Courses Lifecycle - External Referencing Procedure

Section 1 - Summary

(1) The purpose of this Procedure is to provide direction on the use of external referencing at Victoria University to assist with maintaining and evidencing the quality of courses, units, teaching methods, assessment models, student progress, student experience, and graduate outcomes.

Section 2 - TEQSA/ASQA/ESOS Alignment

(2) HESF: Standard 1.4 Learning Outcomes and Assessment – 1.4.1; 1.4.3, 1.4.4; Standard 5.3 Monitoring, Review and Improvement – 5.3.1, 5.3.4, 5.3.7.

Section 3 - Scope

(3) This Procedure applies to all:

a. HE Award coursework courses offered by, or on behalf of, VU in all domestic and off-shore locations.
b. HE Award Course units offered by, or on behalf of, VU in all domestic and off-shore locations.
c. HE ELICOS, Foundations and Bridging courses.
d. HE Non-Award courses that are offered to international students both on and off shore.
e. Higher Degrees by Research Award courses.

(4) This Procedure does not apply to:

a. Vocational Education and Training Award courses.

Section 4 - Definitions

(5) External Referencing

(6) Benchmarking

Section 5 - Policy/Regulation

(7) Courses Lifecycle Policy

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Section 6 - Procedures

Part A - Summary of Roles and Responsibilities

Roles	Resonsibilities
Director of Learning and Teaching (or equivalent)	Establishes an External Referencing Plan for all courses If undertaking assessment moderation or course benchmarking via Peer Review Portal or other tool with similar functionality: - Selects and liaises with appropriate benchmarking partner(s) for courses to be reviewed via call-outs on the portal or other methods - Agrees terms of the benchmark with partners, including reciprocation - Conducts the review via the tool If not utilising a tool: - Selects and liaises with appropriate benchmarking partner(s) - Creates Memorandum of Understanding - Gains approval from internal Legal department and benchmarking partner(s) - Agrees terms of the benchmark with partners, including reciprocation - Conducts the review in accordance with the principles in Part E of this Procedure.
Course Chair	If undertaking assessment moderation or course benchmarking via Peer Review Portal or other tool with similar functionality: - In consultation with the Director of Learning and Teaching, uploads material for review to the portal If not utilising a tool: - Participates in and supplies materials for the review in accordance with Part E of this Procedure
Executive Dean of relevant College	- Approves the results of benchmarking activities undertaken as part of Annual Course Monitoring and Comprehensive Course Review - Submits benchmarking report to the Validation Panel as part of CCR documentation
Director, Academic Quality and Standards	- Approves a proposed professional accreditation-linked benchmarking as satisfying the requirements of this Procedure
Senior Deputy Vice-Chancellor and Chief Academic Officer	- Approves the results of benchmarking activities undertaken as part of course concept proposals
Responsible Officer for policies and procedures	- Commissions or conducts a desktop benchmark of the coverage area of a new or substantially amended policy or procedure - Includes benchmark findings in the development of the policy or procedure, and references benchmarking in communication with stakeholders during consultation - Provides benchmark report to Accountable Officer as part of the approval process
Vice-Chancellor	- Approves the results of benchmarking activities undertaken in the design and approval of new courses, as part of course documentation - Approves the selection of partner institutions for institution-wide benchmarking - Reviews reports of institution-wide benchmarking and reports to the Academic Board, University Council and / or the University community as appropriate

Part B - Overview: External Referencing Requirements

(8) VU undertakes a range of external referencing activities across the breadth of its Higher Education operations, in order to:

a. provide evidence of the quality and standing of course offerings, assessment models, student progress, academic integrity, student experience, and student outcomes;
b. source an external evidence base as context for the development of improvements to courses, policy,

procedures, pedagogy and student outcomes; and,
c. participate in sector-wide improvement and harmonisation efforts.

(9) Key external referencing activities at VU include:

a. assessment moderation and cross-marking;
b. peer review;
c. partnered benchmarking; and,
d. desktop benchmarking.

Part C - Assessment moderation and peer review

(10) External assessment moderation is undertaken by VU on a periodic basis, both as part of course benchmarking (see Part D) and as a stand-alone activity.

(11) Assessment moderation can be undertaken via a sector tool (eg. Peer Review Portal) or on an individual basis. Where a tool is not used, the steps in Part E should be followed.

