

## Chapter 5.24

# The Profession of Research Management and Administration in Romania

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### Abstract

Research management and administration (RMA) is a globally emerging field, but it is not yet established in Romania. The chapter analyses what are the formal expectations regarding RMA in the Romanian research system, and how these tasks are resolved on the ground. First, policy documents and informational packages of the major research funding calls are examined. Second, interviews are conducted with research project leaders, who undertook projects in different research organisations (state financed or private universities, state financed research institutions, or private foundations) in Romania. The interviews focussed on the challenges project leaders experienced in the grant seeking and implementation process, and on how they see the institutional and policy environment they work in.

In the concluding parts of the chapter, concrete policy recommendations are formulated that could help in resolving the research management related challenges, and in establishing RMA as a profession in the country.

*Keywords:* Romania; RMA; research projects; project life cycle; managing research projects; professional identity

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## Introduction

Many argue that a strong research sector is very likely to be linked to the situation of RMA, because conducting science is not only about good researchers and innovative ideas but also about attracting and managing funds efficiently (Landen & McCallister, 2006; Schützenmeister, 2010; Tauginienė, 2009). However, RMA is not a recognised profession in Romania, since there are no training or professional organisations who would train research project managers, and therefore projects are managed by the researchers involved in these projects. In fact, there is hardly any debate about the introduction of RMA as a profession, and analysis on the educational reforms (e.g. Dobbins & Knill, 2009; Nicolescu, 2002; Vasilache et al., 2012) and the R&D sector (Goschin et al., 2015; Sandu, 2018) seldom tackles the issue.<sup>1</sup> Thus, the main objective of the present chapter is to understand how researchers cope with this situation, what are the main problems they face during planning and implementing their projects, and how the institutions they work in help them in their work. As we will show, there is no legal possibility to hire RMA personnel in most projects and therefore most researchers have a hard time when doing their own research and carrying out tasks in the project's administration at the same time. Nonetheless, there are some emerging organisational models through which host institutions try to ease their situation with more or less success.

Being aware of the fact that RMA includes all kinds of non-project related activities, such as researcher development, governance, ethics, and strategy, in this chapter, we focus only on a subset of the field, and assume that RMAs are working on projects. As the profession is not recognised in Romania, we consider that any description of the state of the art should start at the grassroots level. In our assumption, strengthening the profession on this level will entail the development of the profession and the appearance of more complex tasks.

The chapter has two main goals. First, it analyses the Romanian research environment, focussing on policy documents and information packages of calls to understand how RMA is defined and perceived by the different funding programme documents. Second, relying on expert interviews it presents how RMA is perceived by project leaders, describing the different strategies and on the institutional approaches they mention.

## The Romanian Research Environment

According to Eurostat data, Romania is the last among European Union (EU) countries in research and development (R&D) spending, both in terms of share of governmental expenditure<sup>2</sup> and percentage of gross domestic product (GDP).<sup>3</sup> Also, the country is laggard in the percentage of the population participating in research PhD programmes and the number of researchers per capita. The underdevelopment of the sector is explained by the lack of strong and competitive R&D centres in the country and the lack of interest of the private sector in research and innovation. The currently ending *National Research, Development, and Innovation Strategy 2014–2020*<sup>4</sup> (SNCDI) tried to address these issues, foreseeing a more proactive approach of the government in stimulating public–private partnership. Additionally, the plan stimulates the

<sup>1</sup> A refreshing exception from this trend is the article by Marin et al. (2017), which presents an academic managers' perspective on research management.

<sup>2</sup> <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/bookmark/2f9a7f0b-5780-43ec-a88d-17a04915da9f?lang=en>

<sup>3</sup> <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/bookmark/999ebe67-78b5-4e71-910e-29166b557063?lang=en>

<sup>4</sup> Government Decision 929/2014.

formation of research clusters with the involvement of research institutes, universities, and private companies as an opportunity for scientific innovation and progress.

