

Transition from the Soviet teaching methods to modern European according to the Bologna Process

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Abstract. In 2003, in Berlin, took place the Conference of the European Ministers of Education. The main points of discussion were the reorganization of the higher education system, and the growth in the number of countries practicing this system. The Republic of Moldova took part in the Conference only as an observer. However, in 2004, the country submitted to the Bologna Secretariat a letter of accession to the European values and demands in terms of education. In 2005, in Bergen, the accession of the Republic of Moldova to the Bologna Process was officially approved. Starting this year, the State Agricultural University of Moldova (SAUM) has been making efforts to fulfill the European demands. The SAUM as well as all the other universities in Moldova are carrying out the higher education reforms for the purpose of a European integration. Nevertheless, some of the integration stages are still exposed.

Keywords: Bologna Process, SAUM, State University "A. Russo"

During the Soviet period, education followed two systems. The first system consisted in: general school (10 years), college (2 years), university (5 years), and doctorate (3 years). The second system comprised general school (8 years), college or vocational school (4 years each), university (5 years), and doctorate (3 years). The college and vocational school graduates who wanted to continue their studies benefited of an eight-month course of special training in the subjects required for the admission exam and in general knowledge. But this education level was repelled. The admission in colleges and universities was based on the three or four admission exams in compliance with the chosen major. The doctorate required three compulsory exams in a foreign language, philosophy, and computer science. All the study levels gave the students the choice of the courses with compulsory attendance and distant learning.

Studies within the agricultural colleges

The teaching methods were theoretical courses, lab works, seminars, and stages of practice. Theoretical courses were based on the dictation of notes taken from specialized manuals by the professors. Lab courses and works were equipped with various didactic materials such as drawing boards, herbariums, insectariums, instruments, scientific films. The stage of practice took place in the open and represented the most significant part of college. The valuation followed the 1 to 5 marking scale, and 3 was the admission limit. During the vegetation period most of the agricultural works were carried out by the students, regardless of the climatic conditions which were often injurious to the health. In spring, even if it snowed or rained, 15 to 19-year-old students were forced to do agricultural works. However, these practical instructions under the surveillance of the professor lead to a correct assimilation of the theory and practice simultaneously. The students' work was under the guidance of special professors named "educators". This technologic education was doubled by instructive discussions beyond their specialization which involved a direct and active participation of the students. The disadvantage of this teaching method in college was the exploitation of the students in the exchange of an insignificant payment or no payment at all. The special equipment for the health protection of the students, and especially of the girls, was deficient or inexistent which lead to frequent illnesses. In conclusion, compared to the present education system, past teaching methods in college were richer in theoretical and practical knowledge, concurrently with the civic education, but they followed a communist style.

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Higher Education

After the Republic of Moldova gained its independence as a state in 1991, it adopted the Soviet higher education system. This was until 2001 when it started the education reforms.

The first two years of study include basic and general knowledge courses, and courses for the initiation in specialized domains. Starting with the third year, only specialized courses are preserved. The five-year university curriculum comprised 49-50 subjects concluded with written or oral exams, initiation, didactic and production stages of practice, state exams, and the presentation of a final paper. The stage of practice lasted 12 months, six for didactics (the third year) and six for the production (the fourth year). The valuation method followed the 1 to 10 marking scale and 5 was the admission limit.

Theoretical courses in basic, compulsory and optional subjects were taught to a number of 150-200 students in large lecture rooms, through dictation. The didactic and technical support was obsolete and superficial, the student-professor interaction was inexistent, and the students were more and more undisciplined and uneducated.

These as well as other unmentioned aspects were considered the disadvantages of the higher education at that time. The advantages consisted in: the increase in the teaching staff, the high number of courses, lab works and seminars, the long stages of practice, the surety of a workplace.

Higher Education according to the Bologna Process

As mentioned, the Republic of Moldova started the education reforms in 2001 aiming at the European standard. The participants to the International Conference "Modernization of the higher education system of the Republic of Moldova in the context of the Bologna Process" which took place between the 25th and the 28th of November 2004, expressed their wish to implement the objectives of the Bologna Declaration and of the following documents based on the idea of the European harmonization of the higher education system.

The main principles of the higher education strategy are: the interconnection of the education system, the priority of the higher education, culture and scientific research, an impartial higher education, the possibility of continuation of the higher education for every person regardless of their age, the promotion of a lasting university policy, and the stimulation of the professor-student relation.

All these outlined the main aspects to operate on: the stimulation of a loyal, correct and transparent interuniversity competence, the flexibility of the curriculum encouraging its adaptation to the European demands, the use of productive information technologies, the achievement of the legislative reform with an impact on the educational system, the integration of the doctorate within the higher education, the creation of a transparent internal and external evaluation and accreditation system and so on.

