COMPARATIVE ASPECTS ON SOME BENCHMARKING MODELS APPLIED IN THE TOURISM FIELD AT INTERNATIONAL LEVEL

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Abstract
Benchmarking is a method of management that involves an organization to compare with other reference organizations (leaders) in its field and to adopt similar techniques with these leading organizations in order to improve its own performance. Particularly in the tourism field, instead of organizations we can also have tourist destinations (preferably managed through Destination Management Organizations –DMOs). The purpose of this paper is to present a short analysis of five well-established benchmarking models applied in the field of tourism at international level. In this regard, a number of issues related to data accessibility (dissemination), benchmarking types and benchmarking areas were discussed. Being used by the tourism industry, particularly by the private sector and also by the public sector, the five models might be considered as being representative for the tourism sector at international level. It has also been established that although the applicability of benchmarking in the field of tourism refers in most cases to the organizations operating in this field, there is a good representation of the area of applicability at the tourist destination level also.

Keywords: *benchmarking, tourism, tourist destination, comparability.*

1. Introduction

Benchmarking is a relatively new concept that derives from the English word "benchmark". In a simple manner, benchmarking is a management method that involves an organization to compare itself with other reference organizations (leaders in its field of activity) and to adopt similar techniques with these organizations that are leaders in their field in order to improve its own activities.

In the literature lot of benchmarking models are found. Some authors such as Anand and Kodali (2008) identified and analyzed a number of 35 such models. Actually, even earlier, Kozak (2000) mentions the existence of almost 40 models

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that come both from consultancy firms and individual organizations or researchers in this field. More recently Watson cited by Jetmarova (2011) identifies a number of 69 different models within the benchmarking process.

Also in the period January 1980 to January 2002 some authors such as Dattakumar and Jagadeesh (2003) have identified a number of 382 articles in the field of benchmarking out of which only 21 were in the service field (representing only 5.5% from the total number of articles); moreover, Wöber (2002) states clearly that benchmarking is "still a vague concept in the service industry, particularly in the field of tourism" (p. 2).

The purpose of this paper is to present a short analysis of five well-established benchmarking models applied in the tourism field at international level. In this regard, the starting point will be an explanation of the theoretical framework pertaining to the concept of benchmarking and some benchmarking types. Then, a brief presentation of the five benchmarking models applied in the tourism field at international level will follow. The core part is represented by performing a comparability of these models considering a number of issues related to data accessibility (dissemination), benchmarking types and benchmarking areas.

2. Benchmarking – some conceptual clarifications

In the literature, different definitions of benchmarking are found, provided by various authors and organizations. The first one and one of the most complete definition of benchmarking (as a basis of an adopted strategy) has been given last century by the director of Xerox company as "a continuous process of measuring own products, services and practices in comparison with the toughest competitors or those companies recognized as leaders in the industry" (Slave, 2017, p. 1). Similarly, one of the concise definitions for this concept has been presented by Kempner, cited by Andreescu et al (2009, p. 9) that defined benchmarking as an "systematic and permanent process of measuring and comparing work processes of an organization with other organization".

Jackson and Lund, cited by Andreescu et al (2009) defined also benchmarking as being "a learning process structured so as to allow those involved to compare their own services / activities / products, in order to identify the strengths and weaknesses in order to improve them" (p. 10). Other authors, such as Stevenson, Maclachlan and Karmel, cited in Ilie, Maftei and Colibăşeanu (2011, p. 572) emphasized the fact that benchmarking as a method defines both an initial diagnosis and a management instrument focused on learning, collaboration and leadership for a continuous improvement.

Miron et al (2011) considered that benchmarking is a "special type of quality management instrument being included in the SR EN ISO 9004-4:1998 standard, Quality management and elements of the quality system, part IV: Guide for improving quality" (p. 19). In fact the benchmarking programs according to

Grigorescu and Grecu (2010) are included in the initiatives of total quality management. This represents a long term commitment to satisfy the needs of customers in any aspect.

As mentioned by Tripon (2017, p. 7) benchmarking can be used in any type of organization respectively enterprises, units from a certain enterprise or public services, that wants to use benchmarking to improve their competencies, efficiency and/or competitiveness.

