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**Assessing the Quality of Higher Education in the Republic of Moldova**

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## Assessing the Quality of Higher Education in the Republic of Moldova

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**Abstract:** *In the Republic of Moldova (from now on Moldova), there is only one National Agency for Quality Assurance in Education and Research (from now on NAQAER). It is an administrative authority subordinated to the Ministry of Education and Research (from now on MER), with legal personality under public law, responsible quality assurance in the field of education and research, which ensures the quality of services provided by institutions in the field of education and research. All stakeholders are involved in the external evaluation of the quality of studies (higher education institutions, civil society, teachers, students, business representatives, MER, Board of Governors). The main functions of NAQAER are related to the evaluation of quality in higher education; external evaluation of research and innovation organizations; control over the quality of higher education, and compliance with the accreditation and authorization requirements of entities offering educational programs and services. The „Ștefan cel Mare” Academy (from now on the Academy) of the Ministry of Interior is among the higher education institutions that comply with the regulatory framework of the standards established by NAQAER for the evaluation of the quality of education, being the only higher education institution with police specifics within the Ministry of Interior of the Republic of Moldova that was subjected to the external evaluation procedure by NAQAER and ARACIS.*

**Keywords:** *higher education institution, study program, quality evaluation, external evaluation, NAQAER, „Ștefan cel Mare” Academy of the Ministry of Interior*

## Introduction

In the context of concretizing some content aspects, we consider it worthwhile to mention a glossary of terms related to the field of quality management and accreditation at the national level of the Republic of Moldova, namely:

- quality in education – set of characteristics of a study program and its providers, through which the expectations of the beneficiaries are satisfied concerning the quality standards;
- evaluation of the quality of education – multi-criteria examination of the extent to which the educational institution and its programs meet the national reference educational standards;
- accreditation standards – a set of requirements that define the minimum mandatory level of performance of the activities of an education provider organization requesting provisional operation authorization, of an accredited higher education/technical professional institution requesting provisional operation authorization/accreditation of a new program of professional training or an accredited higher education/professional technical institution that requests an external evaluation of the quality of the education offered;
- integrated higher education – the cumulative duration of the I and II cycles of higher education, which corresponds to several at least 300 transferable study credits and which ends with obtaining a diploma equivalent to a master's degree.

The Republic of Moldova has taken important steps in the European integration of higher education by signing the Bologna Declaration in 2005. Therefore, the Republic of Moldova is part of the Bologna Process and, by signing this act, has accepted the implementation of that concept since 2005 (1). With the accession to the Bologna Process, the universities in our country, including the Academy, started replacing the old paradigm with the new one. One of the most important consequences for higher education is the impact of the Bologna Process on the management and quality of higher education, so the primary goal of the Bologna Process was to harmonize higher education and create a European Higher Education Area, in which all institutional actors would have the same standards and principles on which they would base their work. All this, in conditions of increased competition, has made Academy offer a modern, high-quality teaching assessment with attractive study programs to motivate, increase the level of credibility, and enrol as many students as possible. This has had and still has a positive effect on graduates, employers, beneficiaries, academia and the labour market.

We consider that this Bologna Declaration transposed the essential ideas and critiques of the European integration process in the field of higher education, finalized the exhaustive expression of the mission of European culture and the identification of the mechanism of its perpetuation and development in the region and the world of higher education institutions.

