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### External Quality Assurance in Moldovan Higher Education in Challenging Conditions: What We Learned during the Pandemic

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# External Quality Assurance in Moldovan Higher Education in Challenging Conditions: What We Learned during the Pandemic

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**Abstract:** *The global crisis caused by the pandemic has significantly impacted education systems and higher education institutions worldwide. The rapid and forced transition to online and mixed learning, the lack or deficit of necessary resources, and the lack or insufficiency of previous experiences in conducting online education among teachers and students have transformed the teaching-learning-assessment processes into real challenges, raising the same time, many quality questions. This article describes ANACEC's activity in external quality assurance in extreme conditions and lessons learned from its own experience. The main directions that the Agency has followed and continues to follow, considering the recommendations at the European level, in order to support an objective, transparent and development-led external evaluation process are presented.*

**Keywords:** *online learning, e-learning, blended/combined/hybrid education, Moldova, external quality assurance, quality evaluation, challenges, lessons learned*

## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic and the emergency conditions caused and stimulated the reconsideration of the teaching-learning-assessment processes with their rapid reconfiguration, including in higher education institutions worldwide. The urgent need to invest in new technologies and modernize the ICT infrastructure has materialized in targeted actions of universities, conditioning and accelerating their digital transformation. The organization, in the conditions of lockdown of the study process only in the online format, was a platform for experimentation with the use of new tools and enrichment, thus being an impetus for innovation and digitalization. Even if things have returned to normal, many teachers opt for blended or hybrid learning that combines face-to-face learning with online learning, the proportion being established according to the specifics of the course unit and the conditions of the regulatory framework in force. New realities have motivated us to reevaluate the opportunities offered by e-learning. It is evident that in virtual and hybrid learning models, virtual learning, through its greater flexibility, can influence and improve

the student experience. If, in the beginning, it was often improvised, now is the time to develop sustainable online learning platforms directly, applicable in various situations. Furthermore, this becomes particularly relevant if we consider that "we are only at the beginning of the digital transformation"<sup>1</sup>. In this context, the concern for ensuring the quality of processes becomes a priority for the National Agency for Quality Assurance in Education and Research (ANACEC), the Moldovan authority responsible for the external evaluation of study programs and institutions. This paper presents an overview/review of the ANACEC case study during the pandemic, correlated with development trends in the field and the current research context. We will briefly introduce European and global online education and quality assurance policies. We will describe how the Republic of Moldova's national policy responded to the pandemic's challenges, how the new reality influenced higher education institutions, and what measures and tools were used. The Agency's approach to external evaluation in pandemic conditions will be described, highlighting the new role of the Agency in the external quality assurance process, the new key elements that have been applied in the national external evaluation process, as well as what updates have been performed in the regulatory framework of ANACEC. Finally, we will present the lessons learned that are the result of discussions within the Agency and with relevant stakeholders, which could form the basis of future reflection and action for ANACEC staff.

## European and Global Trends

The literature uses various synonymous or attached meanings to describe online education<sup>2</sup>. The concept of online learning is defined by highlighting the essential elements. Thus, online learning is considered the education offered with the Internet for teaching content and improving synchronous or asynchronous learning activities, as well as learning that does not depend on the student's location, whether physical or virtual (Singh & Thurman). Digital transformations have gradually led to digital pedagogy (Greenhow & Staudt, 2020), which promotes the application of various pedagogical approaches complementary to technologies.

The role of digital and mixed education for the EHEA was emphasized at the meetings of ministers responsible for higher education in Paris (2018) and Rome (2020), recognizing the opportunities offered by digitalization for education and its potential to transform the way higher education is provided. However, given that digitization does not offer a solution that would suit everyone, the need to

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<sup>1</sup> Finding of the participants in the webinar *The new online learning imperative*. 31 of January 2022, <https://www.usnews.com/news/live-events/the-new-online-learning-imperative>

<sup>2</sup> Distance learning, e-learning, electronic/ digital education, online/ virtual learning, blended/ hybrid/ combined education/learning, etc. (Singh & Thurman, 2019, <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1230523>, Gritsova & Tissen, 2021, Huertas & comp., 2018).

act creatively in the digital environment was mentioned. In this context, EHEA member countries are committed to supporting national education systems and universities "in using digital technologies for learning, teaching and assessment, as well as for academic communication and research" to invest in "developing digital skills and competencies for all" (Rome, 2020), "to make better use of digital and mixed education, with appropriate quality assurance" (Paris, 2018).

