

# African Research Review

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*An International Multi-Disciplinary Journal , Ethiopia*

*Vol. 4 (2) April, 2010*

ISSN 1994-9057 (Print)

ISSN 2070-0083 (Online)

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## **Advocacy for Benchmarking in the Nigerian Institute of Advanced Legal Studies Library, Lagos**

*(Pp. 471-490)*

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### **Abstract**

*The paper gave a general overview of benchmarking and its novel application to library practice with a view to achieve organizational change and improved performance. Based on literature, the paper took an analytic, descriptive and qualitative overview of benchmarking practices vis a vis services in law libraries generally and with a particular reference to the Apex Law Institute in Nigeria – Nigerian Institute of Advanced Legal Studies (NIALS). The paper highlighted the rationale for the establishment of benchmarking viz; The position of the Institute’s library in the dissemination of legal information in Nigeria and the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century library and law librarianship; subjects of benchmarking, process of benchmarking and the implications of the adoption of the benchmarking strategy. The paper concluded that library services in general and particularly in Nigerian special libraries are poor and below international best practices. The paper provided an insight into the expediency of the establishment of benchmarking procedure in NIALS library as a tool of improving library business performance.*

### **Introduction**

The library and information science over the years have evolved as a body of knowledge with an on-going development of sets of theories which are either

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peculiar or multidisciplinary in nature. Again, the library and information services all over the world have been guided by basic similar procedures though some characteristics may be peculiar to specific groups of libraries (special libraries delineated by user focus). However, with information explosion, cultural diversities, globalization in relation to information dissemination, accessibility, usage and the attendant financial implications, variations are noticeable in library practice and management.

The foregoing therefore throws in a major challenge which is that of standardization of library procedures and management practices most especially amongst libraries of similar mission statements. In some cases, some international library associations have succeeded in producing standardization documents/instruments which are modifiable and have been serving as guidelines for different categories/areas of library operations over the years. Yet, differences in operations are noticeable from region to region or amongst libraries of diverse multicultural settings.

Again, many libraries are in the dilemma of evaluating their services as there are no fixed guidelines to help in this respect. The need for regular and periodic evaluation of library services is not an option, it is an exercise to be done out of necessity. Internal assessments of libraries are desirable but could be deficient when they do not conform with external and/or international standards. Hence, the need for conducting library benchmarks with a view to assessing the status of an individual library and as a means of charting new course of action.

This paper therefore seeks to make a case for the institution of benchmarking in the Nigerian Institute of Advanced Legal Studies (NIALS) Library, Lagos with a view to boosting performance.

### **Benchmarking: What Is It?**

The origin of the term benchmarking is traced back to the business environment. It is a concept that has been so used in the terrain for years and is now being imported into other circles, the library and Information field inclusive (White, 2002).

The literature of benchmarking though terse, has attempted some functional definitions of the concept. Each of the definitions advances its own leanings and lays emphasis on different but related aspects of benchmarking.

The first category of definitions simply defines the concept of benchmarking with emphasis on it being a tool comparison amongst similar organizations. This is exemplified by the following submission.

*Benchmarking is an ongoing, systematic process for measuring and comparing the processes of one organization to those of others that exhibit – functional “best practices”.*  
(White, 2002:17).

Another view in this same category of definitions gave the following summary:

*Benchmarking refers to the practice of comparing on a measurable scale the performance of a business operation to a similar operation in other organizations.* (Robbins, 1997 as cited by Adegboye, 2007: 37)

The second school of thought while maintaining the comparative feature presents benchmarking as a tool of self evaluation:

*Benchmarking is a self-improvement tool for organizations to compare themselves with others to identify their comparative strengths and weaknesses and learn how to improve.*  
(Association of Commonwealth Universities, Registered Charity No 314, 137, 2005).

To buttress the second category definition, benchmarking has also been classified as a kind of research design under evaluation research (Powell, 2006).

Thirdly, the art of benchmarking has further been linked with the effort of an organization to adopt best practices in business orientations. Hence, the following opinions are also relevant.