The adoption of the European Qualifications Framework in 2008 (EQF 2008) had a significant effect on the recognition of qualifications in the National Qualifications Framework of the Republic of Moldova (NQFRM) which provides the basic principles needed to prepare for the alignment of the National Qualifications Framework EQF and the self-certification of the National Qualifications Framework of the Republic of Moldova concerning the Qualifications Framework for the European Higher Education Area (QF-EHEA), as well as the indirect correlation with the national qualifications frameworks of other countries. It is a translation of different national qualifications, making it easier to understand qualifications from different EU countries. Furthermore, EQF aims to facilitate the mobility of students and workers across the EU to encourage the development of a mobile and flexible workforce across Europe and to contribute to the development of lifelong learning. Under the influence of the mentioned processes, in 2017, the National Qualifications Framework of the Republic of Moldova, approved by the Government, entered into force (2). According to p.5 of the respective GD, the National Qualifications Framework of the Republic of Moldova is structured on eight qualification levels, which correspond to the levels established by the European Qualifications Framework (including the Qualifications Framework for the European Higher Education Area) and reflects the current and future situation on the internal labour market and vocational training opportunities, defined in the national education system. Thus, the qualification levels of the National Qualifications Framework of the Republic of Moldova correspond to the levels of the European Qualifications Framework as follows: level 1 of NQFRM corresponds to level 1 EQF; level 2 of NQFRM corresponds to level 2 EQF; ....., level 7 of NQFRM corresponds to level 7 EQF; level 8 of NQFRM corresponds to level 8 EQF. Regarding the qualification levels of the National Qualifications Framework of the Republic of Moldova obtained in the higher education system, they must correspond to the levels of the Qualifications Framework for the European Higher Education Area as follows: level 6 of NQFRM corresponds to level 1 QF-EHEA; level 7 of NQFRM corresponds to level 2 QF-EHEA; level 8 of NQFRM corresponds to level 3 QF-EHEA. Thus, the Academy has transposed the most critical ideas of the Bologna Declaration into the educational process and connected the study programs to the National Qualifications Framework, which corresponds respectively to the European Qualifications Framework.

Also in 2017, in the national education system, in order to implement the provisions of art.81 of the Education Code of the Republic of Moldova no.152 / 2014 (3), with subsequent amendments, as well as taking into account the recommendations of the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED-F 2013), elaborated by the European Commission in order to uniformly apply the normative framework of the organization of higher education, the Government of the Republic of Moldova approved on 28.06.2017 the Nomenclature of vocational training fields and specialities in higher education (4). This Nomenclature includes ten fundamental

fields of science, culture and technology. In turn, each of these fundamental fields forms general fields of study, fields of vocational training, and specialities/study programs at the first cycle (license); all of them are coded.

## **The Education System in the Republic of Moldova**

According to the most crucial normative act on the educational segment (Education Code no. 152/2014) of the Republic of Moldova, art.12, the education system is organized on levels and cycles by the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED – 2011). As for higher education, it consists of three levels/cycles: ISCED level 6 – cycle I: undergraduate higher education; ISCED level 7 – cycle II: master’s higher education; ISCED level 8 – cycle III: doctoral higher education.

In the first cycle of higher education, according to the Nomenclature of fields of vocational training and specialities in higher education approved by the Government (4), the number of transferable study credits (EECS) per program is differentiated by 180, 240, 300 and 360 EECS. According to art.88 paragraph (2) of the Education Code of the Republic of Moldova the transferable study credits measure the amount of work required by the student in a course / academic discipline during a unit of time to reach the minimum level of objectives and programmed learning objectives, which are allocated as follows: one academic semester – 30 transferable study credits; for one academic year – 60 transferable study credits. Therefore, with 60 transferable study credits being awarded for one academic year, the study period for some undergraduate degree programs starts at three years ( $60 \text{ EECS} \times 3 \text{ years} = 180 \text{ EECS}$ , for example, study program 0400.1 Public Administration), four years ( $60 \text{ EECS} \times 4 \text{ years} = 240 \text{ EECS}$ , for example, the study program 0421.1 Law), five years ( $60 \text{ EECS} \times 5 \text{ years} = 300 \text{ EECS}$ , for example, the study program 0911.1 Dentistry), and for others, it even lasts six years ( $60 \text{ EECS} \times 6 \text{ years} = 360 \text{ EECS}$ , ex: study program 0841.1 Veterinary Medicine).