Part D - Benchmarking

(12) VU conducts two types of benchmarking activities as part of its continuous improvement strategy: partnered benchmarking and desktop benchmarking.

a. Partnered benchmarking is a reciprocal comparison exercise conducted via a mutually beneficial relationship with one or more institutional partners. At VU, partnered benchmarking of courses is conducted at least once between each five-yearly Comprehensive Course Review (CCR) and as part of each CCR. This means each course will undertake a minimum of 2 course benchmarking activities within each CCR cycle.
b. In-cycle benchmarking may be undertaken as part of the requirements for professional accreditation of courses, or during Annual Course Monitoring; it is not always a separate stand-alone event.
c. Where professional accreditation is to be used as a benchmarking event, the Director, Academic Quality and Standards, must review the nature and scope of the benchmarking required for professional accreditation to ensure it is sufficient for the purposes of this Procedure.
d. Benchmarking of institutional performance as a whole is undertaken periodically as identified by the Vice-Chancellor or delegate.

(13) Desktop benchmarking is a broader, but less detailed, exercise conducted by researching and comparing publicly available information about several comparative institutions' offerings or activities in a particular area. At VU, desktop benchmarking is used:

a. during concept proposals, course and curricula design;
b. in developing and refreshing institutional policy and procedure;
c. during professional accreditation processes; and,
d. as part of Annual Course monitoring.

(14) Benchmarking can examine a range of different areas as required, including, but not limited to:

a. Course design, structure and curricula;
b. Assessment design, models and outcomes;
c. Course delivery, including modes of delivery and supports provided;
d. Academic integrity, at course or institutional level;

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e. Student progress, attrition and completion;
f. Student experience, as measured through internal surveys and other tools;
g. Graduate outcomes;
h. Policies, procedures and processes used by the University in any area of operations;
i. Institutional performance as a whole, on any selected criteria.

(15) Benchmarking is used to:

a. identify areas for improvement and areas of good practice (as evidenced through benchmarking reports)
b. analyse the reasons for any variation or commonality, including providing justification for why VU has decided to diverge from the approaches identified in benchmarks if this is the case
c. formulate improvement strategies
d. report on the results and analysis of benchmarking, which should be internally considered by the appropriate governance body or person
e. create action plans for improvement, and,
f. provide a measure to consider the outcomes of the implemented actions, both against the expected outcome and against subsequent benchmarking results.

Part E - Steps in External Referencing for courses

(16) Each College at VU will plan for external referencing of courses on a regular basis. External Referencing Plans will cover the five-year cycle period which culminates in Comprehensive Course Review, and will include:

a. the proposed referencing activities for each course;
b. the proposed time of each referencing activity, including, where relevant, an indication that the referencing forms part of another required activity (eg Annual Course Monitoring or professional accreditation); and
c. where known, potential or actual referencing partners. (Plans may indicate that partners are to be established closer to the time for more distant referencing activities).

(17) VU may engage with existing or emerging tools or technology to undertake course referencing activities. If a tool is used, some of the steps below may be automated within the tool itself.

(18) In each course referencing activity, the following steps must be undertaken, whether performed within a portal / tool or not:

a. Suitable partners must be identified: Partners should be genuine peers, offering cognate courses and disciplines. A partner who is identified as having particularly strong results, or is an exemplar of best practice in the area, can also be selected as an improvement exercise. It is important that partners are not selected solely on the basis of existing professional connections between staff members.
    i. Where courses have no or very few direct peer courses, judgement will be used to determine appropriate courses against which referencing can be undertaken. Comparator courses may be in the same overall discipline and related subject areas, or may be in different areas if teaching and assessment methods are similar enough to allow for worthwhile comparison.
b. The terms of the exercise must be agreed: The partner/s and VU must agree on the scope, timeframe, intended outcomes, and expectations of reciprocity of the referencing activity.
c. Course materials must be prepared and presented: VU must prepare the material for the units being selected for the benchmark in a manner that is sufficient, de-identified, and clear. Typically, up to four (4) units will be provided for each course benchmark. Where a tool / portal is not being used, VU should provide templates for reviewers' use in completing responses.

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d. Reciprocal marking / moderation or review must be undertaken.
e. Results must be compiled and reported: Each report must be reviewed by the Director of Learning and Teaching,) and compiled into an overall report, detailing the outcomes of the referencing activity. This report is provided to the Executive Dean of the relevant College and to the appropriate governance committee of the University, either as part of another report or as a stand-alone document.
f. Action plans must be developed: Each external referencing activity should lead to recommendations for action. These recommendations can be built in to other reports (eg. Annual Course Monitoring and Comprehensive Course Review reports, or professional accreditation submissions) where appropriate, or may give rise to a separate action plan for improvement.
g. Implementation must be monitored: The relevant governance body will monitor progress of the action plan at regular intervals of no greater than 12 months.

