



From Strategy to Motivation: The Role of Leadership in Quality Assurance of Moldovan Higher Education

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Abstract. Amid the rapid global transformations of society, university leadership is emerging as a decisive factor in redefining the mission and vision of higher education institutions. Driven by globalization, technological change, and internationalization, universities must redesign their strategies, while leadership is called to transcend traditional administrative role into a visionary and motivational force. This study examines the role of university leadership in the Republic of Moldova, highlighting how universities leaders can transform internal challenges of higher education system and external standards of quality assurance into collective motivation, organizational culture, academic performance, and international competitiveness.

Drawing on survey data, institutional strategies, and international frameworks, the research identifies three essential directions for leadership development: strengthening institutional capacity through project management, digitalization, and strategic planning; fostering people oriented leadership through communication, team management, and participatory decision making; and adapting to international contexts through innovation, resilience, and global partnerships.

Moldovan universities, particularly after joining the Bologna Process in 2005 and implementing the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG), have advanced significant reforms: restructuring curricula, strengthening quality evaluation mechanisms, and expanding academic mobility. These changes have generated an acute need for leadership capable of managing both the post Soviet legacy and the demands of European integration. The study concludes that effective leadership is inseparable from quality assurance, modernization, and international recognition. By converting external pressures into opportunities, Moldovan universities could strengthen their credibility and contribute to the creation of a coherent, diverse, and performance oriented national academic ecosystem.

Keywords: University Leadership, Quality Assurance, Moldovan Higher Education.

1 Introduction

In the context of the accelerated global transformations of the 21st century, university leadership is emerging as a fundamental pillar in redefining the mission and vision of

higher education institutions. Globalization, digitalization, and internationalization compel universities to rethink their strategies, while academic leadership can no longer be reduced to a purely administrative role of managing university processes. Instead, it must become visionary - capable of inspiring and mobilizing the academic community, of building an organizational culture oriented toward quality, inclusion, competitiveness, and innovation.

Thus, university leadership is transforming into a catalyst for institutional change, responsible for integrating global trends and adapting institutions to international quality assurance standards. In this context, academic leaders do not merely manage processes; they shape strategic directions, stimulate the motivation of academic staff and students, and strengthen the resilience of universities in a world defined by complex challenges.

These profound transformations in higher education find their roots in the Bologna Process, launched in 1999, which redefined the architecture of study programs, mechanisms of evaluation and quality assurance, strategies of internationalization, and academic management. Through this framework, universities have been called upon to ensure both diversity and compatibility in educational and managerial processes, thereby consolidating the European Higher Education Area.

On the other hand, the Bologna Process has become a fundamental benchmark for European universities, promoting academic mobility, diploma recognition, and transparency of qualifications. These objectives have required higher education institutions to develop mechanisms of participatory and strategic leadership, capable of responding to the increasingly complex demands of the European Higher Education Area. Moreover, the introduction of the concept of quality assurance as an integral part of university governance has made leadership directly responsible for implementing the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* (ESG was adopted in 2005, revised in 2015 and 2025). This development has transformed academic leadership into a decisive factor for institutional quality and competitiveness.

In the Republic of Moldova, higher education is undergoing a complex process of transformation, driven both by internal reforms and by the pressure to align with international standards, particularly in the context of European integration. Over the past two decades, universities have been required to adapt their curricular structures and evaluation mechanisms to the demands of the Bologna Process (to which Moldova officially acceded in May 2005). This has involved restructuring higher education into three cycles (Bachelor's, Master's, Doctoral studies), implementing the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS), ensuring diploma recognition, and promoting international academic mobility. These changes have generated an acute need for *visionary leadership*, capable of simultaneously managing the post-Soviet legacy, institutional diversity, and compatibility with the European Education.

For the Republic of Moldova, integration into the European Higher Education Area requires the consolidation of strategic academic leadership, capable of aligning institutional strategies with European trends, stimulating the motivation of the academic community, and enhancing the competitiveness and recognition of universities at both European and global levels.

A central role in this process is played by the National Agency for Quality Assurance in Education and Research (ANACEC), whose mission is to implement state policies and promote international best practices in quality assurance across technical vocational education, higher education, adult professional training, as well as research and innovation. ANACEC fulfils this mission through rigorous external evaluation, constructive dialogue with stakeholders, and the continuous development of a national culture of quality.

ANACEC contributes to the modernization of higher education in the Republic of Moldova by establishing standards, criteria, and quality indicators that must be integrated into university management strategies. These are aligned with the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education* (ESG, 2015) and serve as instruments of institutional accountability, while also fostering both organizational and national cultures of quality. In accordance with these quality standards, university leadership is called upon to develop participatory mechanisms, to harness the involvement of academic staff, and to create an academic environment oriented toward performance, competitiveness, and inclusion. The ultimate goal is to ensure the consolidation of quality in higher education and to enhance the international competitiveness of Moldovan universities.

The purpose of this research is to analyze the role of university leadership in relation to global educational transformations and the educational reforms in the Republic of Moldova, and to demonstrate that the effectiveness of higher education leadership constitutes a key factor for institutional modernization, for strengthening quality assurance mechanisms, and for coherent integration into the European Higher Education Area.

The study aims to provide both a theoretical and practical framework for understanding leadership as a decisive factor in adapting universities to the demands of globalization, internationalization, digitalization, external evaluations, and quality assurance in higher education. This adaptation must also respond to the expectations of beneficiaries and the labor market, thereby ensuring collective motivation, organizational culture, and academic performance.

The main problem of this research lies in identifying and analyzing the challenges faced by universities in the Republic of Moldova in the process of implementing educational reforms, within the broader context of adapting to European quality standards and current global trends. In this regard, the fundamental research question is: *How can university leadership move beyond its traditional administrative role and become a catalyst for change - capable of transforming external standards into collective motivation, organizational culture, academic performance, and international competitiveness?*

2 Literature review

The specialized literature on educational leadership and quality assurance in higher education is highly diverse and highlights several important theoretical and empirical directions relevant to analyzing the development context of universities in the Republic of Moldova.

A first line of inquiry focuses on international theoretical studies and research, which emphasize that university leadership goes beyond the administrative dimension, involving strategic vision and the capacity to mobilize the academic community. The model of transformational leadership developed by Burns is based on “raising the motivation and morality of both leaders and followers” (Burns, 1978), while Bass argues that this type of leadership “encourages people to transcend their own interests for the sake of the collective good” (Bass, 1990). According to these authors, leaders who inspire shared values and stimulate the participation of academic staff and students contribute significantly to enhancing institutional performance. These models are particularly relevant for Moldovan universities, where the quality of higher education depends on the active involvement of staff and students in processes of change.

