

Beginning with the Benchmarking Process: Inner Processing for HEIs

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The paper is an analytical discussion on the basis of information and data collected from various online resources. An in-depth and comprehensive discussion in the simplest way has been maintained in order to outline and get everyone introduced to the process of benchmarking in HEIs in India.

The concept of 'benchmark' in higher education has been drawing the attention of everyone around the globe during the last few decades. Since quality improvement has been one of the most important features of higher education institutions, it is of equal importance to understand the role of benchmarking as a means to continually improving and staying competitive. In case of India, it becomes even more pertinent as there has been a constant surge in colleges and universities all around. There are pure issues of the concept of benchmarking and develop transformational methods and practices to improve educational institutions. The profound changes in the higher education context emphasize the necessity of a quality culture realized in the terms of Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) philosophy. Higher education institutions strive to improve academic excellence, through country and institution specific processes. In particular, promoting excellence is essential for creating and establishing a knowledge-based society and economy, and for accomplishing the goals of economic growth and job creation as the issues are interconnected. Excellence can be: (a) a description of current provision and also a goal or aspiration for institutions, academics and students; (b) describing something that is exceptional, meritocratic, outstanding and exceeding normal expectations; and, (c) a relative and an absolute concept. One of the most important topics rises above the issue of academic quality in terms of leadership, academic faculty and human resources in general and has to be regulated in order for excellence to be achieved in higher education institutions. Quality assurance processes are actually models of quality assessment, which models provide institutions with possibilities of putting the theory of quality into practice. Academic excellence reveals the linkage of quality assurance to benchmarking, while changes in the academic scene call for substantial transformations due to business and industry demands. Benchmarking is established as one of the most 3 successful processes of assessment and improvement. It can be viewed as a methodology of study or improvement and as an opportunity to learn best practices, identify, establish and achieve exceptional standards, as long as top management is committed to it and views the process of comparing and competing as an ongoing one. Moreover, benchmarking is highly related to what is called 'good performance' which is determined by levels of expertise including basic, standard, good and excellent performance.

There are three important issues in case of benchmarking:

1. What is the level of benchmarking used by academic institutions for the enhancement and improvement of quality?
2. What are the major outcomes of benchmarking in higher education institutions and what are the bottlenecks in achieving them?
3. How can benchmarking achieve excellence in higher education institutions?

Thus, quality in higher education can be defined as "a multi-dimensional, multi-level, and dynamic concept that relates to the contextual settings of an educational model, to the institutional mission and 4 objectives, as well as to specific standards within a given system, institution, programme, or discipline". The rapidly changing forces that call for quality improvement and the ongoing upheaval in the higher education sector requires institutions recommence their strategic planning and implement effective practices for quality. In all respects, quality is relative to "whether one educational context has more or less quality than another, not whether it meets an absolute threshold standard so that it can be seen to be of adequate quality, nor whether it reaches a high threshold and can be viewed as outstanding and of exceptional quality, nor whether a context is perfect, with no defects". According to many experts, there are considerable barriers in the applicability of the concept of Total Quality Management (TQM) in higher education institutions, though this philosophy has been transferred from industry to higher education due to rapidly changing forces that call for quality improvement in the higher education sector. Quality in the business of education is in need of change in the educational processes, as it is becoming important in the world of competitive environment. Many researchers have compared industry to education and have pointed out conceptual and substantial obstacles in the implementation of TQM in tertiary institutions. Newby (1999) claims that barriers fall into three broad 5 categories:

(a) the nature of the management culture in some institutions, regarding the inability to respond creatively to the pace of change which eventually leads to institutional atrophy and decline;

(b) the traditional culture of higher education, as the barriers to introducing total quality approaches are more likely to lie in the prevailing culture of higher education and the tendency for organizations to ‘regress’ to the long standing and traditional; and,

(c) The heritage of past quality initiatives, meaning that total quality introduces nothing new and that the responsibility for developing and delivering a curriculum is always devolved to course teams. Across the world, academic excellence is a much discussed topic among higher education organizations. According to various authors, excellence, like quality, is a rather vague term. In the European Union, promoting excellence is essential for creating and establishing a knowledge-based society and economy, and for accomplishing the goals of economic growth and job creation (Joosten, 2014).

