

THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE QUALITY ASSURANCE SYSTEM IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA: EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVES VS. LOCAL PECULIARITIES

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Abstract: The construction of the quality assurance approach in the Higher Education in the Republic of Moldova is quite recent. The reconceptualization of quality management systems in Moldovan universities begins with the approval of the new Education Code in 2014. As a result, the National Agency for Quality Assurance in Education and Research (ANACEC) was created, whose aim is to ensure the quality of services provided by institutions of all levels of education and research, thus contributing to the satisfaction of the demands of society and the labour market. Through its role of external evaluation, the Agency stimulates an increase in the level of responsibility of the institutions towards the quality of the services provided. From its inception, the Agency has applied the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG, 2015) in its evaluation. From here, the challenges of Moldovan universities: how to combine European practices and requirements with Moldovan experience and traditions? Based on the methodology and sources selected, it was possible to ascertain that Moldovan quality assurance system face the ongoing challenge of reconciling European standards and practices with national traditional experience, a process that continues to shape the trajectory of higher education reform in the country.

Keywords: quality approach, ESG, internal and external quality assurance systems, Republic of Moldova, EU.

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Introduction

Globalisation is a complex phenomenon of the 21st century that affects every sphere of human existence and represents the relentless destination towards which humanity is heading, an irreversible, inevitable process that affects us all in different ways, whatever our geographical, regional or cultural background. As a system in full development, with its technological, economic and information flows, as well as flows of people, values and ideas, globalisation offers unsuspected opportunities for culture, research and education, such as the internationalisation of higher education, academic mobility and international recognition. Against the backdrop of major changes in today's society, governments must develop effective education and training systems, which remain fundamental to a just, open and democratic society, as well as to the economic growth of society and sustainable employment for future generations. To this end, higher education, strongly linked to research and innovation, plays a crucial role in individual and societal development by providing the highly skilled, engaged citizens that Europe needs to create jobs and economic and social

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prosperity. At the same time, higher education must be “inclusive, open to talent from all backgrounds”, and higher education institutions must not remain “ivory towers”, but become civic learning groups connected to their own communities.

Within this dynamic context, the implementation of quality assurance (QA) systems in higher education has emerged as a central priority for both European and national policy agendas. The European Higher Education Area (EHEA), established through the Bologna Process, has placed quality assurance at the heart of its vision for harmonisation, transparency, and mutual recognition of qualifications. Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG, approved in 2015) provide a common framework that encourages institutions to align their internal mechanisms with external evaluation practices, thereby fostering trust, comparability, and mobility across borders. For countries such as the Republic of Moldova, which aspire to deeper integration into European structures, the adoption of these principles is not merely a technical exercise but a strategic pathway towards international credibility and competitiveness.

At the same time, the transplantation of European models into local contexts is never a straightforward process. Moldova’s Higher education system reflects specific historical trajectories, socio-economic realities, and institutional cultures that shape both the opportunities and constraints of reform. The legacy of post-Soviet governance structures, resource limitations, and uneven institutional capacities often complicates the direct application of European QA standards. Moreover, the expectations of local stakeholders: students, faculty, employers, and policymakers, introduce distinctive priorities that must be reconciled with European benchmarks. Thus, the Republic of Moldova case illustrates the tension between convergence and divergence: the drive to align with European perspectives while preserving responsiveness to national peculiarities.

The purpose of the article is to explore the implementation of quality assurance systems in the Republic of Moldova through the lens of European perspectives versus local specificities. It examines the extent to which European frameworks have been adopted, adapted, or resisted, and highlights the institutional innovations and challenges that accompany this process. By situating Moldova’s experience within broader debates on globalisation and educational reform, the study seeks to contribute to a nuanced understanding of how quality assurance can serve as both an instrument for EU integration and a mirror of local identity. Ultimately, the analysis underscores that successful QA implementation requires not only compliance with external standards but also the cultivation of context-sensitive practices that strengthen institutional quality culture, institutional resilience, inclusivity, and societal relevance.

Literature Review and Methodology

The article is grounded in the analysis of the normative framework and European policy documents in the field of quality assurance in higher education, as well as the reports assessing the progress of the Bologna Process within the European Higher

Education Area (EHEA). These documents provide the conceptual and methodological foundation for harmonizing practices across diverse national systems.

