ACHIEVING QUALITY THROUGH BENCHMARKING IN ODL INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER LEARNING: 
A CASE STUDY OF ODL INSTITUTIONS IN THE SADC REGION

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A THESIS SUBMITTED IN FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

TO
ZIMBABWE OPEN UNIVERSITY

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JUNE 2014
Abstract

There was a lot of interaction about benchmarking in institutions of higher learning, but there seemed to be no clarity on whether these institutions shared an understanding of the benchmarking concept. There also did not seem to be a clear comprehension of what criteria the institutions employed to measure benchmarking as a determinant of quality in higher education. This lack of clarity motivated the study, and the motivation was irrevocably strengthened by the encouragement some governments and international organisations made to their national institutions of higher learning to adopt benchmarking as a quality enhancement mechanism. The qualitative paradigm was adopted as it enabled the researcher to carry out an in-depth interrogation of benchmarking practices in the study. The case study method facilitated the researcher’s interaction with the benchmarking phenomenon within the context of the institution. The population of the study was composed of all the ODL institutions in the SADC region, from which a sample of three institutions, from three countries, was chosen. An average of five participants was purposively selected from each institution because they possessed the required data and these came from the ranks of Senior Management, Middle Management and Lower Management. The researcher used in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, document analysis and observation to generate the requisite data. The generated data were coded, analysed and interpreted to arrive at findings and conclusions. The three institutions consciously practised benchmarking. However, the institutions practised a different type of benchmarking from the approaches contained in the review of related literature. The employees of one institution visited other institutions on staff exchange programmes, as assessors and markers and to attend academic gatherings at which information, experiences and new insights were shared. The institutions belonged to professional associations for collaborative benchmarking purposes and shared a common understanding of benchmarking. It was concluded that the three institutions of higher learning consciously practised benchmarking but the practice was not formalised and not documented, leading to the absence of a feedback loop. As a way forward, the three institutions, and others, needed to formalise and institutionalise their benchmarking practices, and create a feedback loop.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I sincerely and eternally acknowledge the assistance I was given by my two supervisors: Professor T. Modesto and Professor B.C. Chisaka. Their generosity of spirit carried me through the Mt. Everest of study. Many times I ran short of breath and they unconditionally supplied the oxygen (Psalm 37:23 - 24).
DEDICATION

I dedicate this study to my father, whose sight was taken away from him before I could visually show him the bound thesis.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract ................................................................................................................................. ii
Acknowledgement .................................................................................................................. iii
Dedication .............................................................................................................................. iv
List of Tables .......................................................................................................................... ix
List of figures ......................................................................................................................... x
Appendices ............................................................................................................................ x
Chapter 1 ................................................................................................................................. 1
INTRODUCTION ......................................................................................................................... 1
  1.1 Introduction ...................................................................................................................... 1
  1.2 Background to the study ................................................................................................. 4
  1.3 Statement of the problem ............................................................................................... 9
  1.4 Research questions ....................................................................................................... 10
  1.5 Objectives of the study ............................................................................................... 11
  1.6 Purpose of the study ................................................................................................. 11
  1.7 Assumptions of the study ............................................................................................ 11
  1.8 Significance of the study ............................................................................................. 12
  1.9 Delimitation of the study ............................................................................................ 13
  1.10 Limitations of the study ............................................................................................. 13
  1.11 Conceptual framework .............................................................................................. 14
  1.12 Theoretical framework ............................................................................................... 15
  1.13 Definition of terms and constructs .......................................................................... 16
      1.13.1 Benchmarking ........................................................................................................ 16
      1.13.2 Performance ........................................................................................................... 16
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY ........................................................................................................ 87

3.1 Introduction .................................................................................................................. 87

3.2 Epistemological considerations ................................................................................ 88

3.3 The interpretive research approach .......................................................................... 90

3.4 The case study strategy ........................................................................................... 96

3.5 Population ............................................................................................................... 99

3.6 Sample and sampling procedure ............................................................................ 100

3.7 Data generation techniques ................................................................................... 102

3.7.1 Interview .......................................................................................................... 104

3.7.2 Focus group discussion ..................................................................................... 107

3.7.3 Document analysis ........................................................................................... 108

3.7.4 Observation ...................................................................................................... 110

3.8 Trustworthiness ...................................................................................................... 112

3.9 Data analysis, interpretation and presentation ...................................................... 114

3.10 Summary .............................................................................................................. 118

Chapter 4 ..................................................................................................................................... 120

DATA PRESENTATION, ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION ................................................. 120

4.1 Introduction ............................................................................................................. 120

4.2 Background information of the participants and institutions .................................. 121

4.3 Emic perspectives: themes emerging from empirical data ..................................... 126

4.3.1 Core themes that emerged from the study .......................................................... 126

4.3.2 Themes on the meaning of benchmarking ......................................................... 127

4.3.3 Themes on the conscious practice of benchmarking ......................................... 138

4.3.4 Themes on collaborative benchmarking ............................................................ 145
4.3.5 Themes on quality indicators of a benchmarked institution ................................. 155
4.3.6 Themes on objective benchmarking practice........................................................ 162
4.4 Themes emerging from the review of related literature .............................................. 170
4.5 Analysis and interpretation of empirical and theoretical data...................................... 172
4.6 Gaps identified in this study......................................................................................... 177

Chapter 5..................................................................................................................................... 182

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND WAY FORWARD........................................................ 182

5.1 Introduction .................................................................................................................. 182
5.2 Summary ...................................................................................................................... 184
5.2.1 Summary of the review of related literature ......................................................... 184
5.2.2 Summary of empirical study.................................................................................. 191
5.2.3 Congruence and contradiction of perceptions....................................................... 194
5.3 Conclusions .................................................................................................................. 203
5.4 Way forward ................................................................................................................. 214

Appendices.................................................................................................................................. 233

LIST OF TABLES
Table 3.1. Methodological perspective of the study .......................................................... 89
Table 4.1 Chief Executive Officer, Deputy and Deans- Senior Management.................... 122
Table 4.2 Professors - Middle Management........................................................................ 123
Table 4.3 Lecturers – Lower Management ........................................................................ 124
Table 4.4 Interview guide ..................................................................................................... 169
LIST OF FIGURES
Figure 2.1. Benchmarking model .................................................................................................. 71
Figure 2.2 Trade benchmarking methodology .............................................................................. 74

APPENDICES
Appendix 1: Interview guide ...................................................................................................... 233
Appendix 2: DUFG8 ..................................................................................................................... 234
Appendix 3 Request an interview on benchmarking ................................................................. 236
Appendix 4 OUFG9 .................................................................................................................... 237
Appendix 5 Memorandum .......................................................................................................... 239
Appendix 6 ODL .......................................................................................................................... 240
Appendix 7 ODLFG5 .................................................................................................................. 244
Appendix 8 DU ............................................................................................................................ 245
Appendix 9 OU ............................................................................................................................ 251
Appendix 10 ODL1 .................................................................................................................... 255
Appendix 11 ODL2 .................................................................................................................... 257
Appendix 12 ODL3 .................................................................................................................... 259
Appendix 13 ODL4 .................................................................................................................... 261
Appendix 14 DU1 ....................................................................................................................... 263
Appendix 15 DU2 ....................................................................................................................... 266
Appendix 16 DU3 ....................................................................................................................... 269
Appendix 17 DU4 ....................................................................................................................... 272
Appendix 18 DU5 ....................................................................................................................... 276
Appendix 19 DU6 ....................................................................................................................... 278
Appendix 20 DU7 ....................................................................................................................... 280
Acronyms
ODL  Open and Distance Learning
SADC  Southern African Development Community
OU  Open University
DU  Distance University
UNESCO United Nations Education and Scientific Cooperation
AUUA  African Union of Universities Association
DEASA  Distance Education Association of Southern Africa
VSSC  Virtual University of the Small States of the Commonwealth
ICT  Information and Communication Technology
OUT  Open University of Tanzania
UNZA  University of Zambia
OUK  Open University of United Kingdom
MOODLE  Modular Object Oriented Dynamic Learning
UK  United Kingdom
OUM  Open University of Malaysia
RD  Regional Director
SWOT  Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats
ACDE  African Council of Distance Education
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td>NAMCOL</td>
<td>Namibia College of Open Learning</td>
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<tr>
<td>RIM</td>
<td>Review and Improvement Model</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SARUA</td>
<td>Southern Africa Regional Universities Association</td>
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<tr>
<td>UNISA</td>
<td>University of South Africa</td>
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<tr>
<td>MOU</td>
<td>Memorandum of Understanding</td>
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<tr>
<td>IGNOU</td>
<td>Indira Gandhi National Open University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>QA</td>
<td>Quality Assurance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BSC</td>
<td>Balanced Score Card</td>
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<tr>
<td>MBA</td>
<td>Management Business Administration</td>
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

The World Bank (2010) stated that education was one of the most powerful instruments with which to reduce poverty and to lay the basis for a nation’s sustainable economic growth. Higher education, in particular, was a key factor in a nation’s effort to develop a highly educated, highly skilled and competitive workforce. Education contributed towards the reduction in inequality and improved performance, through increased private and public investment, which increased a nation’s earnings and savings, and led to an informed and participatory society. A society whose members were highly educated in business, science and technology possessed political leaders who influenced and expanded opportunities for national development. The World Bank (2010) proceeded to point out that issues of quality were central in the provision of higher education and recommended the adoption of benchmarking practices by institutions of higher learning. National governments in the continents of North America, Europe and Australasia exhorted their institutions of higher learning to adopt benchmarking, as a self-improvement and self-regulation mechanism. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (1998) also encouraged its members and member states to adopt benchmarking. A number of national professional associations were formed to assist in formalising and institutionalising benchmarking practices in institutions of higher learning (www.globalbenchmarking.org). Bogan and English (1994) revealed that benchmarking was the only improvement mechanism recommended by the Business Excellence Framework which existed in over eighty different countries. Benchmarking eventuated in sustainable quality and performance improvement. The researcher concurred with Prasad and Stella (2006) who observed that higher education, an international service, was accompanied by a growing concern about quality and standards in its provision. The World Bank (2010) stated that a benchmarking approach for higher education needed to include a mixture of input, process, output, and outcome indicators in order for it to
produce accurate and comprehensive results. Such an approach presented several advantages: it contributed to the formulation of informed and collaborative strategies concerning the determination of priorities for improving higher education systems and institutions; the establishment and communication of shared priorities for change; the provision to policy makers of a tool with which to compare their higher education systems against internationally accepted standards; and allowed stakeholders to play a more active role in the improvement of institutional and system-wide performance. These merits of benchmarking persuaded the researcher to undertake this study in order to determine the state of benchmarking in open and distance institutions in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) nations.

There was no benchmarking study dedicated to open and distance learning institutions, according to Vught, Brandenburg, Burquet, Carr, Federkil, Rafael, Sadlak, Urban, and Wells (2010), among the existing studies on benchmarking in institutions of higher learning. The current study was meant to fill that identified gap.

The researcher agreed with the sentiment expressed by Garlic and Pryor (2004), and strongly supported by the World Bank (2010), that a large part of the higher education sector throughout the world adopted benchmarking because it was a business management mechanism for achieving and sustaining quality learning and teaching in institutions of higher education. In business, benchmarking improved any given venture by implementing and exploiting “best practices”, rather than merely measuring the best performance. Benchmarking promoted the emergence and evolution of a “learning culture” throughout the practising institution, and as such, provided the impetus for continuous long-term improvement and competitiveness (www.bpir.com). There were two broad objectives for benchmarking in every institution: it was a means of assessing the quality and cost performance of an institution’s practices and processes within its context, or in the context of a “best practice” comparison. Second, and more importantly, it could be used as a continuous assessment management tool focused on learning, collaboration and leadership and aimed at achieving continuous improvement in the institution over a given period of time (http://www.ozemail.com.au/). It was pertinent to always remember that higher education was divided into two broad modes: open and distance learning and
conventional education. In conventional education the students were resident at an institution of higher education, whereas in open and distance learning students learnt from wherever they were and at whatever time they wanted to learn.

The quality of conventional university education was mainly reflected in the teaching and learning aspects and covered a broad range of areas. The concerns about quality were more intimately felt in open and distance learning (ODL) institutions than in conventional institutions of higher learning (See § 2.6, for explanation of quality). Students in an open and distance learning institution enjoyed the freedom to learn from anywhere, at any time and using a variety of media sources, which vexed practitioners who desired to enhance quality. The need to attain quality in open and distance education was central and should be pursued vigorously. The proliferation of open and distance education proved the reality that the ODL institutions should invest heavily in providing quality education. The ODL institutions should prove their competitiveness when benchmarked against conventional institutions whose students were resident and held formal lectures. The current study sought to empirically explore the issue of benchmarking as an instrument that enhanced the quality of education and the performance improvement practices in open and distance learning institutions. The employment of a full complement of highly educated and learned professionals to manage institutional education was not, in itself, a guarantee of quality service and products. There was definitely more to the attainment of quality education than the provision of professional staff and the deployment of requisite resources.

The following sections presented a persuasive argument as to why the investigation was worth the time and effort. The sections started with a background to the study, the statement of the problem, the purpose of the study and the significance of the study. A theoretical framework of the study was presented and explained, followed by a brief review of related literature and ended with a section on methodology. The primary question of the study was:

i. To what extent did the three open and distance learning (ODL) institutions consciously practice benchmarking?
1.2 Background to the study

The background to the study was premised on the understanding that benchmarking eventuated in institutional performance improvement and the enhancement of quality education (Moriarty, 2011). In the opinion expressed by Harvey (2011), benchmarking was a process of setting standards against which quality could be measured or a process of identifying and learning from good practice from other institutions. That opinion was strengthened by Benneworth (2010) who argued that benchmarking had proved to be a contemporary approach which contributed information and strategies on how institutions moved towards being autonomous and competitive public bodies, which used public funds effectively and efficiently. The last word on why benchmarking was such an important mechanism in institutional improvement initiatives came from Jackson (2001) who said benchmarking was driven by the desire to learn and to understand, which led to improvement, change and innovation in an institution. An institution had to be committed to the object of its own improvement and it had to adhere to self-improvement processes based on benchmarking. The researcher desired to establish if this was the case with the three institutions of higher learning in the study.

The governments of countries in the three continents of North America, Europe and Australasia, according to Lutfullayev (2001), encouraged their institutions of higher learning to adopt benchmarking as a self-improvement and self-regulation mechanism. The contention was that benchmarking enhanced the quality of education and the performance of institutions through a process of continuous learning, measurement, comparison and an evaluation of strengths and weakness of an institution, from which the improvement strategies were based. Further exhortation emanated from UNESCO (1998) which encouraged its members and member states to adopt benchmarking. In the African continent the Distance Education Association of Southern Africa (DEASA), the African Union of Universities Association (AUUA) and the Virtual University of the Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC), a partnership of thirty-two institutions, all encouraged their members to adopt benchmarking. To me, the researcher, it was inconceivable that these countries and continents encouraged their institutions of higher learning
without irrefutable proof and conviction that benchmarking was a self-improvement, self-regulation and quality enhancing mechanism, *par excellence*. The encouragement was conclusive proof of the efficacy of benchmarking. The researcher’s motivation was to establish the state and extent of benchmarking in the open and distance learning institutions in Africa, in general, and in the SADC region, in particular.

A brief perusal of the historical development literature on benchmarking revealed that it was a quality enhancement and performance improvement mechanism in institutions of higher education, whose roots were firmly planted in industry but its off-shoots flourished in education. A study by Jackson (2001) explained that, as a process for self-evaluation, benchmarking was introduced to higher education institutions in North America in the early 1990s (Alstete, 1995 and Farquhar, 1998), and was closely followed by Australia (Massaro, 1998). From North America benchmarking was adopted in the United Kingdom (Lund, 1998; QAA 1998a and 1998b; Jackson and Lund, 2000a). The practice of benchmarking was introduced next in the continent of Europe (Schreiterr, 1998). In due course these continental benchmarking initiatives were transformed into international benchmarking processes and agreements and these took place in the mid-1990s (Wragg, 1998; Fielden and Carr, 2000; Mackie, 2000). Africa was the last continent to introduce benchmarking with Kenya apparently in the lead, (Magutu, Mbeche, Nyamwange and Nyaoga, 2011). Apart from the single article on benchmarking in Kenya there did not seem to be any written literature on benchmarking in the continent of Africa. By undertaking the current study the researcher decided to establish the status of benchmarking in open and distance learning institutions in Africa and to contribute to literature on benchmarking in Africa.

The researcher was in total agreement with Achim, Cabulea, Mihalache and Popa (2009) when they succinctly portrayed the nature of benchmarking. They explained that institutions of higher education possessed the eagerness to learn from each other and to share aspects of good practice through benchmarking. The institutions emphasised collegiality and the recognition of the centrality of benchmarking in international education and that desire to improve manifested itself in professional associations, which were both academic and non-academic in nature. The
professional associations met to share common interests, and undertook many visits from one institution to another to learn what practices sister institutions were involved in. The professional bodies worked collaboratively with other institutions in supporting academic provision and articulating academic and other standards, or benchmarks. The members of staff of the institutions participated in assessing quality standards and accreditation systems. All these initiatives depended on the goodwill that existing in institutions, which allowed their staff to take part as external examiners and assessors of examinations and programmes in other institutions. It was through these collaborative benchmarking initiatives and comparisons that the performance of the institutions improved and the quality standards were raised (See § 4.3, for empirical evidence). The researcher wanted to ascertain if the three institutions in the study practised benchmarking for the improvement of institutional quality and performance, as enunciated in this paragraph (See § 5.3, for conclusion).

The present study singled out three institutions of open and distance learning (ODL) for an in-depth investigation into benchmarking as it related to the provision of quality higher education. These institutions offered tertiary programmes and aspired to provide world-class qualifications. The researcher appreciated and acknowledged that institutional benchmarking was generally in its infancy, and could even be so in the institutions under study. There were no databases of practice and performance available against which comparison could be made among the institutions. At the time of the study, benchmarking was almost unknown in the three SADC countries because there was no evidence contained in any literature in the public domain (See § 2.22, for identified gaps). There was no information on benchmarking either in the libraries, in local discourse or on the internet, pertaining to local institutions practising benchmarking. The study was in acknowledgement and support of the position taken by Benneworth (2010), who encouraged the development of benchmarking, and its principles and practices; encouraged the institutionalisation and formalisation of the benchmarking practice in institutions of higher learning; and, encouraged the popularisation of the benchmarking practice by inculcating a culture of continuous improvement in the institutions of higher learning.
The core business of an institution was to promote learning by offering a wide range of degree and diploma programmes through its faculties. Institutional governance reposed in the Vice Chancellor, assisted by Pro Vice Chancellors, Professors, Lecturers, and auxiliary personnel (See § 3.6, for sample). The executive superintended over the implementation of the educational mandate, namely, recruiting students, promoting programmes, conducting tutorials, as well as interfacing with stakeholders. The researcher, assisted by Sayeda, Rajendran and Lokachari (2010), argued that it was the responsibility of senior management in any institution of higher learning to create the vision, institute relevant processes and allocate the resources for the achievement of institutional goals. The top management’s role in an educational institution pertained to its committed guidance of the institution and to effectively deploy the available human and technical resources in order to achieve enhanced performance and productivity.

The issues concerning quality were housed in professional bodies that were set up by the governments for that purpose, in the countries of the three institutions of higher learning. This was a reaction to the divergent and disparate performance standards that prevailed in the higher education sector. The programmes and programme requirements differed from one institution to the other. For instance, the prevalence of many standards resulted in the suspension of three programmes at one of the three institutions of higher learning in 2011 when a regulatory authority was formed to set common standards. The Bachelor of Education degree at one institution was judged to be comparable to a Diploma in Education at another institution which led to questions being asked about its authenticity, suitability and relevance. The Bachelor of Education degree seemed to disadvantage the holders because the Public Service Commission, the civil service employer, had failed to promote anyone to the position of Head of School on the basis of that qualification. It appeared that the institution offering that qualification had not benchmarked the programme against a similar degree programme from any of the sister institutions available to determine its comparability for promotion and other purposes. The Bachelor of Science and the Master of Science in Counselling degrees at the same institution were also suspended apparently on the basis that they had not been benchmarked against similar qualifications at similar institutions in the region. The suspensions were lifted in 2013 when the programmes were brought to the level of comparability with similar programmes elsewhere. It
was instructive to note that the benchmarking practice formed the basis for a standardised and comparable yardstick in the institutions of higher learning when formulating academic courses and programmes. This experience fortified the researcher’s resolve to popularise the benchmarking concept in institutions of higher learning, through this study.

Jackson and Lund (2000b) defined benchmarking as a learning process whose structure enabled those applying the practice of benchmarking to compare their services, activities and products in order to identify their comparative strengths and weaknesses, which formed the basis for self-improvement and self-regulation. This was the definition adopted for the purpose of this study. Camp (1989) defined benchmarking as a process of self-evaluation and self-improvement through the methodical and collaborative comparison of practice and performance with competitors. The aim was to identify an institution’s strengths and weaknesses, and learn how to adopt and adapt the strengths and implement them in order to improve the quality of education at an underperforming institution. This same definition was adopted by Spendolini (1992) as part of a quality enhancement movement, and many players in commerce and industry also adopted the definition in their quest for quality products and services. Spendolini (1992) defined benchmarking as a continuous and methodical process for evaluating the products, services and the performance of institutions that were recognised as representing ‘best practices’ for the purpose of institutional improvement. It was clear from the above definitions that benchmarking offered a method of identifying ‘better and smarter’ ways of working and enabled an institution to understand why certain processes of working were better and smarter than others. The definitions tied in with the objective of benchmarking, as expressed by Garlick and Pryor (2008), who stated that the benchmarking practice could be used as a continuous evaluative management mechanism focused on learning, collaboration and leadership to achieve continuous performance improvement in an institution. The concepts that linked all these definitions were: continuous learning; self-evaluation; self-improvement; and best practice (See § 4.2, for empirical concepts).

Quality assurance was defined Harman (2000) as the management of an institution’s affairs in a methodical manner and the ability to assess procedures adopted by higher education institutions in order to monitor and evaluate performance against objectives, and to ensure the achievement
of quality education through quality performance improvements. Quality assurance facilitated the recognition of standards and awards, served the purpose of public responsibility and accountability, helped inform students when they made their choices, contributed to improved teaching/learning, improved administrative processes, and helped spread “best practices” to other institutions with the goal of leading to the improvement in the higher education system, as a whole. The setting of common standards and evaluation criteria, however, took into account the diversity and plurality of higher education within national, as well as regional systems. Institutions of higher education were challenged by Harman (2000) to develop new visions and new forms of collaboration across institutions and nations to guide the provision of higher education in the institutions. The term 'quality assessment,' manifested in common methods, methodologies and elements which included: the formation of a national coordinating body; institutional self-evaluation; external evaluation by academic peers, who could be external assessors and external markers; and public and published reports. Four main types of "quality values" by Belawati and Zuhairi (2007), which underpinned different approaches to quality assurance were the academic, managerial, pedagogic, and employment focus. The review of related literature fully developed the concepts of quality and benchmarking as they related to open and distance learning institutions (See § 2.2 and § 2.5, for full discussion).

1.3 Statement of the problem

The trend in most institutions of higher learning in all the continents of the world, except in Africa, was to enhance the quality of the education they offered and to improve the performance of the institutions, through benchmarking. The researcher, in sympathy with the World Bank (2010), recognised and appreciated the centrality of quality enhancement and performance improvement in education, especially in open and distance learning institutions. The researcher acknowledged that education was the most powerful instrument in reducing and, eventually, eradicating poverty and it set nations on a path of sustainable economic growth. The World Bank (2010) recommended to institutions of higher education to adopt benchmarking as a quality enhancement and performance improvement mechanism. The researcher felt challenged to carry out a study to ascertain the status of benchmarking in institutions of higher education as a way of
assisting the same institutions to formalise and institutionalise the practice of benchmarking in Africa, where little discernable progress in applying benchmarking seemed to have been achieved.

A perusal of past studies seemed to concur with Garlick and Pryor (2004) that there seemed to be no record of a benchmarking study dedicated to open and distance learning (ODL) institutions.

There seemed to be a lot of interaction about benchmarking in higher education, but it was not clear whether there was a shared understanding of that concept by key stakeholders. Further, it struck the researcher that there did not seem to be a clear understanding of what criteria the institutions used to measure benchmarking as a determinant of quality higher education. This problem motivated the researcher to explore those areas in which there were uncertainties, as well as to address gaps in the literature on benchmarking. The motivation was irrevocably strengthened by the encouragement some governments and international organisations made to their national institutions of higher learning to adopt benchmarking as a quality enhancement mechanism (See § 1.2, for explanation).

1.4 Research questions

The primary question was:

i. To what extent did the three ODL institutions of higher learning consciously practise benchmarking?

The subsidiary questions were:

i. How could benchmarking, within the context of an ODL institution, be ascertained objectively?

ii. How could quality indicators be used in a benchmarked ODL institution?

ii. Why should the three ODL institutions of higher learning employ the collaborative benchmarking practice?

iii. How did the three ODL institutions of higher learning define benchmarking?
1.5 Objectives of the study

The key objective was:

i. To systematically document the benchmarking practices in the three ODL institutions of higher learning.

The subsidiary objectives were to:

i. Explicate the use of quality indicators in a benchmarked ODL institution.
ii. Address gaps identified in the review of related literature.
iii. Explain the benefits of collaborative benchmarking in an ODL institution.
iv. Explore the definitions of benchmarking

1.6 Purpose of the study

The purpose was to explore the reality of benchmarking in three open and distance learning institutions, and to ascertain its status as a quality and performance improvement mechanism in higher education.

1.7 Assumptions of the study

The researcher assumed that the purposively selected participants in each institution would cooperate fully with the researcher throughout the data generation process.

The second assumption the researcher made was that data generated during the data generation process would be sufficient to produce an accurate and authentic benchmarking status of the three institutions of higher learning.

It was also assumed that the three institutions were conscious of the need to provide quality education, but may not have had a common understanding of benchmarking and of how to
ensure such quality was attained. It was further assumed that the leadership would want to support the study as part of a broader strategy to achieve quality in higher education.

1.8 Significance of the study

The benchmarking study provided the institutions with the capability to set targets for self-improvement, strengthen institutional identity, enhance institutional reputation, respond to national performance indicators and continually set new standards for its own use and for the use of the sector of higher education. The study gave the institutions the knowledge that enabled them to understand their core processes better and enabled them to measure performance, compare the performance to that of the best performing institutions, identity quantified performance gaps and devise strategies for implementation with which to close the identified gaps. The study enabled each institution to be able to strengthen strategy formulation and its deployment in a more systematic process. Additionally, and equally importantly, the study contributed to the scarce literature on benchmarking within the context of the SADC higher education scenario.

The three institutions of higher learning were enabled to formalise benchmarking as a determinant of quality improvement and a mechanism for comparable analysis for self-improvement, as a result of the study. The institutions, which may not be employing benchmarking practices, were encouraged to adopt the institutional improvement mechanism. Benchmarking exposed institutions to mechanisms for the adoption of better practices, the adaptation of the “better practices” to suit local conditions for their implementation.

The researcher benefited from the study by acquiring a higher qualification.
1.9 Delimitation of the study

The investigation was a case study of three open and distance learning (ODL) institutions and it focused on the benchmarking of quality education and performance improvement in the institution.

The three open and distance learning institutions were resident in three different countries of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region. Their names were changed to pseudonyms to protect their confidentiality and the trust of participants. The pseudonyms used were: the Open University (OU), the Distance University (DU) and the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) institution. The names of the three countries were withheld and no pseudonyms were given since each country in the SADC region had one open and distance learning institution. It would have been easy for readers to connect the pseudonym to the only ODL institution in each country. The international flavour of the study made it a unique investigation (cf. Chapter 2).

1.10 Limitations of the study

An international investigation posed some challenges to the study in terms of data generation. The researcher went through the processes of immigration and was not allowed a long stay in the country of study, which resulted in a short stay at each institution for the purpose of data generation, but daily contact was maintained through the internet. The challenges of travelling and accommodation were felt but they did not negatively affect the data generation exercise. The researcher properly planned all the travel and accommodation issues and was able to generate enough data to produce a credible and accurate reflection of the benchmarking practice at each of the three institutions. The researcher was assisted at each of the three institutions by personnel in the Chief Executive Officer’s office, which made the data generation process a smooth, well-oiled and successful activity.
1.11 Conceptual framework

The concept of benchmarking came from the work done by Camp (1989) who explicated benchmarking as a way of self-evaluation and self-improvement. The self-evaluation came about through the methodical and collaborative comparison of the quality of a product or service in order for an institution of higher learning to identify its own strengths and weaknesses, and learn the science of how to improve in an environment of continuous turbulence. Jackson and Lund (2000b) proffered concepts associated with benchmarking and these were: learning process, comparison of services, activities and products, comparative strengths and weaknesses, self-improvement and self-regulation. The other concepts were: collaboration, continuous improvement, and performance gap analysis and quality enhancement. These concepts clearly illustrated the meaning and scope of benchmarking.

When benchmarking was introduced to the field of higher education, it was known to be able to enhance the quality of the education an institution attained and to increase the institution’s ability to perform in order to fulfill its mandate. The ability of the institution to identify a gap in its performance was derived from its ability to evaluate its performance and its ability to compare that performance with the performance of comparable institutions. The concept of “gap analysis” became central and critical to the study of benchmarking.

The study was guided by these concepts and the relationship between benchmarking and each of these concepts was noted to be very strong; there would be no benchmarking where there was no comparison of quality, performance and products and services; comparison revealed a gap in quality or performance and the strengths of the better performing institution. The institution producing better quality products was identified and the practice was adopted by the institution experiencing inferior quality or underperforming, which had a gap. Collaborative benchmarking was found to lead to a situation where the institutions shared information in order to close any existing performance gap, at institution level.
1.12 Theoretical framework

The study adopted the five phases benchmarking model by Garlick and Pryor (2004) because of its unique qualities in such an investigation, its simplicity and clarity. The model facilitated continuous and constant feedback, enabled the institution to self-evaluate and self-improve its processes and was characterised by a learning capability. The learning capability was the most important characteristic because it rendered the benchmarking process sustainable (See § 2.16.1, for a discussion of the model)

The theoretical framework from Garlick and Pryor (2004) identified five phases in the benchmarking process or cycle. The model was related to the TRADE Methodologies, which helped clarify aspects from the Garlick and Pryor (2004). The process started with a thorough review of the obtaining situation and the environment as it related to the targeted function. This was followed by a strategic planning process, which included all key stakeholders. The purpose was to share an understanding of the benchmarking process. The programme for the implementation of an improvement plan was made possible with resource commitment from senior management, as explained in the background section. A process of review to establish the degree to which improvement occurred then followed. An external and internal evaluation in accordance with quality standards set in the process provided information on the implementation of the improvement programme. The fourth phase involved an assessment of the quality of higher education at the three top ranks of the institution. The recognition that learning from previous phases could lead to further improved approaches in a continuous process was made. The last phase, which was supported by Illie, Maftei and Colibasanu (2011), supported the establishment of indicators of reference, and it was based on the actual need of support coming from higher education institutions in developing and implementing effective and efficient internal systems of quality assurance.

The theoretical framework was supported by Prasad and Stella (2006) who argued that benchmarking was an improvement mechanism that facilitated the measurement of quality and performance. They said that when an institution desired to bridge the gap between where it was
and where it aspired to be, it implemented the benchmarking practice and, at the end of the implementation, it could still resort to the same benchmarking tools to measure the outcome of its enhanced performance. The researchers used seven criteria of university performance and divided each of the criteria into a number of indicators of best practice which contributed to the efficiency and effectiveness of the institutional functions. An evaluation of each of these indicators represented a judgement on the performance of the institution, which was used to rate the institution against other institutions, based on the similar indicators.

1.13 Definition of terms and constructs

In this study key words that were either peculiar or esoteric to benchmarking or unique in this investigation were defined in accordance with how the researcher intended them to be understood. The definitions were not necessarily according to dictionary usage.

1.13.1 Benchmarking

Jackson and Lund (2000b) defined benchmarking as a process of learning which was meant to enable the institutions engaged in the benchmarking exercise to compare their practices/processes/services/activities/products in order to identify their comparative strengths and weaknesses and use the comparison as a basis for self improvement and/or self-regulation.

1.13.2 Performance

The result obtained from some process, in the form of products and services that permitted the institution to evaluate and compare the products and services in relation to goals, standards, past results, and those of other institutions.

1.13.3 Measurement

Numerical information that quantified input, output and performance characteristics of processes, products, services, and the overall institution and it enabled the comparison of performance.
1.13.4 Performance indicators

Measurable outcomes that indicated the level of performance at each step in the benchmarking process. A baseline was set for initial performance and was used as a measure of future success.

1.13.5 Change management

Change was an alteration in the way things were done in any setting (Murthy, 2007). Change management was how the change process was implemented and controlled to make it manageable and successful.

1.13.6 Quality

Quality in any form was defined as how a product or service was able to provide the intended result, especially in an institutional function (McKinnon, Walker and Davis, 2000).

1.13.7 Performance measurement

This was a process for the collection and reporting of information regarding the performance of an individual, group or institution (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/).

1.13.8 Benchmark

A benchmark was an identification of attributes of good practice in a functional area (McKinnon, Walker and Davis, 2000). A benchmark was an indicator or a standard set to measure the level of accomplishment.
1.13.9 World class

A world class performance was the standard of performance that compared favourably with the same standards obtaining at similar institutions and/or organisations in the world.

1.14 Chapter layout and constructs

The thesis was composed of five chapters and laid out as follows:

1.14.1 Chapter 1

The problem of the study was articulated in the first chapter of the thesis. The conceptual and theoretical frameworks were also explicated in this chapter. The chapter contained the background to the study and the preliminary components of the study.

1.14.2 Chapter 2

In this chapter the researcher narrated the historical background of benchmarking and the studies other researchers undertook, which informed this one. The nature of benchmarking was outlined and gaps that informed this study were identified. The second chapter set out the parameters and the focus of the research.

1.14.2 Chapter 3

The methodological issues pertaining to the study were explicated, which explained the process of data generation, analysis and interpretation. The philosophical perspective informing the study was articulated and supported by citations of prominent scholars in the discipline.
1.14.4 Chapter 4

The findings to the study were discussed. Each of the research questions was considered on the basis of responses of each institution of higher learning. The emic perspective formed the basis of the etic perspective, which gave meaning to the experiences, perceptions and beliefs of purposively selected participants from the three institutions of higher learning.

1.14.3 Chapter 5

The thesis was summarised, conclusions were drawn and a way forward suggested.

1.15 Summary

The concern for issues of quality in higher education expressed by the World Bank (2010) was a cause for concern. That same concern was heightened when considering open and distance learning (ODL) institutions because their students studied from wherever they were, whenever they wanted to study and from any media source. The study sought to ascertain how benchmarking was practised in higher education as a quality assurance engagement, especially considering that the benchmarking practice seemed not to be adopted nor shared by many institutions of higher learning. The same World Bank (2010) report exhorted institutions of higher learning to engage in benchmarking activities in an effort to enhance quality in performance and as a self-improvement and self-evaluation mechanism. The study sought to compare the findings to the empirical perspectives to the theoretical perspectives. The aim was to determine how the institutions could craft a set of strategies to close the gap between the institution offering the highest quality of service and those lagging behind. The study sought to answer five research questions, and the primary one was:

i. To what extent did the three open and distance learning (ODL) institutions of higher learning consciously practise benchmarking?
The purpose of the investigation was to establish the state and extent of benchmarking in institutions of higher learning in the SADC region. The purpose was born out of the encouragement to adopt benchmarking the governments of countries in the continents of North America, Europe and Australasia gave to their institutions of higher learning. These governments were co-joined by UNESCO (1998) and World Bank (2010) in encouraging their members and member states to adopt benchmarking. The encouragement was in recognition of the fact that benchmarking was a self-improvement and self-regulation mechanism, which assisted underperforming institutions to identify those institutions performing well and adopted and adapted their practices, processes and procedures in order to implement them so that they closed the performance gap between the two institutions.

A background to the study was given, together with a statement of the problem, purpose of the study and a justification of the investigation. A section reviewed literature related to the topic, with a detailed exposition to come in the second chapter (cf. Chapter 2). The review considered a number of definitions of benchmarking, and the definition adopted for this study was: benchmarking was a learning process that made it possible for those benchmarking to compare their services, activities and products in order to identify their comparative strengths and weaknesses. That comparison formed the basis for formulating and implementing self-improvement and self-regulation strategies (Jackson and Lund (2000b). This definition was preferred because it encompassed the elements of continuous learning for continuous improvement and a consideration for the identification of an institution’s strengths and weaknesses. There could never be sustainable self-improvement without continuous learning.

In Chapter Two the researcher reviewed literature related to the topic under investigation. A variety of sources were consulted to give the definition of benchmarking, from which one definition was chosen as a working definition. The chapter traced the development of benchmarking in the world and up to the point where the African continent was in the process of adopting the benchmarking practice. The chapter considered two research initiatives which were adopted in the current study as models for the current investigation. The rest of the chapter explained how other benchmarking initiatives were undertaken and how they influenced the
current study. Chapter Three was dedicated to issues of methodology, which included the explication of the research philosophy, research methodology and research methods. The empirical material generating process was eloquently narrated, resulting in the empirical material analysis, interpretation and reporting, in latter chapters.
CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

2.1 Introduction

The study sought to establish the extent to which open and distance learning institutions practised benchmarking, as a mechanism for the enhancement of quality education and performance improvement. The governments of North America, Europe and Australasia encouraged their institutions of higher learning to adopt benchmarking as a self-improvements, self-regulation and quality enhancement mechanism. International organisations, like the World Bank (2010) and UNESCO (1998), appealed to their member states to encourage institutions of higher education within their influence to adopt benchmarking. These exhortations for the adoption of benchmarking were positively responded to by many national institutions. Both national and international professional associations were formed to co-ordinate benchmarking activities and the same institutions co-operated with other institutions on benchmarking initiatives. The appeals to adopt benchmarking were a clear indication of the veracity of benchmarking as a quality enhancement and performance improvement mechanism. The researcher sought to establish the state and the extent of benchmarking in institutions of higher education, due to the proliferation of these institutions and the concerns of many governments about quality issues. The researcher desired to know if there was a shared meaning of benchmarking among the institutions and to establish if there was a clear understanding of what criteria the universities used to measure benchmarking as a determinant of quality improvement. It was against this background that this study was undertaken, to find out the extent to which open and distance learning institutions consciously practised benchmarking.

The primary research question the study sought to answer was:
i. To what extent did the three open and distance learning (ODL) institutions of higher learning consciously practise benchmarking?

The study addressed the question of benchmarking in institutions of higher education with the intention of establishing how benchmarking enhanced the quality of the education offered by each open and distance learning institution. The second research question read:

i. How could benchmarking, within the context of an institution, be ascertained objectively?

Benchmarking, a performance management mechanism or practice, was originally confined to commerce and industry where it was employed as a self-improvement and self-assessment tool. Organisations used the results of self-evaluation to compare their performance with the performance of similar institutions. They then studied how better performing organisations achieved their success, and adopted the better practices, processes and strategies and adapted these to suit their individual circumstances before implementing them. This way the institutions attained higher levels of productivity and profitability and closed the gap between their underperformance and that of better performing institutions. This was why Sallis (2006) stated that benchmarking was about bridging the gap between where an institution was and where it desired to be. With time the benchmarking concept was borrowed and adopted by educational institutions and used by weak institutions to enable them to achieve rapid self-improvement and catch up with their better performing counterparts.

The governments of countries in continents like Europe, North America and Australasia, encouraged their institutions of higher learning to adopt and practise benchmarking. Many other governments followed suit and encouraged their institutions of higher learning to adopt benchmarking on the understanding that it was a self-improvement and self-regulation mechanism. This was why institutions in these countries had a head-start on benchmarking and formed national professional associations to assist in benchmarking activities before institutions in other countries started the practice (www.globalbenchmarking.org). These have, since the
early 1990s, produced a lot of literature on benchmarking, although this literature was largely in
the field of performance comparison and self-assessment (Alstete, 1995). The encouragement did
not seem to filter into continents like Africa, in general and the SADC region in particular, until
recently. There was, resultantly, a perceived gap in literature on benchmarking in Africa, and
other developing nations. The little available information was not able to identify the institutions
engaged in benchmarking and how they were performing. The researcher was able to access a
paper on benchmarking from Kenya (Magutu, et al 2011) but was not able to locate any
literature from any other African country and source.

This chapter covered the theoretical perspectives of benchmarking, starting from the origins of
the practice until it was transformed into a self-improvement and self-regulation, quality
enhancement mechanism in higher education. The writer sought to thoroughly review the
meaning of benchmarking and how it became such an important practice in the higher education
sector, and how benchmarking was the mechanism of choice in the open and distance learning
sector of education. The general objectives of benchmarking were reviewed, together with the
scope of the practice, the critical success factors of benchmarking in open and distance learning
institutions and the practice improved the performance of institutions. The chapter also covered
empirical studies undertaken in the benchmarking field and how these benefited the current
study. The empirical studies were reviewed with special bias towards benchmarking models, as
the researcher desired to fully comprehend this topic in benchmarking. The thinking was that the
three institutions employed models in their application of benchmarking. The last area reviewed
was the types of benchmarking, which appeared crucial since all literature read made reference
to the types of benchmarking.

2.2 Definitions of benchmarking and quality

This section sought to define benchmarking and quality to ensure that the reader of the study
shared the same meaning with the researcher and could clearly follow the report. The section
prepared the reader for the institutions’ definitions of the benchmarking concept, given in answer
to the last question which sought how the three institutions of higher learning defined
benchmarking. A range of definitions, from industry to education, was given to show the diversity of the benchmarking concept. It should be evident from these definitions that there was no consensus on one supreme definition. The section ended with the adoption by the researcher of a working definition of benchmarking for the study. This definition was adopted for its completeness, it covered the basic concepts the term “benchmarking” exuded.

The father of benchmarking, Camp (1989), defined benchmarking as a process of self-evaluation and self-improvement through the methodical and collaborative comparison of practice and performance with competitors in order to identify an institution’s own strengths and weaknesses, and learn how to adapt and improve as conditions changed. This definition was adopted by Spendolini (1992) as part of a quality movement crusade, and many players in commerce and industry also adopted the definition, in their quest to manufacture or produce quality products and services. Spendolini said benchmarking was a continuous and methodical process for evaluating the products, services and the performance of an institution which was recognised as representing best practices for the purpose of institutional improvement. Spendolini (1992) extended the definition and said that at the simplest level benchmarking could be viewed as a strategy for enabling people to think outside the shells they usually lived in and these shells could be departments, service or functional units of institutions or institutions. Benchmarking was a learning process whose practice made it possible for those engaging in the process to compare their services, activities, processes, products and results in order for them to identify their comparative strengths and weaknesses, as a basis for self-improvement and/or self-regulation. It was clear, according to Shahalideh, Amirjamshidi, and Shahalideh (2009), from this definition that benchmarking offered a way of identifying ‘better and smarter’ ways of operating in business and it enabled the institutions to comprehend why the ways were better and smarter than what they were doing.

The researcher acknowledged the explanation by Hagelund (1997) that benchmarking was a process characterised by the reverse philosophy of the research process and it used the best of other people’s ideas, the ability to add to other people’s innovativeness and the ability to extend performance without repeating the negative experiences of predecessors. In other words, the
efficacy of benchmarking lay in its avoidance of re-inventing the wheel because it employed strategies already proven to be successful by other institutions.

However, McNair and Watts (2006) contended that the lack of a complete understanding of benchmarking was one of the main causes that made it difficult for some institutions of higher learning to employ the mechanism effectively. Some institutions realised that benchmarking played a significant role in assisting other institutions and organisations to grow and become successful but because they did not fully comprehend the concept, or the process, of benchmarking they failed to benefit in full from its employment. Institutions needed to understand that for them to fully benefit from its implementation the practice needed to become an integral part of institutional self-improvement methodologies. Benchmarking could not be implemented as a once-off event that ceased to matter when the reason for its implementation ceased to be important (See § 4.3.2, for findings on meaning) but its implementation was woven and embedded into the fabric of institutional operations.

Quality was defined by ISO 9000 (www.iso.org) as the totality of features and characteristics of a product or service that determined its ability to satisfy stated or assigned needs. The writer whose definition of quality was found to be precise was Jackson (2001) who defined it as excellence, equivalent to ‘best-in-class’ in business, as constancy, as fitness for purpose, as value for money, and, as the capability to transform ordinary students into exceptionally alert learners. The definitions of benchmarking and quality given above formed the basis of the quality in the study and gave it direction. The expected or desired outcome of the study was to gain a better understanding of the practice, performance or process, and insights into how improvement might be made to enhance quality. The understanding of quality in this investigation might be retained among the participants to enable them to gain or maintain competitive advantage in their individual institutions, or the understanding may be disseminated widely through conferences, publications and workshops, which acted as the main conduit of the benchmarking practice. According to Inglis (2005), quality was of major importance to institutions of higher learning, especially to open and distance learning institutions (ODL), as reflected by the concerns of the consumers of the products and services of the higher education sector.
In ODL Gandhe (2009) identified two aspects of quality in the educational context: quality of the education system as a whole and quality of what the ODL system offered to the students or the learners. In the conventional education system quality covered various components of face-to-face teaching, like the infrastructure and basic infrastructure, social and geographical environment, professional competence of the teaching, administrative and finance staff, appropriateness, adequacy and relevance of the curriculum, the provision of teaching-learning materials, teaching and learning processes, community support to the institution, performance evaluation of the teachers, students and the system as a whole. However, the ODL mode was not similar to the conventional education mode in that the profile of the distance learner was different from that of the learner who resided in the institution. The learner’s main objective of undertaking higher education through the distance mode could be different from that of the students in their 17-23 age-groups. In furtherance of the two aspects of quality, Gandhe (2009) acknowledged that the focus to quality for the ODL institution was much more stringent and required the institution to be proactive and responsive to student satisfaction needs.

Quality was about academic autonomy, and about expanding and improving higher education systems and the provision of service; the democratization of education. A dominant characteristic of educational quality policy, according to Gandhe (2009), was the methodological evaluation of higher education institutions undertaken as a consequence of indirect pressure from, or by the direct initiative of, regulatory authorities. An additional dimension came from Lutfullayev (2001) who said that a central purpose of benchmarking was to provide managers with an external point of reference or standard for evaluating the quality and cost of the institution’s internal activities, practices, and processes. The evaluation methods used often combined self-evaluation with external evaluation and various forms of external reporting. In quality audits, the focus of evaluation was on the higher education institution as a whole, where the objectives were often coupled with the desire to support institutions in their attempt to re-define their vision, mission, their activities and organisation, and to stimulate and renew their way of dealing with the perceptions and expectations of both society and students. Achim, Cabulea, Popa and Mihalache (2009) claimed that quality depended on the context and that the
three crucial elements of context were: the relationships between higher education institutions and the government, including the level of trust between the two; the methods adopted by external assessors, including how the assessors achieved standardisation and whether institutional rankings or league tables were involved; and, the character of the higher education institution itself, where factors such as reputation, the pace of change and external threats were all important.

The study adopted the ISO 9000 (www.iso.org) definition that quality was the totality of the features and characteristics of a product or service and the degree to which the product or service satisfied the perceived needs of the customer. The definition embodied all the features and characteristics which a product and service must possess to be of high quality. The study adopted the definition of benchmarking advanced by Jackson and Lund (2000b) which stated that benchmarking was a learning process with a structure meant to enable the practitioners to compare the institution’s services, activities and products. The comparison was designed to identify the institution’s comparative strengths and weaknesses as a basis for self-improvement and self-regulation. This position was supported by Nelson (2003) whose contention was that benchmarking involved a number of important aspects. The first aspect was that practitioners identified the process or product which needed to be improved and the priorities that received support and resources, and a commitment to change by senior staff. The next aspect was to identify potential partners in the form of faculty, another institution or parts of an institution, which exhibited good practice and the opportunity to learn from it. The benchmarking partners needed to formalise an agreement and included such detail in the agreement as the code of conduct, project timeline and a commitment to confidentiality. This included a statement on the envisaged outcome and the process the partners followed in publishing the result.

The partners needed to evaluate and list the resources needed as input and the expected output, and the evaluation was shared among the partners on an equal footing, which included the sharing of errors committed in the benchmarking process. The partners needed to identify an alternative approach in case the practitioners indicated a change of approach in order to be able to improve the institutional performance. Another crucial aspect was that partners needed to
strengthen their relationship beyond the signing of the agreement, to include a responsibility matrix, which outlined the duties and responsibilities of practitioners. Lastly, partners needed to make available adequate resources in order for the process to flow smoothly throughout the practice.

The review of related literature clearly articulated that benchmarking, in its explication, had four elements or properties, which were that it was a continuous process, tool or structured approach, which measured, evaluated, improved and learnt about products, services, performance, and practices and it compared these against the best-in-class, world leaders, and competition. The other benchmarking property was that it achieved superior performance, competed, and applied knowledge. Lastly, the analysis showed a minor lack of emphasis on learning for continuous self-improvement (See § 4.3, for findings). In education this element was crucial because quality enhancement was a product of continuous learning. The emphasis on continuous learning was the reason why the definition of Jackson and Lund (2000b) was adopted for this study, which emphasised that benchmarking was initially a learning process formed in such a way that it was possible for those participating in the process to compare their services, activities and products in order to evaluate their comparative strengths and weaknesses, which led to self-improvement and self-regulation.

In this section a variety of definitions of benchmarking was given to prove that the field had not settled on a single definition. The study came up with a working definition to use in investigating what was happening in the three institutions of higher education and the process it took. The same was true of the concept of quality; it did not have one encompassing definition. It had many permutations of what quality was in an educational institution and these were given to illustrate the diversity in the meaning of quality. At the end one definition was adopted for the study.

2.3 Origins and nature of benchmarking in education

The purpose of this part of the discussion was to illustrate the historical development and growth of benchmarking. The section intended to show that the benchmarking concept came a long way
to assume the meaning it now had. For benchmarking to be ascertained objectively, the study learnt how other institutions had managed it and carried out comparative analyses. The benchmarking operational reality of studied institutions informed the response to the second research question (See § 1.4, for research questions). The section also explained the approaches to benchmarking that were available and established the envisioned type which it hoped the institutions employed in their benchmarking activities.

The term benchmarking evolved from the word ‘benchmark’, presumably a mark on a bench. The term ‘benchmark’ was first used in the field of surveying in the 1840s to refer to a mark made on a survey peg or a stone that acted as a reference point and the point was used to refer to all other topographic features which could be measured. It was later used by cobbblers when they measured people’s feet, when making shoes. The passage of time changed the term “benchmark” to refer to a reference against which something could be measured (Jackson 2001). The term “benchmarking” was first used by Rank Xerox (Camp 1989) to describe the process of self-evaluation and self-improvement through the methodical and collaborative comparison of practice and performance with that of competitors in order for an institution to identify its strengths and weaknesses, and learn how to adapt and improve performance as conditions changed. The first explication of benchmarking was given by Camp (1989) who described how Rank Xerox recovered from years of debilitating performance when the Japanese photocopier manufacturers started outperforming Xerox and captured a larger market share. Rank Xerox started losing its market share, its competitiveness and its product became very expensive. Rank Xerox sent a team to Fuji-Xerox in Japan where it learnt good practices from the Japanese. When the team returned home it adapted the better practices to suit its situation and it was able to secure significant improvements in the quality, cost and time to market. The systematic approach of learning and codification of practices from Fuji-Xerox led to an exponential rise in the popularity of the benchmarking practice (Bogan and English, 1994).

The invention of the benchmarking concept was credited with the Japanese who were said to have started sending managers to a wide range of companies in a bid to learn how the companies achieved outstanding results and to learn their good business practices. In 1956 a Mr. Ohno,
according to Ahmed and Rafiq (1998), was sent to America to a company that was performing well and on his return to Japan Toyota he introduced a new inventory system. The new system was the Just-in-time (JIT) system which later became very popular worldwide, leading to its adoption by many companies. The important aspect was that Mr. Ohno’s company realised that the firm was under-performing, identified a firm performing better than it was performing, adopted the practices of the second firm and adapted these practices to suit the practices of Mr. Ohno’s company. This was the essence of benchmarking.

In the education sector Lutfullayev (2001) indicated that the earliest benchmarking processes and methodologies were applied to higher education in North America from the early 1990s. This was when Jackson (2001) explained benchmarking as a set of standards that represented benchmarks with which students were able to compare their ability and performance in the learning process. The origin of benchmarking, as a quality enhancement and performance improvement mechanism in higher education, was well documented and a number of authorities were credited with this development (Watson, 1993; Camp, 1989; Jacob, 1992; Ohno, 1988; Spendolini, 1992; Richard, 1991; Magutu, et al, 2011); and McNair and Leibfried, 1992). Benchmarking was credited with facilitating quality enhancement and institutional performance improvement in institutions of higher learning. This study sought to explore the understanding of benchmarking in these institutions of higher learning and the role it played in attaining quality.

The section showed that benchmarking was originally an industry term which was transferred to the higher education sector. The study sought to establish if the characteristics identified in these definitions, and the attributes of benchmarking given in the next paragraph, were present in the institutions being investigated. The characteristics were that benchmarking focused on continuous improvement, was a systematic procedure, there was measurement based on comparison and there was continuous learning. The study acknowledged that without continuous learning the benchmarking practice was not of a sustainable benefit to an institution.

There were four fundamental approaches of benchmarking practices, which Alstete (1995) articulated as types of voluntary benchmarking, and these were:
External competitive benchmarking, which focused on a comparison of key performance areas of institutions. These were seen as high performers against those of institutions wishing to learn due to their situation of under-performance;

External cross-industry benchmarking, which sought new and innovative practices across industries and institutions in an effort to boost productivity;

Implicit benchmarking, which was forced by pressure from the market to provide data for agencies of government; and

Internal benchmarking, which compared the performance of different departments and units within the same institution.

In addition to the four types briefly explained above UNESCO-CEPES (2007) listed six approaches of benchmarking derived from existing literature, and these types were:

The generic and process-based benchmarking, which sought to establish the basic practice and process and the process through which results were attained, respectively;

Internal benchmarking, which compared similar programmes in different parts of the same educational institution;

External competitive benchmarking, which compared performance in core business areas based on business competitors;

A trans-institutional benchmarking, which crossed institutional boundaries;

A functional benchmarking, which compared single processes across a number of institutions; and

Implicit benchmarking, which sought the production and publication of data in the form of performance indicators that could be employed for a proper cross-institutional comparative analysis.

The two sets of benchmarking approaches listed above illustrated that the practice was still undecided on the approach and the terms to use in benchmarking. The backside of the argument was that the benchmarking practice afforded the practitioner to choose the method a particular situation required in a particular context. The aims of individual approaches were the same and
the processes were similar. The practice used indicators or benchmarks to be able to measure and compare quality and the performance of an institution.

The European Network for Quality Assurance (www.efqm.org) provided a list of 32 attributes of benchmarking and the most important ones were: collaborative or competitive, qualitative or quantitative, internal or external, implicit or explicit, horizontal or vertical, outcome-oriented or experience-seeking, and with many purposes or standards, benchmarks or best practices, and interests, reflecting whether it was to improve or to co-operate, depending on the benchmarking institution. These characteristics were encountered in the study and they contributed to the grasping of a clearer understanding of benchmarking by the researcher.

The present section contributed to literature on the study in that it highlighted the beginning and the development of benchmarking. Benchmarking started in the surveying field, was employed extensively in industry and was later brought into the services sector, which included the field of education. These developments were proof that benchmarking was a performance enhancing practice and this investigation established how the institutions of higher learning benefited from its employment.

2.4 A misconception of benchmarking

The aim of this section was to briefly position the field of benchmarking and separate the myth from fact. It was hoped that a lot of confusion would be prevented by stating what did not constitute benchmarking. The confusion might arise from a careless reference to benchmarking and its perceived benefit. For instance, the mere replication of an activity, or copying, did not constitute benchmarking, but at times it would need a perceptive mind to discern the difference.

The first word of caution came from Vught, et al, (2008) who sought to clear misconceptions by stating that benchmarking was not a panacea or a recuperative programme but an ongoing management process, with a structured methodology and a mechanism for institutional resource allocation. People mistook benchmarking as copycatting, which was the adoption of stale ideas
and applying them without any form of creativity. Benchmarking was not a recipe book that required the looking up of inputs and using them for success, and it was not a fabulous and catchy word, but a strategy for performance and quality improvement, and a process re-engineering tool. Benchmarking was not just a comparative evaluation of how an institution competed with others, benchmarking learnt from others and innovatively looked inwards to adapt and implement the learnt strategies that led to the achievement of improved performance.

To avoid the pitfalls of benchmarking stated above, a benchmarking exercise should be grounded on strong institutional commitment to increase institutional performance through a learning process. The institution should become a learning organisation, which reviewed its processes periodically to search for new or improved practices and to implement new models of operation. Lastly, benchmarking succeeded on the basis of a strong commitment to accept change and to be seen to effect the change and an investment in financial and other resources. The commitment stemmed from senior institutional leadership.

This study was premised on the conviction, shared by Benneworth (2010), that benchmarking was a powerful modern management tool which, through self-assessment and a structured comparative institutional learning approach, provided higher education institutions with crucial information to increase the quality of their education, institutional development and their strategic performance.

2.5 Benchmarking quality higher education

The purpose of this section was to review related literature on benchmarking quality in university education in order to place this study in context of the work already covered in this area by other researchers. The intention was to show that benchmarking provided a systematic approach to quality improvement; it established the amount of improvement required in the improvement process; and it identified new ideas and innovative approaches to the practice of benchmarking (See § 1.13.6, for initial definition).
A study by Lutfullayev (2001) explained that benchmarking, as a process for quality enhancement, was first adopted by higher education in North America in the early 1990s (Alstete, 1995; Farquhar, 1998), closely followed by Australia (Massaro, 1998), and very recently by the United Kingdom (Lund, 1998; QAA 1998a and 1998b; Jackson and Lund, 2000a). Continental Europe started the practice of benchmarking more recently (Schreiterr, 1998). The first international or transnational benchmarking process took place in the mid-1990s (Wragg, 1998; Fielden and Carr, 2000; Mackie, 2000). Benchmarking spread to five continents, with Kenya leading in Africa because the researchers (Magutu, et al, 2011) made their work public. These benchmarking activities were in response to the concerns of quality education consumers expressed due to a massification of education provision. If there were other researchers in Africa they did not put their work in the public domain. The proliferation of the benchmarking practice was made possible by its ability to enhance the quality of education. This was explained by Gandhe (2009) who said quality in university education was a combination of exceptionally high standards, perfection and consistency. It was fitness for purpose, a value for money, and quality embodied transformation capabilities. This definition was not meant to remove nor to replace the definition adopted for this study, but to augment it.

On a slightly different note, Kratochvil, Salem and Wei (2011) mentioned what they called institutional principles of benchmarking which allowed the classification of departmental and institutional benchmarking and outlined some principles. The first principle was process benchmarking, which was based on the analysis of good practice and the sharing of process methods with peers. The second principle was product benchmarking, which consisted of a direct comparison of tangible results offered by academics and administrators. These allowed the comparison of local norms against international standards. The third principle was performance benchmarking, through which internal data were combined with external data to measure efficiency and effectiveness of ongoing departmental or institutional functions. The benchmarking of performance in the academic sector was undertaken by the “criterion reference” technique which entailed collaboration between institutions, based on predetermined and common criteria. This was the benchmarking practice adopted for the current study, and it was hoped that this was the benchmarking type the institutions adopted. Performance benchmarking
focused on the management of the overall change process to close the gap between an existing practice of the institution and that of the best-in-class institution with reference to the most relevant key performance variables. The model proposed by McKinnon, et al (2000) was based on the performance benchmarking criteria. Alstete (1995) explained performance benchmarking as an on-going, methodical process for monitoring, measuring and comparing the work processes of one institution against those of another, by bringing an external focus into internal activities, functions, or operations. The current study was based on collaborative performance benchmarking, which should lead to performance improvement in the three universities. The criterion reference method proposed by McKinnon, et al (2000) was the preferred benchmarking approach for the current study.

