Benchmarking and External Referencing Policy and Procedure

Section 1 - Preamble

(1) Charles Darwin University (CDU) is committed to ensuring that the student experience is informed by the delivery of quality teaching and learning. CDU undertakes benchmarking and external referencing to measure, monitor and improve the performance of the University's operations and achievement of academic standards.

Section 2 - Purpose

(2) This policy and procedure is designed to produce evidence of the quality of the University's operations, identify enhancement opportunities and to adopt best practices in relation to academic standards.

(3) This policy and procedure supports meeting the Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2021 (Standards 1.4.1, 5.3.1, 5.3.4 and 5.3.7), the ELICOS Standards 2018, the National Standards for Foundation Programs 2021, and the National Code of Practice for Providers of Education and Training to Overseas Students 2018, and is designed to:

a. collect evidence of the quality of CDU's operations and academic standards for learning and teaching for institutional self-assessment and effective decision-making;
b. gather data about quality assurance processes at CDU to support decision-making;
c. identify areas for improvement and set targets for quality enhancement across CDU; and
d. identify evidence of good practice and opportunities for improvement and set targets for institutional development.

Section 3 - Scope

(4) This policy and procedure applies to benchmarking and external referencing activities relating to the University, its courses and operations including:

a. Higher education coursework courses and units;
b. Non-award courses, short courses or micro credentials; and
c. University policies, procedures and operations relating to learning and teaching.

Section 4 - Policy

(5) The University is committed to fostering a culture of continuous improvement and will use benchmarking and external referencing to compare its performance and standards within the university and with other education providers to:

a. provide assurance of the quality of its operations;
b. identify enhancements;
c. inform strategy, planning and goal setting; and
d. enhance organisational learning and decision making.

(6) To do this, the University will engage in benchmarking activities that:

a. draw on relevant, reliable, and recent data and information;
b. are collaborative, open, and constructive; and
c. engage with a coherent range of stakeholders concerned with the benchmarking topic.

(7) The University will use external referencing to inform planning, determine areas for future development or growth and for review using comparisons of:

a. course and unit design;
b. cohort analysis of student performance and achievement of outcomes; and
c. policy, procedure and operations relating to learning and teaching.

Types of benchmarking and external referencing

(8) The University uses a variety of internal and external benchmarking and external referencing approaches to monitor academic performance and standards, including but not limited to:

a. organisational benchmarking in which comparisons are made at the organisational level (institution, Faculty, discipline, course and unit levels). This may include comparisons of student experience, measured through external surveys, responses to internal surveys such as MyView, or through other tools.
b. benchmarking and external referencing of course and unit design, assessment and student performance. Course benchmarking may include comparisons of course components such as course structures, entry requirements, delivery modes, assessment and learning outcomes. This also may include Academic Calibration, in accordance with the Academic Calibration Procedure.
c. process benchmarking involving comparisons of particular processes and practices e.g. of cycle times, efficiency, delivery modes.
d. outcomes benchmarking relating to the comparison of outcomes data, including cohort analysis of student outcomes such as retention, progression, attrition and completion rates. Cohorts can include the following:
    i. pre-identified: cohorts identified by factors such as location, international students, Third Party Arrangements, annual intakes, field of education course groups, diversity groups, at-risk groups, students with substantial academic credit or Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL).
    ii. data-driven: detected risk areas such as clusters of under-performance, significant breaches of academic integrity, learning difficulty, slow progression/completion or attrition with a common factor (agent, country of origin, admission entry pathway, mode of study, market niche, location).
e. best-practice benchmarking in which the University selects a comparator thought to be at the forefront in the area to be benchmarked.

Outcomes of benchmarking and external referencing

(9) Outcomes of benchmarking and external referencing will be used to guide and evaluate enhancements to improve the standard of learning and teaching including, but not limited to:

a. assessment design;
b. graduate attributes;

c. course, unit and curriculum design;
d. course structures;
e. credit arrangements;
f. delivery modes;
g. use of institutional systems and technologies;
h. professional accreditation;
i. admissions standards;
j. third party arrangements; and
k. policy, procedure and operations.

Responsibilities

(10) Academic Board will monitor compliance with the Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2021 and University policy, in line with the Educational Quality and Excellence Framework Policy and through the Comprehensive Reporting Framework.

(11) The Associate Director Academic Quality and Integrity is responsible for providing support to adhere to this policy.

(12) The Director Planning and Performance is responsible for providing data relating to the monitoring of student and cohort performance.

(13) Faculty Pro Vice-Chancellors are responsible for ensuring they have appropriate processes and resources in place to undertake the required benchmarking activities to meet the Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2021 and CDU policy.

