

## BENCHMARKING – THE INSTRUMENT FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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### Abstract

Main purpose of quality management within an institution is guidance towards performance in all its dimensions of activity, as well as maximizing this performance. In European universities they organize benchmarking activities based on so-called „codes of good practice” and whose goal is knowledge and study „of the best practices”. By means of benchmarking educational establishments wish to identify performance deficiencies, identification of opportunities and difficulties, identification of strong points and of areas that need improvement, obtaining an objective evaluation, justification of methods, resources and current practices, in comparison with competitors or organizations that use similar functions or processes. In Romania, the institutes of higher education approach two benchmarking methods: evaluation benchmarking, implemented since 2005 by Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education and benchmarking based on data, with the purpose of comparing performance levels of two or more organizations.

**Keywords:** benchmarking, quality, higher education, performance, methods

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### Introduction

The concept of benchmarking is frequently used both for improvement of strategies and as an instrument for quality assurance, having different approaches around the world (ENQA, 2003). It can be defined as a “continuous and systematic process of measuring labour processes of an organization and comparing them with those of other organizations, bringing an external point of view about activities, functions and internal operations” (Kepner, 1993). In this context, there can be presented two well-known definitions of Benchmarking:

„Benchmarking is used to effect comparisons with other organizations and afterwards to learn the lessons provided by these comparisons.” (European Ethical Code for Benchmarking).

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Benchmarking is a continuous process of products, services and practices measurement, comparing them with the strongest competitors or with those companies considered to be leaders in a certain domain (the best in their category)". (Xerox Corporation – Initiators of benchmarking process).

Public and private organizations utilize this technique of improvement on administrative operations and institutional standards by examining the operations and standards of other institutions and adapting them to their own techniques and approaches.

Another major advantage of Benchmarking is the fact that this instrument is quite simple to implement and perform. Basically Benchmarking asks questions and then tries to find answers to (Kepner, 1993):

- How much better are our results compared to others?
- How good do we want to be?
- What are our objectives?
- Who is doing a better job?
- How does one do their work?
- How can we adapt their accomplishments to our institution?
- How can we become better than the best?

By finding the answers to these basic questions, combined with a structured approach and implementing an appropriate methodology, we can benefit from valuable results.

At the same time is important to know the stakeholders opinion about the performance of the educational organization and to find the best ways to have their cooperation and contribution (Grigorescu, Olteanu, 2013).

#### **Using Benchmarking in Institutions of higher education**

European convergence and internationalizing of higher education, keen competition and increase in demand impose upon higher education institutions the implementation of certain strategies in order to maximize the quality of their offer (study programmes and services) and to assure their competitiveness. A big role is played by quality assurance for study programmes and services offered by higher education institutions. Among various strategies and improvement techniques, such as Total Quality Management (TQM) or Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI), Benchmarking asserted itself as a useful instrument, easy to understand and efficient to assure and improve competitiveness (Alstete,1995).

Institutions with benchmarking experience describe this concept as a modern managerial instrument and an efficient method for quality improvement, which leads to growth of efficiency and important improvement within the institution. A practical reason for the success of this method is represented by the opportunity to benefit from other people's experience, which might lead to a collaboration, that being a simple and practical method (ENQA, 2003).

The main opportunities presented by benchmarking in higher education institutions are:

- Identification of performance deficiencies between institutions and other;
- Identification of opportunities and difficulties in future development or improvement of old standards;
- Identification of both strong and weak points: strong points or major weakness can be identified after permission to study the processes of others;
- Receiving an objective evaluation, the so-called "critical eye", in order to objectively study the current performance, without being drawn into a paradigm;

- Justification of methods, resources and current practices (and vice versa); we can see that we operate at a decent level.

The comparison with competitors or with organizations with similar functions or processes can be made between different types of institutions but also between public and private organizations (for example: human resources management). Using marketing the education institution have the opportunity to analyse the education services market and know better the expectation of the citizens and the position of the competitors (Grigorescu, Olteanu, 2011).

