10-30-2013

Benchmarking with the BLASST Sessional Staff Standards Framework

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Abstract

Benchmarking as a type of knowledge-sharing around good practice within and between institutions is increasingly common in the higher education sector. More recently, benchmarking as a process that can contribute to quality enhancement has been deployed across numerous institutions with a view to systematising frameworks to assure and enhance the quality of higher education. However, to date, sessional staff who are the majority of teachers in higher education, have been mostly excluded from or invisible in this process, both within individual institutions and across the sector. To ameliorate the effects of this exclusion and to acknowledge the contribution made to quality teaching by sessional staff, the Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching (OLT) funded BLASST project is establishing a national sessional staff standards framework which sets in place standards to evaluate and support the quality of performance and outcomes in learning and teaching, and in management and administrative policy, procedure, and practices affecting sessional teachers in higher education. In this paper, we present four case studies of benchmarking across four Australian universities that piloted the sessional staff standards framework in order to enhance and support quality learning and teaching by sessional staff. We discuss some of the strengths and limitations of this approach to supporting sessional staff and show how the benchmarking process facilitates active engagement for and particularly by sessional staff in enhancing quality teaching and learning.

Authors

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Introduction

Benchmarking as a form of knowledge-sharing (Epper 1999) about good practice within and between organisations is increasingly common in the higher-education sector. Because it lets organisations evaluate current practice against previously determined reference points (Cameron, Harvey & Solomonides 2010), benchmarking has also been used to systematise institutional frameworks to assure and enhance the quality of higher education.

However, to date, sessional and casual teaching staff, who are the majority of teachers in higher education (May, Strachan. & Peetz 2013; Harvey, Fraser & Bowes 2005; Brown, Goodman & Yasukawa 2010; Percy et al. 2008), have been excluded from or invisible in these processes, both within institutions and across the sector. This exclusion has not been limited to quality-enhancement processes, however. Sessional staff have also routinely been overlooked or excluded from learning and teaching plans (Kimber 2003); professional development and other opportunities to develop and sustain good practice for quality teaching (Dearn, Fraser & Ryan 2002); and full integration into short- and long-term workforce planning (Hammond & Churchman 2008; May, Strachan & Peetz 2011).

This paper presents four case studies of Australian universities benchmarking against a sessional-staff standards framework that addresses these issues as part of a national learning and teaching project. Entitled *Benchmarking Leadership and Advancement of Standards for Sessional Teaching* (BLASST), this project is aimed at supporting quality learning and teaching specifically with sessional staff. Commencing in 2011 and due for completion by August 2013, the BLASST project's key deliverable is a framework that establishes national standards to enhance quality sessional teaching, support sessional staff and sustain good practice around sessional teaching. , The project's first year was been dedicated to testing the transferability of a draft standards framework developed at one Australian university to other institutional contexts. Four benchmarking workshops, with participants from four institutions, were held to pilot the framework and a prototype benchmarking tool. Outcomes from these workshops are presented here as case studies to illustrate some of the potential uses for benchmarking with the BLASST framework and interactive tool, and specifically to develop multi-level and cross-institutional leadership capacity to address sessional staff issues.

The first part of this paper provides a brief review of the use of benchmarking for quality learning and teaching in higher education, along with details of the methodology used to obtain the evaluative feedback that constitute the benchmarking case studies. The second section of the paper presents the case studies, and concludes by reflecting upon the shared outcomes from the workshops and the implications for wider use of the framework and interactive tool. The cases are illustrated with excerpts from pre- and post-workshop surveys and interview transcripts from each workshop.

Background to Benchmarking with the BLASST Framework

Issues relating to sessional teaching and the implications for the sector have been highlighted in two major publications on sessional teaching in Australian higher education: the Australian Learning and Teaching Council publication *The RED Report* (Percy et al. 2008) and *Training, Support and Management of Sessional Teaching Staff*, produced by the Australian Universities Teaching Committee (AUTC 2003). Through these and other publications by quality agencies and bodies, the Australian higher-education sector has been consistent in identifying a need for quality learning and teaching standards that incorporate what is now the majority of the teaching