The pandemic has stimulated interest in online learning in higher education worldwide, with a substantial increase in research in the field<sup>3</sup>. The literature review shows that online learning is implemented differently by higher education institutions, which were creative in the pandemic period, testing and applying various tools and methods to promote online education, including support for teachers and students (e.g. digimenter<sup>4</sup>, Digimenter Network<sup>5</sup>). Support services have proven particularly useful given that teachers and students "were forced to learn new technologies and to adjust quickly to new approaches to learning and teaching" (Xiangha & Stern, 2022). Today it is evident that:

- Both face-to-face and online education are present in higher education. Their "natural development" includes education in the combined, mixed or hybrid formula, education that "activates innovation" (EADTU and ENQA, 2017, p.11).
- Mixed and online education is more than copying campus-based teaching in an online environment; it also requires an appropriate course design to optimize learning.
- Face-to-face learning environments need to be expanded with mixed and online learning environments (EADTU and ENQA, 2017, p.7).
- Common digital approaches are needed to increase recognition, mobility, and quality assurance.

Ensuring the quality of training in online/ e-learning and/or mixed/ combined/ hybrid format was and is the focus of researchers, who identified the dimensions needed

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<sup>3</sup> According to the study (Ling, Xueqin & comp., 2022. <https://bera-journals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/action/doSearch?ContribAuthorRaw=Carter%2C+Richard+Allen>) between January 2020 and August 2021, researchers from 103 countries and regions in 1061 published papers investigated a wide range of topics relevant to online learning, such as the design, delivery, and evaluation of online teaching and learning, the use of different technologies and strategies, redesigned curriculum, student perceptions and the psychological impact of e-learning imposed by the pandemic.

<sup>4</sup> Position with distinct responsibilities to encourage university subdivisions to consider the benefits of digitization, to provide support for the use of digital tools and to disseminate good practices in the field.

<sup>5</sup> Network set up in January 2019 to support the new community of Tampere Universities as a peer support network promoting digitalization within them, <https://sites.tuni.fi/digitaltoolkit/>

to be assessed in the evaluation of those programs<sup>6</sup>. The NAHE report (Grifoll, Huertas & comp., 2010) suggests that the quality criteria applied to e-learning and traditional campus-based education should be the same.

After the approval of the *Standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area* (ESG, 2015), researchers support the idea of using these standards in the external evaluation of study programs regardless of form (e-learning, online, mixed/ hybrid), considering them fully applicable. The European Association of Distance Learning Universities (EADTU) and ENQA supported this idea after examining the development of mixed and online programs in European higher education from a quality assurance perspective as part of a peer-to-peer learning activity. Considering the use of new pedagogies, new forms of curriculum, good online learning environment, the right balance is sought between face-to-face and online education (EADTU and ENQA, 2017). The 13th European Quality Assurance Forum *Broadening the scope of QA (2018)*, formulated the key issues to be addressed from the perspective of quality assurance for each ESG standard. In this context, the need for quality assurance agencies to adapt their methodologies and procedures applied is mentioned.

## National Trends

In the Republic of Moldova, distance education is accepted for bachelor's and master's degree studies (Education Code, art. 78). This legal provision was detailed in the *Framework Regulation on the organization and conduct of distance higher education* (Order of the Ministry of Education no. 474 of 24.05.2016), which establishes the general rules for distance education organization, management, admission, curricular support requirements, technical-material endowment, financing. In addition, the initiation of distance higher education programs is conditioned by obtaining the authorization for provisional operation from ANACEC, as well as by the existence in the requesting institution of the respective program accredited for full-time education.

The institutional structures for quality assurance are responsible for the internal evaluation of the quality of distance learning programs. The external evaluation is carried out by ANACEC or another quality assurance agency registered in EQAR.

