

Legal framework for quality assurance in the Republic of Moldova higher education

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Abstract. In the current economic context, **quality** has become a source of competitive advantage, and universities that want to achieve academic excellence must perceive quality as something integral to their activities. **The purpose** of this research is to demonstrate that without establishing an efficient mechanism for quality assurance and evaluation, higher education institutions turn into diplomas mills, being rather an impediment to the cultural, economic and social development of society. So, in order to ensure the success of the scientific approach, the following **methods** were used: scientific documentation; analytical-synthetic methods; the method of comparing and generalizing theoretical and practical data. The analysis of the quality of higher education in Moldova in terms of the provisions of the Bologna Process raised a fundamental question - the acute need for effective external evaluation mechanisms of higher education institutions in parallel with the internal mechanisms of institutions. As a **result**, following the empirical study, we conclude that the universities of the Republic of Moldova do not face significant problems that seriously affect the performance of the total quality management system, but they must really make efforts to improve the dimensions analyzed in within this research, in order to obtain the benefits expected from the implementation of the total quality management system.

1 Introduction

The development and well-being of a country and its citizens depends on the quality of education and professional training, that is, it can only be achieved through well-trained professionals in their fields of activity who support and contribute to the growth of the economy. It is obvious that the quality of education largely determines the quality of life and creates opportunities for the full realization of the potential of each person. Higher education creates new knowledge, teaches specific skills and promotes core values like freedom, tolerance and dignity.

The higher education has as its main goal the formation and development of a system of competencies, which includes a **multifunctional integrity of knowledge, skills and values**, which can only be achieved by ensuring the quality of education. Higher education should be a matter of responsibility and economic support for all countries as a public good and a strategic imperative for all levels of education and as a foundation for research, innovation and creativity. The main condition for the development of the higher education

system is the need to ensure the quality of education within the framework of university autonomy.

For the Republic of Moldova, **education represents a national priority** or the basic factor in the development of human capital and a knowledge- based society, it is a cornerstone for sustainable development. For a country like Moldova with limited natural resources and a small market, **the contribution of the higher education system to economic diversification and growth is of special importance.**

Currently, there are 24 HEIs in the Republic of Moldova, with a total number of 60 000 students, 16 universities are public and 8 are private. The basic difference between public and private institutions is in the source of financing: public universities are funded from the state budget while private ones are self-financing. Otherwise, all HEIs must follow the national regulatory framework regardless the type of ownership.

The policy documents that define the education reform in Moldova are the **Sectoral Education Development Strategy (2014-2020)**, elaborated in accordance with the provisions of the **2020 European Education Strategy**, the **Education Code**.

Full membership in the Bologna Process starting with May 2005 has a double significance for the Republic of Moldova. On the one hand, the integration into European higher education area has started; on the other hand the national academic community has assumed the responsibility for continuous modernization of the higher education system in order to implement the Bologna Process principles, but also the country's commitments under the Association Agreement of the Republic of Moldova with the European Union.

The greatest problem of our educational system is the massive emigration of youth. Its number was reduced, in the latest **10 years, by 40%**. Under these conditions, universities function in the framework **of an unfair competition and admit to university studies almost anyone**. Therefore, the quality of studies is left behind, while the learning process is infused with negligence from the part of students, after leading to plagiarism and exam fraud. That is why some universities force lecturers to give marks for exams to students who did not in fact complete a course in order to keep the student population level as a source of financing. Also, underfunded education sector that means lack of antiplagiarism tools, low salary for lecturers, which have no incentives to deal with students cheating is another factor of fostering corruption process.

So, in the Moldovan higher education system **priorities** remain the concerns regarding the development and modernization of curricula, quality assurance of study programmes, promotion of university autonomy and academic integrity, fight against cheating and plagiarism in higher education. The implementation of these objectives involves conducting actions starting with an emphasis on educating people in a change of mindset.

2 Materials and methods in establishing of the strategic priorities for the development of the higher education system

Ensuring the quality of tertiary professional training is a fundamental priority of higher education institutions. By signing the Bologna Declaration, the Republic of Moldova has committed itself to achieving the main goals of developing cooperation with European universities in the field of quality assurance, in developing comparable criteria and methodologies.