*Benchmarking is a systematic process for identifying and implementing best or better practices.* (Business Performance Improvement Resource (BPIR), 2007).

*Benchmarking is an activity where organizations continuously engage in self-study and compare themselves with the leaders in their field so they can identify, adapt and apply significantly better practices.* (Archived Information, 1999:1).

*Benchmarking is the process of measuring an organization's internal processes, then identifying, understanding and adopting outstanding practices from other organizations considered to be best in class. (The Benchmarking Exchange (TBE), 2009).*

Fourthly, benchmarking also exhibits the features of an organization creating a competitive business niche for itself as well as setting standards for others to follow. This view is substantiated by Reh (2009:1) when he states that "Benchmarking is the process of determining who is the very best, who sits the standard."

On the fifth plane, the benchmarking art also hinges on the premise of managerial and strategic activity as expressed below:

*Benchmarking is a management technique to improve performance (Office of Government of Commerce (OGC), Retrieved, 2009).*

In summary, the deductions made by this presentation from the various definitions above is that benchmarking is a management/strategic technique employed for healthy comparison, self evaluation, adoption of best practices, creation of business niche and setting of standards with a view to improving performance of organization within similar or related business environment.

### **The Benchmarking Process: Conceptual Framework**

As illustrated in Fig. 1 below, the benchmarking process is part and parcel of the learning, research & development process in an organization. Research findings are measured against observations in an organization, data obtained from such efforts are analyzed and adopted to generate improvement. The cycle is supposed to be an on-going process.

The framework of benchmarking is better consolidated with a modified graphic representation of Choo, (Retrieved 2007) and adopted by Nicholas, (2007:7).

### **Types of Benchmarking**

Literature has identified two types of benchmarking. These are informal and formal benchmarking.

- a) **Informal Benchmarking:** This refers to a casual process of knowing or learning about practices of others in familiar set-up or

environments. This include among others talking to colleagues and learning from their experience, consultations with experts on a particular process, networking with people through conferences, seminars, internet fora and use of online databases & websites. (Business Performance Improvement Resource (BPIR), 2007).

- b) **Formal Benchmarking:** This refers to a formalized method of inter-organizational comparison of their performance levels in order to identify opportunities for improvement/setting performance targets (known as performance benchmarking) or the identification of high performer in an industry for studying through mutual beneficial agreement that follows a benchmarking code of conduct (known as best practice benchmarking). Thereafter, knowledge so gained are adopted or integrated into the organizations home practice. (Business Performance Improvement Resource (BPIR), 2007).

### **Benchmarking and Libraries**

The library has always been described as the heart of any academic or research institution. It is usually a major index of the strength of such establishments. The richness of its collection and services have a direct impact on the quality of learning that take place in their environment. The quality of library services however has been linked with good benchmarking activities. Again, benchmarking activities in the libraries of developed countries date back to the 1980s while their outcomes have been linked with improved performance. Literature further proved that comparative data generated from such activities have been used to call for further support from parent organizations so as to be able to perform well as other leading libraries (Henczel, 2006 Nicholas, 2007).

Like in other business terrains, benchmarking has been applied to the library and information services as a Total Quality Management tool (TQM) with a view to measuring and comparing one library's work process with those of other libraries. It is also done in order to make the services and products of the library better, especially in meeting the needs of library users (Nicholas, 2006).

In a case where internal benchmarking has been done to measure the performance of the library with other departments of the organization, the

process has been used to “justify the existence of the library when faced with threats of downsizing” (Nicholas, 2006:7). In the case of external benchmarking, segments of the library process for instance ‘Cataloguing’ can be benchmarked with that of a similar library establishment. For instance is the University of Virginia’s Library’s experiment which focused on the comparison of its shelving activities with some identified benchmarking partners with a view to achieving improved performance (White, 2002).

The need for the establishment of benchmarking processes in libraries and information centres cannot be overemphasized. Strouse (2002) in an interview opined that information centres are benchmarking themselves so as to enhance operational best practices, rationalize information spending and find out new trends in work processes among others.