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<sup>6</sup> E.g.: The general framework on e-learning quality (Ehlers & Pawlowski, 2006) includes 5 broad categories for the evaluation of study programs (1. Infrastructure provision, 2. Technical standards, 3. Content development, 4. Accessibility and pedagogical practices, 5. Institutional development), detailed in 17 subcategories. <https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/3-540-32788-6>. To ensure the quality of online and mixed education, the E-xcellence tool (<http://e-xcellencelabel.eadtu.eu>) was developed. It includes a set of benchmarks grouped into six categories: 1. Strategic management (5 benchmarks), 2. Curriculum design (4), 3. Course design (9) 4. Course delivery (6) 5. Staff support (6) 6. Student support (5). The eLearning QA checklist, proposed by Tucker C. (Tucker, 2022), is structured into four categories: 1. Functionality and use, 2. Visual design, 3. Animation, video and synchronization, 4. Accessibility. <https://www.learningguild.com/publications/159/elearning-quality-assurance-checklist/>

The methodological framework applied by ANACEC in the external evaluation does not include specific provisions for distance or mixed/ hybrid education, the external evaluation procedure and the stages designed for evaluating the quality of study programs being applied for all forms. It should be noted that, so far, higher education institutions in the country have yet to request an external evaluation to authorize the provisional operation of distance learning programs.

The evolution of the pandemic has affected the whole national education system, which passed through a general lockdown (March-April 2019), a long suspension of the educational process, and an ongoing pandemic reality. During the years 2020-2021, universities and educational institutions of all levels operated under restrictive conditions. The study process was organized, either entirely at a distance or in a mixed format, with a higher share of online activities (teaching-learning-assessment), compared to those carried out through direct contact. The new conditions revealed similarities with other countries' key findings (UNESCO, 2021, pp. 2-5), in particular (1) the presence of imperfect technologies, (2) uncertainty and lack of experience regarding the management and organization of distance teaching as well as distance/hybrid internal quality assurance.

To minimize the result of the evolution of the epidemiological situation and to support universities, the relevant Ministry elaborated the *Framework Recommendations for organizing online teaching activities in higher education institutions during the suspension of the educational process in the study rooms* (Order no. 366 of 22.03.2020). Thus, universities have delegated the right to decide on how to organize online teaching activities considering several factors: the decision of the teacher, technological possibilities, information systems available for teachers and students, the specifics of planned teaching activities and the field. The Ministry recommended to the institutions the establishment of Coordination Groups of online teaching activities at the university level, empowered with distinct responsibilities, including providing digital solutions, counselling, necessary technical support and assistance to teachers and students in the transition to online communication and teaching. The administration of the departments was empowered to organize the elaboration of the course materials in digital format. It was also recommended to universities: (1) to ensure the use of available digital content management platforms: Moodle, Cisco, Virtual Laboratories, Chemcraft, etc.; (2) to rethink the assessment methods according to the specifics of the program and the course and the possibilities of the institution; (3) to adapt to the online format the activities within the internships. As a result, universities initiated the use of online communication platforms (BigBuleButton, Zoom, Google Meet, Cisco Webex, etc.) in the process of teaching/learning/assessment, as well as the development and use of educational platforms (Google Classroom, Moodle, Microsoft 365, etc.) with an emphasis on the development of content. Special efforts were made to ensure video recording of lessons/courses for various levels of education and provide free access for those interested (<https://educatieonline.md>; <https://learn.md>; <https://lectii.utm.md>, etc.).

Material and financial support for processes was increased, and investments in the human factor were consolidated.

The forced and rapid transition to online education has raised several challenges:

- The ability of the main actors to adapt quickly to the changes that have taken place.
- New style and format of teaching-training-learning processes.
- Ensuring the objectivity of assessing the student's learning activity under new conditions.
- Resources (material, human, didactic) available for online education.
- Access of teachers and students to new technologies.
- The level of digital skills development in using the online platforms and tools needed to organize online training is diverse among teachers and students.
- Support provided by higher education institutions to teachers.
- Support services, including methodological, accessible, and functional under new conditions for various categories of students.
- Identifying and implementing new resources meant to facilitate the learning process (webinars, video tutorials, platforms for forums, etc.).
- Students' level of involvement, engagement, and communication, maintaining their interest in online activities.

