Benchmarking Higher Education: Adapting Administrative Best Practices for Sustainable National Development

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Abstract

This paper examined Benchmarking Higher Education: A precursor in Adapting Administrative Best Practices for Sustainable National Development in Nigeria. Education is an important instrument for achieving sustainable national development. For a state or society to achieve a sustainable development, certain benchmarks must be set, especially for the administrators on whose shoulders rest the administration of higher education. In Nigeria for instance, the National University Commission (NUC) have set Benchmarks for quality institutional operations in administrative areas. This paper attempts to explain the concept of benchmarking, sustainable development, administrative best practices in higher education such as, school discipline, and academic workload. Challenges confronting educational administration benchmarks and the way forward were also discussed. It concluded that maintaining benchmarks in higher education does not only lie in the hands of the educational administrators, but for other educational stakeholders to cooperatively work with the administrators to achieve the best practices for sustainable national development.

Keywords: Benchmarking, Higher education, administrative best practices, sustainable national development

Introduction

Education at all levels and all its forms constitutes a vital tool for addressing all global problems. Education is not only an end in itself, it is an important instrument for bringing about development, changes in values, knowledge and behaviours required to achieve sustainable development (Boyi, 2013). It is common sense to say that no meaningful development, no matter the level, in any society, can take place without education. Education is a powerful instrument that sustains the people and community (Egwuasi, Udoye and Etuk, 2015). This means that any shift from the acceptable standards in education regarding its administrative practices, programmes and quality would definitely affects the outcome of education and the society at large.

In Nigeria, education system is divided into four levels. These are: pre-primary, primary, secondary (post-primary) and the tertiary (higher education). Although, the main focus of this paper is not on the lower levels of education but focuses on the higher education. The Federal Republic of Nigeria (FRN, 2004) sees the Higher Education as education given after secondary education in Universities, Colleges of Education,

Polytechnics, Monotechnics including those institutions offering corresponding courses. According to Bender (2003), history has it that higher education has been viewed as trendsetters and change agents for society at large. They provide leadership in creating and developing products in basic scientific research, developing ideas and in advancing scholarship. This shows that higher education set standards for the societal development.

It was because of the importance of higher education that the FRN (2004) stated the objectives and goals of higher education to includes: Contribution to national development through relevant manpower training; to develop and inculcate proper values for the survival of the individual and society; to develop the intellectual capability of individuals to understand and appreciate their local and external environment, to acquire both physical and intellectual skills, which will enable individuals to be self-reliant and useful members of the society; to promote and encourage scholarship and community service; and to promote national and international understanding and interaction (p.36).

The National Policy on Education (2004) further stated that one of the several ways which these objectives and goals of higher education can be achieved is through the maintenance of minimum standards or benchmarks through appropriate agencies amongst others. Hence, the need to adopt 'administrative best practice' as one of the methods for Benchmarking Higher Education for Sustainable National Development. American Productivity and Quality Center (1993) asserted that Benchmarking is the process of continuously comparing and measuring an organization with business leaders globally to gain information, which will help the organization take action to improve its performance. It is also the practical self-improvement tool for organizations to be compared with other organizations in order to identify their comparative strengths and weaknesses and learn how to improve (Achim, Cabulea, Popa and Mihalache ,2009). It may not be out of place to assert that Benchmarking is a way of finding and adopting best practices for collaborative evaluation of services and processes with the aim of emulating best available administrative practice.

School administration has been seen by Adah, Agih and Odoma (2014) as the arrangement of the human and material resources and programmes available for education and carefully using the resources systematically for the achievement of educational objectives. In administering a school, for instance, higher educational institution, the school administrator must adopt some of the standard practices (such as: institutional discipline, institutional workload, Internationalization and reward system) that could enhance administrative effectiveness. This is referred to as administrative best practices.

