
BOOK REVIEW

CACE S., SALI N. (COORD.) (2013). THE EVALUATION OF THE RESEARCH CAPACITY OF THE HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM IN THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA

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This is the English version of the title of a book that was published in Romanian as "Evaluarea capacității de cercetare a instituțiilor de învățământ superior din Republica Moldova", a one hundred pages report on the situation of research in Moldova. The study was achieved in 2013 by Association for Social and Economic Development and Promotion Catalactica, for the Ministry of Education of Moldova through a grant provided by Soros-Moldova Foundation and as part of the Better Governance Program.

It is not customary that a review starts with an inquiry of its own purpose, however, this should be the case when doing a review in English for a Romanian text. This has to do with the nature of the book, which is a policy report, and therefore it should be of interest for a larger set of institutional actors, most of them international. It is also a tentative to reach the readers that have a particular interest in Moldova, and a wider audience of researchers that are interested in comparative studies in education and research policies.

Conducted by a mixed team of ten Romanian and Moldavian researchers, the research was coordinated by Sorin Cace and Nicolae Sali. In an attempt to cover the entire field of research and higher education in Moldova, they did a systemic analysis of the institutional framework, of the legal provisions and of the institutional capacities of the universities that are involved into research projects. Interviews were conducted with

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researchers and two focus groups were achieved with the representatives of the research fora. Since both quantitative and qualitative methods were employed from the design stage of the study, the results are robustly embedded in a layer of carefully collected data. The unapologetic conclusions reflect strongly the opinions of the Moldavian researchers that are working within the system while the mixed methodology that is used by the authors allows them to make full use of the secondary data that was available at the time of the study.

The structure of the book reflects the technical nature of the analysis, perfectly aligned with what should be a standard for any evaluation in this field. The first part places the university level research of Moldova in a European context. It also provides a description of the national administrative framework by reviewing the main documents that regulate the area and by briefly describing the organs of management and control. Many of the aspects that are already present in the Romanian legislation that addresses the issue of evaluation of research capacities can be traced in the study.

Throughout the material we are presented with very direct critiques of the Moldavian system of financing education and research and of its institutional architecture. A strong critical approach is noticeable from the very beginning, as the book starts with an elaborated executive summary in which grave problems of public control and lack of transparency are highlighted. Furthermore, the analysis is detailed throughout every chapter and comes together in the fifth part, that is dedicated to conclusions and recommendations. One of the contributors, Gheorghe Ciucureanu, aptly summarizes in the first chapter the situation as follows: a) the performance of the research and development system in Moldova is relatively stable but quite far from the European level, b) that the strategic directions are harmonized with the European ones but underfinanced and not assumed by the social partners, c) that the lack of financial means leads to an outdated infrastructure, d) that the personnel's average age is high and the number of employees is too low, and e) that international partnerships are rare. In addition to that, the economic partners are scarce and there is still the need to adjust many of the procedures to international standards.

The second chapter puts together data resulted from the two main methods of research that were employed – the qualitative and the quantitative – and starts to bring into the general picture the indicators that reflect the capacity of the higher education units to run research programs, to collect indicators and compare the level of performance of the institutions, to evaluate the spending in a comparative manner with what is going on at an international and regional level and to assess the institutional design. Taking advantage of the ethnographic vignettes that resulted from the interviews, the authors are using them in order to underline the phenomena that was described with quantitative data. One of the issues is that of the overlapping of activities in between the current teaching activity and the research activity and the observation that there is very little research outside education. The older generations of researchers' fear that, because of the very low salaries and the lack of perspectives, young people are not attracted any longer to science. Things that nowadays work, are mostly connected with the projects developed in collaboration with international partners, while older researchers accuse the fact that the younger generation will not be able to benefit from a constant support in their professional development because of the irregular character

of this type of financing. It is therefore acknowledged that the lack of national programs is impeding the development of the future generation of researchers.

Local researchers are described as being stimulated through prizes and, despite the very low salaries, it looks that this creates some dynamic through student circles and motivates the young researchers. There is a nice touch of optimism in this remark and this is part of the effort of the authors to keep a balanced and fair view of the situation in Moldova.

