



Reasons for Joining, Anticipated Benefits, Stages and Procedures of the Implementation of Bologna Reforms in the Higher Education System of the Republic of Moldova

Daniela Sitari¹

Abstract: The Bologna reform is a process of harmonizing higher education systems in Europe, which aims to improve the quality of higher education, facilitate the mobility of students and teaching staff, as well as increase the attractiveness of European higher education worldwide. The Republic of Moldova adopted and started to implement this reform in its higher education system. The Republic of Moldova adopted the necessary legislation to implement the Bologna process. This includes the adoption of the bachelor's, master's and doctorate curriculum, as well as the establishment of quality assurance standards. The implementation of the Bologna reforms is a complex and long-term process, but it can bring many benefits for the higher education system in the Republic of Moldova and for the participants in this system.

Keywords: The Bologna reform; process; higher education; the bachelor's; master's and doctorate

Introduction

Following the proclamation of independence, the Republic of Moldova entered a transition process towards the market economy, carried out in a context of acute social-economic crisis. During the first decade of the Republic of Moldova's independence, all sectors of the economy registered a decline. In 1997, the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) was only 34% of the 1990 level, and the average monthly salary was 25% compared to 1990. This socio-economic situation had an impact on the education system, including higher education. The public funds allocated for

¹ Doctoral School of Humanities, State University of Moldova, Republic of Moldova, Address: 60 Alexei Mateevici Street, Chisinau, Republic of Moldova, Corresponding author: usem.international@gmail.com.

education were far below what was needed, reaching only approximately 40%. During the 1990s, the percentage of GDP spending on education fell significantly: in 1994 it was 8.7%; in 1997 - 10.5%, and in 2000 only 5.3%. In 2003, education funding represented 5.3% of GDP. From the total of public allocations, university education benefited from approximately 6.4%. The budget expenses for a student were about 1510 lei in 2003, while in developed countries; this amount is tens of times higher [13].

State higher education in the Republic of Moldova is financed both from budgetary and extra budgetary sources. In the period 2000-2003, budget allocations represented the main source of funding, with a 10% weight. The current system of funding higher education is centralized, without the involvement of local budgets. Extra-budgetary sources have gained an increasing weight, including tuition fees from state higher education and funding from projects and programs of various international organizations (TEMPUS-TACIS Program, SOROS Foundation, INTAS, etc.). The financial analysis of higher education institutions reveals several negative trends, such as the continuous reduction of budget allocations for this sector and the significant decrease in expenditures for infrastructure development. The growth of the network of higher education institutions and the number of students was not accompanied by a corresponding financial allocation.

The average salary of academic staff is lower than the average salary in the economy. The economic context of the Republic of Moldova does not allow the budget to cover the needs of higher state education. The extremely low allocations, compared to the requirements of a modern and efficient education and the realities of other countries, impose the urgent need to adopt policies and strategies aimed at diversifying the sources of funding for higher education institutions.

As for the demographic context, the deterioration of the living conditions and standards of the majority of citizens had a negative impact on the demographic evolution of the population of the Republic of Moldova. During the 1990s, there was a drop in the birth rate, a reduction in life expectancy and an increase in the death rate. As a result, the number of students in the country's schools has gradually decreased. Thus, in the 2004-2005 school year, approximately 40.2 thousand students were enrolled in grade 1, while in 1993-1994 this figure was 60.9 thousand students. This means that in the next 10-12 years, the number of students in higher education will decrease significantly. Another problem derives from the massive migration of the population to more developed countries,

including young people in search of work. Currently, approximately 800 thousand citizens of Moldova are abroad, where most of them are engaged in unskilled work.

In the 2004-2005 academic year, approximately 104,000 students were studying in higher education. The higher education enrollment rate represented around 24% of the 19-22 year old population and 26.4% of the respective secondary education cohort. In comparison, in the US this indicator was 69%, in Spain - 51%, and in France - 50%. In recent years, the number of students studying on contract basis with tuition fees, both in state and private institutions of higher education, has registered a significant increase. At the same time, the actual number of students in budget-financed places has decreased by 15-20%.

The access of young people from underprivileged families and from rural areas to higher education has been reduced considerably. Only about 72.7% of students benefit from dormitory accommodation facilities and only 44.3% receive state scholarships. From the total number of students, 20% follow the legal profile, 24.2% the economic profile, and 2.92% study medicine. Approximately 2,000 foreign students study in Moldovan universities, while approximately 4,000 Moldovan students study abroad.

The reform of higher education, which began in the 1990s, was limited to the introduction of partial changes and modifications, which often had an incoherent character, due to the lack of a clearly defined strategy for the reform. These changes were accompanied by a practically uncontrolled growth of the number of private universities, which had very limited human and technical-material resources. In recent years, the need for changes in higher education has been increasingly recognized, but at the same time resistance and reluctance to change have appeared, both from the administrative structures and from the higher education institutions.

