

EDUCATIONAL IMMIGRATION TO MOLDOVA: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES FOR PARTICIPATION IN THE INTERNATIONAL MARKET OF EDUCATIONAL SERVICES

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ABSTRACT

The mass emigration of the youth from Moldova, including educational emigration, usually without a subsequent return home, has negatively impacted the demographic situation and the number of students in Moldova's higher education institutions. The internalization of the higher education system allows Moldova to actively involve itself in educational migration to attract international students to Moldova's universities and use academic immigration as investment potential for developing higher education institutions. The article displays the results of an investigation related to attracting international students to Moldova's higher education institutions. The work is based on the analysis of national legislation in education and migration fields. The results of qualitative research were carried out in 2022 by interviewing specialists of higher education institutions responsible for the work with international students. The study aims to find out opportunities to increase the universities' potential in attracting international students, possibilities and main impediments in this process. The results show that to attract international students to Moldovan universities, it is necessary to determine the institutions or facilities that could be attractive for international students. A systematic approach to the development and promotion of educational migration should be adopted, considering the specifics of the countries in the region and the possibility of amending the migration legislation.

Keywords: *international educational migration, higher education, foreign students, export of educational services*

Emigrarea masivă a tinerilor, inclusiv plecarea lor la studii peste hotare, ca regulă fără revenire în patrie, a avut impact negativ asupra pieței muncii, dar și asupra numărului studenților în instituțiile de învățământ superior din țară. Internaționalizarea sistemului de învățământ superior permite Moldovei să se implice mai activ în migrația internațională în scop de studii, pentru atragerea studenților străini în instituțiile de învățământ superior din Moldova, folosirea imigrării în scop de studii ca un potențial investițional în dezvoltarea universităților. În articolul dat se prezintă rezultatele cercetării privind situația ce ține de atragerea studenților străini în instituțiile superioare de învățământ din Moldova. La baza cercetării au stat analiza legislației în domeniul educației și legislației imigraționale, precum și rezultatele unei cercetări calitative efectuate în 2022 prin interviuarea personalului responsabil de lucrul cu studenții străini din cadrul instituțiilor de învățământ superior. Scopul cercetării consta în determinarea oportunității creșterii potențialului instituțiilor superioare de învățământ în atragerea studenților străini, posibilitățile existente și impedimentele principale în procesul dat. Rezultatele cercetării au arătat, că pentru atragerea studenților străini în instituțiile superioare de învățământ din Moldova este necesară indicarea concretă a instituțiilor/facultăților ce prezintă interes prioritar pentru studenții străini, elaborarea unei abordări sistemice în elaborarea și promovarea imigrării străinilor în scop de studii, ținând cont de specificul țării lor de origine, precum și posibilitatea modificării legislației migraționale.

Cuvinte cheie. *Migrația internațională în scop de studii, învățământ superior, studenți străini, export de servicii educaționale*

Массовая эмиграция молодежи Молдовы, в том числе выезд на учебу в другие страны, как правило, без последующего возвращения на родину, оказала негативное влияние как на демографическую ситуацию в целом, так и на численность студентов молдавских вузов. В данной статье представлены результаты исследования ситуации по привлечению иностранных студентов в вузы Молдовы. Работа основывается на анализе национального законодательства в области образования и миграции, а также результатов качественного исследования, проведенного в 2022 г. путем интервьюирования специалистов вузов, ответственных за работу

с иностранными студентами. Цель исследования – определить возможности увеличения потенциала университетов в привлечении иностранных студентов и основные препятствия для данного процесса. Результаты исследования показали, что для привлечения иностранных студентов в вузы Молдовы необходимо четко определить более приоритетные вузы/факультеты, представляющие интерес для иностранных абитуриентов, выработать системный подход в разработке и продвижении образовательной иммиграции с учетом специфики стран происхождения студентов, а также рассмотреть возможность изменения миграционного законодательства.

Ключевые слова: международная образовательная миграция, высшее образование, иностранные студенты, экспорт образовательных услуг

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INTRODUCTION

Participation in the education services international market offers countries the possibility to get economic, demographic and political dividends, as the demand for the education provided in the country and its quality increases the country's image internationally. According to World Trade Organization's data, the volume of the world education market is 50-60 billion US dollars, which is controlled by countries such as the USA, UK, Austria, France, and Germany. At the same time, the number of youth interested in educational migration is also growing.

