

Quick Guide to Benchmarking (Academic)

FAQs

What is benchmarking?

There are many definitions, but for the purpose of Quality Enhancement (QE), benchmarking is a process of making comparisons with other institutions or schools to: establish and learn from their practices; identify areas of strength; share good practice; generate new ideas, methods and practices, with the objective of continuous improvement. Benchmarking does not necessarily provide solutions to problems, but is rather an aid to judgement in solving them.

Why undertake benchmarking?

Benchmarking provides a means for effective, evidence-based decision making. Through both internal and external engagement, it offers opportunity for collegial dialogue, sharing of good practice, enhanced reputation and increased awareness of the School.

Where does benchmarking take place?

Benchmarking can be both inter-institutional (against other external institutions) and intra-institutional (comparisons with schools/units internally). Before selecting the institutions for comparison, it may be useful to firstly identify the criteria against which the home School will be benchmarked.

What are the criteria for benchmarking?

The criteria for benchmarking should be clearly identified in advance and should emerge from the terms of reference and themes of the Review, as agreed between the School and the QEU. The criteria may, for example, emerge from the SWOT exercise undertaken as part of the review process. For the purposes of academic quality review, the criteria should align with the primary objectives of the academic review process to achieve UCC's quality objectives of enabling Schools to reflect on and enhance: academic standards; quality of student learning experience; continued relevance of programmes to internal and external needs; alignment with national and international expectations; good practice and innovation.

How are the benchmarked institutions selected?

The institutions selected for benchmarking should be of good standing and reputation, to enable ambitious but realistic outcomes; they should be of relatively similar size, with similar programmes, resources, student numbers etc. For the purpose of Quality Review, it is common practice (but not mandatory) to benchmark against two institutions – one national and one international. To increase the potential reach of expertise, the selected institutions should not currently be directly engaged with the School (e.g. through the review process itself or, for example, external examiners).

How is the benchmarking conducted and who pays?

The benchmarking usually involves a visit to the cooperating institution/school, following initial contact which may include a written request for feedback on the identified criteria. Occasionally, for practical reasons, benchmarking is undertaken via a survey. The QEU will provide up to €500 to support the benchmarking exercise. The unit under review may add to that amount should it wish. A cost plan should be drawn up and shared with the QEU; an internal transfer will then be arranged.

How is the Benchmarking exercise represented in the SER?

The benchmarking outcomes should not only make direct comparisons, but should reflect on the learning and impact that the process can have on the School at UCC. This should be explicit in the SER.

Summary Process for Benchmarking

