

Back to basics: Benchmarking- A pathway to excellence in higher education

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Abstract— This work provides a broad overview of quality and quality improvement disparities in higher education, aligning with the central theme of benchmarking as a multifaceted pathway to excellence. It introduces fundamental concepts like quality assurance and responsibility in leadership without engaging in an extensive analysis. The article advocates for the contemplation of essential benchmarking questions as a catalyst for continuous improvement and quality enhancement within higher education institutions.

Keywords—Benchmarking, Quality, Responsibility, Leadership, Higher Education

INTRODUCTION

WHY do some institutions in higher education continually excel in quality improvement, while others seem to stagnate or decline over time? Benchmarking, a systematic and ongoing process, a pathway to excellence in higher education, offers a powerful lens through which to explore this question.

Benchmarking involves the measurement and comparison of work processes in one organisation to those in another (Kempner, 1993). This approach brings an external perspective to internal activities, functions, and operations. This thought-provoking concept prompts consideration of how benchmarking can play a pivotal role in deciphering the secrets behind the persistence of

quality enhancement, shedding light on the strategies and practices that lead to enduring excellence. Nevertheless, it is essential to recognise that the practice of benchmarking in higher education is not a straightforward undertaking, often proving to be a rather intricate endeavor.

FUNDAMENTAL QUESTIONS

In the ever-evolving landscape of higher education, the questions posed by Kempner in the 1990s continue to resonate with a profound sense of relevance in 2023. These queries serve as guiding beacons, illuminating the path towards quality enhancement and benchmarking excellence;

- 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?

These fundamental queries inspire a return to the core principles of benchmarking, reminding us that progress often begins with a thorough examination of the basics.

THE CONCEPT AND PRACTICE OF BENCHMARKING IS NOT NEW

As articulated by the United Nations Educational,

Scientific, and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) in 1998, 'For most institutions of higher education, the desire to learn from each other and to share aspects of good practice is almost as old as the university itself.' In the dynamic landscape of higher education, the enduring wisdom of benchmarking lies in its ability to facilitate cross-institutional learning and improvement.

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Likewise, in a noteworthy publication from 2007 titled "Quality Assurance in Higher Education: An Introduction," authored by Dr. Sanjaya Mishra, a prominent scholar in open, distance, and online learning, Dr. Mishra elucidates how higher education institutions aspire to elevate academic excellence by customising their processes to align with the distinct characteristics of both the institution and the nation it serves.

The author underscores the paramount importance of the concept of quality, emphasising that benchmarking serves as a vital tool for investigating, comparing, and analysing quality within other educational institutions. This process enables institutions to acquire new approaches, tools, and techniques, thereby empowering them to take meaningful steps toward enhancing the quality of their own educational services.

However, the term "quality" remains a captivating enigma, provoking profound questions about its essence and significance in various aspects of life. What, indeed, constitutes quality, and why should we concern ourselves with the relentless pursuit of it in our endeavours?

WHAT, INDEED, CONSTITUTES QUALITY?

To exemplify the challenging and elusive character of quality, along with the accompanying perplexity, numerous authors (Nigvekar 1996; Sallis 1996; Warren et al. 1994) have alluded to the widely acknowledged words of Pirsig (1974) who sheds light on the inherent difficulty in defining quality due to its intricate nature.

"Quality... you know what it is, yet you don't know what it is. But that's self-contradictory. But some things are better than others, that is, they have more quality. But when you try to say what the quality is, apart from the things that have it, it all goes poof! There's nothing to talk about it. But if you can't say what Quality is, how do you

know what it is, or how do you know that it even exists? If no one knows what it is, then for all practical purposes, it doesn't exist at all. But for all practical purposes it really does exist... So round and round you go, spinning mental wheels and nowhere finding anyplace to get traction. What the hell is Quality? What is it?" (Pirsig, 1974, p. 171)

In simple terms, benchmarking involves "the classification of relative performance or value" (Broome & Quirk, 2015, p. 820). In 1980, Lawrence and Green emphasised that at the core of benchmarking is the endeavor to empirically quantify "quality," seeking to measure it objectively rather than relying on subjective evaluations through reputational ratings (Lawrence & Green, 1980). Within higher education, there is a growing emphasis on promoting benchmarking, both as a means to regulate academic standards and as a vehicle for enhancing educational, administrative, and business processes in the context of a globally competitive academic environment (Jackson & Lund, 2000).

In addition to the historical debates on quality in higher education, contemporary and recent discussions have placed a significant emphasis on Continuous Quality Improvement (Tasopoulou & Tsiotras, 2017). Moreover, other studies draw our attention to Total Quality Management, while also highlighting the existing confusion surrounding whether or not TQM is a component of benchmarking (as discussed in "Benchmarking in Higher Education: A study conducted by the Commonwealth Higher Education Management Service").

MULTIFACETED QUALITY AND EXCELLENCE

In their seminal work published in the journal "Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education" titled "Defining Quality", Harvey and Green (1993) present a comprehensive classification of quality in higher education, encompassing five distinct conceptions.

