ELABCHROM

Establishing a Laboratory of Cultural Heritage in Central Romania

Establishing a Laboratory of Cultural Heritage in Central Romania (ELABCHROM)

D3.4. Guide of Best Practices in Research

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List of Acronyms

DMP - Data Management Plan

DOI - Digital Object Identifier

GDPR - General Data Protection Regulation

JYU - University of Jyväskylä

LBUS – Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu, the coordinating institution of ELABCHROM

RDM - Research data management

SSH - Social Sciences and Humanities

RDM - Research data management

UBE - Université Bourgogne Europe

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1. Introduction

1.1. Purpose of the Guide

The present *Guide of Best Practices in Research in Social Sciences and Humanities* has been developed within the framework of the ELABCHROM Twinning project with the primary aim of supporting the consolidation of research capacity at Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu (ULBS). In line with the broader objectives of the Horizon Europe Widening programme, the Guide seeks to contribute to the strengthening of institutional performance in research by providing a structured, practice-oriented resource for researchers operating in the social sciences and humanities (SSH). It addresses both early-career and established scholars, offering actionable recommendations for improving research design, publication output, success in competitive funding applications, and overall academic visibility.

The Guide responds to a structural need identified within many universities in emerging research systems, including ULBS, namely the absence of integrated, accessible, and context-sensitive resources that translate international standards of research excellence into concrete academic practices. While a substantial body of literature addresses research methods, academic writing, and scholarly communication, these resources are often fragmented and insufficiently adapted to the institutional realities of universities operating in widening participation contexts (European Commission, 2021a). By contrast, the present Guide aims to bridge this gap by combining established academic knowledge with the practical experience accumulated within the ELABCHROM consortium.

A central objective of the Guide is to articulate what constitutes **excellence in SSH research** within the contemporary European research landscape and to translate this into a set of operational principles that can be implemented at the level of individual researchers and research teams. In doing so, the Guide aligns with key European policy frameworks, including the European Research Area (ERA) Policy Agenda and the Open Science paradigm, which emphasize transparency, collaboration, and societal impact as defining features of high-quality research (European Commission, 2021b; UNESCO, 2021). Rather than providing abstract definitions, the Guide focuses on the practical implications of these frameworks for everyday research practices, including project design, publication strategies, and dissemination activities.

Another core purpose of the Guide is to enhance the **competitiveness of ULBS researchers in international funding environments**, particularly within Horizon Europe and other European and international programmes. Securing competitive funding has become a central dimension of academic success, requiring not only scientific excellence but also the ability to articulate impact, manage complex collaborations, and align research proposals with policy priorities (European Commission, 2021a). The Guide therefore includes dedicated sections on proposal writing, evaluation criteria, and common pitfalls, informed both by the academic literature and by the practical experience of researchers and evaluators within the ELABCHROM network.

In addition, the Guide aims to support the development of a **sustainable and visible research profile** for ULBS scholars. In the contemporary academic ecosystem, visibility is increasingly mediated by digital platforms, open access infrastructures, and international networks. As such, the Guide provides concrete recommendations for building and maintaining researcher profiles on platforms such as ORCID, Google Scholar, and ResearchGate, as well as for engaging in effective dissemination beyond academia. These practices are essential not only for individual career advancement but also for enhancing the institutional visibility and reputation of ULBS within the European and global research landscape.

A distinctive feature of this Guide is its reliance on **success stories and good practices drawn from the ELABCHROM partner universities**, including the University of Jyväskylä (Finland) and Université Bourgogne Europe (France). By incorporating insights from high-performing research environments, the Guide offers empirically grounded examples of how academic careers can be developed, how research projects can be successfully implemented, and how international collaboration can be effectively leveraged. These examples are complemented by recommendations from experienced researchers, providing a balanced perspective that combines strategic guidance with practical advice.

Finally, the Guide is conceived as a **living and transferable resource**, designed to remain relevant beyond the duration of the ELABCHROM project. It is intended to support ongoing institutional development at ULBS while also offering a model that can be adapted by other universities operating in similar contexts. By making the Guide openly accessible through the project's dissemination channels, the consortium contributes to the broader objective of knowledge sharing within the European Research Area, in line with the principles of openness and collaboration that underpin contemporary research policy.

1.2. The ELABCHROM Project and Its Objectives

The *ELABCHROM* (Establishing a Laboratory of Cultural Heritage in Central Romania) project is a Horizon Europe Twinning initiative designed to strengthen the research and innovation capacity of Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu (ULBS) in the field of cultural heritage, with a particular focus on the social sciences and humanities (SSH). Funded under the Widening Participation and Spreading Excellence programme, the project responds to structural disparities within the European Research Area (ERA) by fostering institutional development through strategic collaboration with advanced research institutions (European Commission, 2021a).

The core objective of ELABCHROM is to enhance the scientific performance, international visibility, and research management capabilities of ULBS by facilitating knowledge transfer, capacity building, and long-term institutional transformation. This objective is pursued through a structured set of activities that combine training,

networking, joint research, and dissemination, in close cooperation with the project's partner institutions: the University of Jyväskylä (Finland) and Université Bourgogne Europe (France). These partnerships are central to the Twinning model, which is premised on the exchange of expertise and the adoption of best practices from leading research environments.

At a strategic level, ELABCHROM aims to position ULBS more firmly within the European research landscape by aligning its research practices with key policy priorities, including Open Science, interdisciplinarity, and societal engagement. In this regard, the project contributes to the broader goals of the ERA, particularly those related to increasing research excellence, enhancing cross-border collaboration, and reducing innovation gaps between regions (European Commission, 2021b). The emphasis on cultural heritage as a research domain reflects both the thematic strengths of the consortium and the growing importance of heritage studies within contemporary SSH research, especially in relation to identity, memory, and community development.

The project is structured around several interconnected work packages that collectively support the development of research capacity at ULBS. These include activities focused on training and mentoring researchers, organizing international events, fostering collaborative research outputs, and improving research management practices. A key component of the project has been the organization of the international conference *Revisiting Cultural Heritage: Novel Approaches, Innovative Methods, and Transnational Connections*, held in Sibiu in October 2023. The conference brought together scholars from multiple countries and disciplines, facilitating the exchange of ideas and the development of new research collaborations.

One of the most significant outcomes of this collaborative effort is the publication of the edited volume *Engaging Communities in Cultural Heritage* (Routledge, 2025), which exemplifies the project's commitment to high-quality academic output and international dissemination. The volume brings together contributions from researchers across the consortium and beyond, addressing key themes such as participatory heritage, digital innovation, and governance. As such, it represents not only a scholarly achievement but also a concrete manifestation of the knowledge exchange and capacity-building processes that ELABCHROM seeks to promote.

Beyond specific outputs, ELABCHROM has contributed to the development of a more robust research culture at ULBS by encouraging the adoption of best practices in areas such as project design, publication strategies, and international collaboration. The project has also supported the development of new research tools and methodologies, including data-driven approaches to cultural heritage analysis, thereby expanding the methodological repertoire available to ULBS researchers.

In this context, the present Guide emerges as a key deliverable that synthesizes the knowledge, experiences, and lessons learned throughout the project. It reflects the cumulative expertise of the consortium and translates it into a structured set of recommendations aimed at supporting researchers in their academic development. By

integrating insights from both institutional practice and international collaboration, the Guide contributes to the sustainability of the project's impact, ensuring that the benefits of ELABCHROM extend beyond its formal duration.

Ultimately, ELABCHROM represents an important step in the ongoing process of strengthening research excellence at ULBS. Through its focus on capacity building, internationalisation, and the dissemination of best practices, the project contributes to narrowing the gap between emerging and advanced research systems within Europe, in line with the overarching objectives of Horizon Europe.

1.3. Target Audience

This Guide is primarily intended for researchers affiliated with Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu (ULBS), with a particular focus on scholars operating in the social sciences and humanities (SSH). It addresses the needs of researchers at different stages of their academic careers, including doctoral candidates, early-career researchers, mid-career academics, and senior scholars involved in leading research projects. By providing structured guidance on research design, publication strategies, funding acquisition, and academic visibility, the Guide aims to support the development of a coherent and competitive research profile across career stages.

In addition to individual researchers, the Guide is relevant for **research support and administrative staff** involved in the preparation, management, and implementation of research projects. This includes personnel working in grant offices, project management units, and institutional structures responsible for research development. By clarifying key processes related to proposal writing, project implementation, and dissemination, the Guide contributes to strengthening the institutional capacity required to support high-quality research activities.

The Guide also addresses a broader academic audience beyond ULBS, including researchers from partner institutions within the ELABCHROM consortium – namely the University of Jyväskylä and Université Bourgogne Europe – as well as scholars from other universities operating in similar "widening" contexts within the European Research Area. In this sense, the Guide is conceived as a transferable resource that reflects shared challenges and opportunities in strengthening research performance across diverse institutional environments (European Commission, 2021a).

Finally, the Guide may be of interest to **institutional decision-makers and policy stakeholders** involved in shaping research strategies at the university and national levels. By synthesizing best practices and lessons learned from the ELABCHROM project, it provides insights that can inform the development of policies aimed at enhancing research excellence, internationalisation, and societal impact in SSH fields.

1.4. Methodology: How the Guide Was Developed

The present Guide has been developed through a **collaborative and iterative co-creation process** involving all partner institutions within the ELABCHROM consortium – Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu (ULBS), the University of Jyväskylä (JYU), and Université Bourgogne Europe (UBE). This process reflects the core logic of Twinning projects under Horizon Europe, which emphasize knowledge exchange, mutual learning, and the adaptation of best practices across institutional contexts (European Commission, 2021a).

At the methodological level, the Guide is grounded in a combination of **structured training activities, participatory workshops, and reflective exchanges** that took place throughout the project. In particular, the **summer and winter schools organized by the partner universities** functioned as key platforms for the collective production of knowledge, bringing together researchers from different disciplinary backgrounds and institutional environments. These events were not limited to knowledge transmission but were explicitly designed as **interactive fora for critical debate** on central issues shaping contemporary research in the social sciences and humanities.

The ELABCHROM Winter School hosted by the University of Jyväskylä (20–24 November 2023) represents a particularly relevant example of this co-creative methodological approach. The programme combined **expert lectures, panel discussions, hands-on demonstrations, and interdisciplinary workshops**, enabling participants to engage actively with topics such as EU funding opportunities, research assessment, public engagement, digital humanities, and international publishing. The structure of the sessions facilitated not only the acquisition of new knowledge but also the development of practical skills, including manuscript preparation, project design, and methodological innovation.

Importantly, the pedagogical design of these schools emphasized **interaction and collaboration**, rather than passive learning. As evidenced by participant reports, activities included expert panel discussions on funding strategies, workshops on societal impact and citizen science, sessions on digital methods in heritage research, and debates on the challenges of international publishing. These thematic strands correspond directly to the core dimensions of contemporary research excellence, ensuring that the knowledge generated within these settings is both relevant and transferable.

Beyond the formal training sessions, the workshops created **spaces for interdisciplinary dialogue and co-production of research ideas**, where participants worked collaboratively on developing manuscript outlines, project concepts, and methodological frameworks. These outputs demonstrate that the learning process extended beyond theoretical reflection to the generation of concrete research plans and collaborative initiatives. Such activities are particularly valuable in SSH contexts, where methodological diversity and interpretive frameworks benefit significantly from collective discussion and critical engagement.

The methodological foundations of the Guide are further reinforced by the **cumulative experience of mobility activities** within the project, including both group-based training schools and short-term research visits. These mobilities were strategically designed to first provide a shared foundation of knowledge through collective training, and subsequently to deepen specialized competencies and foster more targeted collaborations among researchers. This staged approach ensured both breadth and depth in the capacity-building process, allowing participants to progressively develop their research skills and international networks.

In addition to these structured activities, the Guide draws on **internal dissemination practices within ULBS**, whereby participants in mobilities and workshops were required to share acquired knowledge through seminars, presentations, and research group discussions. This mechanism ensured that the benefits of participation were amplified at the institutional level, contributing to the consolidation of a shared research culture and the diffusion of best practices across departments.

Finally, the development of the Guide has been informed by a process of **continuous feedback and supervision by the project partners**, in line with the deliverable requirements of ELABCHROM. Draft versions were reviewed and refined based on input from experienced researchers across the consortium, ensuring both academic rigor and practical relevance. This iterative validation process enhances the credibility of the Guide and ensures that it reflects a balanced integration of diverse institutional perspectives.

In sum, the methodology underpinning this Guide can be understood as a form of **collaborative knowledge production**, combining structured training, interactive learning, and institutional reflection. By embedding best practices within the lived experience of the ELABCHROM project, the Guide offers a grounded and context-sensitive resource that is directly applicable to the research environment at ULBS and beyond.

2. Understanding Excellence in SSH Research

2.1. What Defines High-Quality Research in SSH

The question of what constitutes “excellence” in research within the social sciences and humanities (SSH) cannot be addressed without engaging with the **epistemological foundations** of these fields. Unlike the natural sciences, which are generally oriented towards the identification of universal laws through experimental and quantitative methods, SSH disciplines are characterized by their focus on **interpretation, meaning, and context-dependent knowledge**. This distinction has been classically articulated in the tradition of *Geisteswissenschaften*, most notably by Wilhelm Dilthey, who emphasized the difference between explanation (*Erklären*) in the natural sciences and understanding (*Verstehen*) in the human sciences (Dilthey, 1883/1989).

Subsequent contributions have further refined this distinction. Max Weber's concept of interpretive sociology underscored the need to grasp the subjective meanings that individuals attach to their actions (Weber, 1922/1978), while later methodological debates highlighted the plurality of valid approaches within SSH, ranging from qualitative and hermeneutic methods to quantitative and mixed-methods designs. More broadly, the well-known divide between "the two cultures," as described by C. P. Snow (1959), continues to inform discussions about differences in epistemic standards, communication practices, and evaluation criteria across scientific domains.

Within this epistemological framework, **high-quality research in SSH** is not reducible to a single methodological paradigm or evaluative metric. Rather, it is defined by a combination of criteria, including conceptual rigor, methodological appropriateness, theoretical contribution, and the capacity to generate meaningful interpretations of social and cultural phenomena. As Flyvbjerg (2001) argues, the strength of SSH research lies precisely in its ability to produce *phronetic knowledge* – context-sensitive insights that inform both academic understanding and societal practice.

However, the question of excellence in SSH has become increasingly complex in the context of the contemporary academic environment, which is shaped by processes of **quantification, evaluation, and competition**. Over the past decades, the rise of scientometric indicators – such as citation counts, journal impact factors, and h-indexes – has contributed to the emergence of what has been described as an "audit culture" in academia (Power, 1997; Shore & Wright, 2015). These developments have been accompanied by the widespread diffusion of the "publish or perish" imperative, which places increasing pressure on researchers to produce a high volume of publications in indexed journals.

While such mechanisms can enhance transparency and comparability, their application to SSH research raises significant challenges. As numerous scholars have noted, standard bibliometric indicators often fail to capture the specificities of SSH scholarship, including the importance of books and edited volumes, the centrality of language and local contexts, and the longer temporal cycles of knowledge production (Hicks et al., 2015). Moreover, an excessive reliance on quantitative metrics risks incentivizing short-term productivity at the expense of intellectual depth, originality, and methodological innovation.

At the same time, it would be misleading to idealize a purely traditional model of SSH research centered exclusively on individual erudition and solitary scholarship. While this model has produced significant contributions, it is less compatible with the demands of contemporary research ecosystems, which increasingly emphasize **collaboration, interdisciplinarity, and internationalisation**. Furthermore, access to competitive funding, participation in international networks, and engagement with broader audiences have become essential components of academic success.

In this context, the concept of excellence in SSH should be understood as a **dynamic equilibrium between two paradigms**:

- on the one hand, a **classical model** grounded in deep scholarship, theoretical reflection, and intellectual autonomy;
- on the other hand, a **contemporary model** shaped by evaluation frameworks, performance indicators, and institutional competition.

Rather than privileging one model over the other, a sustainable approach to excellence involves identifying a **"sweet spot"** between these paradigms. This implies maintaining high standards of conceptual and methodological rigor while also engaging strategically with the requirements of the contemporary research environment. In practical terms, this means producing research that is both **intellectually meaningful and institutionally visible**, combining depth with dissemination, and originality with accessibility.

This balanced understanding of excellence is increasingly reflected in European research policy. Initiatives such as the San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA) and the Leiden Manifesto advocate for more responsible and context-sensitive approaches to research evaluation, emphasizing qualitative judgment alongside quantitative indicators (Hicks et al., 2015). Similarly, the European Commission has called for reforms in research assessment that better recognize the diversity of outputs and contributions in SSH fields (European Commission, 2021b).

For researchers at Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu, this perspective has important implications. It suggests that achieving excellence does not require abandoning the intellectual traditions of SSH, but rather **repositioning them within a broader framework of visibility, collaboration, and strategic engagement**. The following sections of this Guide build on this understanding, translating it into concrete practices related to research design, publication, funding acquisition, and dissemination.

2.2. Key Features of a Strong Research Profile

Building on the epistemological considerations outlined in the previous section, a strong research profile in the social sciences and humanities (SSH) can be understood as a **multidimensional construct**, combining intellectual coherence, scholarly output, collaborative engagement, and strategic visibility. While institutional frameworks play an important role in shaping research opportunities, it is ultimately at the level of the individual researcher that these dimensions are articulated and consolidated over time.

In contemporary academia, the development of a robust research profile requires navigating the tension between traditional scholarly values – such as depth of knowledge, critical reflection, and originality – and the increasing emphasis on productivity, visibility, and measurable impact. Rather than privileging one dimension over the other, successful researchers tend to integrate these elements into a **coherent and strategically oriented academic trajectory**.

2.2.1. Coherence of Research Agenda and Intellectual Identity

A defining feature of a strong research profile is the existence of a **clear and coherent research agenda**. This involves more than working within a general disciplinary field; it requires the articulation of a recognizable intellectual identity, grounded in a set of interrelated research questions, theoretical perspectives, and methodological approaches.

In SSH disciplines, where research often develops cumulatively over long periods, coherence is essential for establishing scholarly credibility and visibility. As Becher and Trowler (2001) note, academic communities are structured around shared epistemic cultures, and researchers gain recognition by positioning themselves meaningfully within these communities. A fragmented or overly opportunistic publication strategy may yield short-term outputs but often undermines long-term intellectual impact.

For researchers at ULBS, developing such coherence is particularly important in the context of increasing international competition. A well-defined research agenda facilitates participation in collaborative projects, enhances the visibility of one's work, and supports the development of sustained research trajectories.

2.2.2. Quality and Diversity of Publication Output

Publication remains a central component of academic life and a key indicator of research performance. However, in SSH fields, the **quality, relevance, and diversity of outputs** are more significant than sheer quantity. High-impact journal articles, monographs, and edited volumes each play distinct roles in disseminating research and contributing to scholarly debates.

The growing emphasis on bibliometric indicators has led to increased pressure to publish in indexed journals, particularly those included in databases such as Web of Science or Scopus. While engagement with these publication venues is important for international visibility, it should not come at the expense of **intellectual depth or disciplinary relevance**. As highlighted by the Leiden Manifesto, research assessment should account for the diversity of outputs and the specificities of disciplinary practices (Hicks et al., 2015).

A strong research profile therefore combines:

- **selective publication in high-quality international journals**,
- **contributions to edited volumes and monographs**, particularly in SSH-relevant formats,
- and **strategic dissemination across different audiences**.

Within the ULBS context, increasing the presence of researchers in internationally recognized publication venues remains a key objective, but it should be pursued in a manner that preserves the substantive quality and originality of research.

2.2.3. Engagement in Competitive Research Funding

Participation in competitive research funding schemes – particularly at the European level – has become an essential dimension of academic success. Involvement in funded projects not only provides financial resources but also facilitates access to international networks, enhances institutional visibility, and supports the development of collaborative research agendas.

A strong research profile typically includes:

- participation in national and international projects,
- experience in different roles (team member, work package leader, principal investigator),
- and the ability to contribute to proposal development and project implementation.

The increasing complexity of funding schemes, especially within Horizon Europe, requires researchers to develop competencies beyond disciplinary expertise, including project design, impact articulation, and stakeholder engagement (European Commission, 2021a). For researchers at ULBS, building experience in such environments is particularly important for overcoming structural barriers associated with emerging research systems.

2.2.4. Internationalisation and Academic Networking

Internationalisation is a central component of research excellence in the contemporary academic landscape. A strong research profile is characterized by **active participation in international scholarly communities**, including collaborations with researchers from other institutions, participation in international conferences, and involvement in transnational research networks.

Such engagement facilitates the exchange of ideas, the development of joint research outputs, and the positioning of researchers within broader academic debates. As Wagner (2008) argues, scientific collaboration networks play a crucial role in shaping knowledge production and enhancing research impact.

The ELABCHROM project itself exemplifies the importance of internationalisation, providing ULBS researchers with opportunities to engage with established research environments and to develop collaborative relationships that extend beyond the duration of the project. Sustaining and expanding these networks is essential for consolidating a strong research profile.

2.2.5. Digital Presence and Research Visibility

In the contemporary academic ecosystem, visibility is increasingly mediated by digital infrastructures. Maintaining an active and well-curated presence on platforms such as ORCID, Google Scholar, and ResearchGate is now a fundamental component of a strong research profile. These platforms serve multiple functions:

- they facilitate the dissemination of research outputs,

- enhance discoverability and citation potential,
- and contribute to the construction of a recognizable academic identity.

At the same time, researchers must engage critically with the metrics associated with these platforms, recognizing both their usefulness and their limitations. As discussed in the previous section, quantitative indicators should complement, rather than replace, qualitative assessments of research quality. For ULBS researchers, strengthening digital visibility represents a relatively accessible and impactful strategy for increasing international presence and engagement.

2.2.6. Institutional Engagement and Contribution to Research Culture

While research profiles are developed at the individual level, they are embedded within institutional environments that shape opportunities and constraints. A strong research profile therefore also involves **active engagement with the institutional research ecosystem**, including participation in research groups, mentoring of junior researchers, and contribution to collaborative initiatives.

Within ULBS, such engagement is particularly important in the context of ongoing efforts to strengthen research capacity and foster a more dynamic academic culture. The internal dissemination of knowledge acquired through projects such as ELABCHROM, as well as participation in institutional initiatives, contributes to the collective development of research excellence.

At the same time, institutional support structures – such as research offices, training programmes, and collaborative platforms – play a crucial role in enabling individual success. The relationship between individual researchers and the institution should therefore be understood as mutually reinforcing: strong research profiles enhance institutional visibility, while supportive institutional environments facilitate individual achievement.

In sum, a strong research profile in SSH is not defined by a single indicator, but by the **integration of multiple dimensions**, including intellectual coherence, high-quality publications, engagement in funded research, international collaboration, digital visibility, and institutional contribution. For researchers at ULBS, developing such a profile involves both individual initiative and strategic engagement with the opportunities provided by the evolving European research landscape.