## External Quality Assurance Activities

Like many other quality assurance agencies, ANACEC went through several phases: lockdown, suspension of the external evaluation process, gradual relaxation of restrictions, gradual resumption of work of employees in a particular mode, taking care of their health, resumption of the process of external evaluation of higher education programs from September 2019. Significant changes occurred in Agency's role in external quality assurance due to several factors: the strategic need for QA conceptualization for emergency conditions, responding promptly and accurately to the needs of educational institutions, adapting the external quality assessment procedure to the new conditions, ensuring its effectiveness, re-plan external quality assurance processes, define new formats for visiting educational institution.

Under the new conditions caused by the pandemic, operative interventions in the *Methodology of external evaluation* applied by the Agency in evaluating study programs were impossible. Thus, ANACEC organized such activities, applying the procedure in force, but with emphasis on several aspects about which the universities were informed, including:

- submission of self-evaluation reports and supporting materials in electronic format as a mandatory condition for all applicants for external evaluations,
- strict requirements regarding the functionality and comprehensiveness of the institutional web pages as an essential source of information for the potential beneficiaries, but also for the members of the external evaluation panels when identifying and verifying the evidence,

- ensuring the access of ANACEC evaluators to the self-evaluation reports and the related documents online after signing the *Confidentiality Agreement* and the *Declaration of their responsibility regarding the absence of conflicts of interest*,
- partial modification of the format of visits to institutions of external evaluation panels by:
  - reducing the direct contact of evaluators with people from the institutions involved in the external evaluation process,
  - limiting to two the number of members of the external evaluation panel empowered to go to the institution,
  - carrying out the activities specific to the evaluation visit, partially in the online format,
- video and audio interaction with representatives of higher education institutions and beneficiaries of higher education programs as a mandatory element in synchronous online external evaluation activities,
- conducting working meetings of external evaluation panels, as well as interviews with various target groups in universities online using various distance communication platforms agreed with higher education institutions (e.g., Cisco Webex, Google Meet and BigBlueButton),
- organizing meetings of the Profile Committee for Higher Education and the Governing Board in the online format.

That formula was applied in all external evaluations organized in 2020-2021.

At the same time, efforts were made to consolidate human resources on quality assurance issues using online opportunities. For this purpose, numerous webinars for various categories were organized. Given the crucial role of the experts in the external evaluation process managed by ANACEC, special attention was paid to their continuous information and training, an activity carried out by the provisions of the *Methodology for training the expert evaluators of ANACEC*, but exclusively in the online format. Thus, during 2020, the ANACEC staff developed the curriculum and curricular support for a training course *External quality evaluation of bachelor'/ integrated and master's degree programs* (3 ECTS credits), which aims not only to train but also to develop and strengthen the external evaluation skills of evaluators. In 2022 the ANACEC staff provided this course in three sessions expanding the list of beneficiaries to 94 external experts, 56 teachers and 132 students from universities. Moreover, ANACEC is focused on developing its regulatory framework, elaborating *Recommendations for ANACEC experts regarding the external quality evaluation of online and mixed study programs*. New notions and phrases have been introduced: "remote evaluation", "remote evaluation technology", "asynchronous technologies", "synchronous technologies", "virtual evaluation environment", etc.

At the higher education level, ANACEC applies ten quality assurance standards that correspond to ESG (2015). Each of them is characterized by a set of criteria,



performance indicators and evaluation standards described in the *External Evaluation Guidelines* for higher education cycles, developed by the Agency and implemented after approval by the Governing Board. Furthermore, based on the recommendations in the field at the European level, the Recommendations mentioned above for ANACEC experts provide a list of additional specific aspects per standards to be considered in the evaluation of online programs, facilitating the mission of external evaluators, as follows:

**ESG/ National accreditation standard 1. Policy for quality assurance**

Criteria	Performance indicators
1.1. The legal-normative framework for the operation of the program	1.1.1. The legal status of the institution vs. the realization of the study program
1.2. Strategies, policies and internal quality management	1.2.1. Quality assurance strategy and educational policy
	1.2.2. Organization, application and effectiveness of the internal quality assurance system

Specific aspects of being evaluated:

- Reflection on the policies and institutional normative framework of the aspects related to the realization of the didactic process in online, mixed or hybrid format during the pandemic period.
- The application by the evaluated institution through appropriate structures of a clear internal policy to ensure the quality of the educational process, considering the new format.
- Implementing a distinct policy at the institutional level to ensure data protection, academic integrity, and ethical behaviour.