#### **Advantages and concerns of Benchmarking in higher education institutions**

Benchmarking is mainly fitting to higher education institutions as it based on practical information and research and evaluation methodology, and this type of concern is well-known to managers and lecturers. By implementing Benchmarking on higher education institutions, it was observed that this helped fight opposition to change by providing specific and real role models, it also came to an external evaluation structure, it created a new communication network and it enabled the exchange of valuable information and experiences. Aside the substantial proof of benchmarking positive effects, there are arguments against this method. Such argument for instance is the perception that it is just a euphemism for copying, a lack of innovation, it only has a limited capacity to improve existing processes and to expose institutional weaklings. Nevertheless, evidence clearly shows that Benchmarking can lead to radical changes of innovation process, by “adapting” instead of “adopting” the best practices. Also, by observance of Benchmarking Ethical Code, the concerns regarding privacy can be diminished (Alstete,1995).

#### **Important factors for a successful and efficient benchmarking**

Whether it is carried out as a national exercise for an entire department, or for specific institutions (within an institution or between higher education institutions) benchmarking must always focus on the identification of strong and weak points and on a better apprehension of institutions, in order to detect objectives that need improvement. Benchmarking requires a main focus on continuous improvement by a comparative approach and by searching the best practices to be more than a comparison of statistics. A benchmarking exercise should always be conceived as a dynamic exercise whose indicators and relevant comparative evaluations can be measured in comparison to other competitors. Its purpose is to identify good practices that lead to changes implementation. Within the higher education institutions, successful benchmarking exercises are based on an institutional desire to augment the performance of the organization, to become a learning organization, to continuously revise the processes, to search for new practices and to implement new performance methods. A benchmarking exercise, even if it unfolds within one department (faculty) or within the entire institution, it will bring results if it is placed in a context of transformation and progress. It is important to see if efforts will come to maximized results by constantly setting new objectives of institutional improvement.

Benchmarking requires a commitment to change, the need to invest in financial and human resources and the involvement of institutional management and staff (for example, depending on the processed of comparative evaluation) to produce efficient results in collecting data and application of conclusions. Financial resources will be smaller in the case of benchmarking exercises ran strictly within the institution than those unfolded with the help of a chartered external consultant or mediator, but they will always require a minimum level.

The concept of Benchmarking does not represent a fast solution to remedy an unsatisfying organizational performance. Although it can be used to provide a fast change (an instrument to obtain information about a certain issue), it is more valuable when used for continuous approaches, for a long term strategic development of the institution, to sustain the constant effort to improve the performance of the institution. The concept of benchmarking requires a strict and professional approach beginning with the exercise project and ending with the clear identification of the processes, data collecting and implementing the results. This implies planning and involvement of managers and owners. Choosing partners for benchmarking is crucial for the effectiveness of the exercise.

Organizationally, there are many benchmarking methods. *Public Benchmarking* can be compared with analyses made by magazines for consumers of certain products or services. *One on One Benchmarking* consists of collaboration between organizations representatives to benefit from mutual experience in order to improve its own organizational structure, its own practices and products or services. *Evaluation Benchmarking* is set by specialists from outside the organization and it consists of identification of strong and weak points, best practices for improvement guidelines or to facilitate improvement of certain activities (an example in this sense would be ARACIS evaluation for higher education). *Data Benchmarking* consists of provision of certain profile data by all the participants subsequently compared to certain levels of performance. Probing Benchmarking tests the products and services provided by other organizations and compares them with those furnished by their own organization. *Inquiry Benchmarking* is usually carried out by an independent organization that administrates consumers/clients' questionnaires in order to register their perceptions regarding the quality of the products/services provided by an organization. They often measure perceptions which consumers/clients have in regards to quality (strong or weak points) of the same type of products or services provided by different organizations.

In Romanian higher education they approach two benchmarking methods: *Evaluation Benchmarking and Data Benchmarking*. In Romania, evaluation benchmarking is implemented on the educational system since 2005 by the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education in the evaluation process of education institutions. Data benchmarking can compare performance levels of two or more organizations if it complies with two conditions: the existence of an independent consultant or agency and the data base containing considerable information about performance levels of the organizations throughout the years. Observance of these conditions leads to provision of unique information profiles of every participant who joins this study. These are registered in the data base, and the performance level of the new participant is compared (benchmarking), based on various markers, to the level of other participants with registered information in the data base. The inspections carried out in educational organizations gives another possibility for a structural analysis (Grigorescu, Olteanu, 2012).

