

MOLDOVA IN THE ERA OF INTERNATIONALIZATION: CHALLENGES AND REFORM STRATEGIES

*Assist PhD candidate ELENA MANDAJI
Cahul State University "Bogdan Petriceicu Haşdeu", Republic of Moldova*

ABSTRACT: *This article examines the process of internationalization of higher education in the republic of moldova, focusing on the challenges and reform strategies, adopted by educational institutions. In the context of integration into the european higher education area, moldova faces challenges related to adapting to international standards, modernizing the curriculum and creating international academic partnerships. The article explores the solutions and policies implemented to increase the competitiveness of moldovan universities on the global stage, emphasizing the importance of international collaboration and innovation in education.*

Keywords: reform; internationalization; higher education; Rpublic of Moldova; International;

Introduction

The importance of higher education is rapidly increasing. Many view education as a strategic asset and a driving force in society, determining its ability to respond to change and ensuring its survival and prosperity in the context of globalization. Currently, there is a sharp rise in global demand for higher education, presenting universities with challenges as they strive to achieve their strategic goals.

The new global strategy observed in recent decades defines two main directions: the internationalization of higher education and the enhancement of its quality. These goals align with the demands of the global labor market and the liberalization of higher education. Reduced government funding for higher education and the shift toward finding alternative funding sources have led to local, regional, and global competition for funding and for increasing student enrollment. Success in the international education market depends on the global scope of academic programs, the option of instruction in foreign languages, and participation in international research and educational systems.

It is worth noting that there are currently various definitions of the concept of "internationalization of education" based on the Bologna Declaration (1999) and the works of several authors.

Two opposing viewpoints are most commonly presented. The first, which is generally accepted by higher education institutions, defines the internationalization of higher education as a broad

range of international research and educational activities, as well as the phenomenon of academic mobility. The second viewpoint, supported by proponents of the globalization of higher education, frames internationalization as the international trade of educational services. In light of the above, it is necessary to clarify the terms "internationalization" and "globalization", which can often be used interchangeably in practice.

There are studies in which the authors differentiate between these concepts. For instance, Knight (2001) considers internationalization to be a response, catalyst, and foundation of globalization. According to Scott (1998, p. 112), the internationalization of higher education is a reaction to the globalization of the labor market. It is generally accepted that globalization, which began in the economy, is now spreading to all areas of activity, including research and education.

However, knowledge remains an international asset. The number of international research collaborations continues to increase. Most universities acknowledge that international experience is a central element of education for 21st-century students.

Research methods

During the process of researching and drafting the article, it was applied a set of principles and guidelines for conducting investigations, utilized various tools for data collection and analysis, and incorporated theoretical studies by experts from both Moldova and abroad.

The institutional method enabled to analyze the researched issue by examining the roles and activities of entities such as higher education institutions, state bodies, governments, and others.

The historical method provided a foundation for studying the internationalization of higher education in the Republic of Moldova within the context of its historical evolution, allowing to highlight the connections between the past, present, and future.

The behaviorist and structural-functional methods facilitated the examination of the responses and actions of the government, ministries, universities, and society regarding the internationalization of higher education in the Republic of Moldova, both domestically and internationally.

Results

At the national level, considerable efforts are being made to promote the internationalization process. Since 1999, Moldovan universities have engaged with internationalization within the framework of the Bologna Process. However, the recognition of internationalization as a necessity for broader and more strategic perspectives came later. Moldovan universities still face challenges in thinking about, understanding, and presenting themselves as integral to the internationalization process. In this context, it is essential to address the issue of encouraging and stimulating initiatives aimed at enhancing the competitiveness of Moldovan universities, particularly in European Union markets, where internationalization is seen as a crucial prerequisite for success.

As it was noted, the small states like the Republic of Moldova view internationalization as a challenge. After joining the Bologna Process, higher education institutions in Moldova have actively engaged with the internationalization process [Cornea V., 2019]. Recognizing the significance of internationalization, these institutions have devoted ample space in their strategic and development documents to the internationalization process and its related objectives. Furthermore, at the initiative of the universities, specific documents and guidelines have been created to enhance the internationalization of all aspects of higher education activities.

Experts consider the recent transformations in

higher education institutions to be revolutionary. Consequently, a primary objective of modern higher education institutions, alongside their educational and scientific activities, has been and continues to be their contribution to the economic development of a knowledge-based society. The reduction in state funding has prompted universities to adopt market-oriented approaches, which is evident in the increased number of foreign students attracted, participation as partners in international research projects [Cornea V., 2015], and engagement in inter-university teaching activities [Cornea V., 2017] in pursuit of additional funding. In light of these changes, international education is now regarded as a commodity, yet it is viewed as a privilege rather than a public responsibility.

