

# BENCHMARKING: A MECHANISM FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

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# OUTLINE

- ▣ Introduction
- ▣ Benchmarking as a tool for Quality Improvement
- ▣ Categories of Benchmarking
- ▣ Getting Started with Benchmarking
- ▣ Some Examples of Benchmarking Projects in HE
- ▣ Concluding Remarks

# INTRODUCTION

## ○ Benchmarking in Higher Education Institutions

- Benchmarking has been defined as a systematic process for measuring and comparing the work processes of one organisation to those of others with similar operations.
- For most higher education institutions (HEIs) the desire to learn from each other and to share aspects of good practice is almost as old as the university itself (Achim et al, 2009).
- With the emphasis on collegiality and the recognition of the international role of the university, such desires have traditionally manifested themselves in numerous ways:
  - professional associations, both academic and non-academic,
  - Meetings and symposia to share common interests;
  - numerous visits by delegations from one (HE) system to examine practice in another;
  - professional bodies working collaboratively with institutions in supporting academic provision and mediating standards; and
  - where formal quality assessment or accreditation systems exist, their ultimate dependence upon the maintenance of the goodwill of universities often by providing their own staff to take part as assessors of other institutions.
- Improving performance by collaboration or comparison with other universities is nothing new in higher education (Achim et al, 2009).

# INTRODUCTION

## ◉ Ranking of Universities

- University rankings reflect an important trend in the internationalisation of HE and the growing interest in the comparison of the quality of HEIs.
- Institutions are ranked and listed at international as well as national level based on quality systems to aid quality improvement.
- Approaches to measure and analyse what works at the HE level have rely on rankings that attempt to capture, with a single number the relative standing of HEIs, using multiple dimensions of their performance.
- Rankings address the growing demand for accessible, manageably packaged and relatively simple information on the '*quality*' of HEIs.
- The demand for ranking of HEIs is fuelled by the need to make informed choices about universities, within the context of massification of higher education and the fast-growing diversity of providers, both public and private.
- Rankings have also encouraged transparency of information and accountability of HEIs.

**It is evident that rankings do have a value as a reference and as a basis for comparison.**

# INTRODUCTION

## ◉ Criticism of Ranking of HEIs

While interest in university rankings has greatly increased, much criticism has also been heard from academics, students, education service providers, policy-makers and development agencies.

- It has been argued that ranking does not always serve as the best proxy of the quality and relevance of tertiary education institutions. Any ranking is an arbitrary arrangement of indicators aimed at labelling what is pre-defined by the ranker as a 'good' educational institution. (Marmolejo, 2016).
- According to the terminology used by the European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), benchmarking is more improvement-oriented. From this point of view, rankings of HEIs could be considered only as the initial stage in the benchmarking process. They indicate benchmarks and benchmarking gaps between institutions, but they do not indicate ways for improvement (Nazarko *et al*, 2009).

# INTRODUCTION

## ○ Rating of Universities

- Rating is assessing performance based on a set of grades. Unlike, ranking, where all candidates for assessment are assumed to be the same, rating is only effected on candidates belonging to the same category.
- In applying rating to higher education, institutions are categorised (universities, polytechnics, monotechnics, broad-based, specialised, etc).
- The institutions are then rated within their own categories. For example the main features of the proposed African Quality Rating Mechanism are that:
  - It is based on a blend of “fitness of purposes, and ‘excellence’ approaches to quality.
  - Takes institutional diversity into account.
  - Employs a series of quality criteria but takes institutional context into account.
  - Seeks to build in opportunity for institutional self-evaluation and reflection.
  - Rate quality as “unsatisfactory”, “satisfactory”; or “Excellent”, for the individual and over-all criteria.
  - Helps institutions to know what steps to take for improvement.
  - Helps institutions to recognise their areas of strength and weaknesses.

# INTRODUCTION

## Focus of this Presentation

- This paper focuses on benchmarking as a mechanism for quality assurance in higher education institutions.
- It is recognised that while university ranking may be considered as a step in, or even a form of, benchmarking, there some criticisms associated with it.
- This paper also takes into account, further, that rating of universities is another means to classify their performance as being “unsatisfactory”, “satisfactory”; or “excellent” on the basis of some criteria.
- This paper, focuses on the use of **benchmarking** purely as a voluntary tool which HEIs may employ for quality improvement.

