ACODE

Leading in Technology Enhanced Learning and Teaching

Benchmarks for Technology Enhanced Learning

A guide to benchmarking for your context

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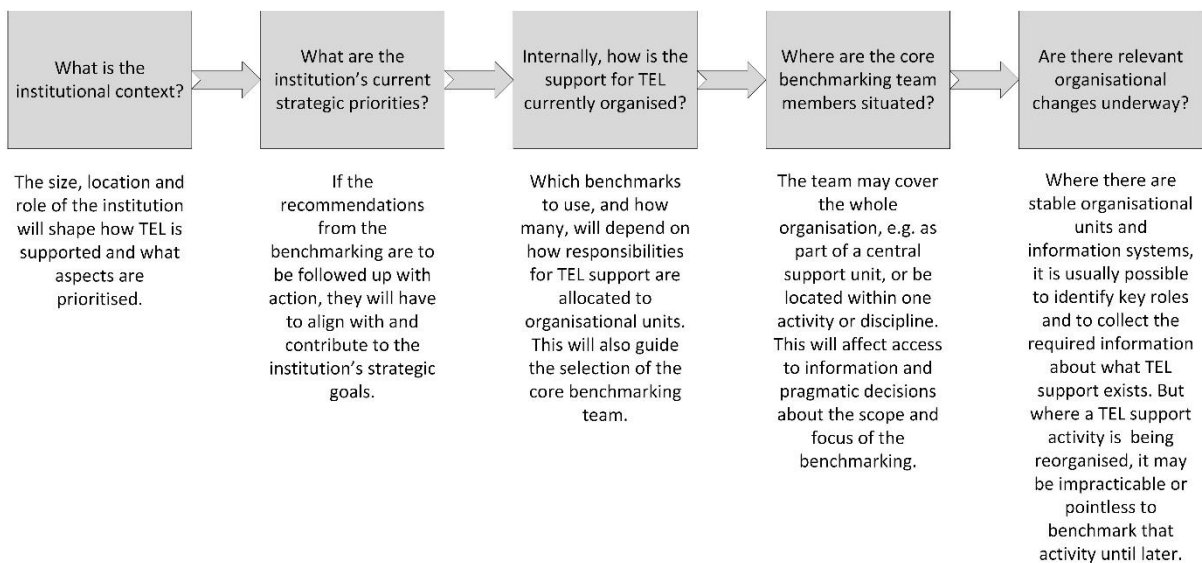
Term	Description	Term	Description
ACODE	Australasian Council on Online Distance and E-learning	EFTSL	Equivalent Full Time Student Load
TEL	Technology enhanced learning	MOOCs	Massive Open Online Courses
IT	Information Technology	PIs	Performance Indicators
QA	Quality Assurance		

Introduction and Background

This guide draws upon the findings of research[1] carried out with a sample of Australian and New Zealand universities during their preparation for taking part in the 2016 ACODE TEL benchmarking summit. The aim of the research was to provide pragmatic evidence-based guidance for institutions on how to:

- select which benchmarks to use
- manage the self-assessment process
- follow up on the resulting recommendations.

Figure 1 summarises key questions that benchmarking teams will need to consider when planning the benchmarking self-assessment in their context.

What is the institutional context?	What are the institution's current strategic priorities?	Internally, how is the support for TEL currently organised?	Where are the core benchmarking team members situated?	Are there relevant organisational changes underway?
The size, location and role of the institution will shape how TEL is supported and what aspects are prioritised.	If the recommendations from the benchmarking are to be followed up with action, they will have to align with and contribute to the institution's strategic goals.	Which benchmarks to use, and how many, will depend on how responsibilities for TEL support are allocated to organisational units. This will also guide the selection of the core benchmarking team.	The team may cover the whole organisation, e.g. as part of a central support unit, or be located within one activity or discipline. This will affect access to information and pragmatic decisions about the scope and focus of the benchmarking.	Where there are stable organisational units and information systems, it is usually possible to identify key roles and to collect the required information about what TEL support exists. But where a TEL support activity is being reorganised, it may be impracticable or pointless to benchmark that activity until later.

