PROCEDURE A5.5-P5.7

EXTERNAL REFERENCING (INCLUDING BENCHMARKING)

1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Related Policy

External Referencing (including Benchmarking) Policy

1.2 Purpose

This procedure aims to support the External Referencing (including Benchmarking) policy by providing detail on the external referencing process and guidance on how to benchmark to ensure external referencing activities are approached in a coordinated, considered and systematic way.

This procedure should be read in conjunction with the External Referencing (including Benchmarking) policy and the Course and Unit Lifecycle policy and procedure.

1.3 Scope

This policy applies to governance committees, the Chief Education Officer,

Head of School ABS, Registrar, and any staff involved in review and continuous improvement activities.

1.4 Scope Exceptions

None.

2.0 RESPONSIBILITIES

1. The External Referencing (including Benchmarking) policy outlines the responsibilities of the relevant board and committees for overseeing and approving external referencing activities.

2. Section 3.2 of this procedure outlines the responsibilities of ACHW staff.

3.0 PROCEDURE

1. ACHW will use various external referencing methods to compare data. For example, peer reviews, desk research or benchmarking (see definitions).

2. When benchmarking, for example, ACHW may use the following types:

   - **Organisational benchmarking** - comparisons are made at the organisational level (institution, faculty/department, school, course and unit levels).

- **Course benchmarking** - of course design and student performance.

- **Process benchmarking** - comparisons of particular processes and practices e.g., of cycle times, efficiency.

- **Outcomes benchmarking** - comparison of outcomes data, especially student outcomes such as attrition and completion rates.

- **Best-practice benchmarking** - selecting a comparator thought to be at the forefront in the area to be benchmarked.

## 3.1 External referencing responsibilities and process:

1. The Course and Unit Lifecycle policy and procedure outline the external referencing process for the design and review of courses and units.

2. The following table outlines the external referencing process within other reviews, and the positions and committees responsible for each stage.

Stages (stages aligned with the guide at 3.3 of this procedure)	Position/ Committee	Description of activities
1. APPROACH: Propose external referencing/ benchmarking	Chief Education Officer Higher Education	The Chief Education Officer Higher Education has overall responsibility for developing external referencing activities for academic programs and governance controls. The Chief Education Officer Higher Education will submit a proposal (outlining the external referencing project, a projected budget and schedule) to the appropriate committee.
2. APPROACH: Approve external referencing/ benchmarking	Corporate Board Academic Board/Teaching and Learning Committee	The Teaching and Learning Committee, Academic Board or Corporate Board will approve external referencing/benchmarking activity to commence. Refer to ACHW review and benchmarking schedule for detail on which committee must approve.
3. APPROACH: **Engage an external organisation** (if required)	Chief Education Officer Higher Education	The Chief Education Officer Higher Education will: • liaise with external benchmarking partners; and • establish a Memorandum of Understanding with benchmarking partners.

Stages (stages aligned with the guide at 3.3 of this procedure)	Position/ Committee	Description of activities
4. DEPLOYMENT: **Make recommendations following external referencing/ benchmarking activity**	Head of School ACHW	The Head of School ACHW will: • ensure that outcomes of external referencing activities are appropriately recorded and reported to enable informed decision-making and support effective implementation of improvements. • report progress and outcomes of external referencing activities (including recommendations) to the relevant committee or board. Refer to ACHW review and benchmarking schedule for detail on which committee must approve.
5. DEPLOYMENT: **Review and approve recommendations for changes and improvements** (following external referencing/ benchmarking)	Academic subcommittees, Teaching and Learning Committee, Academic Board	• The Committee/Board responsible for approving is outlined in the ACHW review and benchmarking schedule.
6. ACTION: **Implement changes and improvements**	Head of School, Academic Services Manager	• The Academic Services Manager will support staff to make improvements arising from external referencing recommendations. • The Head of School ABS will work with staff to monitor the implementation of improvements arising from external referencing recommendations.