The following sections of this Guide build on these dimensions, offering concrete recommendations for designing research, publishing effectively, securing funding, and increasing visibility in SSH fields.

2.3. The Role of Internationalisation

Internationalisation has become a defining feature of contemporary academic life. In the social sciences and humanities (SSH), it is no longer an optional complement to scholarly

work, but a structural condition of participation in what has increasingly become a **global academic field**. Processes of globalization have intensified the transnational circulation of ideas, methods, scholars, publications, rankings, and funding schemes, contributing to what Altbach et al. (2009) described as an “academic revolution” in higher education and research. In this context, researchers are expected not only to produce knowledge within national or local settings, but also to position their work within wider international conversations and infrastructures.

This transformation has contributed to the emergence of a more clearly articulated **global academic profession**. Academic careers are increasingly shaped by international benchmarks: publication in journals indexed in global databases, participation in transnational research networks, mobility across institutions and countries, involvement in competitive international funding schemes, and visibility on internationally recognized digital platforms. As Altbach et al. (2009) argue, academic work is increasingly embedded in global circuits of evaluation and exchange, even if participation in these circuits remains highly uneven.

Yet the globalization of knowledge has not produced a flat academic world. On the contrary, a substantial body of scholarship has shown that knowledge production remains marked by an **unequal geography**, in which institutional prestige, publishing power, research infrastructure, and agenda-setting capacity are heavily concentrated in a relatively small number of countries and regions. Paasi (2005), for instance, demonstrated the uneven spatial distribution of what counts as “international” journal publishing, while Demeter (2018, 2020) has shown the persistent overrepresentation of the Global North in globally visible academic production. Global science is therefore international, but it is not evenly internationalized.

Historically, the **Global North** – especially North America and Western Europe – has occupied the commanding heights of global knowledge production. These regions continue to host a disproportionate share of the world’s most prestigious universities, journals, publishers, funding agencies, and citation networks, and they frequently define the dominant theoretical languages and methodological standards of international scholarship. This concentration has consequences not only for visibility, but also for what kinds of questions are recognized as globally relevant and whose voices are treated as authoritative within international academia (Paasi, 2005; Demeter, 2020).

At the same time, this geography is being increasingly challenged, most notably by the rise of **China** as a major scientific power. UNESCO’s science reporting has documented the growing weight of China in global scientific output, while more recent Nature Index data show the dominance of Chinese institutions among leading research organizations, based on 2023 output. Although this transformation is most visible in STEM fields, it is reshaping the broader geopolitical landscape of knowledge production and weakening, at least partially, the older monopoly of Euro-Atlantic centers (UNESCO, 2021; Nature Index, 2024).

Within this global landscape, **Eastern Europe** occupies a particularly complex position. It can be understood, in world-systems terms, as a **semi-peripheral region** of knowledge production: neither external to the Western academic system, nor fully located at its center. On the one hand, Eastern European universities benefit from their inclusion in the European Union, from access to European funding programmes, and from their incorporation into wider Western academic infrastructures. On the other hand, the region continues to operate from the margins of global academia, shaped by enduring asymmetries of prestige, infrastructure, and resource distribution. Scholars of Central and Eastern Europe have described this condition in terms of "in-between-ness" and semi-peripherality, while also emphasizing the long shadow of postsocialist institutional legacies (Gawlicz & Starnawski, 2018; Kraft, 2023).

For Romania, and by extension for Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu, these structural conditions are compounded by the chronic **underfinancing of research**. The European Commission's Policy Support Facility review of the Romanian research and innovation system identified Romania as one of the weakest-performing R&I systems in the European Union in terms of investment intensity and systemic support. More recent Eurostat data confirm that Romania remains among the EU member states with the lowest government budget allocations for research and development per capita (European Commission, 2022; Eurostat, 2025). In parallel, persistent instability in research policy and uneven integration into international publication systems have further limited the country's academic competitiveness (European Commission, 2022).

This does not mean, however, that Eastern Europe should be understood only through a deficit lens. Its semi-peripheral position also entails a distinctive potential: the ability to mediate between different intellectual traditions, to bring locally grounded perspectives into wider debates, and to challenge epistemic hierarchies through strategic international participation. Precisely because the geography of knowledge production is unequal, internationalisation becomes more than a career-enhancing strategy; it becomes a **structural imperative** for scholars and institutions located outside the traditional centers of academic power.

In this sense, internationalisation serves at least four interrelated functions. First, it facilitates **access**: access to networks, infrastructures, publication venues, and collaborative opportunities that may be limited locally. Second, it enables **recognition**, allowing researchers to position their work within broader scholarly conversations and gain visibility beyond national academic circuits. Third, it promotes **learning and upgrading**, exposing scholars to new methodologies, standards of research management, and publication cultures. Fourth, it provides a pathway for **reshaping unequal geographies of knowledge production**, by enabling semi-peripheral institutions to become more active participants in agenda-setting rather than merely consumers of dominant paradigms. This understanding is broadly compatible with the European Research Area logic, which links excellence to cross-border collaboration, circulation of knowledge, and widening participation (European Commission, 2021, 2022).

For ULBS, this argument has direct practical implications. Internationalisation should not be treated simply as an indicator of prestige or as a bureaucratic requirement attached to European projects. Rather, it should be understood as a long-term institutional and intellectual strategy through which researchers connect their locally grounded scholarship to transnational debates, improve their competitiveness, and contribute to repositioning their institution within the European and global academic landscape. In this sense, internationalisation is not external to research excellence in SSH; it is one of its constitutive conditions for universities situated in semi-peripheral academic settings.

Ultimately, internationalisation in SSH should not be reduced to mobility statistics or formal partnerships. Its deeper significance lies in the fact that it enables scholars and institutions to participate more fully in global knowledge production while also contesting its asymmetries. For universities situated in Eastern Europe, this makes internationalisation not merely desirable, but indispensable.

2.4. Visibility and Academic Reputation

Building on the previous discussion of the global and uneven landscape of knowledge production, the question of **academic visibility and reputation** becomes central for individual researchers navigating this system. In a context where opportunities, recognition, and resources are unevenly distributed, visibility is not merely a by-product of scholarly work, but an outcome of **strategic positioning within what can be described as a "regime of academic visibility."**

This regime is structured by a set of institutionalized practices, norms, and evaluation mechanisms that determine which forms of knowledge are recognized, disseminated, and legitimized at the international level. As Bourdieu (1988) has argued, academia functions as a field in which actors compete for different forms of capital – particularly **symbolic capital**, which is closely tied to reputation and recognition. In contemporary academia, visibility operates as a key mechanism through which such capital is accumulated and converted into career advancement, funding opportunities, and institutional prestige.

At the same time, the construction of visibility is shaped by the broader dynamics of globalization discussed earlier. As academic evaluation systems become increasingly standardized and transnational, visibility is often aligned with participation in **globally recognized circuits of knowledge production**, including high-impact journals, international publishers, and transnational research networks (Merton, 1973; Marginson, 2008). However, access to these circuits remains uneven, reflecting the persistent asymmetries of the global academic system.

One of the major obstacles to achieving international visibility, particularly for researchers working in semi-peripheral contexts, is the persistence of what has been termed **"methodological nationalism."** This concept, developed by Wimmer and Glick Schiller (2002), refers to the tendency to take the nation-state as the natural and unquestioned unit of analysis in social research. While this orientation may be analytically justified in

certain contexts, it often leads to **parochial research designs**, limited comparative scope, and reduced international relevance.

Overcoming methodological nationalism requires a shift towards **translocal, comparative, and theoretically informed research designs**, which situate empirical findings within broader analytical frameworks and enable dialogue with international scholarship. As Beck (2007) has argued, methodological cosmopolitanism offers an alternative approach that recognizes the interconnectedness of social processes and encourages researchers to move beyond nationally bounded perspectives.

However, this transition is not equally feasible across all SSH disciplines. In fields such as **linguistics, literary studies, or history**, research is often intrinsically tied to specific languages, national traditions, and localized archives. In these cases, the challenge is not to abandon national or local focus, but to **reframe it in ways that resonate with broader scholarly debates**. This may involve comparative approaches, theoretical generalization, or the positioning of local case studies within transnational contexts. As Heilbron (2014) has shown in his work on the internationalization of the social sciences, even nationally grounded research can achieve international visibility if it is embedded within globally relevant conceptual frameworks.

Within this broader context, academic visibility is structured by a set of interrelated practices that collectively define the **regime of academic recognition**. First and foremost, **peer-reviewed publications in internationally recognized journals** remain the primary mechanism through which research is validated and disseminated. Journals indexed in major databases such as Web of Science and Scopus function as key gatekeepers of visibility, shaping both what is published and what is cited.

Second, **monographs published by prestigious international academic presses**, particularly English-language university presses, continue to play a central role in SSH disciplines. Unlike journal articles, which often prioritize shorter-term contributions, monographs allow for more extensive theoretical development and are frequently associated with higher levels of scholarly prestige (Thompson, 2005).

Third, **edited volumes and collective publications** serve as important platforms for the construction of academic networks. Participation in such volumes not only contributes to publication output but also signals integration into collaborative scholarly communities and thematic research agendas.

Fourth, **membership in professional associations and participation in international conferences** are essential components of academic visibility. These forums facilitate the exchange of ideas, the establishment of collaborations, and the consolidation of disciplinary identities. As Wagner (2008) has demonstrated, scientific collaboration networks are crucial for enhancing both the reach and the impact of research.

Fifth, **involvement in editorial and evaluative activities**, such as serving as a peer reviewer, editorial board member, or journal editor, contributes to the accumulation of

academic capital and signals recognition within the scholarly community. These roles position researchers not only as producers of knowledge but also as contributors to the governance of academic standards and publication processes.

Sixth, **participation in competitive research funding**, whether individually or as part of international consortia, plays a significant role in enhancing visibility. Funded projects increase exposure, facilitate collaboration, and often lead to further publications and institutional recognition. In the European context, involvement in Horizon Europe and other international funding schemes has become a key marker of academic success (European Commission, 2021).

Finally, the regime of academic visibility is increasingly shaped by the dominance of **scientometric indicators**, including citation counts, h-indexes, journal impact factors, and other quantitative measures of research performance. While these metrics provide useful tools for assessing certain aspects of academic output, their growing influence has raised concerns about the standardization and potential distortion of research evaluation. As Hicks et al. (2015) argue in the Leiden Manifesto, the uncritical use of metrics risks privileging easily measurable outputs over more substantive contributions, particularly in SSH fields where impact is often diffuse and long-term.

In this context, building academic visibility requires a **strategic and reflexive engagement with multiple dimensions of the academic field**. Researchers must navigate between the demands of international publication, the constraints of their disciplinary traditions, and the structural inequalities of the global knowledge system. For scholars at institutions such as ULBS, this involves not only increasing participation in international academic circuits but also **positioning their research in ways that transcend local relevance while preserving analytical depth and contextual sensitivity**.

Ultimately, academic reputation in SSH is not reducible to a single metric or achievement. It emerges from the cumulative effect of sustained scholarly work, strategic dissemination, and active participation in the institutional structures that define the contemporary academic landscape. In an unequal system of knowledge production, visibility is both a challenge and an opportunity: a challenge because of structural constraints, and an opportunity because it offers pathways for repositioning researchers and institutions within the global academic field.

2.5. Alignment with European Research and Innovation Frameworks

In the contemporary European research landscape, alignment with European Union (EU) research and innovation (R&I) frameworks has become a central dimension of academic excellence. For researchers in the social sciences and humanities (SSH), this alignment is not limited to accessing funding opportunities; it also entails engaging with broader policy priorities, evaluation criteria, and governance models that shape the production and dissemination of knowledge across the European Research Area (ERA).

The EU's current framework programme, **Horizon Europe (2021–2027)**, represents the most significant instrument for supporting research and innovation in Europe. With a strong emphasis on scientific excellence, societal impact, and international collaboration, Horizon Europe structures research activities around three main pillars: *Excellent Science*, *Global Challenges and European Industrial Competitiveness*, and *Innovative Europe* (European Commission, 2021a). For SSH researchers, opportunities are distributed across all three pillars, either through dedicated calls or through the integration of SSH perspectives into interdisciplinary projects addressing societal challenges.

Beyond funding, Horizon Europe reflects a broader shift towards **mission-oriented and impact-driven research**, where scientific activities are increasingly expected to contribute to addressing major societal issues, such as climate change, digital transformation, and social cohesion (Mazzucato, 2018). This orientation requires researchers to articulate not only the scientific merit of their work but also its **societal relevance and potential for impact**, both within and beyond academia.

A key complementary framework is the **European Research Area (ERA)**, which aims to create a unified and competitive research space across Europe by promoting the free circulation of knowledge, researchers, and technology (European Commission, 2021b). The renewed ERA agenda places particular emphasis on open science, research careers, gender equality, and the strengthening of research systems in less-performing countries. In this context, alignment with ERA priorities becomes essential for institutions such as ULBS, which operate within what is often described as a "widening" landscape of European research.

The **Widening Participation and Strengthening the European Research Area** component of Horizon Europe is especially relevant in this regard. Instruments such as Twinning, Teaming, and ERA Chairs are specifically designed to reduce disparities between research systems by fostering collaboration between institutions in high-performing and lower-performing countries (European Commission, 2021a). The ELABCHROM project itself is a direct example of such an instrument, aiming to enhance institutional capacity, research excellence, and international integration at ULBS.

In addition to funding structures, European research policy has increasingly emphasized the importance of **Open Science** as a new paradigm for knowledge production. The European Commission defines Open Science as an approach based on transparency, accessibility, and collaboration, encompassing open access to publications, open research data, and participatory forms of knowledge creation (European Commission, 2020). This shift has direct implications for researchers, who are now expected to adopt practices such as data management planning, open access publishing, and the sharing of research outputs beyond traditional academic channels.

Closely related to Open Science is the ongoing reform of **research assessment practices** at the European level. Initiatives such as the San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA) and the Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment (CoARA) advocate for more responsible and context-sensitive evaluation systems,

moving beyond the narrow reliance on bibliometric indicators (Hicks et al., 2015; CoARA, 2022). These developments are particularly relevant for SSH, where diverse outputs and long-term intellectual contributions are not always adequately captured by quantitative metrics.

For individual researchers, alignment with European R&I frameworks involves developing a set of **strategic competencies**. These include the ability to:

- identify relevant funding opportunities within Horizon Europe and related programmes;
- design research proposals that integrate scientific excellence with societal impact;
- engage in international and interdisciplinary collaboration;
- incorporate Open Science practices into research workflows;
- and navigate evolving evaluation criteria and reporting requirements.

Importantly, alignment should not be understood as mere compliance with external requirements. Rather, it represents an opportunity to **integrate local research agendas into broader European and global contexts**, thereby enhancing both visibility and impact. For researchers at ULBS, this alignment is particularly significant, as it provides pathways for overcoming structural constraints associated with semi-peripheral positioning and for strengthening participation in international knowledge production.

At the institutional level, alignment with European frameworks also requires the development of supportive infrastructures, including research support offices, training programmes, and administrative capacities for project management. However, the effectiveness of these structures ultimately depends on the active engagement of individual researchers, who translate policy frameworks into concrete research practices.

In sum, alignment with European research and innovation frameworks constitutes a **key dimension of contemporary research excellence**. It connects individual scholarly activity to broader policy agendas, facilitates access to resources and networks, and contributes to the integration of institutions such as ULBS into the European and global research landscape. In an increasingly competitive and interconnected academic environment, such alignment is not only advantageous but essential.

3. Designing and Conducting Research

3.1. From Topic to Research Problem: Framing for International Relevance

In a highly competitive and structurally unequal academic environment, the transition from a general topic to a well-defined research problem is not merely a technical step in the research process. It is a **strategic act of positioning**, through which researchers determine whether their work will remain locally confined or become part of broader international scholarly conversations.

For researchers operating in semi-peripheral contexts such as Romania, this step is particularly critical. The risk of remaining trapped in **locally relevant but internationally invisible research** is significant, especially when topics are framed in ways that do not resonate with wider theoretical debates. Conversely, when properly conceptualized, locally grounded research can become a powerful entry point into global academic discussions.

3.1.1. Romania as a Resource for Knowledge Production

Romania offers a **rich and multidimensional empirical landscape** for research across the social sciences and humanities. Far from being a peripheral or marginal case, it constitutes a **dense site of historical, political, and cultural complexity**, which can generate analytically valuable insights when appropriately framed.

One important dimension is Romania's **interimperial historical formation**, situated at the intersection of multiple empires (Ottoman, Habsburg, Russian), which has shaped its institutional trajectories, cultural patterns, and social structures. As argued by Manuela Boatcă and Anca Parvulescu (2020), such "interimperiality" provides a productive lens for understanding not only Romania, but also broader dynamics of dependency, hybridity, and uneven development in Europe.

In addition, Romania's **experience of state socialism and postsocialist transformation** offers a particularly fertile ground for research on political change, memory, institutional restructuring, and social inequality. The legacy of communism continues to shape contemporary social life, from governance practices to cultural representations, making Romania an important case within the wider field of post-socialist studies (Verdery, 1996; Stan & Nedelsky, 2013).

Beyond modern history, Romania also presents a significant **cultural and civilizational depth**, encompassing ancient, medieval, and modern layers of heritage. From Dacian and Roman antiquity to the formation of the modern nation-state and contemporary European integration, these historical strata create opportunities for research that connects local phenomena to broader European and global processes.

Importantly, Romania shares many structural features with the broader **Central and Eastern European (CEE) region**, including postsocialist legacies, semi-peripheral positioning, and patterns of uneven development. At the same time, it also exhibits distinctive trajectories and configurations that make it analytically valuable as both a **representative and a deviant case**. This dual character enhances its potential for both **case-based and comparative research designs**.

3.1.2. From Local Topic to International Research Problem

One of the most important challenges facing researchers is not the selection of a topic in itself, but the ability to **transform that topic into a research problem that travels beyond its immediate context**. In many cases, scholars begin with empirically grounded

and locally meaningful subjects – such as urban development in Sibiu or cultural heritage in Transylvania. While such topics are entirely legitimate and often highly relevant, their international visibility depends on how they are **conceptually framed**. A topic becomes internationally significant not by virtue of its geographic location, but by its capacity to engage with broader analytical and theoretical debates.

In this sense, the key shift is from **topic-driven research to problem-oriented research**. Rather than asking simply *what is happening* in a particular place, the researcher must articulate *why this case matters* for understanding wider processes. Urban development in Sibiu, for instance, becomes internationally relevant when it is connected to themes such as urban governance, post-socialist transformation, touristification, or the dynamics of small and medium-sized European cities. Similarly, the study of cultural heritage in Transylvania gains broader significance when it is situated within debates on heritage commodification, identity politics, memory regimes, or globalization. What is at stake, therefore, is not the abandonment of local specificity, but its **reframing within transnational intellectual conversations**.

This transformation involves several interrelated analytical moves. First, it requires a process of **conceptual elevation**, through which descriptive accounts are rearticulated as analytically structured questions. Instead of merely documenting empirical phenomena, the researcher mobilizes concepts that allow the case to speak to broader theoretical concerns. Second, it entails a form of **contextual translation**, whereby locally specific realities are presented in terms that are intelligible and relevant to international audiences. This does not mean simplifying or diluting complexity, but rather making explicit the connections between the local case and more general patterns or processes. Third, it involves **problematisation**: the identification of tensions, contradictions, or gaps in existing knowledge that the research can address. A strong research problem does not simply describe reality; it **intervenes in an ongoing scholarly conversation**, offering new perspectives or challenging established assumptions.

As Johan Heilbron (2014) has argued, the international circulation of knowledge is shaped not only by the intrinsic quality of research, but also by its capacity to connect to **transnational intellectual frameworks**. In a stratified global academic system, where certain centers of knowledge production enjoy greater visibility and authority, this capacity becomes even more crucial for scholars working in semi-peripheral contexts. Research that remains confined to local descriptive concerns, however valuable in itself, often struggles to gain recognition beyond its immediate environment.

A recurrent pitfall in such contexts is precisely the production of **empirically rich but theoretically underdeveloped studies**. These works provide detailed insights into national or regional realities, yet they do not sufficiently engage with broader conceptual debates or articulate their contribution in terms that resonate internationally. The result is a form of **epistemic isolation**, where valuable knowledge remains largely invisible in global academic circuits. Overcoming this limitation does not require abandoning local research agendas, but rather rethinking how they are framed. When local cases are approached as **sites of theoretical inquiry**, rather than merely objects of description,

they can generate insights that travel across contexts and contribute meaningfully to international scholarship.

Ultimately, the transformation from local topic to international research problem is a matter of **analytical positioning and intellectual strategy**. It involves recognizing that the value of research lies not only in what it studies, but in how it connects that empirical focus to larger questions. For researchers at ULBS and similar institutions, this transformation is not only desirable but necessary: it is the condition under which locally grounded research can achieve **global relevance and impact**.

3.1.3. Comparative and Translocal Strategies

One of the most effective ways to enhance the international relevance of research is to move beyond isolated case studies and adopt **comparative or translocal research strategies**. By situating Romanian cases alongside other contexts – whether within Central and Eastern Europe, across Europe, or in a broader global frame – researchers are better positioned to identify patterns, variations, and mechanisms that extend beyond a single setting. In doing so, the empirical specificity of the Romanian case is not diminished, but rather **leveraged as part of a wider analytical configuration**.

Comparative research plays several important strategic roles. First, it helps to **de-center the national frame**, mitigating the risks associated with what has been termed "methodological nationalism" – the tendency to treat the nation-state as the natural and self-evident unit of analysis. Second, comparison enhances the **analytical robustness** of findings, as claims can be tested across different contexts rather than inferred from a single case. Third, and importantly in strategic terms, comparative designs tend to increase the **appeal of research to international journals and funding bodies**, which often prioritize studies with broader generalizability and cross-contextual relevance.

At the same time, comparison should not be treated as a purely formal or decorative requirement. Meaningful comparative research depends on **careful case selection**, clear theoretical justification, and methodological coherence. Cases should be chosen not simply for convenience, but because they allow the researcher to address a specific analytical question – whether through similarity, contrast, or variation. In some instances, even when only one case is studied in depth, an **implicit comparative logic** can be mobilized by situating the findings in relation to existing studies or broader patterns documented in the literature.

Complementing comparative approaches, **translocal strategies** offer an additional way of overcoming analytical parochialism. Rather than comparing discrete units, translocal research focuses on the **connections, flows, and interactions between places**. This perspective is particularly valuable in fields such as migration studies, cultural exchange, digital communication, or policy transfer, where social phenomena are inherently relational and cross-border. By tracing how ideas, practices, or actors move across contexts, translocal approaches shift attention from bounded units to **networks and processes**, thereby opening new avenues for analysis.