In the second cycle of master’s higher education, according to the Regulation on the organization and development of higher master’s studies – cycle II, approved by the Government (5), it is expressly mentioned in point 40 that “Higher master’s studies correspond to a number of 90 – 120 EECS transferable study credits, 30 credits for each semester, and one credit is allocated for 30 academic hours”. Respectively for an academic year, as in the first cycle of higher education, 60 transferable study credits are allocated. Thus, the master’s programs have a study period of 1.5 years at 90 EECS and two years at 120 EECS, respectively. The type and contents of the master’s programs, as well as the number of credits, are established by the organizing institutions so that the total cumulative duration of the studies at cycle I – license and cycle II – master is at least 300 credits of transferable study EECS. The Regulation regulates the organization of studies in the third cycle of doctoral higher education on the organization of higher doctoral studies in the third cycle, approved by the Government (6). According to this Regulation, in particular point

6, to the doctoral higher education programs, the third cycle corresponds to 180 transferable study credits resulting from the quantification of the effort made by the doctoral student (...). Respectively for an academic year, as in the first cycle of bachelor's higher education, the second cycle of higher master's education is allocated 60 transferable study credits. Thus, the doctoral programs have a study period of 3 years organized in the form of full-time education at 180 ECTS, and higher part-time doctoral studies last one year longer and are also awarded 180 transferable study credits.

As mentioned above, higher education in the Republic of Moldova is regulated by Education Code no. 152/2014 (3) with subsequent amendments. Analyzing the structure of this code, higher education is found in a separate segment, namely in Title V Higher Education. This code regulates the general provisions, structure, types of educational institutions, type of property, evaluation and grading scale, study documents, organization of study programs, management, scientific research, and higher education staff in the Republic of Moldova. According to art.75 paragraph (2) of the code, the mission of higher education is: to create, preserve and disseminate knowledge at the highest level of excellence; training of highly qualified specialists competitive in the national and international labour market; create lifelong learning opportunities; preserving, developing and promoting national cultural-historical values in the context of cultural diversity.

Following the ideas, I want to mention a specific moment, the separate Regulation by the legislator in the Education Code of the Republic of Moldova, namely in Title VI, on issues related to higher medical and pharmaceutical education, education in the fields of military, security and public order.

According to the type of property, the higher education institutions in the Republic of Moldova are classified as public and private, and the Government has the power to decide on the proposal of the MER, other central administrative authorities and public institutions on the establishment, reorganization or liquidation of public higher education institutions. So, according to art.82 paragraph (2) of the Education Code, "Higher education institutions are established, reorganized and liquidated by the Government at the initiative of the founder", and according to art. 122 paragraph (4) "The establishment, reorganization and liquidation of educational institutions in the fields of military and security is carried out by the Government, with the approval of the President of the Republic of Moldova, by the Education Code of the Republic of Moldova and other normative acts in force. This situation is also valid for higher education institutions in the field of public order, i.e. the establishment, reorganization and liquidation are carried out by the Government, in accordance with the Education Code of the Republic of Moldova and other normative acts in force.

The first stage in the organization of study programs in higher education is admission. Admission to higher education is organized based on the competition by the higher education institution for study programs accredited or provisionally authorized by NAQAER following the provisions of the legislation in force in the field of

education. There are currently 24 higher education institutions in the Republic of Moldova: 16 public and eight private.

One of the current trends in higher education institutions is related to the significant expansion of specialities and their transformation into competitive study programs nationally and internationally. In addition, increasing competition and the dynamics of social development give rise to the need for continuous diversification of the product of educational services provided by higher education institutions. At the same time, there is a growing interest in various forms of continuous learning throughout life, such as distance learning, training, qualification and retraining, or other activities after a bachelor's degree or master's.

All higher education institutions in the Republic of Moldova, regardless of the type of property, go through an evaluation process. This evaluation process goes through two stages: the first is the internal evaluation of the educational process in higher education that is carried out by the institutional structures of quality assurance (it exists in all institutions), and the second is the external evaluation of the educational process in higher education to NAQAER or another quality assessment agency, registered in the European Register for Quality Assurance in Higher Education.