There were three core reasons for the rapid escalation in benchmarking activity in many countries and continents, which were espoused by UNESCO (1998). First, many governments attempted to create a competitive environment in order to transform most elitist institutions into large, multi-purpose mass systems of higher education. This was termed the massification of higher education. Secondly, there were competitive advantages in establishing and maintaining a reputation for the provision of good quality education, high academic standards and world-class research output in the global market of higher education. Third, there was massive expansion in the number of students in all types of higher education institutions, added to a rapid increase in the diversity of educational provision offered by higher education institutions. This resulted in the public expressing grave concerns for academic standards. These reasons created the conditions for benchmarking, coupled with the concomitant development of institutional capabilities to review and evaluate themselves at all levels and in all functions, especially in the growth of external quality review processes. The institutions also experienced growth in the provision of information that encouraged them to review themselves against certain expectations and performance measures, especially the expectations of the core stakeholder, the student. Institutions preferred to introduce programmes for self-evaluation targeted at self-improvement instead of waiting for external authorities, in the form of standards associations or authorities, to dictate to them what to do. Benchmarking made it possible for the institutions to evaluate their
own work, and institute self-improvement strategies, before external regulators came into the institutions to evaluate their performance (See § 1.3, for statement of the problem).

The importance on self-evaluation was reiterated by Jackson (2001) who said that the two fundamental purposes of any method of self-evaluation in higher education were:

- To facilitate self-improvement, quality development and change in institutional performance, which formed the basis of this study; and
- To satisfy expectations and requirements for professional accountability, and this was normally enforced by society (See § 5.3, for conclusions).

The broad benefits of institutional benchmarking were to improve networking, collaborative relationships and mutual understanding between benchmarking parties and partners. The other benefit was the acquisition and retention of information in the form of text, numerical or graphic information in the area of study. The researcher agreed with Jackson (2001) that an institution needed to benefit by acquiring a better understanding of practices, processes and performance and insights into how improvement might be made. These were the benefits that the three institutions in this study were envisaged to be able to access and which the other open and distance learning institutions in the continent aspired to attain in benchmarking quality education. The researcher intended to discover if the three institutions in the study articulated any of these benefits of benchmarking, or any other benefit the institutions identified with benchmarking (See § 5.3, for conclusions).

The European Union funded a project headed by Vught, et al (2008) to determine the benefits of employing benchmarking as a performance improvement and quality enhancement mechanism in higher education. The focus was to form a quality enhancement movement and the need to demonstrate comparative quality and efficiency of institutional operations, which formed the intent of the current study. The result was the establishment of an online tool on benchmarking in higher education and the provision of guidelines for effective benchmarking, which were targeted at over forty participating institutions in the region. The other finding of the working group was that benchmarking served the needs of individual institutions, which were to learn in
order to improve, to change and to manage operations in a more professional way. Some of the ambitious institutions chose benchmarking as a mechanism for self-improvement in their international positions. The institutions determined that benchmarking involved self-evaluation, which included the systematic collection of data and information in order to make relevant comparisons of strengths and weaknesses in some aspects of performance, usually against other players in the same sector. The researcher would want to determine if the three institutions in the current study would apply the comparative analysis to determine the institution that performed better than the other two (See § 4.3, for findings).

UNESCO (1998) established that benchmarking came into the picture when issues of quality education were considered important, and these issues became critical in open and distance learning (ODL) institutions. The discussion on quality centred on issues like quality control, total quality management, quality assurance and accreditation but there was no process to determine what was an acceptable or comparative level of quality, apart from when quality was defined from ‘outside’ an institution in the form of standards or benchmarks (Vught, et al, (2008). Externally defined standards or benchmarks were often either vague or basic for a higher education institution to guide the process of establishing its own quality improvement. For instance, the ISO 9000 quality establishment approach was contained in the detailed description of processes, which meant that the emphasis was on standardising activities in the organisation. The strength of the ISO 900 in standardisation proved to be its weakness because it was less suited to work processes that showed a large variety of options, whose choice depended on expert insight, or on trial and error. In the institutions of higher learning the teaching and learning processes did not depend on standardisation. The major characteristic of the core business of an institution was the individualisation of the teaching of students with different learning styles and background knowledge. This was also true when it came to the designing and running of innovative tests in laboratories and or surveys. However, most of the work, apart from teaching, could be standardised to the extent that benchmarking could be practiced (See § 1.3, for statement of the study). It was instructive to the researcher to realise that the benchmarking that the institutions practised was aimed at quality education and had a comparative structure, but it did not utilise indicators (See § 4.3.6, for indicators).
There was an exciting insight from Vught, *et al.* (2008) that in the European Union benchmarking was adopted as a quality and performance improvement strategy for all the institutions of higher learning ahead of all other performance management systems because of a number of reasons, some of which were discussed below, including the focus of benchmarking on the process of inter-institutional learning. These same issues of quality continued to dominate discourse in open and distance learning institutions in Africa. However, for the learning to take place there should be a clear and well articulated aim, like to improve the performance of the institution. The current state of the institution should be known and evaluated in order to clearly identify the area to be improved. The processes of learning the ways of achieving the improvement of performance should be given prominence. The guiding thrust in benchmarking was how to get the institution from where it was to where the others. The benchmarking process needed detailed information from deep within the institution for it to be able to come up with ‘good practices’ instead of good performance. This ‘good practice’ came from another institution’s performance, which could be accessed through co-operation, not competition. The two collaborating institutions, the learning and model institutions, should shared ‘trade secrets’.

The public-sector organisations, like institutions of higher learning, were in a better position to share information than profit seeking organisations which thrived on cut-throat competition. Benchmarking partners who competed in certain areas, like student enrolment, could start by co-operating in areas they did not compete in until they built enough trust to enter into areas deemed to be competitive. UNESCO-CEPES (cited in Vught, *et al.* 2008) argued that the European Union was convinced, and rightly so, that benchmarking was an evaluative instrument, a self-improvement tool, a collaborative learning exercise and an on-going measurement and methodical approach of continuously measuring work processes. This explained why Vught, *et al.* (2008) gave the working definition of benchmarking of the European Union as a voluntary process of self-evaluation and self-improvement, through the methodical and collaborative comparison of practice and performance against that of similar institutions.
The study focused its attention on determining the state of the practice of benchmarking quality university education in the three institutions of higher learning under investigation, which were Open University (OU), Distance University (DU) and Open and Distance Learning (ODL) institution and establish if the practice mirrored the benchmarking model proposed by McKinnon, et al (2000). The model comprised of performance indicators which permitted measurement and comparison.

In benchmarking quality in higher education in an open and distance learning (ODL) environment, Gandhe (2009) argued that education was no longer an appearance to become ‘learned’. It was a means that manifested in the prosperity of personal life and the achievement of higher standards of living. Benchmarking reflected the needs and aspirations of the beneficiaries of the education system. Hence quality in higher education was defined as “fitness for purpose”. The purpose of receiving an education was for the recipients to become educated and prosper in life, either materially or academically, and if that objective was achieved education would then have fit the purpose for it. The nexus of the discourse on education centred on quality, as Gandhe (2009) said quality in education could be summed up as a combination of exceptionally high standards, perfection and consistency, fitness for purpose, value for money, and the ability to transform capabilities. Benchmarking made it possible for an institution to achieve these qualities of education.

The researcher concurred with Achim, et al (2009) and Massaro (1998) that initially there was no consensus on quality with most institutions expressing the view that quality was more than simply reporting outputs against external requirements. Later, quality was viewed, according to Amaral and Sousa (2009), as the extent to which there were real processes of improvement in performance as a fundamental part of the evaluation process and the extent to which the involvement of the institution was encouraged across a wide spectrum of stakeholders with the knowledge, experience and skills to add to creative and enterprising outcomes. These stakeholders happened to be the employees of the institutions and they acquired the experience, expertise and knowledge through visits to other institutions. The latest call from the wider community suggested an ‘involve me’ mentality in the world where all stakeholders with an
interest in the outcome were directly involved in the process of evaluation, not simply to know, but to improve, which Garlick and Pryor (2004) advocated for in their study. The last eight to ten years have seen an increase in growth in performance benchmarking in the higher education environment as governments sought increased quality in teaching and learning, greater industry applicability in research, greater efficiency in institutional operation, and greater prudential responsibility for the public funds provided to institutions of higher learning. Achim, *et al* (2009) advocated for the adoption of quality enhancing strategies in higher education, which they said included academic autonomy, expanding and improving higher education systems.

The Council for Higher Education (CHE, 2004) of South Africa took a stand and advised institutions to carry out benchmarking surveys so as to keep abreast of developments in world education and, more importantly, to ensure the voluntary and independent delivery of quality higher education, as part of the self-regulation aspect. However, apart from the exhortation from CHE there was no feedback on how the institutions responded. It would have been interesting to ascertain how the three institutions in this study were proactive to the extent of instituting benchmarking quality assurance measures on their own, without waiting for external quality assurance agencies to do it for them. Benchmarking could be adopted to assist in setting up attainable quality standards by institutions of higher learning, ensuring they remained autonomous and independent, and be committed to self-assessment and self-improvement.

The researcher subscribed to the argument by Westerheijden (2008) that Quality Assurance, on its own, did not produce quality because of a number of factors, some of which were that higher education had become too ‘massified’ for informal quality assurance initiatives and to satisfy broader ‘use’ of higher education graduates. The institutions of higher education were involved in educating a larger proportion of the population, some of whom were first-generation students with little knowledge in cultural issues and representing a more diverse student body than in the traditional set up. The current institutions were large organisations with tough demands on accountability on the public sector, but which lacked transparency and trust. The researcher sympathised with this sentiment and hoped benchmarking would assist institutions of higher learning to improve the quality of education they offered.
In spite of the arguments by Westerheijden (2008) that Quality Assurance was unable to produce quality education; a research by Achim, *et al.*, (2009) showed that the benchmarking process was capable of producing the requisite quality, especially in open and distance learning institutions. The quality enhancement techniques, according to Lund (1998), grew very rapidly over the last few years to the point where it was likely to become a significant tool for the management and improvement of quality and performance standards in higher education. Benchmarking activities aimed at improving the quality of education was undertaken in Kenyan universities (Magutu, *et al.*, 2011) with promising results. Just like the researcher, Garlick and Pryor (2004) cited many reasons for the proliferation of benchmarking practices in institutions of higher education, which directly applied to the Australian situation, but which also represented the circumstances obtaining in most developing countries. First, there was the need by institutions to become efficient and cost effective in order to optimise the use of the resources available; the need to support learning was never as great. Secondly, in the international market of higher education there were clearly competitive advantages in establishing and maintaining a reputation for providing good quality education, high academic standards and world class research output. Thirdly, the massive expansion in the number of students, popularly termed “massification”, and the rapid increase in the diversity of educational provision offered by institutions resulted in a growing public concern over academic standards. In the UK a report by the National Committee of Inquiry in Higher Education (NCIHE) recommended that higher education should develop benchmarking methodologies as part of a policy framework to assure academic standards were maintained. This was why Kenya embarked on a benchmarking initiative, and the three institutions in the current study should do the same. Benchmarking should be viewed as part of a process of performance measurement and performance improvement in higher education. The measurement and improvement methodologies made it possible to enhance quality education; the quality derived from the principle which stipulated that what got measured got improved.

A valid sentiment was expressed by Jackson (2001) that the benchmarking process which focused on the standards of learning might be directed towards the expectations for learners, as it questioned what it was that learners were expected to know and were able to do. The
benchmarking process was meant to enable the learners to achieve the expected outcomes through the curriculum, teaching and learning methods and through support and guidance systems. These were the means by which learners demonstrated the achievement of specified educational outcomes and standards. The benchmarking of quality of education addressed the full spectrum of the quality of education, made up of the quality of inputs, the quality of the process and the quality of the outputs (Jackson, 1998). The above points were supported by Jackson (2001) who understood benchmarking as involving the analysis of performance, practices and processes within and between institution and industries in order to obtain information for self-improvement. The methodology enabled individuals, institutional units and whole institutions to “think outside the particular boxes” which they lived in, to compare and question, in a methodical and analytical way, their own activities and those of similar or dissimilar enterprises. Local institutions appreciated what other countries and their institutions had achieved and started walking along the same path. The researcher was convinced that there should be concerted effort to equip institutions with the necessary or needed resources ‘to think outside the box’, borrow proven strategies, processes and practices and improve their performance; they should not waste valuable time and resources trying to re-invent the wheel.

In higher education, especially in ODL institutions, benchmarking involved, among other issues, the assessment of the quality of programmes and their outcomes against the desired characteristics of graduates. It tested how well each programme was achieving what it was set out to achieve, that was, the fitness of the courses. Fong, Cheng, and Ho, (1998) stated that the fitness of programmes or the entirety of features and characteristics of the programmes, to achieve the desired characteristics of graduates, depended upon six factors. These factors were the institution’s ability to turn each of the desired attributes into operational requirements, which could be made up of the comprehension of content and professional skills outcomes. The understanding was easier than the attainment of attributes such as the ability to communicate and the effectiveness of leadership, and the adherence to ethical standards. The institutions should be able to incorporate operational characteristics into their courses and be able to successfully teach in accordance with the set criteria. There should be a tight fit between course requirements and the desired outcomes, which should reflect evidence of continuous improvement, based on
specific assessments of these desired outcomes. There should also be evidence of value addition, when graduates acquired their qualifications based on the full knowledge of the content, and the attainment of the knowledge, skills and other attributes they set out to achieve. Students should realise that they needed to apply these to best effect, and they desired to continue increasing their operational knowledge, skills and other attributes throughout their working lives to be fully knowledgeable in their areas of specialisation.

This section considered Quality Assurance in university education, especially in ODL institutions, like the ones in the study. Quality related the student to the product at the end of the study and how useful that qualification was in the life of the student, the fit-for-purpose criterion. The outcome of a programme was measured in terms of how the graduate utilised their knowledge and expertise; some got employed, some became research fellows and others became expert researchers in their chosen fields. The designing of new programme should be guided by the requirements of the outside world into which students were absorbed.

2.6 Application of quality in ODL

The intention in this section was to consider the question of quality in higher education in greater detail, as it applied in other continents and countries, ranging from South Africa to Asian nations, extending the argument a little deeper than in the previous section. Benchmarking was credited with the ability to enable a university to introspect and use the result to enhance its performance, both in terms of quality and in terms of institutional performance. The study sought to establish if the three universities were consciously engaged in benchmarking practices as a way of enhancing the quality of education. The question sought to determine if the institutions were aware and knew that they were engaged in benchmarking practices.

There was a marked difference between conventional institutions and their open and distance learning counterpart, and these were aptly reflected in their characteristics, as discussed in this section. Open and distance learning (ODL) institutions did not accommodate students in their halls of residence but offered academic programmes to students who studied from a distance and
in an open environment. The researcher sympathised with the views of Gandhe (2009) that an Open and Distance Learning (ODL) institution was not the same thing as the conventional university. The profile of the distance learner was different; the main objective of entering higher education through the open and distance mode was different from that of a young tertiary college student, who graduated from high school. In most third world countries there was a huge backlog of adult illiterates, semi-literates and the unemployed who were not educated, all in search of new knowledge and new skills, including professional and survival skills, and these viewed ODL as a heaven-sent opportunity to access an education and the requisite skills, which lifted them to a higher social rank.

The three teams of writers, Vught, et al, (2010) and Garlick Pryor (2004) and McKinnon, et al, (2000), agreed that the scope of benchmarking was wide and covered the entirety of an institution. The coverage could involve an internal consideration of parts of the institution or an external comparison with other institutions engaged in the same processes, procedures or services and was performing better than the initiating institution. The scope of benchmarking was explained by Kempner (1993) who argued that benchmarking should be integrated into the fundamental operations throughout an institution and it could be an on-going process that evaluated the data collected longitudinally. A report on a study undertaken by Pryor and Garlick (2004) and a study by Vught, et al, (2010) showed that there had not been any specific investigation on benchmarking in open and distance education institutions and this was corroborated by the models advanced by many researchers (Anand and Kodali, (2008), Lutfullayev, (2001) and Camp, (1989b) and Alstete, (1995)) which focused on benchmarking in conventional institutions. There was, therefore, a gap in literature on benchmarking in higher education institutions, in general, and in open and distance learning institutions, in particular. These were the areas this study focused on. The study hoped to determine the status of conscious benchmarking activity in open and distance learning institutions (See § 1.4, for research questions).

On the question of ODL, Gandhe (2009) argued that open learning removed barriers in access like admission requirements, physical attendance at a particular place and time, the possession of
prescribed equipment, books, journals, and other paraphernalia. Distance learning meant that the learners were physically separated in space and time from the teaching institution and its staff. Nevertheless, the broad criterion of quality concern applied to open and distance learning more than to conventional institutions because of the separation of the learner from the institution. A special feature of ODL was the application of the principles of division of labour and specialisation which introduced the concept of operating more methodically and self-consciously than in the conventional system. Gandhe (2009) paid tribute to the key elements of ODL education and said these ensured that no facet of the institution lacked the expected degree of quality, which were: curriculum design, content and organisation; teaching, learning and assessment; student progression and assessment; and student support and guidance.

The researcher, Gandhe (2009), contended that the various paradigms in quality education had a three-pronged approach, made up of an internal quality assurance mechanism, an evaluation by peers and an accreditation by an independent and competent organization, like the Council of Higher Education (CHE) found in some of the SADC countries. A good and serious ODL institution would ensure that the three-legged pot approach was adopted to ensure the best quality in all the aspects of distance learning. The concept of quality was complex and value-laden and this required an institution to consider all the relevant variables before it decided on how to approach the question of quality. In the ODL system, quality meant the attainment of the expected levels of knowledge and skills which were tools for further learning and elevation from poverty. The learning process was also influenced by the actual work experience which was necessary for managing the learner’s personal and social transaction in daily life. This quality should be attained by all distance learners, as a necessary attribute, in a given time-frame.

Another voice in ODL education was that of Harman (2000) who explained that quality assurance in higher education was a methodical approach and assessment procedure adopted by higher education institutions in order to monitor, evaluate and measure performance against objectives, and to ensure the achievement of quality outputs and quality improvements. Essentially, quality assurance systems were aimed at providing appropriate evidence to substantiate claims made about quality and to enable key stakeholders to have confidence in the
management of education and the level of outcomes achieved. Stakeholders in this respect were
individuals and groups who had a major interest in higher education institutions and systems, and
the work and achievements of these institutions.

The researcher strongly concurred with Harman (2000) who said quality assurance in higher
education was not only an international and institutional issue across the Asia Pacific region but
that it was a global one. Institutions of higher learning throughout the world focused their
attention on designing and implementing innovative quality assurance mechanisms and systems
in order to make sure that students received high quality and relevant education, with recognised
qualifications, which ensured the employability of graduates. The recognition was an important
aspect for the country and it was also critical for employers, both at national and international
level.

Further to the sentiments expressed by Harman (2000), Inglis (2005) said ODL differed in
numerous respects from the practices employed in face-to-face, or conventional, education and
the practices employed in online ODL. The ways in which quality comparisons were made
needed to recognise that these differences existed, and to take them into account when the
processes for judging quality were formulated. It was not appropriate to judge the quality of
programmes offered on-line by the same yardstick that was used to judge the quality of
programmes offered face-to-face or by print-based distance education learning institutions, even
though in superficial terms some comparability among different offerings of the same
programme in different modes may have existed. While accepting the differences that existed,
Inglis (2005) also accepted the similarities and stated that it was important to recognise that there
was a high degree of commonality among institutions. The overall design of a course and its
assessment were likely to be unaffected by the mode of operation, and many of the same
resource materials would be used in different modes. Where differences were likely to be most
pronounced was in the area of delivery of the programme and in student support services. There
were many other important areas but the success of an institution or of students hinged on these
two. These were the reasons that persuaded the researcher to focus on open and distance
learning institutions of higher education.
The purpose of this section was to learn what other countries and universities had done in the area of benchmarking. For instance, in the European Union, Australia and North America, a decision was taken to adopt benchmarking as a performance improvement mechanism. In Kenya benchmarking was employed to improve the quality of education after the drastic expansion of access to education, which was accompanied by a fear that standards would fall. These examples show that benchmarking was spreading far and wide as a performance and quality improvement mechanism. The researcher’s vision was to arrive at a time in the near future when benchmarking would be encouraged in open and distance learning institutions, to the point that it would be institutionalised and formalised as a quality and performance enhancement mechanism.

2.7 Objectives of benchmarking

The intention in this section was to record the objectives of benchmarking. Institutions of higher learning did not just undertake a programme without identifying its intended outcome, in the form of objectives. The objectives guided the performance of institutions and the outcome of the effort expended by employees.

There was agreement between Garlick and Pryor (2004) and Langworthy and Garlick (2007) that benchmarking had two broad objectives. First, it was used as a means through which the quality and cost of institutional activities, practices and processes could be evaluated in the context of the whole institution’s ‘good’ or ‘better practice”. Second, it was used as a problem identification and management tool to achieve continuous improvement in the institution over time. They agreed that benchmarking was grounded on a strong institutional commitment to increase institutional performance, to become a learning organisation, to review processes on an on-going basis, to search for new practices and to implement new models of operation. One of the major goals was to provide key personnel with an external standard for measuring internal activities, and to help identify where opportunities for improvement were resident. These were the objectives that this study meant to achieve and they were closely related to the two purposes of benchmarking that Jackson (2001) espoused. It was clear that the coupling of the two purposes
and the two broad objectives given here made benchmarking quality university education a worthwhile and rewarding pursuit.

Other benefits that accrued to institutions were given by Jackson (2001), who said that apart from the benchmarking objectives given above there were benefits that accrued to the practice of benchmarking quality education, which included the identification of best practices that increased student satisfaction, achieved efficiencies and increased productivity. With time there were opportunities of budget growth and budget reduction, broadened perspectives and an ability to overcome resistance to change, enable change to occur and enhance the capability to demonstrate the quality and efficiency of programmes and services.

2.8 Scope of benchmarking

In the present section, focus shifted to the scope of benchmarking and aspects to be covered included the broad organisational areas in which benchmarking could be applied. In this regard scope referred to the width and breadth or range of coverage an institution considered when planning a benchmarking activity. As was shown, benchmarking was employed in the entirety of an institution (See § 1.1, for background). There were no areas in an institution that could not be benchmarked, both in the physical and operational size of the organisation. The benchmarking investigation in the three institutions of learning would indicate the scope of the exercise.

The researcher could not agree more with Lutfullayev (2001) and pointed out that the scope of benchmarking encompassed the ability of institutions to identify and promote best practices and to share ideas and increase awareness of alternative approaches as the entire institution or parts thereof. Benchmarking was based on an institution’s ability to learn and benefit from an international base of experienced and innovative practitioners, to learn from others what worked and what did not, and to research, and always seek ways to improve, and ways of comparing with each other in the entirety of the institution. A way of achieving continuous improvement would be to follow the suggestion by Kempner (1993) that benchmarking should be integrated into the fundamental operations of the institution and be a ubiquitous process that analysed the
data gathered over a length of time. A welcome encouragement came from Achim, *et al*, (2009) who advocated for the formalisation of benchmarking in all institutions of higher learning because they said formalisation contributed immensely to quality performance in higher education. The greatest benefit was that benchmarking was taken as an opportunity for an institution to learn from its own experiences and from the experiences of others and parts of the institution to learn from each other. The learning should be for a purpose and to be aware of the fact that institutional learning was a continuous process which resulted in methodical, proactive and continuous improvement, involving a cycle of enquiry, action and feedback, and based on institutional memory.

In an educational environment Westerheijden (2008) posited that the benefits of benchmarking were best realised if the identification of ‘best practices,’ that increased student satisfaction and the achievement of efficiencies in order to increased productivity, were pursued. Benchmarking could also be carried out in satisfaction surveys, curriculum mapping, policies and procedures, innovative teaching methods, enrolment, attrition, graduation rates, alumni surveys and employment rates.

The arguments presented in the paragraphs above were meant to convince the institutions which might consider applying the benchmarking practice to all aspects of their operation that it was possible and permissible to do so. Many institutions were not adventurous enough and were happy to tread the same path they had trodden for ages, whose features were well known and the harvest was pre-determined. These ran the risk of remaining mediocre institutions, producing mediocre results.

### 2.9 Critical success factors in benchmarking in ODL institutions

This section of the study discussed the critical success factors in the application of benchmarking quality university education. Where these factors were observed and followed chances of the benchmarking practice achieving the set goals were enhanced.
Traditionally, Lutfullayev (2001) pointed out, educational institutions were nurtured to spread and share knowledge, collaborate in research and be of assistance to each other. Several authors advocated that benchmarking was more suitable in higher education than in the business sector, due to its collegial environment, which encouraged educational institutions to collaborate and cooperate (Bender and Schuh, 2000; Alstete, 1995; Schofield, 1998). As Schofield (1998) said, despite increasing market pressures, higher education remained an essentially collaborative activity involving institutions that had a strong tradition of exercising mutual support. According to Alstete (1995), and due to its reliance on hard data and research methodology, benchmarking was especially suited for institutions of higher education in which these studies were very familiar to faculty and administrators. The adoption of benchmarking in higher education strengthened recently after many governments experienced a decline in the budget of higher education institutions.

The application of benchmarking, according to Kempner (1993), in any institution of higher learning could only succeed if the following critical success factors were stringently observed. The process of benchmarking included the identification of strengths and weaknesses and a clear comprehension of one’s institution, with a view to setting targets and benchmarks for improvement, whether carried out as a national exercise for the whole sector, or at the institutional level. The same process required to be focused on continuous improvement through a comparative approach and the search for ‘best practices’, to be more than a mere comparison of statistical data. Benchmarking was not a quick fix to tackle institutional under-performance. Although it could be used to produce an instant analytical picture, or a tool to obtain one-off information on a specific issue, benchmarking was most valuable as a continuous, long-term approach embedded in institutional strategic development. The exercise itself was a dynamic exercise during which relevant performance indicators and benchmarks were defined against which institutional performance could be measured and compared with other institutions. It aimed at identifying good practices in order to implement changes in a higher education institution. The exercise was grounded on a strong commitment by leadership to increase institutional performance, within higher education institutions, to become a ‘learning
organisation’, to review processes on an on-going basis, to search for new practices and to implement new models of operation, and for the exercise to be a success.

The outcome of a benchmarking exercise was the production of valuable results if placed in the context of transformation and progress, whether carried out at a unit level, like benchmarking a department or a faculty, or at the entirety of the institution. It was crucial to define where effort should be expended to maximize results and to set new targets for institutional improvement. The success relied on an institutional commitment to change, an investment in financial and human resources and an involvement of senior management and staff at all the levels of an institution, depending on the processes benchmarked, in order to produce targeted results in terms of data generation and the implementation of findings. The needed financial resources should be limited for benchmarking exercises conducted purely by the institution’s staff than when using an external consultant or a moderator, but the resources would always be necessary at some level. The approach had to be rigorous and professional from the point of designing the exercise to the clear identification of processes, data generation and the implementation of results. It required planning, senior management commitment and ownership by staff. The choice of benchmarking partners determined the effectiveness of the benchmarking exercise.

In addition to the key success factors articulated above, Stapenhurst (2009) proposed that these factors should be taken into account in order to overcome the challenges in benchmarking, which must be taken cognisance of in the implementation phase. A designed exercise should be thought of as a rapid undertaking, incorporating the relevant indicators against which comparison with other institutions could be made. The practise must be planned for in full, institutional leadership support assured and appropriate partners identified for the project. The focus should be on continuous learning for continuous improvement, gained through periodic comparative reviews. The benchmarking process would produce the desired results if it were undertaken as a transformational exercise, with the direction for change pre-determined. The change would only be possible if the requisite resources were provided and if the involvement of the people was prioritised. The other requirement for success would be the identification of an institution’s strengths and weaknesses so that these could be considered in the planning phase. The
involvement of people was assured when they worked towards the success of the institution, and this happened where the institution accepted to become a learning organisation.

Successful benchmarking exercises, in higher education institutions, were grounded in a strong institutional willingness to increase institutional performance, to become a ‘learning organisation’, to review and revitalise processes on an on-going basis, to search for new practices and to implement new models of operation. The institution should be committed to quality.

These critical success factors may sound insurmountable but the process should not entertain any shortcuts for it to be successful. The critical success factors should be followed in their entirety.

2.10 Continuous performance improvement

In the present section, focus shifted to the issue of continuous performance improvement. This was an important component of the study because benchmarking served the purpose of performance improvement leading to the sustainability of the institutions.

Performance improvement referred to the growth, through the addition to profitability, programmes or capital investment, or as in the case of an institution, an increase in student numbers. Regarding the primary question, a review of literature on performance improvement indicated that where an institution was consciously involved in benchmarking it was, indirectly, consciously involved in growth and sustainability issues, on a continuous basis (See § 5.2, for findings summary). Additionally, McKinnon, et al (2000) stated that institutions defined improvement to mean the qualitative and quantitative increase in productivity, the rate of change in performance which may be quantified in numerical scores, or the qualitative stages of improvement that were reflected in processes and procedures. Improvement was reflected in the measurement of outcomes which gave rise to attributes of good practice and indicators or benchmarks. Self-improvement strategies depicted the action institutions took to improve their performance levels.
Performance measurement, according to Blakeman (2002), could be used to measure productivity, effectiveness, quality, and timeliness. Where performance measures were used extensively and consistently they were quite effective in improving an institution’s output. Further, Blakeman (2002) stated that institutions crafted performance improvement strategies for a number of reasons, which included the provision of information to managers to perform their management control function and to enable them to make factual decisions. Performance measurement linked both performance appraisal and individual or institutional performance to aspects of personnel management and motivation of public employees. It resulted in engendering a sense of responsibility and accountability on the part of managers and led to an improvement in service delivery and in public service performance. There was a clear structure of reporting on performance issues which could stimulate the public to take a greater interest in, and provide more encouragement to government employees to provide quality service, and ensure the improvement of civic discourse which helped to make public discourse about service delivery more factual and specific (See § 5.3, for conclusions).

In benchmarking performance measures were compared to the performance measures of other institutions. The researcher, like Lutfullayev (2001), was convinced that improving performance by collaboration or comparison with other institutions was nothing new in higher education. What was new, however, was the increasing interest in the formalisation and institutionalization of such comparisons.

The primary advantage of benchmarking was that it set the foundation for performance improvement aimed at enhancing competitiveness. By showing how to perform better than the competition, benchmarking ensured the basic survival of the business. Benchmarking identified ‘best practices’ in key business processes and determined what constituted superior performance and it was aimed at achieving the identified superior performance. The institution quantified the gap between the expected performance and the actual performance and in the process drove home uncomfortable facts and harsh realities about its operations to management. This provided the institution with both the reason to improve and a definition of what constituted that improvement.
The foregoing section considered quality of education enhancement and performance improvement as the goals of the benchmarking practice. Performance measurement was explicated, together with how it could be used to determine the level of such concepts as productivity, effectiveness, quality, and timeliness. Measurement was achieved through the generation of data on the performance of the institution, which was then compared with past information or performance from the institution and from other institutions. The researcher wanted to establish if benchmarking eventuated in institutions measuring their performance and compared the performance against that of similar institutions as a basis for instituting quality enhancement initiatives (See § 5.2.2, for empirical result).

2.11 Benchmarking and coping with change

The focus of this part of the study was to illustrate how benchmarking caused institutional change and how that change could be managed. An institution that moved from a state of average performance to a state of world class performance went through change and that change process needed to be managed.

Knowledge developed through the occurrence of change and the processes of teaching and learning were characterised by change itself; change was the constant variable in institutions of higher education. In a similar vein Alstete (1995) stated that benchmarking was a great causal factor of change, it helped overcome resistance to change that could be very strong in conservative institutions, such as colleges, which experienced little operational change in many years. The argument by Bender (2001) was that the most important factor in effecting change, ultimately, was the courage of the leaders to identify an institution’s shortcomings, and then to articulate the findings, with potential solutions, to members of staff who included both supporters and those who opposed the need to change and be able to influence these to the point that they willingly accepted and undertook the change. Conveying the idea and proposal to change to many members helped to make collaborative planning and decision making possible, rather than making decisions behind closed doors, and it also enabled the planners to take
divergent views on board. Collaborative planning assisted an institution to chart a new course to follow, when it crafted a strategic plan, as a result of a benchmarking initiative, on the basis of inclusivity. The importance of the change that came through benchmarking was that decisions were made on the strength of fact, what was called fact-based decision-making and the decision making process was democratised.

In the study the advice given by Weller (2005) was considered, who said planned change was the conscious and deliberate attempt to influence outcomes to match a planned goal and included a well thought-out strategy for achieving the desired end state. The basis of that outcome was derived from the outcome of a benchmarking practice, along which rational decision making was pursued.

In extending the last point Weller (2005) argued that benchmarking was a powerful vehicle for quality improvement and, a paradigm for effectively managing the transformation of ordinary institutions into institutions of quality. Weller (2005) noted that negative aspects found in change theory must be adequately addressed if change was to be sustained in order for the institution to reap its intended rewards. The common elements were external conditions, which should be satisfied by the provision of adequate resources and the dedication to benchmarking by top management. Internal conditions should exhibit in subordinates the desire or the willingness to embrace change.

The foregoing section highlighted how benchmarking could move an institution to manage change and take it from a position of under-performance to a position of enhanced performance. The change could be resisted if it was not planned for and implemented in a way that showed the people accepted it and owned it.

2.12 Advantages and disadvantages of benchmarking

In this section of the study the advantages and disadvantages of benchmarking were discussed. Instead of looking at the whole array of these only the crucial ones were discussed. It was critical
that benchmarking was not seen as a flawless process, whose benefits were not affected by impediments. Any benchmarking exercise should consider these advantages, and especially the disadvantages, to ensure the achievement of the planned result.

2.12.1 Advantages

The researcher agreed with Blakeman (2002) who pointed out that benchmarking had many advantages and disadvantages, which were mostly derived from Rank Xerox's experience with benchmarking (See § 2.3, for background). The advantages were that benchmarking brought out quality and new, innovative ways of managing operations and that it was an effective team building tool. It increased the general awareness of costs and performance of products and services in relation to those of competitor organizations and it assisted to resolve all the divisions and helped to develop a common front for facing competition. Benchmarking highlighted the importance of employee involvement and, as such, encouraged recognition of individual and team effort.

2.12.2 Disadvantages of benchmarking

A major limitation of benchmarking was that while it helped institutions in measuring the efficiency of their operational metrics, it remained inadequate and unable to measure the overall effectiveness of such metrics. Benchmarking revealed the standard attained by competitors but failed to consider the circumstances under which the competitors attained those standards. If the competitors’ goals and visions were flawed or severely restricted due to some factor, an institution, by benchmarking such a standard, ran the risk of trying to emulate such flawed standards or the setting of extremely low standards.

The biggest disadvantage of benchmarking was the danger of self-satisfaction and self-congratulation. Many organizations tended to relax after excelling beyond competitor standards, allowing complacency to develop. The realisation of having become the industry leader led to impudence, when expansive scope for further improvement remained unexploited. Finally, many
institutions made the mistake of undertaking benchmarking as a stand-alone activity. Benchmarking was only a means to an end, and it was worthless if not accompanied by a plan to change. When the institution changed there was the need to sustain that change and ensure the improvement achieved became a permanent feature of the institution.

The disadvantages of benchmarking given above did not adversely affect those who undertook the practice on the basis of proper planning and foresight. The current study would be done without resorting to any form of arrogance and complacency. The approach encouraged benchmarking practitioners to do a baseline study of an institution before a benchmarking exercise was implemented in order to determine the circumstances within which a benchmarking practice was being undertaken. This increased the level of co-operation and the spirit of ownership of the project by the members of the institution, especially its employees. The researcher established that if the institutions suffered any benchmarking disadvantage, it was self-inflicted, like failing to plan, or it was a natural disadvantage.

2.13 Challenges in benchmarking

This section focused on the challenges that many organisations and institutions faced in their endeavour to engage in a benchmarking exercise. These were challenges that should be considered patiently and decisions taken on the basis of full information. The primary research question sought to ascertain the conscious undertaking of the benchmarking practice, which could be done against the proper consideration of challenges found in benchmarking.

A number of challenges were given by Nazarko (2007) and these should be considered by the institutions planning to benchmark, because they could affect the process of collaborative benchmarking. These challenges were the distrust of competition, the lack of faith in project success, a fear of losing position in the market, a reluctance to share qualitative research information, corporate culture barriers and resource constraints.
In addition to the above challenges Jones (2009) said that although benchmarking involved making comparisons of performance, it was not supposed to be taken as information for competitor analysis but it was best when it involved a collaborative comparison of league tables, whose aim was to learn about the circumstances and processes that underpinned superior performance. Benchmarking was not just catching up in rapidly changing circumstances, where good practices became dated very quickly and the institution wanted to gain competitive, or possibly prime mover, advantage (See § 4.3.4, for findings on collaborative benchmarking). Benchmarking was not copying, the fact that others were doing things differently did not necessarily mean they were better spies or were better espionage agents; benchmarking relied on transparency and honesty, which were vital for successful benchmarking initiatives, according to Stella and Woodhouse (2007).

Findings in a survey on the barriers to internal benchmarking initiatives carried out by Amaral and Sousa (2009) were categorised as institutional barriers, consisting of people, culture, and context. Benchmarking anticipated management barriers, which consisted of planning and implementation problems, leadership, and business pressures and put in place measures to ameliorate the challenges, if not eradicate them completely. It also anticipated data barriers that emanated from the difficulty to access or compare data. These barriers should be kept under constant consideration to minimise their influence on the outcome of a benchmarking practice. The researcher defined a barrier as any obstacle, pitfall, drawback, limitation, or difficulty that arose during the implementation of benchmarking.

This section contributed to literature about the study in that it illustrated the challenges and pitfalls the benchmarking application was likely to face. This study considered these challenges in order to carry out a proper investigation and avoid results that got questioned in the academic community.
2.14 Empirical studies of benchmarking

The current section sought to describe two comparable researches in an effort to employ the researches as a base for the current initiative. The findings illuminated the possible outcome of the current initiative, and gave a foretaste of what was to come. The first study, based from the Australian education system, was undertaken by McKinnon, et al (2000) and it formed the basis of the current study, through the theoretical model they proposed, and the study by Van Vught, et al, (2008), which assisted in providing the European Union background. The studies were chosen because they focused on the quality of university education and performance improvement in higher education and illuminated the role of benchmarking practices and processes in these institutions of higher learning in the respective countries. The empirical studies were picked for the benchmarking approaches employed; it was later discovered that they differed from the approaches the three institutions followed (See § 5.2.3, for study conclusions). The difference in approach was explored and explained.


In their study nine core business areas of an institution were chosen and these formed the basis of the reference criterion approach to benchmarking. In institutions of higher learning the emphasis was on how the institutions were governed, how resources were allocated and how their use was managed by senior management. The core business of the Chief Executive Officer, and the team of senior managers, was to exercise leadership through judicious decision making and the acquisition and allocation of resources for the achievement of the institution’s mandate. On a broad base this reflected the approach of the three institutions of higher learning, leadership provided direction and focus.

The attainment of an institution’s mandate was reflected in the quality of the research output, the quality of community service and the quality of the teaching and learning that went on in the institution. This was the external impact of the institution, which reflected the reputation and recognition the institution received from stakeholders. The finance and physical infrastructure referred to the need for a prudent financial strategy for income, which reflected the varied
sources of that income and how the expenditure was managed, and this was accomplished through the setting of appropriate benchmarks or standards of operation. The quality of student learning and teaching depended on the quality of the learning environment, the quality assurance of the learning and teaching material and processes, and the outcomes of the teaching and learning, which included the employability of the graduates. The primary determinant of the quality of learning resided in the quality of student support and how that support enhanced the student outcomes. The service in the form of human and hardware that the students received determined the learning outcomes.

The area of research ranged from the quality of data collected or generated to the quality of the research output, or throughput. The quality of research impacted on the degree of economic development in the country. The quality of research depended on the quality of the library and information services the students received. These services ranged from the hard copy text book to electronic learning material and how appropriately these served the needs of the student. Institutions increased the diversity and range of activities that they engaged in which contributed to the strengthening the culture of internationalisation. The intention and aim of every institution was to recruit the best and most suitable staff for its purpose, whose reward was commensurate with experience and qualification. (See § 4.3, for findings).

These areas guided the researcher in assessing the infrastructure in the three institutions under study and the quality of education and the performance of the institution. The observation on the institution included the state of the institution, like buildings, learning material and electronic property.


The European Union study by Van Vught, Brandenburg, Burquel, Carr, Federkeil, Rafael, Sadlak, Taylor, Urban and Wells, (2008), in a report entitled ‘Benchmarking in European Higher Education’ and funded by the European Union, investigated the concepts and practices of benchmarking in higher education in European institutions of higher learning. This project was
designed to help modernise higher education management and to promote the attractiveness of European higher education, through the enhancement of quality education and the improvement of institutional performance. The purpose of this research reflected the purpose of the current research.

The research was aimed at identifying the concepts and practices of benchmarking in higher education and to compare the characteristics of these benchmarking practices in order to identify similarities and differences. The study chose the collaborative, instead of the competitive, approach to benchmarking because the researchers believed collaborative benchmarking produced the most desirable result in institutional benchmarking and responded to one of the research questions (See § 4.6, for finding of study).

The project was initiated by the European Centre for Strategic Management of Universities (ESMU), together in a consortium with UNESCO-European Centre for Higher Education (UNESCO-CEPES), the Centrum fur Hochschulentwicklung (CHE) and the University of Aveiro. This detail was meant to show the magnitude of the study and the importance of the ideas contained therein.

The study was born out of a desire to formalise and institutionalise benchmarking practice for continuous quality improvement and for a more effective way of improving performance in a highly diversified higher education sector in order to ensure that public funding was used effectively and in a transparent manner, and in support of higher education. The European Union believed that benchmarking served the needs of individual institutions to learn in order to improve, to change and to manage operations in a more professional way. The approach the study took was that benchmarking focused on openness of analysis, organisational learning and examination of processes, rather than narrowly focusing on inputs and outputs. In the co-operative type, there was a strong desire to learn and share aspects of good practice. In Australia, as elsewhere, the development of benchmarking was linked to the pursuit for quality enhancement and the need to demonstrate comparative quality and efficiency that was resident in institutional operations, or performance.
The European Union project acknowledged that there were two kinds of benchmarking practices. The competitive type took place when higher education institutions employed consultant companies or simply bought data from private companies in order to compare themselves to other institutions and to benchmark their standing in the competitive market, as well as to develop enhancement procedures. The other type was the collaborative benchmarking, which emphasised co-operation and collaborative learning between the benchmarking institutions and maintained a clear focus on enhancing procedures by learning from peers (See § 5.4, for way forward). In support of this view Van Vught et al. (2008) said that collaborative benchmarking was grounded on the pre-supposition of voluntary co-operation for the benefit of all practitioners and partners. Trust and ethical conduct were required during the implementation of the project as well as after completion of the benchmarking exercise. By all means, confidentiality should be guaranteed and access to data protected. There should be trust between co-operating partners and information collected in the investigation should not be availed to outsiders.

The Van Vught et al (2008) research adopted the McKinnon, et al (2000) benchmarking model of study, which was given in narrative form. The conclusion drawn in the review of general benchmarking literature was that the academic community was lagging in terms of providing and advancing models and frameworks that integrated the many facets of institutional benchmarking. It also concluded that benchmarking activities in higher education lacked a system-wide institutional approach; it adopted a model which the authors hoped would be authenticated through research. The fact that the model was proposed for the Australian institutions did not prevent its adoption by institutions outside Australia (See § 1.1, on the background to the study).

The study sought to provide suggestions and guidelines useful to newcomers to the scene of higher education benchmarking based on empirical findings from existing initiatives. Therefore, the development of these guidelines was grounded, to a considerable extent, on the analysis of a selection of existing co-operative benchmarking initiatives and networks in higher education. A sample consisting 18 initiatives from different countries in Europe, Australia, Canada and the USA was employed in the study. The team developed a set of 14 criteria by which the
benchmarking approaches chosen as a sample for the survey could be characterised. This was aimed to better understand the concepts and practices of benchmarking with a view to improving and increasing their uses in higher education.

The initiatives were scrutinised carefully through questionnaires and interviews in order to obtain a deeper understanding into the systems, the pitfalls, the advantages and the challenges inherent in benchmarking, as well as to avoid assumptions based on pure desk research. The perception of the benchmarking initiative itself was at the core of the project’s interest. In this way, the research team ensured that any suggestion which was derived from the data and its interpretation was concluded on the basis of a variety of empirical findings.

The results of the interviews and other methods of data generation were analysed according to the uni-variate analysis of every criterion and the bi-variate relation of the criterion to other criteria. The study produced an overview of a broad selection of benchmarking practices in higher education. It also produced guidelines for good benchmarking, an online tool, and a handbook in order to assist European higher education institutions in finding the most appropriate type of benchmarking practices for their own needs.

Van Vught, et al, (2008) stated that the most decisive finding was that there was no single dominant model or even a small group of generic benchmarking models. Benchmarking approaches in higher education varied by their aims, objectives, structure of the groups, their methods, and the kind of data employed (See § 5.3, for conclusions).

**2.14.3 Results of other researches**

This brief section considered researches by other people and what they came out with. Generally, these other studies by researchers like, Yasin (2002), Yorke (1999) and Benneworth (2008) corroborated the work of McKinnon, et al (2000) and Van Vught, et al (2000). The studies enriched the review of related literature by adding dimensions that were otherwise unknown.
Different purposes and contexts of benchmarking processes in higher education were considered by Yorke (1999) who reported that there was no coherent theory or approach to benchmarking that defined standardised methods, procedures and indicators. The report stressed the aspect of diversity between higher education institutions, and claimed that there was no single reference point for the purposes of benchmarking. Another reason for the absence of a single theory of benchmarking was identified by Yasin (2002) who evaluated a literature sample of more than 5000 publications on benchmarking from various fields published between 1986 and 2001. He showed a rapid rise in the volume of publications related to benchmarking and noted that this escalation in benchmarking information, innovations and case studies occurred primarily in publications of benchmarking practitioners (Yasin 2002), not in academic journals. He stressed the fact that benchmarking evolved with very little, if any, input or diffusion of knowledge from the academic community.

The different researches concurred that benchmarking in higher education lacked coherent and broadly accepted definitions for key aspects and that a standard set of concepts did not exist. Information on existing benchmarking initiatives was scarce and incomplete and a general benchmarking process did not exist. There did not seem to be a theory of benchmarking. The researchers, like Yasin (2002), acknowledged that benchmarking in higher education was still a very young child with little experience and with even less publicity. But with the increasing expectation and societal demand for quality education, accountability and process enhancement in higher education institutions, benchmarking was gaining popularity and becoming an important and frequently used mechanism.

The studies identified a number of challenges and benefits inherent in benchmarking practices. A few of these were recorded below, adding on to what was covered in the preceding section on benefit and challenges of benchmarking, in order to guide the current course of action. The challenges identified the absence of proper planning and the inability to undertake a manageable workload as some of the challenges. The other challenges included the difficulty of managing the work alongside other commitments, which was why benchmarking must be a strategic priority, with time and funding set aside for staff participation. It was important not to take on too much
in any one exercise. The benefits that accrued to benchmarking related to quality improvement of services as per institutional action plans, and the development of collegial networks. According to Benneworth (2008) if the data generation took a large amount of time, due to the size of an institution or initiative, the results might easily be out of date because the waiting time for the results could add up to more than eighteen months. The parameters of the benchmarking exercise must be clearly defined; and the most difficult challenge should be identified, and in most instances it turned out to be the implementation of the findings of a benchmarking initiative.

2.14.4 Benefits of past studies to current study

This study benefited in a number of ways from the research done by Van Vught, et al (2008), it made extensive use of the online tool, and communicated with participants through the internet, using the writers’ guidelines and the handbook as sources of information and ideas on the study structure. The finding was that benchmarking in higher education was in its infancy and the study’s contribution to a growing area was in itself energising (See § 4.5, for findings). The researcher was guided by the benefits and challenges unearthed in the research in order to be able to add significantly to the available literature. More importantly, the researcher endeavoured to contribute to benchmarking theory, with special emphasis to the quality of higher education, and the growth of benchmarking practice in higher education.

2.15 The absence of a benchmarking theory

The most important contribution of the findings was the total agreement with Engelkemeyer (1998) who said what was new in the use of explicit benchmarking was the increasing interest in the formalisation and institutionalisation of those processes. It was common cause that some actors in higher education tended to claim that they always did some form of benchmarking, but just never used this specific term, many involved in ‘benchmarking’ projects in higher education used the term ‘benchmarking’ when it had little relevance, the term was used whenever a comparison of some type was made. This view was shared by the current researcher, who recognised the necessity of institutions to start formalising and institutionalizing benchmarking
(See § 5.3, for conclusions). For example, the Distance University set its fee structure after considering fee structures from other institutions, which tended to be nothing but an exercise in comparisons. This study would recommend to the institutions to formalise and institutionalise benchmarking, based on the understanding that benchmarking was practised for a long time in many institutions before the process could be formalised.

The researcher agreed with Van Vught, et al, (2008) that the growth of benchmarking in higher education reflected the search for continuous quality improvement and for a more effective way of improving performance in a highly diversified higher education sector in order to ensure that public funding was used effectively to support higher education improvement initiatives. The researcher would like to contribute to the search for ways to attain quality in higher education institutions.

The current benchmarking study contributed to the area of benchmarking practice in higher education by filling the gap in the knowledge of benchmarking in Zimbabwe and the African region. The intended outcome was the institutionalisation and formalisation of benchmarking in the institutions of higher learning (See § 5.4, for way forward). The study would enable the researcher to embark on other researches as a way of publicising and recommending benchmarking to institutions of higher learning, commencing with those in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region.

2.15.1 A theory of benchmarking

The main purpose of the present section was to show the paucity of a benchmarking theory and the inability of the current study to discuss a theory of benchmarking. The area of benchmarking was dominated by practical application, which failed to encompass any theoretical considerations.

The studies by Van Vught, et al, (2008) and Garlick and Pryor (2008) found that there was no theory of benchmarking and there was no single dominant model or even a small group of
common benchmarking models. The study by McKinnon, et al (2000) did not offer any theory which underpinned the study’s benchmarking practice. Benchmarking approaches in higher education varied by their aims, objectives, structure of the groups, their methods, and the kind of data used. The study concluded that it was clear that benchmarking in higher education lacked coherent and broadly accepted definitions for key aspects and that a standard set of concepts did not exist. The finding, from the two researches described above and others not reported here, was that there was no theory on benchmarking with characteristics to help measure quality education in institutions of higher learning.

However, Moriarty (2008) undertook a study to identify the necessary or sufficient methodological elements which contributed to the effectiveness of benchmarking and to establish them within an acceptable theoretical framework, called a theory of benchmarking. A theory emerged from the study, which failed to measure up to the qualities of a theory. It did not have characteristics which should guide in the measurement of quality in an institution of higher learning. The theory by Moriarty (2008) did not describe behaviour, and did not make predictions about future behaviour. The aim of this study was to determine the extent to which the identified universities practised benchmarking, not to formulate a benchmarking theory. As a result of the inadequacy of the Moriarty (2008) theory this study refrained from discussing this theory of benchmarking.

2.16 Benchmarking models

In this section of the study a number of benchmarking models was discussed in order to expose the researcher to benchmarking models and in case the findings eventuated into a benchmarking model or a structure emerged that appeared like a model. If this happened the researcher would be able to relate the finding to the literature on the model. Two of these models were presented here and employed as a basis for the structure of the study. The study had planned to propose a benchmarking model but the intention was abandoned when it was discovered that this would affect the methodological approach, and a model proposal needed to be tested and tried against other models before it was released into the public domain. The coverage of models was not
affected by earlier discussion about models, which was undertaken at a superficial level, and for reasons other than the consideration of a number of models in the benchmarking arena.

The Chambers 21st Dictionary (1999) defined a model as a representation of reality, or an item that served as a sample in construction of a full-scale version. A model was similar to a framework, described earlier in this report. The field of benchmarking contained a lot of models and most of these were generic to given types of benchmarking situations and some were modified to suit specific performance improvement projects (Ahmed and Rafiq 1998, Dougherty, Clebsch and Anderson, 2005, Illie, et al. 2011, and Nazarko 2007).

The study identified the TRADE methodology and the Garlick and Pryor (2004) model as the two which had aspects that the study could borrow from. Both were clear and explicit on the phases they followed and the steps that came from the phases were also clear. It was the intention of the study to determine if the benchmarking practices were in line with the two models. The two models explained below brought out the strengths and weaknesses of each model, the scope of its coverage and a determination on whether the element of sustainability was evident (See § 4.3, for findings).

2.16.1 Garlick and Pryor (2004) model

The benchmarking model was based on the following three sound principles, which were a committed leadership, including at the most senior levels, and an availability of resources for both the review process and the resulting improvement initiatives. The second principle was the presence of comprehensive dialogue and collaboration across a broad range of relevant stakeholders with an interest in the function needing improvement, both within and outside the institution. The principle ensured that meaningful and purposeful connectedness was attained. The third principle was the need to harness an attitude and associated process of learning for improvement based on reflection, exchange of information, knowledge and the sharing of understanding and experiences.
Garlick and Pryor (2008) considered a good programme for quality improvement within the institution as being made up of characteristics, which included a clear understanding of the institution’s stakeholder expectations in relation to the specific area targeted for improvement, and the environment in which it operated. The second characteristic was the formulation of goals, policies and procedures that were accessible and understood by all relevant staff, students and other stakeholders participating in the process of improvement. The third characteristic was to institute a flexible, complete process to enable active involvement by relevant stakeholders and put in place measures of performance for the function, with mechanisms for both internal and external data support, including from non-institutional comparisons that were consistent with agreed improvement goals and the changing environment in which it was to function. The last was to provide evidence that improvement had eventuated and, learning that fed into continuous improvement on a wide scale had been achieved.

Garlick and Pryor (2004) illustrated a generic benchmarking model, composed of five phases sequenced in cascading order. Within each phase were a number of sub-elements or steps whose number varied with each phase.

The first phase focused on the current situation of the organisation, which should be reviewed comprehensively together with the environment as it related to the function under study. The second phase entailed planning for the improvement of the area under study. This was after a gap had been identified and the organisational circumstance supported the implementation of strategies to correct or fill the gap. In the third phase the strategies were implemented, with senior management commitment so that the required resources could be made available. The fourth phase related to the evaluation that any implementation exercise was supposed to undergo. The gap identified in phase was supposed to be covered; and the fifth and last phase was a learning process to ensure continuous improvement by the organisation.

The five phases were based on the principles of collaboration, leadership and learning. Effective benchmarking eventuated in an increase in the welfare of the involved institution and a learning process to ensure that in future any slackening in performance could be identified quickly and
remedial action taken. The learning process was made possible through the commitment of institutional leadership and a spirit of collaboration. And that was why a diagrammatic representation of these phases placed the learning process at the centre of all activities. The learning process had ripple effect on the operations of the institution, spreading out to all the sectors of the organisation.

Figure 2.1. Benchmarking model


A review of benchmarking initiatives in the United Kingdom done by Kristensen (2002) resulted in the identification of six interrelated characteristics of a learning organisation. The
characteristics were found in each benchmarking institution if any learning was to take place at all. The six characteristics were that a learning institution had mechanisms that enabled it, as an living entity, to learn from its own experiences and from the experiences of others. The learning was for a purpose, including enabling the institution to contend with external factors or adapt to the environment, and to be efficient at producing outputs. The institution had to be effective in producing better products through a continuous process of methodical proactive improvement which involved a cycle of enquiry, action and feedback (See 4.5, for finding). The learning involved a culture of facilitating or enabling the capacity for employees to increase their learning and the realisation that a learning institution developed radical ideas, thought the unthinkable, experimented and took risks and was able to reflect on, or evaluate, the learning.

The researcher wanted to establish if the three institutions of higher learning practised benchmarking along the phases similar to the Garlick and Pryor (2004) model, which was a model constructed from the result of a benchmarking investigation of six universities. There would be a comparative analysis of what each institution was doing in relation to the phases proposed by Garlick and Pryor (2004) to see if the same phases were followed. Garlick and Pryor (2004) proposed that their model be adopted as a blueprint against which the benchmarking activities of institutions of higher learning were compared and findings based. However, this study desired to determine if there were any similarities between their model and the model followed by the three institutions.

2.16.2 TRADE Benchmarking Methodology

An innovative benchmarking methodology called TRADE was developed by Best Practice Club (BPC) and the Centre for Organisational Excellence Research (COER) (www.globalbenchmarking.org). The TRADE methodology was endorsed by the Global Benchmarking Network and has been used by private and public sector organisations of all sizes. The TRADE methodology has been used in the United Kingdom, New Zealand, Taiwan, United Arab Emirates, and was the approved methodology for Singapore’s Public Service
(www.globalbenchmarking.org). The researcher wanted to determine if the three institutions adopted a benchmarking approach similar to the TRADE methodology.

The TRADE benchmarking methodology focused on an exchange, or “trade”, of information and best practices to improve the performance of processes, goods and services; a clear indication of collaboration. Benchmarking projects should be targeted at those areas that delivered the best value to an institution. The aim of the project could be broad or specific and may relate to improving the performance of a process, activity or task, business improvement tool, equipment, strategy or behaviour. Once a project aim was set, the process or activity to be studied was broken down into its component parts and current performance measured. Benchmarking partners could then be identified, and their practices studied through surveys or site visits. An analysis was then conducted to determine which processes or activities should be adapted and implemented.

Supporters and Partners (2010) base their introduction of TRADE methodology on the need to improve any given business process by exploiting “best practices” rather than merely measuring the best performance. They say it appeared on the Business Excellence award criteria more extensively than any other management concept, and that benchmarking promoted the emergence of an evolution of a “learning culture” throughout the organisation, and as such provided the key to continuous long-term improvement and competitiveness.

TRADE benchmarking methodology offered a proven approach. It was flexible and could be used for exploratory (1-12 week) or in-depth (13-36 week) projects. It was easy to explain and communicate, as it only consisted of five stages and had a memorable name. TRADE benchmarking methodology provided a step-by-step approach, within the five stages, and these were simple steps to be followed. The first phase considered the terms of reference in which the planning component took place. The second phase provided a rigorous baseline approach to planning, which ensured that the project only proceeds after a cost/benefit analysis had been undertaken. The third phase was the one in which data were collected and analysed. The fourth
phase included the communication and the implementation of best practices. The fifth and last was the phase for evaluating the benchmarking process and reporting the outcomes.

![Figure 2.2 Trade benchmarking methodology](source: www.globalbenchmarking.org)

There was a strong likelihood of success of any benchmarking initiative linked to this methodology, as projects were supported through a TRADE project management spreadsheet, a TRADE training manual, which consisted of a comprehensive set of benchmarking resources and template forms, and a benchmarking certification scheme. The TRADE benchmarking methodology had proven to save time and money, and had been in existence for fifteen years of benchmarking experience, being used by hundreds of organisations. A lot of resources were invested into the development and refinement of TRADE materials and template forms. TRADE licence holders had full access to these, and future updates, and they did not need to develop their own materials which could be at considerable expense. It delivered results because after each stage of TRADE, the project was reviewed to ensure it was on track. If it was not on track, the project could be stopped or the direction of the project changed. Therefore, all projects should deliver the expected results and major benefits, potentially saving or generating large sums of money for large projects.

The TRADE methodology benchmarking model was adopted for this study so that it could be used to guide the benchmarking comparisons and augment the lessons learnt from the
McKinnon, et al (2000) study. It was chosen for its recency in formulation and because it encompassed aspects that other models did not discuss in detail. For example, it covered the important element of a learning institution.

The TRADE methodology emphasised the exploitation of “best practices”. The aim of the study was to determine the extent to which the three institutions consciously practised benchmarking, through the exploitation of “best practices”. The study would determine if the institutions “think outside the particular boxes” which they inhabited, and to compare and question, in a methodical and systematic manner, the activities of each one in relation to what the other two were doing. This investigation analysed what the institutions were doing in the name of benchmarking and compared that to the phases and steps outlined in the TRADE Methodology.

This section was important to the study because it exposed the researcher to two models which clearly illustrated the phases and steps that the benchmarking process generally assumed in other studies. It also exposed the researcher to the approaches to benchmarking which were different to what the three institutions seemed to follow (See 5.3, for conclusions). The findings revealed the approach the institutions were likely to employ.

**2.17 Other benchmarking models**

The foregoing section illustrated the framework of a benchmarking standard model. This section briefly explained the general structure of models, and sought to expose the researcher to a few more models and how one differed from the other. Benchmarking models outlined the benchmarking process and how each phase or part related to the rest. The researcher considered a number of models because he hoped one or all of the institutions in the study adopted a benchmarking model.