Adding up to the concept of excellence, academic research is another essential element that impacts on the continuous improvement and establishment of excellence in higher education institutions. In the UK, the Research Assessment Exercises (RAE), established by the UK University Grants Committee in 1985, constitutes an essential means for rationalising the stratification of universities and the concentration of research resources, and of maximising research output (Henkel, 1999). Arthur and Cox (2014) suggest the Research Excellence Framework (REF), which is in effect “a renewed version of judging research, notwithstanding the introduction of impact to the assessment criteria”.

A multitude of educational institutions have acquired internal mechanisms for quality assurance and implement self-evaluation procedures for quality enhancement. However, a large number of them around the globe turn to quality assurance agencies to receive external assessment. In this case, the agencies determine the particular quality procedures to be practiced and prepare the guidelines and practicalities of any site visit (Ossiannilsson, 2012).

Quality assurance agencies play an operative and effective role in the Bologna Process, specializing in quality assurance and accreditation (Unit, 2005). Except for the changing needs of the higher education environment, understanding the criteria and sticking to the best practices calls for the implementation of the following widespread framework of the way quality can be assured (Harman, 1998): •

Self-evaluation; 6 •

Peer review by a panel of experts, usually including at least some external panel members in one or more site visits; •

Analysis of statistical information and/or use of performance indicators or the best practices benchmarking; •

Surveys of students, graduates, employers, professional bodies; •

Testing the knowledge, skills, and competencies of students. All processes require the use of specific tools and mechanisms, so that appropriateness for purpose is accomplished. Benchmarking is established as one of the most successful processes of assessment and improvement. Blackstock et al. (2012) define benchmarking as “the process of self-evaluation and self-improvement through the systematic and collaborative comparison of practice and performance with similar organizations in order to identify strengths and weaknesses, to learn to adapt and to set new targets to improve performance”. In the UNESCO-CEPES Glossary for Basic Terms and Definitions, benchmarking is identified as “a standardized method for collecting and reporting critical operational data in a way that enables relevant comparisons among the performances of different organizations or programmes, usually with a view to establishing good practice, diagnosing problems in performance, and identifying areas of strength” (Vlăsceanu et al., 2004). According to the contributing authors, benchmarking can also be defined as: (a) a diagnostic instrument; (b) a self-improvement tool (a quality assurance tool) allowing organizations and programmes to compare themselves with others regarding some aspects of performance, with a view to finding ways to improve current performance; (c) an open and collaborative evaluation of services and processes with the aim of learning from good practices; (d) a method of teaching an institution how to improve; and, (e) an on-going, systematically oriented process of continuously comparing and measuring the work processes of one organization with those of others by bringing an external focus on internal activities (Vlăsceanu et al., 2004). Vlăsceanu et al. (2004) refer to the historical development of benchmarking in the higher education sector. They identify the United States as the first country to introduce benchmarking processes in the early 1990’s and, also, establish NACUBO (National Association of Colleges and University Business Officers) Benchmarking Project for a long period of time. They also mention that benchmarking came to the forefront as a quality assurance tool in the UK, after the 1997 Dearing Committee 7 Report which included: (a) The History 2000 Project, led by Paul Hyland (School of Historical and Cultural Studies, Bath College of Higher Education); (b) The RMCS (Royal Military College of Science) Programme at Cranfield University (example of benchmarking in libraries); (c) The Higher Education Funding Council for Higher Education (HEFCE) Value for Money Studies (VfM), launched in 1993; and, (d) The Commonwealth University International Benchmarking Club, launched in 1996, by CHEMS (Commonwealth Higher Education Management Service), as an example of international benchmarking (Vlăsceanu et al., 2004).