This idea was continued in the Prague Communiqué (19 May 2001), which reaffirmed the commitment to create a “common area of higher education” to promote European cooperation for quality assurance - an important factor in increasing the attractiveness and international competitiveness of European higher education. The vital role of quality assurance systems in ensuring high quality standards and facilitating the comparison of qualifications and qualifications in Europe was also recognized.

In this regard, the reform of higher education in the Republic of Moldova was initiated, which can be summarized by several essential elements: performance, efficiency, competitiveness, diplomas recognized at European level, a new structure of studies in three university cycles: bachelor, master and doctorate, transferable study credit system, mobility of students and teachers, promotion of a culture of quality.

The higher education programs include the educational and research or artistic creation activities, which provide training in an academic or advance professional field, in accordance with the regulatory framework in force. Indeed, in the context of the internationalization of economic and social relations, educational policy and research are designed to ensure the consolidation of the knowledge-based economy and the sustainability of its development. In this sense, synergy between higher education and research is the cornerstone of university education in the Republic of Moldova.

According to the **Moldovan Education Code**, the higher education institutions have the status of **university autonomy** for organization and self-management, exercising the academic freedoms without any ideological, political or religious interference, assuming a set of competences and obligations in line with the national strategies and policies for the development of the higher education. The university autonomy encompasses the areas of management, structuring and functioning of the institution, teaching and scientific research activity, administration and financing, and shall be mainly performed through: organizing, conducting and improving the educational and scientific research process; establishing specialties; developing curriculum and analytical programs in line with the state educational standards; organizing admission of students, taking into account the specific criteria to the profile of the higher education institution; selecting and promoting the teaching, scientific-teaching and scientific staff, as well as the other categories of personnel in the educational institution; establishing the assessment criteria for the teaching and scientific activity; awarding teaching degrees; eligibility of all management bodies by secret voting; solving social problems of students and staff; ensuring order and discipline in the university; finding additional sources of income; establishing cooperation relationships with various educational and scientific institutions, centre and organizations in the country and abroad.

Financially, the university autonomy shall be carried out by: administrating the financial resources through bank accounts, including transfers from the state budget; using the available resources to carry out the statutory activity, according to own decisions; accumulating own income from fees, provided services, performed works and other specific activities, according to the classification of provided services approved by the Government; administrating institution's property and ensuring the optimal conditions for the development of the institution's material resources; using the institution's property and the related rights to achieve the statutory purposes of the higher education institution.

According to the Berlin Communiqué (19 September 2003) and in accordance with the principle of university autonomy, **the main responsibility for quality assurance** in higher education it is up to each institution and this provides the basis for a real assumption of responsibility of the institutional academic system related to the national quality assurance system.

However, in order for the Republic of Moldova to be able to achieve its goal of becoming more dynamic in the economic field, it is necessary for Moldovan higher education to prove that it takes seriously the quality of the programs and scholarships it offers and that it is ready to implement the means of ensuring and demonstrating this quality.

The idea of quality assurance in higher education becomes the main strategic axis in the reform of the national quality assurance system and includes: defining the responsibilities of the organizations and institutions involved; evaluation of bachelor / master / doctoral higher education programmes and universities as a whole, by organizing internal

institutional evaluations and external evaluations, students' participation in evaluation and publication of results; a system of accreditation, certification or comparable procedures; participation, international cooperation.

Institutions should have a policy and associated procedures to ensure the quality and standards of their programs. They must also adhere to the principles of developing a culture of quality to ensure the quality of teaching, learning and student assessment. To this end, institutions must develop and implement a continuous quality improvement strategy. The strategy, policy and procedures should have a formal status and be publicly available.