Anand and Kodali (2008) conducted a research on many benchmarking models. Their finding was that all the processes they examined were made up of planning or preparation, analytical, integration and action phases. Their finding was that most, if not all, of the models followed the
same basic rules of benchmarking, but used different language. The methodological approaches were based on the Rank Xerox type, which was considered to be an effective and generic way of conducting benchmarking projects; it was named the Plan-Do-Check-Act (PDCA) model. The phases and steps of the benchmarking process of these models compared favourably to the generic models.

The benchmarking process models and methodologies, Lutfullayev (2001) pointed out, were made up of various phases and steps, ranging from four phases and two steps to six phases and twenty to thirty steps. Camp (1989b) suggested a ten-step generic process for benchmarking. Watson (1993, Alstete (1995) and Collie (2010) proposed a three phase benchmarking model and Ratcliff (www.apqc.org) proposed a five phase model.

In the Anand and Kodali (2008) research of fourteen models each differed in terms of the number of steps involved, the number of phases, and the type of benchmarking. The models that were examined all had planning or preparation, analytical, integration and action phases. In the surveyed models, the number of steps varied from five to twenty-one and similarly the number of phases varied from two to seven. This study sought to establish the number of phases and steps each of the models had that the institutions used.

This section revealed how a model could be constructed and the phases in the benchmarking process. However, the standard model, expected to be employed by either of the institutions in the study was likely to fall within the limits of an average of six phases and an average of five steps per phase, based on the average of studied models.

2.18 Types of benchmarking

The focus of this section was to consider the types of benchmarking and the differences of these types. The reasons for the differences were discussed as a way of gaining a deep understanding of the types of benchmarking and what each type emphasised. The question was important because Jackson (2001) argued that collaborative benchmarking was used for the purpose of
evaluating the quality and policies of an institution, and its practices and its performance. The objective of collaboration was to provide an institution with an opportunity to share with other institutions the experiences of benchmarking as a mechanism for self-improvement and self-evaluation.

There were two broad types of benchmarking, which were competitive benchmarking and collaborative benchmarking. The following section briefly defined the two types of benchmarking and explained how the two types were operationalised so that the researcher could understand the type of benchmarking ideal for the open and distance learning institution. Although collaborative benchmarking seemed to face fewer hurdles compared to competitive benchmarking an institution chose the type that suited its purpose, at any given time. The study recommended collaborative benchmarking due to its transparency, sharing approach, openness and its spirit of inclusivity.

Collaboration was explained well by Bagchi (1996) who said it was the sharing of information between two parties or within a group of institutions working together as partners. A one-to-one collaborative partnership was made up when one institution partnered another and methodically gathered information in line with its own developmental agenda, on the understanding that the sharing of information would be a two way process and the dialogue would benefit both institutions. Group collaboration involved more than two partners who gathered and shared information (Jackson, 2001) and other projects on the strength of collaborative relationships. Bogan and English (1994) explained that the strength of benchmarking lay in the shared learning, collaborative working relationships and networking which led to a rapidly accelerated enhancement in quality and self-improvement. Collaborative benchmarking included shared information, knowledge and experience about “best practices”.

Collaborative benchmarking was grounded on the pre-supposition of voluntary co-operation for the benefit of all partners. It required trust and ethical conduct during the implementation of the project as well as after completion of the benchmarking exercise. Confidentiality should be guaranteed and access to data protected. The trust between partners was indispensable and could
be enhanced by applying the rule of exchanging the same set of data, as recommended by the TRADE methodology. The recommendation by Vught, et al (2008) that information obtained in the course of a benchmarking process should not be made available to third parties without prior permission of the partner was worth serious consideration.

Collaborative benchmarking was built on a raft of principles for collaborative relationships and some of these were: collegiality, reciprocity, respect and trust, transparency, openness to learning, openness to change in the areas of both quality improvement and quality assurance and a requirement for integrity, according to Prasad and Stella (2006).

The researcher fully concurred with Nazarko (2007) who stated that a collaborative benchmarking exercise was carried out in a co-operative environment involving a significant number of institutions, and ensured fair play through the invitation of a trade association body, or consultants to join them. Each participant gave information freely to the study in the knowledge that the information would remain confidential and would be disclosed to members of the study only. The advantage of collaborative benchmarking was that the information used would be detailed which would allow comparative evaluation. This enabled the identification of the important enablers as well as allowing a greater range of comparisons than would happen if one institution were benchmarking internally. Another advantage was that it would be possible for an institution to decide the level of excellence it wanted to target. A convincing argument by Lankford (2007) was that collaborative benchmarking was the most widely used type of benchmarking because it was relatively easy to practice. A collaborative relationship was the most accommodating way of getting information because there was no direct competition involved. The information collected flowed from the ‘best-in-class’ institution to the benchmarking institutions.

A succinct portrayal of a collaborative benchmarking background was done by Achim, Cabulea, Mihalache and Popa (2009). They said there was a deep rooted propensity to learn and to share parts of good practice in most institutions of higher learning. The desire was tempered with an emphasis on collegiality and the need for all institutions to recognise the role of an institution in
the world. The desire to share emerged in many forms: it manifested itself in professional associations, in the meetings convened to share interests of a common nature, in visits from one institution to another by institutional delegations in an effort to examine what other institutions were doing and when some professional associations worked collaboratively among themselves in order to support the provision of academic service and the setting of common standards. The institutions provided their own staff in order to upgrade and maintain quality after a quality assessment and an accreditation system was offered, for the sake of maintaining goodwill. The goal was to improve performance through collaboration and comparison of performance with sister institutions (See § 4.3, for full findings). The type of benchmarking adopted by the three institutions seemed to approximate the type describe here.

Competitive benchmarking compared similar business practices, processes and products and services which were in direct competition within the market (Borysowich, 2006). There were real challenges in accessing information on competitor activities and studies have shown that the security and confidentiality concerns led researchers and competitors to confine their activities to purchasing competitor products as a way of accessing services. This was almost impossible in an institutional setting. Information on competitive benchmarking was often available through trade associations and industry groups, very little came from the competitor institutions being studied. The results of the study were normally published without revealing the institutions studied, but used pseudonyms. The secretive nature of competitive benchmarking made the availability of information a real challenge to scholars. Where information could be accessed it was generally of an inferior quality to what was needed for the drawing of hard analytical findings.

Some researchers argued that it was not the primary concern of institutions to decide whether their benchmarking practice should be competitive or collaborative. The decision should be based on the characteristics of ‘best practice’. This view was supported by Prasad and Stella (2008) who pointed out that these characteristics contributed to success and sustainability which was identified and which included relative advantages over the preceding practice. The other characteristics were the compatibility within the institutional context and culture, the divisibility or availability in small parts as related to the whole, and the freedom to exercise simplicity which
was almost non-existent to enable the adoption of the practice. The last characteristic was the ease with which to communicate the process which was essential for the acceptance of the practice. Therefore, the benchmarking practice went beyond the type of direct competition or collaboration, it thrived on the adoption of the ‘best practice’ characteristics. However, the conviction of the researcher was that collaborative benchmarking produced findings that were readily credible because they were based on the data pooled from many institutions.

This section explained the types of benchmarking available but it also pointed out that the choice of benchmarking was not crucial, but the ‘best practices’ characteristics. This study determined the type of benchmarking the universities were engaged in from the results of the analysed data. The section covered material required in answer to the research question about the reasons why institutions should engage in collaborative benchmarking.

2.19 Objective benchmarking

The aim in this part of the study was to emphasise the importance of undertaking an objective benchmarking initiative. A benchmarking practice should be motivated by objective reasons and process, whose results would be measurable and quantifiable or they could be expressed in explicit qualitative terms (See § 4.3.6, for research finding). The proposal by McKinnon, et al (2000) to use indicators was considered as an important starting point in a benchmarking practise.

The argument by Garlick and Pryor (2004) was that a benchmarking practice should be employed to gain ideas and criteria for developing quality performance indicators for institutional performance. They argued that benchmarking quality education in an institution could be ascertained objectively through the setting of key performance indicators for institutional performance improvement. They proceeded to state that apart from setting the quality indicators the institutions should realise the importance of sharing knowledge and experience in the areas of institutional practice. Institutions should foster experience based on flexibility, commitment, connectivity and reflection towards doing a professional job. They
accepted that the setting of quality performance indicators was the only authentic measure of an objective benchmarking process if an institution was to improve its performance in a measurable manner (See § 4.5, for finding). The attainment of objectivity was possible where the benchmarking approach was quantitative in nature, where numerical scoring of performance was possible. In a qualitative approach the situation was different and the element of objectivity was sought and attained in a different manner. The current study was premised on the assumption that the institutions employed quantitative benchmarking, based on the McKinnon, *et al* (2000) model.

The question that sought to measure benchmarking in an objective manner was answered through the setting of common standards, or indicators (See § 4.3.6, for finding).

### 2.20 Some experiences from benchmarking initiatives

In the following section an argument was advanced that the proliferation of benchmarking practices in Australian, America and Europe, to mention a few countries, and the forming of international benchmarking organisations, like NASDAC in America, were an indication of how well the practice was received worldwide. The following section was meant to advance a few reasons why institutions of higher education gained a lot in benchmarking their institutions against those performing better than they did (See § 1.2, for background). These reasons were meant to augment the material in the background to the study and provide compelling reasons for undertaking the study (See § 1.4, statement of the problem).

A persuasive argument was advanced by Jeffrey (2005) whose experience informed him that benchmarking increased the demand for accountability, and enabled the sharing of higher volumes of available information, which changed the methods of how institutions of higher education operated in the mid-1990s. A new way of thinking or a paradigm built on efficiency and a desire for continuous learning must be integrated into institutional structures if higher education institutions were to enact sustainable changes in effectiveness and productivity. Benchmarking emerged as a useful, easily understood, and effective mechanism for staying
competitive among the improvement strategies and techniques such as Total Quality Management (TQM), Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI), and Business Process Reengineering (BPR).

The other reason was proffered by Stella and Woodhouse (2007) who stated that from their experience benchmarking was used to help institutions to improve their processes and systems in order to better achieve their educational mission. They claimed that institutions were equipped to defend themselves against external goals and standards that could be destructive to an institution. They proceeded to argue that benchmarking provided a methodical approach to quality improvement, established the extent of improvement that was required, kept an external focus to internal activities, used existing knowledge about the effectiveness of particular processes, and identified new ideas and innovative approaches. They also argued that benchmarking encouraged and provided a framework for change, enabled the incorporation of ‘best practices’ into an institution and decreased subjectivity in decision-making by basing it on hard data. Benchmarking helped create a learning institution, and promoted contacts and networks across other institutions. Meade (1997) used the above argument to prove that benchmarking was way ahead of other institutional quality and performance improvement mechanisms. Longbottom (2000) recounted a study of the Times Top 100 companies by consultants Coopers and Lybrand (1995) which found that 78% of respondents who had been involved in benchmarking activities and studies had reported accruing the following benefits:

- 92 per cent improved productivity;
- 81 per cent improved staff motivation;
- 87 per cent gained new insights;
- 87 per cent warning for competitive disadvantage; and
- 82 per cent for managing performance improvement.

Due to its reliance on hard data and research methodology, benchmarking was suited for institutions of higher education in which these types of studies were very familiar to faculty. Practitioners at institutions found that benchmarking helped overcome resistance to change, provided a structure for external evaluation, and created new networks of communication.
between institutions, where valuable information and experiences could be shared (AACSB, 1994). Benchmarking was a positive process, and provided objective measurement for baselining, which was the setting of the initial values, goal-setting and improvement tracking that led to dramatic innovation of institutional personnel (Shafer and Coate, 1992). In addition, quality strategies and re-engineering efforts were both enhanced by benchmarking because it could identify areas that could benefit most from TQM and/or BPR, and made it possible to improve operations often with dramatic innovations (Alstete, 1995).

In this section the case of benchmarking was advanced very strongly, employing three experiences, to convince the skeptical institutions of the efficacy of the benchmarking practice; it was the single most effective and efficient mechanism for self-improvement and quality enhancement.

### 2.21 Benchmarking quality indicators

The section on objective benchmarking recommended the identification of the need for indicators as a prerequisite of objectivity in benchmarking (See § 5.4, for way forward). The following few paragraphs were intended to briefly explain the importance of performance indictors in the practice of benchmarking. (See § 4.3.5, for indicators). They also provided background information needed in order to answer the question on identifying quality performance indicators.

A definition of a performance indicator was given by Hayford (2003) who said it was a measure, sign, situation or condition which gave information and statistics and permitted comparisons between institutions, over time and with commonly accepted standards. Indicators provided information about the degree to which the objectives to teaching and learning quality education were being met within the higher education sector. Indicators were important in benchmarking as they enabled the institutions to measure and compare their performance with that of other institutions. Higher education systems and institutions worldwide went through extensive reform and change over the past twenty-five years in pursuit of the agenda of improving quality. A
significant feature of this was the drive to produce structured evidence of effectiveness and efficiency (Doyle, 2006; Guthrie and Neumann, 2007; and Hayford, 2003). Higher education institutions progressively implemented more methodical, formalised quality indicators, and recognised this as a way to achieve greater efficiency, transparency and accountability within their organisations (Burke and Minassians, 2001). The setting of common benchmarks or shared indicators was the starting point in objective benchmarking (See § 5.2.2, for common indicators).

The development of higher education quality assurance processes took place together with the introduction by governments of quality models and the founding of institutions meant to audit and review institutional performance across national boundaries. Most of these audits were based on performance indicators. The researcher’s perception was well articulated by Marginson and van der Wende (2007) when they argued that institutional and national quality models and quality performance indicators were considered critical parts in raising the standard of higher education, with institutions such as the World Trade Organisation (WTO) helping developing countries to introduce performance indicators at institutional and national levels. The justification behind quality performance indicators in higher education was to ensure the education provided to students equipped them for employment and provided the nation with a highly skilled workforce that promoted economic growth. A raft of characteristics that a good programme for quality improvement within the institution should comprise of was listed by Illie, et al., (2011), on the basis of which quality performance indicators could be set. Meek and van der Lee (2005) pointed out that the current use of quality indicators in many countries was driven by the motivation, on the part of government, to introduce more market-like competition into higher education in order to make institutions more flexible, cost-efficient and responsive to the needs of society. These were the same indicators which McKinnon, et al (2000) employed in their benchmarking practice, which enabled them to compare the performance of one institution against that of the other, and the performance of many institutions could also be compared.

The trend in the contemporary world over in the last thirty years was that institutions of higher learning experienced a lot of intended and programmed change and transformation in their pursuit and enhancement of quality education. The proliferation of these institutions and the
increased demand for university education meant the issue of quality, and the open and distance mode of university education, placed a bigger weight on the quest for improvement in quality and performance of the education institutions. The quest for quality education meant that the institutions ended up establishing performance indicators, which could be any measure, or sign, situation or condition that pointed to levels of performance or quality (See § 5.3, for conclusions). The measure, in turn, enabled the degree of quality, or performance, to be measured and compared with that of other institutions. Apart from the measurement and comparison the individual institutions were able to measure their teaching and learning assignments and determine if they were improving or falling behind in their plans.

### 2.22 Summary

This chapter contributed a lot of new insights, new information and knowledge to this study. The focus and thrust of the whole study was based on the knowledge and information contained in this chapter. A portion of the chapter was dedicated to the definition of benchmarking, as a concept. The fundamental concept of benchmarking was given by Hagelund (1997) as being the ability to use the best of other people’s ideas, ability to add one’s own creativity to other people’s ideas and the ability to go far without having to repeat other people’s experiences. The practice of benchmarking was popularised by Camp (1989) after Xerox employed benchmarking practices to turn around its business, which was on the verge of collapse. From the repertoire of definitions considered in the chapter the study adopted the definition by Jackson and Lund (2000b) who stated that benchmarking was a learning process whose structure enabled practitioners to compare their services, activities, and products. This was to identify the comparative strengths and weaknesses of the institutions as a basis for self-improvement and self-regulation. Watson (1993) was credited with the introduction of benchmarking in university education, after which there had been widespread acceptance of the practice in all continents.

The review of related literature failed to identify a benchmarking theory (Van Vught, et al., 2008), apart from the theory from Moriarty (2008), which was not authenticated through research. The researcher’s view was that the attempt by Moriarty (2008) to construct a theory of
benchmarking succeeded in formulating a detailed benchmarking definition. The purported theory lacked the characteristics of a theory because of the absence of certain behaviour patterns. The current study did not attempt to formulate a theory of benchmarking but proceeded in the awareness that there was no theory to rely on. The researcher relied on the existing models.

The study relied heavily on the information and knowledge gained in the review of related literature. The knowledge was used to focus the study and to give it structure and direction. The current investigation borrowed the process and methodology from the McKinnon, et al (2000), Pryor and Garlick (2004) and the Van Vught, et al, (2010) studies. The area these three publications investigated was similar to the area the current study focused its attention on. This made the current study all the richer.

The review of related literature identified a number of gaps that motivated and drove the researcher to undertake this study. The absence of any literature articulating the experience of open and distance learning institutions in benchmarking practices in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region was a great challenge to the researcher, which could not be ignored but researched. There was no indication in the reviewed literature of a study dedicated to open and distance learning institutions. The reviewed literature did not indicate any conscious practice in benchmarking, and it failed to articulate a meaning of the concept “benchmarking” in the context of the open and distance learning institutions of Africa, as was the case with other continents, like North America and Europe. The absence of any indication that there was conscious benchmarking in the African context meant that it was not known what type of benchmarking, if any, the institutions practised. These gaps led to the major gap which indicated that, although there was ubiquitous mention and claim that the institutions practised benchmarking, none of the three institutions practised formalised and institutionalised benchmarking. Admittedly, the lack of formalisation meant that the benchmarking practices were not documented and lacked a feedback loop. This loop enabled the practitioners to learn on a continuous basis, through the provision of feedback.
CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

In the last chapter the researcher outlined the review of related literature, and covered the definition of the term ‘benchmarking’, the historical development of benchmarking and reasons for the adoption of benchmarking by the institutions of higher education the world over. In this chapter the researcher identified and explicated the methodological issues underpinning the study. The narration covered an ontological perspective of the study that considered reality to be subjective and a creation of institutional actors and the interpretive epistemology, in which the researcher interacted with the research participants and interrogated that interaction to emerge with meaning. The investigation was a case study, which was explained in relation to how the data generation, analysis and interpretation were carried out. The population, sample and sampling procedures were explained in this chapter, although these were of secondary importance in a qualitative paradigm. The analysis and interpretation of data was aimed at answering the research questions (See § 1.4, for research questions). The aim of the entire chapter was to explain how the researcher subjected the research questions to empirical investigation.

The purpose of the current study was to establish the state of benchmarking in ODL institutions of higher learning by answering the primary question:

i. “To what extent did the three ODL institutions of higher learning consciously practise benchmarking?”
The responses to the research questions led to an understanding and an appreciation of the benchmarking practice as a determinant of quality higher education. The study sought to establish the extent to which the institutions shared an understanding of the concept of benchmarking. Lastly, the study contributed to the knowledge on benchmarking practised in institutions of higher education in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region. The chapter sought to explain how the investigation was executed, through data generation, data analysis and interpretation, and how the study narrative was written.

The study commenced with a consideration of the epistemology underpinning the methodology, and moved to the qualitative paradigm, which was chosen for the investigation because of its suitability in soliciting data from participants (See § 1.15, for research methodology). The strategy of the study was a case study that required the generation of data, also known as empirical material, in a real life situation, where the researcher had no control over events. The qualitative paradigm focused on words and language, unlike the quantitative research paradigm which analysed results through numbers. The basic characteristics of the case study were explained throughout the chapter, as they related to benchmarking in an institutional setting.

3.2 Epistemological considerations

The researcher’s understanding of epistemologies was strengthened by Crotty (1998) who identified three epistemologies from which the researcher could choose one for the study. These were the objectivist, subjectivist and the constructivist epistemologies. The objectivist epistemology indicated that reality was given and could be proven, and in the case of an object its properties could be subjected to empirical measurement and quantification. The role of the researcher was to seek the reality and bring it out into the open. The perspectives of objectivism were closely aligned with those of the positivist epistemology to the point that the two were generally believed to be one. Objectivism was mainly suited for the hard experimental sciences which sought quantities and hard fact. The social world, according to positivists, could be
studied the same way the experimental world was approached, where exact reality was presumed to be out in the world and needed to be discovered and its nature explicated.

The subjectivist epistemology presupposed that reality emerged from nowhere, from a vacuum. The subjectivist reality was not found out there in the world, like the objectivist reality. Reality was not a product of the interaction between the researcher and the respondent or the participant, reality was thrust onto the object by the subject. In the approach considered by Crotty (1998) the problem in the world of society was that meaning, or reality came from somewhere, it could be imposed from outside the social set-up.

The table below illustrated the process of the study; the subheadings taken in each column were italicised, from the epistemology to the research methods.

Table 3.1. Methodological perspective of the study

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<td>Ethnography</td>
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The constructivist epistemology viewed reality as the product of the interaction between the researcher and the social players in the research; reality was socially constructed. Truth and
meaning in the world emerged from the interaction of social actors. What was critical in the constructivist epistemology was that a human being did not possess knowledge and meaning until he/she interacted with social players, through socialisation and social interaction, and acquired perceptions, experiences and belief systems through which more knowledge was generated and acquired. The interconnectedness between objectivism and subjectivism, with constructivism located in-between the two, was responsible for the creation of reality, knowledge and meaning in the world. The encounter one experienced with objects brought about creativity and innovation. Reality was also created through the experiences, perspectives and perceptions people acquired through life. The main point in constructivism was that a researcher was not a passive actor but an active participant who played a key role in the creation of knowledge and reality, through active participation, involvement and reflection.

The researcher adopted the constructivist epistemology for the study because he desired to experience the creation of knowledge and reality through interaction with social actors. The researcher sought to construct knowledge through the lived experiences of participants in the three open and distance learning institutions under study. This would be done through the interpretation of the lived experiences of the participants, backed by the backgrounds of the participants and the institutional contexts in which they worked. The background of the participants was presented and explained and it proved that the participants possessed years of experience and their perceptions and perspectives were grounded in a lot of experiential knowledge. The strength of the interpretations and conclusions drawn from the lived experiences lay in the employment of triangulation, which was the generation of data from multiple data sources, using multiple data generation methods. The key phrase in the study was the ‘interpretation of lived experiences’.

3.3 The interpretive research approach

This section presented the theoretical perspective and philosophical stance informing the constructivist epistemology chosen for the study. The section also provided the context of the process and grounding for its logic and criteria. The theoretical perspective chosen for the study
was the interpretivism, based on the interpretation of generated data, which reflected the type of knowledge and the attendant reality the study assumed.

The purpose of adopting constructivism in this study was to illuminate the specific phenomenon of benchmarking through participant perceptions in the three institutions of higher learning. The employment of the constructivist epistemology translated into the gathering of ‘deep’ information and perceptions through inductive and qualitative methods such as interviews and focus group discussions, which reflected data through the perspectives of the research participants. The researcher shared the conviction expressed by Flowers (2009) that the constructivist epistemology was a powerful tool for understanding experiences, gaining insights into people’s motivations and actions, and cutting through assumptions that were taken for granted and treated as worldly wisdom. The assumption was that constructivist research should start with pre-conceptions or bias, and the researcher should know the importance of clarity in the interpretation of perceptions and experiences of participants, whose meaning was translated into findings. The researcher was visible in the conduct of the research as an interested and subjective actor and not as a detached and impartial observer. The bias of the researcher, as the instrument of data generation, was minimised through the employment of many data sources.

Constructivist methods were particularly effective in bringing to the fore the experiences and perceptions of individuals, drawn from their own perspectives and in the context in which the experiences and perceptions were created. A general principle adopted was that of minimum structure and maximum depth, which, in practice, was not constrained by time and opportunity to strike a balance between keeping a focus on the research issues and avoiding undue influence by the researcher. The researcher establishment good rapport and empathy in interacting with participants, which were critical to gaining depth of information because of the need to understand the embedded state of benchmarking and the quality of education in the institutions (See § 1.4, for research questions). The constructivist epistemology assumed the view that reality was dependent on the meaning participants gave to their actions and their own existence and experiences. Knowledge was dependent on what social actors produced during the moment of perception; knowledge and truth or reality was generated. This philosophical perspective guided
the researcher in the review of related literature and the interpretation of the read material (cf. Chapter 2). The same philosophical underpinning guided the researcher in the choice of methods, which were the practical steps followed in the generation of data in the benchmarking investigation. The manner in which people experienced the world, the way they interacted with each other and the settings in which these interactions took place were characterised by the researcher’s interpretive inquiry.

The aim of adopting the interpretive perspective was to interpret and render meaning to the totality of the interaction between the researcher and the participants and arrive at an authentic status of benchmarking in the university. A strong contribution was made by Chisaka (2013) who said that it was through the interpretive analysis of the participants’ lived experiences in the form of values, meanings and experiences, their beliefs and thoughts about their world of benchmarking that the authentic meaning of benchmarking could be understood. The interpretive methods of research started with the realisation that the knowledge of reality, including the field of human action, was a social construction by human actors, who included the researcher. The researcher, as the instrument of data generation, was afforded the opportunity to experience the reality being studied through his closeness to the participants and this proximity and interaction resulted in the creation of knowledge. The research of Benneworth (2010) was an example of an interpretive study which influenced the current investigation.

Four categories of interpretive research were identified as phenomenology, ethnomethodology, hermeneutics and the philosophy of language. Hermeneutics was the theory of interpretation, which aimed at the understanding of texts, utterances and similar modes of communication. Hermeneutics was employed in the reading, the interpretation of messages and texts behind behaviours and linguistic expressions, and it was adopted for the current study of benchmarking (Chisaka, 2013). Ethnomethodology was defined as an inquiry aimed at the study of everyday methods that people used for the production of social order. It focused on how people made sense of their everyday world and how they understood benchmarking. The study of language was focused on the interpretation of language to access the required or intended meaning. Phenomenology was the study of society and how people interacted in a given cultural setting,
like an institution, so that there was social cohesion, unity of purpose and a sense of belonging. For instance, phenomenology assisted the researcher to understand the interaction with participants in an organisational setting in which benchmarking was practiced. The interpretive perspective enabled the researcher to increase his understanding of the critical, social and institutional issues of benchmarking. Interpretivism referred to the interpretation, or analysis, the researcher carried out in making sense of generated data (See § 4.2, for findings).

Quality in interpretive research was improved by the adoption of principles based on the hermeneutic orientation. The principles that were suggested by Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, (2007) were abstraction and generalisation, methodical reasoning, many interpretations, suspicion, hermeneutic circle, adaptation, and interaction between the researcher and subjects.

The researcher followed these principles in an interrelated manner, and in the context of the institutions being studied. The second principle related to how data were generated in relation to the participants. The third principle helped in deciding the theories and principles to employ but the research was not abstracted and generalised. The fourth principle was considered when the researcher’s own intellectual history became an issue, which was not applicable in the current study. The fifth principle related to how a variety of interpretations were made and whether they needed the researcher to examine the influence of the social context, which was essential in a qualitative research paradigm. The aim of the researcher was to focus on understanding the meaning and interpretation of empirical material from participants and their world from their point of view, and how these related to the practice of benchmarking in an institution of higher learning.

This study adopted the qualitative paradigm because the researcher desired to gain deep, intense and holistic or complete understanding of benchmarking within the institutional context, in which the researcher interacted with individuals and groups within the institution. The researcher supported Chisaka (2013) who said that a researcher should get involved very intimately in the interaction with participants with a view to reading deeper meaning coming out of the interaction in the analysis section, the lived experiences of participants. The researcher was encouraged to
empathise with the participants as the background of their benchmarking practice or experience was being investigated. The purpose was to understand benchmarking within the context and setting of the institutions selected for the study, which was based on the experiences and perceptions of the participants. The point Gray (2009) emphasised was that the qualitative approach was essential in an environment where the researcher wanted to carry out an authentic investigation whose findings were dependable and trustworthy in the given context. The approach of the researcher was to retain findings that were beyond reproach, in answer to how institutions were consciously benchmarking (See § 1.4, research questions).

The qualitative paradigm afforded the researcher the opportunity to generate empirical material in an in-depth and focused manner, unlike the quantitative paradigm, which dealt in numbers. The qualitative paradigm possessed unique characteristics, which suited this study and these were: the paradigm was used where relatively little of the phenomenon under study was known, like in the current situation, and it was conducted through intense and intimate contact within the organisation, which suited the current investigation and investigator. The researcher stayed in contact with participants for a period of eight months. The themes which emerged in data generation and analysis were reviewed by respondents for verification. The main focus of the study was to understand the ways in which people accounted for their actions of benchmarking (Gray, 2009). The aim here was to determine how institutions explained benchmarking practices as there seemed to be very little known or recorded about it in higher education in the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) region (See § 2.3, for full explanation). The data were generated through dialogue with information rich participants, open interviews with different institutional participants and at three levels of an institution to discover and understand the individual and the shared perspectives of benchmarking.

The researcher adopted the qualitative paradigm because of its other unique characteristics, which Chisaka (2013) articulated well. These characteristics were that the qualitative paradigm was essentially inductive, it was interpretive in its focus which was on the context of the phenomenon under investigation. It understood reality as possessing multiple dimensions, the data were always in the form of rich verbal descriptions and the data generation process was
interactive. The data were constructed from the meaning the participants gave, it focused on knowledge creation, and the sampling procedure was purposive, and focused on rich sources of data. The focus of the study was on a question, a problem or a phenomenon and the researcher was the research instrument. These characteristics were applicable to the current investigation and they were individually considered and acted upon by the researcher. The researcher did not begin the investigation from an existing hypothesis or theory, but from the basis of an identified problem, and articulated into a question. The interactive aspect of data generation was augmented by the employment of the focus group discussions, document analysis and observations. (See § 3.7, for data generation tools).

The focus of the interpretive paradigm was to develop an understanding of participant experiences and create knowledge out of the analysed data. The characteristics were essential in this study which explored whether institutions consciously carried out benchmarking practices; understood the nature of that benchmarking in the form of the practices and processes of benchmarking; and understood how these could be institutionalised as a quality and performance improvement mechanism. Data were generated from a sample of each of the top three ranks in the hierarchy of the three institutions, represented by five people purposively selected at each level. The interviews were terminated at the point of data saturation, which occurred before all the interviewees could be interviewed. The generated empirical material were analysed through the coding of ideas and facts into themes (See section 3.9, for full explanation). The themes were grouped into broad categories that reflected the main ideas in each of the research questions.

The method chosen for the study was the case study, which was effective in investigating a contemporary phenomenon in-depth and within its real life situation. The phenomenon was the institution and in the current study there emerged three cases, or three institutions which were studied. Each of these three cases was to be investigated and understood in-depth, according to Punch (2005) and the analysis of each case was related to the analyses of the other two cases. The three cases resulted in the researcher having multiple sources of data and generating data using multiple data generation tools. This was more effective in a real life situation, where there were no boundaries between the phenomenon and the context, as between benchmarking and the
institution. The researcher sought to construct the meaning of benchmarking in engagements with participants, and to understand the context and make an interpretation of interactions with participants in the institutions. The researcher’s interpretation of benchmarking practices was influenced by his past experience and the researched background to the study, as reflected in the review of related literature in order to be able to answer the research questions.

The foregoing section explained that the study employed the qualitative paradigm and discussed the reasons for this choice. It acknowledged the reasons the researcher did not employ the quantitative paradigm, which was synonymous with the use of numbers. The research philosophy for the study was identified as the constructivist epistemology and ontology. In summary, the current study adopted the case study method, which was unique for this investigation because it provided a deeper understanding of the concept of benchmarking higher education in three open and distance institutions.

3.4 The case study strategy

The current section presented the case study as the method of the research and defined that method as a plan or course of action employed to guide data generation, analysis and interpretation into findings. The researcher agreed with Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2012) that a case study was a strategy for the generation of data, its analysis and interpretation in an in-depth manner, and that was why it was adopted for this study. A research methodology was a structure of the research, to show how the major parts of the research project worked together to address the central research question, which was to establish the extent to which the institutions consciously practised benchmarking (See § 1.4, research questions).

The study sought to establish the extent to which three institutions of higher learning practised benchmarking to achieve quality higher education. The exploratory research approach was employed because it was useful and appropriate for a project that addressed a subject about which a little was known, like the status of benchmarking in the three institutions of higher learning. There was generally very little information or certainty about the existence of
benchmarking practices in institutions of higher education in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) countries before the commencement of the study. The researcher’s goal of adopting the exploratory research was advanced by Yin (2009) who pointed out that there was a need to produce possible insights through exhibiting some familiarity with basic detail, settings and concerns of benchmarking, a well-grounded picture of the situation being developed and the generation of new ideas and assumptions. Thereafter, the explanatory mode of narration was adopted, which resulted in the coverage of a lot of detail and depth.

The researcher chose a case study to allow for the intense analysis of the benchmarking operations in the three institutions and to establish if conscious benchmarking activity took place. The method articulated the generation of data from selected participants, the analysis of the data and the interpretation of the analysed data into meaningful information, from which the findings were derived. The foregoing explanation illustrated the point by Yin (2009) that the research method was the logic that linked the generated data and the conclusions to be made, to the initial questions of the study. The researcher believed the case study was the logical sequence that connected the empirical data to the study’s research questions and, ultimately, to the data interpretation.

The other reason why the researcher chose the case study was articulated by Runeson and Host (2009) who said that a case study was an empirical method aimed at investigating contemporary phenomenon in its context. The boundary between the phenomenon and its context may be unclear and data was generated from a few entities, and stressed the use of multiple-sources of evidence. However, a case study was no open to experimental control, which made it a typically flexible design. A trade-off between control and realism was insinuated in conducting research on real world issues. The researcher agreed with Runeson and Host (2009) that a real life situation like benchmarking was complex and was not easily determined. A supporting statement came from Barkley (2006) who said that an exploratory case study was employed when an institution or programme was so new that little information existed, outside the institution, regarding the workings and impact of the institution or programme. This was the position from which benchmarking was being studied. The current research moved from the exploratory to an
This study was a multiple-case study which placed three institutions of higher learning under academic scrutiny, and the three institutions represented three cases. The researcher’s position was clearly articulated by Zainal (1997) who stated that the multiple-case study method was employed in real-life situations, and benefited from numerous sources of evidence through literal replication rather than sampling logic. In the current study the findings in one institution were compared to those from the other two institutions; the multiple-case method enhanced and supported the results of the investigation. This helped raise the level of confidence in the robustness of the method. The findings of a case study were not generalised like those of a quantitative research; instead there was analytical generalisation or replication. The aim was to find out if the results of the first case were replicated by the results of the other two cases (See § 4.3, for findings).

Data were generated from participants who were resident and working at the Distance University (DU), the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) institution and the Open University (OU). The data were generated, stored, interpreted and the findings drawn from each case that was studied. This researcher was supported by Flowers (2009) in employing qualitative in-depth interviews with purposively selected study participants at the three top levels of institutional management to understand the different perspectives on benchmarking that obtained at each institution and institutional level.

The researcher agreed with Gray (2009) who said that a case study approach was authentic, and provided results that were dependable and trustworthy within a given context, which was the objective of this investigation. The researcher was clear on the intention of the study; the intent was to establish the extent of conscious benchmarking in university education. The institutions should follow, and be seen to follow, certain processes, procedures or practices in instituting self-improvement and self-evaluation arrangements for them to be practicing benchmarking. The researcher relied on the advice of Chisaka (2013), and worked in direct contact with participants.
and used the medium of language in its word form as opinions and impressions generated in an interactive manner. The researcher involved participants in constructing their own experiences through the data generating interaction, and shared these experiences with the researcher, which resulted in the production of meaning. The tools were the, the semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions and document analysis and the observations.

3.5 Population

The researcher was guided in the determination of the population by Kombo and Tromp (2009) who identified a population as a group of individuals, objects or items from which samples were taken to be measured. The population referred to the entire group of persons whose commonality was their belonging to open and distance learning (ODL) institutions. In this study the population referred to the three institutions and their staff. Kombo and Tromp (2009) proceeded to advise that the greater the diversity and differences which existed in the population, the larger was the sample size drawn by the researcher. This was due to the desire to capture the variability of the population and allow for greater reliability of the study. The three institutions under study shared many similarities and needed a small sample of participants, who generated a lot of appropriate data. The other point was that the participants were selected for their in-depth knowledge and information, and not the diversity of the population. These were open and distance learning institutions, which were founded between 1999 and 2005, making them of the same age, and their enrolments ranged between eight and ten thousand students. A summary was given by Kombo and Tromp (2009) who said a population of this nature was ideal because the institutions were accessible to the researcher, the sample was used to answer the research questions and the degree of variability among the three institutions was small.

The population of the study was made up of all open and distance learning (ODL) institutions in Africa, in general, and the target population was made up of those in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region, from which three institutions of higher learning, located in three SADC countries were selected. The conventional institutions, where the students stayed at the institution and received lectures in lecture rooms, were not included in the study.
The ODL institutions were within the geographic reach of the researcher. The accessible population was restricted to the workforce of the three institutions, in the ranks of Senior Management, Middle Management (Professors) and Lower Management (Lecturers), who were purposively identified as belonging to the management level and in whom the requisite knowledge and information resided. The researcher interacted closely with those purposively selected participants, and anyone else in the institutions who could contribute useful data, in order to generate quality data on their experiences in higher education benchmarking. The interactions between the researcher and participants lasted from May 2013 to December 2013, a period of eight months.

The foregoing section explained how the study was targeted at those senior members of staff, as outlined above, who were in charge of institutional governance, enterprise operation, curriculum development and the lifelong learning of students.

3.6 Sample and sampling procedure

In this current section the researcher sought to explain how the participants from each university were purposively selected. A sample formed a manageable subset of the population. The need for a sample differed with each study because, by its very nature, case study interviews were in-depth and relied on the information-rich participants. In such a scenario as this study a sample was not relevant, but in this situation one was constructed.

The sample took into consideration the differences between an open and distance learning institution and a conventional one; open and distance learning institutions had more administrative staff than conventional institutions. The structure of an open and distance learning institution was marginally different from that of a conventional institution. An open and distance learning institution had more layers of administrative staff than a conventional institution, and this was because in the former the students did not reside at the institution. Students learnt and stayed at a distance from the institution and, as a result, there was more
administrative work done for students who stayed away from the university, at a distance. All their study needs had to be taken care of from a distance.

A purposive non-probability sampling procedure was adopted for the study. Purposive sampling was a form of non-probability sampling in which decisions concerning the individuals to be included in the sample were taken by the researcher, based upon a variety of criteria: the participant’s possession of relevant knowledge of the research issue; the capacity and willingness to participate in the research; and, their accessibility. In this study the participants were perceived to possess the requisite knowledge and were able to freely contribute the appropriate data, both in terms of relevance and depth. The researcher formally wrote to the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of each institution to seek permission to come into the institution to research on benchmarking (Appendix 5). Five participants from each of the top three ranks of each institution were selected to provisionally form a sample, which was viewed by the researcher as an ideal sample for a case study where interviews were conducted. The actual number of active participants was determined by the number at which the data generated reached the point of saturation; the point at which the addition of more participants did not result in an addition to new data. The idea of purposively selecting participants meant the chance of selection for each potential participant was limited to those participants who were believed to possess the knowledge and information required in this investigation, at each rank. The five participants belonged to the ranks of the Chief Executive Officer and senior managers in designated grades, five from Professors and five Lecturers. The order of the participants who were interviewed was determined through a lottery, where the participant names were written on pieces of paper and the papers were put into a hat and the researcher asked someone to pick the papers from the hat. These were the names of the participants representing that stratum of the institutional personnel, from the Chief Executive Officer to the lecturer. In the event that any of the participants was not available, at any of the institutions, the researcher resorted to the next name in line, but where there was no one else then the researcher sought assistance from the institution’s authorities to identify an appropriate replacement of the participant. The researcher formally wrote to the potential participants requesting that they take part in the study, after the participant selection process (Appendix 3). The participants were informed that the interview would be tap recorded,
and the researcher would also manually record the proceedings. During the interviews it was made clear to participants that whenever they did not feel comfortable with the taping, or when they felt the information they were about to give was sensitive, they were free to stop proceedings, or to stop the tape recording or to terminate the interview altogether. The participants were informed, before the interview, that they could withdraw their participation at any time, without giving any reason. They were assured that their real names would not be disclosed, and pseudonyms would be used (Appendices 1-25).

The study was guided by the view that a sample was the finite part of a statistical population whose properties were studied to gain information about the population. The sample was chosen following a pre-determined selection procedure and this enabled the researcher to investigate an institution. This procedure enabled the researcher to bring together a number of institutions or people or objects from the population in such a way that the sample put together comprised the characteristics of the population.

The foregoing section explicated how a small non-probability sample was drawn from the administrative strata of the institutions. The small sample was believed to possess the requisite information for the study to be successfully concluded.

3.7 Data (empirical material) generation techniques

This section dealt with the techniques which were employed to generate the needed data. Without the techniques there would be no data generation. The researcher was the instrument of data generation, who used four tools to generate data for the study. Data were the constructions of participants regarding what they perceived was benchmarking.

The researcher concurred with Chisaka (2013) when he said the researcher was the instrument for data generation, who used tools to generate empirical material. The researcher experienced first-hand the phenomenon of data generation as the instrument, which was an advantage. The view was concretised by Nherera and Mason (as cited in Chisaka, 2013) who agreed with the
researcher that in qualitative methodology there was empirical material generation, through tools like in-depth interviews, focus group discussions and document analysis and direct observation. The primary purpose of document analysis was to determine if the performance of the institutions was of such high standards that the quality of data generated was equally high. For instance, in an institution where there was no strategic plan to guide the direction of institutional performance and the manner in which the tasks were performed the performance would be of inferior quality, and the data generated would also be of inferior quality to that of an institution in which a strategic plan was religiously adhered to.

The researcher supplemented the data generation process by critically reviewing his own experiences and the available literature, through a review of related literature (cf. Chapter 2). These techniques emphasised the researcher’s closeness to the participants, unlike in the quantitative methodology that maintained distance between the researcher and the participants. This view was echoed by Chisaka (2013) who stated that the practice of data generation, as opposed to data collection, was based on the idea that in the qualitative paradigm the researcher involved participants in constructing meaning from their lived experiences as they interacted with the researcher, which required an environment in which the participants and the researcher closely dialogued. The use of multiple tools ensured there was efficiency and effective complementary data generation. The employment of four tools promoted data triangulation. These tools helped the researcher to generate, interpret and construct knowledge of benchmarking from the participants’ experiences, perceptions and opinions since they did not live in a vacuum but within the context of their accumulated knowledge, experiences and surroundings in the institutions.

The purpose of the tools was to establish the participant perceptions in response to the research questions. The interview explicated the practice of benchmarking in the three institutions when the participants clearly articulated the consciousness of benchmarked in an institution of higher learning, why the three institutions should collaborate and how the institutions explicated the concept of benchmarking (See § 1.4, for research questions). The document analysis was undertaken to establish the nature and extent of quality in the performance of the institution’s
education systems of the three institutions by ascertaining if conditions provided in the documents enhanced the quality of data generated in the research. The documents comprised the strategic plan, quality assurance manuals and minutes of meetings, memoranda, reports and any communication that had something to do with benchmarking in the institution. The most relevant documents were the strategic plans and the quality assurance documents. The researcher appreciated the suggestions by Chisaka (2013) that in an interpretive study the use of ‘empirical material’ in place of ‘data’ made sense even though due to familiarity the current research continued to use data interchangeably with empirical material. The direct observation involved the observation of people in the three institutions, and the interaction the researcher had with the same people. The researcher sought to establish the perceptions of ordinary members of staff in the institutions and to hear what they knew or said about benchmarking.

3.7.1 Interview

The semi-structured interview in this study was meant to open up the participants and stretch out to their deep rooted feelings, perceptions, convictions and propositions about benchmarking, which could not be done by a questionnaire. An interview was the key tool in interpretive studies and was a way of accessing the deep-rooted perceptions of informants in the field (Appendix 1). The in-depth interview questions provoked reflective thinking, which attracted long, deep and information rich responses. The questions were open enough to allow and invite a broad range of responses and issues from the interviewed participants. The interactive nature of the interview led to searching questions being asked concerning responses made by the participants. The interview was recorded by the researcher, as a supplement to the hand written notes.

The researcher relied on the explication of the interview given by Creswell (2003) who said an interview opened a small window through which the researcher accessed the participant’s inner feelings, perceptions and values against which was derived an explanation and definition of a situation, a description of the benchmarking in the institution, memories of the benchmarking experiences, perceptions and the construction of reality in the participant’s view. This view was strengthened by Silverman (2004) who added to this by stating that an interview was primarily
used for the generation of data for academic purposes, which was what the current study was all about.

The researcher placed a lot of faith in the interview and this position was strengthened by the support of Yin (1986) who gave three important reasons for using the in-depth interview as an empirical material generating tool, and these were that:

- Interviews gave background information on the participants;
- Interviews assisted the researcher to gain access to information that could not be accessed through other data generating tools;
- Interviews assisted in identifying other sources of evidence not available in document analysis or observations.

The interviews started with a presentation of the objectives of the study, and an explanation to the participant about the purpose of the study and how the data from the interview would be used. The researcher then asked a few background questions about benchmarking in general to put the participant at ease and get the participant’s trust. This was the funnel part of the interview model. The main questions, which were more involving, came in the third phase of the interview. The participants were asked the same questions but were free to answer each one of them in their own individual way. Responses that needed to be pursued were pursued, burrowing deep to access the core perception. The researcher was conscious of, and in agreement with, the fact that Runeson and Host (2009) suggested that semi-structured questions were the best for a case study because of a number of reasons. The questions were planned and written down in an interview guide but they were not necessarily asked in the same order as they were listed, and the development of the conversation in the interview decided which order the different questions were presented. The researcher used the interview guide to be certain that all questions were attended to, without necessarily following any order. The interview allowed for the improvisation and exploration of the studied subject, by asking a participant further searching questions were extra detail was required. These reasons were pertinent to the current study, especially the latitude and liberty to improvise and to explore, which the researcher adopted to full advantage. The semi-structured interview questions allowed the interviewer and research
report readers to qualitatively experience the phenomenon of benchmarking in its natural context.

Because of the perceived gap (See § 1.2, for background) in the understanding of benchmarking in higher education a semi-structured in-depth interview was used that allowed a combination of exploratory and explanatory type of data generation. The exploratory questions introduced new ground and the explanatory questions sought an explanation to the uncovered ground. An interview guide was constructed that articulated the benchmarking theory and its application in higher education. The semi-structured in-depth interview structure followed the areas covered, as they were contained in the research questions. In other words the semi-structured in-depth interview sought to ascertain how individuals qualitatively experienced the phenomenon of benchmarking. The researcher employed the funnel principle, as advocated by Host and Runeson (2007), where the interview started with general questions and then focused the questions during the course of the interview to a discussion of pertinent issues.

A semi-structured in-depth interview subjected every participant to the same questions, but most of the questions needed a follow-up and attracted responses that needed further explanation. The advantages of a semi-structured in-depth interview were that: there was high reliability of the information gathered since similar questions were employed which generated the data; an in-depth understanding about a particular case was obtained because the interviewer focused on specific issues; it was systematic because the researcher intensively investigated one particular issue with each question; the interviewees responded on the spot to the question asked, thus saving time; the researcher got a comprehensive and detailed understanding of the issues from the participant; the pre-interview formulated questions meant the interview became systematic and comprehensive; and the data generated was qualitative. The researcher’s purpose, in agreement with Chisaka (2013), was to share experiences with the participants on the subject of benchmarking in order to create inter-personal knowledge, which helped the researcher to answer the primary research question and the subsidiary questions.
In summary to the section, the researcher employed the semi-structured interview, taking cognisance of the fact that the participants needed to elaborate or volunteer in-depth information. The participants also voluntarily introduced and included pertinent issues to the interview, related to the benchmarking practice at the institutions. An interview was structured in such a way that it contained an element of flexibility to allow the coverage of all relevant information the interviewer wanted to cover and the participant responded confidently to follow-up questions. Because proper rapport was achieved the participants felt free to volunteer information they could have considered irrelevant to the study and the interviewer patiently coaxed for more data, where the participant seemed hesitant to elaborate.

3.7.2 Focus group discussion

The researcher carried out a focus group discussion with a group of Lower Management participants at each institution, modelled along the in-depth interview between the researcher and individual participants.

The intention of the in-depth focus group discussion, using unstructured questions, was to afford participants, who were predominantly lecturers, an opportunity to interrogate perceptions, insights and experiences in a group where they were able to ask each other questions, share experiences and see if they agreed on issues under discussion, with the researcher assuming the position of moderator. The researcher thought that the lecturers did not enjoy the same exposure to benchmarking practices the Professors and the Chief Executive Officer and members of senior management enjoyed. Because of this they needed to collectively debate experiences and perceptions raised by members of the focus group, and share a common position on benchmarking practices. The other reason was that the lecturers did not place themselves at the same management level as the other two ranks. They seemed to believe they were looked down upon and they sometimes did not get exposed to the same information that the top ranks shared.

At each of the three institutions of higher learning the researcher met with the focus groups of participants, which averaged five participants per group, for discussion and introduced the topic
of discussion and why he was carrying out the investigation (Appendices 2, 4 and 7). The researcher asked the group to define benchmarking, identify instances of benchmarking they experienced in their institution and the other questions on the interview guide. The focus group discussion were more critical to views they felt the top leadership of the institutions offered because they seemed to feel they were not afforded due recognition in the management of the institutions. The discussions excited a lot of interaction and heated debate on institutional benchmarking practices, some of which they felt needed to be strengthened.

3.7.3 Document analysis

Document analysis referred to the analysis, or inspection, of documents to determine if they contained evidence of the institution’s plans to produce quality education and to improve the performance of the institution. Document analysis sought to establish if the institutions planned their activities in order to attain a certain level of performance, which meant the quality of data generated in the study was high. An enhanced quality of data resulted in an enhanced quality of data analysis and presentation, and ultimately, a thesis of high quality.

The advantages of document analysis were to ascertain if the documents were: stable and catered for repeated reviews; unobtrusive and they existed prior to the case study; exact names were used; and, they offered broad coverage and an extended time span during which they existed in the institution. Yin (1986) documented the disadvantages inherent in document analysis were: irretrievability may be difficult, especially where they were considered a security item; biased selectivity; reporting bias, reflected author bias; and access may be blocked. However, according to Chisaka (2007) document analysis was important in qualitative research as it provided an additional source for analysis and interpretation of the benchmarking being studied. Documents could provide valuable insights into the status of benchmarking in institutions and the processes it followed.

The two purposes of document analysis that were supported by Chisaka (2007) were:

- To generate insights into the purpose and importance of benchmarking in institutions;
To evolve an understanding of the perspectives that were reflected in these documents, as they related to benchmarking in higher education.

Document analysis helped the researcher compare data generated through the comparison of insights contained in such documents. Some documents contain elements of standards and indicators which institutions could utilise in comparative studies.

The researcher envisaged a situation where certain documents were classified as confidential and could not be viewed. However, the preliminary informal discussions the researcher had seemed to indicate that information was likely to be freely available, but the availability was confined to academic use. The researcher had access to these documents and the institutions did not put stringent controls on the documents as long as they were used for academic purposes.

The study included a scrutiny of the strategic plans, quality assurance documents and the Balanced Score Cards of the three institutions. The strategic plans were analysed to determine if they evidenced the presence of planning that created an environment conducive for improvement in performance and an enhancement of quality in the provision of education. The analysis considered the evidence of a vision, mission and core values of the institution. Apart from those components the analysis considered whether the goals, objectives and strategies all assisted in giving the institution direction and scope of performance. The strategic plan clearly indicated if the resources available matched the key direction and targets. The question the analysis desired to answer was: How did the strategic plan assist the institution in creating a situation in which it could improve the quality of education and the performance of the institution? The situation would evidence itself through the generation of quality data for the study.

The analysis of the quality assurance documents was also aimed at determining if the provision of the quality principles, processes and procedures could enhance the improvement of the performance of the institution and the quality of the education. In creating standards operating processes and procedures the institutions hoped the standardisation of work processes enhanced the quality of the work. The researcher wanted to analyse the quality assurance documents to find how much they contributed towards the improvement of the quality of education.
The researcher analysed the Balanced Score Cards to determine whether they assisted the institution to create a condition in which the quality of education and the performance could increase. The cards should normally contain metrics which indicated how much improvement in quality and performance the institutions achieved. This would improve the quality of data the study generated.

The researcher requested to be provided with the three documents mentioned above, and any other documents an institution possessed which helped strengthened the quality of data generated by the study.

3.7.4 Observation

The observation tool was used to access first hand experiences from participants in the context of the institution. The first hand experience, according to Creswell (2003), could be in the form of direct observation by the researcher and interaction with a variety of players in the institution, albeit of an informal nature. The researcher observed the behaviour and activities of the participants and other members of the institution relevant to the investigation.

The researcher used the observation method as part of the data generation process. The researcher adopted the direct covert observation method, which meant that he did not reveal his role as a researcher, unless the revelation was necessary. This was done to observe participants in their natural setting without the awareness brought about through the realisation they were being observed. Participants who realised that they were being observed could be affected by that realisation and alter their behaviour and language to conform to the researcher’s expectation. This was necessary because some writers, like Gillham (2010), said participant observation produced the most credible result on the basis that the researcher and the researched shared a setting. The researcher became a participant in the study and kept his ears and eyes open to be able to notice what would normally be missed, and, thereby, gained an inner insight into the benchmarking practices in the institutions. The researcher kept a written record of observations.
The researcher agreed with Woodside (2010) when he said every participant had a mental model of the issues being studied and the observation method of data generation was an attempt to determine if the mental model of a participant that the researcher formed through an interview matched the mental image the same researcher got from the same participant through direct observation. He described a mental image as a set of propositions and assumptions a participant understood to be reality, which was an accurate portrayal of the benchmarking practice. The mental image was a function of the perceptions, perspectives, beliefs and experiences expressed by the interviewee and from direct observation. The mental image formed the emic representation of reality on the participant’s part and the one the researcher formed by the researcher represented the meaning that the researcher made of the participant’s world, a researcher’s description and explanation of the emic meaning, the etic representation.

The generation of operational data through the observation method was the core strength of case study research, not the presentational data from the interview. The operational data made it possible to attain a deep understanding of reality through direct observation in ‘real time’. The researcher resorted to observation due to the realisation that there could be inconsistencies in oral or interview presentations, and that verbal data alone could be insufficient to develop a coherent interpretation. The researcher adopted a multiple data generation method, or triangulation, to enhance the depth and validity of the data.

The researcher became a covert and direct observer of the institutions and the participants, keeping his eyes and ears open to any benchmarking practices that could be happening and to ask unobtrusive questions, or interact with people, whenever the chance to do so presented itself. The researcher kept a log book of all observations and discussions with participants. Entries into the log book were made as soon as they were observed or took place.

The criticism of the observation method was its failure to generalise to a population. This was a known drawback but a necessary one since the focus of case study research was to investigate one case in an in-depth manner and in its context, which was difficult to replicate and generalise.
The other criticism was that observation tended to create prejudices and preferences. However, to avoid the tendency for prejudice and preference the researcher maintained introspection and scrutinised personal actions as a way of enhancing impartiality.

### 3.8 Trustworthiness

This section of the study detailed the manner in which the investigation attained trustworthiness, which was closely related to issues of credibility and or dependability. The readers of this research report should feel it was a truthful investigation and its process, if repeated at the same or similar institutions, would produce the same or similar results. This should give predictability and certainty in future benchmarking practice investigations. The researcher sought to determine if the research interview questions were clear, they were asked correctly and they measured what they were meant to measure and the responses elicited the desired information.

The researcher used the Chisaka (2013) yardstick or standards of trustworthiness, in the form of five measures of trustworthiness, to ascertain trustworthiness in the research. First, empirical material were generated from different angles to provide a broader picture of benchmarking in higher education (Runeson and Host, 2009). Triangulation, in case study, referred to protocols that were used to ensure accuracy and alternative explanations occurred, through the generation of data from many sources. The employment of triangulation was supported by Stake (as cited in Tellis, 1997) who identified triangulation as the processes that were used to ensure accuracy and alternative explanations. The need for triangulation arose from the ethical need to confirm the validity of the processes. The researcher achieved data triangulation through generating data from four sources in the study; namely, in-depth interviews, document analysis, focus group discussions and direct observation. The researcher achieved the second measure of trustworthiness named member checking by giving a participant a transcript of their interview to authenticate. The interviewer could have missed aspects of the participant’s responses and this was why the participant was given an opportunity to correct and re-affirm their position. This was the emic perspective. The interpretation the researcher made of data generated was the etic perspective.
The third measure was thick description. The researcher gave a clear and detailed explication of the processes, practices, services and explanations as he understood them. The aim was to afford the reader the opportunity to closely experience what was said, how it was said and what the researcher experienced in a manner the reader would empathise with the researcher. In the study thick description appeared in the form of a detailed data generating process and an equally detailed presentation of the findings. The fourth measure was achieved through a prolonged engagement of the researcher with participants. The longer the engagement period the more open and honest the interaction became. The interaction was prolonged through both physical contact and through internet communication on a regular basis. The interaction was undertaken in a ‘natural’ setting, and not in a contrived setting. The researcher was in communication with the participants for a period of eight months, from May to December 2013. Even after the last formal communication in December the researcher remained in communication with the participants. The fifth measure of trustworthiness reposed in the trust the investigator earned from participants. This trust resulted in participants opening their hearts and minds in responding to the researcher’s questions. The participants would not have been that free and open in their interaction with the researcher had they mistrusted him or his intentions. The fact that there was not even one participant who refused to be interviewed and not one who opted out of the interview when it started proved the trust the participants had in the researcher. The participants also exhibited their trust in the researcher by remaining in contact for eight months. They had faith in what the researcher was going to write in the research report as evidenced by their willingness to contribute information-rich data and they readily agreed to be tap-recorded. The participants opened up in the interaction and told the truth because they knew it would be recorded to reflect what they wanted it to mean. The measures prevented situations of misrepresentation in the data generation and interpretation process.

The last section outlined the five measures the researcher took to ensure there was trustworthiness in the investigation. These measures were triangulation, member checking, thick descriptions, prolonged engagement and trust for the primary investigator.
3.9 Data analysis, interpretation and presentation

When data was being generated the researcher commenced the process of analysis. The data were coded and interpreted into useful information or themes which were analysed and presented as findings in the thesis report. This section sought to explain the data analysis and interpretation process followed in the study (cf. Chapter 4).

The researcher was supported by Kombo and Tromp (2009) in affirming that data were raw information, and not knowledge as academics knew it. Data had to be processed to become information which could explain the benchmarking practice in the three institutions of higher learning; the information explained the extent of benchmarking evident in the institutions. The interpretation led to new information, new experiences and new views about benchmarking quality university education. These points showed that for data to become coherent and relevant information they must be organised properly. The preliminary data analysis was carried out parallel to the data generating process because the approach was flexible and new insights emerged during data generating, which influenced further data generation. The tools, like the semi-structured interview questions, were modified as new data were being generated and analysed. The analysis commenced with the coding of information received into themes. The researcher, who was the instrument of data generation, accessed the world of participants, through the process of data analysis, in order to empathise with them and develop an understanding of how they constructed the meaning of their reality of benchmarking in their everyday experiences, as was advocated by Chisaka (2013).

The preliminary part of the data analysis process was to code the data, which was the process of categorising and combining the data to form themes and ideas. Coding referred to the process of summarising the prevalence of codes, discussing similarities and differences in related codes across distinct original sources, contexts, or comparing the relationships between one or more codes. The researcher marked similar passages of text of interview transcripts with a code label to ensure all text with the same code were on the same theme, or recurring message. Apart from
mere coding, Cooper and Schindler (2011) postulated that the process also involved defining words and phrases used in a text or interview. A welcome explanation of coding was offered by Fisher (2007) who said it was a formal process that involved identifying themes, dividing the research material into chunks or units, and excluding the great bulk of the interview material that the researcher decided was of no value. For instance, one Chief Executive Officer provided rich and detailed information outlining his university teaching career, but this was not useful in the furtherance of data related to benchmarking activities. The codes were organised in hierarchical order and they were cross-referenced in an effort to connect disparate elements in the code structure. These involved the identification of recurring features of data that related to each of the research questions (See § 4.2, on research findings). The themes that emerged were closely related to the research questions and derived their reference names from the questions.