Figure 1. A summary of contextual influences on TEL benchmarking decisions

The study on which this guide is based had two main parts, which are reported in more detail in separate documents:

1. Analysis of publicly available data and documents for Australian and New Zealand universities; to identify what external strategic factors that appear to be related to the institutional support for TEL. (Russell, 2016)
2. Collection and analysis of qualitative data from discussions with 10 teams in Australia and New Zealand who were involved in planning for the 2016 ACODE benchmarking activity. Also included were 3 institutions that had decided not to participate in 2016, to include data on why they had taken this decision. (Russell, in preparation)

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[1] The research was sponsored by Western Sydney University's Academic Development Program and by ACODE.

The research found that:

I.   Size, location and extent of distance learning activity appear to influence higher education institutions' strategies for supporting learning and teaching, and therefore also for supporting technology enhanced learning.

II. Benchmarking teams were often influenced as much by local circumstances within the institution as by strategic plans. However, there was recognition that unless the benchmarking recommendations could be aligned with institutional strategic priorities there was little chance of their being supported by senior management.

III. Internal change and restructuring of TEL support services and systems is a common constraint on the benchmarking processes. It will influence which benchmarks can be used and who can be involved in gathering the evidence. If substantial restructuring or other major initiatives are underway, this may also affect the optimal timing for the benchmarking.

IV. Benchmarking teams often did not strictly follow the recommended process for evidence gathering and self-assessment scoring. This was usually for pragmatic reasons such as availability of staff, time, resources and access to information.

Institutional contexts and priorities

Each institutional context is unique. However, there are some general patterns in the ways that TEL support is prioritised that could be relevant in choosing which benchmarks to focus on. Some broad generalisations:

Location

Regional universities are likely to shape strategic priorities around the broad needs of their local communities and for some this means distance education provision as well as regional campuses. Universities based in urban areas that are also served by several other universities may vary in their strategic focus, focusing on different sections or interests within the same population, and attracting varying proportions of local and international students.

Distance education activity

Distance providers rely on efficient scalable TEL support for enrolled students. This contrasts with campus-based universities using MOOCs to raise their public profile, locally and internationally.

Size

The size of a university's operations (in terms of EFTSL) is relevant. Larger institutions are more concerned with infrastructure and coordination of institution-wide services, whereas the smaller ones focus more on the student experience, often relying more on less formal coordination of TEL support.

Examples

Below are links to three typical scenarios based on the research findings. Each scenario combines elements that were common across several of the universities in the study.

- [A regional university with substantial distance education activity](#)

- [A suburban multi-campus university](#)

- [A city-centre university with one main campus](#)

Regional university with substantial distance education activity

Institutional strategic context and priorities

While classed as medium-sized in terms of EFTSL, this university has as many enrolled students as some of the larger universities in urban centres, but more than half of these are distance part-time students. There are also multiple campuses situated quite far apart, catering for local students in their areas. This is the only university with campuses in the region.

Online distance education is well established and supported. All subjects have an on online presence. Because of the substantial distance education activity, technology enhanced learning (TEL) and support for online learning is prioritised in the institutional strategy. Centrally provided TEL tools and services form a significant part of the university's costs. Although historically many students have had unreliable and slow internet services, broadband access among the population is growing and speeds are improving. The university is in a good position to take full advantage of the improved internet access.

Within the university, there are discipline-based educational designers working with academic teaching staff, but reporting centrally. Professional development for teaching staff, including TEL skills, is provided centrally, some of it through online self-paced modules. All new teaching staff are required to complete a University Learning and Teaching course, which includes a section on technology-enhanced learning. Student support services for TEL are also centrally coordinated, to cater for the mix of distance students and multiple campuses. Student support for TEL is considered a crucial service for distance students, who may drop out of study if they encounter too many technical or other access problems.

Scope and core benchmarking team

Because most of the TEL support is centrally coordinated, the core benchmarking team includes representatives from several central units: Learning & Teaching, IT services, the Library and Student Services. These central units support both fully online study and campus-based study, both were to be included in the scope of the benchmarking.