For recent decades, half of the students in the world market have come from Asian countries. China, Correa, Malaysia, India, and Hon Kong are leading countries in this sense. In the second place, there are Near Eastern Arab countries and North African countries such as Morocco, Iran, Jordan, Algeria, and Palestine. The leaders of the international education services market are the USA, earning on international students fifteen times the amount that the government earmarks for this purpose. In addition, the UK, German, French, Austrian, Canadian and Spanish higher education institutions take an active part in attracting international students. At the same time, a rise in the activity of relatively small countries as Estonia and Czechia was noticed in recent years in the market of educational services, which implement systematic policies aiming to improve the methods in attracting international students, facilitating their adaptation and integration up to their naturalization.

Consolidation of the competition for highly qualified human resources both among developed countries and rapidly emerging countries, as well as the perception of educational migration as a factor of countries' high competitiveness and increase of human capital, are global trends in today's field of migration processes ([Ignatova & Gorbunova, 2020](#)). Educational migration flows become more intense, and the question is whether the Moldovan higher education system will profit from this possibility and what role it will play in this process.

The work aims to highlight the possibilities for the participation of Moldovan higher education institutions in the international market of education services and factors contributing to this process or halting it.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study is based on legislation in higher education analysis concerning the transition of the Bologna system, immigration law, statistical and administrative data.

A qualitative study was carried out through in-depth interviews with specialists from the Ministry of Education and Research and the Ministry of Interior Bureau of Migration and Asylum (2 interviews), as well as the university's staff responsible for the work with international students (15 interviews). The study was conducted in May 2022. The main purpose is to determine the positions of universities in attracting international students and their opportunities/needs for intensifying these processes. The interview guide contained blocks of questions regarding the availability of academic staff, necessary infrastructure, the possibility of mutual recognition of diplomas, impediments to increasing the number of international students, etc.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Educational migration matters are given great attention by UK, German, and Slovenian scientists in their research ([Ribeiro, 2021](#); [Rehak, 2020](#); [Velazquez, 2022](#); [Osler, 2020](#)) etc., as well as in post-Soviet countries such as the Russian Federation, Belarus, Ukraine, Kazakhstan and others ([Zamotin, 2016](#); [Varshavskaya&Chudinovskikh, 2014](#)). Education is perceived as one of the tools of migration and integration policies ([Mukomel, 2015](#))

Some research mentions that with the decrease of the birth rate and population ageing, it is necessary to activate the immigration policy, including the one concerning education-related immigration. To attract qualified human capital to the economy is required to improve the work on attracting foreign citizens to study with the possibility of their subsequent naturalization ([Fokeeva & Rytova, 2020](#), [Tihonova & Kormiltchik, 2017](#)). The trans nationalization of higher education, cross-border presentation of educational programs, the influence of the global knowledge hierarchy, image and reputation of higher education institutions, non-uniform mobility of educational migration, differentiation of the value of international higher education, correlation of matters of migration, citizenship and development of education system were studied ([Waters & Brooks, 2021](#); [Velazquez & Eghert, 2022](#)). A significant number of works are devoted to the systemic approaches in overcoming cultural and social barriers for foreign students, especially from the countries of the global south, the definition of basic criteria for their best integration ([Abdulai et al., 2021](#)).

ANALYSIS OF LEGISLATION IN EDUCATION AND MIGRATION

Since 2005 Moldova, along with 47 other countries, has been a part of the Bologna process⁶. Though with certain flaws, the reforms carried out under this process in the field of higher education allowed the country to implement the provisions of the Bologna process. The following aspects were implemented: (a) the system of comparable degrees, including the implementation of the academic transcript to ensure the employment possibility for European citizens and increase the international competitiveness of the European Higher Education; (b) the introduction of two-cycle education: undergraduate and postgraduate; (c) implementation of the European credit unit mutual recognition system to support large scale student mobility (grade system); (d) development of student mobility and increase of academic and other staff mobility; (e) contribution to the European cooperation in quality assurance aiming at developing matching criteria and methodology, interinstitutional collaboration, mobility schemes and common education programs, etc. Therefore, Moldova has a particular competitive priority in higher education compared to countries not parties to the Bologna process.

