

SUSTAINABLE SUCCESS IN HIGHER EDUCATION BY SHARING THE BEST PRACTICES AS A RESULT OF BENCHMARKING PROCESS

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Abstract

The paper proposes to review the main benchmarking criteria, based on the quality indicators used by the higher education institutions and to present new indicators of reference as a result of the inter-universities cooperation. Once these indicators are defined, a national database could be created and through benchmarking methods, there could be established the level of national performance of the educational system. Going forward and generalizing the process, we can compare the national educational system with the European one, using the benchmarking approach. The final purpose is that of establishing a group of universities who come together to explore opportunities for benchmarks and best practices sharing on common interest areas in order to create a „quality culture” for the Romanian higher education system.

Keywords: benchmarking, higher education, best practices, quality indicators, quality culture

JEL Classification: D83, I23, I21

Introduction

The history of the benchmarking theory, methodology and application to practice of its conclusions began in 1981, when Rank Xerox became the target of a direct attack of its rival competitor, Cannon Company. Rank Xerox Company accepted the challenge elaborating a new strategy with a significant change in the operating mode of its activity.

The Rank Xerox Company, through its managing director David Kearns, was the first to formulate a definition of this technique: “a continuous process of measurement of its own products, services and practices in comparison with the toughest competitors or with the companies known as industry leaders”. This definition formulated for the first time the idea of a comparison of the firms not only with their greatest market competitors but also with other companies from which the interested organization can learn something (Bank, 1992).

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In education, the benchmarking method defines both an initial diagnosis and a management tool focused on learning, collaboration and leadership to achieve continuous improvement of the educational offer (Sârbu, Ilie, Enache and Dumitriu, 2009).

Benchmark system in higher education is an important measuring tool for improving education systems among Romanian universities as it provides for a comparison of successful education methods and prepares students for success in the global marketplace.

Most Romanian universities will need to establish benchmark criteria for developing new quality indicators in higher education system, make many changes as they move toward a lifelong learning system in which people have access to many types of learning opportunities and develop strategies for the success of their own goals of a continuous quality improvement (Sârbu, Scurtulescu and Bucur, 2007).

In the field of education, as in many other fields of activity, we can develop three main types of benchmarking:

- *internal benchmarking* whose object is its internal departments, offices, programs, faculties etc in order to identify the best practice of a given activity within the same university, the existing problems and the possibilities to overcome them relying on the accumulated experience;

- *competitive benchmarking* – a continuous process allowing a university to evaluate itself in comparison with the existing or the potential competitor universities in the same field in order to obtain information about the programs, the curricula, the administrative, teaching and research processes and the results, to compare them with its own results;

- *generic or functional benchmarking* – the potential comparison partner is any university which has gained the reputation of being excellent within its evaluation (Sârbu, 2006).

In case of a generic benchmarking, gathering information about the best practice' is easier. Much international information is available and helps universities benchmark their performance, both in terms of inputs (unit costs of education and training, student-teacher ratio, teaching time in learning activities) and outputs (learner assessment) (World Bank, 2004). Traditional measures of educational progress, such as gross enrolment ratios and public spending as a proportion of GDP, do not capture important dimensions of benchmark system in higher education. Gross enrolment ratios measure inputs rather than the achievement of core or other competencies; public spending does not include the substantial amount of private spending on training in most universities. Traditional indicators often fail to capture non-formal and informal learning, such as that which takes place in the workplace or outside the formal education and training system, activities that are becoming increasingly important. Such measures are underdeveloped (Garlick and Pryor, 2007).

However, the quality of the educational process cannot be gauged solely on the basis of some quantitative indicators such as: number of students/teacher, size of classrooms, laboratories, libraries etc. (Sârbu et al., 2010). There is, in this domain, a range of specific indicators, among which: the academic and psycho pedagogical competence of teachers, the capacity to meet social needs and demand, the transfer of moral values towards students; equality of chances as far as access to education is concerned, level of student satisfaction;

the cultural, ethical and social responsibility of a university; employment and working conditions provided for staff; the cost the university covers to constantly train staff (teaching staff as well as auxiliary teaching staff), academic mobility etc. (Fernández, Fernández and Álvarez, 2007). The same also stands for indicators taking into account the process initiation, such as: number of books in libraries, number of teachers, number of buildings and educational spaces, number of computers etc., more than the process completion (that is results, for instance: number of students working in their domain of specialization, students' trajectory in their professional life etc.) (Lueger and Vettori, 2007). All these reasons sustain the idea of the rethinking of the entirely quality indicators system in higher education and the development of new complex indicators with a high degree of an accurate evaluation of the whole activity, which will represent, in the same time, new benchmarking criteria of the whole academic system.

