

## Effective Use of Benchmarking: The Context of the Centre for Preparatory Studies in Oman

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### Abstract

This paper examines the importance and the process of developing benchmarks for the courses offered at the Centre for Preparatory Studies, Sultan Qaboos University, Oman. Benchmarks are necessary for improving the quality of instruction. Considering the importance of benchmarking and taking it as a point of reference, a small study was undertaken at the Centre for Preparatory Studies to develop benchmarks for each course offered in the General Foundation Program. One of the aims of developing benchmarks was to make it clear to students what is expected of them at the end of each course. The study draws on some examples of benchmarking models to draft benchmarks for the purpose of study. The exploratory method was followed for gaining insights to write benchmarks. Literature review showed that course objectives are used synonymously with benchmarks. The outcomes of the research project played a significant role in designing curricula for the GFP courses though it was quite a challenging task. It is important to draft concise and clear benchmarks, which are accessible and comprehensible for students and teachers. So, using the level-specific proficiency descriptors, can-do statements for each skill benchmarks were written to make it comprehensible for students to know what is expected of them by the end of each course. Benchmarks used in one context may not be effective in other contexts. One important insight gained was what benchmarking is and what it is not.

*Key words:* benchmarks, challenges, implementation, objectives, standards

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## Introduction

In education, especially in second and foreign language instruction in particular, Benchmarking is the trend of the day. In education, it takes place when measurable standards are set for learning. For example, benchmarks might be set for the targets that educators expect students to master in each course.

They might also be used to see where a particular student, class, or even an institution ranks in comparison to others. (Canadian Language benchmarks, 2012). To define the concept, Language Benchmarks standard is an expressive scale of language ability in English as a second language (ESL). Advancement of the knowledge and skills that underlie basic, intermediate and advanced ability among adult ESL learners are reflected by the standards set. (Cambridge ESOL, 2011).

The Language Centre was restructured and renamed as the Centre for Preparatory Studies (CPS) in 2016. The Intensive English Language Proficiency (IELP) Program replaced the General Foundation Program (GFP), which was offered in the Language Centre. This change necessitated a revision to the curriculum to meet the changing needs of the students and the stakeholders. While redesigning the curriculum, the need for benchmarking was noticed. Consequently, a small-scale study was taken up with the aim of developing benchmarks for the GFP courses.

## Concept of benchmarking

As a first step, to understand the concept better, various definitions given in the literature were reviewed. According to Keegan & Kelly (2012), Benchmarking is a way of helping organizations to compare themselves against others in order to learn from others. For Fisher (1996), the purpose of benchmarking was to establish points of measurement from which one can improve corporate performance by changing the way one does things. Benchmarking was a valuable business improvement technique.

According to Zairi (1998), the essence of benchmarking was to encourage continuous learning and to lift organizations to higher competitive levels. Bogan and English (1994) used two terms, benchmarking and benchmarks. According to them, Benchmarking is the ongoing search for best practices whereas benchmarks are measurements to gauge the performance of a function, operation, business related to others.

From the above said definitions, it is clear that benchmarking is viewed by professionals from different perspectives. However, the common features identified are comparing oneself with others, points of references, a valuable technique and it is a continuous process for improvement. The CPS examined these common factors from which arose some concerns.

## Significance of the Study

The significance of the study stems from four considerations:

1. Study may improve the quality of instruction in GFP courses offered at the CPS.
2. Students will know what is expected of them by the end of each semester.
3. Students can view their progress from their performance
4. Teachers will know where we stand and what to do to meet the goals.

Any study undertaken requires a sound theoretical base/ foundation, discussion of the models in use and the literature related to it reviewed, on the basis of which the results and insights gained can be generalized.

### **Theory of benchmarking**

This exploratory study on developing benchmarks for the GFP courses is based on the ten principles from Meade's theory (1998) of benchmarking. "Learning from the best is the first step towards becoming the best." (Meade, 2007). He says.

According to his theory, Benchmarking:

1. Improves practices, services or products
2. Involves learning about 'best practices' from others
3. Accelerates the rate of progress and improvements
4. Contributes to continuous quality management
5. Is an ongoing process
6. Promotes fresh and innovative thinking about problems
7. Provides hard data on performance
8. Focuses not only on what is achieved, but on how it is achieved
9. Involves the adaptation, not merely adoption, of best practices
10. Results in the setting of specific targets

### **Literature review**

The focus of literature review was on what has been done in the area of benchmarking and to draw insights from them for the framework for our study. The ultimate purpose of benchmarking was to provide a basis for monitoring the quality of education.