**ESG/ National accreditation standard 2. Design and approval of programs**

Criteria	Performance indicators
2.1. Design and approval of the study program	2.1.1. General framework for designing the study program
	2.1.2. Connecting the study program to the National Qualifications Framework
2.2. Content of the study program	2.2.1. Mission and objectives of the study program
	2.2.2. The study plan
	2.2.3. Discipline curricula
	2.2.4. Relevance of the study program

Specific aspects of being evaluated:

- The existence at the institutional level of a clear strategy for digital innovation of the program.
- The level of expertise of the teachers involved in the curriculum design for the program.

- The extent to which the needs of students are considered in the digital innovation process of the program.

***ESG/ National accreditation standard 3. Student-centred learning, teaching and assessment***

Criteria	Performance indicators
3.1. The teaching-learning process	3.1.1. Forms of organizing the teaching-learning process
	3.1.2. Student-centered teaching-learning methods
	3.1.3. Use of ICT tools in the teaching-learning-assessment process
	3.1.4. Academic calendar and study process schedule
3.2. Internships	3.2.1. Organizing internships
	3.2.2. Collaboration agreements to carry out internships
3.3. Assessment of academic results	3.3.1. Organizing the process of assessing academic results
	3.3.2. Organizing the process of assessing internships

Specific aspects of being evaluated:

- To what extent the methods and forms of organizing the online and mixed teaching-learning-assessment process selected, and applied to the study program, are adequate for the acquisition by students of the expected learning outcomes?
- Diversity and efficiency of ICT tools/ educational platforms used in teaching, learning, and assessment of learning outcomes online or in a mixed way.
- Peculiarities in carrying out distance internships.
- To what extent and how the institution provides information/ training to students on the organization/ implementation of online education and the peculiarities of behaviour in the virtual environment?

Existence and functionality of the anti-plagiarism system used.

***ESG/ National accreditation standard 4. Student admission, progression, recognition, and certification***

Criteria	Performance indicators
4.1. Admission of students	4.1.1. Recruitment and admission of students
	4.1.2. Access for disadvantaged groups to studies
4.2. Student progress	4.2.1. Student promotion
	4.2.2. Academic mobility
4.3. Recognition and acquisition of certifications	4.3.1. Awarding the title and issuing the diploma

Specific aspects of being evaluated:

- Existence and functionality of the e-Admission system.
- Availability of student support services.

- Mechanisms are applied at the institutional level to monitor student promotion, dropout, and graduation rates.
- The institution takes preventive actions based on the analysis of collected data.
- Provided opportunities for virtual student mobility.
- Accessibility of data in the institutional information system.

**ESG/ National accreditation standard 5. Teaching staff**

Criteria	Performance indicators
5.1. Recruitment and administration of academic staff	5.1.1. Planning, recruitment, and administration of academic staff
	5.1.2. Professional qualification of academic staff
5.2. Academic staff development	5.2.1. Academic staff development strategies/policies/measures
	5.2.2. Planning and carrying out the methodical activity of the academic staff
	5.2.3. Evaluation of academic staff
5.3. Scientific research and innovation activity of academic staff	5.3.1. Planning and supporting the scientific research and innovation activity of the academic staff
	5.3.2. Carrying out and monitoring the scientific research and innovation activity of the academic staff
	5.3.3. Capitalization of the results of the scientific research and innovation activity of the academic staff in the context of the study program

Specific aspects of being evaluated:

- Adequate tools to ensure that the professional qualifications of the employed academic staff correspond to the study program's field and the teachers' profile to the delegated responsibilities.
- Adequate and accessible technological and pedagogical support services for teachers.
- Informing/ training teachers regularly organized, with increased attention to newcomers.
- Realization of the online editing plan of the curricular supports and of the results of the activity of scientific research, innovation and technological transfer to the program.
- Opportunities provided for the conduct of teacher virtual mobility.
- Participation of academic staff from the study program in scientific/ community research projects and national and international online scientific events, etc.