Administrative best practices refers to methods or technique used by administrative heads that has been generally accepted as superior to any other alternatives because it produces results that are superior to those achieved by other means, or because it has become a standard way of doing things in an organization. Best practices or Benchmarks are used to maintain quality. Alstete (2011) identifies four categories which benchmarking in institutions is based upon, these are:

1.   Internal benchmarking in which comparisons are made of the performance of different departments, campuses or sites within a university in order to identify best practice in the institution, without necessarily having an external standard against which to compare the results;

2.   External competitive benchmarking where a comparison of performance in key areas is based upon information from institutions which are seen as competitors;

3.   External collaborative benchmarking usually involves comparisons with a larger group of institutions who are not immediate competitors;

4.   External trans-industry (best-in-class) benchmarking seeks to look across multiple industries in search of new and innovative practices, no matter what their source.

This paper is mostly concerned on how the administrative best practices in the areas of discipline and workload can be adapted from both internal and external benchmarking process of higher educational institutions in Nigeria.

The Concept of Benchmarking

What is understood as "Benchmarking" varies considerably between different approaches and different practitioners. This has created a problem of the use of the concept to generally mean the same thing. Conceptually in this paper, benchmarking refers to the standard by which an item can be measured or judged.

Benchmarking is also considered as a productive process that provides objective measurements for base-lining, goal-setting and improvement tracking (Hanover Research Council, 2009). This means that benchmarking is a measurement of the quality of something or an organization's policies, products, programmes, strategies and practices and comparing it with what is seen as a standard measurement for best practices in an organization. In the business sector for instance, benchmarking is when comparing one's business processes and performance metrics to industry bests and best practices form other companies. In the benchmarking process, the management identifies the best firms in their industry, or in another industry where similar processes exist and compares the result and processes of those studied to one's own results and processes. In the educational sector, benchmarking is used to measure performance using specific indicator, resulting in a metric of performance that is then compared to others (National Council on measurement in Education, 2011).

Colding (2000) noted that benchmarking originated from Egypt in the olden time to scale things by labeling the horizontal flat strip of iron of stone at an accurate determined point as a bench, contrary to his notion, Authours like Alstete (2011), Lutfullayer (2010) and Ibijola (2015) linked early application of benchmarking to an American Xerox Corp. According to Lutfulayev (2010), the term "benchmarking" originated in business and manufacturing firms before being adopted in the field of education. Benchmarking however, whether it originated from Egypt or Xerox, it is clear that both origin came from the search to attain standards in the business firms. Thus, one can defined benchmarking as a continuous, systematic process

of evaluating companies or organizations recognized as industry leaders, to determine business and work process that represent "best practices" and establish national performance goals.

The goal of benchmarking is to provide key personnel, in charge of processes, with an external standard of measuring the quality and cost of internal activities, and to help identify where opportunities for improvement may reside. McNair and Kathleen (2012) opined that benchmarking is analogous to the human learning process and it has been described as a method of teaching an institution how to improve. Due to its importance in the improvement of organizational quality, higher education has adopted benchmarking as a method of improving best practices. Benchmarking attempts to answer the following questions:

   i.   How well are we doing compared to others
   ii.   How good do we want to be
  iii.   Who is doing the best
   iv.   How do they do it?
   v.   How can we adapt what they do to our institution?
   vi.   How can we be better than the best? (Kempner, 2013).

To answer these questions, several multi-step benchmarking methods have been developed by leading benchmarking practitioners (Alstete, 2011; Camp, 2005). These multi-steps methods for benchmarking procedure has four steps, these include: planning the study, conducting the research, analyzing the data, and adapting the findings to the home institution or organization that is conducting the study. Benchmarking is a way of finding and adapting best practices.

Adapting means an act or process of changing or modifying behaviour to suit new purpose or need. According to Matei and Antonie (2015) Adapting best practice is about "Learning by doing", it is a formal iterative process of increasing the system knowledge through structured feed-back process. In the higher institution of learning, administrative best practices can be adapted as a benchmark for administration and sustainable school development. The reason for the adaption of best practices is to identify, evaluate and justify what may be considered as best practices within a particular organizational context, and applying it for the optimal organizational goal attainment. This adaption process is beneficial to the administrators of higher education because the time, money and other resources that could have been spent on staff develop, can be used for other administrative tasks. In fact, Essien (2003) noted that adapting best practices serves as a tool of utmost importance to the successful execution of administrative tasks and the attainment of goals and objectives. This means that adapting best practices as a benchmark in higher education serves as a measure of determining effectiveness with which major decisions are made, policies formulated and best practices followed and implemented as it best suits the institution's needs.