SNCDI 2020 formulated three general objectives to increase: (1) the competitiveness of the Romanian economy through innovation, (2) the contribution of Romanian involvement in frontier research, and (3) the role of science in society. Furthermore, based on public consultations, SNCDI 2020 defined a few focus areas (bioeconomy, informational technology, energy and climate, eco-nanotechnologies, health, new technologies, heritage, and cultural identity) that are expected to help in achieving the three objectives. More specifically, the first five focus areas were created to attract private actors and to promote investments in the region, while the last three were constituted in line with public interest.

The implementation of the national research strategy was planned mostly through two instruments, namely the National Plan of Research, Development, and Innovation (PNCDI), and the Competitiveness Operational Program (POC). While POC channelled funds from the European Regional Development Fund, PNCDI operated with other research resources such as national funds, the Horizon Europe programme, and the EEA & Norway Grants.<sup>5</sup>

PNCDI III is structured into five programmes: P1: Development of national R&D system, P2: Increasing the competitiveness of the Romanian economy through research, development, and innovation (RDI), P3: European and international cooperation, P4: Fundamental and frontier research, and P5: Research in areas of strategic interest. Most of these programmes are addressed to public and private research organisations. PNCDI integrated European cooperation research programmes such as Horizon 2020, COST, and EUREKA in its P3 program.

POC has two priority axes, AXA1 for developing research investment and infrastructure and stimulating innovation, and AXA2 for developing infrastructure in information and communication technology. From a research perspective, only AXA1 is relevant.

A third specific programme that needs to be mentioned is the EEA Financial Mechanism, a programme financed by the Norwegian, Icelandic, and Lichtenstein governments with the objective to reduce economic and social inequalities in Europe. The programme has been operating in Romania since 2007 and names research as one of the major areas of interest, facilitating cooperation between research institutions from the donor countries and Romania.

Although some of the most recent literature on RMA shows that a working and strong RMA sector is crucial to the development of the research environment (Bezečný, 2017; Garrido et al., 2019; Langley, 2012), RMA is not mentioned in any of the existing policy documents, efficiency being linked solely to strengthening infrastructural and organisational aspects of research.

Structurally, the Romanian research environment can be divided into two main categories: one programme focussing on research organisations and on the increase of competitiveness of the Romanian research sector, and another addressing private companies interested in the usability of research and innovation in the economic sector. Without neglecting the importance of this latter category, the current chapter addresses the situation of RMA in the former programme.

## **Managing Research Projects. A View on the Field**

Although the policy documents do not mention RMA at all, the situation of the sector can be examined through the way in which different calls define and treat the subject, and also through the way in which research organisations resolve management and

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<sup>5</sup> <https://eeagrants.org/about-us>

administration. Accordingly, first we analyse the information packages of different calls to understand what the formal and structural conditions are in which RMA functions, and second, with the help of sociological interviews conducted with project leaders, we reconstruct how RMA works in different institutional settings and what are the main problems that project leaders encounter.

### *The Formal and Structural Characteristics of RMA*

Since SNCDI 2020 was adopted, there were several open calls that targeted research organisations. In order to understand how the Romanian research environment defines RMA, we analysed how informational packages, frequently asked questions' documents, and evaluation materials refer to RMA. In each case, we were looking for the following information:

- How project leaders were defined, and what were the eligibility criteria for becoming one?
- What was the expected role of project leaders?
- What were the eligibility criteria for project team members?
- How management related costs appear among eligible costs?
- How are expert evaluators selected?
- How management related criteria appear in the evaluation procedure?

After inspecting all documents, the results are rather grim.

1. As a general norm, the Romanian research environment is an academia-centred system; this means that eligible projects are those that are led by designated researchers, who hold a PhD degree and have expertise and experience in the field. This is usually measured by the scientific quality (publications, citations, etc.) of the researcher/applicant and with no major or visible intervention by RMAs.