Ultimately, both comparative and translocal strategies contribute to a more **outward-oriented and analytically ambitious research design**. They enable researchers to position local cases within broader configurations, making their work more legible and relevant to international audiences. For scholars working in Romania, such approaches are not merely methodological options, but **key instruments for transforming local research into globally resonant scholarship**.

3.1.4. Strategic Framing for Competitiveness

In a competitive academic environment, the framing of a research problem is never a neutral or purely intellectual exercise. It is also a **strategic operation**, through which researchers anticipate the expectations of reviewers, editors, and funding evaluators. What matters is not only the intrinsic interest of the topic, but the extent to which the research is presented as relevant to current debates, grounded in recognized theoretical frameworks, and connected to broader societal or policy concerns – particularly within the European research space, where relevance, impact, and intellectual positioning increasingly matter alongside methodological rigor.

A well-framed research problem should therefore be capable of answering, either explicitly or implicitly, several fundamental questions. Why does this research matter beyond its immediate local context? What does it add to existing knowledge? How does it engage with international scholarship, rather than merely reproducing a nationally enclosed discussion? These are, in effect, the questions that structure the reception of research in journals, conferences, and grant competitions. Even the most empirically rich study may remain marginal if it does not make clear what is at stake theoretically and why its findings deserve attention beyond the case itself.

For researchers at ULBS, this strategic framing is especially important because it provides one of the most effective ways of counteracting the structural disadvantages associated with semi-peripheral academic positioning. In such contexts, the main risk is not the lack of valuable research topics, but the tendency for those topics to be presented in ways that remain too narrowly local, descriptive, or context-bound. Yet local context should not be treated as a limitation to be overcome or concealed. On the contrary, it should be leveraged as a source of **empirical richness, interpretive nuance, and analytical innovation**. The challenge is to frame that local material in ways that allow it to travel intellectually and to enter broader scholarly conversations.

This is particularly relevant in the Romanian case. Romania's historical complexity, postsocialist trajectories, cultural diversity, and geopolitical location provide an exceptionally fertile terrain for SSH research. These features create the conditions not only for Romania-centered studies, but also for research that speaks to larger questions concerning state formation, memory politics, inequality, migration, cultural heritage, European integration, or peripheral modernities. The challenge – and opportunity – for researchers is to translate this richness into **analytically powerful and internationally resonant research problems**. In an unequal academic landscape, visibility and recognition depend not only on what is studied, but on how it is framed. Strategic framing

is therefore a crucial step in building a competitive research profile and in positioning ULBS researchers as relevant voices within the European and global academic space.

3.2. Positioning in the Literature: Entering Global Debates

In a competitive and unequal academic environment, the literature review is never a neutral or merely technical exercise. It is one of the key sites where researchers construct what may be called their **epistemic positioning**: the place from which they speak within the international field of knowledge production. Especially for scholars working in semi-peripheral contexts, this positioning is decisive. It often determines whether a study remains locally legible but internationally invisible, or whether it succeeds in entering wider debates and being recognized as a relevant contribution.

This is why the literature review should not be understood as a simple summary of previous works. Too often, especially in academically peripheral or weakly internationalized environments, literature reviews take the form of descriptive inventories: author after author is listed, findings are briefly reported, and the section closes without clarifying what conversation is actually taking place or where the present study enters it. Yet academic research does not begin from a blank slate, nor does it merely add one more case to an already existing stock of knowledge. It intervenes in a conversation. Swales's (1990) classic formulation of academic writing as the creation of a "research space" remains highly useful here: the task of the researcher is to identify how a field is structured, where tensions or unresolved questions lie, and how one's work can occupy a meaningful position within that space.

Seen in this way, the literature review becomes an exercise in **conversation mapping**. The relevant question is not only who has written on a topic, but what the main lines of debate are, which theoretical paradigms dominate, where disagreements persist, what assumptions remain unchallenged, and which blind spots continue to structure the field. Researchers who master this level of mapping are much better placed to produce internationally visible work, because they do not merely demonstrate familiarity with a body of texts; they show that they understand the architecture of a debate and know where intervention is possible.

One of the most common reasons why research from semi-peripheral contexts fails to achieve broader visibility is that it falls into what might be called the trap of **descriptive empiricism**. Such work is often rich in data, detail, and contextual knowledge, but weak in theoretical articulation. It describes a case – sometimes very competently – without showing why that case matters beyond itself. This problem is frequently reinforced by what Wimmer and Glick Schiller (2002) termed **methodological nationalism**, namely the tendency to take the nation-state as the natural and unquestioned frame of analysis. Of course, many legitimate research topics are national in scope, and in fields such as history, literary studies, or language studies the national frame may be structurally difficult to avoid. The problem begins when national boundedness becomes an epistemic limit

rather than an object of analysis: when the case is not connected to broader comparative questions, transnational processes, or theoretically resonant problems.

For this reason, the challenge is not to abandon nationally or locally grounded research, but to make it travel intellectually. A Romanian case does not become internationally relevant simply because it is Romanian; it becomes relevant when it is used to illuminate a wider question, test a conceptual framework, challenge a dominant assumption, or reveal a pattern insufficiently captured by existing literature. In this sense, the task is to move from "writing about Romania" to "thinking with Romania." This is particularly important for a country such as Romania, whose historical and social trajectories are deeply entangled with broader regional and global processes – imperial legacies, state socialism, postsocialist transformation, migration, European integration, uneven development, and cultural hybridity. These are not parochial themes. They are part of some of the most important debates in contemporary SSH research. The key is whether the literature review frames them as such.

Effective epistemic positioning can take several forms. Sometimes a researcher enters a debate by identifying a meaningful gap in the literature, though this requires more than simply claiming that "Romania has not yet been studied." Absence alone is not enough; what matters is why that absence is analytically significant. In other cases, positioning may occur through extension: applying a recognized theory to a new empirical context in a way that refines or complicates the theory itself. It may also take the form of critique, where a dominant framework is shown to be inadequate once confronted with evidence from a semi-peripheral or previously neglected setting. Another powerful strategy is to bridge bodies of literature that do not usually speak to one another, thereby opening new conceptual terrain. As Locke et al. (2008) have shown, strong scholarly contributions often derive from exactly these kinds of positioning moves, which allow the author to present the research not as a mere addition, but as a necessary intervention.

This work of positioning also requires balance in relation to the literature itself. Canonical works remain important because they provide the conceptual grammar of a field and signal intellectual seriousness. At the same time, research that relies too heavily on classics without engaging recent scholarship risks appearing dated or disconnected from current debates. Conversely, work that cites only the most recent publications may appear technically current but conceptually thin. Strong literature positioning therefore requires a double orientation: backward, toward the foundational texts that structure a field, and forward, toward the current debates through which relevance is judged. Researchers must demonstrate both depth and contemporaneity.

These issues are inseparable from the unequal infrastructures of global knowledge circulation. The dominance of English as the lingua franca of international scholarship creates a major asymmetry in academic visibility (Hamel, 2007). Likewise, the concentration of prestigious journals, publishers, and citation networks in the Global North means that literature positioning is never purely intellectual; it is also strategic. Demeter (2020) has shown how strongly global publication visibility remains skewed toward Northern centers, even when scholarship is formally international in scope. Under such

conditions, researchers from semi-peripheral settings must work doubly hard: they must know the major debates, master their conceptual languages, and position their work in ways that become legible within those hierarchically organized circuits of recognition.

Citation practices are central to this process. Citations are not simply acknowledgments of prior work; they are signals of intellectual alignment, disciplinary belonging, and scholarly ambition. They indicate which conversations a researcher is entering and with whom they seek to be in dialogue. In this sense, citations are part of the economy of recognition described by Merton (1973): they help constitute academic authority and distribute symbolic capital. A literature review that cites only local or national scholarship may indicate depth of contextual engagement, but it can also confine the work to a narrower horizon of reception. By contrast, a strategically constructed citation practice combines internationally recognized literature with carefully selected regional and local scholarship, showing both conceptual sophistication and empirical embeddedness.

Ultimately, the literature review should be conceived as an argument, not an archive. Its purpose is not to prove that the researcher has read many things, but to make clear what is at stake in the present study: what is already known, what remains unresolved, what assumptions require revision, and why this particular research is needed now. Hart (1998) and Booth et al. (2008) both emphasize that a strong review of the literature establishes a logical pathway toward the research question. In competitive academic settings, that pathway is also a pathway toward visibility.

For researchers at ULBS, mastering this form of epistemic positioning is especially important. In an unequal academic world, international visibility rarely comes automatically from the intrinsic value of local research. It must be constructed through deliberate engagement with global debates. The point is not to abandon local cases, national archives, or Romanian realities, but to mobilize them in ways that resonate beyond their immediate context. This is what allows research produced in a semi-peripheral setting to become more than locally valid. It becomes intellectually portable, analytically relevant, and visible within the wider European and global academic field.

3.3. Research Design, Methods, and Evidence: From Local Data to International Credibility

In a competitive and unequal academic environment, research design is not only a methodological matter; it is a **strategic instrument of credibility and visibility**. For scholars working in semi-peripheral contexts such as Romania, the way a study is designed – its questions, methods, data, and evidentiary logic – plays a decisive role in determining whether the research is perceived as locally bounded or internationally relevant. A robust research design must therefore do more than ensure internal coherence. It must also anticipate the expectations of international reviewers, editors, and evaluators, for whom **rigor, transparency, and theoretical contribution** are key criteria of judgment.

A recurrent challenge in this respect concerns the widespread reliance on **single-country case studies**, often centered on Romania. Such designs are entirely legitimate and, in many cases, unavoidable. However, their international relevance is never guaranteed by the intrinsic interest of the case itself. A study focused on Romania becomes visible in global academic debates only when it is explicitly connected to **broader theoretical conversations**. The question is not whether the research is about Romania, but what Romania allows us to see, test, or rethink. A well-designed case study does not merely describe a context; it **intervenes in theory**.

This is why the most effective strategy is often to move beyond isolated case studies toward **comparative or translocal research designs**. Comparative approaches – whether involving multiple countries, regions, or cases – allow researchers to identify patterns, variations, and causal mechanisms that are less visible in single-case analyses. They also signal, to international audiences, that the research is not confined to a particular national experience. Even when direct comparison is not feasible, studies can adopt an **implicit comparative logic**, situating the Romanian case in relation to broader trends or contrasting it with existing findings from other contexts.

At the same time, it is important to recognize that Romania should not be treated merely as a site for the application or validation of theories developed elsewhere. As demonstrated by Manuela Boatcă and Anca Parvulescu (2020), the specific historical and social configurations of Eastern Europe – and Romania in particular – can serve as a basis for **conceptual and theoretical innovation**. Their notion of "interimperiality," for instance, does not simply describe a regional condition; it reconfigures broader understandings of modernity, dependency, and global hierarchies. This illustrates an important shift in research strategy: from using Romania as a **case that confirms theory** to using it as a **case that generates theory**.

Designing research in this way requires careful attention to **methodological rigor**, understood not as rigid adherence to standardized procedures, but as the capacity to produce **credible, transparent, and well-justified knowledge claims**. In SSH, rigor is achieved through the alignment between research questions, methods, and data, as well as through reflexivity regarding the limits and assumptions of the chosen approach. Whether qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-methods, research must demonstrate that its findings are grounded in systematically collected and appropriately analyzed evidence.

At the same time, rigor should not be equated with methodological conservatism. There is an inherent tension between **rigor and innovation**, which is particularly visible in contexts where new data sources, interdisciplinary approaches, and digital methods are emerging. In this respect, the concept of **serendipity**, as discussed by Merton (1968), is especially relevant. Serendipity refers to the capacity of research to generate unexpected findings that lead to new hypotheses, concepts, or methodological developments. Rather than being a sign of methodological weakness, such moments can become drivers of scientific innovation – provided they are integrated into a coherent analytical framework.

Romania, and more broadly Eastern Europe, can be seen as a particularly fertile ground for such **serendipitous discoveries**. The complexity of its historical trajectories, the coexistence of multiple institutional logics, and the ongoing processes of social and cultural transformation create conditions in which established theoretical expectations may not fully apply. This can open space for:

- the identification of **unexpected empirical patterns**;
- the development of **new conceptual vocabularies**;
- and even the refinement or invention of **methodological approaches** adapted to specific research contexts.

However, serendipity becomes academically valuable only when it is combined with rigor. Unexpected findings must be carefully validated, contextualized, and theoretically articulated. Without this second step, they remain anecdotal; with it, they can become **significant contributions to knowledge**.

Closely related to research design is the question of **data, sources, and evidence**, which are central to the credibility of any study. In international academic contexts, the quality of evidence is often scrutinized as closely as the theoretical argument. Researchers must therefore demonstrate not only that they have access to relevant data, but also that they use it in a **transparent and methodologically sound manner**. This includes clear documentation of data sources, justification of sampling strategies, and explicit discussion of limitations.

For researchers working in Romania, access to certain types of data – archival materials, administrative records, local knowledge, linguistic competencies – can constitute a significant advantage. At the same time, limitations in data availability, standardization, or infrastructure may pose challenges. Addressing these challenges requires methodological creativity, but also careful attention to issues of **validity, reliability, and replicability**, adapted to the specific standards of SSH research.

In this context, the credibility of research increasingly depends on the adoption of practices associated with **transparency and openness**, including clear data management, ethical considerations, and, where possible, the sharing of data and methods. These practices are not only methodological requirements but also signals of alignment with international standards of research integrity.

Ultimately, a strong research design in SSH is one that successfully combines:

- **local empirical richness** with **global theoretical relevance**;
- **methodological rigor** with **analytical creativity**;
- and **context-sensitive data** with **international standards of evidence**.

For researchers at ULBS, the challenge is not to compensate for structural disadvantages, but to **leverage their positionality strategically**. Romania is not a marginal space of knowledge production; it is a complex empirical and conceptual

resource. When mobilized through carefully designed, theoretically informed, and methodologically rigorous research, it can support contributions that resonate far beyond its immediate context.

3.4. Ethics and Integrity in Research Practice

Ethics and integrity are not ancillary components of research practice; they are constitutive of what makes scientific knowledge credible, cumulative, and socially legitimate. In the social sciences and humanities (SSH), where interpretation, argumentation, and evidentiary judgment play a central role, ethical conduct is inseparable from epistemic quality. A useful starting point for understanding this normative foundation is Robert K. Merton's classic formulation of the scientific ethos, captured in the CUDOS norms: **communalism**, **universalism**, **disinterestedness**, and **organized skepticism**. These principles continue to provide a powerful benchmark against which contemporary research practices can be assessed.

Communalism presupposes that scientific knowledge is a collective good, to be shared, scrutinized, and built upon. In today's research environment, this translates into expectations of data transparency, openness of methods, and accessibility of results. **Universalism** requires that knowledge claims be evaluated according to impersonal criteria, independent of the researcher's institutional prestige or geographic location – an especially important principle for scholars working in semi-peripheral contexts. **Disinterestedness** demands that researchers prioritize the pursuit of truth over personal or institutional gain, while **organized skepticism** institutionalizes critical scrutiny as a routine and necessary part of scientific practice.

Yet, these norms operate in a research environment that is increasingly shaped by structural pressures often associated with the **neoliberalization of academia**. The expansion of performance-based evaluation systems, the reliance on quantitative metrics (publication counts, impact factors, citation indices), and the pervasive "publish or perish" imperative have reconfigured the conditions under which knowledge is produced and assessed. While these mechanisms aim to ensure accountability and productivity, they can also generate **perverse incentives** that undermine the very norms they are meant to support.

One of the most visible consequences is the proliferation of **unethical shortcuts** in research and publishing. These include plagiarism, self-plagiarism, the inappropriate use of AI-generated text without disclosure, data fabrication or falsification, and questionable authorship practices. Such behaviors do not simply violate formal rules; they erode the trust on which the scientific enterprise depends. In Mertonian terms, they represent a departure from disinterestedness and organized skepticism, replacing them with strategic behavior oriented toward metric optimization rather than knowledge advancement.

A particularly troubling manifestation of these dynamics is the growth of the **predatory publishing industry**, involving journals and publishing houses that exploit the open-access model for profit while circumventing rigorous peer review. These outlets often

promise rapid publication, minimal editorial scrutiny, and inflated claims of indexing or impact. For early-career researchers or those working under strong institutional pressure to publish, they can appear as attractive – if ultimately detrimental – avenues for dissemination. However, publishing in such venues risks not only reputational damage but also the dilution of the scientific record with insufficiently vetted or unreliable findings.

The normative challenge, therefore, is not only to avoid misconduct in a narrow sense, but to navigate a broader ecosystem in which **structural incentives may conflict with ethical principles**. This requires a form of reflexive professionalism: an awareness of how evaluation regimes, funding structures, and institutional expectations shape research behavior, and a conscious commitment to uphold standards of integrity even under pressure.

From a practical standpoint, ethical research practice involves several interrelated dimensions. First, it requires **transparency in data collection and analysis**, including clear documentation of sources, methods, and limitations. Second, it entails **honest representation of findings**, avoiding selective reporting or overinterpretation. Third, it involves **proper attribution and authorship**, ensuring that intellectual contributions are accurately recognized. Fourth, it requires attention to **ethical considerations in data use**, particularly when research involves human participants, sensitive topics, or vulnerable groups.

Increasingly, ethical integrity is also linked to the adoption of **open science practices**, including data sharing (where appropriate), pre-registration of studies, and the use of reproducible workflows. While these practices are more established in some fields than others, they reflect a broader shift toward reinforcing communalism and organized skepticism in contemporary research.

For institutions such as ULBS, fostering a culture of research integrity is both a responsibility and a strategic necessity. In an international academic landscape marked by competition and asymmetry, credibility is a key resource. Upholding high ethical standards – consistently and visibly – contributes to building that credibility, enhancing both individual and institutional reputations.

At the same time, constructing such a culture of integrity should not be understood as a rejection of the contemporary emphasis on **academic performance and productivity**. On the contrary, ULBS should actively cultivate a culture of **academic excellence** that values intellectual output, international visibility, publication in high-impact venues, and success in competitive funding environments. These are indispensable components of institutional advancement in today's globalized academic field. However, they must be embedded within a broader normative framework that recognizes the **responsibility of knowledge production**. Academic success cannot be reduced to numerical indicators alone; it must also be evaluated in terms of the **credibility, robustness, and societal relevance** of the knowledge produced.

Revisiting Merton's normative framework in this light allows for a productive synthesis rather than a simple opposition between ethical ideals and performance pressures. The goal is not to choose between them, but to align them: to ensure that productivity is achieved **through** integrity, not at its expense. In doing so, ULBS can position itself not only as a competitive research institution, but as one that contributes to shaping a model of academic practice in which **excellence and responsibility are mutually reinforcing**.

3.5. Common Pitfalls in SSH Research

In the context of an increasingly competitive and stratified global academic field, many of the limitations affecting research in the social sciences and humanities (SSH) are not simply individual shortcomings, but **recurrent structural patterns** that shape how knowledge is produced, presented, and evaluated. Identifying these pitfalls is essential not as an exercise in critique for its own sake, but as a means of improving the **international visibility, credibility, and impact** of research. The following discussion outlines ten such recurring weaknesses, particularly relevant for scholars working in semi-peripheral academic contexts.

A first and particularly pervasive issue is the tendency toward **descriptive empiricism without theoretical contribution**. Research often provides rich empirical accounts – frequently focused on national or local cases such as Romania – yet fails to articulate how these findings intervene in broader theoretical debates. As a result, such studies risk being perceived as contextually interesting but analytically limited. In international academic publishing, empirical detail alone is rarely sufficient; what is required is a clear answer to the implicit question: *what does this case contribute to theory?*

Closely related is the problem of **methodological formalism without analytical depth**. Researchers may employ sophisticated methods – statistical models, qualitative interviews, or discourse analysis – yet the connection between research questions, methods, and interpretation remains underdeveloped. In quantitative research, this often takes the form of technically correct but conceptually weak models, where variables are insufficiently theorized. In qualitative work, it may appear as extensive descriptive material without adequate abstraction or analytical synthesis. In both cases, methodological rigor is reduced to procedural correctness, rather than serving as a tool for generating meaningful insight.

A third common limitation is the persistence of **isolated case studies lacking comparative logic**. While single-case designs are often necessary and valuable, their broader relevance depends on explicit positioning within comparative or transnational frameworks. Without such positioning, the case risks appearing self-contained and analytically insular. As comparative-historical sociology has long emphasized (e.g., Charles Tilly), the explanatory power of social research is significantly enhanced through systematic comparison, whether explicit or implicit.

Another recurring issue concerns **weak engagement with international literature**. This may take the form of over-reliance on local or regional sources, limited familiarity with

current debates, or the superficial inclusion of canonical references without genuine integration into the argument. In such cases, the literature review becomes a formal requirement rather than a **strategic positioning device**, failing to demonstrate how the research contributes to ongoing scholarly conversations.

Relatedly, SSH research often suffers from **conceptual vagueness and terminological inflation**. Widely used concepts such as “identity,” “resilience,” “heritage,” or “sustainability” are invoked without clear definition or operationalization. This leads to analytical ambiguity and weakens the explanatory power of the study. As emphasized by Giovanni Sartori in his discussion of “conceptual stretching,” the indiscriminate use of concepts without precise boundaries risks undermining their analytical utility.

A sixth pitfall is **overclaiming combined with under-evidencing**. Researchers may advance ambitious conclusions that are not fully supported by the data or methods employed, particularly in policy-oriented discussions. This mismatch between claims and evidence is quickly identified in peer review and often leads to negative evaluations, as it raises concerns about the credibility and robustness of the findings.

Equally important is the **neglect of data transparency and methodological limitations**. In some cases, insufficient information is provided about data sources, sampling strategies, or analytical procedures. In others, limitations are omitted or downplayed. However, acknowledging limitations is not a sign of weakness; on the contrary, it is a key component of methodological rigor and intellectual honesty, reinforcing the principle of organized skepticism articulated by Robert K. Merton.

Another frequent weakness is **fragmented argumentation and structural incoherence**, particularly in more essayistic forms of writing. When research attempts to address too many themes without a clear analytical thread, the argument becomes diffuse and difficult to follow. In such cases, the lack of structural clarity undermines the overall contribution, regardless of the intrinsic interest of the topic.

A further pitfall reflects the broader transformation of academia under neoliberal conditions: **metric-oriented research behavior**. The increasing emphasis on quantifiable outputs – publication counts, impact factors, citation metrics – has encouraged practices such as “salami slicing,” rapid publication strategies, and the prioritization of quantity over coherence. As scholars such as Wendy Brown and Mariano Ben Plotkin have argued in different contexts, the neoliberal restructuring of knowledge production risks subordinating intellectual inquiry to performance indicators, thereby distorting research agendas and incentives.

Finally, many studies exhibit a **misalignment between research ambition and execution**. This may take the form of highly ambitious theoretical claims unsupported by adequate data or methods, or, conversely, of high-quality empirical work that is not matched by an equally strong conceptual framework. In both cases, the imbalance limits the overall impact of the research.

