

PhD Admission. Ethical ambiguities...

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Abstract: This study aims to formulate and, to a certain extent, to provide possible answers to questions such as: Who is looking for whom to initiate the PhD student-supervisor relation? Can prior knowledge of the candidate by the supervisor generate ethical problems? Is it ethical to decide, as professors, who our PhD students will be based on “human chemistry”? How much relevant information does the candidate receive about their future academic path and how much predictability is there about how the PhD will actually develop their career? On which criteria do we decide which PhD students will receive a scholarship? Who chooses the research topic? What are the criteria we select our future doctoral students by? Is it ethical that the oral entrance exam cannot be contested? Is it ethical to produce, at all costs, a competitive environment in the PhD admissions phase? Does the distinction of *tuition* doctoral student vs. *budgeted* doctoral student produce effects in the ethical field?

Keywords: admission, PhD, ethics, theatre.

1. Introduction

Most of the time, in the Romanian academia, the association between ethics and the activity of a Doctoral School is limited to the issue of plagiarism. Ethics is thus, unfortunately, almost completely overlapped on a single dimension of the very wide spectrum of moral issues faced by a department of doctoral studies within an IOSUD². The overlap is almost official, since ARACIS³ itself recommends in the regular evaluations of the Doctoral Schools, that the structure of the Ethics and Academic Integrity Course, a mandatory course within the Preparation Program⁴ from the first semester of the first year

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² IOSUD – acronym for Institution organizing Doctoral Studies.

³ The only academic evaluation institution in Romania – the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education.

⁴ A paradoxical situation: a course is required to be compulsory within a Training Program which is, in its entirety, optional. This very situation gives rise to conflicts of an ethical nature. Based on the respective Training Program, professors who have courses at the Doctoral School are

of PhD studies, should not deal with other ethical aspects apart from plagiarism⁵. For anyone who has worked or is working within a Doctoral School, it is obvious that the issue of plagiarism is far from being the only *ethical* concern. Moreover, in a university that, in its entire history, has not had any case of plagiarism, this problem doesn't represent a concrete priority, but is only a matter of principle.

2. Vulnerabilities...

In what follows, I intend to limit the discussion to the ethical vulnerabilities that emerge as early as the pre-admission and Doctoral admission phase, following that, in other contexts, I also address other fragilities in the field of doctoral research, whether this field is considered from an institutional perspective, or customized to the individual research activity of the PhD student and the supervising professor.

● *A prior knowledge of the candidate.* Is it ethical to favor someone I know just because I am acquainted to them over someone I know less or not at all? I have frequently asked myself this question when I accepted or refused to take on the role of doctoral supervisor. I have to admit, observing my reactions and attitudes over time, that being acquainted mattered a lot in the specific decisions I made. An explanation of the term “acquainted” is required here. I have in mind, first of all, the close, deep knowledge of a professional path but also of some research skills, to which is added knowing the respective candidate from a moral perspective. Let's put two distinct situations in the mirror: a candidate who was my student during the undergraduate cycle, whose artistic creations or theoretical papers I watched, whose bachelor thesis, then master's dissertation, I eventually supervised, whose behavior I have observed over

normed. In the hypothetical situation in which no doctoral student would enroll in the respective Training Program, no professor could be tenured in a Doctoral School for the simple reason that they could no longer be normed; they would remain normed only for actual guidance (1.5 h/ doctoral student/ week), but you cannot constitute a full-time job without normed teaching activities. In this situation, some Doctoral Schools avoid telling the first-year PhD students that that Program is optional, giving them the idea that it is mandatory. The legislator's principle in this matter is related to the fact that the only purpose of a doctoral research is the final thesis, which can be completed even in the absence of a Training Program.

⁵ The author of this article, as the director of the Doctoral School of Theatre within the “George Enescu” National University of Arts Iași and holder of the Ethics and Academic Integrity Course, a common and mandatory course for doctoral students of the Doctoral School of Theater and the Doctoral School of Music, received this verbal recommendation, during the ARACIS evaluation of the Doctoral School of Theatre, in 2022. Colleagues from Doctoral Schools in other fields and from other Universities received similar recommendations.

several years⁶, in different academic or trans-academic settings; another candidate about whom everything I know comes from the excellent Curriculum vitae I have and the prodigious public activity I find archived in various forms (publications, websites, etc.). Let us suppose I have a choice between these two candidates and only one vacancy. Who will I choose, and especially to what extent will my choice be dictated by my knowledge of the candidates? The tendency is, of course, to privilege the first candidate, even if, say, the second's professional CV recommends him to a greater extent for access to doctoral studies. A “trust effect” comes into play here, trust not only in the one I know so well, but also in my abilities to supervise, to empathize, in the interests of the research itself. I think the ethical dilemma is obvious, especially since this *knowledge* often risks equating to a state of comfort that the supervising professor is not always willing to give up. Can we render meritocracy⁷ absolute when we take it upon ourselves to supervise a doctoral project or will we always be tributary in our decisions to collateral subjectivities?