The implementation of quality assurance (QA) systems in higher education has been extensively studied within the European context, particularly through the lens of the Bologna (and the creation of the European Higher Education Area Process (European Commission Reports, 2018, 2020, 2024). To these we can add the analyses and publication of European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA Publications), where the authors emphasize that the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)* have become the cornerstone of harmonization, ensuring transparency, comparability, and trust among institutions across borders of EU. Research highlights that QA is not only a technical mechanism of evaluation but also a cultural shift towards accountability, inclusivity, and continuous improvement. Studies from Western and Central Europe underline the importance of external evaluations, accreditation agencies, and stakeholder involvement, noting that QA systems contribute to institutional credibility, student mobility, and international recognition. At the same time, comparative analyses reveal that successful QA implementation depends on balancing European standards with national traditions, institutional autonomy, and local priorities.

At the same time, the article explores how these European principles are transposed into the legislative and applicative framework of the Moldovan university system. Moldova's adoption of Bologna commitments has required significant adjustments in accreditation procedures, internal and external quality assurance mechanisms, and institutional governance (European Commission, 2024).

National legislation has been progressively aligned with European standards, yet the process reveals both achievements and persistent challenges, such as resource constraints, uneven institutional capacities, and the need to balance external requirements with local realities. The analysis underscores that while European policy frameworks provide a roadmap for modernization, their successful implementation depends on context-sensitive adaptations that resonate with Moldova's socio-economic and cultural environment (European Council, 2022-2024).

The methodological approach of this study combines comparative, quantitative, and qualitative analyses in order to provide a comprehensive understanding of the implementation of quality assurance systems in the Republic of Moldova.

The research employs a comparative framework to examine the alignment between European policy documents, such as the Bologna Process communiqués and the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)* and Moldova's national legislative and institutional practices of ANACEC. This approach highlights similarities and challenges of adaptation, allowing for a nuanced evaluation of how European perspectives are transposed into local contexts.

Statistical data from National Agency for Education and Research (ANACEC) and education policy documents of Ministry of Education and Research (MEC), institutional

organograms, strategies and reports, and international monitoring bodies are analyzed to measure progress in areas such as internal and external evaluation, accreditation outcomes, and institutional performance indicators. Quantitative methods provide objective evidence of systemic changes, enabling the identification of trends and measurable impacts of QA reforms on the Moldovan higher education system.

Complementing the quantitative dimension, qualitative methods focus on the interpretation of policy documents, institutional strategies, and stakeholder perspectives. Examples, case studies, and document reviews are used to capture the cultural, organizational, and socio-economic factors that shape QA implementation. This approach ensures that the analysis reflects not only numerical progress but also the lived realities and perceptions of actors within the system.

These methodological tools, together with data synthesis and problematization, create a balanced research design that integrates European benchmarks with local specificities, offering both empirical evidence and contextual insights into Moldova's trajectory of quality assurance reform in Higher education system.

Towards a global quality assurance concept

In an era defined by interconnected economies, transnational education, and the rapid circulation of knowledge, the notion of quality assurance in higher education is increasingly transcending national and regional boundaries. While the Bologna Process and the European Higher Education Area have provided a robust framework for harmonization across Europe, globalisation demands a broader vision - one that integrates diverse cultural, institutional, and socio-economic contexts into a shared understanding of quality. A *global quality assurance concept* must therefore move beyond the mere transfer of standards, embracing inclusivity, transparency, and adaptability as guiding principles. It should foster trust and recognition across countries, enabling academic mobility, collaborative research, and equitable access to education, while respecting local specificities. Such a paradigm positions quality assurance not only as a technical instrument of evaluation but as a universal language of credibility, resilience, and innovation in higher education worldwide.

Based on the idea that "higher education structures in Europe are becoming increasingly compatible and comparable", an idea launched in the Bucharest Ministerial Communiqué in 2012, European states have made considerable efforts to ensure coherence between national policies and practices relating to the higher education system, in particular, concerning the use of ECTS credits, the awarding of degrees and qualifications, internal quality assurance at higher education institution level, and the definition and assessment of learning outcomes (Bucharest Communiqué, 2012). The Bucharest Communiqué is also important because it recognises the role of the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* (EHEA) in involving countries in the definition of their common objectives for the construction of quality assurance.

The development of relevant quality assurance systems at the level of higher education institutions, which are capable of applying the same principles, developing

institutional strategies for the continuous improvement of study quality, the creation and proper functioning of national external quality assurance agencies, even if they differ from one to another, from one country to another in terms of the approach underpinning the systems, have the same objectives: to establish the legal framework for institutions and study programmes and to support the improvement of the quality of the educational services provided (European Commission, 2015, p. 90), which have been the priorities for European structures over the last ten years. Against this backdrop, the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) emerged, first as a network (in 2000) and then as an association (in 2004).

