Research culture in the Romanian universities: Searching for identity

Georgeta Ion*

Abstract

The Romanian higher education system has been experiencing substantial changes in the last years, in order to align to the European Higher Education Area and European Research Area. Despite the changes implemented at all levels, universities are still far away of the western European trends in knowledge production.

The article discusses the role of factors such as funding and university governance and their role in shaping the place that universities have in academic and social field. Research management model and university governance, the internal dynamics in the knowledge production and transfer mechanisms are some of the aspects analysed. In addition, international visibility of universities, their efficiency in the knowledge production and the internal dynamics may indicate that Romania is in danger of expanding the distance from the emergent European Research Area.

Key words: Knowledge production, research, universities, governance, research production, Romanian higher education

Introduction

The idea of a knowledge-based society, significantly transforms the models of production and organization of contemporary societies, (Hazelkorn, 2005, Felt, 2007) with consequences at all levels, including the university. Knowledge represents the base for economic development (Dale, 2005) under the concept of "knowledge economy" (Lucas, 2009: 11) and influences the models of its production at university level.

In the knowledge economy, information has become the crucial source of added value (Stehr, 2002). Definitions of the knowledge economy flourish as Foray puts it: *by knowledge-based economies I mean, essentially, economies in*

* Lect.univ.dr. Universitatea din București, e-mail georgeta.ion@g.unibuc.ro

which the proportion of knowledge-intensive jobs is high, the economic weight of information sectors is a determining factor, and the share of intangible capital is greater than that of tangible capital in the overall stock of real capital (Foray, 2006, p. ix).

Therefore, universities are organized to respond to the needs of the economy, in terms of scientific and economic innovation. Thus, this poses some concern on the change towards a university system that is more competitive and market-oriented.

Higher education reforms and international visibility

Starting later than other European countries, Romania has also been promoting in the last years a series of educational reforms, being one of the first members adhering to the Bologna Process, at state (The Education Act 1 from 2011 for example) in order to change and improve higher education. These aimed to enhance the role of the universities in society by strengthening their organisational and managerial logic, and its role in the creation and dissemination of knowledge. The final scope is to make institutions more responsive to the challenges raised by their insertion into environments increasingly focused on achieving competitiveness and oriented to society's needs.

Romanian reforms concerning higher education are framed in the European context by the European regulations as the creation of the European Higher Education Area and European Research Area. Also, the Romanian reforms are framed within the tendencies of Central and Eastern European context and the reforms developed in the region, as indicated by several studies carried out in the last decade (Kwiek, 2012 and Zgaga 2014 among others).

In the early years of the transition from the Communist period to the democratic society in the Central and Easter European countries both national and, especially, international policy actors were paying little attention to social policies and to higher education policies in particular. They set up unemployment systems was the only area of priority concern at that time: neoliberal policymakers focused on stabilisation, liberalisation, and privatisation policies (Orenstein & Haas, 2005).

According to Inglot, (2005, p. 3) "the process of reforming social policies in Central Europe during the post-communist era turned out to be 'much longer and much more difficult than most experts anticipated'. The general lack of reformers' focus on higher education, and the general fascination of both the public and policymakers with the

single indicator of student numbers, had far-reaching consequences for knowledge production: the teaching mission became the core university mission" (Kwiek, 2012: 112) and the research activity seems yet far away from the Western trends.

The same author, alerts that, as a consequence of at least a decade of neglect (i.e. the 1990s) of the reform of higher education and severe underfunding of university research, the amount of Central European knowledge production seems low from a Western European comparative perspective.

In line with international trends, Romanian higher education institutions have been immersed in the last 25 years in a process of adaptation and change of their higher education system process which has not yet been completed. This was due to its complexity but also to a wide variety of factors from external and internal context.

