



AQAS

Agency for Quality
Assurance through
the Accreditation of
Study Programmes



AQAS

Agency for Quality Assurance through the Accreditation of Study Programmes

Quality
Transparency
Comparability

Final Report
Lessons Learned

International Accreditation Procedures
for Study Programmes in Moldova

LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE INTERNATIONAL ACCREDITATION PROCEDURES FOR STUDY PROGRAMMES IN MOLDOVA

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE MOLDOVAN MINISTRY OF EDUCATION, THE MOLDOVAN UNIVERSITIES AND ANACIP

Doris Herrmann and Dr. Katarina Löbel

1. THE PROCEDURE

Background and motivation

The German accreditation agency AQAS, Agency for Quality Assurance through Accreditation of Study Programmes, was partner in the TEMPUS project “QUAEM” (Development of Quality Assurance in Higher Education in Moldova) since the start of the project in 2012. AQAS is an independent non-profit organisation, supported by more than 85 member institutions, both Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and academic associations. Since 2002, the agency has been accredited by the German Accreditation Council (GAC). It is therefore a notified body for accreditation of Higher Education Institutions and programmes in Germany. The activities of AQAS in accreditation are neither restrained to specific academic disciplines or degrees nor to a certain type of Higher Education Institution. AQAS is a full member of the **European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA)** and also listed in the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR) which confirms that our procedures comply with a common set of principles for quality assurance in Europe.

The TEMPUS project has the target to implement internal and external mechanisms for quality management in the Higher Education system in Moldova. Within the TEMPUS project the accreditation of some programmes was planned. The purpose of these accreditations was to test whether the instruments, which had been developed within the project, would work in a country with little experience with this form of external quality assurance. Universities had to apply to become part of this international accreditation procedure. A selection process took place to identify programmes that could be used for this and in the end four programmes from different disciplines at different universities were selected from among 18 proposals: *Mathematics and Informatics* at TSU and at UBS, *History* at MSU and *Electromechanics* at TUM. The Ministry of Education of the Republic of Moldova promised to recognise the accreditation decision by AQAS as a national accreditation.

After the selection process it became obvious that an international accreditation would also be an important procedure to improve quality of the programmes which haven't been selected. Therefore the Ministry of Education decided that 11 study programmes should undergo a programme accreditation by AQAS in a separate procedure outside the TEMPUS project (see *Appendix 1, Timeline*).

The elected study programmes

In total, the following eleven study programmes underwent the review:

- from **Technical University of Moldova (TUM)**: “*Geodesy, topography and cartography*” (B.Sc.) and “*Textiles and Leathers Products Engineering*” (B.Eng.),
- from **Moldova State University (MSU)**: “*Chemistry*” (B.Sc.) and “*Finance and Banking*” (B.A.),
- from **Tiraspol State University (TSU)**: “*Biology and Chemistry*” (B.Sc.) and “*Pedagogy of Primary and Preschool Education*” (B.Ed.),
- from “**Bogdan Petriceicu Hasdeu**” **Cahul State University (SUC)**: “*Romanian and French Language and Literature*” (B.Ed.), “*History*” (B.A.) and “*Political Science*” (B.A.),
- and from **Alecu Russo Bălți State University (USB)**: “*Romanian Language and Literature and English Language*” (B.Ed.) and “*Pedagogy in primary education and Pre-school pedagogy*” (B.Ed.).

The stages of the procedure and criteria for the reviews

Based upon the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG), developed by the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) and presented to the Bologna Follow-Up group in 2005, AQAS has developed criteria for programme accreditation in phase one of the TEMPUS project and this set of criteria was discussed between the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Moldova, the Universities of the consortium and AQAS. In the end every partner could agree on a joint set of criteria and indicators that would reflect the particular situation in Moldova, but at the same time meet the requirements resulting from the ESG.

Based on these criteria AQAS developed guidelines which were used by the universities to provide an application for accreditation: a Self Evaluation Report (SER) of 30 pages plus appendices (e.g. module descriptions, examination regulations, data). AQAS checked if the drafts of these applications were compliant to the guidelines and criteria and gave feedback to the universities.

All accreditation procedures were officially initialised by a decision of AQAS Accreditation Commission. The Accreditation Commission then nominated an expert

panel for each procedure and the university had the right to raise concerns against the composition of the panel.