workforce. In 2012, as part of a project funded by the Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching (OLT), a draft sessional-staff standards framework, developed and piloted at one institution, was further piloted at three project-partner institutions. This was achieved through workshops that asked participants to engage with an online interactive tool to benchmark the policies and practices of their institution against the sessional staff standards (Harvey 2013). The first year of the project has been dedicated to refining, testing and evaluating the draft framework through workshopping a prototype interactive benchmarking tool, originally designed and piloted as a generic spreadsheet. This tool was developed as an evaluative instrument that individuals could use to self-assess or evaluate against the sessional-staff standards at four levels: institutional, faculty, department and individual. Working with the tool at the institutional level, for example, is suitable for those working at a whole-of-organisation level or who are focussed on the role and contribution of sessional staff to the organisation, and/or those who wish to obtain benchmarking data for their organisation. Working at the faculty (or school or division) level is suitable for those working in or with a faculty or school, and/or who have responsibility for a faculty's management, support, recruitment, administration or professional development of sessional staff. Working with the tool at the department level is suitable for those working in or with a department and who have responsibility for the management, support, recruitment, administration or professional development of sessional staff in the department. This level may also be most relevant for unit convenors, subject coordinators, program leaders or directors of teaching and research centres. Working at the individual level is suitable for sessional teachers who wish to self-evaluate against the sessional staff standards.

At each level of the benchmarking tool, there are three sections with statement sets that correspond to the framework's three key principles: *Quality Learning and Teaching*, *Support for Sessional Staff* and *Sustainability* (refer to Harvey, 2013). In each section, respondents are asked to pick the set of statements that best apply to current practice at their institution, and then provide a reason and evidence for their selection. At the end of the process, the tool automatically generates a summary benchmarking report against the sessional-staff standards; the statement is colour-coded to indicate whether *Good Practice* or the *Minimum Standard* is being achieved, or if current levels of practice are *Unsustainable*. The report can then be saved as a PDF or printed for the respondent's own use. No data or personal information entered by respondents is retained in the system; however, with repeated engagement and use of the tool, it will be possible to measure enhancements in practice over time. An important advantage to this tool is that the entire benchmarking process, from training to engagement, debriefing and reporting, is streamlined, taking less than one working day to complete; this can be an important factor for organisations where heavy workloads are standard (McKinnon, Walker & Davis 2000).

Benchmarking for Quality Learning and Teaching with Sessional Staff

Quality assurance and enhancement in higher education can be achieved through a wide range of strategies; for example, peer review as applied to research (and increasingly to teaching activities), and for professional development (Byrne, Brown & Challen 2010). The alignment and development of the BLASST framework, with benchmarking as a quality assurance and enhancement practice, however, was a strategic choice, as benchmarking for "best practice" is a process that has been enacted within international universities (Epper 1999) and nationally (ACODE 2007, CADAD 2010, Cameron, Harvey & Solomonides 2010), albeit not with regard to sessional-staff issues. The methodology of benchmarking, with its "conceptual emphasis on openness of analysis, organisational learning, and an examination of processors rather than narrow focus on input or output data" (Schofield 1998, p6), also offers a good fit with a university culture

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that values collegiality and shared decision-making (Rytmeister 2009). Furthermore, benchmarks need to be specific to the context – in this case to sessional teachers in the Australian higher-education sector – and, as has been argued (Massaro 1998), benchmarks cannot be transferred from other industries or from other contexts. Benchmarks also need to provide flexibility to respond to institutional diversity, which may be achieved by working with a philosophy informed by the "tuning" process: where the goal is to achieve standards as points of reference, convergence and common understanding, rather than uniformity (Gonzalez & Wagenaar 2003). Universities have also raised as an issue the need for any benchmarking process to be user-friendly (McKinnon, Walker & Davis 2000) and time- and resource-efficient. The BLASST interactive tool, with an easy-to-use online interface and automatically generated summary reports, meets these needs.

The overall purpose of the BLASST framework is for quality assurance and enhancement of learning and teaching with sessional staff; therefore its points of reference are examples of good practice. The development of statements of good practice, together with the standards that serve as performance indicators, was informed by a meta-analysis of data on sessional staff in Australian higher education (refer to Harvey 2013) as recommended by Cameron, Harvey and Solomonides (2010).

