

THE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM OF THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA: NEW CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

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The education system of the Republic of Moldova started its transformation process in the last decade of the XX century, accelerating the transformations together with the adherence at the Bologna process in 2005 by modifying and completing the Law on Education no. 547 of 21.07.1995. During this period the reform of the Moldovan university system has been oriented towards the following priority directions:

1. Changing the structure of the university system by organizing 3-cycles university studies, introducing the Diploma Supplement and the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS);
2. Organizing the internal and external quality evaluation and monitoring system by creating a Quality Assurance Agency, independent of the Government, as well as centers of quality management at each university;
3. The coordinating the university offers to market request by monitoring graduates' employment, cooperation with employers, professionalization of education [5].

In order to implement the respective priorities in the area of Higher Education several legislative reforms have been undertaken. Thus, on July 1, 2005 by the Ministry of Education a provision order of Framework-Plan for cycle I (later repealed) has been approved. It established general principles for organizing and conducting the educational process at cycle I, license. The Framework Plan provided that each student could create and follow an individual way of educational studies, consisting of study area subjects proposed within the curriculum for the relevant specialty. In February 2006 the National Education Credit System was approved and implemented. It aims both at outlining the study results and promoting students' mobility.

The Regulation on the organization of master studies, II cycle, was approved by Government Decision nr.1455 of 24.12.2007. On September 20, 2010 the Ministry of Education adopted by Order No. 726 the Regulation on the organization of higher education studies under the National Education Credit System. On June 3, 2011 the Ministry of Education Order No. 455 on the Framework-Plan for higher education has been

adopted. The above-mentioned normative acts were the most important documents that regulate education reform by aligning to the European Bologna system.

Based on this review, we can state that out of several reform attempts, the main achievements are the following:

- The organization of cycle-based higher education starting with 1st of September 2005 and the development of new study programs (license studies lasting 3-4 years and master degree studies lasting 1-2 years);
- Develop and implement the Framework-Plan for cycle I (license studies from 2005);
- Institutionalization of study credits (ECTS) in all higher education institutions;
- Mandatory provision of the unique European model Diploma Supplement for license and master degree studies, which ensures transparency of qualifications and study documents [5].

The research results show that together with some achievements there are still many drawbacks. Among the most important there are the following:

- The Bologna education system was implemented only for cycle I, license, and cycle II, master degrees. The PhD remains to be determined in the new Education Code. Thus, science is still managed (especially financial part) by the Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Moldova.
- Another unsolved issue is students' mobility from one university to another, since there are differences in the structure of the curricula, which also requires students to pass the difference in subjects or the same subject at a different number of credits.
- External quality assessment is a contentious issue for a long time. A first step was made. Each university had created an internal quality management system. But at national level the Quality Assurance Agency remains a debt which will be settled up only after Parliament's approval of the Education Code.
- Optimizing the relationship between state involvement and academic autonomy is always in sight of discussions between state

institutions, especially ministries (Ministry of Education, Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Economy, Ministry of Labor and Social Protection) and universities. The limit of state influence and the extent of university autonomy are to be determined in the near future.

A modern university requires efficient educational process at universities, and, above all, the introduction of university autonomy in work, which in the European area was determined both by approving international documents (University Magna Carta in 1989, the Bologna Process in 1999, the Lisbon Declaration in 2007) and by the existing positive results in the European area. University autonomy is characterized by the following four components:

Organizational autonomy:

- independence to determine the structure, the governance and relations of subordination and responsibility.

Academic autonomy:

- independence and accountability of the university to develop their own programs of study,
- defining the structure and content of the academic curriculum,
- the responsibility for ensuring the quality of study programs and of the academic research,
- designing the selection procedures for student admission.

HR autonomy:

- independence to recruit and select qualified human resources,
- responsibility for signing work contracts,
- setting wage rates and salary increments to the value of human potential.

Financial autonomy:

- independence of the university in providing income and allocation of financial resources,
- decision of fees and charges for accommodation in dormitories, taxes on services,
- financing and co-financing of university research,
- use and storage of financial resources,
- using their transparent procedures regarding the efficient management resources.

The "Public Policy Proposals" project initiated by the Ministry of Education: „Developing managerial capacities of universities by expanding university autonomy", prepared by the Ministry of Education characterizes the current situation in

higher education by the existence of partial autonomy, stressing that Moldova has been achieved some progress in this field.

University autonomy was declared by the Law on Education and other bylaws, as well as by the draft Education Code. In terms of organizational autonomy, universities have the right to determine their own organizational structure and to elect their own administrative bodies. In terms of human resources autonomy, universities enjoy the right to select the scientific, teaching and research staff, as well as the administrative and auxiliary staff. Regarding academic autonomy, universities have the right to approve the curricula and the scientific research plans.

