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QFORTE

Fortifying higher education quality in Moldova.
No boundaries for quality



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Analysis of the current internal quality assurance systems at higher education institutions in the Republic of Moldova

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2 INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this country report is to provide a brief overview of the current external quality assurance (hereinafter: EQA) system and internal quality assurance (hereinafter: IQA) system with regards to the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (hereinafter: ESG) in the Republic of Moldova and to give suggestions to improve both IQA and EQA in the near future.

In the first part of the QFORTE project, in addition to meetings of project partners where clear expectations were identified, the project partners decided to organize a three-day workshop, in which the ESG and examples of different practices for developing EQA systems from Germany and Slovenia were presented and the advantages and differences of several accreditation systems were elaborated and explained in detail. The workshop ended with a discussion on the suitability of the individual EQA models presented for higher education in the Republic of Moldova.

In order to obtain as up-to-date information as possible and to identify the most appropriate path for future development, a survey was prepared for higher education institutions (hereinafter: HEIs), the Ministry of Education, Culture and Research of the Republic of Moldova - MECRRM (hereinafter: the Ministry) and the National Agency for Quality Assurance in Education and Research - ANACEC (hereinafter: the Agency). The sets of questions were prepared for the areas of general understanding of the concept of quality, transparency, legislative frameworks and mutual cooperation, design of new study programmes and areas, cooperation and information of stakeholders, and resource management.

The methodology of preparing the country report, therefore, consists of an overview of the existing legislative framework of the EQA system in Moldovan higher education, the scope and level of its implementation, and information collected and analyzed through completed questionnaires as well as organized events and discussions.

2.1 THE APPROACH TO DESIGN A COMPREHENSIVE EQA

“At the heart of all quality assurance activities are the twin purposes of accountability and enhancement. Taken together, these create trust in the HEI’s performance. A successfully implemented quality assurance system will provide information to assure the HEI and the public of the quality of the HEI’s activities (accountability) as well as provide advice and recommendations on how it might improve what it is doing (enhancement).”¹

The most widespread rationale of EQA in the European Higher Education Area (hereinafter: EHEA) today is a combination of the following purposes:

Enhancement: support the HEI in delivering good quality;

Accountability: assure the wider public, stakeholders and authorities that expected types and levels of quality are provided;

¹ https://enqa.eu/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/ESG_2015.pdf; p. 5

Transparency: information the wider public, stakeholders and authorities about the quality of HEIs and the educational programmes they offer.

The EHEA is based on values and principles that promote innovation in teaching, learning and research, promote active citizenship, critical thinking, etc. HEIs in the EHEA are expected and encouraged to carry out all three missions, being responsible for qualifying the human capital (education – the first mission), producing new knowledge (research – the second mission), and engaging with societal needs and market demands by linking the HEI's activity with its socio-economic context (the third mission).

Although EQA systems demonstrate a certain diversity and no blueprints for the design of an EQA system exist, the rationale of EQA is characterized by leading principles that can be generalized. The examples of good practice for the design of EQA processes, such as the ESG are based on the principles and core features which do not refer to the legal, cultural and political frameworks they are implemented in. Therefore, endeavors to design EQA processes must start with a good understanding of the framework conditions they shall be implemented in.

It is important to highlight that “[t]he ESG are a set of standards and guidelines for internal and external quality assurance in higher education. The ESG are not standards for quality, nor do they prescribe how the quality assurance processes are implemented, but they provide guidance, covering the areas which are vital for successful quality provision and learning environments in higher education. The ESG should be considered in a broader context that also includes qualifications frameworks, ECTS and the Diploma Supplement that also contribute to promoting the transparency and mutual trust in higher education in the EHEA.”²

Therefore, EQA in the Republic of Moldova needs to be built upon a concept of quality in higher education, a legally based governance structure, where IQA is a responsibility and accountability of the HEIs and EQA is combining regulatory and advisory function in higher education. Consequently, EQA, its structures, and processes must be based on the same values and principles as IQA. EQA and IQA must be interlinked to inform and support each other.

The following features are essential to be taken into account for designing EQA:

Clarity of purpose - clarifying and defining the purpose of EQA and the aims that a country wants to achieve with EQA is the indispensable first step of designing such a system;

Conceptual link to internal quality assurance based on shared principles – EQA and IQA are interrelated: both have common principles and concepts, while in many systems IQA is more comprehensive than EQA.

The four principles of the ESG are:

- Higher education institutions have primary responsibility for the quality of their provision and its assurance;
- Quality assurance responds to the diversity of higher education systems, institutions, programmes and students;
- Quality assurance supports the development of a quality culture;

² https://enqa.eu/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/ESG_2015.pdf; p. 6.

- Quality assurance takes into account the needs and expectations of students, all other stakeholders and society.

Clarity and appropriate allocation of responsibilities - a core question refers to the nature and position of the EQA agency. The more important regulatory functions of EQA are, the more appropriate it is to concentrate the core responsibilities within one body.

Explicit link to other tools/policies such as concept of quality in higher education, a legally based governance structure, IQA at the HEIs, EQA including regulatory functions, and monitoring of higher education.

The purpose of this report is to ensure a complementary approach of EQA in the Republic of Moldova to:

- identify and analyze existing core elements of EQA and IQA,
- agree on all-embracing principles for necessary changes,
- suggest the best possible transition model (from programme accreditation procedures to institutional accreditation and towards quality enhancement).

It should be recognized that the complementary approach is necessary (by all) to avoid duplication of effort.

Although there are many different definitions of quality, different ways of its implementation and use in a real environment, it is impossible to establish a uniform and simplified definition of quality, quality assurance and quality culture. In higher education, quality can represent different types of values, activities, requirements and expectations to different organizations, institutions and bodies. For some, meeting compliance requirements is quality. For others, quality means improving students' opportunities and lives, motivated and satisfied staff, stronger partnerships within and between institutions and organizations, transparent and open communication between stakeholders, enhanced and fruitful cooperation between partners, graduates ready for tomorrow's challenges, etc. They can be identified by different forms of implementation, but the European University Association has already encountered the same problem when trying to unify the definitions in the Quality Culture Project (in 2002 and extended by two more cycles in two years). It has become clear that it is impossible to reach agreement on the definitions of "quality" and "quality culture". For the purpose of this document, we highlight only the key elements that are important for distinguishing between individual definitions and stages of development of quality systems:

Quality control

The elements that define quality control are a primary focus on compliance with minimum standards and other requirements, EQA control and centralized state obligations, on providing check and cross-check of documents, data, plans etc., the use of corrective tools focused on detecting inconsistencies rather than enhancement, and a lack of trust.