With the development of sessional-staff standards for good practice, the BLASST framework thus enables two types of benchmarking activity. A comparison between units (departments and/or faculties) within the same university organisation is an example of *internal benchmarking* (Alstete 1996, cited in Schofield 1998, p20). The BLASST framework also enables *sector benchmarking*, where a university benchmarking partner or partners are selected (Woodhouse 2000, cited in Stella & Woodhouse 2007, p15) to allow them to compare "like with like" and share knowledge for mutual benefit. Benchmarking using the BLASST framework may be undertaken as a strategy to assess the current standards of practice within one institution, but partner institutions would also benefit from "intrinsic and ongoing" (Garlick & Pryor 2004, p46) reference to the standards. This cross-institutional approach, embedded in quality systems, supports continuous improvement, and monitors and affirms shared progress towards good practice.

Benchmarking with the BLASST Framework: A Methodology

Because this project focussed on quality enhancement of learning and teaching with sessional staff, and on developing good practice, the data generation and collection was undertaken using a mixed-methods approach (Creswell & Plano-Clarke 2011). This allowed the project team to draw on methods and strategies appropriate for the key deliverables of the project, and that were in line with the project's employment of the MERI evaluation approach (*Monitoring*, *Evaluation*, *Research* and *Improvement*) (Wadsworth 2011). The analysis and discussion here is based upon the qualitative and quantitative feedback collected during workshops held at each partner institution, where participants engaged in benchmarking activities with the BLASST Sessional Staff Standards Framework using a prototype of the online interactive tool. In line with the wider project aims, the specific focus was on identifying the effective and useful aspects of the BLASST framework andinteractive tool, and how both the framework and the tool might be further developed as a tool for quality enhancement with sessional staff. On another level, the project team were also interested in gauging awareness of sessional-staff issues, both broadly and with reference to the BLASST framework's key principles of quality learning and teaching, support for sessional staff and sustainability. This stage of the project received approval from the human-ethics committees of the participating institutions.

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The benchmarking workshops

Partner institutions taking part in the pilot benchmarking workshops included a large, suburban metropolitan university (University W); a small, city-based university (University X); an inter-regional, multi-campus institution (University Y); and a large, inner-city institution (University Z) (Table 1).

TABLE 1: Summary of Benchmarking Workshop Participants

	No. of participants	Framework levels represented
University W *(large, metropolitan)*	20	Whole of institution Faculty Department Sessional staff
University X *(small, city-based)*	16	Faculty[1] Sessional staff
University Y *(inter-regional, multi-campus)*	19	Whole of institution Faculty Department (program convenor) Sessional staff
University Z *(large, inner-city)*	34	Whole of institution Faculty Department Sessional staff ("casual academics")

Each university's benchmarking workshop was jointly organised by members of the project team, facilitated by a project partner with assistance and input from the project leader and/or the project manager. While each workshop differed in duration and in the numbers and types of participants, all included a version of the suggested workshop program (Appendix). This five-and-a-half-hour program (including lunch and two breaks) incorporated a "think-aloud" exercise, where a senior-level participant verbally worked their way through the tool in front of the larger group; individual and collective direct engagement with the tool; and opportunities for small- and larger-group discussion. This format provided role-modelling for working through the main benchmarking activity, and established the tenor for the day's activities.

Data collection

There were three phases of data collection (Table 2). The first phase involved conducting pre-workshop surveys that canvassed participants' awareness of the broad issues around sessional staff in higher education, as well as participant awareness and/or understanding of how the policies and practices within their own institution aligned with the BLASST framework's key principles. These pre-workshop online and paper surveys were carried out at two of the four workshops.

The second phase of data collection was a two-stage process. Participants at all workshops provided written feedback on hard copies of the BLASST framework as they worked through it. They then provided additional feedback on the framework, the interactive tool and the workshop in an online post-workshop survey.

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[1] University X's organisational structure does not include departments

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Both the pre- and post-benchmarking surveys were designed as five-point Likert-scale questionnaires, where respondents are asked to specify their level of agreement or disagreement on a symmetric agree-disagree scale for a series of statements. Surveys included positively worded and negatively worded items, with the latter being reverse-scored.

The final phase involved semi-structured interviews with the project-partner convenors, held immediately after each workshop. Two questions were asked in each interview – *What went well in the workshop today? What didn't go so well?* – with additional prompts as required. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed in abbreviated note form.

