Quality Assurance of Higher Education in Terms of the National Education Performance and Competitiveness Growth

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Abstract: *Development of modern society demands from education to provide a quality education that meets both the needs of the education and training of the individual and the society. Achieving this goal is particularly important for the Republic of Moldova and requires the implementation of efficient quality assurance systems and mechanisms in education (educational services), quality meaning competitiveness and prosperity. Starting from the importance of this issue, this paper analyses the dimension of Moldovan higher education, the changes that have occurred within it in recent decades and its impact on the quality of offered services, as well as the approaches to quality assurance; the opportunity of setting up a unique system of quality assurance in education in the country, based on a systemic and comprehensive approach to respond to the needs of the national economy and European policies in the field of higher education quality.*
Keywords: *higher education, quality assurance, competitiveness, performance of education*

Introduction

On-going reform of higher education in Moldova, over more than two decades (started with the declaration of Independence in 1991), has conducted to relevant changes in this area: expanding access to higher education, establishing private universities, implementing a two-cycle degree structure (Bachelor - Master) in higher education, following Moldova's accession to the Bologna Process (2005), implementing the National Qualifications Framework, providing, by law, academic and financial autonomy of higher education institutions (2012), etc.

However these changes were not followed by a corresponding increase in the quality of higher education, its responsibility for the quality of services and products. National educational system has not yet become a catalyst for sustainable economic growth and a priority factor in increasing competitiveness internally and externally.

Moldova's orientation towards European integration, including the European Higher Education Area, the amplification of processes of higher education internationalization requires urgently the need to move emphasis from quantitative to qualitative reforms. Since joining the Bologna Process, Moldova has expressed strong adherence to European values in higher education, in which quality assurance prevails. Moldova's pro-European orientation, on the one hand, and the internal needs of the country to make higher education an important factor of socio-economic progress and growth, on the other hand, assign quality assurance the national priority status and require efficient solutions in the field. Delaying or ignoring this important aspect is accompanied by considerable risks with long term negative impact.

1. Current Dimension of Higher Education in Moldova and Convergence in the Labour Market

Liberalization of educational services in Moldova in 1990-2000 resulted in a substantial increase in the number of higher education institutions, registering 47 universities in 2000 and a maximum number of students, over 126,000, in 2005-2006. Expansion of access to higher education has generated the shift of young people from vocational to higher education. Development of competition in the following period caused a reduction in the number of higher education institutions in the country; thus, in 2011-2012 there were 34 institutions with a total enrolment of 104,000 students, i.e. 292 students per 10,000 inhabitants, which is 2.3 times more than in 1990-1991 (Table no. 1).

Table no. 1 Dimension of higher education in the Republic of Moldova

	1990-1991	*1995-1996*	*2000-2001*	*2005-2006*	*2010-2011*	*2011-2012*
Number of higher education institutions	9	20	47	35	33	34
Students, thousands	54,7	54,8	79,1	126,1	107,8	104,0
Students per 10.000 inhabitants	125	152	217	351	303	292

Source: National Bureau of Statistics [1, 11]

Analysis of the labour market situation in 2011 highlights that 23.7% of the population employed in the national economy was highly qualified. According to the National Bureau of Statistics, the unemployment rate of the economically active population with higher education is 6%, calculated according to ILO. The total number of unemployed people with higher education is 21.3%. It is alarming that the largest share of unemployed people are persons aged 25 to 34 years - 33.5% and persons aged 35 to 49 years - 26.4%. The rate of unemployment among the young people (15 to 34 years) was 58.5% in the reference period [2].

All this confirms the existence of imbalances between professional training and labour market needs, as well as the existence of deficiencies in the quality of professional competencies of graduates, in their lifelong learning education for a better employability in the labour market and lack of policies, effective mechanisms in quality assurance of education and social responsibility for it along the entire educational system vertical (national level - institutional level).

2. Legislative/Normative and Institutional Framework for Quality Assurance

National legislation in force does not contain certain special provisions with regard to the quality/quality assurance in education. Special Laws, including Law on Education (No. 547 of 21.07.1995) [3], Law on the Assessment and Accreditation of Educational Institutions in the Republic of Moldova (No.1257-XIII of 16.07.97) [4], Law concerning the approval of Assessment and Accreditation of Educational Institutions Regulations (No. 423 of 04.06.1999) [5], do not stipulate explicitly rules and responsibilities regarding quality assurance in education, in particular in higher education. It is necessary to mention the existence of some gaps of the legal acts regulating the field.

Thus, legislation in force [4] states that the assessment and accreditation of educational institutions is the prerogative of the Ministry of Education, which creates, within its own structure, the department of evaluation and accreditation of educational institutions, empowering it with tasks and responsibilities in the field. It follows that the central public authority, which approves professional training programs and monitors the activity of educational institutions, performs also their accreditation which is inconsistent with the principles of objectivity, impartiality, transparency and quality of decision making.

