

The position of the National Research Council regarding principal investigators of PCE projects with permanent positions abroad

In February 2020 the National Research Council (NRC) established the guidelines for the PCE project competition which ended in December 2020, when the projects selected for funding were announced. Among the eligibility criteria was the following: “The project leader is full-time employed in the host institution, on an indefinite period or for a fixed period, covering at least the contract period, or has the full-time employment agreement from the host institution, at least for the duration of the contract. In the case of a financing decision, the full-time employment contract must be concluded by the project director with the host institution at the latest on the date of signing the financing contract, with effect from the start of the project. If the project proposal is accepted for funding, the project leader will work full time in the host institution.”

As it can be inferred from this statement, the intention of the NRC was that project directors from abroad (either from the Romanian diaspora or foreign nationals), once successful in the PCE grant competition, will be employed by Romanian host institutions under the same conditions as their Romanian colleagues, and thus will be fully integrated through full-time positions at host institutions in Romania. As far as the NRC is concerned, the “full-time” employment concept is neither vague nor interpretable: according to Romanian law, full-time employment implies 40 hours/week work for the benefit of the host institution. Unfortunately, we now realize that this requirement, as stated in the competition’s guidelines, is not sufficient to ensure authentic integration of project directors from abroad at their Romanian host institutions. Several researchers with permanent employment at foreign institutions are now principal investigators (PIs) of PCE projects, which they intend to supervise remotely, while planning a number of short visits to Romania, without interrupting, at least temporarily, their full-time permanent positions abroad. Nonetheless, their Romanian host institutions are ready to sign full-time contracts with these researchers, expecting them to conduct their research activity almost entirely through “telecommuting” or “telework”. While we fully understand that the present Covid-19 pandemic is a situation of an exceptional nature, we do not believe it can be used to justify full-time employment of researchers who are already under full contractual obligations with institutions abroad, and who cannot reasonably be expected to deliver the required 40 hours/week to the benefit of their Romanian employer.

We are fully convinced that these project directors have the best intentions to contribute to the development of Romanian research in their fields of expertise; we also understand the desire of Romanian host institutions to attract highly qualified human resources from abroad. However, we wish to emphasize that this was not the vision of the NRC when the PCE grant competition was open to researchers from the Romanian diaspora or foreign nationals; we expected a genuine integration, ensuring not only the success of the proposed research and increased impact of scientific publications, but also generating long-term institutional effects, including implementation of best practice in research, enhancing capacity-building of host institutions, training of doctoral students and postdoctoral researchers to carry out high quality scientific research. We believe that such an array of profound institutional effects cannot be achieved by leading PCE projects via skype or zoom by researchers with permanent positions abroad. This is clearly not the type of “brain gain” we anticipated and aimed for.

The NRC is thoroughly convinced that attracting highly qualified human capital from the Romanian diaspora and generally from abroad would have a beneficial effect for Romanian research and we are actively supporting this idea. Nevertheless, this aim should only be achieved through funding instruments specifically tailored for this purpose, and not by using an unbalanced competition between Romanian researchers and scientists who have built their career abroad. As the selection basis for foreign researchers with high scientific impact and visibility is quite large, we are facing a real risk that a project competition between scientists actively working in Romania will turn into a competition won by teams who have foreign collaborators with stronger CV and track record. We hope that Romanian research institutions will endorse our vision of the PCE competition and will not seek to encourage researchers with permanent positions abroad to apply for funding under this scheme, unless they are willing to fully integrate at the host institution, at least on a temporary basis, for the duration of the project.