⁶ Except medical education, since the duration of the study period in medical universities has not changed.

In 2014 the Education Code of Moldova was adopted by law No. 152 dated 07.07.2014. The code instituted an *equivalent education document, i.e.*, an education document received through the same education system either in the country or abroad. There were introduced state educational standards that established mandatory conditions for the implementation of education programs at all levels and education cycles in public and non-public education institutions, the minimum compulsory standards related to educational programs, minimal mandatory work volume for students and academic staff, to infrastructure and equipment of the institution, to the level of competence of the graduates and the organization of the education process. The state educational standards serve as the basis for an objective assessment of the education quality, level, and qualification of the graduates regardless of education form.

During subsequent reforms, an assessment of the country's higher education institutions was conducted under the methodology and criteria of the National Agency for Quality Assurance in Education and Scientific Research and approved by Government. The draft Intergovernmental Framework Agreement on recognition of diplomas, academic qualifications, skills and competencies with 23 European states, including destination countries of Moldovan emigrants, was approved. Concerned countries are Italy, France, Great Britain, Ireland, Denmark, Germany, Poland, Hungary, Sweden, Norway, Finland, Czech Republic, Slovenia, Slovakia, Bulgaria, Portugal, Greece, Turkey, Israel, Cyprus and Baltic countries. In addition to the agreements achieved on an intergovernmental level, the country's universities have the right to independently establish connections with higher institutions worldwide.

The mechanism of enrolment of foreigners in higher education institutions, the procedure of their transfer to other higher education institutions of the country as well as the legalization of foreigners' education documents were additionally regulated by a special Governmental Decision No.504 of 04.07.2017 "On Approval of the Disposition on Education of Foreigners in the Higher Education Institutions of Moldova and Annulment of some Governmental Decisions".

The reform of the higher education system, its modernization and the introduction of educational standards comparable with European ones have triggered academic mobility, participation of Moldovan higher education institutions in international programs such as Erasmus+Programme, and increased the attractiveness of the higher education institutions for international students. For instance, international students in Moldovan universities participated in the Erasmus Mundus Student Exchange Programme with universities in Turkey, Hungary, Belarus, Poland, and Germany.

The further development and functionality of the higher education system depend on the demographic factor. The decrease in the number of youth due to emigration and the birth rate decline led to a fall in the number of national students enrolling in universities. There is a constant annual average decrease of 9% compared to the previous year during 2007-2021, from 128 thousand to 59 thousand students. The country's higher education system is thus facing a double loss - a decrease in the number of national students and the failure of cultivated academic staff, having the infrastructure capable of meeting the needs of the educational process for a more significant number of people. Moldovan universities have a highly professional teaching staff: 60% of the contingent (2400 people) hold a scientific degree; 87.5% - PhD; 12.5% - are habilitated Doctors.

There is a need to use the possibilities of the Moldovan higher education institutions system to promote a systemic national policy of attracting educational immigrants. However, even with attractive conditions and the opportunity of choosing a university in a particular country, state immigration policies that facilitate the entry and stay of young students in the country are no less important for foreigners.

Immigration issues are treated ambiguously in Moldova due to the post-Soviet prohibitive law enforcement practice, the negative attitude of the population to the consequences of the 2014-2015 migration crisis in EU countries², the presence of a certain degree of xenophobia, the lack of a vision in the interaction between immigration processes and economic development, protection of the citizens' security, etc. The country's active involvement in the processes of globalization contributed to adopting a national legal framework for the requirements of international treaties and the EU Directives in migration, human rights, education, etc. and their transposition into national legislation.

According to the EU legislation, specific priority measures have been introduced into national legislation during the "National Action Plan for the Implementation of the Association Agreement between Moldova and the European Union for 2017-2019". *In immigration, it was proposed to define criteria for the selective and controlled admission of foreigners to the country, considering the needs of the labor market, capital, investment, etc.* Subsequently, an integrated approach made it possible to develop several policies oriented to migration opportunities aimed at development. In particular, Governmental Decision No. 200 of February 26, 2016 "On the Approval of the National Strategy "Diaspora-2025" and the Action Plan for its implementation for 2016-2018" was adopted.