Taken together, these ten pitfalls should not be understood as isolated errors, but as **systematically produced tendencies** arising from the interaction between local academic conditions and global structures of knowledge production. Addressing them requires more than technical improvement; it calls for a heightened level of **epistemic awareness, methodological reflexivity, and strategic positioning**. By recognizing and avoiding these recurrent weaknesses, researchers can more effectively align their work with international standards of excellence, while also leveraging their specific contexts as sources of analytical and theoretical innovation.

4. Publishing Successfully in SSH

4.1. Types of Academic Publications (articles, books, edited volumes)

The landscape of academic publishing in the social sciences and humanities (SSH) has undergone a significant transformation over the past decades, marked by a gradual but decisive shift from the traditional valorization of **books and monographs** – often associated with the "slow science" model – to an increasing emphasis on **journal articles**, aligned with the logics of "fast science." While books continue to hold symbolic and intellectual prestige, particularly in fields such as history, literary studies, or anthropology, the **primary currency of academic evaluation and advancement has increasingly become the peer-reviewed journal article**.

This shift is closely tied to the globalization of academic evaluation systems, which rely heavily on **standardized and quantifiable indicators** such as journal rankings, impact factors, and citation metrics. Articles are more easily integrated into these systems: they are shorter, faster to produce and review, and more readily indexed in international databases such as Web of Science or Scopus. As a result, they have become the preferred format for demonstrating productivity, visibility, and impact in a competitive academic environment.

In the Romanian context, this transformation has been particularly pronounced and, in some respects, accelerated by national research governance structures. Institutions such as Consiliul Național al Cercetării Științifice (CNCS) and Unitatea Executivă pentru Finanțarea Învățământului Superior, a Cercetării, Dezvoltării și Inovării (UEFISCDI) have contributed to institutionalizing evaluation frameworks that prioritize **indexed journal publications**, often in journals classified according to international standards. These frameworks, while designed to enhance the international competitiveness of Romanian research, have also reinforced the centrality of articles as the dominant form of scholarly output in SSH.

Within this evolving ecosystem, it is essential for researchers to understand the **distinct roles and strategic functions** of different publication types. **Journal articles** are now the most important vehicle for achieving international visibility. They enable researchers to engage directly with current debates, to position their work within specific scholarly

conversations, and to accumulate the types of outputs most valued in evaluation systems. High-quality articles published in reputable international journals are often decisive for career advancement, grant success, and institutional recognition.

At the same time, **books and monographs** continue to play a crucial role, particularly for the development of **complex, integrative arguments** that cannot be easily condensed into article format. Monographs allow for depth, theoretical elaboration, and narrative coherence, and they remain highly valued in certain disciplinary traditions. However, their production is time-intensive, their evaluation is less standardized, and their impact – while potentially substantial – is often less immediately visible in metric-driven systems.

Edited volumes occupy an intermediate position. They can serve as platforms for **network-building, thematic consolidation, and collaborative visibility**, especially in the context of international projects such as Horizon Europe or Twinning initiatives. While individual chapters in edited volumes are generally less valued than journal articles in formal evaluation systems, well-curated volumes published by reputable academic presses can contribute significantly to scholarly reputation and to the structuring of emerging research fields.

Given this configuration, a strategic approach to publishing in SSH requires a **balanced and intentional portfolio** of outputs. Researchers should prioritize the production of **high-quality journal articles** as the backbone of their publication strategy, while also engaging, when appropriate, in book projects and edited volumes that allow for broader intellectual development and collaboration. Importantly, these different formats should not be seen as mutually exclusive, but as **complementary components of a coherent research trajectory**.

Beyond this central distinction, several additional elements are crucial for successful publishing and should be addressed in this section. First, researchers need to be aware of the **hierarchies of journals**, including differences in ranking, scope, and audience, and to align their submissions strategically with journals that best fit their research profile. Second, attention should be paid to the **quality of publishers**, particularly in the case of books and edited volumes, where reputational differences can be substantial. Third, increasing importance should be given to **open access publishing**, which enhances visibility and aligns with European funding requirements, but also raises questions about publication costs and the risk of predatory outlets.

Finally, successful publishing is not only about choosing the right format, but about understanding that publication itself is a **social and strategic process**. It involves positioning one's work within networks of scholarship, responding to peer review, and engaging with evolving standards of academic communication. In this sense, the shift toward article-based publishing should not be understood merely as a constraint, but also as an opportunity: it enables researchers, including those at ULBS, to participate more directly and more visibly in **global academic conversations**.

4.2. Selecting the Right Journal or Publisher

Selecting an appropriate outlet for publication is a **decisive strategic step** in the research process, not a secondary decision made at the end of writing. The contemporary journal landscape in SSH is highly **stratified**, structured by a complex combination of criteria that include prestige, thematic scope, editorial selectivity, indexing status, and, increasingly, **quantitative metrics**. While academic prestige – historically tied to reputation, editorial boards, and intellectual influence – continues to matter, it has been progressively complemented, and in some cases overshadowed, by **metric-based evaluations**, most notably the impact factor and related indicators.

In Romania, this shift has been institutionalized through national research evaluation frameworks coordinated by bodies such as Unitatea Executivă pentru Finanțarea Învățământului Superior, a Cercetării, Dezvoltării și Inovării (UEFISCDI). Journals are commonly classified into **quartiles (Q1–Q4)** based on indicators such as the impact factor and the *scorul relativ de influență*, which reflect their relative standing within international databases. This classification has direct implications for academic careers, funding competitions, and institutional assessments, reinforcing a system in which **not all publications are equally valued**. As a result, publishing strategies must take into account not only thematic fit, but also the **hierarchical positioning of journals** within this evaluative ecosystem.

From a practical perspective, one of the most important principles is that researchers should ideally have a **target journal in mind from the early stages of a project**. This does not imply constraining intellectual creativity, but rather aligning the research design, data collection, methodological approach, and writing style with the expectations of a specific scholarly outlet. Different journals privilege different types of contributions – some emphasize theoretical innovation, others methodological sophistication, and others empirical depth or policy relevance. Calibrating a manuscript to a clearly identified target increases the likelihood of successful submission and reduces the need for substantial reworking after rejection. In this sense, your intuition is entirely correct: **successful publishing begins well before the manuscript is submitted**.

At the same time, researchers must be prepared for the **high probability of rejection**, which has become a structural feature of contemporary academic publishing. Leading journals often report rejection rates exceeding 80–90%, reflecting both the increasing volume of submissions and the intensification of competition under the “publish or perish” model. This pressure has been further amplified by the growing accessibility of writing tools, including AI-assisted technologies, which lower the threshold for manuscript production and contribute to the overall expansion of submissions. In such a context, rejection should not be interpreted as an exception or a failure, but as a **routine stage in the publication process**.

Importantly, rejection also has a **formative function**. Reviewer reports, even when critical, often provide valuable insights into how a manuscript is perceived, where its weaknesses lie, and how it can be improved. Learning to read, interpret, and respond

constructively to peer review is a key professional skill. Over time, this iterative process contributes to the refinement of both individual manuscripts and broader research practices.

Understanding the **temporality and technicalities of the peer-review process** is equally important. Academic publishing typically involves multiple stages: initial editorial screening (desk review), assignment to reviewers, the review process itself, and subsequent rounds of revision. This process is often lengthy, frequently extending over several months or even more than a year. Planning research timelines and career strategies therefore requires an awareness of these temporal constraints.

The dominant model in SSH remains **double-blind peer review**, in which both authors and reviewers are anonymized. This system is widely regarded as a cornerstone of academic quality control, embodying Mertonian principles of **universalism and organized skepticism** by ensuring that manuscripts are evaluated on their merits rather than on the identity or institutional affiliation of the author. It provides a structured mechanism for critical evaluation and, ideally, for the improvement of scholarly work.

At the same time, the peer-review system has been the subject of sustained critique. Scholars have pointed out that peer review can function as a form of **gatekeeping**, reproducing dominant paradigms and privileging established scholars or mainstream approaches (e.g., Pierre Bourdieu on academic fields and symbolic power). Anonymity, while designed to ensure impartiality, may also create conditions in which reviewers can exercise power without accountability, occasionally leading to excessively harsh, biased, or unconstructive evaluations. Furthermore, as Michael J. Mahoney and later studies have suggested, peer review is not immune to **cognitive biases**, including conservatism toward novel ideas or methodological approaches.

More recent discussions have also highlighted issues such as **reviewer fatigue**, increasing workloads, and variability in review quality, all of which affect the consistency and reliability of the process. Alternative models – such as open peer review – have been proposed, yet none has fully replaced the double-blind system, which remains the dominant institutional mechanism despite its limitations.

In navigating this complex landscape, successful researchers combine **strategic targeting, resilience in the face of rejection, and critical engagement with the peer-review process**. Selecting the right journal or publisher is therefore not a one-time decision, but an integral part of a broader publishing strategy – one that balances ambition with realism, and adaptability with intellectual coherence.

4.3. Writing for International Academic Audiences

Writing for international academic audiences in SSH requires more than the clear presentation of research findings; it demands the ability to position one’s work within a

global communicative space that is both linguistically and intellectually structured by asymmetries. At the center of this space stands the dominance of English as the contemporary **lingua franca of academia**. The vast majority of high-impact journals, major conferences, and influential scholarly debates operate in English, making proficiency in academic English not simply an advantage, but an **indispensable condition for participation** in international scholarship.

This linguistic dominance is not neutral. As scholars such as Johan Heilbron and Pascale Casanova have shown, the global circulation of knowledge reflects and reinforces an **unequal geography of intellectual production**, in which certain languages – and the academic communities associated with them – occupy central positions, while others remain peripheral. English-language publishing thus both facilitates global communication and reproduces structural hierarchies. Nevertheless, within this system, **mastery of academic English becomes a practical imperative**. It enables researchers to access international debates, to publish in widely visible venues, and to ensure that their work is read, cited, and engaged with beyond national boundaries.

However, writing in English is not merely a matter of grammatical correctness or vocabulary. It involves acquiring a specific **academic style**, characterized by clarity, precision, argumentative coherence, and sensitivity to disciplinary conventions. In SSH in particular, where interpretation and persuasion are central, **style plays a decisive role in the reception of research**. Even methodologically rigorous studies may struggle to achieve publication if they are poorly structured, excessively descriptive, or stylistically opaque. Conversely, well-crafted writing can enhance the visibility and impact of a study by making its arguments more compelling, accessible, and analytically sharp. In this sense, writing is not an auxiliary skill, but a **core component of scholarly competence**.

A further challenge arises from the need to bring locally grounded research – such as studies focused on Romania – into **global academic conversations**. In the 1990s and early 2000s, Romania attracted considerable international attention as a post-communist society undergoing rapid transformation. Its political and social changes were perceived as analytically significant within broader debates on transition, democratization, and European integration. Over time, however, this initial “mystique” has diminished, as global academic attention has increasingly shifted toward other regions, including the Middle East, Southeast Asia, or sub-Saharan Africa, often driven by geopolitical developments and emerging research agendas.

In this changed context, writing about Romania requires a more deliberate and **imaginative strategy of presentation**. The relevance of Romanian cases can no longer be assumed; it must be actively constructed. This involves identifying angles through which Romanian phenomena speak to **broader theoretical, comparative, or global issues**. For instance, rather than presenting Romania simply as a post-socialist case, researchers might frame their work in relation to themes such as peripheral modernities, hybrid governance regimes, cultural memory in transitional contexts, or the dynamics of European integration at the margins. The aim is not to “rebrand” Romania artificially, but

to reveal how its specificities can illuminate **generalizable processes or underexplored dimensions of existing theories**.

This requires a shift in writing perspective: from addressing a primarily national audience to engaging with an **international readership that may have limited prior knowledge of the Romanian context**. Authors must therefore provide sufficient contextualization without overburdening the text with descriptive detail, and must integrate local empirical material into a **conceptually driven narrative**. The challenge is to make Romania both intelligible and analytically significant – neither exoticized nor trivialized, but positioned as a meaningful site of inquiry.

Ultimately, writing for international academic audiences involves navigating a set of intertwined demands: linguistic competence, stylistic clarity, and strategic framing. For researchers at ULBS, this is not merely a technical task, but a central dimension of their integration into global academia. By mastering academic English, refining their writing style, and developing imaginative ways of presenting local research, they can ensure that their work not only reaches international audiences, but also **resonates within them as relevant, credible, and intellectually engaging contributions**.

4.4. Strategies for Increasing Publication Output

Increasing publication output in SSH is not simply a matter of working more intensively, but of working more **strategically, collaboratively, and sustainably**. In a highly competitive academic environment, successful researchers tend to organize their activities in ways that maximize both productivity and impact, while maintaining standards of quality and integrity. Several interrelated strategies can support this objective.

A first, increasingly relevant dimension concerns the **responsible use of artificial intelligence (AI)** in research and writing. AI-assisted tools can facilitate certain stages of the research process – such as language refinement, structuring arguments, or summarizing literature – but their use must remain aligned with principles of academic integrity. European policy frameworks, including the European Commission's guidelines on trustworthy AI and the broader regulatory orientation reflected in the **EU AI Act**, emphasize transparency, accountability, and human oversight. In academic contexts, this translates into clear expectations: AI tools should not replace original intellectual work, should not be used to generate unverifiable content, and should be **disclosed where relevant**. Used responsibly, AI can enhance productivity; used uncritically, it risks undermining both credibility and ethical standards.

A second key strategy involves the development of **collaborative research networks and co-authorship practices**. Increasingly, high-quality SSH research is produced in collaborative settings that bring together complementary expertise, methodological diversity, and access to different empirical contexts. Co-authorship not only facilitates the production of more complex and ambitious research, but also contributes to the **internationalization of scholarship**, as collaborations often span institutions and countries. For researchers at ULBS, participation in such networks – whether through

European projects, bilateral collaborations, or informal scholarly partnerships – can significantly enhance both visibility and publication opportunities. Moreover, collaborative work often leads to **coordinated publication outputs**, including special issues, edited volumes, and joint articles.

Closely related is the importance of **active participation in academic conferences and dissemination events**. Conferences serve multiple functions: they provide opportunities to present work in progress, receive feedback, and refine arguments before submission to journals. They also function as key sites of **network-building**, where future collaborations and publication projects often originate. Beyond academic conferences, dissemination in policy forums, public lectures, or media platforms can further increase the visibility and societal relevance of research, which is increasingly valued in European funding schemes.

A particularly effective long-term strategy is the development of **coherent research programs**, rather than isolated publications. Instead of treating each article or book as a self-contained endeavor, researchers can design **ambitious, multi-year research trajectories** organized around a central theme, dataset, or conceptual framework. Such programs allow for the systematic production of multiple outputs – articles, book chapters, monographs, and policy reports – each addressing different aspects of a broader research agenda. This approach not only increases publication output, but also enhances **intellectual coherence and cumulative impact**, making it easier to build a recognizable research profile.

Importantly, research programs are well aligned with contemporary funding structures, particularly within European frameworks, which prioritize projects that combine **scientific excellence, collaboration, and societal relevance**. They also enable more efficient use of data and resources, as a single empirical foundation can support multiple analytical angles and publications.

Finally, increasing publication output requires a balance between **productivity and sustainability**. The pressures of the “publish or perish” environment can encourage short-term strategies focused on rapid output, but such approaches risk diminishing quality and long-term impact. A more effective strategy is to combine **consistent writing practices**, collaborative engagement, and programmatic research design with a clear commitment to **academic integrity and intellectual depth**.

In sum, successful publication in SSH today depends on a combination of factors: the **responsible integration of new tools such as AI**, the cultivation of **collaborative networks**, active **engagement with scholarly communities**, and the development of **long-term research programs**. For researchers at ULBS, these strategies offer a pathway not only to increased output, but also to enhanced international visibility and sustained academic relevance.

4.5. Publication Ethics and Academic Integrity

Publication ethics and academic integrity are central to sustaining the credibility of scholarly communication, particularly in an increasingly competitive and metric-driven academic environment. As discussed earlier, the pressures associated with productivity, visibility, and evaluation can create incentives that challenge the normative foundations of research. Within this context, ethical publishing is not merely a matter of compliance with formal rules, but a **core dimension of professional responsibility and scientific legitimacy**.

One of the most visible and problematic developments in recent years is the expansion of the **predatory publishing industry**. These journals and publishing houses exploit the open-access model by charging publication fees without providing genuine peer review or editorial oversight. They often mimic the appearance of legitimate academic outlets, using misleading metrics, fabricated indexing claims, and aggressive solicitation practices. For researchers – particularly early-career scholars or those under institutional pressure to publish – such venues may appear as expedient solutions. However, publishing in predatory outlets carries significant risks: it undermines the credibility of the research, diminishes academic reputation, and contributes to the broader erosion of trust in scientific communication. Awareness and critical evaluation of journal legitimacy are therefore essential skills in the contemporary publishing landscape.

Beyond predatory publishing, several other ethical challenges have become increasingly salient. A major concern is the issue of **plagiarism and self-plagiarism**, including the recycling of previously published material without appropriate acknowledgment. While plagiarism is widely recognized as a serious violation, self-plagiarism is sometimes underestimated, despite its implications for the integrity of the academic record and the inflation of publication output.

Closely related are **questionable authorship practices**, such as honorary (guest) authorship, where individuals are listed without having made a substantial contribution, or ghost authorship, where contributors are omitted. These practices distort the attribution of intellectual labor and undermine the principles of transparency and fairness in scholarly collaboration.

Another area of concern involves **data integrity and reproducibility**. This includes the fabrication or falsification of data, selective reporting of results, and insufficient documentation of research procedures. While such practices are often associated with the natural sciences, they are equally relevant in SSH, particularly in quantitative and mixed-methods research. Ensuring that findings are based on verifiable and transparently presented evidence is fundamental to maintaining trust in research outputs.

The rise of digital tools has also introduced new ethical challenges, particularly regarding the **use of AI in writing and research**. While AI can assist with language editing or structuring, its misuse – such as generating substantive content without critical oversight or failing to disclose its use – raises questions about authorship, originality, and

accountability. Academic institutions and publishers are increasingly developing guidelines to regulate these practices, emphasizing that **intellectual responsibility must remain with the human author**.

In addition, the publication process itself raises ethical considerations related to **peer review and editorial conduct**. Reviewers are expected to provide fair, constructive, and confidential evaluations, avoiding conflicts of interest and respecting the intellectual property of submitted work. Editors, in turn, bear responsibility for ensuring transparent decision-making processes and maintaining the integrity of the review system. Failures in these areas – such as biased reviews, breaches of confidentiality, or editorial favoritism – can compromise the legitimacy of the publication process.

Another important dimension concerns **duplicate submission and redundant publication**, where the same or substantially similar manuscripts are submitted to multiple journals or published in overlapping forms. Such practices not only waste editorial resources but also distort the academic record.

Given these challenges, many international organizations have developed guidelines to support ethical publishing. Bodies such as the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) provide widely recognized standards for authors, reviewers, and editors, covering issues ranging from authorship criteria to retraction procedures. Aligning with such frameworks is increasingly expected in international academic publishing.

For institutions such as ULBS, fostering a culture of publication ethics requires both **institutional support and individual commitment**. This includes training researchers in ethical standards, promoting awareness of predatory practices, and encouraging responsible authorship and data management. At the same time, it involves recognizing that ethical conduct is not opposed to academic success, but is in fact a **precondition for sustainable and credible achievement**.

Ultimately, publication ethics and academic integrity are not peripheral concerns, but foundational elements of scholarly work. In a global academic system characterized by competition and inequality, maintaining high ethical standards is essential not only for individual reputation, but also for the **collective trustworthiness and long-term value of scientific knowledge**.

5. Writing Competitive Research Proposals

5.1. Overview of Funding Opportunities (European and national)

For researchers in the social sciences and humanities, writing competitive proposals begins with a clear understanding of the **architecture of the funding system** within which they operate. At the European level, the dominant framework is **Horizon Europe**, the European Union's flagship research and innovation programme for 2021–2027.

According to the European Commission, Horizon Europe has a total budget of **€95.5 billion** and is structured around three major pillars – **Excellent Science**, **Global Challenges and European Industrial Competitiveness**, and **Innovative Europe** – complemented by a fourth component dedicated to **Widening Participation and Strengthening the European Research Area** (European Commission, 2021a, 2021b). This architecture is especially relevant for universities such as ULBS, since it combines frontier science competitions with collaborative and capacity-building instruments.

Within Horizon Europe, the most prestigious funding opportunities for individual researchers are those of the **European Research Council (ERC)** and the **Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA)**. The ERC offers four core grant schemes. **Starting Grants** target promising early-career researchers who are typically **2 to 7 years after the PhD** and are beginning to establish their independence (European Research Council [ERC], 2025a). **Consolidator Grants** are aimed at researchers who are generally **7 to 12 years after the PhD** and seek to strengthen an already established independent profile (ERC, 2025b). **Advanced Grants** support established leading researchers with a recognized track record of significant achievements (ERC, 2025c), while **Synergy Grants** fund groups of **two to four principal investigators** pursuing ambitious frontier-research problems together (ERC, 2026a). In addition, **Proof of Concept** grants are available to current or recent ERC grantees in order to explore the innovation potential of ERC-funded research (ERC, 2026b). These schemes are widely regarded as among the most prestigious and competitive in Europe, combining very high levels of scientific ambition with extremely selective evaluation.

The **MSCA** architecture is different in logic, but equally important for career development and internationalisation. **Doctoral Networks** support international consortia that train doctoral candidates through structured programmes; **Postdoctoral Fellowships** target researchers holding a PhD who wish to acquire new skills and develop their careers through international, interdisciplinary, and inter-sectoral mobility; **Staff Exchanges** fund short-term international and inter-sectoral exchanges of staff involved in research and innovation; and **COFUND** supports regional, national, and international doctoral or postdoctoral programmes that adopt MSCA standards and best practices (European Commission, 2026a, 2026b, 2026c, 2026d). For SSH researchers, MSCA schemes are often crucial stepping stones for international visibility, mobility, and consortium-building, even if they are less individually prestigious than ERC grants. They are, however, also highly competitive, because they combine scientific quality with demanding expectations regarding training, supervision, and mobility.

Beyond ERC and MSCA, Horizon Europe also provides important collaborative opportunities through **Cluster calls**, **Research Infrastructures**, **European Partnerships**, **Missions**, and especially the **WIDERA** component. For many SSH researchers, these collaborative calls are more accessible entry points than ERC frontier competitions, particularly in areas such as democracy, inequalities, culture, heritage, migration, and governance. The ELABCHROM project itself is an example of this logic, having been funded under the Widening framework in order to strengthen institutional

capacity and foster alignment with the European Research Area (European Commission, 2021a, 2021c).