In common cases in society, and in academic environment, in particular, quality assurance is identified with accreditation of educational institutions, which, in our opinion, is a fragmented perception in relation to modern concepts of quality. Accreditation, in standard definition, is a procedure where by an accrediting body officially recognizes and certifies in writing that an organization is competent to carry out specific activities. Such an approach is confirmed by Law on the Assessment and Accreditation of Educational Institutions in Moldova according to which „accreditation of institutions of the educational system in Moldova aims at determining their capacity to achieve qualitative objectives set by the Law on Education" [3]. Thus, accreditation is actually an official recognition of the existence of certain competencies of the university, is evidence of its credibility and a confirmation that the minimum requirements (established by law) of the educational services are provided.

In this context, we mention that the criteria and indicators used in the process of academic assessment and accreditation are mainly oriented toward the educational system inputs (infrastructure, teaching staff, content and forms of organization of education, scientific activity, financial and economic activity and others), but not toward performance indicators. Therefore we believe that in addition to the accreditation system it is necessary to apply other modern concepts in the field of quality,

introducing a set of processes and procedures to ensure continuous improvement, alignment to the best practices.

It should be emphasized that although legislation on education stipulates concurrent evaluation and accreditation of educational activities (professional training) and research, along with the approval and implementation of the Code on Science and Innovation (No. 259 of 15.07.2004) [6], the accreditation process was actually divided in these two indispensable components so that the accreditation of higher education institutions in the field of research is delegated to the National Council for Accreditation and Attestation (empowered to attest the scientific and research staff, and doctoral programs as well, and to accredit science and innovation organizations). Such a situation, in our view, does not meet the modern university concept - centre for education and research.

Recognizing the importance of quality assurance in higher education and in order to establish a coherent system in this area, in 2008 by Government Decision (No. 1295 of 20.11.2008) [7] the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) was established, and the Regulation on the Agency organization and functioning was approved; this institution was commissioned with responsibilities in the following areas: certification of teachers (general education only), assessment and accreditation of educational institutions and quality assurance of education. Document envisaged also external evaluation of the Agency by similar agencies accredited abroad. But for some reasons, dependent, ultimately, on the human factor, the Agency has not started work, remaining only at the regulatory level. This led to stopping the process of accreditation of educational institutions in Moldova for more than five years.

The above said confirms the need and opportunity of establishing the well-defined regulatory, organization, management and monitoring systems for quality of higher education in Moldova, corresponding to internal needs, quality policies of education, the objectives of integration in the European Higher Education Area, which would place the educational system in a process of permanent improvement, competitiveness and excellence in higher education becoming essential factors of progress.

3. Views on the Concept of Quality and Establishing an Effective Quality Assurance System
Although issues of quality in higher education are tackled in multiple ways, however, in many cases, the quality is understood very narrow, just what a university can offer, focusing on resources. The approach stating that the final product is a graduate of the university is wrong, as well.

When referring to ISO 9001standards, the quality of a product or service does not mean what the manufacturer or supplier wants to give, but only what is appropriate to the requirements of customers for that product or service.

In terms of international standards and given the content and specific character of educational services, it can be concluded that the university is a service provider, and its products are immaterial (intangible) - knowledge and competencies. But the quality of a university is the estimate by which its products and activities satisfy the requirements and expectations of customers as well as of internal and external partners. Thus, the services of a university are considered "to be of quality" only to the estimate by which university's products and processes satisfy the needs, requirements and expectations of customers and other partners.

In a permanently changing environment, the university must be addressed as an organization operating in a competitive market of services (education, research, and consultancy) supply. Higher education institution competitiveness is determined by its capability and promptness to adapt to the changing needs of the socio-economic environment, and the latter can only be achieved by providing quality education and improving it continuously. In this sense we can say that quality is competitiveness and vice versa. Our complex vision of the concept of quality in education is presented in [8, 9].

Starting with this approach to the quality of educational services, it can be asserted that the most important dimension of the quality assurance system is the institutional one because the quality of higher education system as a whole is determined by the quality of each separate institution. Also, to promote defined and effective policies in the area of the quality of education, a systemic and complex

approach to the quality problem throughout the education system (from institutional level to the national level) is required. In this sense, it is undeniable to establish a unified quality assurance system, which would integrate all stakeholders responsible for the quality of education, processes and procedures demanded for it.

In search of a viable solution of quality assurance several proposals were provided to establish authorities with responsibilities in the field at national level (National Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education and Research, envisaged in the draft Education Code [10], the Ministry of Education assuming control of quality assurance). In the current draft project for amending the Law on Education, subjected to public discussions, it is foreseen to create the National Agency for Quality Assurance in Professional Education and Research, under the Government subordination, assigning to it functions of external quality assessment in higher and vocational education, but internal quality evaluation is attributed to the institutional structures responsible for quality assurance. At the same time, along with this proposal, the competences, responsibilities, structure of the Agency, functioning mechanisms are not clearly defined. In addition, the implementation of quality concept in other levels of education (general) would require the establishment of other similar authorities, which would increase the administrative resources and a fragmented approach to the problem of quality in the Republic of Moldova.