Immigration to study in Moldovan universities is regulated by Law No. 200 of 16.07.2010. "On the Regime of Foreigners in Moldova" defines general rules for granting the right to temporary residence in Moldova for educational purposes to foreigners entering Moldova to study at pre-university, graduate or postgraduate level educational institutions. The law also regulates the temporary stay in the country of trainee graduates of higher education institutions from a member state of the European Union or other states.

Moldova Government Decision No. 655 of 08.09.2011 "On the Approval of the National Strategy for Migration and Asylum (2011-2020)" is significant. According to the Strategy, the Directive of the Council of Europe of 2004/114/CE of December 13, 2004, the conditions for the admission of third-country nationals for educational purposes, student exchange, unpaid vocational training or volunteer activities and others were transposed into national legislation. The strategy also set *"the promotion of higher education institutions of Moldova to attract foreigners to study. Determining the conditions under which foreigners, upon graduation, may extend the period of stay in Moldova"* as one of the goals.

International students are enrolled in educational institutions of Moldova according to the national legislation, international agreements, and international/regional projects/programs to which Moldova is a party. Agreements concluded between educational institutions accredited in the prescribed manner, as well as individual contracts concluded between foreigners and educational institutions.

The selection and enrollment of international students is performed directly by universities based on education documents from the country of origin, allowing access to the appropriate level of education (study cycle) in Moldova. Several Moldovan universities select prospective students directly in their country of origin, which ensures the quality of selection while reducing the cost of education for students. The legislation regulates the admission procedure of foreigners to the general, vocational and higher education institutions of Moldova, as well as the obligations of universities to organize a quality learning process for foreigners.

The conditions for entry and obtaining a residence permit in Moldova by international students are pretty simple. Permission for a temporary stay in Moldova is granted by the Ministry of the Interior Bureau of Migration and Asylum at the request of the educational institution (a document confirming the student's enrollment for study) with confirmation of necessary funds for education in Moldova. The national passport, proof of accommodation, medical insurance, and a certificate of no criminal

record students have to submit along with the application. The originals and copies of the civil status acts are also presented if necessary.

Foreigners entering Moldova to study in pre-university, graduate or postgraduate level institutions must open a long-term study visa to enter the country. The physical presence of the foreigner in a Moldovan consular office abroad is required for the visa obtaining, which is not always possible due to insufficient diplomatic missions abroad. According to Ministry of Foreign Affairs and European Integration data, only 33 of them, many concurrently serving several countries. Diplomatic missions are represented mainly in the countries of the European region, Canada and the USA. As for Asia, which is the most promising in terms of the possibility of attracting potential students, the opportunities for our diplomatic missions are limited. The additional time and significant travel costs required to open a study visa led to an increase in the overall cost of educational services for residents of this region, which leads to the loss of a part of the people who may become potential students of our universities. Suppose there is an interest in activating the presence of Moldova in the educational services market. In that case, it will be necessary to develop possible mechanisms to solve the issue of visa availability.

Amendments to the legislation and the possibility of visa-free movement of citizens of Moldova to the CIS and EU countries have made the country more attractive for immigration, the flow of which is increasing slowly but constantly. Between 1994 and 2019, the number of annual applications for a residence permit rose from 1543 to 4757. Applications related to admission to study at Moldovan universities increased from 515 to 625. Immigration for study at the universities of Moldova accounted for a high share in the total number of foreigners who entered. In the 1996-2000 and 2013-2018 periods, the percentage of educational immigration amounted to more than 40% and 22%, respectively, in the total immigration flow. The total number of foreigners with a residence permit in Moldova to study for the 2020/2021 academic year was 4.6 thousand and for 2021/2022 - 5.2 thousand people. Every second international student receives a medical education. According to the Bureau of Migration and Asylum by the Ministry of Internal Affairs, most of the international students are citizens of Romania (40.1%), Israel (35.6%), India (12.1%), Ukraine (2.6%), the United States (1.7 %) and Turkey (1.4%).