The concept of benchmarking is seen as an evolving phenomenon, a dynamic phenomenon. Watson cited by Kyro (2003) suggests that benchmarking is an evolving concept that has been developed ever since 1940 to more sophisticated forms. He mentioned that this concept has passed through five generations. The first generation, named "*reverse engineering*" was product oriented and made comparison between characteristics, functionality and the performance of product competition offers. Most of the authors consider this development of the generation as taking place in the 80s at Rank Xerox. The second generation - "*competitive benchmarking*" – entails the comparison of organizational processes with the ones of direct competition. The third generation - "*process benchmarking*" – was based on the idea that the experience of some companies outside its own industry (field of activity) can be a model to follow. The fourth generation in the 90s introduced "*strategic benchmarking*" which entails a systematic process of evaluation of options, implementation strategies and performance improvement through understanding and adopting the success strategies of external partners. With the fifth generation the concept of benchmarking has been completed by the global perspective – *global benchmarking* (Ahmed and Rafiq, 1998), while the sixth generation considered *benchlearning*.

Benchmarking is the method where one can look outside its own organization or from outside of the organization to the inside of the organization in order to find, introduce and raise the performance. Starting from this, different references were found in the literature regarding various types of benchmarking, depending on the organizational level, the purpose pursued and the field under analysis. In this regard, Wöber (2001, p. 5) distinguished between two main types of benchmarking, respectively external benchmarking and internal benchmarking. According to McNair and Leibfried, cited in Andreescu et al (2009), *internal benchmarking* is focused on the internal structure of an organization, on its functional domains. Within this type of benchmarking, the internal information within enterprises is compared, referring to enterprises with more branches and enterprises that are active at international level, where there are similar functions in different operational units. *External benchmarking* according to Andreescu et al (2009, p. 14) looks outside the organization, in order to indentify the level of performances of direct competitors. *Competitive benchmarking* is, as mentioned

by Ilie, Maftei and Colibăşeanu (2011) a continuous process that allows institutions to make a self-evaluation compared with other organizations in the same field, organizations that are real or potential competitors, in order to obtain information and results, in order to compare this with its own performances and to improve its entire activity.

Instead, the *sectorial benchmarking* (according to Andreescu et al, 2009, p. 14) goes beyond the "one to one[2]" comparison proposed by the external benchmarking and considers the identification of trends. The focus is now on the methods and key characteristics (production or delivery of services) that can provide a competitive advantage in relation with the direct competitors in the field/sector. In other words, sectorial benchmarking entails comparison with the organizations that demonstrate the best practices in delivering the products or services.

The literature mentions that *performance benchmarking* is focused on quality elements, on customer satisfaction and qualitative measures. Therefore, Scurtu (2007, p. 7) has defined performance benchmarking as being "*an analysis of relative performances in business between direct and indirect competitors, focused on published official data from the considered organizations or conducted as "blind studies" by consultancy firms*". Performance benchmarking allows an organization to assess its own competitive status regarding price, quality and the characteristics of the product or related services and reliability, by comparing products and services.

Collaborative benchmarking is undertaken by more than two organizations, where many or ideally all partners are acting as models for each other in some cases and as organizations that are learning to compete with other organizations in other aspects.

International benchmarking is the benchmarking process that is carried out at international level. The comparison is made with companies located in other countries, especially when the needed information is not available internally or when the company wants to be competitive at international level.

Finally, the type of benchmarking will be chosen depending on the organization objectives, on the competitive environment they are activating, on the level of development and its evolution as well as on the state of economic environment.

3. Benchmarking models applied in the tourism field at international level

As it follows some models already applied in the tourism field will be briefly presented. In this regard five models have been chosen. In many cases

[2] "One to one" benchmarking is undertaken by a model organization that acts as a standard and an organization that learns to compete with this organization.

these are in fact detailed reports, provided either free of charge or on a fee basis. More, it has to be mentioned that the selection of these models has been made considering these to be periodic updated exercises.

3.1. Model used by the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) – Benchmarking in the field of Travel and Tourism comparing with other economic sectors

This benchmarking model is a research sponsorised by American Express Company and considers a comparison of the Travel and Tourism sector with other eight economic sectors both globally and for each region[3] and 27 individual countries[4] (WTTC, 2017). One can considers that "the results of these comparisons provide new perspectives on the relative significance of Travel and Tourism, as well as some of its unique advantages in driving current and future global economic growth" (WTTC, 2017). The results are published free of charge on the WTTC website at https://www.wttc.org/research/economic-research/benchmark-reports/.

