

BENCHMARKING IMPLEMENTATIONS OF SAKARYA UNIVERSITY IN THE FRAMEWORK OF EFQM MODEL

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ABSTRACT

From the Perspective of European Foundation of Quality Management – EFQM Excellence Model, the purpose of the study is to reveal the benchmarking implementation of Sakarya University (SAU) and extend the study from SAU to national level, to Turkish Higher Education sector to find out where benchmarking stands in Turkish Higher Education System and How it can be institutionalized according to its own methodology by using case study as qualitative research method through extensive literature review and rich primary data gathered multi methods providing triangulation.

Key Words: EFQM Excellence Model, Benchmarking, Benchmarking Implementation, Sakarya University.

INTRODUCTION

EFQM Excellence Model is a practical tool to help organizations establish an appropriate management system by measuring where they are on the path to excellence, helping them to understand the gaps, and then stimulate solutions (Steed and Pupies, 2003). As it is known, EFQM Model is based on nine criteria, with five “Enablers”, and four “Results”. The enabling criteria cover what the organization does; What an organization can manipulate? and the results criteria cover What an organization need to focus on achieve business excellence. Enablers cause results (EFQM, 2013). According to EFQM Model - Higher Education (HE) version (2003), excellence is an outstanding practice in managing the institution and achieving results balancing the needs of students, staff, funding and regulatory bodies and those in our local communities, based on a set of fundamental concepts. Quality is related to processes that requires strategically formalized internal and/or external process benchmarking, while standards are related to results that requires internal and/or external performance comparisons.

As the EFQM Model is used widely across Europe, and has been extensively tested in a range of private and public sectors, it offers benchmarking applications with others within the institution and/or outside the sector providing a common language to share good practices and develop both individual and organizational learning through a systematic methodology (Steed and Pupies, 2003; EFQM Benchmarking User Guide, 2013). According to literature, benchmarking for HEIs, is an ongoing process which aims to measure and improve the organization’s performance by inter-organizational learning about possible improvements of its core and/or support processes by investigating these processes in the better performing organizations (Alstete, 1996; McKinnon et al, 2000; ENQA Workshop Reports, 2012; Burguel, 2008; ESMU et al, 2008). It is important to understand the difference between the concepts of “comparison” and “benchmarking” required by the EFQM Model. By doing comparisons we know what others have achieved and how good they are. Comparisons relates to performance results (relates to quantities), ofcourse provides significant data for quality assurance and accreditation processes of any HEI. However, benchmarking is a management approach examines how to ensure success, not what the success is. It is an inter-organizational research, learning and adaptation process which is systematically conducted in the framework of its own methodology. Benchmarking is recognised now as a single discipline and it can produce useful results if it is used as a management tool for quality improvement rather than just comparing performance results or just making rankings among institutions (Vlasceanu, et al, 2007; Odora, 2014; Sarialtin, 2015). Now, benchmarking of disciplinary learning outcomes is an integral part of the Bologna Process. In Europe use of benchmarking has been supported by the European Commission for more than ten years.

WHY Starting Point of the Study is Sakarya University as a Research Sample?

The success in Turkish Higher Education we quantitatively experienced, must be caught as qualitative. Being aware of this fact, as Sakarya University (SAU), we prioritized quality and adopted it as a work habit and life philosophy.

Sakarya University: the winner of;

- National Quality Grand Prize (2010), given by KalDer (Society for Quality),
- Award of Continuity in Excellence Prize (2013), given by KalDer,
- EFQM Excellence Award Prize (2015), given by EFQM,

- Institutional Evaluation Program-IEP (2016), by European University Association-EUA
Management by processes, strategic management and quality assurance at SAU operates within a Total Quality Management Framework (TQM), implementing the EFQM Model as a roadmap in order to develop a wider quality culture in its teaching and research processes.

Besides internal benchmarking included in SAU's Performans Evaluation System, external performance comparisons are achieved at the programme level through the nationally approved agencies e.g. MUDEK (for engineering), FEDEK (for art and sciences). At the Evaluation Meeting (December, 2016), it is declared that many other faculties are either undergoing accreditation or preparing their application for external accreditation. Accreditation agencies (like ENQA, ABET, CHEA, EQAR, MUDEK, FEDEK), develop evaluation criteria and conduct peer evaluations to assess whether or not those criteria are met. As a quality assurance process, the goal of accreditation for SAU is to ensure that education and research meets acceptable levels of quality.

