

European Construction between Desideratum and Realities

The Influence of the Bologna Process on Higher Education of the Republic of Moldova

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Abstract: The higher education system in the Republic of Moldova has undergone a far-reaching transformation since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. The higher education system, at the present time is in a state of active reforms, a turning point, which is, the country's joining of the Bologna process. The provisions of the Bologna process have become priority areas in the development of the country. Moldova today must build its system of quality education in accordance with the requirements of the European Union. It could be simply copy, but it is necessary to take into account the historical features of the education system development in Moldova and its current preferences. This article analyses some of the main achievements, challenges and influence of the Bologna Process on the higher education reform.

Keywords: higher education; Bologna process; reform; quality; labor market

1. Introduction

Nowadays, the demand for higher education services is primarily dependent on the labor market. On the one hand, higher education institutions are guided by the demand from potential buyers of education services. On the other hand, the supply must correspond to the demand shown by employers. Otherwise, it forms an imbalance of supply and demand, that the labor market is expresses as unemployment. In turn, high unemployment and low wages indicate the inefficiency of investments in higher education. Today in Moldova, almost half of the unemployed are in the age group of 30 - 49 years old, while the majority of citizens in terms of education are people with secondary education – 51%, 36% of unemployed are people with secondary professional and secondary primary

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education, but people, who are having higher education – 13% of the total number of unemployed (Statistical databank, 2019).

Consequently, in the end, the inefficiency of higher education market reduces the competitiveness of the country. That is why, education is included in one of the numbered components of the evaluation and the competitiveness of the economy (Wetzinger, 2019, p. 29).

The basis of intensive economic growth is innovative development, which contributes to increase labor productivity and significant resource savings, including the most valuable of them – time. This is especially important for a country like Moldova, which has a limited resource potential.

Globalization and freedom of movement affect higher education, on the one hand, there is a decrease in international barriers and upgrading qualifications, on the other hand, there is a threat of lowering the quality of services, the migration of qualified specialists and the weakening role of the state in managing the national education system.

The education system in the Republic of Moldova, along with international education processes, is at the stage of reform, for example, internationalization and integration of the higher education system into the European Higher Education Area (European Higher Education Area, 2020). One of the indicators of high-quality educational policy is educational migration, but in Moldova, it is only emerging. The education system of the Republic of Moldova, today is in a state of active reforms, a turning point which was, the country's process of accession to the Bologna Process.

The main purpose of the paper is to show how higher education developed in the Republic of Moldova before joining the Bologna process and how the Bologna process influenced Moldovan higher education. What reforms have followed after 2005 and what remains to be changed and done to improve the education process in Moldova.

2. Methodology

In the process of research and development of the paper has been used a number of principles and rules, theoretical studies of experts in this area, both from the Republic of Moldova and from abroad.

The institutional method allowed to perform an analysis of the investigated problem in the light of activity of such institutions as higher education institutions, ministries, the state, etc.

The historical method served as the basis for studying the evolution of the dialogue between the European Union within Bologna process and the Republic of Moldova, in the context of historical evolution. That allowed to identify the relationship between the past, present and future.

The behavioral and structural-functional method admitted to identify the behavior and reaction of the government, ministries, universities, people and the European Union on the integration of the Republic of Moldova into the European space of education and research, both within the country and abroad.

Document analysis is an empirical method that has been used to study the functioning mechanisms of institutions, official documents and statistics, as well as reports on the development of education and science, and achievements in this sector.

3. Results

The higher education system of the Republic of Moldova is developing in accordance with the vector of European integration, but is strongly influenced by the economic and political situations in the country. The difficult economic situation has led to a gradual reduction of a state involvement in education. For more than 29 years of independence in Moldova has not yet established common competitive system of higher education. In fact, in the country there is a parallel development of two higher education systems: Right-Bank and Left-Bank, as the Transnistrian authorities headed for the actual separation of the educational system of the unrecognized Republic from the rest of Moldova. As a consequence of the political course of the unrecognized Republic, the higher education system is focused on the Russian system of higher education. However, focusing on Russian standards in Transnistria almost completely eliminates the systematic entry of Transnistria into the Bologna process (Educational Law, 2019), which the Republic of Moldova joined in May 2005. Since then, the Moldovan higher education system has been developing in accordance with the requirements of integration into the European Higher Education Area (Percinscaia, Țurcan, Griga, 2016, p. 21).