The objective of the researcher was to carry out a detailed examination of generated data, divide the data into component parts and arrange it into elements or themes and establish their relationships. This was done when working with the data, organising it, breaking it into manageable units, synthesising the units, searching for patterns in order to establish what was important and what was to be learnt, and how it could be structured into a written report. The researcher agreed with Chisaka (2013) that data analysis assumed an inductive or formative angle. This was because when data were generated through interviews, focus group discussion, observation and document analysis the researcher checked on patterns, behaviours, themes and sub-themes in the unfolding evidence. It was through this process of analysis that the researcher created meaning from the data, which became meaningful information. The information was translated into themes which gave the meaning and understanding of benchmarking in higher education in open and distance learning institutions, and this meaning was tabulated in the fourth chapter, under research findings (See § 4.3, for findings).

The themes, which were topics or major subjects that came up in the interview and discussion, were subjected to data analysis on the basis of pre-determined data analysis techniques, to give real meaning about benchmarking practices on the ground. The two data analysis techniques that were employed as special strategies were pattern matching and rival explanation. Pattern
matching, as a strategy, compared empirically based patterns with the predicted patterns which meant the researcher identified patterns and themes in the data, and related these to research questions (See § 1.4, for research questions). The concept of pattern matching was clarified by Campbell (1975) as a useful technique for linking data to research questions and in this study it was a process where several pieces of information from the same case were related to a theoretical proposition. This was extended and demonstrated by Gray (2009) as the logic which emerged from the data matched, or failed to match, those that were expected (See § 5.2.3, for findings). The expected outcome in this study was to show the prevalence of benchmarking in the institutions, or to determine if alternative patterns emerged, which showed there was no benchmarking practice in any of the three institutions. Trustworthiness was enhanced when the patterns coincided.

The emergence of a different pattern from the expected pattern introduced what was called rival patterns. A rival pattern resulted in a technique of rival explanation being called into use. In the emergence of rival patterns certain explanations excluded the presence of other explanations. For instance, there may be no benchmarking in the institutions but there may be other performance improvement practices which may be evident on the ground, which the researcher would explain. The researcher relied on pattern matching because there were no incidences of rival explanations that evidenced themselves.

The responses of the interaction were analysed to establish a baseline situation, reflecting the obtaining position of each institution on which the discussion would be based. The baseline situation was to establish if the institutions understood the benchmarking concept using certain concepts. The next stage was to establish if that understanding of benchmarking resulted in the practice of benchmarking and whether that practice was objectively undertaken in the three institutions of higher education. When that was established the next step was determine if the institutions were, in actual fact, objectively practicing benchmarking to enhance quality and operational performance. The interaction resulted in the identification of quality performance indicators as measures of performance and quality, and a number of institutions could set common indicators which could be measured and compared among the institutions. This
explanation mirrored the proposal presented by McKinnon, *et al* (2000) that it was possible to use indicators to objectively benchmark institutional performance and quality of service (See § 4.3.6, for finding). The finding that quality university education could be successfully benchmarked using identified and common standards or criteria would make it possible to pursue the other questions to secure a credible result.

Etic perspective referred to data interpretation which was the process of assigning meaning to analysed data. The process of interpretation of data involved the conversion of data into meaning to explain or tell a story and conceive the nature of benchmarking in university education.

The researcher accessed vital advice from Chisaka (2007) and employed the strategy of quotations and descriptions of data as a criticality in qualitative enquiry, which allowed the reader to empathise with the benchmarking investigation. The thick descriptions allowed thick interpretations, which were a basis for the research findings (See § 4.3, for findings). The researcher claimed that the thick interpretations were a result of the shared experience with the participants in the study. The researcher made this possible by dedicating space to the reproduction of the individual participant’s exact words and their location in the transcript.

In summary to this section, data were not information until they were processed. First, the coding process involved the creation of codes for related responses, assigned codes to similar responses and set assigned codes to cater for all possible answers. Second, the pre-processing involved transforming data into information and the interpretation of ambiguous responses and the removing of contradictory data from related questions. Third, the data were stored in electronic storage for speedy retrieval. Electronic storage was extensible, easy to distribute, easy to interchange and of low volume. Last, data were analysed in themes or topics which identified major concepts or subjects on the prevalence of benchmarking in the three institutions of higher learning. The last activity was the production of an enduring narrative of the study.
3.10 Summary

The chapter covered the area of methodology, which was defined as the course of action taken for the execution of the research, stretching from the statement of the problem to the presentation of the findings. The epistemological reasoning that informed the study was that the knowledge of benchmarking was created by actors in the institutions, from their perceptions and experiences. The constructivist perspective stated that reality was created by social actors; it was not fixed as an objective entity but was constructively constructed.

The unique features of a case study made it an ideal strategy for this investigation. A case study employed multiple sources of evidence in a triangulating fashion, it contributed to the creation of knowledge, especially in the current investigation where the area of benchmarking seemed to have very little knowledge and information in the public domain, about the SADC region. A case study was employed because the researcher wanted to understand this complex social phenomenon through the exploitation and retention of holistic and meaningful characteristics of real life events. The case study had a peculiar set of tools for data generation, like in-depth semi-structured interviews, focus group discussion, observation and documentary evidence.

The population was given as the totality of open and distance universities in Africa, with special reference to Southern African Development Community (SADC). The sample was made up of three SADC open and distance learning institutions. The non-probability random sampling procedure was used to select the information rich participants. The random sampling was done after the university employees were grouped into their cascading ranks, from the Chief Executive Officer grade to the lecturer grade. To select one from each of the decision-making ranks the researcher drew lots. The selected participants were interviewed employing the in-depth semi-structured interview method. The interview started with introductory questions meant to put the interviewee at ease to gain their confidence and trust and it ended with the researcher asking specific questions. The researcher followed the funnel method of conducting an interview. The in-depth interview was followed by a focus group discussion, a document analysis and direct observation of members of staff in the institutions.
After the data were generated they were arranged properly and coded in groups of similar information. The coded data were analysed, giving them meaning related to the codes assigned to the group of evidence. The primary analysis method was the pattern matching, which grouped data whose pattern of meaning was similar. However, the method of the explanation of meaning was employed to a limited level since most of the data generated were related to one of the themes. It was instructive to point out that the analysis exhibited an exceptional quality or degree of workmanship. This was possible because the analysis showed that the researcher attended to all the evidence, addressed all major rival interpretations, and the most significant aspect of the research was addressed. The researcher used prior knowledge of data coding and interpretation in the analysis. When this was done the analysed data were drawn into findings, from which conclusions and recommendations were drawn.

The next chapter covered data analysis, interpretation and presentation. The data were arranged in codes or themes, broken down into common topics or areas of similar or related data. The themes were developed into meaningful passages explicating responses to the research questions (See § 1.4, for research questions). Lastly, a report was written following the linear-analytic structure. This was the standard analytic linear report which featured the problem, review of related literature, the methodology, the analysis and the findings and ended with the recommendations.
CHAPTER 4

DATA PRESENTATION, ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

4.1 Introduction

The researcher’s aim was to establish if there was a shared meaning of the concept of benchmarking in the three institutions of higher learning. Secondly, the researcher desired to know if there was a clear understanding of what criteria the institutions of higher learning employed to measure benchmarking as a determinant of quality university education. Research questions were formulated, and these served as a guide in the study. The primary question read: To what extent do the three institutions of higher learning consciously practise benchmarking? These questions were responded to by a sample of participants purposively selected at each of the three institutions of higher learning. The sample for each institution included the Chief Executive Officers, Professors and Lecturers. This sample was purposively selected for its possession of information rich data. The selected participants were interviewed, following a semi-structured interview. The interviews were carried out until a point of saturation was reached; that is, the point at which no new information could be extracted from each additional interviewee. The in-depth interviews were complemented with a focus group discussion employing the same interview guide used for the in-depth interviews. The open and uninhibited interaction penetrated deep as members interrogated each theme until the point of data saturation was reached. Second, a focus group discussion along the lines of the in-depth interview was held. The third data generating method was direct observation, through which the researcher immersed himself in the setting to become one of the participants and kept eyes and ears open in order to notice whatever was happening and interact with participants to learn the benchmarking practices in the institution. The last method of data generation was document analysis which resulted in the researcher studying and analysing each institution’s Strategic Plan and the Quality Assurance policy documents.
In this chapter, the researcher recorded the responses of the different participants in accordance with the emic perspective, and then discussed the meaning of the responses in the etic approach section. The researcher supported and followed the guidance given by Pike (as cited in Kottak, 2006) that an “emic” account was a description of the behaviour or beliefs in terms of meaning, conscious or unconscious, to the researcher within the culture of the institution. An emic view was a view from within the culture of the institution being studied. This study considered the role of benchmarking within the three institutions, each of which had its own culture. The researcher recorded the emerging themes from the participants who belonged to each of the three institutions. The researcher followed this with an interpretation of the themes from the participants. The interpretations, under the etic perspective, gave meaning to the emerging themes from the emic data. This was in recognition that an “etic” perspective was a description of the behaviour or beliefs of the participants in the three institutions, in terms that could be applied across similar institutional cultures, given by the researcher. When the emic and etic perspectives were combined in this manner, they gave a rich understanding of the benchmarking culture in the three institutions. McCurcheon (1999) argued that the emic perspective, on its own, struggled with applying important values to a culture. The etic approach enabled the researcher to interpret the emic data into meaning. It was from the interpretation that conclusions were drawn on the applicability of benchmarking across open and distance learning institutions in the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) region.

4.2 Background information of the participants and institutions

In this section, a brief account of the participants was given. The names of the participants and the names of the institutions were changed to protect their identity, in respect of the provision of confidentiality adopted by the researcher (See § 1.16, for ethical and legal considerations). The institutions were given pseudonyms: Open University (OU), Distance University (DU) and the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) College. The participants were given alphanumerical names; for instance, the first participant at OU was named OU1. The names of all the other participants followed the same pattern; the contribution of each participant was referenced with the line
number from the transcript of the institution. The three institutions were located in three countries situated in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region. The use of pseudonyms enabled the researcher to engage in a transparent and fair discussion of the data from the participants and that of their institutions, unencumbered by personal bias. The participants engaged in the study on the understanding of anonymity and confidentiality. That understanding was upheld in the discussion.

The participants were divided into three broad areas: senior management, which comprised the Chief Executive Officers and their senior managers, members of designated posts and Deans (Senior Management); the Professors (Middle Management); and Lecturers (Lower Management) (See § 1.15.4, for sample). The profile of each participant was shown in the table below. The purpose of the profiles was to demonstrate the depth of academic and professional qualifications, knowledge and experience resident in the participants.

Table 4.1 Chief Executive Officer, Deputy and Deans- Senior Management

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant pseudonym</th>
<th>Qualification</th>
<th>Relevant experience at institution of higher learning</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Responsibility</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>OU1 (Appendix 21)</td>
<td>BA (UNZA), Med and EdD (Toronto) Professor</td>
<td>Over 50 years experience in higher education</td>
<td>CEO -Senior Management</td>
<td>Management of the institution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OU2 (Appendix 22)</td>
<td>PhD (UNZA) Professor</td>
<td>Over 50 years experience</td>
<td>Deputy CEO -Senior Management</td>
<td>Deputises the CEO in the management of the institution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OU3 (Appendix 23)</td>
<td>PhD Professor</td>
<td>Taught at University of Melbourne, Auckland University and worked for Australian Civil Service</td>
<td>-Senior Management</td>
<td>Lectures in Organisational Change and Leadership Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DU1 (Appendix 14)</td>
<td>MSc and BSc (Hons) (UZ)</td>
<td>16 years</td>
<td>Senior management</td>
<td>Manages Information and Communication Technology department</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DU2</td>
<td>PhD</td>
<td>41 years experience</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>Coordinator of Higher</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
(Appendix 15) (Georgetown) M.A. (Manitoba), M.A. (UZ) BA (York) Cert. In Ed (Lancaster) management Professor Degrees Directorate

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant pseudonym</th>
<th>Qualification</th>
<th>Relevant experience at institution of higher learning</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Responsibility</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ODL1 (Appendix 10)</td>
<td>PhD</td>
<td>8 years experience in university education</td>
<td>Senior management</td>
<td>Dean of Faculty of Development Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ODL2 (Appendix 11)</td>
<td>PhD -Professor DLitt et Phil (UNISA); MA (UZ); Bed (Hon) (UNISA); BA (ULon) And STC (GTC).</td>
<td>Over 20 years experience</td>
<td>Senior management</td>
<td>Member of senior management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OU4 (Appendix 24)</td>
<td>PhD Professor</td>
<td>Over 30 years experience</td>
<td>Executive Director -Senior Management</td>
<td>Manages the Bureau of Affiliations and Partnerships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OU5 (Appendix 25)</td>
<td>PhD</td>
<td>SADC Secretariat and 5 years university experience</td>
<td>Professor -Senior Management</td>
<td>Management of Quality Assurance and Extension Services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OU6 (Appendix 26)</td>
<td>PhD</td>
<td>20 years experience</td>
<td>Middle management</td>
<td>University lecturer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DU3 (Appendix 16)</td>
<td>Med (UZ) DIP. In Sp Ed (Finland)</td>
<td>15 years experience Prolific researcher and academic</td>
<td>Senior management Professor</td>
<td>Management of Centre for Student Management.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DU4</td>
<td>PhD</td>
<td>18 years experience</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>Coordinates candidates</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.2 Professors - Middle Management
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant pseudonym</th>
<th>Qualification</th>
<th>Relevant experience at institution of higher learning</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Responsibility</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>OU7 (Appendix 27)</td>
<td>Master of Arts in History Certificate in Comprehensive Education</td>
<td>10 years experience Former Examinations Specialist</td>
<td>Lecturer</td>
<td>History lecturer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OU8 (Appendix 28)</td>
<td>LLB (UNZA) MIP (New Hampshire)</td>
<td>Over 10 years experience</td>
<td>Lecturer</td>
<td>Law lecturer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OUFG9 (Appendix 4)</td>
<td>Master in Organisational Psychology</td>
<td>2 years experience</td>
<td>Lecturer</td>
<td>Psychology lecturer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OUFG9 (Appendix 4)</td>
<td>Master of Science in Climatology</td>
<td>13 years</td>
<td>Lecturer</td>
<td>Climatology lecturer</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.3 Lecturers – Lower Management
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Qualification</th>
<th>Experience</th>
<th>Position</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>OUFG9</td>
<td>Master of Science in Pre-School Education - PhD in Child Care</td>
<td>All working life in university education - Presented papers at international conferences and workshops</td>
<td>Lecturer Child Care lecturer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OUFG9</td>
<td>Med in Special Education</td>
<td>Lifetime experience in university education</td>
<td>Lecturer Special Education lecturer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DU6</td>
<td>Med (UZ), Bed (UZ) Sec Trs’ Cert (GTC)</td>
<td>15 years experience in university education</td>
<td>Management of a Regional Centre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DU7</td>
<td>PhD</td>
<td>8 years university experience</td>
<td>Management of Centre for Professional Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DUFG8</td>
<td>MBA</td>
<td>3 years experience</td>
<td>Business Management lecturer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DUFG8</td>
<td>MBA</td>
<td>3 years experience</td>
<td>Faculty of Commerce and Law lecturer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DUFG8</td>
<td>MBA</td>
<td>2 years experience</td>
<td>Commerce lecturer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DUFG8</td>
<td>MSc in Finance and Investment</td>
<td>4 years experience</td>
<td>Finance and Investment lecturer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DUFG8</td>
<td>MBA</td>
<td>6 years experience in university education</td>
<td>Marketing lecturer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ODLFG3</td>
<td>MSc in Economics</td>
<td>11 years experience</td>
<td>Economics lecturer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ODLFG3</td>
<td>MSc in Accounting</td>
<td>3 years experience</td>
<td>Lecturer in Accounting</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Distance University (DU) was founded through an Act of Parliament in March 1999 and was the oldest of the three institutions of higher learning in this study. In 2002 the institution’s enrolment surpassed the 20 000 students mark but the number dropped to average at 8 000 students each year over the last five years. The Open and Distance Learning (ODL) institution was also founded in 1999 through an Act of Parliament as an open and distance learning college. Its enrolment figure rose from less than a thousand student per year to the current average of 8 000 students each year. It was in the process of being transformed into a university at the time of
the study. The third institution, the Open University (OU), was founded as a private institution of higher learning in 2005, making it the youngest of the three institutions in the study. It witnessed an exponential rise in student numbers to the current average of 8 000 students each year.

The study was, therefore, made up of two open and distance learning universities and one open and distance teaching college, which was being transformed into a university at the time of the study. The three institutions were similar in terms of student enrolment, age and the size of the institution.

4.3  Emic perspectives: themes emerging from empirical data

The following themes emerged from the data generated from the study of the three institutions of higher learning. The themes represented the thoughts, beliefs, perceptions and views of the participants and reflect their views on benchmarking. These were generated through semi-structured in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, document analysis and direct observation carried out by the researcher. The themes were meant to enable the researcher to respond to the question: How can benchmarking, within the context of an institution, be ascertained objectively?

The data that were generated from the study through in-depth semi-structured interviews, the focus group discussions, document analysis and direct observation were broken down into themes. The themes were recorded in categories in which they belonged and were assigned meaning in order to answer the research questions (See § 1.4, for research questions).

4.3.1  Core themes that emerged from the study

The following themes are associated with the benchmarking practice. The themes explicate the concept of benchmarking well, when employed in their collectivity.

- compare performance (OU2:5)
- transfer the strength (OU2:2)
shared success stories (OU2:6)
- Measure the gap (OU3:21)
- Self-improvement (OU3:18).
- Partnership (OU3:30)
- Affiliations (OU3:31)
- shared experiences (OU4:22)
- minimum standards (OU6:10)
- standardisation (OU6:53)
- continuous learning (OU7:36)
- quality control (OU3:8)

4.3.2 Themes on the meaning of benchmarking

The researcher sought to capture what the participants in the three institutions of higher learning understood to be the meaning of benchmarking. The researcher needed to determine the concepts that participants used when they referred to benchmarking and how this concept was operationalised in the practice of benchmarking, which was the defining requirement when the participants discussed the benchmarking concept.

4.3.1.1 Themes emerging from interviews

Participants from the three institutions of higher learning were engaged in in-depth semi-structured interviews in which they were expected to articulate issues on benchmarking. They were expected to define benchmarking as they practised it in their institutions and to articulate other concepts associated with the practice. The interviews were meant to bring out the experiences, perceptions and knowledge on benchmarking that the participants had formed over the different lengths of time the participants worked in institutions of higher learning.
4.3.2.1.1 Themes emerging from Senior Management of three ODL institutions

This section considered themes that emerged from senior management of the three institutions of higher learning, who participated in the study. These were the Chief Executive Officers, Deputy Chief Executive Officers, senior managers of designated posts and Deans.

Senior management participants at the Open University defined benchmarking as a mechanism that “helps to establish what things to achieve after observing what others have done, at what time and what practices to adopt” (OU1:50). It was also “an opportunity to compare what one university is doing with a similar university. If one is strong in an area the weak one should identify where it is weak and transfer the strength of the strong one to the weak one in order to lift its performance” (OU2:1-3). Through benchmarking institutions “exchange information and share experiences to sharpen our performance” (OU2:12).

The Open University participants further defined benchmarking as the practice that “helps to establish what things to achieve after observing what others have done, at what time and what practices to adopt” (OU1:50). Benchmarking “can contribute to quality education” (OU2:32). The definitions by participants failed to deliver a concise and eloquent statement which clearly explained what it was and how it worked. The definitions include the following statements: institutions that “emulate others to improve themselves” (OU2:41); the “way through which a better performance can be achieved” (OU2:62); the process of “visiting each other’s institution to learn from them” (OU3:4); “sharing a needed process or procedure” (OU2:9); and it is a process through which “quality can be accessed and improved” (OU2:42). The definitions end with a declaration by a participant that “we will never succeed if we put a wedge between ourselves and other institutions from whom we are supposed to learn” (OU2:70).

At the Distance University benchmarking was defined as “the creation of a reference point” (DU1:1) and “a comparison of similar or established systems” (DU1:2). In other words when a reference point was established an institution could then compare its performance against the reference point. In individual benchmarking “we are always looking at ourselves and comparing
ourselves with others. It is an internal evaluation system to compare ourselves with other people” (DU1:4). Internal benchmarking defined “an institutional system, like the Quality Assurance system, and is meant to do the judging and evaluating of the performance of staff” (DU1:7). Benchmarking “is critical to ICT as things are changing very fast and we would want to know what others are doing” (DU1:95). An institution which “is not benchmarking is not a learning organisation and it does not generate knowledge from within, but gets it from elsewhere” (DU1:100). An eloquently given definition is that benchmarking “is seeing what people are doing, compare it with other institutions which you feel are doing better and borrow or emulate the better practice or model” (DU2:1).

Similarly, the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) college said benchmarking “is meant to leap-frog processes and avoid re-inventing the wheel” in the improvement of institutional performance (ODL1:1). Benchmarking “involves learning from others so that one can improve one’s own performance” (ODL1:2). It is “not a safari or a visit in the park to have a good time” (ODL1:5). For example, “if one wanted to improve on quality one visited someone whose quality is exceptional” (ODL1:6). One participant says “the good thing about benchmarking is that I can do it from my office by corresponding with colleagues from other universities and be able to establish their performance strategies” (ODL1:10). The “processes and performance at this college have largely been informed by what we learn from other institutions” (ODL1:17).

4.3.2.1.2 Themes emerging from Professors of the ODL institutions

The Open University professor participants defined benchmarking as a way “to determine the best practices of the top performing universities and then transfer the best practices to those underperforming to help them pick up their performance” (OU3:1). It included “bringing in external colleagues to help from other institutions, those who are better than us in identified areas” (OU3:24). Benchmarking “is a process of learning from others” (OU4:4). One participant defined benchmarking as “the setting of a ruler and you mark where you want to be” (OU4:1) and the “setting of points along a route to ensure people observe what is happening” (OU4:2) The participants at the Distance University defined benchmarking “as trying to align what you
are doing with other institutions. For example, you could align programmes, in terms of content, strategies to implement, assessment and accreditation” (DU3:1). They believed there “are many renowned universities, like Open University of the United Kingdom (OUK), University of Zambia (UNZA) and Open University of Tanzania (OUT), from which we can learn or measure the quality of programmes” (DU3:5). This learning “can involve the content of programmes, facilities, resources used, time or duration of implementation and the regulations” (DU3:8).

At the ODL institution benchmarking “involves finding out best practices in what others are doing” (ODL2). It “is measuring and comparing what one’s own institution is doing using chosen criteria” (ODL2:2). Benchmarking includes “the borrowing of the best practices and interacting with others who are better or it can be undertaken just to compare how two institutions perform” (ODL2:25).

4.3.2.1.3 Themes emerging from Lecturers

The Open University lecturer participants defined benchmarking “as comparing your practices with other institutions, in the areas of academic work, assessment, administration, teaching and other areas” (OU7:1). Benchmarking “helps improve service delivery” (OU7:19) and “helps regulate internally how we work by asking if we are doing what we are doing correctly” (OU7:20). Someone defined benchmarking as “a scale to attain something, a measure, a standard to achieve something” (OU9:3). Through benchmarking “we learn from others, like from DU, how it has managed to survive. We exchange notes” (OU9:16). In benchmarking “we consider our position, identify our weaknesses and strengthen our courses through reviewing modules” (OU9:36). An example of a benchmarking project was “the MOODLE, Modular Object Oriented Dynamic Learning, which was benchmarked from the UK. A team went to UK to learn and a team from UK came to continue with the training” (OU9:38). The reason for this exercise was “to improving the academic and professional status of academics and students, which has a multiplier effect” (OU9:61). Benchmarking enabled the Open University “to learn successful practices from other universities” (OU9:62). This “is what we want to attain to develop our country through knowledge and skills” (OU9:1).
The lecturers at the Distance University defined benchmarking “as studying what others are doing and learning to do the same or better” (DU4:1) and “emulating best practices identified in a similar university” (DU5:85). They gave the example of “many renowned universities, like Open University of United Kingdom (OUK), University of Zambia (UNZA) and Open University of Tanzania (OUT), from which we can learn or measure the quality of programmes and university operations” (DU4:5). Benchmarking was defined “as looking at institutions that are older and better and adopt best practices to improve yourself” (DU6:1) and it “involves processes, practices production of learning material in ODL and service delivery” (DU6:2). It “is looking at things or performance of people and equates this to standards or standardise the performance or scenario to one’s own institution” (DU7:1). For example, programmes “can be compared to similar offerings at other institutions, using characteristics of what is perceived to be the standard” (DU7:3).

One participant stated that “if we are not grounded on the benchmarking concept we miss out a lot” in a way meant to emphasise the indispensability of benchmarking in institutions of higher learning (DU7:32). What could be debated was the assertion that “benchmarking is done with similar institutions” (DU7:14).

The problem associated with benchmarking at Distance University was that “there is lack of exposure on the people who implement such concepts. Those who benchmark the project get tired with implementers who do not know how the benchmarked concept works where it was originally resident (DU7:16). For example, “the Chief Executive Officer benchmarked the Centre for Professional Development from the OUM but could not concretise the structure and operations of the Centre to the implementers. The result is that the incubators of the concept want it as it is at OUM but the implementer has never seen the OUM project in operation” (DU7:18). The benchmarking procedure dictated that “people should sit down, decide on what they want, chart out the characteristics they want and then mould a unique project from this. Implementers should be involved in the process” (DU7:21).
A participant at the Distance University contended that “benchmarking can be negative. I was teaching for three years after I was appointed as Regional Director (RD) but I discovered my fellow RDs were not teaching and I stopped. After that I would attend all tutorials and then I discovered no other RD was doing the same so I stopped. But my presence at tutorials boosted morale and performance goes up” (DU6:69). This, however, sounded like copying, which was different from benchmarking, but it would be instructive to find out if there were situations when benchmarking could be negative.

The ODL defined benchmarking “as a system an institution embarks on to carry out a fact finding study and appreciates best practices from other institutions” (ODL3:5). It involves “borrowing what best works for you” (ODL3:3). It is “when one compares oneself to others or an institution compares itself with another institution to be able to learn and improve and as a process to inform its stakeholder on the level of performance” (ODL4:5). Benchmarking brought in “an era of continuous improvement” (ODL4:10).

4.3.2.2 Themes emerging from focus group discussions

Benchmarking “is like measuring myself against the best yardstick, that is, best practice or international standards” (DUFG8:1). Benchmarking “could be targeted at all the practices and processes” of an institution (DUFG8:15). One participant calls it “an assessment of various institutions with own institution, it is a comparative study to determine the right or good practice which can be adopted and introduced” (ODLFG5:1). Another one said “it is an essential tool to improve and measure where we stand with other institutions. Benchmarking is part of research and an influential aspect in trying to be better” (ODLFG5:3). The good thing about benchmarking was that “I can do it from my office by corresponding with colleagues from other universities” (ODLFG5:7)

Benchmarking “is a scale to attain something, a measure, a standard to achieve something” (OUFG9:1). It was aimed at collaborating “to attain quality and different units come together and set a standard” (OUFG9:3). Benchmarking was “necessary with the proliferation of universities,
which means greater expectations” from students. (OUFG9:10). Benchmarking was “making it easier to be improving as society, community, nation and globally”. (OUFG9:5). It made it possible “to know the latest and to come up with a new latest” (OUFG9:6).

4.3.2.3 Themes emerging from document analysis

The findings were that Open University did not have a functional strategic plan. The one that the institution had had expired and a new strategic plan was in the process of being constructed. The other two institutions had functional documents; a strategic plan, a Quality Assurance document and a Balanced Score Card.

Blakeman (2002), stated that universities crafted performance improvement strategies for a number of reasons, and these included: the provision of information to managers to assist them to make fact based decisions and to control functions; the linking of performance appraisal and individual or institutional performance to situations of personnel management and be able to motivate an institution’s staff; to foster a sense of responsibility and accountability on the part of managers; to lead in improving in service delivery and in the performance of public service; to put in place a clear reporting structure on performance measures which could motivate the public to take a greater interest in and to provide encouragement for government employees in the provision of quality services; and to ensure the improvement of civic dialogue which could help to make public consideration about service delivery more factual and specific.

This section presented an analysis of documents in the three institutions to establish if they enhanced the quality of data generated in the institution. These documents were meant to improve the quality and quantity of performance which would directly enhance the quality of the data the researcher generated. The contribution of the documents to the quality of education each institution provided to its students was through the meticulous planning and the crafting of strategies that went into the provision of the service. The documents analysed, which were the Strategic Plans, the Quality Assurance policies and procedures and the Balanced Score Card,
showed that the operations of the three institutions of higher learning were, on average, systematically carried out.

The Strategic Plan for the Open University had expired at the time of the study and the researcher decided not to use a document that was no longer current.

The Distance University had a current Strategic Plan 2010 – 2014. The strategic plan was crafted so that the institution could determine the quality of its performance in advance and be able to identify its challenges well before they manifested themselves and institute corrective action in time. The strategic plan had a vision and a mission; the vision identified the destination the institution aspired to attain in five years, and the mission statement spelt out what the institution would do to attain its vision. The strategic plan also had core values, which guided the moral direction of the institution. One of the core values read: Dedication to the highest level of excellence (Core Values: pp 11). These components were a clear testimony that the institution deliberated on what it needed to do in order to fulfil its mandate and wrote it down so that the institution would perform its duties efficiently and effectively and “to the highest level of excellence”. This meant that the data generated in the study were of the highest quality. The participants were expected to thrive in an environment that was conducive to best performance, where every function was planned for and resources were provided.

Proof that the performance of the institutions was planned in advanced and was meant to make the participants focus on their core duties was resident in the strategic plan, which was constructed following a clearly well thought out. It was built on a historical background, which was meant to render a solid foundation, after which emerging trends in education, the economy and the world, were considered. A Strengths-Weaknesses-Opportunity-Threats (SWOT) analysis was done to determine the planning baseline for the strategic plan. A major strength that was identified was that “DU is the only legal ODL institution in the country”. A total of four key performance areas were identified, from which eight goals were derived, and a number of objectives were identified and the strategies that would be undertaken to achieve the objectives were also identified. One objective was “To expand the student base by sharpening the
institution’s focus on ODL”. The researcher thought that this strategic plan was capable of enhancing the institutional performance and to improve the quality of its products and services, which would enhance the quality of the data generated in the study, and improve the quality of the study.

According to Sallis (2005) benchmarking was about bridging the gap between where the institution was and where it wanted to be. The strategic plan was meant to bridge the gap between where an institution was and where it desired to be. When an institution determined where it was and identified where it wanted to be it then crafted a strategic plan to bridge that gap. It set realist and achievable objectives that could be measured. The achieved performance could then be compared with the desired outcome to arrive at a level of performance and quality of service offered.

4.3.2.4 Themes emerging from observation

The researcher carried out an observation of what was happening in the three institutions of higher learning to see what was happening and interacted with a lot of people to learn how they were benchmarking. The researcher wanted to know why lecturers went on contact leave and sabbatical; did they engage in benchmarking activities because they claimed in the interviews that they visited other institutions to learn and bring back new knowledge. The researcher wanted to access and to learn the staff perceptions and practises on benchmarking.

The interactions the researcher had with members of staff who went on contact leave, sabbatical and attended national and international conferences, workshops and seminars seemed to be indicate that they understood the concept of benchmarking, although it’s a term some said they did not use. They gave a strong impression that they were more interested in the extra remuneration they earned than in learning anything at the institutions they went to. There seemed to be more gratification resulting from the remuneration those on contact leave and sabbatical had than on the new knowledge they acquired from the institutions they visited. The interactions seemed to dwell more on the social benefit of the visit than on the new knowledge brought back
and how to adapt it to improve the performance of the institution and enhance the quality of teaching.

4.3.2.5 Findings on the meaning of benchmarking

In answer to the question whether there was a shared understanding of the meaning of benchmarking, the findings were that at the Open University evidence was that they define benchmarking as an act to “exchange information and share experiences to sharpen our performance” (OU2:12). The perception was that an exchange of information and a sharing of experiences enabled an institution to improve its performance. The exchange can be effected through “visiting each other’s institution to learn from them” (OU3:4) and adopt the strategies responsible for the superior performance of an institution. It was the belief that institutions that “emulate others to improve themselves” (OU2:41) could do it successfully through benchmarking. The practice of benchmarking “helps regulate internally how we work by asking if we are doing what we are doing correctly” (OU7:20). Benchmarking was also viewed “as comparing your practices with other institutions, in the areas of academic work, assessment, administration, teaching and other areas” (OU7:1). Benchmarking “is a process of learning from others” (OU4:4). Some saw benchmarking as “a measure, a standard to achieve something” (OU9:3).

The aim of benchmarking was used to define it as a mechanism “to improving the academic and professional status of academics and students, which has a multiplier effect” (OU9:61). It was also employed “to determine the best practices of the top performing universities and then transfer the best practices to those underperforming to help them pick up their performance” (OU3:1).

At the Distance University benchmarking was defined as “a comparison of similar or established systems” (DU1:2), it was an internal “evaluation system” to compare ourselves with other people” (DU1:4). Benchmarking “is seeing what people are doing, compare it with other institutions which you feel are doing better and borrow or emulate the better practice or their model” (DU2:1). It was used to “emulating best practices identified in a similar university” (DU5:85). Benchmarking involved “adopting best practices to improve yourself” (DU6:1) and it
“involves processes, practices (DU6:2). The institution believed that “benchmarking is done with similar institutions” (DU7:14).

The evidence obtained at ODL institution was that benchmarking “is measuring and comparing what one’s own institution is doing using chosen criteria” (ODL2:2). It involved “the borrowing of the best practises and interacting with others who are better (ODL2:25). If one wanted “to improve on quality one visited someone whose quality is exceptional” (ODL1:6). The visitor would be “borrowing what best works for you” (ODL3:3). Benchmarking brought in “an era of continuous improvement” (ODL4:10).

The focus group discussion’s contribution was that benchmarking was “measuring myself against the best yardstick, that is, best practices or international standards” (DUFG8:1). Benchmarking was “a comparative study” (ODLFG5:1). It was “an essential tool to improve and measure” the performance of one’s institution and engaging “in collaborating to attain quality” and different units come together and set a standard (OUFG9:3).

The documents that were analysed supported the institutions in their effort to successfully offer products and services aimed at making everyone work “to the highest level of excellence” (DU). The strength that was identified was that “DU is the only legal ODL institution in the country”. The ODL institution’s major objective was “to expand the student base by sharpening the institution’s focus on ODL”. One of the values in the DU Strategic Plan was on its “dedication to the highest level of excellence (Core Values: pp 11). The major objective of the institution was “to expand the student base by sharpening the institution’s focus on ODL” (DU). These few quotations proved that the institutions crafted documents meant to assist them to attain high levels of institutional quality performance.

The commonality among the institutions was that they identified concepts that are closely related to benchmarking, like measurement, comparison, improvement, learning, collaborate and processes and practices. However, they differed in that, except for the OU, the DU and the ODL institutions failed to identify the learning concept, which forms the basis of benchmarking. The
OU participants seemed to emphasise that benchmarking involved learning from other institutions, but failed to articulate the greater source of learning, which is the experiences an institution gathered as it applied the benchmarking practice. The three institutions seemed to have failed to deliver a concise and eloquent statement which clearly explained what benchmarking was and how it worked, like the one adopted for this study (See § 2.2, for study definition).

The three institutions shared a common understanding of benchmarking, with the best definition being: benchmarking “involves learning from others so that one can improve one’s own performance” (ODL1:2) and “a comparative study to determine the right or good practice which can be adopted and introduced” at an underperforming institution (ODLFG5:1). The three institutions explained benchmarking through the use of concepts, like comparison, measurement, improvement, sharing, and exchange of information, continuous improvement and best practices. The common concepts that were shared by the three institutions were: learning, improvement, comparison and best practices. The differences were that the Open University was the only institution to refer to the concept of collaboration, internal regulation and the sharing through the exchange of information. The ODL institution mentioned the concept of continuous improvement. The Distance University mentioned that benchmarking involved the strengthening of processes and practices, which the other two institutions had not mentioned. However, the institutional definitions failed to deliver a concise and eloquent statement (See § 4.5, for definition)

4.3.3 Themes on the conscious practice of benchmarking

In the current section the responses were meant to answer the question: To what extent do the three institutions consciously practise benchmarking? In establishing the presence of consciousness, or awareness, in practise benchmarking the question sought to establish whether the institutions were aware that they were benchmarking; whether they clearly set out to benchmark; and, whether the institutions knowingly undertook benchmarking initiatives.
4.3.3.1 Themes emerging from interviews

Members of senior management, professors and lecturers were interviewed in an effort to extract their perceptions, experiences and understanding of how institutions of higher learning consciously practised benchmarking.

4.3.3.1.1 Themes emerging from Senior Management

The findings at the Open University were that the institution consciously benchmarked through the decision to send and the action of actually sending people to “workshops, visits and team teaching” (OU1:45). The other conscious activity was the practice of proceeding “on sabbatical after two years of service” for every academic (OU1:17); the “borrowing of modules from another institution” to compare them with local ones (OU1:36); to engage in “monthly presentations to the public” on topical issues (OU1:10); and to “emulate” what others are doing (OU2:31). In the Open University “students are taught to use e-learning through cell phones, laptops and desk top computers”, which was benchmarked from a United Kingdom university (OU1:3). The institution “holds workshops on module writing” with other institutions and share information (OU1:42).

The DU engages in learning from others about degree programmes, “checking what others are doing because if this is not done a degree might not meet international standards; looking at what other bodies are doing in ICT and the software systems they are using; checking academic programmes, through benchmarking professors and lecturers with other institutions; comparing the institution’s staff management system with that of other institutions” (DU1:24). Benchmarking was practised through “emulating best practices identified in a similar university” (DU5:85)

In benchmarking, people “visit other institutions to learn new processes” (ODL1:12).
The ODL institution said people who did not learn from others lacked exposure, through which they could go to others to find how their processes were making them perform well (ODL1:21). There was conscious practice of benchmarking at ODL although the name “benchmarking” had not been used (ODL2:19).

4.3.3.1.2 Themes emerging from Professors

The OU participants said the institution consciously benchmarked an induction/orientation process from sister institutions in order “to acquaint new Regional Managers with OU practices and processes”, in various aspects of university operations so that they start work productively (OU5:20). The conscious benchmarking practice that was current at ODL “involves conducting regular visits to other institutions” and “writing reports on the visits, from which extracts of best practices are made” (ODL2:3). The Virtual University of the Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC) “holds Boot Camps for the 32 small states. Boot Camps are workshops to develop programmes in the thirty-two countries and so far ten programmes have been developed. For instance, ODL developed a Bachelor of Business and Entrepreneurship degree programme” with the assistance of the other states (ODL2:55).

Similarly, the ODL tended to agree when it said there “has been conscious practice of benchmarking although the name “Benchmarking” has not been used. No one talks of the name “Benchmarking” but what we do is benchmarking, especially through visits” (ODL2:20). For instance, “the programmes we have are a result of linkages with other institutions. This is “the acknowledgement that benchmarking is taking place” and the practice is on-going”. (ODL2:22).

4.3.3.1.3 Themes emerging from Lecturers

The Open University practiced benchmarking in a variety of ways and using many activities. There were “periodic workshops to share ideas” (OU7:2), there “are visits” (OU7:5), there “are workshops” (OU7:8), there are “exchange programmes to learn from others” (OU8:26), then “we exchange modules and learn from them” (OU9:9), and “we look at our marking against others
and moderate” (OU9:20). The institution “exchanges lecturers with institutions like DU” (OU9:21) and “attends Distance Education Association Southern Africa (DEASA) and international conferences and learns from others” (OU9:23). The university “exchanges learning materials like modules” (OU9:35) and “module reviews are underway at all times” (OU9:44). Benchmarking “is consciously practiced and emphasised at OU” (OU7:15) and it is regarded “as the only way to provide growth” (OU9:32).

Benchmarking “is practised through going on sabbatical leave, contact Leave, staff exchange visits, which are usually targeted at world class universities”. The reason was to prioritise applicants from world class universities for sabbatical leave, contact leave and staff exchange visits is that DU can learn from their experience (DU5:35). Learning could be through “private communication” (GU6:16), which should have a formal platform to talk shop, assist each other and share ideas and best practices in running institutional operations (DU6:17).

At the ODL people consciously go on “visits to other institutions, attend conferences and other fora where new ideas are shared (ODL04:51).

4.3.3.2 Themes emerging from focus group discussions

At DU the institution was continuously benchmarking but “for serious benchmarking purposes there should be periodic training sessions in areas like examination results processing, student database creation and maintenance, research output and the number of professors and doctors in an institution” (DUFG8:36). The focus group at the Distance University had “much room to improve through benchmarking an institution in a neighbouring country. Right now we fall far short of the expected world standards or what is expected of universities” output (DUFG8:10). Benchmarking should now “target all practices, processes” (DUFG8:15).

The Open University “are interlinked through the internet, we exchange modules and learn from them and we look at our marking against others and moderate” (OUFG9:20). The problem “is that only management team has visited other institutions to learn from them” (DUFG9:22). The
institution “collaborate in setting and marking of examinations, development of modules and curriculum development” (OUFG9:26).

The ODL institution required members “to write reports on visits, from which extracts of best practices are made” (ODLFG5:9). The top down approach “is followed on consultancies and policies of other universities, like those in South Africa. The other method is the down-up approach in which employees go on benchmarking and write reports. People also have internal consultancies, like workshops, and conferences to keep abreast of global and local trends” (ODLFG5:15). People “are sent out to other countries and universities to learn what they are doing” (ODLFG5:23).

4.3.3.3 Themes emerging from document analysis

The Strategic Plan of the ODL institution implored the workforce to consciously implement the tenets of the plan in order to attain the objectives of the institution. The same consciousness was sought in applying the benchmarking practices in the three institutions.

The Strategic Plan 2012 – 2016 was crafted in such a way that it started with the strategic direction of the institution, followed by the business strategy, strategic risk assessment and an alignment of these aspects to the strategy. A strategic plan core team was formed to manage the performance of the institution. The ODL institution considered major current concerns and incorporated these into the crafting of the plan. The given components of the strategic plan were the vision, the mission statement and core values. One of the core values was “Innovation is our key to success”. The other part of the strategic plan were the strategy map, which gave the chosen objectives and their measures, performance drivers, resources and people perspectives, the Business Results perspective and identified key focus areas. One of the distinctive competencies read, “Commitment to quality”. All these aspects showed that the strategic plan was crafted to make it possible for the institution to perform at the highest quality level, if there was this commitment to quality. The participants in the study would perform at their best level and assist in generating the highest quality data for the study.
4.3.3.4 Themes emerging from observation

The observation and interactions the researcher had with members of staff who proceeded on contact leave, sabbatical, visits to other institutions and attended seminars, workshops and international conferences. The perception was that there seemed to be little substantive information on benchmarking in the interactions and the staff seemed to lack a serious approach to benchmarking. They talked about their trips and how they would return with new knowledge, but they informed the researcher that there was no requirement that they should write and submit a report on their trip. There was no documentary evidence that they had visited a foreign institution and learnt something they brought back to implement in their work or for the benefit of the institution.

4.3.3.5 Findings from themes on conscious practice of benchmarking

The question in this section was to determine to what extent the three institutions of higher learning consciously practised benchmarking. The presupposition was that they practised benchmarking but the researcher needed to establish the extent to which the practice was consciously applied in the three institutions.

The evidence at the Open University was that the practise was a deliberate and conscious application practised through sending people to “workshops, on visits and team teaching” to other institutions (OU1:45). The institutions proceeded to deliberately practise benchmarking by the “borrowing of modules from another institution” to compare them with local ones (OU1:36) and to “emulate” what others were doing (OU2:31). The institution “holds workshops on module writing” with other institutions (OU1:42). There were “exchange programmes to learn from others” (OU8:26). Benchmarking “is consciously practiced and emphasised at OU” (OU7:15) and it is regarded “as the only way to provide growth” (OU9:32).
At the Distance University benchmarking was practised through “benchmarking professors and lecturers with those of other institutions; comparing the institution’s staff management system with that of other institutions” (DU1:24). Benchmarking “is consciously practised through going on sabbatical leave, contact Leave, staff exchange visits, which are usually targeted at world class universities” (DU5:35).

The same perceptions came from the ODL institution, whose evidence was that there was “conscious practice of benchmarking at ODL although the name ‘benchmarking’ had not been used (ODL2:19). The institutions had “regular visits to other institutions” and there was the “writing reports on the visits, from which extracts of best practices are made” (ODL2:3). The reasoning was that “no one talks of the name ‘Benchmarking’ but what we do is benchmarking, especially through visits” (ODL2:20).

The focus group discussions produced confirmatory findings. At the Open University “we exchange modules and learn from them and we look at our marking against others and moderate (OUFG9:20). The ODL institution consciously practised benchmarking by “writing reports on visits, from which extracts of best practices are made” (ODLFG5:9). At DU the institution was continuously benchmarking but “for serious benchmarking purposes there should be periodic training sessions in areas like examination results processing, student database creation and maintenance, research output and the number of professors and doctors in an institution” (DUFG8:36). The problem is that only management team has visited other institutions to learn from them (DUFG9:22).

The document analysis it was revealed that in crafting strategic plans and quality assurance documents the ODL institution considered major current concerns and incorporated these into the crafting of the documents. The strategic plans and quality assurance documents at the Distance University included objectives and their measures, performance drivers, resources and people perspectives in the documents in order to assist the institution perform at the highest level.
However, the observation on the ground at the three institutions seemed to indicate that there was little substantive information on benchmarking in the interactions and the staff seemed to lack a serious approach to benchmarking. They talked about their trips and how they would return with new knowledge, but they informed the researcher that there was no requirement that they should write and submit a report on their trip. This observation tended to support the view that “no one talks of the name ‘Benchmarking’ but what we do is benchmarking, especially through visits” (ODL2:20). However, the observation tended to strengthen the view that in official gatherings there appeared to be sporadic reference to benchmarking, especially in efforts to determine institutional fee structures.

In summary, the finding was that the three institutions consciously practised benchmarking. The common approach was through periodic visits to other institutions to learn what they were doing. The institutions sent their lecturers on staff contact leave, sabbatical and to attend international conferences, seminars, symposia and workshops. The other common approach between the ODL institution and DU carried out comparative studies of their institutions and their staff management systems. The ODL, a member of the Virtual University of the Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC), was involved in Boot Camps where the thirty-two institutions came together to consult on degree programmes and learning material. The ODL was the only institution where those returning from visits to other institutions were required to write reports and highlight new knowledge and information learnt.

4.3.4 Themes on collaborative benchmarking

This section sought to answer the question: Why should the three institutions employ collaborative benchmarking practices? The motivation of the question arose from the encouragement to adopt collaborative benchmarking by Garlick and Pryor (2004) and McKinnon, et al (2000) among other writers on benchmarking. Apart from that encouragement, the question sought to establish if the institutions possessed their own persuasive reasons for preferring collaborative benchmarking, not competitive benchmarking. The difference cited in discussion was that collaborative benchmarking depended upon voluntary, transparent and
agreed upon sharing of information, unlike competitive benchmarking which relied on covert and clandestine acquisition of information.

4.3.4.1 Themes emerging from interviews

The in-depth semi-structured interviews were aimed at determining why institutions of higher learning prefer collaborative benchmarking to competitive benchmarking. Collaborative benchmarking seemed to be built on the concept of sharing and the establishment of a close relationship.

4.3.4.1.1 Themes from Senior Management

The Open University participants preferred collaborative benchmarking to competitive benchmarking. The idea was for institutions “not to compete but to complement” each other’s activities (OU2:12). Participants believed “in complementarity, not competition” (OU2:15). To them improvement meant “to borrow from our collaborators in areas we need to improve” our performance (OU2:19). The OU participants believed the “cooperation with other institutions helped in areas of teaching and staff development and a number of best practices which we accessed through a collaborative agreement” (OU2:46). In collaborative benchmarking the institution “took a shorter route to develop and improve” than through competitive benchmarking. (OU2:47). The Open University relies “on benchmarking without competition because competition sometimes turns into rivalry and it becomes cut-throat” (OU2:21). Benchmarking “is not bad, but it can be bad if it is involved with competition and intense rivalry” (OU2:30). The institution “relies on collaboration and cooperation because we may not have everything we need and we invite those who have what we need to come and help us” (OU2:26).

The Distance University was involved “in the formation of a multiplicity of collaborative relationships, like relationships which included: the Catholic University of Mozambique; University of Zambia; Open University of Malaysia; the Distance Education Association of
Southern Africa (DEASA) and the African Council of Distance Education (ACDE); and it was in the process of entering into a relationship with Indira Gandhi National University” (DU1:81). The institution had collaborative relationships at the local level with a number of institutions, like the National Association of State Universities for Vice Chancellors, student bodies, and associations for different professional bodies (DU1:90). The relationships provided free and accurate information which the institution used for self-improvement and to enhance the quality of university education (DU3:17).

The participants at the ODL College believed that “competitive benchmarking may not neatly fit into benchmarking because it is driven by the survival spirit. It involves the going into an institution covertly, something like higher education espionage to obtain information secretly and gain an advantage in order to out-do competitors” (ODL1:65). Collaborative benchmarking “benefit institutions a lot because it involves visits to other institutions and interacts with a number of other colleges and universities” (ODL1:35). The ODL institution has formed “a number of collaborative relationships now” with other institutions of higher learning (ODL1:58). The institutions “that quickly come to mind are other open and distance learning institutions, like North West University, NAMCOL and Open University of UK” (ODL1:60). The Commonwealth of Learning “has played a big role in this college’s benchmarking activities” (ODL1:61). Collaborative benchmarking has “an open agenda” (ODL1:68). Collaborative benchmarking benefits institutions which take part in the practice in the form of new ideas, suggestions, staff undertake exchange programmes and attend conferences, workshops and seminars that “are adopted by the underperforming institutions” in order for them to close the performance gap (ODL1:71).

4.3.4.1.2 Themes emerging from Professors

The reason that the Open University preferred collaborative benchmarking was because “the interaction enables us to charge very competitive fees” (OU4:26). The belief in collaboration is not confined to Open University, but it is bigger, because “I am on the Distance Education of Southern Africa (DEASA) serving as a member of the collaboration committee of universities
and we belong to the African Union of Universities Association (AUUA)”. Both these organisations encourage institutions to collaborate (OU4:20). The result of the encouragement was that the institution currently “collaborates and cooperates” with: University of South Africa; Zimbabwe Open University; Open University of Tanzania; Nairobi Open University; Sudan Open University; and Open University of Nigeria (OU4:37). Collaborative benchmarking encourages the sharing of ideas and information, instead of accessing it through devious means. A recent experience of collaborative benchmarking was that of the Quality Assurance unit which “looked at a number of Quality Assurance models and the criteria, which include African Commission for Distance Education Toolkit and the Commonwealth of Learning’s Review and Improvement Model (RIM). OU then developed a local QA Model or Framework called Quality Review and Improvement Model” through collaborative benchmarking (OU5:15).

Participants at the Distance University stated that collaboration “is sharing”. Collaborative benchmarking “is the formation of voluntary partnerships with others” (DU3:40). Collaboration meant sharing, which did not happen in competitive benchmarking where the master-servant relationship existed (DU3:58). The DU “could collaborate with institutions like Henderson Research Station”, which had a long history of agricultural research. (DU3:6). An organisation that worked with universities on collaborative issues over a long time was the Southern Africa Regional Universities Association (SARUA). The institutions “jointly consider programmes, in terms of accreditation, qualifications of lecturers and other areas in order to offer quality university education” (DU3:30). Some aspects of collaboration “can be undertaken through social media, which would mean that institutions set up Skype, video conferencing, twitter, face book and train people on how these gadgets are used” (DU3:65). The participants at the ODL stated that collaborative benchmarking was done through “the sharing of information on programme development, the joint provision of programme offering and staff training” (ODL: 02).

4.3.4.1.3 Themes emerging from Lecturers

The Open University “collaborates a lot in setting and marking of examinations; in the development of modules; in curriculum development; collaboration between CEOs; and in
holding ceremonies between the universities” (OU9:30). The Open University “is spearheading a School of Law Association to bring about a legal studies structure adopted by all universities offering law degrees” (OU8:13) as a way of working with others for a common cause. The next project “is to start a Law Journal, with contributions of papers from other universities” (OU8:30). The belief was that “collaborating helps attain quality” (OU9:1).

The Distance University Chancellery went “to UNISA and other institutions, like Open University of Malaysia, on contact leave, where they worked, observed, and on their return they recommended to their institutions some benchmarked projects” (DU4:6). The Distance University acknowledges that “collaborative benchmarking is more appropriate, more developmental than competitive benchmarking, which kills educational growth (DU4:59). ODL does not encourage competitive benchmarking in the country or even in the region” (DU4:60). The Distance University “moved to collaborate more with OUM when UNISA felt GU was becoming too competitive after a series of collaborative meetings” (DU4:65). DU had “Memoranda of Understanding with strategic universities” (DU5:123). An example “is the partnership with Open University of Malaysia (OUM) with which DU benchmarks’ (DU5:86). It was accepted that “competition among ODL universities is irrelevant” because they have a niche to exploit (DU6:29).

At ODL the “difference between collaboration and partnership is that in a partnership we sign an Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) or Memorandum of Agreement (MOA), which stipulates who does what and when, but a collaborative relationship is a working relationship, without regulated roles and responsibilities” (ODL3:22). The idea of signing an MOU/A “is to avoid re-inventing the wheel. We should collaborate in offering programmes, especially in areas like ICT and Tourism where MOUs are robust and well known” (ODL3:19). The choice of Mauritius Open University “is a good one because it has strength in the use of open resources” (ODL3:32).

The Virtual University of the Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC) “encourages collaborative benchmarking among the commonwealth countries, under the umbrella of the
Commonwealth of Learning” (ODL3:50). The VUSSC programmes “are exchanged for free, and modules are contextualised to suit the borrowing country or university. Materials are made appropriate for the local market before it can be used”, in the actual sense of collaboration (ODL3:55). This is why it “is argued that there is no competition which negates the spirit of continuous sharing of ideas and learning of new knowledge and the ODL practices collaborative benchmarking” (ODL3:57). The route to take was to collaborate and freely share knowledge (ODL4:10).

There was “no policy on benchmarking at ODL but there are a lot of partnerships which are a form of benchmarking” among cooperating partners (ODL4:11). There was “conscious awareness throughout the ODL that collaborative benchmarking can assist in raising local standards” (ODL4:12). The ODL “offers continuous open learning and uses collaborative benchmarking as a way to ring-fence the institution so that it can grow with other institutions” (ODL4:15). There were “visits to other institutions of higher learning to see how they perform, borrow ideas from them and improve the standards at the ODL” (ODL4:26).

The ODL “attends conferences, meetings and other fora where it learns new ways of doing things and follows the Commonwealth of Learning, which encourages collaborative benchmarking by finding out what others are doing and how they are doing it” (ODL4:30). “We also use the internet to find out new ideas and then approach those whose ideas we appreciate because you cannot take everything” (ODL4:31). The college “decides on what it wants to borrow then changes it to suit what it wants to do” (ODL4:32).

4.3.4.2 Themes emerging from focus group discussions

The fact that leadership sent people to other countries and universities to learn “proves that there is collaborative benchmarking at ODL. Recently, people were sent to an Examination Workshop in South Africa and some went to a fraud prevention workshop” to learn and share information (ODLFG5:22). There would be “a workshop in May in Namibia on academic matters. All this proved there “are conscious collaborative benchmarking practices at ODL” (ODLFG5:25).
Collaboration “gets a university to a high level of performance, which can result in a small university using benchmarking to improve its performance to a level it put its systems in place” (ODLFG5:53). “Competitive benchmarking gets you to stand out alone” (ODLFG5:55)

Collaborative benchmarking “allowed many institutions to work together on a project, like the partnership being implemented between the University of Oreland, Mzuzu University in Malawi, ZAO and Mlungushi University to introduce a Master of Transformative Community Development degree” (OUFG9:55). OU signed a “MoU with institutions, like Malaysian university and visits other institutions, like IGNU in India” (OUFG9:60).

The ODL Focus Group discussion produced an interesting argument on the relationship between collaborative and competitive benchmarking. The group argued that benchmarking was turned into competitive benchmarking after an institution attained a certain level of growth and development (See § 4.6, for the argument).

The researcher’s belief was shared by Bagchi (1996:8) who said that collaborative and co-operative benchmarking “can serve to nullify a comparative advantage” held by a competitor, or offer a source of competitive advantage to the company. Simply nullifying a comparative advantage was a “me-too” or “follow-the-leader” strategy”. The argument by the focus group that after achieving a certain degree of improvement some universities assumed competitive benchmarking would indicate they now practised the “follow-the-leader” mentality of relating with others. The narrow utilisation of the competitive benchmarking practice would not serve to improve a university’s competitive position. The researcher supported the position taken by Bagchi (1996) and said collaborative benchmarking improved an institution’s competitive position by improving processes and innovating new products and/or services to effectively “leapfrog” competitors.
4.3.4.3 Themes emerging from document analysis

The Distance University produced a Balanced Score Card in an effort to induce its workforce to perform in a systematic and planned manner. The Balanced Score Card was divided into four parts; the financials, stakeholder satisfaction, internal business processes and human capital development. These were, in turn, broken down into strategic priorities, objectives, and initiatives with measurable outcomes. One of the key objectives was “To delight the student”. The other one was “To build a win-win relationship with industry, government and the civic society”. These sound like noble objectives of the institution.

The same institution had a Quality Policy Manual whose components were a vision, a mission statement and core values. It was divided into processes and how they interacted, the quality policy manual, the policy statement and objectives, monitoring and evaluation, internal audits and improvement issues. The principal aim of the policy was “to institutionalise and support a culture of quality assurance and continuous improvement” in the operations of the institution. These provisions were meant to enable the workforce to improve the quality of the product and service by providing some guidelines and standards on how certain tasks could be performed. This would enable the participants to perform at higher level of efficiency and effectiveness through the formation of “quality assurance and enhancement committees”. These committees were formed in order “to promote quality assurance through systematic course and programme review and approval processes”. The data the participants helped generate would be of a high quality.

4.3.4.4 Themes emerging from observation

The members of staff of each of the three institutions observed said they were happy with the practice of proceeding on sabbatical, after having acquired two years’ higher education experience. Those who had gone on a visit to institutions of higher learning on contact leave or sabbatical or for some other visit seemed to give the impression that they had gone on the visit to
learn and share information with colleagues at both their institutions and those at the institutions they visited.

The members of staff seemed to understand the meaning and purpose of sabbaticals, but not as a benchmarking mechanism. Some tended to believe that they were not afforded an opportunity to share their experiences and perspectives with colleagues on their return from the visits.

4.3.4.5 Findings on emerging themes on collaborative benchmarking

The response on why institutions preferred collaborative benchmarking to competitive benchmarking, the evidence from the Open University was that the preference was “not to compete but to complement” each other’s activities (OU2:12). Participants believed “in complementarity, not competition” (OU2:15). The OU participants believed the “cooperation with other institutions helped in areas of teaching and staff development and the adoption of a number of best practices which we accessed through a collaborative agreement” (OU2:46). In collaborative benchmarking the institution “took a shorter route to develop and improve” than through competitive benchmarking. (OU2:47) and “competition sometimes turns into rivalry and it becomes cut-throat” (OU2:21).

OU developed “a local QA Model or Framework called Quality Review and Improvement Model” through collaborative benchmarking (OU5:15). The Distance Education of Southern Africa (DEASA) and the African Union of Universities Association (AUUA)” encourage institutions to collaborate” (OU4:20) so that they improve by “the sharing of ideas and information, instead of accessing it trough devious means” (OU4:37).

The Distance University defines collaborative benchmarking “as the formation of voluntary partnerships with others” (DU3:40). The Distance University “entered into benchmarking collaborative relationships at the local level with a number of institutions”, (DU1:90), which provided free and accurate information that the institution “used for self-improvement and to enhance the quality of university education” (DU3:17). The institution and the Southern Africa
Regional Universities Association (SARUA), “jointly consider programmes, in terms of accreditation, qualifications of lecturers and other areas in order to offer quality university education” (DU3:30).