● ***How well do I need to know my future PhD students?*** Intimately related to the previous point, extending *knowledge* to a human sphere, this question places us once again on a dilemmatic ethical ground, prior to the admission phase. Should I, the supervising professor, need to know details from the private life of my future PhD student? Do I really need to know that they have a criminal record, that they tried to kill themselves five years ago, that they habitually assault their partner, that they grew up in foster care, that in the past (but maybe also the present) they were addicted to drugs, that they are part of an extremist organization, that they were members of a political party many consider unpopular, that, in a certain period of their life, they were prostitutes, or that they are gay? And the list of possibilities could go on and on. Any University's code of ethics strongly insists, and rightly so, on a firm separation between private and professional life within that academic community. On the other hand, the question that is asked and which, moreover, opens the ethical debate, is the

⁶ Just as the student, in turn, had time to observe me and decide if I was a good professor. In parentheses, it would be interesting to understand what a “good professor” means in Romanian universities and, specifically, what a “good PhD supervisor” means. I believe that sooner or later a research project like *The Good Teacher*, carried out by the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, at the University of Birmingham, UK, will also be imposed in the Romanian academic space; the project aimed at obtaining from students and teachers the most accurate perspectives on this, ultimately so ambiguous, phrase. (See details on the project in Andrew Peterson, James Arthur, *Ethics and the Good Teacher. Character in the Professional Domain*, Routledge 2021).

⁷ The many ethical dilemmas posed by the principle of meritocracy are discussed at length in Adrian Wooldridge (2022), *The Aristocracy of Talent. How meritocracy created the modern world*, translated by Adina Avramescu, Polirom, Iași. Essentially, the ambiguities of merit are reviewed by Julian Baggini and Peter S.Fosl (2007) in *The Ethics Toolkit. A Compendium of Ethical Concepts and Methods*, Blackwell Publishing, pp. 33-36.

following: would the act of supervision have anything to gain if I knew details about my future PhD student that he/she will never include in the CV?⁸ Would the quality of our future collaboration, spread over many years⁹, benefit if this interpersonal exchange were informal? Supporters of utilitarianism will probably answer such questions in the affirmative, cutting off the ethical debate in favor of the ultimate goal of research: the quality of the final thesis and, adjacently, the quality of the process that makes this thesis possible. From other perspectives, however, nothing would ever justify indiscretions and incursions into someone's private life¹⁰. In practice, however, most PhD supervisors will make decisions (including rejecting certain applicants) based on this type of information as well¹¹.

⁸ In a way, it is also about the so-called “externalities” that Keota Fields talks about in her study “Academic Career Success”: “The academy's efforts to recruit and retain faculty, and to support academic careers, are challenged by what I shall call «externalities». These are events, activities, obligations, or restrictions that affect career success without being fully reflected or acknowledged in a candidate's dossier (e.g., they don't appear on a curriculum vitae). Externalities have often a negative impact on career success”, in Steven M. Cahn (editor) (2022), *Academic Ethics Today. Problems, Policies and Prospects for University Life*, Foreword by Rebecca Newberger Goldstein, Rowman & Littlefield, p. 43.

⁹ The new Education Law in Romania, which entered into force in autumn 2023, extends the duration of the doctoral study cycle from 3 to 4 years, with the possibility of extension by 1-2 years, therefore with a total possible period of 6 years (plus possible “freezing” periods caused by medical situations and prescribed by law).

¹⁰ Utilitarian philosophy becomes even more problematic in the field of research, as here we are not talking about major goals such as happiness, pleasure or well-being (John Stuart Mill, Jeremy Bentham), but about more concrete goals: the satisfaction of the final success, the added value brought by your research to the field in which you operate, the reopening of a scientific topic considered closed, and so on. The utilitarian stakes seem much lower, but they exist and continue to hold valid the ethical question of the end that justifies the means. Referring to utilitarianism from a research perspective, Rachel Brooks, Kitty te Riele and Meg Maguire, authors of *Ethics and Education Research*, touch on a series of particularities relevant for the field of doctoral research: „Utilitarianism hold a certain, common-sense appeal: if the consequences of an action are good, then surely that means the action is good? At a practical level, issues that need to be resolved include how to define and measure good (utility), which stakeholders to include, whether to adhere different weightings to different stakeholders (including the researcher her/ himself) or different potential outcomes, and our ability to foresee all the relevant consequences. At a more fundamental level, we may disagree with the approach that *the end justifies the means*. This is exactly the perspective of deontology” – Rachel Brooks, Kitty te Riele, Meg Maguire (2014), *Ethics and Education Research*, Sage Publications Ltd, London, pp. 22-23.

¹¹ Several years ago, I was part of a doctoral admission committee that admitted a candidate who I vaguely knew to have some mental disorders. The professor who became the supervisor of the thesis knowingly accepted the takeover of that doctoral student. In the following years, the health of our doctoral student worsened, and the relationship with the supervising professor deteriorated until the Doctoral School Council accepted her request to renounce this coordination and redirect the doctoral student to another professor. Probably, if she had had information about the real health of the doctoral student during the admission phase, the professor I mentioned wouldn't have accepted to coordinate him. Would she have acted