If this method is implemented on higher education, certain difficulties may arise and by all means, they must be considered. Such difficulty may be universities/ higher education institutions availability to bring information for data base construction and to accept being part of a data based benchmarking process. Even though it leads to identification of the best ways to increase performance level of the organization, there is still certain reluctance to this method. This reluctance is caused by misinterpretation of benchmarking significance and it is usually asserted by the strategic management.

Implementation of data benchmarking may be influenced by the confidence earned by the independent consultant from the participant institutions in order to achieve comparisons of performance levels. This confidence that must be transmitted to institutions might suffer from the fact that institutions lose control of this furnished information, they have no influence on data collection, on the methods and means of defining, measuring and calculating the results, hence the need to imprint a credible ethical code.

On the other hand, in order to attain an efficient benchmarking, participant institutions must provide valid, real, precise data about the undergoing activity to make comparisons possible based on various performance markers or the data and conclusions could be wrong.

Data Benchmarking analysis is conditioned by the celerity with which the institution can transmit the data asked by the analysis consultant, this way determining the completion date. This also depends on the relation created between the consultant the analyzed institution. If their involvement is reduced the comparative analysis results will be obtained as soon as the data is entered, thus the input time is reduced. Profound involvement in comparative analysis, as a result of the multitude of provided information, will determine a longer timeframe, days, even weeks. The timeframe of attaining a benchmarking analysis is determined by the number of team members, by the volume of processed information, by the credibility of the provided data as well as the consultant's reputation (who can also fix the financial value of the service).

Consequently to those previously presented, we can analyze data benchmarking according to certain differential factors: (Table no. 1)

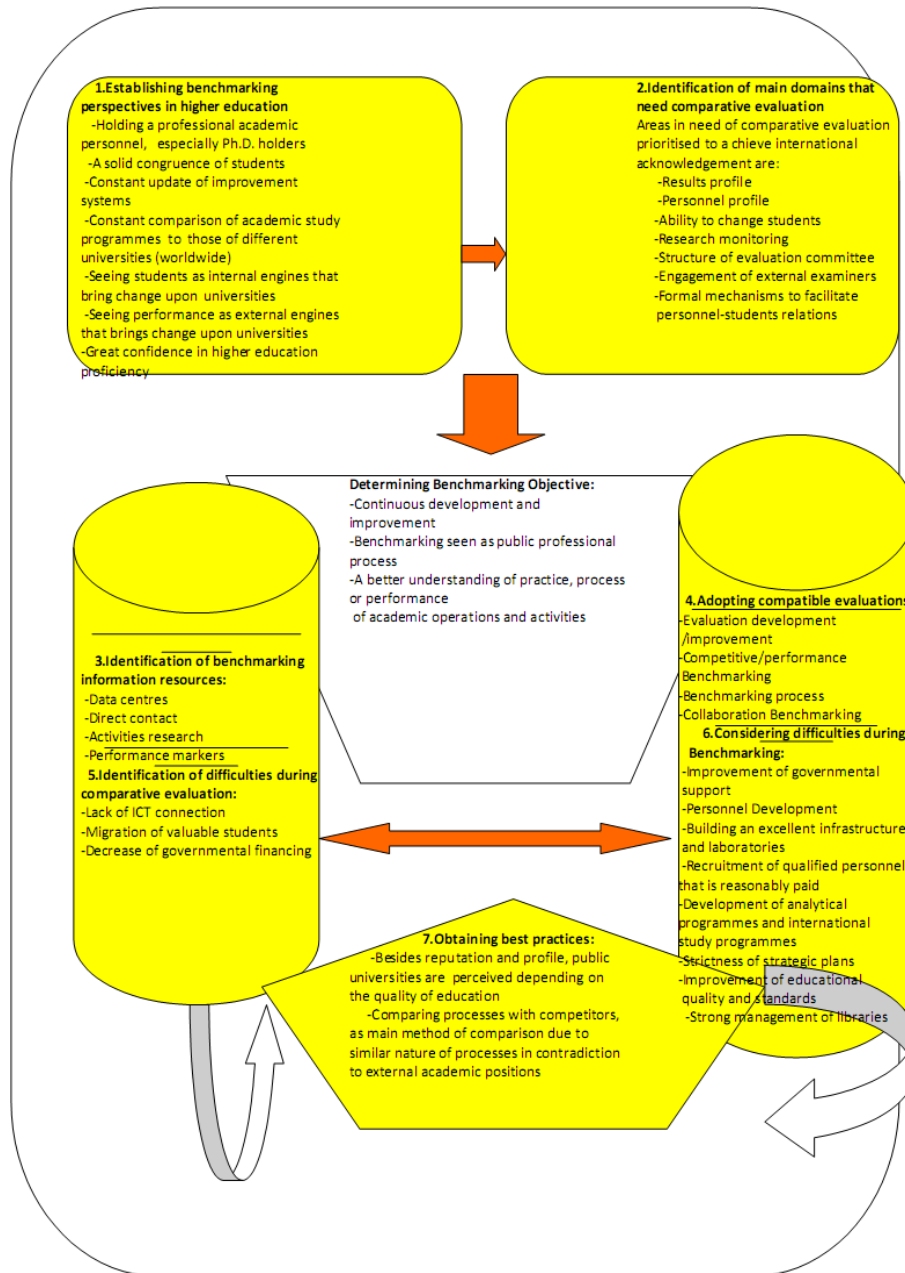
**Table no. 1: Benchmarking characteristics**

