

REQUIREMENTS IMPOSED ON THE UNIVERSITIES OF THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA ON THE PATH OF ACHIEVING SUSTAINABILITY

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Abstract: *The fundamental aspects, factors, as well as, the premises for ensuring the sustainability in higher education in the Republic of Moldova were analysed in this paper. The relevance of the research topic derives from the need to ensure sustainability in the universities in the Republic of Moldova, in the context of the competitive struggle. The research problem represents the need to identify the challenges faced by the higher education institutions from the country, along with the necessity to elucidate effective solutions in order to achieve sustainability. In this context, a methodological analysis of the regulations in higher education in our country was performed. The research methodology focused on the use of several methods such as: analysis, synthesis, induction, deduction, abduction, documentation, scientific abstraction. In conclusion, we can reiterate that the higher education system in the Republic of Moldova must be connected to EU regulations in order to anchor in the process of sustainable university development. An imperative for educational institutions in the country converts into the implementation of the university sustainability management and the assurance of sustainability strategies.*

Keywords: *higher education system, The Code of Education, higher education institutions, sustainability, competitiveness, university sustainability management.*

JEL Classification: *Q18, I23.*

1. Introduction

In the 21st century, everyday education, in consort with other sectors, undergo major transformations, both at the level of education organization and at the level of activity of different institutions in the field of education. Globally, education is changing and is shaped by the requirements and context of the external environment in which educational institutions operate.

Sustainability is a concept focused on achieving human development goals. Simultaneously, it is concentrated on supporting the capacity of ecosystems by providing natural resources and protecting life and nature, without diminishing the chances of future generations.

This concept is perceived as significant in ensuring social and economic development, as it was first defined by the United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) in 1987.

The Report “Our Common Future” defined “sustainability as one that strives to meet the needs of present and future generations in accordance with the exploitation of the environment” (Brundtland Report, 1987).

Recent developments also show that the “Europe 2020 strategy: a strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth” adopted by the European Union in 2010, highlights the crucial importance of innovation, education, the digital society, training and lifelong learning in this context (EU, 2010).

According to the Global Action Programme on Education for Sustainability adopted by UNESCO in 2014, it can be specified that political agreements, financial incentives and modern technologies are not enough to achieve sustainability (UNESCO, 2014).

Scholars in the domain of sustainability, Erpenbeck and Rosenstiel, highlight the fact that “sustainability requires a change in people’s consciousness and provides a framework for further decisions and actions. Accordingly, «a new culture of learning» is required (Erpenbeck, Rosenstiel, 2003).

In this context, we considered it necessary to carry out an assessment of the requirements imposed on the higher education system in the Republic of Moldova in order to achieve sustainability. In terms of this research, we had the opportunity to identify the challenges and prospects for the development of the higher education system on the way to achieving sustainability.

2. Research Methodology

The research methodology focused on the use of documentation as a fundamental method, which helped us to obtain relevant results, but also to point out the most important challenges faced by the universities in achieving sustainability.

The goal of the research consists in the methodological study of the problems and challenges of achieving sustainability in the higher education system in Moldova.

The objectives of the research subsumed to the general goal are:

O1: studying the regulation of the higher education system in Moldova;

O2: identifying the main problems and challenges of higher education institutions on the way to achieving sustainability;

O3: highlighting solutions for the sustainable development of Moldovan universities.

Research Questions

RQ1: What is the development level of the higher education system in Moldova?

RQ2: What are the major problems and challenges for higher education institutions in Moldova on the way to achieving sustainability?

3. Theoretical Background

According to sustainability experts such as Urbaniec, education should focus on self-organization and competence. The purpose of education is to support the development of the personality, in order to manage complex situations and make appropriate decisions, to respond and to have high ethical standards in accordance with the requirements of sustainability (Urbaniec, 2018).

Researcher Ellis explains that dependency refers to the reliability, maintainability, affordability and consistency of services. Students must be able to rely on the university that offers the tools for success. The higher education system is supported by the ingenuity and passion of those who have chosen an academic life (Ellis, 2010).

Scholar Taylor mentions that “universities must ensure that the quality of their services, education and research is properly oriented, so as to train well-educated graduates in the values of sustainability. Teaching and research are intrinsically connected”, and research support is another path to sustainability (Taylor, 2007).

