

Republic of Moldova

World Bank Higher Education Project

### Comment

by **John Reilly**, Higher Education Consultant

John Reilly background relevant to Moldova and the World Bank project

Published Studies for the European Commission on:

(i) **Quality Assurance** in the TEMPUS Countries

(ii) **University Governance and Autonomy** in the TEMPUS Countries

**Workshop** in Chisinau on University Governance and Autonomy and meetings with the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Finance

External expert in two projects funded by the European Commission:

**EUNIAM Enhancing University Autonomy in Moldova** A project designed to support the restructuring, rationalization, and modernization of Higher Education in Moldova.

**Introducing Problem Based Learning in Moldova (PBLMD)** A project to improve the quality of student-centred teaching and learning and relevance for the labour market

**Commentary** on Moldova **Education Code** (EUNIAM project) focusing on Autonomy and Governance

**Commentary** on Moldova **Framework Plan for Higher Education** in the context of the commitment to University Autonomy expressed in the Moldova Education Code

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Having worked with colleagues in the Universities in Moldova over a number of years and been impressed by their openness, warmth, commitment to their students and concern to do what they can to modernise the sector, notwithstanding the challenges they face on a daily basis, I feel impelled to write this brief personal note to urge that the World Bank funding must be accompanied and in one fundamental case, pre-ceded, by the changes indicated below and incorporated in the EUNIAM report.

The World Bank project for Moldova will provide a welcome and much needed investment in a Higher Education system which is faced by serious challenges. These are well illustrated in the project risk analysis. However, it should be a matter for the gravest concern that the fundamental risk, which jeopardises the whole project, is not being addressed before the investment begins. As the report states:

*17. "Too many universities compete for declining numbers of students, and most of those universities are too small to operate efficiently with static administrations and infrastructure that do not adapt to changing enrolments.....Altogether, these facts call for a consolidation of the network of public universities."*

The report indicates that the Government of Moldova is '*considering*' restructuring the sector and that this will entail the retention of nine Universities.

Following a detailed and documented review the EUNIAM project (funded by the European Commission '*Restructuring, Rationalizing and Modernizing Higher Education Sector in the Republic of Moldova*') report in 2015 made a series of recommendations. It is surprising that there is no reference to this detailed report because it is highly pertinent to all aspect of the proposed project.

The report recommended that, to establish a viable Higher Education sector, the number of Universities should be reduced to six and it indicated how this might be achieved. At the time I argued, with colleagues, that even this degree of rationalisation would not represent a

sustainable system and that the logic of numbers, disciplinary strengths, infrastructure, resources and the urgent need for multi-disciplinary Universities, indicated that a tighter consolidation with even fewer Universities was necessary. The colleagues understandably rejected this as too radical and politically fraught and I appreciated that their sense of the political realities should be respected.

When the report was issued it was understood that the Government recognised that the maintenance of 19+ Higher Education Institutions was indefensible and at that time was minded to take action. Since then the situation in Moldova has deteriorated, as I experienced in the most recent project (PBLMD) and is manifest from the WB project risk analysis. There is inertia in the system which no one seems capable of overcoming and hence change will have to be imposed or stimulated by policies which compel change. This must entail integration into a more focused, efficient, organised system. It means fewer than nine (or even six) 'owner' Universities, which might have 'branches' but would be responsible for management, curriculum, and quality. Unless this is an absolute pre-requisite the injection of World Bank funding has every likelihood of being squandered no matter what safeguards are put in place and no matter how committed the key actors may be and I know, from working with them, that there are dedicated, committed staff.

This will happen simply because resources, for a small, diminishing number of students, will be dissipated between too many institutions with all their associated costs. No amount of investment in the short to medium term will reverse the decline in student numbers. If the system is to be modernised and achieve the project objectives the investment needs to be concentrated to improve infrastructure, establish a critical mass of high quality academic, technical and management staff, facilitate genuine interdisciplinary learning, teaching and research and embed generic competences throughout the curriculum. This will not happen with a nine institutions compromise even though this will require courage to drive through.

