

## BENCHMARKING IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

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**Abstract:** Organizational environments, which are constantly evolving, can apply *Benchmarking* as a good way to identify their position on the competitive market, in fact comparing with an organization considered to be a *benchmark* in the field. *Benchmarking* is a concept that can also be developed in higher education institutions. The paper presents a way of using *Benchmarking* in universities as a process complementary to the quality assessment activity. There is presented the stages of the process in the state higher education, correlated with a set of standards and indicators of quality assessment adapted according to the standards of the prestigious European universities. In this way it creates the possibility to really monitor the evolution of its own university in relation to universities at the top of the hierarchy, having similar performance indicators. This way of monitoring can help to reconsider the university's strategy, aimed at increasing educational performance.

**Key words:** *Benchmarking*, higher education, indicators, standards, quality

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The concept of *benchmarking*, comes from the English "*benchmark*" (terminal, reference) and is widely used in the US. This concept is based on the fact that the outside world is in a continuous evolution and consists in comparing its own organization with one or more organizations identified as a reference in a certain field. By choosing as a comparative element the performances of the companies that have achieved special results in a particular field and comparing them with their own results, the unit that has used the benchmarking has the possibility to find the most suitable methods of acquiring the practices that are its own. accessible from here, raising the performance of their own company, higher competitiveness. The importance of this new instrument that can support the management of a company is growing, the *European Union* since 1996 promoting the concept of benchmarking as "*an instrument to increase the competitiveness, the quality of some products, processes or economies*". COM document (96) 413 of 9 October 1996: "*Benchmarking and the competitiveness of European industry*" indicates that benchmarking tools should be used more intensively in comparing good practices in all aspects and key sectors that determine the methods and the ways of success. [3]

### 2. BENCHMARKING PRINCIPLES - BETWEEN BUSINESS AND UNIVERSITY

C.J. McNair and T. Watts [5] consider that "*benchmarking is a way to teach an organization how to improve its activity*". V.L. Meek and J.J. van der Lee [6] states that "*benchmarking involves two mandatory elements: the existence of an agreement of the institutional leaders to take into account the results of the benchmarking and to make the necessary improvements; and the existence of a collaboration between all the parties involved in benchmarking*". HEFCE in *Benchmarking Methods and Experiences* [7] defines the concept of *benchmarking* as follows: "*benchmarking refers to making comparisons between organizations and learning lessons that can be learned from such comparisons.*" The main elements of *benchmarking* would be the following:

- **permanent practice** - benchmarking must be incorporated into a regular cycle of organization planning and management of key processes of the organization;

- **systematic practice** - it is essential the existence of a consistent methodology to be adopted by the organization;

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- **implementation** - *benchmarking* helps to identify the discrepancies between the current performance of the organization and the performance ensured by the best practices; the best practice - it is not obligatory to identify the best practice but a superior practice, in order for the benchmarking to be effective.

S. Garlick [4] and G. Pryor [8], consider that benchmarking has two objectives: to evaluate the processes and practices of an organization from the point of view of quality and costs, as compared to certain external standards in the field in which they operate; benchmarking can be used as a permanent diagnostic management tool.

Authors such as Alstete J., [1], have made important contributions to the development of the knowledge of the *benchmarking process* and its use in higher education institutions. He believes that benchmarking was developed by the XEROX company in the early 1980s, in response to the high level of competition and the dramatic drop in market share.

In the figure below, the benchmarking process is presented schematically:

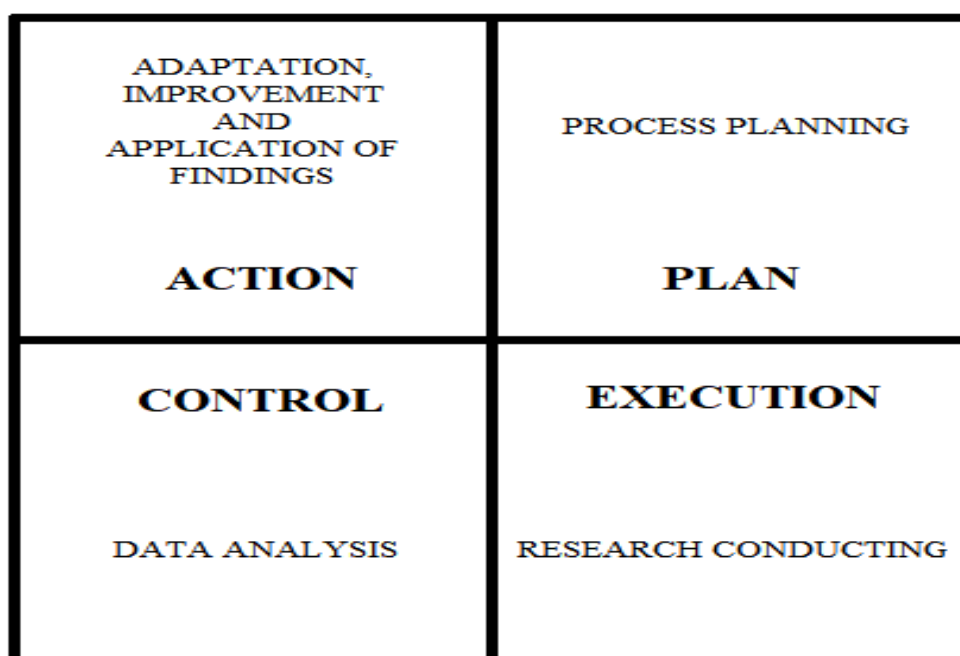


Figure 1. - The benchmarking processes [1]

*Benchmarking* in higher education is a complex learning process, through which state universities seek to improve their activities, strategies and products based on the experiences accumulated by other higher education institutions. It can define *benchmarking* as a process of institutional learning through cooperation.