In today's world, where universities are perceived as companies compelled to compete in the educational services market, the university's image holds significant importance. This image is defined as the public perception of the institution, shaped by personal interactions with the educational organization and influenced by media representation. The university's image is largely determined by its relationships with various target audience groups: the society at large, students as consumers of educational services, and the industry, which expects universities to provide knowledge from both commercial and governmental perspectives while demanding greater economic independence.

As geographical boundaries in higher education diminish and academic exchanges between countries increase, the international image of a university becomes particularly significant. The development of this international image is seen as a highly complex process, influenced by various factors including the university's level of integration into the global educational landscape, the quality of education offered, the presence of advanced scientific research, and the state of infrastructure development, among others [European Commission, 2013].

The primary strategies for establishing a positive image of the university in the international educational landscape include:

- Building long-term, mutually beneficial relationships with foreign educational institutions, as well as with international organizations, foundations, and non-profit entities.

- Developing a robust academic mobility system for faculty, students, and administrative staff within the higher education institution.
- Increasing efforts to process applications for international projects and grants.
- Expanding and enhancing the institution's international research and innovation activities.
- Sustaining cooperation with higher education institutions from other countries to create international collaborative scientific and educational structures.
- Developing joint study programs that offer dual diplomas, which serve as a key strategy for enhancing the competitiveness of the higher education institution in the educational services market.
- Promoting postgraduate education for international students, along with short-term programs and summer schools, and providing opportunities for internships [Naletova I., 2009].

Alongside internationalization, the issue of the quality of higher education has emerged. No country can ensure a civilized level of progress and existence, nor maintain its political and economic independence, without an effective system of higher education and organized scientific research. Consequently, all nations have a vested interest in developing adequate national systems of higher education. However, global economic transformations are giving rise to new international connections within the higher education system and creating a direct dependence on worldwide trends. In the 21st century, alongside the development of higher education systems at the national level, distinct global trends have become evident across many countries. These trends include an increase in the number of students, greater openness in education, rising costs and expenditures for higher education, a growing number of higher education staff, the advancement of distance learning, an increase in the average age of students, the increasing importance of the English language, and the expansion of quality control systems [Zapriagaev, et. al., 2007, p. 277].

The numerous transformations and changes in the higher education system's operations have necessitated a thorough examination of quality issues within this field. The need for comparability among educational programs, levels of education, and qualifications, along with

increased international student mobility, has prompted the development of mutual recognition processes for both educational credentials and trust in educational systems. The accreditation system, which is based on quality criteria for various aspects of university operations, is recognized as a valuable tool for comparing educational programs. Although there are no universally accepted criteria and methods for assessing education quality in higher education, discussions surrounding the concept of quality have become paramount in the realm of educational services.

The quality of higher education in a country, along with its assessment and monitoring, is not only vital for its socio-economic well-being but also serves as a key determinant of the international standing of that higher education system. The establishment of quality assurance systems is becoming increasingly important, not only for overseeing the quality of higher education domestically but also for delivering higher education services at an international level. This is why the number of institutions dedicated to quality assurance and accreditation in higher education has increased significantly over the past few decades. However, in many cases, the existing national capacity for quality assurance is only applied to the services provided by the country's own educational institutions.

It should be noted that for many years the Republic of Moldova has been reforming its higher education in order to integrate into the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). But to integrate into the EHEA, Moldova had to establish a comprehensive legal and political framework. This framework includes international treaties and agreements, alongside specific national legislation, all crafted to align Moldova's higher education system with European standards. As part of these efforts, Moldova adopted and revised several national laws and regulations. The Education Code, introduced in 2014, acts as the core legislation, guiding Moldova's educational system. The Ministry of Education and Research of the Republic of Moldova implemented a fresh approach to higher education, aimed at modernizing the system in the context of European integration, adhering to Bologna Process principles. The Education Code seeks to establish a new educational doctrine prioritizing quality education for all and minimizing political influence in education. According to the Code, the

primary goals of higher education are to:

- Create, preserve, and share knowledge at an advanced level;
- Develop highly skilled specialists who are competitive in both national and global job markets;
- Provide opportunities for lifelong learning;
- Preserve, enhance, and promote national cultural and historical values within a culturally diverse context [Education Code of the Republic of Moldova, 2014].

The implementation of the Education Code led to the creation of multiple regulatory frameworks aimed at ensuring the effective operation and high standards of higher education.

