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ASPECTS REGARDING ETHICS AND INTEGRITY IN ROMANIAN SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH

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Abstract

In order to genuinely perform its function in society, scientific research in general and social research in particular must comply with ethical standards, which guarantee that the research results are correct, in accordance with the needs of society, do not harm research subjects and the community as a whole, and do not violate the rights of any research participant. Integrity codes and research ethics committees play a central role in ensuring the compliance of scientific practice with ethical standards. In order to highlight the degree of compliance of research activities with ethical norms, as well as specific problems, we will resort to the method of content analysis of complaints regarding potential violations of ethical norms, reports and decisions from recent years of the National Council of Ethics of Scientific Research, Technology Development and Innovation, as well as the National Council for Attesting University Titles, Diplomas and Certificates, attached to the relevant ministries in Romania.

Keywords: ethics; scientific research; content analysis; scientific research; content analysis; misconduct; sanction; integrity code.

JEL classification: I23, O32, O34

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Introduction

The first document that codifies a set of principles regarding research on human subjects was the Nuremberg Code, developed in 1947 at the end of the Doctors' Trial, the first of the twelve trials that took place in the German city at the end of the Second World War. Although it refers directly to medical research, this code proved relevant to social research as well. This is justified by the fact that many of the principles are common: the obligation to obtain informed consent from the research subjects, the obligation not to cause significant harm to them, and to assess the benefits and risks of the research. In the following decades, the ethics of research on human subjects focused on the medical field, where participants are subject to greater risks than in the social research. Later, at the beginning of the 1970s, the first research ethics committees were established in academic institutions, in countries such as the United States, Great Britain, Norway, and Sweden. Currently, such research ethics committees are established in academic and research institutions in more than 130 countries (IREX, n.d.). Also, in most countries, at a national level, a series of ethical regulations regarding the research on human subjects were developed.

In Romania, the standardization and institutionalization of ethics, in general, and particularly ethics in scientific research are more recent concerns. First, ethics committees and research ethics committees were created at the level of academic and research institutions. Secondly, at a national level, attached to the relevant ministries, three national councils were established, with divided competencies in matters of ethics.

The academic literature addresses general research ethics problems, such as plagiarism, as well as topics specific to research on human subjects, among which confidentiality and informed consent are the most prevailing.

The analysis of misconduct in research-development activity and at the same time of the situations of noncompliance with the standards of professional ethics that came to the attention of the national ethics councils – by applying the content analysis – will reveal the variety of cases, but also the preponderance of a certain irregularity, one of the worst. In such cases, the sanctions can go up to the withdrawal of the PhD degree or university teaching title.

1. Institutionalization of monitoring the ethics of scientific research in Romania

Research ethics committees occupy a central position in the ethical infrastructure. These committees – organized at the level of academic and research institutions – are distinct from ethics committees. The latter have as their main task the analysis of the complaints regarding deviations from university ethics, while the main task of research ethics committees is the ethical evaluation of the projects in which the institution is engaged. Along with this task, research ethics committees ethically monitor ongoing projects, develop, and update the code of research ethics and other research ethics documents, organize trainings in the field of research ethics, and develop research ethics audits.

In this context, the national ethics councils in Romania make their own contribution in regulating and monitoring the ethics of scientific research. In the 2020 Integrity Guide in Scientific Research – developed by the National Council for Ethics of Scientific Research, Technological Development and Innovation (CNECSDTI), attached to the public institution for research and development – as in most ethical codes, two levels can be distinguished. The first level is that of general values and principles, which require to be examined from the

points of view of correctness and completeness. The second level is that of specific moral rules, focused on ethical issues such as the fabrication and falsification of data, confidentiality, and informed consent. The aforementioned integrity guide develops the issue of plagiarism in scientific works, starting from the definition in Law no. 206/2004 (Legea nr. 206/2004) on the good conduct in scientific research, technological development and innovation, amended and supplemented: “the exposition in a written work or an oral communication, including in electronic format, of some texts, expressions, ideas, demonstrations, data, hypotheses, theories, results or scientific methods extracted from written works, including in electronic format, of other authors, without mentioning this and without referring to the original sources.”

Cases of misconduct in research and development activity in Romania are analyzed in two stages (Legea nr. 206/2004): a) at the level of ethics committees established within the institutions that are part of the national research and development system, the institutions that lead research and development programs, and those that ensure the use of the results, following a written notification or a self-notification, by drawing up a report and, in case of identifying irregularities, by establishing sanctions; b) at the CNECSDTI level, analyzing possible appeals on the ethics committees reports or based on self-notification, by issuing decisions regarding possible deviations from the rules of good conduct and by giving possible sanctions. According to CNECSDTI considerations, the main types of research and development misconduct are: plagiarizing the results or publications of some authors, making up results or replacing results with fictitious data, introducing false information in funding requests – all of these being considered serious offenses; other violations: various forms of discrimination, non-disclosure of conflict of interests, non-respect of confidentiality, abuse of authority, obstruction of research and development activity, obstruction of the activity of an ethics committee or of CNECSDTI, association with various acts of misconduct.