As a genuine forum for cooperation and collaboration between quality assurance agencies, ENQA helps national agencies to strengthen their adherence to the European guidelines by promoting cooperation and the dissemination of information and expertise between its members. It should be noted that the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* (ESG, adopted in 2005 by the Council of Ministers in Bergen and revised in 2015 at the Ministerial Conference in Yerevan) were designed to be applicable to all higher education institutions and quality assurance agencies in Europe, whatever their structure, function, size or national system. The Tirana Ministerial Communiqué of May 2024, gave the authors of the ESG the mandate to revise the document. In the period 2024-2027, the Standards will be updated and should be approved by the Bologna Follow-up Group at their meeting in 2026, with no further changes before adoption by EHEA Ministers at the Ministerial Conference in Romania/Moldova planned for spring 2027 (ENQA, ESG revision 2024-2027).

The advantages of the ESG are that they do not include detailed “procedures”, as institutional and national agency procedures are an important part of their autonomy. On the contrary, the ESG “recognise the supremacy of national higher education systems, the importance of institutional autonomy and that of quality assurance agencies in these national systems, as well as the specific requirements of different academic fields” (ENQA, 2005).

Thus, the objectives promoted by European quality assurance structures emphasise not only the strengthening of internal and external quality management systems, but also the importance of the beneficiaries (students, teachers, representatives of the labour market and the social environment) in achieving quality, linked to university studies appropriate to the transformations in society. As they say: “Higher education thus aims to fulfil multiple objectives; including preparing students for active citizenship, for their future careers, supporting their personal development, creating a broad base of advanced knowledge and stimulating research and innovation” (ENQA 2005, p. 13). Consequently, those involved in education may prioritise these objectives differently, may have different visions of quality in higher education, and quality assurance must take account of these different perspectives and be able to support the development of a quality culture embraced by all the parties concerned: students, teachers, institutional administration.

Consequently, the creation of a favourable context for the compatibility of higher education quality assurance systems and the internationalisation of higher education can

bring long-term benefits to higher education institutions, by helping to improve the quality and relevance of studies, strengthening international cooperation and increasing transnational access to other countries' educational resources, as well as ensuring the competitive participation of everyone in the construction of the Common European Higher Education and Research Area, defined by the Bologna Process. This context also makes it possible to develop and adapt educational services to the requirements of the extra-academic environment identified at national and international level; to develop the optimum framework for integrating education programmes with scientific research; the internationalisation of higher education and support for inter-university cooperation; the exchange of experience with academic, research and economic circles in order to ensure lifelong learning; strengthening cultural identity in Europe by promoting multiculturalism, multilingualism, openness and tolerance in education; promoting public-private partnerships, both nationally and internationally; promoting transparency, compatibility and academic recognition of studies and qualifications obtained in other countries, thus encouraging the development of an open space for national and international cooperation in higher education.

The experience of the Republic of Moldova: institutional structures and internal quality assurance systems

The signing of the Bologna Declaration by 29 European states on 19 June 1999 laid the foundations for the creation of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and set common objectives for the coherent and harmonious development of higher education in the years to come. Since then, the European ministerial structures have made remarkable progress, both in terms of territorial expansion, increasing the number of states involved, and in terms of efforts to make higher education systems more transparent and to consolidate the quality of European higher education at institutional and national level. The quality of higher education has been at the heart of the formation of the EHEA and has materialised through the development of mutually accepted evaluation criteria and quality assurance methodologies (ESG, 2005, 2015). As a result, national quality assurance systems have determined their roles and responsibilities, developed and refined comparable and compatible external evaluation procedures and actively promote international participation, cooperation and networking.

The Republic of Moldova, as a member of the European Higher Education Area (since 2005), has implemented at national level a series of reforms in higher education in line with European principles and values: freedom of expression, university autonomy, the creation of university quality assurance structures and student autonomy, academic freedom, the promotion of academic staff and student mobility, etc. An important role in this direction is played by the creation of internal and external quality assurance structures, which provide the necessary support and monitor measures aimed at continuously improving the quality of educational services offered by higher education institutions. Against the backdrop of changes in society and the world, most Moldovan universities have now created internal quality assurance management systems, designed as a set of institutional actors, measures and activities, which guide and monitor educational