One constraint on the information gathering process was that several academic departments were undergoing restructuring. This meant that it would be difficult to engage many of the affected academic staff in the self-assessment process, as roles and responsibilities were in flux. Instead the team identified other methods for including the academic perspective in the evidence, for example through reported experiences from the discipline-based educational designers.

Selecting benchmarks and planning the self-assessment

In a previous benchmarking round, the university had tried to use all eight benchmarks, but found that this was too ambitious to do thoroughly. This time, they decided to use three at most, and to include one benchmark covering institutional systems and one focusing on the student experience.

The core team were confident that they had clear institutional strategic priorities, policies and governance in place for TEL. Benchmarks 1 and 2, which cover strategy, governance and QA systems, had already been benchmarked. While a follow-up comparison might be useful, this would be of less value than reviewing how the TEL strategy was playing out in routine decision-making. In particular, there were questions about how efficiently and effectively the University was managing decisions about the continuing substantial expenditure on new institution-wide TEL tools and analytics. In particular, there have been questions about the balance of priorities between campus technology (e.g. wifi, videoconferencing between campuses, technology-enabled learning spaces) and provision for distance students (e.g. online learning tools and analytics). So **Benchmark 3** was considered useful.

One of the Learning & Teaching team responsible for evaluation of TEL tools took on the role of convenor of a group of 3-4 people including some from the central IT Services area, who would gather evidence for self-assessment on Benchmark 3.

After some discussion of whether to use Benchmark 4 or 5, the team plumped for **Benchmark 4**, as a way of gauging how effectively technologies are being integrated into teaching practice. This could include elements of professional development for staff and also cover its effectiveness in terms of the student learning experience and educational design. The self-assessment group for Benchmark 4 was convened by a centrally based lead Educational Designer.

The university had recently introduced new student training and support arrangements for online learning, so the team decided to use **Benchmark 7** as a way of assessing the new systems. One of the Directors from the Student Support area convened the Benchmark 7 self-assessment group.

The process planned for gathering information broadly followed that recommended, in that subgroups would be convened for each benchmark to identify the evidence needed and allocate who would do the initial individual self-assessments on each performance indicator. The subgroups would then reconvene to collate, review and agree on the ratings and evidence. The subgroup convenors would then meet as a core team to review and finalise all the scores and summary evidence to be submitted for sharing at the benchmarking summit.

Follow-up plans

Benchmark 3 would help develop proposals for improving the management the TEL systems, by collating and reviewing evidence of how new IT governance systems are working. It has helped optimisation of assets and selection of the best applications.

Benchmark 4 would provide evidence of how well the available technologies are being integrated into teaching practice and how professional development supports this. The results fed into plans for professional development around TEL, including integration with curriculum development initiatives.

Benchmark 7 would evaluate the new student training and support initiatives for online learning.