The ethics committees at the university level, established as “university ethics committees” through the National Education Law no. 1/2011 (Legea Educației Naționale nr. 1/2011), investigates and decides upon ethical misconduct in universities and, at the same time, investigates alleged violations of ethical norms regarding research-development activity. University ethics committees have adopted their own codes of ethics and academic deontology. In Romania, an example of good practice seems to be offered by the University of Bucharest, where both a [university] Ethics Committee (Universitatea din București, 2022a) and a Research Ethics Committee (Universitatea din București, 2022b) are organized. The latter deals with the ethical assessment of research projects and issuing ethics approvals, based on the norms regarding the respect for the human being and dignity, the avoidance of animal suffering, and the protection and restoration of the natural environment and the ecological balance. According to the president of the Research Ethics Committee of the University of Bucharest, in a single year, 98 research projects, out of a total of 200-250 initiated projects, received ethics approval; most filed applications were from the faculties of Biology and of Psychology and Educational Sciences. It is worth noting that in the fields of social and sciences and humanities, applications for ethical approval are significantly less present than in biology. On the other hand, plagiarism, a relatively frequent type of misconduct in scientific research activity, does not fall within the competence of the Research Ethics committee, but is the responsibility of the Ethics Committee. Another important university, The Bucharest University of Economic Studies, has only an ethics committee, called Academic Ethics and Deontology Committee. If necessary, for the time being, ethical approvals are issued through the Dean’s offices (Academia de Studii Economice din București, 2022).

Also, in application of Law no. 1/2011, by Order of the Minister of National Education no. 4783/2017, the Regulation regarding the organization and functioning of the University Management and Ethics Council, attached to the current Ministry of Education (CEMU), was approved (Ordinul ministrului educației naționale nr. 4783/2017). Through CEMU Decision no. 1/2018 (Consiliul de Etică și Management Universitar, 2018), art. 19 (2), it was established that: “In case that university commission’s decision is challenged, the competence belongs to CEMU.”

Moreover, most recently, by the Order of the Minister of Education and Research no. 4621/2020, the Regulation regarding the organization and functioning of the National Council for Attesting University Titles, Diplomas and Certificates was approved (Ordinul ministrului educației și cercetării nr. 4621/2020). Mainly, the National Council for Attesting University Titles, Diplomas and Certificates, attached to the Ministry of Education (CNATDCU), evaluates and proposes to the minister the granting or non-granting of the habilitation certificate, the PhD degrees, and the professional degrees of scientific research. It also proposes specific standards and methodologies and, most importantly in the context of this paper, “investigates and decides upon notifications of non-compliance with professional ethics standards, including the existence of plagiarism, according to the provisions of the Government Decision no. 681/2011 (Hotărârea Guvernului nr. 681/2011) regarding the approval of the Code of doctoral university studies, with subsequent amendments and additions.” Most of the notifications to CNATDCU refer to cases of plagiarism. In September 2021, the Ministerial Order was adopted (Ordinul ministrului educației nr. 5255/2021).

2. Literature review

The analysis of the scientific literature on social research ethics will focus on highlighting the main norms, themes, and problems that are usually found in the codes of ethics in this field. Then, we will review the arguments in the literature that prove that the excessively rigorous formulation of these norms can have a harmful effect on the social research itself.

Codes of research ethics typically include some norms regarding general research ethics matters, such as plagiarism, authorship, falsification, and fabrication of data. Along with these, a number of topics addressed in such ethical codes are particularly relevant for research on human subjects, among which a central position is occupied by confidentiality and informed consent – topics that will be further addressed.

Maintaining confidentiality in research on human subjects is essential for two reasons. First, from a principle-based perspective, research participants have the right to demand that information communicated during research is not disclosed to others. Second, from a consequence-based perspective, failure to maintain confidentiality would discourage subjects from participating in research. Confidence that the confidentiality rule will be observed is fundamental for subjects to agree to take part in research. The specific reasons for which they are concerned with maintaining confidentiality can be fear or embarrassment. In some research, for example, in the medical field or on sexual minorities, the issue of preserving confidentiality becomes essential. The obligation to maintain confidentiality is not absolute, but can be violated in exceptional situations, where the communication of confidential information may prevent significant harm to research subjects or other persons.