***ESG/ National accreditation standard 6. Learning resources and student support***

<b>Criteria</b>	<b>Performance indicators</b>
6.1. Administrative and auxiliary staff	6.1.1. Planning and coordinating the activity of administrative and auxiliary staff
6.2. Material and learning resources	6.2.1. Existence and use of educational and research spaces
	6.2.2. Endowment and accessibility of educational and research space
	6.2.3. Endowment, development, and accessibility of the library fund for the study program
	6.2.4. Students' assurance and access to curricular support
6.3. Financial resources	6.3.1. The financial means allocated to the educational and research process of the study program
	6.3.2. Tuition fees and scholarships for the study program
6.4. Social insurance for students	6.4.1 Providing students with dormitory

Specific aspects of being evaluated:

- Characteristics of the virtual learning environment established in the institution.
- To what extent the technical infrastructure developed in the institution ensures the accessibility of programs for all students, including those with special educational needs?
- Providing the study program with administrative and auxiliary staff.
- Ensuring the didactic and research process in the program with virtual laboratories, virtual simulators, etc.
- Measures are implemented to ensure electronic security, integrity and validity of information, and quality.
- Providing students with literature and updated curricular support in physical and digital format and their accessibility.
- Students' access to the funds of the Institutional Repository and International Scientific Databases, etc.
- Financial resources are allocated to develop online learning.

***ESG/ National accreditation standard 7. Information management***

<b>Criteria</b>	<b>Performance indicators</b>
7. 1. Access to information	7.1.1. Information management and access of students and employees to information on the study program
7.2. Databases	7.2.1. Establishment and access to the study program database

Specific aspects of being evaluated:

- Implementing the university management information system (SIMU) within the higher education institution.
- Ways of collecting data at the institution/ study program level and using their analysis results to improve quality continuously.
- Types of information in databases and ways of access by students and employees of the study program.

**ESG/ National accreditation standard 8. Public information**

Criteria	Performance indicators
8.1. Transparency of information of public interest regarding the study program	8.1.1. Website of the institution / study program
	8.1.2. Transparency of information regarding the activity of the department/chair/study program

Specific aspects of being evaluated:

- Design and functionality of the institutional website.
- The content of the information of public interest regarding the study program is placed on the website of the educational institution/ faculty/ department/ chair.
- Periodicity of updating the information on the institution’s website.

**ESG/ National accreditation standard 9. Ongoing Monitoring and periodic review of programs**

Criteria	Performance indicators
9.1. Procedures for regular Monitoring, evaluation and review of the study program	9.1.1. Monitoring and reviewing the educational offer and the study program
	9.1.2. Monitoring the teaching-learning-assessment processes
	9.1.3. Existence and application of self-evaluation procedures of the study program
	9.1.4. Evaluation of the study program by students, graduates, employers and other beneficiaries
9.2. Employment	9.2.1. Mechanisms for recording the employment and evolution of graduates from the study program in the field of work
	9.2.2. Career guidance activities and the competitiveness of graduates in the labour market

Specific aspects of being evaluated:

- The efficiency of the process of Monitoring and periodic review of the new format program.
- The ways of Monitoring and improving the teaching-learning-assessment activities within the online program.
- Mechanism in place to monitor the quality of the virtual learning environment.

- Ways to identify, process and analysis the students’ opinions regarding the teaching-learning-assessment activities and the content of the online study program.
- Ensuring feedback for stakeholders based on the analysis of the questionnaire results is an indispensable element of the internal quality assurance system.
- Evidence of employment and professional development of graduates of the study program in SIMU.
- ICT tools used in the professional orientation of high school students.

