



Academic research in Romanian universities. The case of the

Academy of Economic Studies from Bucharest¹

1. Introduction

Nowadays, universities are viewed as national competitiveness' instruments. They have assumed, more than anytime, a core role in development, allowing every nation to integrate more effectively into the global economy. The growing importance of universities in modeling and forming a production factor that is essential for surviving in the global competition have influenced specialists in determining the best criteria used for analyzing universities' research performances.

This paper presents a general view of the research framework in Romania, focusing on the aspects that influence the new trends in academic research. A perspective from the Academy of Economic Studies constitutes an example of how the importance of the research process is understood at the level of management and academics. Some pieces of evidence are offered in order to demonstrate that research quality is difficult to achieve without a deep understanding and acceptance of the necessity of this process.

2. An overview of academic research in Romania

Academic research in Romania followed the same evolution as the entire society, with its ideals and failures. Oriented mostly towards teaching and learning, prior to 1989, Romanian universities have been victims of an overcentralized system and lack of

resources. Insufficient material and financial resources, restricted access to foreign publications, no real partnerships with business environment are only a few reasons why Romanian higher education lingered in an inertial and inefficient phase. The challenges posed by the integration process into the EU as well as by the increasing competition in the area of higher education due to globalization demand qualitative changes and a profound reform in education. Unfortunately, the reform is still slow, and higher education continues to have as major characteristics “uniformity” and “inefficiency”².

After 1990 scientific research activity in Romania was under the coordination of three institutions: the Ministry of Research and Technology, the Ministry of National Education, and the Romanian Academy. The Ministry of Research and Technology was responsible for research activity in general, the Ministry of National Education coordinated academic research and the Romanian Academy had its own system of research institutes for fundamental and advanced research. Starting with 1990, the national legislation related to scientific research, technological development and innovation activity was changed repeatedly, with the amendments reflecting both the Romanian society’s evolution and various political influences.

In the course of time new institutions have been created following these evolutions. Thus, under the umbrella of the Ministry of Education, Research and Youth (the former Ministry of National Education) a number of entities were founded: the National University Research Council, the National Council for Higher Education

Funding, advisory organisms in the field of public policies concerning education, research and youth, and other scientific research units such as the Institute for the Science of Education, the European Centre UNESCO for Higher Education, and the National Authority for Scientific Research (NASR).

Public policies regarding scientific research, development and innovation in Romania are synthesized in two important documents, which aimed at the development of this field until the end of 2013. The former document is the National Strategy for Research, Development and Innovation (RD&I) for 2007-2013, approved by Government Decision 217/2007, and the latter is the National Plan for Research, Development and Innovation (NPRDI, PN II) for 2007-2013, approved by Government Decision 445/2007. In compliance with the present legislation the entities carrying out research-development activities are included in the National Research-Development System, which is made up of the bulk of public and/or private entities, and institutions whose statutes stipulate R&D among their activities.

The main actors that participate in the RD&I system in Romania are grouped in three sectors: the governmental sector, the higher education sector, and the enterprise sector. The budget for research and development increased over time, especially after 2004, from 0.2% of GDP in 2004 to 0.72% of GDP in 2007. This increase was determined by the growth of the economy in general, but also by changes induced by integration in the EU.

The vast majority of financing comes from public funds (over 60%), followed by those coming from enterprises. The major consumer of public funds for RD&I is the governmental sector (42.8%), followed by higher education institutions (30.7%), and enterprises (26.4%).

The main organisms in charge with funding RD&I activities in Higher Education are the National Authority for Scientific Research (NASR) and The National University Research Council (NURC).