In the Republic of Moldova, the higher education institutions are subject to external quality assessment once in five years, in line with the methodology and criteria developed by the National Agency for Quality Assurance in Education and Research, and shall be approved by the Government. The external assessment of the higher education institutions is taken into account in ranking the higher education institutions by categories within the accreditation procedure; provisional authorization, periodical accreditation and reaccreditation of the higher education institutions, as well as in ranking the study programs. Depending on the category of the higher education institution and the ranking of the study programs, is established the number of places funded from the state budget, provided to the higher education institution; the budgetary funds allocated to the higher education institution for research, artistic creation, development and innovation activities. Also, the higher education institution shall be established **the internal structures for quality assurance**.

So, the internal assessment of the educational process in higher education is performed by the institutional structures for quality assurance, based on the institutional regulation. The academic outcomes of the students are assessed during the semester; at the end of the semester; at the end of the study program in every higher education cycle. The assessment form for completing the higher education program is established by the Senate of the educational institution.

Therefore, the responsibility of any institution in the national education system, regardless of type, level and form of organization of activity, is to ensure **quality teaching, learning and research**, promoting an institutional culture of quality education, to contribute to personal development and professional development of the young generation, implicitly, to the well-being of society.

It should be mentioned that the spirit of this desideratum is to develop a culture of quality, obliging not only the institutions, but also the people directly involved in the educational process. Here we consider not only the teaching staff, not only the administrative staff, but also the students, master students, doctoral students, graduates, community representatives and future employers. It is about raising awareness of civil society: **Quality education is not only a problem for a school or university**.

Undoubtedly, the professionalism of **the teaching / academic body** is a fundamental requirement for any higher education institution that aims to apply its own strategy in the field of quality of its programs and training activities. It is necessary that, through their own methodologies and procedures, to evaluate the professional knowledge, the didactic competences of transmitting the knowledge to the students, the potential of scientific research and the professional deontology of each person involved in the training process of the students.

The Republic of Moldova faces the same global challenges: high unemployment, limited financial resources available for higher education, or the impact of migration on education systems. Unfortunately, the production and quality of education needs to be improved due to a shortage of qualified teachers, inefficiency and insufficient correlation between the education provided and the needs of the labour market. Many Moldovan universities depend on tuition fees, and international students often pay double tuition fees.

In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, student mobility decisions may be reviewed, and educational institutions may be left without significant financial reserves and will run the risk of insolvency.

So, reform of the education system is absolutely essential for the development of a competitive workforce at a European level. Ensuring the education of new generations in accordance with the highest standards of educational quality and research development is not only a necessity, but also a shared responsibility of all institutions and civil society. Only through the direct participation of politicians, experts, trade unions, non-governmental organizations, as well as the beneficiaries of this system - i.e. students, parents and employers - a significant reconfiguration of Moldovan education can be achieved. Coherence at the level of change, consensus on the great principles of functioning of the institutions is the basis of any democratic system and is the results of debates between all actors involved.

Moldovan higher education suffers from the absence of the introduction of a hierarchy based on value and results. Using a transparent and coherent system of benchmarks, we will have Universities focused on undergraduate studies, Universities that will organize undergraduate and master's studies, as well as Universities focused on doctoral studies and research. Thus, it will be possible to distinguish between the main research activities and the professional training of students for different professions. We can no longer put up with the current situation, unique in the world, when any university can provide doctoral degrees. Let me mention that in the US, only about 10% of universities award doctoral degrees. In our country, doctoral degrees are issued on a conveyor belt, based on very low requirements in any city where a university has opened.

This pandemic has given students the chance to make their voices heard when it comes to the training they appreciate. This is training with flexible delivery, location and the opportunity to work in project teams. It also allows students to work in cities and campuses around the world, while earning a bachelor's degree. Investment in learning outcomes, student-centered teaching has become more important than technological innovation. Institutions need to improve student-learning outcomes by updating curricula and pedagogy.

In this regard, quality assurance in higher education must be achieved through a set of actions to strengthen institutional capacity to develop, plan and implement curricula, which would create and strengthen the confidence of beneficiaries that the institution providing education meets and improves quality standards, in accordance with the mission assumed. In the Republic of Moldova a fully operational quality assurance system implies two successive stages: the provisional operation authorization, which is the act for establishing the institution and grants the right to carry out the educational process and to organize the admission to education; the accreditation, which besides the rights after authorization shall grant the right to organize the graduation exam, as well as the right to issue diplomas, certificates, and other study documents, recognized by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Research.

