
Accounting research in Romania: state of affairs, possible causes and deviations

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Abstract

The paper aims to analyze the state of the accounting research in Romania, as compared to the other countries in Eastern Europe, as well as to identify the causes of the observed situation and its possible deviations in the research activity, respectively in the field of research evaluation. The Scimago database was used to carry out the research, which allowed the analysis of Romania's position in Eastern Europe in terms of the number of published articles, average number of article quotes and self-citations. The study of the specialized literature and the direct knowledge of some aspects specific to the Romanian academic life allowed to identify possible causes of the current situation, and also some behaviors, not always normal, generated by the enforcement of certain criteria for the occupation of didactic functions without a sufficient analysis of the Romanian realities, and even without any care to restore the traditional social role of the universities.

Keywords: research evaluation, bibliometric, citations analysis, Scopus, Scimago

JEL Classification: M14, M21, M40

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Introduction

During the last decades, especially at the global level, the debate on the assessment of accounting research has gained momentum in the wider context of evaluating the impact of the research evaluation on the work of researchers in general. Given the relatively frequent changes of the minimal standards to be met in order to obtain the academic degree of university associate professor and full professor, respectively for obtaining a certificate of habilitation in Economic Sciences and Business Administration, we consider the public would be interested in a proposal to start a debate at national level about the state of the research in the mentioned fields and the effects of the research evaluation, respectively on the distortions and deviations that can occur both in the publication of papers and in the evaluation of the research. We also take into consideration the fact that, although for a faculty and for its students the teaching activity is extremely important, during the last years the research activity has become the main priority in the process of university teaching staff employment, promotion and evaluation.

Recently, many Romanian young academics, both from Romania and from abroad, have begun to be very critical about the older researches of the elderly academics, forgetting an essential fact: new research is only made after a good knowledge of the state of the existing research in the field, and until recently, the access to foreign literature was extremely limited. About 15 or 20 years ago, an attempt to do research according to the current rigors, was almost similar to keeping fire without fuel. However, some criticisms also came as a result of the repeated changes in the university associate professor and full professor employment criteria, as well as in the doctoral supervisor status reaching process (habilitation). Some people consider that current standards are too high, when compared against the standards for getting a university associate professor or full professor degree, or a doctoral supervisor degree in the not too distant past.

In fact, there is a paradox: although some of those who criticize the "Romanian academic environment for economic studies" consider themselves holders of a high research competence, yet they are also worried about their ability to meet the conditions imposed by the current Romanian legislation. On the other hand, the answer to such criticisms is not clearly formulated,

notably by not defining specific objectives at the level of the higher education institutions, at least in order to clarify the relationship between the research activity and the teaching activity and also to establish some institutional objectives that allow academics to formulate individual objectives in line with the institutional ones. At present, there is an almost exclusive, but understandable concern for the achievement of individual objectives (promotion, merit grading, etc.).

The most worrying fact seems to be that in Romania, in the context of the lack of a real debate on accounting research, and during the race for the achievement of the individual objectives (promotion or the employment of teaching or research positions, merit grades etc.), the perspective is lost over what is actually the most important thing in research, namely the creation and development of a market for ideas.

1. What is the market of ideas?

In several papers issued during the recent years, H.-R. Patapievici (2004, 2007, 2014) tries to explain why in Romania there is no real market for ideas, starting from the fact that there is no real debate, not only in the general field of culture, but also in the field of domain-specific culture.

The minimum conditions that an exchange of ideas needs to meet in order for a market of ideas to exist are synthesized by H.-R. Patapievici (2007) in the form of the following criteria:

1. The continuity of exchanges
2. The objectivity of exchanges
3. The freedom of trade
4. The lack of predictability
5. The existence of a critical mass

The author's conclusion, based on these criteria, is that if the number of participants in the exchange of ideas is not high enough, then the listed criteria cannot be fulfilled neither individually, nor altogether. Moreover, the author asserts that "In our public space, disciplines do not communicate, people in a discipline refuse to talk to each other, intellectual groups hate each other, people suspect each other, prizes are conceived as prizes-counter (not prizes-for)" (Patapievici, 2007, p. 97). Unfortunately, even if these statements are not true in all situations, in some sciences, they are a sad reality. In

order to overcome this situation, one of the solutions could be to assimilate and embed ethics as an element that necessarily associates with the exercise of knowledge.