processes in the promotion of institutional policy, objectives, quality planning, quality control and quality assurance. Managing the quality of educational services is a decisive component of consolidated institutional policies, especially after 2014, with the approval of the new Education Code and the creation of the National Agency for Quality Assurance in Vocational Education (ANACIP), reorganised in 2018 in National Agency for Education and Research (ANACEC). However, the ideas of an internal quality assurance system have been gradually implemented in Moldovan universities since 2005, when Moldovan universities designed organisational structures responsible for monitoring and controlling the educational process. Since that year, educational establishments have gradually developed their self-assessment mechanisms, strengthened their institutional policies and objectives in the field of quality assurance, and identified relevant procedures and indicators, which they have described in institutional documents. In principle, it can be said that the internal quality assurance systems of Moldovan universities have been strengthened as a result of the first external evaluations, which identified their shortcomings and determined the institutions to take action in this respect.

At present, Moldovan universities have internal quality management systems which operate on the basis of the institutional regulatory framework and the organisation charts of the institutional system. These systems are administered by the institution's Rector or, by delegation, in most cases by the Vice-Rector for teaching activity. It is important to note that Moldovan higher education institutions have created specialised institutional subdivisions (departments, chairs, sections, etc.) of an advisory and operational nature, which have a supporting role in the consolidation, functioning and effectiveness of the quality management system at institutional level. Overall, the system of quality assurance is the same in all universities of Republic of Moldova: both public and private institutions. The structures of the quality assurance system are created at all administrative levels of the educational process and are delegated accordingly, as follows:

Table 1. Organizational structures of the Quality Assurance in Moldovan Higher Education

A. At the university level:

Name of the structure	Responsibilities
<i>The University Senate</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">establishes strategy, institutional policy, objectives and priorities in the area of quality, monitors awareness of these and their application throughout the institution, and allocates and verifies the use of resources linked to the quality management system.
<i>The Quality Council</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">designs, implements, analyses and periodically improves the quality management system at institutional level.

B. At the faculty level:

Name of the structure	Responsibilities
<i>The Faculty Council</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> designs, implements and periodically improves the Faculty's internal quality management system.
<i>The Quality Assurance Committee</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> oversees the quality assurance process at faculty level.

C. At the academic department level:

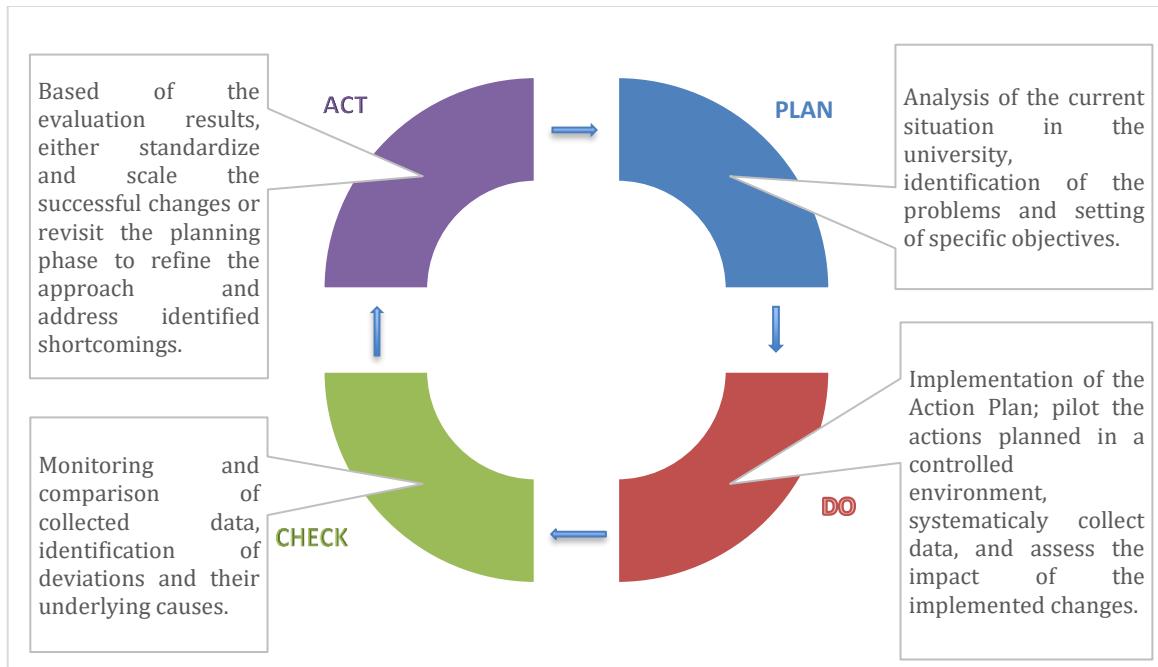
Name of the structure	Responsibilities
<i>The department</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> assurance of the quality of the processes carried out within it (teaching, research, organisation and external relations).
<i>The Quality Assurance Committee</i> or the <i>Quality Manager</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> responsible for promoting the quality assurance policy for the professional training process at departmental level.

