

QUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION: CURRENT SITUATION AND PERSPECTIVES (CASE OF THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA)

Ala COTELNIC*

Abstract: *This paper deals with some issues concerning the importance of quality assurance in universities. Higher education trains professionals who will lead our society in the nearest future. Hence increases the accountability of universities towards society in training professionals. The changes that took place in higher education in recent years (transition to education in cycles, access and massification of higher education, etc.) have influenced the quality of student's education. Concern for quality assurance in academia is important, as long as at the international level quality is the solution that provides credibility to higher education institutions, makes them competitive on international market and ensures their existence. The paper refers to a research conducted at the Academy of Economic Studies of Moldova.*

Key-words: quality, quality assurance, human resources, higher education

JEL Classification: A22, I23.

Today human resources are the basic element of competition, both nationally and internationally. Today's global economic competition has quality and creativity of human resources as the main factors underlying the essential disparities between states.

Higher education creates professionals who will lead in the nearest future the society and economy of a country. Being responsible for preparing young generations of graduates in different fields of knowledge, higher education is also responsible for the future of society and of the

* Professor, Dr. Hab., Academy of Economic Studies of Moldova, e-mail: acotelnic@hotmail.com.

nation. Education and training quality is therefore an essential process, of maximum importance, both for studying people and for the whole society.

Quality in higher education is a real need that we face and have to respond to without making any concessions.

In higher education, the term “quality assurance” refers to the policies, processes and actions designed to ensure that the institution, programs and qualifications meet and maintain the specific standards of education, financial support and infrastructure. So, quality assurance offers higher education institutions and stakeholders a guarantee that the quality level is achieved. Quality assurance also has the function to continuously improve the education system.

Referring to the current situation envisaging the quality in the Republic of Moldova, we shall start from some factors that influence this process. *Firstly*, it is Moldova’s accession to the Bologna process in 2005, which brought a radical change in the higher education system. We have two cycles (Doctorate has not yet become the third cycle): Bachelor and Master or from 4 years of study at BA we have 3 or 4 years (depending on field of study) at cycle I and 2 or 1,5 years at cycle II. We quickly moved to implementing the provisions of this European forum. Thus, if Moldova’s accession took place on May 19th, 2005 during the meeting of the Ministers of Education in Bergen, Norway, then from September 1st of the same year, the higher education system in Moldova changed to education on cycles. Hastily, without understanding properly this process, took place the restructuring of curricula and study programs.

Another factor influencing the quality of university education is access and massification of higher education. University education used to be an elite one and now it turned into a mass one. We appreciate positively the training of people and their desire to learn. The more educated and trained is the population of the country, the more qualified professionals we have, the more stimulated is the competition, the more is driven creativity and progress. Expanding the access to higher education has occurred as a result of economic development, of changes in the labor market and increase of the number of people seeking higher education, motivated by the need for advancement, but also by social and cultural needs.

Nowadays higher education is now no longer a vocation or a privilege, it became a social necessity: modern society can not function without a well

trained and qualified human potential, as well as without extending scientific research, which determines the development of civilization.

For these reasons, the higher education system in Moldova has registered a period of explosive growth in the number of higher education institutions and students' number (figure 1).

