

The Association
of Commonwealth
Universities

ACU University Management Benchmarking Programme

2012 Programme

THE BENCHMARKING PROGRAMME

Since 1996, the Association of Commonwealth Universities (ACU), has run an international "University Management Benchmarking Programme" for universities primarily, but not exclusively, from the Commonwealth. This brochure describes how the programme works, and describes the topics to be addressed in 2012. Universities interested in becoming participants are invited to complete and submit the form located at the end of this document.

The Benchmarking Programme offers a unique and cost effective opportunity for participating universities to compare their key management processes with others in a range of universities. This process helps identify areas for change and assists in setting targets for improvement. Unlike most existing benchmarking initiatives, our approach focuses on the effectiveness of university-wide processes and policies and not narrow departmental functions. It is also not concerned primarily with generating marks or league tables of performance. Rather, through undertaking a series of activities, the process enables participants to learn from each other's experience of difficulties and successes, across international boundaries. Its mode of operation has been designed by university practitioners solely for use in universities, and has been refined, year on year, in the light of experience.

"The ACU Benchmarking initiative is particularly valuable because you are constantly reminded of the bigger picture, the larger strategies, the institution-wide issues that you, as a member of a senior team, must absolutely consider at all times. Your day-to-day responsibility may be marketing and branding, or finance, or HR, and the specific discussions in these areas are engaging and enlightening. But when these conversations take place within the larger context, and with people from across the Commonwealth, you walk away with broader insights and understandings."

A Canadian University Assistant V.P.

WHAT IS BENCHMARKING?

Benchmarking is a self-improvement tool for organisations. It allows them to compare themselves with others, identify their comparative strengths and weaknesses, and identify possible routes to improvement. Benchmarking is a way of finding and adopting good practices with a view to improving management practice. The ACU approach to benchmarking goes beyond the comparison of data-based scores or conventional performance indicators (SSRs, unit costs, completion rates etc.); it looks at the **processes** by which results are achieved. By using a consistent approach and identifying processes which are generic and relevant, irrespective of the context of the organisation and how it is structured, it becomes possible to benchmark across sectoral boundaries (geography, size, research/teaching balance etc.).

'Process' is used here to mean a sequence of activities made up of tasks and steps that cross the boundaries between functions, and which serve a valuable and important purpose. For example, the process of attracting and enrolling students may include activities located in an external relations office, recruitment department, registry, departmental administration, and finance office. However, students often see these organisational boundaries as irrelevant, and are more concerned with the effectiveness of the overall process in meeting their needs. Much of the strength of benchmarking lays in the way it leads organisations to question the impact

of such boundaries on the effectiveness of their processes. Benchmarking is not a 'one-off' procedure. It is most effective when it is ongoing and becomes part of the annual review of a university's performance.

**HOW MANY PARTICIPANTS
WILL THERE BE?**

In each previous year, up to 15 universities from Australia, Canada, Hong Kong, New Zealand, the African continent, the United Kingdom and other parts of the Commonwealth have participated. It is anticipated that the numbers will be similar in subsequent years. (In order to ensure a wide spread of international experience, the number of institutions from any single country may be restricted.) Due to the increasing demand, it is possible that in this and future years, there may be two cohorts in each year, with a minimum of 8 and maximum of 15 participants. The topics and assessors would be identical for each cohort, though the location and timing of the workshop would be different. Allocation to a particular cohort will be at the discretion of the ACU.

WHY A GROUP?

It is difficult and expensive for a single university to obtain comparative benchmarking data. The group approach reduces the cost and improves the availability of relevant data. Furthermore, universities wishing to improve can make follow-up contact with institutions displaying strong performance in particular processes through the group's network. The annual Workshop/Conference provides unique opportunities for presentations and discussions on the issues surrounding good management practice, assisted by the team of internationally respected experts.

"For me, the benefits of attending the forum include learning of the issues that face each of the members in their different contexts, and the solutions they have implemented. I have unashamedly borrowed good practice from a number of institutions for implementation at my own. I enjoy the frank and honest interchanges in a non-competitive environment."

An Australian Deputy Vice-Chancellor

WHAT WILL BE PROVIDED?

Participation in a Programme creates a structured opportunity for institutional leaders to reflect on existing management practice, and to consider fitness for purpose (i.e. the effectiveness of their operation), and in doing so, it stimulates an impetus for change within the university.