Because, as the W B analysis confirms, a more radical restructuring will be painful and politically fraught, prudence may triumph but it will represent a postponement of the inevitable and it will mean that the benefits which should flow from the World Bank funds will not achieve the step changes which are desired. There is also a real danger that procrastination will win and that the '*consideration*' will actually mean further delay in restructuring. It is already over four years since the in depth EUNIAM report was published during which '*consideration*' has been the policy option.

Fundamental restructuring of the system into four interdisciplinary Universities, while it is an essential basis for reform, is of itself not sufficient. The review of the Education Code and the Framework Plan suggested that there are issues relating to autonomy, governance, management, curriculum planning and development and quality assurance which need to be tackled on two fronts - Government and University.

In the present structure, notwithstanding the assertions in the Code, all of these (autonomy, governance, management, curriculum planning and development and quality assurance) are severely compromised by the detailed prescriptions in the Code and the Framework.

Establishing a National Qualifications Framework, strengthening the Quality Assurance Agency, developing central management information and admission systems, while they may be necessary, does not address or remedy the structural and legal flaws in the system. If University autonomy, governance, management, curriculum planning and development and quality assurance are not simultaneously reformed then the national initiatives will achieve little.

Quality Assurance provides a good illustration. As the 2015 European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ESG) specify:

*“Higher education institutions have primary responsibility for the quality of their provision and its assurance”*

*“Institutions should have a policy for quality assurance that is made public and forms part of their strategic management. Internal stakeholders should develop and implement this policy through appropriate structures and processes, while involving external stakeholders”*

The emphasis is on the institution and its ‘structures and processes’ as the primary basis for Quality Assurance. As the WB report confirms *“most institutions do not have well-developed internal QA mechanisms in place”* (21). The project proposes to remedy this by – *“developing self-evaluation and external evaluation capacities within universities, delivering training activities, and fostering inter-institutional collaboration. It is expected that 200 staff of universities would be trained through this activity”*(52) To suggest that this misses the point of the ESG Standard quoted above may seem ungracious in the light of largesse but training 200 staff, if there is no institutional ‘strategic management’ and effective permanent structures and processes, will be a waste. Developing a pervasive, institutional, quality culture, requires dedicated resources professional staff, an infrastructure and a staff development programme. Above all it requires effective governance and strategic management able and willing to bring about radical change in attitudes and practice. There is little indication that the World Bank injections will address this imperative. A part-time, resource limited, marginal, quality activity, which will pertain if the number of Universities is not radically restructured, will not deliver the change required.

Similar points apply to the anticipated modernisation of the curriculum and learning and teaching methods in the designated priority areas. The review of the Code and the Framework (see above) indicated a variety of ways in which academic autonomy in curriculum development is hampered by national prescription and a bureaucratic process. As the commentary on the Framework stated - *“Universities need to operate in a dynamic knowledge world which has to respond, reflect and critically evaluate constant and rapid changes and incorporate these in their curriculum if they are to prepare graduates adequately for the contemporary economic, social, political and employment world. Consequently, the process for approval, redesign development or adding to a programme needs to be reasonably streamlined and responsive to change. At the same time, it has to ensure proper scrutiny and quality assurance.”* The process is not *‘streamlined and responsive to change’*. It is cumbersome and slow. The project is silent on these issues but its aspirations will not be realised unless they are addressed. As with other aspects of the project this means making University autonomy a reality and this has more chance of success in fewer institutions.

An effective management information system is essential. There is a concern that, as it is conceived, it may operate as a further means of control and limitation on University autonomy but as with other aspects of the project it will not be effective unless it is preceded by institutional governance, management and infrastructure change. This is not simply, as the project seems to suggest, a matter of training a number of staff but a reappraisal of the detail of internal information flow and capture which will impact on learning and teaching and requires new style leadership and strategic management. Without this the central management system will suffer from institutional deficiencies which will be compounded if there are nine plus the six colleges. The level of professionalism, management and infrastructure capacity required, is a further reinforcement of the case for dynamic reform and modernisation in a much more compact system.

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