

A Conceptual Benchmarking Model for Quality Management in “IA” University

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Abstract

Benchmarking is the continuous process of measuring products, services and practices against the toughest competitors or those companies recognized as leaders. It is a tool which helps managers to improve their services based on their voice of customers. The success of benchmarking in industrial quality management has prompted us to ask "Why not in Islamic Azad (IA) University?"

This article surveys the background and importance of benchmarking in quality management and also delivers a conceptual model to use this powerful tool in the author's university to reach higher effectiveness.

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1. Historical backgrounds

1.1 Introducing to Islamic Azad University (IAU)

IAU as a private University in Iran founded in 1982 and supports more than 200 campuses for training about 650,000 students in bachelor's degree, master's degree and doctorate in many branches of engineering, medicine, law and political sciences, agriculture, natural resources, arts, human sciences and pure sciences by using more than 19,000 academic staffs. Recently IAU's goals conducted to deeply knowledge procreation, which strongly requested by the chief leader of Iran Islamic Republic. Implementing knowledge provocation and freedom of thinking need creative climate through an effective quality management system foundation. This article emphasizes on a benchmarking model as a powerful tools to acquire this goal.

1.2 Benchmarking. Benchmarking is the process of identifying, understanding, and adapting outstanding practices from organizations anywhere in the world to help organizations to improve their performances. It is a highly respected practice in the business world. It is an activity that looks outward to find best practice and high performance and then measures actual business operations against those goals (Belle, 2000 [1]).

Many organizations including the world class companies such as Xerox, Motorola, AT & T, Du Pont, Ford, IBM and Kodak are using benchmarking as a

standard efficient tool and have achieved numerous successes through benchmarking (Lema and Price, 1995 ^[2]).

2. Total Quality Management in Universities

The theory of quality management has been studied from different areas: quality leaders_ ideas, empirical research and formal evaluation models. This has helped identify a set of critical factors for a successful implementation, as a way to improve customer satisfaction and performance.

Total quality management (TQM) allows firms to obtain, on the one hand, a high degree of differentiation, satisfying customers_ needs and strengthening brand image, and on the other, to reduce costs by preventing mistakes and waste of time and by making improvements in the corporations processes. TQM requires a cultural change (Harber et al., 1993 ^[3]; Abraham et al., 1997 ^[4]; Guilhon et al., 1998 ^[5]; Ritchie, 2000 ^[6]) and the development of a number of components in an integrated way for a successful implementation (Powell, 1995 ^[7]; Easton and Jarrel, 1998 ^[8]).

Various studies have been carried out for the identification of those critical factors ensuring its success, as a way to develop a theory of quality management from three different areas: contributions from quality leaders (Crosby, 1979 ^[9]; Deming, 1982 ^[10]; Ishikawa, 1985 ^[11]; Juran, 1988 ^[12]; Feigenbaum, 1991 ^[13]), formal evaluation models (European Quality Award, Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award, The Deming Award) and empirical research (Saraph et al., 1989 ^[14]; Flynn et al., 1994 ^[15]; Badri et al., 1995 ^[16]; Ahire et al., 1996 ^[17]; Black and Porter, 1996 ^[18]; Grandzol and Gershon, 1998 ^[19]; Quazi et al., 1998 ^[20]).

Quality management is a different way to organize the universities efforts. The objective is to harmonize their works in such a way that not only do their assigned tasks with enthusiasm, but they also participate in the improvement of how the work gets done. Quality management in universities introduces a significant change in the relationship between university's managers and their scientific member of faculties those who actually do the teaching and research activities.

In conventional methods of university's management, management is looked upon as a privilege and scientific members are often treated as a commodity. The separation of university's managers and their scientific comities is now so great; it often results in a social distance which breeds discord and contempt. Current methods of management education encourage people to enter management without actually experiencing "life in the trenches", with the result that they not only do not understand what happens there but have little empathy for the people who must cope with the problems that arise when systems and procedures are simply inadequate to the reality of the marketplace.

The success of quality management systems and standards in industry has prompted many people to ask "Why not in Education?" A few people have begun to answer that challenge and today we have enough experience to say that quality management works well in education. In transferring the methods from

industry to academia, however, there are some differences which need to be kept in mind. The basic principles are unchanged, but the specifics of the application involve new elements. As has been the case in industry, when quality management is comes to education some long appreciated ideas about how to manage the teaching/learning process will have to change.

Also, as has been the case in industry, when the practical applications of quality management in education are examined closely, it will be found that many ideas put forward by educators as long as 50 years ago, and neglected by contemporary practitioners, were right all along.

To begin, it is well to keep in mind some of the important differences between education and industry.