**ESG/ National accreditation standard 10. Cyclical external quality assurance**

Criteria	Performance indicators
10.1. External quality assurance	10.1.1. Implementation of the provisions and recommendations of the Ministry of Education and Research and of the relevant ministries
	10.1.2. Implementation of observations, recommendations and decisions formulated based on external evaluation by the ANACEC/ other quality assurance agencies

Specific aspects of being evaluated:

- Implementation of the E-management system of secretarial activities.
- Institutional procedures for communicating, executing, and monitoring the provisions and recommendations of the MER and the relevant ministries concerning the study program under exceptional conditions.

During the restrictive period, some of the above-listed aspects have been evaluated and analyzed by experts in the external evaluation of study programs. However, the elaborated recommendations with a more detailed list of relevant aspects per each standard are a valuable tool for a more objective and efficient external evaluation in higher education.

**Lessons Learned**

Indeed, online or mixed education implementation offered higher education institutions new opportunities to try different formulas and identify new options. At the same time, the process of external evaluation of online education in pandemic conditions highlighted some critical issues regarding the quality of these processes. Thus, the Moldovan universities have demonstrated a different level of preparation for the provision of study programs in online and/ or mixed format, which was influenced by available at the moment technological resources; the capacity of teachers to integrate new teaching technologies with traditional ones; varied digital skills among both students and teachers; level of information/ training for teachers and students; support services for students (tutoring, pedagogical/ technological/ administrative support) (UN Moldova, 2020). Meanwhile, considerable effort was made by institutions to progress and build step by step the quality in order to ensure the efficiency of the provided services.

Nevertheless, the experience gained and the good practices tested along the way still need to be studied and analyzed to determine what worked best, what did not, and why. Therefore, it is necessary to reflect on several topics and find answers to several questions, such as:

1. What is the optimal correlation between online and face-to-face activities?
2. What are the most recommended formulas for the student's full engagement in the online or mixed training-teaching-learning-assessment process?
3. How to assess the digital skills of teachers and students, crucial skills in the online and mixed learning process?
4. How to measure the level of increasing teachers' competence in using appropriate technologies and tools at all stages of the online or mixed educational process, including course preparation, teaching, communicating with students, Monitoring and assessing student learning, and providing constructive feedback?
5. How to organize continuous training on these dimensions?
6. How to ensure maximum efficiency and effectiveness in online, mixed/hybrid education?
7. How to ensure a comprehensive and fair external evaluation process in the changing environment?
8. How to ensure permanent transparency and correctness during virtual processes?
9. How to ensure the maximum involvement and participation of all interested stakeholders?
10. How to maximize the overall trust (of educational institutions and society in general) in the external evaluation process and its results?

It is obvious that to support the changes promoted in the new conditions; continuous investments are needed to develop institutional (material, technological, human, etc.) resources. Furthermore, the ways of student support should be differentiated and adapted to their needs. Transparency of processes is another success factor. At the same time, the level of accessibility of the higher education system from the perspective of the inclusion of all categories of disadvantaged young people (Agenda, 2030) must be permanently in the sights of all actors involved. At the same time, Agencies for quality assurance "will need to continue their important role in supporting institutions in ensuring that their education provision is fit-for-purpose and meets the needs of all stakeholders" (Gover, 2020).

## **Conclusions**

The current national regulatory framework is not friendly to the extension of mixed/hybrid education. The decisions of the relevant Ministry that promoted online learning during the period of restrictions ceased their action once Moldova returned to normal conditions.

In Moldovan educational institutions, the comprehensive online learning formula has yet to be appreciated by most students, and teachers, especially regarding the level of quality assured and the low level of communication (UN Moldova, 2020).

At the same time, it is a common opinion that mixed/ combined/ hybrid education should be applied in ordinary conditions. The courses that combine online and face-to-face teaching in various formulas seem attractive. Moreover, many researchers in the field consider that mixed/ combined/ hybrid programs are the future of higher education. In this context, traditional universities that intend to develop e-learning or provide mixed programs should guarantee the quality of the teaching-learning-assessment processes and adapt their internal quality assurance systems for this purpose.

In the same vein, ANACEC aims to consider the peculiarities of the mentioned forms of education in the external evaluation process and for this to detail the performance indicators for each quality standard, thus ensuring the necessary preconditions for a transparent, objective, stimulating evaluation, oriented towards the development and enhancement of study programs and educational institutions.

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