As I mentioned, the external assessment of quality in the Moldovan higher education performed by the National Agency for Quality Assurance in Education and Research, or by another quality assessment agency listed in the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR). The quality assessment in the higher education encompasses the institutional capacity; the educational efficiency, including academic outputs; the quality of initial and continuous professional training programs; the institutional management of quality; the results of scientific research and/or artistic creation; the compliance between the internal assessment and real situation.

From these perspectives, the introduction of **quality management systems** in higher education institutions in the Republic of Moldova aims to ensure a compatibility of the

quality of university performance, a system of harmonized values and practices that condition the increase of trust between collaborating universities, creating a framework adequate to a fair competition both at national and European level and, mainly, the creation of the conditions to reach the major finality of higher education - the training of high quality specialists for the national and European economy.

To this end, a number of activities have been carried out in the Republic of Moldova at the institutional level, including: the internal structures for quality management have been created; the post of vice-rector for quality was established; guidelines for quality management were developed and implemented; special systemic procedures for internal assessment of the quality of education are practiced; existing resources are used to improve the quality of research and innovation, to participate in international projects and programs, to involve students in scientific activities; teaching positions are held on a competitive basis and specific procedures for evaluating teachers are established; partnerships with university centres from different European countries are developing.

3 Results in improving the quality and relevance of higher education

Higher education is relevant when it contributes to personal development, sustainable employment and active citizenship. Relevance is understood differently by different actors in higher education. These agreements may relate to the competencies of students and masters, as well as their results for society. In order to analyze national policies on the relevance of higher education and indicators to measure this relevance, the Council of Europe adopted three main goals of higher education: personal development, sustainable employment and active citizenship.

In our country professional training in higher education takes place in an increasingly competitive environment (especially in the private sector), due, on the one hand, to the increase in training offers and, on the other part, reducing the number of candidates. Beyond the measures envisaged at national level to optimize this situation, the university must provide graduates, first of all, with high-level professional skills. This is the result of joint actions, aimed at meeting the objectives formulated by the beneficiaries (graduate and employer), which must take place in a clearly structured and efficient quality assurance system.

In the Republic of Moldova the employment of graduates from higher education institutions is carried out according to the legislation in force. The State provides tax exemptions to the businesses – private legal entities for employment of graduates, in the first year after graduation. In order to ensure the relevance of university studies, the relations of universities with the labour market and the business environment are very important. The monitoring of graduates' employment on the labour market shall be carried out by the higher education institutions, in collaboration with the employers.

The partnership relations between the higher education institutions and the business environment are implemented through: establishing the roles, interdependency, and responsibilities of all stakeholders involved in the professional training and insertion process; establishing a facilitating and cooperating framework for interaction between the higher education system and the labour market; establishing commercial companies to perform economic activities related exclusively to the purposes specified in the Institutional and Strategic Development Plan; implementing public-private partnerships.

The provision of services by the higher education institutions and business environment, as well as benefitting from these services, shall be tackled on equal and equity basis. The partnership between the higher education and business environment shall provide for: establishment of joint centres of professional counselling and guidance, and employment of

graduates on the labour market; organization of job fairs; creation of joint research incubators and labs; organization of continuous professional training; provision of internship places; employment of highly qualified representatives from the business environment in the development of the National Qualifications Framework, and the Classification of occupations and professional standards; involvement of the highly qualified representatives from the business environment in monitoring and evaluation of the quality in higher education; gender mainstreaming in all relevant activities; providing opportunities for the youth to reconcile studies and family responsibilities; other activities and legal actions.

Still, higher education programs often tend to have a hard time responding to the changing needs of the economy as a whole and fail to anticipate or help shape future careers; graduates find it difficult to find quality jobs according to their research. The involvement of employers and labour market organizations in defining and implementing programs, supporting staff exchanges and including practical experience in courses can help to adapt university programs to current and emerging labour market needs and to stimulate employability and entrepreneurship.