According to art.122 paragraph (1) of the Education Code of the Republic of Moldova, quality assurance in higher education is achieved through a set of actions to develop the institutional capacity to develop, plan and implement curricula, which forms and strengthens the trust of beneficiaries that the institution offering education meets and improves quality standards following its mission. Also, in the same article, paragraph (2) it is mentioned that quality management in higher education is ensured: a) at the national level - by MER and NAQAER; b) at the institutional level - by internal quality assurance structures, and at paragraph (3) it is mentioned that a fully functional quality assurance system involves two successive stages: a) the provisional operation authorization, which represents the act of establishing the institution and grants the right to carry out the educational process and to organize the admission to study; b) the accreditation, which grants, in addition to the rights provided in letter a), the right to organize the final exam, as well as the right to issue diplomas, certificates and other study documents recognized by MER.

## **The Accreditation Process of Higher Education Institutions in the Republic of Moldova**

An essential point in the Education Code of the Republic of Moldova (3) is the evaluation of quality. The evaluation of quality in higher education consists of the multi-criteria examination to the extent to which an educational institution and its program meet the national reference standards. Quality assessment in higher education is a complex set of self-assessment, internal assessment and external quality assessment activities following approved accreditation standards, criteria and indicators. Self-assessment and internal quality assessment in higher education are carried out by the institutional structures responsible for quality assurance, in

accordance with the national reference standards. The Education Code allows the external evaluation of quality in higher education to be carried out by NAQAER and another quality assessment agency registered in the European Register for Quality Assurance in Higher Education.

Following an extensive reform process initiated in 2017 (7) to amend and supplement some legislative acts, promoted and implemented in the context of the implementation of the Public Administration Reform Strategy for 2016-2020, it included several organizational changes and content for several structures in various areas of public interest, including quality assurance. As a result, in 2018, the name of the National Agency for Quality Assurance in Vocational Education was changed to the National Agency for Quality Assurance in Education and Research, where the National School Inspectorate, administrative authority under the Ministry of Education, Culture and Research, and the National Council for Accreditation and Attestation, an autonomous administrative authority vis-à-vis the Government, was reorganized by merging (absorption) with NAQAER. All these reorganizations were found in a government act approved by the Government (8).

So, NAQAER from the Republic of Moldova was established according to GD no. 201 of 28.02.2018 mentioned above. Also by this GD (8) there were approved the Regulation of organization and functioning, structure, organizational chart, and staff limit of the administrative apparatus of NAQAER (9).

As we can see, the first fully functional activities of NAQAER took place in 2018. However, due to the lack of experience in the field of evaluation and accreditation of higher education in the Republic of Moldova, the primary approach in the process of setting up the Agency and developing the necessary documentation was studying international experience and best practices, correlating them with the specifics, conditions and traditions of national higher education in order to find the best suitable system for the educational space of the Republic of Moldova.

In order to accomplish its mission, NAQAER has the following functions:

- 1) quality assessment in general, technical and higher professional education;
- 2) external evaluation of continuous professional training programs;
- 3) external evaluation of organizations in the fields of research and innovation;
- 4) evaluation of the scientific and scientific-didactic staff;
- 5) control over the quality of general, vocational and continuing education, compliance with the accreditation and authorization requirements of entities offering educational programs and services.

According to the Regulation on the organization and functioning of NAQAER approved by GD no. 201 of 28.02.2018, the organizational structure consists of the Board of Directors, profile commissions, and the administrative apparatus. The Agency's executive management shall be exercised by the President of the Governing Board, appointed by the Government, with whom the Vice-President and the Secretary-General shall assist.



The Board of Directors consists of 15 members: 13 employees with scientific-didactic and scientific titles, didactic and managerial degrees relevant to general education, technical vocational, higher and research, a student representative and a representative of the business environment. The members of the Board of Directors may not hold positions of public dignity, the position of rector, member of the Board of Institutional Strategic Development or director of the educational or research institution.