Quality control is not aimed at monitoring and improving the IQA and EQA system, nor does it encourage cooperation between the two systems, but it is aimed at verifying compliance with (minimum) standards. In such systems, there is usually no mutual trust

and cooperation between different stakeholders, only individuals with specific tasks are involved, there is no room for development and innovation, there is little or no quality culture, which is a condition and "driving force" for self-initiative, change, innovation and progress. The characteristic of the quality control system can be equated with the criterion of success, such as obtaining accreditation or certification, classification and ranking of institutions according to externally prepared criteria. Action is focused on reporting within the requirements of the authorities.

Quality assurance and enhancement

The key elements of the established quality assurance and enhancement-oriented system are evident in the greater autonomy of higher education institutions, which have the ability to design, organize and implement educational, scientific, research, and artistic activities, formulate their own strategic goals and objectives, choose working methods and cooperate with both internal and external stakeholders.

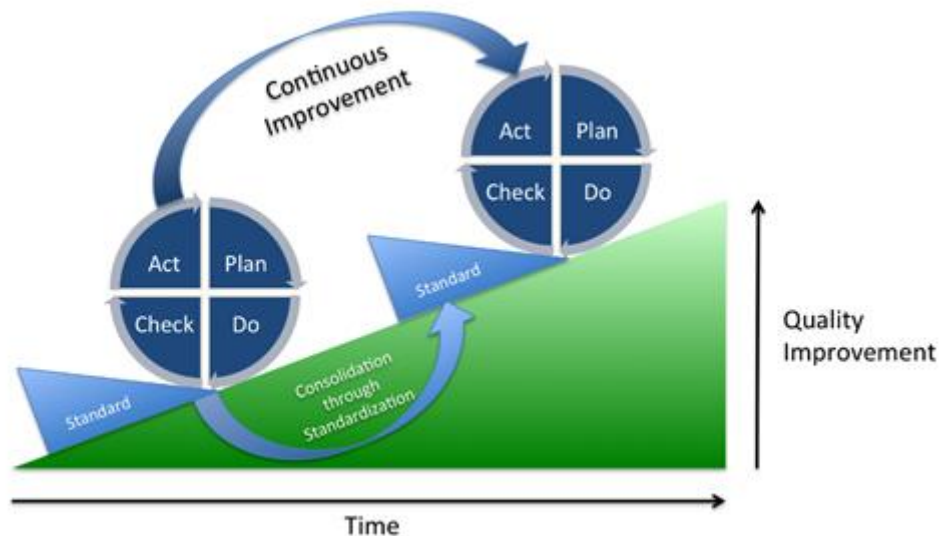
An important element is the prevailing internal motivation, the desire for continuous improvement and integration of IQA and EQA systems, based on the operation of an independent national quality agency (allows even more EQA systems to operate simultaneously), which acts as a facilitator between IQA and EQA rather than an inspectorate. An important aspect is international cooperation, a focus on teaching and learning, on students, although at the same time the satisfaction and involvement of all internal and external stakeholders is important. EQA principles take into account the specifics and particularities of disciplines, institutions and the way they are managed and governed. Mutual trust, transparency of operation, and cooperation are important to guarantee the development of HEIs according to their specifics and strategic orientations.

Quality culture

Quality culture is a set of individual and group values, senses and beliefs that guide individuals and organization towards everyday achievements and enhancement lead outputs. When talking about quality culture, we mean the conduct, the values, beliefs, motivation and the actions of individuals as well as of the entire organization. When embedded adequately, it means »doing it right also when no one is looking« (Henry Ford). A positive change in the quality of one's educational system is not possible without a simultaneous change in the quality culture of all involved. Building a quality culture means investing in the future and the results cannot show overnight, but rather over the years, depending on the level of the culture in one organization.

PDCA cycle

PDCA cycle as one of the most referenced and used traditional models of improvement associated with W. Edwards Deming is the backbone of the modern quality control and problem-solving systems. Plan (P), Do (D), Check (C), and Act (A) are offered as key milestones in the improvement processes, also in the higher education area. While **Plan**, **Do** and **Act** are the constant components of the model, the **Check** was redesigned/replaced with more quality assurance suitable **Reflect** (PDRA) or **Study** (PDSA).



*Continuous quality improvement with PDCA cycle (source: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/PDCA>)

The main purpose of the PDCA cycle is to organize internal quality assurance activities and measures to properly close the quality loop. While EQA and IQA may be interrelated, IQA is more of a comprehensive system that follows the model of continuous improvement. Therefore, the closed quality loop is an essential part of IQA and self-evaluation procedures and allows, if implemented according to the rules, standards and procedures, a valuable insight into organizations' IQA system, modifications, progress and their improvements. The PDCA cycle is a continuous four step model for carrying out change and therefore has no end. The cycle should be repeated again and again and involve all relevant stakeholders (internal and external). The procedure should be able to recognize an opportunity for improvement and plan the change (Plan). The second step is dedicated for testing of the suggested change (Do), the third step includes all relevant stakeholders and self-evaluation mechanisms in order to provide a review, analysis of the results and outcomes and identify the recommendations for improvement (Check/Reflect/Study). The final step is dedicated to taking action based on what we learned in previous steps. If the outcomes are not achieved, the steps need to be planned differently and the cycle needs to be repeated. If the outcomes are achieved, they need to be adequately incorporated and implemented in the process/system and used in planning new improvements - in the new PDCA cycle.

2.2 ACCOUNTABILITY VS. RESPONSIBILITY

Responsibility and accountability are two terms that are often considered synonymous and are used interchangeably. However, they actually have very distinct meanings. It is important to understand the differences between responsibility and accountability in order to assess the level of quality assurance evolution in the country.

The main difference between accountability and responsibility:

Accountability: HEI is accountable to assure the wider public, stakeholders and authorities that expected types and levels of quality are provided. That means that the provider is responsible and accountable for the results and answerable for their action.