Also, Gohlke (2002) of the Library Benchmarking International corroborated the need for benchmarking for best practices in Libraries. He further affirmed that public libraries for instance, as part of municipal governance, are benchmarking to measure performance, move value and cut down on costs.

There is no doubt that various segments of the library and information services have been endeavouring to initiate benchmarking activities within the context of their industries- academic, special or research libraries alike (i.e. in relation to parental affiliations). Kinnel (1997) made a case for benchmarking for information service excellence in pharmaceutical industry while the National Institute of standards and Technology Research Library initiated its own benchmarking survey in the year 2001 (Silcox & Deutch, 2003).

Finally, within the context of law libraries, the Association of Research Libraries, Washington D.C for instance produces law library statistics on annual basis in the U.S (See ARL Academic Law Library Statistics, 2005-06, Available at <http://www.arl.org/stats/annualsurveys/law/index.shtml>). The time is ripe for the institution of benchmarking at the Nigerian Institute of Advanced Legal Studies Library, Lagos.

### **Rationale for Instituting Bench-Marking in the Nigerian Institute of Advanced Legal Studies Library**

#### **The Place of the Institute in Legal Research in Nigeria**

The Nigerian Institute of Advanced Legal Studies is one of its kind in the nation. An initiative conceived and officially commissioned in March 1979

and was intended to be “Nigeria’s Apex Institution in Law” (Nigerian Institute of Advanced Legal Studies, 2006).

Enabled by Section 4 of the Nigerian Institute of Advanced Legal Studies Act, Cap 310, Federation, 1990, the mandate of the Institute includes, among others, the provision and dissemination of information for the support of as well as supervision of post graduate work in law; conduction of research; organization of local and international workshops, seminars and conferences; regular publication of relevant books, journals, seminar and conference proceedings, and cooperation with cognate institutions such as the Nigerian Law School in matters relating to law reform and development, etc. (Nigerian Institute of Advanced Legal Studies, 2006).

In line with the foregoing, the Institute was designed to be the national benchmark for Advanced Legal Studies in the nation. To this extent, how far has the establishment gone in the pursuit of its mission mandate especially in the area of dissemination of legal information? The position and role of the library in the survival of the institute as the Apex law research agency is undoubtedly germane in this respect.

### **The Position and Role of the Institute of Advanced Studies Library in Legal Information Services in Nigeria**

Again, the library remains the heart and essence of an academic institution. It is the major interface of input and output of legal information. It stands as an index of the strength and survival of the establishment.

It may suffice to say that if the Institute is conceived as the leader in Advanced Legal Studies in Nigeria, it is expected that the library should be rated as the best in advanced legal information resources, provision, and services. Maintaining the status quo will always remain a challenge.

A perusal of the history of the Nigerian Institute of Advanced Legal Studies Library revealed it to have taken off with its first crop of collection in the year 1978 to support Advanced Legal Studies Research. It may be said that the library was established as a major consideration in the pursuit of the Institute’s mission statements earlier enumerated.

The library serves the research needs of the various categories of users which include:

- Members and former members of the Governing Board.
- Law Teachers in all Nigerian Universities and the Nigerian Law School.
- Other categories of lecturers apart from law in Nigerian Universities.
- Research Fellows of the Institute.
- Judges of the Superior Courts and other judicial officers.
- Post graduate students of law in all Nigerian Universities.
- Other persons holding academic or professional legal or other appropriate qualifications.
- Firms of legal practitioners.
- Companies having legal departments with legally qualified staff. (Nigerian Institute of Advanced Legal Studies 2006).

The corollary at this juncture is that if the Institute is generally considered as the leader in Advanced Legal Studies in Nigeria, its library should be also rated as the best in Advanced legal information, resources provision and services. This concept is substantiated as follows:

*The vision and intent of the founding fathers was that the Institute Library should be a centre rich in the collection of rare materials non-existent elsewhere.*

(Nigerian Institute of Advanced Legal Studies, 1991: 21).

In addition, the Law Library Course introduced in 1986 was envisioned to offer librarians a sound training in modern techniques of Law Librarianship with the ultimate goal of improving professional performance. (Nigerian Institute of Advanced Legal Studies, 1991).