The university handed in the final version of the SER which was then sent to the experts. AQAS asked the experts to write a short preliminary statement about strengths and weaknesses of the respective study programme and these statements were exchanged between the experts and sent to the university to prepare the discussions during the site visit.

Each site visit lasted at least two days for each programme (see Appendix 2, Schedule). On site, the experts interviewed different stakeholders (e.g. management, professors, students, representatives of the labour market) and consulted additional documentation and student work. The visits concluded with the feedback on the preliminary findings by the panel of experts to the university representatives.

The panel of experts

Stakeholder involvement is seen as one of the major principles by all European associations or institutions (ENQA, EQAR, ECA) dealing with quality assurance in Higher Education. Therefore, all panels of experts, which worked for AQAS in Moldova, included professors from the discipline under review as well as representatives from the labour market and a student member. The panels or experts have been nominated by the Accreditation Commission of AQAS. It was the target of the agency to have a mixed composition of experts from Germany, Romania and other European countries to assure both the international perspective as well as a sufficient understanding of the Moldovan context.

All reviews based on the criteria that had been developed jointly as part of a TEMPUS project. AQAS prepared the panel of experts for its tasks in Moldova with material related to the procedure (e.g. guidelines, criteria and information on the Higher Education system in Moldova in general), with documentation on the respective programme, e.g. the Self-Evaluation Report, and with information on the site visit, e.g. the schedule. Before the particular site visit took place, AQAS arranged an internal meeting of the panel of experts to brief them on the procedure and the criteria as well as to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the corresponding programme. Based on the discussion, AQAS prepared a list of questions for each meeting during the site visit. AQAS also supported the experts during the site visit by taking notes and moderating the discussions with the representatives of the universities.

Finalisation of the accreditation procedure

After the site visit, the panel of experts drafted the report with the evaluation of the respective study programme which was afterwards sent to the university to give comment on the report. Both, the report of the experts and the comment of the

university, were sent to the Accreditation Commission of AQAS to take a final decision.

In general, the Accreditation Commission has four options for decision:

- accreditation without conditions,
- accreditation with conditions,
- the postponement of the decision,
- or the denial of the accreditation.

In one case, an accreditation without conditions was given for the duration of five years. In two cases, the decision was postponed since severe shortcomings were stated which needed to be remedied before the decision for accreditation. In the other eight cases, an accreditation with conditions was given for the duration of five years. According to the regulations, the accreditation is valid from the day when the Accreditation Commission has taken the decision. To keep the accreditation, the conditions have to be fulfilled by the university within nine months and the fulfilment has to be reported to AQAS. The universities were given a specific date until which they have to hand in documents which give evidence of the fulfilment of the conditions.

According to the European regulations, AQAS published the results of the accreditation procedure on its website. While AQAS' accreditation is already valid internationally, legal rights only come with the recognition by the national Ministry. The Ministry of Education of Moldova promised to approve also the accreditation results and to recognise the outcomes of the procedure as a national accreditation. An international accreditation can also be mentioned in the Diploma Supplement which can be helpful for the students if they apply to enter study programmes in the Bologna region.

2. OBSERVATIONS FROM THE ACCREDITATIONS

General remarks

The most obvious result is of course that nine out of these eleven study programmes **successfully went through the accreditation procedure** and were granted international accreditation by AQAS. Two study programmes did not yet comply with all Standards for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) and the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) in the 2005 version. However, it is likely that the shortcomings can be remedied within 18 months, so that the Accreditation Commission of AQAS postponed the decision.

All participants from the partner universities in Moldova showed that they are motivated to work on their programmes and internal management of their universities. It became obvious that international accreditation was seen as an opportunity for improvement. An external QA procedure has the same impact in every country: universities are forced to reflect what they are doing. Usually a good university implements changes already before the panel of experts visits it. This **positive attitude** was crucial for the success of the project which required a commitment from all stakeholders to implement changes in the universities in Moldova. Overall, the AQAS team who was involved in the site visits had the positive impression that most of the staff members of the universities were open to discuss critical aspects with their colleagues from abroad and to accept the proposed recommendations. In addition, the site visits were organised very professionally by the universities.

The Ministry of Education in Moldova was open-minded regarding the accreditation procedures and it was **willing to accept the results** independent of what the outcomes are. Such a “sportive” view on accreditation procedures cannot be found in every country which strives for international accreditation.