Benchmarking Administrative Best Practices for Sustainable Development in Nigerian Higher Education

Higher institutions are educational organizations natured for sharing knowledge, collaborating in research and, assistance to each other. Bender and Schuh (2000) advocated that benchmarking is more suitable in higher education than business sector, due to its collegial environment, which encourages easy collaboration and cooperation. Due to higher institution reliance on hard data and research methodology, Alstete (2011) opined that benchmarking is especially suited for institutions of higher education in which these types of studies are very familiar to faculty and administrators. Practitioners at the higher institutions of learning found that benchmarking helps overcomes resistance to change, provides a structure for external evaluation and creates new networks of communication between schools where valuable information and experiences can be shared (Shafer and Coate, 2002).

Benchmarking can either be internal or external, that is, within an organization or with an external (other) institutions. The process of within higher education benchmarking seeks to answer some of the following questions; how well is the institution doing when compared to faculties within the institution, how good, and in what areas, does the institution want other faculties to improve? How can other faculties introduce into their own practices what is best done in the benchmarked faculty? How can each faculty improve its performance while retaining its unique features; and more competitively better than the best faculty? Achim, Cabulea, Popa, and Mihalache (2009) noted that such questions will be provocative, and challenging to the traditional inward looking decision making systems of higher education. This will result to formulating institutional benchmarks on the administrative best practice in higher education.

An administrative best practice is the method used by educational administrators that has been generally accepted as "better" amongst other alternatives to maintain quality. For instance, if institutional administrators willingly recognize the strengths of operations already existing within the university, When leaders are able to identify their internal peer groups with best administrative practices, it will help them in comparing units that need to emulates those best practices as it become a benchmark to follow.

In addition, Bender (2003) cited an example of administrative best practices as a benchmark in higher education. The author argued that, if the political science department needs to revamp its structure, it should provide the department chair with examples of other social science departments whose structures are working effectively. Similarly, in related administrative areas such as auxiliary services, or in student affairs operations, the internal offices with the best practices can serve as the benchmarks for other organizational units that need improvement. If the whole social sciences divisions of the university that needs to be remodeled, using other academic divisions of the university as well as identifying divisions at peer institutions is most likely to provide the best sources for comparison.

In adapting "best practice" for an institution as a benchmark, the administrative head of such institution must recognize those units, faculties, offices, peer institutions etc. that are effective and excellent in their administration. He/she acknowledges that the faculties, units or offices efforts have benefitted the institution, and make a statement of the institutions appreciation. Mandate is then given to other faculties to adapt same practices as a benchmark for their administration. The administrative best practices for benchmarking for sustainable development in an institution of higher education can either be in the areas of institutional discipline, supervision, workload, reward system, decision-making system, communication system, budgeting system, planning, implementation strategies, institutional supervision, among other practices. This paper places emphasis on institutional discipline, institutional workload, internationalization and reward system.

Adapting institutional discipline as the administrative best practices benchmark in higher institutions

Discipline is the ability of an individual to conform to the norms of the society. It is one's ability to act in accordance with the prevailing standards or customs that governs an organization. Efanga in Egwuasi, Udoye, and Etuk (2015) noted that Discipline reflects the members' respect for authority, rules and regulations, commitment to them and the maintenance of an established standard of behavioiur. Egwuasi, Udoye, and Etuk (2015) argued that discipline can be promoted in any organization if certain techniques are applied, in that, different aspect of a school system contribute to the maintenance of institutional discipline. One of such techniques is setting a disciplinary benchmark by administrative heads of each unit of the institution; and persuading other units who are not well disciplined to adapt such best practices.