If we analyze the contemporary market of ideas in the field of Romanian accounting, we find that it is relatively weakly developed, but seriously affected by administrative decisions, which, although seeming to have the purpose to develop research, often lead to unwanted effects (the tendency to publish as much as possible and only in journals that are on the official list of administrative structures, giving up publishing for the purpose of entering into the debate of ideas, but publishing only in order to achieve individual objectives, the not always high quality of the published works, the large number of self-quotes, the “friendly” or reciprocal citations). To analyze the state of the accounting research in Romania, we studied the evolution of the local publications and quotes in the field, in comparison to the existing situation in other Eastern European countries for the 1996-2015 period.

2. Literature review

Bibliometric tools, were initially used primarily to manage journals collections in libraries and to assess the influence of academic research on the dynamics of science development. During the 1980s, they began to be used to evaluate research groups, so that in the early 1990s, *knowledge management* and *benchmarking*, both based on performance and productivity indicators, would be transferred to universities. Thus, the bibliometric data was seen as a scientific career management tool that allowed for a better assessment than the peer review, which was considered to be too subjective and to be supplemented, if not substituted, by data-based methods considered more objective. However, by the year 2000, most of the bibliometric analyzes were made at the level of large laboratories, universities, whole countries, while the use of bibliometric data in individual assessment was avoided. With the transition to the use of bibliometric data as a tool for evaluating researchers, negative reactions were received from many of them, as it was considered a simplistic method of quantifying research. At the same time, indicators were created which combine different bibliometric data in order to identify the best researchers (Gingras, 2016).

It is known that for more than 45 years, the Institute for Scientific Information (ISI, now part of Thomson Reuters) was the one to produce the only bibliographic database available to carry out statistical processing based on bibliometric indicators. In other words, until 2004, when the Scopus database appeared (owned by Elsevier, considered by the Financial Times the largest international editorial group that publishes scientific journals), the Thomson databases, now compiled as Web of Science, were the major source of bibliometric data (Archambault et al., 2009). However, although most of the scientometric studies have been conducted over time on the basis of ISI's bibliometric data, in recent years Scopus-based studies have begun to multiply (Gingras, 2016). But with the emergence of the Scopus database, a problem arose about the comparability and stability of statistics produced on these data sources, especially when comparing countries or institutions.

Obviously, the debate about the two databases and information on the quantity and quality of the works found in them has become more prominent. More and more comparative studies have been launched between the available databases, besides the Web of Science and Scopus, Google Scholar or other specialized databases such as PubMed. Database research has covered various areas such as: database characteristics (Falagas, Pitsouni, Malietzis and Pappas, 2008), quote rates and H-index (Bar-Ilan, 2008, Belew, 2005, Ball and Tunger, 2006). Studies have shown a high level of similarity between Web of Science and Scopus (Norris and Oppenheim, 2007), which is not surprising, given that 7434 journals, that is, 54% of Scopus and 84% of the Web of Science are indexed in both databases (Gavel & Iselid, 2008).

Among the bibliometric indicators used to assess the quality of scientific research, the H-index and the impact factor are to be mentioned. In this context, we recall that the notion of H-index was introduced in the process of assessing scientific activity in the mid-2000s by physicist Jorge E. Hirsch. This index is equal to the number n of articles that a researcher has published and which have obtained at least n citations each since the publication. Hence, the H-index is not a measure of quantity, nor a measure of quality, but a combination of the two. With regard to the impact factor, an important criticism is that it includes auto-citations in the total citations of an article, so that the authors were asked to quote articles from the journals they wanted to publish. Thompson

Reuters has tried to combat misconduct, such as “exchange” quotes among journals, by publishing “blacklists” of journals that seem to have manipulated their impact factor. Moreover, it is accepted that the impact factor remains an indicator of the value of the journal and not of the articles. Under these circumstances, an article published in a high impact journal may never be quoted (Gingras, 2016).

