



# THE FUTURE OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN MOLDOVA

a look into students' perceptions

2019...



# THE FUTURE OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN MOLDOVA

## a look into students' perceptions

Methodology: Cognitive Edge's SenseMaker® Narrative Enquiry tool

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This paper is a think piece, supported and developed by UNDP Moldova, in partnership with Cognitive Edge -an organisation that specialises in applying a complexity-lens on human systems and decision-making. SenseMaker®, the tool utilised in the study, is developed by Cognitive Edge to conduct narrative-based research. This study's intention is to inform long-term policy development in the education sector, and also inspire local initiatives, either individual or group initiatives, long-term or short-term, initiated by the Ministries, Universities, teachers or even students to support the alignment of higher education to the road ahead.

**We would like to thank Rectors and staff of several local universities, to include Moldova State University, Academy of Economic Studies, Technical University, as well as a large team of volunteers and interns who collaborated with UNDP for the collection and sense-making of the collected stories.**

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## INTRODUCTION

The education sector around the globe is undergoing significant transformations. The education system in five years from now will not be the same as today. There is a need to rethink the existing model of education to meet the demands of a changing world. Massive Open Online Courses, the implementation of augmented reality in learning and training, customised education programmes established within corporate organizations, economic disruptions, critical instructor/faculty shortages and countless other changes are all ingredients shaping the future of education. In this paper, we are painting the future of education in Moldova from the perceptions of students, teachers and other relevant sources.

## CONTEXT

In Moldova, the trust in the educational system has been continuously decreasing during the past years. In 2013, only one-third<sup>1</sup> of the Moldovan population believed that the education reforms are heading in the right direction. Since then, the number of those who are optimistic has decreased even further. Webometrics, a ranking tool measuring the global performance of universities around the world, ranked the average Moldovan University on 11,857th place out of approximately 28,000 universities in the world<sup>2</sup> in 2012. In 2019, the same indicator ranked the average Moldovan University on 14,794th place, which represents a 25% drop in 7 years. Such unsatisfactory ranking should not be surprising.

Official statistics<sup>3</sup> shows that Moldova is experiencing a significant decrease in the number of educational institutions, teachers and students. Compared to the academic year 2010-2011, by 2017/2018, the total number of educational institutions decreased by 17.4%, with no changes in the number of State Universities (19 Universities in total). In the same period, the number of teachers in the education system decreased by 22.8%, and by 25.5% in higher education institutions.

In the academic year 2017/2018, the number of students enrolled in higher education decreased by 9.2 thousand (12.3%) compared to the previous year, and 39.2% compared to the year 2010/2011. The student to teacher ratio at the university level has changed from 17 students/teacher in the academic year 2012/2013 to 13.5 students/teacher in the academic year 2017/2018, this evolution putting a higher burden on the Universities' administrations. Also, considering that the lowest rate of enrollment in education is among the age group 19-23 yrs (24.7% enrollment), this being the university-level age, there is much to be done to improve enrolment in the Universities if not to start shrinking or closing them down.

1. "Institute for Public Policy: Republic of Moldova Public Opinion Barometer." Institute for Public Policy, <http://www.bop.ipp.md/ro/result/bar>

2. Webometrics ranking takes into account the teaching commitment, the research results, the perceived international prestige, the links with the community, including industrial and economic sectors, of the universities in order to perform the ranking.

3. "Education in the Republic of Moldova, Statistical Publication." National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova, [http://statistica.gov.md/public/files/publicatii\\_electronice/Educatia/Educatie\\_RM\\_2018.pdf](http://statistica.gov.md/public/files/publicatii_electronice/Educatia/Educatie_RM_2018.pdf)

The decreasing number of students largely impacts the financial situation of the universities, and ultimately – the number and quality of the teaching staff, but also universities' capacity to innovate and adapt to the global trends.

Another education-related challenge is that the students who graduate rarely find work in their field of choice, as their capabilities and profiles do not match the employers' requirements. There are many questions floating in the air, out of which the most evident one is "What is the future of higher education in Moldova?"

The education-related challenges are tackled in the national level strategic documents, including the Education development strategy 2014-2020 "Education - 2020", where the reality of the education system is recognised, including higher education, the future vision and identified measures. In addition to this, we were curious to know how the users of higher education perceive it today (what is their perception about the quality of higher education they are pursuing) , how they see the future of higher education and which solutions they envision as responses to the most urgent challenges faced by their universities. To answer this, we applied the micro-narratives to collect alternative small data from students and teachers, and below we provide an analysis of what we have gathered.

