

## BENCHMARKING OF EDUCATIONAL PROCESS IN HEI: METHODOLOGY AND TOOLSET\*

UDC 378.4

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*The culture of quality assurance in Artsakhi higher education institutions has been drawing the attention of all the interested parties in this particular sector during the last decade. Since quality improvement has been one of the most important features of higher education institutions, it is of equal importance to understand the role of benchmarking as a means to continually improving and staying competitive. Universities around the world embrace the concept of benchmarking and develop transformational methods and practices to improve their organizations. Thus the positive experience of the latter can be used for further development and improvement of the quality assurance policy in the HEI of Artsakh.*

*The article tends to study the phenomena of benchmarking in education, to point out the methodology and strategies as well as applications of benchmarking as a competing tool for excellence in higher education institutions.*

*During the research methods of description, analysis, synthesis and specification were used.*

**Keywords:** Benchmarking, Artsakh, HEI, quality assurance tools, benchmarking project, benchmarking map

Today in Artsakh, following Armenia, issues of the quality of products and services are coming to the fore, in connection with which the quality of education is also an important problem. This issue is particularly acute in the post-war period, when the need to flexibly respond to the processes taking place in the country and constantly maintain and raise the level of competitiveness forces domestic managers, including in the field of education, to master modern management tools that allow improving the quality of products and services, the quality of processes, the quality of management systems.

Today, universities, like private companies, must take care to make their services attractive to the customer, be it students, firms, government agencies. The growth of competition and the ever-increasing demands on management efficiency lead to a natural conclusion about the need to search for the solutions in the corresponding spheres, that is – in management. This explains the interest in **benchmarking**, a tool used in business, and the attempt to adapt it to higher education.

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\* Հոդվածը ներկայացվել է 26.08.2022:

Տպագրության երաշխավորել է ՄՍՀ-ի «Տնտեսագիտության և Կառավարման» ամբիոնը: 4.09.2022:  
Հոդվածը տպագրության է ընդունվել 15.09.2022:

**Benchmarking** is defined as the process of measuring products, services, and processes against those of organizations known to be leaders in one or more aspects of their operations. Benchmarking provides necessary insights to help you understand how your organization compares with similar organizations, even if they are in a different business or have a different group of customers. (Quality Glossary Definition)<sup>1</sup>

The Investors Book<sup>2</sup> gives the following definition of benchmarking: Benchmarking is the process of continually improving the business or the organization by evaluating the scope for improvement, comparing the current position with that of the previous one or with the business practices of the relevant competitors, thereby establishing standards to be achieved.

The group in the seminar of the European Quality Assurance Network – ENQA defined benchmarking as “[y] a learning process, which requires trust, understanding, selecting and adapting good practices in order to improve”.<sup>3</sup> The locus of benchmarking lies between the current and desirable states of affairs, and contributes to the transformation process that realise these improvements<sup>4 5</sup>. Benchmarking might identify changes necessary to achieve the aims. The concept change seems to be implicit in benchmarking; a change consistent with benchmarking-directed improvements processes. Benchmarking is not only about change, but also about improvements or as Harrington, already in 1995, summarized: “all improvement is change, but not all change is improvement”.<sup>6</sup>

Being viewed as a tool for Higher Education Institutions (HEI) Quality assurance (QA) processes the following definition for benchmarking can be taken into consideration: Benchmarking (English bench – level, height and mark – mark) is a method of objective systematic comparison of one's own activities with the work of the best universities, understanding the reasons for the effectiveness of their activities, organizing appropriate actions to improve their own indicators and their implementation.<sup>7</sup>

Thus benchmarking is based on the concept of continuous improvement of educational processes, which provides for a continuous cycle of planning, coordination, motivation and evaluation of actions for the purpose of sustainable improvement of the organization's activities.

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 higher education sector in order to ensure that public funding is used effectively to support it. As such, it is strongly encouraged by policy-makers. Benchmarking also serves the needs of individual institutions to learn in order to improve, to change and to manage operations in a more professional way.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://asq.org/quality-resources/benchmarking> referred to on 10.09.2022

<sup>2</sup> <https://theinvestorsbook.com/benchmarking.html> referred to on 10.09.2022

<sup>3</sup> ENQA workshop reports 2, “Benchmarking in the Improvement of Higher Education”, Helsinki, Finland 2003

<sup>4</sup> Moriarty, J.P. (2008), “A Theory of Benchmarking”, unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Lincoln University, Lincoln

<sup>5</sup> Moriarty, J.P. and Smallman, C. (2009), “En route to a theory on benchmarking”, Benchmarking: An International Journal, Vol. 16 No. 4, pp. 484-503.