Summary diagram
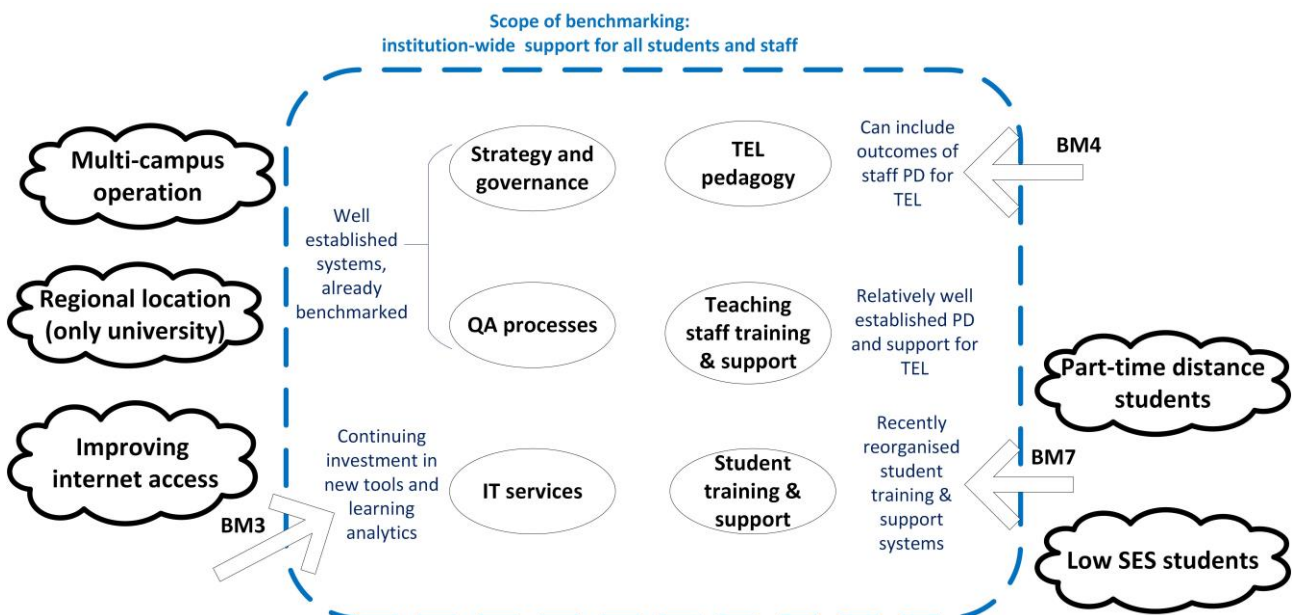
Rationale for using Benchmarks 3, 4 and 7 in a regional university

Suburban multi-campus university

Institutional context and priorities

This is a large multi-campus university with a presence across several suburbs of a major city. The students are mostly drawn from the local population, which is culturally and educationally diverse. The university therefore has a higher proportion of students from non-English speaking families and low socioeconomic backgrounds than in the city centre universities, which also recruit some students from this population.

The university is developing fully online programs way of providing more flexibility for students who may prefer to study online part-time because of family and work responsibilities. These programs were being supported through a partnership with an external provider. However, over 90% of enrolments were still in full-time campus-based study, using a blend of campus and online technologies. The institutional strategic plans emphasise the central role of technology as part of the student learning environment and learning experience. There are strategic institutional targets for TEL, for both distance and campus-based students.

The basic IT support services for both staff and students are run by the central IT Services, and this includes helpdesk technical support for use of the institutional online learning management system. Educational development support for TEL is provided both centrally as a drop-in service and also through discipline based teams who work on priority curriculum development projects. The university used to offer face to face workshops for staff in use of the online learning management system tools, including pedagogical design. But this approach was now being replaced by support for team-based curriculum design.

Previously central TEL support was mainly for innovators. Now they are aiming for later adopters. This needs a more structured program of staff development embedded in curriculum development initiatives. As a result, both training and support services were being reconfigured. This would change the central learning and teaching support team, which has provided most of the staff development and support. However, the basic 'hub and spoke' organisation of TEL support would be maintained in some form.

Scope and core benchmarking team

The core team of three were all from the central Learning and Teaching support. The benchmarking would cover the institution-wide systems for TEL support, but not those of the external partner in the fully online programs. The, and involve gathering information both from central services and from discipline-based users of these services. The student experience of TEL also needed to be included in some way, since this was central to the institutional strategy. It was considered important to include perspectives from academics representing mainstream users of TEL rather than just innovators and enthusiasts, to provide evidence of support for the overall student population.

Selecting benchmarks and planning the self-assessment

The University had a well-developed strategy and policies for TEL, and the latest strategic plans had put more emphasis on TEL. Benchmark 1 was used previously, so the team judged that it would be more useful to focus on other benchmarks to provide evidence on how well the current strategy and policy was being implemented. The central QA processes and systems were being reconfigures, so Benchmark 2 would be more useful at a later stage, once the systems were established.