Indeed, much of the literature on confidentiality in the social research focuses on these two topics: how researchers should act to ensure that confidentiality is preserved and identifying exceptional situations in which confidentiality may be violated.

The first measure necessary to preserve confidentiality is anonymization. In survey-based studies, the solution is simple, the questionnaires are filled without mentioning the identity of the respondent. It is not as simple to protect the participants' identity in focus groups or research interviews, in which the researcher knows the identity of the participants. In this case, the necessary measures are the use of pseudonyms (fictitious names) instead of the participants' real names and removing the identifying elements of the participants from the data set (Kaiser, 2009). However, measures to ensure confidentiality are not limited to the researcher's conduct. The other participants in a focus group must avoid using names or other identifying elements, and at the beginning of the focus group, the researcher should warn participants on this matter.

Complex problems arise in research on very small populations, where simple anonymization is not sufficient, since the participants' identity can be reconstructed through other elements. For this reason, researchers must be careful to present the research results in such a way that they would not lead to the identification of the research subjects, even by the other participants or by other people from that community (Wiles et al., 2008). The notion of *internal confidentiality* is sometimes used to denote the situations in which the identity of the subjects can be discovered by insiders (other research participants, people close to that community) (Tolich, 2004).

A famous example of the difficulty of maintaining internal confidentiality is given by the research presented in *Fisher Folks*, a book which describes in detail the life of a small fishing community in the Chesapeake Bay, an estuary on the United States East Coast. The very small size of the studied population made it easy for the community members to identify, in the final study, people who held various views, which led to conflicts. Consequently, community members felt betrayed (Kaiser, 2009). In such studies, researchers do not have many solutions to fully protect the subjects' confidentiality. However, what the researcher should do in such cases is warning the participants about the confidentiality risk.

Another topic regarding confidentiality, often addressed in the research ethics literature, concerns the limits of this obligation, that is, the situations in which confidentiality can be violated, in order to protect more important values. Two exceptions to the confidentiality rule appear in the literature: the situations in which the researcher violates this rule to prevent harm to the subjects; and to prevent an illegal situation or one that may affect third parties (Smyth and Williamson, 2004; Wiles et al., 2008). Situations in which researchers must reveal the identity of participants in order to prevent their harm generate moral conflicts, where the researcher cannot observe both the obligation to maintain confidentiality and to prevent harm (Surmiak, 2020). In such cases, researchers must base their decision on a cost-benefit analysis (Smyth and Williamson, 2004), which often does not lead to a precise result. An interesting remark, which raises the question of the limits and more precise content of the confidentiality norm, is that sometimes research subjects do not want to maintain confidentiality of their personal data (Miller, 2015; Surmiak, 2017).

A second ethical problem specific to research on human subjects is that of informed consent. Respecting the autonomy and dignity of research subjects implies the obligation of researchers to obtain their informed consent. The obligation involves two elements:

informing the participants on all relevant elements of the research (the objective of the research, its duration, the possible risks involved in the research, etc.) (Nijhawan et al., 2013), and obtaining their voluntary consent from participants. Thus, subjects must consent without any source of coercion, pressure, or manipulation to take part in the research. Many sources in the scientific literature analyze the exceptions to the norm of informed consent, namely the situations that involve misleading the participants, and, respectively, the participatory observation method, in which the subjects also do not express their informed consent.

Many social studies involve a certain amount of misinformation or misleading (Gross and Fleming, 1982). In some cases, participants are not informed at all, and in others are incompletely informed, or even actively misinformed by researchers. One of the experiments most often referred to is the one conducted by the psychologist Stanley Milgram. Its objective was to test the people's degree of obedience to authority (Roulet, 2017). However, the subjects were wrongly informed that they were participating in an experiment regarding the influence of sanctions on the memorizing process, which tests the effect of sanctions, in the form of applying electric shocks. A volunteer played the role of the teacher and an undercover research team member played the role of the student. Because the "student" gave "wrong" answers, the supervisor (the bearer of authority) asked the "teacher" to administer increasingly powerful electric shocks. The "teacher" was informed about the graduality of the shocks, up to the extreme level, and most often he was obedient. This in the conditions in which, for the participation, the "teacher" had received a small financial reward and he/she was assured that the responsibility for the effects rests with the supervisor. In fact, the effects of electric shocks applied to the fake student were only mimicked by him, the objective of the experiment being to test the extent to which, following pressure from the supervisor, the "teacher" agrees to apply electric shocks, which would cause at least intense pain – so much so that the "student" protested and demanded that the experiment be stopped. In the stressful conditions of the experiment, as it often happens in real life, most of the volunteer "teachers" proved submissive, renouncing discernment and being obedient until the end. From an ethical perspective, the problem is that the subjects who play the role of the teacher were misled about the real design and objective of the experiment.