In recent years, assessments based on bibliometric indicators have become increasingly criticized. The prestigious Nature journal argues in an editorial in July 2016 that “these indicators are reductive and can be dangerous” (Nature, 2016). The target indicator is the impact factor of a journal, for example, the average number of citations (for each published article) for published works over a two-year period. Thus, it is considered, for example, that it leads to the underestimation of some disciplines (accounting may be included here), which are not central to research and where the low quotation rates are a characteristic. Although the shortcomings in the use of these indicators have always been well known, they have not prevented researchers, funders and university decision-makers, as well as research assessment bodies from using and sometimes promoting them excessive. Surely fair arguments can be found to legitimize the use of bibliometric indicators to analyze research performance, but their use as managerial objectives can leave universities feeling they are being asked to change their behavior to meet often arbitrary goals (Nature, 2016).

3. Research methodology

In order to analyze the possibility of exchanging ideas in the field of accounting, in Romania, we started from the database of the SCImago research group of the Higher Research Council (CSIC) of the Universities of Granada, Extremadura, Carlos III (Madrid) and Alcalá de Henares, available at <http://www.scimagojr.com/journalrank.php>. The indicators developed by this group indicate the visibility of the journals contained in the Scopus database since 1996. The method of calculating the indicators on the basis of which the study, which served to develop this database, as well as its motivation The basis for their calculation is broadly explained in an article published by Guerrero-Botea and Moya-Anegón (2012). The database allows grouping of journals by 27 thematic areas, 313 categories, 8 geographical regions and 239 countries (SCImago, 2007).

Our study aims at a comparative analysis especially in Eastern Europe of indicators provided by the aforementioned data base for Business, Management and Accounting in order to highlight the position of Romania and to identify possible causes and explanations of the accounting research situation in our country.

4. Research results

By means of our analysis, we wanted to highlight the extent to which the articles published in the Romanian journals indexed in the Scopus database (in the field of “Business, Management and Accounting”) participate, in particular through the number of citations (as a quality indicator) to the ideas market in the mentioned field. The study focused primarily on the countries of Eastern Europe (as was done by the creators of the database), assuming that the level of development of the ideas market was negatively influenced by the communist regime under which these countries have been operating for half a century. The period under review was 1996-2015.

Thus, as shown in **Table no. 1**, Romania occupies an honorable 3rd place, out of the 23 countries of Eastern Europe from which articles in the analyzed field have been published and are indexed in the Scopus database.

Viewed only from the perspective of the number of articles, the situation may seem satisfactory. Unfortunately, an analysis of citations for these articles makes things less pleasant. Thus, if we analyze the total number of citations, Romania drops to 8th, and from the point of view of the average number of citations per article, the place occupied by Romania is 18. Also, an element indicating a habit not very appreciated nor very “healthy” from the perspective of evaluating the quality of publications, is the high level of self-citations, Romania being ranked 4th in this respect.