- 1. Quality as an exceptional phenomenon:** This conception perceives quality as something exceptional and comprises three variations:
 - Traditional Vision of Quality: Emphasises exclusivity, elitism, and distinction, such as the education provided by institutions like Oxford and Cambridge.
 - Quality as Excellence: Defines quality as surpassing

established standards and includes excellence in inputs, processes, and outputs.

- **Quality as Fulfilment of Requirements:** Focuses on conforming to set standards and involves scientific quality control.
- 2. **Quality as Perfection for Coherence:** This perspective underscores the importance of flawless adherence to specifications and processes. Unlike excellence, it is accessible to all and hinges on consistency with standards, promoting a culture of quality and shared responsibility within institutions.
- 3. **Quality as Fitness for Purpose:** This conception posits that quality exists when a product or service meets the satisfaction demands for which it was designed. It centres on functionality and acknowledges that the purpose can be defined by clients, suppliers, or process objectives.
- 4. **Quality as Value for Money:** Central to this concept lies the principle of quality and accountability, wherein organisations and institutions are held responsible to both their financial backers, stakeholders and customers (here “learners”).
- 5. **Quality as Transformation:** Quality here is closely linked to qualitative change. In the realm of education, it emphasises the transformation of the student, shifting the focus from what is done for the student to what is done to empower the student. It encompasses enhancing students’ capacities, adding value in terms of knowledge and skills, and fostering self- confidence and critical reasoning.

Within the context of benchmarking and quality in higher education, Harvey and Green’s conceptual framework offers valuable insights into the multifaceted nature of excellence. The authors eloquently underline that excellence should not be limited to merely surpassing standards; rather, it should be approached holistically, encompassing inputs, processes, and outputs. For instance, in their conception of quality as excellence, they aptly illustrate that a university’s pursuit of excellence goes beyond the recruitment of distinguished professors, including Nobel Prize winners, or the acquisition of top-tier physical resources like laboratories and libraries.

Reflecting on Harvey and Green’s framework, their

comprehensive approach to quality highlights that excellence in higher education should prioritise a holistic perspective, moving beyond notions of perfection. Support from higher management in higher education institutions seem to be the corner stone and precondition to achieve that objective and improve quality assurance intervention’s effectiveness (Seyfried & Pohlenz, 2018).

QUALITY IMPROVEMENT DISPARITIES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

As we embark on our exploration of quality improvement disparities in higher education, I would like to invite the reader to consider revisiting the fundamental question that has driven our inquiry: ‘Why do some institutions in higher education continually excel in quality improvement, while others seem to stagnate or decline over time?’

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As we attempt to address this question and delve deeper into the examination of quality improvement disparities in higher education, it is paramount to underscore the central role of responsibility in this endeavour. Responsibility rests upon the shoulders of numerous stakeholders within higher education organisations, including educational leaders, educators, curriculum developers, product developers, and policy developers, among others. Regardless of the benchmarking principles and approaches institutions adopt or the theoretical frameworks they employ, the degree to which they feel accountable for sustainable and ongoing quality improvement significantly influences their growth and their broader impact on society.

A deep and unwavering sense of responsibility serves as a prerequisite for excelling in quality improvement, as it drives institutions to continually strive for excellence through a holistic approach, ensuring that they not only meet established standards but also nurture a culture of

continuous improvement across all facets of their educational mission.

At the heart of this responsibility lies the concept of quality assurance, a fundamental element in institutions quest for excellence.

THE RESPONSIBILITY IMPERATIVE FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE

In the context of quality assurance, Dr. Sanjaya Mishra's work sheds light on the concept and practice of benchmarking, emphasising that it's not a new phenomenon. Delving into his work, 'Quality Assurance in Higher Education: An Introduction,' reveals that the notion of 'responsibility' is intricately woven into the fabric of the quality assurance process.

This perspective emphasises the critical role that responsibility plays in the pursuit of benchmarking practices within higher education. Mishra (2007) refers to Quality Assurance “the process of maintaining standards reliably and consistently by applying criteria of success in a course, programme or institution.” (p.88). In exploring this further, Dr Mishra also refers to the work of Frazer (1992), who proposes an important question: how can quality be assured?

Frazer (1992), akin to a guiding torch, illuminates the paramount significance of responsibility, drawing our attention to its imperativeness. It is my belief that responsibility serves as a foundational cornerstone for quality assurance, quality improvement, and effective benchmarking.

From the work of Frazer, four key components emerge, underscoring the importance of a shared commitment to quality across the entire enterprise:

- ***Shared Responsibility for Enhancement:*** Every individual within the institution bears a collective responsibility for actively contributing to the improvement of the educational product or service.
- ***Collective Responsibility for Maintenance:*** Just as enhancement is a shared duty, maintaining the established quality standards is a responsibility that all members of the enterprise must uphold.

- ***Ownership of Responsibility:*** A crucial aspect of effective quality assurance lies in the universal understanding, utilisation, and sense of ownership of the systems designed to maintain and enhance quality. This ownership fosters a culture of continuous improvement and accountability.