The question then arises, to what extent can the Institute Library serve as a benchmark in law library administration nationally and internationally?

### **The Challenges of the 21st Century Library Services and Law Librarianship**

The general obvious paradigm all over the world is that professions are moving with phenomenal occurrences of the age and the business environment in which they operate. The corollary is that professionals are doing away with all forms of 'parochialism' in their operations as much as possible. This has been the trend in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. The global economy is information driven while the impact of Information and Communication Technology is colossal and getting more colossal by the day. At this juncture, law library services no doubt are not an exemption. The challenge has been succinctly expressed thus:

*..... traditional quality criteria for judging law libraries are now inadequate because they no longer capture the vital multiple missions of today's libraries ..... Law librarians can begin to develop indica of quality that can adequately evaluate the contemporary law school library and preserve its core missions. (Lee, 2008).*

Lee (2008) further expatiated on the metamorphosis in the traditional law library system by sharing the view that there is already a shift from the books, and the print paradigm could no longer subsist. The advocacy for conformity with the electronic library services is very vibrant and still on-going. The challenge is to keep the profession from obsolescence as engraved in Olaosun's (2007) submission. The consensus at least is to embrace the concept of hybrid libraries (Lee, 2008) (i.e. containing a mix of print and electronic resources). These developments are no doubt with their attendant challenge.

The evolution of hybrid collections is not without its implications for library services and processes in general. Consequently, law librarians have also been faced with the challenge of developing themselves into information technology managers as well as being at the forefront of developing automation initiatives (Pacifi, 1997). These developments of course need to be tempered with the keeping of a nation's legal heritage. This is a big challenge – to marry the space with the volumes (Paul de Jersey A. C., 2002).

Aside the foregoing, the acquisition of managerial skills, knowledge and competencies required in the management of a 21<sup>st</sup> century information

organization is of great importance. Therefore, this presentation at this juncture will attempt to give a general overview and breakdown of areas of challenges facing the law library set-up in the 21<sup>st</sup> century scenario.

Using the recommendations of Abel et.al (2008) to the Special Libraries Association, the challenges and competencies for information professionals for the management of information resources in this new dawn can be analyzed as follows:

**(A) Professional Competencies**

- Competencies in managing information organizations (vis a vis alignment of information organization towards the promotion of strategic directions of parent institution).
- Communication of needed information – products and services to stakeholders.
- Effective operational and financial management, employment of required information application tools, technologies and policies.
- Development of an effective and efficient information services team/professionals.
- Development of strategic and business plans and setting of performance indices – individual/corporate etc.

**(A) Management of Information Resources:**

- Total management of information resources (including identification, selection, evaluation, acquisitions, and provision of access to resources).
- Material acquisition in all formats/media – print, audio-visual electronic etc, organization, categorization, cataloguing, classification and dissemination of resources.
- Expert knowledge of contents of resources.
- Negotiation of purchase of products and services and development of information policies etc.

**(B) Managing Information Services**

- Management of information resources from concept stage, acquisition, processing dissemination to divesting of resources.
- Maintenance of cost-implication profile of prioritized information services vis a vis strategic leanings of organizations.
- Conduction of user survey/market research to determine information behaviour and translate findings into customized information products and services.
- Determination of performance indices and use of evidence-based management techniques for continual improvement of services etc.

**(C) Application of Information Tools & Technologies**

- Assessment, selection and application of appropriate information tools and technology to enhance information accessibility and delivery.
- Demonstration of expertise in databases, indexing, metadata, information analysis and synthesis for the enhancement of information retrieval and use.
- Monitoring and adaptability to changes in information technology and applications etc.

**(D) Personal Competencies**

- Pursuit of challenges and capturing of new opportunities. This is demonstrated through the desire to take up leadership information roles.
- Exhibition of professional knowledge and skills.
- Disposition to offer value-added services to clients, adoption of new ideas and application of evolving technology to products and services.