# BENCHMARKING AS A TOOL FOR QUALITY IMPROVEMENT

## The Growth of Benchmarking in Higher Education

- The growth of benchmarking in Higher Education reflects the search for continuous quality improvement and for a more effective way of improving performance in a highly diversified HE sector.
- Benchmarking serves the needs of individual institutions to learn in order to improve, to change and to manage operations in a more professional way.
- Institutions choose benchmarking as a tool for improvement of their international position (van Vught, et al, 2008).



# BENCHMARKING AS A TOOL FOR QUALITY IMPROVEMENT

## Why Benchmarking in Higher Education Institutions?

- ◉ Institutions experienced in benchmarking describe it as modern management tool and the most effective quality enhancement method leading to growing efficiency and great improvements.
- ◉ Practical reasons for the success of the method are considered to be that building on the work of others makes sense; that it can lead to cooperation; and that the method is simple and concrete (FOCUS Consortium, 2013).
- ◉ The FOCUS Project report indicates that the main opportunities presented by benchmarking in HEIs are:
  - identifying gaps in performance between the institutions and others;
  - identifying opportunities and threats for future expansion or improvement or the potential to be 'left behind' ;
  - identifying strengths and weaknesses: strong points or defects can be identified after studying the processes of others;
  - obtaining objective assessment, a 'critical eye' to be able to objectively study the current performance without paradigm blindness;
  - justifying current methods, resources and practices (and vice-versa);
  - comparing with competitors or organisations with similar functions or processes;

# BENCHMARKING AS A TOOL FOR QUALITY IMPROVEMENT

## Goals of benchmarking

- ⊙ Benchmarking attempts to answer the following questions:
  - How well are we doing compared to others?
  - How good do we want to be?
  - Who is doing it the best?
  - How do they do it?
  - How can we adapt what they do to our institution?
  - How can we be better than the best?
- ⊙ Answers to these questions provide HEI personnel with an external standard for measuring the quality and cost of internal activities and help identify where opportunities for improvement may reside.

**As with other quality concepts, benchmarking should be integrated into the fundamental operations of the university and be an ongoing process that analyses the data collected and the results are used for improvement.**

**BENCHMARKING IS NOT JUST DATA COLLECTION!**

# GETTING STARTED WITH BENCHMARKING

Steps for undertaking benchmarking as proposed by Booth, *et al.* (2011) include:

- 1) Determining which areas to benchmark;
- 2) Identifying benchmarking partners;
- 3) Determining types and level of benchmarking;
- 4) Preparing benchmarking documents and templates including the purpose, performance indicators and performance data;
- 5) Designing the benchmarking process;
- 6) Implementing the benchmarking process;
- 7) Reviewing results;
- 8) Communicating results and recommendations; and
- 9) Implementing improvement strategies.

A university can also take part in an externally sponsored benchmarking project with pre-defined objectives, or conduct a project on its own or with the help of consultants (Alstete, 1995).

# EXAMPLES OF BENCHMARKING

## 1. ACU Measures

As part of its ongoing commitment to international university management and to its members worldwide, the Association of Commonwealth Universities (ACU) has developed *ACU Measures*.

This is a benchmarking tool designed to enhance both data collection and reporting on key areas of university management.

One of the main features of this online tool is the ability for institutions to use custom comparison groups to benchmark and track their institution's data alongside that of their chosen comparison groups.

# EXAMPLES OF BENCHMARKING

## 1. ACU Measures

## 2. PASET Regional Benchmarking

The PASET Regional Benchmarking Initiative is a methodology developed in partnership with the Shanghai Jiao Tong University - Center for World-Class Universities and is being adapted to the African context in close consultations with relevant regional and national stakeholders.

It aims to assist in improving the quality and relevance of learning, research and technology transfer in institutions offering applied science, engineering and technology (ASET) programmes in the Sub-Saharan Africa Region.

# CONCLUDING REMARKS

The paper has highlighted the use of benchmarking as a tool for quality assurance in higher education institutions.

Benchmarking has been shown to serve the needs of individual institutions to improve, to change and to manage operations in a more professional way.

The goal of benchmarking has been indicated as that of providing institutions with an external standard for measuring the quality of internal activities and to help identify where opportunities for improvement may reside.

Steps to be considered for a benchmarking project have been proposed in this paper.

It has been indicated that benchmarking is more than just data collection and analysis but that it should involve adapting a new approach of continually questioning how processes are performed and implementing new models of operation.

Two examples of available benchmarking projects that HEIs in Africa can participate in, besides undertaking their own individual or national initiatives have been identified in this paper.

THANK YOU VERY MUCH  
FOR YOUR ATTENTION