

# [Benchmarking.in college university name comes herei??](https://assignbuster.com/benchmarkingin-collegeuniversity-name-comes-herei/)

Executive Summary

Benchmarking is a journey, not a destination. For schools, it is a journey over the uncertain terrain of school effectiveness, between two places that differ only in the extent to which they are regarded as successful. Quality assurance procedures provide a map for that journey, pinpointing location and indicating direction.

The search for responsive democratic institutions is part of this odyssey. The vehicle of choice is an effective networked organization and the planned destination is an improved service for customers.

Supporting quality assurance and networking structures is a considerable organizational commitment. The end of the industrial economy and the effect of this on organizations mean that traditional methods of inspection and control no longer work. Gone too are the managerial gatekeepers; those who would manage the flow of intelligence between parts of the structure. Empowerment and responsibility is the new order and it requires a new breed of collaborative manager to succeed against this ever-changing landscape. They need to exercise leadership rather than command. They must imbue their organizations with vision and their employees with enthusiasm. Above all, they must embrace change and rise to the challenge of knowing how to harness it. (Christine Vogt, 2005, p. 1)

What is Benchmarking? And applying it in a school

Benchmarking is the comparison and analysis of routine across the entire Corporation or parts of an organization, with a view to enhancing the growth of the company. Individuals and organizations have always sought to improve their performance by studying what others did-it is good practice and is done all the time in the commercial sector.

There are two types of benchmarking. One relies on a comparison of outcomes against an average statistical attainment; the other on a comparison of critical processes against those in another organization acknowledged being more effective. Unfortunately, the term is used rather loosely to describe all manner of comparisons, without much effort being made to distinguish between the two. Unlike the commercial sector, government organizations in education espouse the ‘ statistical’ type and naturally, most schools and colleges have come to think of benchmarking in similar terms.

Schools and colleges have therefore neglected business-type benchmarking, due partly to this lack of promotion and partly to a suspicion that business methods are not easily transferred to an education paradigm. This latter concern is legitimate, of course-some practices are specific to their business context-yet others are transferable. Comparative benchmarking is one such case and this book is an attempt to facilitate its transfer to education from a business setting, where it has a long and distinguished history of initiating and sustaining improvement.

The benchmarking story starts in 1959, when Xerox invented the first plain paper copier. The company became synonymous with photocopying until the mid-1970s, when a number of important patents ran out and Xerox’s market share plunged. The company found itself squeezed between Japanese firms operating at the cheap end of the market and IBM at the other. Analysis revealed a large disparity in effectiveness between Xerox’s different subsidiary companies and in response, the company developed an internal benchmarking system for its manufacturing, administrative and support processes. Benchmarking became the main agency for a change that eventually saw the company recapture more than one-third of the market it had lost.

The well-publicized success of Xerox, coupled with the modern necessity to focus on process, has added further impetus to benchmarking as a modern quality management tool. In the intervening years, it has revolutionized business culture by focusing on how critical functions are best performed and how effectiveness comes about. It has encouraged change through partnership and has moved the focus away from the organization itself, towards the customer and the competitor.

The DfEE and Ofsted, on the other hand, advocate an approach to benchmarking based on the statistical comparison of different schools with similar socio-economic characteristics. Upper quartile figures represent the standards which the best performing schools are achieving and the median sets the benchmark for under-performers in the group. This education view of benchmarking differs in five important ways from the comparative-type benchmarking it attempts to emulate.

First, comparative benchmarking focuses on the analysis and comparison of process, not output. This reflects a belief that the key to improvement lies in understanding how critical functions are best performed, rather than simply measuring outcomes. Statistical benchmarking, on the other hand, is firmly focused on the reverse, i. e. on what is achieved, rather than how it is achieved, and runs contrary to what is believed makes for effectiveness in the business sector. In focusing on output rather than process, it shifts the focus of responsibility one step away from those who carry out the essential work. Whereas processes can be planned, outcomes can only be hoped for. So statistical benchmarking denigrates strategic planning as a tool of headship and distracts attention away from those whose performance can make a difference. It is a form of quality control, when what is needed is quality assurance.

Second, comparative benchmarking is conducted by a partnership making performance comparisons between one organization which aspires to improve and another whose practice is acknowledged to be excellent. It is not a comparison with a statistical quartile or confined to organizations who share similar markets. Statistical benchmarking, on the other hand, only serves to encourage schools towards a median performance and, in a normative way, guarantees that there will always be failing schools, no matter how effective they might be. Put simply, there will always be 25 per cent in the lower quartile!