Source: *Elaborated by the author.*

Another feature of the Republic of Moldova's internal university quality assurance structure is that it is operate on the basis of the principle of representativeness. This means that all the beneficiaries of the education process are involved in the system at every structural level: administration, teachers, students and employers (Sava Lucia, 2019).

At the same time, the activities of all the quality assurance structures are designed around the four dimensions: PDCA - *PLAN-DO-CHECK-ACT*, established by the *Deming Wheel* (i.e. the Quality Cycle):

Figure 1. Application of the PDCA Cycle to Quality Assurance in Moldovan Higher Education



Source: *Elaborated by the author.*

On the basis of operational plans and annual activity plans, quality management structures carry out audit activities (internal evaluation) of study programmes, curricula, teaching-learning-evaluation processes and evaluation tools; they apply periodic questionnaires to teachers, students, graduates and market representatives; they discuss the results obtained and take appropriate decisions to improve the quality of the educational process.

Following the creation of the National Agency for Quality Assurance in Vocational Education (Guvernul Republicii Moldova, 2015) and the approval of the *Methodology for external quality assessment in higher, technical vocational education and adult vocational training and the Regulation for calculating fees for services provided within the framework of the external quality assessment of study programs and institutions of technical vocational education, higher and adult vocational training* (Guvernul Republicii Moldova, 2016, reviewed in 2018, 2024, 2025) and the *External Evaluation Guides* (for higher education programmes and higher education institutions (Agenția Națională de Asigurare a Calității în Educație și Cercetare, 2016, 2025), all the documents that regulate the internal evaluation of study programmes have been adapted to national quality assurance requirements.

Consequently, internal quality assurance in Moldovan higher education is achieved through a set of actions aimed at developing institutional capacity to develop, plan and implement study programmes, which builds and strengthens the confidence of beneficiaries that the institution is meeting and improving quality standards in accordance with its mission. In the Republic of Moldova, however, there is currently little evidence of responsibility in decision-making to improve the quality of studies in terms of depth and content, but rather a phenomenon of bureaucratisation, whereby internal evaluations are subordinated to external evaluation. Annually or periodically, higher education institutions produce extremely voluminous self-evaluation reports containing mainly technical, formal details of internal procedures for evaluating study programmes. However, the real impact of these reports on improving the quality of the educational process is still weak and not very visible.

Furthermore, not all the important stakeholders (e.g. students or employers) are always involved in the implementation of these reports, and if they are involved, they have an insignificant role, do not contribute to sustainable proposals or are not taken into account in the decisions of the institutional administration (Crudu Rodica, Sava Lucia, 2019).

From European students' perspective, they have always been major players in the evolution of policies and quality systems of higher institutions. Students feedback are valuable tools to use in the development of curricula, study plans, learning outcomes and assessment procedures (European Commission, 2016, p. 27). Student-centred learning and periodical student consultation may be also as good practices and European experiences to develop the responsibility of students for the enhancement of quality in our universities.

Therefore, in Republic of Moldova strengthening and rationalising internal university quality assurance systems remains a time-bound imperative that could prove the convergence of our institutions towards the European institutional model. Currently at the beginning of the road, internal quality management systems need to be rigorously strengthened and improved, so that they involve all the key players in university

management. They must ensure that higher education programmes focus on the learning needs of students, on the effective development of their professional skills, on the appropriate qualification of academic staff, on the promotion of research and innovation in the university environment and on current trends in the development of the labour market.

External quality assurance and the promotion of a quality culture in national level

Unlike other European countries with well-established traditions and practices, the Republic of Moldova is at the beginning of these complex transformations in the field of quality assurance of educational services. Although after the Republic of Moldova joined the Bologna Process (in 2005), the need to create a specialised national structure in the field of external quality assurance in Moldovan higher education was mentioned in several national documents and several activity reports by international experts, the process itself took quite a long time.