The ODL institution felt that “competitive benchmarking may not neatly fit into benchmarking because it is driven by the survival spirit. It involves the going into an institution covertly, something like higher education espionage, to obtain information secretly and gain an advantage in order to out-do competitors” (ODL1:65). Collaborative benchmarking had “an open agenda” (ODL1:68) and this “benefits institutions which take part in the practice, through its adoption by the underperforming institutions, in the form of new ideas, suggestions, staff undertake exchange programmes and attending conferences, workshops and seminars in order for them to close the performance gap (ODL1:71). Collaborative benchmarking involves joint “programme development, programme offering and staff training” (ODL:02). The Virtual University of the Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC) “encourages collaborative benchmarking among the commonwealth countries, under the umbrella of the Commonwealth of Learning” (ODL3:50), in the “spirit of continuous sharing of ideas and learning of new knowledge” (ODL3:57).

The focus group discussions agreed that “there is collaborative benchmarking at ODL (ODLFG5:22). Collaboration “gets a university to a high level of performance, which can result in a small university using benchmarking to improve its performance to a higher level and enable it to put all its systems in place” (ODLFG5:53). Collaborative benchmarking “allowed many institutions to work together on a project”, (OUFG9:55).

In the documents analysed it was evident collaborative benchmarking was assisted by institutional documents, like the strategic plans and quality assurance documents that allowed the institutions to perform in a systematic and planned manner. They were able “to build a win-win relationship with industry, government and the civic society” and “to institutionalise and support a culture of quality assurance and continuous improvement”. The ODL institution formed “quality assurance and enhancement committees”.

154
The observations by the researcher were that the staff he interacted with him went on a collaborative benchmarking exercise to other institutions of higher learning on contact leave or sabbatical or for some other visit and the impression that they were happy with the undertaking.

The three institutions shared a common position on the reasons for preferring to collaborate, and not to compete. They all agree that collaboration represented the free sharing of information and work for the common good of the institutions. The differences emerged through their experiences and the language they used in describing their perspectives. The OU preferred complementarity to competition because the institution took a shorter route in order to develop and improve. The institution was a member of the Distance Education of Southern Africa (DEASA) and the African Union of Universities Association (AUUA), which both encouraged their members to collaborate with each other, instead of competing. They contended that competition sometimes turned into rivalry and it became cut-throat, which negated the spirit of continuous sharing of ideas. The OU believed collaboration involved freely sharing information, which tended to be accurate and working with other institutions. The ODL institution shared the same perception but added that collaboration raised the standards of education, through open learning and sharing of information. The Virtual University of the Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC), a partnership of thirty-two small institutions to which the ODL was a member, encouraged its members to collaborate. The members jointly considered programmes and learning material.

4.3.5 Themes on quality indicators of a benchmarked institution

This question sought to identify the quality indicators that were evident in a benchmarked institution. The responses sought to answer the question: What are the quality indicators of a benchmarked institution? The researcher was motivated in asking the question by the demand by many governments to introduce collaborative benchmarking into higher education in order to make institutions more flexible, cost-effective and efficient and sensitive to the needs of the community, through the use of quality performance indicators (Meek and van der Lee, 2005).
The researcher sought to establish if the institutions understood the performance indicators and to establish which of the two benchmarking approaches the institutions preferred in benchmarking: the first approach was through what could be termed unstructured benchmarking, where an institution sent people on visits to other institutions, or to attend conferences and workshops and engages in staff exchange programmes. When these returned they were expected to write reports and make recommendations to the institutional leadership for the adoption of strategies to close identified gaps in institutional operations or to improve processes. The second approach involved the adoption of indicators and models suggested by individuals, like the McKinnon, et al (2000).

4.3.5.1 Themes emerging from interviews

The in-depth interviews were meant to answer the question that sought to establish the indicators which benchmarking institutions employed. The setting up and utilisation of quality performance indicators or standards made it possible for institutions to practise benchmarking. The researcher did not expect the participants to articulate individual indicators but to be able to indicate that quality performance indicators enabled institutions to practise benchmarking. However, some participants may remember the work of McKinnon, et al (2000) which could form the response to the question.

4.3.5.1.1 Themes from senior management

The Open University participants seemed unable to identify any indicators, or benchmarks their institutions could use. The participants stated that their regulatory authority “set up shared standards and if we can use them then that is benchmarking”, without stating the standards (DU2:5). They said indicators “are the standards which institutions could use to benchmark against each other”. These are the quality performance indicators participants were expected to identify and proceeded to do so without much success. “The quality and improvement concepts can be transformed into performance indicators which require benchmarking to be effective” (DU1:77).
The ODL institution believed benchmarking “improves the set standards due to the introduction of best practices in a given area” (ODL1:26), but did not identify the standards that lead to quality improvement. One participant said “benchmarking is a standard in itself” (ODL1:34).

4.3.5.1.2 Themes emerging from Professors

The participants at the OU merely mentioned the need “to set up standards to achieve a given objective”, without identifying the standards (OU3:19). They said these “show improvement standards” (OU3:26) and that “setting standards which an institution wants to achieve” is important (OU4:4). These were “the standardised with regards to content, duration, teaching/learning methods, staff to teach and other issues” (OU5:9).

Quality practices “are meant to ensure standards are maintained and benchmarking practices are also meant to ensure standards are achieved and how they can be achieved at the ODL (ODL2:12). These are “quality assurance standards and the criteria used are recognised as standards. These standards enable institutions to compare how they are performing” (ODL2:14). The institution’s strategic plan “is the driver of aspects of a university which should be followed and documented” as an indicator of performance (ODL2:10).

4.3.5.1.3 Themes emerging from Lecturers

The Distance University should have “indicators that tell you if you have reached your target or not. Unfortunately these are not present in the institution” (DU4:30). It was true that “indicators help in evaluating” institutional performance (GU4:31). Objective benchmarking “can only be undertaken, through comparisons in areas targeted for it, like in research and scholarship, teaching and learning and materials development, using indicators as tools of comparison in order to keep the institution abreast or ahead of others” (DU4:32). Our quality had greatly improved. We won several awards and accolades in the last 12 months (DU5:54). The use of indicators at institutions “encourages the standardisation of practices and procedures” (DU6:19).
The “main purpose for the use of indicators in DU, which is a young university trying to come up with best practices relevant to it, is to make it possible to compare the quality of education among institutions and also to come up with standards that catapult an institution into the league of recognised world players” (DU6:33). This meant that “growth should be in terms of quality of service, refining processes and procedures, the visibility of the institution, reputation and recognition from stakeholders, which comes through benchmarking” (DU6:68). DU emphasised growth in student numbers but a small institution in terms of numbers but a giant in performance, in processes, procedures, service delivery and the quality of the product, which is well groomed (DU6:59). Indicators “encourage institutions to render quality service that satisfies the students and the rest will fall into place” (DU6:68).

The participants at ODL emphasised that benchmarking “gives benchmarks which are standards of quality” to an institution which could be compared to that of other institutions (ODL3:39). Quality was “improved through benchmarking by identifying what standards to achieve then identify who is achieving the standard and borrowing how they are doing it and also to access new ideas” (ODL3:70).

4.3.5.2 Themes emerging from focus group discussions

At the Distance University “there are no benchmarked standards or indicators, and this has resulted in poor quality service delivery to stakeholders, like students” (DUFG8:38). The ODL “has gained a lot in terms of quality enhancement through collaboration with institutions like, IGU and Leeds Metropolitan University” (ODLFG5:35). If an institution “wants to come up with a Balanced Score Card (BSC) it can do so through benchmarking” and it can use the BSC as a quality indicator which can be employed in a comparative study (ODLFG5:41).

The indicators “are helpful in the comparison of performance and adopting the best practice results in increased quality in education” (OUFG9:63). Improving the academic and professional status of academicians, which has a multiplier effect and to learn successful practices from other universities (OUFG9:62). Organisational learning “means workers continue to develop by
publishing articles. In benchmarking institutions continue to adopt what others are doing and academics continue learning” (DUFG8:75).

4.3.5.3 Themes emerging from document analysis

The ODL institution crafted a Corporate Scorecard divide into four parts; customer/stakeholder satisfaction, processes, resources, people and leadership and business results. These were followed by strategic objectives, strategic goals, performance measure and institutional targets. A major objective was “To increase student enrolment numbers from 8625 to 9825 by 2016” (12%). The Corporate Scorecard then outlined academic quality assurance and improvement policies and processes, which were sub-divided into policy objectives, the scope of the policy, quality assurance and enhancement principles, policy statement, quality assurance structures, different quality assurance committees and their functions and risk types. Another objective was “To develop the necessary human resources to deliver on the mandate of the institution by 2016”. It ended with an annual programme review of internal and external reviews. The purpose of the Corporate Scorecard was to guide staff and stakeholders on how to perform tasks and how to achieve high levels of quality and performance. The institution planned “To improve the percentage of funding from Non-Government sources from 19% to 30% by 2016”. These measures would enhance the performance of participants and increase the quality of data generated in the study.

4.3.5.4 Themes emerging from observation

The members of staff the researcher interacted with gave the impression that they appreciated the concept of benchmarking. They valued the concept of learning new insights and knowledge and new ways of doing something (DU) but they needed training in benchmarking. They felt they possessed knowledge and information which the recipient institutions could benefit from, if they suggested and recommended certain practices, processes and procedures which could improve the host institution’s quality of education and improve institutional performance (OU).
The other perception that emerged from the interactions was that members of staff were engaged as external examiners by other institutions where their knowledge and expertise were valued and learnt from (ODL). The same people were not engaged as internal examiners by their own institutions when they possessed so much knowledge, expertise and experience which could be tapped to improve the quality of education in the institution. It would seem that there were many people employed in institutions where their value was not realised but it was sought after by other institutions. This led lecturers to go through the motions at their institutions but worked hard when engaged by other institutions on a part time basis, because their institutions undervalued their worth.

4.3.5.5 Findings from emerging themes on quality indicators

In answer to the question about the quality indicators of a benchmarked institution, the Distance University “set up common standards or benchmarks” from which indicators could be drawn (DU2:5). The institution believed that “the quality and improvement concepts can be transformed into performance indicators which require benchmarking to be effective” DU1:77). The institution also believed in “indicators that tell you if you have reached your target or not. Unfortunately these are not present in the institution” (DU4:30). It was true that “indicators help in evaluating” institutional performance (GU4:31). The use of indicators at institutions “encourages the standardisation of practices and procedures” (DU6:19). Quality indicators “make it possible to compare the quality of education among institutions and also to come up with standards that catapult an institution into the league of recognised world players” (DU6:33). Indicators “encourage institutions to render quality service that satisfies the students and the rest will fall into place” (DU6:68).

The ODL institution believed benchmarking “improves the set standards due to the introduction of best practices in a given area” (ODL1:26). The “indicators enable institutions to compare how they are performing” (ODL2:14). The institution’s strategic plan “is the driver of aspects of a university which should be implemented and from which indicators could come” (ODL2:10). The ODL institution emphasised that benchmarking “gives benchmarks which are standards of
quality” to an institution which could be compared to that of other institutions (ODL3:39). The institution emphasised that benchmarking “gives benchmarks which are indicators of quality” to an institution which made it possible to compare its performance to that of other institutions (ODL3:39).

The OU mentioned the need “to set up shared standards to achieve a given objective”, but failed to identify the standards (OU3:19), which “show improvement standards that scale up quality” (OU3:26). The institution believed that “setting common standards which an institution wants to achieve” was important (OU4:4) and quality indicators are derived from the standards. The set common standards could be “in the areas of content, duration, teaching/learning methods, staff to teach and other issues”, which could effectively be quality indicators (OU5:9).

In the focus group discussions the Distance University believed that “there are no benchmarked standards or indicators, which resulted in poor quality service delivery to stakeholders, like students” (DUFG8:38). The Balance Score Card, as a quality indicator, can be employed in a comparative study (ODLFG5:41). The Open University believed that indicators could be used for “comparing of performance and adopting the best practice results in efforts to increase quality in education” (OUFG9:63).

In the documents analysed the identified indicators, like “to increase student enrolment numbers from 8625 to 9825 by 2016” (12%) (DU), “to develop the necessary human resources to deliver on the mandate of the institution by 2016” (ODL) and “to improve the percentage of funding from Non-Government sources from 19% to 30% by 2016” (ODL) could be used for comparative purposes.

The researcher observed that there was an appreciation for the employment of quality indicators for performance comparison in the three institutions. They valued the concept of learning new knowledge and new ways of doing something, especially in coming up with quality indicators (DU). The Open University institution believed that quality indicators, as suggested and recommended through the adoption of certain practices, processes and procedures, could lead to
improvement in the host institution’s quality of education and improve institutional performance (OU). Professors could come up with quality if they employed their experience as external examiners of other institutions where their knowledge and expertise were valued and learnt from (ODL).

The three institutions are agreed that the purpose of indicators was to make it possible to compare the quality of education among institutions; a comparison in the areas of quality of service, processes and procedures, the visibility of the institution, reputation and recognition from stakeholders. The institutions are also agreed that indicators were standards that institutions set for themselves to use as the basis for measurement of performance or quality. A number of institutions could come together and agree on common indicators they could use in comparing the performance of one institution against that of other institutions. The Distance University went beyond the common ground and said indicators were tools of comparison in order to keep the institution abreast of, or ahead of, other institutions. Because the Distance University did not have set standards or indicator it had resulted in poor quality service delivery to stakeholders, like students. The observations evidenced the belief by institutional workers that they possessed information and knowledge which institutions could use in benchmarking

4.3.6 Themes on objective benchmarking practice

The question sought to establish how institutions of higher learning could ascertain that the benchmarking practices they undertook were objective and produced the intended results. Garlick and Pryor (2004:41) argue that the benchmarking practice should be employed to access ideas and criteria with which to develop key performance indicators for institutional performance. The use of key performance indicators ensured that the result of the benchmarking exercise would be objective and beyond reproach.
4.3.6.1 Themes emerging from interviews

The interview was meant to establish how the practise of benchmarking could be carried out objectively. The question was important because institutions realised that objectivity resulted in credibility. An institution needed to know that if it replicated a benchmarking exercise it would produce the same result produced in the initial exercise.

4.3.2.1.1 Themes from senior management

The ODL institution “offers continuous open learning and uses benchmarking as a way to ring-fence the institution so that it can grow with other institutions by identifying indicators can be used to compare institutions objectively” (ODL1:10). In research work, “a university can set up identical research development strategies from those institutions renowned for their research output and objectively compare itself against them” (ODL3:15). There should be a model “to justify benchmarking by identifying an area which submits to benchmarking, decide on what criteria to employ, which can be a checklist, for processes, decide on the length of time the benchmarking practice should take place and then implement the strategy chosen for the purpose” (ODL1:40).

“We construct identical processes from which we can make objective assessment of their performance” (DU1:10). The openness of a university “is derived from being literate and the levels of literacy are nationally defined and examinations results can be set” to compare performance objectively (DU1:21). Concerned institutions “can set common performance standards and assess their performance objectively using the standards” (DU3:48).

Institutions form plans with “shared objectives that can be compare objectively” (OU2:26). The institution “can use the same objectives” in order to be able to assess objectively (OU2:54).
4.3.6.1.1 Themes from Professors

The ODL claimed “there is objectivity in most benchmarking projects. For instance, the use of a common Balanced Score Card can be used if the institution is achieving 25% of its potential and you want to achieve the 75% deficit through benchmarking. You decide on how best to do it and what strategy to implement, internally” (ODL2:27). Each Law School should produce QA booklets on examination management to guide its members and periodically convene a retreat to in-service members so that the process can be evaluated objectively (ODL2:32).

The institution “can set shared performance standards and assess their performance objectively using the standards” (DU3:37).

The students of a number of institutions could “write the same examination and the results can be compared across institutions” if they all write the same paper (OU4:12).

4.3.6.1.2 Themes emerging from Lecturers

The Department of Partnerships has come up with guidelines on benchmarking, which include: justifying benchmarking; outline expectations of a visit; and, what are the possible yields of the visit or practice (ODL3:7). Benchmarking partners can set the same standards for all institutions which can enhance comparison and objective evaluation (ODL3:11). Institutions should set standards as a group so that benchmarking is objective (ODL4:16).

The learnt knowledge from other institutions “can be set out in identified standards and indicators institutions can use and determine their performance compared to these indicators” (DU6:13). Benchmarking “can be measured objectively through the money a research project raises” (DU7:21).
The Open University “can identify common indicators of quality to compare objectively (OU6:9). We need to set minimum standards to meet when selecting students which can also be compared objectively in terms of students selected” (OU6:10).

4.3.6.2 Themes emerging from focus group discussion

The focus group of the Open University it “looks at our marking against others and moderate and make sure it reflects the marking guide” (OUFG9:20). The institution “produces plans with smart objectives and make sure they are achieved” (OUFG9:22). It also “collaborates a lot with other institutions and sign MOUs with quantifiable targets” (OUFG9:24). The Open University “benchmarks according to the institution’s strategic plan smart objectives and achieves the objectives set” (OUFG9:29). Institutions come together and “set the same targets to be done over a period and then evaluate objectively” (OUFG9:59).

The universities “offering the MBA programme in South Africa are affiliated to an organisation of African Business Schools as a benchmark, and the results can be compared objectively” (DUFG5:6). A participant said “we fall far short of the expected world standards, or what is expected of universities’ output which can be measured” (DUFG9:10).

“The number of research publications can be counted” (ODLFG5:9). There “is no written benchmarking policy, but a written benchmarking guide at ODL which can be shared” by institutions which results can be compared (ODLFG5:36).

4.3.6.3 Themes emerging from document analysis

The documents analysed informed the study that strategic plans, quality assurance documents and Balanced Score Card were crafted to enhance the quality of an institution’s products and services, which led to an improvement in the performance of the institution (DU). The quality policy statement of the Distance University was its “commitment to the provision of high quality ODL, scholarship, research and community service”. The strategic plan was an identification of
where the institution concerned was and where it aspired to be. It also identified the resources that were required to bridge the gap between where the institution was and where it desired to be in a five years’ time.

The documents showed that each of the three institutions of higher learning convened workshops and meetings (ODL) at which agreements were made concerning where the institutions would be in five years and how they would manage the transition to the desired destination. The document would assist the staff by enabling them to produce output which was greater than the input expended in the task (ODL). The need was to be effective and efficient. For instance, the Distance University Strategic Plan aspired “to increase student enrolment by 50%, by second semester, 2010, and by 15% each semester, subsequently, to 2014” (ODL). The ultimate aspiration of the ODL institution was “to increase the number of students completing from 4676 to 6276 students annually by 2016”.

4.3.6.4 Themes emerging from observation

The researcher got the distinct perception that professors in institutions were engaged as benchmarking consultants by other institutions, not their own, and they could lead in comparative studies (All). These people seemed to understand benchmarking and its benefit to the institution but they did not utilise the knowledge for the betterment of their institutions. The professors indicated that their institutions did not value their contribution to the institution. When the researcher suggested that this could be because the institutions did not know about their knowledge and their expertise in benchmarking but they suggested that the institutions knew (All); they were not consulted because they were liked by senior management. They were viewed as a threat to the positions of senior management.

The researcher sought to establish why there seemed to be a lot of mention of benchmarking in meetings and at official gatherings but there seemed to be very little practical benchmarking on the ground. The institutions seemed to rely on benchmarking in order to grow and improve on quality and performance but there did not seem to be any benchmarking guidelines, documented
process or how ideas brought from outside the institution could be adopted and utilised for the benefit of the institution.

**4.3.6.5 Findings from emerging themes on objective benchmarking practice**

In answer from the question about how benchmarking, in an Open and Distance Learning institution, could be ascertained objectively, the ODL institution’s evidence was that “indicators can be used to compare institutions with objectively” (ODL1:10). It was also possible “to construct indicators or benchmarks from those institutions renowned for their research output and objectively compare itself against them” using the benchmarks (ODL3:15). The institution should “decide on at criteria to employ, which can be a checklist, for processes, and the length of time the benchmarking practice should take and the implemented strategy can be objectively evaluated” (ODL1:40). The institution believed that “there is objectivity in most benchmarking projects. For instance, the use of the Balanced Score Card can be used if the institution is achieving 25% of its potential and you want to achieve the 75% deficit through benchmarking. You decide on how best to do it and what strategy to implement, internally” (ODL2:27). Objectivity could be ascertained if the ODL institution “sets the same indicators to enhance comparison and objective evaluation” (ODL3:11). Institutions “should set standards as a group” in order to objectively compare benchmarking (ODL4:16).

Response from the Distance University was that it set common performance standards and assessed the performance of the institution objectively using the set standards (DU3:48). In fund raising projects benchmarking can “be measured objectively through the money a project raises” (DU7:21).

The Open University could form plans, with another institution, with “shared objectives that could be compared objectively”, in the targets section (OU2:26). A number of institutions could use “the same objectives in order to be able to assess their performance objectively” (OU2:54). The Open University can identify common indicators of quality with another institution, which it can compare objectively” (OU6:9). One participant said “we need to set minimum standards
when selecting students” which can be compared objectively in terms of the number of students selected (OU6:10).

In focus group discussions the Open University said “we look at our marking against others and moderate” and make sure the marking reflected the marking guide” (OUFG9:20). The institution “produced plans with smart objectives and made sure they were achievable” (OUFG9:22). The institution could “set the same targets with those of another institution which could cover a given period and then evaluate the implementation objectively” (OUFG9:59). In research “the number of research publications can be counted” (ODLFG5:9). However, a participant at DU said “we fall far short of the expected world standards, or what is expected of universities’ output which can be measured” (DUFG9:10).

The documents analysed showed that they were of a high standard, which enhanced the level of performance so that the quality of data generated could be equally high. At the ODL and the DU institutions Balanced Score Cards were crafted to enhance the quality of an institution’s products and services, which led to an improvement in the performance of the institution (DU). One of the measurable objectives was “to increase student enrolment by 50%, by second semester, 2010, and by 15% each semester, subsequently, to 2014” (ODL). This was coupled by the institution’s “commitment to the provision of high quality ODL, scholarship, research and community service” (ODL) and “to increase student enrolment by 50%, by second semester, 2010, and by 15% each semester, subsequently, to 2014” (ODL). The other objectively quantifiable target was “to increase student enrolment by 50%, by second semester, 2010, and by 15% each semester, subsequently, to 2014” (ODL).

The observations made by the researcher indicated that the institutions were able to internally measure the output of their performance. This was done through the setting of measurable objectives. The three institutions agreed that the setting of the same objectives, or shared objectives made it possible to compare the performance of the institutions in an objective and credible manner. The indicators, benchmarks or standards should be common or shared by a few institutions in order for these institutions to compare their performance through measurement and
quantification of the performance. The Distance University suggested that the quantification of research project proceeds, in the form of money raised, was another way of comparing the performance of an institution in the research field. The Distance University suggested the production of a guide on procedures and processes, which was confirmed in the document analysis as a way of standardisation of work processes. The ODL institution produced a Quality Assurance booklet on examination management and this could be a used to measure performance in examination management.

Table 4.4 Interview guide

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Category of participant</th>
<th>Remarks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. To what extent do the three institutions of higher learning consciously practise benchmarking?</td>
<td>Senior Management at the three institutions (Top Management)</td>
<td>Answered all the questions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Professors at the three institutions (Middle Management)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lecturers at the three institutions (Lower Management)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. How could benchmarking, within the context of an institution of higher learning, be ascertained objectively?</td>
<td>Senior Management at the three institutions (Top Management)</td>
<td>Answered all the questions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Professors at the three institutions (Middle Management)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lecturers at the three institutions (Lower Management)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. What are the quality indicators of a benchmarked institution of higher learning?</td>
<td>Senior Management at the three institutions (Top Management)</td>
<td>Answered all the questions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Professors at the three institutions (Middle Management)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lecturers at the three institutions (Lower Management)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Why should the three institutions of higher learning employ collaborative benchmarking practices?</td>
<td>Senior Management at the three institutions (Top Management)</td>
<td>Answered all the questions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Professors at the three institutions (Middle Management)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lecturers at the three institutions (Lower Management)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. How do the institutions define benchmarking, in an institutional setting</td>
<td>Senior Management at the three institutions (Top Management)</td>
<td>Answered all the questions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Professors at the three institutions (Middle Management)</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Lecturers at the three institutions (Lower Management)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
4.4 Themes emerging from the review of related literature

The themes that emerged throughout the review of related literature revolved around the concepts that define benchmarking (cf. Chapter 2). The themes were the thoughts and ideas that kept recurring as the review of related literature evolved and some of these themes mirrored those that emerged in the in-depth interviews, as participants discussed their understanding of the benchmarking concept through their perceptions, experiences and thoughts on the benchmarking practices of their respective institutions. These themes embodied the definitions and characteristics of benchmarking, which were:

- A learning process
- Identify their comparative strengths and weaknesses
- Self-regulation and self-improvement.
- Performance comparisons and self-assessment
- Comparison of services, activities, processes, products and results
- Continuous self-improvement
- Quality improvement
- Self-evaluation
- Comparison of strengths and weaknesses
- Quality and performance improvement.
- Diagnostic instrument,
- A collaborative learning exercise
- An on-going evaluation and systematic approach of continuously measuring work processes.
- Continuous improvement through a comparative approach
- The rate of change in performance
- Institutional performance
- Shared interests of a common nature
- Professional associations
- Work collaboratively
- Setting of common standards
- Improve processes and systems
- Improve performance through collaboration and comparison with sister institutions

The above themes emerged from the review of related literature and appear to be variations in defining the benchmarking concept, and a few of them appear to be benchmarking strategies. A benchmarking process is a “learning process” which builds on the knowledge from one phase contributing to the process of the next phase, as illustrated in the model constructed by Garlick and Pryor (2004). The purpose of benchmarking is to enable institutions to self-improve or self-regulate through comparing their performance with that of other institutions. The comparison related to the strengths and weaknesses that institutions had, which allowed each institution to evaluate its performance and be able to identify a performance gap. The institution that had a performance weakness, resulting in a gap, could identify an institution performing better and adopt the better performing institution’s strategies, adapt them to suit its situation and implement the strategies in an effort to close the performance gap (See § 2.2, for definition).

The short paragraph above clearly illustrates how each of the themes tabulated above can be explained in the benchmarking practise. Benchmarking is about bridging the gap between where an institution is and where it aspires to be. That way the institution sets performance targets, sets in motion performance improvement strategies. Some institutions enter into collaborative performance benchmarking initiatives where they visit other institutions, share information and set common standards through which results can be measured and reported on.

The emerging themes can be compacted into a few, which are:
- Continuous learning
- Measurement and comparison
- Continuous quality and performance improvement
- Standards and benchmarks
- Learning institution
- Best practices
- Strengths and weaknesses
These reflected the emerging themes that emerged from in-depth interviews and interactions with study participants and individuals in the three institutions.

4.5 Analysis and interpretation of empirical and theoretical data

This section considered the alignment between the empirical data with the data contained in the review of related literature. The researcher sought to identify areas of congruence and difference between the two forms of data that were employed in the study. In most instances the information in the research mirrored what the former researchers and authors stated in their articles, but there were a few cases were this was not the case and these cases were indicated in this section.

Jackson and Lund (2000b:6) defined benchmarking as a learning process meant to enable those benchmarking to compare services/activities/products so that they could identify their comparative strengths and weaknesses, which they could employ as a basis for self-improvement and/or self-regulation. Benchmarking was given as a learning process, which continued to evolve as long as the benchmarking process was in motion. The learning was embodied in the revision of the implementation of strategies meant to close the identified gap between where the institution was and where leadership wanted it to be (See § 2.14.2, for Vught, et al 2010 study). The gap was identified through the comparison of processes, practices, services and products. The benchmarking process was meant to explicate the strengths and weaknesses of the benchmarking institution as a basis for the crafting of strategies that would lead to the improvement of the institution’s performance or quality of education. This was the definition adopted for the study.

In the empirical study the institutions left the concepts of a “learning process” and the comparison of an institution’s “strengths and weaknesses”. The Open University defined benchmarking as “learning from others”, which was an acceptable attempt but it did not capture the concept of “a learning process” captured in the theoretical definition. The comparison of an
institution’s strengths and weaknesses was important in determining what the institution could do and could not do (See § 2.2, for study definition). However, most of the concepts of benchmarking were articulated, and the definitions of the three institutions of higher learning converged. The Open University was the only one which included in the definition the fact that benchmarking was a way to “regulate internally”, as captured in the study definition.

In consideration of the observations made in the review of related literature this finding agrees with the definition of Lund and Jackson (2000b), it is, therefore, confirmatory.

The benchmarking practice was consciously practised at all the three institutions of higher learning, at Open University, and similarly practised at the other institutions. The practise was in the form of visits to other institutions to learn new ideas; proceeding on staff exchange programmes, after spending two years at the institution; the exchange of learning material, like modules, in order to learn how they are structure, their content and other aspects; to attend research conferences at national and international levels; to attend material development workshops and other staff development workshops, like the holding of Boot Camps; and, to consult institutions on degree and other programmes. In the contemporary institutions the incidence of visits and exchange programmes was a normal phenomenon, institutions collaborate and share information on a wide range of experiences.

Notwithstanding, the observation that “although the name ‘benchmarking’ has not been used and no one talks of the name ‘benchmarking’” at Open University, the practice was consciously practised at all the three institutions of higher learning. The inability to use the term ‘benchmarking’ could have led to the institution’s “failure to deliver a concise and eloquent definition”. This may have led to the perception of the lecturers that it was acceptable to proceed on contact leave and other visits to other institutions without writing formal reports on the visits. The ODL institution was the only one that wrote reports on visits to other institutions, but it was not clear what purpose the reports served in the institution. There did not seem to be a formal system of attending to the reports and learning from them. There was also no articulated process or procedure of learning from experiences of members of staff who went on contact leave and
other staff exchange programmes. Benchmarking was useful when learnt experiences, new ideas and information were communicated to leadership and these formed the basis of improvement strategies.

The three institutions followed the approach to benchmarking that was recommended by Achim, *et al* (2009) who succinctly portrayed institutions of higher learning as possessing the desire to learn from each other and to share aspects of good practice. The desire to learn was as old as the first institution itself and it focused on the spirit of collegiality and the need to uphold the international role that the international institutions played in education. The institutions showed the desire to share through the formation of professional associations, both academic and non-academic, to meet and share common interests. They undertook many visits to other higher education institutions to learn how they operated and performed. They had collaborative relationships with fellow institutions of higher learning in areas of academic and non-academic interest. The goodwill of institutions in areas of quality assessment or accreditation systems was maintained by employing their members of staff as assessors and examiners of other institutions, and through staff exchange programmes. There was convergence that the three institutions of higher learning, to a large extent, consciously practised benchmarking.

Considering the observations made in the review of related literature and the findings of the study (See § 4.3, for results) this finding resonates the view expressed by Achim, *et al* (2009), hence it is confirmatory.

Collaborative benchmarking was emphasised in the empirical coverage where institutions, like the Distance Education of Southern Africa (DEASA), the African Union of Universities Association (AUUA) and the Virtual University of the Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC), a partnership of thirty-two institutions, all encouraged their members to practise collaborative benchmarking. The institutions put forward a number of reasons to justify why they preferred collaborative benchmarking to competitive benchmarking; the former involved the voluntary sharing of information, which they believed shortened the route to closing the performance gap (See § 2,19, for types of benchmarking).
The theoretical section explicated the reasons why collaborative benchmarking was preferable to competitive benchmarking. Bagchi (1996) said collaboration was preferred based on the sharing of information and a dialogue among participating partners. Jackson (2001) preferred collaboration because it was a voluntary exercise, based on cooperation. Collaborative benchmarking was premised on trust and ethical conduct of partners. The cooperating institutions relied on transparency, collegiality, reciprocity, openness and respect for the other institutions (Prasad and Stella, 2006). The exercise was carried out in a cooperative environment. These reasons mirrored the empirical reasons by the three institutions.

In consideration of the observations the researcher made in the review of related literature (See § 2.18, for explanation) this finding agrees with the views expressed by Bagchi (1996) and Prasad and Stella (2006), hence it is confirmatory.

The benchmarking model presented by McKinnon, et al (2000) proposed the breaking of the institution of higher learning’s business into nine core areas and subdividing these into fifty-seven indicators. These indicators enabled the institution to measure and compare the quality of its education and the level of its performance. These indicators could have the Likert scale added to them in order for the institutions to give these to people to score each indicator, depending how they perceived how the institution performed in each area. A number of institutions could take part in scoring their institution’s performance and, at the end, the scores for all participating institutions could be compared and ranking to come up with the institution offering the highest quality of service and the lowest (See § 1.12, for theoretical framework).

The participants in the study indicated that the setting up of shared performance indicators was necessary if institutions wanted to measure its performance. The Distance University said indicators were standards that an institution set for itself in order for it to determine how it was performing (See § 2.22, for quality indicators). The ODL institution concurred that the set indicators enabled the institution to compare how it was performing. The Open University
pointed out that the setting of standards or indicators made it possible for an institution to measure its performance.

However, the institutions were not able to mention the type of indicators that they could set, apart from stating that these were benchmarks or standards. The ability of the institutions to identify how institutions could measure their performance, through the formulation of shared performance quality indicators, was a commendable achievement. It may have been inappropriate to expect participants to recall from memory a number of quality indicators, but their ability to explain the purpose of quality indicators showed they could apply the benchmarking practice, according to McKinnon, et al (2000).

It was unfortunate that the institutions were unable to articulate quality indicators, but it was heartening to discover that they could explain how the indicators could be utilised.

The benchmarking theoretical framework by McKinnon, et al (2000) suggested the setting up of core business areas and breaking these down into performance indicators (See § 2.14.1, for indicators). These performance indicators could be used to measure and compare the performance of a number of institutions, and rank their performance from the institution with the highest quality of service to the stakeholders to the institution with the lowest quality of service. The fifty-seven indicators given could further be broken into more indicators, or they could be consolidated to come up with fewer indicators than the fifty-seven.

The three institutions of higher learning in the study were all agreed that shared performance indicators or benchmarks could be set up for the participating institutions. These could be used to score the performance of each institution and measure the performance of the institutions. However, the institutions were not able to name the individual performance indicators, but they were able to articulate how the quality performance indicators could be employed to measure and compare the performance of the institutions. The ODL institution said it could set up identical indicators with other institutions and use these to measure and compare its performance against that of other institutions. The Distance University concurred and contended that the construction
of common or identical indicators enabled institutions to assess their performance. These common indicators were able to be used to objectively measure and compare the quality of education of the institution, or that of participating institutions. In the event of strategic plans, these had to have common objectives, which could be compared objectively. The Open University also concurred and said the setting of group standards or indicators was meant to enable the institutions to measure their individual performance and compare it with that of the members of the group. The comparison was also possible when a group of institutions used a common Balanced Scorecard with smart objectives and the production of a group Quality Assurance booklet on examination management, which could be used to assess compliance among the participating institutions.

Considering the observations in the review of related literature and the findings of the study this finding echoed the view expressed by McKinnon, *et al* (2000), hence it is confirmatory.

### 4.6 Gaps identified in this study

The major gap the researcher identified concerned the absence of a reporting system by those returning from visiting other institutions on staff exchange programmes. Except for those from the ODL institution who said they were required to write reports the other institutions did not mention this important aspect of benchmarking. Observations and interactions made with the ODL participants indicated that even if the requirement to produce reports was in existence the professors and lecturers rarely wrote the reports. Without writing reports there was no way the institution’s leadership could access the new knowledge, ideas and information the professors and lecturers returned with. There seemed to be no requirement that they furnish leadership with a written report on their return from a visit to another institution. According to Achim, *et al* (2009) one way of benchmarking was inter-institutional visits of both an academic and non-academic nature. The visits needed to generate new insights, new information and share experiences which all led to the improvement in the quality of education and the performance of the institution. There was no link between the institutions, on the one side, and the experiences, new insights and information, of professors and lecturers on the other side, which could lead to
the improvement. The professors and lecturers who went on staff exchange programmes were highly educated and intelligent professionals who could transmit a lot of information, knowledge and new ideas from their institutions to the host institutions, which when shared could be a source of great performance improvement to the host institution. When they returned to their institutions they could return with new ideas, information and knowledge acquired in the host institution. Apart from this these professionals were invited to institutions, other than their own, to act as external assessors and other professional duties. These duties exposed them to new ideas, new knowledge and information which could be harnessed by the home and host institutions to great benefit.

It would appear that these professionals either did not fully appreciate the benchmarking role they played and the influence they could exert on the improvement in performance and the quality of service delivery in both their home and the host institutions. Further to this, it would appear these professionals and academics were under-utilised by their respective institutional leadership or there could be some incomprehensible distance in communication between the professionals the leadership of their institution.

The other gap was the lack of active involvement of professors and lecturers in benchmarking issues when they visited other institutions on staff exchange programmes, on sabbatical or as external assessors and markers needed to be explicated through research (See § 2.10, for continuous improvement). Institutions should realise the value of professionals they employed and the new insights and knowledge they brought back when these professionals visited other institutions. The inviting institutions did so in the full knowledge that they were recipients of expertise and knowledge they did not possess and that they were benefiting from the knowledge of these professionals when the same knowledge was not being accessed by the professionals’ own institutions. The quality or value of these professionals, who were invited to certify the standards and performance of other institutions, should be the object of benchmarking practices.

The focus group of the ODL institution argued that competitive benchmarking was ideal after an institution achieved a certain level of growth, through collaborative benchmarking. Competitive
benchmarking introduced the spirit that the institution should be different from other institutions in the areas that included programmes, environment for learners, stakeholder satisfaction and relevant technology. The institution should out-perform other institutions in every way. The rationale would be for the institution to become a world class institution and be among the best 50 universities in the world, which included universities like Harvard, UNISA, OUK and IGNOU, which was reputed to be the biggest in the world. The argument was that the institution would have attained a certain level or kind of uniqueness in an operational area, like technology at IGNOU. Harvard was reputed to excel in world research and UNISA was said to have centres of excellence. Collaborative benchmarking got an institution to a high quality and performance level and competitive benchmarking got the institution to stand head and shoulders above other institutions in the world (ODLFG5:62).

This argument needed to be further researched in order to refute or authenticate it.

The other gap identified in the study was the dearth of benchmarking literature in the SADC region. The research was able to locate just one article written by two scholars in Kenya (Magutu, et al, 2011). If there are other articles in the region the researcher was not able to access them. In this regard the researcher decided to undertake this study in order to contribute to the literature on benchmarking in the African continent, in general, and the SADC region, in particular (cf. Chapter 2). The hope of the researcher was that this study would be followed by many more studies on the same topic.

The three institutions created a gap in this study when they did not adopt the benchmarking approaches presented by Garlick and Pryor (2004) and McKinnon, et al (2000) that were composed of key components, which were a review of the current situation and environment as it related to the targeted function, a SWOT analysis or environment scan and an initiation of a strategic planning targeted at performance improvement. The plan would be implemented with the senior management providing the requisite resources. A review of the implementation process would indicate the level of achievement of the targets and this would be based a continuous learning process at each stage of implementation. Nelson (2003) concurs to the use of
this approach and said it identified the product or process that needed to be improved, identified potential partners, entered into agreement with partners, shared the situation analysis and provided resources. The approach by McKinnon, et al (2000) meant the participating institution could break down the core university business into a number of areas, and further break down the core areas into performance indicators. These would be employed to apply benchmarking in the institution. The institutions in the study managed to articulate how indicators could be used to measure and compare the performance or quality of service of the institution or the participating institutions. The three institutions were able to articulate this benchmarking approach, which meant they could used it to measure and compare the performance of the institutions, through the setting shared indicators (See 2.21, for indicators).

The Distance University claimed that similar institutions needed to practise benchmarking together, but the studies by Vught, et al (2008) Garlick and Pryor (2004) did not support this position. Their position seemed to be that institutions could benchmark with any other institutions in the areas of mutual agreement. If an institution felt it was not performing well in a given area, like student support, it was free to benchmark with an institution identified as performing well in that area. This was why an institution could benchmark with a company in another area, not education, as long as that company performed well in a related area which enjoyed superior performance. This area could be investigated in the future to determine the authenticity of the claim by Distance University.

A participant at the Distance University believed benchmarking could be negative in that instead of enhancing productivity or quality it could be a source of negative output. The participant was promoted to the position of Regional Director and taught in that position for three years before he encountered negative benchmarking. He learnt that fellow Regional Directors did not teach and he stopped teaching but continued to attend tutorials to supervise part time tutors. He later discovered that no Regional Director attended tutorials and he stopped attending the tutorials. He noticed that the morale of tutors went down when he stopped attending tutorials. This was similar to a participant at the Open University who defined benchmarking as “emulate others to improve”, which was copying or imitating. However, Vught, et al, (2008) outline a number of
activities that could be confused with benchmarking and copying was one of them. The Regional Director and the participant, who defined benchmarking as emulating others, were guilty of copying their peers in the name of benchmarking. They state that benchmarking was based on a learning process leading to the improvement of performance or quality of service; benchmarking was a deliberate exercise to enable an institution to catch up with a better performing institution, or to surpass its performance. Institutions needed to educate their staff on what benchmarking was and its benefits in the organisation (See § 2.4, for misconceptions).

The problem at the Distance University was that only the senior management team has visited other institutions to learn from them. This created a gap of knowledge and ideas in the institution, polarised relations and affected morale. The responsibility of institutional leadership was to be seen to be professional in their execution of duty.
CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND WAY FORWARD

5.1 Introduction

The study started by seeking to establish the extent to which the three institutions understood the meaning of the benchmarking concept. The desire to establish the state of benchmarking in the three institutions was motivated by the governments of three continents of Europe, North America and Australasia which encouraged their institutions of higher learning to adopt benchmarking, as a quality enhancement, self-improvement and a self-regulation mechanism, after these institutions witnessed rapid growth in enrolments. The expansion, massification and diversity in enrolments and institutions of higher education led to stakeholder anxiety on issues of quality in education. The governments believed the issues about quality were dealt with through the adoption of benchmarking. Apart from these countries encouraging their institutions to adopt benchmarking, international organisations like UNESCO and the World Bank also implored their member states to encourage institutions of higher learning in their areas of influence to adopt benchmarking. The encouragements motivated the researcher to establish the extent to which open and distance institutions in the Southern Africa Development Community region of Africa practised benchmarking. The researcher desired to determine if the institutions shared a common understanding of benchmarking and if they had a way of measuring benchmarking as a determinant of quality enhancement and performance improvement in these ODL institutions. The study needed to answer the primary research question:

i. To what extent did the three ODL institutions of higher learning consciously practise benchmarking?

The researcher concurred with McNair and Watts (2006) who argued that the absence of a complete understanding of benchmarking made it difficult for some institutions of higher
learning to effectively utilise the self-improvement mechanism. The choice of open and distance learning institutions of higher learning was a deliberate one, which was taken after the researcher discovered that the articles and reports on benchmarking in the public domain covered mainly conventional institutions of higher learning. The researcher did not encounter a research or study solely dedicated to open and distance learning institution, which have peculiar characteristics that require special attention. For instance, the students learn from wherever they maybe, while doing whatever they may be doing and at their individual time and speed. The ODL institutions did not have dedicated lecture rooms and halls of residence, like conventional institutions, which meant that the needs of the institutions were different. The primary research question sought to establish the extent to which the three institutions of higher learning practised benchmarking. To be able to answer this, and the other research questions, the researcher carried out a case study in which he purposively selected information rich participants from each of the three institutions, or cases, and conducted in-depth interviews with the participants until a point of data saturation was reached. The researcher complemented the in-depth interviews by undertaking focus group discussions, document analysis and observations.

In this chapter, the researcher summarised the main components of the review of related literature. Of particular attention were the areas that covered the background to benchmarking, and traced the change from an industry-based improvement mechanism to an education quality enhancing strategy or tool; the benchmarking methodologies; the benefits of benchmarking to educational institutions, especially the open and learning institutions of higher learning; and, other researches on benchmarking and how they impacted on the current study. A summary of the empirical study was also given. The summary started from the background to the study and covered the research questions, the methodology and the data generation, analysis and interpretation aspects of the study. Attention then shifted to the conclusions of the study and ended with a way forward of the study. In a qualitative study it was felt, with advice from Chisaka (2013) that a way forward was more appropriate than the issuing of recommendations since there was no identifiable authority to which the recommendations were directed for actioning.
5.2 Summary

The study was divided into two parts; the first part was a review of related literature and the second part was an empirical aspect, which covered the actual investigation. The first part briefly summarised the motivation for the study, and the historical development of benchmarking as a quality and performance improvement mechanism, which was historically located in industry. The education sector later adopted the benchmarking concept and employed it to improve the quality and performance of institutions of higher learning and their processes, products and services.

5.2.1 Summary of the review of related literature

This section summarised the review of related literature, which included the definition of benchmarking, its historical background and the approaches to benchmarking. The summary included other researches carried out by other researchers and how these researches contributed to and influenced this study.

The researcher was driven by a passion to establish the state of benchmarking in open and distance learning institutions in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region. This was after learning, through Lutfullayev (2001), that the governments of countries in the continents of North America, Europe and Australasia encouraged their institutions of higher learning to adopt benchmarking, as a self-improvement and self-regulating mechanism. The message was that benchmarking enhanced the quality of education and the performance of institutions through a process of continuous learning, measurement, comparison and a comparison of strengths and weakness of an institution, from which the improvement strategies were based. The Distance Education Association of Southern Africa (DEASA), the African Union of Universities Association (AUUA) and the Virtual University of the Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC), a partnership of thirty-two institutions, and UNESCO (1998) also encouraged their members and member countries to adopt benchmarking (See § 2.1, for motivation). For the governments of these countries, in three continents, and the international
organisations, to encourage their institutions of higher learning to adopt benchmarking could only mean they were convinced beyond doubt that benchmarking immensely benefited the institutions that adopted it. As a practitioner in a higher education institution in the SADC region, the researcher sought to establish the state of benchmarking in open and distance learning institutions in the region, and whether the African institutions of higher learning had taken up the encouragement to adopt benchmarking, with a view to popularising the practice.

In the early 1990s benchmarking, as a quality and performance improvement mechanism, was adopted by the education sector of the world, in the continents of Europe, Europe, North America and Australasia, and a number of national associations were formed to assist in formalising and institutionalising benchmarking in institutions of higher learning (www.globalbenchmarking.org). The rationale for adopting benchmarking at international level was the realisation that it was a process of self-evaluation and self-improvement carried out by institutions through the comparing of practices and performance with other institutions in a systematic and collaborative manner (See § 2.7, for objects of benchmarking). In the words of Garlick and Pryor (2004) the comparison enabled an institution to identify its own strengths and weaknesses, and learn how it could adapt and improve through deliberate change taking place.

The study adopted the definition suggested by Jackson and Lund (2000b) that benchmarking was a learning process which was constructed in a way that made it possible for institutions to measure their services, activities and products, in order to make it possible to compare their respective strengths and weaknesses and use the result as a basis for self-improvement and self-regulation initiatives. The definition contained important concepts in benchmarking, which assisted in explaining the benchmarking concept, and these were: comparison, learning process, self-improvement, self-regulation, strengths and weaknesses. These concepts were articulated by many of the researchers and writers who contributed to the study. The definition implied that to be successful the object of benchmarking for improvement was identified, a benchmarking partner was identified, and an agreement with the partner was concluded, which bore the relevant detail. The circumstances surrounding the underperformance was analysed and documented, shared with partners and alternative approaches to performance were identified. The chosen
approach was supplied with adequate resources. Throughout these stages the institution engaged in continuous learning. The researcher sought to establish if the three institutions defined benchmarking in a similar way to the definition supplied by Jackson and Lund (2000b).

The researcher concurred with the reasons cited by UNESCO (1998), why benchmarking practices rose sharply in many countries and continents in the 1990s. A number of governments tried to change the elitist type of institutions within their areas of jurisdiction in order to create a competitive environment made up of large, competitive multi-purpose educational institutions. Governments sought to establish and maintain a reputation for providing quality education, research output or a world class standard and excellent academic standards, which bequeathed to the institutions a competitive advantage in the higher education sector. The last reason was that the institutions of higher education were experiencing massive expansion, which was coupled with diversity in the provision of education (See § 2.2, for reasons). These developments raised concerns about issues of quality in education. Benchmarking was introduced in an effort to raise the quality of education and to enhance the capabilities of institutional performance, at all levels of education, and as a way of encouraging institutions to review and evaluate themselves. The institutions of higher education were encouraged to share information, knowledge and experiences to expedite the enhancement of quality education. When it came to the definition of quality Gandhe (2009) propositioned that it concerned academic freedom, it was about improving higher education standards and the provision of services that met the expectations of recipients of the service. Other definitions of quality were that it was the inclusion of all the characteristics of a product or service which led to a service or a product satisfying the stated or implied needs of the consumer (ISO 9000-www.iso.org); excellence; equivalent to ‘best-in-class’ in business; as constancy; as fitness for purpose; as value for money; and as the capacity to transform learners (Jackson, 2001). In this study quality was viewed as infusing into a product or service features that satisfied the expectations of the consumer, or exceeded those expectations.

The above discussion appealed to the researcher so much that he decided to explore the status of benchmarking in the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) context. The researcher believed the institutions of higher learning practised some benchmarking but desired to establish
to what extent they did so and whether the practice was formalised and institutionalised in the institutions of higher education.

Benchmarking has advantages over other improvement methodologies, like the Quality Assurance strategies. These advantages included the fact that benchmarking brought new, innovative and creative ways of improving quality and performance. It was a team building tool, and it enabled institutions to enhance their capacity to increase their awareness of costs and performance of products and services in relation to those of competing institutions. Benchmarking manifested itself in breaking institutional divisions and inter-institutional barriers to develop a collaborative relationship among many institutions and associations. Lastly, benchmarking encouraged the involvement of employees in all institutional activities and the recognition of the contribution of individuals in the institution (See 2.12.1, for advantages).

However, benchmarking was judged to possess some disadvantages as well. Benchmarking could identify the standards attained by institutions but it failed to consider under what circumstances the standards were achieved. In a situation where an institution’s goals and visions were flawed or severely restricted because of some wrong calculation or some other factor, an institution that benchmarked the flawed institution’s performance ran the risk of applying inappropriate standards. The other disadvantage was the danger of complacency and arrogance; an institution tended to relax when it achieved a certain level of excellence and the assumption of a leadership position in the sector brought with it some complacency, and a failure to realise that considerable scope remained unexplored for further improvement. The other danger was that many institutions employed benchmarking as a stand-alone activity, without integrating it with a strategic plan that accommodated change. Any desired change in an institution should be planned for in order to sustain it and for it to become a permanent feature of the institution (See § 2.12.2, for disadvantages).

The theoretical framework for the study was borrowed from the benchmarking theoretical model suggested by McKinnon, et al (2000), whose extensive research on benchmarking resulted in the writing of a Benchmarking Manual for Australian Universities. In the manual they recommended
to divide institutional operations into nine core business areas, and further sub-divided each core business area into a number of indicators. These indicators formed the basis of an assessment and measurement of the institution’s quality of education and performance, and the assessment and measurement was used to compare the quality of the institution’s educational provision to that of other institutions. The benchmarking method was called the criterion referencing method (See § 2.14.1, for details). The second research that informed the scope and direction of the current study was the Vught, et al (2008) study of European institutions of higher education. The study identified the concepts and practices of benchmarking in higher learning institutions and compared the characteristics of benchmarking practices in order to identify similarities and differences. This was a collaborative benchmarking study meant to show the strength of cooperation, as opposed to the divisive characteristic of competitive benchmarking. The finding was that collaborative benchmarking produced the most desirable results in university benchmarking. The researcher’s view was that the Vught, et al (2008) study enabled the current study to answer the research question about the fecundity of pursuing collaborative benchmarking in institutions of higher education (See § 2.14.3 and § 2.18, for explanation).

The Garlick and Pryor (2004) investigation was used as a complement to the theoretical framework for this study because of its clear methodological approach. The approach self-explained the concept of benchmarking through its employment of a six stage model, which was based on the concept of continuous learning for continuous self-improvement. The study was complimented by another study called TRADE Methodologies (www.globalbenchmarking.org), whose thrust was the exchange, or “trade”, of information and best practices leading to the improvement of the performance of processes, products and services. Benchmarking projects should be targeted at those areas that deliver the best value to an organisation. These studies enriched the current one with new insights, knowledge and new thinking (See § 2.16.2, for explanation).

The researcher agreed with findings arrived at by Achim, et al (2009) who said benchmarking consciously took place in a situation where institutions of higher learning were possessed by a deep desire to learn and to share good practices. The intense need to learn and share was mixed
with a reliance on collegiality and the need for institutions to recognise the role played by individual institutions of higher learning in the world of education. The craving for benchmarking manifested itself in the formation of professional and other academic associations in order to share interests of a common nature and to visit each other’s institutions. The visits were meant to examine what other institutions were doing and learn from those institutions. The associations worked collaboratively to support the provision of academic service and the setting of common academic and other standards. The associations assisted their members to maintain standards, through the assessment of quality and accreditation systems offered by the institutions in order to maintain goodwill. The goal of the institutions of higher learning and the associations was to improve the quality of education and the performance of institutions through collaboration and the comparison of their performance with fellow institutions.

Researchers seemed to differ on whether a benchmarking exercise should be collaborative or competitive; some believed that the primary concern of institutions of higher learning should not be the identification of a benchmarking approach. They believed that the characteristics of the “best practice” should decide the approach to employ. Prasad and Stella (2008) pointed out that these characteristics determined the success and sustainability of a benchmarking exercise. The characteristics included the relative advantages over the preceding practice, the suitability of the approach to the institutional context and culture, and the divisibility of the exercise in small parts of the whole. They also included the simplicity of the approach in terms of adaptability and the ease with which it could be communicated, which was important if the practice was to be successfully implemented. The institutions investigated in the study did not differ on the benchmarking approach they employed.

The benchmarking practice proposed by McKinnon, et al (2000) used the criterion reference approach which was based on the employment of indicators as a method of measuring and comparing the quality of an institution’s education (See § 2.14.1, for explanation). The benchmarking institutions agreed to a common set of indicators, or benchmarks, and the measuring involved respondents scoring the performance of each of the criteria in an institution. The summed up scores were used to compare the performance of each institution against the
performance of other institutions. This process produced objective results, which could be replicated if a similar research was undertaken. The criterion referencing benchmarking approach was used because of its ability to divide the institution into a number of core business areas, which were then sub-divided into a number of objectives for each core business.

The researcher acknowledged that the approach suggested by Garlick and Pryor (2004) differed from that of McKinnon, *et al* (2000) in that the former attained objectivity in benchmarking through an adherence to a methodical process, while the latter used scores. The former divided the benchmarking process into phases and each phase was sub-divided into a number of steps. A benchmarking institution followed the set out phases and steps in order for the practice to be objective, and any other institution could replicate the same process and practice and achieve the same result. Generally, an institution exercised a measure of flexibility, connectivity and commitment in applying the Garlick and Pryor (2004) benchmarking practice, based on shared knowledge and information in the benchmarking process. However, the two writers acknowledged the researcher’s conviction that the McKinnon, *et al* (2000) benchmarking model of criterion referencing produced a more authentic measure of an objective benchmarking process because it enabled an institution to improve its performance in a measurable and comparable manner. This acknowledgement was based on the observation that the objectivity of the criterion referencing method was superior in that it produced measurable and comparable results, whereas the phase-based objectivity depended on the adherence to the individual steps in the model; the former model was quantitative and the latter was qualitative in nature.

Hayford (2003) agreed with the researcher who posited that indicators provided information about the degree to which the objectives of quality education were met in the higher education sector. Indicators were important in benchmarking as they enabled the institutions to measure and compare the quality of education and the performance of the institution with that of other institutions. The institutions of higher learning and the higher education systems worldwide evolved through reform and change over many years in pursuit of the agenda of improving quality and performance. A deciding feature in this pursuit of enhanced quality was the production of evidence of effectiveness and efficiency in the form of quality performance
indicators. The position taken by Burke and Minassians (2001) was found to be sensible, that many institutions of higher learning have progressively employed formalised and systematic quality performance indicators to achieve efficiency and effectiveness in the provision of higher education. In response to the question about how benchmarking could be ascertained objectively, the institutions were not expected to name individual indicators but to articulate the employment of shared or common quality performance indicators in objective benchmarking and how these were used to objectively benchmarking quality (See § 2.21, for explanation on indicators).

The amount of reviewed related literature in the benchmarking practice was truncated because of it was abundant in many continents, but that which concerned the African experience was scarce. The definitions of benchmarking were discussed and one was adopted for this study. The other areas covered in the summary were a discourse on collaborative benchmarking, the extent to which benchmarking was consciously practised in the three institutions, the consideration of quality indicators as a necessary tool to measure and compare the quality of institutional education and the use of the indicators to ascertain an objective benchmarking practice.

5.2.2 Summary of empirical study

The present section summarised the empirical evidence from the data generated from the study, which was interpreted for meaning with which to answer the research questions. The responses were compared to the evidence contained in the review of related literature to determine the presence of congruence, or the difference and the existence of a gap in the benchmarking practice.

The researcher sought to establish the extent of benchmarking in three institutions of higher learning. The desire to establish the extent of benchmarking was born by the realisation that benchmarking was adopted by countries in North America, Europe and Australasia, as a self-improvement and self-assessment mechanism, which harnessed the knowledge of employees in an institution and learnt from each institution’s experiences. The widening of access through diversity of educational provision and the proliferation of institutions of higher learning, which
were a direct result of the increased demand for education, heightened the demand for quality of educational provision. Benchmarking proved to be a most effective and efficient quality enhancement mechanism and this was why it was adopted by institutions throughout the greater part of the world. There seemed to be a dearth in literature of benchmarking in Africa and the researcher wanted to establish the nature of the literature gap and contribute to literature that could close the identified literature gap.

The researcher believed reality was constructed by people through social interaction, and the nature of the knowledge that resulted from the generation of reality was reflective of people’s perceptions and experiences, it was learnt knowledge. This meant the researcher believed in constructivist epistemology and constructivist ontology. The theoretical perspective informing the study was the interpretive paradigm, which related to the way perspectives and experiences were interpreted into meaning when social entities dialogued. Huglin (2003) said qualitative researchers developed knowledge by collecting primarily verbal empirical material through the intensive study of cases and then subjecting the empirical material to analytical induction. The study sought to understand the meaning of benchmarking in the organisation. The researcher adopted the case study method for empirical material generation and interpretation because it enabled him to interact at a more personal and deeper level with participants to access their inner perceptions and experiences in order to learn what they meant when they used the term “benchmarking”, how they operationalised the benchmarking concept and how they explicated the practice of benchmarking in operational discourse. The researcher agreed with the perception of Yin (2003a) that a case study was an empirical inquiry that investigated a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, more so in situations where the boundaries of the phenomenon under investigations and the context were not clearly defined (See 3.2, for full exposition).

The researcher chose to study three open and distance learning institutions of higher education located in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region. He purposively selected information rich participants from within the ranks of lecturers, professors and senior management or the leadership of the institutions. The researcher, as the instrument of data
generation, dialogued with participants to generate empirical material through in-depth interviews until a point of saturation was reached at each institution and this explained why the number of participants differed from one institution to another (See § 3.7, for empirical material generation tools). Apart from the interviews the lecturers were interacted with in focus group discussions as a way of generating “deep” empirical material through question and answer in an open and free environment, where discussants could argue and seek conviction from others on issues concerning the status of benchmarking in the institution. The other empirical material generating methods employed were document analysis, in which the researcher sought to establish if there were documents in the institution that enhanced the systematic and planned performance of operations, which would ensure the quality of empirical material generated was good. The last method was the observation method, which was undertaken to compliment the other methods by observing the behaviour of participants in the institution and how they interacted with others. The researcher informally discussed with members of the institution how they viewed the state of benchmarking in the institution. These observations supplemented the other methods and the data played a complementary role to the in-depth interviews and focus group discussions.

The researcher was resident at one institution of higher learning from which he visited the other two institutions, in turns, and carried out in-depth interviews with each of the purposively selected participants. The participants at each institution, in all the three ranks, were more than the numbers needed in the in-depth interviews and focus group discussions and the researcher wrote the names of those in each group, put the pieces of paper with the names in a box and allocated to them the order of the interviews through a lottery system. The lecturers were all accommodated in a focus group at each institution without the use of the lottery. After the in-depth interviews, which lasted for over an hour, the researcher joined the focus groups to discuss the state of benchmarking at the institution, and the discussions lasted for more than one and a half hours each. He spent the time between the in-depth interviews and the focus group discussions observing and interacting with the members of the institution. The greater part of observations took place at the institution where the researcher was employed. The researcher was in contact with every one of the participants from May 2013 to December 2013. The participants
were, on three separate occasions, asked to update their transcripts, which had been availed to
them soon after the tap-recorded interviews were transcribed, in order for them to verify the
authenticity of captured empirical material and, where necessary, correct areas they felt their
responses had not been captured accurately or where they desired to alter the initial responses
(See § 3.8, for trustworthiness).