In terms of financial autonomy, a degree of freedom was offered by Government Decision nr. Nr. 983 of 22.12.2012 that currently has applied two very important actions: each university has the right to open bank account and the balances at end of the year can remain on university bank account. Other measures provided by the Government Decision Nr. 983 of 22.12.2012 regarding the type of functioning of the institution of the higher education in condition of the financial autonomy. will be implemented starting with 2015.

According to the study developed by the Institute for Development and Social Initiatives (IDIS) "Viitorul", February 2012., currently most acute weaknesses in university autonomy in Moldova are the following:

Organizational component:

- Legal and organizational forms: budgetary institution;
- Deficit of decisional transparency;
- Lack of external actors in the management;
- Ineffective Student Governing;
- Non-transparent partial autonomy at university subdivision;
- Centralization of the admission process;
- Centralized student social aid system;
- Failure to implement to the full extent the Bologna process on the functioning of the three courses of study in universities;
- Bureaucracy on expanding educational activities.

Academic component:

- Lack of control structures and quality assurance at national level;
- Lack of mechanisms for implementation of performance indicators in universities;
- Inefficient mechanisms of interaction with business, labor, research, development and innovation areas at national and international level.

HR component:

- Crumbled and oversized university system as number of institutions;
- Lack of motivational conditions for human resource development;
- Low wages against major teaching loads;
- Low work experience of teachers in real economy sector.

Financial component:

- The existence of a centralized financial management mechanism;
- Budget Funding is based on historical costs, not per student;
- Budget Funding does not consider the shape, type and field of study;
- The budget is not apparent from the achievement of state order, or the needs of universities. The allocation is made based on the financial possibilities of the state.
- Special means are conditional on use of cash;
- The tuition fee is capped by the Government and is less than the actual cost of the education;
- High costs of maintaining dormitories, being covered improperly by the university;
 - Existence of difficulties in using balances

[5].

The character of a „mass” higher education felt the last few years, even if it is a challenge for higher education institutions, did not give the expected results. Budgetary funding based on the number of students, without considering the complexity of the various fields of studies in vocational training, without establishing academic performance indicators; the lack of funding for university research, etc. does not cause competition by increasing competitive academic advantage. Acceptance of completing quantitative approach - based only on the number of students - with qualitative approach - oriented towards quality of the education programs, knowledge and skills, all coordinated with economic and social environments requirements; monitoring of graduates' occupations would ensure sustainable skills on the labor market. The implementation of qualitative and quantitative principles could provide real challenge to competition.

The “*Public Policy Proposals*” project initiated by the Ministry of Education: Developing managerial capacities of universities by expanding university autonomy” offers two options for implementing the university autonomy, one called partial, another one called enlarged. The first option provides partial liberalization of several positions within the four components of university autonomy.

The option expects that there will remain certain limits imposed by the government on the organizational and financial component. Organizationally, the option provides the creation of a dual system of University management (the Senate and the Board) and some state intervention in the principal decisions on the quality of education system and student protection. Other limitations relate to the financial resources that will be managed by the Treasury (the ones from the state budget) and bank accounts (those from special funds) by the Government capping the maximum and minimum amount of the contract.

The one mostly preferred by universities is the wide autonomy; the conditions necessary to achieve this autonomy are the following:

- Quality assurance of education by the state by applying external evaluation mechanisms by an independent agency;
- Follow-up of the professional career of graduates;
- Allocation of budget based on academic performance;
- State budget allocated to universities depends on the state order, the calculation is carried out according to student academic performance based on an aggregated formula that applies coefficients dependent on the form, type and field of study;
- Limit the total number of students based on university capacity as infrastructure and teaching body;
- University independence in establishing scholarships and social benefits out of state funds and special funds;
- The possibility of fee-based study alternation on budget place depending on academic performance;
- Liberalization of the contract amount in accordance with the specific costs;
- Liberalization of salary level of the academic staff;
- Independence on the management of financial resources from the state budget transfers and special means;
- The university right to request accreditation of study programs / cycles;
- A prerequisite for both options is the establishment of the Quality Assurance Agency as well as of a body responsible for university ethics and management [5].

Of course, any improvement takes time and effort. The Bologna process requires educational efficiency and effectiveness, quality of the education process, involvement of the entire

academic community, results associated with traditions and previous achievements, thus contributing to strengthening the image of modern university.