The rationale to establish the National Authority for Scientific Research emerged from the requirement to promote the development of a knowledge-based society. Given the relative large gap in research and technology development (RTD) between Romania and the EU average, NASR assumed the mission to act as the executive manager of the Romanian government's decision to rapidly increase the public support for RTD towards the Lisbon "Three Percents for RTD" ambitious goal.³

The National University Research Council is the main Romanian funding organization for university and postgraduate research programs, envisioned by the Ministry of National Education in late 1994 as a consultancy body of the Ministry of Education and Research, as well as an interface between the university research community and the Ministry of Education. In its capacity of government representative, it plays a crucial role in the allocation of funding for university research and the evaluation of

scientific research performance. Under this continuously transforming context, some aspects can be considered as characteristics of academic research in Romania over the past period.

For a long time, the financing of the research process was deemed the major impediment in reaching high performance in the research activity. Starting with 2007, this situation began to change, more and more opportunities being open to universities. Not only national funds are available, but also European funds, under the Framework Program 7. New indicators measuring the performance of the research activity in universities were enforced in order to boost international competitiveness of higher education in Romania. The overwhelming share of RD&I public funds for universities is allocated through national competitions open to all eligible institutions with research competences. The project-oriented system of committing funds for R&D starts to turn through a result-oriented process. Not only is the competition process considered to be an indicator of performance, this holds true especially for the grants' results as measured through a set of indicators, which differ from program to program (for example, number of papers annually published in ISI quoted journals, citation in ISI journals, ISI quoted Romanian journals, number of national patents, international patents registered in the EU, USA, Japan, number of transferable products, participation in international projects etc).⁴

In a very strong relation with the organization of the research activity, an important impetus for academic research was the new promotion system in higher education,

with a strong shift from teaching and learning to research. Starting with 2005, a new system advanced by the former minister Mircea Miclea has brought in two major changes. The first one called for articles published in peer-reviewed journals, cited in ISI data bases, and grants, gained through national competitions as the most important requirements for promotion. The second one introduced a periodical evaluation – to be conducted every five years - for all academics, on the basis of requirements applying for their current position or a higher one. The changes induced by this decision created a large debate, especially for economics and social sciences universities, and a strong opposition coming from the academics' side. It was without precedent for an academic to go through an evaluation process, unless he or she targets a better position!⁵

However, there are still many challenges confronting academic research. Higher education institutions have to overcome internal and external factors that contribute to an inefficient use of research potential. The “old-fashioned” mentality definition of educational processes in universities, the rather formal character of scientific research, the defensive attitude against the utility of the research process and against collaboration with the business environment are among these factors. Of course, one cannot ignore the fact that Romania is still “learning” market economy lessons, and that companies are still in the infant stages in point of research and development activities. Romanian universities responded to market demand, and, following the shortage in education, they concentrated on learning and teaching. Despite the general impression that there are too many students, it is worth mentioning that Romania has significantly fewer students per 1000 inhabitants (33) than the European average (38)⁶.

Universities in Romania have to decide what role the research activity will play in the future. Will they concentrate on teaching and learning or will they focus on research activity? Romanian universities have concentrated on delivering and creating knowledge, and less on developing skills or attitudes. This is one of the reasons why higher education is perceived as being “out of touch with the bare facts” and mostly theory-oriented⁷. Passing from teaching to research needs more than individual efforts, it calls for a deeper reform of the system. A Presidential Commission for Education and Research proposed four levels of universities according to the latter’s choices in relation to human resources, strategies for increasing competitiveness, and their target role in the higher education market (1. research-intensive: undergraduate studies + master +doctoral studies + post-doctoral studies, focusing on graduate and post-graduate programs, 2. education and research: undergraduates studies and master programs, 3. education: undergraduates studies, 4. vocational: military training, arts, music, sport institutes).⁸ Research activity in Romanian universities, which international partnership is likely to strengthen, hence the stronger urge for engagement, will have two main benefits: enhance their poor financing and improve training for staff and students. A number of studies dedicated to students will be able to make connections with research partners and get financial aid during studies and/or find a job when graduating.⁹

Publication is another sensitive matter for academics. Among the most important indicators used to measure the research output is the number of articles published in peer-reviewed journals. For some domains, like economics, words like peer-review or article cited in ISI data based were completely new¹⁰. Prior to 2005 no economic

journal was cited in ISI data bases. By 2008, 45 journals were reported to have been included in ISI data bases, out of which 34 were indexed in 2007 and 2008 (Academy of Economic Studies, 2008). The number of articles is increasing; however Romanian universities are still out of the major ranking systems. No Romanian university is in top 500 according to SHJI and Webometrics. Romania's best placed university holds the 1063rd position (Webometrics, 2007).