In addition to the NAQAER subdivisions, there are, according to its organization and functioning regulations, the profile commissions, which organize the competition for the selection of expert evaluators and their inclusion in the Register of expert evaluators by fields approved by the Board. The profile commissions are organized for each field of activity of the Agency: general education, technical professional, higher education, continuous professional training, research and innovation. The profile commissions are set up by the Regulation developed by the Agency and approved by the Government (10), in coordination with the MER, after consultation with the Academy of Sciences of Moldova. The nominal composition of the profile Commissions of NAQAER is approved by the order of the Minister of Education and Research (<https://www.anacec.md/ro/content/organigrama>). The profile commissions are made up of personalities with remarkable experience in the fields of activity of the commissions, with professional achievements recognized at national and international levels. Each profile commission consists of nine people, selected by the competition.

One of the subdivisions that are part of the structure of NAQAER and ensure the proper functioning of the Agency is the Department of Evaluation in Higher Education (DEHE), with distinct attributions of external quality assurance at the level of higher education. The DEHE activity is based on several national and international regulations. In our opinion, among the most relevant national normative acts on which the DEHE activity is based are: the Education Code of the Republic of Moldova (2), the Methodology for external quality assessment in order to authorize temporary operation and accreditation of study programs and vocational-technical, higher education and continuing education institutions and the Regulation on the calculation of fees for services provided in the external evaluation of the quality of study programs and vocational-technical, higher and continuing education institutions, approved by the Government, as subsequently amended (11), Guidelines for the external evaluation of undergraduate higher education programs (cycle I) and integrated higher education programs, of master's higher education programs (cycle II), approved by the NAQAER Board of Directors, with subsequent amendments (12) and the external evaluation of higher education institutions, approved by the NAQAER Board of Directors (13).

As mentioned above, quality assessment in higher education is a complex set of self-assessment, internal assessment and external quality assessment activities by the accredited standards, criteria and indicators approved; from now on, we will

refer to the external assessment procedure quality achieved by NAQAER.

With the entry into force in 2016 of the External Quality Assessment Methodology and External Assessment Guidelines for undergraduate (cycle I) and master's degree programs (cycle II), higher education institutions, with subsequent amendments, there have been organizational and content changes in the external evaluation procedures in order to authorize the provisional operation, accreditation, re-accreditation of study programs and higher education institutions. All this made it possible for NAQAER to fully fulfil the functions established by the Education Code of the Republic of Moldova, the Code on Science and Innovation and the Regulation of organization and functioning of NAQAER, being an administrative authority subordinated to the MER, responsible for quality assurance in full-fledged education and research.

The external quality assessment procedure performed by NAQAER is the following: According to the normative framework in force, the external evaluation of the quality of higher education programs can be organized by study program or by a group of study programs in the same field of professional training. Providers of educational services must request the external evaluation of undergraduate/integrated higher education programs for temporary operation authorization, accreditation, and re-accreditation to demonstrate their compliance with the accreditation standards.

*External evaluation for provisional operation authorization.* Any educational institution regardless of the type of property, public or private, interested in offering higher education programs must undergo the external evaluation process to authorize the provisional operation before starting to operate. Specifically, it is required by the higher education institution in case of initiation of a new study program in the first cycle (undergraduate studies / integrated higher education), registered in the Nomenclature of fields of vocational training and specialities in higher education, has study programs accredited / re-accredited to the first cycle (graduate studies) in the field of vocational training in which he/she is required to obtain the provisional operation authorization of the second cycle study program (master's higher studies) and has accredited / re-accredited study programs to the first cycle (undergraduate studies) and the second cycle (higher master's studies) in the field of vocational training in which it requests the obtaining of the authorization of provisional operation of the study program at the third cycle (doctoral higher studies). This type of external evaluation aims to demonstrate the existence of resources, facilities and institutional structures necessary to initiate the teaching process for the study program by the regulatory framework in force.

The external quality assessment procedure to authorize the provisional operation of study programs and educational institutions shall be completed by NAQAER within up to 5 months from the date of initiation of the external evaluation procedure by the decision of the Board of the Agency.

Authorization for the provisional operation of higher education curricula expires after the first promotion of graduates.

*External assessment for accreditation / re-accreditation* is required upon expiry of the provisional operating license after the first promotion of graduates to the licensed higher education / integrated higher education program. Higher education institutions may not obtain a provisional operating license or accreditation for master's and doctoral higher education programs (cycles II and III) if the undergraduate higher education programs (cycle I) in the same field are not accredited.

