DL Benchmarks

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# Introduction: How does Quality DL look like?

There is a gap in understanding of what quality DL is or looks like. While there is not a sole or absolute definition of what quality DL is, there is a need to filling in this gap of understanding in a way that provides direction of travel flexibly.

This document offers a review of scholarship around DL QA and standards (see Sources section) and an approach to quality improvement in DL. On the basis of this review of the literature and experience in what constitutes good practice in Distance Learning, it is proposed the adoption of framework of reference for DL that encompasses the complex set of areas that, in an inter-related manner, determine the quality of distance programmes

* Strategic fit
* IT systems and governance
* Programme QA processes
* Teaching and Learning methods for distance education
* Student academic and technical support
* Student course community
* Academic support

**Purpose and audience: supporting through Benchmarks**

Following the ACODE (Australasian Council on Open, Distance and E-learning) definition of Benchmarking (as the process of measuring one’s performance, in a given area, against a specific set of established performance indicators), it is expected that the adoption of a set of benchmarks for DL may result in an improved understanding of strategic and operational requirements, systems and processes and the identification of strengths and weaknesses within the Faculty. It is proposed that these DL Benchmarks are adopted and serve as a source of reference towards best practice, as and when needed.

The purpose of benchmarking, and these benchmarks in particular, is **to support continuous quality improvement**. The benchmarks therefore are not imposed minimum standards but are there to *guide and inform* the delivery of quality DL.

This document is proposed to be a reference document for a range of agents (Table 1) including the eLearning teams.

Table Who do the benchmarks concern?

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Benchmarked areas | To whom it concerns |
| 1. Institutional Strategic and IT Systems Governance | Heads of DL  Head of IT and IT Partners  Faculty Vice-Dean for Teaching, Learning and Students, Associate Deans for T&L and DL |
| 1. Programme Standards and Curricular | Programme Directors  Faculty Vice-Dean for Teaching, Learning and Students, Associate Deans for T&L and DL  Faculty PSS management, Faculty QA administration elearning Managers  School PSS teams |
| 1. Teaching and Learning | Course leaders, TAs  eLearning Support teams |
| 1. Course community, context and identity | Programme directors, course unit directors  School PSS teams  elearning Support teams |
| 1. Student Support | School admin teams – admissions |
| 1. Academic Staff Support | Library services, IT support services |
| 1. Evaluation and Review | Programme Directors  Faculty Vice-Dean for Teaching, Learning and Students, Associate Deans for T&L and DL  Faculty PSS management, Faculty QA administration elearning Managers  School PSS teams |

**Structure of the Benchmarks**

Seven **Benchmark areas** are used. Each benchmark area is discrete and each area can be used alone or in combination with other benchmarks.

Each Benchmark includes a series of **good practice statements.**

Each good practice statement includes a range of indicators that allow to identify/define/**indicate the realisation of the good practice statement**.

Some overlap between areas is inevitable.

**What is different from other sector-wide Benchmarking models**

Unlike the ACODE Benchmark, no assessment of indicators is being proposed.

# Overview of benchmarks

1. **Institution-wide Strategic and IT Systems Governance Benchmarks**

Benchmarks around institutional commitment to distance learning (DL): how distance education initiatives relate to an institution’s mission and whether the institution has secured the resources necessary to support students in this new initiative.

Benchmarks around institution-wide IT infrastructure and tools, for example, providing for a consistent, coherent, and appropriate technical framework, as well as a check on an institution’s understanding of and response to legal and regulatory requirements.

1. **Programme Standards and Curricular Benchmarks**

The emphasis of this category is on the quality of the processes around the approval, design and regular review of DL courses on the grounds of academic and curricular quality. It covers provisions around standards for course development, design, and delivery of DL courses and review of programme level strategies including programme added (educational and market) value, optimal staff/student ratio.

It focus is on appropriateness of the curriculum developed and on a coherent plan that enables students to complete a program. On the ground, these benchmarks materialise on (overarching) programme-wide policies and programme level management including the consistent development of courseware, specialist DL technical and educationalist support, adherence to accessibility standards (e.g. appropriate use of font and colour, video transcription, etc. as indicated by W3C for example), consistent navigation and visual design, regular review of instructional materials and other programme-wide standards.

The benchmarks also cover organizational issues (who does what) once a course has been approved and development is in progress such as ensuring copyright clearance for third-party resources.