Disciplinary problems in higher education that require adapting administrative best practices include: Indecent dressing, punctuality to class by lecturers and students; competency of lecturers, examination malpractices and lecturer – student relationship. These areas of institutional discipline are very important in higher education. For instance, the alarming rate of indecent dressing of students is pitiable. A situation where some female students wear dresses that depict nudeness to school and the male counterparts sag their trousers to classes. These call for adapting best practices. For instance, faculty of Law, and Department of Accounting have formal dress code for her students. In situations where the lecturer comes to class two hours behind the allotted time for a three hour credit unit course and the students come to the class after the commencement of lectures. Such lecturers should be sanctioned, and students' entry to the class should be restricted as it is practiced in pharmacology laboratories in the University of Uyo. These disciplinary best practices can be, setting internal standards or rules in line with the NUC disciplinary standards in the areas of punishment, examination malpractice, cultism, relationships dress codes, amongst others.

Alstete (2011) noted that this type of best practice becomes a code of conduct for internal benchmarking.

Adapting Institutional Workload as the Administrative Best Practices benchmark for Higher Education

Workload refers to all activities that involved lecturers' time either directly or indirectly with professional duties, responsibilities and interests (Akob, 2016). It is also referred to as the amount of work that must be done by employees. It refers to the total time a lecturer or teacher spends in the class, the time allocated to accomplish the school work or official responsibilities as a teacher in school and also after school hours. These responsibilities according to Azita (2012) include teaching, co-curricular activities, file management, meetings and anything related to the official duties as a teacher.

Higher institutional workload for lecturers seems complex, lecturers are saddle with the responsibilities of instructional delivery, supervision of project, thesis and dissertation; marking of examination scripts, examination officership, publication of academic works, amongst others. This has become cumbersome for most lecturers which result to work related stress (Manabete, John, Makinde and Duwa, 2016). To clearly state that workload is overbearing for lecturers and administrative heads of higher institutions of learning; Wolff (2010) stated that the administrative tasks in higher institution can be hard and frustrating which is an evident of overload of work. Equasi et al (2015) found out that leadership behaviours such as assigning of heavy workload to lectures and other agencies of administration such as Deans, Heads of Departments, Directors, among others, is highly significant to lecturers' to lecturer's morale.

Here, where administrative best practice can be adapted is when the administrative head of each faculties and/or departments are able to share responsibilities to staff based on specialization. Other areas include, reshuffling responsibilities that cause psychological stress and consumes more time; and probably give room for flexibilities in its administrative procedure for sharing workloads. Such administrative practices becomes effective and efficient, thus, becomes the best practices to be adapted by other faculties or units of the institution.

Adapting Internationalization as an Administrative best Practice Higher Education

Internationalization of higher education refers to the process of integrating international education into the Nigerian curriculum (Sheidu, Adetoro and Bellow, 2013). It is also the process of integrating an international and intercultural dimension into the curriculum, service and functions of the educational institution in Nigeria. Altbich, Reisbery and Rumbley (2009) defined internationalization as the variety of policies and programs that universities and Governments implement to respond to globalization. This implies the

University of Uyo for example; increasing International Cooperation, inclusion of national security and improved economic competiveness into the university curriculum. Adeoye, Anyikwa and Avant (2013) listed some of the programmes to include creation of International Programmes departments, exchange programmes, cross-border distance education, and e-learning.

Nigerian universities engage in different dimensions of internationalization which have been adopted as best practices for other institutions. For example, the University of Lagos, Nigeria in 2009, established the office of International Relations, Partnership and Prospect (IRPP). This office functions as a unit under the office of the Vice Chancellor, and has amongst others the following aims and objectives to achieve:

- Serving as a central coordinating office for the universities, prospects, undertaking and encouraging collaboration among faculty members and among the various schools and colleges.
- Developing of opportunities for the university's students to engage in international service, undertake international internship, and study abroad, though student exchange prorammes.
- Establishing and maintaining information resources, including an active and dynamic website that will inform faculty, staff and students of international resources and opportunities.