According to Professor Bob Farrant, “for universities to stimulate sustainability, they need to focus on creating new knowledge, preserving indigenous knowledge, disseminating both types of information, economic and social innovation, solving problems associated with rapid globalization and urbanization, and the development of a strong community-based organization” (Farrant, 2002). The researcher reiterates that “the ability to create sustainability thrives on clearly defining the objectives of the higher education institution and supporting different strategies of researchers and academia”. The research continues in the context of ensuring sustainability and the research assessment is needed for the sustainability strategy and the achievement of objectives.

4. Results

In recent years, the education sector has undergone major changes. A first change that has taken place in the education system in the Republic of Moldova is the

implementation of the Bologna system in the education system of the Republic of Moldova. The Bologna Declaration of 1999 laid the foundations for the achievement of a Common Higher Education Area in Europe by promoting common strategic directions at national and institutional levels (Bologna Declaration, 1999).

Important changes also took place in the higher education system, which was also vulnerable to several changes that took place with the development of society but also with the adoption of the Bologna Declaration. In the field of higher education, the organization of the Bologna system is summarized to the organization of the higher education system in graduate and postgraduate education, as shown in Figure 1.

According to the data in Figure 1, we can see that the higher education system is organized on 2 major levels:

a. university higher education – which comprises 2 dimensions:

- undergraduate studies – the length of studies is 3-4 years depending on the field of education. It ends with obtaining a Bachelor's degree diploma in this particular field;
- master studies – the length of studies is 1.5-2 years, depending on the chosen field of education. It ends with obtaining a Master's degree diploma in this particular field;

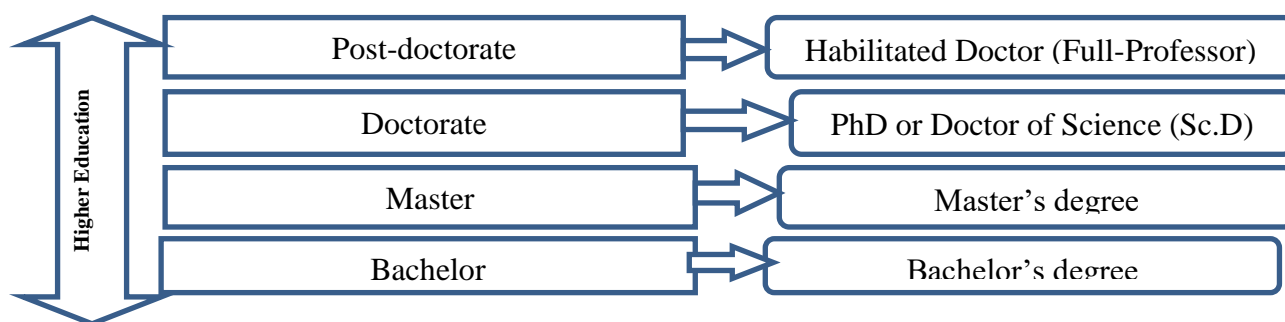


Figure 1. Organizing the higher education system according to the Bologna system

Source: developed by the author based on the Education Code, 2014

b. postgraduate higher education – includes 2 other major dimensions:

- doctoral studies – the length of studies is 3-4 years depending on the program of studies (full-time or part-time). It ends with obtaining a Doctorate Diploma in a certain field;
- post-doctoral studies – the length of studies is over 3-4 years, depending on the field of studies. It ends with obtaining the title of Habilitated Doctor.

The implementation of the Bologna system in the higher education system of the Republic of Moldova has contributed decisively to the joining of the education system in our country with the requirements and principles of organizing higher education of the European Union.

Major changes to the European Union's directives regarding higher education organization also took place in 2017, when the EU Commission published a "Renewed EU Agenda for Higher Education" (COM (2017)0247, 2017).

The agenda is focused on 4 important dimensions:

- aligning the skills development in higher education with labour market needs;
- ensuring higher education that is widely accessible and more conducive to inclusion, and increasing its interaction with society;
- stimulating the innovation capacity of higher education;
- increasing the effectiveness and efficiency of higher education.