There is a rich literature on the informed consent norm in participant observation. This method – which involves the observation of subjects during their usual activity by members of the research team – is also sometimes used in the economic sciences. For example, Bernstein (2012) comparatively examines the behavior of workers in a factory when they are monitored by the manager and when they are not monitored. The method used is to analyze the data collected by three members of the research team, who were sent to a factory in the role of workers. To prevent the observation from being flawed, the observation subjects were unaware that their new colleagues were actually researchers. So, here and in most cases, the subjects of such research are in no way informed about the fact that they are being observed, and therefore there can be no question of informed consent. Several authors argue that such research is ethically problematic, as it involves misleading the subjects (Erikson, 1967; Shills, 1982). However, other authors argue that the rejection of participatory observation, in which subjects do not give informed consent, is simplistic (Calvey, 2008) and that this strategy cannot be equated with misleading (Spicker, 2011).

Some ethical codes accept misleading as an exception, but only if three conditions are met: the objective of the experiment can only be achieved by misleading; subjects are not significantly harmed; after the completion of the experiment, the subjects will be informed

about the objective and the conduct of the experiment, because the lack of honesty is no longer justified. This can benefit the subjects by learning something about themselves.

Without denying the role of research ethics committees, several authors bring some objections to their activity, especially in the United States and other countries with a developed research ethics infrastructure. First of all, the much higher risk in medical research, which represented the main source of ethical codes applicable to social research, led to a too restrictive interpretation of ethical principles in the social field, which sometimes generates obstacles for research in this field (Hart and Belotto, 2010). For example, Hessler et al. (1983) show that the restrictions imposed by current ethical codes would very likely have blocked some of the fundamental studies in the social science, whose design was based on the fact that the subjects were not consciously participating in the experiment, unable therefore to give informed consent. At the same time, Ross et al. (1999) claim that “unconventional” research, for example, that on prison inmates, has suffered from the imposition of excessive ethical norms by research ethics committees. These restrictions would have led to the rejection or delay of research unproblematic from an ethical point of view. Objections of this kind may lead to the idea that, in some cases, excessive caution shown by research ethics committees may lead to blocking socially important research. Also, the complex network of regulations can generate a limitation of the researcher’s autonomy regarding the methodological approach (Clapp et al., 1994), such as a paternalistic approach in the relationship with the research subjects.

3. Methodology

The premise is that for the cases included in the analysis of the national ethics councils, in general, the casuistry cannot be significantly influenced by someone’s interested decision, even of a person engaged in the process (offender, petitioner, appellant, expert, and evaluator). The source of the cases are exclusively the deviations from the norms of good conduct in the research-development activity upon which a notification, an appeal, or a self-notification was filed.

Under these circumstances, the identification and inventory of the characteristics of these cases can be made through content analysis. In the same direction, Stemler (2000) considers that content analysis is a systematic, reproducible technique for synthesizing some documents in a number of categories. Practically, it allows the transformation of documents into data (Şandor, 2013). More directly, content analysis is the systematic, objective, and quantitative analysis of the characteristics of a document (or message).

Established by sociology and communication sciences, content analysis, understood equally as a qualitative and quantitative research method, allows the researcher to examine and establish exactly which the categories of analysis (items) are, as well as their frequency. On this basis, the risks associated with the ethics of scientific research are highlighted, and the stakeholders’ attention can be directed accordingly.

4. Results and Discussion

At the National Ethics Council of Scientific Research, Technological Development and Innovation, attached to the Romanian public authority for research and development

(CNECSDTI), for each individual case, the president appoints, by decision, a working group composed of at least three experts – CNECSDTI members or external experts. At the same time, it is noted that the CNECSDTI is exercising some of its legal duties and that it has the material competence to resolve that appeal. The final report of the working group, establishing potential sanctions and providing recommendations to interested parties, is approved by decision of CNECSDTI. After approval by the General Directorate for Legal Affairs, Control, Public Relations and Communication within the ministry, the decision is sent to the interested parties and published on the CNECSDTI website. A similar procedure is applied by the National Council for Attesting University Titles, Diplomas and Certificates (CNATDCU), with the distinction that, when it is necessary, it only can propose the withdrawal of a PhD degree, by the same procedure by which it was granted, i.e., by order of the Minister of Education. Sometimes, during the process of resolving the complaints regarding alleged unethical situations in the preparation of doctoral theses (plagiarism), a point of view is also required from the ethics committee of the institution that awarded the PhD degree.