To be successful and to ensure positive outcomes, benchmarking must be approached with some insight into the potential challenges and problems that may arise. (Wilson, 2000). Potential challenges include the need to ensure viable outcomes. (Wilson, 2000).

There are many types of benchmarking and many ways of categorizing these types. Different authors with different meanings use some terms. Each type seems useful for a particular situation. However, the type of benchmarking is not as important as that the aims are clear, achievable and achieved.

Benchmarking provides a professional foundation of shared philosophical and theoretical views on language ability that informs language instruction and assessment. It provides a common national framework for describing and measuring the language ability of ESL learners for instructional and other purposes, assuring a common basis for the development of programs, curricula, resources and assessment tools, which can be shared by professional across the nation. In short, it helps the professional field to articulate ESL needs, best practices and accomplishments. (Darling-Hammond, 2010).

In Canada, American Universities Data Exchange is used for benchmarking. Professionals in charge of benchmarking visit the benchmarked institutions to examine the practices, which led to its superior performance. Then return to incorporate positive factors and reduce inhibiting ones

so that the identified best practices can be adapted and implemented within the University context; one can observe that institution individualizes it, and it is self-selective in determining specific processes to benchmark. It tends to be ad hoc in nature, informal in approach, and ‘grass roots’ in generation (Benchmarking in Higher Education A study conducted by the Commonwealth Higher Education Management Service. 1998).

In the UK, the term benchmarking is also commonly applied to an approach where a series of ‘contextualized’ benchmarks are created for schools according to various background factors. This approach allows schools to crudely compare themselves to other schools with similar pupil intakes to their own.

The National Association of College and University Business Officers of the United States launched a benchmarking project in 1991. Australian Universities, Vocational Education, and Training Institutions have been able to participate in the project since 1995. The functional benchmarking activities include,

- (a) Participation in data collection workshops designed to increase institutions’ understanding of benchmarking;
- (b) To assist institutions in interpreting data definitions in common;
- (c) To help institutions organize the process of data collection and survey completion;
- (d) The post-data-collection workshops assist institutions to understand how to analyze benchmarking results;
- (e) How to research best practices and how to apply the tools and techniques of business process redesign to higher education. (Council of Australian Directors of Academic Development, 2011).

We have also examined a few models of benchmarking to adapt them in our study.

### ***Models of Benchmarking***

The review of literature has frequently cited benchmarking models. We reviewed three models to understand the process of benchmarking.

Camp Model (1989) has four stages, which are planning, analysis, integration and action. There are several steps under each stage thus making the model crowded. In addition, there is no room for flexibility to make changes as required in any context.

Generic “Meta-Model” (1994) depicted by Anderson and developed by International Benchmarking Clearinghouse (IBC). Though this model also has four stages which are, plan, collect, analyse and adapt, information provided in this model is very little. There is flexibility built in the model for restricting the model. Circular model developed by Spendoloni (1992) has five stages. These are; determine what to benchmark, form a benchmarking team, identify benchmarking partners, collect and analyse benchmarking information and take action. It is premised in the concept of re-cycling to project continuous improvement.

Each of these models have shown benchmarking as a continuous process with each phase being critical to the successful implementation of the process. These models in the literature review

showed benchmarking to be a planned, formal, and a structured process. Further, there should always be some flexibility built into any process or model to accommodate situational variation.

The main stages in arriving at benchmarks are planning, identifying benchmarking partners, collecting data, analyzing and taking action. In addition to following these stages and various steps under each stage, we have also examined CEFR common reference scales for all skills.

### **The Context**

Following the decision of the Higher Education Council No. 13/2008, HE the Minister for Higher Education issued Ministerial Decision No. 72/2008 stating that all public and private higher education institutions operating in the Sultanate of Oman should adopt the General Foundation Programs. The deadline for the adoption of these standards is the academic year 2009-2010 (Oman Accreditation Standards for General Foundation programs Document, 2009). Oman's Academic Standards set the minimum requirements that programs of study are expected to attain. Their primary focus is on student learning outcomes; and based on the result of carefully planned and executed formal programs of study.