Finally the benchmarks also include student preparedness prior to registering on online course in terms of motivation, workload, assessment and technology. Knowing what to expect before electronic matriculation can reduce dropout rates and increase student satisfaction. In other words, for quality distance education, students and faculty should be able to identify the objectives, projected outcomes and assessment timescales before the course begins.

1. **Teaching and Learning Benchmarks**

This category of benchmarks cover standards related to pedagogy, teaching and assessment activity at module level. They set standards on module design (clearly articulating ILOs, teaching methods and assessment) on student and staff educational interactions, student-to-student interactions, and constructive feedback, which are seen as critical to a quality student learning experience.

Similarly critical are treated aspects such as appropriate pedagogies and teaching methods for education at a distance and of content and delivery that compensates for lack of face-to-face student-staff and student-student interaction. Thus this category includes benchmarks around educational processes involving independent learning, interactivity, social interaction and collaboration e.g. courses are designed to encourage students to work with each other and/or their tutors or require students to work in groups utilizing problem-solving activities in order to develop topic understanding.

Another important consideration in this component is interaction between instructor and students and among students. Here, institutions are asked about provisions for interaction and the timeliness of instructor responses to students.

Learner-content interaction, learner-instructor interaction, and learner-learner interaction is included as an essential requirement for achieving learning effectiveness.

The benchmarks also incorporate possibilities for new forms of communication and engagement with course materials using electronic media.

1. **Community, Context and Identity Benchmarks**

As part of considering how to provide a quality student experience in a distance education setting, this category concerns the aim to create an experience that is equivalent to on-campus experience and quality interactions. This requires planning, clear ownership.

This category is distinct from Teaching and Learning benchmark in that it encompasses co-operative relationships among students outside the curriculum, where sharing, community and identity is forged. It also encompasses those interactions with a wider range of institutional roles that support the development of institutional affiliation - academic advisers, administrative staff and strategies e.g personalisation.

The importance of creating student learning communities is widely recognized (Sutherland, 1996; Tinto, 1997). Some are as basic as organizing and sharing student contact information, while others involve using the technology to create chat spaces in web-based courses. Is the quality equivalent? Data on this issue is still being gathered. It is clear, however, that to create an equivalent experience in the distance education environment requires more planning on the part of the instructor and more effort on the part of the student. The issue of community continues to be an element of concern for faculty as they contemplate how to provide a quality learning experience in a distance education setting.

Flexibility for Unique and Personalized Educational Experience

Retention strategies

1. **Student Support**

This category covers institutional support for learners and concerns the provision of information regarding programme, admission requirements, pricing, and the ongoing requirements that students will need to complete the courses. The assumption is that many students who take a distance education course will never visit a campus and will not use campus-based student support resources.

This include

Additionally, three benchmarks describe requirements for hands-on training and information for students to access institutional resources such as library support, technical assistance standards with quick and accurate responses to questions, and a structured system to address complaints. At the same time, alternative forms of student support services are critical for the academic success of students and must be provided for students to succeed.

A range of services are necessary to engage the student in the online course experience: assessment of readiness and advising, marketing information, full information about the course requirements and services, admissions, registration, and financial processes.

The guidelines also address the support systems necessary for the student: library resources, tutoring, and bookstores.

One subsection is somewhat unusual; it reflects the commissions’ grounding in traditional academic values. This subsection emphasizes building a sense of community for distance education students through actions such as “encouraging study groups, providing student directories, including off-campus students in institutional publications and events, including these students in definitions of the academic community. . . invitations to campus events. . . and similar strategies of inclusion” (p. 12). What is interesting here is the silence about new technology strategies that are used and promoted to build community. Threaded discussion, chat rooms, and various e-mail services are standard fare in the portfolio of the major learning platform providers, in part to engender community among learners.

Student access to institutional support resources: Access to support resources: Library support,

1. **Academic Staff Support**

The benchmarks in this category concern academic staff having the opportunity to learn the skills needed to succeed in a DL environment.

Staff readiness (DL specialism)

Issues: To what extent are faculty members responsible for the development of an online course? What role should instructional designers play in this process? Are online courses best developed by a single faculty member or a team?

Recognition that although technical teams are essential, ultimately digital capability Academic staff development as key to handover to standard support

Staff and student support share several aspects in common relative to the provision of adequate and appropriate technology support.