Subsequently, another major change took place in May 2018, when following the Gothenburg Summit, the European Commission published a communication “Building a stronger Europe: the role of youth, education and culture policies” (COM(2018)0268, 2018).

The contents of this document focus on the creation of a common European area of education, and includes the following aspects:

- strengthening the funding of education through Erasmus+ programs;
- opening more than 20 European universities by 2024, which would contribute to obtaining diplomas recognized throughout Europe;
- creating a student ID card that would encourage the mobility of students throughout Europe;
- a proposal for the automatic recognition of higher education and higher secondary education diplomas, as well as the results of periods of study spent abroad (COM(2018)0270, 2018).

The higher education system in the Republic of Moldova is regulated by the legislation of our country but also by the legislation of the European Union.

If we analyse the provisions of the Education Code regarding the organization of universities, we can see that universities are classified into 3 basic categories, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Classification of universities in the Republic of Moldova

Category	Its description
Category A	The university falls into Category A if: a) pursues higher education in one or more fields of professional training; b) carries out research, development, innovation or artistic creation activities; c) offers Bachelor, Master and Doctoral programs.
Category B	The university falls into Category B if: a) pursues higher education in one or more fields of professional training; b) carries out research, development, innovation or artistic creation activities; c) offers Bachelor and Master programs.
Category C	The university falls into Category C if: a) pursues higher education in one field of professional training; b) carries out research or artistic creation activities; c) offers Bachelor programs.

Source: developed by the author based on the Education Code, 2014

According to the Education Code, universities are subject to external quality assessment every 5 years, based on the methodology and criteria developed by the National Agency for Quality Assurance in Education and Research, and approved by the Government.

The importance of accreditation is enormous since it contributes to:

- a) ranking of higher education institutions by categories during the accreditation procedure;
- b) provisional operation authorization, accreditation and periodic re-accreditation of higher education institutions, as well as the hierarchy of study programs;
- c) ranking of higher education institutions based on the methodology approved by the National Agency for Quality Assurance in Education and Research (Education Code, 2014).

The network of higher education institutions, at the level of 2019, consists of 29 units, including 19 state and 10 non-state institutions. Most higher education institutions have their headquarters in Chisinau – 25 units. Balti and Comrat, Cahul and Taraclia have 1 higher education institution in each location (NBS, 2020).

In Table 2 we showed the dynamics of higher education institutions in the country by property, and the number of students in these institutions by sex (women and men).

Table 2. Dynamics of higher education institutions in Moldova, 2010-2019

Indicators	10/11	11/12	12/13	13/14	14/15	15/16	16/17	17 /18	18/19
Total number of institutions	33	34	34	32	31	31	30	29	29
Number of state institutes	19	19	19	19	19	19	19	19	19
Number of non-state institutions	14	15	15	13	12	12	11	10	10
Total number of students	107813	103956	102458	97285	89529	81669	74726	65543	60608
of which women	61202	58576	57371	55067	51496	47217	42828	38054	35091
of which men	46611	45380	45087	42218	38033	34452	31898	27489	25517
Students from state institutions	88791	84946	83008	78919	72474	66938	62108	55341	50620
Students from private institutions	19022	19010	19450	18366	17055	14731	12618	10202	9988

Source: developed on the basis of NBS data, 2020

Based on the data from the table, we can see that in the last 9 years there has been a negative dynamic of reducing the number of higher education institutions from 33 institutions in 2011 to 29 institutions in 2019. State institutions have registered the same number, 19 institutions, but the private units were reduced from 14 institutions in 2011 to 10 institutions in 2019, otherwise by 40%.

From the data in the table, we notice that the dynamics of the number of students in Moldovan institutions is decreasing, following a negative trend for the period of 2011-2019 from 107813 students in the 2010-2011 academic year to 89529 students in 2014-2015, registering a decrease by 17%, to reach 60608 students in 2018-2019 or by 44% compared to 2015 and by 43% compared to 2010-2011. This is explained by the low birth rate, by the departure of young people abroad and their subsequent employment in those educational institutions, along with the migration of young people in order to reunite with their families.