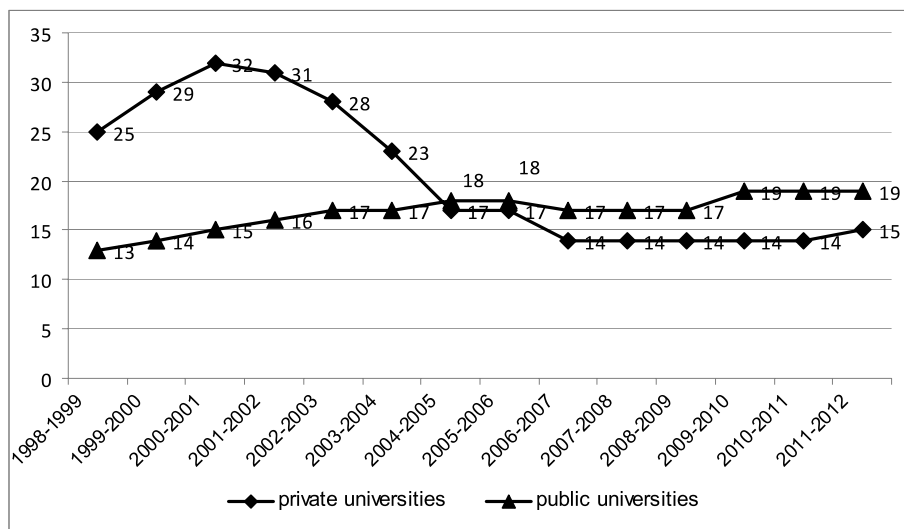


Figure 1. Evolution of universities in the Republic of Moldova

Source: National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova, www.statistica.md

Figure 1 shows the downward trend in the number of universities, especially of private ones, from 32 in 2000-2001 to 15 in 2011-2012. Although, last year this number increased by one university. However, we consider that in the next few years there will also be a downward trend, either by liquidation of some universities or by merging of several institutions. This process is inevitable, if we consider the decreasing number of applicants to universities. It is not the interest in higher education that is decreasing, but the declining demographic situation of the country. This trend is better seen in figure 2.

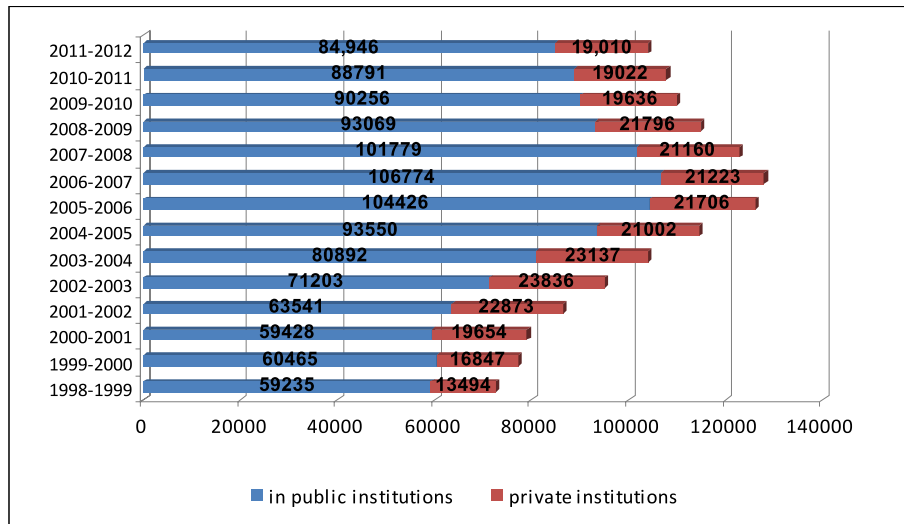


Figure 2. Evolution of the number of students in Moldova

Source: National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova, www.statistica.md

If until 2006-2007 there is a steady increase in the number of students, then, beginning with 2007-2008 there is a tendency, also stable, in its decrease. Here we can mention a few reasons: the decline of demographic situation, studies abroad, where parents live or scholarships offered by other states.

The massification of higher education has made impossible for universities to cover the demand of higher education as human factor. Now we have the situation when quantitative growth of students became inversely proportional to the quality of training.

A third factor influencing the quality of education is *qualification and status of teachers*. At the moment, is highlighted a gap between the older and the younger generation of teachers. It is considered that older teachers have scientific degrees, are more experienced, but very often, are more conservative and are less flexible. Young teachers do not have scientific degrees but know information technologies, foreign languages, are more flexible and more likely to accept changes. The “middle age” generation, which combines scientific degrees and experience with the dynamism and

flexibility, is less present in universities. In this respect, we believe that the Academy of Economic Studies of Moldova is an exception. Generally, it is a well balanced institution with an upward trend in the share of people aged over 60.

Table 1.