Third, underlying the statistical view of benchmarking is the failure to separate the constituent critical processes that contribute to overall effectiveness, from the overall performance itself. It is too simplistic. It regards the school as a single organic entity, whereas, in reality, it is a network of sometimes conflicting and sometimes cooperating professionals. Critical processes need to be identified if a cycle of improvement is to be supported in schools. Comparative benchmarking does that because it focuses on critical processes, but the type of benchmarking currently recommended in education does not. How can effective performance be replicated if no one understands how it comes about?

Fourth, an unfortunate side effect of statistical benchmarking is that it discourages partnership. It pits school against school and encourages isolationism, since effective schools are only judged successful if others are judged failures. In statistical benchmarking, an effective school helping a less effective one guarantees only to threaten its own position by being hauled back towards the median.

Fifth, and finally, statistical benchmarking encourages schools to benchmark only against other schools operating in similar socio-economic circumstances. This seems contradictory in that it suggests that socio-economic circumstance is the major determinant of pupil achievement, while at the same time acknowledging that there is a wide range of achievement within any catchments. At any rate, schools operating in very similar circumstances are likely to share many common approaches in their day-to-day operation and benchmarking between such very similar organizations is unlikely to result in any great improvement. It seems more likely to encourage inertia, if anything.

Whereas a business can measure its effectiveness by reference to the profits it makes or fails to make, a school or college is a more difficult enterprise in which to gauge the extent to which the institution has achieved its aims. The distinction between for-profit and not-for-profit organizations is most obvious when it comes to measuring effectiveness. The free market links the interests of the organization with those of the customer and the shareholder in such a way that the business does not prosper (or even survive) unless the interests of both are served. In such an environment, effectiveness is largely determined by customers. (David N. Ammons, 1999, p. 1-2)

Not-for-profit organizations, on the other hand, lack clear-cut market-driven measurements of effectiveness, due to the absence of a customer-controlled free market. It is more difficult to select criteria for setting standards and it is more difficult to select indicators for evaluating performance in the absence of such a market, but it is not impossible.

In theory at least, there are many ways in which a school can measure its effectiveness, some manifestations of which are more easily measured than others. These manifestations fall into two categories: those that are apparent and measurable; and those that are latent or more subtle. The relative importance of the two categories is a matter of some disagreement among practitioners and academics. Benchmarking does not engage in this dispute. It takes measurable indicators of effectiveness in one institution and compares them with like measurements in another. It does not purport to compare that which cannot reasonably be measured. (Anne W. Miller, 2006, p. 1)

The fundamental assumption made in relation to all measures of effectiveness, crude or otherwise, is that success (or effectiveness) is taken as a reflection of something being done well within the institution. However, this link between good practice and effectiveness is largely one of definition, since good practice is defined as practice that results in greater effectiveness! Therefore, effectiveness has come to be regarded as a planned result, rather than an accidental outcome, and it is this which sustains the belief that it can be analyzed within and across institutions and shared among practitioners.

Benchmarking is a process which involves making comparisons within an organization or with another organization. Using similar points of reference, benchmarking involves examining the critical activities of one institution and comparing its performance in critical areas with the performance of another institution. The purpose is to improve performance and therefore increase effectiveness. Since institutions are continuously changing, benchmarking is a continuous process, rather than a once-off comparison with a competitor.

Benchmarking is not just about researching what another institution does. It seeks to make contemporaneous comparisons in specific areas-an outcome more easily achieved in today’s information age than was the case in the past. Society is moving inexorably towards a state of perfect and complete information, where not only is information more extensive and more readily available, but is in real time and instantaneous. All organizations must have the willingness and the expertise to access this information and use it.

The greatest obstacle to benchmarking is the secrecy with which institutions operate in a competitive environment. This is no less true for schools and colleges than it is for private sector businesses. For this reason, one of the essential steps to successful external benchmarking is to find a suitable partner institution. Fortunately, this is not so problematic in the education sector, since institutions outside a small and well-defined catchments area cannot really be said to be in competition with each other. Organizations in the for-profit sector, on the other hand, generally compete without regard to geographical location, making it more difficult to find partner institutions for benchmarking.

Another obstacle to benchmarking is corporate inertia, particularly in schools and colleges unused to managing change or operating responsively to extraneous factors. Historically, schools and colleges have had a major change cycle only every 10 or 20 years, although this has shortened considerably in recent times, and the period between reform and implementation for schools has largely been governed by the time it takes legislation to go through the various stages of enactment. There is no corresponding inertia period in the for-profit sector; organizations must respond to the market immediately.

