



Benchmarking Geography in the UK

Dr. Kevin Crawford
Liverpool Hope University College
UK



Presentation Outline

- What is Benchmarking?
- Role of Benchmarking in the UK
- Uses of Benchmark statements in the UK
- UK Geography benchmarking details
- Case study of the use of Benchmarking in curriculum development
- Assessment of Benchmarking



What is benchmarking?

Benchmarking is a higher education evaluation tool. It is commonly used but in different ways throughout Europe (ENQA, 2002).

An exact definition of the term *benchmarking* varies but from a UK perspective it can be defined in the following way.



Benchmarking Definition

“Benchmarking is a subject community making explicit the nature and standards of awards which carry the subject in their title, or in which the subject is included in the programme leading to the award.”

(ML July 1999 cited in Crozier, 2002)



Benchmarking Format

Benchmarking can be any of the following:

- National or international
- External or internal
- Can concentrate on the process itself or on the output

Benchmarking can be applied as a tool for quality improvements within Higher Education through any of the above approaches.



Significance of Benchmarking

It can clearly be seen to relate to the context of the Bologna process, which emphasises the need for more comparison, transparency and visibility of quality in higher education (ENQA, 2002).

ENQA (2002) also view benchmarking as a response to the growing competition among educational institutions and their search for best practices and high performance.



Role of benchmarking in the UK

- National Role
- Co-ordinated by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) in the UK
- Fairly recent development - from 1997 onwards
- Widely used and applied



Development of UK Benchmarking

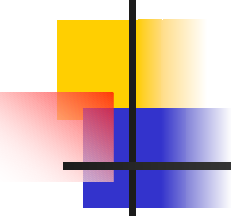
Benchmarking developed in response to recommendations of the 1997 report of the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (the Dearing report) concerning a need to develop and set degree standards (benchmark statements) as part of a degree programme approval process.



Development of UK Benchmarking


Small, expert teams of academic (and professional) subject specialists develop their own sets of benchmarking statements (47 have been produced to date).

Benchmarking provides a means for the academic community (including professionals) to describe the nature and characteristics of programmes (*bachelors degrees with honours*) in a specific subject area.



“The benchmarks also represent the general expectations about the standards for the award of qualifications at a given level and articulate the attributes and capabilities that those possessing such qualifications should be able to demonstrate.”

QAA (2000)



“Benchmarking, therefore, is not about creating a national curriculum. It is an exercise to provide the means of acknowledging differences and diversity of programmes within agreed limits set by the subject community itself.”

Crozier (2002)



Uses of Benchmark statements in the UK

Benchmark statements are used in the following ways:

- QAA academic review of higher education courses and institutional internal review processes
- Public information for potential students and employers
- Inform the design of programmes and curriculum development
- Supporting external examining (assessing broad consistency of standards between institutions)



Geography Benchmarks

The Geography benchmarking statements were published by the QAA in 2000.

Developed by a panel from the subject community, selected as being representative of the breadth of the discipline, the range of institutions where Geography degrees are taught, regions in the UK, gender, age and experience of teaching, including external examining.



The Geography statement covers the following aspects:

- Introduction
- Aims of an honours geography programme
- Knowledge and understanding
- Student skills, abilities and attributes
- Processes and contexts of learning
- Assessment
- Standards and levels of achievement
- Conclusion



The purpose of the statement is to:

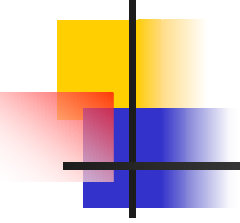
- Provide a framework for staff running Geography programmes, and assist in the development of degree programme specifications
- Help external examiners to validate standards of student achievements
- Inform potential students and employers as to the nature of attainment that can be expected of graduates from Geography programmes
- Provide academic reviewers with guidance for judging standards



Scope of the Statement

As an example of the scope of the statement, the section on **knowledge and understanding** will be examined.

It is expected that all degree programmes in Geography should address the following key areas of *knowledge and understanding*, so that graduating geographers are conversant with these aspects of the discipline.



These are summarised by extracting the key words from each of the 12 areas (QAA, 2000):

- Environments and landscapes
- Spatial variation
- Place
- Systems
- Scale
- Change
- Difference
- Nature of discipline
- Representation
- Analysis and interpretation
- Observational
- Informed concern



Use of Benchmarking in curriculum development

Case study of the BSc Geography
programme at Liverpool Hope
University College



Use of Benchmarking

Benchmarking statements were used to:

- inform the design of a new BSc Geography degree programme
- develop a new curriculum
- develop new modules

This was then mapped against section 4 relating to *Student skills, abilities and attributes*



Student skills, abilities and attributes

- Intellectual skills
- Discipline-specific skills
- Key skills
- Personal attributes and social skills

Mapping was linked to module content or specific modules within the programme at each level (cert., dip., degree)



Usefulness in Development

The benchmarking statement for Geography was an invaluable aid in the development of the new BSc Geography programme.

It enabled a clear focus to be achieved but without being too rigid or prescriptive.



Assessment of Benchmarking

Positive

- Written by peer academic community with wide consultation built into process
- Ensures academic and quality standards
- Ensures comparability of degree programmes
- Not too prescriptive
- Creation/safe guarding identity



Negative

- Narrow perception – can be interpreted as a checklist
- Acceptance by wider community
 - can be viewed as too rigorous or difficult to apply
 - too much like an imposed curriculum



Sources of Information

Crozier, F. (2002) Recent developments in benchmarking in the United Kingdom and an overall look at three benchmarking subject statements as case studies. *In* European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) Workshop Report 2, *Benchmarking in the Improvement of Higher Education*.
<http://www.enqa.net/texts/benchmarking.pdf>

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<http://www.qaa.ac.uk/crntwork/benchmark/geography.html>