The generated data were taken through the process of coding and breaking it down into
manageable units, synthesising the units, or themes, searching for patterns in order to establish
what was important and what was to be learnt, and how it could be structured into a written
report. The researcher followed the advice by Chisaka (2013), who said data analysis took an
inductive or formative angle. It was through this process of analysis that the researcher created
meaning from the data, which became meaningful information.

5.2.3 Congruence and contradiction of perceptions

The following section compared the empirical findings to the evidence contained in the review of
related literature, as outlined in the sections above. It established areas of commonality or
congruence and areas of contradiction. The investigation sought to establish the extent to which
the three institutions of higher learning practised benchmarking, and to answer the other research
questions (See § 1.4, for research questions). The areas of congruence established agreement
between the theoretical perspective and the empirical findings, whereas the areas of contradiction
reflected the dissonance that existed between the theoretical perspective and the empirical
findings.

The overarching congruence in perception among the three institutions of higher learning was
that they were all convinced that benchmarking was a quality enhancement and performance
improvement mechanism, whose efficacy was beyond question. The fact that there was almost a
total dearth of authenticating research in the SADC region did not cause an institution or two to
cast aspersions on the veracity of benchmarking. There were many researches and reports about
the effectiveness and efficiency of benchmarking in North America, Europe and Australia and
these formed the basis for the belief many institutions possessed that benchmarking was their source of quality improvement and institutional performance enhancement.

The congruence in perception among the three institutions of higher learning, regarding the objective to explain the understanding the institutions had of benchmarking, was that they shared a definition of benchmarking. They said benchmarking enabled an institution to learn from other institutions as a way of improving its performance and as a comparative analysis among institutions to identify the institution with the best practices which could be adopted and implemented by an underperforming institution. The three institutions understood the benchmarking practise and it could be concluded that the other open and distance institutions exhibited an equal understanding of benchmarking. The definition identified the common concepts of learning, comparison, measurement, improvement, sharing, and exchange of information, and best practices (See § 4.3.1, for core themes). The definition compared favourably with the theoretical definition adopted for the study from Jackson and Lund (2000b), who said benchmarking was a learning process whose structure enabled institutions of higher learning to compare the quality of their services, activities and products, and be able to compare their respective strengths and weaknesses in order to use the result as a basis for self-improvement and or self-regulation.

The congruence in perception, regarding the objective to establish whether institutions consciously practised benchmarking, was that the three institutions consciously practised benchmarking although there was no mention of benchmarking as “a learning process”, which led to “continuous improvement”. This was contrary to the expectation of the researcher; that these aspects of the results did not come out. The word “learning” was mentioned by the ODL institution, but not as a process. The absence of a learning process could be explained by the type of benchmarking practised by the three institutions which did not need continuous learning and continuous improvement. Traditional benchmarking comprised of staff visits, staff exchange programmes and meetings. The lack of the inclusion of the “learning process” resulted in the omission of a comparison of an institution’s “strengths and weaknesses” in the benchmarking practised. The other open and distance learning institutions could be equally handicapped in
applying the benchmarking practice with the same constraints, mentioned above, as those that constrained the three institutions in the study.

The next congruence in perception was that, although the three institutions of higher learning consciously practised benchmarking, the practice was different from the approach by McKinnon, et al (2000). The approach of the three institutions differed from the approach of the other researchers, like Garlick and Pryor (2004). The difference in approach lent credence to the study by Van Vught, et al, (2008), where their decisive finding was that there was no single overarching model or even a small number of similar benchmarking models. The higher education institutions adopted a variety of benchmarking approaches, depending on the desired structure of the parties, their aims, their objectives, their methods, and the kind of data they used. The conscious practice of benchmarking by the three institutions was undertaken through visits to other institutions to learn new ideas; proceeding on staff exchange programmes, after spending two years at the home institution; the exchange of learning material, like modules, in order to learn how they were structure, their content and other aspects; to attend research conferences at national and international levels; to attend material development workshops and other staff development workshops, like the holding of Boot Camps; and, to consult institutions on degree and other programmes (See § 4.3.3, for findings). One area that was not given due consideration was the exchange of professors and lecturers as external markers and external assessors at host institutions. These people were professionals of repute and with a lot of experience in their areas but the releasing, or home institutions, did not seem to realise the expertise and knowledge that resided in these professionals. The home institutions did not tap into the knowledge and accumulated experience for the institution’s self-improvement and the enhancement of the quality of education.

The contradiction in perception that was experienced was in the benchmarking approach the three institutions of higher learning practised, as alluded to in the preceding paragraph. Their application of benchmarking was based on inter-institutional staff visits; staff exchange programmes and the formation of collaborative professional associations, meant to facilitate the sharing of insights and information among participating institutions. This was different from the
McKinnon, *et al* (2000) approach in which the criterion referencing method was used to enable the measurement and comparison of the quality of service, products and processes of an institution. Basically, the three institutions practised qualitative benchmarking but the McKinnon, *et al* (2000) approach focused on a quantitative benchmarking application. The theoretical approach of the study was based on the McKinnon, *et al* (2000) study. The Garlick and Pryor (2004) study, based on phases and steps approach could be closer to the approach of the three institutions because of the same qualitative paradigm they both follow. The researcher named the approach the three institutions adopted the Traditional Approach because in the review of related literature Achim, *et al* (2009) intimated that the approach had existed for a long time.

The Traditional benchmarking approach adopted by the three institutions was not formalised, nor was it institutionalised in the three institutions. None of the three institutions seemed to accept the suggestion that benchmarking had to be formally structured in their institution if it were to accrue to the institution the benefit of enhanced quality and an improvement in the performance of the same institution. This made its implementation haphazard, and it depended on the interpretation of the implementer and the prevailing situation (See § 2.8, for formalisation). The observation of the researcher was that the institutions could not enforce a practice that was not formalised and which had no policies and procedures to follow. There were no processes to follow; people were not encumbered in their behaviour by a set of expectations and policy issues. However, this observation echoed the findings of other researchers, like Yasin (2002), who concurred that benchmarking in higher education lacked coherent and broadly accepted definitions for key aspects and that a standard set of concepts did not exist. Information on benchmarking initiatives was scarce and incomplete and a general benchmarking process did not exist. Benchmarking in higher education was in its infancy and was not well known, but with the increasing expectation and societal demand for quality education, accountability and cost-effectiveness there were clear signs of growth in benchmarking (See § 2.14.3, for full explanation).
An important contradiction was that, while the institutions claimed that they consciously practised benchmarking, the researcher’s observations and interactions with the participants and other people in the institutions clearly gave the impression and conclusion that the participants practised benchmarking for personal gain. There was no institutional structure or institutional policy on benchmarking, and when the lecturers undertook inter-institutional visits they used the experience and new insights they gained in improving their performance in their personal capacity, especially when they were invited for an external assessment or external examination assignment. The visits, staff exchange programmes and workshops benefited the individuals who attended them, not the institution which sent the individuals. There was no process through which the new experiences, insights and knowledge gained by an individual could be channelled into the home institution to materially benefit the institution. The institutions were encouraged by Amaral and Sousa (2009) to ensure they fully involved all their stakeholders who possessed the knowledge, experience and skills to add to the improvement of the performance of the institution, which was not yet happening in the three institutions. The theoretical evidence converged on the empirical finding that the three institutions practised benchmarking through visits to other institutions to attend meetings, workshops and national and international conferences. The empirical finding resonated the statement by Achim, et al., (2009) who said in benchmarking members of staff visited other institutions on staff exchange programmes, sabbaticals and contact leave. Institutions formed professional associations, both academic and non-academic, where they met and shared common interests. The many visits that were undertaken to other institutions of higher education were for the purpose of learning how they operated and performed. The argument some lecturers posed was that the home institution gained through improved expertise, new insights, skill and knowledge acquired from host institutions during the visits.

The congruence in perception among the three institutions, with regard to the objective to explain the benefits of collaborative benchmarking, was that they all indicated their preference for collaborative benchmarking and advanced a number of reasons for that preference. The review of related literature and the empirical study agreed on the broad reasons why these
institutions of higher learning should adopt collaborative, as opposed to competitive, benchmarking.

The following were some of the reasons advanced for preferring collaborative to competitive benchmarking: the Distance Education of Southern Africa (DEASA), the African Union of Universities Association (AUUA) and the Virtual University of the Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC), a partnership of thirty-two institutions, all encouraged their members to adopt collaborative benchmarking as a quality and performance enhancement mechanism. The institutions believed in the spirit of sharing information and complementarity, not competition, in the provision of quality education. Collaboration led to the provision of free and accurate information between and among institutions, which was not tainted by ulterior motives; the freedom to interact with many institutions on an equal footing; and, the ability of institutions to co-operate in an effort to achieve a common cause.

The researcher accepted the reason that Lankford (2007) posited that collaborative benchmarking was widely employed because it was easy to practise and it produced credible results within a short time. The reason was expanded by Achim, et al (2009) who stated that the formation of professional and other associations enabled institutions to access valuable information on issues of a common nature and interest. Collaborative benchmarking was a two way process accessed through dialogue which benefited the dialoguing institutions. Group collaboration involved the gathering and sharing of information between two or more collaborators (Jackson, 2001). The sharing involved the exchange of the same set of data, which should not be shared with third parties, but confined to cooperating partners (Vught, et al, 2008). A summation of the reasons came from Nazarko (2007) who advocated the creation of a co-operative environment among institutions by bringing together a number of institutions, including trade associations, or consultants, to ensure a wide catchment area of ideas and new insights and fair play. Collaborative benchmarking was built on the importance of voluntary co-operation for the benefit of all the cooperating partners (See § 2.18, for approaches).
The review of related literature and the empirical evidence converged on the objective to provide reasons for preferring collaborative benchmarking to competitive benchmarking, and it was, therefore, concluded that the three institutions preferred collaborative benchmarking to competitive benchmarking. From the above conclusion it was rational to conclude that other institutions of higher learning also preferred collaborative benchmarking. The improvement in the quality of education provided by and the performance of institutions of higher learning seemed to be assured when collaborative benchmarking was adopted, not when competitive benchmarking was practised. The perception in both theoretical and empirical evidence seemed to indicate that competitive benchmarking involved a clandestine subversive acquisition of data. The conclusion was strengthened by an earlier assertion by Achim, et al (2009) that collaboration among institutions of higher education enhanced the quality of education, which meant that collaboration should be extensively popularised in the institutions of higher education.

The next congruence in perception, with regard to the objective to explain how indicators were used in a benchmarked institution, was that the three institutions explained the role that indicators played in benchmarking. The inability to name specific indicators resided in the type of benchmarking the institutions practised, which did not require the employment of indicators, the Traditional Benchmarking approach (See § 4.3.6, for indicators).

The researcher’s definition of an indicator was shared by Hayford (2003) who said a performance indicator was any measure, sign, situation or condition that conveyed information and statistics, which made it possible to compare the performance of two or more institutions, within a given timeframe and employing shared standards. The information provided by indicators could be about the level of achievement of objectives in the teaching and learning quality education and how the level of performance was attained in the sector. In a situation where common indicators were set they enabled institutions of higher learning to measure and compare the quality of education and the performance of the institutions, and this made them very important to benchmarking. The researcher concurred with Doyle (2006) that institutions of higher learning throughout the world went through extensive changes in the past half century in
order to focus it towards the pursuit of the provision of quality education. A drive to make available systematic evidence of the efficiency and effectiveness of the higher education sector in its pursuit of quality education stood as a significant feature of the challenge to attain quality; and common indicators were used to ensure quality and performance could be measured and compared.

McKinnon, et al (2000) proposed the introduction of shared indicators in the benchmarking practice, which enabled them to measure the performance of many institutions, or parts of a single institution. They divided the core business of an institution into nine areas and sub-divided each area into indicators or measures, or benchmarks. These shared indicators showed the level of output or performance achieved, or not achieved, in a given period, when they were scored. For instance, in an area like research, the institution could come up with six common indicators, and if each one of the indicators was achieved it meant the quality or level of research was high. Some indicators measured the quality while others measure quantity, depending on what the institution wanted to know. The common indicators in McKinnon, et al (2000) benchmarking model were quantitative and were called criterion referencing indicators. Common indicators were those that were set to be used by more than one institution at a time.

In the empirical study, the institutions were able to explain what indicators were and how they could be employed in benchmarking, without being able to name specific indicators. The Distance University defined indicators as standards used in benchmarking to indicate the quality of a service or product. Indicators were referred to as tools of measurement to help in evaluating performance. The other institutions articulated similar definitions; indicators were defined as standards or measures. They proceeded to state that common or shared indicators were set to measure the performance of people or an institution. The institutions were agreed that they could set shared indicators according to some criterion, and the set of shared indicators could apply to a number of institutions (See § 4.3.5, for benchmarks). The agreement in the definition and use of indicators was evidence of the understanding of indicators the institutions possessed, and it included the agreement that a set of shared indicators enabled the measurement of quality or
performance of an institution. The institutions showed that they knew what to do in the event they desired to measure the quality of the education they provided or their performance.

The last congruence in perception, in reference to the need to achieve objectivity in benchmarking initiatives, was on the use of indicators to be able to measure and compare performance and quality as established by Garlick and Pryor (2004) who argued that institutions gained experience based on flexibility, commitment, connectivity and reflection in the execution of their mandate. The three institutions of higher learning explained how they could set shared or common indicators which enabled them to measure quality. Because the three institutions adopted a different benchmarking approach to one approaches proposed by McKinnon, et al (2000) and Garlick and Pryor (2004) and Vught, et al (2008) they confined their response to the theoretical achievement of objectivity through the use of shared indicators; they did not name the individual indicators. The ability to measure and compare was made possible through the setting of quality performance indicators as the only authentic measure of an objective benchmarking process. The institutions indicated that indicators enabled them to measure and compare quality and institutional performance. In addition to the above justification of indicators Meek and van der Lee (2005) said the current use of quality indicators in many countries and by many institutions of higher learning was being driven by the desire, on the part of government, to introduce more market-related competition into higher education in order to make institutions more flexible, cost-efficient and responsive to the expectations of society.

The model proposed for Australian institutions of higher education by McKinnon, et al (2000) clearly explicated the process of carrying out an objective practice of benchmarking, although it was not adopted by the three institutions. They proposed to divide the core business of an institution into about nine areas, and sub-divide each of the nine areas into a number of indicators per core area. The shared indicators were phrased in such a way that a respondent was able to scored the performance of an institution against each of the indicators, which were given in a questionnaire form, and the individual scores were then added up to give an institutional total. The totals of all the participating institutions were ranking in order of performance. The institutions were able to identify the best performing institution and identify how it achieved the
outstanding performance, which the other institutions could transfer for their use in order to close the performance gap between themselves and the best performing institution. In the empirical study the three institutions claimed they could practise benchmarking through the setting of shared standards or indicators, which could be used to measure the quality of education or the performance of an institution, although they were not benchmarking that way at the time of the study. The common indicators could be shared objectives, which could be used to measure the performance of each institution and compare that performance with the performance of other institutions. Where shared objectives were not employed, identical performance processes could be used or subject students at a number of institutions to write the same examination, whose results could be compared among the institutions. The commonality was the setting of shared or identical objectives, standards or examinations which could be used as a tool to measure quality or performance in order to compare the performance and rank institutions according to the comparative result.

It could concluded that the institutions could objectively practise benchmarking by setting shared or common or agreed standards, which were scored for measurement and comparative purposes. The conclusion was valid, not because the institutions of higher learning practise benchmarking based on the setting up of shared quality indicators, but because the three institutions were able to articulate the objective benchmarking process. The institutions followed a different benchmarking approach which did not require objective measurement or comparison of quality or performance, the Traditional Benchmarking approach.

5.3 Conclusions

The researcher sought to establish if the African institutions of learning had taken up the encouragement that some governments made which was to adopt benchmarking. The researcher sought to establish the state of benchmarking in the open and distance learning institutions of higher education. He went into the field to generate data, returned to analyse the data and drew conclusions to the study, based on the empirical data and the review of related literature.
It was concluded that the three institutions of higher learning practised benchmarking. This was arrived at from the finding that institutional personnel visited other institutions, shared ideas and information and attended international conferences, workshops on topical academic issues and formed collaborative relationships, which other institutions of higher learning could practise. The institutions practised benchmarking in a conscious manner, but using a completely different benchmarking approach (See § 4.3.3, for finding) from the approaches proposed by Vught, et al (2008) and Garlick and Pryor (2004). The researcher expected the institutions to use a benchmarking approach based on indicators, like the McKinnon, et al (2000) benchmarking model, adopted for this study. However, the researcher encountered what he termed the Traditional Benchmarking Model, practised through visits to institutions, attended national and international workshops, attended gatherings of institutions to share information of common academic interests and to share learning material and programmes in order to learn from each other and improve the quality of education offered and the performance of the institutions. This method resonated with the Achim, et al (2009) type of benchmarking, which used visits and the sharing of ideas, information and collaborative relationships. This was a confirmatory finding. The conclusion could be extended to include other institutions of higher learning, which sent its people to other institutions to grow academically by acquiring experience, new insights and knowledge.

Lutfullayev (2001) stated that benchmarking was introduced in education in North America in the 1990s. The Traditional Benchmarking approach may have been in existence and resident in institutions of higher learning much longer than the 1990s, a conclusion drawn from the approach of benchmarking followed by the institutions, which was known to have been in operation for some time. The conclusion that the institutions practised benchmarking before the 1990s could be extended to other institutions of higher. It was clear that some of the institutions, like the Open University, did not use the term “benchmarking”, but they were benchmarking for some time. A further conclusion could be made that the failure to use the term “benchmarking” was because the institutions used a different benchmarking approach to the one the researcher based this study on. The adoption of a different approach could be the reason why the institutions confined themselves to one approach of benchmarking, the Traditional Approach.
The conclusion that the three institutions consciously practised benchmarking even though the Open University did not use the term “benchmarking” confirmed the relevance of literature on benchmarking in the African context and to the present research problem. The benchmarking approach the three institutions adopted could have been in existence for a long time but there was no literature available to explain or support the practice. This study report thus filled a perceived gap in literature. This contribution to literature could only strengthen the benchmarking practice through proper and focused planning, following a systematic process and benchmarking jargon.

The conclusion that the three institutions shared a common meaning and understanding of benchmarking was drawn from the finding that the institutions were able to define benchmarking and use concepts that were associated with the benchmarking practice. Apart from a shared meaning and understanding of benchmarking the three institutions used common concepts associated with benchmarking: measurement, comparison, best practices, improvement and learning. The review of related literature gave a definition for the study whose concepts were: learning process, compare, strengths and weaknesses, self-improvement and self-regulation. Although the empirical evidence had “learning”, instead of a “learning process” it could be concluded that the three institutions shared a meaning of benchmarking which resonated the meaning given in the review of related literature section.

Although the three institutions agreed on the meaning and understanding of benchmarking, the Open University indicated that it did not use the term “benchmarking” in its interactions. It, however, understood the meaning and carried out benchmarking practices without using the term “benchmarking”, which the researcher understood because he had arrived at the same conclusion during the observation sessions; there was hardly any mention of the term “benchmarking”. The institution’s leadership did not have a benchmarking policy or reference literature in place, unlike the ODL institution which had produced guidelines, although at the time of the study the guidelines had not been officially presented to staff. The Distance University used the term “benchmarking” but the level of staff exposure to the concept was very low; members of staff indicated they wanted to be inducted on the nature, benefits and use of benchmarking. The feeling among members of staff was that they were excluded from benchmarking activities when
they wanted to participate, especially on staff exchange programme and visits to other institutions, which had been affected by the scarcity of resources. The fundamental conclusion still stood that the institutions shared a meaning and an understanding of benchmarking, even though these differences were evident among the three institutions.

The finding was that the three institutions of higher learning practised benchmarking, even without using the term ‘benchmarking.’ The conscious practice of benchmarking by the three institutions was practised through deliberately sending members of staff to other institutions on staff exchange programme, visits to attend workshops, conferences, symposia and academic gatherings where information on common interests was shared. The institutions also consciously borrowed learning material, like modules and reading material from other institutions. They shared information on programmes, and the ODL institution was in the process of transferring programmes from one institution for its own use at the time of the study. The institutions deployed staff to sister institutions on exchange programmes, contact leave and sabbaticals; although the lecturers from the Distance University claimed they had not been able to undertake these visits for some time due to resource constraints. A conclusion was drawn that there was no single most important model or even a small number of similar benchmarking models (Vught, et al (2008). The approaches in benchmarking in higher education institutions differed in their aims, objectives, and the make-up of the benchmarking parties, their methods, and the kind of data they needed to generate. The Traditional benchmarking approach was one of the many approaches that were at the disposal of the institutions that desired to carry out benchmarking practices.

The researcher concluded, through observation and interaction, that the institutions suffered from deficient performance, which they could have avoided, had they formalised and institutionalised the benchmarking practice. The institutions did not seem to possess a structured and systematised benchmarking process, which could have been adhered to by all those who undertook inter-institutional visits. Where the three institutions possessed policy and procedure manuals for the benchmarking process there would have been reporting structures in place to capture the new insights, knowledge and experiences people from host institutions could have brought back. (See
§ 2.8, for explanation). The existence of a documented benchmarking structure, the performance of personnel when they visited other institutions could be monitored and measured in order to ascertain that they continued to grow academically, from host institutions. It could further be concluded that the lack of the manuals led to the observation by the researcher that there tended to be a lack of appreciation from senior management on the importance of benchmarking, with regard to sabbaticals and other staff visits. The institutions possessed a number of senior and well qualified members of staff who were engaged by other institutions as external examiners and assessors and the host institutions benefited a lot from the quality of service and expertise of these external assessors and markers. The quality of education was enhanced through these engagements and those engaged gained a lot of experience with which they further sharpened their skills and expertise. The releasing institutions did not seem to realise, and failed to benefit, from the expertise and skills their employees acquired from these external engagements. The lack of appreciation was reflected in the lack of clear processes and policies on accessing information and knowledge from those who would have returned from sabbatical, staff exchange programmes and as assessors to other institutions. The ODL institution was the only one which indicated that those who proceeded on these visits were expected to write reports, on their return. However, the institution seemed to have overlooked the need to enforce that requirement which resulted in the returning members of staff not submitting the reports. The observation by the researcher was that there seemed to be no mechanism put in place by the releasing institution to extract important information from the reports and use it for self-improvement purposes.

It could also be concluded that the lack of formalisation of the benchmarking approach by the three institutions was because of the use of a different benchmarking approach. It could also be because the institutions did not fully appreciate the origin of this approach. The theoretical evidence was that the new benchmarking approach, Traditional benchmarking, started through the desire by institutions to access new ideas and information on the performance of other institutions through visits, staff exchange programmes and the formation of professional associations. These associations existed to share new ideas, new insights and other operational intelligence. An institution benefited from benchmarking when it learnt from its own experiences and from the experiences of others; learning for a purpose; and to be aware of the fact that
institutional learning was a continuous process resulting in systematic proactive continuous improvement, which involved a cycle of investigation, action, feedback and the growth of institutional memory. However, while the institutions practised benchmarking, some encountered challenges, like the failure by one institution to send lecturers on a staff exchange programme due to resource constraints (See § 4.3.3, for finding). The challenges did not deter institutions from being aware of the benefit of benchmarking and that it could deliberately interact with other institutions through the exchange of staff, exchange of learning material and visit each other’s institutions. This resonated with the theoretical approach of conscious practice of benchmarking which was applied through visits and other methods of information exchange.

A conclusion was made that the three institutions of higher learning preferred collaborative to competitive benchmarking, and so did the other institutions. The conclusion was derived from the findings of the three institutions where they articulated a number of reasons why they preferred collaborative benchmarking to competitive benchmarking. The reasons were reflected in the evidence of the theoretical investigation. The experience of the three institutions was that collaborative benchmarking was a more preferable approach than the competitive approach, which tended to access data and information in a clandestine and subversive manner. Collaborative benchmarking was a voluntary engagement; it was built on the spirit of co-operation and the sharing of information. The staff exchange programmes, and inter-institutional visits, were a result of collaborative benchmarking, which resulted in the open sharing of information and new ideas; and, this process lifted an institution’s performance to a higher level.

Prasad and Stella (2008:47) argued that collaborative benchmarking led institutions to success and sustainability. Collaborative benchmarking had characteristics which included: comparative advantages over the preceding practice; compatibility with the context and culture of the institution; the availability of the practice in small and manageable parts as related to the whole; freedom from complexity which leads to ease of adoption of the practice; and the ease with which it can be communicated, which was important if the practice was to be successful. Collaborative benchmarking included the gathering and the free sharing of information between two or more parties involved in the practice. The researcher concurred with Jackson (2001) who
said collaborative benchmarking was a two-way process that was based on dialogue and ethical conduct during the collaborative benchmarking process (See § 2.18, for types of benchmarking).

The conclusion was also in realisation that there was commonality between the institutions of higher learning’s empirical evidence and the theoretical information obtained through a review of related literature. These findings led to the conclusion that the three institutions preferred the collaborative benchmarking approach to competitive benchmarking approach, and the same applied to the other institutions. This was notwithstanding the observation by the focus group of the ODL institution that there was a cut off point when a collaborating institution decided to abandon the collaborative benchmarking approach in preference to the competitive approach, as a way of protecting its status of the best performing institution in the group and preventing other institutions from learning how it achieved that status.

The researcher concluded that the three institutions shared perceptions, regarding the objective on how quality indicators could be used in a benchmarked institution led to a shared understanding of the role of indicators in institutions of higher education. The three institutions did not employ the same benchmarking approach that McKinnon, et al (2000) used which required the use of indicators to measure the quality of a service and the level of performance, and this caused them to fail to name specific indicators, but they understood that the measurement could be achieved through indicators, the use of shared quality indicators.

The empirical evidence from the three institutions indicated an understanding of the need to measure the performance of an institution and the tool to use. The institutions said that if they wanted to measure the performance of an institution they set common standards, common goals, which they could evaluate after a given period. Indicators reflected the standards an institution attained or required to attain in a give timeframe. The indicators could take the form of processes, products, practices and procedures; the adherence to a certain procedure of performing a task could enable the same procedure to be evaluated and the work to be measured (See § 4.3.6, for indicators).
The review of related literature provided that shared indicators were employed to measure the performance of an institution. Neumann (2007) argued that indicators were important in benchmarking as they enabled the institutions to measure their performance against that of other institutions. The institutions of higher learning put in place extensive reform spanning over past twenty-five years seeking to improve the quality of education. The institutions introduced the use of quality performance indicators to be able to measure the quality of education provided. The shared indicators assisted in measuring the effectiveness and efficiency of the education system.

The researcher was not surprised by the inability of the institutions to articulate the indicators that were used in benchmarking. This failure arose from the fact that the institutions adopted a different approach to benchmarking, leading to the emergence of three approaches to benchmarking from the study; two of them discussed in the theoretical analysis, and the third one emerged from the empirical study. The first was the McKinnon, et al (2000) approach, which employed indicators to measure the performance of an institution, in accordance with the criterion referencing method. McKinnon, et al (2000) divided an institution’s operations into nine business areas and sub-divided these into a number of indicators for each business area. At the end of a given period the indicators are assessed and scored to measure the quality of service or the performance of the institution. The second was the Garlick and Pryor (2004) model which was divided into five phases and each phase was divided into a number of steps, which varied in number with each phase. The implementation of this approach did not result in a scored performance; it was a qualitative measure. The steps could be changed to indicators if the participating institutions wished to do so. The third approach was the one the institutions adopted, which was named the Traditional Benchmarking approach by the researcher. The institutions practised benchmarking through sending members of staff to other institutions to attend workshops, conferences, symposia and other gatherings where new idea and information were shared. Traditional benchmarking encouraged institutions to form professional bodies to enhance the collaboration process among participating institutions. However, the observations of the researcher indicated that the institutions may be encouraged to adopt the use of indicators in order for them to measure and compare their performance against that of other institutions.
It was strongly concluded that the three institutions of higher learning appreciated and understood the role quality performance indicators played in attaining measurable performance results. The ability to measure performance brought with it the ability to compare one institution’s performance and quality of service with that of other institutions using the same indicators.

It could, therefore, be concluded that the three institutions were able to objectively practise benchmarking; but the approach they were using did not lend itself to objective measurement and comparison of performance (See § 2.21, for indicators). The three institutions practised their own brand of benchmarking, the Traditional benchmarking approach, hence the other open and distance institutions in the region. The three institutions of higher learning did not practise the McKinnon, et al (2000) benchmarking approach; neither did they practice the Garlick and Pryor (2004) benchmarking approach. It was further concluded that the lack of a formalised and institutionalised benchmarking process could be the reason why the benchmarking approach used was neither official nor structured. The researcher strongly recommended that the three institutions of higher learning, and indeed the other institutions, be encouraged to formalise and institutionalise benchmarking so that the practice could be applied in a systematic and structured manner. The observation with the current benchmarking approach was that it was not officially planned, but it was officially implemented, and the process was not recorded, assessed and reported on.

The researcher expected the institutions to adopt the benchmarking approach proposed by McKinnon, et al (2000) in the theoretical section of the study, for Australian universities, but the institutions did not do so. They adopted a different benchmarking approach, one the researcher named the Traditional Benchmarking approach. The writers divided the institutional operations into nine core business areas, which were further divided into a number of indicators each. The quality performance indicators are scored and the result ranked, with the highest scored institution becoming the best performing and the lowest becoming the least performing institution and strategies were used to close the performance gap. Marginson and van der Wende (2007) stated that the justification for the use of benchmarking models, based on indicators in
institutions of higher education, was to make sure the quality of education provided by these institutions equipped the students for employment. It was also a way of providing the nation with a highly skilled workforce that spearheaded economic growth. Hence the researcher’s desire to conscientise the institutions on the importance of formalising and institutionalising benchmarking.

The empirical evidence supported the use of indicators in benchmarking activities in the three institutions of higher learning. The institutions asserted that they set shared quality indicators if they desired to measure and compare institutional performance. They set common benchmarks among the institutions taking part in a benchmarking activity. They also set shared objectives in Quality Assurance and Strategic Plan documents, performance standards or common processes that could be used to measure the performance of an institution and compare that performance with that of other institutions. The institutions argued that it was not important whether they set common objectives, examinations, standards, processes or benchmarks; the primary requirement was that the institutions should agree on the object of measurement. They should agree on the core business areas, how they proceeded from there and how the measure worked; the agreed unit of measurement had to measure what the institutions wanted to measure, in a fair and equitable manner.

The three institutions of higher education concurred that they needed to measure their performance and they agreed that they could do this using quality performance indicators. They articulated that this could be done through the formulation of shared benchmarks in order to measure performance using the benchmarks. It could therefore, be concluded that, even though the institutions did not provide specific indicators, they exhibited clear information about how indicators could be used to objectively measure and compare the quality of education and the performance of each of the three institutions.

The title of the thesis was “Achieving quality through benchmarking in ODL institutions in higher education: a case study of three open and distance (ODL) institutions in the SADC region”. The researcher concluded that the three institutions achieved quality through
benchmarking, in a judgment based on the criteria advanced by Jackson (2001), who advised that benchmarking facilitated the attainment of quality through the implementation of a number of, or one of, the following actions: identifying and implementing best practices; improving work practices that satisfied the needs of clients; the evaluation of services and processes in a open and collaborative manner leading to the implementation of strategies for self-improvement, development and change; improving the effectiveness of best practices; a comparative analysis of the quality of education; and becoming a learning institution. Where a single, or a combination, of these activities was implemented the quality of education was enhanced. The three institutions demonstrated, through document analysis, that they implemented one or a combination of these activities. The institutions identified and implemented best practices, the institutions evaluated the processes and services in an open and collaborative manner, which led to the implementation of strategies for quality enhancement and the institutions undertook a comparative analysis of the quality of education with a view to adopting benchmarking exercises for the enhancement of the quality of education. These activities were housed in the Quality Assurance units of the institutions and the processes and procedures were provided for in the relevant unit/department/faculty procedure manuals.

Further to the activities outlined above, Jackson (2001) recommended a method of self-evaluation, based on two different processes, which could facilitate the achievement of quality, and the processes were:

- Referencing or comparing one thing against another
- Searching for and crafting reference points or benchmarks and understanding the reasons for the reference points.

The referencing process was made up of the following activities: action research; surveys supported by discussion; work specifications; codes that described practice; examples of good practice; performance criteria; scoring systems; standardised testing; and, examples of performance. The three institutions adopted the referencing process and proceeded to craft reference points, referred to as indicators, which preceded the implementation of the specific activities in order to attain quality education. In the interactions and observations the researcher encountered evidence of standardised testing, scoring systems, and performance criteria in the
form of objectives and benchmarks and examples of good performance, contained in the Strategic Plans and the Balanced Score Cards of the institutions. It can be concluded that the primary question of the study, couched as the title, was attained; the three institutions of higher learning, and, indeed, other institutions, in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region achieved quality education through benchmarking.

However, a structured benchmarking cycle was not complete without a feedback loop. The three institution of higher learning consciously practised benchmarking but they did not have a reporting component to the benchmarking structure to enable those who proceeded on visits to other institutions to be heard and their experiences received by institutional leadership for current and future use of the information and experiences.

5.4 Way forward

The major conclusion was that the three institutions of higher learning to a very large extent consciously practised benchmarking and so did the other institutions in Africa, albeit according to their own benchmarking approach. The approach differed from the two approaches proposed by McKinnon, et al (2000) and Garlick and Pryor (2004). The researcher named the approach the Traditional approach, a qualitative approach, which needed to be formalised and institutionalised in order to manage its application properly and to put in place a reporting structure, which would enable the institutions of higher learning to achieve the desired benefit. The formalisation and institutionalisation of benchmarking would strengthen the suggestion by Benneworth (2010), who encouraged the development of benchmarking, and its principles and practices through the institutionalisation and formalisation of the benchmarking practice in institutions of higher learning (See § 1.2, for explanation). This would encourage the popularisation of the benchmarking practice by inculcating a culture of continuous improvement in the institutions of higher learning.

The finding of the study was that the three institutions of higher learning understood the meaning of the benchmarking concept and concluded that they consciously practised benchmarking, although the approach differed from the approach adopted for the study. It was
on the basis of this finding and the conclusion that the researcher strongly recommended that the way forward should be to strengthen the Traditional Benchmarking model, by formalising and institutionalising it (See § 2.8, for formalisation). The three institutions did not follow any clear method of measuring and comparing the quality and performance of their educational provision, which could be overcome if the practice was formalised. An official and formalised benchmarking practice would be operationalised through a policy framework, which clearly narrated the structure and procedure to be taken. The existence of policies and procedures of benchmarking would enable institutions to practise benchmarking with clear goals and measurable quality performance indicators, which made it possible to measure and compare performance.

The finding that the three institutions visited each other and other institutions, attended international and national gatherings to share new insights, and cooperate with other institutions in matters of common interest, resulted in the conclusion that the three institutions, and others, consciously practised benchmarking. It was on the basis of this conclusion that the researcher recommended that the way forward should not only be to formalise and institutionalise the practise but the implementation of the current benchmarking approach, which should be strengthened to make the process efficient and effective. Another way forward should be that the members of staff who proceeded on staff exchange visits, attended meetings and conferences, where common issues were discussed and information freely shared, should be trained to give them requisite knowledge and skills to transmit new ideas, new information and other performance improvement issues to their institutions, eloquently and systematically. The members of staff should not approach the benchmarking practice as an extension of their holiday. Members of staff who visited other institutions to act as external assessors, and similar other assignments, should be trained to armed them with the skills to identify requisite policies, procedures and products that their institutions could borrow and implement in order to improve their performance.

The way forward would be for the benchmarking institutions to agree on a coherent and broadly accepted definition of benchmarking, which would be supported by a number of concepts, like
the concepts associated with the benchmarking concept (See § 4.2, for concepts). This approach was critical when it involved collaborative benchmarking, in which the parties must agree on all aspects of the benchmarking process. These sentiments were shared by Yasin (2002) whose findings concluded that there was a lack of a generally accepted benchmarking process in higher education because the practice was still in its infancy, with little experience and even less publicity. The scarcity of benchmarking literature was another drawback in institutions of higher learning located in developing countries, but this was a problem that was being attended to with the increasing number of benchmarking initiatives undertaken and research articles being written, the current study included.

It was on the basis of the conclusion in the previous paragraph that the three institutions were found to be consciously practising benchmarking in accordance according to the Traditional Benchmarking approach, which was a qualitative approach, that the researcher recommended, as a way forward, that this approach be complemented by another benchmarking approach, like the criterion reference approach by McKinnon, et al (2000), a quantitative approach, that lent itself to the use of benchmarks or indicators which were measurable and comparable with those of other institutions. The Traditional Benchmarking approach was practised by the three, and other, institutions through visits to other institutions and sharing of academic information which was not readily measurable and comparable, which strengthened the recommendation for the adoption of another approach to complement it. The way forward should be to strengthen the Traditional approach, a qualitative approach, and the use of the McKinnon, et al (2000), a quantitative approach, could be complementary and could lead to the achievement of better results than when institutions used the Traditional approach alone.

The Traditional Benchmarking model should continue to be applied in a qualitative manner, as has been the tradition, and the quantitative approach could open the performance to measurement and comparison, to enable institutions to be ranked in the order of their performance as a basis for the implementation of self-improvement initiatives. The practice of benchmarking would lead institutions to popularise the benchmarking concept, which would
enhance the systematic pursuit of benchmarking, and, in the process, inculcating a culture of quality provision of institutional education (See § 4.3, for findings).

Another way forward would be to train employees in appropriate benchmarking expertise and skills when they visit other institutions in order for them to function properly as benchmarkers in their own right. Apart from equipping the employees with skills and expertise in benchmarking the institutions should show the same employees some recognition and appreciation for their value in the institutions in which they serve. The researcher observed that they felt marginalised in matters related to institutional idea generation and fact-based participatory decision-making, when they believed that they possessed a lot of information the institution could benefit from. The recognition and appreciation of the employees’ value and possible contribution to the enhancement of institutional performance could motivate and energise them into contributing fully to institutional improvement initiatives; at the moment they seemed to sit back and watch leadership try to move the institution forward. It seemed the perception of the employees was that they could fully exploit their potential for the benefit of institutions which invited them to externally assess and mark students’ work, but their expertise and skills were forced into dormancy at their home institutions because they did not feel fully engaged in local academic activities, like overseeing the management of the examination processes.

A reporting structure should be constructed so that those on inter-institutional visits could capture as much detail as was humanely possible in their benchmarking endeavour. The reporting structure would be a channel of accessing feedback when the employees returned from visits, staff exchange programmes and other staff exchange arrangements. The ODL institution was the only one that indicated that the lecturers returning from visits to other institutions were required to produce a report but a few people seemed to submit the reports; the other two institutions did not have that requirement. The same institutions were strongly recommended, as a way forward, to form collaborative relationships with other institutions of higher learning, as articulated in the conclusion to the question of collaborative benchmarking. These relationships encourage cooperation with other institutions and the sharing of information and the comparison of the performance of participating institutions.
The researcher observed a major shortfall in the benchmarking process of the institutions; members of staff of the three institutions were employed as assessors and examiners by host institutions, through staff exchange programmes, as a method of maintaining the goodwill of institutions in areas of quality assessment and accreditation systems. The aim was to share information and enhance quality in the provision of education, but on the return of these members of staff to their institutions they did not seem to provide feedback to their respective home institutions. The researcher expected people who visited other institutions for the purpose of benchmarking to produce reports or to submit some feedback in one form or another, in which they noted new ideas, new experiences or new processes and procedures they may have encountered, which they hoped could benefit the home institution. The ODL institution required that those on visits to other institutions furnish the home institution’s leadership with a report but the fate of the reports was not revealed. The researcher tried to learn how feedback was communicated to institutional leadership and how it was articulated into strategies for the improvement of the quality of educational provision and the performance of the institution, to no avail. The way forward was for the institutions to appreciate the value of work done by the lecturers they employed by fruitfully engaging them in advancing the cause of benchmarking. These lecturers possessed a wealth of expertise and experience which could be exploited to advantage in enhancing the quality of education and the performance of institutions. The institutions could formalise and institutionalise benchmarking but, if the lecturers continued to feel unappreciated they could remain sequestered from the benchmarking process.

The ODL focus group discussion produced an interesting observation. A claim was made that collaborative benchmarking successfully propelled an institution to attain a certain level of quality service and performance output but after that level the institution ceased to materially gain from further collaborative benchmarking. The institution was then likely to adopt competitive benchmarking as a way of keeping other institutions below its level of performance and unable to access its performance processes, practices and products. The researcher was unable to substantiate this claim and, as a way forward would recommend that interested benchmarking researchers should verify the authenticity of the claim. This observation tended to
counter the argument advanced by UNESCO (1998), that one reason for adopting benchmarking was that many governments attempted to create a competitive environment in order to transform most elitist institutions to large, multi-purpose mass systems of higher education. This was termed the massification of higher education. The focus group argument seemed to indicate that elitist institutions shunned any form of massification, to remain unique and exclusive (See § 2.5, for explanation). It would be interesting to ascertain the position on the ground through research.

The researcher recommended that further research be undertaken on benchmarking to ascertain and authenticate the applicability of the Traditional Benchmarking model. The three institutions in this study adopted this approach to benchmarking and a lot of additional detail should be unearthed, through investigation, in order to understand it better and to operationalise it in the most appropriate manner.
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224


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### APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Interview guide

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>QUESTION</th>
<th>PARTICIPANT RESPONSE</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>What do you understand by the term “benchmarking”?</td>
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<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>How do you think the benchmarking concept can be practiced in an institution of higher learning?</td>
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<td>3.</td>
<td>What activity/activities prove(s) that benchmarking is being practiced in your institution?</td>
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<td>4.</td>
<td>Could you explain the benchmarking process that is followed in your institution?</td>
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<td>5.</td>
<td>How has benchmarking resulted in, or affected, quality education in your institution?</td>
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<td>6.</td>
<td>How has benchmarking been consciously practiced in your institution?</td>
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<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Should an institution of higher learning employ benchmarking for the purpose of self-improvement, self-regulation or both? Please, explain.</td>
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<td>8.</td>
<td>How can you relate quality performance indicators to the practice of benchmarking?</td>
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<td>9.</td>
<td>How has your institution benefited from benchmarking?</td>
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<td>10.</td>
<td>How can benchmarking, in an institution of higher learning, be carried out objectively?</td>
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<td>11.</td>
<td>From your own perspective, what is the main purpose for benchmarking in an institution of higher learning environment?</td>
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<td>12.</td>
<td>To what extent would you say your institutional leadership supports benchmarking activities?</td>
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<td>13.</td>
<td>How does your institution collaborate with other institutions as a way of benchmarking?</td>
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<td>14.</td>
<td>Why do you think your institution should prefer collaborative to competitive benchmarking?</td>
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<td>15.</td>
<td>How does benchmarking directly feed into the quality of ODL education?</td>
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<td>16.</td>
<td>I am asking for copies of:</td>
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<td></td>
<td>1. University Strategic Plan (current).</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>3. Benchmarking Policy Document</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>5. Any document relevant to benchmarking practice.</td>
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### Appendix 2: DUFG8

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<th>No.</th>
<th>QUESTION</th>
<th>PARTICIPANT RESPONSE</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>What do you understand by the term &quot;benchmarking&quot;?</td>
<td>Benchmarking is like measuring myself against best yardstick, that is, best practice or international standards. A person can benchmark against another person. If one finds someone with better standards he/she can borrow what is believed to be the best standard available or best practices available. Is the process of determining who is the very best, who sets standards and what that standard is. 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>How do you think the benchmarking concept can be practiced objectively in an institution of higher learning?</td>
<td>The universities offering the MBA programme in South Africa are affiliated to an organisation of African Business Schools as a benchmark, and the results can be compared objectively. A visit to the Stellenbosch or Cape Town universities can reveal the name of the international organisation. We have much room to improve through benchmarking in a neighbouring country. Right now we fall far short of the expected world standards, or what is expected of universities’ output which can be measured. We have errors in examination results where results are given to someone who did not sit for the paper, or did not even register for the course, and our results take too long to be published. Midlands State University publish their results 21 days after the last paper is written. Is ZOU committed to improve its processes? Benchmarking should now target all practices, processes. 15 ZOU cannot produce ID cards for its students, what of its staff. We are embarrassed when people ask us for our business cards, which we don’t have. How do those who know what is expected of a university see us in ZOU? The regulatory body, ZIMCHE, should have been introduced a long time ago so that by now everything should be in place. 20 ZIMCHE would be disappointed if they knew lecturers do not have university IDs and Business Cards The banking institutions have banking regulation, ZOU systems are in shambles and they must be rectified through benchmarking. The problem could be how ZOU was modelled. It took a British model, which came through the University of Rhodesia, then University of Rhodesia and Nyasaland and finally University of Zimbabwe. ZOU was modelled along the UZ lines, even if it is an ODL institution. ZOU failed to assume its own model when it a conventional university model. There should be no Virtual Region because every student should be a Virtual student. ZOU is trying to add contact time, which should be reserved for conventional university; it is a response to competition. 30 ZOU should stick to its ODL mode of delivery; there may not be a module at UZ, which is not their mode of operation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>What activity/activities prove(s) that benchmarking is being practiced in your institution?</td>
<td>Results processing Student database Research output Number of Professors and Doctors.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Could you explain the benchmarking process that is followed in your institution?</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>How has benchmarking resulted in, or affected, quality education in your institution?</td>
<td>There are no benchmarked standards, which has resulted in poor quality service delivery to stakeholders, like students The ZOU image which results poor practices and processes 40 We use part tutors from competitors’ competitors’ institutions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>How has benchmarking been consciously practiced in your institution?</td>
<td>Unconsciously practising benchmarking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Should an institution of higher learning employ benchmarking for the purpose of self-improvement, self-regulation or both? Please, explain.</td>
<td>Both, Stellenbosch and Cape Town Universities are the best in Africa and should be benchmarked by ZOU. The rigour of ZOU is doubted, most students enter the university through the APL. There is no methodological structure like in other universities ZOU fees are not benchmarked with any university to make them affordable to students. Conventional universities are getting into ODL and ZOU is failing to respond positively to competition.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Question</td>
<td>Answer</td>
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<td>8</td>
<td>How can you relate quality performance indicators to the practice of benchmarking?</td>
<td>Key deliverables of lecturers are used to benchmark lecturers in all universities, like in research and journal articles production. These should be considered against other institutions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>How has your institution benefited from benchmarking?</td>
<td>There is no effort to benefit from benchmarking, or there may be no awareness, or conscious effort. Benchmarking is not in our Strategic Plan. ZOU has nine (9) objectives in its Quality Aims and Objectives when five (5) should be the maximum.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>How can benchmarking, in an institution of higher learning, be carried out objectively?</td>
<td>Select an activity, like examination processing and compare the practice with other institutions. Identify key performance metrics. Choose internal areas to benchmark. Collect data on performance and on practices. Analyse data and strategies to achieve improvement. Adapt the strategies. Contextualise and implement, setting resource goals. Ensure there is buy-in.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>From your own perspective, what is the main purpose for benchmarking in an institution of higher learning environment?</td>
<td>Improve the services of ZOU and the core business of ZOU. Measure stakeholder satisfaction. Delight the stakeholder. Improve performance. Understand cost positions. Get strategic advantage.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>To what extent would you say your institutional leadership supports benchmarking activities?</td>
<td>Unknown. No activities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>How does your institution collaborate with other institutions as a way of benchmarking?</td>
<td>Sign MOU/As with institutions, like Tanzania Open University. BOCODOL. Zambian Open University. Open University of Malaysia.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Why do you think your institution should prefer collaborative to competitive benchmarking?</td>
<td>Organisation learning means workers continue to develop by publishing articles. In benchmarking continue to adopt what others are doing and academics continue learning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>How does benchmarking directly feed into the quality of ODL education?</td>
<td>Paper setting and Department has to agree. 3 readings. Using Marking Guide. In ZOU different people mark, moderate and work on each stage. In conventional universities the lecturer sets the paper, teaches it, marks, moderates and writes reports. The ZOU MBA programme was once voted the best in Africa because of its procedures and ZIMCHE came in before end of lunch.</td>
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</table>
Appendix 3 Request an interview on benchmarking.

Vice Chancellor,
Professor M. Pondombiri
Distance University
P. O. Box 3459
Mount Kilimani
Azanaland

20 May 2013

Distance University
P.O. Box MP 3459
Mount Kilimani
Azanaland

Dear Professor Pondombiri

RE: REQUEST AN INTERVIEW ON BENCHMARKING

My name is Caxton Shonhiwa and I am a Distance University Doctor of Philosophy candidate. I am conducting research on “Benchmarking and quality in open and distance learning (ODL) university education”. Benchmarking is a methodology meant to attain quality in ODL university education.

I hope, through this case study, to identify and document benchmarking practices in two universities and one college. More importantly, the investigation should expose the institutions to formalised benchmarking, how it can be institutionalised and the benefits they can derive from benchmarking.

The study should answer the following questions:
1. To what extent do the three institutions of higher learning consciously practice benchmarking?
2. How can benchmarking, within the context of an institution, be ascertained objectively?
3. What are the quality indicators of a benchmarked institution?

The study aims to produce a benchmarking model which can be employed by any ODL institution to assess its performance management, as a way of continuously improving performance with concomitant enhancement in the quality of education. The study will also carry out a benchmarking exercise of the three institutions in nine core university performance areas.

I am, therefore, requesting to interview you for 20 minutes on your experiences in the field of benchmarking. I am asking you to set a date and time for the interview convenient to you, but before the end of May 2013. If you do not mind, I will be taping the session so that I may not miss any part of your valuable contribution. However, I will also be taking hand-written notes.

All responses will be kept confidential. This means that your interview and questionnaire responses will not be shared with anyone and any information included in the report will not identify you as the participant. You do not have to talk about anything you may not be comfortable with, and you are free to end the interview at any time. Should you have any questions or need additional information, please do not hesitate to contact me.

I sincerely thank you in anticipation of a positive response to this request.

Yours sincerely

C. Shonhiwa. Phone: Ext. 339. E-mail: caxtonfc@gmail.com Cell: +263 772 499 992.

Interview acceptance/rejection slip

I ……………………………………………….. accept/do not accept to be interviewed in
C. Shonhiwa study.

Name………………………………………..Signature …………………………..Date………….

I have set the interview for ……………………date and at ……………………time.
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<th>No.</th>
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<th>PARTICIPANT RESPONSE</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>What do you understand by the term “benchmarking”?</td>
<td>Benchmarking is a scale to attain something, a measure, a standard to achieve something. It is aimed at collaborating to attain quality. Different units come together and set a standard. It is what we want to attain to develop our country through knowledge and skills. To acquire total independence where does Zambia want to be, its national expectations and what five universities need to acquire to uplift the standard of living and develop as a nation through knowledge and skills from a university which serves the community. Benchmarking is now necessary with the proliferation of universities, which means greater expectations from students. Parliament and people should ensure quality graduates are produced, like the type of lecturers and the degrees. Many schools in Zambia do not do not have qualified teachers. A nation needs to attain certain benchmarks to be able to borrow money internationally.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>How do you think the benchmarking concept can be practised objectively in an institution of higher learning?</td>
<td>There should be a policy on employing well qualified staff and having infrastructure and resources. We learn from others, like from ZOU, how it has managed to survive. We exchange notes. We are interlinked through the internet. We exchange modules and learn from them. We look at our marking against others and moderate and make sure it reflects the marking guide. We exchange lecturers with sister institutions. We produce plans with smart objectives and make sure they are achieved. The problem is that only management team has visited other institutions to learn from them. ZAO can attend DEASA and international conferences and learn from others. We learnt how to use cell phones for students and carry out conferencing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>What activity/activities prove(s) that benchmarking is being practiced in your institution?</td>
<td>We collaborate a lot with University of Zambia (UZ) and sign an MOU with quantifiable targets, which looks at: Setting and marking of examinations. Development of modules. Curriculum development. Collaboration between VCs of the two universities, and the local VC was once a Board Chairman at UZ. Hold ceremonies between the two universities.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Could you explain the benchmarking process that is followed in your institution?</td>
<td>There is no benchmarking policy at ZAO.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>How has benchmarking resulted in, or affected, quality education in your institution?</td>
<td>Benchmarking is the only way to prove growth. This is done by seeing shortfalls from what we are doing when we compare it to what others are doing. We noticed we needed to improve our internet. We can exchange learning materials like modules. We consider our position, identify our weaknesses and strengthen our courses through reviewing modules.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>How has benchmarking been consciously practiced in your institution?</td>
<td>MOODLE- Modular Object Oriented Dynamic Learning was benchmarked from the UK. A team went to UK to learn and a team from UK came to continue with the training.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Should an institution of higher learning employ benchmarking for the purpose of self-improvement, self-regulation or both? Please, explain.</td>
<td>A good teacher sets objectives, and benchmarking performs such a role as setting objectives. It is a control mechanism to avoid losing vision.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>How would you relate quality performance indicators to the practice of benchmarking?</td>
<td>The process has been started, like the MOODLE, and internet connectivity. The process is ongoing. ZAO is trying to find out how to use cell phones to communicate with students. Module reviews are underway. Graduates are being promoted. The examples of ZAO doing well are; 1. Zambian institute of Advanced Legal Education, where ZAO graduates...</td>
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| 9. | How has your institution benefited from benchmarking? | are doing well  
2. Zambian police, whose members are promoted after studying law |
| 10. | How can benchmarking, in an institution, be carried out objectively? | Benchmark according to the institution’s strategic plan and achieve the objectives set  
Institutions come together and set the same targets to be done over a period and then evaluate objectively |
| 11. | From your own perspective, what is the main purpose for benchmarking in an institution of higher learning environment? | Very much so  
Two months ago two day workshop was held in Lusaka on QA in ODL and good ideas were exchanged  
Most initiatives have come from higher office, like internal workshops  
The leadership also sends juniors to attend workshops  
Leadership is willing to fund benchmarking projects |
| 12. | To what extent would you say your institutional leadership supports benchmarking activities? | There is a partnership being implemented between the University of Oreland, Mzuzu University in Malawi, ZAO and Mlungushi University to introduce a Master of Transformative Community Development degree. The results of the research-based degree will be used to develop the communities of the universities. ZAO signs MoU with institutions, like Malaysian university VC visits other institutions, like IGNU in India. |
| 13. | How does your institution collaborate with other universities as a way of benchmarking? | Improving the academic and professional status of academics, which has a multiplier effect  
Learn successful practices from other universities. |
| 14. | Why do you think your institution should prefer collaborative to competitive benchmarking? | The comparing of performance and adopting the best practice results in increased quality. |
| 15. | How does benchmarking directly feed into the quality of ODL education? |   |
| 16. | I am asking for copies of:  
6. University Strategic Plan (current).  
8. Balanced Score Card  
11. Any document relevant to benchmarking practice. |   |
MEMORANDUM

TO : Registrar: Academic
FROM : Caxton Shonhiwa, DPhil candidate, Distance University
DATE : 12 March 2013
SUBJECT : REQUEST PERMISSION TO CARRY OUT RESEARCH ON BENCHMARKING AT DISTANCE UNIVERSITY

I am applying for permission to carry out a research at the Open University (OU) on the topic “Achieving quality through benchmarking in ODL institutions of higher learning: a case study of ODL institutions”. The institutions targeted for the study are the Open University (OU), Distance University (DU) and ODL institution (ODL). The study is for the Doctor of Philosophy qualification.

I hope, through this case study, to identify and document benchmarking practices in the three institutions. More importantly, the investigation should expose the universities to formalised benchmarking, how benchmarking can be institutionalised and the benefits derived from it.

The study aims to produce a benchmarking model which can be employed by any open and distance learning institution to assess its performance management, as a way of continuously improving performance with concomitant enhancement in the quality of education. The study will also carry out a benchmarking exercise of the three universities in eight core university performance areas.

The study should answer the following questions:

• To what extent do the three institutions of higher learning consciously practice benchmarking?
• How can benchmarking, within the context of an institution, be ascertained objectively?
• How can quality indicators be used in a benchmarked institution?
• Why should the three institutions of higher learning employ collaborative benchmarking practices?
• How do the three institutions of higher learning enunciate benchmarking?

The researcher will carry out a pilot study in a different university in order to trial-run the instruments and the processes, especially the questions and to assess the nature of the responses, before the actual process is rolled out.

The researcher undertakes to be sensitive to the following ethical considerations:

(a) gaining access to the university confidential documents and informed consent from research respondents, by making them aware of the nature of the study and formally requesting them to participate;
(b) protecting the image of the university and protecting those who take part from any harm, including the avoidance of any deception in the study;
(c) protecting the privacy and confidentiality of university information, participants, and
(d) taking special precaution to protect vulnerable participants, if any participate.

I sincerely express my gratitude in anticipation of the granting of permission.

Yours sincerely

Caxton Shonhiwa
DPhil candidate
(Former UNISA student).
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<th>No.</th>
<th>QUESTION</th>
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<td>1.</td>
<td>What do you understand by the term 'benchmarking'?</td>
<td>Benchmarking avoids the re-inventing of the wheel by taking advantage of existing processes, technologies and activities to enhance objectives. Benchmarking involves finding out best practices in what others are doing. It is measuring and comparing what one’s own institution is doing using chosen criteria. Benchmarking is a system an institution embarks on to carry out a fact finding study and appreciates 5 best practices from other institutions. Benchmarking is meant to leap-frog processes and avoids re-inventing the wheel. It is to learn from others so that one can improve one’s own performance. Benchmarking is not a safari or a visit to have a good time. For example, if one wants to improve on quality one must visit someone whose quality is exceptional. Benchmarking is an era of continuous improvement. Benchmarking (Bm) was when one compared oneself to others, or an institution comparing itself with another institution to be able to learn and improve and as a process to inform.</td>
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<td>2.</td>
<td>How do you think the benchmarking concept can be practiced objectively in an institution of higher learning?</td>
<td>It is very appropriate to use benchmarking, although there is no policy on benchmarking. In research work, a university can set up research development strategies from those institutions 15 renowned for their research output and objectively compare itself against them.</td>
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<td>3.</td>
<td>What activity/activities prove(s) that benchmarking is being practiced in your institution?</td>
<td>There was no policy on benchmarking at BOCODOL but there are a lot of partnerships which are a form of benchmarking. People visit other institutions to learn new processes. BOCODOL involves conducting regular visits to other institutions. Quality Assurance instruments are a result of benchmarking, which include policies for operational areas and the criteria used to ensure quality education.</td>
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<td>4.</td>
<td>Could you explain the benchmarking process that is followed in your institution?</td>
<td>Writing reports on visits, from which extracts of best practices are made Quality Assurance instruments are a result of benchmarking, which include policies for operational areas and the criteria used to ensure quality education. Currently, I am organising for a benchmarking visit to the Mauritius Open University (MOU). The aim is to populate a new faculty with books, while BOCODOL produces its own. The visit to Mauritius will result in BOCODOL getting a menu of what it can use now, bring them and contextualise them and then use them by second semester 2014. The targeted is an ideal institution because it started the same way BOCODOL has started. It started as Mauritius College of Air, and then it was transformed into a university. I will possibly visit MOU in an effort to avoid re-inventing the wheel. Collaborate in offering programmes, especially in areas like ICT and Tourism where MOU is robust and well known.</td>
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<td>5.</td>
<td>How has benchmarking resulted in, or affected, quality education in your institution?</td>
<td>Quality practices are meant to ensure standards are maintained and benchmarking practices are also meant to ensure standards are achieved. These are quality assurance standards and the criteria used are 35 recognised as standards. These standards enable institutions to compare how they are performing. The visit to Mauritius will result in BOCODOL getting a menu of what it can use now, bring them and contextualise them and then use them by second semester 2014. BOCODOL proposes to benchmark with an institution, like the Bangladesh Open University and the National Institute of Open School when it has aspects it wants to introduce in its programmes, like the Agency Model.</td>
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<td>6.</td>
<td>How has benchmarking been consciously practiced in your institution?</td>
<td>There has been conscious practice of benchmarking at BOCODOL although the name has not been used. No one talks of the name “Benchmarking” but what we do is benchmarking, especially through visits. The programmes we have are a result of linkages with other institutions, like ZOU, IGNU, VUSSC and AMITY. There is the acknowledgement that benchmarking is taking place. There are cases when people are advised to go out and learn how others are excelling. The people who do not learn from others lack exposure, through which they can go to others to find out how their processes are making them perform better. Even people in new jobs or new challenges can learn from those who have been in the same situations before them. The college has always asked people to visit other institutions, to attend conferences and</td>
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other fora where new ideas are shared. These are brought back in conference or workshop reports. They are then borrowed and contextualised and then implemented.