Socio-political remarks

During the procedures, the experts and AQAS learned about the specificities of the Moldovan situation in Higher Education. They learned that many of the Moldovan young people go abroad for their studies, especially to Romania, since they get scholarships and other forms of support and they consider a degree from a university abroad as more prestigious. This means for the Moldovan universities a hard competition for students and for the Moldovan society a **brain drain** in many branches. Therefore, the representatives from the universities were partly doubtful with respect to **internationalisation** because this might contribute to worsen this situation. On the other hand, internationalisation was considered to be crucial to keep up with other European universities, thereby offering a vision to young people to stay in Moldova or to young people from other countries to come to Moldova.

Another aspect, that was specific for Moldova, was the role and **status of teacher education**. To work as a teacher seems to have a low reputation. Due to the low status and since teachers have a very low salary, many students decide against these studies. Teachers, however, have a crucial function in societies for the upbringing of the future generation. Therefore it is important for the development of a country to gain the best of the graduates to become teachers at the public schools and to build up an attractive career path for them.

In addition, it became apparent that also the salary of the **professors** who teach at the universities is, compared to other countries, low. For that reason, many professors have more than one job. In addition, the teaching load at one institution is high

compared to Western European countries. This leads to a situation in which the professors spend their time teaching and have nearly no time left for doing research.

A core feature of the European accreditation procedure is the **stakeholder principle**, e.g. students should have an active role in the process of quality assurance. It was very helpful to have students from Germany or other European countries included in the panel of experts. The experiences with the students from the universities in Moldova, who discussed the strengths and weaknesses of their programmes with the panel of experts, were mixed. Some students were open and active while others were shy. In order to benefit most from the student perspective, universities should encourage their students to play a more active role in internal and external quality assurance procedures.

Procedural remarks

On the methodological level, AQAS recognised that trust in the instruments of external quality assurance, particularly accreditation, was generated in the course of the TEMPUS project. All persons involved in the accreditation procedures became familiar with these instruments and how to use them. Thus, the **aspect of professionalism** was also strengthened during the procedures. From the perspective of AQAS, both points are a highly valuable outcome since it is always difficult “to come from paper to action”.

However, some issues could be observed during the procedures which should be addressed by the new agency ANACIP in further external quality procedures.

All universities **lacked experience in writing applications** and Self-Evaluation reports. Most often, the universities described their programmes on a mere formal level by stating that national regulations are fulfilled. Experts, on the other side, need information on how things are done, with what aim and with what success and how processes have been developed by the university. This “**self-evaluation**” **aspect** was missing in nearly all application reports.

The **presentation of the universities’ representatives** during the site visits differed. Some representatives presented themselves in a professional way and discussed their programmes in a constructive manner. Others were more evasive in their answers which caused difficulties for the experts to understand the practices of teaching and learning and, consequently, caused difficulties in the evaluation.

During many site visits the language, respective the **interpretation** was an issue. Romanian experts were included in all expert panels which was helpful because of their better understanding of the situation of Moldovan universities within the Higher Education system but also because of their knowledge of the language. Due to their feedback it became clear that the interpreters often misunderstood the contributions or that they left aside important aspects. This might be caused by the fact that in many

cases members of the academic staff from the respective university were in charge of interpreting instead of trained interpreters. This problem is specific for international procedures. However, if Moldovan universities wish to apply for further international accreditation procedures, universities should work exclusively with trained interpreters who are independent from the respective university.

Typical conditions and recommendations given to the universities

The panels of experts confirmed that in many programmes the **quality of teaching and learning** is high. They were satisfied with the adaptations to the Bologna process so that the general concepts of the programmes were largely accepted. Most of the recommendations given by the experts to the programmes refer to the particular situation of the specific programme so that they cannot be generalised (e.g. implementation of new modules, integration of internships, activating learning methods, reduction of the number of exams). On the other hand, some issues were of a more general character.

In many procedures, the experts criticised the descriptions of the **intended qualification goals** of the programmes. In some cases, a description of the goals and learning outcomes did not exist at all. In cases where such a description existed, it was most often on a mere formal level oriented to the fulfilment of the requirements by the Ministry of Education and less oriented to the development of competences. In many cases, the Accreditation Commission of AQAS therefore required, that the university must describe the qualification goals in a transparent manner and that the goals must be described as competences. Furthermore, the definition of targets of the individual courses and the fundamental idea behind the curricular structure was sometimes difficult to understand. Therefore, several programmes got the condition to provide completed and updated module descriptions, again including the definition of the intended learning outcomes. These module descriptions must also be publicly available. In the European higher education area, the aspect of transparency is of crucial importance to raise trust in each others' programmes. To support the universities in Moldova, AQAS recommended organising a specific workshop on competence orientation and on how to formulate the definition of qualification goals and learning outcomes which took place within the TEMPUS project in Moldova.

