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University-Staff Tensions in Implementing Human Resource Autonomy in Practice: The Example of Moldova

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Introduction

In this chapter, we explore the nature of relationships and possible tensions between university management and academic staff at universities in emerging or developing economies. In our analysis we draw on recent attempts by the government of the Republic of Moldova to restructure and modernize higher education in the country. We also draw on our recent policy research involving a situational analysis of university autonomy in Moldova (Turcan and Bugaian 2014) and a benchmark analysis of institutional university autonomy in Denmark, Lithuania, Romania, Scotland, and Sweden (Turcan and Bugaian 2015).[1] We argue that academic and nonacademic staff[2] are the key to an efficient exercise of university autonomy as well as to the successful achievement of a university's mission of *teaching*, *research*, and *knowledge transfer*. The central premise is that, in the contemporary world, a university should combine teaching and research/knowledge transfer activities and that, without research-based teaching, a university lacks the dimension that gives it its distinctive quality and that is essential for the formation of the future generation of high-level graduates who will be able to contribute in all spheres of the knowledge economy. We first discuss the nature of issues and challenges that might emerge at the intersection between the need to fulfill the university mission and the need to exercise university autonomy, with a specific emphasis on the human resource (HR) dimension of autonomy. We then present recent (as of 2015) risks and developments in the higher education sector in Moldova in relation to the HR dimension of autonomy and discuss implications for practice and policy.

University Mission and HR Autonomy

In the last century, knowledge transfer was seen as something "disturbing not only because it could alter the practice of science in the university but also because it threatens the central values and ideals of academic science" (Bok 1982: 142). That view dominated the public discourse for quite a while. Nowadays, universities around the globe embrace knowledge transfer along with regional business and economic development as part of their core mission in addition to traditional research and teaching (EUR 22836 EN 2007). Several categories of knowledge products that have their role and importance in the process of knowledge transfer can be identified, such as scholarly research; publications in international journals; knowledgeable graduates; industry-targeted learning and teaching; contract research; consultancy; staff interchange and academic staff appointments in industry; creation of intellectual property rights; and the formation of spin-off companies (Howard 2005).

Universities in emerging or developing economies still practice traditional teacher-centered pedagogies, which stress the transmission and recall of knowledge from teacher to student. In contrast, modern universities constantly innovate in learning and teaching methodologies around a student-centered learning pedagogy, in which students take the lead and the academic staff act as facilitators (Graaff et al. 2015).

An echo from the past, especially in communist and postcommunist countries, is the separation of research from teaching, with research concentrated in one institution: the Academy of Science, and teaching in universities (Guins 1953, Graham 1975). This divorce has weakened inter alia universities' capacity to conduct cutting-edge, state-of-the art fundamental and applied research as well as to compete nationally and internationally for research funding. Recently, the European Commission set a target for research at 3 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) by 2020, estimating that over one million researchers would be needed to achieve that target, which underscores the fact that many researchers will retire over the next decade (Deloitte 2012).

The issues mentioned above are just a few of the many challenges universities in emerging and developing countries face in fulfilling their mission of teaching, research, and knowledge transfer. One question to ask is whether these universities have the quality of academic staff to satisfy the universities' mission? If not, what needs to be done to turn the situation around? If so, the question is whether the quality of staff alone is sufficient or whether the impact of governance and management on the ability of academic staff to fulfill their mission needs to be assessed. Are there power sharing/consultative mechanisms to involve and engage academic staff in strategic and operational decision-making? What are the implications of a university corporate culture—top-down, bottom-up, or flat organization—for academic staff? What institutional incentives, evaluation, and promotion (external vs. internal) policies exist for academics? How are policies relating to "accountability" and wider public/social responsibility implemented and how do these affect academic work (teaching and research)? These represent only a few of the questions, tensions, and challenges that may emerge at the university management-academic staff interface in an autonomous university and that need to be addressed in order for a university to realize the full potential of autonomy to realize its mission.