Section 5 - Procedure

Benchmarking and external referencing processes

(14) There are five (5) phases involved in benchmarking and external referencing:

a. planning and design;
b. evidence collation;
c. reporting and monitoring;
d. implementation and communication; and
e. evaluation and review.

Planning and design

(15) Benchmarking and external referencing activity must be appropriately planned and designed, including:

a. documenting decisions about the rationale for undertaking benchmarking and/or external referencing activity, the type of benchmarking or external benchmarking, who will undertake the activity, the expected timelines for project completion, deliverables and identified stakeholders.
b. clearly identifying the information being benchmarked and/or externally referenced, strategic indicators, parameters, methods and proposed data comparison sources prior to undertaking the activity.
c. using comparators or partners that have a shared commitment to the objective, are appropriate for the benchmarking and/or external referencing activity and allow a worthwhile comparison.

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

a. The Agreement must include the scope, timeframe, intended outcomes and any expectations of reciprocity of the referencing activity and ensure confidentiality of shared data.
b. All agreements must be prepared in consultation with the University legal team and with the support of the Quality Specialist – Academic Calibration and Benchmarking.

Evidence collation

(17) Evidence must be collected in accordance with the benchmarking and/or external referencing plan. All evidence must draw on relevant, reliable and recent data and information.

(18) Self-review activities must be undertaken to analyse relevant information and data.

(19) Where partners are involved, peer review activities, such as a workshop, can be undertaken to compare data and processes and identify areas for sharing and collaboration.

Implementation and communication

(20) Benchmarking activity must lead to recommendations for action through the development of an Action Plan.

a. Recommendations for action can be embedded into continuous improvement processes and built into other reports, such as through Annual Course Monitoring or Course Accreditation.
b. Recommendations for action may bring about a separate Action Plan.

(21) Implementation of the Action Plan must be monitored through a relevant governance body or person.

Reporting and monitoring

(22) The Quality Specialist – Academic Calibration and Benchmarking will report on the results, outcomes and recommendations from benchmarking and/or external referencing activity to relevant management, committees and governance bodies (in accordance with the Comprehensive Reporting Framework) to identify common themes, trends and drive improvements.

a. Reports will be tabled at the Learning Teaching and Assessment Committee and Academic Board in accordance with the Comprehensive Reporting Framework.
b. Reporting will occur on a regular cycle and outcomes from benchmarking may be built into other reports, such as Annual Course Monitoring or Course Accreditation.

Evaluation and review

(23) Benchmarking and external referencing activities will be evaluated by the Quality Specialist – Academic Calibration and Benchmarking to determine the effectiveness of the activity.

Section 6 - Non-Compliance

(24) Non-compliance with Governance Documents is considered a breach of the Code of Conduct - Employees or the Code of Conduct - Students, as applicable, and is treated seriously by the University. Reports of concerns about non-compliance will be managed in accordance with the applicable disciplinary procedures outlined in the Charles Darwin University and Union Enterprise Agreement 2025 and the Code of Conduct - Students.

(25) Complaints may be raised in accordance with the Complaints and Grievance Policy and Procedure - Employees and Complaints Policy - Students.

(26) All staff members have an individual responsibility to raise any suspicion, allegation or report of fraud or corruption in accordance with the Fraud and Corruption Control Policy and Whistleblower Reporting (Improper Conduct) Procedure.

Status and Details

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Responsible Executive	Lisa Papatraianou Deputy Provost
Implementation Officer	Amanda Martin Associate Director Academic Quality and Integrity
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Glossary Terms and Definitions

"Benchmarking" - Benchmarking can be defined as a structured, collaborative learning process for comparing practices, processes or performance outcomes. Its purpose is to identify comparative strengths and weaknesses, as a basis for developing improvements in academic quality or performance. Benchmarking can also be defined as a quality process used to evaluate performance by comparing institutional practices with identified good practices across the sector (definition from TEQSA Guidance Note: External Referencing)

"Faculty" - An organisational and academic unit in the University that delivers courses and conducts research.

"Higher education coursework course" - Higher education coursework courses include award courses, which lead to a qualification recognised by the AQF, and accredited non-award courses, including enabling, foundation, preparatory, bridging, study abroad, international exchange, and other types of accredited non-award courses.

"External referencing" - External referencing means a process through which a higher education provider compares an aspect of its operations with an external comparator(s) e.g., comparing the design of a course of study and/or student achievement of learning outcomes with that of a course from another provider. (definition from TEQSA Guidance Note: External Referencing)

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