Another general remark of the panels of experts was that the programmes were solid from a scientific point of view but they were, on a content level, in some cases not up-to-date compared to the developments in the disciplines in many countries in Europe. That is why in many procedures a condition was given that the university must **update the curriculum with respect to modern theories and methods**. In addition, it is recommended to define a process how the update of the curriculum is organised involving all stakeholders.

The **internationalisation** of most of the study programmes in Moldova should be strengthened. To study in other European countries, the students need a solid command of English which was most often not the case. Moreover, international students should be attracted to study in Moldova by extending the number of courses taught in English. Even if there is the risk of brain drain if the students are sent to other countries, international mobility will be crucial for Moldova to connect with Europe. To stress this perspective, in many procedures the experts recommended that the faculties should strengthen their efforts towards internationalisation, to increase the number of courses taught in English and to encourage students to use international research literature and international databases.

Quality assurance instruments had been developed and implemented in all universities before the accreditation procedures took place. The experts even highlighted the quality management systems as elaborated. However, in many procedures it became clear that the university-wide instruments are hardly applied by the faculties on the programme level. For that reason, many universities were requested to develop a concept on how to establish a system for data collection on the progression of the students, a monitoring system on their workload as well as on the success of the graduates of the individual programmes. It must be clear and transparent how the data and the evaluation results are used for the development of the individual programme.

Furthermore, in some cases the students reported that they filled out questionnaires from time to time but that they never got any **feedback**. Therefore, a condition was given in some cases that the faculty should establish a system for quality assurance which is applied to all courses, in which students are included on a regular basis and in which students also know about the results of quality assurance as well as about the countermeasures.

The experts noticed in many programmes that the curricula were built up of a high number of small courses. The universities often explained that this structure resulted from the prescribed content and competence areas defined by the Ministry of Education. The experts, on the other hand, think that competence development can be realised better in bigger **educational components e.g. modules**. The modules then constitute the frame for competence development. This way, both content-related competences are imparted and transversal skills, e.g. instrumental competences, can be trained. The Accreditation Commission followed the experts' perspective and recommended in many procedures that faculties should merge courses of the same domain to larger units with a clear denomination. This restructuring would also allow the Moldovan programmes to be more compliant with the curricular structures of other European countries as explained in the ECTS Users' Guide.

With respect to the examination concept, the reviews revealed in many cases a high number of examinations focussing on limited content units. In this respect, a reflection of the **role of assessment in the progression of students** towards the achievement

of the knowledge and skills associated with their intended qualification is needed. Connected to the discussion about modularisation, the experts favoured a reduction of the number of exams. Instead, more comprehensive exams should be applied and more alternative assessment methods should be included in the programmes with which to assess different competences.

One aspect, which can be seen as strength and a weakness at the same time, refers to the **personal and material resources** at the universities in Moldova. The experts appreciated with high respect what is achieved with little resources by the universities. Nevertheless, the limits set by the resources can also be seen as an obstacle for the teaching and learning process. In the field of Informatics, for example, the lack of hardware and software at some universities was obvious. To be trained on modern software is crucial for the success of the graduates on the labour market. For the humanities and social sciences, it is important that more scientific literature in English is provided for the students. And in the language programmes, the number of teaching staff in the foreign language should be increased. The Ministry and each university should carefully monitor that all necessary resources are provided.

As far as **staff resources** are concerned, the experts identified more problems. In some of the programmes, the number of PhD holders is relatively low, in some disciplines the staff members are relatively old and the teaching load for the academic staff members is in almost all programmes relatively high. The panels of experts concluded that **research activities** and the connection of teaching and research still need to be improved. From a German perspective, teaching at a university is based on research to train the new generation for future challenges. That is why in some cases, a condition was given that a concept should be provided on how research activities of the faculty will be planned and coordinated over the next years and how research and teaching are connected. On the other hand it's not possible to increase the number of PhD holders on a short term but only in the middle run. The introduction of doctoral programmes can help to strengthen research at universities in Moldova but only if the outcome of research bears comparison with the scientific level of other European countries. The aspects of staffing and research should also be discussed on a national level because it is not only in the responsibility of the universities to change the resource situation.