Responsibility: HEI is responsible to follow the legislation and comply with relevant quality standards. Responsibility can be understood as a duty, obligation, or liability for which someone is held accountable.

It is very important to make a clear distinction between accountability and responsibility, which we will try to identify in the case of higher education in the Republic of Moldova. By analyzing the results of the survey, we will assess whether the quality assurance system is more focused on responsibility or also on accountability and which key elements to fully achieve the latter are still missing.

If an HEI is responsible for establishing a functional IQA system according to pre-described criteria but not held accountable for their enhancement, the level of engagement could be much lower and expectations significantly different than in the case where an HEI as an organization of people is also held accountable. Often the responsibility is linked to an individual task, goal, or result and distributed among several individuals, units or bodies, while accountability includes also the obligation of liability and the expectation of account-giving. In the case of quality assurance in higher education that often means a commitment to enhancement, strengthening the quality culture among all stakeholders, the adequate level of academic integrity and transparency, involvement of all relevant stakeholders, and much more.

The following analysis of the survey results will therefore focus especially on the level of accountability, the level of engagement and transparency, the involvement of all stakeholders in designing, testing and implementing changes to the EQA system, and on the level of the quality culture.

3 METHODOLOGY

The analysis of the IQA systems of participating HEIs and the role of the EQA system is based on the survey mentioned above. It is divided into several chapters, in which we focus on different aspects and stakeholders within quality assurance. We aimed to gather different perspectives on the same issue; therefore, the questions were dispersed among several groups of internal stakeholders of the HEIs (management, quality assurance unit, faculties, departments, student representatives, staff representatives). The study was sent to the 7 Moldovans partners within the QFORTE project in June 2021: Moldova State University (USM), Academy of Economic Studies Moldova (ASEM), Balti State University (USARB), Cahul State University (USC), Comrat State University (KDU), Academy of Music, Theatre and Fine Arts (AMTAP) and University of Political and Economic European Studies (USPEE). We received 6-7 filled out surveys, depending on the chapter. In chapter 4.1 we analyzed the answers from the HEIs' management and quality assurance unit, in chapter 4.2 we analyzed the answers from the HEIs' management, faculties/departments, and quality assurance unit, in chapter 4.3 we analyzed the answers from student representatives, in chapter 4.4. we analyzed the answers from staff representatives, and in chapter 4.5. we analyzed the answers from the HEIs' management, faculties/departments, quality assurance unit, the Agency, and the Ministry.

To get background information about the national context, we sent two different short surveys to the Agency and the Ministry.

Throughout the report, we compared the state of the Higher Education Area in Moldova to the state of the EHEA. The basis for this comparison is the ESG, as the common European framework. In Moldova, there are existing Guidelines for the external evaluation of higher education institutions, which were approved by ANACIP (now ANACEC) in 2016. These guidelines follow the ESG completely. Each standard has additional performance indicators and explains the required connection to the self-evaluation process and reference documents (e.g., Education Code, various regulations, and frameworks). Since the existing Guidelines have not yet been used in the institutional evaluation process and will undergo changes during the QFORTE project, we mention them only briefly in chapter 4.5.

Each chapter of the analysis is connected to one or more ESG. The content is, however, expanded beyond the strict interpretation of the respective standard when deemed necessary for the report. For example, despite the ESG standard 1.5 primarily focusing on the teaching staff, we aimed to gather information on other crucial groups of personnel as well, especially on technical and administrative staff. Therefore, the questions were answered by representatives of all groups of HEIs personnel.

4 ANALYSIS

4.1 QUALITY ASSURANCE POLICY AND IMPLEMENTATION

ESG 1.1: Institutions should have a policy for quality assurance that is made public and forms part of their strategic management. Internal stakeholders should develop and implement this policy through appropriate structures and processes, while involving external stakeholders.

While individual measures in quality assurance – such as surveys, reports, or feedback cycles – may be well-established and worthwhile on their own, they are always only means to an end. This is the basic idea formulated by standard 1.1 of the ESG. The crucial task of the HEI is to define these ends clearly and to lay out the way towards them through an institutional strategy as well as through a policy for quality assurance that elaborates how the individual mechanisms interact and how they help the institution in attaining its goals. The following chapter takes a look at how these processes currently work at the Moldovan higher education institutions that participate in the QFORTE project and where room for improvement can be detected.

Not all respondents outline clear objectives of their IQA system, although all mention some aspects related to the quality of their study programmes and the teaching and learning in them. However, the effectiveness of quality assurance measures can only be evaluated against such objectives. Hence, all institutions should develop an explicit quality assurance policy and define unambiguous goals that the quality assurance system has to achieve. Part one of the ESG should serve as a baseline for such a policy, as it mentions the areas to be covered and establishes some minimal requirements. It may, however, not be more than a baseline, as each institution's quality assurance policy has to consider the overall goals of the institution, its specific profile, organisation, and the given resources.

Once established, such a policy should in turn be periodically evaluated and revised to ensure that it coherently reflects the institution's strategy and that it takes into account relevant developments within the institution and in the broader higher education sector. Most HEIs currently do not report of a clear evaluation process of their quality assurance policy, while some explain that they have defined such a process at the university level. In these cases, the university management is mainly responsible, although the institutions stress that they also include other stakeholders, such as teaching staff, the administration, and representatives of employers, in the strategic planning. On the other hand, the participation of students, for whom the institutional strategy and quality assurance policy are immediately relevant, is not always mentioned and should be ensured. In order to assess the success of a policy, roughly half of respondents say that they have established formal indicators measuring its implementation. As this can provide a quantitative information base for further discussions about strategy and quality assurance policy, the remaining institutions could profit from introducing such formal indicators as well.