At the **national level**, the Romanian funding architecture coordinated by **UEFISCDI** reflects, to a significant extent, the broader European paradigm. The core competition instruments include **Proiecte de Cercetare Postdoctorală (PD)**, **Proiecte de Cercetare pentru Stimularea Tinerelor Echipe Independente (TE)**, **Proiecte de Cercetare Exploratorie (PCE)**, and **Proiecte Complexe de Cercetare de Frontieră (PCCF)**. The **PD** scheme is designed to provide young postdoctoral researchers with financial and institutional support for building a stable career in research and increasing the international visibility of Romanian scholarship (UEFISCDI, 2021a). The **TE** scheme targets young researchers who have already established an independent research agenda and are ready to create or consolidate their own research team (UEFISCDI, 2023a). The **PCE** competition supports advanced exploratory and fundamental research, explicitly addressing researchers with internationally recognized scientific results (UEFISCDI, 2026a). PCCF competitions, in turn, are intended for larger-scale frontier-research projects capable of supporting more ambitious teams and agendas, while other instruments such as **PED** also complement the system at the applied or demonstrative level (UEFISCDI, 2023b).

This resemblance between the national and European funding architectures is not accidental. It reflects a process of **institutional isomorphism**, in the sense formulated by DiMaggio and Powell (1983), whereby organizations and systems increasingly converge toward models perceived as legitimate, successful, or internationally authoritative. In Romania, this convergence is visible in the adoption of the language of **excellence**, **international visibility**, **project-based competition**, and **performance evaluation**, all of which mirror the dominant EU research policy paradigm. National competitions increasingly reward the same types of academic behavior valorized at European level: internationally visible publications, mobility, team leadership, and competitive project management.

At the same time, however, the Romanian system remains substantially more **volatile and fragile** than the European one. The convergence in evaluation logic has not been matched by a similar convergence in **stability of funding** or **resource levels**. Romania continues to rank among the weakest-funded research systems in the EU. According to Eurostat, **R&D expenditure in the EU amounted to 2.24% of GDP in 2024**, while Romania remains far below the European average and among the lowest-performing member states in terms of research investment (Eurostat, 2025a). Eurostat also reports that final government budget allocations for R&D at EU level stood at **€284.3 per person in 2024**, whereas Romania was among the lowest-funded systems in the Union already in **2023**, with only **€21.2 per person**, ahead of only a very small number of countries (Eurostat, 2024, 2025b). The European Commission's Policy Support Facility review likewise emphasized Romania's structural weaknesses, low R&D intensity, and strong dependence on EU funds for public investment in research and innovation (European Commission, 2022).

For Romanian researchers, this creates a dual reality. On the one hand, the **evaluation paradigm** of the national system increasingly resembles that of Horizon Europe: excellence, publications, mobility, international networks, and project leadership all matter more than before. On the other hand, the **institutional environment** remains more unstable, affected by political volatility, discontinuities in competition calendars, and chronic underfunding. For researchers at ULBS, this means that proposal writing should be approached across **both levels simultaneously**. National competitions can serve as important stepping stones for building preliminary results, teams, and institutional credibility, while European competitions remain the main arena for achieving high-level scientific recognition, larger budgets, and durable international visibility.

In practical terms, funding opportunities should be understood not as isolated calls, but as elements of a broader **career architecture**. PD and TE competitions can support early independence; PCE and PCCF can consolidate more ambitious research agendas; MSCA schemes can deepen internationalisation and mobility; and ERC grants represent the highest frontier of individual excellence in European academia. In a structurally unequal environment, understanding this architecture is itself a competitive advantage.

5.2. Key Elements of a Successful Proposal

Despite the increasing rationalization of research evaluation and the growing standardization introduced by contemporary funding systems, there is still **no fixed recipe or blueprint for a successful research proposal**. Evaluation procedures have become more formalized, criteria more explicit, and expectations more transparent, yet success continues to depend on a complex combination of intellectual quality, strategic positioning, and contextual fit. In this sense, proposal writing remains both a **structured and an interpretive exercise**, situated at the intersection of institutional norms and scholarly creativity.

At the core of any competitive proposal lies the requirement of **originality**. However, originality in SSH should not be understood as radical novelty in the sense of entirely unprecedented topics or methods. Rather, it is always **relational**, defined in reference to the existing **state of the art**. As Thomas S. Kuhn (1962) has shown, scientific progress often occurs through the reconfiguration of existing paradigms rather than through constant revolutionary breakthroughs. In SSH, originality typically involves **re-interrogating established questions, offering new interpretations, or applying existing concepts in novel empirical contexts**. A successful proposal demonstrates a precise awareness of current debates and shows how it moves beyond them – whether by refining, challenging, or extending existing knowledge.

Closely related is the criterion of **innovation**, which, like originality, must be understood as embedded within a **network of existing ideas and practices**. Innovation does not emerge in a vacuum; it is recognized as such only in relation to what is already known and valued within a field. As Pierre Bourdieu (2004) argues, the scientific field is structured by positions and struggles over legitimacy, and what counts as innovative depends on how a contribution is situated within these dynamics. In SSH, innovation may

take multiple forms: conceptual (introducing new analytical categories), methodological (combining or adapting methods), or empirical (bringing new types of data or cases into discussion). Importantly, proposals must **make this innovation legible** to evaluators, clearly articulating what is new and why it matters.

Beyond originality and innovation, several additional elements are crucial. One is **conceptual and theoretical clarity**: a strong proposal must demonstrate a coherent framework that links research questions, concepts, and expected contributions. Another is **methodological robustness**, ensuring that the proposed methods are appropriate, feasible, and well-justified in relation to the research objectives. Increasingly important as well is the dimension of **feasibility and project design**, including a realistic work plan, clearly defined tasks, and an achievable timeline. Evaluators are not only interested in what a project proposes to do, but also in whether it can be **credibly delivered within the proposed timeframe and resources**.

Equally significant is the growing emphasis on **public utility and societal relevance**. European and national funding frameworks increasingly require proposals to demonstrate potential contributions beyond academia, whether in terms of policy relevance, social impact, cultural value, or public engagement. This reflects a broader shift toward what is often described as the "impact agenda," in which research is expected to contribute to addressing societal challenges.

However, this emphasis also raises important tensions. As scholars such as Wendy Brown (2015) and Sheila Slaughter and Gary Rhoades (2004) have argued, the increasing alignment of academic research with market logics and policy imperatives risks framing knowledge as a **commodified resource**, valued primarily for its instrumental utility. In this context, there is a danger that SSH research may be evaluated predominantly in terms of short-term applicability, rather than its broader intellectual or critical contributions.

It is therefore essential to maintain a balanced perspective. **Fundamental research** – driven by theoretical curiosity, conceptual development, and long-term inquiry – remains indispensable to the advancement of knowledge. At the same time, SSH research plays a crucial role in providing **critical perspectives** that question dominant assumptions, reveal underlying power structures, and contribute to a deeper understanding of social processes. As Jürgen Habermas (1971) emphasized, knowledge is not only instrumental but also **critical and emancipatory**, enabling societies to reflect upon and transform themselves.

A successful proposal, therefore, is one that manages to **integrate these different dimensions**. It articulates a clearly original and innovative contribution, grounded in a solid understanding of the state of the art; it demonstrates methodological rigor and feasibility; and it situates its relevance both within academic debates and in relation to broader societal concerns – without reducing itself to purely instrumental goals.

Ultimately, writing a competitive proposal in SSH requires more than meeting formal criteria. It involves the capacity to **position a research idea within multiple evaluative frameworks simultaneously**: scientific, institutional, and societal. In an increasingly competitive environment, this capacity becomes a defining feature of successful researchers and a key driver of academic advancement.

5.3. Excellence, Impact, and Implementation

The triad of **excellence, impact, and implementation** – central to contemporary research funding frameworks, particularly within Horizon Europe – does more than structure proposal evaluation: it actively shapes the academic field by defining what counts as valuable knowledge, credible research practice, and legitimate scholarly achievement (European Commission, 2021a). In this context, **winning a competitive research grant is not merely an outcome**, but a transformative process that contributes to the construction of both **institutional research cultures** and **individual academic trajectories**.

At the institutional level, successful grant acquisition plays a crucial role in cultivating a **culture of research excellence**. Universities that consistently attract competitive funding – especially from highly selective schemes such as those of the European Research Council – signal their capacity to produce high-quality, internationally recognized research. This, in turn, reinforces their position within global academic hierarchies, where **prestige is increasingly tied to performance indicators such as grant income, publication output, and international visibility** (Hazelkorn, 2015). Funding success enables institutions to invest in infrastructure, attract talented researchers, and develop strategic research agendas, thereby generating a cumulative dynamic of excellence.

Simultaneously, grant success contributes to the construction of an **exemplary academic status** for principal investigators (PIs) and their teams. Within the academic field, competitive grants function as powerful markers of **symbolic capital**, signaling not only intellectual merit but also the ability to mobilize resources, lead complex projects, and engage with international research networks. As Pierre Bourdieu (1988) argued, academic prestige is relational and accumulative, structured by recognition within the field. Securing major grants enhances a researcher's visibility, credibility, and authority, often translating into further opportunities such as invitations to collaborate, editorial positions, or leadership roles in international consortia.

Beyond these immediate effects, the **impact of successfully funded projects unfolds across multiple, interrelated scales**.

At the **national level**, competitive research funding contributes to the consolidation of a more robust and internationally integrated research system. Projects funded through European or high-level national schemes introduce advanced methodological standards, foster international collaboration, and promote practices aligned with open science and

research integrity. In contexts such as Romania, where research systems face structural challenges related to underfunding and fragmentation, participation in competitive funding schemes plays a particularly important role in **raising the overall quality and visibility of national research output**, while also facilitating integration into the European Research Area.

At the **institutional level**, the successful implementation of funded projects generates tangible and intangible benefits. These include the development of research infrastructure, the strengthening of administrative and managerial capacities, and the institutionalization of best practices in project management, data governance, and dissemination. Importantly, successful projects often have a **demonstration effect**, serving as models for other researchers within the institution and contributing to the diffusion of grant-writing skills and strategic thinking. Over time, this leads to the emergence of **institutional ecosystems of competitiveness**, in which experience and expertise are shared and amplified.

At the **individual level**, the impact is equally significant. Researchers involved in funded projects acquire not only financial resources but also **experiential knowledge**: how to design competitive proposals, manage complex collaborations, navigate reporting requirements, and communicate results to diverse audiences. These competencies are increasingly central to academic careers, particularly in an environment where research funding is both scarce and highly competitive. Participation in successful projects thus enhances researchers' professional profiles and expands their capacity to engage in future funding competitions.

These cumulative dynamics can be understood through the lens of Matthew effect, as formulated by Robert K. Merton (1968). According to this principle, **initial advantages tend to generate further advantages over time**. In the context of research funding, those who succeed in securing grants acquire not only resources but also reputation, networks, and procedural know-how, all of which increase their likelihood of future success. This produces a **virtuous circle** in which prior achievements reinforce subsequent opportunities, contributing to cumulative inequality within the academic field.

Importantly, this dynamic is not purely individual but also institutional: universities and research centers with a strong track record of funding success are better positioned to attract additional grants, further consolidating their status within the global academic hierarchy. While this can lead to concentration effects, it also underscores the strategic importance of **building early capacities for grant acquisition and project implementation**, particularly in less advantaged institutional contexts.

In sum, excellence, impact, and implementation are not merely evaluative criteria but **structuring principles of contemporary academic life**. Winning and successfully implementing research grants contributes simultaneously to **institutional development, national research capacity, and individual academic advancement**, while also activating cumulative processes that shape long-term trajectories of success within the global knowledge economy.

5.4. Practical Tips from Evaluators and Experienced Researchers

While there is no fixed formula for writing a winning proposal, evaluators and experienced researchers converge on a set of **practical principles** that consistently make the difference between competitive and unsuccessful applications. These are not rigid rules, but **strategic orientations** that reflect how proposals are actually read, interpreted, and judged in highly competitive environments.

A first essential principle is to **start from the evaluation criteria and write "backwards" from them**. Rather than treating criteria such as *excellence, impact, and implementation* as formal requirements to be addressed at the end, successful applicants structure the entire proposal around them from the outset. This means ensuring that each section clearly and explicitly responds to what evaluators are asked to assess. In practice, evaluators often read proposals **through the lens of scoring grids**, and proposals that make this alignment visible have a clear advantage.

Equally important is the need to **position the project sharply within the state of the art**. Experienced evaluators consistently emphasize that many proposals fail not because they lack good ideas, but because they do not convincingly demonstrate what exactly is new. A strong proposal does not simply summarize existing literature, but **identifies a precise gap, tension, or overlooked dimension**, and shows how the project addresses it. This positioning should be concise, focused, and directly connected to the research objectives.

A third key recommendation concerns **internal coherence**. One of the most common weaknesses observed in evaluation practice is the misalignment between research questions, theoretical framework, methodology, and expected results. Competitive proposals ensure that these elements form a **logically integrated whole**, where each component clearly follows from the others. Evaluators tend to reward proposals that "make sense" structurally, even when dealing with complex topics.

Another recurrent piece of advice is to aim for **credible ambition**. Funding schemes, especially at the European level, value ambitious and high-impact research. However, overambitious proposals that attempt to cover too many objectives, cases, or methods often lose credibility. Experienced applicants strike a balance by proposing projects that are **intellectually ambitious but operationally realistic**, with clearly defined priorities and achievable outcomes.

In terms of methodology, evaluators consistently stress the importance of **specificity and justification**. It is not sufficient to list methods; proposals must explain **why these methods are appropriate**, how data will be collected and analyzed, and how potential limitations will be addressed. In SSH in particular, methodological rigor is often demonstrated through **reflexivity and transparency**, rather than technical complexity alone.

The **impact dimension** also requires careful strategic thinking. Rather than treating impact as an afterthought or equating it with dissemination, strong proposals articulate **concrete pathways to impact**: who the relevant stakeholders are, how they will be engaged, and what changes the project is expected to generate. This includes both academic impact and broader societal relevance, aligned with current policy expectations while maintaining intellectual integrity.

From a writing perspective, one of the most frequently cited recommendations is deceptively simple: **write for the evaluator, not for yourself**. Evaluators read under time constraints and across diverse fields. Clarity, structure, and readability are therefore decisive. This involves using clear headings, avoiding unnecessary jargon, and ensuring that key ideas are easily identifiable. A well-written proposal reduces cognitive effort for the evaluator and increases the likelihood that its strengths will be recognized.

Another practical insight concerns the importance of **iterative refinement and feedback**. Successful proposals are rarely written in a single draft. They are the result of multiple revisions, peer feedback, and, ideally, input from colleagues with evaluation experience. This process helps identify blind spots, clarify arguments, and improve coherence.

Collaboration also plays a strategic role. Working within **networks of experienced co-authors or partners** can significantly strengthen a proposal, not only by enhancing expertise but also by increasing credibility and international visibility. At the same time, collaborations must be meaningful: each partner should have a clearly defined and necessary role within the project.

Finally, experienced researchers emphasize the importance of **learning from both success and failure**. Unsuccessful proposals are not wasted efforts; they provide valuable insights into evaluation expectations and can often be improved and resubmitted. Over time, this leads to the accumulation of tacit knowledge – what Michael Polanyi (1966) famously described as knowledge that is difficult to formalize but essential for skilled practice. In the context of research funding, this includes an intuitive understanding of evaluators' expectations, the ability to anticipate potential weaknesses, and the capacity to strategically position a proposal within the competitive landscape. This form of **"proposal-writing expertise"** significantly increases the chances of future success.

In sum, writing a competitive proposal is not only about having a strong idea, but about the ability to **translate that idea into a clear, coherent, and strategically aligned document**. The most successful applicants are those who understand that proposal writing is both a scientific and a rhetorical practice, shaped by the norms and expectations of an increasingly competitive funding landscape.

6. Increasing Research Visibility and Impact

6.1. Academic Networking and Collaboration

nderstanding how research visibility and impact are produced requires moving beyond an individualistic view of academic work and situating knowledge production within broader **relational structures**. Scientific knowledge is not generated in isolation, but within what are often described as **epistemic communities** – configurations of researchers, institutions, and networks that share cognitive frameworks, methodological orientations, and communication channels.

A useful starting point for conceptualizing these communities is the notion of the **"network society"** developed by Manuel Castells (1996). In this perspective, contemporary social life – including scientific activity – is increasingly organized through **networked structures** enabled by digital communication technologies. Epistemic communities can thus be understood as **networked socio-cognitive systems**, in which knowledge is co-produced through distributed interactions among actors who are connected across institutions, countries, and disciplinary boundaries. Access to these networks is uneven, depending on factors such as institutional affiliation, access to funding, technological infrastructure, and integration into international publication circuits. As a result, epistemic communities are not flat or egalitarian, but **stratified and hierarchical**, with varying degrees of visibility, influence, and resource control.

This networked perspective can be further deepened by incorporating Pierre Bourdieu's concept of the **scientific field** (Bourdieu, 1988; 2004). For Bourdieu, science constitutes a relatively autonomous social field structured by relations of competition and cooperation among actors who seek to accumulate **scientific capital** – that is, recognition, prestige, and authority. Within this field, positions are unequally distributed, and actors' capacity to influence knowledge production depends on their location within the structure. Importantly, the field is not homogeneous: it is internally differentiated into **subfields or disciplines**, each governed by its own stakes, norms, and evaluative criteria.

From this perspective, SSH domains can be seen as a **network of interconnected fields**, where disciplines (e.g., sociology, anthropology, cultural studies) function as semi-autonomous arenas with distinct intellectual traditions and hierarchies of prestige. At the same time, these fields are increasingly interconnected through interdisciplinary collaborations, shared funding schemes, and transnational research agendas. The result is a **multilayered epistemic architecture**, where researchers simultaneously operate within local institutional contexts, disciplinary fields, and global scientific networks.

Within such a framework, **research visibility and impact are not simply the result of intrinsic scientific quality**, but of **positionality within these epistemic networks and fields**. Visibility emerges from being embedded in networks that enable the circulation of knowledge – through co-authorship, conference participation, editorial activities, and institutional partnerships. Impact, in turn, depends on the extent to which one's work is recognized, taken up, and mobilized by others within the field and beyond.

This implies that academic networking and collaboration are not peripheral activities, but **constitutive dimensions of knowledge production itself**. Collaborations facilitate access to new datasets, methodologies, and theoretical perspectives, while also expanding the reach of research outputs across different audiences and contexts. Moreover, participation in international networks enhances both **intellectual exchange and symbolic visibility**, contributing to the accumulation of scientific capital.

At the same time, it is important to recognize that these dynamics are structured by **inequalities of access and power**. Researchers affiliated with institutions in the global academic "core" often benefit from greater access to funding, publication venues, and high-impact networks, while those in more peripheral contexts must navigate additional barriers to visibility. In this sense, increasing research visibility is not only a matter of individual strategy, but also of **strategic positioning within unequal epistemic infrastructures**.

In conclusion, academic networking and collaboration should be understood as central mechanisms through which research visibility and impact are produced. Situated within the broader framework of the network society and the scientific field, they reflect the fundamentally **relational, stratified, and competitive nature of contemporary knowledge production**. For researchers and institutions alike, success depends on the ability to **build, maintain, and strategically leverage positions within these epistemic networks**, transforming connections into recognition and recognition into impact.

6.2. Building an Online Research Profile

6.2.1. Open Access Platforms and Researcher Profiles (e.g., ORCID, ResearchGate, Google Scholar)

The digital transformation of academia has profoundly reshaped the structure and functioning of epistemic communities. Building on the framework outlined above, digitalization has intensified the **networked character of knowledge production**, expanding both the scale and speed at which scientific communication occurs. In the context of the "network society" described by Manuel Castells, epistemic communities have become increasingly mediated by digital infrastructures that facilitate the circulation, visibility, and evaluation of research outputs.

A key dimension of this transformation is the emergence of **open access platforms** and **digital researcher profiles**, which function as central nodes within contemporary academic networks. Platforms such as Academia.edu and ResearchGate, alongside identity and indexing systems such as ORCID, Google Scholar, and Web of Science, form a broader **digital assemblage of scientometric infrastructures**. These platforms do not merely host research outputs; they actively structure how knowledge is disseminated, discovered, and evaluated, thereby shaping the dynamics of visibility and recognition within the academic field.

Under the pressures of digitalization and the broader **neoliberal transformation of higher education**, researchers are increasingly encouraged – if not compelled – to cultivate a **distinct online presence**. This entails the construction of a recognizable **"academic profile" or personal brand**, through which scholars present their publications, projects, and achievements to both specialized and broader audiences. In this sense, the contemporary researcher is no longer only a producer of knowledge, but also a **curator and promoter of their own intellectual output**.

This shift brings significant opportunities. First, digital platforms provide unprecedented possibilities for **showcasing research**. Publications, preprints, datasets, and conference outputs can be made rapidly accessible to global audiences, often bypassing traditional barriers of access and distribution. Open access infrastructures, in particular, contribute to the **democratization of knowledge**, enabling wider dissemination beyond well-resourced institutional environments.

Second, these platforms facilitate new forms of **engagement and connectivity**. Researchers can connect with peers across geographical and disciplinary boundaries, participate in academic discussions, and engage with **non-academic publics**, including policymakers, practitioners, and civil society actors. In this sense, digital profiles function as **interfaces between academia and society**, enhancing both visibility and potential impact.

At the same time, these developments are accompanied by significant tensions and risks. As critical scholars have noted, the increasing emphasis on visibility, metrics, and online presence reflects a broader process of **marketization and "brandification" of academic life**. Drawing on the work of Axel Honneth, one can interpret this shift as part of a struggle for recognition under conditions shaped by competitive individualism. Researchers are increasingly positioned as **"digital entrepreneurs"**, compelled to compete for attention, citations, and symbolic capital within a highly quantified and performance-oriented environment.

This dynamic contributes to the **commodification of research**, where knowledge is evaluated not only for its intellectual merit but also for its visibility, reach, and measurable impact. Scientometric indicators – such as citation counts, h-index scores, and platform-specific metrics – become proxies for value, reinforcing a system in which **recognition is increasingly mediated by quantification**. In Bourdieusian terms, this reflects a transformation in the forms of capital that structure the scientific field, with digital visibility becoming a key component of contemporary scientific capital.

Moreover, the integration of these platforms into everyday academic practice risks subjecting epistemic communities to the **ethos of the market**, where competition, self-promotion, and continuous visibility become normative expectations. While these dynamics can enhance dissemination and connectivity, they may also generate pressures toward **strategic self-branding**, short-term visibility, and the prioritization of "marketable" research topics over more fundamental or critical inquiries.

In conclusion, building an online research profile is now an integral component of academic work within digitally mediated epistemic communities. It offers powerful tools for increasing visibility, fostering collaboration, and engaging broader audiences. At the same time, it requires a **reflexive and critical approach**, recognizing both the opportunities and the structural pressures embedded in these platforms. Navigating this landscape effectively means balancing **strategic visibility with intellectual integrity**, ensuring that digital presence serves the advancement of knowledge rather than its reduction to mere visibility metrics.