In higher education institutions, the use of benchmarking has recently been used mainly in the United Kingdom, Australia and the United States. The recent appearance in the institutions of higher education of the benchmarking is due, in particular, to the increase of the interest towards the increase of the quality which leads to an increased financing from the state, but also to the development of the spirit of competition at international level to attract a number as greater than students worldwide.

The procedure for establishing evolutionary reference values, standards and performance indicators, is internationally known as "*benchmarking*" [8].

One element that facilitated the introduction of benchmarking in universities was the rapid development of information technology that simplifies the process of data collection and management.

In the EU member states, the university has an important role to play in benchmarking not only in the academic environment but also in the economic environment.

The main objective of benchmarking is to find out how the best performing (reference) organizations have reached the position they occupy.

Benchmarking in higher education institutions is a complementary process to the quality assessment activity. It is based, first and foremost, on the collection of statistical data on higher education institutions; and then, in order to be able to produce analyzes of specific aspects of their activity, on the collection of qualitative data. *Benchmarking* is not a classification technique, its main objective being to help an institution identify and implement optimal processes, used by similar institutions, to carry out its activities [9].

### **3. AN APPROACH TO BENCHMARKING IN THE UNIVERSITY ENVIRONMENT**

In most higher education institutions, the desire to learn from each other is continuous, emphasizing collegiality and the recognition of the international role of the university. The desire of universities is materialized in various professional associations, both academic and non-academic, that meet to share their common interests; professional organizations that collaborate with other institutions to support academic activities; numerous visits by delegations from one higher education system to another. [2]

What should be avoided is the confusion between the benchmarking process and the control process. Control gives us important information about the organization, while benchmarking can tell us what's behind this information helping the organization improve its position, which is why benchmarking can also be considered a means of signaling the erosion of positions. competition. [2] The role of benchmarking in state universities is to research the processes, concepts, methods and strategies of successful universities and to transpose the most favorable elements resulting from the analysis in their own institution.

The stages of the benchmarking process are shown schematically in the figure below:

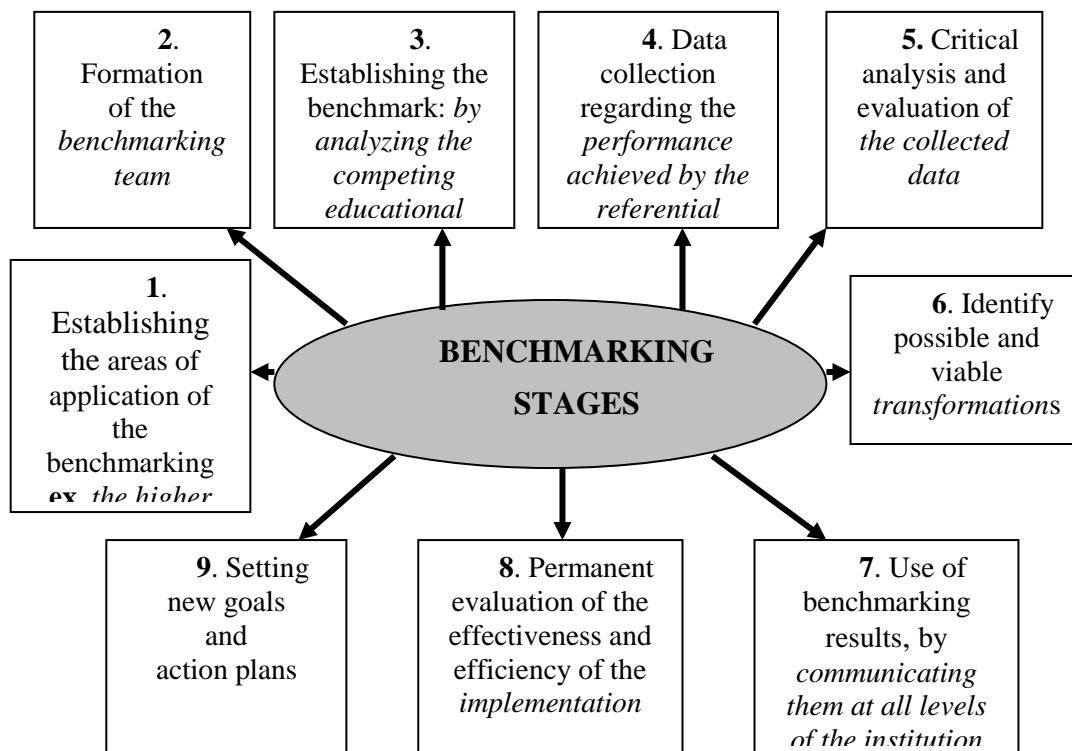


Figure 2. - The stages of the benchmarking process in the state higher education  
(Source: by the authors)

In order to design a benchmarking process at the level of higher education institutions in Romania, the following presents a set of quality assessment standards and indicators, adapted according to the quality assessment standards used in universities in Europe:

**STANDARD I: The quality of the students at the time of their registration indicators:**

*1. Admission notes*

The indicator must take into account the population of students coming from the same education system, otherwise it could lead to erroneous results. If there are students coming from different education systems, it is necessary to use a standardized scoring system.