Part F - Steps in External Referencing of the institution as a whole

(19) The following steps must be undertaken when VU is engaging in institution-level benchmarking of one or more aspects of its performance or operations:

a. Decide on an annual basis the necessary areas for external benchmarking with partner universities: Areas may include measures such as attrition rates, timely completions, graduate outcomes, or any other area where VU wishes to compare its performance against peer institutions. Internal stakeholders at VU should be consulted to ensure areas selected for benchmarking are appropriate.
b. Appoint a person to lead the benchmarking for VU: Depending on the area/s selected, the appropriate lead should be identified and appointed by a Senior Officer of the University.
c. Identify and approach suitable benchmark partners: As for course benchmarking, partners should be peer organisations with similar or closely comparable courses and student community size to VU.
d. Liaise with benchmarking partners regarding the parameters of benchmarking: This may include:
    i. Establishing which institution will carry out which component of the data analysis.
    ii. Establishing what data set(s) will be used, how it/they will be analysed and how it/they will be segmented
    iii. Agreeing on timeframes and tasks to be completed.
e. Conduct the benchmarking: The benchmarking activities must be conducted as agreed in the project parameters.
f. Report on the benchmarking: Initial reports should be shared with all benchmark partners only. Permission must be obtained from all institutions before sharing the reports externally or publicly.
    i. Depending on the benchmarking area, the report will be provided to the appropriate governance body at VU.
g. Develop action plans: Each external referencing activity should lead to recommendations for action to produce measurable improvements. These plans are approved by the appropriate governance body.
h. Monitor implementation: The relevant governance body will monitor progress of the action plan at regular intervals of no greater than 12 months.

Part G - External Referencing in VU's processes

(20) VU engages in external referencing at specified trigger points:

a. when a new course is proposed, in accordance with the Courses Lifecycle - Concept Proposal and Business Case (HE) Procedure;
b. during course design, in accordance with the Courses Lifecycle - Award Course Design (HE) Procedure;
c. during course specification and approval, in accordance with the Courses Lifecycle - Award Course Accreditation

(HE) Procedure

d. during Annual Course Monitoring, in accordance with the Courses Lifecycle - Annual Course Monitoring (HE) Procedure;
e. during comprehensive course review, in accordance with the Courses Lifecycle - Comprehensive Course Review (HE) Procedure;
f. as part of formulating submissions or responses to professional accreditation bodies, during the process of obtaining or refreshing course accreditation;
g. when reviewing or developing new policies, procedures and key processes relating to learning and teaching, curriculum, educational quality assurance and student experience and outcomes; and,
h. when a need is identified to qualitatively measure VU's performance as an institution on one or several measures.

(21) External referencing arrangements must be:

a. identified at an early stage in all relevant activities by the person or group responsible for undertaking the activity; and,
b. detailed as a specific task in appropriate documentation relating to the activity, with a clear description of the type, purpose and (if relevant) benchmarking partners to be used and a plan for when and how the referencing will be undertaken.

(22) External referencing outcomes are approved by the relevant approval authority as follows:

a. Concept Proposals and Business Cases: Senior Deputy Vice-Chancellor and Chief Academic Officer following endorsements as specified in the relevant Procedure
b. Course Design and Accreditation, including Assessment Design: Vice-Chancellor, following endorsements as specified in the relevant Procedure
c. Annual Course Monitoring: Relevant Executive Dean then validated through the Academic Board and its committees
d. Comprehensive Course Review: Relevant Executive Dean then validated via the Validation Panel as specified in the relevant Procedure
e. Professional accreditation submissions: Relevant Executive Dean then validated through the Academic Board and its committees
f. Policy and procedure development: Academic Board or a nominated Committee (as part of their oversight of the policy or procedure documents).

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Glossary Terms and Definitions

"External Referencing" - A process through which a higher education provider compares an aspect of its operations with an external comparator(s) e.g. comparing the design of a course of study and/or student achievement of learning outcomes with that of a course from another provider.

"Benchmarking" - A structured, collaborative learning process for comparing practices, processes or performance outcomes. Its purpose is to identify comparative 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 with identified good practices across the sector.

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