Pan-sectoral working groups comprising national and international academicians developed these standards. The process involved national and international benchmarking, a review of past and current national experience, and extensive public consultations including a major symposium held at Sultan Qaboos University (SQU workshop handout, 2006).

The framework for the study was based on the above review of literature and the models discussed, The focus of this paper is to explain the process of benchmarking at the Centre for Preparatory Studies (CPS) and the insights gained for enhanced quality of teaching.

### **General Foundation Program (GFP)**

GFP is a formal, structured program of study licensed in the Sultanate of Oman. The CPS has designed the GFP course to prepare students for their postsecondary and higher education studies. GFP is general in disciplinary scope, preparing students for a wide variety of subsequent postsecondary and higher education program options. It does not result in the awarding of formal academic credit to the student.

### **Language Centre/Centre for Preparatory Studies**

Language Center has undergone a huge transformation ever since its inception in 1986. From time to time, it has improved the quality of instruction and kept itself updated with the changing paradigms. In June 2016, it gained a new status as the Centre for Preparatory Studies (CPS), which meant shouldering bigger responsibilities and meeting bigger challenges, as it would now include Math and IT in addition to English language teaching.

The Foundation Program English Language (FPEL) curriculum is a part of a larger foundation programme curriculum, which was implemented at SQU in fall 2010. The FPEL consists of six proficiency levels. Each level has its own set of learning outcomes and materials with a gradual increase in difficulty from one level to the next. These six levels are seen as a continuum based on the

developmental nature of language learning which entails a lot of recycling and reinforcement throughout the learning process.

### **Developing Benchmarks for the FPEL Program**

Before embarking on developing benchmarks for the FPEL program at the CPS, the Centre looked at the standards set by the TESOL organization (Kuhlman & Knezevic., 2013), and identified the following areas: logical reasoning, critical thinking, problem-solving; inferencing; interpreting; analyzing; applying; evaluating; creativity; and promoting autonomy for considering while benchmarking skills. Next, we used the GFP standards and the TESOL standards as a point of reference to draft benchmarks for the FPEL program at the CPS. In this process, we also considered several other factors, for example, needs analysis of students and other stakeholders (Carroll, M. 2006), adapting CEFR references for different levels and drafting level descriptors followed by writing Can-do statements for each area/skill.

The CPS examined the common reference levels, which are also known as global scales, described in the CEFR (Common European Framework of References for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment. Structured View of all CEFR Scales, 2011). Then qualitative aspects of each were examined, for example, spoken language use, reading comprehension etc. After critically examining the common reference scales of the CEFR, the CPS team working on benchmarking also gathered data on the needs of students, colleges and administration (Carroll, M. 2006).

Learning outcomes were then drafted for each skill in/at/for each level (Appendix A) using as reference points the common reference levels of CEFR, needs analysis data, TESOL standards and the GFP standards. Finally, keeping in forefront these learning outcomes, level descriptors were developed and used as benchmarks (Appendix B). The Can-do statements supported and made it easy for students to comprehend the benchmarks. (Appendix C)

### **Challenges faced while assessing and implementing level descriptors**

Assessing students working in-group work posed a challenge because of one or two students the others in a group. This resulted in thinking of different methods to assess student's work done individually, in pairs, in groups, in class, in labs, in library and at home. This resulted in exploring a variety of ways to assess students' progress from time to time.

The assessment results resulted in resetting the curriculum differently in fall and spring semesters. Student understanding of the benchmarks challenged us to come up with a rephrased list of benchmarks. Consequently, Can-do-Statements list was developed. Similarly, the Centre also revised the criteria for assessing students' work.

### **Conclusion & Insights gained**

The whole process of developing descriptors to use as benchmarks and piloting them took a couple of years to overcome the challenges and to standardize the benchmarks. In this process, it became clear that benchmarks needed to fit into the context of teaching and learning. Moreover, the key phrase in the whole process was 'Adapt and then Adopt'. Benchmarking is a step forward to progress. However,

it is not ranking, not a competitor, not spying and least of all not a research or a tradition. Then, what is benchmarking? It can definitely be described as context specific and constant revisions for growth.

