

Benchmarking for continuous improvement

This AUSSE Enhancement Guide provides information on steps institutions can take to pursue evidence-based continuous improvement.



Benchmarking approaches

Benchmarking can deepen your analysis and interpretation of AUSSE data. You can benchmark your AUSSE data in two main ways:

- criterion-referenced benchmarking
- norm-referenced benchmarking.

Benchmarking can occur via face-to-face discussions with benchmarking partners. You could benchmark using email or by teleconference. Benchmarking discussions might take two hours a year, or ten. You decide what is appropriate.

Benchmarking activities offer opportunities to involve your students in the collection and analysis of data.

Criterion-referenced benchmarking

Criterion-referenced benchmarking involves establishing a target. Usually the target is either:

- a specified minimum outcome
- an outcome you aspire to.

For example, the AUSSE's Student and Staff Interactions scale asks students to assess the level and nature of their contact with teaching staff. AUSSE data for your institution or faculty may show that 25% of first year students report they 'often' or 'very often' have good contact with teaching staff. You might decide – perhaps as part of a first year strategy – that 50% is a preferred result on the Student and Staff Interactions Scale. By nominating the preferred outcome – in this case, 50% – you establish a criterion, a benchmark you aspire to. Against the criterion you can measure the effectiveness of the changes you put in place to increase the proportion of students who report that such interactions occur 'often' or 'very often'.

Norm-referenced benchmarking

Norm-referenced benchmarking involves comparing your outcomes with other universities or with kindred faculties in other universities.

You can undertake normative benchmarking simply by comparing your AUSSE outcomes with the national or international AUSSE results. This can give you a general idea of your institution's relative performance on AUSSE scales and items.

You may also choose to benchmark your AUSSE outcomes with the US NSSE scales. The NSSE data are available from nsse.iub.edu.

A deeper sense of your university's or faculty's performance can be gained through active benchmarking your arrangements with selected universities or faculties.

For example, if you are an academic or professional staff member in a law faculty, comparing your AUSSE outcomes with the outcomes in a law faculty in one or more universities is likely to increase significantly the power of your analysis and interpretation of AUSSE data. This kind of normative benchmarking benefits your faculty and the law faculties that are your benchmarking partners. It spreads good ideas about student engagement in legal disciplines. It can help you determine appropriate targets for criterion benchmarking in your law faculty.

Benchmarking partnerships

Your university or faculty may already have benchmarking arrangements with one or more partners. It may be a matter of participating in existing arrangements more actively, or of extending the benchmarking arrangements to include AUSSE data.

Benchmarking relies on the willingness of benchmarking partners to share AUSSE data. As the data belong to your institution, you decide which results to share. Initially, you might agree to share only scale results rather than results for each survey item. You might decide to share only results for the Academic Challenge Scale and the Staff Interactions Scale. As confidence grows, you can agree to share more.

It's especially helpful to compare results over time. To this end, benchmarking partnerships are usually long-term arrangements.

Benchmarking agreements

Benchmarking partners usually establish a benchmarking agreement that governs important benchmarking arrangements.

A benchmarking agreement can cover matters such as:

- confidentiality of your shared AUSSE data
- confidentiality of the discussions you have about the data
- how you will conduct benchmarking with your partners
- when you will schedule benchmarking activities.

Selecting benchmarking partners

Every faculty in every university – business, law, science, medicine – is different in important ways. Benchmarking allows you to tease out the influence of those differences on your AUSSE outcomes.

If your business faculty operates across two campuses and one of your benchmarking partners offers business programs on one campus, you can explore through discussion what effects these arrangements might have on your respective AUSSE outcomes.

Students in different disciplines evaluate student engagement in different ways. The 2007 AUSSE data indicates that those studying information technology are frequently less satisfied than those studying natural and physical sciences. It makes sense for an information technology department to seek another information technology department as a benchmarking partner. Through your discussions you can better identify influences on student engagement for students in your discipline. You can assess impacts for information technology students of varied approaches to work integrated learning, for example, or the creation of supportive learning environments.

Discussions like these can reveal ideas about, and perspectives on successful student engagement that are new and helpful. Benchmarking can offer ideas for adjusting your practice based on the practical experience of your partners. Partners often develop better approaches through discussion. Benchmarking is a clear indication to students, to accreditation and quality assurance bodies, and to your professional networks, that you take student engagement seriously. You could

report outcomes of benchmarking discussions to these groups, if your benchmarking agreement covers this.

Selecting appropriate benchmarking partners is an important decision. It can help if benchmarking partners are similar in some ways. You might consider faculties or departments with similar characteristics such as:

- student numbers
- student demographics (such as proportion of students who are first in family to attend university, or proportion of students studying full time)
- location (regional or inner-city perhaps).