Only after the approval of the Education Code of the Republic of Moldova (Law no. 152 of 17.07.2014), which establishes the legal framework for reporting on the design, organization, functioning and development of the education system of the Republic of Moldova, it was decided that external quality assessment would be entrusted to a new entity. Thus, by Government Decision no. 652 of 13.08.2014, the National Agency for Quality Assurance in Vocational Education (ANACIP) was established. In accordance with the *ANACIP Organizational and Operational Regulations* (Annex No. 1 to Government Decision No. 191 of 22 April 2015), the Agency's mission was to develop and promote a quality culture in the field of technical, higher and continuing vocational education, contributing to economic competitiveness and social cohesion in the Republic of Moldova. The *main aim* of ANACIP was to ensure an integrated, credible, objective and transparent system of external evaluation and accreditation of institutions and study programmes in technical, higher and continuing education in the Republic of Moldova. The *strategic objectives* set by the new structure were to contribute to the development and promotion of a culture of quality in technical, higher and continuing education; to evaluate the curricula and capacity of institutions providing technical, higher and continuing vocational education in order to achieve quality standards; to ensure the application in technical, higher and continuing vocational education in the Republic of Moldova (Guvernul Republicii Moldova, 2015) of the *References and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)*; ensuring access to information of public interest on the quality of technical, higher and continuing vocational education in the Republic of Moldova; proposing strategies and policies to partners with a view to ensuring and developing quality in technical, higher and continuing vocational education; promoting the professionalism and competitiveness of education in the Republic of Moldova; obtaining international recognition for ANACIP (since 17 December 2015, the Agency has been an associate member of ENQA).

It should be noted that since its creation, the Agency has implemented in the external evaluation process the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG, 2015)*. Thus, the objectives of the external quality

assurance of study programmes and higher education institutions in the Republic of Moldova are: a) to improve external quality assurance activities in higher education; b) to strengthen quality management at institutional and inter-institutional level. External quality assurance evaluation is carried out on the basis of 10 national accreditation standards similar to the European standards: 1. Quality assurance policies; 2. Curriculum design and approval; 3. Student-centred learning, teaching and assessment; 4. Student admission, progression, recognition and acquisition of qualifications; 5. Academic staff; 6. Student learning and support resources; 7. Information management; 8. Public interest information (public transparency); 9. Ongoing monitoring and periodic programme evaluation; 10. Cyclical external quality assurance (Table 2). The references are included in the documents applicable to the external evaluation process: the Methodology of External Quality Evaluation for the Authorisation and Accreditation of Study Programmes and Institutions of Technical, Higher and Further Education (Guvernul Republicii Moldova, 2016, reviewed in 2018, 2022, 2024, 2025) and the External Evaluation Guides (for Higher Education Programmes and Institutions of Higher Education (Agenția Națională de Asigurare a Calității în Educație și Cercetare, 2016, reviewed in 2020, 2024, 2025).

The reform of ANACIP was a part of the Action Plan of the Government of the Republic of Moldova for the years 2016-2018 (Education sector), which includes a set of measures and commitments of the Moldovan Government and Parliament planned for implementation in several priority areas, including Education. According to the reform projects, the intention of the authorities was to create an efficient and effective national quality assurance structure, which would promote and evaluate from a multidimensional and multigrading perspective the competitiveness and sustainability of educational processes in the Republic of Moldova. The reorganisation of ANACIP into ANACEC, an administrative authority subordinate to the Ministry of Education, Culture and Research, was achieved by absorbing the powers and responsibilities of the National Accreditation and Attestation Council (CNAA) and the National School Inspectorate (Regulations on the Organisation and Operation of the National Agency for Quality Assurance in Education and Research (Guvernul Republicii Moldova, 2018).

The mission of the newly created structure, ANACEC, was to implement State policies and contribute to development geared towards the best international standards in the areas of competence assigned to it in accordance with the regulations. According to the Organisation and Operation Regulations, ANACEC has the following functions: 1) quality evaluation in general, technical and higher education; 2) external evaluation of continuing vocational training programmes; 3) external evaluation of research and innovation organisations; 4) evaluation of scientific and scientific-educational staff; 5) quality control of general, vocational and continuing education, compliance with accreditation and authorisation requirements for entities offering study programmes and educational services.

In other words, the newly created institution has the role of multidimensional external evaluation of quality at all levels of the Moldovan education system: from kindergarten to scientific research and the awarding of scientific and didactic titles. As an

institution with multiple responsibilities in the external evaluation and monitoring of continuous quality improvement (Education Code, art. 115), in the field of higher education ANACEC has so far carried out the external quality evaluation of bachelor's degree programmes (first cycle) and in part master's degree programmes (second cycle).