<b>ONLINE DATA BENCHMARKING</b>	<b>DIFFERENTIAL CRITERIA</b>	<b>DETAILED DATA BENCHMARKING</b>
Few minutes or an entire day	Promptitude of results procurance by the participant organization	Few days or weeks
Free of charge or a low price	Price	The price rises directly proportional to the consultant's level of commitment
Arguable or low	Results quality	Study results can be a starting point for implementing changes within the organization
Non-existent or extremely low	Consultant's involvement	Extremely high
Arguable or low	Data quality	Highly trustworthy
Low	Consultant's reputation	High

*Source: Magazine for quality assurance in higher education Vol.1, Nr.2, Decembrie 2009*

In specialized literature, the success of benchmarking process in higher education institutions is achieved by their great uniformity, by their resembling structure, with the purpose to create references farther used to function better, to excel. In this regard organizations must be prepared to accept outer practices and types of organizing from

similar organizations, to collaborate with the purpose of self-management to an optimizing level which others already achieved.



**Figure no. 1: Model implementation of benchmarking in higher education**

Above is proposed a model of benchmarking for the universities based on their specific.

Education is a key point of the society development and it has to answer to the requests of the labor market at first, but not only (Grigorescu, 2015). That is why using performant tools to manage the activities on a professional level is a must, giving to benchmarking a good chance to be implemented successfully.

Another fundamental condition for a successful benchmarking is maintenance of a permanent stability level of their activities. It was noticed that higher education institutions with inferior performance and activity are more interested in these analyses in order to improve their organizing and learning process, while the institutions of reference show a poor engagement in the process.

### **Conclusions**

This way, Benchmarking consists of thorough evaluation and detailed analysis of practices, procedures and results of a certain institution taken as model in order to compare performances of its own practices, processes, services with those of the model, and identification of practical and viable solutions, in order to increase its own competitiveness. Therefore, based on results of comparisons, and guided by the principle: „If they can do it, so can we”, new objectives, plans and action programmes will be introduced, allowing the institution that implements benchmarking to attain new competitive advantages. Benchmarking is not a copy process, but by comparison to leaders' activity, institutions that implement this procedure can learn from their experience and can identify the processes of improvement opportunities. So, the biggest role of benchmarking in higher education institutions is to analyze processes, concepts, methods, strategies and ideas of successful institutions and to transpose the best characteristics resulted from their own analysis. This evaluation method shows us what are the negative and positive variations of our institution compared to competition, permanently improving operations and it is important for the strategic analysis because systematic comparison sets grounds for an objective assessment of performances and costs of their own activity. Benchmarking is also an instrument for early notice of competitive positions degradation, thus being a method to encourage organizational development.

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