● ***Who is the initiator in the PhD student-supervisor interaction?*** Many years ago, I was very surprised when a professor from a Doctoral School with a humanistic profile, who had just become PhD supervisor, posted an ad on Facebook announcing he was looking for PhD students. Back then, just like now, I felt somewhat flabbergasted by such an explicit call, almost vulgar due to the gap between what was being sought and the place where it was being sought. The moment such a search becomes embeddable in something resembling a classified ad, it seems that we instantly leave a tradition of academic seriousness and place ourselves in total inadequacy. Beyond such extreme situations, however, I think this question remains important: who is looking for whom? Or rather, who should they be looking for? Does the question imply an ethical horizon or is it simply completely irrelevant who will initiate the PhD advisor-doctoral student duet? At a first glance, let's admit, the matter at hand seems ethically neutral. Everything gets complicated, however, when we double the question by another: who proposes the research topic to whom when one is looking for the other? There are situations where the future candidate is the one who takes the first step; they contact the professor and express their intention to pursue doctoral research. Two underlying possibilities arise: the prospective candidate comes with a proposed topic or, secondly, he has no clear research interest, no predetermined topic, but makes himself available to the professor. The ethical background appears at this point: is it ethical for the teacher to fill this “gap” of intention with a particular topic, or should professional ethics stop us from investing anything (including public research funds) in someone who has not even the slightest idea of what they would like to research? Personally, I am inclined to say no to that last question and refuse to randomly assign assignments just for the sake of having one more PhD student.

The opposite situation is equally not devoid of dilemmatic background, the one in which the professor has a kind of drawer with potential topics and is waiting for the appearance of the ideal candidate capable of putting them into the act of research. When it seems that such a candidate has appeared somewhere on the horizon, he contacts them and proposes that research topic. Research, in this case, does not start with the premises of an organic, real need that the researcher feels, but is limited to being a simple task based on a questionable intuition such as “I think this topic would suit you ...”. It is equally true that the professor has his arguments: experience may reveal that the professional profile of doctoral student X fits with a certain type of research; likewise, the professor has the right to a pragmatic type of thinking: the PhD student lives in another city and it will be difficult for him to spend months in the archive of this city to study a topic related to this city, so assigning him this topic would be a wasted

ethically? Hard to say... Would it have been ethical to try to find out about the real health of the candidate? Again, hard to say...

“bullet”. There are other arguments, related to the interest of the respective professor to cover a certain thematic horizon, part of a multi-generational research program that the respective one proposed. Not to mention, then, the specific directions of thematic interest of the Doctoral School to which that professor is affiliated. Paradoxically, the image of a professor who has a drawer with pre-determined topics implies, from an ethical point of view, endless discussions of pros and cons. All the ambiguities stem from another dilemma: whose interest is to be pursued when a topic is assigned? The academic interest of a professor who has the bigger picture or the interest of the doctoral student who wants to develop his knowledge in a certain corridor or niche of the field in which he applies? In addition, other interests intervene: the interest of the community¹², national interest in relation to a certain theme¹³, the interest in preserving the memory of a personality in the field¹⁴.

¹² We have been in a position to “hijack” the proposal of some candidates by sacrificing their interests for the sake of a broader interest of the community. Not long ago, a fellow professor asked me for my opinion on a topic suggested by a well-known journalist of the regional public radio, herself a Theatre graduate in the 90s. The journalist wanted a thesis relevant to cultural marketing, starting from the cultural programs of that radio and probing the profitability of some theatrical programs that the station had in the grid. The passion with which she talked about this project had almost convinced my colleague, her future supervisor. We decided to meet for coffee the three of us and, after an hour of dialogue, all three came to the conclusion, to varying degrees, that the stakes of such research would not have been very relevant to the community. Instead, the idea of revisiting the history of public radio from the perspective of relations between radio and theatre, this implying a valorization of both radio and theatre archives, seemed profitable to us. It was the kind of “hijacking” agreed upon by the PhD student, based on clear and convincing arguments. In other situations, however, research becomes a burden due to the fact that the direction drawn by the supervising professor is not assumed out of conviction by the doctoral student, but only accepted as a kind of fatality against which you cannot fight. Statistically speaking, in the Doctoral School where I work, the abandonment of doctoral studies is intimately linked to the researcher's lack of real attachment to the topic.

¹³ I considered it necessary to have a doctoral research on the work of the most important Romanian director of the last decades, Radu Afrim, and I had the chance to meet the ideal doctoral student for this topic: the actress Ada Lupu, who played in no less than ten performances signed by this director. The topic and assignment of the topic were so natural that today, after the defense of the thesis (evaluated as Excellent), neither I nor my former doctoral student can remember who looked for whom years ago, but, rather, we enter the depth of that Nicu Steinhardt saying, “I wouldn't have looked for you if I hadn't found you.”

¹⁴ A clear example of the initiating discussion done by the professor: a doctoral thesis dedicated to a great actor of Iasi, Petru Ciubotaru, shortly after he passed away. At that time, I considered there was only one possible author of that research: a young actress employed in the National Theatre to replace the great actor, daughter of a director who had cast him in dozens of performances, raised practically, literally and figuratively, in the immediate vicinity of the one who would become the subject of her research. I still wonder today if I did the right thing from a moral point of view: at that time, the actress did not want to pursue doctoral studies, she was too young to prove real qualities as a researcher, and my bet was based on an emotional area

So, who should be looking for whom? Who has the greatest and most beautiful need of the other... It's an answer that, through its stylistics, could satisfy ethical rigors for a while...