*Structure of ASEM teaching staff
age during 2008-2011*

Age	2008		2009		2010		2011	
	number	%	number	%	number	%	number	%
Teaching staff								
Total teaching staff	470	100	464	100	453	100	450	100
Up to 30 years	66	14,0	47	10,1	42	9,3	37	8,2
31 – 40 years	188	40,0	198	42,7	196	43,3	197	43,8
41 – 50 years	77	16,4	79	17,0	72	15,9	69	15,3
51 – 60 years	88	18,7	82	17,7	83	18,3	79	17,6
Over 60 years	51	10,9	58	12,5	60	13,2	68	15,1

Figure 3 shows the structure of AESM teaching staff in 2011 by age, which we appreciate, as mentioned above as a balanced one. The share of “middle age” generation, as called above, i.e. aged between 31 and 60 years is 76.7%. At the same time, it should be mentioned that in recent years the age structure of AESM teachers recorded a process of aging, though not so pronounced. Thus, if the share of young teachers fell from 14.0% in 2008 to 8.2% in 2011, the share of teachers aged over 60 years increased in the same period from 10.9% to 15.1%. The situation is quite critical at the faculty of “Cybernetics, Statistics and Economic Informatics”, where the aging of teaching staff is most pronounced. Thus, if the share of teachers aged over 60 years is 39.4%, the share of teachers under 30 years marks a level of only 1.6%. In the same context we can mention that in some chairs of this faculty the average age is 59 years.

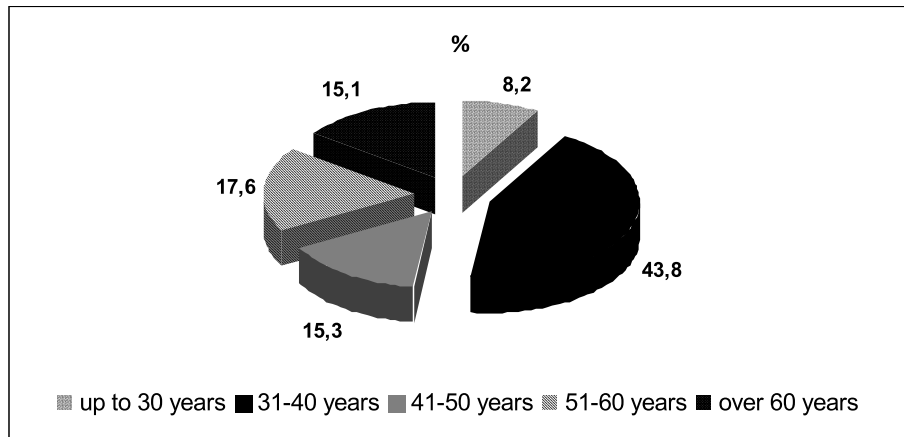


Figure 3. Teaching staff by age in 2011, ASEM.

Referring to the professor status, it is one that does not meet the requirements and performance. In Moldova, education must become de facto a priority with all the consequences arising from the primacy of education: teachers' life quality, sufficient funding of university research, etc.

The concept of quality in education was taken from the productive sector, where it has been "exploited" over several years. The literature contains numerous definitions of quality in general and the quality of education in particular, fact that denotes the multi aspectuality of this term. In the present study our aim was not to analyze these definitions, we refer to everything that is done at national and institutional levels to achieve the main goal: to train highly qualified professionals in a specific field, able to meet the requirements of the labor market.

In higher education, the term "quality assurance" refers to all policies, processes and actions designed to ensure that the institution, programs and qualifications meet and maintain specific standards related to education, financial support and infrastructure. So quality assurance offers higher education institutions and stakeholders a guarantee that the quality level is achieved. Quality assurance also has the function to continuously improve the education system.

The quality strategies of university education can be structured into two dimensions: *external dimension*, which provides: 1) final product

quality assurance - the specialist with a university degree - able to integrate into the labor market; 2) contribution to the sustainable development of society, implementing the fundamental and applied university research; and *internal dimension*, which in turn provides: 1) assurance of internal processes quality aimed at the ends of the external dimension; 2) implementation of a self-assessment system of the quality of internal processes (educational process, strategic governance, operational management, etc.).