3. COMPARISONS TO THE GERMAN HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM

In Germany, universities underwent their first accreditation procedures from 1999 onwards. Indeed, the situation was in many aspects similar to the situation of Moldova at the beginning of the QUAEM project. Universities struggled when defining a concept for BA/MA programmes, when thinking in goals and competencies and when writing the Self-Evaluation-Reports. But in the last 17 years universities developed internal QA systems and many show a highly professional attitude with respect to

external quality assurance over time. They professionalised their structures and procedures for QA on every level of the institution.

A comparison between the two Higher Education Systems in Moldova and Germany is not easy if you compare data. The reason for this is that there are 121 universities and 220 universities of applied sciences plus several HEI for arts in Germany. Meanwhile more than 17,700 BA/MA programmes exist and more than 10,000 programmes have been accredited in Germany. Therefore competition between institutions and programmes seems stronger in the German Higher Education system and the pressure to change rapidly and to adapt to new developments is high.

With the introduction of BA/MA programmes in Germany universities took the chance to implement new, interdisciplinary programmes beside the traditional disciplines, e.g. Environmental Sciences, Financial Mathematics or Cultural Studies. This enabled universities to react to the needs of society and the labour market more precisely. In comparison programmes offered in Moldova seem more traditional. Of course, in a small country the number of specialists in Financial Mathematics which is needed may be low but nevertheless universities should offer more modern (interdisciplinary) knowledge from which society can benefit.

The conditions and recommendations given by the Accreditation Commission of AQAS changed during the last years but there is still a need to give advice for improvement. An accreditation without condition is rarely given by AQAS: only in approx. 10 % of the cases. 85% of the programmes are accredited with conditions. Mostly, conditions are fulfilled by the universities in the first period; the accreditation is very rarely withdrawn by AQAS due to the non-fulfilment of conditions. The other 5 % of the cases are those cases where the decision is postponed for a period of maximum 18 months or in which the accreditation was denied. Usually, the universities withdraw the application for accreditation before a negative decision has been taken.

To contrast the results from the eleven accreditation procedures carried out in Moldova and to put them into greater context, some facts and typical conditions and recommendations from Germany should be discussed hereinafter.

When conditions are given, in the majority of the cases they refer to formal aspects and to transparency. Indeed, the condition most frequently issued by the AQAS Accreditation Commission refers to the need to define the profile of the programme more precisely and to the module handbook that should be revised. There is still a need in Germany that the universities should strengthen the description of competencies on programme and module level. Another requirement is to publish the official programme documents, in particular the examination regulations so that transparency and legal certainty is achieved for students. The number of exams is also an issue that often needs to be corrected in order to improve the feasibility of the programmes. In many programmes, the experts furthermore complain that the study

plan is not comprehensible and needs to be revised. In fewer cases, the requirements to enter a programme must be defined more clearly.

When the accreditation system in Germany started to evaluate the programmes of different disciplines in 1999 many conditions have been given which refer to the content of the curriculum and the BA-/MA-structure in general. In the last years this is not a major issue at German universities anymore. The universities became familiar how to conceptualise a Bachelor- or Master-programme and how to structure the curriculum in modules. From a comparative perspective, it becomes clear that many of the conditions issued in Moldova are not “typical Moldovan” but typical for universities which have little experience with the new BA-/MA-programmes and the core ideas of Bologna. Many German universities also struggled to describe their programmes in a comprehensible way for external readers.

The situation of German universities in general differs from universities in Moldova because for several years now the political idea of autonomy allows institutions to take decisions without the influence of the government. In some of the federal states of Germany universities decide which programmes they would like to offer, how the concept of the programme looks like and how the resources are spent. This has, of course, also an impact on the recommendations given in accreditation procedures. German universities are able to implement changes in their disciplines or in the demands of the labour market much faster. Normally, the programmes are not outdated.

A huge difference between German and Moldovan universities lies in the role of research. All Higher Education Institutions in Germany follow the principle that education should be research-based, even in Bachelor programmes. Although the intensity and the quality of research differs between institution and depending on the type of HEI research is either more oriented towards theory or towards practice, but there is no Higher Education without research. The role of Academies of Science is therefore another than in Moldova and often universities and Academies of Science and other external research institutes cooperate in certain fields of research in Germany.