3. Research activity in the Academy of Economic Studies

The Academy of Economic Studies (AES) is one of the most important universities in Romania. Created in 1913 by a Royal Decree, the Academy of High Commercial Studies (nowadays the Academy of Economic Studies) is the largest economic university in Romania and one of the largest in South-East Europe. AES is made up of almost 1,000 academics and 40,000 students (in both campus and distance learning) coming down to 10 faculties and 27 academic departments. The objectives that AES established in the last years revolve around meeting the criteria to transform itself into a research-intensive university; therefore research became an essential component of the university's mission.

At the level of 2006, AES accommodated 18 research centers, and 104 research teams, it has participated in numerous institutions, and is involved in numerous national activities that sustain the development of higher education in Romania. AES is one of the major competitors on the Romanian market of higher education, not only through its educational capacity, but also through its faculty of around 1000 academics, which proves a high capacity of research.¹¹

Despite this important human potential, AES does not hold a good position on the research market. Even if AES is an important player in the national competition for public funds (its financial resources for research are attracted mainly from public funds), AES being one of the most important beneficiaries of national grants' competition,¹² its position in international and even national rankings is very weak. According to national rankings, in 2007, AES was on the 42nd position from 50 universities surveyed. This hierarchy was based on the number of articles published in international journals cited in the ISI data base.¹³

However, the situation started to change from 2007, especially in terms of funding resources. That year AES applied very successfully for public funds under the grants offered through NPRDI and the trend continued in 2008. For example, in 2008, AES conducted 278 projects and attracted over 13 million RON (more than 3.5 million Euro), which means a double amount if compared to 2006.¹⁴ Even though there are evident improvements in the research activity, there are still many aspects that AES should take into consideration.

One aspect is related to the productivity of the research activity. A discrepancy persists between the capacity of absorbing funds and the possibility to produce valuable articles and studies. The projects should produce more articles and studies published in prestigious journals. And with over 40 ISI-quoted journals in Romania, local academics run the risk to reach a certain level of self-sufficiency, and to overlook incentives to publish outside Romania. Access of academics to foreign journals is a

must. The management of the institutions should foster the acquisition of data bases and to grant free access to journals for each academic. Otherwise, Romanian articles will be less valuable than foreign ones and publishing in foreign journals can remain a desideration only.

Another aspect is given by the fact that academics from AES are still resistant to the research activity, considering it necessary, but not decisive.¹⁵ Some faculty members (especially those over 55 years of age) believe that the real mission of a university should be education, not research. Most of them chose this profession due to the teaching component, not for research purposes. The existence of research institutes is a proof in sustaining the idea that there are enough institutions which can perform in the research area, universities have a different mission.

There is still an insufficient debate at the level of academics in order to understand the role and importance of the research process in raising the performance of the university. In this debate, academics, management and students should be involved in order to identify where this resistance is coming from, and more importantly, how to avoid transforming the research process into a purely formal one, without any productive, efficient outcomes.

AES has to look very carefully into the relationship with the business environment. Stronger partnership should be developed with enterprises in order to demonstrate that

research activity in the AES is not outside real economic life, but an intrinsic part thereof. Improving relationships with the business environment is very important also from an education process point of view. Students show a greater interest in those universities that can offer them the possibility to integrate learning and practice, especially when the latter means participating in research projects with private companies.

4. Conclusions

In Romania, the research activity in universities is on an ascendant trend, but there is still room for improvements. Defining the status of each university, enhancing higher education processes' quality and productivity, improving relations with the business environment, attracting students in the research process are some of the challenges that universities and academics are facing.