Table 2. Mapping ESG Standards to the external evaluation and national accreditation framework in Moldovan Higher Education

Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG, 2015)	Standards of accreditation applied by ANACEC (since 2016 to present)
1.1.Policy for quality assurance	1. Politici pentru asigurarea calității (Quality assurance policies)
1.2.Design and approval of programmes	2. Proiectarea și aprobarea programelor de studii (Design and approval of studies programmes)
2.1.Student-centred learning, teaching and assessment	3. Învățarea, predarea și evaluarea centrate pe student (Student-centred learning, teaching and assessment)
3.1.Student admission, progression, recognition and certification	4. Admiterea, evoluția, recunoașterea și dobândirea de certificări de către student (Student admission, progression, recognition and certification)
4.1.Teaching staff	5. Personalul academic (Academic staff)
5.1.Learning resources and student support	6. Resurse de învățare și sprijin pentru student (Learning resources and support for students)
6.1.Information management	7. Managementul informației (Informational management)
7.1.Public information	8. Informații de interes public (Public interest information & public transparency)
8.1.On-going monitoring and periodic review of programmes	9. Monitorizarea continuă și evaluarea periodică a programelor (On-going monitoring and periodic review of studies programmes)
9.1.Cyclical external quality assurance	10. Asigurarea externă a calității în mod cyclic (Cyclical external quality assurance)

Source: *Compiled by the author based on ENQA (2015) and ANACIP (2016).*

In 2024 and in 2025, the regulatory framework for the functioning of the Agency was modified, by excluding the external evaluation process of general education institutions, which was subordinated to the Ministry of Education and Research (Guvernul Republicii Moldova, 2024, 2025).

From the beginning, the Agency's organisational structure, defined by the Regulations, sets out the Board of Directors, which is made up of 15 members: 13 members represent

academic staff: teachers or researchers with teaching and scientific duties in higher education, one student representative and one labour market representative (art. 12).

Also, in 2024 a new competition was organised with international experts in order to select the members of the Board of Directors. The current Board has developed and approved the new Strategy of National Agency for Quality in Education and Research for the period 2025-2029. The Strategy has established six important objectives:

- Aligning the quality of education and research in the Republic of Moldova with European Union standards;
- Sustainable development of the external quality system in education and research;
- Strengthening ANACEC's institutional capacities to increase beneficiary trust;
- Developing ANACEC as a strategic partner for educational institutions and other stakeholders;
- Digitalizing ANACEC's process to support quality assurance;
- Achieving international recognition for ANACEC (ANACEC Strategy, 2025-2029).

Thus, the mission of ANACEC is to implement state policies and promote international best practices in quality assurance in technical vocational education, higher education, adult vocational education, and research and innovation at the national level. As an institution responsible for promoting and ensuring a culture of quality, ANACEC is the national pillar involved in harmonization of quality assurance tools with European practices and strengthening of the national ecosystem of quality assurance in education and research.

With well-defined strategic objectives, during the years 2016-2025 the Agency carried out an extensive process of external evaluation activities to authorise or accredit study programmes in the field of technical vocational education, higher education and content, which has revitalised the education system in the Republic of Moldova.

According to Moldovan law, „Any public or private legal entity interested in providing study programmes and educational services is subject to the external quality evaluation process...” (Guvernul Republicii Moldova, 2016). To this end, the application to initiate the external quality assessment procedure with a view to authorising the provisional operation of a study programme or educational establishment is made by the educational establishment/ consortium/ partnership/ subsidiary/ founder/ Ministry of Education submitting the application to the specialised department within the Agency. In most cases, the initiation of the external evaluation process is the responsibility of the educational institutions.

In 2021, the Agency approved the *National Action Plan on Quality Assurance of Higher Education in the Republic of Moldova for the period 2021-2023*. This strategic document provides a comprehensive overview of the Moldovan higher education system and articulates the national vision for quality assurance. It establishes the criteria for external evaluation, outlines procedures for the recruitment and selection of expert evaluators, and emphasizes the involvement of stakeholders in assessment processes. Furthermore, the plan incorporates thematic studies, identifies systemic challenges, and defines priority actions aimed at strengthening a national culture of quality. At the same time, it seeks to advance the

integration of the Moldovan higher education sector into the European Higher Education Area (Agenția Națională de Asigurare a Calității în Educație și Cercetare, 2021).