<sup>6</sup> Moriarty, J.P. (2008), “A theory of benchmarking”, unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Lincoln University, Lincoln, p. 29

<sup>7</sup> Кузьмин, А. М. Метод «Бенчмаркинг» / А. М. Кузьмин // Центр креативных технологий [Электронный ресурс]. – Режим доступа: <https://www.inventech.ru/pub/methods/metod-0029>. referred to on: 09.09.2022.

Ambitious institutions choose benchmarking as a tool for improvement of their international position.<sup>1</sup>

Handbook for the Universities of BIH<sup>2</sup> states the following benefits of benchmarking while:

- ✓ *Defining Customer Requirements*: based on reality; acting on objective evaluation;
- ✓ *Establishing effective goals*: Credible; customer focused, proactive, university leadership
- ✓ *Developing true measures of performance*: solving real problems, performance outputs

known, based on best practice;

✓ *Becoming competitive*: Understand the competition, revolutionary ideas with proven performance, high commitment;

✓ *University processes*: proactive research for change, many options, breakthroughs.

Several authors advocated that benchmarking is more suitable in higher education than business sector, due to its collegial environment, which encourages *collaborating and cooperating* easily (Bender and Schuh, 2000; Alstete, 1995; Schofield, 1998). At the same time, the people in universities claim an autonomy and liberty in his actions. Thus, for benchmarking in Higher Education it is important to foster a climate of confidence and honesty.

Benchmarking contributes to a learning process which helps to give confidence to university managers that they have correctly identified their strengths and weaknesses, to help them understand potential improvements, and to understand whether those improvements have effectively been delivered. Good benchmarking needs to be premised on strong learning environments, at three levels, within the individual institutions, within the benchmarking groups, and by involving experts in the development of the group.<sup>3</sup>

In Artsakhi universities the culture of ensuring and emphasizing the quality of education was not specified until 2018, when the Government of the Republic of Artsakh decided on the state institutional accreditation of universities conducted by ANQA.

Institutional Accreditation is the state recognition of academic and QA procedures of the TLI (AN: HEI), the requirements set forward towards academic programmes as ascribed to the TLI by the law, correspondence with state academic standards and institutional accreditation criteria. Institutional accreditation is a regular mandatory process both for private and public institutions operating in the territory of the RA. Institutional Accreditation allows to evaluate the effectiveness of TLI operations, as well as to find out whether the TLI is in compliance with its mission, whether it follows the policy of continuous improvement and enhances the development of implemented academic programmes.<sup>4</sup>

After the adoption of this decision, the policy of universities on the issue of quality assurance began to change with an emphasis on studying the positive experience of domestic and foreign universities in this area. It is obvious that each university has its own internal policy and management specifics, which set the university the task of developing certain tools that would meet the tasks set and provide objective and truthful results.

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<sup>1</sup> Benchmarking. Handbook for the Universities of BIH, 2014

<https://projects.odisee.be/BIHTEK/sites/default/files/bijlages/BIHTEK%20Benchmarking%20Handbook%20English.pdf> referred to on: 01.09.2022.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p. 12

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p. 18

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.anqa.am/en/accreditation/#Papers> referred to on: 01.09.2022.

Mesrop Mashtots University (MMU), being one of the leading and innovative universities of Artsakh, also defines benchmarking as one of the productive and practical tools for ensuring the quality of educational processes. Having studied all the positive experience of the leading institutions in the sphere the following basic principles of benchmarking were adopted by MMU management:

1. *Leadership role of management.* Understanding and support of the university management is necessary for the successful implementation of a benchmarking project at the university.
2. *Employee engagement.* For the successful implementation of any innovations, especially new management methods, the nature of the views of the staff plays an extremely important role – its orientation to development, attitude to change, willingness to take risks, etc.
3. *A systematic approach.* A systematic approach to management involves understanding the university's activities as a system of interrelated processes. Benchmarking activities should be linked to the strategic goals of the organization, as well as to ongoing initiatives to improve processes in the context of a university-wide improvement strategy.
4. *Process-oriented approach.* The use of modern management tools, such as benchmarking, universal quality management, a system of balanced indicators and others becomes the most effective if it is based on a process approach to the organization of activities at the university.
5. *Making decisions based on facts and data.* Effective solutions are usually impossible without collecting reliable data and analyzing information. This assumes that the university has a system for collecting and analyzing information about its activities and its interaction with the external environment.
6. *Customer orientation.* Benchmarking is a mechanism to meet the expectations of consumers, since they are the ones who are interested in improving our work, which for them is expressed in better service, in better products and services.
7. *Continuous improvement.*

Consortium for Excellence in Higher Education<sup>1</sup> (2003) identifies seven main approaches to benchmarking:

- ✓ Strategic benchmarking, which used where organizations seek to improve their overall performance by focusing in on specific strategies or processes;
- ✓ Performance or Competitive Benchmarking, a process whereby organizations use performance measures to compare themselves against similar organizations;
- ✓ Process Benchmarking, which focuses on specific processes or operations, in higher education examples might be enquiry management, enrolment or timetabling;
- ✓ Functional and Generic Benchmarking, which involves partnerships of organizations drawn from different sectors that wish to improve some specific activity or process;
- ✓ External Benchmarking, which is enable the comparison of the organizations functions and key processes against good practice organizations;
- ✓ Internal Good Practice Benchmarking, which establishes of good practice organization wide through the comparison of internal activities or operations;
- ✓ International Benchmarking, it can be undertaken internationally as well as nationally.