The faculty support component also includes a review of personnel issues (compensation, workload, and intellectual property), with the expectation that an agreement with faculty covering these issues will have been completed prior to course development. As with the IHEP document, there is silence on the extensiveness of the faculty role in the development and delivery of distance education courses.

* Role clarification: who does what admin, TA, course leaders

1. **Evaluation and Review**

Benchmarks around the learning effectiveness and cost effectiveness of distance education, whether the online educational program is effective, from both educational and financial perspectives.

Benchmarks around a multi-tiered evaluation process in which these variables are taken into account and data are collected and used to determine effectiveness including recruitment and marketing. Finally, these benchmarks call for learning outcomes to be reviewed regularly with regard to clarity, utility, and appropriateness.

# Good Practice Statements

## Institution-wide Strategic and IT Systems Governance Benchmarks

### There is an Institution-wide strategy and planning for DL and its development

* Institution's strategic and operational plans support and promote distance education.
* Specific Faculty or local plans around the development and governance of DL are aligned with the institution's strategic directions and plans.

### There is a supportive institution-wide ICT infrastructure and strategic governance

* The institution has established policies, procedures and guidelines for the governance of technology that support DL and include representation from key stakeholders.
* The institution uses a clearly articulated policy framework and governance structure when deciding on the adoption of new technologies including both DL and blended delivery.
* The institution has robust procedures and processes in place to identify and manage risk associated with technologies and their effectiveness for DL provision.
* A well-planned, coordinated centralized system flexible in meeting the multiple needs of programmes, staff and students and provides support for building and maintaining the distance education infrastructure
* Planning for the ongoing use of technology in DL is aligned with institution’s IT processes
* Technology is reliable and consistently failsafe

### There are Institution-wide or local enticements for DL development

* Academic staff are provided professional incentives for innovative practices and to encourage development of distance learning courses
* There are institutional rewards for the effective teaching of distance learning courses

## Programme Standards and Curricular Benchmarks

### DL-specific approval, development, support and review processes are in place to ensure QA and minimum standards in DL provision.

* Institution-wide processes for quality assurance are in place and in use to validate new DL programmes. These include a detailed evaluation of the required lead time for the preparation, development and testing before launch of the programme.
* Processes and procedures for quality assurance are in place and in use for the regular review of existing DL programmes, these include detailed evaluation of existing provision against DL benchmarks, analysis of evolving training needs, and re-design and or refresh of instructional materials.
* Ongoing evaluation of program effectiveness is part of continuous quality improvement processes
* QA validation and regular review of DL programmes is resourced and supported with DL-specific pedagogical/technical expertise.
* There are clearly articulated academic processes around teaching, learning and assessment and for the implementation and upkeep of both online education and student support activity.
* Instructional materials are reviewed periodically to ensure they meet program standards.

### There is robust Curriculum development

* Qualifications are awarded on the basis of achievement of outcomes and attainment.
* Programmes are meaningfully separated into self-contained segments (modules) that can be used to assess student mastery before moving forward in the course or program.
* The modules/segments are of varying lengths determined by the complexity of learning outcomes. Written programme objectives and outcomes are available to students pre-registration and throughout duration of programme.
* Instructional materials and programmes are reviewed periodically to ensure they meet program standards.
* Explicit and DL-specific guidelines exist regarding minimum standards for course development, design, and delivery of DL courses.
* Cost effectiveness measures are taken in designing and delivering online programs by giving serious consideration to media and technologies selection, use of academic and support teams time, academic and administration resources, and other relevant input e.g. marketing teams.
* Policies and technology plan is in place that give high priority for user-friendly systems
* Continuous multiple forms of technology support to students throughout the program is in place.

### Articulated responsibilities and procedures are in place to ensure programme-wide consistent quality and accessibility

* Course design is managed by teams comprised of academic staff, instructional designers, DL specialist technical experts, graphic and media experts, and evaluation personnel.
* Dedicated support and investment is deployed for the design and development of DL programmes
* A comprehensive technology plan is in place that includes electronic security measures (authentication, data security, backup systems), observance with legal requirements, consistent recourse to technologies and coherence across institution.
* Training needs analysis of programme teams is undertaken to identify gaps in digital capability.
* Procedures and responsibility for the sourcing of copyrighted materials are clearly articulated.
* Courses are designed with a consistent structure, easily discernible to students.
* Across all courses students are provided with consistent course information that outlines course objectives, clearly written ILOs, assessment method and readings.
* Assessment criteria and standards are explicitly written, transparent and available.
* Accessibility standards are explicit and adhered to across the programme.