TABLE 2: Summary of Data Collection (adapted from Parrish 2012)

Data collection phase	Method	Sample questions and prompts
1	Pre-workshop survey	Please select the response that most closely reflects your level of awareness (including your knowledge, comprehensive, experience and understanding) of: *Sessional-staff issues across the Australian higher-education sector* *How my institution/faculty/department assures and enhances the quality of learning and teaching for sessional staff* *How my institution/faculty department supports sessional staff* *To what extent the practices around sessional staff at my institution/ faculty/department are sustainable*
2	Feedback on hard copies of the framework	Written feedback and notations by workshop participants
	Post-workshop online survey	Framework and interactive tool Use of the BLASST online interactive: *It was easy to use for the first time* *I was able to perform the benchmarking task at a reasonable pace* *I was able to correct any mistakes with ease* *Overall, I enjoyed this activity* *The summary report is a useful product* Workshop evaluation *The workshop offered a potential framework for enhancing quality learning and teaching by sessional staff at this institution.* *The workshop offered a potential framework for supporting sessional staff at this institution* *The workshop offered a potential framework for the sustainability of sessional staff*
3	Interviews with project-partner facilitators (post-workshop)	Question 1: *What worked well today?* Question 2: *What didn't work well today?*

Benchmarking with the BLASST Framework: Case Studies

Four universities representing each project partner institution led the piloting of the benchmarking workshops with the BLASST framework. The outcomes and key learnings for each university are

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presented here as case studies. Case studies are a useful qualitative approach for studying a phenomenon – the "case" – in its real-world context (Yin 2011). In this instance, the four benchmarking workshops are presented as real-world university contexts that illustrate a "phenomenon": the transferability and potential usefulness of the BLASST framework in initiating multi-level discourse on sessional staff standards, supporting multi-disciplinary networks involving sessional staff and sharing good-practice strategies for enhancing quality learning and teaching with sessional staff.

Case study 1: The large, suburban university
Using a prototype tool, the first intensive benchmarking pilot was conducted at a large, suburban university (University W). All four levels of the BLASST framework were represented by 20 workshop participants: individual sessional staff, departments, faculties and university executives. Two faculties led the process, inviting three departments and sessional-staff representatives. A team of university executives representing the Office of the Provost, Human Resources and the Learning and Teaching Centre opened the benchmarking process.

The process was scaffolded with a structured program (Appendix 1), simple user instructions and project-team members to offer support to participants during the day. One full day had been scheduled for the process; however, the efficiency of the benchmarking tool was demonstrated by the process's completion in less than a day. Additional benefits of using the BLASST framework in this format included the open and honest discussion modelled by the university's executives at the beginning of the process, which established a collaborative and collegial standard for discussion and communication for the day. The benchmarking process required participants to provide evidence to support their self-assessment of standards achieved. This was beneficial, as "talking about reasons and evidence prevents (one) from being too positive or negative about their own performance" and "if you couldn't provide evidence at least [the process] made you think about what you were saying and why you couldn't provide evidence" (*University W – workshop evaluations, 2011*). Another benefit noted was the generation of cross-disciplinary and cross-level discussion throughout and after the benchmarking exercise. Discussion was stimulated as the university executives, the faculty and department representatives and individual sessional-staff members compared their evidence against the framework's criteria and openly debated the ratings for each level. One positive outcome from this discussion was the sharing and learning of diverse strategies and practices to assure and enhance the quality of learning and teaching with sessional staff.

Feedback was collected from all participants about the usability of the online tool, and more specifically, the readability and language of the criteria and standards. All feedback was collated, considered by the project team and reference group and incorporated into the next version of the BLASST framework. The framework, which had been developed at this university, offered the potential to contribute to sector-wide good practice, but it was necessary to further pilot both the framework and the tool to ensure they would be valid, reliable and contextually applicable to other higher-education institutions. Further benchmarking pilots were organised to take place in other institutional contexts, including a small, city-based institution, a regional, multi-campus context and a large, inner-city university to test the applicability of the standards framework across the sector.

Case study 2: The small, city-based university
University X supports the development of nationally benchmarked faculty-level programs and resources. This has involved the development and implementation of a strategic plan to raise the quality of learning and teaching in the case-study faculty through support for sessional staff. This

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plan provided an alternative model to the traditional faculty processes for employment of sessional staff by including external professional staff on a two-year secondment to the faculty. These "clinical professional staff" remained employees of the employing authorities, but also became resident and functioning teaching staff in the faculty. The plan included orientation and professional development for these sessional staff, mentoring partnerships with experienced teachers and establishment of a sessional-staff community of practice.

