Arab Open University

Benchmarking Policy and Procedures

Policy Title:	Arab Open University Benchmarking Policy and Procedures
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Policy Monitoring and Compliance:	VPPD Office HQ Branch Rectors Quality Assurance and Accreditation Units at AOU Branches
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Note: A policy can be reviewed before the designated review date should there be a need to.

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Policy Statement

AOU is committed to providing a high quality education and to a continuous improvement and quality enhancement of its provision by adopting internal and external benchmarking processes and procedures.

The benchmarking policy is designed to fit with the purpose of AOU vision and mission. Therefore, the benchmarking policy will have a crucial role at a university level by improving and enhancing both the administrative as well as the academic practices. This will be achieved by examining processes and models at other leading universities and adopting their techniques and approaches whenever possible in order to maintain high academic standards and performance levels.

Purpose

This policy mandates how AOU will review and quality assure the standards of its academic programmes and its overall provision through a clear and transparent benchmarking procedures to compare its standing with the partner institution and other similar or leading universities. The policy will be applied in compliance with the internationally recognized Benchmarking Code of Conduct.

Goal

The main goal of benchmarking is to provide AOU managers with information from an external standard or reference point for evaluating the efficiency and effectiveness of the internal activities, practices, and processes, to make any necessary changes which lead to improve the overall performance.

Objectives

AOU will perform a regular internal and external bench marking processes by adopting standardized benchmarking methods and practices to achieve the following:

- Gain an independent perspective and significant insight about how well it compares to other regional/international universities.
- Re-examines existing policies and structures and challenges the status quo.
- Develop and articulate a standardized set of processes and statistical parameters.
- Drill down into performance gaps to identify areas for improvement.
- Promote a culture of continuous improvement and quality enhancement.
- Emulate the best performance indicators.

Scope

This policy Applies to university key provisions including management structures, academic programmes, primary and support services and relevant administrative procedures.

Responsibility

AOU senior management and respective offices are responsible for guiding and supervising the execution of the Bench marking policy.

Implementation of the Policy:

The policy is implemented throughout AOU where the relevant review processes and strategic focus areas are set out along with the appropriate approaches and operational priorities for Implementation.

Monitoring:

The responsibility for monitoring the implementation of the policy lies with the AOU Vice Presidents, Branch Directors/Rectors, Deans of Academic Programmes in collaboration with the Quality Assurance units. Respective reports are presented to the University Council (UC). The existing Quality Management processes provide for the evaluation and support for the benchmarking processes.

The policy will be revised and updated as per the AOU schedule for revisiting and updating its bylaws and policies or when deemed necessary.

Benchmarking Definition

Bench marking is "a self- improvement tool for organizations which allows them to compare themselves with others to identify their comparative strengths and weakness and learn how to improve."

It is a process of continuously comparing and measuring an organization with other leading organizations anywhere in the world to gain information, which will help the organization take action to improve its performance. (American Productivity and Quality Centre 1993).

Bench marking is considered as a diagnostic instrument, a self-improvement, a collaborative learning exercise and an ongoing evaluation and systematic approach of continuously measuring work processes. (UNESCOCEPES, 2007).

Types of Benchmarking

Consortium for excellence in Higher Education (2003) identifies seven main approaches to benchmarking:

• "Strategic Benchmarking, which used where organizations seek to improve their overall performance by focusing on specific strategies or processes;

• Performance or Competitive Benchmarking, a process where organizations use performance measures to compare themselves against similar organizations;

• Process Benchmarking, which focuses on specific processes or operations;

• Functional and Generic Benchmarking, which involves partnerships of organizations drawn from different sectors that wish to improve specific activity or process;

• External Benchmarking, which enable the comparison of the organizations functions and key processes against good practice organizations;

- Internal Benchmarking, which establishes good practice organization wide through the comparison of internal activities or operations;
- International Benchmarking, it can be undertaken internationally as well as nationally."

