

PROBLEMS *VERSUS* PROSPECTS FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE REPUBLIC MOLDOVA

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Abstract

The article addresses the issue of higher education in Moldova, with performance, issues and development perspectives. It is noted that higher education in Moldova has recorded significant results in implementing the provisions of the Bologna process. At the same time, it is facing a number of issues, which should be taken into account by Moldovan higher education policy makers. In this context, are deduced recommendations for the development of higher education.

Keywords: *Education system, Higher Education, Development Strategy.*

The higher education in the Republic of Moldova has the mission of training highly qualified specialists, competitive on the national and international labor market; to create lifelong training opportunities; preserving and disseminating knowledge at the highest level of excellence; development and promotion of national cultural-historical values in the context of cultural diversity [1]. In this context, during the last years the higher education in Moldova has registered significant results in the implementation of the provisions of the Bologna process:

1. The process of studies in higher education, including integrated higher education, in public and private institutions of higher education, in all forms of education is organized on the basis of the National System of Study Credits (SNCS), structured in three study cycles [2].

2. In order to promote convergence in higher education, the legislative framework in the field of initial vocational training has been updated. According to the provisions of art.81 of the Education Code of the Republic of Moldova [1], in 2017 by Government Decision was approved the *Nomenclature of fields of vocational training and specialties in higher education* [3], which aims to *strengthen the correlation between the level of qualification and competencies demanded by the labor market*. The nomenclature of vocational training fields and specialties in higher education corresponds to the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED-F, 2013), *diversifying the offer of study programs*, in accordance with the current requirements of the labor market.

3. In order to improve the transparency and recognition of qualifications and competences, the National Qualifications Framework of the Republic of Moldova (CNCRM) [4] has been approved, which supports national policies and strategies in the field of vocational education and training, in line with European policies. With the approval of the National Qualifications Framework, the national qualifications system acquires the characteristics recommended in the EQF, QF-EHEA: *it is flexible, includes all levels and forms of vocational education, is oriented towards meeting concrete needs in qualified labor market frameworks and aligning lifelong learning with the country's economic development*.

4. For the modernization of the university curriculum from the perspective of focusing on competencies, the learner and the needs of the economic environment, a series of curricular policy documents have been developed.

5. To ensure access to and participation in higher education:

- *Integrated higher education* is organized (in the fields regulated by norms of international law: medicine and pharmacy; veterinary medicine; architecture).

- Starting with the 2017 session [5], the admission to *double specialties* is organized, with the duration of studies with a frequency of 4 years (240 ECTS credits), including 60 ECTS credits for the psycho-pedagogical module - *important action for ensuring preschool, primary education institutions, middle school and high school with qualified teachers*.

- Higher education institutions may develop/ initiate *interdisciplinary study programs* within the general fields of study, in which the institution already organizes an accredited study program.

- Studies are organized in *short terms*.

- The forms of *organization of higher education were diversified*: full-time, part-time education and distance learning. A relevant achievement for higher education is the realization, in pandemic conditions, of *online* higher education [6], thus diversifying the form of organizing educational programs and making the higher education process more flexible.

- It is allowed *to interrupt the studies*, at the request of the student in certain conditions, after the completion of at least two semesters, for a maximum period of 3 years for the entire duration of studies.

- It is allowed *to transfer* from one educational institution to another, from one form of education to another, from one faculty to another within the same cycle of studies, provided the compatibility of the curricula in terms of learning outcomes and expected competencies, respecting the application rules of the National System of Study Credits, for the second year and following.

- It is allowed *to restore* to studies people who have lost the quality of student by expulsion and requires the continuation of the study program from which they were expelled, by evaluating the learning outcomes and skills previously acquired.

- It is allowed to promote the year of studies, in Cycle I and in integrated studies, full-time education, *with at least 40 credits accumulated* at the course units / compulsory modules provided in the Annual Study Contract for the current year of studies and accumulation of the total number of credits (60 per year) provided by the curriculum for the previous years of studies, as well as for the year of completion of university studies.