The educational institution requests the external quality assessment to accredit the study programs / educational institution at least six months before the expiration of the provisional operation authorization or the accreditation of the study programs / educational institution.

The external quality assessment procedure for the accreditation of curricula and educational institutions shall be completed by the Agency within up to 5 months from the date of initiation of the external evaluation procedure by the decision of the Governing Board of the Agency.

After obtaining the accreditation, the study programs and higher education institutions are subject to external evaluation periodically in order to be re-accredited, at least once every five years, to the accredited undergraduate / integrated higher education program and which is promoted every year during the last five years.

Both the external evaluation for accreditation and re-accreditation aim to demonstrate the existence and functionality of resources, facilities and institutional structures at a minimum acceptable level, which provides premises for the further development of the teaching process for the study program in accordance with the legislative framework in force.

The decision on the provisional operation authorization, accreditation, non-accreditation or withdrawal of the right of activity of a higher education institution or the organization of a study program shall be taken by the MER, adopted based on a decision of the Management Board of the Agency or a decision of another quality assessment agency recorded in the European Register for Quality Assurance in Higher Education.

In case of obtaining negative results in the external evaluation of higher education institutions, MER withdraws the right of activity of institutions or organization of study programs, students being assigned to similar programs in other educational institutions until the reasons for the unfavourable evaluation results are removed. These provisions also apply to doctoral higher education programs offered by organizations in the field of science and innovation, as well as to the respective organizations regarding the organization of higher doctoral studies.

As previously mentioned, the external quality assessment is performed based on the provisions of the Education Code of the Republic of Moldova, accreditation standards, criteria and performance indicators established in the External Evaluation Methodology, approved by the Government, with subsequent amendments (11), and standards and the minimum mandatory assessment standards set out in the External Assessment Guidelines for Undergraduate (Cycle I) and Integrated Higher

Education Programs, Master's Degree Programs (Cycle II), approved by the NAQAER Board, with subsequent amendments (12) and the Guide for external evaluation of higher education institutions, approved by the NAQAER Board of Directors (13).

According to these guidelines mentioned above, external evaluation of the quality of higher education is capitalized by:

- *accreditation standards* contain a set of requirements that define the mandatory minimum level of performance of activities by an education provider. Accreditation standards are formulated in terms of rules or results in the form of a statement, are differentiated according to evaluation criteria and are specified in a set of Performance Indicators, evaluation standards and minimum mandatory evaluation standards. Each accreditation standard contains an appropriate number of points.
- *evaluation criteria*, represent performance levels, through which the possibilities of reaching certain standards and/or objectives, which are specific to each accreditation standard, are examined. Each criterion corresponds to one or more performance indicators and a certain number of points.
- *performance indicators* is the measuring instrument that indicates the characteristics of a specific criterion for evaluating the quality of the curriculum and the activity of the educational institution. The evaluation standard reflects the mode of manifestation and the level of achievement of each performance indicator.
- *evaluation standard* is formulated in a statement that reflects the quality requirements required for the curriculum and/or the activity of the educational institution and allows the determination of the level of fulfilment of these requirements. Each evaluation standard is rated with points.

The main accreditation criteria are summarized in the following ten accreditation standards:

1. Quality assurance policies (corresponds to 8 points).
2. Design and approval of programs (corresponds to 12 points).
3. Student-centered learning, teaching and assessment (corresponds to 13 points).
4. Admission, evolution, recognition and acquisition of certifications by the student (corresponds to 8 points).
5. Teaching staff (corresponds to 21 points).
6. Learning resources and student support (corresponds to 14 points).
7. Information management (corresponds to 5 points).
8. Information of public interest (corresponds to 3 points).
9. Continuous monitoring and regular evaluation of programs (corresponds to 12 points).
10. External quality assurance on a cyclical basis (corresponds to 4 points).