- ***Regular Management Validation:*** Management plays a pivotal role in quality assurance by regularly validating the effectiveness of the systems in place for checking quality. This ongoing evaluation ensures the reliability and validity of the quality assurance process.

LEADERSHIP'S CRUCIAL ROLE IN QUALITY ASSURANCE AND BENCHMARKING

In an informative work titled “Effective Leadership in Quality Assurance for Higher Education: A Literature Review” Setiawati (2016) explains that “leaders of higher education have responsibility in assuring the quality of their higher education institutions. However, quality assurance effort can only be achieved if there is hard work of all units in an education institution (p.151). The collective efforts to which Setiawati is referring are indeed what I consider as integral components of institutional culture. Successful quality assurance and benchmarking practices may be at risk of failure if this culture is not implemented, and if leaders do not support and reward the concept of assuming responsibility and taking action for improvement.

Toor and Ogunlana (2009) in their examination of adverse leadership facets, noted that the misapplication of authority, deficient communication skills, and limited professional experience can cause project leaders to appear inept and ineffective. This "dark side of leadership," if present in higher education institutions, can compromise benchmarking processes and undermine the responsibility for quality enhancement and improvement. The repercussions of such ineffective leadership could impact all stakeholders within higher education.

In a similar vein, a study conducted within the context of higher education institutions in Southern Africa, investigating the impact of leadership on the turnover of academic staff, revealed that the quality of leadership

significantly predicts the commitment of academic staff in the workplace (Gwavuya, 2011). This concept, linking the quality of leadership with the optimisation of employee commitment, also demonstrates a positive correlation with work engagement, a factor that predicts academic productivity among professionals in the higher education sector (Christensen et al., 2021). Work engagement, defined as a "positive fulfilling work-related state of mind, characterised by vigor, dedication, and absorption" (Schaufeli, 2002, p. 74), thus emerges as a crucial dimension through which effective leadership fosters dedication and commitment to quality enhancement initiatives among academic staff. Once again, this underscores the significant role of effective leadership and the corresponding responsibilities borne by leaders and managers within higher education institutions.

In the realm of higher education, the concept of quality assurance stands as an indispensable pillar, as highlighted in our earlier discussions. It intertwines seamlessly with the notion of responsibility, forming a symbiotic relationship that propels institutions towards excellence. Effective leadership in this context entails not only individual responsibility but also the initiation of open dialogues regarding the necessity of effective regular internal audits (Turetken et al., 2020), accountability enhancement (Sofyani, 2022), and transparency and commitment to identify areas of improvement within the institution.

Furthermore, it's important to note that while there is a rich literature on this topic of benchmarking and quality enhancement across many disciplines, there is a notable scarcity of research in the realm of higher education, specifically concerning senior leadership teams — both in terms of what is known and what remains unexplored (Kezar et al., 2020). This scarcity of research highlights the need for the cultivation of a culture where responsibility for quality enhancement is recognised and rewarded across various dimensions within the institution, tailored to individuals' roles and capacities. This transformative culture hinges on fostering open discussions and encouraging dialogue, echoing the fundamental questions about benchmarking that Kempner (1993) introduced at the outset of this article:

- ***How good do we want to be?*** This fundamental

question invites institutions to envision their aspirations and set the bar for their academic pursuits.

- ***Who is doing it the best?*** Prompts a search for paragons of improvement and achievement in the field, motivating us to explore the heights of accomplishment.
- ***How can we adapt what they do to our institution?*** Challenges us to bridge the gap between inspiration and implementation, forging a customised path to excellence.
- ***How can we be better than the best?*** Transcends conventional limits, inciting us to push boundaries and redefine the very notion of supremacy, and embrace evolution.

How can these questions shape our path? These queries shape our path by inviting thoughtful reflection as we work to enhance the quality of our education. These inquiries serve as a compass guiding us through the multifaceted landscape of quality assurance, benchmarking, and the pursuit of excellence in higher education. They underscore the need for an enduring commitment to returning to these foundational questions, not as mere formalities, but as living principles embedded in the very DNA of institutional culture and leadership style. In order for benchmarking, a process that enables institutions to improve upon existing best practice models (Lankford, 2002), to succeed, leaders must endorse and support this ongoing commitment to revisiting and reinforcing these essential questions. This sense of accountability ensures continued agility, responsiveness, and drive in the pursuit of educational excellence while adapting to evolving challenges and opportunities.

As these fundamental benchmarking queries are integrated into the very fabric of institutions, they serve as the threads binding them to a future defined not by complacency, but by an unwavering dedication to improvement and innovation, shaping the path toward enduring excellence.

CONCLUSION

This article highlighted the multifaceted nature of quality improvement in higher education, emphasising the pivotal roles of responsibility, leadership, and

benchmarking. With a broad brush approach, it underscored the importance of cultivating responsibility, particularly within leadership positions, to promote a culture of continuous improvement and accountability across various aspects of higher education institutions. Integrating fundamental and essential benchmarking questions into institutional culture serves as a guiding compass for quality improvement. This work encourages ongoing reflection and action, inviting the scholarly community to engage in discourse and practical applications to enhance the multifaceted landscape of quality within higher education.

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