1. The university is not a factory.
2. The students are not the product.
3. Education and research are the products.
4. The customers for the product are several
 - a) The students themselves.
 - b) Their parents
 - c) Their future employers.
 - d) Society at large.
5. Students need to be "co-managers" of their own education.
6. There are no opportunities for recalls.

But despite these differences, when properly adapted our experiences to date show that quality management can make as great a difference in education as it has in industry. Education can be improved, productivity of teachers enhanced, teachers and students find greater joy in their work and the leaving students are more likely to make positive contributions to their society.

3. Benchmarking As a Core Tool for Quality Management

Benchmarking acts as a swift efficient method to design your own quality management systems. Today many experts believe that any business process can be benchmarked. Most academic processes are common throughout universities. For example; IA University has the same fundamental human resources requirements for teacher's hiring and developing employees as American successful universities. Also it has the same customer satisfaction survey process as doing well UK universities. These processes, even though from different universities, are all common and can be benchmarked very effectively. It's called "getting out of the box".

By Benchmarking you will find out;

- Who performs the desired process very well and has process practices that are adaptable to your own organization?
- Who is the most compatible for you to benchmark with?
- If you need to conduct a comprehensive benchmark study or if you can obtain 80-90% of what you need from just using the telephone, email, or an electronic survey to communicate your needs with other members on The Benchmarking Exchange.

Jill Johnes, 2006 [21] during his under press article examined the possibility of measuring efficiency in the context of higher education. The paper begins by exploring the advantages and drawbacks of the various methods for measuring efficiency in the higher education context. The ease with which data envelopment analysis (DEA) can handle multiple inputs and multiple outputs make it an attractive choice of technique for measuring the efficiency of higher education institutions (HEIs), yet its drawbacks cannot be ignored.

4. Suggested Benchmarking Model

Today, various benchmarking models exist from a four step model to fourteen steps model including the original ten step model of Xerox Co. In the proposed benchmarking model in order effective feedback from system to ensure that continuous improvements has taken place, the desired practices measured regularly based on Deming's PDCA cycle (Reid and Sanders, 2005 [22]) which acts cyclically through Plan, Do, Check and Amend Phases. This conceptual benchmarking model specifically designed for IA University and could easily be customized for other universities after analyzing their present conditions.

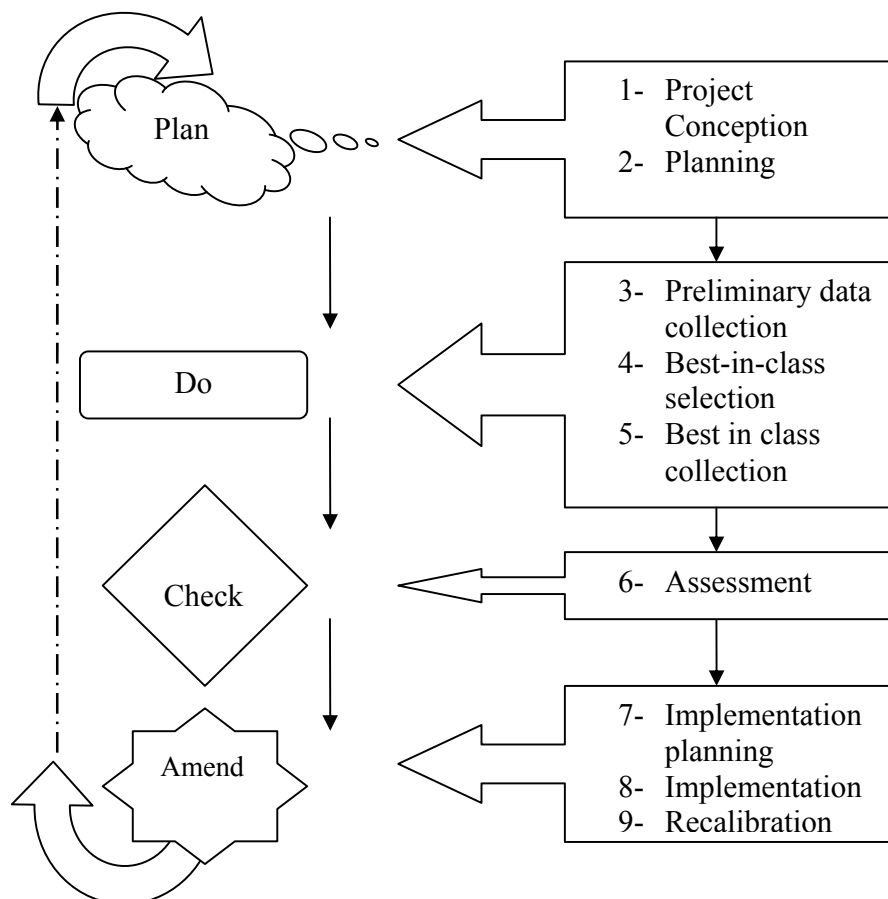


Fig. 1: Proposed quality management benchmarking model for IA University.