As has been mentioned, the quality assurance policy of an institution should manifest itself in structures and processes that constitute its internal quality assurance system. All responding HEIs have established such a system. They emphasise that it covers all areas

of activity in accordance with the ESG, national regulations, and their strategic plans, although the examples and explanations provided were not always clear.³

Regarding the general setup and understanding of this IQA system, a certain disparity between the institutions has to be noted. Some present it in a clear top-down way, inasmuch as the system is established and operates mainly at the university level and exercises some sort of control over lower levels (departments, study programmes), whose involvement is not very clear. Others do note that lower organisational units are included in the design and implementation of the quality assurance system, although mostly teachers are expressly mentioned as active participants in these processes. All HEIs stress that external stakeholders, mostly in the form of employers, participate in the IQA processes. On the other hand, a certain lack is visible when it comes to active participation of some internal stakeholders. In contrast to university management, teachers and administration, who take part in the discussions within the institution, students mainly appear as providers of information and feedback, and less so as active disputants. Moreover, non-academic staff is hardly mentioned at all, although their activities and capabilities are crucial for research and teaching to function adequately.

Regarding the tasks of the IQA system, all institutions emphasise the compliance with standards, which are mostly derived from national laws and regulations, which could be considered responsibility as defined in the introduction. There is a certain awareness of the fact that the system should also contribute to enhancing quality beyond these minimal standards, thereby realizing the institutions' accountability. However, the way in which such enhancement measures could be built up onto these standards and how quality enhancement would relate to merely ensuring a standard is not quite clear. The HEIs mention many different quality assurance mechanisms in place, some of which are considered in detail in the following chapters, but it appears that these are not really analyzed and evaluated in terms of their effectiveness and efficiency. This leads back to the need for a clear quality assurance policy and indicators for its success, which should serve as a basis for this analysis. We strongly emphasise the idea that it is important to pick the right tools, to use them for the right purposes and to regularly check if they are really effective.

In addition to the mechanisms that focus on individual points such as study programmes, at the university level a defined process of institutional self-evaluation is usually one of the cornerstones of a functioning quality assurance system. This process comprises the draft of a self-evaluation report that points out strengths and weaknesses, the identification of suitable measures to combat the weaknesses, and an institutionalised follow-up to ensure that the measures are indeed taken. While some of the responding institutions explicitly mention periodic institutional reports or internal audits, it is not clear whether they refer to a process of this kind. Judging from the replies, most of these reports rather seem to contain recent activities and achievements and to present them to a wider audience. In this context, one would not expect to openly discuss the institution's weaknesses. Regardless, establishing a process of institutional self-evaluation as described here would be a crucial step on the way to institutional accreditation.

Currently, Moldovan HEIs have only been subject to EQA in the form of programme accreditation, which only marginally relates to the IQA mechanisms of an institution, particularly those that are not directly concerned with degree programmes. This may

³ Some of these areas are covered in more detail in the following chapters of this report, for instance the design of study programmes, teaching, and staff management.

explain why large differences between the IQA systems of the responding institutions can be observed. Moreover, it may contribute to the fact that all HEIs say that their own system is fit for purpose, despite these differences and despite the room for improvement which has been identified. Beyond the fulfilment of legal standards, there seems to be only a small degree of coordination and exchange of good practices between the different HEIs. The institutions heavily stress their responsibility and their compliance with rules and regulations and put considerably less stress on their accountability for quality enhancement beyond these standards. In the same vein, the existing quality assurance mechanisms are not yet consistently evaluated to ensure that they are capable of fulfilling the task of continuous improvement.

4.2 QUALITY ASSURANCE OF STUDY PROGRAMMES

Study programmes are cornerstones of the educational mission of each HEI. Therefore, it is of utmost importance to develop internal structures and processes that are able to guarantee

The material aspect includes various elements such as well-structured curricula or up-to-date content. However, the core idea is that an institution should define explicit learning outcomes for each programme – based on the institution’s overall strategy – and then strive to design the programme in such a way that the students achieve these learning outcomes. This is where the procedural aspect comes into play. Establishing suitable processes and involving all stakeholders in these serves the purpose to ensure that the objectives reflect societal needs and that they are reasonably implemented in the programme. The following chapter aims at analysing the state of play with regards to these principles at Moldovan HEIs.

The design of new programmes

ESG 1.2: Institutions should have processes for the design and approval of their programmes. The programmes should be designed so that they meet the objectives set for them, including the intended learning outcomes. The qualification resulting from a programme should be clearly specified and communicated, and refer to the correct level of the national qualifications framework for higher education and, consequently, to the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area.

To start with, most of the HEIs report that they have established a formal procedure of initiating a new study programme that typically involves a concept provided by a working group, and an opportunity analysis based on competing programmes, the current labour market situation, available resources and similar things that have to be considered. This process is mostly located at the department level, while the faculty and HEI management level (for instance through the faculty council and the senate) apparently only participate through the official decision-making processes that are necessary to start a study programme. It remains unclear whether this really means that faculty and university level are not involved at all in the preparation process or whether this only reflects the official formalised procedure. In any case, as the offer of study programmes should result from

the institution's overall strategy, it would only be logical for the higher levels to be involved in the planning from early on.

All respondents say that dedicated quality assurance units also participate in the process to design a new study programme, although in different roles. Sometimes they are only meant to check the compliance of the proposed degree programme with current (national and institutional) rules and regulations, in other cases their tasks are further reaching. One institution explicitly mentions that their quality assurance unit is responsible for assessing how the study programme would relate to existing programmes. Others say that it should endorse the new programme based on a self-assessment report, although the nature of this report is not made clear.

The participation of two other groups suggests room for improvement: In some cases, it appears as if only full professors take an active part in the initiation of a new degree programme, but not other teaching staff, even though they will likely be involved in the resulting teaching (and possibly research) activities. This is expressly mentioned by one institution as room for improvement. Furthermore, while all respondents stress that students participate in this process, they mostly only mention surveys as concrete instruments of this participation. It remains unclear whether this refers to specific surveys in the framework of the development of a new study programme or, more likely, only to general student satisfaction surveys. Besides surveys, it could prove useful to have students take part more actively when designing a new degree programme to ensure that it adequately reflects their needs.

Furthermore, most HEIs say that employers as external stakeholders are given room to voice their opinion in the design process of a new study programme. This may be part of the labour market analysis mentioned above or serve to determine necessary and useful learning outcomes.

Monitoring of existing programmes

ESG 1.9: Institutions should monitor and periodically review their programmes to ensure that they achieve the objectives set for them and respond to the needs of students and society. These reviews should lead to continuous improvement of the programme. Any action planned or taken as a result should be communicated to all those concerned.