Another approach emphasizes the perspective that leaders in higher education must be able to harmoniously combine management competencies (organization, planning, control) with leadership skills (vision, inspiration, motivation). Research in this area shows that institutional success occurs when these two dimensions are complementary rather than separate. As Warren Bennis stated: “Leadership is the capacity to translate vision into reality” (Bennis, 1991). This suggests that leaders cannot remain solely at the level of inspiration; they must transform vision into concrete plans through managerial tools. Another theorist, John Kotter (1990), highlighted that “Management is about coping with complexity. Leadership, by contrast, is about coping with change.” This distinction demonstrates that universities need leaders who can manage administrative complexity while also inspiring cultural and academic change. Referring to the creation of the institutional climate, Ken Robinson argues: “The real role of leadership in education is climate control, creating a climate of possibility” (Robinson, 2017). This perspective shows that leaders cannot be merely managers of procedures; they must create a motivational and innovative environment. Jack Welch emphasizes the importance of growing people, not just of the institutions: “Before you are a leader, success is all about growing yourself. When you become a leader, success is all about growing others” (Welch & Lowe, 2007). In universities, this means that leaders must combine resource management with leadership oriented toward the development of teachers and students. This idea highlights that leadership goes beyond managerial planning, becoming a process of motivation and inspiration. Therefore, the analysis of these diverse perspectives in the literature demonstrates that management is essential for implementing quality standards (procedures, evaluations, reporting), while leadership is vital for transforming these procedures into collective motivation by involving teachers and students. Adapted to the local context and particularities, we can conclude that in Moldovan universities - where remnants of the former Soviet system still persist - leaders must be both competent managers and inspirational leaders in order to ensure the quality of institutional management processes and to create an organizational culture oriented toward innovation and responsibility.

These studies are complemented by normative documents that reflect global trends promoted by UNESCO, the Bologna Process, and other European institutions, all of which emphasize the importance of participatory and visionary leadership. According to these frameworks, contemporary universities are required to adapt their development

strategies to the demands of the knowledge society, while university leaders must become architects of transformation - capable of turning strategic vision into collective motivation and sustainable outcomes. For example, the UNESCO Futures of Education report (UNESCO, 2021) highlights the need for a “new social contract for education,” based on cooperation, solidarity, and shared responsibility. Thus, academic leadership is no longer merely a management tool, but a decisive factor in ensuring quality, motivating faculty and students, and strengthening institutional resilience in the face of contemporary challenges: “Leadership in higher education is not only about managing institutions, but about inspiring collective action towards equity, sustainability, and knowledge sharing” (UNESCO, 2021, p. 45). Within this framework, universities in the Republic of Moldova - currently undergoing modernization and European integration - must align their leadership practices with these global trends. Another UNESCO document (2025) emphasizes that “leadership in higher education is critical for advancing excellence, promoting equity and inclusion, and contributing to socioeconomic development.” This statement confirms that university leaders must move beyond the role of administrators and become promoters of equity and sustainable development.

Furthermore, the Global Education Monitoring Report: Lead for Learning (UNESCO, 2024/5) specifies that “effective leadership is essential to ensure accountability and to mobilize all stakeholders towards the achievement of educational goals.” This highlights the dual role of leaders: on the one hand, to manage accountability mechanisms (management), and on the other, to mobilize the academic community through motivation and engagement (leadership). At the European level, the European University Association (EUA) has developed programs dedicated to strengthening university leadership, such as the Leadership Development Programme and the Future Fit Universities initiative. These emphasize the ability of leaders to manage change and to build resilient universities, capable of responding to the challenges of the knowledge society. According to EUA publications, “strong leadership is among the key enabling factors for building open, autonomous and accountable universities” (European University Association, 2023, 2024, 2025). In these documents, university leaders are not seen merely as resource administrators, but as strategic actors who articulate institutional objectives, make visionary choices, and mobilize the academic community for their implementation. Thus, international organizations such as UNESCO, EUA, ENQA, and institutions of the European Union emphasize that universities can no longer function only as administrative structures. They must instead be led by visionary leaders, capable of inspiring the academic community and transforming institutional strategies into collective motivation.

Another research area in European literature focuses on quality assurance in higher education (ENQA, ESG) and emphasizes the correlation between institutional strategies and the mechanisms of internal and external evaluation of the quality of studies and university processes. Within this framework, leadership is seen as a decisive factor in implementing a culture of quality, through the creation of transparent procedures, accountability, and the development of a mindset oriented toward continuous improvement. Studies from Central and Eastern Europe show that universities undergoing democratic transition face challenges related to adapting to European standards, and leadership plays an essential role in mediating these changes. At the European level,

ENQA highlights that “Leadership is essential in fostering a quality culture within higher education institutions, ensuring that quality assurance is not only about compliance but about continuous improvement and innovation” (ENQA, *Advancing Quality in European Higher Education*, 2026).

The Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) emphasize the correlation between institutional strategies and the mechanisms of internal and external quality evaluation. These documents underline that quality assurance cannot be reduced to a bureaucratic exercise, but must become an integral part of the organizational culture of universities. Thus, the ESG, adopted by ENQA in 2005, laid the conceptual foundations of the quality culture within the European Higher Education Area, stating that “quality assurance requires clear responsibilities and strong leadership at all levels of the institution.” This idea remains relevant today, demonstrating that university leadership is a decisive factor in integrating strategies with quality evaluation mechanisms and in strengthening institutional resilience. According to the updated ESG (2015), “quality assurance is not only about compliance, but about fostering a culture of continuous improvement.” This formulation highlights the role of university leaders in transforming formal procedures into everyday practices oriented toward development. The most recent ESG version (2025) further emphasizes the participatory dimension of leadership: “Institutional leadership must ensure that quality assurance processes are inclusive, transparent, and aligned with the strategic mission of the university.” In this way, academic leaders do not merely implement standards; they create a framework for collective involvement, in which faculty, students, and administrative staff all contribute to strengthening quality.

In this regard, Harvey and Williams (2010) argue that “a quality culture cannot be imposed, but must be built through participation and accountability,” which highlights the decisive role of leadership in creating a climate of transparency, trust, equity, and continuous improvement. Within this framework, university leaders become mediators between external regulations and the internal realities of institutions.

Research in the Romanian academic space confirms these trends. L. Vlăsceanu emphasizes that “university governance and quality assurance are inseparable” (Vlăsceanu, 2014), while R. Iucu highlights that “educational leadership is a process of influencing and mobilizing human resources, which goes beyond simple administration and becomes an act of cultural and organizational construction” (Iucu, 2016). In the same vein, D. Potolea stresses the importance of developing managerial and leadership competencies in universities, noting that “the quality of education depends on the ability of leaders to integrate strategic vision with pedagogical practice” (Potolea, 2015). Similarly, M. Jigău underscores the role of participatory leadership in the development of higher education institutions, stating that “the involvement of the academic community in decision-making processes is essential for strengthening the culture of quality” (Jigău, 2017). M. Păunescu also points out that adaptation to European standards requires leadership capable of transforming formal strategies into everyday practices (Păunescu, 2018). In more recent studies, several authors expand on the perspectives of Vlăsceanu and Păunescu, offering updated insights into university leadership in Romania. For instance, M. Bocoș argues that “participatory educational leadership is essential for engaging faculty and students in processes of change, thereby strengthening

organizational culture and collective responsibility” (Bocoș, 2019). Likewise, D. Mara emphasizes that “modern university management must combine the strategic and operational dimensions, with academic leaders playing a key role in creating an institutional climate conducive to innovation and quality” (Mara, 2020).

In the Republic of Moldova, recent literature emphasizes that the success of higher education reforms depends not only on a legislative framework aligned with European standards, but also on the capacity of university leaders to transform strategies into academic performance and collective motivation. In this sense, leadership becomes a catalyst for institutional cohesion, integrating strategic dimensions (plans, policies) with motivational ones (recognition, engagement, and the valorization of human resources). A. Cujbă highlights that “educational reforms succeed only when university leaders manage to mobilize the academic community through motivation and recognition” (Cujbă, 2020). This observation confirms that leadership is not just an implementation tool, but a catalyst for cohesion and innovation. Researcher A. Cotelnic argues for the active role of university leaders in managing institutional change, stressing the importance of leadership competencies in optimizing the process of organizational transformation (Cotelnic, 2021).