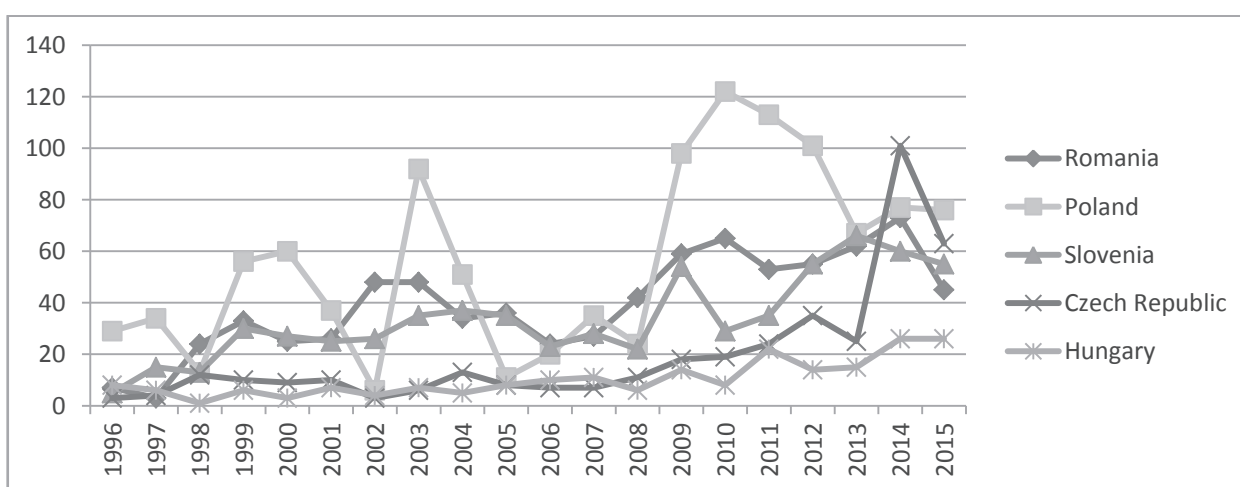
The comparative situation of the number of articles published by the first five Eastern European countries for which we found records each year is presented in **Figure no. 1**. Although Russia is included among the Eastern European countries, we exclude this country from our analysis, on the one hand, because size makes it hardly comparable to other countries and, on the other hand, because it is geographically not exclusively Europe.

Table no. 1. East-European countries ranking based on the number of published papers during 1996-2015 which have been indexed by the Scopus database (in the field of "Business, Management and Accounting")

Rank	Country	Documents	Citations	Self-citations	Citations per article
1	Russian Federation	2495	1498	227	0.6
2	Poland	1122	1849	325	1.65
3	Romania	789	629	277	0.8
4	Slovenia	675	2741	549	4.06
5	Czech Republic	388	759	259	1.96
6	Bulgaria	260	210	24	0.81
7	Lithuania	258	1870	954	7.25
8	Hungary	207	1678	135	8.11
9	Croatia	188	730	102	3.88
10	Estonia	150	639	152	4.26
11	Serbia	131	181	42	1.38
12	Slovakia	126	359	87	2.85
13	Latvia	100	236	41	2.36
14	Ukraine	99	189	26	1.91
15	Macedonia	36	66	5	1.83
16	Belarus	22	42	9	1.91
17	Bosnia and Herzegovina	20	15	0	0.75
18	Georgia	16	186	0	11.63
19	Albania	14	22	2	1.57
20	Azerbaijan	13	8	1	0.62
21	Armenia	7	3	0	0.43
22	Montenegro	3	8	0	2.67
23	Moldova	3	0	0	0

Source: <http://www.scimagojr.com/countryrank.php?category=1401&area=1400®ion=Eastern%20Europe>

Figure no. 1. The evolution of the papers number published by the top 5 countries in Eastern Europe during 1996-2015