Using this 9 steps model a framework for designing IA university quality management based on benchmarking process achieves. The process starts with planning phase and proceeds through data gathering, analysis, recommendation and finally implementation. These phases are described along with the following nine steps involved in them.

4.1. Planning.

The most important phase of all the phases is planning. Through it the foundation for successful benchmarking project in quality management erects. Planning phase consists in two steps as follows:

4.1.1. Project conception. Project perception deals to reach good understanding on the project needs. In generally speaking, it should include the main purpose of designing quality management system for your university. For example:

- Improving university performance to train efficient and capable students
- Increasing satisfaction for students, their parents, their future employers and finally society
- Increasing creativity and innovation climate in university
- To implement a real free thinking climate for knowledge provocation in university
- To support teachers as main researchers effectively
- To engage the researches on structure and philosophy of cooperation with aboard industrial and business organizations to solve social real problems through defining research project
- To apply the creativity procedure for easier problem solving

Using brainstorming method ^[23] could generate a large number of real ideas on project needs. This method is a group activity, optimally between five to ten experts. At least two-thirds of them invited from experienced teachers to the brainstorming session. It is better that they should have ideally a variety of experience obtained in different academia fields such as strategic planning, system engineering, finance, business administration, human resource planning and so on. Preferably an experienced, neutral facilitator should run the session, whose job is to record the ideas on white board and to stimulate and orchestrate the flow of ideas from the participants.

4.1.2. Planning. Developing benchmarking plan is the next step of planning phase. Through it, based on the prior step determined project purposes, an obvious plan for benchmarking process develops. In this plan, the most important activities, the order of sequences and scheduling of main activities and also the way to implement benchmarking process puts across.

4.2. Doing

The 2nd phase of proposed model called as “doing”. This phase conveyed of the desired plan and consists of three active steps as follows:

4.2.1. Preliminary data collection. Through this step you need to gather data from your own university on your desired process. For example, you can document the mechanism to hire new teachers, teaching and testing methods and so on. Expert system analysts can analyze the present conditions of your university well.

4.2.2. Best-in-class selection. Select universities with best-in-class process. In order to successfully doing this step an active investigation requires. This may be done after interviewing with expert teachers who are familiar with other universities or inviting them in a meeting to listen their opinions via a brainstorm process.

4.2.3 Best-in-class collection. After selecting the best-in-class universities data can be collected via mail or on-line computer questionnaire or through face-to-face visiting and interviewing. The next approaches have many advantages such as allowing for direct interaction and deep detail comprehension. This approach contains more desirable economic aspects when a few number of universities participated in benchmarking project. Data collection through mail or on-line computer questionnaire may be helpful in cases where the survey instrument is simple.

4.3. Checking.

Checking is the next phase of never-ending Deming cycle. In this model it consists of one step called as assessment. Through it identifying the benchmarking metrics is necessary. It is very important to select suitable quantitative or qualitative metrics which show the performance levels of your own university. Through assessment step a detailed comparison on your own process and best-in-class process needs to do. After this analyzing comparison, the amount of performance level can attain and recommendations develop.

4.4. Amending.

After assessing, some recommendations achieve to implement. Before implementing them it is necessary to erect a plan to develop operational improvement plans to attain superior performance. Based on the referred plan, all operational plans enact and process improvements monitors.

Recalibration updates benchmarking findings and asses improvements in process via any dynamic feedbacks.

5. Conclusion

The presented model encourages IA's manager to use a comprehensive systematic approach to reach well understanding of the proven best practices in the university. This never-ending approach conducts them in a continuous development way to reach more customer satisfaction. The developed framework employs dynamic feedback to learn and gain facts and knowledge. By applying this model procreation of knowledge (as the main goals of IA University) in all aspects enriches. It is impossible just to insist on creativity in IA University without benchmarking of the process whit best-in-class. All top

managers in universities should be familiar with such tools, understand when they can be used most effectively and encourage their use within their universities.

The proposed model has the following benefits:

- 1- Recognize gaps among university's existing position with the best-in-classes
- 2- Helps to use more teamwork activities in documentation and gap analysis.
- 3- It provides accelerated learning for all engaged managers.
- 4- It can cause maximum long-term payback for university
- 5- It is a never-ending developmental approach
- 6- This model can be used for other universities via applying some modification in few steps.

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