7. **Should an institution employ benchmarking for the purpose of self-improvement, self-regulation or both?**
   Please, explain.

   Benchmarking can be employed for both self-improvement and self-regulatory purposes. The purpose would be to determine if there are any deviations from the proposed course of action. **55**
   Benchmarking can be used for both self-improvement and self-regulation but more importantly to catch up on the performance of better performing universities.
   The benchmarking has done to introduce a programme or an aspect to improve the performance of the college.
   Benchmarking is for self-improvement purpose. **60**

8. **How would you relate quality performance indicators to the practice of benchmarking?**

   Benchmarking has benefited quality in that it improves the standards due to the introduction of best practices in a given area.
   Benchmarking is carried out by borrowing from only those who are the best or those established who are more grounded in an area.
   One may discover one is doing better than the one from whom an idea is being borrowed, so there is **65** need for initial baseline study and the identification of a performance gap.
   This can be done through measuring oneself against others to be able to reach or exceed their level.
   Benchmarking is a standard in itself.
   Benchmarking gives benchmarks which are standards of quality.

9. **How has your institution of higher learning benefited from benchmarking?**

   **BOCODOL** has benefited a lot because it visits other institutions and collaborates with a number of **70** other colleges and universities.
   There may be no policy on benchmarking but the instruments are there, like collaboration.
   Benchmarking includes the borrowing of the best practises and interacting with others who are better or it can be undertaken just to compare how two institutions perform.
   There have been visits to other institutions of higher learning to see how they perform, borrow ideas **75** from them and improve the standards at **BOCODOL.**

10. **How can benchmarking, in an institution, be carried out objectively?**

    It is very appropriate to use benchmarking, although there is no policy on benchmarking. However, the Department of Partnerships has come up with guidelines on benchmarking, which include (i) justifying benchmarking (ii) outline expectations of a visit (iii) what are the possible yields of the visit or practice. **80**
    There is objectivity in most benchmarking projects. For instance, the use of the Balanced Score Card can be used if the institution is achieving 25% of its potential and you want to achieve the 75% deficit through benchmarking. You decide on how best to do it and what strategy to implement. You need to look at technicalities, like the quality of tutors and material.
    Go inside the department at micro-level and see the systems in place. **85**
    Each school should produce QA booklets on examination management to guide its members and periodically convene a retreat to in-service members.
    There should be a model to justify benchmarking by identifying an area which submits to benchmarking, decide on what criteria to employ, which can be a checklist, for processes, decide on the length of time the benchmarking practice should take place and then implement the strategy chosen for the purpose. **90**
    The problem is the there is a cost tied to the process of benchmarking so it affects how long it can be carried out. It also affects the point on institutionalising it. There is no written benchmarking policy at **BOCODOL.**

11. **From your own perspective, what is the main purpose for benchmarking in an institution of higher learning environment?**

    The main purpose is to improve performance, although there are cases where an element of self-regulation is done. If benchmarking is setting standards then self-regulation is also involved in it. **95**
    Benchmarking should be approached like a project with a beginning and an end, and parts in between. Each part should be quality assured.
    An example is the Bachelor of Commerce degree programme from ZOU. It was received and thoroughly contextualised and case studied were changed to suit to local situation.
    The main reason for the current benchmarking exercise is to populate the local faculty with relevant **100** modules and programmes before the beginning of September when **BOCODOL** becomes a university.
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<th>12.</th>
<th>To what extent would you say your institutional leadership supports benchmarking activities?</th>
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<tr>
<td>The local leadership is enthusiastic about benchmarking and assumes the omnibus approach, they also listen and learn. It is a learning leadership. The BOCODOL leadership is a transformational leadership. The approach is to undertake institutional capacity building then develop processes to ensure customers are satisfied by the products/services. The executive management and the Chief Executive Officer are involved in regular visits to places where issues of concern are discussed. There is a budget to expose leadership to best practices in different parts of the world, like the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) and Virtual Universities of the Small States of Commonwealth (VUSSC). The Virtual University for Small States of Commonwealth holds training sessions for quality material production and use, personnel training and initiate collaborative practices and many other activities meant to improve institutional performance. VUSSC also holds Boot Camps for the 32 small states (those with 4 million people or less. Botswana has slightly above 2 million people.). Boot Camps are workshops to develop programmes in the thirty-two countries and so far ten programmes have been developed. For instance, BOCODOL has developed a Bachelor of Business and Entrepreneurship degree programme. There should be a budget for benchmarking to cater for resources and there should be senior management support if benchmarking can be implemented successfully. At times one can implement benchmarking with or without leadership support, depending on what authority one has, otherwise it is essential to have leadership support. The institution must be concerned about the dividend and there usually is easy support if there are some benefits to be accrued from the benchmarking exercise. Currently, resources have become a major issue in higher education; the budget from government is no longer adequate so there should be a tangible spinoff from the benchmarking practice. Benchmarking must be reflected in changes that can be accounted for in institutions. In other words some positive benefit must manifest itself. The leadership of BOCODOL encourages benchmarking. The MOU effort came from the Chief Executive Officer of the college. They also make resources available for people to visit other institutions and share ideas. In fact the senior management here are always nagging me to push me for better performance through benchmarking. Senior leadership here actually opened an international phone line to enable us to communicate easily with international universities and organisations.</td>
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<th>How does your institution collaborate with other institutions as a way of benchmarking?</th>
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<td>There have been a number of collaborative relationships now. The institutions that quickly come to mind are AMITY, IGNOU, ZOU, North West University NAMCOL and Open University of UK. The Commonwealth of Learning has played a big role in this college’s benchmarking activities. The local institutions have also played their part in programme development, the joint provision of programme offering and staff training. BOCODOL is collaborating with Namibia College of Open Learning (NAMCOL) in Quality Assurance, and other international universities. The college attends conferences, meetings and other fora where it learns new ways of doing things, like the Commonwealth of Learning, which encourages benchmarking by finding out what others are doing and how they are doing it. We also use the internet to find out new ideas and then approach those whose ideas we appreciate because you cannot take everything. The college decides on what it wants to borrow then changes it to suit what it wants to do. The Virtual Universities of the Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC) encourages benchmarking among the commonwealth countries, under the umbrella of the Commonwealth of Learning. Programmes are exchanged for free, and modules are contextualised to suit the borrowing country or university. Materials are made appropriate for the local market before it can be used.</td>
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<td><strong>14.</strong></td>
<td>Why do you think your institution should prefer collaborative to competitive benchmarking?</td>
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<td><strong>15.</strong></td>
<td>How does benchmarking directly feed into the quality of ODL education?</td>
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### Appendix 7 ODLFG5

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<th>No.</th>
<th>QUESTION</th>
<th>PARTICIPANT RESPONSE</th>
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<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>What do you understand by the term ‘benchmarking’?</td>
<td>Benchmarking is the assessment of various institutions with own institution, it is a comparative study to determine the right or good practice which can be adopted and introduced. Benchmarking is an essential tool to improve and measure where we stand with other institutions. Benchmarking is part of research and an influential aspect in trying to be better. Benchmarking is making it easier to be improving as society, community, nation and globally. It makes it possible to know the latest and to come up with a new latest.</td>
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<td>2.</td>
<td>How do you think the benchmarking concept can be practiced objectively in an institution of higher learning?</td>
<td>The good thing about benchmarking is that I can do it from my office by corresponding with colleagues from other universities and be able to establish their research cultures. The number of research publications can be counted.</td>
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<td>3.</td>
<td>What activity/activities prove(s) that benchmarking is being practiced in your institution?</td>
<td>Writing reports on visits, from which extracts of best practices are made.</td>
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<td>4.</td>
<td>Could you explain the benchmarking process that is followed in your institution?</td>
<td>BOCODOL has carried out benchmarking with Namibia College of Open Learning (NAMCOL). The top down approach is followed on consultancies and policies of other universities, like those in South Africa. The other method is the down-up approach in which employees go on benchmarking and write reports. People also have internal consultancies, like workshops, and conferences to keep abreast of global and local trends. There is the institution-to-institution approach, like the North-West University on programmes. There are external examiners and writers from the University of Botswana and some benchmarking assistance from the Virtual University of Small States of the Commonwealth of Learning (VUSSC of CoL).</td>
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<td>5.</td>
<td>How has benchmarking resulted in, or affected, quality education in your institution?</td>
<td>The processes and performance at this college have largely been informed by what we learn from other institutions.</td>
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<td>6.</td>
<td>How has benchmarking been consciously practiced in your institution?</td>
<td>There is conscious benchmarking at BOCODOL as people are sent out to other countries and universities to learn what they are doing. Recently, people were sent to an Examination Workshop in South Africa and some went to a fraud prevention workshop. There will be a workshop in May in Namibia on academic matters. All this proves there are conscious benchmarking practices at this college. Benchmarking is a must and it is taking place. Reports show there is benchmarking at the college.</td>
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<td>7.</td>
<td>Should an institution of higher learning employ benchmarking for the purpose of self-improvement, self-regulation or both? Please, explain.</td>
<td>Benchmarking is for self-improvement purpose. In the modern times there is no institution that can survive without some form of benchmarking.</td>
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<td>8.</td>
<td>How would you relate quality performance indicators to the practice of benchmarking?</td>
<td>The Human Resources Development Commission will be the authority responsible for accreditation of universities in Botswana after the Botswana Training Authority, which was responsible training up to certificate level, merges with the Tertiary Education Council, which is currently responsible for training from the diploma level upwards.</td>
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<td>9.</td>
<td>How has your institution benefited from benchmarking?</td>
<td>The college has gained a lot in terms of quality enhancement through collaboration with institutions like AMITY, IGNU, Leeds Metropolitan University and ZOU. The processes and performance at this college have largely been informed by what we learn from other institutions.</td>
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<td>10.</td>
<td>How can benchmarking, in an institution of higher learning, be carried out objectively?</td>
<td>There is no written benchmarking policy at ODL which can be shared by institutions which results can be compared. It is debatable whether a policy would be a good thing in benchmarking. Benchmarking is part of a research policy because it involves research. A benchmarking policy would streamline everything. It would be better to give benchmarking guidelines, instead of a policy. Benchmarking is not usually used on the academic side of the institution, but on the management side. If an institution wants to come up with a Balanced Score Card it can do so through benchmarking. What would be a benchmarking policy when the output is part of the process? Benchmarking should be part of the process.</td>
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The main purpose of benchmarking is to be up-to-date.
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Appendix 8 DU
1. **What do you understand by the term 'benchmarking'?**

Benchmarking is like measuring myself against best yardstick, that is, best practice or international standards.

Is the process of determining who is the very best, who sets standards and what that standard is.

Benchmarking is seeing what people are doing, compare it with other institutions which you feel are doing better and borrow or emulate the better practice or their model. 5

Benchmarking is appreciating what others can do and emulating the performance of process.

Benchmarking is looking at institutions that are older and better and adopt best practices to improve yourself.

Benchmarking involves processes, practices production of learning material in ODL and service delivery 10

Benchmarking is the creation of a reference point.

A comparison of similar or established systems.

Individual benchmarking is not an approach taken but with individual benchmarking we are always looking at ourselves and comparing ourselves with others. It is internal evaluation system to compare ourselves with other people. 15

Benchmarking is emulating best practices identified in a similar university.

Benchmarking is trying to align what you are doing with other universities. For example, you could align programmes, in terms of content, strategies to implement, assessment and accreditation.

Benchmarking is looking things or performance of people and you try and equate this to standards or standardise the performance or scenario. 20

2. **How do you think the benchmarking concept can be practiced in an institution of higher learning?**

Sabbaticals, Contact Leave, Study Visits should target world class universities. We should also prioritise applicants from world class universities for Sabbaticals, Contact Leave and Study Visits so that ZOU learns from their experience.

An example is the partnership with Open University of Malaysia (OUM) with which ZOU benchmarks. People came from OUM, picked up a few lessons from ZOU which they implemented and have now 25 grown. They were also certified to ISO 9001. OUM was a young and small university but because of that benchmarking exercise OUM has grown into a university of more than two hundred thousand students. ZOU still has less than ten thousand students.

The reason for OUM’s sudden growth is that it came up with a much better model than the ZOU one.

ZOU returned to OUM after the implementation of the benchmarked model and the delegation was 30 astounded by what they saw. The ISO 9001 Certification is the unique ingredient that led to the exponential growth and this is why ZOU is working flat out to be ISO 9001 certified.

We have errors in examination results where results are given to someone who did not sit for the paper, or did not even register for the course, and our results take too long to be published. Midlands State University publish their results 21 days after the last paper is written. 35

Conscientisation.

The first step to benchmarking is making people aware, like pedestrians are made aware of cars by traffic lights and then you can drive well. Awareness is the number one condition for drivers.

Benchmarking needs education, conscientisation and awareness workshops.

Universities learn from other universities that are doing well through the sharing of information, ideas 40 and the formation of organisations, like DEASA and ACDE. The learning can involve the content of programmes, facilitators, resources used, time or duration of implementation and the regulations.

3. **What activity/activities prove(s) that benchmarking is being practiced in your institution?**

ZOU emulated a UNISA model of Teacher Education. Registrar and FD went to UNISA to see what was happening there in Teacher Education. FD went to find out how it was funded. They also went to 45 OUM and IGNOU.

They applied the learnt model so effectively, the programme started with 7 students and 20 in the following semester.

Research is default to benchmark.

Implementers should be involved in the process. You can’t conceive and then ask someone to deliver 50 the baby. When you talk to the incubators of the concept they want it as it is at OUM but the implementer has never seen the OUM project in operation.

The problem with such projects is that there is lack of exposure on the people who implement such concepts. Those who benchmark the project get tired with implementers who do not know how the benchmarked concept works where it was originally resident. 55

Within ZOU regional centres learn from other regions through:

1. Private communication, through asking each other how we are doing certain
Regional Directors should have a formal platform to talk shop, assist each other and share ideas and best practices in running regional centres.

4. Could you explain the benchmarking process that is followed in your institution? There is no benchmarking procedure. Certain members of senior management go on contact leave to certain universities where they believe there is something they can learn. When they get back they write a report where they state what they learnt and make recommendations to the University to implement what they learnt.

When you talk to the incubators of the concept they want it as it is at OUM but the implementer has never seen the OUM project in operation. ZOU has borrowed the Centre for Professional Development (CPD) from Open University of Malaysia (OUM), which they have tried to implement very closely to what is happening at OUM. The model is being contextualised to the needs of ZOU. CPD is a fund raising instrument but the ZOU model is failing to do so.

The VC taught the implementation as she had seen it in Malaysia, which teaching depended upon her imagination and the contact with OUM she had. It also depended upon her communication and transformational skills to bring it here in full. People in Malaysia are professionally trained to fundraise, unlike in ZOU where the professional training is absent. People in ZOU did not appreciate or understand the business model. In fact a Shona novel writer was put in charge of CPD because she was the best person among those available. She has struggled to grasp the fund raising concept because she has no business appreciation. The CPD appointment was problematic. She is training herself and the VC transferred someone from the Faculty of Commerce and Law to help her with the business management and financial matters.

Culturally, ZOU is a product of benchmarking with UNISA and the British Open University. It was modelled along the British system. However, there is no reporting format for people who visit other institutions on contact leave, sabbatical or workshop attendance. There should be a defined feedback mechanism, which should also cover short courses, conferences, workshops and which should include such subheadings as lessons learnt, conclusions, feedback, recommendations and any other important issue. There should then be feedback on the outcome of the report. Where a recommendation should be implemented the reporter should be asked to implement the recommendation.

5. How has benchmarking resulted in, or affected, quality education in your institution? The standards that Zimbabwe Council of Higher Education (ZIMCHE) are benchmarked from universities like UZ, NUST, UNISA and Midlands State University (MSU) Chinhoyi University of Technology (CUT).

There are no benchmarked standards, which has resulted in poor quality service delivery to stakeholders, like students. Our quality has greatly improved. We have won several awards and accolades in the last 12 months. (Get list of awards from Mr. Gabi).

There is no organisation in Africa for benchmarking. The organisation that used to work with universities on collaborative issues was Southern Africa Regional Universities Association (SARUA). The 95 universities used to consider programmes, in terms of accreditation, qualifications of lecturers and other areas. SARUA has gone dormant due to a lack of funds.

6. How has benchmarking been consciously practiced in your institution? Unconsciously practising benchmarking ZOU is consciously benchmarking but views it as a trivial issue. All the local state universities were modelled along the University of Zimbabwe (UZ) and become 100 replications of UZ. The people knew no other university but UZ and every new university took the processes, procedures and structures of UZ. As a result ZOU is struggling today because it took the processes, procedures and structures of a conventional university when it is an ODL institution.

The expectation is that universities like the Dutch Reformed Church University, a private institution, may start differently.

7. Should a university employ benchmarking for the purpose of self-improvement, self-regulation or both? Please, explain. Benchmarking is primarily for self-improvement. As we improve in certain practices then self-regulation comes in to stay competitive. The purpose of benchmarking is to achieve best practices and continuous improvement. Yes; To be relevant to society To be competitive 110 To be attractive To keep pace with developments around us. For instance the systems on sabbatical and contact leave should be followed closely without any individual involvement in determining who qualifies and who does not. Systems do not look at individual faces but consider the satisfaction of all requirements, and the 115 budgets that go with the leave are provided. Systems should reflect sponsorship, staff development on how to manage research in ODL, tracking the progress.
8. How would you relate quality performance indicators to the practice of benchmarking?

Key deliverables of lecturers are used to benchmark lecturers in all universities, like in research and 120 journal articles production. These should be considered against other institutions.

Benchmarking establishes reference points in terms of where we stand. It helps you to understand the realm you are operating in so that you do not over-estimate or under-judge yourself or your own performance. 125

Benchmarking helps stabilise and to put yourself on a scale. Some of the broad aims of the QA unit are:

1. Fulfil the requirements of ZIMCHE and other regulatory authorities.
2. Quality teaching in terms of lecturers, structures and materials
3. Offer relevant market driven programmes, which is achieved by the use of tracer study 130 instruments employer satisfaction survey and needs assessment.
4. Quality drive, which relates itself to regulatory benchmarking and international benchmarking in university rankings.
5. Quality objective of research is crucial and there is the need to set a target number of publications from individual academics on a yearly basis. These should appear in peer reviewed journals. 135 These would translate to at least 200 ZOU academic articles per year.

Research into community based issues, humanitarian and other community centred issues, which all lead to improving livelihoods.

The quality and improvement concepts require benchmarking to be effective.

9. How has your institution benefited from benchmarking?

CPD and QA 140

ZOU has nine (9) objectives in its Quality Aims and Objectives when five (5) should be the maximum.

Benchmarking has got ZOU where it is today, not innovation. The Printing Press was acquired due to benchmarking with other universities.

Improved quality, improved processes and procedures

10. How can benchmarking, in an institution of higher learning, be carried out objectively?

Select an activity, like examination processing and compare the practice with other institutions. 145

Identify key performance metrics
Choose internal areas to benchmark
Collect data on performance and on practices
Analyse data and strategies to achieve improvement
Adapt the strategies 150

Contextualise and implement, setting resource goals
Ensure there is buy-in

There should be a policy for benchmarking to be objectively carried out.

Clear guidelines are necessary based on consultation and philosophical considerations. The rationale is that students from ZOU have to match those from Chicago University, Cape Town University or any 155 other university

Sabbaticals, Contact Leave, Study visits should target world class universities. We should also prioritise applicants from world class universities for sabbaticals, contact and study visit so that ZOU learns from their experience.

11. From your own perspective, what is the main purpose for benchmarking in an institution of higher learning environment?

Improve the services of ZOU and the core business of ZOU. 160

Measure stakeholder satisfaction
Delight the stakeholder.

Improve performance
Understand cost positions
Get strategic advantage. 165

The main purpose in ZOU, which is a young university trying to come up with best practices relevant to it, should come up with standards that make it recognised as a world player. It should be recognised as an ODL world class university by prospective students, who then make it their university of choice.

We need to identify an area of expertise in which the university excels and people know the university for that. 170
### 12. To what extent would you say your institutional leadership supports benchmarking activities?

Leadership is preoccupied with petty issues which detracts it from substantive realities. It no longer focuses its attention on important issues. The minds of leadership are in the right place. Leadership is supposed to open their eyes and seeing what they admire as being done well and implement it in their institutions. **175** Leadership supports benchmarking in the sense that they travel a lot and bring back ideas that are implemented to improve the operations of the institution. The challenging ideas are customised to suit the needs of ZOU. Benchmarking is taken very seriously, from lecturers to senior management. University leadership encourage people to go on contact leave and sabbatical engagement so that they can go to other institutions and learn and improve the scope of their view. If you mention UZ to the PVC, AA, he will not listen, even if the idea you have may be good, he can’t see beyond the horizon. Leadership can’t think beyond the box, outside the box they inhabit. They are afraid of competition.

### 13. How does your institution collaborate with other institutions as a way of benchmarking?

The use of benchmarking is to manage collaboration with others. **185** Expose people to the collaborating partners so that they implement projects properly. For instance, the person driving the website development is the one who should go to the benchmarked partner for them to fully and properly understand the process.

- Tanzania Open University
- BOCODOL 190
- Zambian Open University
- Open University of Malaysia
- BOCODOL, OU Tanzania, and a few other universities borrowed the structure of ZOU
- ZOU borrowed the Higher Degrees Directorate model from American universities.

There are many collaborative relationships, like: **195**

1. MoUs with Catholic University, a relationship in the area of IT to share and exchange knowledge on many issues, like the registration process.
2. University of Zambia.
3. Open University of Malaysia, where we exchange learning materials
4. ZOU is a member of DEASA AND ACDE where meetings have resulted in continuous **200** learning initiatives and exchange of ideas.
5. ZOU is in the process of entering into a relationship with Indira Gandhi National University.
6. At the local level ZOU has relationships with a number of institutions, like the National Association of State Universities for Vice Chancellors, student bodies, and associations for different professional bodies.
7. There are internal benchmarking initiatives with Academic Registry on information systems and other relationships in financial management systems, Administrative management systems, E-learning platform was a result of a benchmarking exercise.

Benchmarking is critical to ICT as things are changing very fast and we would want to know what others are doing. **210** ZOU has MoUs with strategic universities. We benefit in terms of learning materials and programmes.

We are learning from friends in Israel, Galilee International Management Institute (GIMI) Collaboration is sharing.

There is no collaboration to speak of, except for Catholic University.

The other collaboration is with BOCODOL, where ZOU has one programme of study. **215** Efforts to collaborate with lecturers didn’t work.

### 14. Why do you think your institution should prefer collaborative to competitive benchmarking?

Organisation learning means workers continue to develop by publishing articles. In benchmarking continue to what others are doing and academics continue learning. ZOU is continuously learning but for serious benchmarking purposes there should be periodic training sessions. **220** The Call Centre should identify potential workers; train them to answer questions and to retrieve information from the database.

There is a direct relationship between the two because the underlying objective for benchmarking is improvement.

If a university is not a learning organisation then it cannot improve. **225** The objectives of the institution may determine if it is a learning organisation or not.

A university which is not a learning organisation does not generate knowledge from within, but get it from elsewhere.

### 15. How does benchmarking directly feed into the quality of ODL education?

Growth should be in terms of quality of service, refining processes and procedures, the visibility of the institution, reputation and recognition from stakeholders. **230** ZOU emphasises growth in student numbers but there are small institutions in terms of numbers but they are giants in performance, in their processes, service delivery and the
quality of the product, which is well groomed.
If you don’t benchmark you don’t grow, you remain stagnant.
Benchmarking is part of the Quality Management Principles, which are:

1. Leadership
2. Customer focus
3. Process approach
4. Involvement of people
5. Systems approach to management
6. Continuous improvement
7. Factual approach to decision making
8. Mutually beneficial customer/supplier relationships

Benchmarking is directly related to principle number 6 and is a part and parcel of the principles that support the ISO 9001 Quality Management Standard.

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No. | QUESTION | COMPOSITE RESPONSE |
--- | --- | --- |
1. | What do you understand by the term 'benchmarking'? | An opportunity to compare what one university is doing with a similar university. If one is strong in an area the weak one should identify where it is weak and transfer the strength of the strong one to the weak of to lift its performance. Benchmarking is comparing your practices with other institutions, in the areas of academic work, assessment, administration, teaching and other areas. It is better for similar institutions to compare performance but it is not a prerequisite. A similar university may have common objectives, and shared success stories. Benchmarking is setting a ruler and you mark where you want to be. Its setting points along a route to ensure people observe what is happening. Setting standards an institution wants to achieve. It's a process of learning from others and when you have sufficient time to learn how to measure, like reading two hours a day. Benchmarking is setting points along a route to ensure people observe what is happening. Setting standards an institution wants to achieve. It’s a process of learning from others and when you have sufficient time to learn how to measure, like reading two hours a day. It is better for similar institutions to compare performance but it is not a prerequisite. A similar university may have common objectives, and shared success stories. The prime thought is to compare with another private university. A situation can arise to go out of a ‘similar’ situation and pick a company or an institution sharing a needed process or procedure. We can learn from a private company if they have what we can learn. Helps to establish what things to achieve after observing what others have done, at what time and what practices to adopt. |
2. | How do you think the benchmarking concept can be practiced objectively in an institution of higher learning? | We exchange information and share experiences to sharpen our performance. We rely on collaboration and cooperation because we may not have everything we need and we invite those who have what we need to come and help us. In areas in which we are better we keep those factors or elements that make us better and borrow from our collaborators in areas we need to improve. We need to interact more, go to each other’s institution to learn from them. Bring best practices home and vice versa. Interact more. A workshop was held by the Director, SADC ODL who came and shared practices in the SADC region on ODL. Other institutions were also invited, like Zambia Institute of Special Education and Zambia In-Service Training Institute. The workshop was very fruitful because there was a lot of sharing. ZAO does not compete but complement other universities offering education. We believe in complementarity, not competition. Our collaborators may be better in some areas just like we may be better in others. |
3. | What activity/activities prove(s) that benchmarking is being practised in your institution? | There are periodic workshops to share ideas. There are visits as well. Benchmarking is very good because we see what others are doing and we improve, even on fees. Leadership always goes on national radio and television to talk about what ZAO is doing. We sent a team to London for two weeks to learn about this concept. Then the London group came to continue with the training. One or two people picked up what it was all about. We then hired a consultant to train all the members of staff to use the e-learning. Students are taught to use e-learning through cell phones, laptops and desk top computers. Held workshops on module writing. |
4. | Could you explain the benchmarking process that is followed in your institution? | Process starts at department level, according to results of benchmarking. From the school it goes to Senate in the form of a concept paper with full courses. Module outline is written and it passes through the school QA checks for conformity to the module outline and content requirement. ZAO has based what it does on UZ. There has not been a policy, everything has been done like a tradition, not written down. ZAO has formalised what it does on UZ. It was formalised with the appointment of Director, QA where benchmarking resides. After examinations Senate meets to consider results. |
5. | How has benchmarking resulted in, or affected, quality education in your institution? | When ZAO started it went into a MOU agreement with UZ to: Access a curriculum because UZ had been running for years. Access the experienced lecturers of UZ on a part time basis. The cooperation with UZ helped in areas of teaching and staff development. UZ also had a number of best practices which we accessed through the agreement. This way we took a shorter route to develop and improve. It made ZAO grow faster. This young institution still has to learn from older institutions, to try and emulate what they have done. |
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<td>Open institutions, those who admit they are deficient in some areas, should cooperate. Police members who study law at ZAO get promoted on completion of their programmes. Very important. Quality Control is one area that gives an institution competitive advantage. We need to go out and see what others are doing, like Kenya and Zimbabwe. The quality of the law programme is above what is good but not yet excellent. How to communicate with students, for example, when marking and through positive comments and not to delay sending feedback. Students should get feedback before they write the next assignment.</td>
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<td>6. How has benchmarking been consciously practiced in your institution?</td>
<td>Benchmarking is consciously practiced and emphasised at ZAO. We are competing for students so we have to compare what we are doing with our competitors, like UZ and Nkrumah University College of Education. The monthly presentations are to the public. One academician presents a researched paper which is then discussed. The public includes members of embassies, other universities and the general public. Not at the moment.</td>
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<td>7. Should an institution employ benchmarking for the purpose of self-improvement, self-regulation or both? Please, explain.</td>
<td>New universities are being created and they are told by government to accredit themselves to existing universities. This is an indirect way to regulate what the institutions can do through current universities. The existing universities advise the new ones and guide them along until they are ready to run on their own. ZAO was affiliated to UNISA when it started. Both. Benchmarking helps improve in service delivery. Helps regulate internally how we work by asking if we are what we are doing correctly. Challenges and problems are handled a better way if we see how others have handled them. For instance, some now use cell phones and e-mails to communicate with students. Self-improvement, like in the School of Law where students have been performing well and qualifying to get onto the bench. A project, being funded by the government is instructive. The Fast Track Programme for Teacher Advancement involves ten students each from the University of Zambia, Copperbelt University Zambia Open University and Mungushi University. The results will be known later to determine which students get promoted after completion.</td>
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<td>8. How would you relate quality performance indicators to the practice of benchmarking?</td>
<td>QA- To look at a number of QA models and the criteria e.g. ACDE Toolkit and the Commonwealth of Learning’s Review and Improvement Model (RIM). ZAO then develops a local QA Model or Framework called Quality Review and Improvement Model. Set up standards to achieve given objective. Sit and evaluate what we have achieved. Measure the gap. Give ourselves a few years then measure again to see if the gap has been closed. The increasing number of students enrolling proves the programmes are popular.</td>
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<tr>
<td>9. How has your institution benefited from benchmarking?</td>
<td>Bring in external colleagues to help from other institutions, those who are better than us in identified areas. Internal benchmarking is important. A few of the students have been promoted to provincial positions. Certain programmes have had good results with graduates getting promoted. ZAO students are generally doing fairly well. To set and maintain these standards we established benchmarking close links with others. It was fortunate that when ZAO submitted its results to the Ministry of Education for the first three years the Ministry changed its stance, they were good results. The VC was appointed onto government boards and I was also appointed last year. The VC and I are on the Directorate of Distance Education at the Ministry of Education and we advise them. I am on the Distance Education of Southern Africa serving as a member of the collaboration committee of universities and we belong to the African Union of Universities Association. We share information on the development of open resources and how to put together material for the African Union cite. 29 universities come together to share experiences. 1. Improve ODL through training, and this has already started. 2. Trained staff on Customer Care and there are now a number of approved workshops. 3. Monitor performance of various units, e.g. residential school.</td>
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| 10. How can benchmarking, in an institution of higher learning, be carried out objectively? | | 252
<table>
<thead>
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<td>11. From your own perspective, what is the main purpose for benchmarking in a institution of higher learning environment?</td>
<td>The purpose of benchmarking in ODL is to take a look at what others do and ensure the product is of a high quality. Improve standards and scale up quality.</td>
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<td>12. To what extent would you say your institution leadership supports benchmarking activities?</td>
<td>Leadership is obsessed with benchmarking. They support projects to do with benchmarking, although we don’t use that term. Support is automatic if the way is related to programmes. In principle benchmarking of academic work is fully supported as long as it leads to quality education. There are research funds which are given to those whose papers qualify for funding. Many people don’t apply. Very supportive. Leadership is in the forefront of support. The coming on board of Professor Siaciwena there is now change in quality delivery. There is no corporate governance at ZAO, no independence. We would like to be better if we were independent. We want to have exchange programmes to learn from others.</td>
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<tr>
<td>13. How does your institution of higher learning collaborate with other institutions as a way of benchmarking?</td>
<td>We collaborate and cooperate with: 1. University of South Africa 2. Zimbabwe Open University 3. Open University of Tanzania 4. Nairobi Open University 5. Sudan Open University 6. Open University of Nigeria. We rely on collaboration and cooperation because we may not have everything we need and we invite those who have what we need to come and help us. MOODLE, an e-learning platform. We sent a team to London for two weeks to learn about this concept. Then the London group came to continue with the training. One or two people picked up what it was all about. We then hired a consultant to train all the members of staff to use the e-learning. Students are taught to use e-learning through cell phones, laptops and desk top computers. It is an open source platform which enables one to call, chat and broadcast material free of charge. It lets students ask questions. MOODLE is a strict/mechanistic product which does not have artistic flexibility one might need. MOODLE is open and free. Curriculum is borrowed from UZ ZAO has a number of affiliates, some of which are: Southern African Development Teachers College and Northern College for underwriting diploma programmes. Paglory College in Kabwe in Early Childhood Education and Secondary Education. This is part of benchmarking because we look at the programme and advise where a better performance can be achieved. Other areas of attention include dormitories, water closets, courses and the qualification of teachers. The advice on deficiencies is given and this should lift performance to a certain level. There workshops where people meet and collaborate. The VC visits other universities to learn and when he returns he convenes meetings to share with academics any new ideas. There are regular meetings to share the sentiments of students and react accordingly. A project funded by the Irish Government and includes Mzuzu University in Malawi, Mlungushi University in Kabwe, National University of Ireland and Zambian Open University. The project is to introduce a Masters programme to be done by ten students from each university on community research. The results of the research are used to develop the community. Results are not yet available as the project is still ongoing. We formed a partnership with Open University of Malaysia Affiliations with local institutions and we give guidance for free. We aim to develop more active relationships with comparable institutions using both modes of operation. We need to interact more with everybody.</td>
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<tr>
<td>14. Why do you think your institution should ZAO is working well with other institutions and accessing best practices.</td>
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</table>
| 15. | How does benchmarking directly feed into the quality of ODL education? | Direct relationship
If positive in one's thinking then one looks at a neighbour, appreciate what the neighbour is doing and access the practice so as to raise performance and quality.
This is done through cooperation. This cooperation is continuous.
We will never succeed if we put a wedge between ourselves and other institutions from whom we are supposed to learn.
Leadership promotes continuous learning through further studies.
ZAO encourages the attendance of international workshops to learn.
Colleges that want to affiliate with ZAO are welcome and this encourages continuous learning through looking at their papers and it helps us continue to raise standards.
VC travelled a lot and brought back a lot of modules from different universities. For instance, VC went to Malaysia and borrowed their study guides for post graduate studies in business and the university can now write its own. |
<p>| 16. | I am asking for copies of: |
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| 26. | Balanced Score Card |
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<td>1.</td>
<td>What do you understand by the term 'benchmarking'?</td>
<td>Benchmarking is meant to leap-frog processes and avoid re-inventing the wheel.</td>
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<td>It is to learn from others so that one can improve one’s own performance.</td>
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<td>But the one benchmarking must know what one wants and design strategies that suit what one wants to achieve.</td>
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<td>Benchmarking is not a safari or a visit to have a good time.</td>
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<td>For example, if one wants to improve on quality one must visit someone whose quality is exceptional.</td>
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<td>2.</td>
<td>How do you think the benchmarking concept can be practiced in an institution of higher learning?</td>
<td>In research work, a university can set up research development strategies from those institutions renowned for their research output.</td>
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<td>The good thing about benchmarking is that I can do it from my office by corresponding with colleagues from other universities and be able to establish their research cultures.</td>
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<td>The college offers continuous open learning and uses benchmarking as a way to ring-fence the institution so that it can grow with other institutions by identifying indicators to compare with.</td>
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<td>3.</td>
<td>What activity/activities prove(s) that benchmarking is being practiced in your institution?</td>
<td>People visit other institutions to learn new processes.</td>
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<td>4.</td>
<td>Could you explain the benchmarking process that is followed in your institution?</td>
<td>There is no laid down benchmarking procedure or process at BOCODOL. I have never seen a policy on benchmarking at this college but there is a lot of benchmarking going on.</td>
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<td>Benchmarking is a necessary practice and the college should have a policy or strategy on how to go about it.</td>
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<td>5.</td>
<td>How has benchmarking resulted in, or affected, quality education in your institution?</td>
<td>The processes and performance at this college have largely been informed by what we learn from other institutions.</td>
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<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>How has benchmarking been consciously practiced in your institution?</td>
<td>There are cases when people are advised to go out and learn how others are excelling. The people who do not learn from others lack exposure, through which they can go to others to find out how their processes are making them perform well.</td>
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<td>Even people in new jobs or new challenges can learn from those who have been in the same situations before them.</td>
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<td>7.</td>
<td>Should an institution employ benchmarking for the purpose of self-improvement, self-regulation or both? Please, explain.</td>
<td>It can be employed for both self-improvement and self-regulation.</td>
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<td>8.</td>
<td>How would you relate quality performance indicators to the practice of benchmarking?</td>
<td>Benchmarking has benefitted quality in that it improves the standards due to the introduction of best practices in a given area.</td>
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<td>Benchmarking is carried out by borrowing from only those who are the best or those established who are more grounded in an area.</td>
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<td>One may discover one is doing better than the one from whom an idea is being borrowed, so there is need for initial baseline study and the identification of a performance gap.</td>
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<td>This can be done through measuring oneself against others to be able to reach or exceed their level.</td>
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<td>Benchmarking is a standard in itself.</td>
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<td>9.</td>
<td>How has your institution of higher learning benefited from benchmarking?</td>
<td>BOCODOL has benefited a lot because it visits other institutions and collaborates with a number of other colleges and universities.</td>
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<td>There may be no policy on benchmarking but the instruments are there, like collaboration.</td>
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<td>10.</td>
<td>How can benchmarking, in an institution of higher learning, be carried out objectively?</td>
<td>There should be a model to justify benchmarking by identifying an area which submits to benchmarking, decide on what criteria to employ, which can be a checklist, for processes, decide on the length of time the benchmarking practice should take place and then implement the strategy chosen for the purpose.</td>
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<td>The problem is the there is a cost tied to the process of benchmarking so it affects how long it can be carried out. It also affects the point on institutionalising it.</td>
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<td>11.</td>
<td>From your own perspective, what is the main purpose for benchmarking in an institution of higher learning environment?</td>
<td>The main purpose is to improve performance, although there are cases where an element of self-regulation is done. If benchmarking is setting standards then self-regulation is also involved in it.</td>
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<td>12.</td>
<td>To what extent would you say your institution’s leadership supports benchmarking activities?</td>
<td>There should be a budget for benchmarking to cater for resources and there should be senior management support if benchmarking can be implemented successfully. At times one can implement benchmarking with or without leadership support, depending on what authority one has, otherwise it is essential to have leadership support. 50 The institution must be concerned about the dividend and there usually is easy support if there are some benefits to be accrued from the benchmarking exercise. Currently, resources have become a major issue in higher education; the budget from government is no longer adequate so there should be a tangible spinoff from the benchmarking practice. 55 Benchmarking must be reflected in changes that can be accounted for in institutions. In other words some positive benefit must manifest itself.</td>
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<td>13.</td>
<td>How does your institution collaborate with other institutions as a way of benchmarking?</td>
<td>There have been a number of collaborative relationships now. The institutions that quickly come to mind are AMITY, IGNOU, ZOU, North West University NAMCOL and Open University of UK. 60 The Commonwealth of Learning has played a big role in this college’s benchmarking activities. The local institutions have also played their part in programme development, the joint provision of programme offering and staff training.</td>
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<td>Why do you think your institution of higher learning should prefer collaborative to competitive benchmarking?</td>
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1. University Strategic Plan (current).  
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6. Any document relevant to benchmarking practice. | Competitive benchmarking may not neatly fit into benchmarking because it is driven by the survival spirit. It involves the going 65 into an institution covertly, something like higher education espionage to obtain information secretly and gain an advantage in order to out-do competitors. |
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<td>1.</td>
<td>What do you understand by the term ‘benchmarking’?</td>
<td>Benchmarking involves finding out best practices in what others are doing. It is measuring and comparing what one’s own institution is doing using chosen criteria.</td>
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<td>2.</td>
<td>How do you think the benchmarking concept can be practiced in an institution of higher learning?</td>
<td>Benchmarking at BOCODOL involves conducting regular visits to other institutions. Writing reports on visits, from which extracts of best practices are made Quality Assurance instruments are a result of benchmarking, which include policies for operational areas and the criteria used to ensure quality education.</td>
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<td>3.</td>
<td>What activity/activities prove(s) that benchmarking is being practiced in your institution?</td>
<td>Benchmarking is consciously practiced but it is not called by that name. A university is a dynamic entity which strives in setting landmarks which it attains to solve problems. A strategic plan is the driver of aspects of a university which should be followed and documented. It works together with benchmarking and can be referenced for future generations. There is no policy on benchmarking in BOCODOL but a lot of talk on how it should be done. Qualitative instruments like reports can be translated into benchmarking instruments but it may not be done systematically, although it should follow the benchmarking approach.</td>
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<td>4.</td>
<td>Could you explain the benchmarking process that is followed in your institution?</td>
<td>Quality practices are meant to ensure standards are maintained and benchmarking practices are also meant to ensure standards are achieved. These are quality assurance standards and the criteria used are recognised as standards. These standards enable institutions to compare how they are performing.</td>
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<td>5.</td>
<td>How has benchmarking resulted in, or affected, quality education in your institution?</td>
<td>There has been conscious practice of benchmarking at BOCODOL although the name has not been used. No one talks of the name “Benchmarking” but what we do is benchmarking, especially through visits. The programmes we have are a result of linkages with other institutions, like ZOU, IGNU, VUSSC and AMITY. There is the acknowledgement that benchmarking is taking place.</td>
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<td>6.</td>
<td>How has benchmarking been consciously practiced in your institution?</td>
<td>Benchmarking can be employed for both self-improvement and self-regulatory purposes. The purpose would be to determine if there are any deviations from the proposed course of action.</td>
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<td>7.</td>
<td>Should an institution employ benchmarking for the purpose of self-improvement, self-regulation or both? Please, explain.</td>
<td>Benchmarking includes the borrowing of the best practices and interacting with others who are better or it can be undertaken just to compare how two institutions perform.</td>
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<td>8.</td>
<td>How would you relate quality performance indicators to the practice of benchmarking?</td>
<td>There is objectivity in most benchmarking projects. For instance, the use of the Balanced Score Card can be used if the institution is achieving 25% of its potential and you want to achieve the 75% deficit through benchmarking. You decide on how best to do it and what strategy to implement. You need to look at technicalities, like the quality of tutors and material. Go inside the department at micro-level and see the systems in place. Each school should produce QA booklets on examination management to guide its members and periodically convene a retreat to in-service members so that the process can be evaluated objectively.</td>
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<td>9.</td>
<td>How has your institution benefited from benchmarking?</td>
<td>An example is the Bachelor of Commerce degree programme from ZOU. It was received and thoroughly contextualised and case studied were changed to suit to local</td>
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<td>10.</td>
<td>How can benchmarking, in an institution of higher learning, be carried out objectively?</td>
<td>Benchmarking should be approached like a project with a beginning and an end, and parts in between. Each part should be quality assured. An example is the Bachelor of Commerce degree programme from ZOU. It was received and thoroughly contextualised and case studied were changed to suit to local</td>
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<td>11.</td>
<td>From your own perspective, what is the main purpose for benchmarking in an institution of higher learning environment?</td>
<td>Benchmarking includes the borrowing of the best practices and interacting with others who are better or it can be undertaken just to compare how two institutions perform.</td>
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</table>
12. To what extent would you say your institution’s leadership supports benchmarking activities?  
The local leadership is enthusiastic about benchmarking and assumes the omnibus approach, they also listen and learn.  
It is a learning leadership.  
The BOCODOL leadership is a transformational leadership.  
The approach is to undertake institutional capacity building then develop processes to ensure customers are satisfied by the products/services.  
The executive management and the Chief Executive Officer are involved in regular visits to places where issues of concern are discussed.  
There is a budget to expose leadership to best practices in different parts of the world, like the CoL and VUSSC.  
The Virtual University for Small States of Commonwealth holds training sessions for quality material production and use, personnel training and initiate collaborative practices and many other activities meant to improve institutional performance.  
VUSSC also holds Boot Camps for the 32 small states (those with 4 million people or less. Botswana has slightly above 2 million people.).  
Boot Camps are workshops to develop programmes in the thirty-two countries and so far ten programmes have been developed. For instance, BOCODOL has developed a Bachelor of Business and Entrepreneurship degree programme.

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The ODL Benchmarking Model could be a local product to inform open and distance learning institutions, as opposed to the McKinnon et al model which informs conventional universities. The model should reflect local circumstances and justification.
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<td>1.</td>
<td>What do you understand by the term 'benchmarking'?</td>
<td>Benchmarking is a system an institution embarks on to carry out a fact finding study and appreciates best practices from other institutions. It involves borrowing what best works for you.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>How do you think the benchmarking concept can be practiced in an institution of higher learning?</td>
<td>It is very appropriate to use benchmarking, although there is no policy on benchmarking. However, the Department of Partnerships has come up with guidelines on benchmarking, which include (i) justifying benchmarking (ii) outline expectations of a visit (iii) what are the possible yields of the visit or practice. Benchmarking partners can set common standards which can enhance comparison and objective evaluation.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>What activity/activities prove(s) that benchmarking is being practiced in your institution?</td>
<td>Benchmarking is not consolidated or institutionalised in BOCODOL. Currently, I am organising for a benchmarking visit to the Mauritius Open University (MOU). The aim is to populate a new faculty with books, while BOCODOL produces its own. The visit to Mauritius will result in BOCODOL getting a menu of what it can use now, bring them and contextualise them and then use them by second semester 2014. The targeted is an ideal institution because it started the same way BOCODOL has started. It started as Mauritius College of Air, and then it was transformed into a university. I will possibly visit MOU in an effort to avoid re-inventing the wheel. Collaborate in offering programmes, especially in areas like ICT and Tourism where MOU is robust and well known. The difference between collaboration and partnership is that in a partnership we sign an MOU or MOA which stipulates who does what and when but a collaborative relationship is a working relationship, without regulated roles and responsibilities. The Department of Partnerships is responsible for the formation of partnerships. Aided by the Division of Development Services, which is equivalent to a Faculty.</td>
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<td>4.</td>
<td>Could you explain the benchmarking process that is followed in your institution?</td>
<td>There is no laid down process at BOCODOL. There should be a reason, like the one for MOU is to populate a new faculty with requisite programmes. A needs assessment has already been done. When BOCODOL is given a university status in September 2013 the faculty should have the needed programmes. The choice of Mauritius Open University is a good one because it has strength in the use of open resources.</td>
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<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>How has benchmarking resulted in, or affected, quality education in your institution?</td>
<td>The college has always asked people to visit other institutions, to attend conferences and other fora where new ideas are shared. These are brought back in conference or workshop reports. They are then borrowed and contextualised and then implemented.</td>
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<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>How has benchmarking been consciously practiced in your institution?</td>
<td>Benchmarking can be used for both self-improvement and self-regulation but more importantly to catch up on the performance of better performing universities.</td>
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<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Should an institution of higher learning employ benchmarking for the purpose of self-improvement, self-regulation or both? Please, explain.</td>
<td>Benchmarking gives benchmarks which are standards of quality.</td>
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<td>8.</td>
<td>How would you relate quality performance indicators to the practice of benchmarking?</td>
<td>The main reason for the current benchmarking exercise is to populate the local faculty.</td>
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<td>Question</td>
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<tr>
<td>11. From your own perspective, what is the main purpose for benchmarking in an institution of higher learning environment?</td>
<td>40 with relevant modules and programmes before the beginning of September when BOCODOL becomes a university.</td>
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<tr>
<td>12. To what extent would you say your institution’s leadership supports benchmarking activities?</td>
<td>The leadership of BOCODOL encourages benchmarking. The MOU effort came from the Chief Executive Officer of the college. They also make resources available for people to visit other institutions and share ideas. In fact the senior management here are always nagging me to push me for better performance through benchmarking. Senior leadership here actually opened an international phone line to enable us to communicate easily with international universities and organisations.</td>
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<tr>
<td>13. How does your institution of higher learning collaborate with other institutions as a way of benchmarking?</td>
<td>The Virtual Universities of the Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC) encourages benchmarking among the commonwealth countries, under the umbrella of the Commonwealth of Learning. Programmes are exchanged for free, and modules are contextualised to suit the borrowing country or university. Materials are made appropriate for the local market before it can be used.</td>
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<td>14. Why do you think your institution of higher learning should prefer collaborative to competitive benchmarking?</td>
<td>There is no competition which negates the spirit of continuous sharing of ideas and learning of new knowledge. In Botswana the university fees are heavily subsidised which cuts out competition. The route to take is to collaborate and share knowledge.</td>
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<td>15. How does benchmarking directly feed into the quality of ODL education?</td>
<td>When the college was developing the Integrated Early Childhood Development programme it went to Jamaica where it borrowed the programme, contextualised it and implemented it. The fruits of that benchmarking exercise are being seen today, two years after the programme was started. The current Master of Arts in Distance Education degree programme was benchmarked from Indira Gandhi National University (IGNOU). The Diploma in Youth Development Work was benchmarked from the Commonwealth of Learning (CoL). The Bachelor of Commerce degree programme came from the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU). Quality is improved through benchmarking by identifying what standards to achieve then identify who is achieving the standard and borrowing how they are doing it. The practice has been to start at local level, identify who is performing at what level, and then spread the outreach to international institutions. At local level the institutions which are normally considered are ABM University and Balsago University, which are private but have a rich and wide menu of programmes as they are well established. The reputation of BOCODOL is good which means it has no problems in accessing students. It is going to start a re-branding exercise to establish itself as a university.</td>
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A model should have an aim, which contains the terms of reference, anticipated outcome, a brainstorming session, for the sharing of ideas, an implementation phase and an evaluation phase after every other phase. The evaluation should be formative instead of summative.
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<td>1.</td>
<td>What do you understand by the term ‘benchmarking’?</td>
<td>Benchmarking (Bm) was when one compared oneself to others, or an institution comparing itself with another institution to be able to learn and improve and as a process to inform. Bm relates to everything in life, no area is left out in benchmarking so that people see what they are doing. Benchmarking brings in an era of continuous improvement.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>How do you think the benchmarking concept can be practiced in an institution of higher learning?</td>
<td>There was no policy on benchmarking at BOCODOL but there are a lot of partnerships which are a form of benchmarking. There is conscious awareness throughout the college that benchmarking can assist in raising local standards. The college offers continuous open learning and uses benchmarking as a way to ring-fence the institution so that it can grow with other institutions.</td>
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<td>3.</td>
<td>What activity/activities prove(s) that benchmarking is being practiced in your institution of higher learning?</td>
<td>Institutions should set standards as a group so that benchmarking is objective.</td>
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<td>4.</td>
<td>Could you explain the benchmarking process that is followed in your institution?</td>
<td>BOCODOL proposes to benchmark with an institution, like the Bangladesh Open University and the National Institute of Open School when it has aspects it wants to introduce in its programmes, like the Agency Model. The Agency Model is whereby a college or university opens agencies to run its programmes then it comes in to quality assure the programmes.</td>
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<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>How has benchmarking resulted in, or affected, quality education in your institution?</td>
<td>There has been conscious practice of benchmarking although there has not been any written policy or process of benchmarking. Usually the benchmarking is a once off exercise, meant to introduce some practice.</td>
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<td>6.</td>
<td>How has benchmarking been consciously practiced in your institution?</td>
<td>The benchmarking has done to introduce a programme or an aspect to improve the performance of the college.</td>
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<td>7.</td>
<td>Should an institution of higher learning employ benchmarking for the purpose of self-improvement, self-regulation or both? Please, explain.</td>
<td>The benchmarking has done to introduce a programme or an aspect to improve the performance of the college.</td>
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<td>8.</td>
<td>How would you relate quality performance indicators to the practice of benchmarking?</td>
<td>There have been visits to other institutions of higher learning to see how they perform, borrow ideas from them and improve the standards at BOCODOL.</td>
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<td>9.</td>
<td>How has your institution benefited from benchmarking?</td>
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<td>How can benchmarking, in an institution of higher learning, be carried out objectively?</td>
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<td>From your own perspective, what is the main purpose for benchmarking in a institution of higher learning environment?</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>13.</strong> How does your institution collaborate with other institutions as a way of benchmarking?</td>
<td>BOCODOL is collaborating with Namibia College of Open Learning (NAMCOL) in Quality Assurance, and other international universities. The college attends conferences, meetings and other fora where it learns new ways of doing things, like the Commonwealth of Learning, which encourages benchmarking by finding out what others are doing and how they are doing it. We also use the internet to find out new ideas and then approach those whose ideas we appreciate because you cannot take everything. The college decides on what it wants to borrow then changes it to suit what it wants to do.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>14.</strong> Why do you think your institution of higher learning should prefer collaborative to competitive benchmarking?</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>15.</strong> How does benchmarking directly feed into the quality of ODL institution of higher learning’s education?</td>
<td>The college accesses new ideas on quality assurance policies and practices from other universities, through conferences and institutional visits to learn from each other. The visits are an added advantage since we learn by visiting others, to improve or to establish something. BOCODOL identified the Open University of UK as an institution which had materials which it could borrow while we developed our own.</td>
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<td>3. Balanced Score Card</td>
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<td>4. Benchmarking Policy Document</td>
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<td>6. Any document relevant to benchmarking practice.</td>
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<td>1.</td>
<td>What do you understand by the term 'benchmarking'?</td>
<td>Benchmarking is the creation of a reference point. A comparison of similar or established systems. We ask ourselves where we stand with respect to a particular position. Individual benchmarking is not an approach taken but with individual benchmarking we are always looking at ourselves and comparing ourselves with others. It is internal evaluation system to compare ourselves with other people. There is no external benchmarking for individuals. Internal benchmarking defines an institutional system, like the Quality Assurance system meant do the judging and evaluating of performance of staff.</td>
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<td>2.</td>
<td>How do you think the benchmarking concept can be practiced objectively in an institution’s setting?</td>
<td>It can be used as reference to what others are doing. We construct identical processes and be able to make objective assessment of their performance. We are a university like any other university and ODL is the prescribed methodology for the learning and teaching at law. As a university we don’t limit ourselves to ODL but we can open ourselves. Benchmarking is a multifaceted methodology and it can be used in ODL and conventional university. Certain aspects in benchmarking apply to ODL and others apply to conventional mode but it can be used in all aspects of university operations. ODL can be taken as a specific process or procedure of university operation. The product is what we get from the whole university and it comes as an output from the input and process in the university. Inputs may be different, for instance the Iron Triangle is designed for a conventional university. The openness of a university is derived from being literate and the levels of literacy are nationally defined and examinations can be set to compare performance objectively, like the 5 ‘O’ levels for entry in ODL institutions but 10 points or so for conventional institutions.</td>
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<td>3.</td>
<td>What activity/activities prove(s) that benchmarking is being practiced in your institution?</td>
<td>We should benchmark a number of aspects: 1. Degrees, through checking what others are doing because if this is not done a degree might not meet international standards. 2. ICT, by looking at what other bodies are doing and the software systems they are using. The systems need to be benchmarked with others. 3. Academic programmes, through benchmarking professors and lecturers with other institution. 4. Staff management 5. Institutional policy. All these need to be benchmarked with others.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Could you explain the benchmarking process that is followed in your institution?</td>
<td>There is no process which is explicitly in a particular way. It is accepted benchmarking enables the University to attain a standard with which to compare what other institutions are doing, like UNISA or OUM. The standard is the requirement in terms of quality. There is no policy in the University on benchmarking because it may be viewed as being trivial. Trivial in the sense that this accepted as the norm in solving problems. Trivial in the sense that people rarely consciously consider it, it is taken to be so basic that it taken for granted. We can’t solve a problem without looking at what others are doing. This triviality explains why benchmarking has not been formalised by most universities in Zimbabwe. It is overlooked because it has become something like a culture, although not written down. There are likely to be benchmarking bodies, associations and groupings later in tertiary institutions. These will create a common reference point. In Mozambique and SADC local institutions are being given guidelines by regulating authorities, in all the areas of the university. This is some kind of benchmarking. In Zimbabwe ZIMCHE defines the parameters or thresholds at all levels. There is likely to be a Qualifications Authority to guide levels of qualifications at national level. The absence of a benchmarking policy or system maybe a result of historical developments in different countries. Australia, America and Europe have different historical background and are at different developmental levels. In those countries standards are not enforced by law but in our case the regulations have a force of law and universities are forced to comply or you are banned from operating. The same countries are free to offer programmes and courses they want but in Zimbabwe the regulatory authority decides on the programmes to offer. The universities are set up to specialise in given areas, like Harare Institute of Technology.</td>
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</table>
Prospects are that the future will see the introduction of open fields and we start to benchmark with world standards.

5. How has benchmarking resulted in, or affected, quality education in your institution?

   ZOU is consciously benchmarking but views it as a trivial issue. The history of a country plays a part, in Zimbabwe we start with what we know and then grow the institution. All the local state universities were modelled along the University of Zimbabwe (UZ) and become 60 replications of UZ. The people knew no other university but UZ and every new university took the processes, procedures and structures of UZ. As a result ZOU is struggling today because it took the processes, procedures and structures of a conventional university when it is an ODL institution. The expectation is that universities like the Dutch Reformed Church University, a private institution, may start differently.

6. How has benchmarking been consciously practiced in your institution?

   All the local state universities were modelled along the University of Zimbabwe (UZ) and become 60 replications of UZ. The people knew no other university but UZ and every new university took the processes, procedures and structures of UZ. As a result ZOU is struggling today because it took the processes, procedures and structures of a conventional university when it is an ODL institution. The expectation is that universities like the Dutch Reformed Church University, a private institution, may start differently.

7. Should an institution of higher learning employ benchmarking for the purpose of self-improvement, self-regulation or both? Please, explain.

   The purpose of benchmarking is to achieve best practices and continuous improvement.

8. How would you relate quality performance indicators to the practice of benchmarking?

   Benchmarking establishes reference points in terms of where we stand. It leads to continuous improvement. It helps you to understand the realm you are operating in so that you do not over-estimate or under-judge yourself or your own performance. Benchmarking helps stabilise and to put yourself on a scale.

9. How has your institution benefited from benchmarking?

10. How can benchmarking, in an institution of higher learning, be carried out objectively?

11. From your own perspective, what is the main purpose for benchmarking in an institution of higher learning environment?

   Benchmarking is taken very seriously, from lecturers to senior management. University leadership encourage people to go on contact leave and sabbatical engagement so that they can go to other institutions and learn and improve the scope of their view. Currently, visits to other institutions may not be many due to funding challenges. The Strategic Plan may not explicitly state benchmarking but it is there. The quality and improvement concepts require benchmarking to be effective. ZOU established the Quality Assurance unit due to a benchmarking exercise that identified the need for such a unit. Leadership will continue to send people to other institutions to learn from them.

12. To what extent would you say your institution’s leadership supports benchmarking activities?

   There are many collaborative relationships, like:
   8. MoUs with Catholic University, a relationship in the area of IT to share and exchange knowledge on many issues, like the registration process.
   10. Open University of Malaysia, where we exchange learning materials.
   11. ZOU is a member of DEASA AND ACDE where meetings have resulted in continuous learning initiatives and exchange of ideas.
   12. ZOU is in the process of entering into a relationship with Indira Gandhi National University.
   13. At the local level ZOU has relationships with a number of institutions, like the National Association of State Universities for Vice Chancellors, student bodies, and associations for different professional bodies.
   14. There are internal benchmarking initiatives with Academic Registry on information systems and other relationships in financial management systems, Administrative management systems, E-learning platform was a result of a benchmarking exercise.

13. How does your institution collaborate with other institutions as a way of benchmarking?

   There are many collaborative relationships, like:
   8. MoUs with Catholic University, a relationship in the area of IT to share and exchange knowledge on many issues, like the registration process.
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   13. At the local level ZOU has relationships with a number of institutions, like the National Association of State Universities for Vice Chancellors, student bodies, and associations for different professional bodies.
   14. There are internal benchmarking initiatives with Academic Registry on information systems and other relationships in financial management systems, Administrative management systems, E-learning platform was a result of a benchmarking exercise.
Benchmarking is critical to ICT as things are changing very fast and we would want to know what others are doing.