Despite numerous measures taken, there is a continuing absence of Central European universities in global (and especially European) university rankings. In 2010, only five universities from the region were present in the Academic Ranking of World Universities: one in the 210-300 ranking (Charles University in Prague, the Czech Republic), and four in the 301-400 ranking (Warsaw University and Jagiellonian University in Poland; Eotvos Lorand University and University of Szeged in Hungary). No university from Romania was ranked in top 500 world universities in the last years. Currently in the World University Rankings 2015-2016, only one Romanian university (University Babes Bolyai from Cluj Napoca) is ranked in the 500-600 positions and the other three (University of Bucharest, University Alexandru Ioan Cuza from Iasi and West University of Timisoara) in the frame of 601-800 positions. As example, the performance indicators breakdown of the main Romanian universities in the Times Higher education ranking (2015-2016) are illustrated in the image below:

Rank	Title	Teaching	International Outlook	Research	Citations	Industry Income	Overall	
501-600	Babeş-Bolyai University Romania	27.9	35.4	12.5	32.1	28.6	-	Add
601-800	Alexandru Ioan Cuza University Romania	24.9	46.9	13.6	7.0	28.2	-	Add
601-800	University of Bucharest Romania	34.3	21.3	11.5	9.9	29.5	-	Add
601-800	West University of Timişoara Romania	16.1	21.0	3.9	22.4	-	-	Add

Image 1. Performance breakdown for the main Romanian Universities ranked in Times Higher Education Ranking. Available at: https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/2016/world-ranking#!/page/0/length/25

The presence of Romanian institutions in higher universities rankings is very low despite the fact that, more than 25 years after the end of the Communist regime, the number of public and private higher education institutions has increased. This expansion was accompanied by changes in the political and economical sectors. Still the university management follows traditional paths and only few institutions are implementing real reforms in their organisation (Vlăsceanu et al, 2015). This immobilization of the higher education system is maintained in the last years despite the fact that new trends and challenges appear in the external and internal contexts of the university system. This determines Romanian HEI to accumulate a gap every time a deep comparison is made with other European universities. Vlasceanu et al (2015) explain this situation by two main categories of factors:

- **Demand side**: the demand for a university degree decreased because of the demographic deficit, lack of public funding supporting higher education, decline of personal interest in achieving higher education studies, slow economic growth correlated with a reduced inclusion of the graduates on the labour market;
- **Supply-side**: the university programmes offer also decreased due to: homogenization of the study programs at university level, institutional isomorphism, and lack of enthusiasm of the HEI blocking the adaptation of the university to its dynamic context.

Recent years also brought a transition of universities towards new academic models with a reconsideration of the research-teaching balance. This opens the debate about the future of European universities' mission. Their proponents do not very often directly engage with the importance of research as well as teaching in the roles of the university, something which is embedded in European traditions, particularly in the Germanic version of stretching from Humboldt onwards (Von Humboldt, 1976). This tradition is often mentioned as one of the historical antecedents for the modern university in Europe. Nevertheless the conditions of its contemporary existence and the potential for its disappearance are much more of a rarity, as advocated in an article exploring the extent to which different European higher education systems represent a Humboldtian, pre-Humboldtian or post-Humboldtian position (Schimank & Winnes, 2000). Deem (2006) stated that much more common foci in writings about shifts in higher education are changes to modes of knowledge production, from modes of knowledge which are largely theoretical to those which are more practical and applied (Giibbons, Limgoges et al., 1994). The rise of entrepreneurial cultures and activities such as applied research and consultancy units on a grand scale, and the establishment of spin-off companies on the backs of scientific and technological innovations in universities are also topics of interest. In addition public funding declines and has to be replaced by other funding sources (Clark, 1998; Marginson, 2004).

The research and teaching faces of the academia

Considering the debate between different activities in universities, the higher education model of universities in Romania corresponds to a Humboldtian model based on the harmonization of teaching and research activities and collegial ways of management. In the higher education management system in Romania coexist a collegial model of governance and traditional academic professionalism ideology (Bleiklie, Frølich & Michelsen, 2013). Based on the Humboldtian tradition, academics were seen as professors, i.e. those within HEIs devoted mainly to teaching and the transmission of knowledge, supported by some research activity. However, they enjoyed different levels of autonomy, granted namely via the collegial model. In this model, decision-making on institutional and professional issues remained under the control of the senior professors (Torgal, 2012).

Research and teaching are currently the main activities of most Romanian universities, but in the last years, under the pressure of the knowledge based economy and academic capitalism logic, the research activity tends to increase

its role. Research, as a vital activity of universities, influences the creation of a stimulating culture, the attraction and retention of high-level professionals and students, the design of an innovative curriculum, the creation of closer links with external agents, the industry, and the transfer of knowledge and understanding between the disciplines (Downes, 2004). In addition, it points to a new model of university which involves changes at all levels: the content of its academic activity, the role of the faculties and the balance research-teaching and transfer of knowledge.