In all institutions, there appear to be regular curriculum revision processes in place every five years, in which internal and external stakeholders participate. On a smaller scale, there are regular discussions in the institutions at various levels, for instance in department and faculty meetings. However, only one institution reports of a formalised smaller revision process each year, in which teaching staff, students, and external stakeholders are involved. It can be considered a good practice to dispose of such a small-scale process, so that the institution is able to quickly react either to a change in external needs or to changes regarding its own resources or teaching staff. While informal discussions within the institution, particularly within the teaching staff, also contribute to constant development, establishing such procedures moreover ensures that the voices of all stakeholders are continuously heard. Moreover, it is crucial to consistently inform all participating stakeholders about the planned actions to close the feedback loops and to assure them that their input is taken seriously.

Concerning the issue of external stakeholders, most institutions strikingly only expressly mention that employers participate in the creation and development of degree programmes and only some also refer to their graduates, which they involve through surveys. The latter should consequently be involved as they have most useful knowledge about a programme's learning outcomes and their relations to the needs of the labour market. Their feedback can be gathered through surveys and tracer studies, but also by directly including them in committees or more informal discussion rounds in the framework of curriculum revision processes.

Moreover, it is not always clear which employers participate, how they are chosen by the institution and in which way exactly they are able to voice their opinions. Establishing a clear process in this regard should be an important goal concerning the improvement of IQA structures. This is all the more important as, generally speaking, the external stakeholders seem to be eager to help and no significant conflicts occur between them and the HEIs.

As mentioned above, the crucial focus of monitoring systems for degree programmes has to lie on how well they achieve the objectives that the institution has set for them. Almost all of the responding higher education institutions claim that they systematically monitor if the students reach the programmes' learning outcomes. In this, they mostly refer to the examinations for individual courses. On a higher level, only some explain that in the processes for the design and improvement of the programmes, they evaluate how the individual courses contribute to the overall learning outcomes of the programme. However, this has to be considered the central aspect of all curricular revisions. In lack of a clear picture, the institutions can only be urged to strengthen their attention on this. In principle, study programmes should be designed by formulating clear objectives based on the overall institutional strategy and in turn by developing a curriculum that contributes to these objectives as good as possible, given the available human and material resources.

At the level of teaching and learning in the individual courses, all institutions agree that the teachers decide on the teaching and learning methods that are employed in individual courses, although there are sometimes recommendations (for instance to include some interactive methods) at the university or faculty level. Furthermore, the methods need to be appropriate for achieving the learning outcomes of a course and thus, in sum, of the entire programme. Students' participation in determining the teaching and learning methods of a course is rather indirect: They can give feedback directly in class or through the formal mechanism of satisfaction surveys and on this basis, the teachers may change their methods in the next semester.

While it is generally reasonable to give the teaching staff considerable freedom in deciding on teaching methods, higher education institutions are responsible to realise student-centred teaching and learning. To this end, didactic guidelines for designing courses and support mechanisms for choosing and implementing adequate teaching methods are necessary. Such guidelines are mentioned for some of the responding higher education institutions, but should be elaborated for the remaining ones as well. Moreover, the majority of respondents report that they either directly offer workshops and trainings on didactic issues, recent technological developments related to teaching and similar topics or enable their teachers to visit such courses elsewhere. However, not all apparently offer their teachers this opportunity, which is highly relevant for ensuring the quality of teaching and which therefore should be ensured through suitable measures.

4.3 STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVE

Policy for Quality Assurance

ESG 1.1: Institutions should have a policy for quality assurance that is made public and forms part of their strategic management. Internal stakeholders should develop and implement this policy through appropriate structures and processes, while involving external stakeholders

Students as a central group of internal stakeholders are part of the development of a quality culture at higher education institutions. Therefore, they have to be included equally in the IQA and at the same time should assume responsibility for quality and engage in quality assurance processes.

According to the survey, all HEIs include their students at the management level, although it is not clear if the students are included at the other levels as well (e.g. departments and faculties). They feel the cooperation with the students is very good, with one exception claiming that student cooperation is not really visible in daily operations. The participation of students in the improvement of faculty activities happens mostly through various surveys, though it was mentioned by one student representative and one HEI that they organise special working groups when they are planning to revise their study programmes. The HEIs are generally aware of the benefits of including the students in these processes and therefore stress to take negative comments seriously and to discuss them at the official meetings.

Student-centred learning

ESG 1.3: Institutions should ensure that the programmes are delivered in a way that encourages students to take an active role in creating the learning process, and that the assessment of students reflects this approach.

According to the answers, HEIs in Moldova are actively implementing student-centred learning via various methods such as interactive teaching methods, individual case studies, promoting continuing dialogue between student and teacher, offering broad choices of elective courses in their curricula, etc. The answers encompass a varying degree of awareness of the importance of students' active role in creating the learning process and of the individuality and diversity of students and their needs. Comparing HEIs' answers to student representatives', we can see that the perception of student-centred learning is quite diverse; however, all answers contain some degree of allowing more independence to students. The students are familiar with the learning outcomes of their study programmes and courses and mostly have an option to monitor the achievement of the outcomes. There is a mention of occasional difficulties with some teachers, which is attributed to their age and consequent hesitance of embracing a more equal role in the learning and teaching process. But overall, students feel their individual interests are acknowledged and developed during the study.

When discussing students' individual needs and diversity, we should not forget about the inclusion of students with special needs and physical disabilities. According to the HEIs, they either do not have such students, or they include them equally in the study process by providing them with special adaptations according to students' needs. Student

representatives confirm that specific needs of different groups of students (e.g., students with physical disabilities, students with special needs, students with children) are taken into account, though the answers reveal that they wish to have more knowledge about the inclusion and proper adaptations for these students in order to help them better.

Learning resources and students' support

ESG 1.6: Institutions should have appropriate funding for learning and teaching activities and ensure that adequate and readily accessible learning resources and student support are provided.

According to the ESG, institutions should provide a range of resources to assist student learning, thereby ensuring a good higher education experience. These resources can vary from physical resources such as libraries, study facilities, and IT infrastructure to human support in the form of tutors, counselors, and other advisors. The IQA should ensure that all resources are fit for purpose, accessible and that students are informed about the services available to them.