In order to highlight the state of observing the ethical norms during the research activity, it is useful to carry out a content analysis of the cases of presumptive misconduct investigated by CNECSDTI, as well as of CNATDCU in the period 2020-2022. In fact, the activity of CNECSDTI was relaunched by the Order of the Minister of Education and Research no. 4655/2020 regarding the approval of the Regulation on the organization and functioning of the National Council for the Ethics of Scientific Research, Technological Development and Innovation, as well as its nominal composition (Ordinul ministrului educației și cercetării nr. 4655/2020). CNECSDTI includes 19 members, and the University Ethics and Management Council (CEMU), 11 members. CNATDCU has a more complex structure and, consequently, a higher number of members. Thus, the General Council of CNATDCU has 21 members, being led by a president, currently the president of the Romanian Academy, acad. Ioan-Aurel Pop; the components of the five panels on fundamental fields of CNATDCU – mathematics and natural sciences, engineering sciences, biomedical sciences, social sciences, humanities – are 69 in number, and the 35 commissions, in turn, comprise 505 members. This high figure can be explained by the fact that, in a year, at least 2.000 PhD degrees are awarded. So, in 2019, for example, a CNATDCU member evaluated up to 60 doctoral theses. It is true that some members evaluated a significantly lower, in some cases single-digit, number of theses, with some members evaluating even a single doctoral thesis. On average – in 2019, with 2359 doctoral degrees awarded – there are 4.59 theses for each CNATDCU evaluator. However, CNATDCU's activity includes other components, including the analysis in the appointed working committee of some doctoral theses for which a notification of non-compliance with professional ethics standards was filed, including – in fact, especially – the existence of plagiarism (CNATDCU, 2022).

In CNECSDTI, for example, in 2021, the number of resolved cases with final reports and decisions was 15 (CNECSDTI, 2022). The content analysis refers to cases resolved in the years 2020-2022. From the point of view of the party that filed appeals/complaints to CNECSDTI, they are distributed as follows (Figure no. 1):

- from the original petitioner, dissatisfied with the resolution of the ethics committee of an institution or even without having obtained a resolution from the respective ethics commission – 50% of the cases;
- from the defendant in the initial notification – 18%;

- from the ethics committee of an institution – 5%;
- from a third party – 9%;
- by self-notification – 18%.

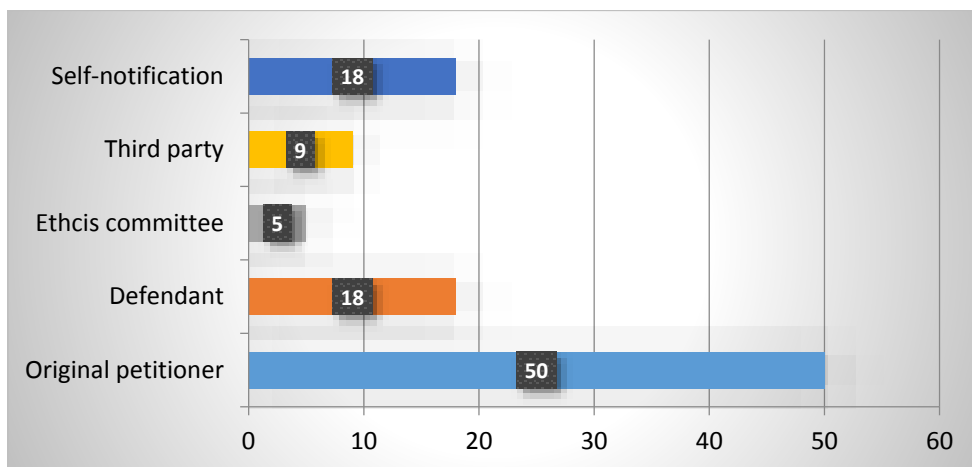


Figure no. 1. The position on the case of the party that issues the appeal to CNECSDTI

Data source: CNECSDTI

Regarding the field of activity, the distribution is as follows (Figure no. 2):

- research institutes – 71% of cases;
- universities – 29%.