If we analyse the dynamics of Moldovan students enrolled in the period of 2011-2019 in state higher education institutions, then we can observe a negative trend for the entire analysed period. Accordingly, if in 2010-2011 a number of 88791 students studied in state institutions, then in 2014-2015 their number decreased by 18.4% to 72474 students, so that, at the end of 2019, their number would reach 50620 students, registering a decrease of 30.02% compared to 2014-2015, and 43% compared to 2010-2011.

If we analyse the dynamics of students enrolled in private higher education institutions, we can observe that at this point there is also a negative trend from 19022 students in 2010-2011 to 17055 students in 2014-2015, to reach in 2018-2019 to a number of 9988 students, or 41.4% less than in 2014-2015, and 47.5% compared to 2010-2011.

In Table 3, we have shown the distribution of graduates according to the category of state or non-state universities.

Table 3. Distribution of graduates of higher education institutions by state or non-state institution, 2010-2019

	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Total	28408	27788	26730	24848	24274	23630	21886	19943	18142	16266
State	22370	22111	21548	20105	19649	18867	17632	16228	14945	13267
Non-state	6038	5677	5182	4743	4625	4763	4254	3715	3197	2999

Source: developed on the basis of NBS data, 2020

Analysing the data presented in Table 3, we can observe that during the period of 2010-2019 the dynamics of graduates of higher education institutions in Moldova registers a negative trend from 28408 graduates in 2010-2011 to 24274 graduates in 2014-2015, and in 2018-2019 it records 17288. This shows that the number of graduates decreased in 2018-2019 by 28.77% compared to 2014-2015 and by 38.4% compared to 2010-2011. Equally, graduates from state institutions and those from private institutions show a negative trend.

Graduates of state institutions, in the period of 2010-2019, decreased from 22370 graduates in 2011 to 20105 in 2014, afterwards registering 13267 graduates in 2019, remarking a decrease of 34.01% compared to 2014, and a reduction of 40.69% compared to 2011.

On the other hand, we observe the same negative trend in the number of graduates from private institutions, while in 2011 a total of 6038 graduates were registered, in 2014 this record is reduced to 4625 graduates, in addition, in 2019 the number of graduates totalled 2999 people. It is worth mentioning that in 2019 the number of graduates decreased by 35.15% compared to 2014, and by 51% compared to 2011.

In Table 4, we have shown the dynamics of the total number of students enrolled according to the type of study financing.

Table 4. Dynamics of the total number of students enrolled by form of studies (budget or contract), 2011-2020

	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20
Number of students, total	88791	84946	83008	78919	72474	66938	62108	55341	50620	47745
Budget	30907	29175	28340	28098	27470	26669	25872	23260	21883	20754
Contract	57884	55771	54668	50821	45004	40269	36236	32081	28737	26991
Enrolled, total	23128	23018	23086	22417	20501	20939	18990	16459	15858	16599
Budget	9527	9381	10241	10263	9807	9348	9029	7300	7595	7662
Contract	13601	13637	12845	12154	10694	11591	9961	9159	8263	8937

Source: developed on the basis of NBS data, 2020

Based on the data presented in Table 4, we observe that in the period of 2011-2020 the total number of students decreased from 88791 people in 2011 to 72474 people in 2015, afterwards reaching the record of 47745 people in 2020. We also point out that in 2020 there was a decrease in the number of students by 34.1% compared to 2015, and by 46.22% compared to 2011.

Correspondingly, the same decreasing trend is maintained in the dynamics of students in higher education institutions enrolled on a basis of budget funding. Thus, in 2011 there were enrolled 30907 persons, while in 2015 their number decreased to 27450

people, and in 2020 it reaches the record of 20754 people. Accordingly, in 2020 there is a decrease by 24.39% compared to 2015, and by 32.85% compared to 2011.

We observe the same trend regarding the students enrolled on a contract basis funding. In 2011 57884 people were paying the tuition fee for studies, while in 2015 this number decreased to 45004 people, and in 2020 it reaches the record of 26991 people. So, at the level of 2020, there is a decrease of 40% compared to 2015, and a decline of 53.37% compared to 2011.

A significant reduction is attested, in the analysed period of 2011-2020 and at the level of students enrolled in higher education institutions. If in 2011 23128 people were enrolled in higher education institutions, then in 2015 this number is reduced to 20501 people, and in 2020 it reaches the record of 1399 people. Thus, we attest a decrease in 2020 compared to 2015 by 19.03%, and compared to 2011, a decrease by 28.2%.