The opportunity to participate in the development of national standards to support and enhance quality learning and teaching by sessional staff was particularly timely for the case-study faculty. Trialling the BLASST interactive tool in a whole-of-faculty workshop context supported the faculty implementation of sessional-staff strategic initiatives by increasing participants' level of awareness of the initiatives, and importantly, of the national and faculty-specific drivers behind their introduction. All participants agreed that the workshop provided an opportunity to reflect on the challenges and opportunities faced by sessional staff in the higher-education sector. Following the workshop, participants reported increased awareness in terms of:

- *sessional-staff issues across the Australian higher-education sector.* Prior to the workshop, 50% of participants had had "some" or a "high" awareness of these issues. On completion of the workshop this percentage had increased to 78%;
- *how their faculty supports sessional staff.* The percentage of participants who had "some" or a "high" awareness of these initiatives had increased from 75% prior to the workshop to 89% at its completion;
- *the extent of sustainability of the sessional-staff practices in their faculty.* Prior to the workshop, 38% of participants were unsure of the extent to which the initiatives for sessional staff were sustainable, and only a slightly higher percentage (41%) had some awareness of the potential for sustainability. On completion of the workshop, the percentage unsure of the extent of sustainability had decreased to 11% and the percentage with some awareness of the sustainability of the new practices had increased to 67%.
  (*University X – pre- and post-benchmarking surveys, 2012*).

Workshop discussions were valued by University X participants because they stimulated the sharing of personal experiences, areas of concern and good-practice tips that enabled individual reflection on personal practice. In fact, participants indicated that the conversations were the aspect of the workshop that was most helpful. They reported that the discussions helped them "appreciate the variety of roles we undertake", and provided an opportunity to "network" and "discuss issues" and an "opportunity to share our experiences and learn about new research in this important area" (*University X – post-benchmarking survey, 2012*). Participants also felt they had identified strategies for collaboration and networking with their colleagues that would be likely to enrich their work as sessional staff and enable them to support other sessional staff.

The workshop activities also facilitated particular sorts of cross-faculty conversations that might not otherwise have occurred, further enhancing participants' knowledge and understanding of the national context and their faculty's initiatives. For example, as she undertook the benchmarking of the faculty initiatives through a think-aloud exercise, the Associate Dean (Education) shared the thinking behind each strategy adopted in the faculty, as well as the details of each strategy's implementation, to reveal the complexity of establishing good practice for sessional-staff teaching at the faculty level. One complexity that group discussion revealed was the extent of cultural change involved in the faculty's strategic initiative to establish communities of practice for

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sessional staff when such communities of practice, and the opportunities for conversations about teaching and learning they offered, were not something staff members were used to. There was consensus that change at the sessional-staff level was really about change at the faculty level (and indeed at the institutional level in relation to communities of practice).

The honest and open dialogue throughout the day facilitated a constructive environment for testing the framework, and opened spaces for ongoing cross-faculty conversations. The benchmarking workshop helped maintain staff enthusiasm for the faculty's initiatives, as well as being "invaluable in assuring quality for both sessional staff and the faculty" (*University X – post-benchmarking surveys, 2012*). All participants agreed that the workshop offered a potential framework for supporting the faculty's sessional staff and enhancing their learning and teaching. While contextually significant to the case-study faculty, the learning from the workshop has the potential to influence sessional-staff support in other faculties.

Case study 3 – The inter-regional, multi-campus university
As an inter-regional, multi-campus university, University Y has a need to approach all institution-wide issues in an inclusive manner. Consequently video-conferencing is a well-used communication strategy that enables all campuses to be "at the table" for consultation and decision-making. Given the centrality of the workshop format to benchmarking with the BLASST framework and interactive tool, and given the multi-campus context, it was decided to use video-conferencing for this pilot benchmarking workshop.

With the exception of the use of video-conferencing as the medium for discussion and plenary sessions, University Y's workshop followed a similar format to those at the other partner institutions. The workshop participants included representatives of the office of the Deputy Vice Chancellor (Students and Education), a head of school, unit coordinators and members of sessional staff. Four of the seven faculties were represented. The workshop was also attended by representatives (including the coordinators) of two programs that employ current undergraduate students in sessional teaching roles, for programs such as peer-assisted study sessions and as student learning mentors. With no Human Resources representative at the workshop, however, university management and executive were not as well-represented as would perhaps be optimal for this process.
There was a strong commitment to supporting sessional staff amongst the participants in the workshop, all of whom attended voluntarily (with appropriate payment made to the sessional staff who were in attendance). The pre-workshop survey indicated that the majority of the participants had some awareness of sessional-staff issues and practices at University Y. However, four participants indicated low to no awareness prior to the workshop on policies, practices and/or issues of sustainability.