The outcome of the Programme provides models of good practice that are better than the best of the participating group. It creates opportunities for networking and a workshop, guided by internationally acknowledged subject experts, to identify and share good practice and explore the key issues that arise during the study of the topics under review. The output will take the form of a comprehensive report which will include examples of good practice relating to the topics under review.

By the end of each one year Programme, institutional leaders will have a comprehensive set of good practice statements which can be used selectively in objective/target setting within the reviewed areas. Participants in previous Programmes have confirmed the positive influence for change generated by the Benchmarking Programme.

WHAT PROCESSES WILL BE BENCHMARKED?

In the 2012 Programme, the following topics have been selected:

F234 Financial management

This will explore and compare the procedures and standards found within the financial management operations of each university, and will seek to identify any universally acceptable 'best' practice. Issues such as accountability and financial reporting will be central to this topic.

Assessor: **Michael Gallagher**. Executive Director, Group of Eight Ltd. Australia. (Formerly, Director of Policy and Planning at the Australian National University.)

F235 Managing league tables and rankings

This is about managing a university in an environment in which it can be ranked by lay organisations with widely varying methodologies. Rankings can be international e.g. Shanghai Jiao Tong, Times HE, QS or national. A discussion of the questions if and how institutions might respond to international rankings, and how might the institutional processes to operationalise these responses (e.g. institutional processes aimed at improving the institution's rank) be improved."

Assessor: **Prof Ellen Hazelkorn**. Vice President of Research and Enterprise, and Dean of the Graduate Research School, Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT), Ireland

F236 Managing graduate outcomes

Graduate employability. The big issue right now is 'student success', i.e. retention, progression, time to completion, graduate destination (employment), and graduate attributes. These are essential KPIs that are of deep concern to most institutions. Managing student destination and employability is in fact a large management issue in itself and how it is managed at all stages in the student life cycle is extremely important. This topic will explore these issues and examine how universities might enhance their performance.

Assessor: **Prof John Brennan**. Emeritus Professor of Higher Education Research, The Open University Business School.

WHAT IS THE METHODOLOGY?

The benchmarking is undertaken by an initial institutional self-review process, using frameworks prepared by the ACU team and the specialist assessors, (the latter are appointed for their international expertise in each area under review). Each university participating will receive a handbook, incorporating guidance notes for completing those frameworks.

Each participating university prepares its responses (primarily using existing material), which are then submitted and evaluated by the assessors with assistance from the ACU Benchmarking Project Manager. Prior to the Workshop/Conference, a set of good practice statements are produced, derived from the responses and the assessors' comments, which then form the basis and framework for the discussions.

Each university is also asked to prepare a brief 'environmental scan' of the major factors which it is currently facing. These will be used by assessors and participants in the Workshop/Conference discussions of common

challenges and opportunities, and provide contextual data to enable a judgement to be made about 'fitness for purpose' in respect of the chosen management approaches that are presented.

Evaluations from previous participants show that the questionnaire process is itself a valuable change management tool, as it focuses attention on the issues that are relevant, and causes the operational managers to reflect on the fitness for purpose of whatever they are doing.

The methodology is designed to encourage a significant depth of debate of the key management issues at the Workshop/Conference, where senior representatives are engaged from the participating universities in high level strategic issues and policy discussions.

"As a management tool it has been useful in identifying specific strategic areas and aspects that need to be developed and improved and has also led to much better integration of planning, implementation, monitoring and review processes."

A South African University Vice-Rector

At the Workshop/Conference, the reports are discussed, comparisons made with other participants' practices, good practices identified, and the key high level management issues considered. A confidential final report will be issued, containing the agreed elements of good practice, and identifying (for participants only) the leading institutions in each element.

Following the Workshop/Conference participants are invited to conduct a self-assessment exercise, to compare their own practices with the models of good practice. This process enables each university to identify areas where and how improvements can be made.

The Workshop/ Conference will be held in **Bloemfontein, South Africa**, hosted by **the University of the Free State**, running from the **27th to the 29th August, 2012**. If required, the second cohort event will be in **October, 2012**, at a venue yet to be identified. Each participating university will be entitled to send up to three delegates to the Workshop/Conference. (Please note that travel and accommodation costs are **not** included in the Programme fee.)

WHAT ARE THE CRITERIA FOR JUDGEMENT?

