

Between hopes and risks

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This issue of the Ad Astra Journal comprises papers presented at the workshop "Romanian integration in the European Research Area", which took place at the New Europe College (NEC) in October 25-26, 2002. Everyone present at the NEC meeting would agree that it exceeded our expectations in terms of openness, honesty and ability to tackle real issues. This statement is based on previous experiences of the same kind. Based on the conclusions of this meeting some final remarks and possible action courses have emerged that in our opinion are worth following up.

The need for integration into the European Research Area (ERA) has inevitably drawn attention upon the present state of Romanian research. During the workshop researchers have described accurately the problems of scientific research in Romania without trying to disguise the reality. It was the first and quite needed step forward toward finding solutions.

The absence of an organism for unbiased evaluation of research was mentioned repeatedly as an issue during presentations and ensuing discussions. Without rewarding the performance of internationally competitive research groups the limited funding available for research in Romania will inevitably be misused. Currently, official evaluators give as much credit to publications in local scientific journals as to those in top international journals allowing for promotions and funding of people who have local influence but not necessarily competitive results.

"Brain drain" was mentioned as a significant problem and was regarded as a direct consequence of inappropriate funding. Presently Romania allocates just 0.4% of the GDP to research, far below the level of funding in neighboring countries or the developed ones.

During the meeting, the supportive attitude of the attending senior researchers towards their much younger colleagues was a reason for optimism. We hope that this new attitude can find an echo throughout all research institutions in Romania where lack of communication and collaboration between junior and senior researchers is a serious issue. It is quite common that senior researchers do not pay attention to opinions coming from young scientists and voice their belief that young researchers need to change this situation by themselves. One of the contributors used the term "gerontocracy". Conversely there are junior scientists who believe they can do everything without established mentors. This was recognized as a mistake since young researchers will always need guidance and supervision from experts.

The need for dialogue and establishing networks of scientists for solving their problems was recognized as an important goal at the meeting. Everyone agreed that solutions come easier when working as a group than in isolation and, moreover, that solutions can be implemented only as a joint effort.

We can say that the optimism of the researchers present at the NEC meeting gives credit to the idea that we should still try to change things for the better in the Romanian research.

Giving now voice to the “pessimistic side” one of the risks that we can foresee is that all efforts will stop again at the level of wonderful discussions. There were other similar events in the past but we have not seen any tangible results or actions that derived from them. Changes are possible only if people interested in identifying solutions join in organized groups and lobby for their implementation. Everybody knows that sustained effort is needed, but the individual effort while working as a team is definitely much less than acting individually. On the other hand, joint actions ensure higher chances of success than individual ones, and may avert the disappointment that many of us felt in our unsuccessful efforts aimed at restructuring the academic and research environment.

We also run the risk that the currently existent research networks will remain just informal. Informal networks of scientists are in fact the only kind of networking in Romanian research... Nobody wants to deny their efficacy, but we need additional types of networks based on collaboration agreements and team work, which could lead to palpable results.

Integration of Romanian research in the ERA is hindered primarily by domestic problems. The UE officials that attended the workshop declared that UE cannot interfere with national administration of research. They are not in a position to issue special aid to Romania preferentially over neighboring candidate countries. This aid would solve some of the problems that Romania presently confronts. Politicians have no inherent interest in science since scientists are not a significant electoral group. It is up to us, the researchers, as a functional social group to try actively to improve Romanian research in general. Networking, team work, and professional lobbying are some of the key solutions to our problems.