In Table 5, we have shown the dynamics of higher education institutions in Moldova according to the forms of study (full-time/ part-time).

Table 5. Graduates of higher education institutions by form of study (full-time/ part-time)

	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Total	28408	27788	26730	24848	24274	23630	21886	19943	18142	16266
Full-time	19672	20846	21201	19615	18367	16482	15649	14114	13240	11694
Part-time	8736	6942	5529	5233	5907	7148	6237	5829	4902	4572

Source: developed on the basis of NBS data, 2020

Based on the data presented in Table 5, we can observe that in the period of 2011-2019 the number of students from higher education institutions who studied in higher education institutions decreased from 28408 students in 2011 to 23630 students in 2015, and it reaches the record of 16266 students in 2019. We observe a reduction in 2019-2020 compared to 2015 by 31.1%, and compared to 2010-2011 by 42.71%.

The dynamics of full-time students in higher education institutions in Moldova in 2011-2020 decreased from 19672 students in 2011 to 16482 students in 2015, and in 2020 this number reaches the amount of 11694 students. Thus, there is a significant decrease in 2020 compared to 2015 by 29.04%, and compared to 2011 a decrease of 40.55% is identified.

We also identify a negative trend in the dynamics of students studying on a contract basis in higher education institutions in the country. Thus, in the period 2011-2020, a decrease is identified from 8736 students in 2011 to 7148 students in 2015, so that in 2020 this number will reach 4572 students. In this context, we can identify that in 2019-2020 there is a decrease of 36.08% compared to 2015 and 36.03% compared to 2011.

In Table 6, we have schematically shown the dynamics of graduates of higher education institutions by cycles, Bachelor's and Master's degrees, in the period of 2010-2019.

Table 6. Graduates of higher education institutions by Cycles, 2010-2019

	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Total	27800	27149	26036	24082	23471	22978	21243	19943	18142	16266
Bachelor (Cycle I)	23264	22049	20132	17744	17062	17063	15141	13421	11952	10763
Master (Cycle II)	4536	5100	5904	6338	6409	5915	6102	5744	5399	4754

Source: developed on the basis of NBS data, 2020

Based on the data presented in Table 6, we can observe that the total number of graduates of higher education institutions in Moldova decreased from 27800 people in 2011 to 22978 people in 2015, and it registers the record of 1266 people in 2020. Accordingly, for the analysed period, we identify a significant decrease in the number of graduates of higher education institutions. In 2020, the number of graduates decreased by 29.21% compared to 2015, and by 41.49% compared to 2011. All the data analysed show a drastic decrease and the problem of higher education institutions in Moldova regarding the reduction of their students' number, the main reasons being the low birth rate, the migration of families from Moldova, along with the phenomenon of globalization, which has increased the possibilities for students to go to study abroad.

Figure 2 shows schematically the dynamics of graduates of higher education institutions in Moldova, cycle I and cycle II, in the period of 2010-2019.

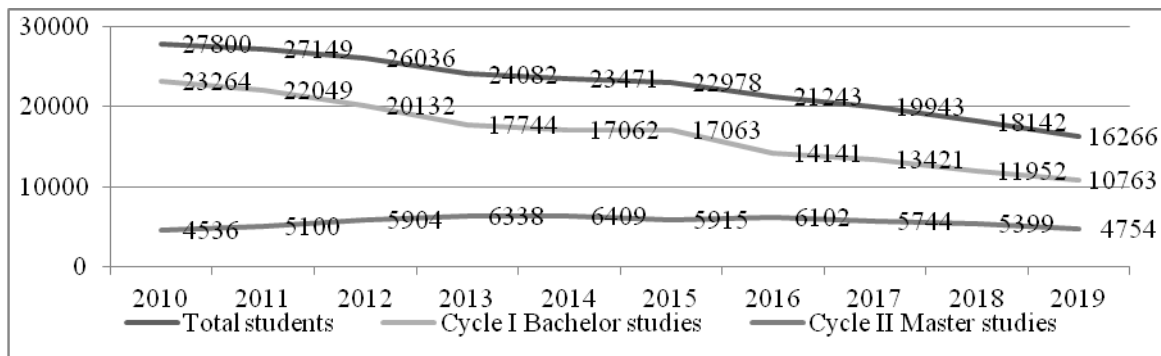


Figure 2. Dynamics of the number of students by years of study 2010-2019, by cycles