Given the strategic emphasis and investment in new learning environments (both online and in campus learning spaces) and the considerable investment in developing these, the team considered that **Benchmark 3** would be important. This had not been included in an earlier ACODE benchmarking activity.

Benchmark 4 would provide evidence of progress on how well the investment in digitally enhanced environments and tools were being used in the curriculum. The core team intended to include input from discipline academic groups, especially mainstream users rather than just innovators and enthusiasts, as this would give a more representative picture of the overall use of TEL.

Benchmark 6 could represent progress on support for technology use as part of priority curriculum work, which involved some large-cohort main discipline groups. This benchmark would require input from the discipline-based academics and support staff involved in major curriculum development projects. Because the professional development arrangements for TEL were in the process of becoming devolved and integrated with curriculum development projects, Benchmark 5 was not as relevant as Benchmark 6.

The team also wanted to use **Benchmark 8**, because it could provide an overview of how students were being supported directly in accessing and using the various digital facilities, resources and activities. This benchmark would involve input both from the IT services, the central quality assurance teams who coordinate student surveys, and the Library, who provided digital resources and academic skills support.

The team were aware that running meetings of four benchmark subgroups across multiple campuses would be time-consuming for all involved, and ran the risk of failing. Many of the individuals who would be needed to provide evidence on the benchmarking performance indicators were involved in developing new services or new curricula, in addition to their routine work. So the team decided to ask for written responses and to direct each of the participants to particular indicators that they would have direct experience of. At the same time, they were free to comment on other indicators if they wanted to.

The core team took responsibility for liaison with each of the key contributors and collating the evidence for circulating the amongst all the participants. Final comments and clarifications were used to finalise the scores and summary evidence submitted for the Benchmarking summit. While this missed out some of the conversations that are considered a benefit of the recommended process, the core team judged that many of the contributors were already in communication in the context of institutional TEL projects.

Follow-up plans

Benchmark 3 would show what processes are in place to manage quality and risk. For example, with external vendors working with disciplines, there might be problems with external access to student data.

Benchmarks 4 and 6 would both provide evidence of how the curriculum development process is working, and on the configuration of educational design support.

Benchmark 8 would provide evidence of the students' experience of TEL, from the perspective of those providing direct student-facing services.

Summary diagram
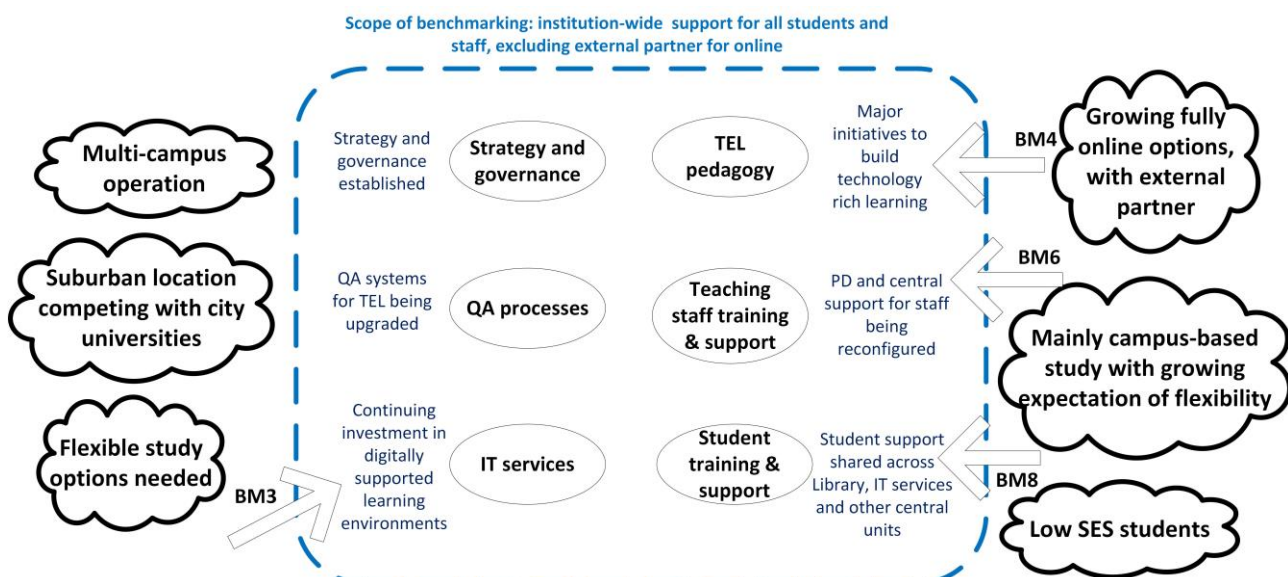
Rationale for using Benchmarks 3, 4 6 and 8 in a suburban university