The logic of benchmarking is sound and easy to follow as stability cannot bring improvement. Various authors suggest that continuous improvement and excellence can be achieved by higher education institutions that are empowered to take deliberate

steps by using the benchmarking tool for optimization of their processes and programmes. One basic step is to choose a benchmark and the type of benchmarking that is going to be practiced. Typifying the concept of benchmarking in four broad categories, various literature recognize internal, competitive, functional and generic as the most common types. Jackson and Lund (2000) categorize benchmarking types with regard to processes that are implicit or explicit, independent or collaborative, internal or external, vertical or horizontal, quantitative and qualitative approach, and input-output focused. Achtemeier and Simpson (2005) recognize: (a) process benchmarking, which is about identifying the problem area within one's institution, identifying another institution with impeccable performance in the same area, and sending a team of experts of the area to learn from the exemplar institution their success formula that brings outstanding results; (b) metric benchmarking, which means comparing data of selected performance indicators among several institutions (Smith et al., 1999); and, (c) goals and milestones, which represent another way to understand benchmarking by identifying internal targets to establish a process, without any external point of reference for measurement (Zairi, 1996). Yarrow and Prabu (1999) add up to the variety of benchmarking types by recognizing diagnostic benchmarking, which is more akin to the examination of an institution's well-being in that it helps to identify the practices that need change and the nature and extend of performance improvements to be followed. The Consortium for Excellence in Higher Education (2003) identifies international benchmarking along with strategic, performance or competitive, process, functional and generic, external, and internal good practice 8 benchmarking. International benchmarking can be determined nationally and internationally and includes "a mix of all these approaches and organizational learning that is best done when it is carried out within a spirit of partnership and collaboration that enable both parties to learn from each other" (Lutfullayev, 2007). However, those who compete for excellence must make sure that they meet the criteria of powerful and progressive strategic management and governance, high standards of academic achievement, a strong track record with students destinations, an exceptional student experience, positive stakeholder satisfaction, high levels of student satisfaction, commitment to research and academic development, support for socio-economic and cultural development, recognition of the social benefit of education, commitment to internationalisation, promotion of equity and academic freedom (Brusoni et al., 2014). Considering the popularity of rankings worldwide, the main idea is linked to benchmarking and the acceptance of being compared to others in the sector. Ranking contributes to the improvement of institutions and programmes as universities are alerted to get better and better through processes of assessment and evaluation in order to elevate in the global ranking and gain reputation in the international scene. All universities that aspire to become renowned and attract more customers should be conscious of rankings and thus, establish benchmarking processes.

This discussion study explores quality in higher education as enhancement and improvement, and focuses on the use of benchmarking as a self-improvement tool. The aim of this research paper is to point out the structure and applications of quality assurance, by providing evidence for understanding the implementation of benchmarking as a competing tool for quality in higher education institutions. The gathering of data aims to provide: (a) findings on the dissemination of benchmarking; and (b) exemplar attitudes towards the particular types of benchmarking and the verified methods and tools for practicing it.

The formation and pursuance of benchmarking involves the use of some practical and functional tools in order for institutions to be able to diagnose, improve, collaborate, continuously compare and measure their work processes.

Thus, internal benchmarking is mostly outlined in this process of evaluation, probably due to the encumbrance of costly external evaluation, bureaucracy and the tendency of preserving university autonomy. It is common knowledge that institutional processes may be evaluated either continuously or periodically. In the area of process evaluation, the findings derived from research analysis were attributed in a statistical manner with permanent evaluation possessing a 25%, periodical evaluation holding a 65%, and evaluation that varies due to process content owning a 5%. The unfolding of this analysis regards the most critical challenge in the idea of benchmarking: continuous improvement through evaluation. Interestingly, the majority of the participants seem to be totally engaged with periodical evaluation, rather than permanent evaluation.

Works Cited:

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