3.2   Benchmarking guide[1]

Staff should use the following guide (developed by Philip H. Meade) when conducting benchmarking:

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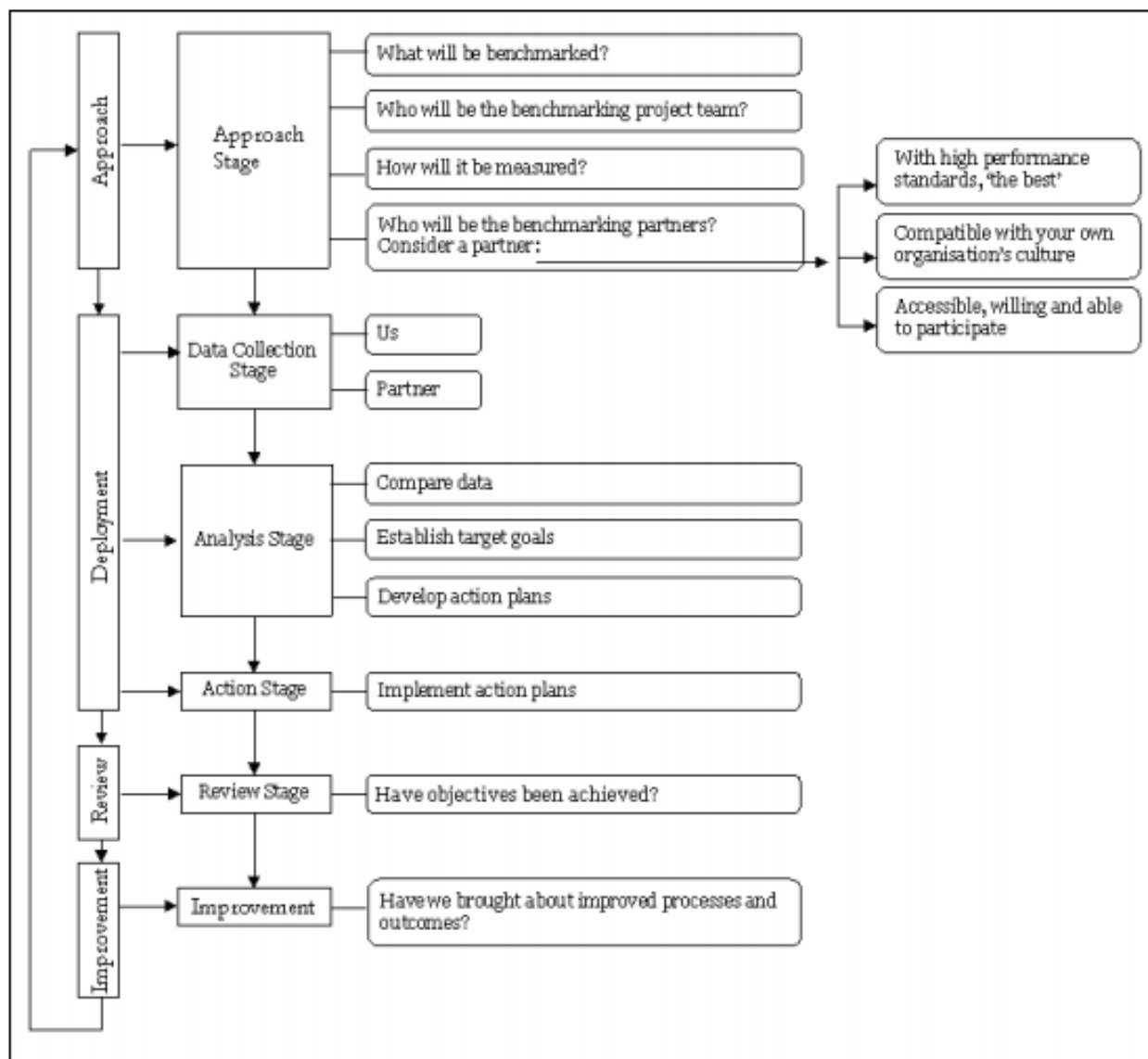
[1] Meade P.H. 'A Guide to Benchmarking', The University of Otago, 1998