6.3. Dissemination Beyond Academia

In recent decades, there has been a growing expectation that research should extend beyond the "ivory tower" of academia and engage more directly with society. This shift is driven both by policy frameworks – particularly within the European Union, where concepts such as **Responsible Research and Innovation (RRI)** and societal impact have become central (European Commission, 2012, 2021b) – and by broader transformations in the relationship between science and society. Scholars such as Helga Nowotny, Peter Scott, and Michael Gibbons (2001) have described this transition as a move toward **"Mode 2" knowledge production**, characterized by context-driven, socially distributed, and application-oriented research. In this context, researchers are increasingly expected not only to produce knowledge but also to **communicate, translate, and "give back"** that knowledge to wider publics.

A major intellectual response to this shift is Michael Burawoy's influential concept of **public sociology** (Burawoy, 2005). Burawoy distinguishes between professional, policy, critical, and public sociology, arguing for a more active engagement of sociologists with diverse publics beyond academia. Public sociology seeks to foster dialogue between researchers and society, making sociological knowledge accessible, relevant, and reflexive. Importantly, it is not simply about popularization, but about **mutual engagement**, where knowledge circulates between academia and the public sphere.

The influence of this approach has extended across the social sciences and humanities, giving rise to analogous movements such as **public anthropology** (e.g., Robert Borofsky, 2011), **public history** (e.g., Thomas Cauvin, 2016), and related initiatives in fields such as geography, political science, and cultural studies. These approaches share a common commitment to making disciplinary knowledge **socially relevant, accessible, and dialogical**, while maintaining scholarly rigor.

At its core, the idea of **public social science** involves rethinking the role of the researcher: from a distant observer to an **engaged participant in societal debates**. This entails translating complex ideas into accessible language, addressing issues of public concern, and contributing to informed public discourse. It also implies a shift in communication practices, moving beyond traditional academic outputs toward more diverse and interactive forms of dissemination.

In practical terms, dissemination beyond academia can take multiple forms:

- **Public lectures and community events**, organized in collaboration with cultural institutions, NGOs, or local authorities;
- **Media engagement**, including interviews, opinion pieces, and contributions to public debates;
- **Blogs, podcasts, and social media communication**, which allow researchers to present their work in accessible formats and reach broader audiences;
- **Policy briefs and advisory roles**, translating research findings into actionable insights for decision-makers;
- **Educational outreach**, including collaborations with schools and informal learning environments.

These practices contribute not only to visibility, but also to the **societal relevance and legitimacy of research**, reinforcing the role of SSH in addressing contemporary challenges.

A more far-reaching approach to public engagement is represented by **co-creation and citizen science**. Citizen science involves the active participation of non-professional actors in the research process, ranging from data collection to analysis and even co-design of research questions (Bonney et al., 2009; Irwin, 1995). Within European research policy, citizen science is increasingly promoted as part of open science and participatory governance frameworks (European Commission, 2020).

Co-creation takes this logic further by positioning stakeholders – not merely as contributors, but as **partners in knowledge production**. This approach is particularly relevant in SSH, where local knowledge, lived experience, and community perspectives can significantly enrich research processes and outcomes.

However, these developments also introduce important **epistemic tensions**. The inclusion of citizens as co-producers of knowledge challenges traditional hierarchies between expert and lay knowledge. While this democratization of research can enhance relevance and inclusivity, it also raises questions about **authority, validity, and standards of evidence**. As scholars have noted, citizen science requires careful negotiation between scientific rigor and participatory openness, ensuring that collaboration does not compromise the quality of research while still valuing diverse forms of knowledge.

In conclusion, dissemination beyond academia reflects a broader transformation in the role of research within society. From public sociology to citizen science, these approaches emphasize **engagement, dialogue, and co-production**, expanding the scope of academic work. For researchers, this entails not only new opportunities for impact and visibility, but also new responsibilities – and challenges – in navigating the relationship between knowledge, publics, and power.

6.4. Measuring Research Impact (citations, altmetrics)

The contemporary emphasis on measuring research impact through citations and alternative metrics reflects a broader transformation in the governance of science. Over the past decades, academic evaluation has undergone a process of **rationalization**, in the Weberian sense articulated by Max Weber: the increasing organization of social life through calculation, efficiency, predictability, and control. Within academia, this has translated into the **standardization and quantification of research evaluation**, where complex intellectual contributions are rendered comparable through numerical indicators.

A key moment in this transformation was the development of citation indexing systems by Eugene Garfield, which led to the creation of the Institute for Scientific Information (ISI), later incorporated into Web of Science. These infrastructures enabled the large-scale tracking of citations, laying the foundation for a new regime of **scientometric evaluation**. Over time, a range of indicators emerged, including the **impact factor** (journal-level metric), the **h-index** (individual-level metric), and various citation-based rankings. More recently, **altmetrics** have expanded this landscape by capturing online attention (downloads, mentions, social media visibility), further integrating digital traces into the evaluation of research impact.

Together, these developments have reshaped not only how research is assessed, but also how it is **produced, communicated, and valued**. Researchers increasingly operate within a system where visibility, citation counts, and measurable impact play a central role in career advancement, funding success, and institutional prestige.

Despite their apparent objectivity, scientometric indicators have been subject to sustained critique across the social sciences and humanities. At least five major lines of criticism can be identified:

1. Reductionism and loss of epistemic richness

Quantitative metrics reduce complex intellectual contributions to simplified numerical proxies. This risks obscuring the **qualitative dimensions of research**, such as theoretical innovation, conceptual depth, or long-term intellectual influence, which are not easily captured by citation counts.

2. Disciplinary biases and structural inequalities

Citation practices vary significantly across disciplines, languages, and regions. SSH fields, in particular, are disadvantaged by systems that privilege **English-language journal articles** and fast-citation cycles. This reproduces global inequalities between academic “core” and “periphery,” reinforcing asymmetries in visibility and recognition.

3. Incentivizing strategic and sometimes distortive behaviors

Metrics can shape researcher behavior in unintended ways, encouraging practices such as **salami slicing** (fragmenting research into multiple publications), excessive self-citation, or prioritizing "trendy" topics likely to generate citations. In this sense, evaluation systems do not merely measure science – they actively **reconfigure its production**.

4. Short-termism and the erosion of fundamental research

The emphasis on measurable impact often privileges research that produces **rapid and visible outputs**, potentially at the expense of long-term, foundational, or critical inquiry. This can be particularly detrimental to SSH, where significant contributions may unfold over extended periods.

5. Metric dominance and the redefinition of academic value

As metrics become central to evaluation, they risk transforming the very meaning of academic success. In Bourdieusian terms, they contribute to a shift in the forms of capital that structure the scientific field, privileging **quantifiable visibility over substantive intellectual contribution**.

In response to these concerns, various initiatives have emerged within the global academic community to promote more responsible and context-sensitive approaches to research assessment. Notably, the Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment (CoARA) and its associated agreements advocate for a move away from the overreliance on journal-based metrics and toward more **qualitative, multidimensional evaluation practices**.

Similarly, the **San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA)** and the **Leiden Manifesto for Research Metrics** articulate principles aimed at restoring balance between quantitative indicators and expert judgment. These initiatives emphasize the need to **evaluate research on its own merits**, consider disciplinary diversity, and avoid the misuse of metrics as simplistic proxies for quality.

Rather than rejecting metrics altogether, a more productive approach is to advocate for their **responsible and reflexive use**. Metrics can provide useful information when employed as **complementary tools**, embedded within broader evaluative frameworks that include peer review, qualitative assessment, and contextual understanding.

For assessing individual merit, this implies recognizing that:

- metrics should be interpreted **in context** (discipline, career stage, publication practices);
- no single indicator can capture the full value of a researcher's contribution;
- qualitative dimensions – such as originality, theoretical insight, and societal relevance – remain indispensable.

In this sense, the challenge is not to eliminate quantification, but to **reintegrate it within a more nuanced and pluralistic understanding of scientific value**. Such an approach allows epistemic communities to benefit from the informational advantages of metrics while resisting their reductionist and potentially distorting effects.

In conclusion, the rise of scientometric evaluation reflects broader processes of rationalization and standardization in contemporary academia. While metrics have become indispensable tools in navigating an increasingly complex research landscape, their dominance also raises fundamental questions about **what counts as valuable knowledge**. Addressing these tensions requires a critical and reflexive stance – one that balances efficiency with intellectual integrity, and quantification with judgment.

7. Open Science, Research Ethics, and Responsible Practices

7.1. Open Access Publishing

The rise of **open access publishing** must be understood against the background of the older subscription-based model that dominated scholarly communication for most of the twentieth century. Under that model, researchers – typically employed by publicly funded universities and often supported by public research grants – produced articles, reviewed manuscripts, and served on editorial boards, while publishers controlled access to the final outputs through journal subscriptions and licensing arrangements. Over time, this system became increasingly concentrated in the hands of a relatively small number of large commercial publishers, including Elsevier, Springer Nature, Wiley, Taylor & Francis, and Sage. Large-scale bibliometric studies have documented this concentration, describing it as an **oligopolistic structure** in academic publishing (Larivière, Haustein, & Mongeon, 2015).

From a normative perspective, this concentration sits uneasily with the classic Mertonian understanding of science as governed by the principle of **communalism**, whereby scientific knowledge should circulate as a common good rather than remain enclosed behind proprietary barriers (Merton, 1973). The subscription model effectively enabled private corporations to appropriate and monetize access to knowledge that had often been produced through public funding and academic labor. This tension helped fuel the open access movement, which emerged as a challenge to the idea that publicly funded research should remain inaccessible to the publics that financed it. Policy frameworks at the European level explicitly frame open access as part of a broader commitment to **open science** and the democratization of knowledge (European Commission, 2012, 2021).

At the same time, the transition to open access has not simply replaced a closed system with a fully emancipatory one. In many cases, the new paradigm has preserved the central role – and financial interests – of major publishers, while shifting the payment structure. Instead of charging readers or libraries for access, publishers increasingly rely on **article processing charges (APCs)** and large-scale **transformative agreements** negotiated with institutions and national consortia. These arrangements make research outputs

freely accessible to readers, but often at significant cost to public institutions. Recent analyses have shown that such agreements can reproduce existing market concentrations while maintaining high levels of expenditure (Borrego, Anglada, & Abadal, 2021).

This ambivalence is important to emphasize. The **advantages** of open access are substantial. It expands access to knowledge for researchers, students, practitioners, and the wider public, thereby enhancing the **visibility, dissemination, and potential impact** of research. It also aligns with contemporary expectations regarding transparency, accountability, and the public value of science. Within **Horizon Europe**, open access is not merely encouraged but required: beneficiaries must ensure **immediate open access to scientific publications**, reflecting the European Commission's commitment to open science (European Commission, 2021).

However, the **disadvantages and structural tensions** are equally significant. First, costs are not eliminated but redistributed, often placing financial pressure on institutions and funding bodies. Second, this model may generate new inequalities, as well-resourced institutions are better positioned to cover APCs or negotiate agreements. Third, the persistence of dominant commercial actors raises concerns about the **marketization of knowledge** and the continued commodification of publicly funded research. As such, open access represents not a complete rupture, but a **reconfiguration of the political economy of academic publishing**.

Within this evolving landscape, several **models of open access** can be distinguished. **Gold open access** refers to immediate publication in open access journals, often financed through APCs. **Green open access** involves self-archiving versions of publications in institutional or disciplinary repositories. **Diamond open access** refers to non-commercial models where neither authors nor readers are charged, typically supported by academic institutions or public funding (Fuchs & Sandoval, 2013). Each model reflects different balances between accessibility, cost, and institutional control.

At the European level, open access is embedded within a broader policy framework promoting **open science**, including FAIR data principles and wider accessibility of research outputs (European Commission, 2021). At the national level, Romania has developed institutional mechanisms to facilitate this transition. A key example is the **ANELIS Plus consortium**, which negotiates national-level agreements with major publishers. Through these agreements, researchers affiliated with participating institutions can publish open access without directly paying APCs, as costs are covered collectively. This arrangement provides clear advantages: it reduces financial barriers for individual researchers, increases international visibility, and supports compliance with European funding requirements (ANELIS Plus, 2023).

In sum, open access publishing represents both a **normative advance** and a **contested institutional settlement**. It challenges the exclusivity of the subscription model and expands public access to knowledge, in line with long-standing ideals of science as a collective good. At the same time, it preserves important elements of the existing

publishing economy, raising critical questions about cost distribution, inequality, and the commodification of knowledge. For contemporary researchers, the challenge is to engage strategically with open access – leveraging its benefits for visibility and impact, while remaining critically aware of its structural implications.

7.2. Sharing Research Data

The sharing of research data has become an increasingly important norm in contemporary social sciences and humanities (SSH), reflecting broader transformations associated with **open science**. While traditionally data remained in the possession of individual researchers or research teams, there is now a growing expectation – both from journals and funding bodies – that the empirical basis of research should be **accessible, transparent, and reusable**. In many leading journals, authors are required to submit not only their manuscripts but also the **datasets, code, and documentation** underlying their analyses, or at least to make them available upon request or through trusted repositories.

This shift is closely linked to concerns about **transparency, reproducibility, and research integrity**. As debates around the "replication crisis" have highlighted, the credibility of scientific findings depends not only on theoretical and methodological rigor, but also on the possibility for other researchers to **verify, reproduce, or reanalyze results**. Data sharing thus becomes a cornerstone of what is increasingly framed as **responsible research practice** (Munafò et al., 2017).

At the same time, the expansion of digital infrastructures has facilitated the emergence of dedicated platforms for data sharing. Repositories such as Harvard Dataverse, Zenodo, Figshare, and discipline-specific archives such as Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR) provide standardized environments for storing, documenting, and disseminating datasets. These platforms allow researchers to assign persistent identifiers (e.g., DOIs), ensuring that datasets can be **cited, tracked, and integrated** into the broader ecosystem of scholarly communication.

The practices of data sharing are underpinned by a set of widely recognized principles, most notably the **FAIR principles** – that data should be **Findable, Accessible, Interoperable, and Reusable** (Wilkinson et al., 2016). These principles reflect both **methodological** and **societal/utilitarian rationales**.

From a **methodological perspective**, data sharing enhances the robustness of research by enabling:

- **Verification and replication** of results;
- **Secondary analysis**, allowing new questions to be explored using existing data;
- **Cumulative knowledge production**, where datasets become building blocks for further research rather than one-off resources.

In this sense, data sharing contributes to a more **transparent and collaborative scientific culture**, aligning with Mertonian norms such as communalism and organized skepticism.

From a **societal and utilitarian perspective**, the argument for data sharing is equally compelling. Much research in SSH is publicly funded, and there is a growing expectation that its outputs – including data – should be treated as a **public good**. Making datasets openly available allows policymakers, practitioners, civil society organizations, and other stakeholders to **reuse research outputs** for decision-making, innovation, and social problem-solving. It also increases the **return on public investment** in research, as datasets can generate value beyond their original purpose.

At the same time, data sharing in SSH involves important **ethical and practical challenges**. Unlike many natural sciences, SSH research often deals with **sensitive data**, including personal information, interviews, or ethnographic materials. Ensuring anonymization, informed consent, and compliance with data protection regulations (such as GDPR) is therefore essential. Moreover, not all data can or should be fully open; in some cases, controlled access or restricted sharing may be necessary.

There are also **epistemic considerations** to take into account. Data are not neutral or self-explanatory; they are produced within specific theoretical and methodological frameworks. Without adequate documentation and contextualization, shared datasets risk being **misinterpreted or decontextualized**. For this reason, good data sharing practice requires not only making data available, but also providing **metadata, codebooks, and methodological explanations** that render the data meaningful and usable.

In conclusion, the growing emphasis on data sharing reflects a broader shift toward **openness, transparency, and collaboration** in SSH research. Supported by digital infrastructures and policy frameworks, these practices enhance both the methodological rigor and the societal relevance of research. At the same time, they require careful attention to ethical, legal, and epistemic dimensions, ensuring that openness is balanced with responsibility.

7.3. Ethical Considerations in SSH Research

Ethical reflection has always been a core component of social sciences and humanities (SSH) research. Traditionally, research ethics has centered on issues such as **academic integrity**, **plagiarism**, **data fabrication and falsification**, and the **protection of human subjects**. These principles are grounded in widely accepted norms of scientific conduct, including those articulated by Robert K. Merton (1973) in his formulation of the CUDOS ethos – **communalism, universalism, disinterestedness, and organized skepticism**. In practice, this has translated into ethical requirements such as informed consent,

confidentiality, anonymization of data, and the responsible reporting of findings, particularly when research involves vulnerable populations.

However, the contemporary research environment is undergoing profound transformation. The increasing integration of **AI-powered tools**, the intensification of **neoliberal pressures toward productivity**, the dominance of **scientometric evaluation (citations, h-index, altmetrics)**, and the growing importance of **online visibility and personal branding** have generated new ethical challenges that extend beyond the classical framework.

One major area of concern is the use of **artificial intelligence in research and writing**. AI tools can assist with data analysis, literature synthesis, and even text generation, raising questions about **authorship, originality, and intellectual responsibility**. Where is the boundary between legitimate assistance and unethical delegation of intellectual labor? Ensuring transparency in the use of AI and maintaining clear standards of authorship are becoming increasingly important ethical imperatives.

At the same time, the pressure to publish and remain visible within a competitive, metric-driven system can incentivize **questionable research practices**. These may include excessive self-citation, strategic fragmentation of research outputs ("salami slicing"), or prioritizing topics likely to generate visibility over those driven by genuine scientific curiosity. As scholars such as Wendy Brown (2015) have argued, the neoliberal restructuring of academia risks transforming knowledge production into a form of **market-oriented activity**, where performance indicators shape research agendas and ethical boundaries.

The expansion of **digital academic profiles and online engagement** introduces further ethical complexities. Researchers are increasingly expected to maintain an active online presence, engage with publics, and disseminate their work through social media and other platforms. While this enhances visibility and impact, it also raises issues related to **self-presentation, credibility, and the potential oversimplification of complex findings**. The pressure to be visible can blur the line between scholarly communication and self-promotion, challenging traditional norms of academic modesty and rigor.

Moreover, the rise of **open science and data sharing** – while normatively desirable – introduces additional ethical dilemmas. Making data publicly available must be balanced against the need to protect **privacy, confidentiality, and the rights of research participants**. In SSH, where data often involve personal narratives, cultural practices, or sensitive social contexts, ethical responsibility requires careful judgment about what can be shared, how, and under what conditions.

These transformations suggest that research ethics must be **rethought as a dynamic and context-sensitive framework**, rather than a fixed set of rules. Contemporary ethical practice involves navigating tensions between openness and protection, visibility and integrity, efficiency and rigor. It requires not only compliance with formal regulations, but

also the cultivation of **reflexive ethical awareness**, where researchers critically examine the conditions under which knowledge is produced and disseminated.

In this evolving landscape, the core principles of research ethics remain indispensable, but they must be **reinterpreted in light of new technological, institutional, and cultural dynamics**. Ethical research in SSH today entails not only doing no harm and ensuring integrity, but also critically engaging with the broader structures – digital, economic, and political – that shape the production and circulation of knowledge.

8. Success Stories and Good Practices from ELABCHROM Partner Universities

8.1. Building an Epistemic Hub: Conferences and Network Formation

A central mechanism through which research excellence has been cultivated within the ELABCHROM project is the strategic organization of a series of international conferences, which have functioned not merely as dissemination events, but as **infrastructures for epistemic network formation**. In line with the theoretical framework outlined earlier, these events can be understood as key sites where **epistemic communities are assembled, stabilized, and expanded**, contributing to the gradual positioning of Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu (ULBS) as an emerging regional hub in the field of cultural heritage studies.

The inaugural conference, *Revisiting Cultural Heritage: Novel Approaches, Innovative Methods, and Transnational Connections* (2023), marked a foundational moment in this process. Bringing together over 70 participants from multiple European countries and beyond, the event created a **transnational platform for intellectual exchange**, structured around interdisciplinary dialogue and methodological innovation in heritage research. Importantly, the conference was not conceived as a one-off academic gathering, but as the starting point of a **long-term strategy of network consolidation**. By combining keynote contributions from partner institutions with a diverse set of panel sessions, the event facilitated both **vertical integration** (linking senior scholars and early-career researchers) and **horizontal expansion** (connecting different disciplinary and national contexts).

The subsequent editions of the conference series (2024 and 2025) played a crucial role in **transforming an event into a sustained epistemic infrastructure**. Rather than simply replicating the initial format, these editions contributed to the **iterative deepening of the network**, reinforcing existing collaborations while incorporating new participants and thematic directions. This continuity is particularly significant: repeated interaction is a key condition for the stabilization of epistemic communities, allowing relationships to evolve from initial contact to **structured collaboration and co-production of knowledge**.

Across its three editions, the ELABCHROM conference series has thus functioned as a **mechanism of cumulative network-building**, with several notable effects. First, it has contributed to the **internationalization of ULBS**, embedding it within broader European and global research circuits. Second, it has facilitated the emergence of **collaborative research trajectories**, including co-authored publications and joint project applications. Third, it has strengthened the university's capacity to act as a **convening actor**, capable of attracting and coordinating diverse scholarly communities.

From a sociological perspective, these conferences can be seen as sites where **scientific capital is both accumulated and redistributed**. By hosting high-level international events, ULBS enhances its visibility and prestige within the academic field, while also providing local researchers with access to networks that might otherwise remain difficult to enter. In this sense, the conference series contributes to reducing structural asymmetries between academic "core" and "periphery," positioning ULBS as an **active node rather than a passive recipient** within the global knowledge system.

Moreover, the thematic focus on **critical heritage studies** has enabled the consolidation of a recognizable intellectual profile. Rather than dispersing efforts across unrelated topics, the conferences have consistently articulated a coherent research agenda centered on participatory approaches, cultural governance, and transnational perspectives. This thematic coherence is essential for the formation of an epistemic hub, as it provides a **shared cognitive framework** around which networks can coalesce.

In sum, the ELABCHROM conference series illustrates how **strategically organized academic events can evolve into durable infrastructures of knowledge production**. Through iterative editions, international participation, and thematic consistency, these conferences have contributed to the construction of ULBS as a **regional center of excellence in cultural heritage research**, demonstrating the central role of networking practices in shaping contemporary epistemic communities.

8.2. Publications as Markers of Research Excellence

A second fundamental dimension through which the ELABCHROM project has contributed to the consolidation of research excellence at Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu (ULBS) is represented by its **publication output**, which functions both as a marker of scientific quality and as a vehicle for institutional visibility within the global academic field. In contemporary academia, publications – particularly those appearing in internationally recognized venues – constitute a primary currency of **scientific capital**, shaping reputational hierarchies, influencing rankings, and enabling integration into transnational research networks.