The didactic process of the SAUM adapted to the demands of the Bologna Declaration along the following stages: the radical change in the education system of the agronomical universities, the formation of specialists with new conceptions which could lead to the modernization of agriculture and to productive, efficient and lasting results. The development of SAUM was so significant that is raised to the international standards:

1. The elaboration in 2001-2003 of a agronomical higher education curriculum which included the general objectives, the majors, the specialized objectives, the professional standard, the specialized Frame-Plan, the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS). The ECTS standard was approved in the Republic of Moldova on the 1st of September 2001. As a result, during the academic year 2005-2006, the ECTS standard was applied in the SAUM and for the first time in the Republic of Moldova. All the graduates received the diploma Supplement in compliance with the UNESCO-CEPES level. A number of credits corresponded to each subject; therefore, if the students summed 240 credits they received the Bachelor's Degree.

2. The implementation of ECTS for the equalization of diplomas and studies achieved within the SAUM. Starting with the academic year 2005-2006, according to the new Frame-Plan accepted by the Republic, SAUM has been organizing the first series (higher education for the Bachelor's Degree). Several new variants of curriculum were drawn up following the demands of the ECTS system and, therefore, of the Bologna Process.

According to the Frame-Plan, 30 hours are dedicated to study in the auditorium, and the rest of the hours are for the individual study. The study duration has 30 weeks a year; therefore the 60 credits are equally distributed for each semester. The number of hours dedicated to the annual academic year is 1800 hours. The overall number of credits, depending on the study duration, is 240 credits in four years of study (horticulture, agriculture, zootechnics, engineering), 360 credits in six years (veterinary medicine), and 180 credits in three years (economics, accountancy, etc.). The credits for each subject are achieved by the students if they obtain the mark 5 or if they are admitted. The optional subjects do not have credits.

The Republic of Moldova adopted the higher education system based on two cycles of studies: 1. the university system, 180-240 ECTS credits, usually awarding a Bachelor's degree and 2. the post-university system lasting 1-2 years, 120-60 ECTS credits, awarding a Master's degree. According to the Bologna Process provisions, the Master's degree requires 300 ECTS credits. The veterinary medicine also imposes integrated courses at the end of which the students who acquired 360 ECTS credits receive the Bachelor's and the Master's degrees. This two-cycle structure of education is regulated by prescriptive acts issued in the Republic of Moldova: the Education Law, the Frame-Plan, the classified list of professional training domains and of the specializations for the training of the teaching staff within the higher education institutions, cycle 1.

The flexibility of the ECTS system is due to the mention of the number of unattained credits (not more than 6) that still allow the possibility of carrying on the studies.

The student is able to promote their next year of study if they acquired 54 credits in a year, 114 credits in two years, and 174 credits in three years. The situation is a little different in the case on veterinary medicine students who study for a longer period of time.

The study programs are divided on specializations and include the curricula of all the subjects stipulated in the education plan. They are even codified in letters (G – general training, F – fundamental training, S – specialized training, O – compulsory, A – optional, F-optional) and numbers. (01-08) for example, indicates the semester: G.02.O.017; S.08.O.068; S.07.A.61.

The curriculum of a course contains the all the other necessary information about the responsible professor, the revision, the duration of the course, the number of hours, the summary of the course content, the valuation method, the necessary bibliography.

The study consists in the hours of contact (seminars, theoretical and practical courses, lab works) and the individual work (papers, theses, individual training, and production practice). Depending on the form of study (compulsory attendance or distant learning), the distribution of the hours of contact and individual work in the SAUM is the following: compulsory attendance imposes 30 hours of contact and 15 hours of individual work; reduced attendance imposes maximum 12 hours of contact and at least 33 hours of individual work; distant learning imposes 2-6 hours of contact and 39-43 hours of individual work under the distant surveillance of a guardian. In conclusion, the time allotted to study during the semesters is 900 hours of contact (30 weeks x 30 hours), 450 hours of individual work (30 weeks x 15 hours), 450 hours for the training passing the exams each semester. During the examination session the students must prepare for the exams 9 hours a day.

The ECTS credits are transferred in the SAUM at three administration levels: within the university, the faculty, and major. The 28 credits allotted for the general knowledge social-humanistic subjects are transferable. There are 94 transferable credits (46%) for

Agricultural Science, of which 28 belong to the general modulus, 24 to the fundamental modulus, and 26 to the specialization modulus. 106 credits (44%) are transferable for specializations within the same faculty, of which 27 belong to the general modulus, 30 to the fundamental modulus (out of 54 allotted credits), and 49 to the specialization modulus (out of 159 allotted credits).

The control of the curriculum and the Credit System implementation in September 2001-June 2007 justifies the maintenance of the six-unattained-credit limit in order to be transferred from one semester to another and from one year to another.