Access to information continues to remain one of the major impediments in publishing high quality papers in prestigious journals outside Romania. Universities cannot offer to their academics the opportunity to access any journal which is indexed in data bases. Without access to the relevant literature, publishing articles in peer-reviewed journals becomes almost impossible! The dissemination of national grants results through articles in peer-reviewed journals is still low, showing a dysfunction in the transition from the existing creative potential to the efficiency of this potential.

In Romania, academic research is still considered to be too theoretical, without practical utility, especially in economics and social sciences. Academics have a lot of work to do in order to prove that their research activity is connected to the economic and social reality and that the results of their studies are socially valuable. A solution to this problem is a stronger cooperation with the business environment, partnerships with enterprises and studies connected to real life aspects. Building trust in academic research is a very complex issue and is determined not only by the results of the research activity, but also by the quality of the graduates.

As a leading higher education institution in economics, the AES has to cope with the same weaknesses as the whole system. In the context of an increasing competition, AES has to define its strategy in order to achieve a better image on the market, a better position in international rankings and a higher prestige among economic universities at an international level.

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¹This study was conducted under the grant 91-058 “The development of interdisciplinary research in order to increase the competitiveness of the Romanian universities at a global level”, gained by a consortium led by the Academy of Economic Studies (project manager Professor Rodica Milena Zaharia, PhD), financed by the National Authority for Scientific Research (NASR).

² Comisia Prezidențială pentru Analiza și Elaborarea Politicilor din Domeniile Educației și Cercetării din România, „România Educației, România Cercetării”(2007), <http://edu.presidency.ro/edu/cv/raport.pdf>

³ Idem 3 (National Authority for Scientific Research, 2008).

⁴ European Institute from România, “Restructuring Romania’s Education System Considering the Evolution from the Domestic Market Perspective and Impact on RDI Progress”, (2008), 218-219.

⁵ Zaharia, R.M., “Performance of Academic Research: The View of Academics from Bucharest University of Economics”, accepted for publication in *Transformation in Business and Economics* (March 2010).

⁶http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page?_pageid=2993,65015306&_dad=portal&_schema=PORTAL(2007).

⁷ Zaharia, R.M., “Performance of Academic Research: The View of Academics from Bucharest University of Economics”, accepted for publication in *Transformation in Business and Economics* (May, 2010).

⁸ Comisia Prezidențială pentru Analiza și Elaborarea Politicilor din Domeniile Educației și Cercetării din România, „România Educației, România Cercetării”(2007)”, <http://edu.presidency.ro/edu/cv/raport.pdf>).

⁹ Constantin, N., “Scientific research in Romania and international partnership: Necessity, challenges and difficulties ahead”, *Ad Astra 2 (2)* (2003).

¹⁰ Zaharia, R.M., “Performance of Academic Research: The View of Academics from Bucharest University of Economics”, accepted for publication in *Transformation in Business and Economics* (May 2010).

¹¹ Departamentul de Cercetari Economice, ASE, “Raport asupra activității de cercetare în ASE” (2007), <http://www.dce.ase.ro/buletin-ian-2008/buletin-ian-2008-c-1.htm>.

¹² Departamentul de Cercetari Economice, ASE, “Raport asupra activității de cercetare în ASE” (2007), <http://www.dce.ase.ro/buletin-ian-2008/buletin-ian-2008-c-1.htm>.

¹³ “Topul universităților din România - Clasamentul pe domenii” (2007), <http://www.ad-astra.ro/universitati/universities.php?year=2006/7>.

¹⁴ Departamentul de Cercetari Economice, ASE, “Raport asupra activității de cercetare în ASE” (2007), <http://www.dce.ase.ro/buletin-ian-2008/buletin-ian-2008-c-1.htm>.

¹⁵ Zaharia, R.M. (2008), “Performance of Academic Research: The View of Academics from Bucharest University of Economics”, accepted for publication in *Transformation in Business and Economics* (May, 2010).