The recent studies of the undersigned author highlight concerns regarding the internationalization and consolidation of the quality assurance system in higher education in the Republic of Moldova within the European context, analyzing both the benefits and risks of this process. In an earlier article, we argued that “the internationalization of higher education programs brings opportunities to increase the visibility and competitiveness of Moldovan universities, but also involves risks related to adapting to external standards and maintaining local identity” (Sava, 2019). This perspective is complemented by a more recent study analyzing the implementation of the quality assurance system in the Republic of Moldova and its adaptation to European standards: “the process of implementing European quality standards must take into account local specificities, in order to avoid a mere formal adoption and to build an authentic institutional culture of quality” (Sava, 2025). This research highlights the tension between the pressure to align with European standards and the need to adapt to national specificities, confirming that university leadership plays a decisive role in transforming internationalization and quality assurance strategies into collective motivation and sustainable outcomes for the higher education system.

In conclusion, the relevant scientific literature on the topic highlights that university leadership plays an essential role in quality assurance and cannot be analyzed only as a tool for implementing institutional strategies, but rather as a complex process of organizational transformation. In the evolution of the higher education system in the Republic of Moldova - situated at the intersection between the post-Soviet legacy and European development perspectives - universities face both the pressure of aligning with European standards and the responsibility of responding to local needs. Within this framework, university leadership becomes the connecting element between strategy and motivation, between formal normative regulations and institutional culture. This perspective provides the theoretical foundation for investigating how university leaders can sustain the quality of education by mobilizing the academic community and consolidating a culture of responsibility, inclusion, and innovation.

3 Methodology

The research methodology is based on the complementary integration of qualitative and quantitative methods, with this mixed approach designed to provide a comprehensive perspective on the role of university leadership in quality assurance processes within higher education in the Republic of Moldova. By combining empirical analysis with contextual interpretation, the study aims not only to describe the phenomenon but also to highlight causal relationships and the strategic implications of university leadership in strengthening a culture of quality.

The methodological approach employs comparative analysis, which enables the identification of similarities between European standards and local practices, as well as the highlighting of structural discrepancies that influence the effectiveness of quality assurance mechanisms. By referencing the criteria of the European Higher Education Area, the analysis reveals both the degree of compatibility of the Moldovan higher education system with international trends and the specific challenges that require institutional adaptations and leadership strategies oriented toward convergence and sustainability.

At the same time, the documentary analysis of the legislative framework provides a solid comparative perspective, as it correlates data from the institutional development strategies of Moldovan universities (UPSC, UTM, USM, USMF) with the educational policies developed by the Ministry of Education and Research, the external evaluation methodologies established by ANACEC, and the international standards promoted by ENQA, UNESCO, EUA, and other European institutions. Through this triangulation of sources, the research seeks to identify both the normative and methodological convergences that facilitate the integration of Moldovan universities into the European Higher Education Area, as well as the local specificities that require strategic adaptations of university leadership in order to ensure the relevance, competitiveness, and continuity in quality processes.

The thematic analysis of university leadership in Moldovan universities, structured around dimensions such as strategic vision, quality culture, institutional development, and organizational resilience, - provides a broader conceptual framework for understanding how academic leadership influences transformation processes. This is complemented by statistical analysis applied to quantitative data collected through surveys of academic members and university managers during November - December 2025 (case study: UPSC). Such an approach allows not only the validation of theoretical hypotheses but also the identification of empirical trends regarding perceptions and leadership practices in relation to quality assurance as promoted within the higher education system.

Thus, the adopted methodology has made it possible not only to capture the interaction between the strategic and cultural dimensions of higher education institutions in the Republic of Moldova, but also to demonstrate that university leadership represents an intermediary element between European standards and local specificities. The results show that the effectiveness of university leadership is not limited to the formal implementation of elaborated strategies or of quality standards and indicators. Rather,

it involves a complex process of adaptation, negotiation, and consolidation of an institutional quality culture, which confirms its decisive role in the modernization and sustainable integration of the educational system into the European Higher Education Area.

4 Analysis/Results interpretation

4.1 Global context: The role of leadership in universities and international trends

In recent decades, university leadership has become a crucial factor in strengthening the quality and competitiveness of higher education institutions. The rapid transformations generated by globalization, digitalization, and internationalization have compelled universities to redefine their strategies, placing emphasis on visionary leadership and the capacity to mobilize the academic community in institutional organization and governance processes.

At the global level, several major trends are emerging in the approach and implementation of leadership within higher education systems:

- **Transformational leadership**, developed by psychologist James MacGregor Burns in 1978 and later expanded by Bernard Bass and his predecessors, seeks to create a profound impact on the university team by facilitating the personal and professional development of its members and generating authentic commitment to the institution's vision and values. This type of leadership promotes the idea that leaders can drive fundamental changes within institutions, inspiring and motivating staff to improve themselves and contribute to the achievement of the common good. It emphasizes inspiration, vision, motivation, and the ability to create an organizational culture oriented toward innovation and quality (Ceri-Booms et al., 2017). From this perspective, university leaders foster high levels of engagement and commitment, encourage innovation and creativity, and exert a long-term, profound influence on the formation of institutional culture and performance, promoting the continuous growth and development of academic teams (Cetin & Kinik, 2015).

- **Participatory (democratic) leadership**, promoted in European and North American universities, emphasizes participatory governance models in which strategic decisions are shared with different university subdivisions (faculties, departments) and with all categories of stakeholders (managers at various levels, faculty, students, etc.). According to the opinion of S. Anit (2005), participatory leadership involves joint decision-making and the distribution of influence between superiors and subordinates. This approach increases transparency and collective responsibility. At the level of higher education systems, this type of leadership entails: a) *Decision-making transparency* (by involving teachers and students in strategic processes); b) *Distribution of responsibilities* (not only rectors or vice-rectors, but also departments, academic councils, and internal quality assurance structures contribute to the institution's strategic direction); c) *Adaptability* to societal trends and challenges. Participatory leadership represents the educational foundation of the 21st century and is widely applied in quality assurance systems and structures in higher education. There is broad consensus that strategies

developed with the involvement of the executive level become more effective and productive.

- **Strategic leadership** (Hitt, M., Haines, K.T., & Serpa, R., 2010) is grounded in institutional strategies aimed at achieving objectives across different areas of activity, ensuring the fulfillment of the mission and enhancing the institution's competitiveness at inter-institutional, national, or international levels. This type of leadership goes beyond formal planning, requiring the articulation of a coherent vision, the mobilization of resources, and the creation of a high-performing organizational framework oriented toward quality and innovation. Strategic management becomes effective when the leader's vision is developed, institutional competitiveness is promoted, human resources are used efficiently, investments in technology are made, an effective organizational culture is consolidated and maintained, and the exercise of control is carried out in a balanced manner, with respect for ethical principles.