The attractiveness of educational immigration to Moldova is determined by the existence of universities that provide study opportunities in several popular areas (medicine, pharmacology, information technology, international economic relations, etc.) at relatively low education costs. However, the national higher education system lost the volume of exports of educational services to a number of countries whose citizens previously studied in Moldova. From 2000 to 2004, the number of students from Romania decreased nine times; from 2000 to 2006 the number of Ukrainian students fell by half, and from Syria almost four times.

Since 2009, the number of students from Israel in Moldova has increased, and since 2014 from India. Language particularities, the existence / absence of common cultural and religious traditions with the students' country of origin required more flexibility from the university academic staff in organizing the educational process in a way that would avoid wasting time required for learning the language, to ensure the best adaptation of students. Thus, the enrollment of international students from India, Israel, and Syria allows Moldovan universities, by improving the qualifications of the teaching staff, to organize the educational process in English or another language that is widely used in the region. Teaching in one of the international languages contributes to the growth of the competitiveness of the educational institution. For example, within the "N. Testemitanu State Medical and Pharmaceutical University" teaching is conducted in Romanian, Russian, English or French, in the Academy of Economic Studies of Moldova in Romanian and English, in the Independent International University of Moldova in Russian, Romanian and English, in the Comrat University, where education is conducted in Russian and Turkish.

PRIORITIES FOR ATTRACTING INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS TO MOLDOVAN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS. THE RESULTS OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

The competition for talented and highly qualified human resources is currently increasing. The intensity of educational migration is due to many factors: (a) the increasing importance of education as a result of the development of the information/digital society; (b) the need for continuous education and continuous professional development in connection with the modernization of the labor market and increasing competition in connection with this; (c) the existence of integrated educational systems that meet the regional/global needs of the economy; (d) internationalization of the educational environment, the introduction of common educational standards, etc.

Educational migration opens opportunities to preserve and develop the higher education system in Moldova. Eliminating several gaps in the higher education system and improving the conditions for foreigners' stay in the country for study purposes would contribute to the more active involvement of Moldovan universities in this process.

The rankings of universities are an essential guideline for youth in choosing their country of study, and the positions of Moldova's higher education institutions in the international classification, are far from first place. However, several other factors also influence the choice of Moldova for education, and this is not only the ranking of the university and the cost of education. Surveys conducted among international students in other countries ([Pimanova & Fomina, 2019](#)) also revealed several expectations of international students regarding the educational institution and the host country, which can be considered and used in Moldova.

Among the main factors, one can note the high education quality, diploma prestige; competence of teaching staff involved in the educational process; moderation of expenses for accommodation, food and insurance in the country; medical expenses, volume and quality of medical services provided to foreign students; knowledge of the language, level of adaptation and awareness of foreign students in the host country; attractiveness of the country for education, in our case of Moldova; the possibility to obtain a long-term visa for education (list of required documents, presence of an embassy in the country of residence, etc.); desire to get an education in a more developed country, compared with the country of residence and, if possible, employment in it after graduation; opportunity to use the acquired knowledge in their native country; existence/absence of religious and cultural traditions that give rise to certain personal risks for the student (risks for a foreigner to get involved in illegal activities in the host country).

Correlating these expectations with the possibilities of Moldova, we can determine the potential for more active participation of Moldova in the export of educational services. There are 20 public and private higher education institutions in Moldova, which have a particular experience working with international students. In the interviews, the experts noted the strengths of universities: (a) reform of university management and management under European standards and their integration into global and regional education systems; (b) strengthening contacts between higher education institutions and the labor market; (c) the presence of a network of higher education institutions capable of providing potential students with a range of specializations of interest now or in the future, such as medicine or information technology, international finance and banking, technical professions; (d) relatively low tuition fees as compared to other countries; (e) the positive and long-term experience of Moldovan universities in working with international students from the European and Asian regions; (e) availability of the necessary infrastructure for study and living; (i) relatively liberal immigration policy, etc.

According to the results of the qualitative research, all universities are interested in attracting international students on a contract basis, which can help strengthen the university's facilities. Depending on the higher education institution and the faculty to which the student is enrolled, the annual tuition fee currently varies from 1.5 to 6.0 thousand dollars, which is several times less than that of other European countries and is an attractive rate for international students.