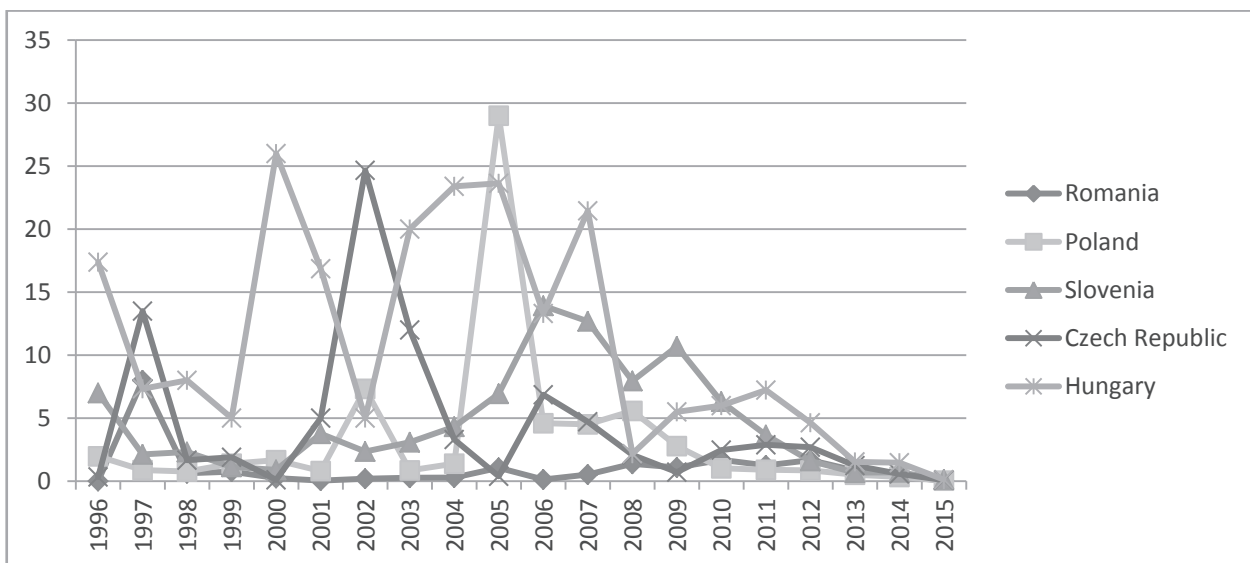
Source: The author, 2017

There can be noticed a significant increase in the number of articles published in Romania during the 2008-2014 period, one of the explanations being the doctoral programs financed by projects of type POSDRU (Sectorial Operational Program for Human Resources Development) 2007-2013, a fact highlighted by the previous research (Chersan and Mironiuc, 2015), and somehow confirmed by the decrease in the number of articles published during 2015.

From the perspective of the average number of citations per article, the comparative situation for the five countries is presented in Figure 2. We find that for Romania the situation of quotes is constantly worrying, confirming either the lack of concern for the articles published by the local researchers, their poor quality, or

the lack of accessibility to such research, all of which lead to the conclusion that there is no market for ideas in the field in question. If for all other four countries there is a large number of citations in some years, for Romania, the highest average number of citations per item is 1.69, if we exclude the average of 8 quotes registered in 1997. Also, Romania ranks last as the average number of citations, with 1.02 citations/article, while the next ranked average 3.36 citations/article, and the first ranked, Hungary, has an average of 10.8 citations/article. However, in order for the situation of Romania not to be very dramatic, we note that the average number of citations for articles published in Eastern European journals is 2.87 citations/article, compared to 8.47 citations/article in the Western Europe.

Figure no. 2. Evolution of the average number of quotes per paper in the top 5 East European countries during 1996-2015



Source: The author, 2017

Although it is not among the top 5 ranking countries throughout the time, Georgia, Lithuania, Estonia and Croatia have an over the average number of article citations in Eastern Europe.

Gingras (2016) shows that the number of citations of an article depends on the number of references it contains. In other words, the more references one article contains, the more chances of being quoted are growing. On the

other hand, it is obvious that the number of references per article has seen an important increase over time and as a result of the exponential increase in the number of researchers and published articles. In other words, as Gingras (2016) shows by a simple “demographic” effect, there is an important chance that the average number of citations of an article will increase over time. Based on this finding, we analyzed the number of references

contained in the articles in the studied database and came to the following findings:

1. Except for a Croatian diary (Management), where the average number of references has not been in any of the analyzed years less than 33, the rest of the journals have registered a maximum of 11 references by 2003. Romania reached an average of the article references greater than 10 only in 2010.
2. The average number of article references in Eastern Europe was consistently below the average number of article references in Western Europe. For

example, in 2015, the average number of references for articles published in Eastern European journals was 34, compared with 48 in Western Europe.

