



Editorial

The what, why and how to benchmark

Higher education worldwide is undergoing massive change to its structure, declining resources, diverse student population and the move to internationalization. The increasing competition and legitimization of the standing of a school of nursing is always at the forefront in today's higher education arenas. The reasons are mainly due to increasing international competition and accountability which forces the nursing schools in academic research organizations to search for means to assess their own performance in a more comprehensive way and to look for ways to improve their professional status (1).

Nursing schools are now compelled to benchmark research performance at the university level with information theoretic measures. But what do nursing schools know about benchmarking? What might this mean for nursing research in general and for academic promotions and tenures in particular?

What is benchmarking?

Benchmarking was developed in the United States of America in early 1980s at the Xerox Corporation in response to increase competition and proliferated in the business sectors (2). Benchmarking is an ongoing and systematic process for measuring and comparing the work processes of one organization to those of

another by bringing external focus to internal activities, functions, or operations (3).

Benchmarking is aimed at identifying processes and practices from other organizations or institutions and to answers questions such as: 1) how are we doing in comparison with other schools of nursing? 2) What are the best practices for a given process? 3) Who is using the best practice and what can we learn from them? 4) What makes those schools of nursing with best practices successful? 5) How good do we want to be? 6) How do they do it? 7) How can we adapt what they do to our school of nursing?

Why do we have to benchmark?

Many organizations are trying to catch up with rapid technological advances and ever-changing students and academic needs. In schools of nursing, although it is a new concept and practice, it has rapidly gained acceptance particularly now that schools of nursing are within a research-intensive university settings. Schools of nursing may want to know how it compares with other schools of nursing within their region or internationally. Benchmarking could be in terms of not only know how they compare in terms of research outputs, research grants and publications but could also be in terms of educational programs, teaching and learning, use of resources, students' clinical experiences, admissions and graduation rates in both undergraduate and

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graduate programs, effectiveness of online courses, timetabling as well as reviews for salary increase and promotion and tenure guidelines (4). Benchmarking is often referred to as a method of teaching an institution how to improve.

This has been linked to the quality enhancement program to demonstrate comparative quality and efficiency of the university operations (5). Benchmarking is also used as a process of self-evaluation and self-improvement through a systematic and collaborative comparison of practice and performance with similar organizations in order to identify strengths and weaknesses, to learn to adapt and improve organizational processes. This is important in order to set targets for improvement based on inter-organizational learning. In nursing, there is a need to benchmark the outcome of nursing research capable of comparison with the best in the fields of health care research. Several evidences have been suggested for benchmarking including the number of PhD graduates, amount research funding, publications and profile of tenured staff including their citation indexes (6).

How do we benchmark?

Drew (1997) suggested that the activity of benchmarking is composed of five steps: 1) identify the object of the study, 2) select the superior performer (benchmarking partner), 3) collect and analyze data, 4) set performance goals for improvement, and 5) implement plans and monitor target key indicators (7).

The literature provides different benchmarking approaches that schools of nursing could use depending on their objectives. These approaches include the following (8):

1. Internal benchmarking– comparing the performance of units or departments within one organization
2. Competitive benchmarking– comparing the performance of units or departments with a direct competitor
3. Functional benchmarking – comparing a specific function with best practice
4. Generic benchmarking – comparing a specific function with the best in the class of organizations irrespective of the type of organization

In schools of nursing, the approach most commonly used is competitive benchmarking. From our experience in benchmarking, we have followed the following steps. First, define the parameters of what to benchmark. Second, form a benchmarking team. Third, identify benchmarking partners. When choosing benchmarking partners, decide to search for peer departments (similar to size and history) and aspirant department (those you aim to be in five-year's time).

Fourth, collect and analyze all benchmarking information such as case profiles of tenured Professor, Associate Professors and Assistant Professors and compare then with your nursing department. Lastly, develop your strategic plan and take actions. In benchmarking research development, achievements and excellence in nursing in the UK, James and Clark (2007) used Curran's competitive advantage framework in higher education.

They compared the development of nursing with other disciplines and found that nursing has a predictable research trajectory in quality and quantity (9).

However, nursing's capacity to contribute to health improvement needs to secure competitive research income.

In summary, no matter what approach is used for benchmarking, it is important, to have a clear aim and objectives why and what to benchmark. Benchmarking is not simply about change. It is the successful implementation of what was learned from the benchmarking exercise and a process that should also be consistent with the organization's paradigm and what constitutes superior status and standing.

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