To attract international students, most universities have created special departments responsible for providing information and attracting prospective students from foreign countries, accepting the necessary documents, assisting potential students in obtaining a residence permit, housing, etc. A potential student can also get more detailed information about the country, university, conditions of admission, and the possibility of participating in student mobility programs on universities' websites in one of the UN languages.

During the interview, a few bureaucratic barriers were also mentioned, the simplification of which would contribute to better interaction between universities and international students. In particular, the practicality of simplifying the procedure for obtaining a residence permit by including the preparatory period in the general period of the educational process was emphasized, streamlining the forms of statistical reporting, the need for a more preferential procedure for serving universities by the institution responsible for documenting foreigners, etc. Experts also noted that in Moldova, unlike many European countries, the best categories of international students are not provided with employment according to the diploma obtained.

The experts mentioned that there is no information on cases of non-recognition of Moldovan diplomas abroad since the Ministry of Education and universities do not have the practice of monitoring the employment abroad of foreign graduates of our universities according to their speciality. The absence of such data makes it impossible to objectively determine to what extent the quality of training at a Moldovan university meets the expectations and is in demand by employers in the country of origin. Therefore, it is difficult to determine the prestige of a Moldovan diploma and the possibilities of further attracting other representatives of these countries to study.

CONCLUSIONS

Depending on the priorities established at the national or higher education institutions level, the international market of educational services allows for solving demographic or economic problems, using educational immigration as a particular investment potential. The country's higher education institutions and responsible departments should consider the academic, financial and material needs for more active participation in the market of international educational services, using and supplementing the existing advantages. In particular, the following possibilities should be considered:

- *purposeful allocation of resources to strengthen universities and/or faculties/ specializations most in demand by international students in Moldova*, to modernize their educational base, provide the possibility of teaching in English, and improve living conditions for international students. It is possible to use the experience of other post-Soviet countries, such as Estonia, which brought several national universities to a high rank (21) among 1300 educational institutions in the world. It should be considered that according to the international scale of educational services, the most demanded fields among international students are currently business education (specializations related to economics, management, marketing, business information systems, etc.) - almost 25%, technical and engineering sciences, especially information technology (20 %), natural sciences, mainly mathematics (20%), social specializations (7-8%), art (5-6%) and medicine (4-5%).

- a more *selective approach related to the countries of origin of potential students* for Moldovan universities. During the survey, the experts showed that the most acceptable target group for studying in Moldova would be students from CIS countries, Syria, Turkey, Israel, India, Nepal;
- while determining a potential group of countries to attract students to Moldova, it is advisable to consider the possibilities of *more active involvement in the work of diplomatic missions*. It is also necessary to monitor how the industry develops in these countries and what technologies are being introduced; what staffing needs they have and what educational policies are pursued by national governments, etc. to develop further systematic approaches to attract students from these countries, taking into account changing needs;
- in view of the existing shortage of highly educated and highly skilled labor force in the country, consider the possibility of employment of specific categories of international students after they graduate from Moldovan universities;
- a significant source of income for the country can be the experience of using the intellectual potential of graduates of Moldovan universities who returned to their homeland. Development at the state and other levels of special programs will promote professional cooperation between universities and graduates, cooperation in advanced training, professional retraining, etc.
- considering the prospects for youth mobility in the European and Asian regions, it is advisable *to create more favorable immigration conditions for a selected group of countries*, provide for the possibility of employment in Moldova for university graduates and the recognition of educational diplomas at the bilateral level, as an advantage in attracting students from selected countries.

The experience of Moldova's universities accumulated during the 2019-2022 (Covid-19) pandemic allows expanding the range of educational services provided by Moldovan universities (language courses, distance education, schooling, advanced training, additional education) and products (various programs, methods, educational CDs, books, etc.).

The modest position of Moldova in the international market of educational services proves not so much the non-competitiveness of our higher education system as much as the lack of a formulated orientation of state policy towards promoting national educational services and optimizing efforts within the country, the lack of coordinated actions of ministries and departments.

Exporting educational services certainly brings economic benefits to both universities and the country. At the same time, entering the foreign market will tighten the requirements for the quality of the educational product, its professional conversion, the educational content and conditions for student learning. And consequently, it will improve the quality of the national education system.

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