Additionally, some calls explicitly mention that all project participants should be researchers with PhD or should be enrolled in a doctoral program. Only some POC subprogrammes treat project management as a separate entity, making available a limited number of posts for administrative personnel.

2. Project leaders are responsible for every task of the project, from research to administration, finances, reporting, and dissemination. Thus, while selection and eligibility criteria are scientific in nature, the needed expertise are both research and administrative, for which not all project leaders are prepared for.
3. The position of RMA personnel is made even more ambiguous, if we look at how eligible costs are defined. PNCDI calls do not mention administration costs separately, these are included in the overhead costs category. In some calls (Horizon 2020, EEA Grants, and POC), management and administration costs are defined as staff costs.
4. Evaluators, if mentioned, are researchers, who have expertise in the field, meaning that they have publications and some experience in project administration. However, only in the case of POC projects, managerial qualities of the application are decisive.

Consequently, based on programme descriptions, a gloomy picture of the RMA profession in Romania emerges. Officially, all project leaders must be experienced researchers, but managerial experiences are not mandatory. Furthermore, most projects

cannot employ RMA personnel directly, and therefore these costs are included in the employing institution's overhead costs. These structural characteristics foreshadow a system where the internal logic and culture of each institution determine what type of administrative and managerial assistance is available for researchers. As it is shown in the following part, institutions – depending on how centralised they are, and how open their administration is to help researchers – develop different strategies to assist project leaders in their management duties. As research funds become more and more important, institutions begin to adapt as well.

### ***Research Project Leaders and RMA***

To get a more precise image on RMA, in the spring of 2022, seven at least one-hour long interviews were conducted (online or face-to-face). We have chosen to interview researchers, who have active, or recently closed research projects financed through the Romanian research system. The interviewees were selected based on two criteria: (1) we targeted people from a wide range of institutions, with diversified experience in the field; and (2) we tried to cover all possible research programmes and research domains – in order to mitigate our assumption that the perceived problems could differ between research calls and the domain the researcher comes from. Furthermore, in selecting participants, we strived to keep gender and age balance as well.

The interviews addressed issues such as professional identity of the interviewee, attitudes towards RMA, and the perceived tasks of project leaders. In addition, how research organisations help in project management, the list of most important management related problems, and the situation of the research environment in Romania were explored.

In the following section, we present the situation on RMA in Romania focussing on three topics: (1) how researchers cope with project administration; (2) what are the main problems they encounter; and (3) what kind of institutional support they receive.

### ***Researchers' Professional Identity and RMA***

Most of the interviewees have a strong identity as researchers; however, only a few associate this with a managerial approach. These persons usually are consciously looking for calls and develop and write research project proposals with ease. Also, they excel in time management, keeping their projects organised and on track. However, those who feel comfortable with managerial roles are the minority. Most researchers do not necessarily consider the task hard but see it more as a burden rather than an opportunity. Many of them think that it would be better to delegate these administrative tasks to someone more familiar with their management.

Furthermore, despite the strong sense of identification with their discipline and with research more generally (Becher & Trowler, 2001), identification is a much more complex issue for staff/researchers working in universities. This is because in Romanian universities most people are employed as full-time professors, meaning that research projects are understood as additional tasks, which can be done after fulfilling other tasks, for example, teaching, and so when all their classes are finished. Ongoing projects therefore do not relieve researchers of the burden of teaching, and because project leaders are doing both the research coordination and project administration work, there is significant pressure on their shoulders, which often goes to the detriment of performance.

In conclusion, most project leaders do not choose to do RMA purposely, and so they would gladly delegate it to someone else more competent and familiar with the duties required by calls.

#### *Problems Encountered When Managing Research Projects*

Our interviewees reported several problems related to project management, which spread through the whole management process. We order these according to the project life cycle: first, we present problems related to planning phase; second to writing the project; third to implementation and reporting; and last to dissemination.