Back in 1986, the University of Bologna turned to universities in Europe with the proposal to accept the Magna Charta of the European Universities, and in 1988, the Charter was adopted by 80 university rectors (Magna Charta Universitum, 2018). In 1999, the Bologna Declaration was already signed by 29 countries (The Bologna Declaration of June 19th, 1999). The main objective of the Bologna process was a creation of a single educational space of European countries. As a part of Bologna process, a significant part was given to student mobility between participating countries, and it strength the cooperation between universities.

The post-soviet countries soon joined the Bologna system. Their connection to the system has contributed to improve the competitiveness of the region. Moldova joined the Bologna process in 2005.

Since February 2006, the country's higher education system has switched to the credit system, i.e. Moldova adopted the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) (European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System, 2006).

Also, instead of a certified specialist (5 years of study), students started to study 3-4 years to obtain a Bachelor degree (I cycle), and 2 years to obtain a Master degree (II cycle). In addition, the extension of the educational process for a year caused discontent among students studying on a fee basis, and at the beginning of reforms, and sometimes even today, undergraduate studies are considered incomplete education, but Master studies for many students was considered incomprehensible phenomenon (Education Code of the Republic of Moldova, 2014).

Even, if the reform process in the Bologna spirit is market by the interaction of different interests, since 2005, efforts have been made to conceptualize how the principles of the Bologna process can be implemented in practice, a conceptualization that takes into account educational models in Europe. It is worth mentioning two more notable attempts that caused heated debate in society. The first took the form of the Educational Code, developed by a group of experts in the field of education. This Code caused fierce criticism in society and, although at the end of 2008, the Parliament voted for it, it did not enter into force. In 2009, this Code was repealed and a new Education Code was developed, which was discussed in the summer 2010. Unfortunately, this Code was also seen as a tribute to some of the interest groups, which led to the blocking of the adaptation process, although working groups continued to work to improve the content (Ciurea, Berbeca, Lipcean & Gurin, 2012, p. 8).

Even if these projects have been abandoned, it is worth noting their key aspects that show the differences between the views of the authors of the two documents, as well as their points of contact. The first element is connected with the autonomy of the university and state control. The first Code of Education is a more balanced document because it was not aimed to distinctions between the institutions. The Education Code from 2008, aimed to distinguish between private and public institutions, between some higher education institutions and others under state care, but also between universities and institutes and academies that seem to be differentiated, according to area of study (Ciurea, Berbeca, Lipcean & Gurin, 2012, p. 13).

Only, on June 17, 2014, the Educational Code of the Republic of Moldova was adopted (Education Code of the Republic of Moldova, 2014). It could be said that, the accession of Moldova to the Bologna process starts the most active period of reforms. The provisions of the Bologna process became priority areas in the development of education. After joining the Bologna process, new state standards for higher education were approved: Bachelor degree (I cycle), Master degree (II cycle), PhD (III cycle).

Through the introduction of accreditation in higher education, management becomes more transparent, significantly increased staff and students to participate in governance process, improved the resource bases, increased requirements for scientific research. Structures, created during the accreditation process, become part of the management and promote a cultural of quality assurance.

Higher education reforms- including implementation the Bologna process- were also supported by the European Union through funding schemes such as TEMPUS and Erasmus +. These programs bring together international consortia of higher education institutions and related stakeholders to promote the reform of higher education institutions and higher education systems (Wetzinger, 2019, p. 30).

For Moldova, 83 Tempus projects (1994 – 2013) and 17 Erasmus Capacity Building projects in higher education (2015-2019), 17 Jean Monnet projects, were selected for funding. In addition, educational institutions in the Republic of Moldova participate in several Erasmus mobility projects for students and staff (2015-2017: 1303 mobilities) (Statistics of the National Erasmus+ Office in Moldova, 2019). All these projects have contributed to the internationalization of higher education in Moldova and have promoted the integration of higher education institutions in the European Higher Education Area. However, the real degree of internationalization

of Moldovan educational institutions remains unequal (Wetzinger, 2019, p. 30). This evolution is presented in the Chart no.1:

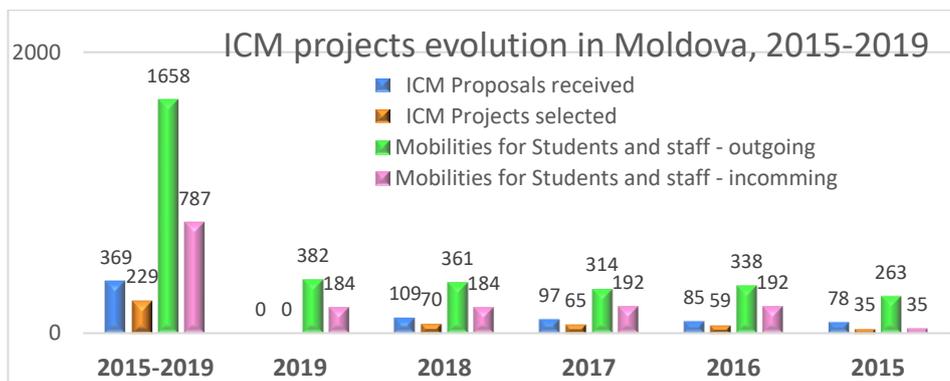


Figure 1. International Credit Mobility Projects Evolution in Moldova 2015-2019

Source: http://www.erasmusplus.md/sites/default/files/media_file/2019-09/erasmus_programme_in_rm_final.pdf. Accessed on: 14.05.2020

Despite the positive and high results of students and staff mobilities, the analysis of the current state of Moldovan higher education system, shows great difficulties. Studies show that the importance of higher education for the labor market is often lacking. For example, a recent World Bank report showed that “there are compelling indicators that higher education does not meet current labor needs, not to mention the future demand for skills” (The World Bank Annual Report, 2018, p. 54). According to the World Bank, “almost half of Moldovan companies have systematic employment problems with the right skills” (The World Bank Annual Report, 2018, p. 55).

Recently, the university system in the Republic of Moldova has gone through various types of requirements that adapt it to the so-called labor market requirements. There requirements come from different areas and are difficult to evaluate because they are a collection of statements that are difficult to verify. In fact, the created situation reflects a clear antagonism between employers and universities, which led the government to include in the list of national priorities in the National Strategic Planning Document for 2014-2020 the chapter “Relevant Career Studies”. The main idea of this document was to show that the main drawback of the Moldovan university system is its weak connection with labor market. The Ministry of Education supports this desynchronization between universities and companies, based on various statistics that we could take into account (Education Development Strategy for 2014-2020 “Education - 2020”, 2014).

4. Conclusions

In general, speaking about the educational system of Moldova, the main attention should be paid to the Bologna process, because in fact, since 2005, in Moldova have begun real active educational reforms. Although, speaking about the Bologna process, it is difficult for us to give it an unambiguous assessment. Many note the positive changes in the country's formation after joining the process, but some talk its extremely negative impact, nothing how the educational system of Moldova is gradually losing its national identity and simply copying western models. It is noteworthy that Western experts highly appreciate the reform of higher education in Moldova, and our Diploma Supplements, but they are not in hurry to hire specialist with higher Moldavian education abroad. However, in general based on analysis, we can see the positive, though clearly not fast enough, the development of the educational system in Moldova after acquiring its independence.

University education has become increasingly accessible, and age restrictions have been removed (Percinscaia, Țurcan & Griga, 2016, p. 21). In addition, a larger number of students in higher education compared with a much smaller number of students in institutions of secondary professional and secondary specialized education indicates that higher university education is becoming more popular and a priority for citizens of the Republic of Moldova. And even now, after more than 25 years of educational reforms, we are again on the verge of a new reform. But this is the requirements of the knowledge market (Statistical databank, 2019).

Given that the higher education system determines the future prospects of the country, Moldova needs to carry out quality reforms to train European-level specialists (Percinscaia, Țurcan & Griga, 2016, p. 26). And not only by subscribing to the reforms, but it is also worthwhile to practically create a system for training competitive graduates, who will work in their specialty not only at home, but also abroad.

Finally, despite the difficult political, social and economic conditions, some important steps have been taken to reform the higher education system. The Bologna process has become an important milestone as Moldova tries to integrate more into the EHEA. Structural reforms that have been implemented, have increased international comparisons and the compatibility of the Moldovan higher education system and have become the basis of international growth. However, problems remain until formal and structural changes are made. Undoubtedly, one of the most important problems of the higher education system of the Republic of Moldova is

the demographic development of the country: it is clear that the deterioration in the number of students must be rearranged to ensure the sustainability of the higher education system. Investments to increase the quality and relevance of higher education can strengthen the position of higher education institutions and thus their ability to get rid of future changes. However, it is not possible to deny that some universities will disappear from higher education in this process.

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