The workshop opened with a think-aloud activity, followed by participants at each campus working in groups on appropriate levels of the framework. The groups then reconvened through video-conferencing in a plenary session to discuss findings and give feedback on the process. Given the composition of the group, it is perhaps unsurprising that a vibrant and passionate discussion ensued, demonstrating both the qualitative and quantitative differences across groups, roles and levels, and among individual participants. It was also evident that practices varied across the institution, even within individual faculties, and that participants found the workshop useful for getting updated with current practice across the institution:

> As the tool is finalised it will be good to have sessions like this actually using it to get
> a report on our institution (*University Y – post-benchmarking survey, 2012*)

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The requirement to identify sources of evidence to support the selection statements around current levels of practice within institutions was instrumental in participants uncovering examples of good practice within the institution. These served as a counterpoint to those cases of unsustainable practice in other schools and faculties. One important observation regarding the uneven distribution of quality learning and teaching practice was from two postgraduate sessional teachers, who noted that while their school was very supportive of their development activities in research, it had not encouraged any development in learning and teaching.

A comparison of the summary reports identified strong support for sessional staff in at least one faculty and in the student programs. In these cases, the summary reports also indicated where substantial work had been undertaken in the areas of induction, provision of professional learning and ongoing support and mentoring.. The comparison also unearthed sustainability as an area of concern common to all programs, particularly from those who were achieving good practice in a certain area and wanted to sustain that growth. Undertaking an appraisal at each of the organisational levels of the framework also shed light on issues of communication between these levels. It was clear that, at least in some schools, there was an inadequate level of awareness of institution-wide practices and programs.

The benchmarking workshop, by virtue of its interactive and collaborative structure, had a positive effect on the level of awareness of sessional staff issues. The post-workshop survey indicated all respondents reported having "some" or a "high" level of understanding. This awareness appeared to have been supported through the workshop activities and discussion, without the need for an explicit focus in the workshop on identifying sessional staff issues:

> Excellent working process and facilitated engagement with the topic (participant, post-workshop feedback survey…. (*University Y – post-benchmarking survey, 2012*)

Feedback from the workshop also provided clear endorsement of the benchmarking process as a method of engaging at an institution-wide level, and was especially useful for discussing the framework in context. Importantly, too, the use of video-conferencing was not considered an impediment to this process; there was no reference in feedback to any difficulties posed in engaging with the framework or the interactive tool through this medium. Participants at both campuses saw the BLASST framework as an excellent tool for promoting a whole-of-institution approach to supporting sessional staff. The opportunities for reflecting on current practices and sharing examples of good practice across campuses were also highly regarded, with the caveat that the current format of the workshop did not allow for the identification of practical strategies for collaboration, or for the leadership of sessional staff. For University Y participants, however, the BLASST framework did present a powerful tool to move on to this next important stage.

Case Study 4: A large, inner-city university
A large, inner-city university (University Z) participated in the series of pilot benchmarking workshops, in part as a means of evaluating and building upon recent initiatives implemented over the previous four years. In the case of University Z, these include the development of a dedicated website, paid annual professional-development workshops and conferences, as well as special categories created within the institutional teaching awards for sessional staff (or "casual academics", as they are referred to at this institution). The practice orientation of this university also means that a relatively large number of practitioners are employed on a sessional basis. The principles set out by the BLASST framework are therefore well aligned to institutional priorities.

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The benchmarking workshop at University Z included 34 participants from five faculties, ranging from Arts and Design to Engineering and Business. Workshop participants represented a wide range of roles across all four levels of the BLASST framework, including individual-level sessional academics; departmental-level subject coordinators; faculty-level professional (administrative) staff and course coordinators. At the institutional level academic developers, a divisional executive officer, a human resource specialist, senior leaders and a member of the university executive also participated. Following an introduction to the project, framework and interactive tool by the project team, the think-aloud exercise provided in the exemplar workshop format (Appendix) sparked wide-ranging discussion. Opportunities to work in pairs or groups and share perspectives on the different framework levels provided another catalyst for important conversations across the organisational levels.

