

# A review on benchmarking in Higher Education Institutions

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**Abstract** - The higher education system is very wide in performance. For policy makers and stakeholders a question is raised as to why and what can be done to improve and understand the system. It makes to propagate that there have been benchmark of entire education system and hence, a reliable benchmarking tool is vitally important to the higher education institutions. Historically, the colleges and universities have been viewed as trendsetters and change agents for society at large. They provided leadership in creating and developing products, in basic scientific research and in advancing learning. In the modern era, or may be called technologically supported management era, leadership in advancing organizational development and modernizing management techniques has moved to the business community. In such fast revolutionary scenario, to cope up with present demand is vitally important. Therefore, it is articulated the benchmarking process to be adopted by the higher education institutions for their development. A good answer to the need of benchmarking is elaborated; some key parameters for benchmarking and the channelized process to be followed by the institutions, the hurdles in the process are discussed in the article.

**Key words:** Benchmarking, Higher Education, innovative practices

## I. INTRODUCTION

The term Benchmarking is a way of finding and adopting best practices'; to the participative 'the open and collaborative evaluation of services and processes with the aim of emulating best available practice'; through to the global and ambitious "benchmarking is the process of continuously comparing and measuring an organization with business leaders anywhere in the world to gain information, which will help the organization take action to improve its performance" (American Productivity and Quality Center 1993).

The benchmarking concept is also defined in the following ways: 'the process of measuring and comparing the performances of a business with similar processes extent within the main organizations in order to obtain information which will help the organization to identify and implement improvements' or 'the continuous process of measuring products, services and business methods belonging to your own company, in comparison to the ones of the most powerful competitors and of those companies which are known as being industry leaders'.

Gerald Balm defines benchmarking in the following way: 'The continuous action of comparing a process, a product or a service with a similar activity, known as being the best in that field, with the purpose of establishing ambitious but real improvement objectives and actions so as to become and keep the number one position among the best within a reasonable period of time'.

Xerox, the first company that ever used this method, called it 'a continuous search process for new ideas, methods and practices, for processes and for adjustment of these practices; or the adaptation of some good ideas and their real life application so as to become the first among the best'.

In the face of such potential confusion, a number of sources have found it easier to describe what processes characterize typical benchmarking rather than trying to define it. Thus it is generally recognized that benchmarking is a means of making comparisons of performance, usually with a view to establishing 'good' - or more ambitiously 'best' - practice methods, and as such it is also begun as a corporate exercise at used to diagnose problems in performance and to identify areas of strength. Like the publication of performance indicators, benchmarking does not necessarily provide solutions to problems - it is an aid to judgment rather than a substitute for it.

In addition to concentrating on what benchmarking is, another way of identifying what constitutes it is to identify what it is not. Thus, the Innovation Network, a US-based higher education management consultancy group, makes the point that ideally benchmarking is not just 'comparative analysis' of how an institution matches up to others in terms of measures like student staff ratios, or graduation rates, because this "doesn't drive change" and "does not specifically focus on the practices which create superior performance". It is not 'process reengineering'(where internal processes are examined and improved, without looking at other organizations' practice). It is not just a survey, where data is presented in aggregated or average terms; benchmarking studies, by contrast, draw attention to successful scenarios of practices - for the process or function. Nor is it a "three-hour 'show and tell' session" with another institution,

because “no improvement mechanism has been developed...nor have any measurements of success typically been put in place” (Innovation Network, 1994).

Other distinctions between what benchmarking is and is not were drawn by Spendolini (1992) in a important work for the American Management Association, when benchmarking was identified as: a continuous process and not a one-off event; a process that provides valuable information rather than simple answers; a process of learning from others rather than mere copying of ideas or practice; a time-consuming and labor intensive process rather than being quick and easy; and viable tool for improving virtually any business activity rather than a buzzword or fad.

The process oriented benchmarking within higher education seeks to answer some of the following questions: how well is the university or college doing compared to others? how good, and in what areas, does the university we want to be? across the university as a whole which part of it is doing best, and how do they do it? how can universities introduce into their own practice what is done well in others? how does an institution improve its performance while retaining its unique features? and - more competitively - in the longer term how an institution might become better than the best in the context of its own mission? For many in universities such questions will be provocative, ‘and a challenge to the traditionally inward looking decision making systems of higher education.

