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STUDENT MOBILITY FROM THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA WITHIN THE ERASMUS+ PROGRAMME

PARTICIPAREA STUDENȚILOR DIN REPUBLICA MOLDOVA ÎN CADRUL PROGRAMULUI ERASMUS+

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Abstract: *Prezenta lucrare analizează dinamica mobilității studenților din Republica Moldova în cadrul programului Erasmus+ și a acțiunilor Jean Monnet în perioada 2014–2020. Obiectivul principal al cercetării este evaluarea impactului acestor programe asupra dezvoltării competențelor profesionale, interculturale și personale ale participanților. Metodologia utilizată îmbină analiza cadrului legislativ național cu interpretarea datelor statistice oferite de Biroul Național Erasmus+ în Moldova, evidențiind fluxurile de mobilitate outgoing și incoming. Rezultatele indică o tendință generală de creștere a participării, în ciuda provocărilor logistice și financiare, atingând un punct de maturitate în anul 2020. Studiul confirmă faptul că programul Erasmus+ reprezintă pilonul central al internaționalizării învățământului superior în Republica Moldova, facilitând alinierea sistemului național la standardele Spațiului European al Învățământului Superior. În final, sunt propuse recomandări pentru optimizarea procesului de mobilitate prin diversificarea parteneriatelor și îmbunătățirea mecanismelor de recunoaștere academică.*
Key words: *mobilitate academică, programul Erasmus+, competențe interculturale*
JEL CLASSIFICATION: I23, I21, F22

INTRODUCTION

In the context of globalization and the internationalization of education, student mobility has become a central phenomenon in the development of modern higher education. It involves the possibility for students to study temporarily at other academic institutions, both in their home country and abroad, through internationally recognized programs such as Erasmus+. Participation in such programs provides students with opportunities to acquire advanced knowledge, develop linguistic and intercultural skills, and strengthen personal autonomy and responsibility. Academic mobility is not limited to the accumulation of information; it also contributes to students' adaptation to diverse cultural environments, enhances the quality of education, and fosters the creation of international academic networks that can facilitate future professional collaborations.

The study of student mobility is relevant both for participants and for host universities, as it supports the internationalization of institutions, facilitates the exchange of best practices, and contributes to the development of competitive human capital in the global labor market. In the context of the European integration path of the Republic of Moldova, this analysis becomes essential for assessing the degree of alignment of the national education system with the standards of the European Higher Education Area. An analysis of this phenomenon allows for the identification of advantages, such as the development of professional, intercultural, and linguistic competencies, as well as associated challenges, including financial costs, administrative barriers, and the need for full academic recognition of studies completed abroad.

The main objective of this research is to analyze student mobility within international programs and to assess its impact on the development of professional, intercultural, and personal competencies. Specifically, the research aims to define and conceptualize student mobility, identify the main mobility programs with particular emphasis on the Erasmus+ ecosystem and Jean Monnet Actions analyze the evolution of student participation at both global and national levels during the

period 2014–2020, and evaluate the advantages and disadvantages associated with these experiences, as well as the benefits and opportunities they offer to each participant.

The methodology used in this paper is based on a mixed approach, combining the theoretical analysis of the national legislative framework with the quantitative analysis of statistical data provided by the National Erasmus+ Office in Moldova. The case study focuses on the dynamics of mobility flows (outgoing and incoming) and on the diversity of academic cooperation projects implemented in Moldova.

MAIN CONTENT

In the Republic of Moldova, academic mobility of students is regulated by Government Decision No. 56 of January 27, 2014 on the approval of the Framework Regulation regarding academic mobility in higher education. According to this decision, academic mobility represents a process of completing study cycles/periods or internships by students or teaching staff in an educational institution in the country or abroad (Weblex Service, n.d.)

Student mobility represents the process by which students temporarily move to other higher education institutions, either in their home country or abroad, in order to study or undertake internships. This phenomenon is supported by international programs such as Erasmus+, which provide study opportunities, financial scholarships, and international academic recognition. By participating in these programs, students acquire professional, linguistic, and intercultural competences, which contributes to improving the quality of their education and their adaptability to the global labor market. The mobility process is carried out within various mobility programs (long-term and short-term mobility programs). The long-term mobility program is a program that ends with obtaining a study certificate confirming a qualification level, while the short-term mobility program is carried out through study periods, internships, language training, research activities, summer schools, etc., which end with the issuance of an academic certificate or, where applicable, a certificate of participation (Institutul pentru Politici Publice, 2017). The most well-known mobility program is Erasmus+. Through this program, funded mobility activities are supported:

- student mobility for studies for one semester at the first cycle – bachelor's degree studies;
- student mobility for studies during the second cycle – master's degree studies;
- staff mobility – teaching missions.