Within the WTTC model the focus is on more on the obtained results and less on the methodology that is used. Regarding the results of the benchmarking model, it has been estimated that, by considering the direct, indirect and induced effects, al global level in 2016 Travel & Tourism sector accounts for more than 10% from the world GDP, thus exceeding industries such as automotive manufacturing, chemicals manufacturing, agriculture or mining industry and represents around 60% from the GDP generated by the construction industry. Another element of comparability of Travel and Tourism sector is given by the prognosis regarding the annual average growth of the GDP generated by each economic sector in the following 10 years, respectively the period 2017-2027 (real growth, inflation adjusted). Therefore, the Travel and Tourism sector is foreseen to increase in average annually with 4%, a level which is superior to the economic growth at global level (2.7%) or some sectors such as agriculture (2.2%), mining industry (2%) or construction (3.6%).

One has to admit the fact that the figures provided by WTTC are the only data in this field at global level, therefore it is difficult to discuss too much on these. However, from the methodological point of view there are some issues such as overlapping of some sectors for which comparability is achieved, the exceeding of 100% threshold in relative terms (by considering the total effects - in the case of sectorial GDP or generated jobs) and these entitle us to show some caution in using

[3] The following regions are analysed as detailed reports Europe, Americas, Asia-Pacific, Africa, Middle East

[4] Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, France, Germany, India, Indonesia, Italy, Jamaica, Japan, Kenya, Malaysia, Mexico, Peru, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, South Africa, South Korea, Spain, Thailand, Turkey, USA, United Kingdom, UAE

these data coming from the benchmarking model used by WTTC (INCDT, 2017, p. 33). However, the WTTC model is an illustrative macroeconomic example of how travel and tourism sector is compared with other economic sectors.

3.2. Canadian model of benchmarking the performances of tourism within the economy

This model is one that allows the comparability of tourism performances with other sectors of the Canadian economy. The model has been conceived by the Conference Board of Canada. Unlike the WTTC benchmarking model which is one exclusively applied at macroeconomic level, the Canadian model considers also some indicators at microeconomic level, more precisely at enterprise level. Practically, the Canadian model consists in comparing the performance of tourism sector (defined as a group of interconnected industries) with other sectors of the economy as well as comparing the tourism industries with other industries in the Canadian economy[5].

The intersectorial comparability is achieved by calculating a sort of "composite performance index" that "integrates the performance of all economic and financial indicators over three separate time horizons, while also capturing the degree of volatility in performance reported across each of the 10 indicators." (The Conference Board of Canada, 2013, p. 4). In fact, the data regarding the performance indicators are combined in a benchmarking index for each perspective used in the analysis: current performance, recent performance, trend performance and the so called volatility performance. As variables, both the size of each sector and its growth rate are presented.

Regarding results, comparing with the other 10 economic sectors, tourism ranked 6 (according to the composite performance index) ahead of sectors such as primary industries (Agriculture, Fishing and forestry), Mining, and oil and gas extraction, Public utilities, Manufacturing, Transport and warehousing. Regarding analysis at the industry level, this showed that not all tourism industries performed in a same manner. For instance, the tourism component of other tourism industries ranked 5 among the 48 industries from the Canadian economy due to the strong financial performance registered while the tourism component of transport ranked 32, "dragged down by particularly weak financial performance" (Conference Board of Canada, 2013, p. 23).

[5] From the terminological point of view, one should distinguish between tourism "sector" and tourism "industries". Following the definition used by the Canadian Tourism Satellite Account, the tourism sector is defined as "group of industries that provides goods and services to visitors and that would be significantly affected if the tourism activity had been eliminated from the Canadian economy" (the Conference Board of Canada, 2013, p. 27). The industries that are part of the tourism sector are defined following NAICS 2002 – The Standard Classification of the Industrial Activities in the North America.

Also, the results showed that tourism is an important sector of the economy with growth rates which are pretty good compared with other economic sectors. Also, on the other hand, particularly on short term, the results proved that tourism is unlikely to generate the best economic and financial performance due to the diversified structure of the Canadian economy.

3.3. The model used by the European Cities Marketing – ECM for city tourism in Europe

Based on data provided by over 100 cities in Europe, the European Cities Marketing – ECM produces the report entitled *European Cities Marketing Benchmarking Report*. The ECM's scientific partner in this project is Modul University in Vienna.