♦ *Why do you want to pursue a PhD?* This is the first question that most of the doctoral supervisors address to those who express such an intention. Even though, philosophically, “why?” is not an ethical question *par excellence*¹⁵, many of us consider it necessary in order to define our goals and understand our needs, from the start. Over time, I have encountered several types of response:

- ♦ Because I want to pursue an academic career.
- ♦ Because this theme has concerned me for a very long time and seems important to my development and my relationship to art.
- ♦ Because I want to evolve/grow.
- ♦ Because I am in that stage of my life when I feel the need to get involved in something consistent, long-term, something worth using my energy.
- ♦ Because I can't find my place and I need a refuge.
- ♦ Because my salary would increase¹⁶.
- ♦ Because X or Y has a PhD and I find it unacceptable that I don't.¹⁷
- ♦ Because confidence in my abilities and, generally speaking, my self-esteem would increase if I had such a title.
- ♦ Because I feel that I would die or go crazy if I did not research this topic in an institutional setting¹⁸.
- ♦ Because I'm very keen on working with you.
- ♦ Because that's what I feel I have to do at the moment.
- ♦ Because I really miss my student years and I feel that the PhD would make me relive some of the charm of those years.
- ♦ For the need to clarify who I am and what I want.

rather than a scientific one. We were somehow acting in the interest of Petru Ciubotaru or, better said, in the interest of his memory.

¹⁵ Nicholas Ridout, for one thing, argues that the fundamental question of ethics is “How should I act?”. He refers to this question through the character Neoptolemus, the son of Achilles, facing an ethical dilemma in the Sophocian *Philoctet* (see Nicholas Ridout, *Theater and Ethics*, Methuen Drama, 2021, ch. “How shall I act?”, pp. 1-6).

¹⁶ In Romania, employees who have a PhD degree in their field of institutional activity receive, according to the law, a monthly doctoral allowance of approximately 200 euros. Over time, in different periods of crisis, this increase was cut, then reallocated, questioned, reaffirmed, etc. Currently, the final word in its allocation or non-allocation rests with the manager of the institution who, together with the Board of Directors, decides whether that doctorate is relevant to the current activity of the respective employee in the institution in question.

¹⁷ Though it seems hard to believe, the power of example, to elegantly rename the statement “if he, then so do I”, works with quite motivating effects in the domestic academic space. Discussions on this topic with many other fellow PhD supervisors confirmed my own findings.

¹⁸ It's a rare response, just as acts of research “fanaticism,” in the sense of unconditional, constant and intense passion for research, are increasingly rare.

♦ Because financially I am in a difficult situation, and the doctoral scholarship would be of great use to me¹⁹.

♦ Forgive me, but I don't understand the question.

Some of these answers betray ambition, passion for the topic, while others reveal candor, ego, vested interest, or simply make doctoral research an acceptable option when ...one has nothing better to do. It is left to be decided, in each individual case, how much the answer itself matters for the formalization of the doctoral student-supervisor relationship, if we accept that a question like “Why do you want a PhD degree?” is acceptable from the ethical point of view, in order to open a possible future collaboration. Apparently, they don't harbor much suspicion. It is only natural to know how those with whom you are going to work for a significant number of years think, what goals they have, what personal definitions they assign to the “PhD”. On the other hand, however, the risks involved by asking such a question relate to a certain intrusion into very personal motivations, opening up the issue of the private-public distinction. Formulating such a question implicitly places the relationship in an area of confession, thus in an area marked by subjectivity, which, at least in this initial phase, may seem inadequate to some. From this perspective, rephrases such as “What are the professional reasons that made you pursue doctoral research?” or “What are your expectations from doctoral research?” seem more neutral. Of course, the tone with which we address the “why?” also matters. The tone can decide whether the question has the nuances of an interrogation, a conversation, or an honest desire to understand someone's underlying motivations in a matter that concerns you to an equal extent.

• ***Human chemistry and other doubts.*** Whether we like to admit it or not, liking and disliking play quite important roles in the decisions we make when we choose our collaborators or allow ourselves to be chosen by them. No matter how much objectivity we intend to have, the viruses of subjectivity intervene with or without our will. Among them, there is one of the most problematic and difficult to contest: *human chemistry*. The ethical question is simple but unsettling: to what extent is this *chemistry* allowed to decide the research partnership between the PhD student and the supervising professor? It's not just about chemistry in the sense of that professional compatibility that, say, players in a doubles tennis match need to have, or, more generally, people put in a position to harmonize their thinking and actions. The situation is much more complicated, as variables such as “first impression”, sympathy, even astral

¹⁹ Until 2023, the doctoral scholarship had the approximate value of the minimum salary (around 350 euros). Since the fall of 2023, it has increased to approximately 600 euros, which, compared to the revenues in Romania, makes it really attractive.

compatibility (“what zodiac sign are you?”) and so on come into play. All this subjective “scoring” in the pre-admission phase is much more intense in the Doctoral Schools of Universities with an artistic profile and quite inevitable when the PhD is not scientific, but professional.²⁰ The scenario in which the doctoral students would be distributed to us, instead of chosen, still seems meaningless to us, just as it seems meaningless to try to look at the supervision of doctorates without the human touch that covers it. As long as we translate the chemistry with the topic to the chemistry with the person proposing the topic, we won’t be able to talk about a perfectly ethically regulated relationship.