The above accreditation standards are in line with national and international reference documents. In the context of the commitments undertaken by the Republic of Moldova by signing the Bologna Declaration, tending to be part of the Common European Higher Education Area and to ensure the quality of education in higher education, an important reference document is “Standards and guidelines for ensuring quality in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)”, version 2015. This allows a measurable implementation of a certain standard through an appropriate criterion. This justifies the need to enrich the content and characteristics of the criteria for evaluation, monitoring and post-accreditation control on the implementation of the internal system of evaluation and quality assurance for the training and development of academic staff in higher education institutions.

In conclusion, the external evaluation of higher education institutions is considered when ranking higher education institutions by categories within the accreditation procedure.

According to the legislation of the Republic of Moldova in force, which regulates the external evaluation procedure approved by the Government, with subsequent amendments (11), each external evaluation procedure of the quality of the study program/study program group and/or educational institution for provisional authorization operation or accreditation / re-accreditation goes through the following steps:

- initiation of the evaluation procedure by the educational institution/consortium/partnership/subsidiary/founder/MER;
- internal quality assessment (self-assessment) and elaboration of the Self-Assessment Report by study program/group of study programs / educational institution;
- submission of the application and the file on paper and in electronic format, completed according to the regulatory requirements, to the SDC within NAQAER;
- returning the file of the educational institution in case of finding the non-compliance of the rigours of completing the file or of elaborating the Self-Evaluation Report after a preliminary examination within NAQAER;
- approval by the NAQAER Board of Directors of the decision to initiate or reject the external evaluation procedure;
- setting up the External Evaluation Commission;
- analysis of the Self-Assessment Report;
- carrying out the evaluation visit to the educational institution/institutions and completing the “Visit form”;
- elaboration of the External Evaluation Report;
- examining and validating the results of the external evaluation by the profile Commission and submitting the proposed decisions, accompanied by a report, to the NAQAER Board of Directors;

- examining the results of the evaluation and taking the decision by the NAQAER Board of Directors;
- transmission of the decision of the NAQAER Board to the MER;
- granting the provisional operation authorization/accreditation by the MER for higher education;
- application of the recommendations resulting from the external evaluation.

The Government recently approved the new amendments and rules governing the external evaluation procedure and introduced them in February 2022 (14). In its turn, NAQAER transposed these changes in the guidelines for external evaluation of higher education programs, approved by the Board of NAQAER, through the minutes no. 73 of 01.04.2022.

### **Educational Activity of the „Ștefan cel Mare” Academy of the Ministry of Internal Affairs**

The Academy is the only higher education institution subordinated to the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA) of the Republic of Moldova, specializing in training qualified staff/specialists with higher education for the administrative authorities and institutions subordinated to the MIA and other law enforcement bodies. The Academy is a public institution of higher education with accredited study programs, with the status of a legal entity under public law, an integral part of the education system in the Republic of Moldova. Thus, the Academy carries out its activity with a double subordination: to MIA and MER.

During activity from its foundation until now, the Academy has been subject to accreditation processes according to national legislation. Following the Law of the Republic of Moldova no. 1257 of 16.07.97 (15) from 2005, the Academy was subject to evaluation and accreditation, for which it obtained accreditation. In 2013, the Academy was subjected to external evaluation in the field of science and innovation by the National Accreditation and Attestation Council, for which it obtained scientific accreditation.

In order to implement the provisions of the Action Plan for the implementation of the Justice Sector Reform Strategy for 2011 – 2016, approved by Parliament Decision (16), as well as based on the results of the external evaluation carried out by NAQAER, the Academy was accredited to organize undergraduate studies (cycle I) in the field of Law by Government Decision (17), as well as based on the external evaluation carried out by the Estonian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher and Vocational Education (EKKA), the Academy was accredited to organize higher master's degree studies (cycle II) in the field of Law by Government Decision (18). Furthermore, the third cycle of higher doctoral studies is organized within the Doctoral School “Criminal Sciences and Public Law”, which operates on the basis of the provisional operation authorization of the NAQAER Board of Directors from 2016.

Thus, in the context of those mentioned above, the Academy is currently conducting educational processes in all three cycles (<https://www.academy.police.md/admitere>) (19).