Benefits of Benchmarking

Referring to the Benchmarking Higher Education, the benchmarking strengthens AOU's ability to successfully:

- Reflect and Self-assess its performance as an institution
- Better understand the processes which support strategy formulation and implementation in increasingly competitive environments
- Measure and compare to the competition, i.e. how well are other higher education institutions in the sector performing, which higher education institutions are doing better and why
- Discover new ideas, looking out strategically; learn from others how to improve
- Obtain data to support decision-making with new strategic developments
- Set targets for improvement of processes and approaches in order to increase performance
- Strengthen institutional identity, strategy formulation and implementation
- Enhance reputation and better position your Institution
- Respond to national performance indicators and benchmarks
- Set new standards for the sector in the context of higher education reforms

Benchmarking Process Steps

Plan

1) *Determine the benchmark target:* AOU has to determine first the process and/or the activity it wants to improve and the level of change. The starting point for AOU to set its benchmark target will be the university profile and its capacity, its willingness to change, the availability of resources and data

needed. All these factors impact the nature and size of the benchmarking process.

1) *Determine universities to be benchmarked:* AOU will look at competitors it wants to compare itself against by identifying the best universities working in the same filed whose practices can match with AOU requirements and can be easily adopted and adapted by AOU. AOU starts by developing its competitors list, and then selects the best universities which have similar characteristics in terms of profile, size and type of activities as AOU. This will be more profitable than comparing with totally different higher education institutions.

2) *Collect data:* The implementation of this step will result in gathering data that can be used directly from other universities to enhance AOU's performance. The data will be collected through primary and/or secondary research about the colleges, universities, or other organizations being studied. At the end of this stage the AOU will have a complete, accurate and relevant data against which it compares its own processes with the best universities.

Analyze

4) *Determine the gap:* This step involves analyzing the data collected, discovering to what degree the present performance lags behind the best practice in each area and combining the best features from the best practices into an ideal process. At this point, the differences or gaps in performance between the universities being benchmarked will be identified.

5) *Determine future trends:* This step allows setting a target of what AOU wants to achieve and timeframes for getting there. During this step, AOU team will examine the past performance in relation to its competitors, forecast potential change and project future performance. Upon completing this step AOU will have identified the benefits of implementing the proposed benchmarking changes.

Integrate

6) *Share results:* To keep the team involved AOU has to share and communicate the benchmarking information and results with its staff in order to motivate them to carry out changes. This also helps set the standards and show the team what is expected of them in the implementation phase.

7) *Establish goals:* This step involves revising goals to close the performance gap determined and achieving consensus on those goals. AOU has to establish clear goals that its management approves and that all employees understand.

Action

8) *Develop Action Plans:* Develop an Action Plan that works with the goals and timelines that AOU has established for its team. Use the Action Plan to clarify to each member of the team what is expected of them and the critical success factors associated with these targets.

9) *Implement plans and monitor results:* This step involves executing the approved best-practice procedures and the day-to-day monitoring of changes. This step will result in a closely watched process in which deviations from the plan will be corrected and the ultimate goals achieved.

10) *Recalibrate benchmarks:* The purpose of recalibration is to adjust and update the benchmarks to assure that AOU has based and used the best methods and practices in its benchmarking process.

Arab Open University Benchmarking Practices

Internal Benchmarking:

The AOU already adopts an internal benchmarking among its branches/ campuses, by applying the good practices concept across its Nine branches, in order to spread excellence throughout. AOU encourages such kind of collaboration between branches because it leads to exchange of experience and knowledge between staff members in addition, it spreads the teamwork spirit across the branches and enhances collegiate cooperation among staff.

External Benchmarking:

AOU is involved to some extent in a number of activities of external benchmarking as follows:

- Identifying and importing good practices from its partner, the Open University-United Kingdom (OU UK) and disseminating these practices across its academic programmes and relevant administrative processes.
- Benchmarking its Examination & Assessment strategies and the relevant practices with that of Higher Education Providers in the United Kingdom.
- Benchmarking its students academic standards in terms of performance (progression& retention and achievements of LO) with UK universities through its external examining system.
- Benchmarking its overall provision across campuses and academic programmes through an annual evaluation process (AMR).
- Mapping of its core practices for expectations for standards and expectations for quality with the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA)-UK Quality Code in the following themes:
- Admission, Recruitment and Widening Access
- Course Design and Development
- Concerns, Complaints and Appeals
- External Expertise
- Learning and Teaching
- Enabling Student Achievement
- Students'Engagement
- Examination and Assessment
- Monitoring and Evaluation

AOU will focus on its future benchmarking activities into selecting universities that are known to be the best in their class. This helps AOU to compare its current practices and operations with leading universities to determine current and future trends in its performance.

Acknowledgement

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