Engagement with external benchmarks is a central plank of SAU's quality strategy. It is a way of managing progressive change and the model at SAU coincided with the key tenets of quality systems found in higher education institutions across the world. Also, the commitment of the university's senior leadership assuring and enhancing the quality of its education through peer review processes such as EUA's Institutional Evaluation Program (IEP) show that how strategic aims at SAU are comparable nationally and internationally (SAU IEP Final Report, 2016). According to this report, SAU is seeking accreditation in the United States (through the Higher Learning Commission based in Chicago). Also, hosting of the International Conference on Quality in Higher Education (ICQH) and the involvement of many members of staff, including the Rector. This presence on the international quality show that SAU opens itself to external peer reviews and external comparisons which is crucial for the implementation of EFQM Excellence Model.

PURPOSE, METHOD AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In the EFQM Excellence Model 2013, benchmarking is defined as "A systematic comparison of approaches and/or processes with other relevant organisations that gains insights that will help the organisation to take action to improve its performance. *It should be noted that the focus is on understanding how benchmarking partner does something, not just the results they achieve.* This is reflected in the RADAR logic EFQM Model use to assess (EFQM Benchmarking User Guide, 2013). When assessing enablers, in order to demonstrate that the way approaches and processes are conducted, have been benchmarked with other organizations would be considered within the framework of benchmarking methodology. When assessing the results to demonstrate how performance results against other organizations, performance comparisons would be considered.

From this perspective, the purpose of the study is to reveal the benchmarking implementations of Sakarya University and from this point to question and investigate the place of benchmarking practices in the Turkish Higher Education System. Sakarya University, as a study sample, is the one that proves its education, training and research quality, student centredness and the balanced satisfaction of all its stakeholders as its critical success factors. Therefore, SAU is the best sample to question and investigate where does benchmarking stands in Turkis Higher Education.

For this purpose, the case study method has been planned through semi-structured interviews with quality-dedicated top management of SAU, Academic Evaluation and Quality Improvement Committee (SAUDEK) coordinator, and quality/benchmarking professionals of Kalder for the benchmarking application data in detail to examine phenomena within its context. As an empirical method of qualitative research, case study collects rich data through multi methods (triangulation) and gives a depth picture in the manner of inductive reasoning (holistic approach). The case method is particularly useful for exploring how and why things are happening representing the truths (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). In achieving this goal, the study tries to answer the following questions;

- What kind of benchmarking does Sakarya University implement?
- How is it linked to EFQM Excellence Model?
- Today, what types are in use? And How?

Benchmarking Implementations of Sakarya University in the Framework of EFQM Model

SAU considers benchmarking as a quality assurance process leading to sustainable business excellence in the framework of EFQM Model. SAU which join the EFQM align itself with role-model institution and gain practical exposure to leading edge developments in the field of Educational and institutional excellence utilizing the EFQM Benchmarking Methodology. The EFQM Benchmarking Methodology is unique in combining both metrics and process benchmarking as part of its data collection, analysis and integration of good practices. In

doing so, the methodology fully reflects the scope of the EFQM Model for business excellence, where results are expressed in relation to four key stakeholders areas;

- the people in SAU,
- the students,
- the community in which SAU operates,
- the overall performance of the institution.

Results in these areas give a comprehensive view of what and how SAU is achieving, and provide comparable performance data and metrics.

However, in order to deliver maximum results, it is also necessary to consider how SAU is managed; this is reflected in the enablers of The EFQM Excellence Model, which describe the culture of SAU; how it approaches topics such as objective setting, student relationships, competencies, leadership, etc.

The interaction between what is achieved and how it is achieved, typical of The EFQM Model, is therefore also reflected in the EFQM Benchmarking Methodology. In this context, EFQM Benchmarking implementation stages at Sakarya University briefly involves;

- Plan: know what we want to improve,
- Collect: identify the leaders in those areas,
- Analyse: learn from the leaders: what they are achieving and how they are achieving it,
- Adapt: disseminate and incorporate the learning into our own institution.

Internal benchmarking is the part of the annual performance assessment process of SAU (as stated above), which comparisons are made of the different units or divisions within the institution, and also with other institutions in order to identify good practices. The results of the comparison can then highlight areas where improvements are needed, where SAU can learn from others and where problems have to be investigated.

External collaborative benchmarking practices SAU carries out, usually involves comparisons with a group of institutions or organizations regardless of the sector. As a Quality Organization implementing the EFQM Excellence Model, SAU involved in international university rankings and compares its results to the main leagues of the HE sector countrywide and worldwide. This is ofcourse a unique opportunity to gain visibility and external recognition. However, university international rankings which assess the performance against set criteria, while benchmarking focuses to improve critical processes, identify areas for improvement and set targets for institutional development.