### There are minimum standards at the pre-registration stage

* Before starting the programme, students are advised on the suitability of the programme to their educational objectives, educational qualifications, cost expectations, motivational and commitment requirements and digital capability to determine if learning at a distance is appropriate with a view to see programme completion.
* Specific expectations are set for students with respect to a minimum amount of time per week for study and homework assignments across the programme.

### There are mechanisms to assess Student Experience and employment success

* A Course Experience Survey is carried out to obtain information on student perceptions of their experiences at university for the purposes of quality improvement.
* A Graduate Destination Survey is completed by graduates six months after completion of their course to collect information on student career placement

### Legal and Statutory Requirements are observed

* In the delivery of the online programme, to facilitate equal access by learners with disability, the institution has taken appropriate steps to meet the requirements of the Disability Act and other legal requirements set by the government.
* In the design and delivery of the online programme, the institution has taken the necessary steps to protect the copyright and intellectual property rights of all concerned within the institution, and others outside of the institution.

## Teaching and Learning Benchmarks

### QAA Academic standards are met and learning design support the meeting of academic standards

* Course objectives, teaching methods and assessment on each module are clearly and consistently stated.
* The choice and use of pedagogies is underpinned and appropriate to the specific needs and conditions of distance education and discipline requirements
* Learning design procedures are used to ensure constructive alignment of ILOs, teaching methods and assessment, a logical flow of learning, and a purposeful use of technology
* Content made available to students is:

(a) Appropriate to deliver learning against outcomes, and level of study

(b) Rigorous and reflects current thinking in the field

(c) Engages learner and promotes active learning at distance

(d) Is varied in format - lectures as well as interviews, tutorials, video, self-tests, etc.

(e) Responsive to flexible delivery and personal circumstances including potential technical limitations e.g. bandwidth

### Teaching and Learning is inclusive

* ILOs are designed so that they are achievable by a wide range of students including students were reasonable adjustments may be required
* Processes of assessment are fair and transparent and do not discriminate according to gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, religion or belief, age, class or disability.

### There is high level cognitive activity

* Each module/segment requires students to engage in analysis, synthesis, and evaluation as part of their course assignments.
* Students are instructed in the proper methods of effective research, including assessment of validity and reliability of sources

### Academic presence is felt

* There is a strong academic online presence (participation once a week in discussion board) and expectations are clearly set e.g. provide online office hours,
* Access to instructors includes a range of methods
* Student interaction with staff is facilitated through a variety of ways effectively including technological means.
* Personalisation (staff pictures, video presentation) abounds

### There is facilitation of social interaction and collaboration and interactivity in distance education

* Courses promote synchronous and asynchronous student-student interaction
* Social interaction and collaboration among students and their instructor(s) is promoted through course design, course materials, course activities and/or assessment.
* Student interaction with other students is facilitated through a variety of ways incorporating digital means.

### There is appropriate assessment and feedback

* The range and type of assessment is appropriate for the level of study and is appropriate to measure achievement of learning outcomes
* Programme includes a range and types of assessment that pursues both breadth and depth of knowledge
* Assessment, summative and formative, is undertaken for all distance education
* Assessment is used strategically to support active student engagement, student retention and authentic learning
* Assessment tasks are designed with due regards to preventing academic malpractice
* Feedback to student assignments and questions is provided in a timely manner.
* Feedback to students is provided in a manner that is constructive and non-threatening.

### Appropriate Technologies are used

* The technology being used to deliver course content is based on learning outcomes.
* Resourcing requirements of technologies used can be met

## Community, Context, Identity and Student Experience Benchmarks

### Community and cohort identity is actively pursued

* There is planning and clear ownership for the creation of a student experience and cohort identity that is equivalent to on campus programmes
* A variety of methods have been used to create a sense of community for distance education students e.g. organising and sharing student contact information, online chat spaces to more elaborated and encompassing a range of support functions

### Cultural contextualisation and social integration is actively pursued

* Explicit rules and procedures are in place to support communication for students in between students that is non-discriminatory, politically correct and diverse.
* Social integration - by designing courses to create a conducive social climate - is included as an essential requirement for learning effectiveness
* Programs are designed with flexibility in content and delivery to remain relevant and adequate for the varying requirements of learners in different social and cultural settings.

