Lessons learnt from scoping a human capital transfer scheme in higher education for Moldova

1. In short

The aim of this action is to develop a framework of engagement and pilot mobilisation mechanisms for highly skilled Moldovan diaspora active in the higher education (HE) sector, so as to allow the Bureau for Relations with Diaspora to harness their potential. To do so, the project consists of three distinct phases implemented between July 2022 and August 2023.

The objective of this publication is to capture the insights the three experts gained during project implementation, as these are important for institutional memory and future decision-making on the topic.

- In the *first phase*, the needs and capacities of national institutions in HE in Moldova were assessed, as well as information on the skills, knowledge, and interests of the Moldovan diaspora. A survey targeted at highly skilled Moldovan diaspora members was conducted and the 100 responses were analysed and presented in the first deliverable - *The Moldovan Brain Gain: A Profile of Skilled Diaspora in Higher Education Sector* assessment report.

- In the *second phase*, focus groups were conducted with national stakeholders, academic diaspora, professional diaspora and academic staff working in Moldova to validate the findings from the assessment report and explore ways forward for the transfer of expertise. Based on the insights from these activities, including the analysis of a wide variety of case-examples, the second deliverable of this project was developed – *Expertise Beyond Borders: Practical Roadmap on Piloting Diaspora Co-working Hub in the Higher Education Sector in Moldova*. This roadmap presents practical tools and procedures for piloting a human capital transfer scheme in the higher education (HE) sector by creating a co-working hub (Diaspora Co-working Hub, DCH).

- In the *third and final phase*, after the roadmap was discussed during a validation workshop, the piloting phase started. During the piloting phase, the strategies and recommendations to establish the DCH are implemented. This phase will culminate with the establishment of a board for the DCH.

Three diaspora professionals provided their expertise during the implementation of this project, namely – Dr Dorina Baltag, Olga Bostan and Mariana Plamadeala.

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The Diaspora Co-working Hub

The intended purpose of the DCH is to contribute to the modernisation of the higher education sector in Moldova, to upgrade teaching and learning methods and to advance research practices through developing collaboration with diaspora. The DCH is a structured mechanism for diaspora mobilisation. The DCH will serve as diaspora talent pool and network of those who are interested in contributing to the development of the higher education sector. DCH members will be able to organise, collaborate, communicate and work together to transfer their expertise, skills and experience in higher education.

In terms of governance and membership, the DCH will be run by an appointed management board, whilst its members are highly skilled sectoral specialists who are available to co-create projects and/or undertake deployments according to demand in the higher-education sector.

The added value of this mechanism is to go beyond the sporadic engagements of diaspora existing in the country and to offer a pool of diaspora talent ready for assignments.

2. What is enabling and preventing diaspora skills transfer in Moldova?

Enablers	Barriers
• Familiarity with the local and diasporic context of diaspora experts acquired through long-term engagement in diaspora activities, project implementation and partnership building with local stakeholders.	• Limited local resources and institutional capacities (i.e.: human, financial, research, monitoring, evaluation and learning, marketing) hinder the implementation of diaspora mobilization schemes.
• Diaspora experts' local and transnational networks suggests that a broad range of participants can engage in the projects' activities.	• The complex bureaucratic environment within institutions could slow down the project's progress.
• The mandate of the BRD gives it the central role in developing and implementing mobilisation schemes and influencing how diaspora engagement is incorporated in the agenda of other national stakeholders.	• The outdated policy environment (i.e.: the national strategy on diaspora 2025) regarding the transfer of expertise of highly skilled migrants hinders the creation of such schemes.
	• Lack of knowledge within national institutions about institutionalised diaspora actors (NGOs, initiative groups, communities etc.) negatively impacts the level of acknowledgement of the potential of diaspora engagement.
	• Sceptical attitudes from local actors reflected in the organizational resistance to change regarding the incorporation of diaspora expertise.

To channel Moldovan diaspora human capital effectively, BRD requires a roadmap which determines in which sectors and areas it requires diaspora input, how it can create a mutually beneficial partnership with diaspora, and the steps to enable, incubate and encourage those human capital transfer initiatives with a light hand. The cooperation with diaspora experts in this action highlighted some of the prerequisites linked to diaspora human capital transfer schemes, as described below.