The Erasmus+ program offers European universities the opportunity to establish partnerships with higher education institutions outside the EU and to develop mobility programs, international cooperation programs for capacity building, and staff development programs in countries outside the European Higher Education Area. In the field of higher education, universities in the Republic of Moldova can benefit from the following actions:

- Key Action 1 – International Credit Mobility
- Key Action 2 – International Cooperation / Capacity Building Projects
- Jean Monnet Action (Erasmus+ Moldova, n.d.)

The institution responsible for monitoring the implementation of Erasmus+ projects is the National Erasmus+ Office in Moldova. In addition to the office, a team of Higher Education Reform Experts (HEREs) has been established and operates. Representatives of the Erasmus+ Moldova Office collect statistical data on mobility within Erasmus programs based on information from the European Commission.

In the graph below, the evolution of international mobility within the Erasmus+ program for students and teaching staff from the Republic of Moldova is presented, by year and type of mobility.

Analyzing the graph, a clear and different evolution of outgoing and incoming mobility for students and academic staff from the Republic of Moldova can be observed during the period 2015–2020. Outgoing mobility shows a general upward trend, with values increasing from 263 in 2015 to 454 in 2020. A slight decrease can be observed in 2017 (314 mobilities), but this fluctuation does not change the long-term growth trend. This suggests a growing interest among students and academic

staff from the Republic of Moldova in international experience and in strengthening academic partnerships with European institutions.

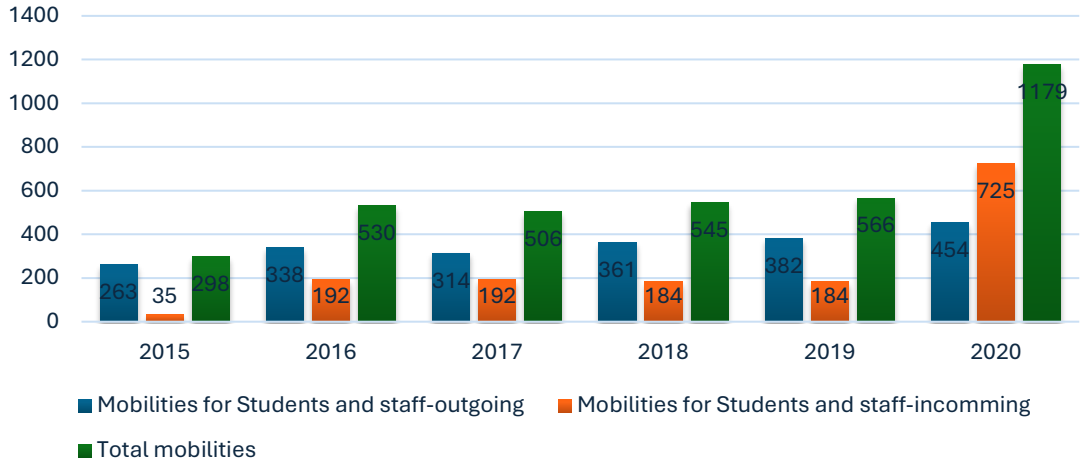


Figure 1. Number of ICM mobilities for Moldova, 2015-2020
Source: *elaborated by the author*

Incoming mobility had a more volatile evolution, but with a dramatic increase in 2020. During the period 2015–2019, incoming mobility remained relatively stable, between 35 and 192 participants, indicating a gradual consolidation of the capacity of universities in the Republic of Moldova to attract international participants. The exceptional increase in 2020, when the number reached 725, indicates both an expansion of Erasmus+ projects in Moldova and an increase in the attractiveness of institutions in European cooperation.

In addition to international academic mobility, an important role in the development of university cooperation and the promotion of European studies in the Republic of Moldova is played by Jean Monnet projects implemented within the Erasmus+ programme. These projects are aimed at promoting studies on European integration, developing university courses dedicated to the European Union, and stimulating scientific research in the field of European policies and institutions.