Source: developed on the basis of NBS data, 2020

The data from Figure 2 shows that in 2010 23264 students were enrolled in the first cycle. In 2015 this number is reduced to 17062 students, and 10763 students are registered in 2019. There is a decrease in the number of undergraduate students in 2019 by 36.92% compared to 2015, and by 53.74% compared to 2011. This decrease is largely due to the penetration of the phenomenon of internationalization in the system of education, and the reduction of the birth rate which caused a dramatic reduction in the number of students.

In addition, there is a positive trend in the number of students enrolled in the second cycle of Master's studies in higher education institutions in Moldova in 2010-2019. From the data shown in Figure 2, we notice that students' number increased from 4536 in 2011 to 6409 in 2015, and in 2019 it reaches the record of 4754 students. In 2019 the number of master students in Moldova decreased compared to 2015 by 25.8%, but increased compared to 2011 by 105% compared to 2011. This increase can be largely explained by the increase in students' motivation to continue studies and to complete both cycles of studies in higher education, but also by the requirements of the Education Code for certain categories of employees, where the completion of Master's studies is required. In this context, Master's studies have become a necessity for students who want a successful career, and who want to advance in the professional path.

Analysing the dynamics of the number of students per 10000 inhabitants in the period of 2010-2019, we obtained the following picture, showed in Figure 3.

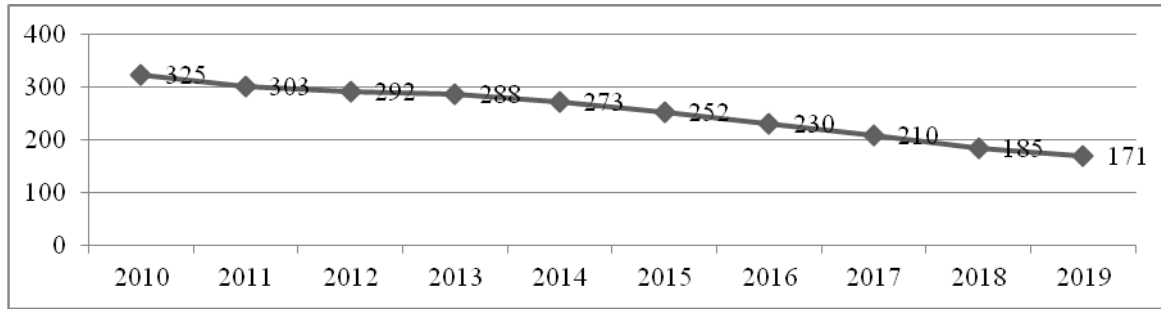


Figure 3. Dynamics of the number of students per 10,000 inhabitants during the period of 2010-2019

Source: developed on the basis of NBS data, 2020

Analysing Figure 3, we can see that the dynamics of the number of students per 10000 inhabitants in higher education in the period of 2010-2019 decreased from 325 students in 2010 to 252 students in 2015, reaching 171 students in 2019. Thus, in 2019 the number of students per 10000 inhabitants decreased by 31.6% compared to 2015 and by 47.38%.

Analysing the dynamics of the share of students studying on a contract basis in the total number of students in the period of 2010-2019, we obtained the following picture, showed in Figure 4.

