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**Introducing Problem Based Learning in Moldova:
Toward Enhancing Students (PBLMD)**

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Work Package 6

Proposal for the Framework Plan for Higher Education

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Executive summary

This Proposal arises out of work carried out within the European Commission funded project – Introducing Problem Based Learning in Moldova: Towards Enhancing Students (PBLMD).

As part of PBLMD project a Commentary on the Framework Plan for Higher Education in Moldova was undertaken. This Commentary suggested that the prescriptive nature of the current Framework Plan poses serious obstacles to the realisation of effective university autonomy in the development and approval of new programmes.

The Commentary proposed that the Ministry should grant derogation from the Framework Plan procedures for the six subject areas and degrees which are being developed in the PBLMD project and identified the specific requirements of the Framework Plan which should be waived.

However, following the Commentary and full discussion with colleagues at the Ministry of Education in Chisinau, it was agreed that it may be timely for a radical revision of the policy and the requirements and procedures set out in the current Framework Plan to apply to all recognised and quality assured Higher Education Institutions in Moldova.

The Proposal presented in this report is meant to replace the existing Framework Plan for Higher Education in Moldova.

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1. Background

This proposal arises out of work carried out within the European Commission funded project – Introducing Problem Based Learning in Moldova: Towards Enhancing Students (PBLMD).

As part of PBLMD project a Commentary on the Framework Plan for Higher Education in Moldova was undertaken (Annex 1). This suggested that the prescriptive nature of the current Framework Plan poses serious obstacles to the realisation of effective university autonomy in the development and approval of new programmes.

The Commentary (Annex 1) proposed that the Ministry should grant derogation from the Framework Plan procedures for the six subject areas and degrees which are being developed in the PBLMD project and identified the specific requirements of the Framework Plan which should be waived.

However, following the Commentary and full discussion with colleagues at the Ministry of Education in Chisinau, it was agreed that it may be timely for a radical revision of the policy and the requirements and procedures set out in the current Framework Plan to apply to all recognised and quality assured Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Moldova.

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 proposal below is developed in the context of the Education Code of the Republic of Moldova (No. 152 dated July 17 2014), which states in

Article 79 University Autonomy:

- (1) The higher education institutions shall have the status of university autonomy.*
- (2) The university autonomy is the right of the university community for organization and self-management, exercising the academic freedoms without any ideological, political or religious interferences, assuming a set of competences and obligations in line with the national strategies and policies for the development of the higher education.*
- (3) The university autonomy shall encompass the areas of management, structuring and functioning of the institution, teaching and scientific research activity, administration and financing, and shall be mainly performed through:*
 - a) organizing, conducting and improving the educational and scientific research process;*
 - b) establishing specialties;*
 - c) developing curriculum and analytical programs in line with the state educational standards;*
 - d) organizing admission of students, taking into account the specific criteria to the profile of the higher education institution;*
 - e) selecting and promoting the teaching, scientific-teaching and scientific staff, as well as the other categories of personnel in the educational institution;*
 - f) establishing the assessment criteria for the teaching and scientific activity*
 - g) awarding teaching degrees;*

- h) eligibility of all management bodies by secret voting;*
- i) solving social problems of students and staff;*
- j) ensuring order and discipline in the university;*
- k) finding additional sources of income; establishing cooperation relationships with various educational and scientific institutions, centre and organizations in the country and abroad.*

It should be understood that the implementation of Article 79 on University Autonomy at an institutional level entails Universities accepting and taking full and effective responsibility in effect replacing the external oversight explicit in the Framework with rigorous institutional quality assured procedures with an appropriate Governance structure.

Exercising University autonomy in curriculum design and approval in a wider national and international context requires embedding the broad principles established in a number of critical documents. These include guidance provided in:

- Education Code of the Republic of Moldova Chisinau 2014
- Moldova 2020 National Strategy
- Moldova National Qualifications Framework Chisinau 2016,
- Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG),
- European Commission Qualifications Framework (EQF),
- EHEA Qualification Framework
- ECTS Guide 2015.

Account should also be taken of work undertaken by the European Universities Association in the development of the European ‘Scorecard’ to measure university autonomy (EUA – University autonomy in Europe) which states unequivocally what Academic Autonomy means:

- Academic autonomy refers to a university’s ability to decide on various academic issues, such as student admissions, academic content, quality assurance, the introduction of degree programmes and the language of instruction.
- The capacity to introduce academic programmes without outside interference and to select the language(s) of instruction enables a university to pursue its specific mission in a flexible way. A free choice of teaching language may also be important in the context of institutional internationalisation strategies.
- The ability to design the content of courses, except for the regulated professions, is a fundamental academic freedom“.