However, studies about research activity across European universities demonstrated that many academics in a variety of disciplines do appear to base their work and identities around both teaching and research (Benninghof & Sormoni, 2005; Deem & Lucas, 2005). Although, there is some indication, with evidence from world-wide surveys on academics (Fulton, 1996) as well as more qualitative studies of academics in specific European countries, that those in more vocationally-oriented institutions (Martilla, 2005) may sometimes favour teaching over research. There are also studies which analyse the relations between teaching and research, highlighting the even greater role of research (Hazelkorn, 2005), to the point of speaking about the existence of a true "research culture".

As we can notice at international level, the university under the external influence of the society developed two different, concurrent trends in university research intensification. The first of these is the shift towards general research intensification and improved quality of research, currently driven by the global ranking phenomenon (which has marketization implications) and other ideas such as the quest for the world class university. The metrics here comprise the volume of research, percentage of doctoral qualified staff, and more qualitative measures such as citations etc. At the same time, driven by the knowledge economy imperatives, there is a tendency to secure not just research intensification, but also changes in the orientation of research towards research which can be commercialised, transferred, applied and that can lead to innovation. The indicators for this are not necessarily the same as for the research intensification drive and include aspects such as patents, instances of university-industry partnerships, start-ups etc.

Trying to adopt measures to promote the research dimension of the university, some policy processes in Romania were promoted more intensively in the last 5 years with the adoption of the National Education Act (no. 1. 2011). In this act, the research activity is recognised as a priority and the state has to allocate 1% of the PIB to its development. With this law, some of the previous distinctive features of Romanian HE began to change under the

influence of several factors, such as globalisation, knowledge society and economy, and the preoccupation for the quality assurance models. Among the transformations which occurred, one must highlight the emergence of new types of HEIs models, new relations between institutions and the external environment, as well as the re-configuration of HE's and institutions' missions and purposes in society. Consequently, Romanian universities have been classified into three categories: advanced research universities, teaching and research universities/teaching and artistic creation universities, and teaching oriented universities. In addition, and in line with this classification, all university study programs were ranked (from the class A to class E).

The classification of universities based on their research or teaching dimension represents quite an extended idea across Europe in the last years. In all cases, the main intention was to enhance the knowledge production and the introduction of the accountability criterion.

The classification was based on four criteria, each having been assigned a set of reference standards: Teaching and learning (Human resources, Curriculum and Qualifications); Research (Results in scientific research; Providing necessary resources for scientific research); Relations with the external environment (Socio-economic environment; Internationalization; Social and cultural involvement); Institutional capacity (Capacity to support teaching and learning; Capacity to support research; Capacity to support services for the society; University management).

In the process of classification, 90 universities were evaluated and ranked according to the three categories listed above. As a result of the classification, twelve universities were categorized as advanced research universities, 30 as teaching and research universities and 48 as teaching oriented universities.

Moreover, these requirements based on the research logic are able to provide new ways of moving up onto the academic career, considering the ability of academics and researchers to connect, by excellence in research, to international flows of ideas and research communities. It was also expected to facilitate the transition of Romanian higher education to the incorporation of new academic values, habits and behaviours more coherent with international trends in research and teaching.

The change in the weight of both activities in the professional academic profile is not automatic, but requires structural and financial support for academics. While the classification of universities was the first step in the reform process, this was not accompanied by an increase in financial support and institutional autonomy. Despite Romania's

efforts in sustaining research and innovation, data shows that it is still placed below the EU average (Curaj, 2015) - only 0.4% of GDP. Mainly because of this aspect, a connection with fragmented and under-funded institutional setting or unreliable funding was also found (with frequent changes in the structure of the advisory councils of the Ministry of Education and other national bodies). "*Romania is to be found far from the desired 6% of GDP, established by the National Education Act. Reported to the percentage of GDP, the most funding that education has benefited from was in 2008, representing 4,4% of GDP. We also notice that the trend to get closer to the European average, which prevailed during the period of economic growth in the years between 2000-2008, has been overturned starting with 2009, and the distancing from the European average is also accentuated in the present*" (UEFISCDI, 2015:38).