The University of Lagos has served as a benchmark for other universities to adapt her practices of internationalization. Some schools engage in staff and students' exchange; inter-institutional collaboration, taking of courses offered by foreign universities on online without leaving Nigeria. They either do this through affiliation with the foreign university or by e-learning to supplement the face-to-face teaching offered via the partner institution abroad (Adoye, Anyikwa and Avant, 2013). Some universities like university of Ibadan in Nigeria have adapted an internationalization best practice of not joining other universities in their incessant strike actions and school closure. They allow their school calendar to run as it was scheduled. Not a situation where it takes an average of six sessions to complete a four session course which is anti-internationalization to students and their sponsors (Robert, 2014). Schools who practice these international educational best practices have become a Benchmark for other universities to adapt and practice in their own for better productivity.

Adapting Reward System as the Administrative Best Practice for Higher Education

Reward refers to something given in recognition of services, effort or achievement offered by someone. The reward system refers to the procedures, rules and standards associated with allocation of benefits and compensations to employees. Most people when they hear about reward, they attribute it to money. Eze (2012) noted that organization's rewards include, but not limited to monetary compensation. The author listed them to include

praise, promotion, individual business, merit pay, team business, prizes, special awards and professional development. In Reward system procedures are set to ensure that all of the employee activities and outputs are in congruence with the organization's (university's) goal. For Administrators to set a benchmark for reward system, various department or faculties can set procedures, for example, lecturers who are able to co-publish up to five students' projects, dissertations and theses will be rewarded. This will make lecturers to put in their best efforts in the supervision of students to ensure high quality projects that can be published. When such goal is achieved, that forms a benchmark for other faculties to adapt as best practice in the university.

Challenges to Administrative Best Practices Benchmarks

The problem of not attaining institutional administrative best practices as a benchmark for each institution of higher learning in Nigeria is caused by a number of factors such as:

 i. **Gender inequality in administration:** Gender disparity is a well known feature of the Nigerian educational system (Boyi, 2013), gender differences exist in both students' enrolment and leadership position in schools. Male counterpart sometime refuses to learn from the female administrative heads with best practices in their various units. This leads to inter-institutional benchmarking which could have been achieved through the administrative best practices internally.

 ii. **Shortage of Staff:** It is a well known fact that no educational system in a nation can rise above the quality of its staff. In order words, the success of higher education rest on the availability of good and qualified staff who are internally motivated Wasagu (2006). When the number of responsibilities or workload is greater than the available staff on ground, it leads to work overload which in turn result in administrative ineffectiveness. When responsibilities are too many for the staff even the competent one becomes less competent in the cause of meeting up work schedules. This reduces the performance of administrative heads to achieve best practices.

 iii. **3.   Inaccurate Documentation:** The problem of documentation and publication of achievements recorded by faculties has become a major challenge to benchmarking administrative best practices in Nigerian higher education. Data on faculties with best practice can easily be retrieved from the internet for adaption in areas of needs.

Way Forward

The following are some of the suggestions to the challenges militating against administrative best practices benchmarks in Nigeria.

 a. Both internal and external comparison on the institutional disciplinary administrative best practices should be encouraged other than emphasizing on NUC benchmarks.

 b. Every institution of higher learning in Nigeria should have a central commission which embarks on regular supervision of activities in each faculty to ensure that

noticeable efforts made by Staff are rewarded and such efforts adapted as administrative best practice in other Faculties.

c.   Internationalization of faculties' achievement and best practices through digital documentation should be encouraged. This would help other institutions or faculties to easily access it from the internet.

d.   Responsibilities should be shared based on specialization and (or) Ad hoc Staff should be employed to supplement the inadequacy of Staff to reduce the inefficiency and work related stress caused by workload.

Conclusion

Education is the cornerstone for achieving national development. There is no doubt achieving sustainable national development is the goal of all developing nations such as Nigeria. As such there are needs to invest in efforts that could enhance high quality and standards in institutions of higher learning. Such standards involve benchmarking administrative best practices in higher institutions. This means comparing standards regarding administrative practices which can be adapted for sustainable national development.

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