A landmark achievement in this regard is the edited volume *Engaging Communities in Cultural Heritage* (Routledge, 2025), which stands as a **foundational contribution to the consolidation of critical heritage studies at ULBS**. Emerging directly from the

ELABCHROM conference series, the volume brings together contributions from an international group of scholars and reflects the project's core emphasis on participatory approaches, cultural governance, and interdisciplinary methodologies. Beyond its intrinsic scholarly value, the publication plays a strategic role in **institutional positioning**. As a volume published by a leading international academic press, it enhances the visibility of ULBS within the global research landscape and signals its capacity to coordinate high-quality, large-scale academic outputs. At the same time, the volume contributes to the **stabilization of an epistemic community**, transforming conference-based interactions into durable scholarly collaborations.

Complementing this collective achievement, the portfolio of **peer-reviewed journal articles** produced within the project represents a second, equally important axis of excellence. These publications function as **high-impact vehicles of academic recognition**, given their role in citation-based evaluation systems and global university rankings. Importantly, the articles emerging from ELABCHROM are not limited to local or regional outlets but are strategically positioned within **flagship international journals**, thereby ensuring both visibility and credibility.

Several contributions exemplify this trajectory. For instance, research on the **gendered structure of symbolic space**, based on a comprehensive national dataset of street names, has been published in *Women's Studies International Forum*, advancing quantitative approaches to cultural heritage and contributing to debates on gender representation in public space. Similarly, work addressing the **politics of memory and post-socialist transformations** has appeared in journals such as *Memory Studies* and *Cultural History*, situating Romanian case studies within broader theoretical discussions on collective memory and mnemonic governance. Other outputs engage with themes such as **heritage commodification, touristification, and local identity**, targeting journals like the *International Journal of Cultural Policy* and the *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, which are central platforms in the field.

From a sociological perspective, these publications perform multiple functions. First, they contribute to the **accumulation of individual scientific capital**, enhancing the profiles of participating researchers. Second, they generate **institutional capital**, as affiliations with ULBS are systematically associated with high-quality outputs in indexed journals. Third, they facilitate **network expansion**, as publication processes – particularly in international journals – create opportunities for collaboration, peer recognition, and integration into broader scholarly communities.

Crucially, the combination of an edited volume and a portfolio of journal articles reflects a **dual strategy of knowledge production**. While the volume enables the articulation of a coherent research agenda and the consolidation of a thematic field, journal articles ensure continuous visibility and engagement within competitive academic circuits. This duality is essential in the contemporary research ecosystem, where both **collective intellectual projects** and **individual high-impact outputs** are required to sustain excellence.

In sum, the publication outcomes of the ELABCHROM project demonstrate how **strategically coordinated research outputs can enhance both epistemic authority and institutional prestige**. By combining field-defining collective work with high-impact individual contributions, ULBS has strengthened its position as an emerging center of excellence in cultural heritage studies, both within Romania and in the broader Central and Eastern European academic space.

8.3. From Networks to Funding: Strategic Project Development

A defining indicator of the maturity of an epistemic network is its capacity to **translate collaboration into large-scale research funding**. Within the ELABCHROM project, this transition is exemplified by the development and submission of the Horizon Europe proposal *Network of Excellence for the Study of Travelling Cultural Heritage (NESTRA)*. Far from being an isolated initiative, NESTRA represents the **strategic continuation and scaling-up of the collaborative structures, research agenda, and institutional capacities** established through ELABCHROM.

Submitted under the Horizon Europe WIDERA call (European Excellence Initiative), NESTRA brings together a consortium of seven universities from the FORTHEM European University Alliance, coordinated by Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu (ULBS), alongside an associated digital partner. With a proposed budget of €5 million and a duration of 60 months, the project aims to develop a **network of excellence in cultural heritage research**, structured around the innovative concept of *Travelling Cultural Heritage*, which reconceptualizes heritage as a dynamic process of circulation, translation, and reinterpretation across contexts.

Crucially, NESTRA is not simply a new project, but the result of a **multi-layered process of accumulation and transformation** initiated within ELABCHROM. As explicitly stated in the application, the proposal emerges from ELABCHROM at three interconnected levels: institutional, scientific, and strategic. Institutionally, it marks a transition from a **Twinning partnership** – where ULBS was primarily a beneficiary – to a broader transnational network in which ULBS assumes the role of **coordinator**, signaling a significant increase in institutional capacity and leadership. Scientifically, it builds on the empirical and theoretical work developed in ELABCHROM, particularly the research conducted under Work Package 5, which explored cultural heritage in Central Romania and generated conceptual insights that could be generalized to a wider European context. Strategically, it reflects a shift from **capacity building to excellence building**, aligning with the logic of Horizon Europe's WIDERA instruments.

The emergence of NESTRA also illustrates how **epistemic networks evolve into structured research consortia**. The collaborative ties established through conferences, joint publications, and mobility activities within ELABCHROM provided the social and intellectual infrastructure necessary for assembling a larger consortium. The integration of partners from the FORTHEM Alliance ensured not only geographical diversity but also

a balance between institutions from “Widening” and more research-intensive countries, facilitating **knowledge transfer and capacity convergence** within the European Research Area.

At the level of research design, NESTRA extends the conceptual and methodological innovations of ELABCHROM into a more ambitious framework. The shift from locally grounded research to a transnational perspective is encapsulated in the concept of *Travelling Cultural Heritage*, which draws on theoretical traditions such as Edward Said’s “travelling theory” and Mieke Bal’s “travelling concepts.” This conceptual expansion is matched by a corresponding methodological scaling, including the development of a consortium-wide digital infrastructure integrating AI-supported tools, semantic search systems, and interoperable datasets, aligned with FAIR principles and open science practices.

Beyond its scientific ambitions, the NESTRA proposal highlights the broader **institutional and societal impacts** of such strategic project development. It aims to increase the critical mass of research in Widening institutions, enhance their visibility in global academic debates, and strengthen their capacity to participate in large-scale European projects. At the same time, it fosters connections between academia, cultural institutions, and regional stakeholders, promoting more inclusive and participatory models of cultural heritage governance.

From an analytical perspective, the trajectory from ELABCHROM to NESTRA exemplifies a key mechanism of academic development: the transformation of **temporary project-based collaboration into durable institutional capacity**. It also illustrates the operation of cumulative advantage processes similar to those described by Robert K. Merton as the “Matthew effect”: the experience, networks, and expertise acquired through one project increase the likelihood of securing subsequent funding and further consolidating academic prestige.

In this sense, NESTRA can be understood as both an **outcome and a catalyst**. It is an outcome of the successful implementation of ELABCHROM, demonstrating the project’s effectiveness in building research capacity and fostering international collaboration. At the same time, it acts as a catalyst for future development, opening new pathways for institutional growth, research excellence, and integration into the European and global research landscape.

Ultimately, the transition from ELABCHROM to NESTRA illustrates how **strategic project development operates as a central mechanism for overcoming structural peripherality**. By leveraging networks, producing high-quality research, and mobilizing collaborative capacity, ULBS has positioned itself not only as a participant in European research, but as an **active coordinator of transnational scientific initiatives**, marking a significant step toward becoming a regional center of excellence in cultural heritage studies.

In addition to the Horizon Europe application discussed above, ULBS has become an institutional partner in the **European Partnership for Resilient Cultural Heritage (RCH)**, funded under the HORIZON-CL2-2025-03-HERITAGE-01 programme. This partnership brings together 78 entities – including governmental bodies, universities, research institutes, and cultural organisations – from 30 countries, with a total budget exceeding €198 million over a ten-year period (ULBS, 2025). The scale, duration, and institutional diversity of this initiative position it as a major instrument for shaping the future of cultural heritage research and policy at the European level.

The objectives of the partnership further illustrate the shift from project-based collaboration to **system-level research integration**. It aims to advance research on cultural heritage resilience by developing innovative solutions, evaluation systems, adaptation strategies, and risk management models, while also strengthening dissemination and capacity-building activities (ULBS, 2025). In this sense, participation in RCH extends the epistemic and institutional ambitions of ELABCHROM into a long-term framework oriented toward sustainability, policy impact, and cross-sectoral collaboration.

From an analytical perspective, ULBS's inclusion in this partnership represents a **qualitative leap in institutional positioning**. While NESTRA demonstrates the university's capacity to coordinate a competitive research proposal, participation in RCH signals its recognition as a **reliable and visible actor within European research governance structures**. Unlike project-based funding, which is typically time-bound and competitive, European partnerships operate as semi-permanent platforms that shape research agendas, funding priorities, and policy directions over extended periods. As such, they offer not only financial resources but also **agenda-setting power and strategic influence**.

Moreover, this development reflects the cumulative effects of ELABCHROM's capacity-building activities. The establishment of international networks, the production of high-quality research outputs, and the consolidation of the Cultural Heritage Laboratory have collectively contributed to enhancing ULBS's credibility and attractiveness as a partner in large-scale European initiatives. The explicit link between participation in the partnership and the further development of the Cultural Heritage Lab within the FORTHEM Alliance underscores the **institutional anchoring of research infrastructures** initiated during ELABCHROM (ULBS, 2025).

Importantly, the dual trajectory represented by NESTRA and RCH illustrates two complementary pathways through which epistemic networks translate into funding success. On the one hand, competitive project proposals enable institutions to **scale up their research agendas and assume leadership roles** within transnational consortia. On the other hand, participation in European partnerships facilitates **long-term integration into policy-driven research ecosystems**, ensuring sustained visibility and influence.

Taken together, these developments demonstrate that ELABCHROM has functioned not merely as a capacity-building project, but as a **platform for strategic transformation**. By enabling ULBS to move from peripheral participation to central involvement in European research initiatives, it has contributed to repositioning the university within the European Research Area. The transition from network formation to funding acquisition – and further to institutionalised partnership – thus exemplifies how **epistemic consolidation can be converted into structural integration and long-term research competitiveness**.

8.4. Institutionalization of Research Programs

A crucial dimension of research excellence – often overlooked in short-term project evaluations – is the ability to **institutionalize research beyond the lifecycle of a single grant**. Within ELABCHROM, this process has taken a concrete and measurable form through the development of a **large-scale, mixed-methods research program on cultural heritage in Central Romania**, which functions as both a methodological infrastructure and a long-term platform for knowledge production.

At the core of this research program lies a **robust mixed-methods design**, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches in order to capture both the breadth and depth of cultural heritage phenomena. This design reflects a deliberate strategy of **methodological triangulation**, aimed at overcoming the limitations inherent in relying on a single methodological approach (Creswell, 1999; Bryman, 2016). The quantitative component consists of a large-scale web-based survey (N = 932 valid responses), administered between April and June 2023, which investigates public perceptions, attitudes, and practices related to cultural heritage in Sibiu and Central Romania. The survey operationalizes key analytical dimensions – patrimonialization, festivalization, and multiculturalization – allowing for a systematic exploration of how cultural heritage is socially constructed, consumed, and contested.

The structure of the dataset enables a wide range of analytical strategies, from descriptive statistics to advanced multivariate modelling techniques, including regression analysis and variance analysis. This level of methodological sophistication positions the research program within contemporary international standards in social science research, while also providing a **renewable empirical resource** that can support multiple publications over time. Importantly, the dataset is not conceived as a one-off output, but as a **longitudinal research asset**, capable of being extended, replicated, and reinterpreted in future projects.

Complementing the quantitative component, the qualitative strand of the research program consists of **semi-structured individual and group interviews**, involving 35 individual participants and 40 participants in focus group settings. These participants were selected as key actors in the field of cultural heritage – such as cultural managers, festival organizers, and local professionals – thus enabling the research to capture **expert**

knowledge and insider perspectives on heritage practices. The interviews, conducted between March and December 2023, were transcribed verbatim and integrated into a searchable textual corpus, which is analyzed using specialized qualitative software such as Atlas.ti and NVivo. Through systematic coding and thematic analysis, this qualitative dataset provides the interpretive depth necessary to contextualize and enrich the quantitative findings.

From a methodological standpoint, the integration of these two components illustrates a **balanced approach to rigor and innovation**. The quantitative survey ensures generalizability within the limits of its sampling design, while the qualitative interviews provide nuanced insights into meaning-making processes and institutional practices. At the same time, the research design explicitly acknowledges its limitations – such as the use of convenience sampling in the survey – demonstrating a reflexive awareness of methodological constraints. This reflexivity is itself a marker of methodological maturity, aligning the program with best practices in contemporary SSH research.

Beyond its technical features, however, the significance of this research program lies in its **institutional embedding**. The development of standardized research instruments (questionnaires, interview guides, consent forms, and protocols), the creation of interoperable datasets, and the training of researchers in both quantitative and qualitative methods collectively contribute to the emergence of a **research infrastructure within ULBS**. This infrastructure is further reinforced through the Cultural Heritage Laboratory, which acts as a focal point for data collection, analysis, and collaborative research.

Importantly, the program also reflects a strategic shift from **project-based research to programmatic research**. Rather than producing isolated studies, ELABCHROM has generated a coherent empirical and conceptual framework that can sustain multiple lines of inquiry over time. The dataset has already been mobilized in peer-reviewed publications – for example, studies analyzing public interest in heritage preservation using multivariate statistical modelling – and continues to support new research outputs. This capacity for **iterative knowledge production** is a defining feature of institutionalized research programs.

From a broader perspective, the institutionalization of this research program contributes to the consolidation of ULBS as an **epistemic hub in cultural heritage studies**. By combining empirical depth, methodological rigor, and infrastructural development, the program not only enhances the university's research capacity but also strengthens its ability to participate in – and shape – international academic debates. In doing so, it exemplifies how targeted investments in research design and data production can generate long-term academic value, extending well beyond the temporal boundaries of a single project.

Ultimately, this case demonstrates that research excellence is not only a matter of publications or funding success, but also of **building durable epistemic infrastructures**. Through the development of a comprehensive mixed-methods research program, ELABCHROM has laid the foundations for sustained scholarly productivity,

methodological innovation, and institutional visibility, positioning ULBS as a key actor in the evolving landscape of cultural heritage research in Central and Eastern Europe.

8.5. Key Lessons and Transferable Good Practices

The experience of the ELABCHROM project offers a rich set of insights into how research capacity can be effectively developed and consolidated within a semi-peripheral academic context. Beyond its concrete outputs – conferences, publications, datasets, and funding applications – the project demonstrates a series of **transferable practices** that can inform institutional strategies for achieving research excellence in the social sciences and humanities.

A first key lesson concerns the foundational role of **network-building as research infrastructure**. The ELABCHROM experience shows that academic networks are not merely auxiliary to research activity, but constitute one of its primary enabling conditions. Through conferences, mobility programs, and collaborative engagements, the project has created a dense web of relationships that facilitated knowledge exchange, co-authorship, and joint project development. In this sense, networking should be understood as a **strategic investment**, requiring sustained institutional support rather than ad hoc initiatives.

Closely related to this is the importance of transforming isolated events into **durable epistemic communities**. The transition from a single conference (2023) to a recurring series (2024, 2025) illustrates how continuity enables the stabilization of scholarly networks. Repeated interaction fosters trust, deepens intellectual collaboration, and allows for the emergence of shared research agendas. The lesson here is that **temporal continuity is essential**: impactful academic initiatives are those that evolve over time, rather than those that remain singular occurrences.

A third insight derives from the value of **strategic thematic focus**. ELABCHROM's emphasis on cultural heritage has enabled the concentration of intellectual and institutional resources around a clearly defined domain, facilitating both visibility and coherence. In an increasingly competitive academic environment, where fragmentation can dilute impact, the development of a recognizable research niche is a critical condition for success. This suggests that institutions should prioritize **thematic consolidation over dispersion**, aligning individual research efforts within broader programmatic frameworks.

The project also highlights the effectiveness of a **dual publication strategy**, combining collective and individual forms of knowledge production. Edited volumes have played a crucial role in consolidating epistemic communities and articulating shared research agendas, while peer-reviewed journal articles have ensured visibility within global academic circuits and contributed to citation-based evaluation systems. The complementarity between these two forms of output underscores the need for a **balanced publication portfolio**, capable of addressing both intellectual and institutional objectives.

Another major lesson concerns the transformation of collaboration into **strategic funding acquisition**. The development of the NESTRA proposal and the participation in the European Partnership for Resilient Cultural Heritage demonstrate how networks can evolve into structured research consortia and institutional partnerships. This trajectory illustrates that networking should not be seen as an end in itself, but as part of a broader process leading to **resource mobilization and institutional upgrading**. Successful institutions are those that are able to convert relational capital into financial and symbolic capital.

Equally important is the **institutionalization of research beyond project boundaries**. The mixed-methods research program on cultural heritage developed within ELABCHROM exemplifies how empirical data, methodological tools, and analytical frameworks can be transformed into durable research infrastructures. By creating datasets, standardizing instruments, and embedding research within dedicated institutional structures such as the Cultural Heritage Laboratory, ULBS has moved from project-based activity to **programmatic research capacity**. This shift is essential for ensuring continuity, scalability, and long-term impact.

From a methodological perspective, the project demonstrates the importance of combining **empirical ambition with analytical rigor**. The integration of large-scale quantitative data with in-depth qualitative inquiry has enabled a comprehensive understanding of cultural heritage processes, while also generating a renewable empirical resource for future research. This approach illustrates the value of investing in **high-quality, reusable data**, which can support multiple publications and research trajectories over time.

A further lesson relates to the strategic positioning of institutions within the **global academic field**. Through ELABCHROM, ULBS has progressively transitioned from a beneficiary of capacity-building initiatives to a coordinator of international projects and a partner in major European research frameworks. This trajectory reflects a process of **gradual upgrading**, whereby institutions enhance their roles, visibility, and influence within transnational academic networks. For universities operating in semi-peripheral contexts, such progression is essential for overcoming structural disadvantages and achieving greater epistemic agency.

The integration into European research ecosystems represents another critical dimension. Alignment with Horizon Europe instruments, participation in WIDERA initiatives, and involvement in long-term partnerships have enabled ULBS to connect with broader policy frameworks and funding structures. This demonstrates that research excellence is increasingly shaped by the ability to **navigate and align with supranational research architectures**, rather than operating solely within national systems.

Finally, the ELABCHROM experience underscores the importance of constructing a **distinct institutional identity as an epistemic hub**. By consistently focusing on critical heritage studies, fostering international collaboration, and producing high-quality

research outputs, ULBS has begun to position itself as a regional center of expertise. Such identity formation is not a by-product of research activity, but a strategic outcome that requires coherence, visibility, and sustained investment.

Taken together, these lessons point to a broader transformation: from isolated research activities to the construction of **integrated research ecosystems**, capable of generating knowledge, attracting resources, and shaping academic debates. For ULBS and similar institutions, the challenge is not only to replicate individual successes, but to embed these practices into long-term institutional strategies. In doing so, they can move from peripheral participation to **active engagement and influence within the European and global research landscape**.

9. Practical Recommendations for Early- and Mid-Career Researchers

9.1. Building a Research Agenda

A central condition for academic development in the social sciences and humanities is the construction of a coherent and recognizable research agenda. In a global academic environment structured by competition, visibility, and specialization, early- and mid-career researchers must gradually position themselves as experts in a defined domain, rather than dispersing their efforts across unrelated topics. Such coherence enables not only cumulative knowledge production but also the development of intellectual identity, which is essential for recognition within epistemic communities. In this sense, a research agenda functions not only as a thematic orientation, but as a **strategic narrative of scholarly positioning**, allowing researchers to be legible to peers, evaluators, and funding bodies.

The importance of coherence is closely tied to the institutional logic of contemporary academia, where evaluation mechanisms – such as publication metrics, grant success rates, and international visibility – tend to reward specialization and continuity over fragmentation. As emphasized in the sociology of science, scientific fields are structured spaces in which recognition accrues to those who are able to establish a distinct and credible contribution within a bounded domain. A fragmented publication profile, even if individually composed of high-quality outputs, often fails to produce the cumulative visibility required for academic advancement. By contrast, a well-articulated research agenda allows for **trajectory building**, where each publication, project, and collaboration contributes to a broader, recognizable line of inquiry.

However, the construction of a research agenda is rarely a purely autonomous process. Instead, it emerges at the intersection of three structural forces. First, there is the ideal of thematic autonomy, rooted in the classical academic ethos of pursuing intellectually meaningful questions driven by curiosity and scholarly interest. This dimension remains fundamental, as long-term sustainability in research is difficult to achieve in the absence

of genuine intellectual engagement. A research agenda that is externally imposed or strategically opportunistic, but not internally meaningful, is unlikely to generate the persistence required for cumulative scholarly production.

Second, researchers operate within a context of structural availability, particularly through participation in research projects led by senior scholars or embedded within institutional research infrastructures. These projects often require thematic and methodological alignment, which may constrain individual choices but simultaneously provide access to essential resources, including funding, data, collaborative networks, and publication opportunities. Especially in semi-peripheral academic contexts, such as those characteristic of Central and Eastern Europe, participation in externally funded projects is frequently a key mechanism for integration into international research circuits. In this sense, research agendas are not only intellectual constructs but also **organizationally embedded trajectories**, shaped by the opportunities and constraints of the institutional environment.

Third, there is the growing pressure toward applied and policy-relevant research, reflecting broader societal and funding expectations that research should demonstrate tangible impact beyond academia. European research frameworks, including Horizon Europe, increasingly emphasize societal relevance, stakeholder engagement, and the co-production of knowledge. While this orientation opens new avenues for visibility and funding, it also introduces additional tensions, as researchers must balance the demands of theoretical contribution with those of practical applicability. The challenge is not simply to produce “applied” research, but to integrate societal relevance into a coherent intellectual trajectory, avoiding the fragmentation that may result from opportunistic engagement with short-term policy agendas.

A sustainable research agenda is therefore not the result of unrestricted choice, but of strategic negotiation between autonomy and constraint. Successful researchers are those who are able to align their personal intellectual interests with available opportunities, while gradually carving out a distinctive niche that allows for both participation in collaborative projects and the development of independent lines of inquiry. This process often unfolds incrementally, through a combination of thematic consolidation, methodological refinement, and network building.

From a practical standpoint, the development of a research agenda can be supported through several interrelated strategies. First, researchers should aim to define a **core thematic cluster**, consisting of a limited number of interrelated research questions that can sustain multiple publications over time. This does not imply rigidity, but rather a structured flexibility, where new topics are incorporated only insofar as they contribute to the expansion or deepening of the core agenda. Second, methodological coherence plays a crucial role, as the repeated use and refinement of specific methods – whether quantitative, qualitative, or mixed – enhances both efficiency and expertise. Third, cumulative publication strategies should be explicitly considered, ensuring that individual outputs are not isolated contributions but part of a broader intellectual program.

Equally important is the temporal dimension of research agenda building. In early career stages, researchers often rely more heavily on existing projects and collaborations, which may limit thematic autonomy but provide critical entry points into academic networks. Over time, however, the balance should gradually shift toward greater independence, including the development of investigator-driven projects and the capacity to lead research initiatives. This transition is essential for achieving academic maturity and for securing competitive funding, particularly in schemes that prioritize individual excellence and leadership.