Analyses of the Romanian higher education system (Vlasceanu and Hâncean, 2015 among others), have revealed an extremely interesting fact, as a reflection of systemic policy. The Bologna Process had an early debut in 2004 Romania, being regulated by law and introduced as a curricular standard for all higher education institutions in Romania (the transition to the three cycles – Bachelor, Masters and Doctorate - was done through a top-down decision-making process by the 2004 Law regarding the study cycles, with consequences especially for unregulated qualifications and professions, for which the Bachelor degree was reduced to three years.) This also fuelled the public perception, for both teachers and students, that the Bologna Process actually represents a quantitative change, namely a decrease in the number of years dedicated to the Bachelor degree, without a real understanding of the profound and intricate connexions with the other « European processes » - EQF, ECTS, the QA movement, which, in fact, made the Bologna Process a process of a profound qualitative academic reshaping, for the educational process, as well as for the certification and recognition processes.

The very fast creation of the premises for developing an authentic national extension of EHEA, brought shadow, through an unintentional omission, on the second major line of the Bologna Process, the creation of a research area (ERA - European Research Area). This was conceived as a fundament of the educational processes, as well as a basis for institutional development processes and even for the technological progress, through the transfer or mobilization of knowledge/research to practice, institutional improvement and to qualitative educational policies.

This second component of the Bologna Process, which defined the progress and development of Europe in the sense of applying the Lisbon Process and Europe 2020 principles through innovation, advanced research and technological transfer, has been left in the background, with consequences felt not only at a community level, but also damaging through a delay in the implementation. As well as in social acceptance and awareness at the academic community level – referring both to teachers and students (students' «black books of the Bologna Process » could be seen for reference). Another factor which is important to mention at this point in the analysis is the subjective dimension of the relationship between teaching and research in the academic space, where the organizational culture variable should always be exploited in the best way possible.

The changes in the internal research dynamics and research culture

Reforms and funding in higher education are only two of the main aspects framing the higher education system. However, these structural and policy aspects are implemented at institutional level and have impact on university culture and professional academic profile. Studies on university model oriented towards research (De Silva Lokuwaduge and Armstrong, 2014, among others) highlight the relationship between government structures and the competitiveness of the universities.

This transformation in the university model oriented towards competitiveness also influences "traditional academic values" and the research culture of universities characterised by super-vigilance, competency and hierarchy outlined by Roberts (2007). Characterizing a productive research culture, Bland and Ruffian (1992) identify 12 aspects as: clear objectives for co-ordination, focus on research, specific culture, positive group culture, decentralized organization, participatory governance, frequent communication, human resources, group age, dimension and diversity, appropriate rewards, focus on the selection of personnel, and leadership competencies both in research and management.

In order to promote changes, political measures are critical, but also institutional modifications are required. Under the new policy regulations, universities tried to stimulate the creation of a research culture and adopt managerial measure to enhance the production, dissemination and transfer of knowledge. But transforming the university culture is not an easy task. Authors like Holligan (2011) and Billiot and Codling (2013) investigate the factors affecting the

culture of research from the academics' perspective and point to elements such as: pressure to publish high-level academic papers, change in the concept of "undertaking research" towards the concept of "producing publications", the legal and political frameworks marked by the pressure to define what research represents and its use, the role conflicts between teaching and research tasks, changes at structural and management levels with little involvement on the part of teachers, new processes for the evaluation of research activity, the imbalance perceived by academics between workload, resources and available support. Along with these elements, Rix, Aylward, MacGregor and Glynn (2004: 302) added institutional elements such as: a) Effectiveness of the faculty research management structure, b) How effective research communication mechanisms are within the faculty, c) Whether the faculty encourages external research collaboration, d) To what extent the faculty fosters research mentoring among staff, e) How clearly articulated the faculty's research priority areas are, f) Whether research concentrations within the faculty emerge naturally, and g) Overall opinion of the research environment.

In its attempt to influence the creation of a productive research culture and at the same time to promote Quality Assurance mechanisms, the Romanian Council on University Qualifications and Degrees (CNATDCU) has formally introduced new quality internal evaluation mechanisms and scheme. "The new policy of staff development has thus rendered a shift from the traditional policy to a post-traditional one. While the traditional approach, in Romania, was based on principles of in-breeding localism and academic gerontocracy, considering age/seniority as the key element in the process of job recruitment and appointment, the post-traditional one relies entirely on peer-reviewed academic performances and scientometric outputs. The post-traditional approach is meant to be meritocratic, highlighting the knowledge productivity internationally acknowledged" (Vlăsceanu and Hâncean, 2015: 188). The authors highlight that according to the reforms provisioned in 2011, academic and research staff recruitment and promotion have had to take into account individual performances measured by specific criteria, such as: publications impact (e.g. number of citations, G-index and H-index scores), number of publications (e.g. papers, books, book chapters etc.) included in internationally indexed databases etc.