It also states that:

- Although quality assurance mechanisms are essential accountability tools, related processes can often be burdensome and bureaucratic. Universities should therefore be free to select the quality assurance regime and providers they consider as appropriate

The proposal below is meant to replace the existing Framework Plan for Higher Education in Moldova.

2. The Proposal for the Framework Plan for Higher Education

2.1 Institutional Accreditation and Recognition

Institutional accreditation and recognition is a prerequisite for the exercise of autonomy in the development of curriculum and approval of degrees and programmes of study which will be recognised nationally and internationally. The Moldovan Government will need to have a published procedure for the formal approval and accreditation of institutions with degree awarding powers.¹

In this Proposal a distinction is made between institutional accreditation and quality assurance although it is recognised that procedures for external quality assurance may overlap with those for formal institutional accreditation. **A key distinction inherent in this Proposal is that accreditation relates to the HEI as a whole and does not cover individual programmes of study.**

2.2 Principles

The Proposal is based on the four principles enunciated in the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG, page 8):

- *HEIs have primary responsibility for the quality of their provision and its assurance;*
- *Quality assurance responds to the diversity of higher education systems, institutions, programmes and students;*
- *Quality assurance supports the development of a quality culture;*
- *Quality assurance takes into account the needs and expectations of students, all other stakeholders and society.*

2.3 Governance

The successful exercise of institutional autonomy requires effective institutional governance arrangements which are transparent and open to review and scrutiny.

HEIs' governing bodies must develop and be responsible for a quality assurance and enhancement culture represented in published written processes and procedures for the design, approval, monitoring and review of curriculum in all faculties.

In shaping their processes and procedures HEIs in Moldova should take account of and be guided by the documents listed above, in particular the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area*. They should ensure that external stakeholders and students are fully involved in the structures and processes.

2.4 Policy for Quality 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 [ESG].

¹ It may indicate whether these powers are to be limited – for example it may wish to accredit institutions which may only award first cycle qualifications.

2.5 Suggestions for Structural Arrangements

- Universities should adopt an outcomes and student-centred approach to all programmes of study.
- In establishing procedures for the approval of programmes universities should place an emphasis on innovation and creativity.
- Universities should ensure that all programmes appropriately reflect the level descriptors in the National Qualifications Framework, the EHEA Qualifications Framework, and the EQF.

2.6 Design and Approval of Programmes

Following ESG:

- *Institutions should have processes for the design and approval of their programmes.*
- *The programmes should be designed so that they meet the objectives set for them, including the intended learning outcomes.*
- *The qualification resulting from a programme should be clearly specified and communicated, and refer to the correct level of the national qualifications framework for higher education and, consequently, to the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area.*

While each HEI should be free to develop structures and processes relevant to its mission, it is suggested that they may wish to take into account the following basic proposals amended as appropriate for their specific situation.

2.6.1 Level

Normally the first stage in the development of new programmes of study or the substantial revision of an existing programme should be at the subject/departmental level. The process should always be through a formally constituted and approved curriculum team and documented throughout. The team should include students and external stakeholders.

2.6.2 Business case for new and revised programmes

Universities may wish to require that before detailed curriculum work is undertaken on either of a new or a redesign of an existing programme a brief business case should be presented for approval to a senior University management committee with the endorsement of the initiating School/ Department.

The business case should inter alia indicate the title and level of the programme, the objectives and how these may relate to institutional and/or national or international strategic objectives, the resources which will be required, the intended outcomes, evidence of demand and anticipated employment and the timetable for implementation.²

² This is only an indicative list and each University should develop a template for the business case which will be used throughout the University.

2.6.3 *Template for curriculum proposals*

HEIs should develop a template for curriculum/programme/degree proposals – new and re-designed to be used by all Schools/Departments.³

This should normally include the title and level of the programme/qualification, overall programme objectives, potential employment areas for graduates, the number of credits, duration, intended programme outcomes, programme structure with details of the educational units/modules with their outcomes, resources, assessment procedures, student engagement, learning and teaching methodology, monitoring and review arrangements, procedures for student complaints and appeals.

Details of the teaching staff who will have primary responsibility for the programme and the resources which will be required should be given.

The minimum and maximum number of students for viability should also be specified.

If external advice has been sought this should be noted.

2.6.4 *Quality assurance scrutiny*

Following development of detailed curriculum proposals by the curriculum team they should be subject to independent and objective scrutiny on the basis of published criteria, normally at a Faculty level. This would probably be best managed through a Learning and Teaching Committee with delegated authority from the Faculty Board.