One aspect which hasn't been discussed in all accreditation procedures in Moldova very intense was the introduction of elements of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) in the programmes. Some universities provide the technical equipment needed to their students for ODL and others have a lack of technical resources. Nevertheless, compared to the situation of German universities which have sufficient resources to include ODL as one element of teaching and learning (e.g. blended learning) the availability of ODL in the programmes in Moldova should be improved to keep pace with modern developments.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE MOLDOVAN MINISTRY OF EDUCATION, THE MOLDOVAN UNIVERSITIES AND ANACIP

Recommendation to the Ministry

Based on the general impressions and remarks, the following recommendations can be given to the Ministry for the further improvement of the higher education system.

The most obvious aspect for the experts referred to the **resource situation** at the Moldovan universities. The situation was different at each university but in most cases, the resources were very limited. Although the experts highly admired the staff members and their engagement in the programmes, the experts also opine that the university sector could improve significantly if the availability of material resources can be improved. It should be discussed how it could be reached that professors and/or lecturers have more time to carry out research. The amount of time spent on a good level of **research** will be crucial in the development of the Higher Education system in Moldova. The potential that research at universities could provide to solve some national problems or to improve problems of the labour market is not yet well used in Moldova.

The experts – especially from Germany – were surprised about the division of universities and Academies of Sciences which didn't seem very transparent to them. From a German perspective teaching and research are interlinked at universities and a research-based teaching is crucial for the training of the next generation which should become an innovative elite of a country. Therefore the aspect of research in the university programmes must be strengthened. By doing so, the curricula will be updated on a regular basis for the benefit of the students. To include students in research projects will also support them on their way to autonomous learning.

The experts experienced in some reviews that the national regulations prescribe titles and the degree awarded did not fit properly to the content and the intended qualification goals of the programmes. Thus, the transparency of the programmes was limited. Therefore it would be easier if the Ministry allows universities to choose the **appropriate title and degree for their programmes** in their own responsibility.

In some of the programmes, the experts found it hard to figure out the main profile of a programme since these programmes served both intentions: **academic training and teacher training**. But the qualification goals and the areas for employment differ crucially between these profiles (e.g. in Chemistry). Without clear qualification goals the concept of the programmes was somehow undefined and too broad and therefore the transparency of the programmes was limited. The Ministry should allow a stronger differentiation between programmes for teacher education and programmes oriented to an academic career or to the needs of the labour market.

An aspect, which is specific to programmes in engineering and in natural sciences, was the high amount of credit points reserved for prescribed **courses in “Humanities”**. The experts acknowledge the idea of humanistic education and personal development also in these programmes. However, the Ministry should reconsider whether it is appropriate to prescribe fixed courses with a defined amount of credits. It could be easier for the Ministry and for universities if both sides agree on learning outcomes in the “Humanities” but leave it to universities if the content is delivered in special courses or included in discipline oriented courses. Universities should have the freedom to decide how they can achieve the qualification goal to enable their students to reflect social, scientific and ethical aspects in their decisions. This can be achieved in very different ways according to the discipline of the respective programme.

With respect to the orientation to the labour market, the experts were impressed by the strong relations between the universities and the labour market representatives as well as by the high degree of practical skills conveyed in the programmes. This way, a training oriented to practical aspects is assured. The disadvantage of more practice oriented programmes is that the **abilities in academic/scientific working** may be not of the same importance (e.g. in Pedagogy). The danger is that the programmes lack a certain academic level which is expected from a university. In an overall view the experts got the impression that some of the programmes in Moldova would better fit to the profile and level of a university of applied science (“Fachhochschule” in Germany) while other programmes are strictly academic and perfectly placed at a university. Although the number of Higher Education Institutions (HEI) in Moldova is small it could be an option to differentiate between the different types of HEI and to distinguish between more practice-oriented and more research-oriented institutions.

Recommendation to the national agency ANACIP

The conclusions drawn from the review procedures may be helpful to the work of ANACIP in future accreditation procedures.

AQAS made good experiences with joint panels of **Romanian and German experts** but also with experts from other countries. The different perspectives on higher education were fruitful for the discussions. Due to the different approaches towards criticism in an accreditation procedure, it would be helpful to work with experts who already have some experience with accreditation procedures.