3. Romania ranks second in Eastern Europe in terms of the number of auto-citations in total citations (after Lithuania) and the first place in the ranking of the five countries for which a more in-depth analysis was possible (Table 2). Also, in this context, we note that the average of self-citations in total citations in Western Europe journals is 13%, compared to 21% in Eastern Europe.

Table no. 2. The weight of self-citations in total citations in the top 5 East-European countries during 1996-2015

Country	Citations	Self-citations	Citations/Self-citations
Romania	629	277	44.04%
Czech Republic	759	259	34.12%
Slovenia	2741	549	20.03%
Poland	1849	325	17.58%
Hungary	1678	135	8.05%

Source: The author, 2017

The gap between the countries of the two regions on the one hand, and between Romania and the other Eastern European countries on the other hand can be explained by their different levels of economic development. Hart and Sommerfeld (1998) have shown that the total number of publications in a country is closely related to the country's gross domestic product. In other words, it is obvious that scientific development can not be dissociated from the level of economic development of a country. Also, the low level of citations of articles published in Eastern European countries may be the consequence of the fact that these articles deal with issues of local importance, which would explain to some extent the high level of self-citations.

In addition, we can assume that articles dealing with topics of local importance are published in the language of the country where the research is carried out, which significantly reduces their visibility. Consequently, due to the need to ensure international visibility, some of the journals have become bilingual or simply ceased publishing articles in their national language, becoming English-language publications. However, at least for strictly demographic reasons, a journal published in

English has a larger potential number of readers than a journal published in any other language.

On the other hand, although citation is considered a measure of the visibility of articles, this perception can also lead to an increase in the number of auto-citations. The fact is not neglected in the context in which at the level of universities in Romania were requested information regarding the H-index provided by Google Scholar.

Conclusions

The discussions that have taken place in Romania during the last years, on the evaluation of research, have been carried out since the 1960s at the level of the Western society, leading to the Science Citation Index (SCI), the H-index and the impact factor. In Romania, the transition to the use of these new methods of research evaluation was determined by the need to find objective forms of research results in the context of the transition to differentiated financing of universities according to performance. Beyond this need for classification, rigorous debates and analyzes would be needed to capture the peculiarities of different research

areas in finding ways to encourage research in the context of the need to modernize society and to involve researchers in Romania in the exchange of ideas Both in the country and abroad. Unfortunately, these discussions, if any, have been marginal, and research is carried out rather than as an institutional objective. In addition, solutions for participating in exchanges of ideas are only rarely institutional (organizing conferences and/or meetings of teachers from different specialties) but mostly individual. Moreover, it sometimes happens that individual efforts are not appreciated, sometimes underestimated or considered “accidents” generated by happy “meetings” of Romanian authors with different foreign collaborators.

Our study, though limited to the Scimago database, which, had in its turn, only the Scopus database as support, highlighted some relatively well-known but not necessarily publicly acknowledged aspects of Romanian accounting research. Firstly, the relatively large number of articles published in the period under review rather show the tendency to publish a lot, without a constant concern about the quality of the work, quantifiable, for example, by the number of citations received during a number of years. This is perhaps the consequence of the fact that, until relatively recently, there was no requirement for the quality of the articles, other than the indexation in the international databases of the journals in which they were published. It is only during the recent years that the criteria for occupying a teaching position have also included elements that take into account the quality of the published articles, in addition to the impact factor and, more recently, the relative influence score of the journals where a candidate has published articles, citations also being taken into account. Unfortunately, as a consequence of the need to publish in impact factor-driven journals and the need to be quoted, solutions have been sought such as: publishing in impact-oriented journals where the link to the candidate’s field of research is hard to find and “collegial” quote. Such practices are not necessarily to be condemned when: the modification of the criteria has often been done without a prior debate of the proposals; Romanian journals with impact factor in some research areas are missing; Publishing in foreign journals is extremely difficult, especially in the context of a lack of data to allow for quality research.