STAGE	SUB-STAGE	KEY STEPS/POINTS TO CONSIDER
Approach	Select a benchmarking topic	Examples of what might be benchmarked: • Student support systems and/or learning methods which have led to decreased dropout rates and higher student satisfaction in first year subjects. • Teaching review and feedback strategies which have enabled staff to increase the effectiveness of their teaching without adding significantly to their workload. • Improving support, course advice, and assistance for potential students during enrolment. • Methods and programmes for staff development and support
	Select a benchmarking project team	Three to eight members is the optimal size for a benchmarking team. Team members need to be experienced, competent and respected within the area which is to be benchmarked.
	Identify the measures to be used to collect the data	The most important factors when selecting what will be measured and how results will be compared are: • including both quantitative and qualitative measures of performance. • including indicators that are relevant to the selected topic for benchmarking. • including indicators which exhibit sufficient precision to accommodate meaningful comparison. • 'contextualising' benchmarking data; and • including measures of performance that can be reproduced, to enable comparison with the benchmarking partner and evaluation of one's own performance after initiatives arising from benchmarking have been implemented.
	Select benchmarking partner(s)	Points to consider when deciding on benchmarking partner(s): • the number of partners • the depth of assessment • the performance standards of the potential partner. • the accessibility of the potential partner. • the cultural similarity and compatibility of the potential partner in relation to one's own institution. • the geographical proximity of the potential partner (cost and ease of site visit and other communication). • the willingness of the potential partner to participate; and • the ability of the potential partner to participate
	Approval of benchmarking projects	This requires the submission of a proposal to the appropriate senior manager or committee. This should include an outline of the planned benchmarking project, and a projected budget and schedule.

STAGE	SUB-STAGE	KEY STEPS/POINTS TO CONSIDER
Deployment	Collect data from own organisation	Measuring your own current performance in the selected areas is necessary to provide a baseline against which comparisons can be made. You must first study your own institution, and understand what is currently being practised, before attempting to measure the performance of any other institution.
	Collect data from benchmarking partner(s)	The performance of the benchmarking partner is assessed in this sub-stage, with the focus on both measurement of outcome or product, and investigation of practices by which those outcomes are achieved. This may include a desk review of publicly available information or direct site visits with a partner to discuss and observe processes.
	Compare data	Information obtained from the benchmarking partner is compared with that from the internal evaluation. Three key questions need to be considered here: • Is the partner better? • How much better are they? • Why are they better?
	Establish target goals for improved performance	The aim of benchmarking is at least equal to the benchmarking partner's performance, and preferably to overtake it. Factors to consider here may include the difficulty of achieving a particular goal, the costs of change as compared to the likely benefits to be accrued, the necessity of change to the achievement of critical success factors, and the amount of organisational upheaval which particular changes may bring.
	Develop action plans	This step involves the identification of changes required to achieve the specific performance targets, and the formulation of an action plan for improvement. The key here is the adaptation of the approaches and insights gained from the benchmarking exercise. Do not attempt to simply to copy the practices observed, without sensitivity to organisational and environmental factors.
	Benchmarking report	The purpose of the benchmarking report is to present the findings of the benchmarking exercise as well as a summary of the recommendations for change. Reports should include: • a brief outline of the project's methodology, • a detailed yet concise presentation of the quantitative and qualitative results of the benchmarking, and • a summary of the key findings of the benchmarking exercise and the recommendations arising from these. The report may also include information relating to the future review of the benchmarked processes, and the results of any implemented change.