• **Promises, promises, promises.** How do we respond to pre-admission requests such as: “Please describe my career path during the PhD and post PhD?” Or: “Please tell me how this PhD degree will help me. What perspectives will it open for me, what opportunities will I have?” The code of ethics of most Romanian universities insists on transparency and consistency in the description of career paths for students from all study cycles²¹. This does not, of course, turn the professor into an academic Cassandra able to forecast what and how it will be, but it puts them in a position to speak, one way or another, about the future²². The supervisor cannot afford to shrug or say “I don’t know!” when his future PhD student asks for a concrete description of what is going to happen to him or her. The Code of Ethics starts from the questionable premise of a predictable future; in a balanced, steady world, safe from major accidents, we can formulate predictions, the effect of predictability being essential for most of the decisions we make in life. In academic practice, however, long-term certainties are almost out of the question. Ambiguities intervene, such as the long-term economic resources from a university’s budget, the dynamics of research grants, the qualitative evolution of the doctoral student’s research, the need or lack of need

²⁰ The distinction between a scientific PhD and a professional PhD, present in the Romanian academic environment, is incomprehensible to many professors and researchers from the Western world. It stems from a radical traditional separation between theory and practice, between *researching art* and *practicing art*.

²¹ See the chapter Personal autonomy of the Code of Ethics of the George Enescu National University of Arts Iasi, available here: <https://www.arteiasi.ro/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Carta-UNAGE.pdf>

²² It is what American literature calls “informed consent”. See Bryan Warnick’s article, “The Ethics of Doctoral Admission”, in *Academic Ethics Today*, quoted edition, pp. 213-215. The American professor even questions the fairness of admission to doctoral programs with a high risk of failure in relation to the labor market: „Under what circumstances it is justifiable students into PhD programs with risky future employment prospects? Of relevance here is the notion of informed consent: individuals must agree to interventions administered by professionals that affect their lives. Valued for several reasons, informed consent is important to protect the welfare of individuals, who are themselves the best judges of what constitutes and promotes their welfare”, p. 213.

for the University to integrate students into its ranks after completing the PhD, the attitude that society itself will have after five years in relation to the graduates of doctoral studies, blockages of all kinds, human and institutional, that could intervene and the list can go on. Even if, from an ethical point of view, “personal autonomy” is a sound concept, it can only be partially satisfied. No one can promise, for example, an academic career in this pre-admission phase. It would be unethical to fuel the hopes, ideals, expectations of a PhD student with such empty promises. What we could do would be that, when we talk about the future, we would actually talk about the past, indicating precise, statistical data about what has happened so far and leaving candidates to draw their own conclusions and establish their own kind of balance between *hope* and *actual possibility*.

The problem is not, however, entirely solved²³. Will we talk to our future doctoral students about the systemic difficulties, about the nervousness with which, year after year, we await the number of doctoral grants allotted by the Ministry of Education, about the topic of new Government Ordinances that discredit research by humiliating underfunding, about the possibility of new scandals with plagiarized PhD theses that would make society hostile in relation to the so-called “factories of doctors”? How much honesty and how much realism are we willing to put into this discussion? Or, we will take comfort in the fact that this happens to others, too,²⁴ we will minimize and dismiss the negative information and predictions, on the Wittgensteinian principle that “what cannot be talked about, must be kept silent”...

• ***The research project or about the impossibility of an ethical ideal of evaluation.*** In most Romanian Doctoral Schools, one of the (decisive!) admission tests is the presentation of the so-called “research project”, in fact a

²³ Sometimes one ethical problem opens up another, and so on, in a desolate and dilematic chain of uncertainties. In Paul Oliver's useful volume on research ethics, *The Student's Guide to Research Ethics*, Open University Press, 2010, the author notes the particular situation in education and social sciences: „Ethical issue in education and social sciences are so complex that once one starts to analyse the ethical issues inherent in a particular research project, one often feels that the debate could go on and on for ever. One could easily get into a position where one would never feel confident in starting the research” (p. 166).

²⁴ In the article already cited, Bryan Warnick describes in detail the major problems faced by universities that organize doctoral programs; in many cases the uselessness of doctoral studies for certain segments of the labor market is revealed. If we try, however, to look at the glass half full, we will come to the conclusion, according to the professor from Ohio State University, that a PhD is never “wasted time”: „An ethical graduate program will create alternate pathways that allow for a flexible future by providing a host of useful soft skills, such as writing, speaking, overall communication, teamwork, teaching, and conceptual and empirical analysis. While a doctoral program may not lead directly to a marketable credential, it may still impart proficiencies valuable across a range of occupations, so time spent in a PhD program is not simply time lost, economically speaking” (*Idem*, p. 216).

more or less detailed structure of the future work, a kind of tentative summary of the directions the research will take, the research methodology, the innovations that the research aims for and, of course, the initial bibliography. No one guarantees the admissions committee that this document will materialize one day, that those chapters and subchapters will gain content, that the stakes the research promises will be reached at a given moment. In this phase, the commission evaluates the charm of a promise and awards or fines a speech about the future. In the case of certain themes, especially those with a high degree of originality, it is difficult to anticipate how the research will develop, what new paths will intervene. In the case of other themes, things are so predictable that without much effort conclusions could be drafted from the very beginning. In both situations, the professors on the committee seek to understand what the concrete steps of the process will be, the angles from which some topics will be approached, the starting points and the final stations where the thesis will take us. Very often – although unofficially – in Romania, the realization of the structure falls under the responsibility of the supervising professor, the latter wanting to go for it with a successful admission and, on the other hand, rightly believing in the usefulness of a solid structure. In other cases, the structure presented for evaluation is the result of a co-production between the professor and future doctoral student. The ethical vulnerability of such a situation is obvious, the commission no longer evaluates the actual candidate, but a form of ambiguous co-authorship that makes the professor himself subject to evaluation, along with his future doctoral student. The ethical vulnerability is even greater when the professor himself is on the committee, becoming, of course, an advocate for the structure he himself created. The competition ceases to be (only) between PhD students; it moves to the teacher level. More than once, admission to the PhD has become an occasion for upsets, reproaches, tensions of all kinds between the professors as “authors of structures”. Needless to say: each of them thinks they have created the perfect structure!