The economic impact of COVID-19 triggered the biggest unemployment crisis. In response, higher education is designed to energize and respond to unprecedented and pressing needs that go far beyond delivering on its promises and commitments to students and faculty. This issue highlights an already tense relationship between higher education and employers, who have expressed dissatisfaction with universities about the ability to produce graduates with the skills necessary to succeed in a rapidly changing economy. Once social distancing became the norm, universities were forced to restructure their curricula to meet the emerging demands of an increasingly dynamic world of work. Faced with rising costs and the toughest job market, universities have begun to work more closely with employers to combine teaching innovation with unsatisfied labour market demand.

Under pandemics, governments, higher education institutions and the private sector can create educational ecosystems that go beyond the traditional campus and the three- or four-year course of study. Given that public-private partnerships are usually accompanied by financial sponsorship, this will help reduce overhead costs and improve student outcomes by extending internships.

4 Discussion and conclusions

Education, research are areas that have undergone many transformations over time. The purpose of these transformations has always been to increase quality and performance. Following the analysis of the performances of universities in the field of quality assurance, we came to the conclusion that the lack of coherence, successive changes, generated rather a rush for formal indicators and not the modernization of education and research in the Republic of Moldova. We are a European country, but we will not be able to maximize the human potential we have in the absence of a profound reform of the mechanisms used in the formation of tomorrow's generation.

Higher education is tremendously important for the public good, and it continuously needs reform. Indeed, since higher education is vital, those of us in higher education have a responsibility to make sure our industry does what we say it does: prepare the next generation not only for work, but also for that to be leaders who can create a better and fairer future - in the workplace, in their communities and in the world at large. We must fight for our universities, but we also need to create universities that are worth fighting for.

Universities cannot be solely responsible for the poor insertion of graduates in the field of work in the conditions in which the economic system itself is not able to define its own priorities. Under these conditions, it is necessary to improve the forecasting mechanisms

and identification of the basic directions of economic development in order to adequately guide higher education institutions. In the absence of such mechanisms, any restriction on admission can be seen as an intrusion affecting university autonomy.

We need a fundamental change in the way we think about the purpose of higher education. Teachers prepare students as they were trained, in specializations that have been developed in our academic fields and not necessarily in skills and specializations that correspond to the needs of the contemporary world that our students inherit.

Taking into account the results of external quality assessments for accreditation undertaken by the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ARACIS), the Estonian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher and Vocational Education (EKKA), the German Agency for Quality Assurance for Accreditation Curricula (AQAS), as well as the National Agency for Quality Assurance in Vocational Education, **the Ministry of Education, Culture and Research** (including the authors) has developed *Recommendations - framework for improving the quality of curricula in higher education institutions in the Republic of Moldova* (https://mecc.gov.md/sites/default/files/recomandari_cadru_calitate_0.jpeg) and *Recommendations for student participation in quality assurance in higher education* (https://mecc.gov.md/sites/default/files/recomandari_asig_calitate_studenti.pdf).

According to international external experts, the Moldovan system of higher education requires coherence, continuity and interconnection between components, creating premises for the development of the field, aiming at European educational standards and general human and national values. In order to ensure the quality of the reforms implemented, it is necessary to review and refine the newly established schemes and mechanisms and to strengthen capacity at all levels of the education system.

The future of higher education will combine a combination of face-to-face, on-site programs, experiential learning and the flexibility of both synchronous and asynchronous virtual learning. Universities that view Covid-19 as a temporary outbreak and plan to revert to traditional teaching and learning methods are unlikely to survive in the new world. Our universities must take this opportunity to innovate and rethink their strategies. Institutions that don't embrace change will be left behind.

Modern and efficient higher education systems are the foundation of an open, confident and sustainable society; as well as a creative, innovative and entrepreneurial knowledge-based economy. The joint efforts of the authorities of the Member States EHEA, of higher education institutions, stakeholders and the European Union will be the key to achieving the goals and will underpin Europe's overall success.

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