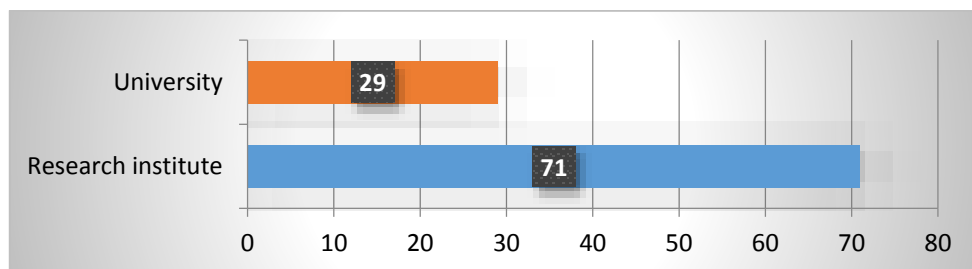


Figure no. 2. Distribution of appeals investigated by CNECSDTI

Data source: CNECSDTI

According to the Ministry of Education website (Ministerul Educației, 2022), in Romania, the national research, development and innovation system includes 263 public organizations and approximately 600 enterprises. Among the public organizations, 56 are authorized public universities, 46 are national research-development institutes, and 65 are institutes and research centers of the Romanian Academy. As for the types of misconduct at the origin of the cases, they were (Figure no. 3):

- plagiarism – 35% of cases;
- false statement and introduction of false information in financing requests, under affidavit (overestimation of some personal contributions) – 22%;
- non-fulfillment of minimum criteria when filling the position by competition – 13%;
- hindering the activity – 9%;
- non-resolution by the institution's ethics committee of a complaint – 9%;
- conflict of interests – 4%;
- sexual harassment – 4%;
- abusive suspension of the institution's ethics committee during the state of alert - 4%.

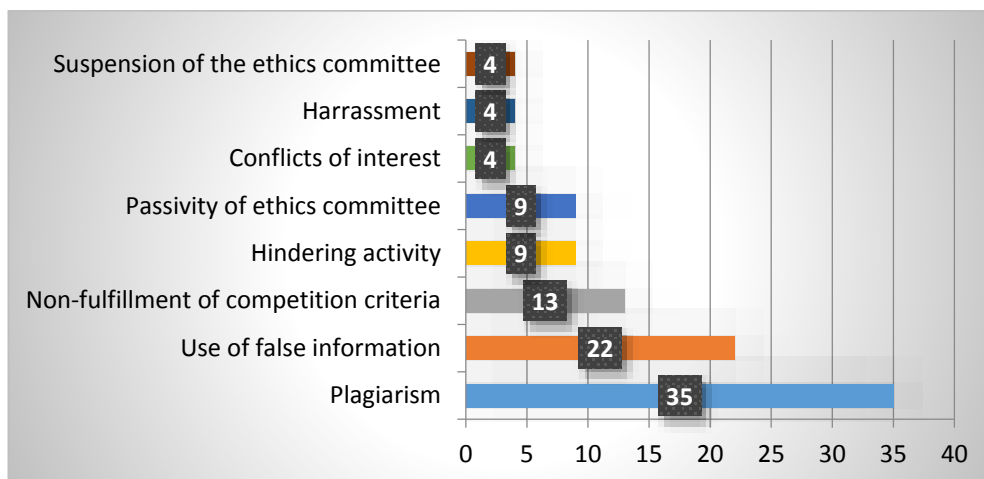


Figure no. 3. Distribution of types of misconduct investigated by CNECSDTI

Data source: CNECSDTI

At the CNECSDTI level, plagiarism is the most common type of misconduct. It is also among the worst. Its dimensions vary from a case of minor plagiarism, with the absence of citation or improper citation for two maps, to a case of multiple, massive plagiarism, with blocks of text taken without quotation marks and without indicating the source, the accused person being the second-time offender. A director plagiarizes, seemingly by compiling from scientific sources published by the researchers of the institute he leads and from the reports of research projects in the institute. In another case, the accused author published, before the resolution of the complaint, a corrected version of his book, which could be perceived as a mitigating circumstance. As for the minimum criteria for filling a position, sometimes it is erroneously established that some criteria are not fulfilled, although these had been adopted after the contest.

CNECSDTI adopts resolutions, and for misconduct in the research and development activity, establishes one or more of the sanctions provided by Law no. 206/2004 (Legea nr. 206/2004). Thus, in the years 2020-2022, the distribution of CNECSDTI resolutions was as follows (Figure no. 4):

- unfounded/ungrounded appeal/notification/complaint – 35% of the cases;
- annulment of the decision as groundless/cancellation of the report of the ethics committee of the institution - 10%;
- revoking its own decision and resuming the resolution of the case by CNECSDTI – 3%;
- written reprimand – 14%;
- withdrawal/correction of works published with violation of the norms of good conduct – 10%;
- withdrawal of university teaching title or research degree or demotion – 7%;
- the prohibition, for a determinate period, of access to funding from public funds for research and development – 7%;
- suspension, for a period of time between one and ten years of the right to enter a competition for the occupation of a higher position or a management, guidance and control position or as a member of competition committees – 7%;
- stopping funding the project – 7%.