You might consider faculties that are strong performers on AUSSE scales or items where your performance is not as strong as you would like.

Process benchmarking – another option

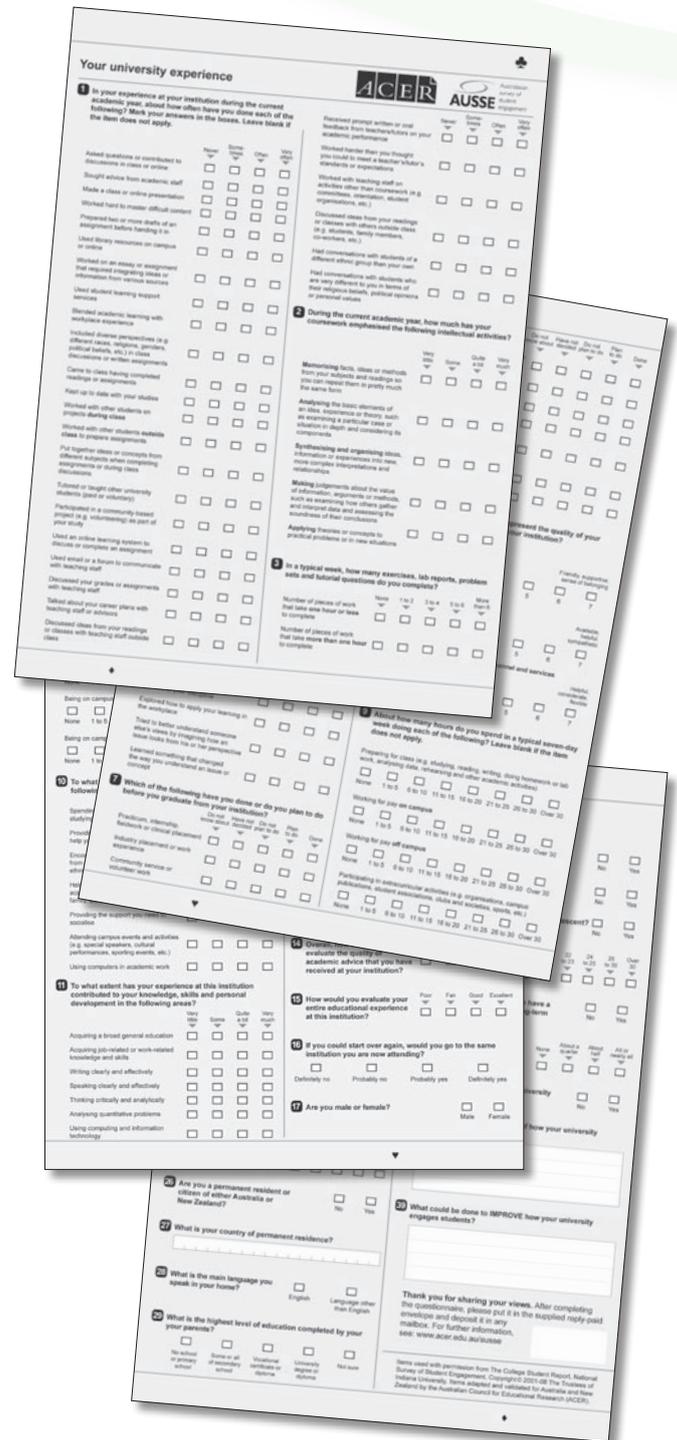
Sometimes you may wish to explore differences, or similarities, in AUSSE outcomes at greater depth.

Perhaps 22% of your first year education students respond 'quite a bit' or 'very much' in response to the AUSSE item 'Providing the support you need to help you succeed academically'. Your benchmarking partners may have AUSSE outcomes ranging from 42% to 56% on this item. Yet, based on discussions, you believe that the range of support services you offer is as wide and deep as your partners. You could seek the agreement of your partners to study in depth how they link their first year students with these services, how those services are managed, how they are delivered.

In effect, you can process benchmark your own services against your partners' services in order to determine if there are changes you could make.

Scholarship of teaching and learning

Benchmarking can also reveal fertile areas for research activity, contributing to discipline advances in the scholarship of teaching and learning. This research could be within your faculty, or cross-institutional within your discipline. It may be research that seeks to describe or explain exceptional and consistent outcomes, or it may be research that seeks to describe the impact of changes to practice that you introduce.



About this guide

This AUSSE Enhancement Guide forms part of the suite of resources developed by ACER to assist institutions to enhance their students' engagement in effective educational practices. Visit www.acer.edu.au/ausse for further information about the Australasian Survey of Student Engagement.