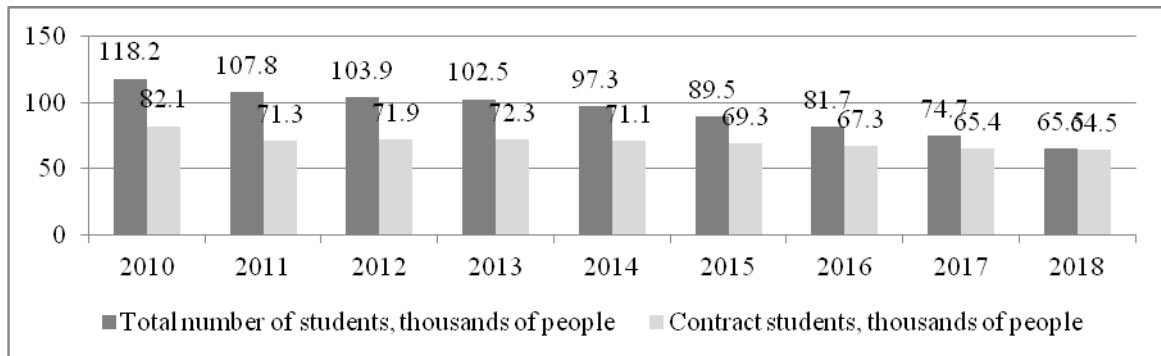


Figure 4. The segment of students studying on a contract basis from the total number of students during the period of 2010-2019

Source: developed on the basis of NBS data, 2020

If we analyse the data presented in Figure 4, we can see that out of the total number of students who are enrolled in higher education institutions in Moldova, most of them are students enrolled on a contract basis. This is explained by the small number of budget places allocated by the state for certain priority specialties for Moldovan students. For example, for economic specialties the number of budget places is reduced for each specialty being allocated 3-5 budget places, while the demand is higher than over 20 places per specialty.

Analysing the dynamics of the enrolment rate in youth in the period of 2011-2018, we obtained the following data presented in Figure 5.

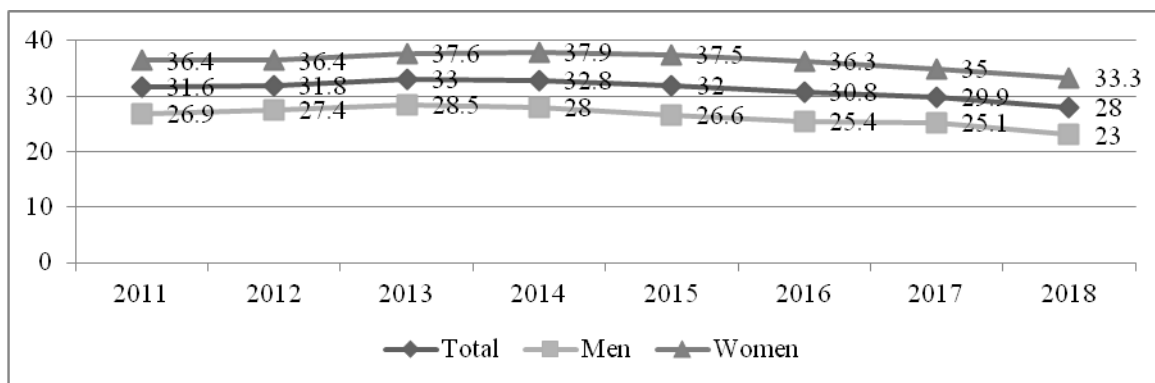


Figure 5. Dynamics of the youth enrolment rate in higher education, 2011-2018
Source: developed on the basis of NBS data, 2020

Analysing the data presented schematically in Figure 5, we can see that in the period of 2011-2018, the enrolment rate in youth increased from 31.6 in 2011 to 32 in 2015, and then it registers a decrease in 2018, reaching the value of 28. Thus, in 2018 the enrolment rate in youth decreased by 12.5%, and compared to 2011 it decreased by 11.39%.

An interesting evolution registers the dynamics of the scientific-didactic and didactic staff within the higher education institutions in the period of 2011-2019, which is shown schematically in Figure 6.

