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THEORETICAL ASPECTS OF BENCHMARKING IN MANAGING INNOVATIVE DEVELOPMENT OF ENTERPRISES

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Summary. In today's competitive and globalized educational world, collaboration between universities has become crucial for improving the performance of educational institutions. One effective way to achieve this collaboration is through benchmarking projects, which help universities explore and implement best practices for their overall development. The relevance of this research stems from the increasing importance of inter-social consensus and collaboration in the context of globalization, both at the national and international levels. Consequently, the formation of partnerships with leading higher education institutions for the purpose of exchanging and implementing positive experience is of paramount importance. The study employs content analysis and expert evaluation methods. As an illustration, it provides an example of the evolution of innovative terminology in the context of public administration, as well as aspects of public policy in the field of education in the Republic of Tajikistan.

Keywords: benchmarking, innovation, higher education institutions, introduction of advanced technologies, government, product, new approaches, competitive advantages.

1. Introduction

Competition in the field of higher education forces universities to look for new ways to attract all stakeholders, from potential students and government agencies to partners and the public. This is achieved through strategic positioning, building an attractive image, and establishing a strong business reputation in the educational services market, which directly affects the efficiency and competitiveness of the university. The information sent outwards should be convincing, relevant, meet modern public demands, and highlight the university's strengths to maximize the loyalty of its stakeholders to its brand. To effectively address these challenges, a comprehensive application of management and marketing tools is necessary, which should become the foundation of the university's operations.

2. Benchmarking and Innovation in University Branding

Let's analyze the place and role of benchmarking in the arsenal of marketing tools, especially in relation to the university's brand. "Benchmarking is not just a research activity, but an entire field focused on improving production and marketing management by discovering and implementing what others do best, whether it's other companies or entire industries. It's a kind of art of finding the best solutions, studying them, improving them, and applying them" (Ustavitskaya, 2011). In order to successfully apply this approach to a university brand, it is necessary to combine management mechanisms and marketing tools that will become the foundation of the university's entire activities, which is a kind of innovation.

Innovation is usually a product or technology that has been successfully introduced into production or the service sector, and is commercially viable, with improved or fundamentally new characteristics compared to previous versions. Innovation acts as a driving force for progress not only at the enterprise level, but also at the level of the Republic of Tajikistan, and flexibility and adaptability are essential for maintaining a leading position. The implementation of innovative ideas is a key element and a guarantee of success in today's dynamic world. Long-term progress and expansion are unthinkable without innovative activities.

3. Understanding Innovation: Definitions, Types, and National Context

Despite the frequent use of the term “innovation” by various experts, a commonly accepted and precise definition of this concept remains somewhat ambiguous. This ambiguity is evident in both academic research and official government documents such as laws, strategies, and concepts.

Let's consider the term “innovation” based on its etymology, specifically the ancient Indo-European root *new-, which is found in Latin, French, and Russian. This root indicates the emergence of a previously absent property or characteristic. In Russian, the adjective “new” often carries a positive connotation. “Additionally, it can be challenging to distinguish between innovations and similar words with shared origins” (Law of the Republic of Tajikistan, 2012).

Referring to the Latin language, we can conclude that these concepts indicated absolute novelty, something so new that it had never existed before. It is argued that this concept dates back at least two millennia (for example, the Roman aqueduct “Anio Novus”, built approximately 2,000 years ago, is one of the earliest references to the term). It is important to note that the word “novelty” in a broader sense encompasses everything related to technological breakthroughs.

Y. Schumpeter identified “five fundamental types of changes that underlie the innovation process:

- Apply innovative methods, advanced production technologies, or improved logistics.
- To develop and offer fundamentally new products and services with improved characteristics.
- Use non-traditional types of raw materials.
- Modernize the production system structure and company management methods.
- To open and develop new distribution channels and territories for product sales” (Baigaziev, 2025).

“Tajikistan is taking steady steps towards digitalization of the national economy in order to ensure transparency in financial and economic relations”, said President of the Republic of Tajikistan, Leader of the Nation, Emomali Rahmon, in his Address to the Majlisi Oli of the Republic of Tajikistan on the Main Directions of the Republic's Domestic and Foreign Policy.

The concept of “innovation” is interpreted in two main ways. Innovation, according to the original definition, is the result of creative thinking that takes the form of new products (such as equipment), technological developments, or improved work processes. The second perspective views innovation as the process of introducing new products, components, strategic decisions, or fundamental principles that replace existing ones.

Innovation is something new or improved that comes from working on ideas. It could be a new product, a new technology for managing things, or a new way to solve a social problem.

In the current environment, innovative advancement is the most promising approach to leadership, which relies on the relentless search for and application of advanced techniques and areas of opportunity for the company in a transforming situation. Innovative company development involves integrating fresh strategies and solutions into the company's operations. Innovation is understood as a multifaceted mechanism that encompasses the generation, translation, and implementation of new concepts. In this sense, innovation is a continuous process. Consequently, innovative activity involves a diverse range of actions that encompass scientific, managerial, technical, marketing, and investment elements.