The following section presents the evolution of Jean Monnet projects implemented in the Republic of Moldova, illustrated through a graph.

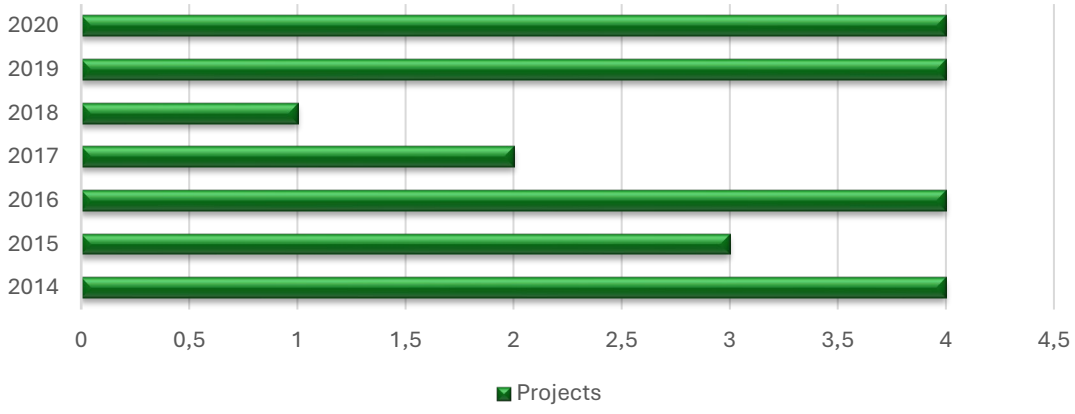


Figure 2. Jean Monnet Projects in Moldova, 2014-2020
Source: *elaborated by the author*

Analyzing the graph, the evolution of the Jean Monnet Programme projects implemented in the Republic of Moldova during the period 2014–2020 can be observed. In 2014, 4 projects were recorded, and in 2015 their number decreased to 3. In 2016, a slight increase to 4 projects can be

observed, followed by a decrease in 2017, when only 2 projects were implemented. The downward trend continued in 2018, when only one Jean Monnet project was carried out. However, in the following years a recovery can be observed, with the number of projects increasing to 4 in 2019 and remaining at the same level in 2020.

Thus, the data indicate a fluctuating evolution of Jean Monnet projects in the Republic of Moldova, characterized by periods of decline followed by recovery. This dynamic reflects the level of participation of higher education institutions in European academic programs and their interest in developing European studies within universities.

The Jean Monnet Action within the Erasmus+ Programme includes several types of academic activities aimed at promoting European studies in higher education institutions. These contribute to the development of teaching, research, and academic cooperation in the field of European integration. These activities are diversified depending on the specific objectives of institutions and are classified into modules, chairs, and centres of excellence, as illustrated in Figure 3.

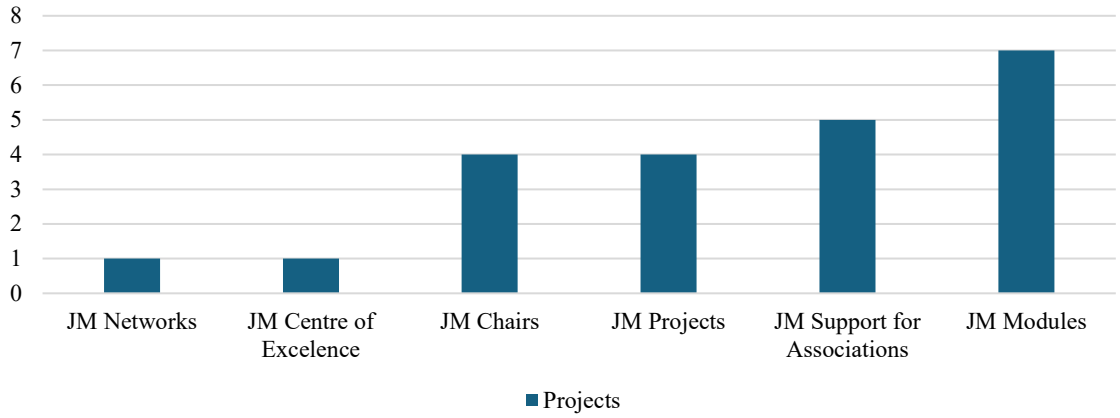


Figure 3. Types of Jean Monnet projects in Moldova, 2014-2020
Source: *elaborated by the author*

The diversity of these projects reflects the high level of involvement of higher education institutions in the Republic of Moldova in the process of European integration through education and research.