3. What have we learnt in each phase?

Phase 1 - Conceptualisation and assessment

Reflections	Recommendations
Conducting a sectoral needs assessment was a crucial first step. Interviews, consultations, and fact-finding meetings were held to map the relevant stakeholders and to understand the specific institutional needs in terms of expertise. The categories of needs identified in the Assessment Report served as starting point for developing the three targets for the Diaspora Co-working Hub in the roadmap: (1) to enhance research & development collaboration; (2) to upgrade teaching & learning methods and (3) to develop institutional capacities.	Using a needs assessment grid avoids overlooking important points, therefore conducting needs assessment exercises should take place on a regular basis. Templates for stakeholder identification and needs mapping have been provided to BRD (and interested stakeholders) in the roadmap, which can be re-used for similar exercises (also in other sectors), with proper adjustments.
The comprehensive diaspora profiling exercise helped map out the background knowledge and expertise transfer experience among the diaspora. The assessment report indicated varied expertise in the areas of research, teaching, and capacity development, corresponding to the roadmap targets. Moreover, the analysis of the 100 survey responses and complementary interviews indicated that 86% are willing to transfer their knowledge, skills, and expertise to institutions in their home country. 43% of respondents indicate that they would only be interested to do so by participating in remote or short term on-site assignments.	Profiling diaspora is important as a research, development and learning activity for any institution that intends to better match its products (programmes and activities) with its beneficiaries (different diaspora groups). Collaborating with diaspora professionals to develop the most appropriate methodology (such as surveying) has been set as a practice in this project. Free tools to collect data (e.g., Microsoft Forms, Kobotoolbox, EUSurvey) are easy to use. It is important to take a targeted approach to disseminate the results of such exercises, by using channels where diaspora professionals interact, such as LinkedIn.
Desk research analysis of 3 case studies (Latvia, Armenia, and Georgia) highlighted the crucial role that state institutions play in transforming "brain drain" into "brain gain" through knowledge transfer between academic diaspora and educational institutions in their home countries. The report showcased successful programmes in these countries and led to a peer-exchange organised with the Armenian counterpart.	Regularly conducting desk research on different countries' practices serves as background information that is helpful in developing programmes. Hosting peer-to-peer learning activities has proved beneficial. Such exchanges make a valuable contribution to understanding the (cost) effectiveness of programmes and lessons learnt prove inspirational and practical.

A new Diaspora policy (the 2024-2028 sectoral programme) which targets activities of engagement with highly skilled migrants is under development but has not been finalised or budgeted yet.

With the imminent development of the new 2024-2028 sectoral programme, it will be necessary to adopt the programme accordingly as it will be the framework within which to budget the co-working hub. Overall, it is important to develop an adequate legal and policy framework to support the implementation of new structural initiatives and ensure their sustainability.

The State Chancellery invests limited financial resources dedicated specifically to attracting highly skilled migrants for expertise transfer.

Diversifying financial streams of funding/investment in programmes dedicated to expertise transfer should be prioritized by anyone planning to create such schemes.

Phase 2 - Drafting and consultation

Reflections	Recommendations
The action led to the creation of a roadmap that serves as a comprehensive plan outlining the key processes to establish and implement novel schemes, such as creating a Diaspora Coworking Hub.	When developing knowledge mobilisation schemes, it is useful to have a roadmap stating the standard operating procedure in order not to overlook any step of the process.
Conducting consultations with different groups of stakeholders (diaspora academics, diaspora professionals, national stakeholders) helped validate the strategic direction of the DCH. For example, the consultation discussions indicated that setting targets for the DCH helps respond to local needs and capabilities of stakeholders.	Ensuring efficient implementation of any mobilisation scheme requires consultations with those stakeholders who will be central to its implementation. Co-creation between stakeholders leads to developing a product aligned with needs and that takes into consideration the challenges posed to implementation.
Matching the needs and capacities of local stakeholders and diaspora is a complex activity. Any mismatch between local needs and the capacities of different actors (i.e.: government, diaspora, universities...) can lead to implementation issues. For instance, teaching exchanges can be disruptive to the academic year, highlighting the need to carefully consider their timing in the development of knowledge mobilisation schemes.	Nonetheless, it is recommended that BRD, through the DCH, organises regular e-meetings between Moldovan universities and Moldovan academics to assess these gaps and to manage expectations on both sides. In general, it is important to have regular exchanges between all stakeholders involved in such schemes to make sure that needs and capacities align throughout implementation.