- In order to increase access to and participation in higher education, the Government provides *scholarships and other forms of social assistance* for students [7]:

- In order to stimulate students with academic performance, it is allowed to participate in the competition of scholarships from the state budget both students admitted to studies with budget funding and students admitted to studies on a contract basis with the payment of tuition fees, which the established terms, the curriculum for a semester / year of studies, obtain promotion grades and the established number of credits: 30 - for a semester and 60 for a year of studies.

- Higher education institutions may provide social and merit scholarships, material aids, prizes, one-off allowances, including in exceptional cases, for free medical treatment, from the means of providing paid services, from sponsorships and donations.

- During the internships of pedagogical and specialized practice, according to the normative framework, students *should be paid the daily allowance and accommodation* in the amount of 50 percent of the daily allowance and the cost of accommodation established for officials and workers, as well as full transportation costs (round trip) from the educational institution to the headquarters of the institution/ enterprise where the internships are organized.

- The Government provides *for the exemption from the payment of the tuition fee to students enrolled on a contract basis*, starting with the second year of education in the profile, specialty, respective form of studies at available places, with funding from the state budget, as well as academic results obtained during each session.

6. To improve the graduation rate, special services are provided for students:

- *Individual teacher-guided study*, which also includes additional consultations for low-achieving students.

- *Counseling services* in order to coordinate the implementation process of study credits in the teaching process.

- *Joint higher education programs* - a form of collaboration between two or more institutions, which is carried out within a consortium of higher education institutions with other institutions and organizations.

7. In the context of the internationalization of higher education, various Projects/ Programs of the European Union are promoted [8].

8. In order to improve the prospects of professional insertion of graduates, the normative framework in the Republic of Moldova provides several measures:

- *Internships* in the process of initial training in higher education are a compulsory and essential component of university vocational training [9].

- *Career guidance and counseling services*.

However, the demographic, social and economic context in the country is increasingly affecting the higher education system, causing a dramatic decrease in the number of students; reducing the enrollment rate of young people in higher education; the small number of students in some fields such as Chemical Sciences, Biological Sciences, Environmental Sciences, Physical Sciences, Mathematics and Statistics, etc.; decrease in the number of students studying in state institutions on a contract basis; the small number of foreign students who choose to study in higher education institutions in the Republic of Moldova, compared to the growing number of students who choose to promote higher education in universities abroad [10].

The created context highlights **the problems of higher education** in Moldova [10]:

1. In the Republic of Moldova there is an oversized network of higher education institutions, which does not correspond to the demographic and economic situation in the country; higher education institutions compete in too many and diverse general fields of study, without fully possessing the competence to excel and ensure quality in each of these fields. This situation leads to a dispersion over a large area of budgetary financial resources, which determines modest results of the sector and the reduced efficiency of spending public money/ taxpayers' money.

2. The structural reform of higher education in Moldova, in convergence with the standards of the European Higher Education Area, has not been sufficiently supported by the curricular reform, the modernization of the education process itself, this situation further determining the modest performance of the sector.

3. The current mechanism for establishing the Higher Education Admission Plan/ State Order for the training of staff by specialties and general fields of study in higher education institutions is based on data on job offers for the previous year, not on the results of the prognostic study, with a reference period of at least 3 years. The lack of forecasts results in the inefficient use of public funds, allocated for the training of specialists, which either does not cover the needs of the state in some areas or causes surplus in other specialties. This situation is also aggravated by an ambiguous methodology of allocating budget places to universities.

4. The effectiveness of the system is affected by a process of initial teacher training for general education that does not fully meet the real needs of the system and international practices; an outdated concept of the initial training of teachers for general education is promoted, the concept and the explicit normative framework of the initial training of teachers for vocational-technical education and of scientific-teachers for higher education are missing. The situation is also aggravated by the lack of a clear concept, supported by a pertinent normative framework, of the continuous professional training of teachers at all levels of the system.