Regarding the attitude towards higher education reform, at the beginning of the 2000s, two extreme trends were distinguished: 1) the state supported a centralized management, in which key decisions were taken at the central level, and universities had the role of implementing them; 2) the universities supported a decentralized management based on unlimited university autonomy. None of these positions has reached a level of credibility that would demonstrate the priority of one over the other. The university autonomy provided for in the Law of Education (1995) [14] has not been realized in reality. The Ministry of Education did not have sufficient information to make optimal decisions. Similarly, higher education

institutions do not have the necessary experience to operate autonomously in the application of effective university policies.

At the beginning of the 2000s, the sources of funding diversified, and changes were introduced in the mechanisms of funding higher education institutions. However, one could not ignore the negative trends, such as the reduction of the real funding of higher education, the insufficiency of funds to cover current expenses, for repairs and maintenance, etc. Higher education institutions lacked adequate mechanisms to attract new funds and to manage them efficiently. Therefore, a reform of the financing of higher education was necessary.

The mechanisms for adapting higher education to the demands of the market economy and the labor market were not working effectively. In the early 2000s, there was a significant decline in the quality of teaching and university research. In addition to the external factors (financial, economic, social, demographic), there were also a number of internal factors that negatively influenced the quality of university studies. First of all, the university curriculum was oriented predominantly towards the accumulation of reproductive knowledge. Secondly, inefficient pedagogical technologies prevailed, there were no criteria and mechanisms for objective assessment of training results. Third, information technologies were not effectively applied in the teaching-learning-assessment process.

Fourthly, university scientific research does not occupy its proper place in the research-development sphere. In the years 2004-2005, there was no real assessment of the quality of higher education in the Republic of Moldova. Therefore, it was not possible to rank the different higher education institutions according to the quality of the studies offered, the quality of scientific research, professional and social prestige, etc.

The Republic of Moldova's accession to the Bologna Process in 2005 represented a significant step in the modernization and alignment of higher education with European standards. This process was motivated by a number of considerations and generated many anticipated benefits for the Republic of Moldova, both in the field of education and in the field of socio-economic development.

On May 24, 2004, the Strategy for Higher Education of the Republic of Moldova was adopted in the context of the Bologna Process, which proposed the following measures: 1) Restructuring of higher education in three distinct cycles; 2) The

implementation of a system of qualifications (diplomas) comparable to those in the European space; 3) Adopting an evaluation strategy based on the European Transferable Credit System (ECTS), to facilitate student mobility; 4) Encouraging the mobility of teaching staff and managerial staff for the purposes of professional training, teaching and research; 5) Development of the curriculum in accordance with methodologies and criteria compatible with those of the European community; 6) The extension of positive development trends over the entire education system [13].

The reasons for the accession of the Republic of Moldova to the Bologna Process were the following: 1) European Integration and the Neighborhood Policy: one of the main reasons for the accession of the Republic of Moldova to the Bologna Process was the country's aspiration to integrate more closely into the European institutions and to align with European standards in various areas, including higher education. This process was in line with the European Neighborhood Policy and demonstrated the commitment of the Republic of Moldova to reforms and modernization. 2) Facilitation of Student Mobility: the accession to the Bologna Process opened new opportunities for the mobility of Moldovan students, who got the chance to study in higher education institutions in other European countries, which contributed to the development of intercultural experiences and the improvement education quality [7].

3) Recognition of International Qualifications: the accession to the Bologna Process allowed the Republic of Moldova to align its education systems and study programs with European standards. As a result, the qualifications obtained in the Republic of Moldova have become more easily recognized abroad, which has increased the attractiveness of Moldovan graduates on the international labor market. 4) Modernization of Higher Education: the accession to the Bologna Process imposed a series of reforms in higher education in the Republic of Moldova, which aimed at aligning the curriculum with the current requirements of the labor market, promoting research and innovation, developing modern teaching methods and ensuring quality higher education. 5) Increasing the Attractiveness for Foreign Investments: the accession to the Bologna Process contributed to improving the reputation of higher education in the Republic of Moldova. The country's universities and colleges have become more attractive for foreign investment, thus attracting financial resources and international partnerships that support the development of the educational sector [12].

Among the anticipated benefits of the Republic of Moldova's accession to the Bologna Process, we will mention the following: 1) Increase in the Quality of Education: the accession to the Bologna Process has imposed increased attention on the quality of higher education in the Republic of Moldova. The reforms have contributed to the development of academic standards, ensuring that graduates have the knowledge and skills necessary to meet the demands of the labor market [8]. 2) International Mobility: One of the main benefits of joining the Bologna Process was to facilitate the international mobility of students and academic staff. Students had the opportunity to study abroad and get their qualifications recognized at European level, which increased the cultural and academic diversity in the country [7].

