

Benchmarking For Improvement of Quality in Private Universal

Basic Education Junior Secondary Schools in Rivers State

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Abstract

This study focused on Benchmarking is an improvement process in which an organization is able to measure its performance against that of the best in class to determine how these organizations achieve their performance level and use the information to improve their own performance. Quality means fully satisfying agreed or established customer requirement at the lowest price. This study was designed to find out the role of benchmarking in improving quality in Universal Basic Education Junior secondary schools in Rivers State. From a population of 490 principals and vice principals from the 245 private UBE junior secondary schools in Rivers State a sample of 250 was used. In carrying out the research a self structured questionnaire was used, opinions of experts in the field were sought for reliability purpose. Data collected were descriptively analysed using mean and standard deviation and rank order for the research questions posed and z-test for hypotheses. The researchers made some finding that benchmarking increases potentials, enables institutions set standard which no other can beat and educational goals are achieved with benchmarking in private UBE junior secondary schools.

Keywords: Benchmarking, Improvement, Quality, Private and Universal Basic Education.

1. Background to the study

Since Nigeria's independence in the 1960s, there has been a rapid expansion of education at all levels in general and secondary education in particular. Secondary education is a type of education which individuals receive after primary and before tertiary education. Its major aim borders on the preparation for useful living and preparation for higher education. The parallel population growth rate and the insatiable demand for education by the numerous learners and their parents created a new crisis in the nation's education sector. This crisis essentially on how to provide functional education to the teeming student population at all levels since education has been recognized as a veritable instrument against ignorance, poverty, disease as well as instrument in human capital required not only for economic development and material well-being but also for cultural development, social equality and political emancipation. The perception of education has apparently prompted the federal government of Nigeria to recognize education as an instrument for national development with a view to integrating the individual into a sound and effective citizenry (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2004). This policy statement re-echoes the view expressed by Glennester (1979) cited in Babalola and Aiyeni (2009) that equal educational opportunity will help to remove unfair or arbitrary barriers to education or in the process of selecting individuals for placement in schools.

One of the steps taken by the federal government of Nigerian to actualize the philosophy of equal educational opportunity was the putting up of a blueprint in 1979, empowering individuals and organizations to establish private schools. Since then, private interest and investment have been on the increase. Maduagwu (2004:5) pointed out some of the guidelines for the establishment of private schools in Nigeria. These include:

- 1.1 The ability of proprietors to be financially capable of running a school;
- 1.2 The ability to recruit and pay the workers; and
- 1.3 The ability to recruit and maintain staff including qualified graduate teachers.

The reasons for allowing the establishment of these private schools border not only on providing equal educational opportunities but also for supplementing government effort in providing quality education that will result to good academic performance. However, looking at these private schools today, it is easy for one to find out that not all of them are performing at the same level in providing quality education. In that regard, there are some private schools that are performing better than others in terms of their inputs, processes and outcomes. At the same time, there are others that are less performers, and therefore fall short of achieving the performance levels that are necessary in today's competitive environment. The first category of private schools can be regarded as 'best-in-class' while the second category may be deemed the 'less performing' private schools. The 'best-in-class' private schools have more qualified teaching staff, available and sometimes quality instructional facilities, and better infrastructure in form of physical plant facilities and recreational facilities. This is the reason

why Nigerians prefer private schools because private schools have a unique set-up. Those private schools that are 'good' are unique in the sense that they have all that students need to excel-quality teachers, good learning environment and quality infrastructure. As fee-paying educational institutions, they strive to give their students good value for the money paid.

On the other hand, the 'less performing' private schools, in many occasions, do not perform on the same level as the 'best-in-class' private secondary schools because of unavailability of poor quality infrastructure with which they operate with. For this group of schools to measure up with the 'best', they have to learn from their practices and experiences so as to identify ways they can improve on their own practices, and learn how to do things well. Based on these approaches, there is need for private schools to learn from each other so as to find out what makes one better than the other. This will enable them assess how to improve performance because in order to stay competitive, an organization needs reliable information on what and how other organizations are doing. It can also, in fact, help organizations to recognize those aspects and processes which in one's own department is lacking, in the background or do not even exist. With all these existing problems, there arises the need for benchmarking.