During this period of vagueness in the field of quality policy and identification of the authority responsible for this field at national level, realizing that "the primary responsibility for quality assurance in higher education lies with each institution" (Berlin Communiqué 2003), Moldovan universities try to build their own systems of quality assurance by starting during the last decade the development and implementation of quality management systems, some universities getting their external certification, as well. The models used by Moldovan universities in this respect and the experience in the field are presented in previous publications [9]. But the establishment of such systems is not compulsory and their "quality" is different in terms of lack of recommendations / requirements / benchmarks.

With account of the above said, we believe that it is necessary, particularly topical, to create a regulatory and institutional framework to underpin the national system of quality assurance in education.

In my opinion, the establishment of the national quality assurance system should be based on the following:
- Integration of all levels of the educational system and authorities responsible for its finalities (institutional level - national level) in order to accomplish quality policy of education;
- Establishment of the national structure/independent authorities responsible for quality assurance, which should not be dependent and influenced in the decision-making by authorities (Ministry of Education), other institutions and universities;
- Implementing and developing, at institutional level, quality assurance/quality management systems as components of the university management;
- Awareness and approval of the concept and principles of quality assurance;
- Development and promotion of an adequate quality culture and perception of quality according to modern concepts oriented to performances;
- Development of appropriate mechanisms and procedures of quality assurance/quality management, and development of a indicators' system for the evaluation of university performances;
- Introduction of educational institutions ranking according to their performances, and development of methodology for this purpose;
- Recurrence to the single (complex) procedure for higher education institutions accreditation (professional training and research);
- Budgetary funding of universities according to the quality of their services and performances;
- Collaboration with Quality Assurance Agencies, accredited at European level, inviting foreign experts to participate in activities of educational quality assessment;

- Involvement of stakeholders (Ministry of Education, employers, students), interested in the quality of education, in the process of quality assessment of institution performances.

From the perspective of synergistic and systemic approach to the quality of education, given the dimension of the educational system in Moldova, as well as the opportunity of implementing quality assurance mechanisms at all levels, ensuring compatibility of procedures and mechanisms used for this purpose, it would be appropriate to establish the Agency for Quality Assurance in education, which would cover all levels of education (having in its structure subdivisions responsible for these levels, including units for quality assurance in higher education), and have the following main areas of expertise:

- Quality assessment of resources engaged in the activity of educational institutions and in education, in general;
- Quality assessment of processes and finalities of study, and convergence with socio-economic needs;
- Evaluation and attestation of teaching staff (at all levels);
- Evaluation and accreditation of educational institutions;
- Educational institutions performances monitoring, and accomplishment of actions aimed at continuous improvement of educational services.

Responsibilities for quality assurance need to be appropriately assigned, as follows:
- *Government, Ministry of Education:* approval of quality assurance policy in education, financing educational institutions according to the accomplished performances;
- *Agency for Quality Assurance:* developing mechanisms for implementation of quality policies in education (procedures, criteria, requirements, standards, performance indicators etc.); monitoring of predetermined requirements observance; measuring performances of educational institutions; evaluation and accreditation of educational institutions; ensuring transparency of decision-making by publishing the results; educational institutions ranking in conformity with their performances; promoting and fostering the best practices in the field of quality assurance and orienting towards quality on-going improvement, etc.;
- *Educational institutions:* implementing their own systems of quality assurance/quality management, taking into account the European standards for internal quality assurance; developing their own performance indicators; identifying and harnessing opportunities to enhance the competitiveness of institutions; informing the society authentically about the quality of performed services, etc.

The Agency should encourage coordination and synergy of action in quality dimension between the bodies involved in education management.

This would help to address the issue of quality assurance in higher education not only on the internal dimension of this segment, but also in line with the other components of the educational system.

Such a system of quality assurance of education in the country would contribute to the substitution of a system reactive to quality issues with a proactive and strategic one, and would boost efforts to ensure the continuous growth of quality in education.

Conclusions

Although the importance and necessity of concerns about quality is known in the educational environment, however, under certain factors, activities in this area are advancing at a rate much slower than required. The following barriers can be highlighted: legislative and regulatory deficiencies; lack of policies and strategies in quality assurance at institutional and national levels; fragmented approach to quality assurance in detriment of the systemic approach; resistance of the human factor to changes and the complexity in promoting change in mentality, attitudes, behaviour, etc.

To increase the operating efficiency and competitiveness of the national educational system it has become an urgent need to implement an effective quality assurance system that would respond, on the one hand, to the internal needs and peculiarities of education in the country, and on the other hand, it would meet the European requirements and practices in the area. The principles of setting up and the

model of such a system, argued in this paper, is an alternative proposal so far, and taking it over and developing it will facilitate the growth of quality of educational performances and its impact on the socio-economic development.

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