engagement with peers is likely to lead to more sustainable outcomes);
4. **Initiate the Graduate Employability Indicators** (highly recommended), online surveys designed to gather graduate, employer and teaching staff feedback on graduate attainment of key capabilities;
5. **Prepare the Benchmarking Evidence Portfolio** by reflecting with the course team and appropriate others, then decide which parts are to be shared with selected benchmarking partners);

6. **Confirm the benchmarking partners and event** (time, place and mode) and confirm Executive support for the evidence that will be shared with these partners;

7. **Engage with partners at the benchmarking event, sharing summary material from the Benchmarking Evidence Portfolio** and consider the reasons for current successes, and how to maintain them, as well as strategies to address weaknesses and enhance outcomes;

8. **Share the outcomes of the benchmarking event with internal and external stakeholders**, including Executive, and secure strategies, funding, timelines and indicators to provide evidence of future success; and maintain 'critical friendships' with the benchmarking partners; document the outcomes in preparation for the next benchmarking event.

To mirror the philosophical underpinning of this Fellowship (see Figure 1) and to emphasise the collaborative and reflective aspects of this style of benchmarking, the process includes consideration of a broad array of reflective (soft) evidence and quantitative (hard) evidence of the course inputs (eg where key capabilities are developed and assessed in the curriculum) as well as the course outcomes (evidence that graduates of this course have the 'capabilities that count'). This array is detailed in the *Benchmarking Evidence Portfolio,* a summary of which is shown in the Appendix.

The role of the Fellowship team is to support participating course leaders to prepare their portfolios, to facilitate partnerships, and observe and draw on participant feedback to evaluate the process, and suggest refinements. Full results with recommendations will be reported in the Final Fellowship Report, and in the literature. This approach—which maps inputs such as work-integrated learning with outputs such as employer perceptions—is likely to produce some evidence of the effectiveness of incorporating work-integrated learning (WIL) into the curriculum: does more WIL lead directly to greater graduate employability? Is there a saturation point after which a greater emphasis on WIL may detract from graduate employability?

Conclusion

Benchmarking partnerships for graduate employability is an ALTC Fellowship programme designed to engage course leaders in collaborative benchmarking with a focus on graduate employability, an issue of national importance. It is built on a 360-degree evidence-based approach to capability development. The partnerships are designed as collaborative learning experiences, undertaken with mutual respect and within agreed confidentiality boundaries, within which course leaders responsible for similar degree programs agree to share reflection and evidence as a starting point for ongoing and mutually beneficial planning, implementing and monitoring of enhancements to effect enhanced graduate employability. The process described in this paper—centering on Goals, Inputs, Outcomes and Enhancements—is designed to enable course leaders and their teams to explore curriculum enhancements with trusted partners, and may go some way towards building collaborative networks as well as scholarly evidence-based reflection on the outcomes of teaching and learning. It also provides a mechanism for evidence of effectiveness the optimum amount of work-integrated learning in the curriculum. Federal government initiatives such as the Standards agenda and the launch of TEQSA are likely to mean more rather than less benchmarking at various levels. Done well, with energy and attention and an eye to enhancing graduate employability, benchmarking partnerships may be one way of reinvigorating curricula for a changing world.

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Appendix: Summary of the Benchmarking Evidence Portfolio

Benchmarking Evidence Portfolio: Summary

--Goals--

1. The key capabilities
What are the graduate attributes, graduate qualities, professional competencies or course learning outcomes that are the stated goals of this course? Comment on the degree to which the course is governed by these capabilities, and what you see as the strengths and weaknesses of your current approach.

--Inputs--

2. Evidence showing where, when and how the capabilities are assessed
Provide evidence showing where, when and how the capabilities are assessed in the course, particularly within work-integrated learning. Provide details of any systematic work-placements, simulations or authentic tasks (assessments which emulate professional tasks). Comment on what you see as the strengths and weaknesses of your current approach.

--Outcomes--

3. Student self- and peer assessment of capabilities
Some courses ask their students to self- and peer assess capabilities. If you have access to student self-assessment data, describe the outcomes here. Comment on what you see as the strengths and weaknesses of your current approach.

4. Evidence from quantitative indicators canvassing stakeholder perceptions

4.1 Students
- Commencing and total Headcount and EFSTL (domestic and international)
- First year retention rate
- Course annual retention rate
- Course Student Load Pass Rate
- Unit Pass Rates (domestic and international)

4.2 Graduates
- Australian Graduate Survey: Course Experience Questionnaire (Good Teaching, Generic Skills, Overall Satisfaction); Graduate Destination Survey (Proportion of Respondents in Full-time and Part-time Employment and Undertaking Further Study)

- Graduate Employability Indicators—Graduate Survey: Graduates of up to five years perceptions of the extent to which their experience during their degree contributed to their development of the capabilities, and their overall work-readiness (quantitative items); the importance of each capability to the early professional success of new graduates of this degree (quantitative items); and the best aspects of the degree in helping develop capabilities for employment, and suggestions for improvements (qualitative items).

4.3 Employers and industry
- Graduate Employability Indicators—Employer Survey: Employers' perceptions of the extent to which new graduates (from any university) demonstrate each of the capabilities, and their overall work-readiness (quantitative items); the importance of each capability to the early professional success of new graduates of this degree (quantitative items); and what skills, attributes and personal qualities are most useful for new graduates in this field, and which can be prioritized for improvement (qualitative items).

4.4 Course teaching team
- perceptions of the extent to which new graduates demonstrate each of the capabilities, and their overall work-readiness (quantitative items); the importance of each capability to the employment success of new graduates of this degree (quantitative items); and their confidence in teaching and assessing the

capabilities (quantitative items); their role in assisting students to develop the capabilities, and the main incentives and disincentives for doing so (qualitative items).

Comment on what you see as the strengths and weaknesses based on the evidence in this section.

5. Overview reflective questions

Overall, what do you see as the strengths, weaknesses, threats and opportunities for graduate employability of this course? What issues to you hope to collaborate on with your benchmarking partner(s)?