STAGE	SUB-STAGE	KEY STEPS/POINTS TO CONSIDER
Action		Improving our own performance requires the effective implementation of the recommendations for improvement which arise from the benchmarking exercise. Accomplishing the goals and targets contained in the action plan requires a commitment to change. The benchmarking report may be a useful tool to clearly illustrate the need for improvement. Successful change will require effective leadership and planning.
Review		A continuing process of review is necessary to determine whether outcomes have improved, and whether objectives and targets have been met. If they have not, the reason should be ascertained: does the problem lie with the plans, or with their implementation, or is the data analysis incorrect?
Improvement		Reflect on the learnings from the benchmarking exercise to identify how the process and outcomes can be strengthened. This learning will help inform a higher level of continuous improvement as a new cycle of improvement commences.

3.3   Governance Reporting

1. ACHW provides reports on external referencing outcomes through the Academic Board to the ACHW Corporate Board.

2. Summary reports on benchmarking are prepared by the Academic Services Manager against the activities outlined in the Benchmarking Schedule, including an annual summary of the recommendations, improvements made, and their impact.

3. Reports customarily include:
   - Areas for improvement and good practice identified via external referencing activities.
   - Analysis as to the reasons for any variation or commonality identified.
   - Improvement strategies as developed by ACHW in response to findings.
   - Action plans for implementation of strategies.

   This reporting mechanism ensures follow through on external referencing outcomes to ensure continuous improvement throughout ACHW operations

4.0   DEFINITIONS

- **Benchmarking** - is a type of external referencing. It can be defined as a structured, collaborative learning process for comparing practices, processes, or performance outcomes. Its purpose is to compare 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 across the sector.

- **Desk research** – process of finding, collecting, and comparing publicly available data with own data.

  - **External Referencing** - In the context of the Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2021 (HES Framework), external referencing means a process through which a higher education provider compares an aspect of its operations with an external comparator(s) (for example comparing the design of a course of study and/or student achievement of learning outcomes with that of a course from another provider).

- **Learning Outcomes** - The intended learning outcome is provided in writing, in the unit outline, prior to the commencement of teaching the unit. Learning outcomes serve as a reference point for the pre-assessment moderation of assessment tasks.

- **Peer review** - evaluation by others working in the same field.

5.0   REFERENCES AND ASSOCIATED INFORMATION

- External Referencing (including Benchmarking) Procedure

- Scentia, AIM, ACHW Quality Assurance Framework

- ACHW Review and Benchmarking Schedule

- Course and Unit Lifecycle Policy and Procedure

- Assessment Moderation Policy and Procedure

6.0   POLICY/PROCEDURE OWNERSHIP

Policy Owner	Chief Education Officer Higher Education
Status	Reviewed on September 2025
Approval Authority	ACHW Academic Board
Date of Approval	11/09/2025
Effective Date	15/09/2025
Implementation Owner	Head of School, ACHW
Maintenance Owner	Senior Compliance Manager Higher Education
Review Due	December 2027

7.0   AMENDMENTS

Version	Amendment Approval (Date)	Amendment Made By (Position)	Amendment Details
A5.0-P5.0	10 July 2017	Head of Compliance / Director ACHW	Initial document review after purchase of MHMHE

Version	Amendment Approval (Date)	Amendment Made By (Position)	Amendment Details
A5.1-P5.1	18 January 2021	Academic Board	General update on process and responsibilities
A5.2-P5.2	22 January 2021	Academic Board	Further changes made to the procedures and on benchmarking activities
A5.3-P5.3	14 September 2021	ACHW Academic Board	Rewrite to provide further detail on responsibilities, include a process and guide on how to benchmark.
A5.4-P5.4	25 June 2024	ACHW Academic Board	Update to staffing titles
A5.4-P5.5	28 August 2024	Executive Director	Further reference to governance reporting.
A5.5-P5.6	13 January 2025	Executive Director	Changes to staffing
A5.5-P5.7	11 September 2025	Senior Compliance Manager Higher Education	Minor administrative changes • Update to staff titles • Template slightly revised following benchmarking