- Awareness of environmental and strategic values of parent organization and the use of information services for the promotion of same.
- Effective communication skills, professionalism in public presentations, effective negotiation skills, and articulation of concepts.
- Capabilities for team work, leadership and collaboration skills, mentoring abilities and maintenance of trends in professional leadership skills.
- Personal engagement in career planning and development featuring ongoing learning and personal growth (Note: that librarianship in the Nigerian context is a professional as well as academic position, hence attaining highest academic qualification is desirable).
- Celebration of individual and corporate achievements (viz: identification of excellent performance, reward of good performance and celebration of personal successes and that of others).

### **Determining What to Benchmark**

The literature and practice of benchmarking reveal that benchmarking scope is wide and that nearly every aspect of an enterprise can be benchmarked – be it action, task or process (Gohlke, 1998). Whatever the case may be, the ultimate goal is to identify best practices for adaptability to ensure improved performance.

In line with the foregoing, the following are possible target areas that are subject to review or prevailing exigencies:

#### **(B) Collections**

- Number of book volumes held.
- Number of electronic books.
- Number of journal subscription.
- Number of electronic journal subscription.

- Number of databases subscriptions
  - Other formats – audio – visual etc.
  - Rare materials in the library’s holdings.
  - Subject areas covered etc.
- (C) **Work Processes.**
- Collection development issues (acquisition tasks, gifts and exchanges, detailed work processes).
  - Readers Services Issues (Circulation Processes, loans and inter-library loans, reference services – manual and electronics; security issues; on-line catalogues, types of readers, number of readers, library usage, shelving, type of access, statistics etc).
  - Cataloguing/Classification Issues (Classification Schemes, electronic cataloguing, statistics etc).
  - Other special features (e-mail based reference services, alerting services, library maintained web-sites etc).
- (D) **Library Infrastructure/Facilities**
- Reading area, seats, shelves, ventilation/air conditioning facilities, security devices, facilities for the physically challenged, photocopy/scanning services etc).
  - Trends in information application tools/technologies.
- (E) **Preservation and Conservation Policies**
- Preservation and conservation strategy for various formats in holdings – print, electronic, audio visual, insurance and risk management issues.
- (F) **User Information**
- User Survey – opinions; needs/satisfaction vis a vis library services etc.
- (G) **Trends in Library Administration**
- (H) **Trends in Library Budgeting and Expenditure Control**
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- Centralized versus decentralized budgeting etc.
- (I) **Staff Development Issues**
- Qualification requirements, career structure, capacity building

The above categorization is in-exhaustive and is not sacrosanct. They are subject to amendments and modifications from time to time. It is also important to note that developments in the information service industry are a crucial factor in the choice of benchmark targets at any point in time.

### **The Benchmarking Process: Recommendations**

The following are desirable guidelines to be taken into consideration in the execution of the benchmarking activities.

- (A) **Institution/Adoption of the Benchmarking Process:** The first step in the process of benchmarking is its formal adoption as a management tool for the analysis and evaluation of library processes with the ultimate vision of ensuring improvement in performance. With this in place, the library officially regards the practice as part of the obligations of the establishment.
- (B) **Team Members:** It is also desirable for the library to constitute a benchmarking team for effective execution of the project. In doing this, the establishment could draw from the experience of corporate organizations who have Research and Development (R&D) Units to coordinate the activities. On the other hand, the team could be made up of representatives from different sections of the library and membership can be reviewed from time to time.

Again, services of professionals from adjunct or related disciplines outside the library may be solicited if so required.

- (C) **What to Benchmark/Frequency of Benchmarking:** The library needs to decide on what to benchmark from time to time. It usually involves the design of regular benchmark indices that could be used repeatedly at various times for competitive analysis. It may be holistic or segmental or topical. This is equally tied to the determination of frequency of benchmarking activities.

**(D) Identification of Benchmarking Partners:** There is the need to identify benchmarking partners to be engaged in benchmarking activities. It may also identify specific library process(es) and select partners for those acclaimed to have best practices in that area(s). For instance, benchmarking partners on ICT application may not necessarily be from the law library category only; it may require looking beyond the group. Attempts can be made to draw up lists of partners from time to time.