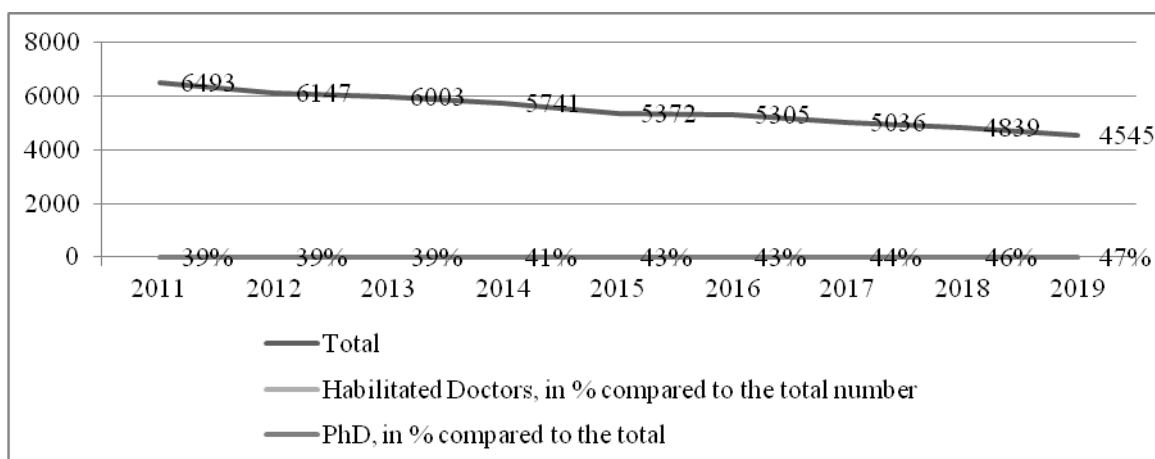


Figure 6. The dynamics of the scientific-didactic and didactic staff within the higher education institutions during the period of 2011-2019

Source: developed on the basis of NBS data, 2020

Analysing the dynamics of the scientific-didactic and didactic staff in higher education in Moldova, we can observe that in the period of 2011-2019 there is a negative dynamic of the scientific and scientific-didactic staff in higher education. Thus, the total number of staff in the period of 2011-2019 decreased from 6493 people in 2011 to 5372 people in 2015, and it reaches the record of 4545 people in 2019. Consequently, in 2019 there is a decrease of 15.4% compared to 2015 and 30.0% compared to 2011. This decrease is largely due to the decrease in the number of students, the reduction of academic groups, but also the tightening of the conditions of quality of didactic and scientific-didactic staff.

If we analyse the dynamics of the number of PhDs/ Doctors of science from the total number of teaching and scientific-teaching staff in higher education in Moldova, we

can see that in 2011-2019 there is an increase in the percentage of staff with a scientific degree in higher education institutions in Moldova, from 39% in 2011 to 43% in 2015, reaching 47% in 2019.

In addition, a trend of maintaining the percentage of Habilitated Doctors from the total number of scientific-didactic and didactic staff is maintained, for the analysed period, at the level of 7%. This demonstrates the difficulty of conducting postdoctoral studies and the lack of time to promote postdoctoral studies.

5. Conclusions

Taking a retrospective of the development of higher education institutions in the Republic of Moldova, we can highlight that our country faces major problems in terms of the number of students studying at Moldovan universities. Thus, following the research, we identified the subsequent problems and challenges for higher education institutions in Moldova:

- *reducing the total number of students for the analysed period of 2011-2019* – to a large extent, this problem derives from the reduction, during this period, of the birth rate, along with the penetration of the phenomenon of globalization in education. Thus, this shows that a great number of students chose to study abroad, in foreign universities, where they can get quality studies and budget funding sources. Another portion of students go abroad due to the phenomenon of family reunification;
- *increasing the number of students in the second cycle of master studies* – the number of master students in the period of 2011-2019 increased from 4536 to 4734. This phenomenon is due, in large part, to the implementation of the Bologna system, and the desire of students to get complete higher education studies, which involves the first cycle of Bachelor studies and the second cycle of Master studies;
- *increasing the number of teaching staff with scientific titles of doctors* – for the analysed period of 2011-2019 the percentage of staff holding the scientific title of doctor of science increased from 39% in 2011 to 47% in 2019. This phenomenon is largely fuelled by the requirements of the Education Code, which addresses the need to have doctors, i.e. staff with a scientific degree, to hold lectures within universities.
- *maintaining the percentage of habilitated doctors in the total number of didactic and scientific- didactic staff* – during the analysed period, the percentage of habilitated doctors was maintained at the level of 7%, with small variations over the years.
- *reducing the number of students per 10000 inhabitants* – for the analysed period of 2011-2019, the number of students per 10000 inhabitants decreased from 325 students to 171 students, i.e., by 47.38%.

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