1. Literature review

The benchmarking method defines both an initial diagnosis and a management tool focused on learning, collaboration and leadership to achieve continuous improvement of the educational offer (Stevenson, Maclachlan și Karmel, 1999). In response to limited resources, universities made partnerships with businesses, benefiting from marketing projects, appropriate organizational tools and other methods and techniques designed for income generation purposes (Clark, 1998).

In their work on benchmarking in Romanian economic higher education, Ilie et al. (2010) write that for universities, benchmarking is a means of analyzing their internal performance in comparison with that of other universities, of identifying the highest performing education systems and of collaborating with other universities in order to learn about successful school improvement measures.

The Martin's paper (2003) notes that the destabilizing effect of continuing fundamental transformations in higher education creates the inability of many institutions to cooperate in the elaboration and application of strategic plans as well in the reviewing and improving them.

The paper written by McKinnon, Walker and Davis, (1999) provides the benchmarking process with an unique approach, as it puts in the background some variables as life cycle, localization, government size within and between universities. Butcher, Howard, McMeniman and Thom (2002) emphasizes that the universities primary activities put on the forefront the benchmarking process, referring in particular to professors' training programs. Most of benchmarking process history has focused on the statistical data and their application in areas of administrative support, which has limited the benchmarking between university functions (Urquhart, Ellis and Woods, 2002). Another approach to higher education's benchmarking is based on the usage of terms such as collaboration, program of study inclusion, reflection, revision, management and improvement (Butcher, Howard, McMeniman and Thom, 2002). The paper titled „Primary and secondary indicators for qualitative evaluation” („Indicatori primari și secundari pentru evaluarea calității”) (Miroiu et al., 2009) is proposing the elaboration of new performance indicators to project a benchmarking process for the high education institutions in Romania.

2. Research Methodology

Research on higher education is an object-focused area based on a broad range of disciplines. The institutional base is often shaky and diverse. Interest in comparative research on higher education grew in recent years and was reinforced by the community of higher education researchers in Europe. As it can be conceptually and methodologically demanding and fruitful, the growing interest could serve as a stimulus for enhancing a common identity and a growing quality. However, few comparative research designs represent the ideal type of setting a research agenda of clearly defined hypotheses to be tested, and if they do so, the study mostly turns out to be too simplistic due to disregard of the complex context. Rather, most comparative projects are exploratory and most productive in providing unexpected insight.

Generally, the objective of this study is the elaboration and implementation of a sustainable model using benchmarking in socio-economic universities in Romania. Through this project we would like to develop a qualitative hierarchical model for the Romanian profile universities and in the same time promoting the importance of benchmarking as a useful tool for performance comparison between institutions.

The authors argue that comparative studies on higher education are most fruitful in destroying conceptual reasoning based on narrow experience; they are a gold mine for the early stages of conceptual restructuring. They are indispensable for understanding a reality shaped by common international trends, reforms based on comparative observation, growing trans-national activities and partial supra-national integration in higher education. Comparative projects can be regarded as theoretically and methodologically most promising if they are based on a semi-structured research design, whereby the strengths of various conceptual approaches in explaining the phenomena are analysed and the researchers systematically deal with the fact that the project is likely to generate surprising information requiring to restructure the initial conceptual framework.

The research methodology would be based on the complementarities between the qualitative and quantitative methods. The research process would have two stages: the first focusing on the Bucharest Academy of Economic Studies and the second on the national profile institutions.

3. Benchmark system in higher education. Concept

The Lisbon strategy adopted at the EC spring summit set a strategic goal for the EU to become, by 2010 "the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion" (APEC/OECD, 2005).