In Romania, academics recognize the importance of the teaching activity but consider that the assessment of their academic performance has been based in the past years on research indicators such as number of grants obtained and number and quality of publications (Iucu and Ion, 2015).

Moreover, Singer (2013), making an analysis of the scientific production in Romania by referring to 6 years of scientific publications (between years 1996-2012) finds that despite the academics awareness on research, the results are still under-represented. At the international level, Romania stands among the last countries in what concerns the number of scientific articles and H index. The Romanian educational research, as Singer observes, has a relatively small percentage of citations and a small H index compared with countries rated above. Singer (2013) remarks that the mean number of citations from 2008 to 2012, in Romania, is around 62. Therefore, the author concludes that Romania is not significantly present in the international educational research.

Romania was on the 41st position in the Scimago Ranking[8] in 2014, with a H-index of 167 compared with the first ranked country with a 1648 H Index, which is approximatively 10 times lower. Image 2 presents the position in this ranking of the first 10 countries and the countries in the category occupied by Romania, from a total of 239 countries evaluated. In addition, Romania only has one journal indexed in the field of Social sciences in the last quartile of the journal rankings.

	Country	Documents	Citable documents	Citations	Self-Citations	Citations per Document	H index
1	United States	8.626.193	7.876.234	177.434.935	83.777.658	23,36	1.648
2	China	3.617.355	3.569.652	19.110.353	10.462.121	7,44	495
3	United Kingdom	2.397.817	2.103.145	44.011.201	10.321.539	21,03	1.015
4	Germany	2.176.860	2.045.433	35.721.869	9.141.181	18,50	887
5	Japan	2.074.872	2.008.410	27.040.067	7.619.559	13,79	745
6	France	1.555.629	1.468.286	24.700.140	5.516.943	17,95	811
7	Canada	1.227.380	1.134.588	22.152.666	4.136.384	21,40	794
8	Italy	1.200.448	1.117.013	18.019.464	4.186.908	17,52	713
9	India	998.544	944.632	6.989.150	2.409.025	9,61	383
10	Spain	952.099	884.670	12.628.097	3.068.362	16,14	591
40	Ukraine	133.650	131.490	635.570	176.428	5,03	174
41	Romania	125.576	122.884	619.956	153.395	7,24	167
42	Egypt	120.493	117.104	818.728	162.544	9,19	165
43	Thailand	109.832	104.982	976.328	162.255	13,00	213
44	Saudi Arabia	91.460	87.643	547.167	89.352	8,95	164
45	Chile	90.216	86.521	1.014.687	193.534	15,38	233

Image 2: *The SCImago Journal & Country Rank. Available at: http://www.scimagojr.com/index.php*

[8] The SCImago Journal & Country Rank is a portal that includes the journals and country scientific indicators developed from the information contained in the Scopus® database (Elsevier B.V.). These indicators can be used to assess and analyze scientific domains.

Not only publications are representative for the scientific production and visibility, but also department rankings (Vîiu, Vlăscean and Miroiu, 2012; Vîiu and Miroiu, 2013; Păunescu andd Hâncean, 2013), using citation measurement of the research conducted in particular institutions or fields (sociology, political science). Studies conducted by Vlăscean and Hâncean (2015) in the past years, measuring the impact of the scientific productivity, demonstrated that researchers did not find any relationship between the total funding/public funding/private funding streams reported by the Sociology departments and the number of citations or the departments' H and G scores which highlighted that financial support is critical, but it is not the only aspect to consider in order to increase the research productivity.