At present the benchmarking report is now at the 13th edition and includes "the latest figures on the performance of leading European cities in 2016 and illustrates the main trends in city tourism between 2012 and 2016, enabling individual city destinations to benchmark themselves in terms of volume and other parameters, especially key source markets" (European Cities Marketing, 2017).

The considered indicators are number of overnight stays (in nominal values) and average annual growth rate for overnight stays in the last 5 years. A ranking based on these indicators are included for all the cities incorporated in the report and separately the top 15 cities. The data consist of a breakdown of number of overnight stays by types of tourists (the volume and growth performance of each source market– in this regard the following source markets are considered: Germany, Italy, France, Spain, United Kingdom, USA, Japan, Russia and China). Also, data on accommodation capacity (number of beds) is included as well as a comparability of city tourism with national tourism regarding the main source markets.

Also, one has to admit the fact that there are still some challenges from methodological point of view since there are some differences between cities and countries in Europe regarding the collected statistics. The main purpose for performing annually this type of benchmarking analysis for more than one decade is the fact that the ECM benchmarking report is seen as being very valuable for city marketing managers who need data to be used in their campaigns, strategies and plans (UNWTO, 2014).

The ECM Benchmarking report pays special attention to definitions and methodologies, and in this regard ECM favours a certain harmonization by clearly presenting the differences that occur between city tourism statistics hoping that this will lead to a better understanding and an increase in the credibility of the data.

3.4. The STR benchmarking model for hotels

This benchmarking model was initially launched by the American company Smith Travel Research (STR) ever since 1988 once launching the STAR (Smith Travel Accommodation Report) product as a monthly report with data on the performance of a hotel compared with a defined competitive set of hotels (Wikipedia, 2017).

As an output, three basic indicators are found in the STR benchmarking reports: Room occupancy, Average Daily Rate – ADR, REVenue Per Available Room – RevPAR. These three indicators are considered the **Key Performance Indicators. In this regard, it is illustrative to present the definition of benchmarking from the STR perspective as being: "a strategic and analytical process in which key performance indicators (KPI) are compared with a competitive sample for the purpose of improving performance results" (STR, 2017).**

As a general rule, being performed by a consultancy firm, data are provided on a fee basis both for external users and for participating hotels. The participating hotels get free of charge only a report entitled Hotel Survey while on a fee basis the hotels receive the STR benchmarking product, the so called STAR report where a hotel choose its own set of competitor hotels and has the possibility to compare its own performance with that of the competitor hotels. Also as a basic rule, a special attention is paid on data confidentiality, not being provided individual data on the competitor hotels/hotel chains but only aggregate data at the market level or for the whole competitive set chosen.

Being a private company, the number of hotels providing data for each country/tourist destination is not made public. However, STR owns another product entitled Hotel Census Database, a database containing data at global level for a number of over 156,000 hotels having over 14.5 millions of rooms.

3.5. The model used by the Cornell University – Hotel Sustainability Benchmarking

The prestigious Cornell University from the United States has published starting with 2014 the study entitled Cornell Hotel Sustainability Benchmarking (CHSB). Up to now, three such studies have been published through the Cornel Centre for Hospitality Research in collaboration with Greenview, a consultancy firm activating in the hotel sustainability field.

In the first study, carbon emissions and energy usage from over 2,000 hotels have been analyzed (Chong and Ricaurte, 2014). However, the last study available in July 2016 included data referring to 4,557 properties across 191 locations (Ricaurte, 2016). The participant hotels provided the following information: identification data, number of rooms, the property's surface and separately the surface of rooms and exhibition spaces, STR segmentation, type of location

(urban/suburban, rural/low density, airport, conference, resort, timesharing), duration of operation, existence of laundry, number of occupied rooms, monthly water consumption, monthly energy consumption by types of source of energy.

Practically, through the benchmarking model implemented by the Cornell University a hotel can compare itself with a set of hotels in certain segments and geographical areas regarding energy consumption, water consumption and greenhouse emissions. However, in the benchmarking analysis the following caution is given: "due to the variability among hotels, comparisons among hotels are generally not appropriate without further analysis of their drivers" (Ricaurte, 2016, p. 1).

4. The comparability of benchmarking models presented

The five models presented above can be considered representative for the tourism sector. Therefore, the first two models envisage benchmarking of tourism as a distinct economic sector compared with other economic activities. The third model presented above considers city tourism benchmarking while the last two models illustrate strictly benchmarking in the hotel sector. As stated before, all these models are used in the tourism industries, predominantly by the private sector but also by the public sector.