When asked who they can turn to when having any problems (regarding a grade, course, a professor, etc.), only one answer mentioned a student representative, and one mentioned a tutor. As other first points of contact, the responding students named professors, heads of department, and the dean's office, which implies that student representatives are not sufficiently included in detecting potential problems at some higher education institutions. Students' responses imply that only some HEIs have implemented a student mentor system. Therefore, we would suggest implementing the system at all institutions, since it enhances a systematic and organized assistance to students in their studies and in their academic development.

Students' opinions regarding individual courses and other areas are mostly collected via surveys; strikingly, this is also the only mentioned procedure of students' participation in assessing and implementing changes of courses and study programmes. Moreover, even student representatives explain that they use surveys to collect fellow students' opinions. While two answers mention group meetings and discussions, there is a clear variety deficit when collecting students' ideas, especially among peers, but also concerning the information flow between higher education institutions and students. Looking for alternative sources to detect issues among the students is essential since official surveys could prove to be too official for some. Furthermore, student feedback can be gathered more directly and at the same time students can be actively involved in discussing possible improvements of courses and degree programmes by relying more on interactive group meetings and discussion fora. The received suggestions are usually presented to the quality commission or to some other administrative body. As the student representatives emphasise, quite a few suggestions and initiatives of students have been accepted in the official quality assurance body (for instance making an obligatory course elective, introducing a new course, more extracurricular activities, more ICT in courses), although one HEI could not find a single suggestion that came from students and was implemented. Looking at the broader picture, it seems that those students' suggestions, which get to be discussed at this official level, are adequately implemented, and students seem satisfied with that. However, it is not completely clear how many suggestions are implemented. Students feel they have enough influence at the faculty, though one respondent mentions a certain lack of students' involvement.

Public information

ESG 1.8: Institutions should publish information about their activities, including programmes, which is clear, accurate, objective, up-to date and readily accessible.

The students observe that they have sufficient information regarding the study process, international exchanges, and research projects. The most commonly referred source was the higher education institution's website. However, it is not clear whether this source is sufficient also for daily changes and news or whether the institutions also make use of e-mail lists and social media for this purpose. Respondents say that some HEIs have established career centres and international offices to act as points of information and contact regarding the labour market and international exchange respectively, although their exact role and nature is not clear as well.

As an important instrument of informing the public about recent activities and developments, many higher education institutions say that they create yearly reports and publish them through their websites. Since the students do not mention this kind of report, it is unclear whether they are aware of it and whether they consider it of importance for them.

4.4 STAFF PERSPECTIVE

ESG 1.5: Institutions should assure themselves of the competence of their teachers. They should apply fair and transparent processes for the recruitment and development of the staff.

According to ESG, HEIs have the primary responsibility for the quality of their staff and for providing them with a supportive environment that allows them to carry out their work effectively. We discuss transparent processes for staff recruitment and conditions of employment, professional development, and student-centred teaching.

The HEIs say that they have a sufficient amount of personnel for teaching, research, technical, and administrative tasks; the answers are especially positive regarding the teaching staff. If they lack staff in certain areas, the HEIs hire new people apparently without any problems, while occasional absences are covered by other employees. Nevertheless, it appears that technical and administrative staff is slightly overlooked since HEIs oddly report on their insufficient technical skills and their undue workload, but do point out their efficiency and hard work. While the HEIs rate the cooperation between administrative and teaching staff as mostly good, interdepartmental communication has some weaknesses. One way to improve these issues is to develop an action plan for the training and development of administrative staff with well-defined goals.

Prerequisites and promotion procedures for different levels of teaching staff (assistants, lecturers, associates, professors), where qualifications, professional experiences, scientific/artistic projects, etc. are evaluated, are well defined in the HEIs' institutional regulations, which according to one respondent are based on the Education Code and national framework regulations. The teaching staff has different responsibilities, according to their position. Some HEIs clearly state that the performance of staff members is then periodically analyzed and evaluated through annual reports and anonymous student surveys. However, it is not clear how the other institutions ensure the sufficient

qualification of staff members. While some answers mention normative acts or institutional regulation, others remain vague about their internal procedures.

Continuous education of all categories of staff is ensured via yearly seminars, trainings, and participation in projects with various European partners. The employees are encouraged to express their wishes in annual surveys. One institution explains that they enable their employees to pursue further education in doctoral programmes for free, which can be considered a good practice to ensure the continuous development of the staff. In contrast, another institution does not offer any possibilities for developing professional competences. An exchange of good practices and advice between the institutions could reduce these stark differences when dealing with continuous staff education and help establish a common standard in Moldova.

According to the answers, the teachers receive assistance from their institution when designing the courses and in utilizing adequate teaching methods via clear internal procedures, methodological seminars, internal guides for the elaboration of the curriculum but also with courses on pedagogy, modern teaching, and assessment methods. Comparatively, two respondents could not find any good practice case, which could indicate the HEI support is not fully developed. When asked about the HEIs' assistance in individuals' research projects, three respondents listed clear support in the form of space, materials, conferences, seminars, publishing, a framework for training, etc. One answer indicates that the HEIs' help is not adequate. Concerning is also the fact that only three HEIs conduct international research projects. One answer mentions the international department, but from the responses of two researchers, it is unclear if and how they are supported in accomplishing such a project. For the most part, the respondents are satisfied with the provided material conditions, though some answers indicate that there is not enough modern ICT infrastructure and laboratory equipment. The distribution of funds is not an issue according to the answers; nevertheless, the respondents expressed a need for more state funds.

The teaching and research processes interact daily since the same people are engaged in both processes. According to the teacher representatives all categories of teaching staff (professors, associate professors, lecturers, and assistants) are involved in curriculum design, the content of individual courses, devising learning outcomes; however, the division of their responsibilities is not visible from the answers. Moreover, this is not consistent with the answers received about the design of study programmes (see chapter 4.2), where the participation of all groups was not indicated. Regardless of the situation, inclusion of all teaching staff in design and improvement of study programmes should be guaranteed.

According to the answers, the HEIs' staff feel involved in all the levels of the quality assurance process at their institutions through various tasks: internal evaluation of study programmes, elaboration of normative acts, evaluation of scientific-teaching and teaching staff, development of questionnaires, etc. Nevertheless, the respondents still see a possibility for improvement in strengthening the quality culture within all structures of their institutions, and in better collaboration within the institution when it comes to quality assurance. While the systems and procedures of IQA are in place, the institutions should work on enhancing cooperation between all internal stakeholders and, as such, raise their motivation to contribute to and amplify an existing quality culture.