The acceptance of external QA and in the end for the acceptance of the work of the national agency will also depend on the behaviour and the contributions of the experts during the site visits. That is why **trainings for experts** from different disciplines, for representatives of the labour market and for students are crucial. If the experts are too weak, universities will not benefit from the discussions during the site visit. If the experts criticise too hard, the universities will “lose their face” and try to hide what

works wrong in the next site visit. Therefore, experts who act in a professional manner are highly important for the success of the agency. ANACIP should therefore start at an early stage to define processes for experts' trainings. And ANACIP should identify what is needed to prepare the panel of experts for their job (e.g. training on criteria as well as on communication skills).

If international experts are included the professional abilities of the interpreters (including discipline specific knowledge) are crucial for the understanding of the discussions during a site visit. If ANACIP wishes to work with internationally composed teams, the agency should assure to work only with **well qualified interpreters**. Otherwise one person can become an obstacle for the whole procedure. If there is an international panel of experts, the time schedule for discussions needs to provide enough time for the interpreting. Also, sufficient time should be allowed for foreign experts to understand the national features and regulations of the Moldovan HE system. It is therefore recommended that ANACIP develops **appropriate schedules for future site visits** which consider the need for additional time.

During the discussions at the site visit, an open discourse between the university and the experts has been experienced as beneficial and necessary especially when it came to the discussion of problematic aspects. ANACIP should therefore **create an atmosphere of trust** with the universities. It always takes time to convince the majority of the staff members at universities that accreditation can be helpful for their development. ANACIP should strengthen its efforts to promote the benefits of the Bologna process and of quality assurance.

One of the major challenges of ANACIP will be to create trust in its work and in the independence of its procedures and decisions. Therefore, the agency should **develop mission statements and documents** on a professional level and should install boards and commissions on whose independence the universities rely. ANACIP should carry out pilot procedures which have to be reflected by all stakeholders in a transparent manner ("lessons learned"). An agency always moves in the field of tension between quality control and quality enhancement but without the trust of universities in procedures which are fair and transparent the accreditation will fail in the middle run. ANACIP should implement an ongoing exchange about the needs of the universities in Moldova and about the experiences made with the relatively new instrument of accreditation.

Recommendation to the universities

Based on the remarks and the conditions and recommendations given to the universities, some general recommendations to the universities can be summarised for their further development.

With respect to the profile of a programme and the corresponding curriculum, the universities should define the **core idea of what is supposed to be achieved by the**

graduates of this programme. This central idea should be defined in terms of competences. So far, most universities remain at the level of describing the requirements of the Ministry and not so much their own vision of a programme. Connected to that, the central paradigm **shift of Bologna from teaching to learning** should be strengthened. The experts acknowledge that the process is under way. Still, sometimes the advancement of competencies was difficult to recognise in the description of the curriculum. Most often, a mere description of contents or, again, the requirements of the Ministry were enumerated but it remained unclear what competencies the student should acquire through a course unit.

A second overall recommendation referred to the state of the art of the curricula. Most of them were rather old-fashioned and did not include **modern approaches to theory and methodology**. The experts connected this observation to the lack of time and financial resources for research and the fact that only very few teachers take part in mobility programmes and, in addition, have only little command of English. These shortcomings should be remedied. Professors must be given the opportunity to conduct research and to take part, for example, in international conferences or in mobility programmes. In addition, foreign Western languages should be taught at the universities as a basis for exchange. Also, processes should be defined on how to update the curricula on a regular basis.

As already discussed in the recommendations to the Ministry, the universities should also strengthen the **connection between teaching and research**. Traditionally, both aspects seem to be separated in Moldova. On the other side, Humboldt's principle, which is prevalent at European universities, demands this unity in order to convey the ability to autonomous learning. When one target of the universities in Moldova is to found more doctoral schools, this plan can only succeed when aspects of research are already included in Bachelor programmes, strengthened in Master programmes afterwards and then practiced in PhD programmes. Up till now the aspect of research is too weak in many BA programmes.

The instruments for quality assurance should be adapted to the new perspectives of **competence orientation**. Many of the instruments, which were discussed with the universities, were rather technocratic but less oriented to monitor if the intended learning outcomes are reached through a programme. The experts acknowledge the elaborated level of some of the quality systems at university level. However, a recommendation is given particularly to the management of the universities to develop **appropriate instruments for the monitoring of target achievement**. In addition, these instruments should be applied more strongly at programme level. So far, many results were available on an abstract level but few indicators could be shown as proof for the success of a specific programme.