The comprehensive nature of the framework and the multiple perspectives embedded in its levels provided participants with a useful "overview of issues relating to sessional staff", according to post-benchmarking survey respondents. Importantly, it also provided "a clear outline of best practice for sessional staff". The opportunity the workshop offered to reflect upon the challenges and opportunities faced by sessional staff was valued by respondents (92.3%) (University Z post-benchmarking survey, 2012). The workshops' "introduction to the framework tool" and "hands-on work with the program" gave participants valuable experience in working simutaneously with a benchmarking process and a tool. However, in this case the greatest value of the benchmarking workshop approach for participants lay in the opportunity for contextualised discussions together.

This aspect of the workshop was the most important for the majority of respondents. Their comments included: hearing and sharing "others' views and experiences"; finding out "about practice outside my own faculty"; "different perspectives" and being able to compare views and work with a partner as highlights. Meeting other sessional staff – "appreciating the variety of roles we fulfil" and "being listened to" by each other and staff in other roles across the institution – along with "networking and giving feedback to university (executive)" were also valued by the sessional-staff participants.

As an action-research project, the workshop was also a pilot for the draft framework and the online tool. Some issues regarding the functionality, navigation and flexibility within the spreadsheet version of the tool used for the workshop emerged. The language and structure of the questions within each level and the institutional "fit" at each level also caused issues for some participants, but provided useful feedback for the project team. This benchmarking exercise is relatively time-efficient compared to similar processes; the process required several hours on the day, including the various activities from introducing and demonstrating the framework, tool and levels individuals completing the framework at a particular level from their own perspective or in discussion with others, and whole-group discussions. This was perceived as time-consuming by some participants. However, the workshop timing was sufficient to produce summary benchmarking reports from all participants, as well as offer opportunities for reflection and conversation around current practice, with the extended and extensive discussion time highly valued by most participants (*University Z – post-benchmarking survey*, 2012).

The use of the benchmarking process in a large group, incorporating extended discussions, meant that specialist and senior staff were able to hear from a diverse group of sessional staff. Alongside the chance to do some "reflection on current action", comments included references to the fact that meeting to discuss issues with and get "feedback from sessional staff was invaluable". A majority of respondents thought the summary report was useful, and the reports themselves revealed surprisingly common perceptions of standards across participant roles and faculties (*University Z –*

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post-benchmarking survey, 2012). Conversely, participants considered the standards to be implemented unevenly across the institution. This confirms anecdotal feedback regarding the faculty- or department-dependent nature of the experiences of sessional staff at this university, which coexists alongside the many centrally funded sessional-staff initiatives. The potential of this framework for supporting sessional staff at the institution was recognised by 92.3% of respondents (*University Z – post-benchmarking survey, 2012*), providing a compelling rationale for implementing the benchmarking tool and process.

Concluding Reflections

The benchmarking pilots for the BLASST framework across four Australian universities, aimed to test the transferability of the draft framework and the accompanying interactive tool across a range of institutional contexts (including a small, city-based university, an inter-regional multi-campus institution and a large, inner-city university) using different media, including video-conferencing. Through benchmarking workshops and the collection of evaluative data before, during and after the workshops, the project team sought to identify the useful aspects of the framework and tool, and gather feedback on how both could be refined. The case studies presented here discuss the outcomes of these endeavours in terms of the perceived efficacies of the framework and tool as these emerged through the workshop feedback.

As the case studies indicate, the workshops offered a potential framework for enhancing the quality of learning and teaching by sessional staff. The BLASST framework and interactive tool offers an active, multi-level benchmarking approach, which may provide a viable alternative to the policy-driven strategies that are common across Australian institutions (Harvey 2013). As the case studies here also indicate, the deep cross- and intra-institutional engagement with the framework through the benchmarking tool and process illustrates the potential for the framework to effect change through its support of evaluating and reflecting upon current and possible future practice to foster quality in sessional-staff learning and teaching. The framework's alignment with the three principles of quality learning and teaching, support for sessional staff and sustainability for workforce planning actively recognises and incorporates the contribution of sessional staff within a particular institution. Another strength of the framework is that it supports planning and improvement *across* institutions and at a range of organisational levels. The flexibility of the framework was evidenced by its use across diverse institutions and different cohorts of sessional staff, including seconded professionals and student leaders. This planning is further facilitated through day workshops and instant summary reports.