Within the first cycle of higher education, the educational process is carried out in two study programs:

- Law is the first of two forms of full-time and part-time education. This program's studies are carried out from the state budget and by contract (for a fee). Graduates who have successfully passed the bachelor's exam obtain the title of Bachelor of Law.
- The second is Public Administration, which is done only through full-time education. Studies in this program are carried out only from the state budget. Graduates who pass the bachelor's exam obtain a bachelor's degree in administrative sciences.

Within the second cycle of master's higher education, the educational process is carried out in five study programs, the type of programs are the following - professional master's degree: Criminal Law; Economic Law; Criminal Investigation Activity; Police Law; Special Investigative Activity.

Studies within the second cycle of higher master's education are carried out full-time. The duration of studies is 1.5 years / 90 ECTS and two years / 120 ECTS and is carried out from the state budget and by contract (for a fee). Graduates who have successfully defended their master's thesis obtain a master's degree in law.

Within the third cycle of higher doctoral education, the educational process is carried out in two study programs, and only a scientific doctorate:

- Criminal Law, specializing in Criminal Law and Criminal Enforcement; Criminology; Criminal Procedural Law; Forensics, Forensic Expertise and Operational Investigations.
- Public Law, specialities Administrative Law; Land and Environmental Law; Contravention Law.

The studies in the third cycle of higher doctoral education are organized in the form of full-time education with a duration of 3 years and part-time education with a duration of 4 years. In addition, frequency / low-frequency studies are also awarded 180 ECTS. Higher doctoral studies are organized with funding from the state budget and by contract (for a fee). The finality of the doctoral thesis is the elaboration and public defence of the doctoral thesis.

Therefore, the study programs at all study cycles are constantly updated and modernized, subject to processes, constant procedures of self-assessment (internal assessment), evaluation and accreditation. All this occurs through an internal quality assurance system of education, carried out through the procedures of monitoring the teaching-learning-assessment processes by questioning students, academic staff, graduates, employers and other interested actors.

The institutional quality assurance structures, the Studies and Quality Management Directorate and the Quality Assurance Commission, following national reference standards, carry out the internal assessment of the educational process within the Academy. Quality assurance within the Academy is carried out through a set of actions to develop the institutional capacity to develop, plan, conduct, organize and implement study programs, through which the trust of the beneficiaries (students, graduates, employers) is formed and strengthened that The Academy offers a qualitative and satisfactory education, improves quality standards following the mission assumed by it.

Also, at the end of these processes, self-assessment reports and a plan of measures for continuous improvement of study programs procedures are prepared, with their submission to NAQAER or another quality assessment agency registered in the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education.

## **Conclusion**

As a result of these analyses, we found that assessing the quality of higher education in the Republic of Moldova is complex and very beneficial because higher education institutions can demonstrate compliance with the quality of the educational process with national and international accreditation standards. Due to the conformity of the quality of the national educational process with the international accreditation standards, the higher education system in the Republic of Moldova demonstrates that it is part of the European educational space. Therefore, the high standards, indicators and criteria set for the evaluation and accreditation of higher education institutions in the country are a prerequisite for the future positive development of higher education and assure the academic community, beneficiaries, employers and the general public that higher education programs, as well as the educational institution, meet the level of quality corresponding to state educational standards and good practices, both national and international. This leads to a closer relationship between the institution and the labour market.

During the activity, from the foundation until now, the Academy has demonstrated that it aligns with the requirements, and the national accreditation standards, offering an optimistic perspective to graduates with diplomas of different levels (bachelor, master, and doctorate) for professional development, offering opportunities qualification, employment with a successful future career. This fact again proves that the skills acquired by graduates of the programs of study of the Academy correspond to the requirements of the labour market.

Once it aligns with the requirements and national and international accreditation standards through the lens of external evaluation by NAQAER, ARACIS, the educational process of the Academy demonstrates academic performance and excellence, all of which would influence increase the level of appreciation worldwide, occupying advanced positions in the top universities of the whole world.



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