As a key aspect of Moldova's broader European integration, the internationalization process serves as a vital strategic pathway for the nation's political, economic, and social development. In this framework, universities play an essential role in educating and developing human capital, promoting European values and principles, and facilitating international partnerships and collaborations [Cornea & Mandaji, 2021].

In the context of European integration, higher education institutions place strong emphasis on establishing international collaborations to globalize teaching and research, identifying this as a central priority for the local education system. To outline the role of higher education institutions in the European integration process, we can consider the following key aspects:

- Contributions in academia and research.
- Updating and advancing the educational system.
- Advancing European values and principles.
- Establishing global partnerships.

While having a positive impact, it is also important to acknowledge the challenges that higher education institutions in the Republic of Moldova encounter during the internationalization process:

1. Underdeveloped educational infrastructure - universities struggle to upgrade their infrastructure to align with the requirements of a globally competitive education system.
2. Insufficient financial resources - higher education institutions encounter challenges in securing the necessary funding for academic mobility programs, international research initiatives, and the establishment of global partnerships.

3. Requirement to align curriculum with international standards – modifying and updating study programs to comply with international standards can, at times, hinder the pace of the internationalization process.

4. Inexperience in managing international partnerships – certain institutions may struggle with negotiating and overseeing international agreements, resulting in limited integration into global academic networks.

5. Language barrier – the primary language of instruction in Moldovan universities poses a challenge in attracting international students and faculty, as well as in facilitating joint programs with institutions from other countries.

6. Challenges in diploma recognition – the international recognition of degrees awarded by Moldovan universities can hinder graduates' integration into the global labor market.

7. Limited academic mobility – the small number of faculty and students able to engage in international mobility programs presents a barrier to diversifying academic and cultural experiences.

8. The highly adverse demographic trends of the past decade, coupled with significant emigration and the broad availability of various programs, grants, and international scholarships, have contributed to the challenges faced. However, another crucial factor to consider is that recent governments have largely resisted the expansion of higher education in the Republic of Moldova.

Conclusion

Overall, it can be concluded that, despite certain costs, internationalization is becoming a necessary and vital resource for the development of higher education institutions, enhancing the quality of educational activities and scientific research.

Consequently, a modern university's participation in the internationalization of education and efforts to improve quality are not only prerequisites for innovative development but also essential for survival in a rapidly changing socio-economic landscape. The future prospects of contemporary Moldovan universities in the educational services market largely depend on how effectively they engage with global processes of internationalization. A successful international strategy for a regional university serves as a resource for boosting its competitiveness, an

additional source of funding, and a means of enhancing its prestige both nationally and internationally.

At present, the main tool for promoting the internationalization of higher education in the Republic of Moldova and enhancing international mobility is the European Union's Erasmus+ Program, which was initiated in 2014.

In the 21st century, the advancement of higher education has become a critical priority for all modern nations. Education, especially higher education, not only highlights its social importance but also acts as a vital foundation for a country's political and economic development. This need is not merely domestic; it is also an essential condition for bolstering a nation's standing on the global stage. A well-educated workforce capable of acquiring new knowledge is a key driver of social and economic advancement. In an increasingly interconnected and rapidly evolving world, investing in higher education is no longer an option but a strategic imperative for every country. The capacity to train specialists who can tackle complex global challenges is

crucial for addressing contemporary issues.

Higher education in the Republic of Moldova encounters numerous challenges and obstacles on its path to development, yet it also holds significant educational potential.

Its primary objective in the contemporary era is to create and implement a new model of internationalization that aligns with global trends and prioritizes the enhancement of educational service quality.

This new internationalization model focuses on the growing consumer demand and leverages the existing infrastructure of both public and private higher education institutions in Moldova. In a globalized and fast-changing environment, these institutions must adopt effective competitive strategies to meet the demands of an increasingly broad global market.

It is essential for the Republic of Moldova to continue its reforms and investments in higher education to ensure a prosperous and sustainable future, where an educated and innovative youth will be the driving force of a modern and equitable society.