But the main obstacles that are perceived by those involved in operational programs are related with the lack of infrastructure. Since Moldova is a developing economy, the involvement of the private sector in research partnerships is very limited, and here the authors of the study accuse once more the monopoly of the Moldavian Academy of Science. A less detailed but more recent peer review paper on the Research and Innovation system of Moldova (EC, 2018), and it reinforces the idea of the dominance of the Moldavian Academy of Science, stating that it acts indeed as a ministry of research (p. 6).

It is precisely the type of contradiction that cannot be solved based on the opinions of the respondents, nor on the observations of the researchers; the centralized system appears to be too weak to stimulate the activity, still too strong to let initiative flourish. In my opinion this has less to do with the institutional research architecture of Moldova and a lot more with the place of the country on the regional scene, with the prospects of its international relations in the near future and with the nature of its economic activities. This is briefly considered (p. 32), but the nature of the study is not one of a political economy paper, more of a policy analysis in a relatively narrow domain, leaving so the description of the general historical and economic context to the reader, presumably one that is already familiar with the contemporary struggles of Moldova.

A brief remark that has to do with the language of the book, from the perspective of a prospective reader of the study that is either a native Romanian speaker or somebody that is proficient in Romanian: as it was mentioned at the begging of the review, the book is written in Romanian. For a Romanian reader the book opens a window into a way of speaking Romanian that is specific to a Moldavian speaker. I think that this is a very interesting encounter of two contemporary ways of developing the scientific language. We are all familiar with regional variations of language that are so present in every language, but we rarely engage into a much deeper reflection on the way in which regional variants work. What is obvious throughout the book is the effort of the co-authors to find linguistic formulas that aim to reflect, in the most precise way possible, a set of social actions and features. By doing so, a new scientific language standard appears to emerge, a thing that can be observed through the variations of style, general vocabulary and jargon that can be found in the book. Any foreigner who is only familiar with the standard version of Romanian will have to invest some effort into disentangling the mix of regional speak and international jargon. Luckily for all of us – some may say, unfortunately – the global version of English that is so dominant in our area has such a heavy influence that it is to be expected that all of us will end up

speaking different versions of the new „academic pidgin¹”, that is in use and that would somehow level up the jargon in social sciences as it already did in „hard” sciences.

The third chapter is the most technical one and goes into great details about the projects implemented by universities, from selection and financing to mechanisms of stimulating research and bureaucratic barriers. It is the most elaborated chapter and it reflects the hard work of the team to collect and interpret data. Though various judgments about the value of research activities in Moldova are present in every section of the book, the authors felt the need to add a fourth chapter that specifically summarizes the way in which the results are used by the universities and by the society. In brief, it shows a major concern of the informants about being a part of the economic development of Moldova, but not leaving aside the academic development of individual researchers.

Conclusions

Moldova does not have a system of education and research that is aligned to the European practices of today, and the last five pages before the very detailed annexes are dealing with all the aspects of this lack of integration. All the details that were described through the chapters are reunited here and are followed by brief recommendations. What has been observed is that scientific research is a major preoccupation of the academic system and that a sustained activity at the master and doctoral level is crucial in the development of the field. Reconsidering the role of the Moldavian Academy of Science is paramount to the reform of research in the ex-Soviet republic, in order to insure the access of more institutional actors to research funding and to distribute grants in a competitive, transparent and just manner. In the annexes one can find all the documents that were analyzed, several schemes of different research structures, budgeting data, performance and visibility data and the questionnaire that was applied during the research. All these are valuable data for further comparative studies.

The book is an excellent illustration of a fairly recent European audit culture that, despite being underdeveloped in our part of the world, and not really welcomed by academics in Western Europe (Shore, 1999) is an unavoidable exercise if we want to understand the architecture of the system and the challenges it has to face. Both the analytic dimension and the critical one are present in the work of the collective and the final result is a very precise and vivid picture of the situation of research in Moldova.

¹ This a formula, an idea, for which I am indebted to prof. Thomas Acton who advanced it as an informal review in connection to a thematic issue published in English in a Romanian journal by Romanian authors. He mentioned on that occasion that, even though, from a literary point of view, the English that was used by the Romanian authors was far from perfect, the struggle to find linguistic formulas that accurately describe ideas and situations is a fertile exercise that is peculiar to a community of researchers. It is precisely what can be observed in the material produced by this Romanian-Moldavian team.

References

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