Student-centred teaching

ESG 1.3: Institutions should ensure that the programmes are delivered in a way that encourages students to take an active role in creating the learning process, and that the assessment of students reflects this approach.

When asked about student-centred teaching and its understanding, the respondents list the following components: respecting and valuing the student's uniqueness, needs, and characteristics, promoting active learning, rather than passive learning, focusing on in-depth learning and understanding, increasing the responsibility on the student, accessibility of teachers, integration of theory with practice, individuality, creativity, trust, and support.

The respondents implement student-centered teaching by adapting teaching methods to the student's learning needs, establishing a partnership relationship between student and teacher to achieve common goals, providing feedback, clear dissemination of the objects of the course and the performances expected from the student, using modern means and tools of instruction, etc. These responses correspond with the impression of the student that overall, the HEIs actively work on implementing student-centred teaching.

4.5 EXTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE AND THE RELATIONSHIP WITH AUTHORITIES

When analyzing the IQA system at HEIs, as it is done in the other chapters of this report, the general structure of the higher education system and the relationship to external systems of quality assurance and oversight should not be neglected, since these exert an important influence on internal structures and processes. Hence, the survey included questions about the HEIs' autonomy and about the relationship between institutions, the Agency, and the Ministry, on which the analyses in this chapter are based.

Autonomy of higher education institutions

The higher education landscape in Moldova consists of a broad variety of universities and academies, both public and private, some of which offer a wide range of programmes, while others are highly specialised. An important challenge for the general higher education system, but particularly for all systems of EQA and control, is to establish general standards and frameworks while respecting this diversity. Against this background, it is interesting that the respondents present very different assessments on the factual autonomy of Moldovan HEIs. In general, they do agree that – in accordance with the national Education Code – autonomy is reflected in the four dimensions of organisation, finances, staff management and academic matters.

However, while the majority of respondents think their autonomy reflects a European average, some complain about an undue influence of the Ministry on their activities and about a large amount of orders and regulations they have to comply with. They also disagree on whether there is a difference between public and private higher education institutions in this regard. Some think that private institutions have more leeway, a better

financial situation and are less regulated by state authorities, which results in a greater degree of autonomy. Others opine that the organisational structures and decision-making processes tend to be better established at public institutions and that it is thus easier for them to effectively realise their autonomy with a meaningful involvement of teaching staff and students.⁴ This situation, in which HEIs feel they are not all on an equal footing and that they are overly regulated by state authorities, is rather unfavourable and should be addressed.

External quality assurance

The Agency is primarily responsible for providing EQA to Moldovan higher education institutions, complementing their IQA processes. The latter are under direct responsibility of the respective institution, although the Ministry and the Agency should offer guidelines on how to organise these systems in an efficient way, taking into account that quality assurance in the way as it is envisaged by the Bologna process is relatively new to the country.

One of the Agency's main tasks is the evaluation of quality in higher, general, and vocational education. In the field of higher education, which is of interest here, this currently mostly translates into the evaluation of study programmes for the purpose of accreditation and of newly founded HEIs for their authorisation for provisional operation. The accreditation process is based on criteria and a methodology, which have been developed in consideration of ESG and national standards and regulations.

Overall, the responding HEIs emphasise that they consider these external evaluation procedures as an important element of quality assurance and not as a bureaucratic burden. They agree that the underlying criteria, methods and processes are clearly defined and understandable. However, room for improvement can be identified particularly in two respects:

Many of the respondents feel that the current EQA system in Moldova does not adequately respond to the diversity of HEIs, degree programmes, and students. One issue, which is explicitly mentioned, is that the expert panels in accreditation procedures do not always have sufficient expertise in all areas of the degree programmes under review, presumably mostly when it comes to highly specialised programmes.

Furthermore, and more fundamentally, the current accreditation procedures are mostly perceived in terms of ensuring the compliance with standards and regulations in a rather strict way (quality control). One respondent expressly states that formal issues and matters of documentation are given high priority, sometimes more so than questions of quality in practical teaching and learning. This is also reflected in the current Guidelines for the external evaluation of HEIs, which contain a large amount of documents to be presented. Evidently, this results in a considerable burden for the institution as well as the external experts who need to assess these documents, potentially leaving less time to deal with

⁴ Interestingly, this idea considers autonomy not only as a formal or legal status, but in its practical implications. Autonomy from others (particularly from state influence) is important, but can only be fruitfully realised if all internal stakeholders adequately participate in the decision-making of the HEI. This leads back to questions of their involvement, which have been discussed in previous chapters.

more pressing matters. While these formal aspects have to be an integral part of any such system, it appears as if the potential to support not only the reaching of standards, but also the active and continuous improvement of quality is not yet fully exploited. This is a point, in which revised internal and external mechanisms of quality assurance need to go hand in hand.

At the end of an accreditation procedure, there are two options: The respective programme is either accredited for five years or not accredited.⁵ This is critically noted by one respondent, as it allows little room to differentiate between programmes of good, medium, and bad quality. What has to be added is that particularly in re-accreditations, this situation makes it very difficult to positively influence the development of a study programme, because it can only be accepted as it stands or outright rejected. Furthermore, it should be noted that the Methodology is not clear, under which conditions study programmes should be accredited. On the one hand, it says that for a successful accreditation, every accreditation standard has to be met (with at least 90 % of the corresponding performance indicators). On the other hand, it says that the accreditation shall be refused if three or more standards are not met, which means less than 50 % in the corresponding performance indicators. So there is a twofold gap: if one or two standards are not fulfilled and if the performance indicator of a standard is fulfilled between 50 % and 90 %. Consequently, the legal basis for accreditation decisions is currently not well-defined and urgently needs to be clarified. In this context, it would be reasonable to allow more flexibility in the accreditation decision, for instance through shortened accreditation periods, conditional accreditation or suspension of the procedure for a certain amount of time.