- **Quality-oriented and international evaluation leadership** is closely linked to the regulatory framework and European policies, particularly the Bologna Process, the initiatives of the European Commission in higher education, and the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance established by ENQA since 2005 within the European Higher Education Area. Since its launch in 1999, the Bologna Process - currently bringing together 49 states - has aimed to create a harmonious academic space based on international cooperation and academic exchange, facilitating the mobility of students, professors, and researchers, while preparing young people for future careers and for active citizenship in democratic European societies. It ensures the principles of comparability and transparency in European higher education. In this context, university leadership plays a crucial role in coordinating and implementing structural reforms, such as organizing the higher education system into three cycles (Bachelor's, Master's, Doctorate), applying ECTS credits, and promoting academic mobility, as well as integrating a culture of quality into the institutional mission and development strategies. Effective leadership does not consist merely in the textual transposition of European norms, but requires adapting them to local specificities and transforming them into instruments for strengthening institutional performance and competitiveness. On the other hand, the European Commission emphasizes that university leadership is essential for the implementation of quality assurance systems and for strengthening trust among higher education institutions within the European Education Area. The Council Recommendation of 12 May 2025 (proposed by the European Commission) states that quality assurance systems are fundamental for establishing high standards and building trust between universities (Council of the European Union, 2025). For this purpose, university leadership has the role of integrating these systems into institutional strategies, while university autonomy must be balanced with responsibility toward European quality standards. At the same time, documents issued by European Union institutions promote participatory leadership models designed to ensure transparency and collective responsibility and to strengthen the culture of quality in universities. This type of leadership stimulates the involvement of the academic community in decision-making processes and encourages institutions to participate in global rankings, to undergo external evaluation procedures and standards carried out by accreditation agencies registered in ENQA and EQAR, thereby aligning with international quality indicators. In this regard, the European Commission, through the "European Degree" package (2024), high-

lighted that university leaders must act as architects of transnational cooperation, capable of integrating European standards into local strategies and building mechanisms for the automatic recognition of qualifications. Moreover, the Council of the EU (2025) recommendations underline that university leadership has the role of transforming external evaluations into opportunities for institutional development, thereby strengthening trust among universities and facilitating academic mobility. The development of robust quality assurance systems in higher education institutions requires the application of common principles and the elaboration of institutional strategies oriented toward the continuous improvement of studies and academic processes. From the outset, European standards have “recognized the primacy of national higher education systems, the importance of institutional autonomy, and the role of quality assurance agencies within these national systems, as well as the specific requirements of different academic fields” (ENQA, 2005). Although methodological approaches differ from one country to another, the objectives remain convergent: regulating institutions and study programs, and supporting the ongoing enhancement of educational services. In this regard, ENQA (European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education), through the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* (ESG, 2015, 2025), emphasizes that university leadership has the responsibility of integrating quality processes into the institution’s strategic mission, ensuring transparency, participation, and collective accountability. In accordance with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance, “Higher education aims to fulfill multiple purposes; including preparing students for active citizenship, for their future careers, supporting their personal development, creating a broad base of advanced knowledge, and stimulating research and innovation” (Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area, ESG, 2015, p. 5). Therefore, educational actors may prioritize these purposes differently and may hold diverse views on what quality in higher education entails. Quality assurance must take these perspectives into account and be able to support the development of a quality culture embraced by all stakeholders from students and teachers to institutional leadership and management.

- ***Innovation and digitalization-oriented leadership*** is perceived as a catalyst for the transformation of universities, being associated with their capacity to respond to global challenges and to integrate into the European Higher Education Area. Researcher P. Drucker emphasizes that innovation is the specific instrument of organizations aspiring to relevance and competitiveness, and in the university context this translates into leadership capable of harnessing digital technologies to modernize educational and administrative processes (Drucker, 1999). In the same vein, D. Yukl highlights that transformational leadership stimulates creativity and the adoption of technologies, making it indispensable for universities in transition (Yukl, 2013). Similarly, Fullan and Scott (2009) argue that university leaders must integrate digitalization into institutional development strategies in order to meet global pressures and student expectations. Recent reports by the European University Association (EUA, 2020-2024) and ENQA (2015) confirm that digitalization is not merely a technical tool, but a cultural process requiring visionary leadership capable of ensuring quality, experimentation, digital transformation, and sustainability. Consequently, digital leaders invest effectively in emerging technologies and in their integration into the traditional structures of organizations. Leaders who adopt technology rapidly and encourage experimentation perform signif-

icantly better, managing to address the challenges posed by digitalization and to stimulate innovation. Thus, university leadership oriented toward innovation and digitalization is not limited to the implementation of technologies, but entails a strategic vision capable of transforming universities into consolidated, competitive organizations connected to the dynamics of European democratic society.

- *University leadership oriented toward internationalization and international cooperation* represents a strategic vector for the modernization of higher education institutions, as it facilitates their integration into global academic networks and contributes to strengthening international visibility. J. Knight defines internationalization as the process of integrating the international and intercultural dimension into the mission and functions of the university, emphasizing the role of leadership in articulating a coherent vision (Knight, 2004). At the same time, De Wit stresses that internationalization is not limited to academic mobility, but also involves the development of strategic partnerships, joint programs, and an organizational culture oriented toward diversity and inclusion (De Wit, 2015). At the practical level, the European University Association (EUA, 2022) report highlights that university leadership plays a decisive role in negotiating and implementing international agreements and partnerships, attracting external resources, and adapting institutions to the standards of the European Higher Education Area. However, leadership oriented toward internationalization is not confined to expanding cooperation opportunities; it also contributes to building an open academic culture, capable of responding to the challenges of globalization and strengthening institutional resilience. Transnational partnerships, joint academic and research projects, double-degree programs, academic mobility, and Erasmus+ initiatives have confirmed the role of university leaders as architects of institutional openness at the European and global levels, consolidating the visibility and competitiveness of universities. This dimension of leadership entails the elaboration and implementation of strategies, policies, and national and institutional measures of significant, transparent, and impactful character, designed to ensure a systematic and strategic long-term approach to the internationalization of higher education and research.

4.2 University leadership in the Republic of Moldova: between European convergence and local adaptation

In the Republic of Moldova, university leadership emerges as a decisive factor in the modernization of higher education institutions, situated at the intersection of the pressures and perspectives of European convergence and local specificities, complemented by the persistence of mental, cultural, and institutional patterns inherited from the Soviet period, which remain present in the educational system. On the one hand, accession to the Bologna Process imposes clear standards of quality, transparency, and international compatibility; on the other hand, universities must respond to internal challenges related to limited human and financial resources, the narrow segment of the educational market, the national socio-economic context, and labor market demands. In this context, university leadership must confront these challenges, acting both as a mediator between the two tendencies and as a catalyst for change. It is responsible for integrating European reforms into an organizational culture adapted to national particularities, capable of mobilizing the academic community and transforming external pressures and

internal constraints into opportunities for development and competitiveness within a globalized educational environment.

At the national level, the particularities of university leadership in the Republic of Moldova must first be analyzed through the lens of the regulatory framework and educational policies developed by the Ministry of Education and Research (MEC), which establish the strategic directions for the development of the higher education system. These documents not only regulate the functioning of institutions but also outline the responsibilities of academic leadership in relation to European standards and national requirements. The reform of higher education in the Republic of Moldova reached a decisive moment with the adoption of the *Education Code* (Law No. 152 of 17 July 2014), which introduced a unified legislative framework for all levels of education and established the principles of governing universities. The *Education Code* defined the mission of higher education, its general structure and organizational forms, enshrining institutional autonomy, management principles, the responsibility of university leadership, and the integration of European standards, with an emphasis on transparency, quality, and social relevance (Parliament of the Republic of Moldova, 2014). As a result, universities were compelled to translate these provisions into concrete strategies capable of modernizing curricular structures and responding to labor market demands.