### **Analysis of Data**

Data collected from the survey instrument or any benchmark partners should be duly analyzed to draw out research findings.

**(E) Communication of Research Findings:** It is desirable that research findings and conclusion drawn out from data collected be communicated to all members of staff within the library system. This is expected to generate some reactions from stakeholders as well as inform the next course of action.

**(F) Report of the Benchmarking Outcomes:** An official report of the benchmarking outcomes needs to be made available by the library management to the library committee as well as the parent institution. The report could also be made available on the library managed web-site and/or the Institute's web-site as the case may be. It is an official declaration that benchmarking findings have been translated into policies.

**(G) Adoption/Integration of Benchmarking Outcomes:** This is the final stage of the benchmarking process. It entails the translation of the policies arrived at into service(s). The outcomes are applied to the library management principles and services within the context of the aspects that were benchmarked with measurable expectations of improved performance.

### **Implication of the Benchmarking Strategy**

In summary, the following are the likely implications of the adoption of the benchmarking strategy:

- a) Proactiveness in library management.

- b) The development of a vibrant and dynamic work-force.
- c) Inter-departmental cooperation within the library system.
- d) The development of a value-added library services.
- e) The development of a user-friendly library services (improved user satisfaction).
- f) Creation of national/international business/service niche.
- g) Encouragement of research and development.
- h) Improved library placement and visibility within and without the organization.
- i) Improved financial commitment of the parent institution to the library.

### **Conclusion**

The retention of the title of the ‘Apex Institute’ in Advanced Legal Research in Nigeria is a very demanding one to maintain. The provision of an enviable Law Library Services of international standard is apparently germane to maintaining the locus using the benchmarking strategy. The inherent value of engaging in the exercise of this thesis though may not be apparent now, will be discovered to be a worthwhile venture and legacy in the nearest future.

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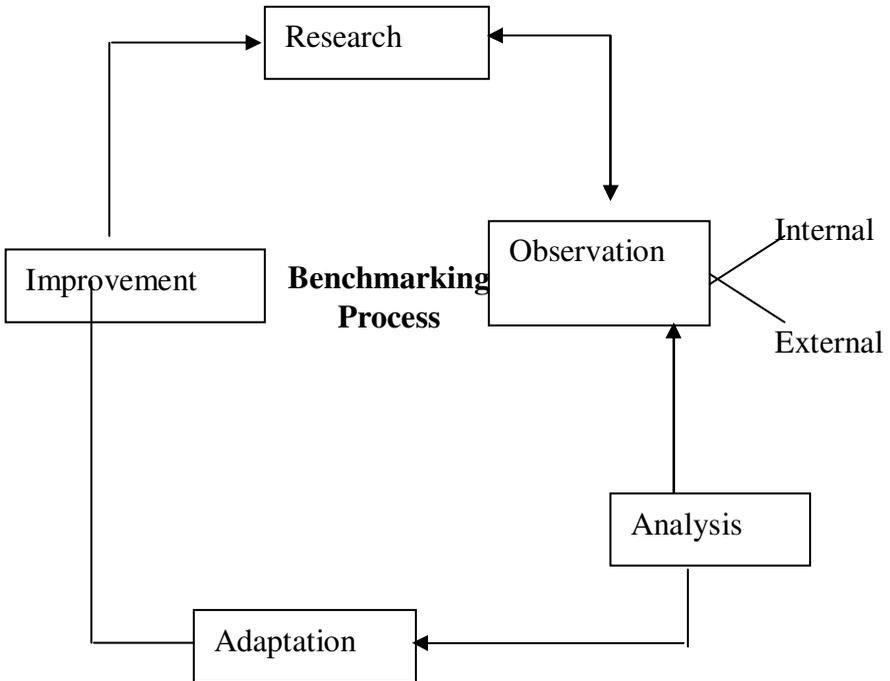
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**Fig: 1: Modified model of benchmarking process (Choo, Retrieved 2007, Nicholas, 2007:7).**