During the period 2014–2020, within the previous edition of the Erasmus+ Programme, higher education institutions from the Republic of Moldova managed to implement:

- 3,624 Erasmus+ academic mobilities between universities from the Republic of Moldova and the European Union, offered to students and university teaching staff;
- 600 ICM projects (International Credit Mobility);
- 21 CBHE projects (Capacity Building in Higher Education);
- 22 Jean Monnet projects;
- 30 scholarships for beneficiaries from Moldova within Erasmus Mundus Joint Master Degrees projects.
- Within the 2021–2027 period, the Erasmus+ programme will implement new educational projects:
- 2,000 Erasmus+ academic mobilities between universities from the Republic of Moldova and the European Union, offered to students and university teaching staff;
- 10 Jean Monnet projects;
- 10 projects of Erasmus Mundus Joint Master programmes;
- 30 mobility projects for youth workers;
- 29 youth mobility projects – youth exchanges;
- 14 capacity building projects in higher education;

- 9 capacity building projects in the field of education and vocational training (Erasmus+ Moldova, 2024)

It should be noted that although the year 2020 was marked by the COVID-19 pandemic, the high number of mobilities reported in the previous graphs is largely due to projects contracted earlier and to the adaptation of the system to blended or virtual mobility formats, implemented to ensure the continuity of the educational process under global health crisis conditions.

From the perspective of educational and social impact, the Erasmus+ programme generates both positive effects and certain difficulties. The advantages of international mobility within the Erasmus+ programme are multiple and contribute significantly to the personal and professional development of students. First of all, it offers the opportunity to study in another country and become familiar with a different educational system, allowing them to acquire additional academic knowledge and develop their language skills. Secondly, international experience facilitates understanding and adaptation to different cultures and environments, contributing to the development of intercultural competences, independence, and communication skills. At the same time, participation in mobility provides the opportunity to build valuable international relationships and networks that can be useful professionally. The programme also supports students by providing monthly scholarships, partial coverage of transport expenses, and exemption from tuition fees at the host university, thus facilitating their integration and maximizing academic and professional benefits during the mobility period.

However, besides the advantages offered by student mobility in the context of its promotion by educational institutions in our country, there are also a number of weaknesses that need to be addressed over time in order to increase awareness of the importance of mobility. The disadvantages of international mobility primarily refer to insufficient experience and tradition in implementing international research and education projects, which limits the effective involvement of universities in our country. Additionally, the lack of qualified staff in this field hinders the identification of partners and the development of mobility projects. The reduced national and international visibility of some universities may lead to a decrease in the number of candidates for their programmes. Limited financial resources represent an obstacle to the proper development of mobility programmes. Moreover, the limited promotion of research results at the international level affects recognition and collaboration with external institutions, and the lack of clear mechanisms for recognition and equivalence of studies completed during mobility may create difficulties for students upon returning to their home country.

CONCLUSION/RECOMANDATIONS

Following the conducted research, it is confirmed that the Erasmus+ program represents the main pillar of the internationalization of higher education in the Republic of Moldova, facilitating the alignment of the national system with European standards. The evolution of mobility flows demonstrates an increasing openness of local universities, reaching a point of maturity in 2020 through the significant growth in the number of participants despite global challenges.

The impact of these programs is multidimensional, as it goes beyond the accumulation of theoretical knowledge and directly contributes to the development of human capital by strengthening linguistic and intercultural competencies, as well as personal autonomy. The diversification of implemented actions, from Jean Monnet modules to capacity-building projects, reflects a strong commitment to the European integration process and the modernization of scientific research.

To optimize this process in the future, it is recommended to identify additional funding sources to reduce economic barriers, thus ensuring equal access for all students. It is also necessary to promote Erasmus+ programs more effectively in order to increase the participation of students and academic staff. The development of new international partnerships can contribute to balancing mobility flows. Financial and logistical support for participants must be strengthened, and the experience gained through mobility should be integrated into the study curriculum and recognized through academic

credits. Monitoring and evaluating the impact of mobility programs is essential for adjusting the internationalization strategies of universities.

In conclusion, the success of internationalization depends on increasing the visibility of results and strengthening the attractiveness of our universities in the context of global competition in the labor market.

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