Subsequently, at the governmental level, several normative documents were developed and approved, such as the *National Strategy "Education 2020"* (Government Decision No. 944/2014), the *National Strategy for Research and Innovation 2020-2023* (Government Decision No. 381/2019), and the *National Strategy "Education 2030"* (Government Decision No. 944/2021). These strategies provided medium and long-term directions for the development of higher education, guiding reforms toward performance, digitalization, internationalization, and the consolidation of a culture of quality. Thus, the *National Strategy "Education 2020"* represented the first comprehensive programmatic document that oriented educational reforms following the adoption of the *Education Code*. It emphasized the modernization of teaching and learning processes through the development of professional competencies, the enhancement of the relevance of studies for the labor market, and the strengthening of quality assurance mechanisms (Government of the Republic of Moldova, 2014). As a result, universities in the Republic of Moldova aimed to translate the objectives of the strategy into institutional plans by restructuring curricula, promoting transparency, and developing an organizational culture oriented toward performance. On the other hand, the *National Strategy for Research and Innovation 2020-2023* aimed at integrating universities into international research networks, strengthening scientific infrastructure, and stimulating innovation. The document emphasized the role of university leadership in mobilizing resources, fostering interdisciplinarity, and promoting technology transfer (Government of the Republic of Moldova, 2019). The university leadership was called upon to transform universities into centers of excellence, capable of ensuring research quality and contributing to the country's socio-economic development.

More recently approved, the *National Strategy "Education 2030"* marks a stage of continuity and deepening of reforms, as well as the integration of higher education into the European space. It places emphasis on the digitalization of educational processes, the internationalization of universities, and the consolidation of a quality assurance system compatible with European standards. In this context, university leadership has the

mission of adapting institutions to the demands of globalization, mobilizing the academic community, and transforming external pressures into opportunities for development. The document underscores that the modernization of education cannot be achieved without strategic university management, capable of integrating European reforms into the national organizational culture (Government of the Republic of Moldova, 2021).

The continuation of reforms in higher education and the strengthening of the compatibility of the quality assurance system with European standards were reaffirmed through the *Action Plan for the implementation of the Association Agreement between the Republic of Moldova and the European Union* (Government of the Republic of Moldova, 2022). The document highlights the need to align national evaluation and accreditation mechanisms with the Standards and *Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area*, as well as to integrate universities into European quality and research networks. These measures aim to transform institutions into credible and competitive organizations, capable of meeting both national and international requirements.

At the same time, the reform of higher education in the Republic of Moldova was correlated with the establishment and consolidation of a coherent system of quality assurance in education at both national and institutional levels, designed to align universities with European standards. The *Education Code* (Law No. 152/2014) provided for the creation of a structure responsible for external quality evaluation, which led to the establishment of the National Agency for Quality Assurance in Vocational Education (ANACIP) through Government Decision No. 652 of 13 August 2014. According to ANACIP's *Regulation on Organization and Functioning* (2015), the Agency's mission was to develop and promote a culture of quality in technical vocational education, higher education, and lifelong learning, thereby contributing to increased economic competitiveness and social cohesion. It should be emphasized that, from its very foundation, the Agency implemented in its external evaluation processes the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)*.

Subsequently, following the 2018 reform, the responsibilities of ANACIP were transferred to the National Agency for Quality Assurance in Education and Research (ANACEC), an institution tasked with implementing state policies and contributing to development aligned with the highest international standards in its areas of competence. ANACEC is authorized to conduct external evaluation and accreditation of study programs and higher education institutions. This evolution placed university leadership at the center of the modernization process, requiring it to develop internal quality assurance mechanisms, promote transparency, and strengthen the international credibility of institutions. In this way, university leadership became a strategic actor, responsible for integrating a culture of quality and adapting institutions to the requirements of European convergence (Government of the Republic of Moldova, 2018).

The *Strategy of the National Agency for Quality Assurance in Education and Research (2025-2029)* reaffirms the central role of the institution in modernizing higher education in the Republic of Moldova, emphasizing compatibility with European standards, the digitalization of processes, and the strengthening of university leadership as a strategic actor in implementing and promoting a culture of quality. Its strategic objectives include: harmonizing quality assurance instruments and mechanisms in education and research with European Union practices, strengthening institutional capacity,

achieving international recognition, and developing strategic partnerships with universities to enhance competitiveness and international credibility (ANACEC, 2025).

The accreditation standards applied by ANACEC since 2016 for the external evaluation of study programs and higher education institutions in the Republic of Moldova are aligned with European standards (ESG 2015). They address both the dimension of strategic management and the culture of quality, highlighting the role of university administration in shaping and implementing strategic development directions toward performance, inclusion, diversity, and participatory governance.

Thus, for the dimension of strategic management, the external evaluation aims to verify the existence and functionality of institutional quality policies, institutional development strategies and plans, as well as the capacity of universities to integrate these policies into their strategic management. *Standard 1. Quality Assurance Policies* requires institutions to have clear, public, and applicable documents that form an integral part of university governance. Consequently, the university administration is responsible for formulating and implementing quality strategies, involving students and teachers in decision-making processes, and aligning programs with both national and European policies.

At the same time, the ten accreditation standards, which cover: program design and approval (Standard 2), student-centered learning and assessment (Standard 3), admission and certification (Standard 4), academic staff (Standard 5), learning resources (Standard 6), information management (Standard 7), public information (Standard 8), continuous monitoring (Standard 9), and cyclical external evaluation (Standard 10), constitute an integrated framework for quality verification. These standards require universities to demonstrate that programs are designed in accordance with the National Qualifications Framework and are compatible with the European Higher Education Area (ANACEC, 2025).

At the institutional level, the university administration has the role of ensuring the functionality of internal quality structures, coordinating the implementation of quality assurance processes and the preparation of self-evaluation reports, as well as implementing recommendations resulting from external evaluations, with the aim of continuously improving the quality of studies and academic processes. Rectors and leadership teams must demonstrate the institution's capacity to integrate ESG into curricular, research, and management processes, while maintaining transparency and accountability toward society. In this way, external evaluation is not limited to verifying compliance but also stimulates universities to develop a genuine culture of quality, to promote academic mobility, and to strengthen their international credibility.

In these conditions, the universities in the Republic of Moldova have been compelled to elaborate their own strategies for institutional development, oriented toward key directions such as quality assurance, promotion of study programs, academic staff development, internationalization, digitalization, research, ethics and academic integrity, and continuous training of human resources. These strategic documents vary from one institution to another, reflecting the vision and priorities of university management during the rectors' mandates, but they share the common objective of transforming universities into modern and competitive organizations at both national and international levels. Such strategies are widely discussed within academic communities, involving aca-

ademic staff, students, and external partners, which grants them legitimacy and relevance. Finally, they are approved by university senates, becoming official instruments for annual activity planning and university governance.