*Planning.* One of the major problems mentioned by all interviewees is the lack of plannability. In the past seven years, Romanian national agencies did not open calls regularly. This made planning extremely hard, research organisations cannot foresee when the next call is expected to be published. Some of our interlocutors believe that lack of plannability makes the Romanian grant-system weak and rely on it only as a last resort, while others are used to this and do research without major funding.

The problem above has a different lens of understanding though. Most research institutions rely on state financed or managed sources, and only a few of them are able to look for alternative resources. As most institutions do not offer help in attracting funds or monitoring calls, researchers can rely only on their own skills in this matter.

*Writing the Proposal.* Interviewees agreed that writing the project proposal is the responsibility of the project leader and only some of them asked for help in this task. The level of help they ask for varies on a person-by-person basis. Some project leaders discuss the project in their research team and then begin writing on their own, while others allocate some of the work to team members. Also, it is a common practice that younger researchers are guided by senior researchers in writing their first project. This usually means oral guidance or a review of the first draft. A less common practice was found at some of the state universities, where some research support is provided already in this phase, and the financial parts of the project proposal are allocated to the administrative department. This is usually a huge help for researchers who believe that the budget is one of the hardest parts to compile.

A specific situation is the one of those involved in POC projects. As EU structural funds are the most complicated to apply for, only a few researchers venture on these realms. One of our interviewees explained that there are some project writing companies in the market, who undertake research projects applications, and if the project is successful, they usually help with project implementation as well.<sup>6</sup>

*Implementation and Reporting.* In line with other research on the topic (Sunindijo, 2015), implementation and reporting were mentioned as the most important parts of any project, and most problems that arise in the project lifecycle may be related to this phase. Only a few of our interviewees had experience with EU structural funds (POC), however they say that there is a huge difference between implementing a project financed by these programmes and working on national research projects (PNCDI). In the former, procedures are very strict, there is a lot of paperwork, but administrative personnel can be hired for the purposes of the project. Even so, the administrative and

<sup>6</sup>See Researcher in Chemistry, 'RMA in a private foundation', available at the Repository of the Sapientia University.

financial pressure on project leaders is very high, monitoring focussing on these issues. As a result, in many projects assessing the quality of research is only secondary.

In the case of PNCDI projects, research project management is not that hard but depends on the support made available by the institution. At state institutions for example, researchers usually oversee the preparation of necessary documents, timetables, and reporting materials. Furthermore, the involvement and attitude towards research/research groups shown by the administration unit of the department is crucial. In some institutions administration is overly cautious, while others participate proactively in the project helping researchers in administrative tasks.

Most of our interviewees agreed that for a project leader, the most important resources to be equipped with are problem solving skills and the level of trust and cooperation that they have been able to build. Also, in many cases administrative personnel are hired informally, or tasks are delegated to one of the colleagues involved in the project. This, however, needs a certain kind of openness and flexibility from administrative departments, as in this way an extra researcher or technician position needs to be created.

*Dissemination and Exploitation of Project Results.* A last set of problems that was reported is related to dissemination. On paper project leaders are responsible for disseminating the project. Although in most projects, this usually refers to scientific publications and conference participations, dissemination is more complicated in projects funded by EU operational programmes, and projects involving patents.

EU funded projects have strict regulations regarding knowledge reaching society. Project leaders need to think about how they will achieve this target much in advance. Usually, these actions involve the creation of websites, social media accounts, press releases, and conferences for experts or the wider public; while open dialogue with local stakeholders rarely takes place.

Totally different problems arise when the result of the project is a patent. In many cases, project leaders must figure it out for themselves, what are the procedures, what kind of paperwork must be presented, and what institutions they need to refer to. Research organisations in many cases are as inexperienced as the researchers themselves in these matters.

### *Institutional Support of Research Project Management and Administration*

When talking about how institutions support research, two topics need to be addressed: how research organisations encourage participation in research, and what type of institutional help they offer to researchers and project leaders.