So far as types of benchmarking are concerned, according to Alstete (1995) there are four main types and Schofield (1998, 18) adds a fifth type of benchmarking to this list:

- Internal
- Competitive
- Functional/ industry
- Generic
- Implicit

The basic components of benchmarking - examining internal processes, searching for best practices at other institutions and adapting those practices to the home institution-must be included before change and improvement of institution. In nut shell, it may help the college practitioners to design, execute, and evaluate benchmarking programs. With regard to the specific higher education environment, benchmarking should exist to help institutions answer questions like:

- How well are our institutions doing compared to others?
- Who is doing it better than we are? How?
- Should we be doing better than we are? If yes, how? If no, how to we justify our current quality and standards?
- Who is the best? How do we define ourselves against the performance of the best?
- What lessons can we learn from the best, to apply those lessons to our organization?
- What is unique about our department/school/faculty/institution and how do we sustain our existing excellence and mission while seeking constant improvements?

## II. BENCHMARKING PROCESS

The resources of benchmarking are – examining internal processes, searching for best practices, and adaption of best practices of other institution. The process of bench marking at any institution involves four basic cyclic steps.

1. **Pre-benchmarking:** It is quite resemble as the TQM and represents the continuous improvement. Several indicators may be identified which could be considered for performance measurements. The areas of top priority are selected. The areas for the benchmarking are defined at the initial level.
  - a. Strategic planning process
  - b. Admission process
  - c. Curriculum development
  - d. Faculty recruitment
  - e. Teaching –learning process and methods
  - f. Research and consultancy
  - g. Feedback Mechanism
  - h. Students supports services
  - i. Examination Result and analysis
  - j. Governance and management
  - k. Record management
  - l. Alumni relation
  - m. Student-faculty grievances
  - n. Extension services

## o. Sports activities

For each area to be studied, the leading and lagging indicators are developed. Performance and satisfaction rates must be taken care off. These must be considered on the basis of standard of Accreditation of HEIs.

2. **Benchmarking:** This is the challenging step of the process as the data regarding the excellent institutions was lacking. Information may be collected from the freely available data on the internet from various colleges or universities. The data may not relevant to the culture and organizational structure or standards followed by us. It is rare to get good partnership with the best in particular class. But the process of benchmarking needs primarily the best practice of other organization which is to be shared. Therefore, it is challenging as the other institution do not permit to share its best.
3. **Post-benchmarking:** This involves an analysis of the data obtained in our college with that of the benchmark is set. If the results are up to the benchmark, the concerned staff / felloes must be appraised and still behind the benchmark, actions must be planned to get better result in the next evaluation. It is necessary that by the time the next measurement take place fresh benchmarks will be set as it is the continuous process. For internal benchmarking, it would be a great deal of interdepartmental learning and cooperation. Similarly, for external benchmarking, paucity of data makes it less effective.
4. **Review/Renew:** From the previous step lot of can be learned in particular area of study. It leaves lot scope for improvement and help to plan with priority. It also reflects the resources for that area.

### III. LIMITATIONS

For the benchmarking in particular area the data is required from the desired number of organizations. The requisite information in that area may available on their site if it comes under mandatory disclosure. But, it quite difficult to access the data if it is not made available. Major challenge is to share the best practice of the institutions. Thus, the availability of data, inertia in communication openness among competitors are seem as the major limitations or challenges.

### IV. CONCLUSION

Benchmarking can be enormously useful to influence and shape institutional decisions. Through analyzing the best practices of peer institutions, then adapting and developing programs for their own campuses, higher education leaders can improve the quality of programs and services that they provide. Strengthening the effectiveness of a college or university may require altering institutional practices and transforming cultures and subcultures that have been in existence for decades. Even the most insightful and visionary leaders will require as many administrative support mechanisms as possible to succeed; benchmarking can be one such mechanism. Through the effective use of benchmarking, institutions can determine the degree to which they are successful as compared with their peer group, identify the areas they need to improve, and develop strategies that will work best for their unique organizational circumstances. Whereas practices and procedures are not necessarily transferable from one peer institution to another, learning from the achievements of peer institutions can be enormously valuable in strengthening existing programs and developing new initiatives. All benchmarking efforts, of course, must incorporate and complement the vision and mission of the institution. It is up to the leaders to ensure that the college or university is working effectively to achieve its strategic goals, meet its accreditation standards, and realize its mission.

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