There are many advantages to the external quality evaluation process. In the case of temporary authorisation, the institution obtains the right to carry out the teaching process and organise admission to study, and in the case of accreditation of study programmes, in addition, the institution has the right to organise final examinations, issue diplomas, certificates and other nationally and internationally recognised training qualifications. All the beneficiaries of the educational process are also involved in the external quality evaluation process: teachers, students and employers (both as members of the external evaluation committees and as respondents, representing the institution being evaluated), in accordance with the *Standards and Guidelines of Quality Assurance (ESG, 2015)*, which stipulate that programme quality assurance should also include regular feedback from employers, labour market representatives and other relevant organisations.

The Agency has also promoted in its work the same principles and values as the European Agencies, such as independence, objectivity, integrity, professionalism and transparency in decision-making. Other important objectives in the Agency's work have been to carry out the process of external evaluation of the quality of education based on objective procedures, to implement the ESG in external evaluation activities, but above all, to promote partnerships and implement State policies in the field of quality assurance in higher education; to respect the university autonomy and institutional specificity; as well, to align the legal and methodological framework and tools with European best practices in order to facilitate international recognition and integration in the European Higher Education Area.

Clearly, the Agency's difficult journey has not been free from certain errors inherent in the business process, such as: difficulties in correctly and objectively interpreting the general regulatory framework; elements of subjectivism in the external evaluation proven by the experts; existing discrepancies between the various structures for promoting and implementing the education system, etc. These errors have highlighted the shortcomings of the education system in the Republic of Moldova, determined by the weak institutional capacity to undertake broader reforms and the resistance of institutions to change, while generating the need to adjust education policies in the European or global context, as well as to modernise internal or external quality assurance structures and the education system as a whole.

Conclusions

The internal and external quality assurance systems set up in the European Higher Education Area are a priority that has undergone many changes since the launch of the Bologna Process. The European quality assurance agencies for higher education are currently responsible for determining whether these systems produce effective results and operate in accordance with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ESG), i.e. whether they meet the two objectives of ***continuous improvement*** and ***accountability***, that are at the heart of all quality assurance activities.

Given that the development of a *quality culture* must be the responsibility of all the players involved: students, teachers, institutional administration, it is very important to involve all the beneficiaries in the internal and external evaluation of the quality of educational processes. There is still much to be done in this respect, particularly as regards the participation of students and representatives of the labour market in quality assurance processes, as partners in the decision-making processes for the continuous improvement of the quality of the educational services provided by higher education institutions.

The internal and external quality assurance systems of educational services in the Republic of Moldova are parallel processes, but fairly synchronised, being at the beginning of consolidation in the spirit and European practices of quality assurance. For the time being, there are timid and sporadic elements of responsibility in decision-making to improve the quality of studies, and more of a phenomenon of bureaucratisation, of formalisation, which consists of subordinating internal evaluations to external evaluation. Higher education institutions produce annual or periodic self-evaluation reports and analyses of their internal procedures for evaluating study programmes. However, the real impact of these analyses on improving the quality of the content of the educational process is still limited. The strengthening and effectiveness of quality management system structures, the quality approach and the rationalisation of mechanisms for forecasting, evaluating, analysing and improving internal quality assurance systems are absolutely essential if the established objectives of promoting successful university management and producing quality curricula, designed to make it easier for graduates to enter the (national or global) labour market, are to be achieved.

In addition, strengthening the external quality assurance system at national level by recognising the external evaluation activities of the National Agency for Quality Assurance in Education and Research (ANACEC) is a temporal imperative that could prove the convergence of the Republic of Moldova towards the European model imposed by the Bologna Process. For the time being, the process of external evaluation of the quality of university studies must be rigorously strengthened and improved, so that, thanks to external evaluations, higher education programmes are focused on students' learning needs, on the effective development of their professional skills, on the adequate qualification of academic staff, on the promotion of research and innovation in the university environment, as well as on current development trends in the labour market. Ultimately, such a consolidated system of external quality assurance will not only enhance the credibility of Moldovan universities at the European level, but will also open new opportunities for international partnerships, student mobility, and the creation of a resilient academic environment capable of driving sustainable social and economic progress.

Abbreviations

ANACEC – National Agency for Quality Assurance in Education and Research
(2018- present)

ANACIP – National Agency for Quality Assurance in Vocational Education (2014-2018)

CNAA - National Accreditation and Attestation Council

ECTS – European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System

EHEA – European Higher Education Area

ENQA - European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education

ESG – Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area

MEC – Ministry of Education and Research (2021-present)

MECC – Ministry of Education, Culture and Research (2017-2021)

QA – Quality Assurance

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