*2. The percentage of the students coming from outside the usual recruiting area of the institution.*

- 2.1. Share of students from outside the county where the institution is located;
- 2.2. Share of students from outside the country;
- 2.3. Share of students from outside Europe;

This indicator represents a way of measuring the attractiveness of the institution / program of studies.

*3. The success rate on admission, calculated as a ratio between the number of those declared admitted and the total number of those who participated in the admission. The values of this indicator measure the quality and attractiveness of the institution / program of studies.*

**STANDARD II: Student performance**

*Indicators:*

*1. The dropout rate at the end of each year*

Number of students who remain in the institution after the first year of studies.

*2. The average time required for a student to complete an educational program.*

3. *Graduation rate of the educational program*

The number of students completing a study program relative to the number of students enrolled in the first year of the study program.

4. *The share of students employed after graduation in total graduates.*

5. **STANDARD III: The scientific research activity in the university**

*Indicators:*

1. *Number of research grants / research contracts obtained*
2. *The average value of the research / research contracts obtained*
3. *Number of published papers*
  - 3.1. *Number of papers published in ISI Web of Science journals*
    - a. *Number of papers published in Romanian magazines CNCSIS type B*
    - b. *Number of papers published in Romanian magazines type CNCSIS type B +*
    - c. *Number of works published in foreign BDI journals accepted by CNCSIS*
    - d. *Number of papers published at international conferences*
4. *The number of doctoral students existing in the institution*
5. *The share of full-time researchers in the faculty*
6. *The report of doctoral students – professors*
7. *Publication report – teacher*
8. *Awards and distinctions for research.*

**STANDARD IV: Resources allocated by the institution to the education and research process**

*Indicators:*

1. *Student-teacher report*
2. *Student report - auxiliary academic staff*
3. *Relationship between auxiliary and technical staff – teachers*
4. *The ratio between the budget used and the number of equivalent students*
5. *The ratio between the number of students and the space for teaching*
6. *The ratio between the number of specialized bibliographic titles and the number of students*
7. *The ratio between the number of specialized bibliographic titles and the number of teachers*
8. *The ratio between the number of students and the area for research / laboratories*
9. *The ratio between the number of computers and the number of students.*

**STANDARD V: University governance and management**

1. *Indicators:*
2. *Presence of representatives of teachers, teaching, administrative staff, students, graduates or socio-economic groups interested in administrative structures, senate, or research committees*
3. *Recognition of student participation in the structures that regulate university life*
4. *Existence of selective mechanisms for the allocation of budgetary resources at the level of the different units of the institution*
5. *Diversity of funding sources, which measure the degree of real autonomy of the institution*
6. *Number of interdisciplinary research centers*
7. *Existence of the annual evaluation of the teachers carried out by the students as a form of monitoring the teaching performances.*
8. *Existence of policies for evaluation of teaching and research*
9. *Existence of research evaluation policies*
10. *Contributions to the cultural life of the region*
11. *Participation in adult education in the region*

12. Existence of partnerships with pre-university educational institutions in the region
13. The percentage of the students of the unit involved in the study programs abroad
14. The share of foreign students involved in their own study programs
15. Number of partnerships with foreign universities.

The proposed version of *benchmarking* can contribute to a more accurate assessment of the position of universities in the university competitive environment. In Timisoara there was a constant competition between the 4 universities. There were always subjective considerations about the value of one or the other. Currently, *Western University (WUT)* ranks 1260 in the 2000 **CWUR** (*Center for World University Rankings*), and the *POLITEHNICA University* ranks 1939 [9], although by complexity, heritage, role on the labor market, benchmarking principles, In more realistic case, the hierarchy is inverse. *The University of Agricultural Sciences and Veterinary Medicine of the "King Mihai I" Banat*, respectively the "*Victor Babeş*" *University of Medicine and Pharmacy of Timisoara*, would follow.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

Taking over the Benchmarking method of comparison, so evolved in the business environment and applied to the higher education system, can bring more fairness and realism, but also more efficiency.

Formalizing comparisons between universities is an important element of higher education. Benchmarking in higher education can be a tool used in the ranking of universities as well as to stimulate competition in the university education market.

In any field, the strategies are established in relation to the most accurate and objective diagnosis of the present state, from which it starts. It is confirmed that Benchmarking is the search for best practices in a particular field of activity, leading to superior performance. It has relevance in both university marketing and, above all, it can contribute to qualitative and performance growth favorable to the labor market and scientific progress.

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