City-centre university

Institutional context and priorities

This is a large, city-centre, research-focused university with mostly full-time campus based students, about a third of these enrolled as international students. The university also has some small satellite campuses overseas. However, these satellite campuses operate semi-independently and have different local support arrangements. Overall, the University is similar to other large research-intensive universities worldwide, with disciplinary differences being more prevalent than other factors.

Academic disciplines have a lot of organisational autonomy, and this has previously been reflected in multiple online learning management systems being used across the University. However, there is now an institutional online learning management system, which required substantial financial investment and the senior management has mandated its use. Initially the focus was on technical implementation, and there is now an opportunity to facilitate curriculum development. Senior management have noted the need to innovative teaching practices to meet student expectations.

The central IT Services division provides mainly IT infrastructure services and technical support. The central learning and teaching team has been responsible for rolling out implementation of the online learning management system and providing training for staff in how to use the tools. Student training and support services are all handled through the Library, which also provides access to third party digital learning resources. Both IT Services and the Library had recently taken part in their own separate inter-institutional benchmarking exercises.

One of the main strategic focuses for learning technology is MOOCs. The support for MOOC development and digital media is provided by a central learning and teaching support unit, as is development of learning analytics systems. Although the MOOCs have stimulated interest in digital media, the support for mainstream use of learning technology within disciplines is patchy. Some disciplines run fully online courses and have local TEL support teams for these. Others have very little local learning and teaching support.

Professional development for teaching in general, including TEL, is also provided by the central learning and teaching support team. But this is voluntary and the uptake is patchy. The need for pedagogical support, as distinct from technical media support, is not widely understood. Now that the university's senior management is interested in ensuring that there is better use of the online learning management system, the ACODE benchmarking is an opportunity to recommend a more coherent system of TEL pedagogical support across all discipline groups.

Scope and core benchmarking team

The core team involved two representatives from the central learning and teaching support team and two academic staff from different disciplines. Given the devolved nature of most of the support for learning and teaching, and the strategic need to innovate teaching practices, it was essential that the team include a discipline-based academic perspective. The two disciplines represented both had an active interest in TEL, but had different arrangements for TEL support. The team were all based in the main city-centre campus and agreed that satellite campuses and fully online programs would excluded from the scope of the benchmarking; to focus on support for teaching that affected the majority of students.

No central IT services or Library representatives were included in the core tem. These areas were managed separately from the central learning and teaching support and both had recently taken part in their own benchmarking. So it would be hard to convince them of the value of another such exercise. Without a clear institution-level directive related to strategic priorities, it was unlikely that any IT services or Library staff time would be made available.

Selecting benchmarks and planning the self-assessment

The team agreed that there would be little benefit in using Benchmark 1. There was, as yet, no institutional strategy or governance processes for TEL. Disciplines had developed their own rationale and priorities and there was very little articulated in the published institutional strategic plans. The team considered that a focus on teaching quality and methods on the ground would be more likely to lead to implementation of any recommendations. Once it was clear what kind of support was needed to promote teaching innovations, this could then lead to development of a more coherent institutional strategy.

For Benchmark 2, the team believed that the devolved nature of the disciplines meant that definitions of quality would be contested. There would not be enough time to resolve these debates. Benchmark 3 would require IT Services input. So the team considered that Benchmarks 1, 2 and 3 would be best done at a later stage. Since the direct training and support for student use of technology is provided by the university Library, Benchmarks 7 and 8 were also considered too challenging to organise at this stage.