Benchmarking is the process of identifying, understanding and adapting outstanding practices from within the same organization or from other businesses to help improve performance. It is a tool for quality improvement in organizations and schools. Meade (1997) describes benchmarking as a formal structured process of searching for practices which lead to excellent performance. According to Mathis and Jackson (2000) benchmarking is a method of teaching an institution how to improve its quality. The roles of benchmarking in quality improvement cannot be overemphasized. It is important to encourage private UBE junior secondary schools to embark on the process of benchmarking.

Benchmarking increases potentials for improvement in numerous ways. Meade (1997) states that benchmarking provides incentive to change and assists in the setting of target goals. Its emphasis on understanding the process underlying successful practice makes it a useful tool in establishing plans and strategies for achieving educational goals. Benchmarking provides objective data to illustrate need for change in areas that need improvement and it leads to the formulation of plans and initiatives for bringing about the required improvement.

According to Alstete & Jefferey (1995) benchmarking provides a systematic approach to quality improvement and established the extent of improvement required.

It brings external focus to internal activities, that is, using the knowledge of effectiveness of a particular process learnt from outside to improve the process within thereby enabling the incorporation of best practices into one's organization or school. It helps to create a learning organization, promotes contact and networks. Benchmarking is all about quality and setting a standard which no other can beat. The term quality when used in education is seen as relative as it is with other services because of its intangible nature. It is unlike products where standard are measured and outcome seen physically.

Cole (2005) states that it is difficult to agree on a particular definition of quality. Quality according to him depends on the perspective of those concerned. An engineer like he says will tend to see quality in terms of how well the product or component fulfills its purpose. He however pointed out that quality is seen as something good and worth having. Bank (1992:14) defines quality as "fully satisfying agreed or established customer requirement at the lowest internal price". In education, quality is visible or measurable in terms of the qualitative output (student). Quality must be satisfying to the students, the parents and government as it concerns Nigerian economy with emphasis on labour force. Therefore benchmarking as a tool for improvement will enhance the desired quality in education. Benchmarking for quality education in private secondary schools will take into cognizance all that is needed in the achievement of educational goals.

These include, finance, teaching and learning facilities, manpower (teachers) environment that is climate etc. If educational managers are unable to properly harness, utilize and develop these resources, the school is bound to witness a very poor quality educational output but with benchmarking these can be checked and improved upon.

Benchmarking is inevitable in schools since school form part of the community. There has been increased awareness of parents on the usefulness of education, every parent now expects positive result on their investment in education. They desire to get the best quality of education for their children. Therefore educational managers in private secondary schools must ensure that they meet the demands of stakeholders, they have to demonstrate high standardization, and should be able to deliver what is required of them and even more. Using benchmarking, the managers will be able to achieve theses. Fife (1995) argues that benchmarking in future may not be optional. Increasing, institutions are being asked to give specific evidence concerning value of the outcomes as compared with other institutions. Fife's (1995) view is that when benchmarking is carefully used to help institutions to improve their process and systems in order to better achieve their educational mission; institutions are equipped to depend against external goals and standard that could be dysfunctional and even

destructive to an institution. Therefore benchmarking is considered as one of the tools for demonstrating achievement of appropriate standard against external reference point and for making further improvement.