The main problem that arises with quality is related to its evaluation, i.e. determining some indicators that would allow us judge for or against the quality assessment of studies or determine which university has more qualitative studies. In this regard, discussions are endless. We could highlight the implementation of quality systems. Thus, AESM has implemented quality assurance mechanisms aimed at *increasing the efficiency of the educational process* and forming a personality and a professional, able to meet the current and future demands of the local and international labor market. For this purpose was developed and implemented a Quality Management System (QMS) based on the following values: justice and equity, competition, professionalism, respect and tolerance, kindness, responsibility, transparency, confidentiality. The QMS at AESM is focused on customer satisfaction by providing institutional competence, in order to produce competitive and scientific services through effective and efficient educational processes. Since March 2009, the INTEGRATED MANAGEMENT SYSTEM of AESM is certified in accordance with the International Standard ISO 9001:2008. Responsible for implementing the quality policies and objectives of AESM, quality assurance and provision of educational services and professional retraining for teachers is the Department of Education, Curriculum Development and Quality Management (DSCDQM).

The mission of DSCDQM: *ensuring qualified professional education to the beneficiaries of educational services provided by AESM through an efficient management of the teaching process.*

The main objectives set for the mission accomplishment of DSCDQM are:

- a. Establishing and ensuring the functioning of an institutional mechanism of quality management;
- b. Systematic monitoring and evaluation of quality in education;

- c. Developing pedagogical skills of teaching staff;
- d. Developing and improving the academic curriculum of AESM;
- e. Training and keeping students' records;
- f. Implementing educational marketing instruments;
- g. Promoting new educational technologies in teaching, learning and assessment.

The AESM Senate decided on October 27th, 2004 to organize the mandatory annual assessments of teaching quality. **Assessment objectives:** to determine, in terms of training beneficiaries (students), the quality of teaching, taking into account the following factors: *preparation and organization; interest and intellectual stimulation; presentation and communication skills; knowledge of materials; teacher-student interaction; evaluation and retroaction; overall assessment.* **Assessment method:** written anonymous questionnaires. **Means of assessment:** standardized questionnaire. Survey results are discussed within the chairs and, if necessary, certain measures are taken. Every year all faculties perform a survey aimed at determining student satisfaction regarding the conditions and services of ASEM.

The same time, this survey is just an instrument for evaluating the quality from students' point of view and reflects the extent to which they perceive quality (teachers' professionalism, quality and number of classrooms, accommodation, quality of information services, etc.).

Another very important point of view, worth to be taken into account in assessing the quality of training, we consider, is the opinion of graduates and employers. From their perspective, quality dimensions are related graduates' qualifications and competences. To this end, we performed a survey to set up a real picture of the professional quality training for both, higher education graduates, employers and for those who are concerned with the labor market problem in the Republic of Moldova. Survey period: April 16th – October 17th, 2011, Total people surveyed: 68 graduates of AESM during 2004-2008.

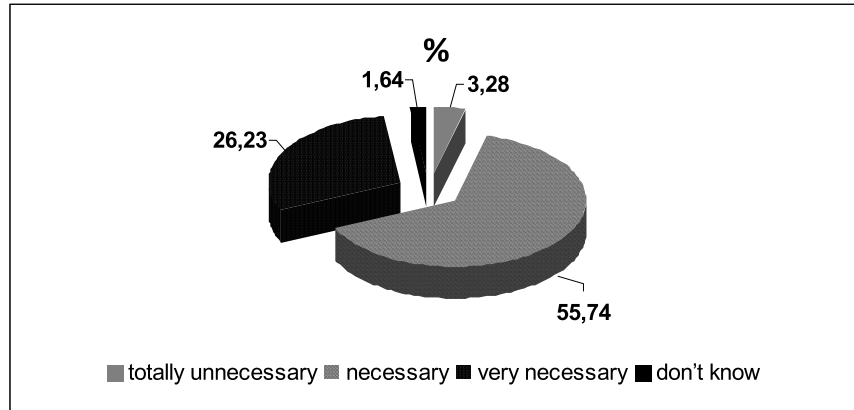


Figure 4. How necessary are the knowledge and skills acquired during the studies?

Satisfactory is the fact that almost 82% of graduates, who responded to the questionnaire, consider the knowledge acquired during their studies as “necessary” and “very necessary” at their current workplace. Simultaneously, 73% of respondents mentioned that they had their first job while being a student.