There were already some innovative teaching practices, so **Benchmark 4** could highlight the potential for making the best practices more consistent and systematic across the university. Benchmark 4 could also cover some aspects of learning analytics use. **Benchmarks 5 and 6** would pick up on professional development for staff, and support for staff. The team agreed that Benchmark 6 in particular could provide evidence for the role of learning designers, both by comparing different arrangements within the university and in benchmarking against other similar universities.

Follow-up plans

Benchmark 4 would provide some evidence of how the institutional TEL support might promote better use of the LMS. While some disciplines had internal showcases of good practice, there was scope using this benchmark to recommend better sharing across disciplines.

Benchmark 5 evidence would identify where there is a need for training programs around use of LMS tools.

Benchmark 6 evidence would identify gaps in the staff support for using TEL. For example, TEL projects were usually funded from within disciplines and had varying levels of local support. The evidence could help inform a more consistent institution-wide strategy and policy for professional development in TEL.

Summary diagram
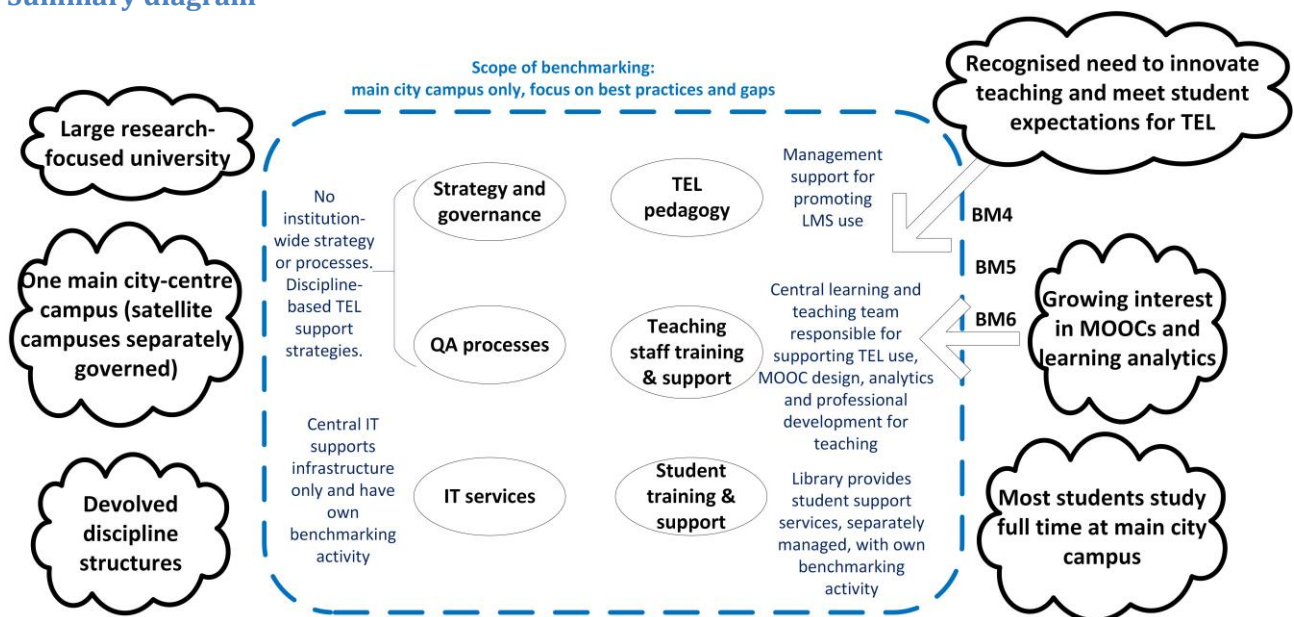
Rationale for using Benchmarks 4, 5 and 6 in a city-centre university

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Some general patterns

Reasons for not benchmarking

Several of the participants in the research had been considering taking part in the benchmarking summit and decided against doing so. Their reasons included the following:

- None of the individuals who could coordinate the benchmarking process at the institutional level would be available during the period when the self-assessment would need to be done.