After approval at the Faculty level, the proposal should be submitted for formal review and approval at University level – normally again by a committee of experts with delegated authority from the University Senate. The University may wish to seek comments and advice from external experts in the field.⁴

2.6.5 *Fast track arrangements*

HEIs may wish to consider appropriate arrangements for fast track proposals to meet a demand for specific scientific, industry, commercial, professional, policy needs for new or revised programmes and/or the amendment of existing programmes for similar reasons. Such procedures should not compromise on quality assurance but should require that the relevant reviewing bodies/committees should be convened at short notice and subject to the executive body or a delegated member of the executive body – e.g. a Pro Rector agreeing that there is an urgent need.

³ This is an indicative list, each institution will need to determine the content and form of its template

⁴ These are indicative suggestions. The actual process, committee structure and timing will be the responsibility of the University. It may be that a University structure will suggest that proposals should proceed direct from the School/Department to a University level committee. The key point is that the process should be documented and published, that the criteria for approval should be published and operated in an open and objective manner and that the ‘approval’ committee should provide a brief report explaining its decision.

2.6.6 Formal contact and workload expectations

Each programme submission should specify the formal contact and individual student workload expectations, including independent work. The University may wish to specify normal expectations for formal contact,⁵ independent: individual and group. These should be flexible and non-prescriptive.⁶

2.6.7 Structure of the academic year

As indicated in 2.6.6, each programme description will indicate the individual student workload.

Universities will need to publish an annual calendar of key dates which may vary between institutions.

They will need to specify the normal structure and workload of the academic year, which will respect the national norms but recognise the need for flexibility in responding to the particular pedagogical approach of each programme.

2.7 Learning and Assessment

2.7.1 Student-centred learning, teaching and assessment

Institutions should ensure that the programmes are delivered in a way that encourages students to take an active role in creating the learning process, and that the assessment of students reflects this approach [ESG].

2.7.2 Monitoring student progress

All programme proposals should make clear the arrangements for student progression and include transparent methods for monitoring student progress and providing effective support and advice.

2.7.3 The learning environment

The University should encourage a diversity of research based learning environments and methods designed to equip graduates with the skills and competences for their further development and employment.

The University should indicate its expectations in relation to assessment, recognising the need for assessment to be embedded and integral to the specified learning outcomes and the learning and teaching methodology adopted for each module.

The University should encourage and establish expectations for innovative and creative assessment which will allow students to demonstrate in a variety of ways their knowledge, understanding and ability.

⁵ Defined in the current Framework Plan as ‘auditory contact’ hours.

⁶ And certainly not at the level of detail prescribed in the current Framework Plan.

As proposed in the ESG “*The criteria for and method of assessment as well as criteria for marking are published in advance*”; and “*Students are given feedback, which, if necessary, is linked to advice on the learning process*”; and “*Where possible, assessment is carried out by more than one examiner*”.

As suggested in the EUniAM project report (Annex 2), universities should wherever possible engage external examiners for all programmes, subject to the provision of adequate resources.

2.7.4 University credit framework

In the context of the national credit system and the use of ECTS, each university should develop a credit framework as suggested in the ECTS Guide. It is suggested that the university should consider establishing level descriptors relating to the year of study and the minimum and/or maximum number of credits at each of these levels for the award of a first cycle and second cycle degree.

A University credit framework facilitates flexibility and the development of multi and interdisciplinary programmes by (a) establishing a standard and shared number of credits for a unit to be used throughout the university; (b) by defining level descriptors and minimum and maximum numbers of credits at each level, for the award of a degree, it further facilitates a diversity of programme pathways while ensuring that each programme contains sufficient credits at an advanced level.

2.7.5 Internships and work placements

Universities should encourage all departments to make every effort to include and integrate assessed work placements (internships) in programmes of study awarding ECTS credits for these placements.

2.8 Monitoring and Review

2.8.1 Information management

Institutions should ensure that they collect, analyse and use relevant information for the effective management of their programmes and other activities.

2.8.2 On-going monitoring and periodic review of programmes

Institutions should monitor and periodically review their programmes to ensure that they achieve the objectives set for them and respond to the needs of students and society. These reviews should lead to continuous improvement of the programme. Any action planned or taken as a result should be communicated to all those concerned [ESG].

Each programme should be subject to ongoing monitoring and annual review and report which should include student evaluation and the collection of basic data to support the monitoring and review.

In the light of the monitoring and review the programme should be encouraged, subject to report to the relevant university committees, to amend and develop the curriculum for current and new students.