To ground the research, we selected four representative universities from the Republic of Moldova, whose institutional development strategies were elaborated and adopted in 2021. The choice of these institutions: “Ion Creangă” State Pedagogical University of Chişinău, Technical University of Moldova, Moldova State University, and “Nicolae Testemiţanu” State University of Medicine and Pharmacy, is justified by their major role in the national higher education system, the diversity of their academic profiles (pedagogical, technical, generalist, and medical), and their relevance for a comparative analysis of university leadership. Thus, these universities constitute a pertinent case study for understanding how the strategic directions and visions regarding quality assurance are reflected in academic leadership practices in the Republic of Moldova:

1) In the *Strategic Development Plan for 2021-2025*, “Ion Creangă” State Pedagogical University of Chisinau (UPSC) focused on the development and consolidation of the quality of its educational offer; strengthening research areas in line with the challenges of contemporary society; intensifying the process of internationalization; developing and motivating human resources; improving the quality of student services; increasing the efficiency of university management; and modernizing institutional infrastructure (UPSC, 2021). Analyzing UPSC’s vision on quality assurance, we can observe that the university focuses on building an organizational culture oriented toward quality through viable internal policies and continuous evaluation mechanisms. These are centered on: student-centered education, modernization of study programs, integration of research into teaching, development of transversal competencies, digitalization of teaching-learning-assessment processes, diversification of the educational offer, creation of an inclusive and safe educational environment, and consolidation of the internal quality assurance system.

2) In the *Institutional Strategic Development Plan for 2021-2026*, Technical University of Moldova (UTM) has oriented its priorities and strategic objectives toward educational management; management of scientific research, innovation, and technology transfer; continuous training and modernization of digital infrastructure; relations with labor market partners and internationalization; as well as the management of assets and investments (UTM, 2021). UTM’s vision on quality assurance focuses on transforming the institution into a competitive actor at both national and international levels, through a management that ensures: student-centered education and quality, debureaucratization and digitalization, updating of study programs, diversification of the educational offer, distance learning processes, internationalization, partnerships with business and industry, and the strengthening of educational infrastructure.

3) Through the *Development Strategy for 2021-2026*, Moldova State University (USM) has outlined its strategic directions as follows: ensuring guaranteed conditions for quality studies; promoting excellence in research and training young researchers; harnessing human potential and supporting cultural and sports performance; creating a student-friendly university environment; fostering openness and international academic cooperation; digitalizing processes; promoting institutional identity and image; and strengthening institutional management and financial capacity (USM, 2021). USM’s vision on quality assurance is defined by: the continuous improvement of study pro-

grams through alignment with labor market requirements, modern educational technologies and the valorization of scientific achievements; strengthening the academic environment through motivation and responsibility for the quality of studies; improving physical conditions favorable to the educational and research processes; and reconfiguring lifelong learning by covering a broader range of professional training and personal development fields.

4) Through the *Strategic Development Plan for 2021-2030*, “Nicolae Testemițanu” State University of Medicine and Pharmacy (USMF) highlighted the following areas of strategic development: educational and teaching activity; research, innovation, and technology transfer; clinical activity; internationalization; students and social responsibility; human resources; management of financial resources; informatization; communication, promotion, and institutional visibility (USMF, 2021). USMF’s vision on quality assurance is characterized by: the improvement and modernization of the educational process; increasing competitiveness; student/resident/trainee-centered education; aligning training with the requirements of the healthcare system; modern resources and diversified clinical infrastructure; transparent recruitment policies and internationalization; promoting a culture of quality through standardized and transparent evaluation of competencies; professional development of teaching staff; and reaccreditation of study programs at both national and international levels.

Therefore, the vision of university managers regarding academic leadership plays an essential role in shaping these documents, ensuring their coherence with national and European policies, while also adapting them to institutional and local specificities. Institutional strategies thus become instruments of strategic management through which universities define their development directions and strengthen their credibility in relation to society and international partners. In the following, we have analyzed and synthesized the particularities of university leadership in the Republic of Moldova, starting from the strategic directions of institutional development and the visions of quality assurance presented above for the four representative universities: UPSC, UTM, USM, and USMF (See *Table 1*):

Table 1. Leading features of university leadership in the Republic of Moldova as reflected in the Institutional Strategies, approved in 2021

Univer- sity	Strategic directions for the years 2021-2025	Key features of university leadership
UPSC	✓ Quality of educational offer;	Transformational leadership , oriented toward organizational culture, student-centered education, curricular innovation, and inclusion. University administration stimulates change and continuous adaptation to societal demands.
	✓ Scientific research;	
	✓ Internationalization;	
	✓ Human resources;	
	✓ Student services;	
	✓ Modernization of infrastructure.	
UTM	✓ Educational management;	Innovative and entrepreneurial leadership , focused on debureaucratization, digitalization, and partnerships with industry.
	✓ Research and innovation;	
	✓ Technology transfer;	
	✓ Lifelong learning;	
	✓ Digitalization;	

	✓ Labor market relations;	University administration promotes competitiveness by connecting education with the economic and technological environment.
	✓ Internationalization.	
USM	✓ Quality of studies;	Academic and community leadership , oriented toward excellence in research, responsibility for study quality, and creating a favorable university environment. University administration supports motivation and the involvement of the academic community in university processes.
	✓ Excellence in research;	
	✓ Cultural and sports performance;	
	✓ Student-friendly environment;	
	✓ International cooperation;	
	✓ Digitalization;	
	✓ Strengthening management.	
USMF	✓ Teaching activity;	Professional and socially responsible leadership , centered on integrating education with clinical practice, internationalization, and modern infrastructure. University administration ensures the training of competitive specialists recognized internationally.
	✓ Research and innovation;	
	✓ Clinical activity;	
	✓ Internationalization;	
	✓ Social responsibility;	
	✓ Human resources;	
	✓ Institutional visibility.	

Source: The table is elaborated by the author on the information selected from the universities' strategies.

Integrated at the national level, university leadership in the Republic of Moldova is expressed through a convergent vision: *modernization, internationalization, digitalization*, and, not least, the *consolidation of a culture of quality*. Each institution adapts these directions to its own specific context, but together they contribute to integration into the European Higher Education Area and to building a credible and competitive image of Moldovan universities (see *Fig. 1*).

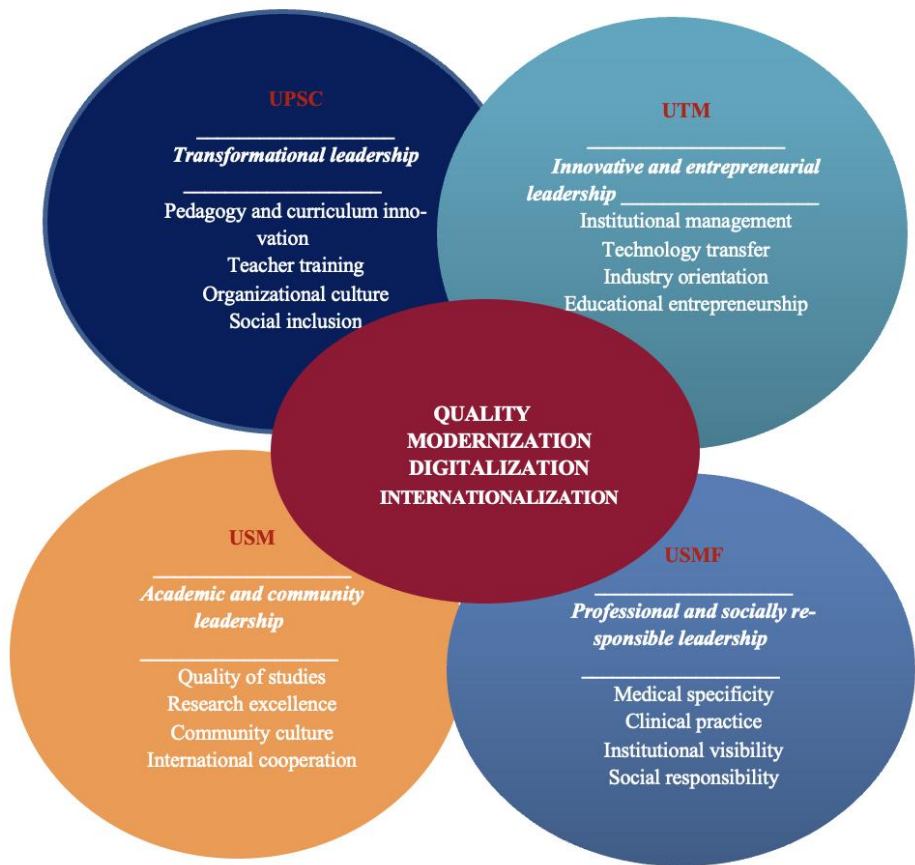


Fig. 1. Elements of complementarity and differences in university leadership in Republic of Moldova

Source: The Diagram is elaborated by the author based on information selected from universities strategies.