As for the first question, facilitating participation is relevant mostly for universities having significant budget in addition to the research projects. In these cases, institutions offer financial motivation for those who publish in top papers and who manage to attract research funds. This model is universal to both state and private universities and those working in research do feel motivated.

At smaller and private research organisations things work differently. As their core budget is smaller, all research projects are vital for keeping employees. Therefore, these organisations develop a more proactive support for their researchers. As they are not restricted by the strict financial protocol characteristic to state institutions, they can use the overhead costs of research projects more freely and can hire personnel with expertise in project management if they want. Some researchers are aware of these possibilities and look for private organisations to host their project. However, this type

of movement is not becoming a general trend, because only a few non-governmental organisations or foundations have the needed financial security to venture into this area and even if they do so, because of the already mentioned problems in planning, they are having a hard time offering continuity for their researchers.

As for the institutional help, the pattern depicted above depends largely on the type of the institution. Private research organisations may have a lot of manoeuvring possibilities since they usually work with a few researchers and conduct only a handful of projects. They can offer administrative help for their researchers. State funded research institutes and universities are in a more complex situation. Prior to 2014, when it was less common to manage many projects, researchers were offered no help at all, and the institutions did not provide a healthy research environment for these projects to flourish. Most interviewees agree that from 2014 onwards some universities created departments that help researchers in some of the administrative issues, such as gathering needed signatures, support in financial matters, while others reformed their existing administrative offices to participate more proactively in projects, offering help to researchers when needed. This can be understood as a first step towards the set-up of research support services, and researchers feel the importance of these changes, because they do not have to worry about financial matters, how much of the budget was spent, or how to resolve some of the legal situations that arose. Problem solving capacities of the administration accelerated as well.

Without downgrading these developments, it is important to emphasise that the offered support covers only a small part of what an RMA expert could do. Institutions do not offer systematic help in the project writing or reporting phase and do not follow research projects closely. This means that they do not have the wider picture of the process, do not have information about how the project develops, or what are the most important deadlines. Their involvement is occasional, mainly of financial or legal nature and happens at the request of the research project leader. This is partly explained by the fact that in most cases, administrative personnel cannot be linked directly to projects, administrative and managerial departments are maintained from core budgeting and overhead costs.

## **The Future of RMA in Romania**

Both the policy documents and the interviews confirm that RMA in Romania is not considered as an important part of research, and that more often researchers must solve everything by themselves. As the number of research projects began to grow, institutions recognised the need of administrative support, but this usually meant occasional involvement in financial and basic administrative tasks.

Another characteristic of the Romanian research system is its academia-oriented approach. Project leaders and even project staff in most projects need to be designated researchers who hold a PhD degree. This, however, is not measured through RMA experience but through publications. As a result, those researchers, who want to do high quality research, need to lead projects both from a research and managerial perspective, which is a burdensome work for most of them. Although some of them manage to get help informally, in the end this largely depends on the flexibility and the attitude of the institution.

Researchers becoming project leaders encounter several problems throughout most stages of the project cycle. Although they would like to focus on research, they need to focus on grant-writing, cumbersome implementation, keeping deadlines, administrative work in procurement of materials, and societal dissemination. Most of these problems, however, could have been avoided if their projects had designated RMA

personnel, who have the necessary managerial, communicational and problem-solving skills to address these issues.

From a policy perspective, to solve these problems and to strengthen the administrative quality of projects, two important steps should be taken. First, RMA needs to be recognised as a profession, which could allow universities to hire and train personnel. Without this, RMA will be lost in a system of administration departments, who do not understand how research works. Second, RMA should be introduced in projects as possible budgetary spending allowing research institutions to hire designated personnel to monitor not only the basic administrative and financial tasks, but also to understand the implications of the project, follow the development of projects closely, and meet all the deadlines. These two simple tasks would allow institutions to build up their capacity in RMA and would take the administrative burdens off research leaders so as to enable them to carry out more competitive and excellent research.

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