As with other innovations, benchmarking requires the support of senior managers if it is to be successful. The essence of good benchmarking is the identification of critical processes and this cannot be achieved by a ‘ hero innovator’ working without senior management cooperation.

While benchmarking in manufacturing and service sector businesses is well established, the process is little understood or used in schools and colleges, and as already mentioned, where the term is used, it is used in a different sense. Schools and colleges are complex organizations with many different ways of measuring effectiveness. Those most easily measured include examination success, inspection reports, enrolment trends, exclusion rates and so on. It is more difficult to compare measurements of other aspects of school life such as parental perception, pastoral care effectiveness and the professional satisfaction of staff. Yet all these manifestations are assumed to be worth measuring because they are believed to reflect fundamental processes essential to what is believed makes for good practice: good quality and consistent teaching, pro-active management, institutional responsiveness, caring discipline, on-going professional development and the like. (Cheryl Burkhart-Kriesel, 2006, p. 2-3)

Comparative benchmarking between organizations must involve direct contact. Sufficient current information can never be got from archives, journals or inspections. Archives may be years out of date-academic journals have a delay of at least a few months before publication-and inspection systems, such as Ofsted, are necessarily contextualized in time and circumstance. Direct contact must be established between partner organizations and maintained over the course of the benchmarking process, to ensure that only contemporaneous information is used to inform the comparison. Also, particular circumstances do influence practice within organizations, particularly in the case of schools and Further Education colleges, and only a direct exchange of information between partners can contextualize any success or failure they may have had.

There are four main types of benchmarking:

i?? External competitive benchmarking;

i?? External non-competitive benchmarking;

i?? Internal benchmarking;

i?? Benchmarking against a ‘ market’ leader.

Each type has different resourcing and staffing requirements. None of the four is a quick fix, although some are more ‘ basic’ than others.

External competitive benchmarking

External competitive benchmarking involves comparison with a competitor that is perceived to be more effective, operating in a similar market place and under similar circumstances. In the education sector, if such an institution were to be in the same geographical catchments area, then it is unlikely that a partnership would be formed and vital specific information about the competitor’s critical processes would only be gleaned from the transfer of staff from one institution to the other, or from accounts in professional journals. It is also unlikely that personal visits to the competitor institution would be very informative, although they could possibly reveal how far advanced the competitor actually is.

External non-competitive benchmarking

Comparison with other organizations not in direct competition is likely to be more productive. In the case of educational institutions, this could involve (or result in) a partnership between two or more schools from different catchments areas, or a school and a Further Education college in the same catchments area. In a broader sense, a school or college may even wish to compare some of its critical processes with those of non-educational organizations, such as public relations firms, hospital trusts and recruitment agencies. However, before this could be done, critical processes within the school or college would have to be matched, in isolation, to similar processes in the partnering organization and an overall perspective is seldom gained. Non-competitive benchmarking is sometimes referred to as ‘ functional’ or ‘ process’ benchmarking.

Internal benchmarking

Benchmarking need not involve a comparison with another institution at all. It can be carried out internally, in which case similar processes are compared in terms of their effectiveness and efficiency. Most benchmarking starts with just such an internal comparison and only becomes external at a later stage, so it is a popular starting point for organizations.

Internal benchmarking is relatively straightforward in a school or college setting, although it is clearly limited by the small number of critical processes which can be compared. For example, examination results in similar subjects (with similar student intakes) can be compared in-house, but retention or exclusion rates and enrolment trends clearly cannot. Internal benchmarking is also limited by the fact that critical processes within a given organization tend towards a ‘ median’ way of doing things-a house style-which may be both a cause and an effect of institutional inertia, and militate against meaningful comparisons being made.

Leader benchmarking

Leader benchmarking is a comparison with another organization whose reputation is such that it is widely recognized as a centre of outstanding practice. In all probability, such leading institutions will be non-competitor, but have little incentive to form a partnership with an institution with markedly inferior practice. Market leaders are more likely to benchmark themselves against other leading institutions outside the sector. For example, leading beacon schools and Further Education colleges sometimes benchmark themselves (informally) against successful private sector businesses or higher education institutions. However, notwithstanding the lack of incentive, leading educational institutions do tend to share practice quite readily with non-competitors, but whether this is specific or continuous enough to enable an inferior institution to benchmark, is doubtful. (McGonagle Jr., 1996. p. 14-22)

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