In the global context of profound transformations affecting higher education, the Ministry of Education and Research of the Republic of Moldova initiated, in 2025, a national program for the training of university managers and the transformation of academic leaders, so that they may become architects of change, capable of managing the complexity of institutional processes and integrating values such as transparency, accountability, and sustainability into academic governance.

The training of university leaders in the Republic of Moldova has become imperative for the current processes, which include accelerated digitalization, internationalization, academic mobility and demographic pressures. These developments demand leadership models that are adaptable, responsible, and quality-oriented. Within this framework, Moldovan universities can no longer function only as traditional training institutions,

but must evolve into modern organizations capable of integrating emerging technologies, responding to labor market demands, and contributing to societal sustainability.

In accordance with the *Managerial Competence Framework for University Leaders* (MEC, 2025), developed at national level within the Intervention Plan of the Moldova Higher Education Program (PBC1), the Ministry of Education and Research promotes an integrated and modern vision of university leadership. This vision is grounded in responsibility, innovation, ethics, and strategic orientation, with the objective of transforming universities in the Republic of Moldova into resilient, competitive institutions that are connected to the European and global space of education and research.

The document does not limit itself to general principles of organizing university management but concretely defines ten areas of managerial competence, which serve as essential benchmarks for the training of academic leaders. These cover the entire spectrum of modern academic governance: from strategic leadership and institutional vision to ethical governance and organizational culture; from financial management and sustainability to digital transformation and the responsible use of artificial intelligence; from quality and innovation in education to research, technology transfer, and doctoral management. At the same time, the document emphasizes the importance of people-centered leadership, diversity, equity, and inclusion, as well as the essential role of data governance and institutional performance management. Student success and the creation of an inclusive academic ecosystem are placed at the core of this vision, while civic leadership and academic diplomacy are recognized as strategic dimensions for strengthening the international visibility of universities.

Thus, university leadership in the Republic of Moldova aligns with international trends promoted by UNESCO, OECD, and EUA, which emphasize transformative and participatory leadership, academic integrity, institutional accountability, and the intelligent use of data for decision-making. This involves not only a change of mentality, but also a restructuring of internal processes, consolidation of organizational culture, and the development of inclusive ecosystems that ensure student success and the relevance of research.

In order to substantiate the elaboration of the *Training Program for University Leadership* (2025-2030), the Ministry of Education and Research carried out, during November-December 2025, an extensive consultation process at national level by applying a questionnaire on the real professional development needs of individuals in leadership positions within higher education in the Republic of Moldova, as well as of emerging leaders preparing to assume such roles in the coming years. The instrument targeted seven public universities in the Republic of Moldova: Moldova State University, Technical University of Moldova, "Ion Creanga" State Pedagogical University of Chisinau, "Nicolae Testemițanu" State University of Medicine and Pharmacy, Academy of Economic Studies of Moldova, "B.P.Hasdeu" Cahul State University and "A. Russo" Balti State University, which constitute the core of the higher education system. This selection provided a relevant picture of the diversity of institutional profiles and of the common challenges in academic leadership.

Although the results of the questionnaire have not yet been officially published, our analysis will focus on the data collected at "Ion Creangă" State Pedagogical University of Chișinău (UPSC). This focus allows us to highlight the particularities of university leadership within a pedagogical institution, while also drawing generalizable conclusions for the entire higher education system of the Republic of Moldova. The UPSC

respondents (102 individuals) represented all levels of university management: rector, vice-rectors, deans, heads of departments, heads of university subdivisions, and administrative specialists with decision-making roles, covering various areas of responsibility such as academic, administrative, financial, human resources, quality assurance, and digitalization. The analysis of managerial and strategic training needs, reported against the 13 domains proposed by the Ministry of Education and Research (MEC), revealed differentiated opinions across the various managerial levels (See Fig. 2).

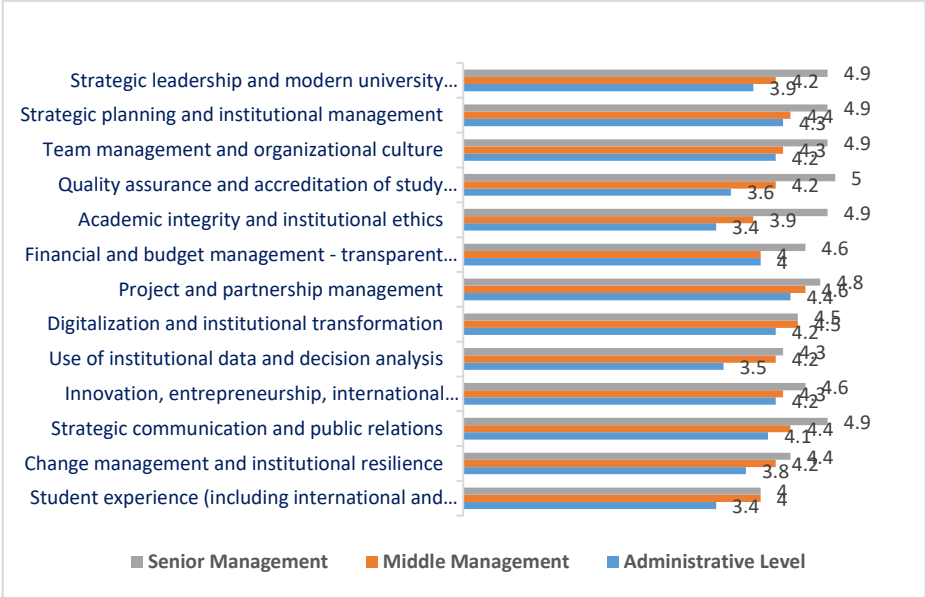


Fig. 2. Average scores of training needs by domain and by level of management UPSC, 2025.

Source: The Diagram is compiled by the author based on data selected from the questionnaire.

Therefore, senior (top) management assigns very high scores across most domains, reflecting a strategic and comprehensive perception of training needs, with the highest values being in: quality assurance, strategic leadership, communication, planning, team management, and integrity. These results suggest that leaders at the top of the institution consider it essential to strengthen the skills that influence vision, strategic direction, and institutional credibility. Middle management scores fall within a relatively homogeneous range, but clear priorities emerge, such as project management, digitalization, strategic planning, and strategic communication. This profile reflects the positioning of middle management as the operational and implementation level, responsible for translating strategies into concrete activities, hence why projects, digitalization, and team management become central. Administrative management shows somewhat lower scores, though still within the range of high training needs. The most important domains for administrative staff are: project management, digitalization, and strategic planning.