Phase 3 - Piloting and launch

Reflections	Recommendations
Successful mobilisation schemes require ongoing monitoring, evaluation, and learning activities. When piloting mobilisation schemes, it is essential to catch problems early to ensure that resources are used efficiently, that every stakeholder is informed and accountable and that diversity of thoughts and opinions is encouraged. In this vein, the roadmap proposes tools such as: recruitment criteria and styles, needs assessments, Process Map, PDCA (Plan-Do-Check-Act), SWOT analysis, and lessons learnt reflections.	The roadmap includes templates to support these activities, which can be easily used for such exercises.
Successful piloting benefits from learning from past or existing initiatives and creating synergies. Creating lasting partnerships through synergies is key to the sustainability of skills transfer schemes. Diaspora members who have been transferring their expertise in teaching, research and drafting joint funding bids have mobilised into an initiative group called DEER: Diaspora for Excellence in Education and Research. Using their experience and learning from their practices of transferring know-how is a massive advantage for setting up the DCH.	To do so, it is important to make sure that all partners share the same goal and that each brings their own contribution. Identifying existing initiatives (such as DEER in Moldova) and co-developing (or merging) activities will avoid overlap.
BRD's invitation to the three diaspora professionals to continue their involvement as part of the DCH board is an important step for learning, co-creation and ensuring the project's sustainability.	It is important to assure continuity between initiatives and actors involved to capitalise on existing success.
Little or low level of openness of key national stakeholders (e.g.: universities) to the creation of knowledge transfer schemes due to institutional constraints on resources (human, time, financial, IT, etc.), or even misunderstanding the role of the DCH has been a limiting factor in the conceptualisation phase.	Constant communication and open dialogue between all key actors are needed and adequate platforms should be made available. In the case of Moldova, for example, it is important to organize information sessions between DCH and interested university departments to progressively align needs and capacities on both sides.

The motivation of the DCH board and future members will depend on a variety of factors such as: effort recognition, progress, involvement in the decision making process, upcoming activities or events linked to the HE sector, proper remuneration for their effort, etc.

It is important for national authorities to ensure the continuous support of the diaspora they wish to engage in the long term by addressing their concerns. To do so, in the case of Moldova, a clear communication strategy on the DCH activity should be in place, ensuring transparency; clear criteria for financial resource distribution should be developed and opportunities for DCH members' professional development could be considered.

4. Beyond the action

The action has produced an unintended outcome that significantly contributes to its sustainability, namely the convergence of objectives between the Diaspora Coworking Hub (DCH) and the Diaspora for Excellence in Education and Research (DEER) initiative group members. In parallel with action implementation, DEER members, Mariana and Dorina carried out various activities in 2022. These included educational webinars targeting Moldovan students, researchers, and academic staff, focusing on innovative teaching and research methodologies. Additionally, some members underwent training to become national evaluators listed by the National Agency for Quality Assurance of Moldova. All three diaspora experts played a pivotal role in facilitating interaction between the Bureau for Relations with Diaspora (BRD), the Ministry of Education and Research and members of the DEER group. One clear win of the action is the ability of the BRD to leverage the outcomes of the initiative itself and the DEER group activities. Recognising their valuable contributions, Dorina, Mariana, and Olga were invited to join the Board of the Diaspora Coworking Hub by BRD.

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5. What comes next?

Considerations for the next steps of the project to ensure sustainability, scalability and replicability:

- *Sustainability*: to ensure the long-term sustainability of the project, it is important to establish an autonomous DCH board. Collaboration with members of the board from the DEER group should prove beneficial as it will engage diaspora professionals who have been transferring their expertise for an extensive period of time.

  Additionally, diversifying and securing funding resources will be key in supporting the continued implementation and maintenance of the DCH.

- *Scalability*: this should involve recruiting new members to the DCH, expanding the reach to involve a wider variety of departments from different national universities. It is essential to identify opportunities for collaboration and partnerships with additional stakeholders, both nationally and internationally, such as NGOs, donors, and start-ups.

- *Replicability*: the project can serve as a model for similar initiatives in different sectors thanks to the step-by-step approach and tools provided in the roadmap. Documenting and sharing best practices and lessons learned of the DCH piloting can also facilitate the replication of the project in other countries.

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