3) International recognition of qualifications: Qualifications obtained in the Republic of Moldova became more easily recognized abroad, which opened up new opportunities for graduates on the international labor market. This has enhanced the attractiveness of the Republic of Moldova for international students and foreign investors [3]. 4) Increasing Economic Competitiveness: The modernization of higher education and its alignment with the demands of the labor market have contributed to increasing the economic competitiveness of the Republic of Moldova. Graduates brought with them up-to-date competences and relevant skills, contributing to the development of the economic sector and to increasing productivity [12].

In conclusion, the Republic of Moldova's accession to the Bologna Process was motivated by the aspiration to integrate higher education into European structures and to align this system with European standards. Membership has brought many anticipated benefits, including increasing the quality of education, facilitating international mobility and international recognition of qualifications. These changes have had a significant impact on the educational and socio-economic development of the Republic of Moldova.

The implementation of the Bologna reforms in the higher education system of the Republic of Moldova was a complex and gradual process, which involved a series of essential stages and procedures. The main objective of these reforms was to align the higher education system of the Republic of Moldova with European standards in order to facilitate the academic and professional mobility of students and teachers.

The first stage of the implementation of the Bologna reforms in the Republic of Moldova was the elaboration and adoption of a clear and coherent strategy, which would define the main directions of the reform. This process involved consultation and close collaboration between government authorities, representatives of higher education institutions, students, teaching staff and other stakeholders. The strategy of higher education in the Republic of Moldova in the context of the Bologna Process was adopted on May 24, 2004 and was a fundamental document, which established the objectives and priorities of the reform.

According to the Strategy of higher education in the Republic of Moldova, higher education can contribute, directly and indirectly, to the progress of the whole society. In an era where information and knowledge are becoming key elements in development, the importance of the university is anticipated to increase. The social functions of higher education consist of dynamic perpetuation, preservation and transmission of scientific and cultural values; initial and ongoing training of professionals for the economic and cultural field; the development of a creative personality, the skills and attitudes necessary for professional and social activity; meeting the individual's educational requirements; promoting national awareness and identity; consolidating national culture and encouraging intercultural dialogue. In the context of the economic, political and social crisis, the role of higher education acquires increased importance. Likewise, education, especially higher education, must be seen as a strategic factor for development and recovery from the crisis. Education represents the foundation of national security in the economic, social, ecological and ethnic fields.

The strategic orientations of the higher education of the Republic of Moldova refer to: 1) Prioritizing the educational policy within the state policy; 2) The integration of higher education in the Republic of Moldova into the European higher education system; 3) Recognition of higher education as a basic factor in the country's social-economic development; 4) Boosting the development of higher education as a quality criterion for the development of society.

The general strategic objectives of higher education must be in line with the objectives of socio-economic development, because higher education institutions are centers of modernization, production of scientific knowledge and technological development, promotion of national and international values.

These objectives are the following: a) Modernization of higher education, to meet the requirements of a society based on knowledge, in the context of a competitive

economic market and a society based on European democratic values; b) Improving the quality of higher education according to European and international standards; c) Increasing the access of young people to higher education and promoting broad access for young people from economically disadvantaged social categories; d) Ensuring the comparability and compatibility of the national system of higher education within the European system of higher education; e) Increasing the competitiveness of higher education internationally.

The specific objectives of higher education include: 1) The implementation of a system of qualifications (diplomas) that are comparable to those in the European space, thus reflecting the common educational purposes; 2) Organizing higher education in three distinct cycles; 3) Adopting an evaluation strategy based on the European Transferable Credit System (ECTS), to facilitate student mobility; 4) Stimulating teacher mobility for training, teaching, research, etc. purposes; 5) The development of the curriculum based on criteria and methodologies comparable to those in the European community; 6) Promotion of the European dimension, with an emphasis on cooperation between universities and participation in joint projects; 7) The extension of positive development trends over the entire education system.

In order to achieve the established objectives, the Strategy of higher education in the Republic of Moldova foresees the implementation of the following actions: 1) adjusting the changes in higher education to fit the triad formed by traditions, social-economic and cultural reality, and European values; 2) Promoting collaboration between public and private higher education systems; 3) Encouraging fair, fair and transparent competition among universities; 4) The flexibility of university education plans to constantly adapt them to the requirements and trends in curriculum development at the international level; 5) Promotion of the use of active and productive teaching technologies in the teaching and learning process; 6) Encouraging close collaboration between professors and students in the educational process; 7) Implementation of a quality management system in higher education; 8) Coordination of the decision-making process, including the legislative aspects related to education, with the possible impacts on the entire system; 9) Extending postgraduate education within the higher education system; 10) Establishing a system of both internal and external evaluation for higher education; 11) Modernization of the university infrastructure, including by computerizing the educational and research process.