## HOW DATA WAS COLLECTED AND ANALYZED

Back in 2017, UNDP Moldova partnered with UNDP Istanbul Regional Hub and Cognitive Edge in a joint effort to reply to the question "What is the future of higher education in Moldova?" using small data, now referred to as micro-narratives and their indexing through SenseMaker. The SenseMaker is a convenient tool that combines the advantages of both qualitative and quantitative research methods. The qualitative part collects people's stories relating to the research question (which are not long and relate directly to the problem addressed), while the quantitative part, such as multiple choice questions or choosing a singular position on a triad or duad, allows the narrator to answer a few questions about his or her story. The combination of quantitative and qualitative data collection allows for both individual in-depth analyses and representativeness (or at least a reliable estimate) of the frequency and commonality of certain stories. The methodology of the micro-narratives is described in the earlier paper "Listening to local needs for development: Micro Narratives as a tool for the localization of SDGs"<sup>4</sup>.

The micro-narratives were collected during the 2nd semester of 2017/2018 academic year at the level of State University of Moldova (32% of responses), Technical University of Moldova (38% of responses), and the Academy of Economic Studies of Moldova (30% of responses). Students made up 97% of the respondents. The questionnaires were collected mostly offline, in classes of students from diverse faculties in all 3 universities. More than 1,000 narratives were received and analyzed.

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4. [https://www.md.undp.org/content/moldova/en/home/library/inclusive\\_growth/listening-to-local-needs-for-development--micronarratives-as-a-t.html](https://www.md.undp.org/content/moldova/en/home/library/inclusive_growth/listening-to-local-needs-for-development--micronarratives-as-a-t.html)



In the questionnaire<sup>5</sup> we provided respondents with a brief overview of the general trends that are influencing the future of education, then asked them to index their perspectives on the triads and share micro-narratives on how they believe their educational institutions are preparing to meet those trends. We also asked respondents to provide a utopian as well as a dystopian perspective of the main changes that will occur in education by 2030. This created a ground for us to understand the general patterns and perspectives of students to the future of education, as well as provided us with a pool of micro-narratives to read and interpret.

The analysis of the collected information was conducted in several stages:

- Firstly, we looked into the quantitative data and possible correlations;
- Secondly, we looked into the qualitative data – the micro-narratives;
- And finally, we organized sensemaking sessions with students, University staff and education practitioners to read through the findings, map the challenges and jointly identify possible solutions.

The analytic effort got us to three main areas of challenges related to the preparedness of the Moldovan Universities for the future, which are:

Challenge1 : A theoretical and rigid education curricula not attractive to students;

Challenge2: Low level of teachers' motivation and skills to drive change, proactivity, and students' engagement;

Challenge 3: Lack of innovation in the education system.

Below we are bringing the details of the analysis, collected and systematized insights from various actors, and recommendations and possible solutions to adapt higher education to a brighter future.

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5. [https://eu.sensemaker-suite.com/Collector/collector.gsp?projectID=UNDP\\_FutureofEdu2017&language=en#Collector](https://eu.sensemaker-suite.com/Collector/collector.gsp?projectID=UNDP_FutureofEdu2017&language=en#Collector)

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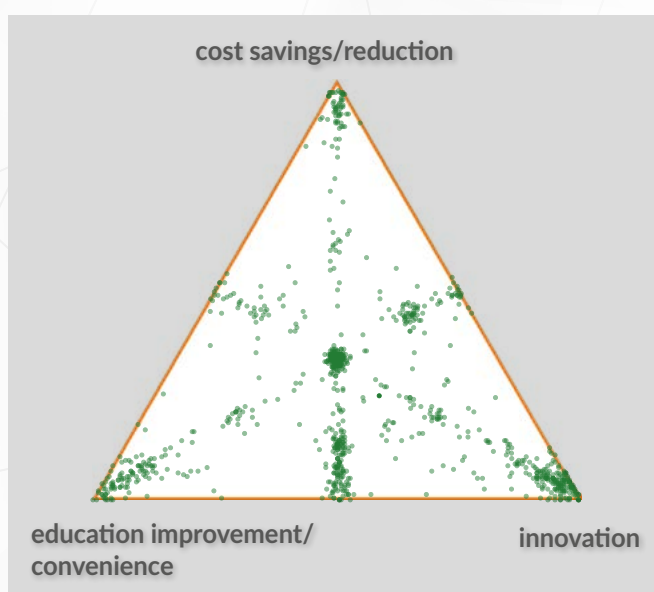
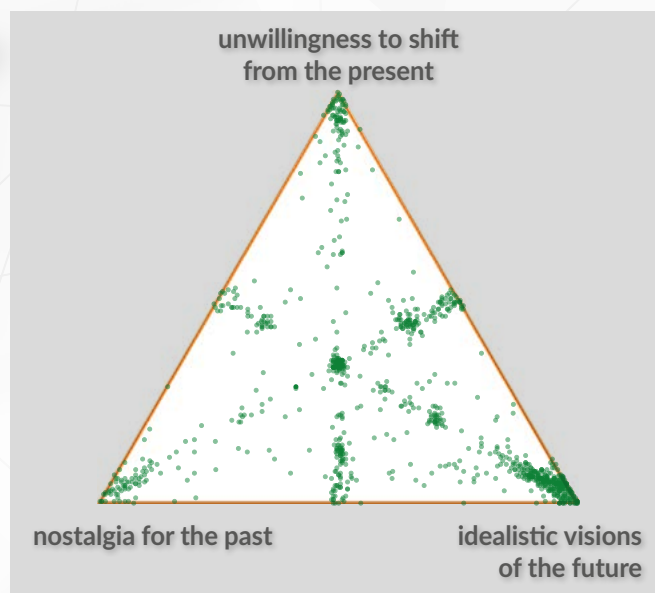
## SURVEY RESULTS. YOUTH PERCEPTION