Ideally, the committee should not know which supervising professors the PhD students have chosen, but in the case of small and medium-sized Doctoral Schools with a small number of specialists in niche subfields, this ethical rigor is, of course, utopian. This is how this oral presentation of the research project is encumbered from one end to the other by various subjectivities, from the fact that it only illustrates a few intentions, private research fantasies, to the fact that it indirectly already bears the “signature” of the collaboration in the pre-admission phase of the doctoral student-supervising professor couple. If we add the strange provision of some Universities, namely that oral tests cannot be challenged, we have the complete picture of relativism...

• ***The false competition in PhD admissions.*** There is seldom real competition for vacancies in a PhD admission. Somehow, things are decided in a previous phase, each professor knowing approximately how many vacant places they have and what percentage these places represent from the entire number of places allocated to the respective Doctoral School. Though questionable from an ethical point of view, a series of preliminary discussions take place between the professors who are going to take new PhD students, precisely to avoid tensions during the admission. An admission in which, as I said above, not only PhD students are competitors, but also their advisors. A non-competitive environment is an environment, if not dubious, then at least sterile. The possibility of optimal choices disappears, being replaced by predetermined scenarios in which (almost) every candidate has his/her seat already taken. Blatantly, such a situation is reprehensible, at least to the point where, on the basis of another ethical dilemma, we end up being much more tolerant about the lack of competition in doctoral admissions: is it ethical for a professor, aware that a candidate wouldn't have a chance to pass the admission exam, fuel their hopes by making them, just for the sake of the final competition, sit the exams? We have to keep in mind here that many candidates come from other parts of the country, if not other countries or continents. They will therefore spend significant amounts on transport, accommodation, admission fees (which are not recoverable in case of failure!). They will use up time, funds, energy unnecessarily, and I, the professor, am aware that they have no chance of admission because I have already discussed with my colleagues and allocated the available places. Do I still encourage them to apply or do I imply that their chances of success are minimal?

This is why the competition for doctoral admissions will rarely be real. That is with the exception of the competition for scholarships, which we will talk about a little later. Given that each candidate is running for their seat, unpleasant situations can occur, such as those in which the performance of the person under evaluation is very poor. If you don't declare he/she is accepted, the place remains vacant, the University loses the grant allocated to that place and, very importantly, next year the Ministry may assign fewer budgeted places on the idea that since you didn't take them, it means you don't need them.

• ***To whom and why do we offer scholarships?*** Part of the budgeted places that a Romanian Doctoral School receives annually are places with scholarships. The substantial increase of this scholarship, applied from the fall of 2023, will make the doctoral period cease to be a research process only, being understood, more recently, as full-time job. This is all the more so since the budgeted period also increased from 3 to 4 years. The contract that the doctoral scholarship student signs with the University now has the weight of a real employment contract. The financial focus on doctoral scholarships is able to make admissions

committees even more accountable, forcing them to ask themselves questions like “how and why are we awarding scholarships this year?” with the utmost seriousness. The evaluating professors must decide, in principle, from the beginning of the admission process whether they will follow an exclusively meritocratic approach or take into account other details that are not directly related to merit. Although handy, widely praised, the criterion of merit (“May the best win!”) is not always the best solution. The experience put us in front of some excellent PhD students, to whom the admission committee assigned a high degree of confidence and who, in a short time, became so-called *ghost PhD students*. Some of them settled in cities other than the one where the Doctoral School operates, gradually distanced themselves from it to the point that they ceased any relationship with and any participation in the life of the academic community. They respected, in most cases, their training program, they handed in their reports on time, but they did everything from a distance without really adding value to the Doctoral School where they worked. There are PhD students whose existence you almost forget, there is something ghostly about their periodic appearances. The physical and psychological distance that is created between them and the University prevents you from involving them in mobilities, in teaching activities, in organizing academic events, etc., even if, month after month, these doctoral students receive some funds for which they should do something. In extreme situations, we are dealing with *missing PhD students*; their consistency in relation to the School is even less than in the case of phantom PhD students. Immediately after the admission, which they passed successfully while benefiting from a scholarship (based on the most meritocratic criteria possible), these PhD students simply disappear. They do not complete their assignments and will never complete the thesis. The type of contract they sign, a very weak one for the University, doesn’t contain clauses that provide for a possible return of the funds in case of non-fulfillment of obligations. All they risk is expulsion, but the Doctoral School will be very cautious of expelling PhD students mid-PhD. Why? Simple, we’re talking about money again and losing an ongoing grant. The funding *per PhD student*, like the one *per student*, frequently shows its limits.