The whole global education system is in the transformation process. Higher education faces the challenge to find ways and solutions to survive on a competitive market that passes through a knowledge and information revolution. The trend of the educational market dynamics shows that change is irreversible and the choice of universities can be - adapting and developing competitive advantages - or opposing and staying alert in the future.

Higher education reform can be achieved only by the ability and capacity to adapt to the European University development trends. National culture, education and values can be capitalized and promoted effectively only in a European context. The unique opportunity and the right choice is to become a high performance organization and tend to the excellence level of the best European universities, based on active students, competent and dedicated teaching staff and efficient management. Conservative, traditional, passive, waiting-based approach will fail in the current environment of quick change and society development.

Traditional educational institutions are challenged by forces that characterize the global economy: competitive markets, demographic change, increasing ethnic and cultural diversity, technology. Universities must be responsive to the needs of the environment, to promote policies and educational strategies appropriate to the labor market, both opportunity and challenge for the educational environment being felt. Prosperity and well-being of a nation in a global knowledge-based economy will require educated citizens. The environment will require institutions with the ability to discover new knowledge and to transfer them on the market through economic activities. Cooperation between scientific research and economic development requires practical application of research results and technology transfer methods. Orientation to the needs of the environment must reshape higher education research and restore education programs.

Following the challenges of the Bologna process, which set out guidance and promotion of education development and research to integration into a common area of education and research, higher education institutions must take into account the following requirements:

1. To promote teaching and research in accordance with the requirements of a

2. To contribute to active participation in local, regional and national development in social, economic, cultural and political terms;
3. To contribute and provide original systematic knowledge for the major areas of science and technology, associated with flexible, comprehensive, interactive and permanent studies;
4. To promote and support the quality of public institution at national and international levels to develop a culture of proactive and participatory attitude, of personal development and integration of diversity and globalization;
5. To be open to interaction with economic, social and academic communities at national and international level, etc. [8]

In this context of principles the capitalization of scientific research is required, by initiating new relationships with the socio-economic environment, diversification of study programs, and realization of joint projects that will help transform universities from traditional, conservative institutions, in new, entrepreneurial institutions. An educational institution is an entrepreneurial university when teaching and administrative staff unite their efforts for the institutional development, providing resources for a properly function, which will help develop a dynamic university character. As a result, university graduates acquire skills consistent with labor market structure [6].

Changing the vision from traditional to entrepreneurial was triggered by decreased public funding of the education system, therefore, all business activities are meant to balance this financial decline. Implementation of academic entrepreneurial approach requires:

- development of an entrepreneurial culture;
- further development of Training Centers for technology transfer and innovation;
- creation of an entrepreneurial vision and initiative to encourage the creation of spin-off companies;
- promotion of technology parks development, participation in public-private initiatives and partnerships;
- creation of the requirements and facilities for lifelong learning [7].

By definition, the academic entrepreneurship must create conditions for new organizational structure, oriented towards independent activities. That kind of universities are actively involved in social and economic development of the region, creatively using the existing resources, reorganizing

education in order to adapt graduates to environmental requirements, teaching them to work in conditions close to real environment, considering the cost and profit indicators. The defining characteristic of the entrepreneurship is to strengthen, expand and renew university's relationship with business community in particular and society in general, which has a positive impact on the rhythm of sustainable economic development.

Strengthening academic partnership with the company leads to sustainable adaptation of university services, study and research programs, entrepreneurial approach deserves special attention because of its potential to make a university more active and deeply committed to social development accompanied by an institutional management, capacity for self-governance and managerial values required by the labor market requirements. Therefore, it is imperative to develop a modern, flexible and efficient management, which is continuously looking for solutions to environmental problems, with a vision and clearly defined academic mission and objectives-oriented strategy. This type of management should be oriented to identify appropriate solutions to a variety of challenges to benefit and empower the university as a promoter of progress. In this context, it is essential to identify various sources of funding (European programs, grants and research contracts, exploitation of intellectual property rights, consulting services, etc...) [7].

The state cannot be indifferent on financing public educational institutions, as economic and social significance of the whole educational system is too important for the society. Good practice of European universities show that for a more appropriate financial management of the market situation it is necessary for the state to pass from strict inspection methods to surveillance methods. The state does not disappear; it undertakes new approaches realized by introducing various steering and financial supervision committees. The state must "resist" [4].

A high performance educational system requires complex reform aimed to develop a clear concept, developed in a code of education, adequate funding, optimal working conditions and facilities, prestige, a system able to recruit the best qualified, talented and committed teacher, dynamic curricula geared to market needs, transnational cooperation and regular mobility, continuous development, etc.

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