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<th>Why do you think your institution of higher learning prefer collaborative to competitive benchmarking?</th>
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<td>If a university is not a learning organisation then it cannot improve. The objectives of the institution may determine if it is a learning organisation or not. A university which is not benchmarking is not a learning organisation and it does not generate knowledge from within, but get it from elsewhere.</td>
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The MOODLE software is being used in ZOU. What is important is what each member in the university wants to accomplish or to do and the ICT will find the software for it.

People are not technologically driven but they are assisted by technology to do what they want to do.

If you have a need ICT will assist you to satisfy that need.
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<td>1.</td>
<td>What do you understand by the term 'benchmarking'?</td>
<td>Benchmarking is seeing what people are doing, compare it with other institutions which you feel are doing better and borrow or emulate the better practice or their model. We start by asking what it is they are doing at UNISA, OR OUM OR University of Manitoba in Canada. What are we doing at ZOU? What can we borrow for ZOU? ZIMCHE has set up standards and if we prefer them then that is benchmarking. Benchmarking is appreciating what others can do and emulating the performance of process. Benchmarking is not a tactic. ZOU emulated UNISA model. Registrar and FD went to UNISA to see what was happening there in Teacher Education. FD went to find out how it was funded. They also went to OUM and IGNOU. They applied the learnt model so effectively, the programme started with 7 students and 20 in the following semester. The success in the programme was in the benchmarking, seeing how the programme was managed and then returning home to apply it properly. ZOU is following benchmarking from others and applying it well. This is how the success of UNISA is being emulated successfully at ZOU. The VC is running the University as a business concern, using the OUM and the American universities models and managing everything along business lines. Greenville College in Illinois State has played a part. The VC went to Greenville College and talked to the college President. She learnt a lot of strategies which she is now applying at ZOU. Greenville College President has been advising the VC on how to manage a university along business lines. The structure of a university is about the VC, Deans, Bursar and senior management. Innovators are likely to be resisted wherever they are, that is why benchmarking is resisted by certain people.</td>
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<td>2.</td>
<td>How do you think the benchmarking concept can be practiced in an institution of higher learning?</td>
<td>Conscientisation. The first step to benchmarking is making people aware, like pedestrians are made aware of cars by traffic lights and then you can drive well. Awareness is the number one condition for drivers. Benchmarking needs education, conscientisation and awareness workshops. Instead of travelling to other institution the internet can be used to expose one to other institutions, like UNISA. Interest can take us to certain places and give us a picture of what happens at that place, like at IGNOU. People can get together to do something through Conscientisation, and then comes collaboration. Learn from those who are doing well, like the Emirates, who are made up of 7 principalities working together. Promote awareness through education.</td>
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<td>3.</td>
<td>What activity/activities prove(s) that benchmarking is being practiced in your institution?</td>
<td>ZOU has borrowed the Centre for Professional Development (CPD) from Open University of Malaysia (OUM), which they have tried to implement very closely to what is happening at OUM. The model's being contextualising to the needs of ZOU. CPD is a fund raising instrument but the ZOU model is failing to do so. When you talk to the incubators of the concept they want it as it is at OUM but the implementer has never seen the OUM project in operation. ZOU was operating in a hard economic environment those days, it hardly had funds coming into the institution and she thought the CPD concept was a possible solution. The VC taught the implementation as she had seen it in Malaysia, which teaching depended upon her imagination and the contact with OUM she had. It also depended upon her communication and transformational skills to bring it here in full. People in Malaysia are professionally trained to fundraise, unlike in ZOU where the professional training is absent.</td>
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<td>Could you explain the benchmarking process that is followed in your institution?</td>
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People in ZOU did not appreciate or understand the business model. In fact, a Shona novelist was put in charge of CPD because she was the best person among those available. She has struggled to grasp the fund raising concept because she has no business appreciation. The CPD appointment was problematic. She is training herself and the VC transferred someone from the Faculty of Commerce and Law to help her with the business management and financial matters.

Most universities borrow business models but they do not have business management skills. The general university leadership in Zimbabwe, except for the ZOU Vice Chancellor, who has business training and can talk about financial matters eloquently, do not possess any appreciation of business and financial matters. She has considerable strength in business matters.

ZOU has the lowest grant from Government among all universities, maybe because the Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education does not want to support ZOU, which means the university must depend on the fees students pay and what it can source externally.

There are a number of occurrences which makes ZOU suspect the Ministry’s intentions are not supportive. The most important is the issue of audits. ZOU has had five audits in about fifteen months when 95% of government departments had not been audited.

The Anti-Corruption Commission came to investigate rumours that the University had flown the husband of the VC to South Africa at a cost of US$95 000 for medical attention when, in actual fact, First Mutual Life had done so. There have not been any reports on the audits carried out so far.

Culturally, ZOU is a product of benchmarking with UNISA and the British Open University. It was modelled along the British system. It started as the College for Distance Education under the University of Zimbabwe, where a British, Dr. Hill, was a Vice Chancellor. The college was meant to extend education to poor people, who were those who could not afford the fees. Distance education was chosen because UZ did not have space on which to expand. This is why the British model was borrowed and reproduced.

However, they did not borrow the management of the system.

Zimbabwe is a male dominated country but a woman was chosen to run the institution with an enrolment of more than 21 000 students. The university was transformed into an experiment to how a woman who was not a professor could run the university on business lines.

The female and youngest VC surrounded herself with women to promote women in education, which was not benchmarked for. The VC did not aspire for professorship but she was preoccupied by the desire to develop the university.

She introduced the Teacher Education by ODL degree as it was run at UNISA.

However, the Chairperson of the Quality Committee at ZIMCHE saw teacher training as the preserve of UZ and was incensed. This programme was considered a UZ cash cow. The ZOU Vice Chancellor did not have any reason, according to the Business Model of competition, to enrol students for the Teacher Training programme. This is why the committee invalidated the certificates a day before the students graduated. The Bachelor of Counselling programme, with 3 000 students, was suspended. And the Master of Counselling degree with many students was also suspended.

The benchmarking of a business minded woman, following a business model, is killed by ZIMCHE, which is being used as a weapon.

ZIMCHE is being selective with benchmarking. A lot of universities are doing ODL after benchmarking with ZOU and proceed to use ZOU modules but the programmes are not suspended.

<p>| 5. | How has benchmarking resulted in, or affected, quality education in your institution? |
| 6. | How has benchmarking been consciously practiced in your institution? |</p>
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<td>Don’t re-invent the wheel Benchmarking is primarily for self-improvement</td>
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<td>8</td>
<td>How would you relate quality performance indicators to the practice of benchmarking?</td>
<td>Benchmarking has got ZOU where it is today, not innovation. The Printing Press was acquired due to benchmarking with other universities.</td>
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<td>10</td>
<td>How can benchmarking, in an institution of higher learning, be carried out objectively?</td>
<td>There should be a policy for benchmarking to be objectively carried out. Clear guidelines are necessary based on consultation and philosophical considerations. The rationale is that students from ZOU have to match those from Chicago University, Cape Town University or any other university. Currently, the benchmarking is being undertaken by leadership. The way the institution through what other universities are doing. The Corporate Structure comes through the Strategic Plan of the university.</td>
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<td>11</td>
<td>From your own perspective, what is the main purpose for benchmarking in an institution of higher learning environment?</td>
<td>Leadership is preoccupied with petty issues which detracts it from substantive realities. It no longer focuses its attention on important issues. The minds of leadership are in the right place. Leadership is supposed to open their eyes and seeing what they admire as being done well and implement it in their institutions. Experience also plays a part. VC worked in Barclays Bank and in industry before she joined UZ so she has business experience.</td>
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<td>12</td>
<td>To what extent would you say your institution’s leadership supports benchmarking activities?</td>
<td>BOCODOL, OU Tanzania, and a few other universities borrowed the structure of ZOU. ZOU borrowed the Higher Degrees Directorate model from American universities.</td>
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<td>13</td>
<td>How does your institution of higher learning collaborate with other institutions as a way of benchmarking?</td>
<td>BOCODOL, OU Tanzania, and a few other universities borrowed the structure of ZOU. ZOU borrowed the Higher Degrees Directorate model from American universities.</td>
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<td>14</td>
<td>Why do you think your institution of higher learning should prefer collaborative to competitive benchmarking?</td>
<td>Exposure. The exposure should be through: 1. Benchmarking, but where economic limitations prevail the methods listed below can be employed since they produce the same result. 2. Bringing Chiwenga to all candidates 3. Internet enables people to know what is happening in other universities. 4. Public lectures involving the community and researchers from ZOU and invitees. Faculty Forums in other universities. People share their thinking, the way they are doing things, free fellowship and networking 5. Reports on university activities. 6. Giving incentives for people to attend public lectures in many forms, like free lunch. The university cannot escape the need for exposure. How do people get to UNISA, OUT or OUM?</td>
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<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>How does benchmarking directly feed into the quality of ODL education?</td>
<td>I am asking for copies of: 13. University Strategic Plan</td>
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268
The purpose of education is humanisation, the current society dehumanises people. These are the oppressed people who need to be made aware of their freedom. They may be afraid of freedom because to them ‘to be is to be like the master’ kuita seMurungu. How is benchmarking possible in ODL? Through conscientisation/education. To be informed that benchmarking is not the same as copying, which is dirty.

In terms of informal education CPD’s achievement has been remarkable. Minister Chombo recommended the training of local urban women to run small projects, like the tobacco farmers were trained to grow tobacco. Benchmarking from ZIMCHE has not been exemplary, it is full of tension. ZOU knows what ZIMCHE wants and effectively implemented the recommendations. But whether ZIMCHE has recognised this or not is not evident. There is no goodwill on the part of ZIMCHE, as shown by the suspension of degree programmes. It seems it wanted to settle a score with VC by suspending the programmes. The suspended MSc Counselling is the strongest master programmes with 72 credit hours, which translates into 24 courses. It’s stronger than the PhD in America.

It is common knowledge that some master’s programmes at UZ have 3 course. UZ has been the standard bearer in conventional university education. ZIMCHE does not seem to promote benchmarking by policing controversial universities like ZOU. ZIMCHE should understand ODL and come up with standards applicable to ODL. It should come up with what it judges to be best practices in Economics at Chicago University and benchmark ZOU on the basis of those benchmarks. In other words the quality of each course at ZOU should be comparable to the quality of the same course at other universities. VC has more recognition outside the country than she has from local ministries. VC is a certified ODL practitioner from UNISA.

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<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>What do you understand by the term ‘benchmarking’?</td>
<td>Benchmarking is trying to align what you are doing with other universities. For example, you could align programmes, in terms of content, strategies to implement, assessment and accreditation.</td>
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<td>2.</td>
<td>How do you think the benchmarking concept can be practiced in an institution of higher learning?</td>
<td>There are many renowned universities, like Open University of United Kingdom (OUK), University of Zambia (UNZA) and Open University of Tanzania (OUT), from whom we can learn or measure the quality of programmes. The learning can involve the content of programmes, facilitators, resources used, time or duration of implementation and the regulations.</td>
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<td>3.</td>
<td>What activity/activities prove(s) that benchmarking is being practiced in your institution?</td>
<td>Most universities have a budget for research but ZOU does not have one. Researchers are using their own resources, which compromises the quality of research. There are no industries attached to ZOU for research, like at University of Zimbabwe (UZ) which is sponsored by seed houses in agriculture. Midlands State University (MSU) has industries collaborating with it in business.</td>
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ZOU could collaborate with institutions like Henderson Research Station. Bindura University of Science Education has a vibrant and well stocked research unit, MSU has 15 Research Faculty and UZ has a research department, which is well funded and it is doing very well because it has collaborative partnerships from which it get research funding. ZOU has mooted the idea of harnessing parliamentarians, who could fund research to identify problem areas in their constituencies, or research specific problems for discussion in Parliament. ZOU could decentralise the researches to regions. Researchers can link with specific parliamentarians at the 20 constituency level. The National Centre could train the researchers in the regions to be able to identify problems and come up with innovations to develop people within the region. The Research Board is still in existence but it suffers from the lack of a budget, it has held meetings and considered projects for research but the element of funding problems. 25

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<td>4.</td>
<td>Could you explain the benchmarking process that is followed in your institution?</td>
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<td>I am not aware, but I am aware of the QA.</td>
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<td>5.</td>
<td>How has benchmarking resulted in, or affected, quality education in your institution?</td>
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<td>There is no organisation in Africa for benchmarking. The organisation that used to work with universities on collaborative issues was Southern Africa Regional Universities Association (SARUA). The universities used to consider programmes, in terms of accreditation, qualifications of lecturers and other areas. SARUA has gone dormant due to a lack of funds. 30</td>
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<td>6.</td>
<td>How has benchmarking been consciously practiced in your institution?</td>
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<td>Self-improvement, like in systems management. What is done by senior management reflects more dictatorship than following management systems, for instance the systems on sabbatical and contact leave should be followed closely without any individual involvement in determining who qualifies and who does not. Systems do not look at individual faces but considers the satisfaction of all requirements, and the budgets that go with the leave are provided. Systems should reflect sponsorship, staff development on how to manage research in ODL, tracking the progress of a lecturer and the differences between ODL and conventional mode of operation. Other areas could include how to research and programme administration in ODL.</td>
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<td>7.</td>
<td>Should an institution of higher learning employ benchmarking for the purpose of self-improvement, self-regulation or both? Please, explain.</td>
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<td>The use of benchmarking is to manage collaboration with others. 40 The implementers should be involved in the actual benchmarking activities. For instance, how many people have gone to Open University of Malaysia? Expose people to the collaborating partners so that they implement projects properly. For instance, the person driving the website development is the one who should go to the benchmarked partner for them to fully and properly understand the process. 45 Senior management normally goes to the partners and bring ideas, which may not be fully understood by the implementer on the ground. They should, at least, bring reports which clearly describe the process and what should be done to ensure it produces the intended results. There is no formal reporting format, in the few cases when reports are written.</td>
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<td>8.</td>
<td>How would you relate quality performance indicators to the practice of benchmarking?</td>
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<td>12. To what extent would you say your institution’s leadership supports benchmarking activities?</td>
<td>No support. The support from senior management is minimal, where it’s present. If you mention UZ to the PVC, AA, he will not listen, even if the idea you have may be good, he can’t see beyond the horizon. Leadership can’t think beyond the box, outside the box they inhabit. They are afraid of competition. Normally, suggestions are not accepted. For instance, MSU looks after its lecturers very well and they go on contact. At ZOU they are not motivated and enrolment numbers are falling. Lecturers interact with students and they can influence them and this has a bearing on the reputation of the university.</td>
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<td>13. How does your institution collaborate with other institutions as a way of benchmarking?</td>
<td>Collaboration is sharing, which does not happen here where the master-servant relationship exists. There is no collaboration to speak of, except for Catholic University. The other collaboration is with BOCODOL, where ZOU has one programme of study. Efforts to collaborate with lecturers didn’t work.</td>
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<td>14. Why do you think your institution of higher learning prefer collaborative to competitive benchmarking?</td>
<td>We could be a learning organisation if we had at least one workshop per semester for internal people on institutional issue, like tutorials in ODL, administration and working environment. We should train each other through the internet. There is no Skype, video conferencing, twitter, facebook and how these gadgets are used.</td>
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<td>15. How does benchmarking directly feed into the quality of ODL education?</td>
<td>Quality is dependent on aspirations. In ODL we look at the product we take into the community, which should be the same the product from any other university. Quality should consider duration of programme or course, examinations, facilitators in ODL should be well trained and motivated to develop the human mind and the qualification should be quantified. ZOU, UZ and all the other universities should use the same systems and produce the same results. ZOU does not have benchmarks in research and it does not have research Ethics Form, research manual, and there is no Ethics Committee at ZOU.</td>
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<td>What do you understand by the term ‘benchmarking’?</td>
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<td>2.</td>
<td>How do you think the benchmarking concept can be practiced in an institution of higher learning?</td>
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<td>3.</td>
<td>What activity/activities prove(s) that benchmarking is being practiced in your institution?</td>
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272
4. Could you explain the benchmarking process that is followed in your institution?  
   | There is no benchmarking procedure. Certain members of senior management go on contact leave to certain universities where they believe there is something they can learn. When they get back they write a report where they state what they learnt and make recommendations to the University to implement what they learnt. However, there is no reporting format for people who visit other institutions on contact leave, sabbatical or workshop attendance. There should be a defined feedback mechanism, which should also cover short courses, conferences, workshops and which should include such subheadings as lessons learnt, conclusions, feedback, recommendations and any other important issue. There should then be feedback on the outcome of the report. Where a recommendation should be implemented the reporter should be asked to implement the recommendation.|

5. How has benchmarking resulted in, or affected, quality education in your institution?  
   | Our quality has greatly improved. We have won several awards and accolades in the last 12 months.|

6. How has benchmarking been consciously practiced in your institution?  
   | There is no benchmarking procedure. Certain members of senior management go on contact leave to certain universities where they believe there is something they can learn. When they get back they write a report where they state what they learnt and make recommendations to the University to implement what they learnt. However, there is no reporting format for people who visit other institutions on contact leave, sabbatical or workshop attendance. There should be a defined feedback mechanism, which should also cover short courses, conferences, workshops and which should include such subheadings as lessons learnt, conclusions, feedback, recommendations and any other important issue. There should then be feedback on the outcome of the report. Where a recommendation should be implemented the reporter should be asked to implement the recommendation.|

7. Should an institution employ benchmarking for the purpose of self-improvement, self-regulation or both? Please, explain.  
   | Yes; To be relevant to society, To be competitive, To be attractive, To keep pace with developments around us.|

8. How would you relate quality performance indicators to the practice of benchmarking?  
   | Some of the broad aims of the QA unit are:  
   6. Fulfil the requirements of ZIMCHE and other regulatory authorities.  
   7. Quality teaching in terms of lecturers, structures and materials  
   8. Offer relevant market driven programmes, which is achieved by the use of tracer study instruments employer satisfaction survey and needs assessment.  
   9. Quality drive, which relates itself to regulatory benchmarking and international benchmarking in university rankings.  
   10. Quality objective of research is crucial and there is the need to set a target number of publications from individual academics on a yearly basis. These should appear in peer reviewed journals. These would translate to at least 200 ZOU academic articles per year.  
   11. Research into community based issues, humanitarian and other community centred issues, which all lead to improving livelihoods.|

9. How has your institution benefited from benchmarking?  
<p>| Improved quality, improved processes and procedures. |</p>
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<tr>
<td><strong>10.</strong> How can benchmarking, in an institution of higher learning, be carried out objectively?</td>
<td>Sabbaticals, Contact Leave, Study visits should target world class universities. We should also prioritise applicants from world class universities for sabbaticals, contact and study visit so that ZOU learns from their experience.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>11.</strong> From your own perspective, what is the main purpose for benchmarking in an institution of higher learning environment?</td>
<td>Benchmarking is emulating best practices identified in a similar university. An example is the partnership with Open University of Malaysia (OUM) with which ZOU benchmarks. People came from OUM, picked up a few lessons from ZOU which they implemented and have now grown. They were also certified to ISO 9001. OUM was a young and small university but because of that benchmarking exercise OUM has grown into a university of more than two hundred thousand students. The reason for OUM’s sudden growth is that it came up with a much better model than the ZOU one. ZOU returned to OUM after the implementation of the benchmarked model and the delegation was astounded by what they saw. The ISO 9001 Certification is the unique ingredient that led to the exponential growth and this is why ZOU is working flat out to be ISO 9001 certified. Similarity of institutions in benchmarking is significant; the ODL set up is different from the conventional learning set up. People feel a university needs buildings, professors and lecturers. ODL uses the module as the lecturer or professor. ZOU should not bark up the wrong tree but stick to its mode of operation. Currently, some conventional universities are going the ODL way, reversing their mandate through the offering of parallel and block release programmes. Some even use ZOU modules in their programmes. Conventional universities have benchmarked and discovered that ODL is the way to go these days, so ZOU should not be seen to be going the conventional way. My argument about ODL comes from my experience. When I decided to study for the MBA degree I looked at what my friends were doing at UZ and discovered they spent a lot of time writing notes, in dictation and held lectures during weekends. I could not dedicate my weekends to lectures because I had other commitments and I could not leave my family to attend block release lectures for two weeks at a time. That’s when I discovered I had to join ZOU, whose ODL offering was flexible, affordable and I could learn in the comfort of my home without leaving my family. The ZOU module was interactive and it was the lecturer. ODL is convenient to a lot of workers who cannot leave their workplaces to attend fortnightly lectures. The added advantage in my experience is that I got the opportunity to network and picked up a number of friends who have helped open up a few doors and windows. The ODL mode related the assignments to the work I was doing and the dissertation was related to my work as well. In fact, I produced an instrument I started using at work and it was effective way to manage productivity. Lastly, my family appreciated my studies because I was studying at home; they encouraged me and got involved in what I was doing. The family would have resented my studies if I had been studying away from home.</td>
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<td><strong>12.</strong> To what extent would you say your institution’s leadership supports benchmarking activities?</td>
<td>Yes, very much so. Formed the first QA in 2007 in Zimbabwe, which was a result of benchmarking with a South African institution and recommendations were made, accepted and implemented From OUM the University benchmarked ISO 9001.</td>
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<td><strong>13.</strong> How does your institution of higher learning collaborate with other institutions as a way of benchmarking?</td>
<td>ZOU has MoUs with strategic universities. We benefit in terms of learning materials and programmes. We are learning from friends in Israel, Galilee International Management Institute (GIMI).</td>
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Why do you think your institution of
| 14. | higher learning should prefer collaborative to competitive benchmarking? | There is a direct relationship between the two because the underlying objective for benchmarking is improvement. |

Quality is:
1. Delivering what our customers expect.
2. Programmes that are relevant.
3. Expectations, in that programmes are accepted by society and are capable of transforming “O’ level school leavers into graduates whose impact on commerce and industry and government are positively felt.
4. Internal quality involves efficiency, effectiveness and competitiveness.
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<td>1.</td>
<td>What do you understand by the term 'benchmarking'?</td>
<td>Benchmarks are looking at institutions that are older and better and adopt best practices to improve yourself. Benchmarking involves processes, practices, production of learning material in ODL and service delivery. You identify certain aspects of service delivery. You identify certain aspects you want to benchmark because you should benchmark a few items, like service delivery, registration processes, and material development. In benchmarking you consider macroeconomic and cultural variables. I don’t think we can benchmark a product, which is a result of a process and it is bound to be the same if the process is followed properly. The concept of a product in industry is different from the concept of a product in education. In industry you can determine the results after the input, the process and output have been put in place. You have a rough idea of the product.</td>
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<td>2.</td>
<td>How do you think the benchmarking concept can be practiced in an institution of higher learning?</td>
<td>Universities learn from other universities that are doing well through the sharing of information, ideas and the formation of organisations, like DEASA and ACDE.</td>
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<td>3.</td>
<td>What activity/activities prove(s) that benchmarking is being practiced in your institution?</td>
<td>Within ZOU, regional centres learn from other regions through: (a) Private communication, through asking each other how we are doing certain operations. Regional Directors should have a formal platform to talk shop, assist each other and share ideas and best practices in running regional centres. This encourages the standardisation of practices and procedures so that ZOU remains one university, instead of ten universities in one. (b) Meetings are initiated by senior management because there is a suspicion and belief that people should not meet, or when they do meet someone from senior management should be present. Regional Directors should visit each other and also visit institutions like UNISA. When visits are made by senior management they bring home ideas and recommendations. But currently, there is no post-visit report, with a strict reporting structure. In ODL any serious benchmarking should be done at regional centre level.</td>
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<td>4.</td>
<td>Could you explain the benchmarking process that is followed in your institution?</td>
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<td>How has benchmarking resulted in, or affected, quality education in your institution?</td>
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<td>6.</td>
<td>How has benchmarking been consciously practiced in your institution?</td>
<td>Benchmarking for improvement. As we improve in certain practices then self-regulation comes in to stay competitive. Competition among universities is irrelevant because ZOU has a niche to exploit. It has the worker with a family who wants to learn from home and cannot secure leave to attend block release sessions. ZOU is failing to satisfy that market by servicing the students. If the students were all satisfied with the service then ZOU would be swamped with new students and those who left would want to return.</td>
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<td>7.</td>
<td>Should an institution of higher learning employ benchmarking for the purpose of self-improvement, self-regulation or both? Please, explain.</td>
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<td>8.</td>
<td>How would you relate quality performance indicators to the practice of benchmarking?</td>
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<td>9.</td>
<td>How has your institution benefited from benchmarking?</td>
<td>The main purpose in ZOU, which is a young university trying to come up with best practices relevant to it, should come up with standards that make it recognised as a world player. It should be recognised as an ODL world class university by prospective students, who then make it their university of choice. We need to identify an area of expertise in which the university excels and people know the university for that.</td>
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<td>11.</td>
<td>From your own perspective, what is the main purpose for benchmarking in an institution of higher learning environment?</td>
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<td><strong>ZOU should fund research although people are currently researching but it is behind done at individual level.</strong>  The Centre for ODL, Research and Scholarship should set research areas in which the university <strong>becomes strong and research themes should be chosen strategically to attract industry to come and present papers.</strong></td>
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<td><strong>12.</strong> To what extent would you say your institution’s leadership supports benchmarking activities?</td>
<td><strong>Yes, they do.</strong> Leadership supports benchmarking in the sense that they travel a lot and bring back ideas that are implemented to improve the operations of the institution. The challenging ideas are customised to suit the needs of ZOU.</td>
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<td><strong>13.</strong> How does your institution of higher learning collaborate with other institutions as a way of benchmarking?</td>
<td>From a regional point of view there are many but ordinary Regional Directors do not know the collaborations the University is engaged in. ZOU collaborations do not filter down to regional centres, which only see the students but do not know how they come to the University.</td>
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<td><strong>14.</strong> Why do you think your institution of higher learning should prefer collaborative to competitive benchmarking?</td>
<td>ZOU is continuously learning but for serious benchmarking purposes there should be periodic training sessions. If the Call Centre is adopted from UNISA and be able to answer all the questions students have within a set period like 24 hours then the institution will grow. The Call Centre should identify potential workers; train them to answer questions and to retrieve information from the database.</td>
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<td><strong>15.</strong> How does benchmarking directly feed into the quality of ODL education?</td>
<td>If you don’t benchmark you don’t grow, you remain stagnant. Growth should be in terms of quality of service, refining processes and procedures, the visibility of the institution, reputation and recognition from stakeholders. ZOU emphasises growth in student numbers but there are small institutions in terms of numbers but they are giants in performance, in their processes, service delivery and the quality of the product, which is well groomed. Because of the focus on numbers ZOU may fail to produce a quality product. ZOU should adhere to its deadlines, especially in registration dates. This semester the dates were changed from 30 May, to 5 April and then 30 April. On the ground registration continued to a week before the examination started. This affects the statistics and all the processes that feed from the registration exercise. ZOU should stop the obsession with numbers and render quality service that satisfies the students and the rest will fall into place.</td>
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Benchmarking can be negative. I was teaching for 3 years after I was appointed as Regional Director but I discovered my fellow RDs were not teaching and I stopped. After that I would attend all tutorials and then I discovered no other RD was doing the same so I stopped. But my presence at tutorials boosted morale and performance goes up. ZOU has a lot of potential and we have a number of institutions which would want to benchmark with. We should channel more resources to the improvement of service delivery to satisfy the stakeholder.
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<td>1.</td>
<td>What do you understand by the term ‘benchmarking’?</td>
<td>Benchmarking is looking things or performance of people and try and equate this to standards or standardise the performance or scenario. For example, programmes can be compared to similar offerings at other institutions, using characteristics of what is perceived to be the standard. This is perceived by decision makers or incubators of suggestion to compare. The University of Zimbabwe has perceived to be the centre of excellence when it comes to university education in Zimbabwe. I remember when I taught in the Lowveld there was a teacher who always asked people when they had been to UZ. He was oblivious to the fact that most of the teachers had acquired their qualifications at other universities, like University of South Africa (UNISA), National University of Science and Technology (NUST) and other institutions. The standards that Zimbabwe Council of Higher Education (ZIMCHE) are benchmarked from universities like UZ, NUST, UNISA and Midlands State University (MSU) Chinhoyi University of Technology (CUT).</td>
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<td>2.</td>
<td>How do you think the benchmarking concept can be practiced in an institution of higher learning?</td>
<td>Benchmarking is done with similar institutions. There is no Open and Distance Learning (ODL) university in Zimbabwe except Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU), which means ZOU can only go outside the country and benchmark with institutions like UNISA or the Open University of UK. These ODL institutions have matured and have learnt a lot of lessons which ZOU can access. They have travelled the path. Centre for Professional Development (CPD) is a new concept in Southern Africa, a result of benchmarking with universities like Open University of Malaysia (OUM). The problem with such projects is that there is lack of exposure on the people who implement such concepts. Those who benchmark the project get tired with implementers who do not know how the benchmarked concept works where it was originally resident. When you talk to the incubators of the concept they want it as it is at OUM but the implementer has never seen the OUM project in operation. People should sit down, decide on what they want, chart out the characteristics they want and then mould a unique project from this. Implementers should be involved in the process. You can’t conceive and then ask someone to deliver the baby.</td>
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<td>3.</td>
<td>What activity/activities prove(s) that benchmarking is being practiced in your institution?</td>
<td>Almost everything we do is benchmarked. CPD is a business project, different from academic work. If we are not grounded on the benchmarking concept we miss out a lot. People ask us to generate funds but they don’t support us with seed money so that we get more money. We do event management, like organising symposia and breakfast meetings which are business activities which need fast decision making and being responsive to environment but there is red tape in what we do. Achievements attained were largely due to my ignoring red tape at times so that we could move with the business current. When we received the Victory Business Forum Award, it was after a long struggle against red tape and prejudice against the unit. We failed to receive cooperation from the units we approached but they were the first to spread the news of the award. They should have congratulated us first before they told everybody else about our achievement. An achievement like the farmer training programme came with a lot of personal sacrifice both in terms of money and time. The programme could have succeeded more if it had received a lot of support from the institution.</td>
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<td>4.</td>
<td>Could you explain the benchmarking process that is followed in your institution?</td>
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<td>5.</td>
<td>How has benchmarking resulted in, or affected, quality education in your institution?</td>
<td>At CPD the benchmarking concept is present, we can’t achieve anything if we don’t benchmark because the concept itself was benchmarked. The only problem is that the business model is not being fully appreciated and...</td>
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<td>6.</td>
<td>How has benchmarking been consciously practiced in your institution of higher learning?</td>
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<td>7.</td>
<td>Should an institution of higher learning employ benchmarking for the purpose of self-improvement, self-regulation or both? Please, explain.</td>
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<td>1.</td>
<td>What do you understand by the term ‘benchmarking’?</td>
<td>Benchmarking is studying what others are doing and learning to do the same or better. Benchmarking is not documented but was adopted as a principle at a Strategic Planning workshop sometime ago.</td>
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<td>2.</td>
<td>How do you think the benchmarking concept can be practiced in an institution of higher learning?</td>
<td>ZOU sends people to other universities, like UNISA. Mr. Vengesai and Mr. Benza went to UNISA. In 2011 the Registrar and the Finance Director went to UNISA. The Chancellery went to UNISA and other institutions, like Open University of Malaysia. Contact leave, where one works, observes, and recommends to his/her institution upon end of contract. The Call Centre was benchmarked from OUM. ZOU was started two years before OUM but it now benchmarks OUM processes and products. In 2008 ZOU changed the way it was carrying out its graduation ceremony after the former Prof Chimiedza had benchmarked how OUM carried out its graduation ceremony.</td>
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</table>
| 3. | What activity proves that benchmarking is being practiced in your institution? | There is no benchmarking process that was agreed to and followed. For instance, the Centre of Student Management is a creation of a benchmarking exercise with OUM that senior management visited around 2009. The preferred benchmarking process was to:**
- identify the way an institution would want to grow,
- understudy someone who has grown to the desired stage,
- hold a strategic meeting on how to emulate the model studied,
- adapt the practices you want and
- implement.**
This could be the way to go for all universities since they have the same headaches, like the teaching, research and community service. They do the same things but world rankings reflect on differences from advancements. |
| 4. | Could you explain the benchmarking process that is followed in your institution? | Benchmarking is consciously practised at ZOU. OUM and Indira Gandhi Open University were benchmarked for their IT practices. **|
| 5. | How has benchmarking resulted in, or affected, quality education in your institution? | Self-improvement. The purpose is to improve the quality of programmes, service delivery, learn new ideas/systems/practices/new instruments/exchange ideas and models on how to run programmes, like the PhD programme. Programmes which are dying can be benchmarked at Indira Gandhi Open University. **|
| 6. | How has benchmarking been consciously practiced in your institution? | Indicators tell you if you have reached your target or not. Unfortunately these are not present in ZOU. **|
| 7. | Should an institution of higher learning employ benchmarking for the purpose of self-improvement, self-regulation or both? | Indicators help in evaluating. Indira Gandhi is a mega-university which should help ZOU construct indicators. **|
| 8. | How would you relate quality performance indicators to the practice of benchmarking? | Compare areas targeted for it, like in research and scholarship, teaching and learning and materials development in order to keep the institution abreast or ahead of others. In conventional universities there may be a problem because each institution has a mandate to perform in a given area. For example, Bindura University of Science, was meant to replace students who were going to Cuba, and education, National University of Science and Technology, **|
which should facilitate the production of technological gadgets.

11. From your own perspective, what is the main purpose for benchmarking in an institution of higher learning environment? Self-improvement.

   To improve the quality of education, this is why the university set up a Quality Assurance unit. 40 The university does not have ordinances nor does it have a Prospectus, which normally shows that an institution has grown to a certain stage. There should be a proper induction programme for new employees in ZOU.

12. To what extent would you say your institution of higher learning leadership supports and makes resources available for benchmarking?

   Senior management support is there but there are problems at the top. ZOU has been heavier on administration than on academic work, which affects output. 45 The quality of tutoring and material production has gone down due to the top heavy structure, which has resulted in little kingdoms being created.

   The ODL student/lecturer ratio has not been kept. Resource support has been greatly reduced. There is not much resource allocation for academic work, like the Research Board, which no longer disbursed funds to anyone. There has been no regular money from 50 Research Board for books, tape recorders and other technological gadgets. It is difficult for academic staff to go and teach anywhere in the regional centres due to monetary constraints.

   Senior leadership looks at resources as its own and academics have to beg for resources, for instance there is a reduced marketing budget.

   University depended on academics. There has been no contact leave for academics for the last six years. 55 The university needs to prioritise resources in the interest of the performance of all the parts of the institution.

13. How does your institution of higher learning collaborate with other institutions as a way of benchmarking?

   Collaborative benchmarking is more appropriate, more developmental than competitive benchmarking, which kills growth.

   ODL does not encourage competitive benchmarking in the country, or even in the region. 60 Collaborative benchmarking makes the university to be more pro-active, not reactive.

   ZOU held a series of meetings with UNISA on how to collaborate and from those meetings the collaborative benchmarking approach has been pursued.

   ZOU moved to collaborate more with OUM when UNISA felt ZOU was becoming too competitive after a series of collaborative meetings. 65

14. Why do you think your institution should prefer collaborative to competitive benchmarking?

15. How does benchmarking directly feed into the quality of ODL education?

16. I am asking for copies of:

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   33. Balanced Score Card
   34. Benchmarking Policy Document
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Wide-ranging interview

**MOODLE**, an e-learning platform
We sent a team to London for two weeks to learn about this concept. Then the London group came to continue with the training. One or two people picked up what it was all about. We then hired a consultant to train all the members of staff to use the e-learning. Students are taught to use e-learning through cell phones, laptops and desktop computers.

It is an open source platform which enables one to call, chat and broadcast material free of charge. It lets students ask questions. **Moodle** is a strict/mechanistic product which does not have artistic flexibility one might need. MOODLE is open and free.

Research
We are satisfied with teaching but not with research.

There forums where there are monthly presentations, after a call for papers. **10**

There are research funds which are given to those whose papers qualify for funding. Many people don’t apply.

Forums
The monthly presentations are to the public.

One academician presents a researched paper which is then discussed.

The public includes members of embassies, other universities and the general public.

Everyone is interested to be part of the forum. **15**

There is a monetary allocation to schools for research, at US$5 000.

Staff go on sabbatical after two years of service.

There are also meetings on how to manage research.

The VC:
1. is very strong in qualitative research.
2. Teaches students in the PhD and Masters programmes, with 25 students **20**
3. Is a playwright
4. Takes part in film production
5. Sits on ten boards
6. Teaches theatre
7. Resource person on research for the whole university **25**
8. Produced module writing guidelines
9. Teaches Communication to all students
10. Takes a lead in the tutorial sessions and shares with staff on how to go about tutorials
11. Assists with videos and other material on team teaching.
12. Produces a lot of material due to his connections to media **30**
13. Wrote 10 modules

**COURSE INTRODUCTION**
Process starts at department level, according to results of benchmarking.

From the school it goes to Senate in the form of a concept paper with full courses.

Module outline is written and it passes through the school.

QA checks for conformity to the module outline and content requirement **35**

**Curriculum**
Borrowed from UZ.
But not the modules.

ZAO produces colour coded modules.

Modules have been revised, almost every two years.

VC travelled a lot and brought back a lot of modules from different universities. For instance, VC went to Malaysia and **40** borrowed their study guides for postgraduate studies in business and the university can now write its own.

Held workshops on module writing.

Modules are in PDF format.

Modules being made more interactive.
Teaching
There are workshops on: Relationship with students’
There is team teaching, with VC taking leading role in planning of tutorials

Vision
To set up a Centre for Teaching and Learning to help in the delivery of materials, especially on Face-to-face.
Not everyone is born a teacher, some need to be assisted and adapt to modern technologies
To scale up on internal training

Benchmarking
Helps to establish what things to achieve after observing what others have done, at what time and what practices to adopt.
It has not been methodically followed
ZAO would want to learn from others
ZAO is working well with other institutions and accessing best practices.

Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment
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<td>What do you understand by the term ‘benchmarking’?</td>
<td>An opportunity to compare what one university is doing with a similar university. If one is strong in an area the weak one should identify where it is weak and transfer the strength of the strong one to the weak of to lift its performance. Benchmarking means the weak university must know where to put emphasis. It is better for similar institutions to compare performance but it is not a prerequisite. A similar university may have common objectives, and shared success stories. The prime thought is to compare with another private university. A situation can arise to go out of a ‘similar’ situation and pick a company or an institution sharing a needed process or procedure. We can learn from a private company if they have what we can learn.</td>
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<td>2.</td>
<td>How do you think the benchmarking concept can be practiced in an institution of higher learning?</td>
<td>We are a very young institution but offering and delivering education in a different way. ZAO does not compete but complement other universities offering education. Students come to ZAO to take up study in areas other institutions don’t offer. ZAO collaborates with and assists other institutions. We believe in complementarity, not competition. ZAO benchmarking is meant to help us offer excellent education. Our collaborators may be better in some areas just like we may be better in others. In areas in which we are better we keep those factors or elements that make us better and borrow from our collaborators in areas we need to improve. We benchmark without competition because it sometimes turns into rivalry and the competition becomes cutthroat. We exchange information and share experiences to sharpen our performance. Part-time lecturers come from UZ to supervise postgraduate studies or from University of Lusaka. We rely on collaboration and cooperation because we may not have everything we need and we invite those who have what we need to come and help us.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>What activity/activities prove(s) that benchmarking is being practiced in your institution?</td>
<td>The Director, QA and Extension Services, can start benchmarking practices for the university. Benchmarking is not bad, but it can be bad if it is involved with competition and intense rivalry.</td>
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<td>4.</td>
<td>Could you explain the benchmarking process that is followed in your institution?</td>
<td>The Director, QA and Extension Services, will start a benchmarking policy and process for the university. This young institution still has to learn from older institutions, to try and emulate what they have done. Open institutions, those who admit they are deficient in some areas, should cooperate.</td>
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<td>5.</td>
<td>How has benchmarking resulted in, or affected, quality education in your institution?</td>
<td>When we compare ourselves with the level of strength we have then benchmarking can contribute to quality education. We are trying hard to get to a certain level and if our neighbour has a better way to get to quality education then we approach our neighbour. For instance, in football, players who play really well can look at those who play better than themselves, like Messi, and emulate them to improve themselves. This way quality can be accessed and improved. When ZAO started it went into a MOU agreement with UZ to: 3. Access a curriculum because UZ had been running for years 4. Access the experienced lecturers of UZ on a part time basis The cooperation with UZ helped in areas of teaching and staff development. UZ also had a number of best practices which we accessed through the agreement. This way we took a shorter route to develop and improve. It made ZAO grow faster.</td>
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<td>7.</td>
<td>Should an institution of higher learning employ benchmarking for the purpose of self-improvement, self-regulation or both? Please, explain.</td>
<td>Could be both. New universities are being created and they are told by government to accredit themselves to existing universities. This is an indirect way to regulate what the institutions can do through current universities. The existing universities advise the new ones and guide them along until they are ready to run on their own. ZAO was affiliated to UNISA when it started.</td>
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| 12. | To what extent would you say your institution leadership supports benchmarking activities?  
**Support is automatic if the way is related to programmes (55)**  
In principle benchmarking of academic work is fully supported as long as it leads to quality education. |
| 13. | How does your institution of higher learning collaborate with other institutions as a way of benchmarking?  
ZAO has a number of affiliates, some of which are:  
Southern African Development Teachers College and Northern College for underwriting diploma programmes.  
Paglory College in Kabwe in Early Childhood Education and Secondary Education  
This is part of benchmarking because we look at the programme and advise where a better performance can be achieved. Other areas of attention include dormitories, water closets, courses and the qualification of teachers.  
The advice on deficiencies is given and this should lift performance to a certain level. |
| 14. | Why do you think your institution of higher learning should prefer collaborative to competitive benchmarking?  
**Direct relationship (65)**  
If positive in one’s thinking then one looks at a neighbour, appreciate what the neighbour is doing and access the practice so as to raise performance and quality. This is done through cooperation. This cooperation is continuous.  
We will never succeed if we put a wedge between ourselves and other institutions from whom we are supposed to learn (70) |
| 15. | How does benchmarking directly feed into the quality of ODL education? |
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ZAO did an initial study in Strategic Planning and a small document was produced but it did not tie up the planned activities with expenditure.  
Our Strategic Plan is deficient in that way  
ZAO enrolled its first students in 2005 and has graduated 4 cohorts, starting in 2009.
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<td>What do you understand by the term ‘benchmarking’?</td>
<td>Working on a research to determine the best practices of the top 5% of Cooperative Movement in Zambia, and then transfer the best practices to those not performing well to help them pick up their performance. This is benchmarking in practice.</td>
</tr>
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| 2.  | How do you think the benchmarking concept can be practiced in an institution of higher learning? | We need to interact more, go to each other’s institution to learn from them. Bring best practices home and vice versa 5  
Visit other institutions, like ZOU, and they visit us  
Interact more 5                                                                                     |
| 3.  | What activity/activities prove(s) that benchmarking is being practiced in your institution? | There is not much happening. We intend to start looking at local institutions and quality control learning material.  
We need to be strong as ODL in the areas of modules and study guides. 10  
ZAO is the leader in ODL locally  
Interact more 10                                                                                   |
| 4.  | Could you explain the benchmarking process that is followed in your institution? | To be developed further  
To be developed further                                                                                                                                  |
| 5.  | How has benchmarking resulted in, or affected, quality education in your institution? | Very important.  
Quality Control is one area that gives an institution competitive advantage  
We need to go out and see what others are doing, like Kenya and Zimbabwe 15  
At present we only have dreams. 15                                                                  |
| 6.  | How has benchmarking been consciously practiced in your institution?      | Not at the moment  
Not at the moment  
Not at the moment                                                                                      |
| 7.  | Should an institution of higher learning employ benchmarking for the purpose of self-improvement, self-regulation or both? Please, explain. | Self-improvement  
Self-improvement  
Self-improvement                                                                                      |
| 8.  | How would you relate quality performance indicators to the practice of benchmarking? | Set up standards to achieve given objective  
Sit and evaluate what we have achieved 20  
Measure the gap  
Give ourselves a few years then measure again to see if the gap has been closed. 20 |
| 9.  | How has your institution benefited from benchmarking?                   | Bring in external colleagues to help from other institutions, those who are better than us in identified areas.  
Internal benchmarking is important 25                                                              |
| 10. | How can benchmarking, in an institution of higher learning, be carried out objectively? | Improve standards and scale up quality  
Improve standards and scale up quality  
Improve standards and scale up quality                                                                 |
| 11. | From your own perspective, what is the main purpose for benchmarking in an institution of higher learning environment? | Leadership is very supportive  
Leadership is obsessed with benchmarking  
They support projects to do with benchmarking, although we don’t use that term.  
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They support projects to do with benchmarking, although we don’t use that term.                  |
| 12. | To what extent would you say your institution of higher learning leadership supports benchmarking activities? | Leadership is very supportive  
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<td>How does your institution collaborate with other institutions as a way of benchmarking?</td>
<td>We formed a partnership with Open University of Malaysia. Affiliations with local institutions and we give guidance for free. We aim to develop more active relationships with comparable institutions using both modes of operation. We need to interact more with everybody.</td>
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<td>What do you understand by the term ‘benchmarking’?</td>
<td>Benchmarking is setting a ruler and you mark where you want to be. Its setting points along a route to ensure people observe what is happening Setting standards an institution wants to achieve It’s a process of learning from others and when you have sufficient time to learn how to measure, like reading two hours a day. Law is easy to benchmark and it shows that students have done well in the last three years.</td>
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<td>How do you think the benchmarking concept can be practiced in an institution of higher learning?</td>
<td>When ZAO was form Ministry of Education was hesitant at first, they said universities are not started by private individuals. The Ministry of Education also felt teachers could not be trained through ODL but the students have confounded critics because they have done really well. A few of the students have been promoted to provincial positions. Certain programmes have had good results with graduates getting promoted. ZAO students are generally doing fairly well.</td>
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<td>3.</td>
<td>What activity/activities prove(s) that benchmarking is being practiced in your institution?</td>
<td>It was fortunate that when ZAO submitted its results to the Ministry of Education for the first three years the Ministry changed its stance, they were good results. The VC was appointed onto government boards and I was also appointed last year. The VC and I are on the Directorate of Distance Education at the Ministry of Education and we advise them. I am on the Distance Education of Southern Africa serving as a member of the collaboration committee of universities and we belong to the African Union of Universities Association. We share information on the development of open resources and how to put together material for the African Union cite. 29 universities come together to share experiences. They develop toolkits for the evaluation of quality assurance of a university, headed by Professor Ardu of Open University of Tanzania. ZAO is linked to the society of universities so that they know what we are doing. Government inspects ZAO through the Ministry of Education ZAO is open with what it is doing, knows how it is making interactive (talking) modules and working on assignments. We have worked on interactive modules and we are now turning the modules into electronic copies. To set and maintain these standards we established benchmarking close links with others.</td>
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<td>How can benchmarking, in an institution of higher learning, be carried out objectively?</td>
<td>The purpose of benchmarking in ODL is take a look at what others do and ensure</td>
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<td><strong>11.</strong> From your own perspective, what is the main purpose for benchmarking in an institution of higher learning environment?</td>
<td>the product is of a high quality.</td>
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<td><strong>12.</strong> To what extent would you say your institution of higher learning leadership supports benchmarking activities?</td>
<td>The people at ZAO are all ex-UNZA employees. The primary idea they founded a private university was to open up education. They came from the same stock but they now want to make ZAO the university of choice.</td>
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</table>
| **13.** How does your institution collaborate with other institutions as a way of benchmarking? | We collaborate and cooperate with:  
7. University of South Africa  
8. Zimbabwe Open University  
9. Open University of Tanzania  
10. Nairobi Open University  
11. Sudan Open University  
12. Open University of Nigeria  
We are all members of the African Council on Distance Education (ACDE) and the Technical Cooperation Committee in Dar es Salaam.  
ZAO is now a university and it must see what others are doing in all areas of university education.  
The Graduate School has produced graduates in the MPhil and DPhil in Sociology, Religious Studies, Development Studies and History. |
| **14.** Why do you think your institution of higher learning should prefer collaborative to competitive benchmarking? |   |
| **15.** How does benchmarking directly feed into the quality of ODL education? |   |
| **16.** I am asking for copies of: |   |
| 48. University Strategic Plan (current). |   |
| 50. Balanced Score Card |   |
| 51. Benchmarking Policy Document |   |
| 53. Any document relevant to benchmarking practice. |   |

African universities have not developed literature. ODL writers are not writing on ODL. Maybe they are still getting acquainted with the idea of writing on ODL, and then write. The literature should be country specific.
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<td>Should an institution of higher learning employ benchmarking for the purpose of self-improvement, self-regulation or both? Please, explain.</td>
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<td>How would you relate quality performance indicators to the practice of benchmarking?</td>
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<td>How has your institution benefited from benchmarking?</td>
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Envisioned QA Directorate

The Director, Quality Assurance and Extension Services, will construct a QA Framework. The Director is responsible for the unit or Directorate, which includes Learner Support, who should be a direct link between the university and the student and a link between the 9 Regional Managers and the Director.

The Director has a number of responsibilities which include:

4. Printing of modules and other learning materials. A supervisor to be employed.
5. Dispatch section- for the dispatch of modules to Regional Centres and other learning materials. A supervisor will be recruited.
6. Assistant registrar- to coordinate activities of printing, dispatch and learner support.
7. 9 (nine) Regional Centres- for extension services- these should offer short courses in addition to course registration, examinations, and enquiries. Short courses to be quality assured by Senate and standardised with regards to content, duration, teaching/learning methods, staff to teach and a other issues. The short courses are ZAO courses.
8. Improve ODL through training, and this has already started.
9. Trained staff on Customer Care and there are now a number of approved workshops.
10. Monitor performance of various units, e.g. residential school.

Approved workshops

1. Management of ODL for Deans and Directors
2. QA- To look at a number of QA models and the criteria e.g. ACDE Toolkit and the Commonwealth of Learning’s Review and Improvement Model (RIM). ZAO then develops a local QA Model or Framework called Quality Review and Improvement Model
3. All part time lecturers, even full time lecturers, to undergo induction in ODL as a condition of appointment, which is done in batches of 25 people
4. Orientation of Regional Managers to acquaint them with ZAO practices and processes will start on 20 May 2013, where various aspects of university operations to improve service will be covered.

Quality Assurance Modules

1. All course outlines to be approved by Senate
2. Modules to be reviewed by peers
3. Develop modules according to guidelines and reviewed by Director and two other people
4. Module writer is not paid until Director is satisfied. A master copy must be seen by the VC before payment.

Plan

To decentralise tutoring, marking of examinations, residential school, where lecturers are carefully selected and trained.

The Strategic Plan is being reviewed. The SWOT analysis has been done university-wide; the Deans and Directors have made their input. They looked at the performance of enrolments and budgetary expenditure. In the following two weeks the crafting of a new Strategic Plan will start.

The university is expanding with the addition of new units, new programmes, increasing enrolment, staffing, instruction methods, and other areas. The Strategic Plan should support the growth. The Strategic Planning Committee is working on the new document, whose focus should also change due to growth implications.
### Appendix 26 OU6

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>What do you understand by the term 'benchmarking'?</td>
<td>Benchmarking is setting criteria to reach or measure or standard</td>
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<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>How do you think the benchmarking concept can be practiced in an institution of higher learning?</td>
<td>The university’s point of view on: 1. Graduations, enrolment, the number of people with credits, merit or pass. The student’s point of view: 1. Am I finishing my programme? 5 2. Am I getting a merit, award, credit or pass? The university makes students aware of the learning process. Orientation has a bearing in their benchmarking. In ODL are students receiving assignments on time and is feedback on time?</td>
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<td>3.</td>
<td>What activity/activities prove(s) that benchmarking is being practiced in your institution?</td>
<td>We need to set minimum standards to meet when selecting students. 10 The same is true when selecting lecturers and professors. This is related to benchmarking. At graduation ZAO should announce merit, pass or credit, which can be compared</td>
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<td>4.</td>
<td>Could you explain the benchmarking process that is followed in your institution?</td>
<td>It was formalised with the appointment of Director, QA where benchmarking resides. After examinations Senate meets to consider results. 15 But before Senate schools meet to consider the school results and make comparisons with previous years. The schools are: 1. School of Education 2. School of Agriculture 3. School of Human Resources 20 4. School of Law 5. School of Business. There has not been a policy, everything has been done like a tradition, not written down. ZAO has based what it does on UZ</td>
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<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>How has benchmarking resulted in, or affected, quality education in your institution?</td>
<td>Yes, especially with results. 25 Poor results could be due to poor lecturers or materials</td>
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<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>How has benchmarking been consciously practiced in your institution?</td>
<td>Self-improvement, like in the School of Law where students have been performing well and qualifying to get onto the bench. If most of your students do not go to the bar find out the course by benchmarking. ZAO students have been performing well. 30 Most ZAO students are teachers and how soon they get promoted after graduating can indicate the strength of the programmes. A project, being funded by the government is instructive. The Fast Track Programme for Teacher Advancement involves ten students each from the University of Zambia, Copperbelt University, Zambian Open University and Mlungushi University. The results will be known later to determine which 35 students get promoted after completion. Police members who study law at ZAO get promoted on completion of their programmes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Should an institution of higher learning employ benchmarking for the purpose of self-improvement, self-regulation or both? Please, explain.</td>
<td>The increasing number of students enrolling proves the programmes are popular.</td>
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<td>8.</td>
<td>How would you relate quality performance indicators to the practice of benchmarking?</td>
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<td>How can benchmarking, in an institution of higher learning, be carried out objectively?</td>
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<td>From your own perspective, what is the main</td>
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<td>purpose for benchmarking in an institution of higher learning environment?</td>
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<td>12. To what extent would you say your institution of higher learning leadership supports benchmarking activities?</td>
<td>Very supportive. They have an interest in seeing how ZAO is performing against other institutions. They want to identify problems through reports to Management Committee, which monitors the activities of the university, especially those of non-academic staff. If a problem requires the introduction of a new policy then it is referred to the Board but if it can be resolved without a new policy a member of the staff is given the responsibility. The Management Committee is chaired by the VC, and includes the Deputy VC, Directors, Deans and the secretary is the Registrar.</td>
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<tr>
<td>13. How does your institution of higher learning collaborate with other universities as a way of benchmarking?</td>
<td>A project funded by the Irish Government and includes Mzuzu University in Malawi, Mlungushi University in Kabwe, National University of Ireland and Zambian Open University. The project is to introduce a Masters programme to be done by ten students from each university on community research. The results of the research are used to develop the community. Results are not yet available as the project is still ongoing.</td>
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<td>14. Why do you think your institution of higher learning prefer collaborative to competitive benchmarking?</td>
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<td>62. Balanced Score Card</td>
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<td>63. Benchmarking Policy Document</td>
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<td>64. Your office Procedure Manual</td>
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<td>65. Any document relevant to benchmarking practice.</td>
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ODL has no boundary
It should work towards standardisation
There is no university that feels inferior to another university.
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<td>1.</td>
<td>What do you understand by the term ‘benchmarking’?</td>
<td>Benchmarking is comparing your practices with other institutions, in the areas of academic work, assessment, administration, teaching and other areas. In ODL, which is the new phenomenon in Zambia, there are periodic workshops to share ideas. There are visits as well. 5 There is need for ZAO to know what others are doing since they are dealing with the same students and same catchment area.</td>
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<td>2.</td>
<td>How do you think the benchmarking concept can be practiced in an institution of higher learning?</td>
<td>A workshop was held by the Director, SADC ODL who came and shared practices in the SADC region on ODL. Other institutions were also invited, like Zambia Institute of Special Education and Zambia In-Service Training Institute. 10 The workshop was very fruitful because there was a lot of sharing of ideas.</td>
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<td>What activity/activities prove(s) that benchmarking is being practiced in your institution?</td>
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<td>4.</td>
<td>Could you explain the benchmarking process that is followed in your institution?</td>
<td>How to communicate with students, for example, when marking and through positive comments and not to delay sending feedback. Students should get feedback before they write the next assignment.</td>
</tr>
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<td>5.</td>
<td>How has benchmarking resulted in, or affected, quality education in your institution?</td>
<td>Benchmarking is consciously practiced and emphasised at ZAO. 15 We are competing for students so we have to compare what we are doing with our competitors, like UZ and Nkrumah University College of Education.</td>
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<td>6.</td>
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<td>7.</td>
<td>Should an institution of higher learning employ benchmarking for the purpose of self-improvement, self-regulation or both? Please, explain.</td>
<td>Both Benchmarking helps improve in service delivery Helps regulate internally how we work by asking if we are what we are doing correctly. 20 Challenges and problems are handled a better way if we see how others have handled them. For instance, some now use cell phones and e-mails to communicate with students. ZAO is planning to communicate through MOODLE, an e-learning platform. Some areas of the country are inaccessible, without electricity or suffer electricity outages, which is a problem to be looked into. 25</td>
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<td>12.</td>
<td>To what extent would you say your institution of higher learning leadership supports benchmarking activities?</td>
<td>Leadership is in the forefront of support The coming on board of Professor Siaciwena there is now change in quality delivery. To survive we should have a visionary leadership.</td>
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<td>13</td>
<td>How does your institution of higher learning collaborate with other institutions as a way of benchmarking?</td>
<td>There workshops where people meet and collaborate with academics any new ideas. There are regular meetings to share the sentiments of students and react accordingly. Leadership always goes on national radio and television to talk about what ZAO is doing. Leadership promotes continuous learning through further studies. ZAO encourages the attendance of international workshops to learn. Colleges that want to affiliate with ZAO are welcome and this encourages continuous learning through looking at their papers and it helps us continue to raise standards. ODL has a lot of challenges, like the delay in the submission of assignments, which can be solved by looking at what others are doing? It is also difficult to access students in remote areas. The access to information by students in remote areas is difficult and ZAO recommends the issuance of prescribed and reference books. ODL is one of the best methods of providing education because most employers find it difficult to release workers for study leave. Benchmarking is very good because we see what others are doing and we improve, even on fees.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>What do you understand by the term ‘benchmarking’?</td>
<td>Benchmarking is a critical plan for institutions to determine and set standards and goals. For example, in Law School applications can be benchmarked to make new applicants better than old applicants. For instance, we now want applicants with 5 'O' Levels or better whereas in the past we took 3 'O' Levels plus a diploma. The idea is to enrol less than 550 students who are better qualified. ZAO is now popular and the number of applicants is growing. We do not compromise on quality even though we lack the required number of full time lecturers. We are aiming to increase the number of full time lecturers to ten. Currently, we have ten part time lecturers. Those who pass with a credit or better can proceed to a Masters in Law programme. ZAO is spearheading a School of Law Association to bring about a legal studies structure adopted by all universities offering law degrees.</td>
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<td>5.</td>
<td>How has benchmarking resulted in, or affected, quality education in your institution?</td>
<td>The quality of the law programme is above what is good but not yet excellent. The changes outlined above should enhance the quality. In 2010-11 all the best lawyers came from ZAO. What ZAO is doing now is what UNZA is also doing but we are a private university, UNZA is a public university. We need to change.</td>
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12. To what extent would you say your institution of higher learning leadership supports benchmarking activities?

There is no corporate governance at ZAO, no independence. We would like to be better if we were independent.
We have no computers, papers are strewn all over, and we have no filing cabinets and no shelves.
The money is there but the money decisions are not supportive, the money is deployed in other areas. This is why independence is essential.

20 We want to have exchange programmes to learn from others
We are an open minded School of Law and we should make our own money and be able to use it ourselves.

Resource constraints deter us from doing some of the things we would want to do.

13. How does your institution of higher learning collaborate with other institutions as a way of benchmarking?

14. Why do you think your institution of higher learning should prefer collaborative to competitive benchmarking?

15. How does benchmarking directly feed into the quality of ODL education?

16 I am asking for copies of:
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6. Any document relevant to benchmarking practice.

Focus for ZAO
To start a Law Journal, with contributions of papers from other universities. 30
Most part time lecturers are UNZA full time lecturers
We had a MOU with UBNZA but it expired some time ago but should be renewed. ZAO behaves like an extension of UNZA, we even borrowed their curriculum.
The focus is to attain best practices and be the Harvard University of Southern Region and ODL students should be attracted to it.
ZAO should grow on its own best students; staff develop them, engage them and let them become the future lecturers in order to cut the UNZA-ZAO umbilical code.
ZAO Law School has some of the best brains in the country.