**Dr. Meenalochana Inguva** has a PhD in Teacher Education and has 33 years of teaching experience at various levels. She has published books and articles. She has presented at national and international conferences. Classroom based research is her interest. Currently she is working as Standing Member of the Central Curriculum Committee, CPS, SQU, Oman. ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0620-5077>

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#### Appendix A: Reading: Sample-Learning outcomes for FP courses

#	Learning Outcomes	Level					
		1	2	3	4	5	6
1	Read and respond to a text of an appropriate length, for each level, in a given period of time	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
2	Develop reading fluency and speed by regularly reading extensively outside the classroom via graded readers	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
3	Demonstrate acquisition of both general and level-specific academic vocabulary through a range of strategies	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
4	Predict the content of a text using the title and visual prompts	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
5	Show understanding of instructions	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
6	Skim a text for the main idea	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
7	Scan a text and demonstrate comprehension of specific information	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
8	Use personal experience and background knowledge to understand texts	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
9	Deduce the meaning of words from context	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
10	Identify pronouns and their references		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
11	Identify parts of speech and their functions in a text		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
12	Identify the character, plot and setting in fiction(whenever applicable)		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
13	Make inferences based on information in a text			✓	✓	✓	✓
14	Identify the purpose of a text using topic sentences and introductory paragraphs			✓	✓	✓	✓
15	Distinguish between main ideas and supporting details			✓	✓	✓	✓
16	Interpret graphically presented data (maps, charts, graphs, tables)			✓	✓	✓	✓
17	Identify the relationship between textual and graphical information			✓	✓	✓	✓
18	Transfer relevant information from a text to a table/outline			✓	✓	✓	✓
19	Identify ideas expressed in compound and complex sentences			✓	✓	✓	✓

20	Create notes from a text			✓	✓	✓	✓
21	Identify the writer's point of view				✓	✓	✓
22	Recognize logical relationships within and between sentences				✓	✓	✓
23	Distinguish between facts and opinions				✓	✓	✓
24	Summarize short texts				✓	✓	✓
25	Use knowledge of word formation (prefixes, suffixes and roots) to comprehend a text				✓	✓	✓
26	Identify arguments for and against a certain issue in a text					✓	✓
27	Identify attitude and point of view in fiction where applicable					✓	✓
28	Read texts broadly relevant to the student's area of study (minimum 450 words per text) and respond to questions that require analytical skills, e.g. prediction, deduction,					✓	✓

(Source: CPS: Comprehensive Curriculum Document, 2017)

#### Appendix B: CPS English Language Proficiency Level descriptors

L6	Can understand texts of at least 450-500 words with an FK 10-12 level of difficulty. Can respond to questions requiring analytical skills including prediction, deduction and inference. Can understand different academic and literary genres, including arguments, complex ideas and/or plots. Can follow the signposts of a lecture and take or complete detailed notes using symbols and abbreviations. Can distinguish fact from opinion and draw conclusions using implicit information. Can produce a research report of 500 words showing evidence of research, note-taking, revision, paraphrasing, summarizing, in-text citations, attributions and use of references. Can actively participate in discussions relevant to their studies, defend opinions and use persuasive language to express one's point of view. Can deliver a 5-7 minute presentation on a research topic.
L5	Can understand texts of FK 8-9 level of difficulty by predicting the gist of a text using textual and visual clues, making use of knowledge of word formation, recognising ideas, making inferences, and identifying specific information. Can produce organized notes using abbreviations and symbols effectively. Can understand the main points of texts related to their academic fields. Can produce organized, coherent essays of at least 250 words on a variety of guided topics showing evidence of paraphrasing, note-taking and control of layout. Can express ideas, opinions in a conversation on a topic relating to their studies, using appropriate interaction strategies and topic specific vocabulary.
L4	Can respond to texts of FK 6-7 level of difficulty, applying the sub-skills of using contextual clues to make inferences, identifying the attitudes of the speakers, and distinguishing facts from opinions. Can complete outlines or write notes based on listening texts using some symbols and abbreviations. Can produce a revised, connected text of at least 150 words on familiar or guided topics, stating reasons or providing examples where appropriate. Can maintain a general conversation and use appropriate communicative strategies and language functions in both formal and informal contexts. Can deliver a 3-5 minute presentation on a research topic.