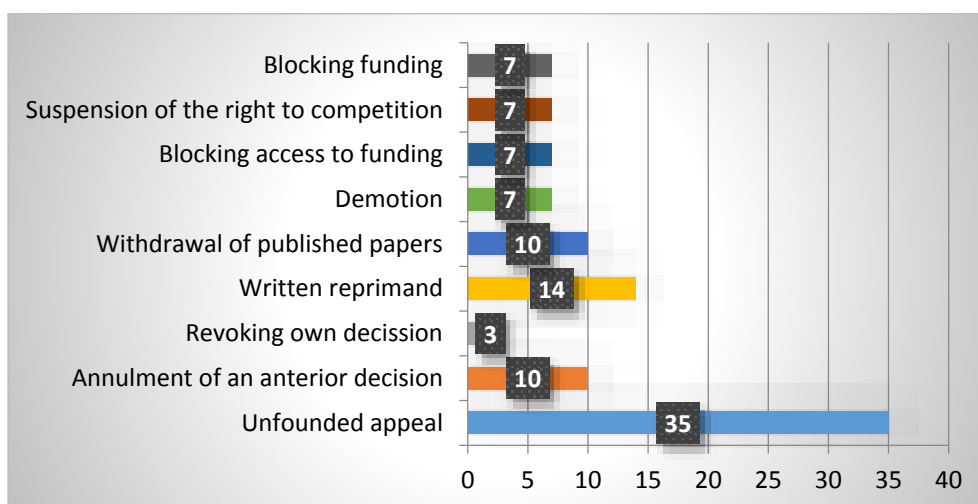


Figure no. 4. Distribution of CNECSDTI resolutions

Data source: CNECSDTI

In general, at CNECSDTI, appeals/reports are admitted or rejected, entirely or partially. In case of applying sanctions, they cannot be other than those provided in the regulations. In one case, CNECSDTI canceled an additional sanction, namely the prohibition, for a determined period, of the right to coordinate the activity of some volunteers or members of the institute, such a prohibition not being provided either in the law or in the code of ethics of the institution. Likewise, the offense of self-plagiarism, for example, cannot be sanctioned until it has been regulated. A member of the working group appointed by the CNECSDTI, who in the last five years had collaborated with the petitioner, was in a conflict of interest,

the appeal being admitted, and the case being resolved again. The demotion of a university professor to the immediately lower rank, of senior lecturer, for recurrent plagiarism, especially since the respective person has the position of rector, his situation being publicized, is likely to confuse and even upset... the stakeholders. At the time of the respective notification, the former university professor was also a member of CNATDCU. In the same years, 2020-2022, CNATDCU, under the signature of its president, issued 26 decisions (Figure no. 5):

- proposing the withdrawal of the PhD degree – 42% of the cases;
- maintaining the PhD degree –15%;
- rejection of an appeal regarding the proposal to withdraw the PhD degree – 19%;
- rejecting a previous own decision, as a result of an appeal, and maintaining the PhD degree – 8%;
- request from the plaintiff for completion of the complaint with extracts from bibliographic sources – 12%;
- dismissal of the complaint – 4%.

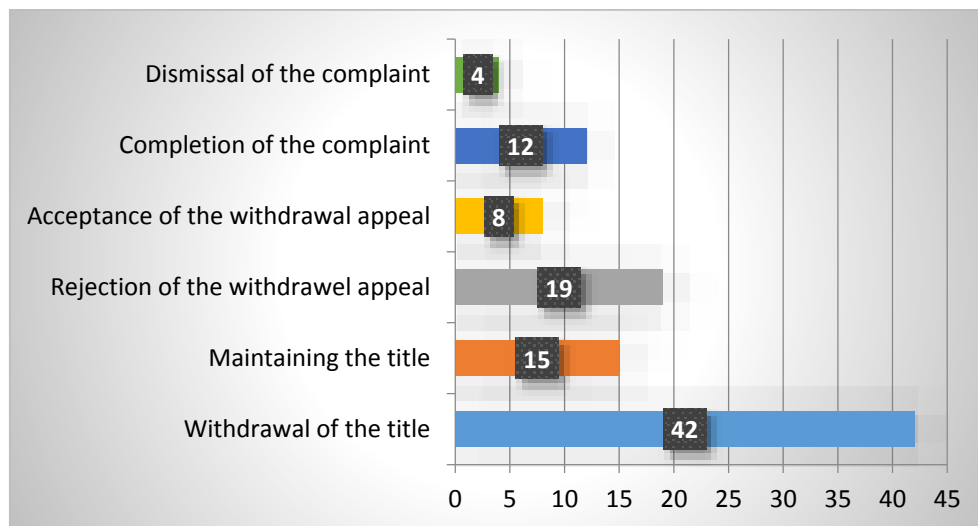


Figure no. 5. Distribution of CNATDCU resolutions regarding the doctorate title
Data source: CNATDCU