The research dimension in individual professional career

In the new model of universities based on the intensification of the research dimension and production of knowledge, academics have a central role leading the transformation in the academic profession. Within research intensive universities in particular, professors face heightened competition of several kinds. An analysis carried out by Mohrmana, Mab and Baker (2008) highlighted the changes experimented by the universities in the research intensive contexts. The authors, referring to the responsibilities which academics have within the institution, insist on the multiple tasks they have to perform. Not only are they expected to conduct publishable research, but also to teach graduate and undergraduate students, to provide service to their universities, and to use their knowledge for the benefit of local and national communities. The system clearly gives priority to published research, especially in prestigious journals, over other goals. As a result, the academic working environment is changing rapidly (Stromquist, et al 2007).

In countries still under development, and in non-science fields in particular, the demand for research productivity does not come with increased financial and administrative support. In many developed countries, a new category of faculty academics do not teach at all, but rather work with contracted projects, consulting businesses, research institutes, and governmental agencies. They are fully engaged in transferring their knowledge. This last model is still far away from the Eastern European countries, including Romania, where the academic profession has not experimented many changes in the last years, and where it incorporates teaching, research and administrative

functions equally and no differentiation is made between academics with high performances in research comparing to those teaching-oriented.

A study conducted in Romania in the last 4 years, based on a survey on academics reveals that the academics' perception on the research in universities is "segmented and ambiguous, incoherent and fragmented" (Iucu and Ion, 2015) which makes their research task in the knowledge production more difficult. Furthermore, researchers believe that the research activity is less institutionalized and lacks sustainability and quality as a result of a lack of financial resources.

On the one hand, universities expect researchers to produce high quality knowledge likely to have social application and, on the other hand, their activity is deterred by cumbersome institutional mechanisms and the lack of resources, as well as the balance between research and teaching in the case of academics in universities. Actually, researchers tend to focus more on the importance of research than on teaching, despite the fact that there are no clear mechanisms to support and incentivize this first one.

In addition, they consider the teaching workload influences the scientific profile of research in education and represents an obstacle to dedicate more time and effort to research: "*Most people in education are overloaded with tasks other than research. The regular teaching workload does not include time for research activities. Obviously, the amount you can produce is insignificant. There is not enough time for research"* stated one of the participants.

In spite of this picture, the staff evaluation system emphasizes the research activity. Nevertheless, it brings about a conflict of roles at a personal level and causes frustration since "*your job is purely didactic whereas your evaluation is based on research. The teaching workload is too high and the effort expended on daily tasks leaves little time for research"* as added by another academic.

In a recent study regarding the professional development in the academic career, academics identified some of the main difficulties they face in their professional development (Ion and Iucu, 2015) as follows:

- "Focus on quantity, rather than quality in both teaching and research. Teaching hours are established in an unrealistic manner";
- "Arbitrary opening teaching and research positions without any strategy or without taking in consideration the strategies established".

- "Schizophrenic criteria for staff evaluation – for example, the promotion system is focused on the teaching activity, whilst evaluation criteria are almost exclusively connected to research, and the evaluation of the teaching activity is neglected or defined in terms almost impossible to measure and test".
- "Difficulties in planning long term career strategies, especially research activities, due to frequent and unpredictable changes in funding research".
- "The professional competences are not valued as a decisive factor in selecting academics. There are rather subjective criteria, interpersonal relationships, group interests, lack of professionalism of those who become managers in universities".

Conclusions

The Romanian higher education system experimented changes and developments aimed at aligning to the requirements of the Higher Education and Research Area, but the process is still in progress. Without reforms based on coherent measures and internal strategies based on collaboration between all actors, little can be done. In addition, all the reforms should be doubled by financial and structural support in order to produce real changes.

The aspects discussed in this paper are illustrative for the lack of coherence of a higher education system which makes academics face new demands and challenges without a coherent strategy behind and real mechanisms to support their work. This idea is coherent with the diagnosis realised by David (2013), which summaries four 'sins' of the Romanian university system: "I believe that the mistake made so far is that we tried to introduce modern mechanisms/models (for example, what type of publications we need to target? ISI or non-ISI?) in a traditional/old paradigm. Thus, it has established an extraordinary tension in the system. I believe that we should act radically different! A change of the paradigm in which we think and function. And only afterwards we can discuss nuances of the new mechanisms/models. Thus, we will have to fight for every normal mechanism/model from prestigious universities that we want to adopt, because it is not only incompatible with a specific practice, but with the whole paradigm. Let's, therefore, rethink the paradigm, by connecting to the performant academic environment abroad, without ignoring the needs and particularities of the Romanian context (p.220).

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