### There are strategies in place for quality interactions and communications

* A variety of synchronous and asynchronous methods are in place to promote personalised communication and interactions: face to face induction activities, staff pictures.
* Courses and programs are designed to provide flexibility to learners in learning approaches, and other personal and social factors to provide them a learning experience which is as unique and personalised as possible

### Pro-active Retention strategies are in place

* Effective retention methods are in place to pro-actively monitor and minimise drop-out of distance students
* Regular academic advisement is in place
* Personalised synchronous and asynchronous methods are being used for academic advisement
* Synchronous and asynchronous methods are being used for employability and career advise

## Student Support Services

### There is an integrated student support system

* Student service personnel exist to channel student support queries across a range of areas and to provide adequate information about the technical, administrative, study skills, careers and academic requirements of the online course
* In smaller programmes dedicated administrative support is provided for DL students to cover helpdesk/primary support queries.
* Information about the programme is supplied to the students through a variety of channels including Student Support Services.
* Easily accessible technical assistance is available to all students throughout the duration of the course/program.
* The system encompasses or re-directs pastoral care and academic advisement
* A structured system is also in place to address student complaints.

### Student Support is DL appropriate

* Questions directed to student service personnel are answered promptly and accurately
* Support it provided 24/7
* The system is monitored regularly for effective functioning

### There is an effective library services system

* Library administration and other personnel are involved in the detailed analysis of planning, developing, and evaluating DL programmes from the earliest stages
* A range of support services are available to students: a virtual library; arrangements with local libraries for library resources; hands-on training and information to aid learners in securing material through electronic databases, interlibrary loans, government archives, news services,
* Sufficient library resources are made available to the students
* Students can obtain assistance to help them use electronically accessed data successfully.

### There is effective Student Induction

* Induction materials and activities are effectively planned, scheduled appropriately and regularly reviewed
* All student are provided with induction before the course starts
* Induction includes how the programme will be delivered/assessed and a clear schedule; the academic expectations on students; cultural expectations; how to access the University's central support services, resources and systems including the library, IT, etc.; what systems are used for student communication and community building; channels to and for student representation;
* Student induction includes induction to effective T&L online

## Academic Staff Support

### Sustainable models to ensure academic engagement are in place

* The required dedicated time for designing and writing course materials as well as to develop digital ability is supported by a range of means e.g. favourable work allocation.

### Teaching Training Support is available

* Faculty members are assisted in the transition from classroom teaching to online instruction through various forms of ongoing training and assistance.
* To deal with issues arising from student use of electronically accessed data, faculty members are provided with resources.

peer review, should be the same for distance education and traditional courses

### Technology support

Technical assistance in course development and course management is available to faculty and such assistance is appropriate to motivate them to use it.

* Technical assistance in course development is available to faculty and they are encouraged to use it.
* Faculty members are assisted in the transition from classroom teaching to distance instruction and are assessed in the process
* There are peer mentoring mechanisms available to academic staff teaching distance courses
* Distance instructor training continues throughout the progression of the online class.
* Academic members are supported with a range of resources and development opportunities to deal with issues arising from student use of electronically-accessed data.
* Distance education and online learning informing Online teaching informed
* workload allocation - academic time commitment - a lot on development less in delivery, TA involvement, more regular monitoring of discussion boards
* Expert DL advise - modes that support campus and online delivery
* Setting quality standards
* Partnership with TEL team - dedicated TEL support, media services support
* Staff experience of DL - e.g. do a MOOC
* staff skill: media training, e-moderation training, providing feedback online
* Lecture/seminars online
* staff competent to resolve basic technological questions as opposed to offload to LTs
* Nominated LT ‘to go to’ is important for a DL programme (yet at the same time for that LT not to belong solely to a DL programme)

Institutional environment for online teaching is an enabling environment that encourages innovative practices and enhances and sustains motivation for development of distance learning programs.

There are institutional incentives and rewards such as monetary awards and tenure policies to motivate reluctant faculty in innovative practices for development and effective teaching of online programs .

## 7. Evaluation and Review

* The program’s educational effectiveness is measured using several methods.
* An evaluation process is used to improve the teaching/learning process.
* Specific standards are in place to compare and improve learning outcomes.
* Intended learning outcomes are regularly reviewed to ensure clarity, utility, and appropriateness
* Course evaluation embedded
* Data on enrolment, costs, and successful/ innovative uses of technology are used to evaluate program effectiveness.
* Marketing of courses is appropriate to ensure sustained demand

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