The first part of the questionnaire is based on triads, which show the thoughts of respondents on the future of education, and here below are what the respondents told us:

### The way things pan out over the next decade will reflect...?

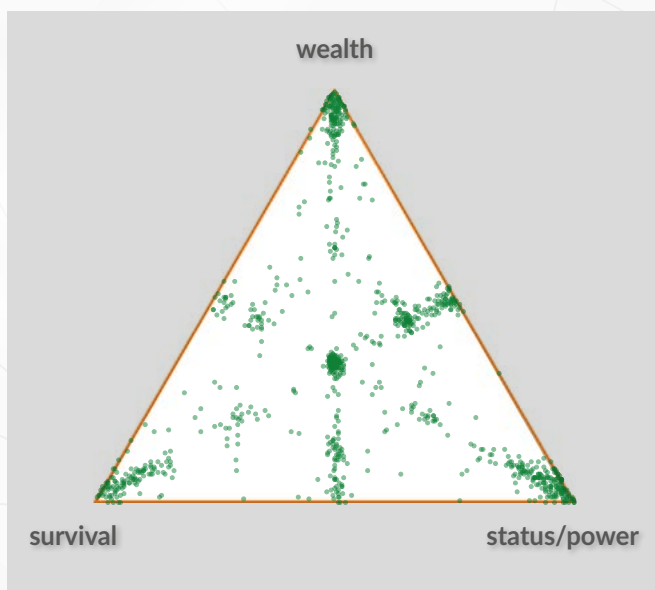
63% of the respondents are moderately to very idealistic about the future of education. This can be explained in various ways, in particular:

- Respondents are very optimistic as they have high chances and opportunities to continue studies abroad, benefiting from an overall better quality curriculum and research infrastructure
- Such perspective is given due to the fact that students are optimistic and/or naive that things would change for the better.



### Motivations will likely be coming from...?

Most of the focus is placed on innovation and improvement of quality of education (with particular focus on the quality of the available curriculum, less on the infrastructure and endowments). Students might believe that cost saving and further reductions would be destructive and devastating for educational institutions as the educational situation is already poor.



### Change is likely to be driven by...?

Very much mixed, but most answers relate to either wealth or status/power or a mix of the two.

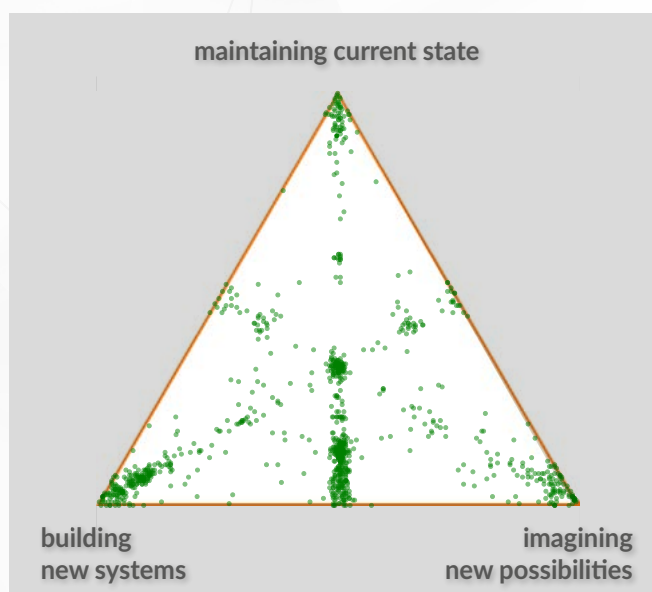
This might be explained by the student's perceived societal hierarchy in Moldova, where people who possess wealth, status and power can easily override and overrule any efforts done by those who don't. This implies that the deciding factors behind any change to the educational systems in Moldova are in the hands

of wealthy and powerful.

### Educational institutions are likely to react by...?

Most respondents think that universities would rather react by building new systems, imagining new possibilities and a mix of the two.

Students might understand that the current educational situation is poor and will only continue to worsen unless actions are undertaken. They are confident that maintaining the current state would be self-destructive and potentially even devastating



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