Benchmarking can be enormously useful to influence and shape school's decisions. Decision making according to Stonner, Freeman and Culbert (1996) cited in Babalola & Ayeni (2009:42) is the "process of identifying and selecting a course of action to solve a specific problem". Through analyzing the best practices of peer institution then adapting and developing programmes for their own schools, school managers can improve the quality of programmes and services that they provide. Strengthening the effectiveness of a school may require altering school practices and transforming cultures that have been in existence for decades. Even the most insight and missionary principle will require as many administrative mechanism as possible to succeed, benchmarking can be one of such mechanism as all the outlined processes improve quality. Through effective use of benchmarking schools can determine the degree to which they are successful as compared with their peer group, identify areas they need to improve and develop strategies that will work best for their unique circumstances. Bender (2003) notes that practices and procedure may not be transferable from one peer to another but learning from the achievement of peer institution can be enormously valuable in strengthening existing programmes and developing new initiatives. Benchmarking process enables schools to study targets that have been achieved by others and find a possible way of improving on them. When ideas on improvement come from other schools, it is likely that resistance to change will be less and when this change is embraced quality is improved. Benchmarking enables technical breakthroughs thereby increasing quality. It raise people's experience and increases knowledge. It helps a school to identify its strengths and weaknesses and those of other organizations and then improve on their own. With benchmarking school goals, parents' goals and societal goals on education will be achieved, thereby flooding the country with quality output (graduates) who will empower the economy positively.

Benchmarking motivates team to work collaboratively internally, to surpass external benchmarks. It encourages private secondary school's management to become open to new methods, ideas, processes and practices to improve effectiveness, efficiency and performance. It helps to prioritize improvement opportunities, shifts internal thinking from input to quality output. It creates a sense of competitive and a real desire to improve. Benchmarking accelerates understanding and agreement on the new problem areas and educates on the latest practices being used and performance being achieved. Regular benchmarking encourages a culture of continuous evaluation and improvement. Benchmarking improves quality in schools by enabling schools effect radical improvement through exposing the managers to practices that they would never have developed on their own. It accelerates changes and enhances awareness of world class standard. In view of these, the researchers are bothered as to whether these roles are actualized in private Universal Basic secondary schools in Rivers State.

2. Statement of problem

The fall in the standard of secondary education has been a thing of worry to the Nigerian populace and government. This has led to drift of students abroad for qualitative education. The cause of this trend is not far-fetched as there has been outcry on poor standard and quality of education in Nigeria. The issue of quality improvement in education should be of great concern to any society. Benchmarking or rather learning from experiences of similar organizations, has come to be seen as a recognized tool in the development of continuous improvement process, as it encourages individuals to take responsibility for improvement of quality. This study sets out to examine the roles of benchmarking in private Universal Basic schools in Rivers State.

3. Purpose of study

The main purpose of the study was to specifically identify the roles of benchmarking in improving quality education in Private Universal Basic Education junior secondary schools in Rivers State.

4. Research questions

What are the roles of benchmarking in improving quality education in Universal Basic Education in private junior secondary schools in Rivers State?

5. Hypothesis

There is no significant difference between the mean rating of principals and vice principals of private UBE schools on the roles of benchmarking in improving quality education in Universal Basic Education junior secondary schools in Rivers State.

6. Delimitation of the study

The work is delimited to Private Universal Basic Education junior secondary schools in Rivers State geographically while the contents is delimited to benchmarking and improvement of quality in Private Universal Basic Education junior secondary schools in Rivers State.

7. Method

The descriptive survey design was used. The study was conducted using the 490 principals and vice principals from the 245 Private UBC schools in Rivers State. Out of the 490 principals and vice principals a sample of 250 representing 51.02% served as study participants. The sample was drawn through a stratified random sampling technique using odd and even numbers.

A self designed instrument called Benchmarking and Improvement of Quality in Private Junior UBE Secondary Schools in Rivers State Questionnaire (BIQPUBEJSS) was used for data collection. The instrument had eight (8) items relevant to the research questions and patterned after a modified likert scale rating option: 4 – strongly agreed; 3 – agreed, 2 – disagree and 1 – strongly disagreed.

The test-retest method of reliability was adopted to establish a reliability coefficient of 0.81. Data analysis involved the use of mean, standard deviation and rank order. Z test was used to give answers to the hypothesis.

8. Results

Results obtained in this study after data analysis were presented and analyzed in tables.

Research question 1

What are the roles of benchmarking in improving quality education in Private Universal Basic Education junior secondary schools in Rivers State?