5. Although the state finances the studies of about 40 percent of the total number of students in state institutions, who after graduation will be employed, depending on the needs of the state, the investment in training specialists from the state budget remains to be without economic purpose, the state bears two categories of losses: on the one hand, it does not benefit from the contribution of

graduates of higher education institutions to the development of the national economy, and on the other hand, the budgetary resources allocated for their formation are wasted. This aggravates the problem of inefficient capitalization of public money, the state budget expenditures not being justified, the state registering colossal long-term losses.

6. The implementation of the “knowledge triangle” *education-research-innovation* in higher education is blocked by a number of human, economic-financial, material, logistical, etc. impediments, as well as by the low presence in universities of *innovation culture and entrepreneurship* facing outwards. Universities in the country are mainly focused on teaching-learning activity, less on research activity; they do not contribute as much as they should be able to innovate, with innovation performance at a minimum; human potential is not sufficiently exploited to increase the scientific and innovative productivity of universities. The result of the university scientific research is also carried out by the lack of a mechanism for monitoring the implementation of the research results, for evaluating their impact and sustainability on the evolution/ development of the economic-social environment, the university environment.

7. The strategic development and ensuring the functionality of higher education institutions is affected by a series of problems specific to university management, which does not fully respond to the principles of university autonomy, public responsibility, strategic leadership, efficient and transparent management. The right of universities to university autonomy has been recognized in the Republic of Moldova, but external control mechanisms are still maintained, universities cannot decide on the system of governing bodies according to its mission; At the same time, universities have not yet demonstrated the full system of institutional competencies needed to fully assume university autonomy; internal quality assurance mechanisms are still dysfunctional; relations with the labor market and the business environment remain ineffective.

8. Quality assurance in higher education is also affected by the low functionality of the Quality Management System in Education, caused by poorly functional institutional structures; lack of quality standards in higher education; reference/ external evaluation methodology focused mainly on input indicators; the lack of complex periodic studies on the quality per higher education system and the impact of initial vocational training on the economy and society as a whole.

Through the perspective of these issues, in order to become the de facto source of competitive human capital, a determining factor of the smart, sustainable development of the country, higher education must be more inclusive, more equitable, provide high quality training services, employment opportunities lifelong learning, as well as research and innovation services relevant to society and the economy:

- ✓ within larger and stronger university centers of excellence, visible internationally; with a well-developed technical-material base (new technologies, hard, virtual libraries, high-performance laboratories); with high-performance infrastructure, dedicated to research and innovation, knowledge transfer, academic entrepreneurship; involved in effective relations, advantageous with the labor market, the business environment; engaged in solving the real problems of society and enterprises in the country;

- ✓ based on a university training offer connected to the current and perspective requirements of the labor market and a modern, student-centered education process, oriented towards sustainable training of professional skills required by employers, towards cultivating innovative and entrepreneurial spirit;

- ✓ promoted by highly qualified, competent and competitive scientific-didactic staff, formed through various national and international training internships, mobility programs, more motivated and better paid, depending on the demonstrated professional performance; with a professional managerial staff, able to promote university autonomy, public responsibility, strategic leadership and efficient and transparent management of financial resources.

In order to maximize the contribution of higher education to the sustainable development of the country, changes are needed in the key areas [10]:

1. Reforming the national higher education landscape by consolidating based on mergers and alliances.

2. Expanding the fields of activity of higher education institutions, diversifying the services offered within (state) universities in order to effectively solve the problems of society and the economic and social development of the country, such as the need of lifelong learning citizens in a specialized framework, under the guidance of competent specialists or the needs of the public and private sector in innovative research to determine the development of society and the national economy.

Higher education must be developed from a *consumer-type* field to a *producer of goods*; it becomes opportune to develop entrepreneurial universities, or, the consolidation of higher education on the dimension of *research and innovation* represents a sure way of economic growth of the country.

In the same logic, it is necessary to strengthen the capacity of universities on the dimension of *continuous professional training* of specialists in the fundamental field of science, culture and technology for which the institution has obtained authorization / has been accredited.