The values suggest that administrative personnel perceive their own involvement in institutional transformation, particularly in the area of digitalization, while assigning comparatively less importance to ethical domains or those related to student experience.

The analysis and generalization of the collected data have outlined three essential directions for the development of professional skills required for university leadership: 1) Strengthening institutional capacity through project management, digitalization, and strategic planning. 2) Developing people-oriented leadership through team management, communication, and organizational culture. 3) Adapting to the international context and rapid changes through innovation, international partnerships, and institutional resilience. The accumulated data allow us to conclude that UPSC is undergoing an advanced process of transformation, and its leaders perceive high training needs in areas that support modernization, efficiency, and internationalization.

At the same time, the analysis of responses highlights a particular interest in leadership styles, marked by diversity but also by clearly defined trends. The styles with the strongest support are: Strategic leadership – 29 respondents; Participatory leadership – 27 respondents; Transformational leadership – 25 respondents; Others (adaptive, servant, ethical) – 21 respondents.

These options configure a dominant leadership model within UPSC, which is simultaneously oriented toward institutional vision and direction (strategic), collaborative decision-making (participatory), and the promotion of change and innovation (transformational). These trends observed at UPSC correlate with opinions expressed in other Moldovan higher education institutions. Since universities are complex organizations, respondents' preferences lean toward styles that combine strategic rigor, academic community involvement, and the capacity to inspire transformation.

Building on the framework document on managerial competencies for university leaders and on the results obtained from the questionnaires, universities have developed their own institutional training programs, designed to respond to the urgent need for transformation and strengthening university leadership capacity in line with European trends. These programs go beyond the development of individual competencies of university managers; they stimulate institutional modernization, the professionalization of leadership, and the strengthening of resilience within the higher education system. Their ultimate goal is to contribute to the formation of a coherent, diverse, and performance-oriented national academic ecosystem.

5 Conclusions

Generalizing the information and data collected, we can affirm that in the context of the current dynamic global processes, university leadership is increasingly emerging as a decisive factor in ensuring the quality of processes within higher education institutions. International trends demonstrate that high performing universities succeed in transforming strategic plans into inspirational narratives, capable of connecting institutional objectives with the values and energy of the academic community. University leaders play a crucial role in these processes, because turning institutional development strategies into motivation requires complex and sinuous administrative actions that link

institutional plans to the energy, personality, and engagement of people. Thus, leadership becomes a process of translating the vision of university managers into clear messages that stimulate involvement and give meaning to institutional development directions.

Another central element of these trends is the participation of the university community in decision making processes. When university leaders translate strategic objectives into clear messages connected to the values of the academic community, these directions become sources of motivation for its members. A strategy oriented toward institutional vision gains strength when it is presented as a common path, in which every member of the university plays an essential role. At the same time, participatory decisions transform plans into collective commitments, while the innovative dimension of strategies awakens the desire for change and the courage to experiment. Within universities, this distinction is expressed through the ability to transform strategic documents into collective motivation, capable of inspiring change and professionalizing the act of leadership. Motivation also arises when strategies are not perceived as obligations but as opportunities: the opportunity to contribute to the modernization of the institution, to gain professional recognition, and to be part of a project larger than the individual self. In this way, university leadership is not reduced to planning; it becomes a catalyst of collective energy and a promoter of an institutional quality culture based on collaboration and collective resilience.

At the same time, the analysis of reference sources allows us to conclude that university leadership in the Republic of Moldova is undergoing a profound redefinition. Beyond the traditional administrative role inherited from the Soviet period, it is becoming a catalyst for change, capable of transforming institutional strategies and international quality assurance standards into collective motivation, organizational culture, and international competitiveness. In this regard, a first key observation concerns the evolution of university leadership from administrative compliance, defined by the national and institutional legislative framework - toward a model of professional inspiration, centered on quality assurance processes. At the national level, the Ministry of Education and Research (MEC) and the National Agency for Quality Assurance in Education and Research (ANACEC) have developed educational policies and national quality assurance standards that create a framework for modernization and professionalization of university governance. These policies establish clear criteria of transparency, accountability, and performance, guiding universities toward alignment with European and international standards.

Secondly, within the higher education system of the Republic of Moldova, adherence to the Bologna Process and the implementation of Quality Assurance Standards are no longer perceived merely as formal obligations, but as opportunities for modernization and institutional transformation, embedded in institutional development strategies. The strategic plans of Moldovan universities (UPSC, UTM, USM, USMF), analyzed in this study, demonstrate that strategy has become the driving force of organizational culture. The integration of the European framework of managerial competencies is not simply an exercise in compliance, but a process of consolidating an institutional culture of quality assurance. This culture is built on transparency, collaboration, and innovation, while university leadership emerges as a process of building shared values, a factor of

cohesion, and a promoter of academic performance, capable of transforming external pressures and internal challenges into opportunities for growth and international recognition. In Moldovan universities, this reality translates into modernized professional training programs, high quality studies, a strong orientation toward innovation and technology transfer, internationalization, the professionalization of management, and the strengthening of resilience in the higher education system. Leaders thus become mediators and architects of change, able to conduct rigorous analysis, identify pragmatic solutions to internal challenges, and convert external pressures into opportunities for institutional growth and international recognition.

A third aspect concerns the orientation toward performance and international competitiveness. University leadership in the Republic of Moldova, oriented toward change, stimulates international openness and academic recognition. Erasmus+ and Horizon Europe programs, together with global partnerships, have become instruments through which Moldovan universities consolidate their position on the international stage, transforming external pressures into opportunities for growth and affirmation. This orientation reflects a broader strategic shift: Moldovan universities are no longer content with national visibility but are actively seeking integration into the European Higher Education Area and global academic networks. Internationalization is not only about mobility programs or joint projects; it is increasingly tied to quality assurance, innovation, and institutional credibility. By engaging in cross border collaborations, universities strengthen their research capacity, diversify their educational offerings, and enhance their attractiveness to international students and scholars. At the same time, international competitiveness requires professionalized leadership capable of navigating complex funding schemes, building sustainable partnerships, and aligning institutional strategies with global standards. Leaders thus become mediators between local realities and international expectations, ensuring that Moldovan universities can both preserve their identity and expand their influence. Ultimately, this international orientation positions leadership as a driver of resilience and recognition, enabling universities to transform challenges - such as demographic decline, financial constraints, or external evaluation pressures - into opportunities for institutional growth, modernization, and global affirmation.

In conclusion, from strategy to motivation, university leadership in the Republic of Moldova has the potential to move decisively beyond its traditional administrative role and become a true engine of transformation. By integrating external strategies and standards into collective motivation, strengthening organizational culture, stimulating academic performance, and embracing international openness, Moldovan universities are gradually aligning themselves with global trends in higher education. This evolution marks a profound shift: leadership is no longer confined to compliance with regulations or the management of routine processes. Instead, it is increasingly understood as a dynamic force that inspires, modernizes, and connects institutions to the European and international academic landscape. Leadership becomes a catalyst for resilience, collaboration, and innovation - ensuring that higher education institutions can adapt to rapid changes, strengthen their credibility, and contribute to the creation of a coherent, diverse, and performance oriented national academic ecosystem. Ultimately, the Moldovan case demonstrates that quality in higher education is inseparable from leadership

capacity. When strategies are transformed into motivation, when governance is infused with values of transparency and participation, and when international partnerships are leveraged for growth, universities become not only centers of learning but also engines of societal progress and global recognition.

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