The 11 cases of proposed withdrawal of the PhD title during the period 2020-2022 have as domains: Military Science and Intelligence (3 cases), Intelligence and National Security, Public Order and Homeland security, Law, Philosophy, History, Industrial engineering, Finance, Medicine. In the years 2016-2021, by order of the Minister of Education, 60 PhD degrees were withdrawn. The distribution by fields is as follows: Military Science and Intelligence (35 withdrawals, i.e., 58% of the total), Military Science (2 withdrawals), Intelligence and Homeland Security (4 withdrawals), Public Order and Homeland Security (3 withdrawals), Law (4 withdrawals), Theology (4 withdrawals), Philosophy (a withdrawal), History (a withdrawal),

Materials Engineering (a withdrawal), Mechanical Engineering (a withdrawal), Industrial Engineering (a withdrawal), Management (a withdrawal), Finance (a withdrawal), Psychology (a withdrawal). Equally, according to Law no. 1/2011, art. 170 (1), the ministry can withdraw the title of doctoral supervisor (Legea Educației Naționale nr. 1/2011).

In Romania, there are 50 institutions that have the right to award PhD degree – 47 public universities, two private universities, and the Romanian Academy. During the period 2016-2021, 12,994 PhD degrees were awarded (Roșca, 2022) – on average, 2166 degrees each year. Practically, for these years, the percentage ratio between the withdrawn PhD degree and the awarded ones is 0.46%. It is necessary to mention that, in general, the withdrawn titles had been granted in a previous period. More recently, the number of awarded PhD titles has stabilized at just over 2,000, after a record number of degrees had been awarded in 2012 – 6,259. Also, in 2012, a plagiarism complaint was filed against the then prime minister; following the media coverage of the case, after the controversies, a mechanism was created to withdraw a degree and “anti-plagiarism software” was introduced in the universities, which further discouraged the enrollment for PhD studies of some people who would not have the intellectual level or time available to complete the PhD training. The effects are found especially at the level of the severe restriction, approximately 3 times, in the number of PhD degrees awarded. It should be noted that the anti-plagiarism software, which provides coefficients of similarity with Internet resources, actually tests the degree of originality of the texts subject to evaluation. According to Government Decision no. 681/2011, art. 4, a PhD thesis is an “original scientific work”. Practically, a PhD thesis with high similarity coefficients is not necessarily plagiarized, in the sense of Law no. 206/2004, but it lacks originality, it is counterfeit – an aspect that obviously also does not entitle to obtain the PhD degree. Therefore, the actual plagiarism analysis can only be done by visually comparing the content of the PhD thesis with the allegedly original sources.

Conclusion

The development and application of adequate norms of research ethics play an essential role in aligning the practice of scientific research with the needs of society. In Romania, on a national scale, at different levels of ethics monitoring, three institutions are established with specific attributions: CNECSDTI, CEMU and CNATDCU. The literature and practice of different countries provide various examples of research ethics guidelines. On the CNECSDTI website, their own Integrity Guidelines are available to Romanian researchers (CNECSDTI, 2020).

For the complaints brought to the attention of the national councils with ethics attributions, the most frequent type of misconduct in research and development activity and also situations of non-compliance with the standards of professional ethics are represented by cases of plagiarism. On this basis, since 2016, by order of the Minister of Education, 60 PhD degrees have been withdrawn. In terms of fields, we register a big exclamation mark in the case of so-called PhD theses in the field of Defense and Homeland Security, almost three quarters of the withdrawn PhD degrees being circumscribed to this field. Although there is no public information for all fields, we can believe that other PhD theses, not necessarily numerous, are invalidated, for the same reason or for other reasons, before awarding the PhD title, in the preliminary stages (at the level of the guidance committee, of the doctoral supervisor, of the PhD defense committee, of CNATDCU).

Equally, 35% of the cases examined by CNECSDTI consider other aspects of plagiarism in the publication of research results. It is obvious that the Romanian researcher is faced with real problems of this nature. The causes themselves would be worth studying separately. It could be a matter of a certain more or less widespread mentality, of the bad example of some people who obtained public and even scientific recognition through less legitimate ways, of a certain kind of incompatibility between the hierarchical-military organization and scientific recognition, or, at least, of clumsiness in applying the general ethical rules. That is precisely why the CNECSDTI Integrity guide to scientific research must be observed and, above all, widely known. Also, the distinction between plagiarism, in the sense given by the legislator, and counterfeiting, i.e. lack of originality, should be more clearly marked.

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