The assessment system used by the assessors is based on that used for the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Awards in the USA and the European Quality Awards. Each framework or process contains a number of sub-topics, which are examined during the assessment. The criteria used are:

- **Approach:** which refers to the policy or technique adopted and whether it is right for the task (fit for the purpose).
- **Application:** which refers to the extent to which the approaches are applied to all relevant areas of the university.
- **Outcomes:** which refers to how successful the university is in achieving the fundamental purposes in the areas to be examined and how this is monitored.

There has to be latitude in assessing the different approaches to meeting the challenges given the diversity of participating institutions and the contexts in which they are located. 'Fitness for purpose' will be an essential factor in assessing the appropriateness of the chosen approach.

Consequently the assessors will be looking to see whether a clear approach is defined and used and whether it achieves the desired results, rather than using a checklist of standards for specific techniques, structures or tools. A five level rating system is used to indicate how they perceive a university has performed in each process under review.

WHAT IS OBTAINED FOR THE PARTICIPATION FEE?

Participation in the Programme brings the following benefits and services:

- A Handbook from ACU setting out the methodology and detailed frameworks, to guide the university in its self-review.
- An initial draft report, following the self-review, giving written comments from the assessors and listing the key elements of good practice.
- Participation in the Workshop/Conference, to be held in August (or October), 2012, to hear presentations by the exponents of good practice, to consider the key issues, and agree on good practice in the processes under review. ***(NB: travel and accommodation costs are not included in the fee.)***
- The opportunity to shape future years' benchmarking exercises in terms of scope, and process.
- Receiving the advice of ACU and other participants in the Programme on issues raised through the benchmarking process.
- A final Report from ACU on good practice for those processes reviewed for the year. This provides a checklist of elements of good practice, which can be used to bring about management improvements.
- Participation in the Programme also entitles a university to buy copies of the sections of past reports (including the statements of good practice) covering previously addressed topics (the list of all topics covered will be set out in the handbook), subject to a maximum of two topics each year of participation. The cost of each past report and its statements of good practice will be £500.

HOW MUCH INFORMATION HAS TO BE PROVIDED?

Participants will need to provide information on the basic management processes that are under review, and the amount of work involved will depend on the size and diversity of the university, and the extent to which present procedures are well documented. However, as the benchmarking process is based on how universities operate at present, participants should not have to generate or collect much new information; the work will focus on describing the processes currently in place. In addition, participants may need to answer certain specific queries from the assessors when they review institutional submissions.

**HOW WILL
CONFIDENTIAL
DATA BE
PROTECTED?**

The Programme operates on the basis of it being an international collaborative activity where universities can use benchmarking methodologies to examine their own performance in a comparative context. It follows that universities joining the Programme must be prepared to allow other participants to see some of the results. Indeed, without sharing these results it would be difficult to interpret comparative performance in the international context. In this respect the Programme differs from some national benchmarking services where competitor institutions do not share information, but measure their performance against the range and distribution of other scores.

All data collected will be the property of the ACU, and all prospective participants will be asked to ensure confidentiality. Of course, Vice-Chancellors and other Chief Executive Officers will be able to inform their own governing bodies about relevant data, providing it is not subsequently made available for external use.

MEMBERSHIP FEES

The fee will be £6,900 and is independent of how many topics are undertaken. The only major costs not included in this fee are travel and accommodation costs associated with participation in the Workshop/Conference.

If copies of topic reports from previous years are requested (maximum of two in each year of participation), they will be at a cost of £500 per topic.

ACU BENCHMARKING PROGRAMME - 2012 Programme
APPLICATION FOR PARTICIPATION

(Please use accompanying Word file copy of this application form.)

CONTACT DETAILS

Name of University*	
Address*	
Contact Person*	
Telephone	
Facsimile	
E-mail*	

* (essential)

SELECTED PROCESSES

- We wish to join the Programme to participate in the processes marked below

Processes		Chosen by us (X)
Financial management	F234	
Managing league tables and rankings	F235	
Managing graduate outcomes	F236	

PARTICIPATION FEES

Once our participation has been confirmed we agree to pay the fee of £6,900 when invoiced by ACU.

We accept that we may be assigned to either of the two cohorts for the year.

We agree not to divulge any information about any other participant to any third party and not to use information about any other participant/institution for any commercial purpose.

Authorised on behalf of the University by:

Name

Title

Please send the completed form, **by email**, to: cliffwragg@fastmail.fm

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