L3	Can understand longer texts of FK 4-5 level of difficulty and distinguish between main ideas and supporting details. Can identify the purpose and predict the content of a text by using textual and graphical information. Can take guided notes from a monologue or dialogue and respond to questions about speakers, topics and opinions. Can use an outline to produce an ordered and unified text of at least 120 words. Can edit a text, paying attention to level-specific grammatical structures and core vocabulary. Can initiate and maintain an informal conversation on a familiar or personal topic.
L2	Can understand main ideas and specific information in longer, simple texts of FK 3-4 level of difficulty on familiar topics and predict content by using background knowledge. Can deduce the meaning of unknown words. Can follow spoken instructions to carry out a simple task with a number of stages. Can brainstorm ideas and complete simple outlines. Can produce a revised text of at least 100 words using basic punctuation, spelling conventions and level-specific grammatical structures. Can follow and participate in basic classroom dialogues on familiar topics, such as daily routines.
L1	Can understand simple instructions and short texts of FK 2-4 level of difficulty and deduce meanings of words from context. Can produce a short paragraph of at least 80 words on a familiar topic using clear hand-writing, basic punctuation and correct spelling. Can use appropriate basic social and classroom language, e.g. greetings and introductions, and participate in simple dialogues.

(Source: CPS: Comprehensive Curriculum Document, 2017)

### Appendix C: Can-Do Checklist

**Can I do the following?** Put a  $\checkmark$  if you can; or a **X** if you haven't learnt it yet.

Skill	Can I . . . ?	Beginning of semester ( $\checkmark$ / <b>X</b> )	End of semester ( $\checkmark$ / <b>X</b> )
LISTENING	Use symbols and abbreviations to take notes?		
	Use the context to understand what the speaker means?		
	Identify the opinion or attitude of the speakers?		
	Understand the difference between facts and opinions?		
	Tell the difference between main ideas and supporting details?		
	Understand information given directly and indirectly?		
	Use expressions like <i>for example</i> / <i>secondly</i> / <i>however</i> , etc. to understand the flow of ideas in a talk?		

READING	Recognize the difference between fact and opinion when I read?		
	Understand information given directly and indirectly in a passage, graph or table?		
	Summarize short passages to identify main ideas?		
	Identify sentences that either support or oppose a certain issue in a passage?		
	Can understand relationships between sentences, and within sentences?		
SPEAKING	Express my opinion, and ask for other people's opinions?		
	Discuss topics in my studies by asking questions, agreeing or disagreeing, asking for making something clear, and sharing information?		
	Present an argument and support it?		
	Persuade someone to do something?		
	Understand information in tables, pictures, notes, maps and graphs, and explain it to someone?		
	Use question forms (e. g. Who? / Which? / Do? / Did? etc.)		
STUDY SKILLS / RESEARCH PROJECT	Describe my learning experiences, challenges and thoughts in a portfolio?		
	Take notes using a systematic note-taking technique?		
	Write a glossary of key words?		
	Find specific information on the Internet?		
	Use an online catalogue to locate a book or journal, or find information related to a topic?		
	Use a Contents page and an index to locate information in a book?		
	Use my skimming and scanning skills to locate information in a certain chapter or section?		
	Select or reject a source based on whether it is difficult, relevant or updated?		
	Understand whether a source is reliable, objective (correct) and authentic (original)?		
	Cite a source in the way they do in higher institutions of learning?		

	Summarize and paraphrase information (in my own words)?		
	Prepare a five-minute presentation using library or online resources, and present it with an outline and visual aids?		
	Evaluate (make judgements on) my own presentation?		
WRITING	Paraphrase information from a written text, or from tables, pictures, notes, maps and graphs?		
	Produce paragraphs with topic sentences and supporting details?		
	Give reasons and provide examples to support them?		
	Select relevant information from texts, and use it?		
	Write essays of at least 250 words, showing control of organization (with an introduction, body and conclusion), punctuation, spelling, sentence structure, grammar and vocabulary?		
	Write a report of at least 500 words showing evidence of research, note-taking, paraphrasing, review of work, and use of quotation and references?		

(Source: CPS: *Comprehensive Curriculum Document*, 2017)