- A small specialist professional (postgraduate) college judged that benchmarking against like institutions would be more useful than comparison with universities.

- A small institution that was rapidly expanding its activities was still in the process of setting up new scaled-up TEL support systems. Benchmarking would be more relevant once these were established.

- A large devolved institution was in the process of rolling out its first institution-wide online learning management system. As a result, the TEL support arrangements were all changing. Participants and evidence for benchmarking would be hard to obtain until the roll-out was complete.

Deciding on the scope of the benchmarking

TEL support services are most commonly provided at the institutional level, spanning all students, disciplines, users and campuses. The scope of the benchmarking self-assessment may be institution-wide, encompassing all students and staff. But it is common to exclude those parts of TEL support that have separate arrangements, whether on satellite campuses with their own local support, or activities that are supported differently, perhaps through an external partnership arrangement. Smaller institutions may have more integrated TEL support arrangements with less formal liaison requirements, where it is fairly easy to involve all the staff involved. Larger institutions may have more devolved arrangements and/or more formally differentiated management responsibilities. While the ideal is to take an institution-wide view, and use the benchmarking to spark conversations across organisational divisions, the study showed a need to be pragmatic in selecting who to involve at particular points in time.

Similarly, a satellite campus or college with its own TEL support teams and/or online learning management systems may decide to benchmark separately from the main institution. There could be substantial differences in the students, the level of qualifications offered or the local context, which mean different priorities for TEL support.

Who to involve in the self-assessment exercise

The benchmarking activity is typically coordinated by a member of staff from a central learning and teaching or TEL support function; someone with an overview of institutional TEL support. However, all of the institutions studied in 2016 had recently undergone, or were currently undergoing, some form of internal organisational change in TEL support. At a pragmatic level this often constrained which departments could be expected to take an active part in gathering evidence and scoring against the performance indicators. In some cases, responsibilities and access to information were in flux and an aspect of the TEL support, although relevant, had to be excluded. In other cases, it was possible to gather evidence indirectly. For example, centrally based educational designers working with discipline groups reported on the responses of the academics they were working with, or representatives of particular user groups were canvassed as part of their routine meetings rather than invited to join a separate benchmarking group.

Which benchmarks to use

The choice of benchmarks was influenced by the institutional strategic priorities and also by the internal responses to these – particularly the stage of development. In general, there was a pattern of choosing to benchmark those activities that were considered strategically important and timely, were substantially in place and had not already been benchmarked in their current form.

On a pragmatic level, the time and people available, and level of institutional management support also influenced the number of benchmarks that could meaningfully be included in the self-assessment.

How to gather evidence

The recommended process involves convening a group of people for each benchmark chosen, then allocating the gathering of performance indicator evidence among this group. Each member then collects evidence and scores individually before the group reconvenes to share and agree on scores and evidence.

Some institutions varied this process. The most common variant was for the core team to take on more responsibility for compiling the evidence and scoring for each of the performance indicators. In some cases, there were established and well-documented processes that could be used as evidence. In others, illustrative examples could be provided for how TEL support services operated on the ground to support particular projects.

Following up the recommendations

Benchmarking teams in institutions that had taken part in previous ACODE benchmarking exercises all commented on the importance of planning from the start for follow-up. Reports and recommendations were often circulated but did not necessarily result in any senior management action. There needed to be some resonance with strategic priorities; arguments and evidence for how the recommendations would help achieve the institution's stated goals.

This guide aims to alert benchmarking teams to some of the ways that the scope of the self-assessment, choice of benchmarks, and the gathering of evidence can be adapted to each institution's context, in order to optimise the likelihood of the resulting recommendations being implemented.

Russell, C. (2016). *Contextualizing institutional strategies for technology enhanced learning.* Paper presented at the ascilite 2016: show me the learning.
Russell, C. (in preparation). How universities self-assess their support for technology-enhanced learning