Thus, innovation is a key factor in competitiveness and development in today's world. It allows companies to adapt to changing market conditions, offer new and improved solutions to consumers, and improve the efficiency of their operations.

4. Benchmarking Implementation and Cooperation in Higher Education

In order to achieve a high competitive professional level of the university and successfully implement the benchmarking project, we consider it promising to develop cooperation with other universities both in Tajikistan and abroad. Such a partnership will allow us to receive the necessary information and methodological support through mutual exchange. Cooperation can be organized through educational associations, consortia, and international education networks, which help to unite efforts and resources in order to solve current problems and develop the global market of educational services, providing participants with access to the best practices.

For example, in order to meet the government's objectives, the Abuali ibn Sino Tajik State Medical University is actively developing international cooperation. "The university has established partnerships with 149 universities worldwide, including Russia, the United States, Germany, France, China, and Japan. This cooperation has yielded tangible results, including improved medical training, student and faculty exchange programs, and joint research and conferences. Additionally, the university organizes international schools that facilitate the exchange of knowledge with foreign colleagues" (Tashkent State Medical University, n.d.).

Innovation work, like any other process, does not exist in a vacuum, but is always associated with interaction between subjects and objects. In a broad sense, the subjects of this activity include various participants: organizations of all forms of ownership, individual citizens of Tajikistan, foreign companies and citizens, as well as stateless persons involved in the creation and implementation of innovations. In other words, innovation does not occur on its own, but is the result of purposeful actions by various stakeholders.

When conducting benchmarking to improve the university's competitiveness, its integrity is crucial. This includes setting clear goals, consistently implementing improvements in quality indicators, and ensuring harmonious collaboration among all structural units. The essence of benchmarking lies in a unified process or project where individual elements and subsystems of the university are compared with "ideal" or baseline models. Universities have the opportunity to choose from a wide range of benchmarking types (internal, external, strategic, operational, process, problem-solving, individual, network, intermediary, independent, rating, reference, search), based on their specific goals and available resources.

Let's take a closer look at some of the existing types of benchmarking in the higher education system. Internal benchmarking, also known as intra-university benchmarking, involves conducting a comparative analysis between different structural units of the university. "This can include aspects such as the quality of educational and methodological work, the level of student performance, the effectiveness of research and innovation activities, and the results of educational work" (Afanasyeva, 2019).

The comparison is carried out between faculties, departments, and even individual professors. This type of benchmarking is the most preferred for a university, as it is highly manageable and cost-effective. It can be implemented by the university's own staff, provided that proper organizational measures are taken. External benchmarking involves comparing the performance of similar activities between different educational institutions. This comparison can be made with leading global universities or with the best Russian and regional universities. It is worth mentioning rating benchmarking, which consists of measuring and evaluating the performance of a university, as well as comparing its indicators with others to determine its place in the relevant ranking. Choosing a suitable benchmark or partner for comparison and collaboration is a critical step in the benchmarking process.

Let's outline a few approaches to finding such partners. The world of higher education is replete with various rankings of prestigious universities. Among them are:

QS (Quacquarelli Symonds): it evaluates universities based on their citation rate.

Shanghai Global Ranking: Focuses on academic achievements.

CWUR (Center for World University Rankings): conducts its own independent analysis without using the universities' data.

According to a ranking based on the analysis of scientific research (the EduRank index recorded 686 publications and 1197 citations), non-academic reputation, and the influence of 10 outstanding graduates, Tajik National University has taken a leading position in Tajikistan. Among the mentioned graduates is Emomali Rahmon, the country's third president since 1994. In addition to the national leader, the country's top-rated universities include the Tajik State University of Commerce, the Russian-Tajik Slavic University, the S. Aini Tajik State Pedagogical University, the Avicenna Tajik State Medical University, the M. S. Osimi Tajik Technical University, and the Tajik Technical University (TUT).

To achieve common goals and foster innovation, partner benchmarking, supported by established networks, involves the collaborative use of advanced technologies, research findings, and comparative analysis methods. This collaboration takes the form of joint conferences, forums, and discussion platforms, as well as active exchange of experiences between universities. Mutual visits, the sharing of best

educational practices, digital solutions, professional development programs, and pedagogical innovations, along with student mobility, contribute to this process.

5. Conclusion

The main goal of partner benchmarking is to turn competition into constructive cooperation, and the meeting of rectors can be a key stage in its implementation. In addition, leading universities that demonstrate significant success and serve as a model for evaluation create a positive professional reputation, improve their prestige, and thus contribute to the comprehensive growth of the educational institution.

Thus, benchmarking in the field of higher education provides opportunities for maintaining and improving the quality of education, strengthening the position in the educational services market, and creating a positive business image and reputation.

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