In addition to annual monitoring and review each university should institute procedures for periodic review of each programme normally during the fifth year. Periodic review should normally involve a self-assessment evaluation, at least one preferably two external assessors, the evaluation of graduates, data on graduate employment and an assessment of comparability with equivalent programmes in Moldova and in selected other countries. The university committee for programme approval should receive and comment on the periodic reviews.

2.9 Recognition of Prior Learning

Each HEI should establish procedures for the formal recognition of prior learning and/or experience and award credits at the appropriate level towards a qualification of the university. This should be documented and potential students should be given help and guidance in the preparation of a portfolio for submission in support of their application for approval of their prior learning and/or experience.

2.10 Public information

Institutions should publish information about their activities, including programmes, which is clear, accurate, objective, up-to date and readily accessible [ESG].

Each university should publish details of all programmes of study with their profile and intended learning outcomes.

Each university should develop an ECTS course catalogue which is publicly available.

2.11 Students

Students are fundamental and adult partners in university education and are the future generation of workers and leaders in all spheres of life. They should be expected and encouraged to play an active and developmental role in the work of the university and in assuming increasing responsibility for their learning. Active and engaged students are vital to the university mission and their engagement should be regarded as an integral aspect of their personal development and preparation for the work environment.

Universities should have transparent and published procedures for ensuring the effective engagement and motivation of students both in their learning journey and in their effective involvement in processes of curriculum development and quality assurance and enhancement.

Universities may wish to consider whether it would be appropriate to establish and support some form of student charter or union specifying rights and responsibilities.

This should not be a substitute for effective and active engagement of students in the university committee structures and the processes of curriculum development and quality assurance and enhancement. The university expectations and the ways in which students are participants should be manifest and specified in published documents. These should include appropriate structures within which students are represented at all levels within the university. The arrangements should ensure that whatever form the representation takes, it effectively represents all students.

2.11.1 Student feedback

All HEIs must have in place effective arrangements for student feedback at all levels and monitor the responses to the feedback so that it becomes part of the institutional quality enhancement process and students understand that their feedback is integral to this process.

2.11.2 Appeals and complaints

As an aspect of their quality process and enhancement universities should have robust procedures for responding to and dealing with complaints and appeals in ways which assist the resolution of complaints and appeals in a non-confrontational manner. These procedures must be transparent and published and make clear what the formal process is and whether any time limits may apply.

The procedures must ensure equity, objectivity, timely resolution and not result in risk to the student.

2.12 International context

As well as the European documents referred to above, institutions should have regard for international models of good practice which may include:

- subject benchmark statements,
- national and international professional requirements and/or regulations
- examples of high quality curriculum development on a global basis.

2.13 External Quality Assurance

2.13.1 Cyclical external quality assurance

HEIs should undergo external quality assurance in line with the ESG on a cyclical basis [ESG].

2.13.2 Consideration of internal quality assurance

External quality assurance should address the effectiveness of the internal quality assurance processes described in Part 1 of the ESG.

If universities in Moldova are to be given freedom to implement the Autonomy granted in the Education Code quoted above it is to be expected that they should be subject to external review.

As the ESG makes clear this review is to address their internal processes and procedures and the records of action and not the detail of individual programmes, although it will be evident that if the procedures are not satisfactory questions will undoubtedly be raised about the quality of the programmes.

3. Summary

It is proposed that each university should:

- Be responsible for the approval of programmes without further report to the Ministry or other external body.
- Review its governance structures to be confident that they are fit for purpose in the context of the effective realisation of their autonomy
- Establish rigorous quality assured procedures for the approval of new or revised outcomes based programmes. these procedures should respect the standards and guidelines established in a number of relevant national and international documents listed and principally the ESG
- Establish standard templates for curriculum proposals and use them through the university. Each proposal should be subject to rigorous quality assurance scrutiny and wherever possible and practical external expert advice should be sought
- Put in place a 'Fast track' route for approval to respond to urgent needs but only with the approval of a member of the senior management team
- Specify its expectations for contact and workload but do so in a flexible and non-prescriptive way
- Specify the normal structure of the academic year in a similar way allowing flexibility for individual programmes
- Ensure that learning, assessment and the learning environment is student centred
- Consider formulating a credit framework as suggested in the ECTS Guide in the context of the national credit system and the use of ECTS
- Encourage the integration of credit bearing internships and work placements in all programmes
- Ensure that all programmes should be subject to annual and periodic monitoring and review
- Establish procedures for the approval of prior learning and/or experience
- Publish full and timely information about all their programmes
- Ensure that students as stakeholders and partners in higher education should play a full role in all the processes
- Be subject to external quality review of its procedures on a cyclical basis

Appendix 1: Commentary on the Framework Plan for Higher Education in Moldova

Appendix 2: EUniAM Legislative Proposals