Table 1: Mean and standard deviation on the roles of benchmarking

S/N	Statements	N = 167 principal			N = 83 Vice principal		
		\bar{x}	SD	Rank	\bar{x}	SD	Rank
1.	Benchmarking increases potentials	2.93	.93	3 rd	2.95	.87	5 th
2.	Benchmarking uses external focus to improve internally	2.47	1.03	6 th	2.85	.86	7 th
3.	Benchmarking promotes learning	2.27	1.00	7 th	2.89	.73	6 th
4.	Benchmarking enables institution to set standard	3.00	.09	2 nd	3.04	.82	3 rd
5.	Benchmarking enhances quality using external forces to improve internal	2.70	.94	5 th	2.96	.65	4 th
6.	Benchmarking helps to bridge gap of inefficiency	3.03	.83	1 st	3.20	.81	1 st
7.	Benchmarking influences and shapes schools decisions	2.17	.97	8 th	3.08	.96	2 nd
8.	With benchmarking educational goals are achieved	2.73	.97	4 th	2.85	.86	7 th

Table 1 shows that bridging inefficiency gap ranked 1st for both principals and vice principal with mean score and SD of (3.03, .83; 3.20, .81). Ranking 2nd for principal is benchmarking sets standard with mean score and SD of 3.00, .90 and 2nd for vice principals is benchmarking influences and shapes decision with means score of SD of (3.08, .96). The 3rd variable for principals is benchmarking increases potentials with mean score and SD of (3.04, .82). For principals the 4th, 5th and 6th ranks go to achievement educational goals, benchmarking enhances quality using external focus to improve internal with mean scores and SD of (2.75, .97) (2.70, .94) and (2.47, 1.03) similarly 4th, 5th and 6th for vice principals and benchmarking enhances quality, using external focus to improve internal and promoting of learning through benchmarking with mean score and SD of 2.96, .65, 2.97, .87 and (2.89, .75). Ranking 7th and 8th for principals are promotion of learning through benchmarking and benchmarking influence decision with mean scores and SD of (2.27, 1.00) and (2.17, .97) respectively. For vice principals, achieving educational goals and using external focus to improve internal ranked 7th with mean scores and SD of (2.85, .86) and (2.85, .86).

Table 2: z-results on roles of benchmarking

Group	N	\bar{x}	SD	DF	z-cal	z-critical	Remarks
Principal	150	21.30	3.89	248	5.150	1.96	Significant
Vice principal	100	23.82	3.61				

Table 2 shows mean scores of (21.30, 23.82) and SD of (3.89; 3.61) for principals and vice principals. The table shows a calculated z-score of 5.150 and a critical z-value of 1.96 at 248 df. Since the z-value of 150 is greater than the z-critical of 1.96, it implies that there is a significant difference between the mean scores of principals and vice principals on the roles of benchmarking in private secondary schools in Rivers State.

9. Discussion

From the analysis, it is evident that benchmarking increases potential, use external focus to improve internally, benchmarking promotes learning, it enables institution to set standard. Furthermore, findings revealed that benchmarking enhances quality, helps to bridge inefficiency gap; influences and shape school decision. Finally with benchmarking educational goals are achieved. These variables had mean of above 2.50 for both principals and vice principal were implying that the items in question were positive. It is therefore clear that benchmarking is a tool which cannot be avoided in the improvement of quality and attainment of educational goals. This finding is in line with Meade (1997) who stated that benchmarking provides incentive to change and assists in setting of target goals. He further stated that its emphasis on understanding the process underlying successful practice makes it a useful tool in establishing plans and strategies for achieving its goals.

10. Conclusion

Results of this study have shown that benchmarking plays a vital role in the improvement of quality in Private Universal Basic Education junior secondary schools in Rivers State. It is also of significant that benchmarking improves efficiency and effectiveness thereby improving standard of education in Universal Education junior secondary school in Rivers State.

11. Recommendations

The management of Private Universal Basic Education junior secondary schools should embrace benchmarking as a tool for quality improvement and attainment of educational goals. Furthermore, schools should select benchmarking partners and see them as role models. Schools in general should emulate and possibly exceed the performance of their partners as to say competitive and become the best performing school.

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