In order to increase the international visibility of universities, but especially to keep young people in the country, it is good to analyze the opportunity of *international academic franchise contracts* - a way of "grafting" the national university with the "European" university model. As a result, universities can obtain engineering (consulting), know-how elements regarding quality initial professional training / successful practices, assistance and all the necessary knowledge for the entire duration of the franchise contract, professional training of staff, etc.

3. Implementation of the mechanism for elaborating the State Order for the training of staff on fundamental fields of science, culture and technology in prospective terms, from the perspective of harmonizing demand with supply (*jobs (over 3-5 years): budget places*).

4. Modernization of the university curriculum from the perspective of the National Qualifications Framework, capitalization of the individual guided study and involvement of the business environment/ employers' representatives throughout the professional training process.

University education, being the key provider of human resources, funded from public sources, is obliged to meet the concrete needs of society, the labor market, to provide young people with the skills required in the labor market, to increase their employment opportunities and reduce structural unemployment, on the one hand, and to support the increase in productivity and competitiveness of enterprises in the country, on the other. At the same time, the state has undertaken to ensure *access to and participation* in higher education. In this sense, we believe that *the designed curriculum* (curriculum as a product) from the perspective of the *sociocentric* paradigm will facilitate the training process of competent specialists, according to the concrete needs of society, of the labor market; *the realized curriculum* (curriculum as a process) is to respond to *the psychocentric paradigm*, in order to ensure the access and the participation, the centering of the professional training approach on the student; *the evaluated curriculum* (curriculum - result of the training) resumes the *sociocentric* approach, focusing the evaluation process on the finalities described in the National Qualifications Framework.

Recent studies argue that the knowledge-based economy requires people with the optimal combination of skills: *transversal skills, IT skills for the digital age, creativity and flexibility, as well as a thorough understanding of the chosen field*. There is a need to strengthen the development of *entrepreneurial, creative and innovative skills* in all disciplines and in all three cycles; it is appropriate to place greater emphasis on the development of *socio-behavioral skills*. In the context of the above, we believe that universities in the country must follow the course towards an educational process provided by *an integrated curriculum from a transdisciplinary perspective*. For the elaboration of disciplinary curricula, integrated from a transdisciplinary perspective, we recommend giving up design based on distinct contents of a narrow field of science and focusing the curriculum on a system of *significant situations* in professional activity/ *concrete tasks specific*

to professional activity, elaborated by reference to the knowledge system. skills and competencies targeted in the curriculum.

The integrated approach of the transdisciplinary curriculum takes into account the “real life”[11], the important problems in a field of study, significant, as they appear in a professional context. The contents are integrated around significant issues. As a tool for determining the conceptual framework, *the transdisciplinary network* is proposed, through which the classical formal disciplines lose their capacity to dictate the way of training and the model of curricular design. The knowledge that the individual acquires is correlated with the social, economic, professional and cultural context.

It is important that each course holder develops *the course support with cross-curricular themes - integrated (interdisciplinary) study topics that focus on the personal, professional and social development of students; they represent integrated study units that aim to form competencies, especially, of values and attitudes essential for the current professional activity / society.* The main benefits of promoting an integrated approach to the curriculum, by introducing cross-curricular topics, are: the possibility to get out of the disciplinary "box", both for teachers and students; the "opening" of the curriculum to *the real world, to life*, as it is lived by learners: full of strangers and challenges [11].