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<sup>1</sup> Consortium for Excellence in Higher Education. (2003). Benchmarking Methods and Experiences. Sheffield: Sheffield Hallam University.

Specifying the approaches for the MMU QA of educational processes the following types of benchmarking can be singled out:

Table 1: Types of Benchmarking

	Feature	Variation of the feature	Type of benchmarking
1	The level of goals and objectives for improving activities	Strategic (key aspects of activities in strategic areas)	Strategic
		Operational (tasks of improving production processes, processes related to consumers)	Performance or Competitive
2	Benchmarking object	Process (all aspects related to it: the process itself, the result, resources)	Process-oriented (process benchmarking, result benchmarking, input benchmarking)
		Specific problem	Functional and Generic
3	Benchmarking entities (partners)	Within the same organization	Internal Good Practice
		In different organizations	External (competitive, functional, global (general))

Thus depending on the feature and variation of the features the corresponding type of the benchmarking can be chosen.

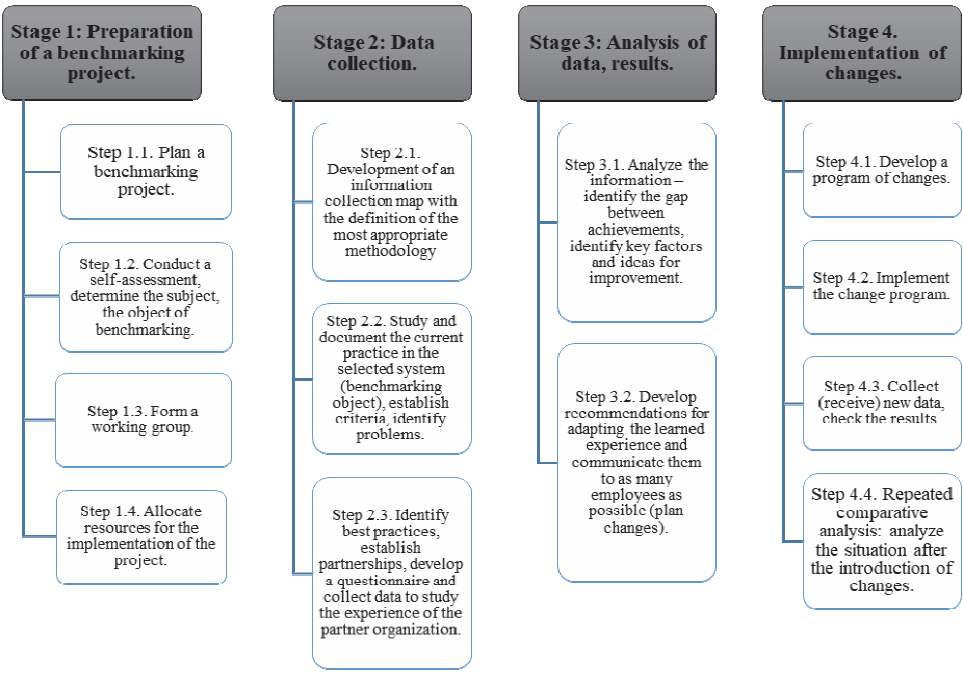
In order to make the process of benchmarking productive and clearly organized there is a need to have **a benchmarking map**, i.e. to decide upon the stages of benchmarking. For MMU the most acceptable and suitable set of stages is the following:

1. Identification of the benchmarking subject – defining the objective(s);
2. Identification of suitable performance evaluation indicators – verification;
3. Selecting an object for comparison;
4. Identification of the benchmarking partner;
5. Determining the type of benchmarking;
6. Determining the most appropriate method of collecting information;
7. Data collection;
8. Data analysis;
9. Identification of discrepancies which are important from the point of view of ensuring competitiveness;
10. Assessment of the possible level of achievements;
11. Planning future performance indicators;
12. Communicating the results of benchmarking to all interested parties and receiving assistance in their application in practice;
13. Setting specific goals and objectives in the field of quality improvement;
14. Development and implementation of action plans to achieve and solve them;
15. Carrying out planned activities and tracking their results;
16. Re-checking of benchmarking check points.