Another consequence of the need to publish in impact-oriented journals was the focus on “trendy” topics at

international level, which offer greater opportunities for publication and subsequent quotes. Unfortunately, in this way, the almost complete disappearance of the debate and, implicitly, the exchange of ideas on issues of local (national) interest has been achieved, which, especially in the present development conditions of our country, is not desirable at all. Moreover, if for many years there has been the practice of publishing works of conferences on topics of national interest (which would hardly become of interest to the journals) in collective volumes, as they have no impact factor, this practice has been abandoned, even if it maintained a certain level of debate.

Also, after a significant increase in the number of published papers during the doctoral sessions funding period through POS DRU programs, starting in 2015, there has been a decrease in the number of published articles. A possible cause of this decline is the increase in the exigencies of the Romanian journals, which, wanting to be indexed in the most prestigious databases, have tightened the review processes of the articles. An enlightening example is the “Financial Audit” journal, which, since 2017, has moved from a monthly appearance regime to its quarterly appearance, with the declared aim of “improving the quality of published articles” (<http://revista.cafr.en/home>).

Although the data base did not allow for such an analysis, it is obvious from previous research (Gingras, 2016; Chersan and Mironiuc, 2015; Teixeira da Silva and Dobranszki, 2016) that the so-called phenomenon of research “collectivization” appeared, in the sense that in more and more fields, research is performed by a team, while during the last century single-author papers were the rule, and the collaboration between the authors was quite rare. The phenomenon is interesting, given that, at least at the level of Romania, the team publication of the research results also implies the division of the score allocated to that achievement. However, a reason for the increase of the number of a paper’s authors is, at least in Romania, also the increasing costs of publishing in important journals. Unfortunately, Romanian researchers do not discuss at all the ethical issues that may arise in the case of collaborating in the production of articles, given that international issues are under debate, Teixeira da Silva, Dobranszki, Kamkar, Muscolo, Nasraoui, Ruan, Yu, Zeng, Winarto (2012, 2013, 2015 and 2016) are the authors of several studies that deal with ethics of

research, collaboration and partnership in scientific writing, spanning across many countries and geographic regions.

Therefore, it is noted that in addition to the deviations in the assessment of research that can be reported without the need for any bibliometric studies, it is a fact that in the process of scientific papers publishing, the most affected are the researchers in human and social sciences whose subjects are of local interest only, more than in the case of “hard” sciences, such as math, medicine, physics, chemistry, etc.

Under these circumstances, we must not be surprised that “practices are adapted to the criteria, although the situation should be the reverse” (Gingras, 2016, p. 40), but we should be saddened that in our country, the “transition from one theory to another is performed without any critical discussion, without debate, without opposition” (Patapievic, 2004, p.88).

Moreover, in a recently published study, Urdari, Farcas and Tiron Tudor (2017, p. 19) objectively and steadily present the current reality of Romanian higher education: “Focusing on publishing in top journals makes it detrimental to the development of significant long-term research; publishing requirements imposed by

faculties lead academics to neglect their teaching activities; the leadership of universities forces teachers to disconnect from the economic and social environment; instead of developing the atmosphere of collegiality, the evaluation process has led to increased tensions among peers, while practices cannot be corrected and redirected to the original purpose of higher education institutions.”

Many of the aspects observed and described in our study can be explained, at least in part, psychologically. Thus, by presenting the synthesis of the Romanian cultural profile as a result of a very wide and rigorous study, David (2015) argues that Romanians have a culture that promotes rather heterodetermination (the influence of tradition) towards self-determination (autonomy in decision) and pragmatism (personal interest) towards the civic spirit. Moreover, the same study shows that, compared to other Europeans, Romanians are less concerned about the general good or the well-being of the people they know, the search for the new and the independence but, in order to make a good impression, they pretend to be concerned of these values.

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