The case studies here have also highlighted both the benefits and the limitations to benchmarking with the BLASST framework within the context of a workshop. One of the key benefits to running the workshops across the participating institutions was the provision of a unique opportunity (or "space") for important conversations on sessional staff issues across the institution, structured and supported by a scholarly, evidenced-based and tested framework. Discussions framed around the sessional-staff standards enabled friendly but frank exchanges incorporating very different perspectives across faculties, roles and subjects. The different experiences and priorities that were highlighted through the discussions, as well as through the summary reports, provide a foundation for future institutional and individual planning and development, as well as (in some cases) extending current strategic projects and initiatives. Responding to the need identified by Case Study 3 for an opportunity to "identify practical strategies", the summary report has since been upgraded to support the development of action plans.

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The majority of participants across the four participating institutions considered the otherwise rare opportunity for review, reflection, (self-) evaluation, conversations and network-building within and across organisations a major benefit. The scaffolding of open and honest exchange as modelled through the think-aloud exercises generated what were generally considered necessary cross-disciplinary and cross-level discussion of current institutional practice, including instances – and evidence – of good practice, as well as areas for improvement. The workshops also provided the valuable opportunity to gather stakeholders from across the university to highlight key issues and clarify the diverse practices in different faculties from a range of different perspectives, while creating a sense of community for all those involved with sessional-staff issues. This was particularly significant for sessional-staff participants across all four universities, who appreciated the opportunity to raise particular areas for concern and also just to share information:

> All of this workshop was useful as it was an opportunity to share our experiences and learn about new research in this important area. *(Post-benchmarking survey comment, 2012)*
> A very useful workshop…as a course convener it has helped me to identify some issues that need to be addressed *(Post-benchmarking survey comment, 2012).*

Piloting the framework and tool through benchmarking workshops provided an opportunity not only to test the potential of this alternative approach, but to simultaneously engage sessional staff and those responsible for working with and managing them in the benchmarking and evaluative process. Again, this contrasts to other approaches where sessional staff are absent or not consulted, or are otherwise excluded from institutional plans that directly affect the quality of learning and teaching. However, as noted in the case studies, engaging stakeholders at the university management and executive level was an issue at some of the participating institutions. Responding to calls for a time-effective benchmarking process, each of the case-study institutions undertook the full benchmarking activity using the BLASST framework within the timeframe of one day. This demonstrates a time efficiency compared to traditional benchmarking practices that rely on paper-based reporting. Such efficiencies provided time for the important discussions, debates and reflections on new learning about good practice that were stimulated by the tool.

Over 95% of post-workshop survey respondents agreed that the benchmarking workshops offered an opportunity to reflect on the challenges and opportunities faced by sessional staff in the higher-education sector. This feedback provides a strong rationale for building these types of interactions into the university more systematically to further develop quality learning and teaching with this essential group of teaching staff. The results of the pilot workshops provide compelling rationales for implementing the framework and tool not only at the individual institutional level, but also across the sector to keep the momentum and share good practice cross-institutionally, sustaining initiatives that support sessional teachers while complementing other strategic initiatives.

In conclusion, benchmarking with and through the BLASST framework not only ensures important discussions regarding good practice with sessional teachers, with sessional staff actively included and engaged in the process, but also provides a starting point and appropriate instruments to work towards good practice in supporting quality learning and teaching with sessional staff. The case-study data indicate that the BLASST framework is transferable and can be used reliably across a range of higher-education institutions. We, the BLASST project team, now invite others to engage in benchmarking with the BLASST framework and with the BLASST benchmarking interactive tool (now known as the B-BIT) and to further develop multi-level leadership capacities with sessional staff, both within their own institutions and across the sector.

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Appendix 1: Suggested Benchmarking Workshop Format

Time	Activity
10.00	**Welcome** **Introduction** to the BLASST Sessional Staff Standards Framework (SSSF) Benchmarking using the SSSF
10.10	Starting the process with *Institutional level standards* • Think-aloud exercise
10.40	**Group Workshop**: Attendees work in groups at institution, faculty/school, department, and individual level focus on criteria from appropriate level • Use prototype online tool
12.00	Lunch
12.30	**Continue Group Workshop:** What areas of strength and areas for further development around sessional staff issues have been identified at each level?
2.00	Afternoon tea
2.15	**Plenary and feedback**: • the Sessional Staff Standards Framework • the benchmarking process
3.15	**Discussion:** Where to from here? Developing an action plan and timeframes
3.30	Close

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