Besides their role in official accreditation procedures, quality assurance agencies should also actively contribute to the development of a quality culture within the higher education sector. The Agency emphasises that it already supports institutions by offering trainings, for instance on creating self-evaluation reports, accreditation procedures, and on the organisation of necessary external evaluation procedures, as well as providing general consultation services. The responding institutions confirm and highly appreciate this. Notwithstanding, the primary responsibility of the institutions themselves for the establishment of a quality culture, quality assurance agencies can support this process by providing information on typical issues and offering good practices to solve them. Since several institutions express the wish for more support in quality development, it is recommended for the Agency to further strengthen their activities in this area.

Relationship between agency and ministry

Since 2018, the Agency has been subordinated to the Ministry. The Agency is still mostly independent in designing its internal procedures and processes, in selecting and training experts, conducting external evaluation procedures and making decisions about the accreditation of study programmes. However, there are two apparent structural problems:

⁵ Methodology of external quality evaluation for the authorization of provisional operation and accreditation of vocational education and training, higher education and professional continuous training study programmes and institutions, Art. 62.

Firstly, the Ministry is practically in charge of revising and changing the methodology of external evaluation and the Agency points out that there have indeed been several changes that directly affect its work and in which the Agency's point of view was not taken into account. Regardless of who is formally responsible, this contradicts good practices in the EHEA, as the Agency has the best insights into the specific issues that are addressed by the methodology. Therefore, the Ministry should take into account the views and experiences of the Agency in all future changes to the legal basis of external quality assurance in Moldova.

Secondly, the final decisions on the accreditation of study programmes and the authorisation of provisional operation of a new HEI are taken not by the Agency, but by the Ministry. Consequently, the Agency is not fully responsible for its quality assurance processes and their outcomes, which directly violates the ESG (standard 3.3). While the Ministry says that these final decisions are only bureaucratic in nature, this is not clearly stated in the methodology. In accordance with ESG, the Ministry should not have the competence - whether theoretical or applied in practice - to override decisions of the Agency.

5 CONCLUSIONS

In reference to the analysis of the survey results and from the overview of the Moldovan EQA and IQA, it can be concluded that there is possible room for improvement in various areas. The current EQA system consists of the assessments of study programmes, based on the ESG, which are not a blueprint for national EQA systems, but rather guidelines to consider, when designing quality assurance systems. When considering the possibilities of introducing a parallel or incorporated institutional accreditation system, the policy makers and responsible authorities (the Agency) must take into account involvement of all relevant stakeholders, establishment of quality culture, encouraging and supporting HEIs to take responsibility, in order to be accountable for their IQA systems, and to provide them adequate support and guidance.

HEIs must have autonomy to take responsibility for developing and improving their own quality systems, of course in compliance with EQA standards and guidelines and be accountable for it. Furthermore, the Agency needs to strengthen its role as a quality assurance ambassador and strengthen its advisory role, promoting the equal participation and inclusion of all stakeholders in higher education. It is important that all relevant stakeholders co-create quality assurance policies and take on all of the obligations and tasks arising from their autonomy.

HEIs should design the IQA system for all areas of their activities, thus incorporating elements of self-evaluation into their strategic orientations, vision and mission, while strengthening the cooperation and engagement of all internal (teachers, students, employees, researchers, management) and external stakeholders (project partners, employers, participating organizations and associations, etc.). Prerequisites for successful involvement of all stakeholders are established sustainable and transparent procedures and processes within the institution, two-way communication that allows transparent flow of information, appropriately distributed responsibilities and assigned activities and tasks, following the model of improvement (e.g., PDCA cycle) and establishment of quality culture. The latter in particular requires time, so it is important that all activities and improvements are planned prudently, in consensus, and in communication with all stakeholders. Successful and transferable practices developed by HEIs in the field of self-evaluation of study programmes should be implemented properly at the institutional level, while developing an explicit quality assurance policy and defining unambiguous goals that the quality assurance system has to achieve. The active participation of all stakeholders, especially students, staff and important external stakeholders, must be properly planned and encouraged at all levels of HEI's leadership and management.

There is a need to raise awareness of the importance of the quality culture concept and the pursuit of continuous improvement, not only following compliance with external (national) standards. Positive elements of innovation have been identified in the responses to questionnaires, which are already being promoted by individual HEIs (student-centered learning and teaching), so it is important for these efforts to continue and be further strengthened. Accountability must build on ingrained elements of responsibility and go beyond just pursuing minimum standards. HEIs must take responsibility for planning and establishing a comprehensive IQA system at the institutional level and EQA authorities must offer them guidance and support.



In the presented analysis it is possible to identify some examples of good practices at individual HEIs (involvement of employers in the creation and development of degree programmes; awareness of the importance of students' active role in creating the learning process and of the individuality and diversity of students and their needs; group sessions and discussions to collect students' feedback etc.), however, they are not widely implemented and visible throughout the higher education sector, while identified differences helped recognize opportunities for improvement on the other hand. The purpose of the report was to identify and analyze the current situation of EQA and IQA in Moldova also through questionnaires and to propose guidelines for the introduction of an institutional model of audits through the elements and values of the EHEA. We emphasize that it is necessary to build on the development of a quality culture and responsibility, to ensure the involvement of all stakeholders in the preparation of EQA policies and framework and to offer appropriate assistance and advice to HEIs.

Experiences show that, before new or modified EQA models can be introduced, the awareness of existing ones needs to be strengthened (study programme accreditation). The proposed changes will be successfully implemented only if they are the result of organic development of the quality assurance system and not in the form of an "external" forced change. Thus, knowledge and activities in the field of evaluation and self-evaluation of study programmes should be strengthened, and at the same time pilot projects could be introduced for the implementation of institutional evaluations. HEIs that have a well-developed IQA system at the level of study programmes shall be invited to participate in different phases of designing institutional standards and guidelines. EQA should provide assistance and guidance to these institutions in setting up self-evaluation procedures and activities to prepare an institutional self-evaluation report. Pilot evaluations could introduce changes and recommendations to supplement and adapt the current EQA system, and only with the introduction of improvements the possibility of enforcement of this new institutional model throughout the country shall be discussed. In such pilot procedures participating HEIs should be offered various incentives. For instance, upon successful pilot institutional accreditation they could be granted with institutional accreditation for a certain period, and in case of unsuccessful pilot accreditation they should not be punished or discredited due to participation in the pilot project.