Therefore, to whom and why do we give scholarships? At this point, the objectivity of the assessment begins to crack once again. There are criteria absent from the grading scales, so subjective that even the professors on the committee don’t name them, but, rather, imply them and tacitly assume them. Thus, one of the great unofficial advantages arises when the city of residence of the future doctoral student coincides with the city where the Doctoral School operates. Doctoral students with a scholarship must be normed as university assistants, so they must teach, i.e. be physically present during the week. They will also attend the current research activities of the University, academic events, they will have to be more available than PhD students without a scholarship. Whenever one of

the fellows lives in the other end of the country, everything gets complicated for everyone: for the doctoral student, for the supervising professor, for the Doctoral School and for the University. Definitely, this is not ethical, but pragmatic thinking. Another debatable and cross-scale criterion is the social situation of the candidates. When he has to decide who will receive the scholarship (monthly, for four years), the professor develops a kind of social empathy. Between a PhD student who the committee knows does not have a job and one with a better admissions performance but who is known to have a stable job, in most cases the former will get a scholarship at the expense of the latter, which, from the perspective of merit, is profoundly unfair, but from the perspective of a hypothetical equality of chances (financially!) at this beginning of the doctoral journey, seems to be a legitimate decision. When qualitatively two candidates are very close, other unnamed criteria intervene: common sense, modesty, politeness, sympathy, the number of dependents the candidate has, whether he/she is family-oriented or not, etc. If a Doctoral School were to adopt something like this in its admissions methodology, it would be discredited in the long run. Peculiarities such as those listed above must remain the little secrets of each Doctoral School.

In contrast, very few Doctoral Schools in Romania check the ethical eligibility of candidates. They are not asked for recommendations from teachers or the authorities of the field in which they were trained or worked until the time of admission, and any professional slips they may have had in the past are impossible to sanction in admission for the simple reason of that the admissions methodologies do not refer to such a thing. In addition, in the interview with the candidate, questions of an ethical nature would seem to many to be ... out of place.

● ***The ideal PhD student – a profile sketch.*** The profile of the ideal PhD candidate, regardless of the field, is different from that of, say, a decade ago, and downright antinomian from that of two or more decades ago. And for the sake of this “profile”, admissions committees are often ready to make delicate moral compromises. According to the Bologna system, which links the three cycles of academic education (bachelor's, master's and doctorate), most doctoral students should be 23-24 years old upon admission. Most PhD supervisors will recognize that the difficulties of coordination are directly proportional to the youth and immaturity of PhD students, in which case the ideal age is pushed a bit further, but not very far: 30+. The reasons are multiple: the quality and intensity of the energies allocated to research, the availability for multi-tasking, belonging to a professional field that brings added value to the Doctoral School, civil stability, temperament adjustments, etc. Once the ideal age for doctoral research, 40+ or 50+ are no longer so tempting; the main reserve comes from the reduced mobility of these PhD students with family obligations, with full time jobs, but also with

a certain lack of enthusiasm to travel around the world. In the context where there is real pressure on the internationalization processes of Doctoral Schools, a PhD student who does not travel becomes, in the eyes of many, unfairly, a weak link. Other qualities such as consistency, seriousness, the quality of reports, articles and scientific communications are quickly forgotten or minimized, for the sake of this neo-PhD student whose main virtue is the speed with which they prepare the trolley for a new journey. They have to go, we want them gone as much and as often as possible, so that we can report with satisfaction, annually, an increasing number of days, months, years, spent in mobility. No one really cares what our PhD students do in these mobilities. They just check off what they have to check off and the rest is up to them. A new formalism, more subtle, but just as harmful, risks becoming chronic in Doctoral Schools in Romania, at least in the humanities field, where the quantification of results and actions undertaken is somewhat more relaxed.

More recently, in the admission phase, and even in the pre-admission phase, the professor's gaze has become accustomed to “scanning” and recognizing the doctoral student's potential to contribute to the internationalization of the School. The Director of the Doctoral School will periodically remind his colleagues of all the so-called “critical indicators”²⁵ that must be met, putting a certain pressure on them and causing them, over time, to prioritize something that in the opinion of many of them is not really a priority. The ethical crack is visible again in the doctoral crystal bowl that we flaunt with such academic pride...

• ***Ethics and Taxes.*** Another ethically relevant issue concerns the fee-based PhD places, places that most Universities put out for competition despite the unprofitability that the Finance Departments never cease of pointing out. The quotable arguments are, indeed, strong: currently, the annual grant allocated by the state to a PhD student is approximately 6,000 euros (this includes the teacher's salary, current expenses, funds allocated to research – travel, participation in conferences, etc.); logically, the fee for an unfunded place from the public budget should still be 6,000 euros, i.e. a monthly rate of 500 euros. It is hard to imagine in Romania candidates with such financial potential or willing to see this tax as an investment they will recover someday. Chances are they'll never get it back. Consequently, an ethical principle is employed²⁶: the tax must

²⁵ The list of critical indicators related to doctoral studies can be looked up here:: <https://www.aracis.ro/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/EN-Annex-4-List-of-indicators-and-critical-indicators-doctoral-study-domains.pdf>

²⁶ The relationship between economic and ethical thought is complex and... full of unpredictability. See *The Oxford Handbook of Ethics and Economics*, edited by Mark D. White, Oxford University Press, 2019, with an emphasis on Arjo Klamer's study, “Economy and Culture: The Importance of Sense Making”, pp. 275-295.

not be prohibitive! It is wrong to associate fee-paying places with PhD students whom we consider poorly prepared because they failed to get the funded places²⁷, just as it is completely unethical to treat them differently, during their doctoral research, by putting a kind of invisible label on them and excluding them from grants, side projects to their individual research and so on. There are quite a few examples in which a fee-paying doctoral student proves to be more successful than a doctoral student who obtained a scholarship. The simple fact that the former pays a regular sum of money makes him additionally responsible; what would be the point of taking on an expense that would lead nowhere?! Let's not forget the particular situation in which doctoral students with a level of excellence who are on their second PhD which, according to Romanian legislation, they have to pay for, end up on fee-paying places.