The Lisbon conclusions contained a number of benchmarks and guidelines in the area of education and training, as well as in other policies areas. The European Commission thereby made it clear that indicators play an important role in monitoring progress towards the achievement of agreed objectives. Furthermore, the structural indicators have the additional function of helping to identify member States which perform well, thereby making possible the identification of successful policy (European Commission, 2010). In this sense, indicators might be used as an instrument for stimulating the exchange of expertise, supporting good practice and inspiring new approaches.

Benchmark system is a critical tool for studying education among the universities because of some factors (APEC/OECD, 2005):

- allows for one university to benefit from the experience of another university;
- creates an opportunity for universities and professors to share best practices and learn from the successes of others;
- at a global level, international benchmark system, greatly expands opportunities for cross-cultural communication and the collaboration of ideas through the internet;
- provides model of high performing, as well as rapidly improving, universities to others who may not possess access to such models in a local education system;
- creates a national (or world) laboratory for new ideas and collaboration.

The benchmarking process includes, but is not limited to the following sequence of steps (APEC/OECD, 2005):

- From an expert university turnaround group, such as Romanian universities, to provide technical assistance to identify criteria for selecting benchmark sites; develop benchmarking protocols and review benchmarking site write-ups;
- Examine the national (international) literature on effective strategies for the universities;
- Using the following principal criteria, identify high performing universities with promising education policies for addressing persistently low performing universities:
 - history of national/international high educational performance;
 - a comprehensive set of standards or intended curriculum;
 - method for systematically identifying consistently low performing universities;
 - explicit procedures for reform and improvement of low performers;
 - provision of added resources and technical support;
 - excellent teach preparation and development;
 - monitoring the faculty's improvement including the availability of formative evaluations or inspection / assistance teams;
 - hold conferences bringing experts to discuss university benchmarking findings and to seek to generalize to identify superior practices.

To focus our work, we are proposing to concentrate especially on three dimensions that are of particular relevance for higher education system: *human resource management, budget management and information*. Together, these three dimensions can help characterize a governance system as well as measure its performance (World Bank, 2004).

The recent reforms at the university level determined the need of improving the operational capabilities of universities taking into account the funding diversity that universities count on today and the increase in quality of educational services at the national level. Taking into account the European academic preoccupations in the field, the present paper is

focusing on researching ways of improving the university level educational services exploring benchmarking as an useful tool to evaluate the organizational performance. The paper has, therefore, the following specific objectives:

- *Raising awareness and increasing scholars' interest into proposing new evaluation indicators considering the main trends of the European educational policy* (i.e. the degree that ASE Bucharest is participating in programs and projects that develop further vocational training). The research that we develop would cover some of the main areas, namely: Economy, Cybernetics and Statistics, International Economic Relations, International Affairs, International Trade, Marketing, Finance, Accounting, Economic Informatics, Management, Computers and technology Information, Law.

- *Elaborating a system that would collect primary data considering the analysis level and data relevance (coherence and flexibility)*. We'll take into account the primary indicators: referring to data common to all national institutions of higher education, secondary indicators: data allowing comparisons between higher education institutions based on specialty and field of study and tertiary indicators regarding the data that allows comparisons between individual programs developed by universities, taking into account the specializations and field of study.

- *The analysis and interpretation of the indicators that are data specific: Input, Process, Output, Outcome*. The input indicators give a measure of institution's resources (human resources, logistics, financial), the process indicators are a measure of educational, research and administrative processes, or what is called „the academic counseling services offer”, the output indicators are measuring the outcomes of the educational, research and administrative (i.e. number of diplomas awarded, the number of patents obtained or of published articles), while the outcome indicators are measuring the impact that the higher education institutions have on the society (i.e. the effect on human resources' market, the increase in productivity as an effect of the well prepared human resource in a specific field).