Another important observation refers to how benchmarking data are made public. For the first two benchmarking models, data are provided free of charge (both of them envisage benchmarking of tourism as an economic sector) while for two models there are no public data (STR model and ECM model) but data are obtained on a fee basis. The model used by the Cornell University presents freely only partially data using the dissemination means used by the university.

Another characteristic is given by the fact that these benchmarking models are produced by private organizations/consultancy firms and provided to customers either public authorities, or private operators from the tourism industry. Being products of consultancy firms, in many cases the results have a restricted dissemination, being only known to a very specialized target audience, especially to tourism professionals.

It is important also to frame the five models presented above according to the types of benchmarking presented previously (see table 1).

Table 1 Identification of benchmarking types in the analyzed models

Benchmarking types → **Benchmarking models ↓**	**Sectorial**	**Competitive**	**Performance benchmarking**	**Collaborative**	**International**
WTTC model – Benchmarking Travel and Tourism compared with other economic sectors	√				√
Canadian model of benchmarking the performances of tourism within the economy	√		√		
ECM benchmarking model for city tourism	√	√	√	√	√
STR model for benchmarking hotels	√	√	√	√	√
Cornell University model – Hotel Sustainability Benchmarking	√	√	√	√	√

Source: *INCDT (2017)*, p. 45

One can see that all five models presented in this paper are included in the sectorial benchmarking type, envisaging exclusively tourism sector or hotel sector. At the same time, all benchmarking models presented above (excepting the Canadian model of benchmarking the performances of tourism within the economy) are international benchmarking models, the process of benchmarking being conducted internationally (allowing a comparison between different countries / international destinations or between organizations / hotels in different countries). At the same time, three of the analysed models (ECM, STR and Cornell University) are included in the collaborative benchmarking type since all participating organizations in these models decide to provide its own data and want to learn from their competitors by comparing with them.

Excepting the WTTC model (which envisages exclusively the sectorial comparability of tourism at macroeconomic level) all the other models consider measuring the performance and from this point of view they are framing in the performance benchmarking typology. Last but not least, three of the five models presented (ECM, STR and Cornell University) are within the competitive benchmarking type, as these models directly allow comparability with similar organizations.

On another level, one can analyze for each of these models presented above the areas of benchmarking in tourism as defined by Wöber (2002) respectively benchmarking at tourist destination level and benchmarking at the enterprise/organization in the tourism industry level; therefore three out of five benchmarking models (ECM, STR and Cornell University) are considered both

benchmarking models that are used/applied at the tourist destination level and benchmarking models that are used/applied at the enterprise/organization level. Instead the WTTC model as well as the Canadian model can be applied only at the tourist destination level and cannot be internalized as a benchmarking model for a enterprise/organization in the tourism industry (see table 2).

Table 2 Areas of benchmarking in tourism identified in the analyzed models

Areas of benchmarking in tourism → / **Benchmarking models ↓**	**Tourist destination**	**Enterprise/organization in the tourism industry**
WTTC model – Benchmarking Travel and Tourism compared with other economic sectors	√	
Canadian model of benchmarking the performances of tourism within the economy	√	
ECM benchmarking model for city tourism	√	√
STR model for benchmarking hotels	√	√
Cornell University model – Hotel Sustainability Benchmarking	√	√

Source: *INCDT (2017)*, p. 46

5. Conclusion

This paper aimed to present some comparative aspects of several benchmarking models particularly used in the tourism field considering the multitude of benchmarking models that come both from consultancy firms and individual organizations or researchers from this field. In this process a number of five models have been chosen representing strictly some applications of using the benchmarking concept in tourism at international level.

However, at the very beginning, the presentation of the conceptual framework of benchmarking was included, as an essential issue in a better understanding the benchmarking concept, and in this regard several definitions from the literature were illustrated. It is important to mention the fact that there is no common accepted definition of benchmarking at global level, each author making his own contribution to developing the benchmarking concept. Also, one can say that these definitions reflect also a certain stage of development of benchmarking over the last few years; the same applies to the existing benchmarking types (from product benchmarking to competitive benchmarking, from process benchmarking to strategic benchmarking and to global benchmarking).

As mentioned before the five benchmarking models presented in this paper have an applicability specific to tourism which is suitable at the tourist destination level and, in most cases, also at organization level in the tourism industry.

Therefore, from this point of view, the models presented are useful to the practitioners in the tourism industry.

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