We notice that the educational process is becoming more and more complex under the impact of new information technologies, shifting the focus from *teachers who teach students to students who learn from teachers.* From the classic knowledge transfer during the courses, it is opportune to move on to *the creation of a learning environment in which students become knowledge seekers,* therefore, it is necessary to intervene in the structure of the educational process. In particular, there is a need to develop *the explicit knowledge* base of universities *by strengthening the individual study of students,* to emphasize their ability to search, in the knowledge environment created by the university, for the most relevant knowledge in their field of interest, not on the didactic performance of teachers. It is opportune to develop *the tacit knowledge* base, by offering multiple direct experiences on reality for a phenomenological understanding of reality; to develop the ability to process knowledge [12]. Another process necessary for our university education is *the transformation of tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge, respectively, the generation of explicit knowledge.*

The organization of the professional training process requires:

- ✓ Optimization of direct contact activities in the form of lectures.
- ✓ Involvement of employers - practice mentors - throughout the training process. We believe that *the integration of on-the-job learning and cross-curricular skills in higher education* is one of the main measures to improve higher education graduation, due to its positive impact on all students in terms of *motivation, completion of studies and employability.*
- ✓ Offering *tutoring programs.*
- ✓ Ensuring in universities *the support processes,* such as: the information process organized by *the hard and virtual libraries* of the university, connecting to the most important knowledge bases available, ensuring high-performance technological bases for laboratory and scientific research works, etc.

5. Implementation of the functional mechanism for placing graduates in the labor field, attractive for all parties, based on shared responsibilities. We believe it is necessary for universities *to offer free consultancy/ counseling services to young specialists - newly hired,* in order to facilitate the process of professional insertion and favor their maintenance in the system - this activity being a procedure within the quality management system and aims at *improving quality by post-training activities.* The University will periodically assess the degree of satisfaction of employers in relation to the level of competence of graduates employed; the transparency of this data will be ensured.

6. The development in universities of the culture of innovation and the entrepreneurial spirit, oriented towards the outside. Diversifying the ways of capitalizing and implementing the results of university research; the establishment of “spin-off” units (academic entrepreneurship) for the

capitalization of the research activity - represent opportune directions in this respect. There is a need to strengthen partnership and cooperation with enterprises as a core activity of higher education institutions, through reward structures, incentives for multidisciplinary and interorganizational cooperation.

7. Reforming the university management from the perspective of the correlation between the assumed university autonomy, the demonstrated public responsibility, the strategic leadership, the efficient and transparent management. The current university management needs a restructuring by introducing efficient leadership mechanisms, as well as ensuring the coherence between the strategic management of the institution and the methodical one, continuity and consistency of the decision-making act at university level; endowing the management of universities with tools and methods for collecting, processing and rapid synthesis of information, analysis / evaluation, systematization, decision, improvement of activity in the organization, competitive development.

8. Strengthening the capacity of national and institutional structures in the field of quality management and strengthening the partnership with the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education. In order to strengthen the real functionality of the internal / institutional structures of quality management, the administration will ensure:

- Clear, known and assumed policy on the quality and ways to ensure it in all areas of activity.
- Human resources management, with an emphasis on staff training in order to understand the requirements of quality management and quality policy, as well as the role of each in the functionality of this process.
- Consolidation of the necessary infrastructure: rooms and spaces (buildings, workspaces, classrooms, laboratories, libraries); equipment for the teaching-learning process; information technology; communication services; utilities.
- Continuous monitoring of the satisfaction of the beneficiaries.
- Transparency and vertical and horizontal communication.
- Measurement, analysis and improvement of all activities through annual internal audit / evaluation programs.
- It is necessary to strengthen the interaction with the beneficiaries of educational services; to sensitize all stakeholders to obtain their involvement in quality assurance procedures.

Quality cannot be imposed, it must become a necessity, aware of every educational factor, which implies a profound change in the minds and behavior of teachers and managers, students. The issue of *changing the university culture* becomes pressing, with an emphasis on the conscious and assumed individual responsibility, or, *the cultural and mentality component becomes essential for the internal quality assurance*. If each actor will be responsible for his field of activity, then the issue of quality in education and its assurance will not be such a difficult field at the operational level, or, it implies a high level of competence, behavior and commitment to tasks.

The lessons learned in the process of implementing the Education Development Strategy "Education-2020" [13] should be valued in the context of developing and implementing the Education Development Strategy "Education-2030", to strengthen the role of higher education in developing the nation, building the future of Moldova.

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