The quality of the SAUM activity is obvious in its objectives: the promotion of the teaching methods, the flexible curriculum which offers the student the cognitive and strategy autonomy, creativity, competence, the ambition to assimilate knowledge, the will to be useful to the community. It also sets the limits of the responsibilities of the faculty and of the departments. Starting with 2004, there have been established internal Committees which ensure the quality of the education within the specializations, the faculty, and the University. These organization bodies identify, analyze, give solutions and make decisions concerning the Quality Management System of the University. In March 2006 external valuation Committees of the quality of education in the SAUM have been founded. These Committees act on the basis of a regulation which was approved by the general assembly of the committees on the 24th of March 2006.

The problems related to the implementation of the Bologna Process demands in the Universities from the Republic of Moldova are closely related to the economical and social situation of the country.

The Republic has been carrying out its economical, political, and social reforms for a long time. The population hardly accepts important and rapid changes, especially in agriculture which is their main branch of economy. Their consequences influence the education system.

The Teaching Staff

The teaching staff in the SAUM and other universities comprises three generations. The honorable university professors and academicians of the third age are forming the pillars of the universities. They were trained in Soviet schools and are extremely reserved to European reforms. The university professors of the first and second ages are the graduates of the third-age professors and use the same methods. Therefore, regardless of the age, there is an homogenous group within the universities, a group whose quality is very different from the one demanded by the European standards. In this context, the efforts of the Ministries and of the Rector Offices to implement the Bologna process in the anticipated conditions.

The possibilities of communication and exchange of experience between the colleagues in the Republic's universities are limited. The participation to scientific symposiums and conferences, professional and didactic stages are insufficient. These priorities are usually consumed by the teaching staff of the second and third age while the young remain disadvantaged. This is all because of the fact that the population of the Republic of Moldova is familiar only with the Russian language, and Russia does not offer European priorities. Nevertheless, the young members of the teaching staff follow the correct direction and are familiar with international languages such as English and French, but their participation in international projects is restricted. The general image of the Republic of Moldova in Europe and in the whole world is reflected on its internal problems too.

The overall attitude of the state towards the payment of the university teaching staff is beneath criticism in all universities. As a result, corruption is in progress.

The Students

The state offers students of the Republic of Moldova a strong professional motivation. The workplaces based on specializations are limited and the salaries are unacceptable for a decent life. Private companies offer a slightly higher salary than the state salary, but it is still

insufficient for the young graduates. For this reason, the superficial attitude towards the studies persists. The statistics show that the graduates do not practice their profession according to their university training, but prefer a better paid job. Under these circumstances, their migration towards the Western European countries, Eastern and the West is in full swing which is a disadvantage for the Republic. Corruption in universities, as mentioned, continues unfortunately, because both parts follow an interest: the professor receives an indecent salary, while the student proves individual, social, and patriotic indifference. Consequently, inconveniences between the students who were accepted at universities become visible because they must rise to the European standards. Some of the members of the teaching board themselves prove unsatisfied.

The Didactic Methodic Support of the Study Process

As mentioned before, the Bologna Process was accepted and implemented by the SAUM. This process would be a lot more successful if the teaching board had initiated more activities of reorganization such as: stages within the university, without the university, and international stages. For example, in the interval 2001-2008, only two pedagogical stages have taken place within the SAUM, through the international projects of the United Kingdom and the Czech Republic. These stages involved a small number of members of the teaching staff and, the most importantly, these participants were the same active professors. Most of the members of the teaching staff refuse the idea that they need professional stages and pedagogical renewal. The moment they reach a university degree, they believe they know everything and have the right to teach. The Bologna Process contradicts this conception and promotes the idea that there is always something to learn because the quality of information and knowledge is the basic condition for self-confidence, opportunity, mobility, consistence, and the ambition to direct towards the European higher education system.

Within the same range of thoughts, the didactic and methodic equipment of the SAUM dedicated to student support, the access to the modern information technology while teaching are insignificant. The department has two or three computers and only 50% of the teaching staff owns a computer. Info labs which are connected to the Internet are novelties and they are very few. The Library of the SAUM does not have a free access computer room. Both the space and the information available on the Internet are limited and confirm what has been said in this paper.

The example of the SAUM reflects a general state, a number of problems that all the Universities in the Republic of Moldova are facing. In this range of thoughts, we announce the existence of a free space for the European Universities that have access to the International Projects of support dedicated to the non-developed countries such as the Republic of Moldova, a space that follows the model of the Czech Agricultural University of Prague. Thus, we would like to thank CZU again for what they have been doing for the SAUM, including our participation in this honorable action, which is taking place in the famous historic city of Cordoba.

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