Benchmarking practices encourage SAU to look beyond peers to different benchmarking partners giving “outside the box” thinking as distinguished from sharing knowledge only with its peers. In doing so, benchmarking provides a model for action and improvement. A lot of learning takes place by gaining comprehensive evidence-based data.

Sakarya University is usually selected as a benchmarking partner by many HEIs and other organizations due to its integrated total quality approaches and practices based on EFQM Excellence Award criteria. Within this scope, SAU has done extensive benchmarking studies this year between April-August 2017. For instance, A Pakistani delegation, composed of members of the Higher Education Commission of Pakistan and financial specialists from several universities of Pakistan, made a benchmarking visit to examine and learn good practices of quality assurance systems, strategic management, process management and financial processes of SAU.

Another example is the benchmarking visit of officials from Nilufer Municipality and IETT to Sakarya University to understand, compare and learn the SABIS (information system of SAU), quality approaches and partnerships management of SAU as good practices according to EFQM Model. Both are Nilufer Municipality and IETT (general Directorate of IETT Enterprises) EFQM Prize winners and both officials are also benchmarking specialists of KalDer.

When choosing partners to benchmark itself, SAU prefers the leaders in their fields and award winning institutions or companies regardless of the sector. Due to application for EFQM Excellence Grand Prize this year, SAU has made a benchmarking visit to Italian Bosch Bari on 1 August 2017 to research, compare and learn process management system, partnerships, leadership, industry 4.0 practices and corporate social responsibility projects of Bosch Bari who is EFQM Excellence Award Prize winner in 2016. This is a generic benchmarking exercise of the mutual learning takes place at a high level between two organizations. SAU, as a quality leading university in Turkish HE System, implements both internal and external collaborative process benchmarking with good (even best) performing organizations in Turkey and in the world to ensure a wider quality culture and

institutional development together with its quality dedicated Rector, top management team, faculty deans, unit and division authorities, SAUDEK Coordinator and volunteer Quality Envoys. The above explanations of SAU's benchmarking case is based on observation, experience and document reviews of the author who is one of the quality envoys of SAU. (<http://www.saudek.sakarya.edu.tr/>)

Benchmarking has become widespread by excellence awards which are basis for national and international quality awards. One of the scoring elements of RADAR tables of EFQM Model is "learning" and "creativity". Within this scope, good practices and improvement opportunities should be determined both inside and outside the organization. Sakarya University as EFQM Excellence Awards Price Winner (in 2015), continues its benchmarking exercises to gain experienced true data about itself and other organizations to support decision making and improve its teaching and research processes, and to identify areas for continuous process improvements. For SAU, the most focal point of benchmarking is to develop a common language in Turkish HE System to share good practices within the framework of EFQM Benchmarking Code of Conduct. If so, benchmarking creates the potential for radical improvements and mobilize this potential of higher education institutions.

Extending the study from SAU's perspective to the national level (to Turkish HE sector), it is aimed to clear up "where benchmarking stands in Turkish Higher Education System and How it can be institutionalized as an ongoing quality management tool". This study is the first research study in the field of higher education benchmarking in Turkey. As explaining and exploring benchmarking case of Sakarya University in detail, multiple data gathering and data analysis are all time consuming, the study has not ended yet. At the end of the study, it is expected to find out proper answers to the following questions by conducting depth interviews with Higher Education Council- Quality Board Members, University Rectors whose institutions have already participated EUA's IEP evaluation and benchmarking professionals of Kalder (national cooperation partner of EFQM);

- How to formulize and institutionalize the benchmarking process as an ongoing management tool within the framework of its own methodology?
- How we establish a National Higher Education Benchmarking Institution?
- What responsibilities could SAU undertake for this initiative as a leading Institution in quality improvements and outward looking university with many external engagements?
- How Kalder contribute to this initiative using its extensive benchmarking experiences and network?

CONTENT AND CONTRIBUTION

The extended version of the study will start explaining HE benchmarking and its linkage to EFQM Model based on extensive literature review, and then present the SAU's internal and external benchmarking implementations with all aspects of its quality journey and will continue introducing current benchmarking applications of selected Turkish Universities who have participated the EUA's Institutional Evaluation Programme-IEP, seeking to answer above research questions.

Some implicit focus of benchmarking have always been part of higher education. Peer reviews, external accreditations and site visits have encompassed some aspects of benchmarking for both the peers and the institutions could make comparisons with their own institutions. What is new today is the use of explicit benchmarking and the formalisation and institutionalisation of these processes (ESMU, et, al, 2008). Multiple data analysis still continues therefore, study has not ended yet. At the end of the study, it is strongly expected that we can identify what the benchmarking means for Turkish HEIs, how it can be institutionalized according to its own methodology and whether or not we can constitute National Higher Education Benchmarking Institution.

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