It should be noted, that depending on the objective set, some of the stages may be missed out or combined. The reason lies in the possibility of more organized and coordinated work in order to avoid unnecessary documentary routine.

After the benchmarking stages are decided upon a benchmarking project is to be worked out. MMU IQAC accepts the following structure of benchmarking project:

Chart 1: Benchmarking Project Stages



Thus, competent planning of the benchmarking of the educational process contributes to improving the quality of education and educational activities. Taking into account and using the positive experience of domestic and foreign educational institutions certainly creates favorable conditions for determining the directions of development and ways to improve the educational process at various levels of the education system. The existing trends and the state of the national education system open up wide opportunities for the use of benchmarking methodology by Artsakh universities both individually and at the level of professional associations and networks.

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### **ԱՄՓՈՓՈՒՄ**

#### **ԲՈՒՀԵՐՈՒՄ ԿՐԹԱԿԱՆ ԳՈՐԾԸՆԹԱՑԻ ՀԱՄԵՄԱՏԱԿԱՆ ՎԵՐԼՈՒԾՈՒԹՅՈՒՆ /ԲԵՆԶՄԱՐՔԻՆԳ/. ՄԵԹՈՂԱԲԱՆՈՒԹՅՈՒՆ և ԳՈՐԾԻՔԱԿԱԶՄ**

#### **Ներսեսյան Ավինա**

*Մեսրոպ Մաշտոցի Համալսարան, ՆՈԱԿ դեկավար;*

*Օտար լեզուների ամբիոն, Ավագ դասախոս*

*Ստեփանակերտ, Արցախ*

Արցախի բարձրագույն ուսումնական հաստատություններում որակի ապահովման մշակույթը վերջին տասնամյակի ընթացքում գրավում է տվյալ ոլորտի բոլոր շահագրգիռ կողմերի ուշադրությունը: Հաշվի առնելով այն փաստը, որ որակի բարձրացումը բարձրագույն ուսումնական հաստատությունների կարելիության առանձնահատկություններից մեկն է, պակաս կարելիոր չէ հասկանալ բենչմարքինգի դերը որպես շարունակական բարելավման եւ մրցունակության պահպանման միջոց: Համալսարանները ամբողջ աշխարհում ընդունում են Համեմատական հայեցակարգը եւ զարգացնում են փոխակերպման մեթոդներ եւ պրակտիկա՝ իրենց կազմակերպությունների բարելավման համար: Այսպիսով, վերջինիս դրական փորձը կարող է օգտագործվել Արցախի բուհում որակի ապահովման քաղաքականության հետագա զարգացման և կատարելագործման համար:

Հոդվածի նպատակն է ուսումնասիրել բենչմարքինգի ֆենոմենը կրթության մեջ, ուսումնասիրել մեթոդաբանությունը, ինչպես նաև բենչմարքինգի կիրառումը որպես արդյունավետ գործիք բարձրագույն ուսումնական հաստատություններում գործունեության կատարելությանը հասնելու համար:

Հետազոտության ընթացքում օգտագործվել են նկարագրության, վերլուծության, սինթեզի և կոնկրետացման մեթոդներ:

**Բանալի բառեր՝** բենչմարքինգ, Արցախ, ԲՈՒՀ, որակի ապահովման գործիքներ, բենչմարքինգի նախագիծ, բենչմարքինգի քարտեզ

**РЕЗЮМЕ**  
**БЕНЧМАРКИНГ ОБРАЗОВАТЕЛЬНОГО ПРОЦЕССА В ВУЗ-АХ: МЕТОДОЛОГИЯ**  
**И ИНСТРУМЕНТАРИЙ**

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Культура обеспечения качества в высших учебных заведениях Арцаха привлекает внимание всех заинтересованных сторон в этом конкретном секторе в течение последнего десятилетия. Поскольку повышение качества было одной из наиболее важных особенностей высших учебных заведений, не менее важно понимать роль бенчмаркинга как средства постоянного совершенствования и поддержания конкурентоспособности. Университеты по всему миру принимают концепцию бенчмаркинга и разрабатывают трансформационные методы и практики для улучшения своих организаций. Таким образом, положительный опыт последнего может быть использован для дальнейшего развития и совершенствования политики обеспечения качества в вузе Арцаха.

Целью статьи является изучение феномена бенчмаркинга в образовании, изучение методологии, а также применение бенчмаркинга в качестве продуктивного инструмента для достижения совершенства деятельности в высших учебных заведениях.

В ходе исследования были использованы методы описания, анализа, синтеза и конкретизации.

**Ключевые слова:** Бенчмаркинг, Арцах, ВУЗ, инструменты обеспечения качества, бенчмаркингový проект, карта бенчмаркинга