Another crucial stage was the adaptation and updating of curricula and study programs to comply with European requirements and standards. This process involved revising and restructuring the study programs to organize them into three distinct cycles: Bachelor's, Master's and Doctoral. Particular attention has also been paid to developing students' practical skills and abilities, as well as promoting international mobility through the European Transferable Credit System (ECTS). The modernization of the higher education curriculum within the Bologna Process represents a significant national interest issue. This modernization is influenced by various factors, such as those of a social, economic, political and educational nature, which reflect the interactions between higher education institutions, society and the labor market.

Any change in the structure of the higher education system can be without substance, if it is not accompanied by a new vision and updated strategies for the development and implementation of university education plans. This coordination will take place at three distinct levels: 1) Institutional level: each higher education institution will examine university education plans in the light of defined objectives, standards and goals; 2) Inter-university level (at the national level): a comparison at the national level of the education plans for different subjects will be made, with the aim of facilitating the transfer of credits; 3) International level: standards for initial vocational training and curricular standards with international relevance will be developed, including quality standards comparable to those of European countries will be created. The quality of the university education plans will be evaluated by the professional market of the graduates.

In parallel, significant efforts have been made to implement and strengthen a system of quality assurance in higher education. This included the development and implementation of internal and external quality assessment procedures, as well as the promotion of a quality culture among higher education institutions. Mechanisms for collecting and analyzing student feedback as well as monitoring academic performance have also been established.

Another essential aspect was to strengthen the academic and professional mobility of students and teaching and administrative staff. This involved the mutual recognition of diplomas and ECTS credits between higher education institutions in the countries involved in the Bologna Process. Exchange and collaboration programs between universities from different European countries were also promoted, thus facilitating the international experience of students and teachers.

The efficiency of higher education institutions is closely linked to the quality of the human resources involved. The initial selection processes, influence the level of competences of the teaching staff in higher education the participation in continuous training, including abroad, the degree of motivation, the involvement in scientific research activities and educational projects, as well as the adherence to the didactic norms corresponding to. The quality of university teaching staff can be strengthened by implementing guest teacher exchange programs between educational institutions in the Republic of Moldova and those abroad, with a view to supporting courses. Investing in the development of human resources in higher education will have a significant impact on the improvement of the quality of higher education.

To enable higher education to properly fulfill its essential social functions, it is necessary to allocate funds as a priority to this sector. In this context, we note that it is crucial to significantly increase the budget allocated to higher education institutions, ensuring full coverage of all categories of expenses. Furthermore, higher education institutions should be encouraged to seek new sources of income and funding to strengthen their financial stability. The reform of the higher education financing system involves a series of measures, among which are: 1) Development of a solid institutional and legal framework for higher education financing; 2) Diversification of funding sources, combining budgetary funding with alternative sources, such as school fees, research income, sponsorships from economic agents, donations, etc.; 3) Changing the financing method: from financing by item of expenditure to global financing, using predefined criteria; 4) Allocation of funds according to performance, so that institutions that achieve quality results receive additional funding; 5) The granting of financial autonomy to higher education institutions, including the right to manage funds according to financial legislation, based on efficiency and public responsibility criteria.

In the end, the implementation of the Bologna reforms in the higher education system of the Republic of Moldova represented an extensive and complex process, which involved the close collaboration of various stakeholders. These reforms had the result of aligning higher education in the Republic of Moldova with European standards, thus facilitating international integration and collaboration in the field of higher education. Currently, the Republic of Moldova is in a process of continuous transformation of the university system.

References

*** (1995). The Education Law of the Republic of Moldova. No. 547 of 21-07-1995. In: *Official Gazette*. November 09. No. 62-63 art. 692.

European Higher Education Area (2021). *Bologna Process - Mobility*. (Visited: 26.08.2023). Available: <https://www.ehea.info/cid101903/bologna-process-mobility.html>.

European Neighborhood Policy (2021). *The European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) is the foreign policy framework aiming at bringing the EU and its Eastern and Southern neighbours closer, to their mutual benefit and interest*. (Visited: 26.08.2023). Available: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/european-neighbourhood-policy_en.

Mandaji, Elena (2020). *The strategy of higher education in the Republic of Moldova in the context of the Bologna Process*. (Visited: 26.08.2023). Available: https://utm.md/edu/legal/strategia_rm.pdf.