References

1. Annex to the order of the Ministry of Education no. 726 from 20.09.2010. *The Regulation for the organization of studies in higher education based on the National System of Study Credits*. Available at: https://view.officeapps.live.com/op/view.aspx?src=https%3A%2F%2Fmecc.gov.md%2Fsites%2Fdefault%2Ffiles%2Fregulament_de_organizare_a_studiilor_in_invatamant_ul_superior_in_baza_sncs.doc&wdOrigin=BROWSELINK (accessed September 12, 2024).
2. Knight, J. (2001). *Issues and Trends in Internationalization: A Comparative Perspective. A New World of Knowledge: Canadian Universities and Globalization*. Bond S., Lemasson J.-P. (eds.). Ottawa: International Development Research Center.
3. Cornea, V. (2015) *The innovating triangle in teaching European Studies: trends, legal regulations, vocations*. Journal of Danubian Studies and Research, Vol 5, No 1, pp. 25-33.
4. Cornea, V. (2017) *Tenta ia Studiilor Europene în Republica Moldova*, Buletinul Științific al Universității de Stat „B. P. Hasdeu” din Cahul №. 1 (5), 2017, ISSN 2345-1858, p. 5-11. Available at: <https://jss.usch.md/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Buletin-St.-Sociale-15-2017-%D1%81%D1%82%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%BD%D0%B8%D1%86%D1%8B-%D1%83%D0%B4%D0%B0%D0%BB%D0%B5%D0%BD%D1%8B-5-11.pdf> (accessed on October 25, 2024).
5. Cornea, V. (2019) *The identity and legitimacy of the PhD in administrative sciences*. International Conference Contemporary Challenges in Administrative Law from an Interdisciplinary Perspective At: Bucharest, Volume: M. Elvira Méndez-Pinedo (ed.) Jakub Handrlica (ed.) Cătălin-Silviu Săraru (ed.) Practical Aspects Regarding the Role of Administrative Law in the Modernization of Public Administration, ADJURIS – International Academic Publisher, pp.112-123.
6. Cornea, S., Mandaji, E. (2021) *Particularities of The Internationalization Process of Higher Education in Regional Universities: The case of Cahul State University “B. P. Hasdeu”*. The Scientific Journal of Cahul State University "B. P. Hasdeu": Social Sciences, №. 2 (14), ISSN 2345-1858. Available at: https://ibn.idsi.md/sites/default/files/imag_file/22-30_11.pdf (accessed on October 24, 2024).

7. *Decision of the Government of the Republic of Moldova regarding the approval of the Education Development Strategy for the years 2014-2020* "Education – 2020", no. 944 from 14.11.2014. In: Official Gazette of the Republic of Moldova, no. 345-351, art. 1014. Available at: https://mecc.gov.md/sites/default/files/1_strategia_educatia-2020_3.pdf (accessed on September 23, 2024).
8. *Education Code of the Republic of Moldova*, no. 152 of 17.07.2014. In: Official Gazette of the Republic of Moldova, 2014, no. 319-324, art. 634. Available at: https://www.legis.md/cautare/getResults?doc_id=110112&lang=ro (accessed on September 20, 2024).
9. European Commission (2013). *European higher education in the world*. COM (2013) 499 final.
10. *Joint Declaration of the European Ministers of Education*, 19 June 1999. Bologna Secretariat, 1999.
11. *Order of the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Moldova regarding the approval and implementation of the Regulatory - framework regarding the organization and operation of the management bodies of higher education institutions in Moldova*, no. 10 from January 14, 2015. Available at: <https://mecc.gov.md/sites/default/files/conducere.pdf> (accessed on September 12, 2024).
12. Order of the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Moldova regarding the approval and implementation of the Framework Plan for higher studies (cycle I - Bachelor's, cycle II - Master's, integrated studies, cycle III - Doctorate), no. 1045 from October 29, 2015. Available at: https://mecc.gov.md/sites/default/files/ordinul_nr._1046_din_29.10.2015_regulamentum_de_organizare_a_studiilor_in_invatamintul_superior_in_baza_sistemului_national_de_credite_de_studiu.pdf (accessed on September 13, 2024).
13. Mandaji, E. (2023). *The power of knowledge: how politics influences universities, but education influences politics*. Scientific Journal of the Cahul State University „B. P. Hasdeu”: Social Science. Vol. XVII, No. 1, 2023, DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.8215700.
14. Naletova, I. (2009). *Modern sociocultural models of universities*, Socio and humanitarian problems of our time: Interuniversity scientific collection, Vol. 2. Tambov: Publishing House Pershina R. V. pp. 191-203.
15. Scott, P. (1998). *Massification, Internationalization and Globalization. The Globalization of Higher Education* / P. Scott (ed.). Buckingham: Society for Research into Higher Education/Open University Press. pp. 108–129.
16. The Bologna Process 2020 - *The European Higher Education Area in the new decade*, Communiqué of the Conference of European Ministers Responsible for Higher Education, Leuven and Louvain-la-Neuve, 28-29 April 2009. Available at: https://mecc.gov.md/sites/default/files/leuven_louvain-la-neuve_communique_april_2009.pdf (accessed on October 10, 2024)
17. Report, National Erasmus+ Office in Moldova, 2023. Available at: <https://erasmusplus.md/mobilitate-internationala-de-credite?year=all> (accessed on October 1, 2024).