Based around these general and specific objectives, a good program for quality improvement within the university was seen as comprising the following characteristics (Garlick and Pryor, 2007):

- *a clear understanding of the university's stakeholder expectations in relation to the specific area targeted for improvement and the environment in which it operates;*
- *goals, policies and procedures that are accessible and understood by all relevant staff, students and other stakeholders participating in the process of improvement;*
- *a flexible, holistic process to enable active involvement by relevant stakeholders;*
- *measures of performance for the function, with mechanisms for both internal and external data support, including from non-university comparisons that are consistent with agreed improvement goals and the changing environment in which the function has to perform;*
- *an agreed recognition by all stakeholders that practice can be improved;*
- *leadership and commitment from senior management for the drive and the resources to assist with an improvement program;*

- evidence that improvement has resulted;
- learning that feeds into continuous improvement on a wide scale.

A generic approach to a comprehensive improvement program, comprising initial review, strategic planning, reflection, action and evaluation is presented in figure no.1. The underlying principles of collaboration (or connectivity), leadership and learning are seen as influencing each of these five phases.

Phase 1: Comprehensively reviewing the current situation and environment as it relates to the targeted function - the purpose of this first phase is identifying the external and internal factors at work (drivers and impediments), and the way they shape and influence the present operating environment for the university and targeted functional area. This material may include: policy and procedure documents; staff, stakeholder and student surveys and views; staff recruitment programs; budget implications; and wider factors and influences. An analysis of this data may highlight gaps to be filled.

Phase 2: Undertaking a process of strategic planning targeted at improvement - this phase is envisaged as an inclusive process involving all relevant stakeholders (including those who are external to the organization) and is initially about sharing understandings and being comfortable about the future vision – particular goals, language, concepts, culture, constraints, impediments and opportunities – as it relates to their perspective on matters to do with the targeted area for improvement.

Phase 3: Self-evaluation and external evaluation, concentrating on three different directions - the methodological improvement and that of the general guidelines associated with ensuring the system-wide quality, in accordance with the quality standards at the European level; the external and internal evaluation of 20 profile universities; building a central database containing criteria, standards and performance indicators to provide information on the program development status at the institutional level. The database will be public.

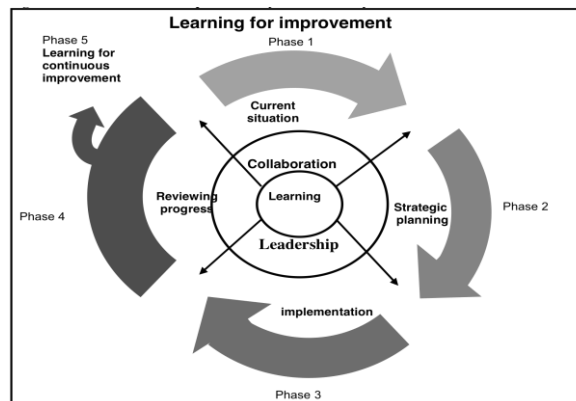


Figure no. 1: Learning for improvement – benchmarking effects

Source: adaptation after Garlick and Pryor, 2007

Phase 4: Assessing the quality of socio-economic higher education, through annual surveys at the students, professors and other employers’ level on the university services quality and

through secondary data analysis, expressing the experts' opinion on state-wide quality system. In this sense, there would be a methodological development comprising three steps: the elaboration of the three types of questionnaires: one for students, one for trainers and one for other employers, followed by the collection and processing of collected data, and finally, the reporting on the processed data.

Phase 5: The establishment of indicators of reference, based on the actual need of support coming from the higher education institutions in developing and implementing effective internal systems of quality assurance. The specific objective is to elaborate annual benchmarking indicators able to offer comparison between universities at the specialization and institutional level.

Conclusions

In the pursuit of achieving this goals, centered around the desire of offering complex and solid based answers, both conceptual and empirical, our research requires the consideration of some performance indicators that provide comparative data on the performance recorded by certain higher education institutions in Romania financed by the public budget: increasing the access to higher education, diminishing the abandonment rate, improving the outcomes of learning and teaching activities, research results, and level of employment of the graduates. All of these elements are associated with the increased institutional autonomy, in terms of a greater transparency and a better management of funds. These statistical indicators are constructed to provide an objective view on the performance of a higher education institutions funded by the state budget.

The present paper represents only a starting point in strengthening the institutional capacities that correspond to the requirements of a qualitative academic service, in line with European standards, in accordance with Bologna model and in close relationship with the agreements within the Lisbon Agenda.

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