With respect to quality assurance, another aspect could be observed. Many evaluations were carried out but the results of these evaluations were rarely discussed with the relevant stakeholders. The feedback procedures should be

developed in a more regular and structured way so as to **include all stakeholders in discussing shortcomings and possible solutions.**

On a more general level, universities are also asked to take over **responsibility for national accreditation** and for the new national agency ANACIP. For example, university representatives should become members of the board and commissions and staff members involved in accreditation procedures should give an honest feedback on procedures, experts and decisions as well as on the decision-taking of the agency. All stakeholders should appreciate that a national agency exists which provides services for them and secures a certain level of autonomy of the Higher Education system.

5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

A lot of work was done by Moldovan universities before, during and after the accreditation procedures: the internal quality assurance systems were further developed, new courses or modules were defined, the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) was implemented and qualifications goals and learning outcomes were formulated.

In general, the team of AQAS was impressed by the dedication and commitment of everybody who was involved in the accreditation procedures. All partners worked hard. It became obvious that the accreditation procedures contributed to create space for dialogue and to open new perspectives on the quality of Higher Education and how to further improve it.

AQAS wishes to sincerely thank all the partners and wishes all the best to the Moldovan universities and to the young quality assurance agency ANACIP in its important work.

Appendix

Appendix 1: Timeline

1. Phase of Accreditation procedures

Exemplary Schedule	Steps of the validation process
February 2015	AQAS-workshop for the universities on writing the documentation
1 April 2015	The university hands in the documentation of the programmes
20 April 2015	AQAS provides feedback on the documentation
4 May 2015	The university hands in the revised (if necessary) documentation
18/19 May 2015	The Accreditation Commission decides on the opening of the accreditation procedure
September and October 2015	The panel of experts visits the university
30 November 2015/February 2016	The Accreditation Commission decides on the accreditation of the programmes.

2. Phase of Accreditation procedures

Exemplary Schedule	Steps of the validation process
February 2015	AQAS-workshop for the universities on writing the documentation
17/18 June 2015	The university hands in the documentation of the programmes
13 July 2015	AQAS provides feedback on the documentation
3 August 2015	The university hands in the revised (if necessary) documentation
17/18 August 2015	The Accreditation Commission decides on the opening of the accreditation procedure
December 2015 (or beginning of 2016)	The panel of experts visits the university and writes the final report
February 2016/ May 2016	The Accreditation Commission decides on the accreditation of the programmes.

Appendix 2: Example of a schedule for a site visit



Visit to the University

Day 1

09.00	Transfer from hotel to University
09.30 – 12.30	Internal discussions of the expert panel to prepare the site visit and discuss the programme (experts only, meeting room at University required)
12.30 – 13.45	Light lunch of the expert panel
13.45 -14.45	Discussion with the Management of the University The discussion serves to acquaint the experts with the University, with its overall strategies and quality assurance with regard to its study programmes. The experts may wish to discuss questions of past and future development of the programme as well as general questions to understand the academic framework of the programme (university context).
14.45	Break
15.00 – 16.15	Discussion with the Head of Department The experts may wish to discuss questions of past and future development of the programme as well as general questions to understand the academic framework of the programme (faculty / departmental context).
16.15	Break
16.30– 17.30	Discussion with the Employers
17.30 – 18.30	Guided tour through the premises of the Faculty; end of first day The experts have the opportunity to take a look at the premises and facilities that are relevant to the programme. There will be visited: the library, the reading room, the computer center, the workshop and the laboratories used for training students of the specialty

Day 2

08.40	Transfer from the hotel to University,
09.00 – 10.45	Discussion with the Head of the Programme and the Academic Staff as well as the Support Staff Discussions may cover intended learning outcomes, teaching and learning, student assessment, student support, curriculum, feedback from the labor market etc.
10.45 – 11.00	Break
11.00 – 12.30	Discussion with students of the programme Topics might cover: student perspective (stakeholder involvement, quality assurance, counseling and student support) (student selection shall be representative for different student phases, no students shall be in a professional relationship with University [assistants etc.], also graduates shall be invited)
12.40 – 13.30	Lunch and internal meeting of the experts
13.40 – 15.00	Internal Discussion of the panel, discussion of findings
15.00 – 15.30	Feedback to the University and Faculty; end of the visit



www.aqas.de

AQAS e. V.

Hohenstaufenring 30-32,
50674 Köln

Tel.: 02 21 / 99 50 06 0

Fax: 02 21 / 99 50 06 99

Mail: info@aqas.de