On the edge of ethics, there is also that more or less explicit convention that, in a phase prior to admission, the doctoral supervisor establishes with the one who is going to become his doctoral student, something along the lines "I'll be your supervisor, but only as a fee-paying student". The professor pre-judges the quality of the candidate, either because they knows him/her very well, or because the CV they received doesn't look reliable. There is, of course, also the situation that that professor no longer has vacancies and is only allowed to have fee-paying PhD students.²⁸ The PhD student is suggested to check the fee-paying option in the admissions documents. When taking the admission exam, those PhD students already know they will be assigned one of the fee-paying positions,

²⁷ Unfortunately, there is this trend of *low inclusion* of fee-paying PhD students in the life of a Doctoral School. Procedurally assimilated in a different way to "full-time" PhD students, they are placed in a very approximate "reduced frequency", the term "reduced" describing the type of relationship that the School maintains with them. Although it sounds harsh, not a few Doctoral Schools treat the fee as a "disability" of the respective PhD student. Discussing fee-paying doctoral students in Romania in 2023 almost pushes you towards the area of inclusive education, with all the nuances related to the complicated inclusive-exclusive relationship (see in this sense Franziska Felder (2022), *The ethics of Inclusive Education. Presenting a New Theoretical Framework*, Routledge: „Inclusion is a complex and multifaceted concept, and its implementation in practice involves many hurdles and trade-offs, not merely the reversal of exclusion. If we are to understand which forms of different treatment or even exclusion are legitimate and which are not, we need a nuanced understanding of the form and content of inclusion and inclusion education”, p. 17.

²⁸ In some Doctoral Schools, there was and still is a discussion about norming the fee-paying doctoral students on the payroll of the professors. The discussion is generated by the economic structures of the Universities that insist on profitability criteria, sending Doctoral Schools a message like: "We understand the ethical principle, but you must also understand the profitability principle. It would not be bad, then, to minimize the expenses regarding these PhD students; or the biggest expense comes from your salaries. Of course, such a message will never be sent officially, explicitly, to the supervising professors. A situation is "exposed" to them; once, twice, as many times as needed. Finally, the professor acquires a kind of "academic guilt" and will avoid taking on fee-paying PhD students.

their poor performance being indulgently accepted by the commission on the nefarious principle “if they are fee-paying students, what's the point of torturing them?”

Universities are therefore compelled to establish the amount of the fee, guided not only by profitability, but having at the back of their mind variables such as equal opportunities or the primacy of quality. Currently, the annual fees set for PhD programs in most Romanian Universities do not exceed 3,000 euros. In the Doctoral School to which I am affiliated, the fee was increased in 2021 from 1,200 euros to 1,600 euros. Each Doctoral School also decides the number of fee-paying places it is willing to put up for competition, depending, of course, on the number of budgeted places it receives. It would be absurd and indeed completely unproductive for the number of fee-paying places to be greater than the number of places funded from the budget.

3. Conclusions

It is difficult, if not impossible, to believe that an admissions methodology, even if backed up by a very carefully articulated code of ethics, could refer to situations such as those discussed above. In general, relative to the situations that arise concretely, our official benchmarks show their shortcomings²⁹. The multitude of perspectives from which you can look at a specific situation at the level of the supervising professor – candidate/doctoral student relationship discourages applied ethical reflection, in favor of conjunctural decisions, based at most on common sense, on personal values or on the approximate principle that “I've done this before in the past and there was no problem”.

Regardless of what kind of decision we will take, and how much this decision will reflect a prior conscience of an ethical nature, I think it is very important to openly discuss what seems to elude our needs for dialogue. It is a first and very important step towards a future stage in which the ethical reflex could become an integral part of everything we do, undertake, decide in the field of doctoral research. No one guarantees us that the research we coordinate will be better or more useful, however, Blaise Pascal's words in the discussion about the bet on the existence of God: we have nothing to lose if we bet on ethics!

²⁹ It is a conclusion frequently reached by researchers in the field of ethics. „...In research, those principles are put into action by individuals, pairs or small groups of people influenced by many interacting factors such as their research topic and their own worldviews. This means that guidelines, codes or principles, made up (as they must inevitably be) of broad concepts, require those concepts to be interpreted in their application to specific situation. Codes or guidelines, however detailed and helpful, cannot cover every possible eventuality and will never be the only influence on a researcher's ethical decisions. Also, guidelines and codes may lay out ethical considerations, but not rank them in order of priority”, Helen Kara (2018), *Research Ethics in the Real World*, Policy Press, University of Bristol, UK, p. 36.

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