During the same period were also interviewed 45 employers to see whether they are satisfied with the competences of their employees, graduates of AESM.

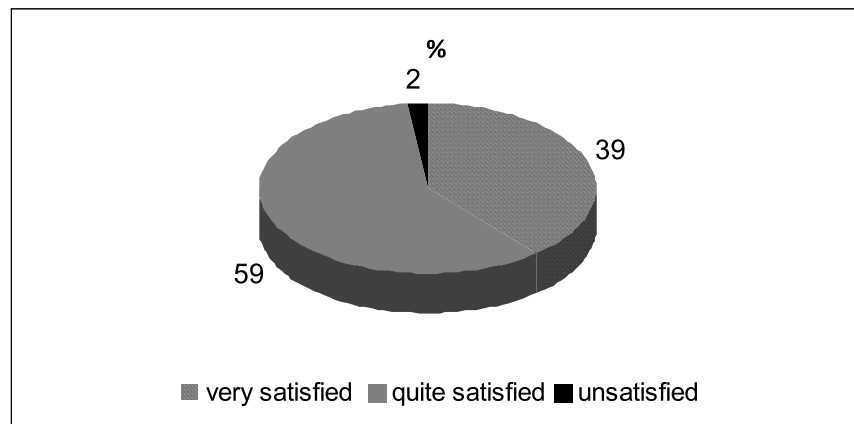


Figure 5. Respondents' answer to question “How satisfied are you with the professional training of your employees, graduates of AESM?”

The survey results show that 39% of respondents consider the professional training of AESM graduates very high, 59% have an average satisfaction in this respect, denoting some gaps in professional training. All employers who were willing to answer the questionnaire believe that the knowledge and skills acquired by graduates of AESM during their studies match the job requirements: 32% to a very large extent, 68% - to a medium extent.

So, we can state that the development and implementation of an efficient quality system in higher education, where specialized fields are directly correlated with the real and dynamic labor market requirements is a successful scenario for universities to contribute to the human capital development.

In recent decades employability of graduates has become a widely spread goal of quality assurance agencies, being in the process of introducing or reviewing the indicators designed to evaluate universities from this perspective. Thus, quality in higher education, along with dimensions related to teaching and research, facilities and equipment, refers to the degree of compatibility between labor market needs and graduates' training. It is considered one of the most important output indicators of a university performance.

Universities still remain in search of the most successful formula for ensuring the quality of graduates' training. It is a complex and continuous process. Transition to a knowledge-based economy requires permanent changes in the economy and the labor market – from the growing importance of new technologies, changes in work patterns, to phenomena associated with aging of labor force. We can not ignore the fact that the development of the knowledge-based economy implies an increased share of jobs that require middle and high education training and drastic reduction of jobs that require reduced training (Bajan et al., 2004). Today, higher education, due to its links with research and innovation, plays a crucial role in providing highly skilled human capital.

In this context and in order to ensure the highest possible quality in training professionals, we consider necessary the following measures:

- Create an independent Moldovan organization in higher education quality assurance;

- Promote among students and teaching staff the “quality culture”, focusing not on detecting the nonconformities and their solution, but *preventing* them;
- Involve the employers and other stakeholders, though difficult to fulfill at the moment, in the elaboration and implementation of study programs;
- Higher education institutions must have a clear vision of the future, so that to meet the demand for education services and anticipate the changes that may occur in the labor market, keeping in touch with all the partners.

Bibliography

1. Bratianu, C., Smith, S. (Eds.), 2004, *Guide to quality in higher education*. CALISRO project. New York: University Press.
2. Cabac, V., 2006, *The quality of higher education in the academic community vision*. Case Study. State University "A. Russo" Balti. Chisinau: Institute for Public Policy.
3. Gutu, A., 2012, *Universitas Europaea: Sapientia et Virtus*. ULIM at 20 years, Chisinau.
4. Miroiu, A. (coordinator), 2007, *Quality assurance policies in higher education in Romania*, study, Bucharest.
5. Todorescu, L., *Quality in higher education - opportunity and importance* AGIR Bulletin no. 1-2/2009, April-September, pp. 219-225.
6. www.statistica.md.