Finally, it is important to recognize that research agendas are not static constructs, but dynamic and evolving configurations. While coherence is essential, excessive rigidity may hinder intellectual innovation and responsiveness to emerging research frontiers. The most successful research agendas combine **continuity with adaptability**, maintaining a recognizable core while allowing for the incorporation of new perspectives, methods, and empirical domains. In this sense, building a research agenda is not a one-time task, but an ongoing process of reflexive adjustment, shaped by both individual aspirations and structural conditions.

9.2. Time Management and Productivity

The contemporary academic environment is embedded within what has been described as a "**chronophagic society**", in which time is increasingly fragmented, accelerated, and commodified (Rosa, 2013). Within this context, time becomes a scarce and highly contested resource, particularly for researchers who must simultaneously engage in teaching, administration, publication, and project development. Effective time management is therefore not merely a matter of personal efficiency, but a structural necessity for sustaining academic activity. Academic work unfolds under conditions of **temporal compression**, where multiple, often incompatible, temporalities – deadlines, teaching schedules, review cycles, and funding calls – compete for limited cognitive and organizational capacity.

This fragmentation is further intensified by the digitalization of academic work. Email communication, online meetings, administrative platforms, and continuous connectivity generate a constant flow of micro-tasks that disrupt extended periods of concentration. As a result, researchers increasingly operate in a state of **permanent partial attention**, in which deep, uninterrupted intellectual work becomes difficult to sustain. The consequence is not only reduced productivity in a quantitative sense, but also a qualitative erosion of the conditions necessary for complex thinking, theoretical development, and sustained writing.

At the same time, academic work is shaped by the pressures of the "publish or perish" paradigm, which emphasizes continuous output and measurable productivity. While these pressures reflect broader processes of rationalization and quantification within academia, they also risk privileging speed over depth. Evaluation systems based on

publication counts, citation metrics, and project acquisition rates encourage short-term output strategies, sometimes at the expense of long-term intellectual development. In the social sciences and humanities, where research often involves complex interpretation, theoretical reflection, and engagement with extensive bodies of literature, such acceleration can undermine the quality of scholarship.

These dynamics contribute to what has been described as an **audit culture**, in which academic performance is continuously monitored, measured, and compared. Time, in this context, becomes not only scarce but also normatively structured, as certain activities – such as publishing in indexed journals or securing external funding – are privileged over others, including exploratory research, teaching innovation, or public engagement. Researchers are thus compelled to allocate their time strategically, often prioritizing activities that are most visible within evaluation frameworks, even when these do not fully align with their intellectual priorities.

In response to these pressures, alternative models such as “slow science” advocate for a more reflective and deliberate approach to knowledge production (Stengers, 2018). This perspective emphasizes the importance of time for thinking, reading, and conceptual development, arguing that high-quality research cannot be reduced to accelerated output cycles. Particularly in SSH fields, rigorous research requires time for conceptual clarification, methodological refinement, and hermeneutic interpretation. The challenge for researchers is therefore to balance the demands of productivity with the need for intellectual depth, developing working rhythms that allow for both sustained output and meaningful engagement with research questions.

From a practical standpoint, effective time management in academia requires the development of **structured yet flexible working regimes**. One key strategy is the intentional allocation of time blocks dedicated to different categories of activity. For instance, “deep work” periods – reserved for writing, data analysis, or theoretical reflection – should be protected from interruptions and scheduled during times of peak cognitive performance. Conversely, administrative and communication tasks can be grouped into designated intervals, reducing the fragmentation of attention throughout the day. Such differentiation allows researchers to align the **temporal structure of their work with the cognitive demands of specific tasks**.

A second important dimension concerns the prioritization of activities in relation to the researcher’s long-term agenda. Not all tasks contribute equally to academic development, and the ability to distinguish between **strategic and non-strategic commitments** is essential. This often involves making deliberate choices about which collaborations to pursue, which administrative roles to accept, and which opportunities to decline. In this sense, time management is inseparable from **academic self-positioning**, as the allocation of time reflects and reinforces the researcher’s intellectual trajectory.

A third aspect relates to the cumulative organization of work. Rather than approaching tasks as isolated units, productive researchers tend to integrate activities into broader workflows. For example, teaching can be aligned with research interests, allowing course

preparation to contribute to literature review and conceptual development. Similarly, conference presentations can be designed as intermediate steps toward journal publications, and smaller outputs can be incorporated into larger research projects. This **integration of functions** reduces redundancy and enhances the efficiency of time use, while simultaneously strengthening the coherence of the research agenda.

Equally important is the management of temporal expectations. Academic work is characterized by long and often unpredictable time horizons, including extended peer-review processes, delayed publication timelines, and uncertain funding outcomes. As a result, productivity cannot be assessed solely in short-term terms, but must be understood as part of a **longitudinal process of accumulation**. Maintaining multiple projects at different stages of development – data collection, analysis, writing, submission – can help stabilize output over time and mitigate the effects of delays in individual components.

At the institutional level, the challenges of time management and productivity point to the need for supportive organizational frameworks. Universities and research institutions can play a significant role by reducing unnecessary administrative burdens, providing structured support for project management, and recognizing a broader range of academic activities in evaluation processes. Without such support, the burden of managing structural time pressures is shifted entirely onto individual researchers, potentially leading to burnout, reduced research quality, and uneven career trajectories.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that time management in academia is not only a technical issue, but also a normative and ethical one. Decisions about how to allocate time reflect broader values regarding what counts as meaningful academic work. Balancing productivity with intellectual depth requires a conscious resistance to purely quantitative logics of evaluation, and a commitment to maintaining the conditions necessary for rigorous and reflective scholarship. In this sense, effective time management is not simply about doing more in less time, but about **doing the right things at the right pace**, in alignment with both individual research goals and the broader mission of academic inquiry.

9.3. Balancing Teaching and Research

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9.4. Developing International Collaborations

In a globalized academic landscape, research is increasingly produced within transnational networks of collaboration. For early- and mid-career researchers, becoming part of such networks is no longer optional, but a structural requirement for achieving visibility, accessing resources, and participating in major research initiatives. International collaboration enables researchers to engage with diverse perspectives, enhance methodological rigor, and position their work within broader scholarly debates. At the same time, it facilitates access to funding opportunities that are increasingly structured around multi-institutional and cross-national consortia, particularly within European research frameworks.

From a sociological perspective, international collaboration can be understood as a process of integration into a **global academic field**, characterized by unequal distributions of resources, prestige, and influence. Not all collaborations are equivalent: partnerships with highly ranked institutions or internationally recognized scholars tend to generate greater visibility and symbolic capital than those confined to peripheral or less connected contexts. As a result, participation in international networks is not only a matter of cooperation, but also of **strategic positioning within hierarchies of knowledge production**. Researchers must therefore navigate both the opportunities and asymmetries inherent in global academic structures.

For early-career researchers, the primary challenge lies in entering existing networks. This typically occurs through a combination of participation in international conferences, mobility programs, and involvement in collaborative research projects. Conferences, in particular, function as key sites of network formation, where informal interactions can lead to future collaborations. Similarly, mobility schemes – such as visiting fellowships or short-term research stays – provide opportunities for embedding oneself within established research environments. These initial connections often serve as the foundation for co-authorship, joint publications, and future project applications.

At this stage, visibility is crucial. Early-career researchers must actively communicate their work, not only through formal presentations, but also through informal academic interactions. The ability to articulate one's research clearly and situate it within broader debates is essential for attracting potential collaborators. In this sense, international collaboration begins with **intellectual recognizability**: being perceived by others as working on relevant and clearly defined problems within a shared field of inquiry.

For mid-career researchers, the focus shifts from entry to consolidation and leadership. At this stage, researchers are expected not only to participate in networks, but to act as **active nodes** within them – initiating collaborations, coordinating research activities, and contributing to the formation of epistemic communities. This often involves taking on roles such as principal investigator, work package leader, or editor of collective volumes. The

ability to mobilize networks around specific research agendas becomes a key indicator of academic maturity and leadership.

A critical dimension of international collaboration concerns the **division of intellectual labor** within collaborative projects. While collaboration offers opportunities for synergy, it also requires careful coordination of roles, responsibilities, and contributions. Successful collaborations are those in which partners bring complementary expertise – whether theoretical, methodological, or empirical – while maintaining a shared understanding of the project's objectives. Clear communication, mutual trust, and well-defined expectations are essential for avoiding conflicts and ensuring productive outcomes.

At the same time, international collaboration is increasingly mediated by digital technologies, which enable continuous interaction across geographical distances. Online platforms, shared databases, and virtual meetings have become integral components of collaborative research. While these tools facilitate coordination and reduce the need for physical mobility, they do not fully replace the importance of face-to-face interaction, particularly in the early stages of collaboration, where trust and rapport are established. Effective international collaboration therefore combines **digital connectivity with periodic physical co-presence**.

In this context, internationalization is not merely a matter of geographic mobility, but of epistemic integration. Researchers must be able to engage with global debates, communicate effectively in international academic environments, and position their work within transnational frameworks. This involves not only linguistic competence – particularly in academic English – but also familiarity with dominant theoretical paradigms, methodological standards, and publication practices. Epistemic integration thus requires an ongoing process of alignment with international norms, while also preserving the capacity to contribute original perspectives rooted in local or regional contexts.

This latter point is particularly important for scholars operating in semi-peripheral academic environments. In such contexts, international collaboration serves as a key mechanism for overcoming structural constraints, including limited access to funding, infrastructure, and high-impact publication venues. At the same time, there is a risk of **asymmetric integration**, in which researchers from peripheral contexts are incorporated primarily as data providers or local partners, without full recognition of their intellectual contributions. Addressing this imbalance requires a deliberate effort to assert intellectual agency, including leading publications, shaping research questions, and negotiating equitable authorship arrangements.

Strategically, researchers should approach international collaboration as a **long-term investment**, rather than a series of isolated interactions. Building durable partnerships requires sustained engagement over time, including repeated co-authorship, joint participation in projects, and reciprocal visits. Trust, once established, becomes a critical resource that facilitates future collaboration and reduces the transaction costs associated with new initiatives. In this sense, successful international networks are not only

structures of cooperation, but also **communities of practice**, characterized by shared norms, mutual recognition, and ongoing interaction.

From a practical perspective, several strategies can support the development of international collaborations. First, researchers should identify and target **relevant academic networks**, including conferences, associations, and research groups aligned with their field. Second, proactive communication – such as reaching out to potential collaborators following conferences or engaging in scholarly exchanges – can help transform initial contacts into sustained relationships. Third, participation in international funding schemes, particularly those that require consortium-based applications, provides structured opportunities for collaboration and network expansion.

Finally, it is important to recognize that international collaboration is not an end in itself, but a means of enhancing research quality and impact. The goal is not simply to accumulate international connections, but to develop **meaningful and productive partnerships** that contribute to the advancement of knowledge. This requires a balance between openness to collaboration and selectivity, ensuring that partnerships align with the researcher's broader agenda and intellectual commitments.

In sum, developing international collaborations involves a complex interplay of individual initiative, institutional context, and global academic structures. It requires not only the ability to connect with others, but also the capacity to position oneself strategically within transnational networks of knowledge production. For researchers in the social sciences and humanities, mastering this process is essential for achieving both visibility and influence in an increasingly interconnected academic world.

9.5. Career Development Strategies

Academic careers in the contemporary research environment are increasingly diversified, non-linear, and strategically constructed. There is no single pathway to success; rather, researchers must navigate a range of opportunities and constraints, developing individualized strategies that align with their goals, resources, and institutional contexts. In contrast to older academic models, in which professional advancement often followed a relatively stable sequence of stages within a single institution or disciplinary community, contemporary careers are shaped by mobility, project-based employment, competitive evaluation, and changing expectations regarding productivity, visibility, and societal relevance.

For this reason, career development in academia should be understood not as the passive unfolding of merit, but as an active process of **strategic self-positioning** within a highly structured and unequal field. Researchers do not simply "grow" into successful careers; they build them through a series of decisions concerning what to study, where to publish, with whom to collaborate, what funding opportunities to pursue, and how to allocate time between research, teaching, and service. These decisions are never made

under conditions of full autonomy, but neither are they fully determined by structural constraints. Academic careers emerge precisely through the negotiation between aspiration and opportunity, vocation and institution, long-term intellectual identity and short-term professional demands.

Several broad career strategies can be identified. One pathway emphasizes **publication-driven development**, focusing on building a strong portfolio of peer-reviewed articles in high-impact journals. This strategy is particularly effective in academic systems where promotions, evaluations, and grant competitions heavily reward indexed publications and citation visibility. Researchers following this pathway tend to prioritize journal placement, writing continuity, and thematic coherence in order to establish a strong scholarly profile. The advantages of this strategy are clear: publications remain the most visible and portable form of academic capital, especially in international evaluation systems. A strong publication record can open doors to grants, editorial roles, invitations to speak, and institutional recognition.

At the same time, a publication-driven career strategy has limitations. It may encourage a narrow focus on journal outputs at the expense of broader intellectual projects, such as monographs, public engagement, or long-term empirical research. In some cases, it can also reinforce metric-oriented behavior, pushing researchers toward short publication cycles and incremental outputs rather than more ambitious, integrative scholarship. For this reason, publication-based development is most effective when combined with a clear intellectual agenda, rather than pursued as a purely quantitative exercise.

Another pathway centers on **project-based development**, where success is defined by the ability to secure research funding, lead teams, and coordinate collaborative initiatives. In this model, grants function as a central axis of academic career-building, generating not only financial resources but also prestige, visibility, and institutional influence. Researchers following this path tend to develop strong competencies in proposal writing, consortium building, project management, and impact articulation. This strategy is particularly important in the contemporary European academic space, where funding schemes such as Horizon Europe, MSCA, ERC, and national research competitions play a major role in structuring careers and institutional reputations.

A project-based strategy is especially effective for researchers who wish to shape research agendas at a broader scale, build infrastructures, and move into leadership roles. However, it also comes with risks. It can create dependence on unstable funding cycles, intensify administrative workloads, and potentially displace time from actual research to project management and reporting. Moreover, in underfunded systems, competition for grants can be so intense that failure becomes structurally common. As a result, project-based career development requires not only ambition but also resilience, strategic timing, and the ability to learn from repeated rejection.

A third strategy involves **network-oriented development**, prioritizing international collaboration, mobility, and participation in epistemic communities. In this model, career advancement is built through sustained integration into transnational scholarly networks,

often facilitated by conferences, visiting fellowships, joint publications, editorial collaborations, and international associations. Researchers who pursue this pathway invest heavily in building durable academic relationships and in becoming visible participants within broader scholarly communities. This approach can be especially advantageous for those working in semi-peripheral systems, where access to local resources may be limited but international networks can compensate by providing visibility, mentoring, and collaborative opportunities.

The strengths of a network-based strategy lie in its cumulative and relational character. Collaborations often generate publications, projects, and invitations, thereby expanding academic reach beyond what isolated work can achieve. At the same time, this strategy requires substantial social and communicative labor, and not all forms of networking lead to meaningful scholarly development. Superficial or purely instrumental networking may produce contacts without generating substantial intellectual partnerships. For this reason, successful network-oriented careers depend on the cultivation of **substantive scholarly relationships**, not merely on increasing the number of connections.

Increasingly, **hybrid approaches** are emerging, combining elements of publication, funding, and networking strategies. In fact, the most sustainable academic careers are often those that do not rely exclusively on one pathway, but build complementarities among them. Publications strengthen grant applications; funded projects generate data and networks that support further publications; international collaborations lead to both co-authored outputs and new project opportunities. Rather than choosing one model in a rigid manner, many successful researchers gradually assemble a portfolio of strategies that fits their disciplinary profile, institutional context, and career stage.

This temporal dimension is particularly important. In early career stages, researchers often rely more heavily on publication-building and network entry, using conferences, mobility opportunities, and co-authorship to gain visibility. At this stage, project leadership may be less accessible, though participation in funded projects as team members is highly valuable. In mid-career stages, the emphasis often shifts toward greater autonomy: leading projects, mentoring younger researchers, shaping research groups, and consolidating a more distinctive academic identity. In later career stages, institutional leadership, editorial influence, and field-shaping intellectual contributions may become more central. These shifts are not automatic, but they suggest that career strategies should be calibrated in relation to **professional timing** and evolving institutional roles.

At the same time, it is important to critically reflect on the structural conditions shaping academic careers. The contemporary academic system is characterized by increasing precarity, short-term contracts, intense competition, and heightened performance pressures (Standing, 2011). The neoliberal transformation of academia has introduced managerial logics, metric-based evaluation systems, and an emphasis on continuous productivity, often at the expense of intellectual autonomy and long-term stability. Under such conditions, even highly skilled and productive researchers may face insecure employment, fragmented work trajectories, and limited institutional support. Career

success is therefore never purely a reflection of merit; it is also mediated by structural inequalities, institutional resources, and access to prestigious networks.

This is especially important in emerging or semi-peripheral research systems, where evaluation standards may converge toward international models of excellence without equivalent convergence in salaries, infrastructure, funding stability, or administrative support. Researchers are often expected to perform at “global” levels while operating under “local” conditions of scarcity. This mismatch can generate frustration, overload, and uneven career opportunities. It can also intensify inequalities between those who are already connected to international circuits and those who remain structurally disadvantaged.

In this context, career development should not be understood solely as individual advancement, but also as a process of navigating – and, where possible, critically engaging with – the structural conditions of contemporary academia. This involves not only strategic adaptation, but also the cultivation of reflexivity regarding the values that guide one’s academic life. Researchers need to ask not only how to succeed, but also **what kind of academic they want to become**: a hyper-productive metric optimizer, a grant entrepreneur, a field-building intellectual, a public scholar, or some combination of these roles. Such questions are not secondary. They shape the coherence, sustainability, and ethical orientation of a career.

For this reason, one of the most important career development strategies is the cultivation of **selective ambition**. Not every opportunity should be pursued, not every collaboration accepted, and not every evaluation demand internalized. Strategic selectivity allows researchers to preserve coherence, avoid burnout, and invest in activities that reinforce their long-term trajectory. Closely related is the importance of mentorship and peer support. Academic careers are often imagined as individual achievements, but in practice they are deeply relational. Guidance from more experienced scholars, feedback from trusted peers, and inclusion in supportive research communities can significantly affect career outcomes.

Ultimately, there is no single or universally valid path to academic success. Careers are built through combinations of writing, funding, collaboration, teaching, mentoring, and institutional engagement, all under conditions that are uneven and often unstable. A realistic and sustainable approach to career development therefore requires both strategic action and critical awareness. It means pursuing excellence without surrendering entirely to the narrow imperatives of neoliberal academia, and building a career that is not only competitive, but also intellectually meaningful and professionally viable.

9.6. Navigating Structural Constraints in Emerging Research Systems

The development of academic careers in Romania must be understood within the broader context of a **semi-peripheral research system**, characterized by a complex interplay of opportunities and constraints. On the one hand, Romanian academia has become increasingly integrated into European research frameworks, benefiting from access to Horizon Europe funding schemes, international collaborative projects, academic mobility programmes, and transnational professional networks. These developments have opened important avenues for institutional learning, research professionalization, and international visibility. On the other hand, this process of integration unfolds against the backdrop of **enduring structural limitations**, including chronic underfunding of higher education and research, institutional volatility, administrative fragmentation, and uneven access to material and symbolic resources across universities and regions.

This dual condition produces a distinctive academic environment in which expectations often outpace support. Researchers are encouraged to perform according to international standards of excellence, productivity, and competitiveness, yet they frequently do so in settings where the infrastructural and organizational conditions for such performance remain only partially developed. Laboratories, research support services, administrative expertise, and long-term funding mechanisms may be **unevenly distributed or insufficiently institutionalized**. As a result, academic work in such contexts often requires not only scientific competence, but also significant adaptive capacity, improvisation, and the ability to manage uncertainty.

This situation can be understood through the lens of **institutional isomorphism**, as described by DiMaggio and Powell (1983). National research systems situated outside the traditional academic core often adopt the organizational models, evaluation criteria, and performance norms of more established Western institutions in order to gain legitimacy and ensure compatibility with international frameworks. Such alignment can be beneficial, as it facilitates participation in the European Research Area, enhances comparability, and encourages the development of shared standards of research quality and accountability. At the same time, however, it may also generate structural tensions. The importation of high-performance models into resource-constrained environments can create a mismatch between institutional demands and actual capacities, placing considerable pressure on researchers and organizations alike.

In this context, academic careers are shaped not only by merit and scholarly achievement, but also by the capacity to **navigate institutional asymmetries**. Researchers in emerging research systems often need to be especially strategic in identifying opportunities, building collaborations, and diversifying their professional activities. European funding programmes play a particularly important role in this regard. Beyond their financial value, such programmes provide access to international consortia, mentorship structures, mobility opportunities, advanced research infrastructures, and broader scholarly recognition. Participation in European projects can thus function as a powerful mechanism of career development, while simultaneously contributing to the

strengthening of local institutional capacity and the internationalization of universities that might otherwise remain more peripheral.

However, the benefits of integration should not obscure the costs and pressures associated with contemporary academic work. The growing reliance on **metric-based evaluation systems**, publication counts, citation indexes, and competitive grant acquisition as indicators of academic value can intensify inequalities within already fragile systems. Researchers with stronger international networks, better institutional support, or greater familiarity with the unwritten rules of transnational academia are often better positioned to succeed, while others may find themselves structurally disadvantaged despite strong intellectual potential. In this sense, the academic field does not operate as a level playing field; rather, it reflects **broader hierarchies of access, visibility, and recognition**.

Moreover, in semi-peripheral systems such as Romania's, the pressure to conform to international standards may coexist with **local bureaucratic burdens, inconsistent policy frameworks, and shifting institutional priorities**. This can produce a particularly demanding professional environment in which researchers must simultaneously satisfy domestic administrative requirements and international performance expectations. Academic careers therefore involve not only intellectual work, but also the management of institutional complexity. The ability to write competitive grant proposals, maintain international partnerships, handle reporting obligations, and strategically position one's research agenda becomes increasingly central to professional advancement.

For this reason, successfully **navigating academic careers in emerging research systems requires more than individual talent or perseverance alone**. It calls for a combination of strategic engagement, institutional awareness, and intellectual resilience. Researchers must learn to identify and leverage available opportunities without losing sight of the structural inequalities that shape access to them. They need to cultivate professional autonomy while remaining attentive to the organizational and political conditions under which knowledge is produced, evaluated, and rewarded. In this respect, career development is not simply a matter of personal progression, but also of learning how to operate reflexively within an uneven and evolving research landscape.

Ultimately, the Romanian case illustrates a broader condition shared by many **emerging research systems**: integration into international academia is **both enabling and constraining**. It expands horizons, creates possibilities, and fosters institutional modernization, yet it also exposes researchers to intensified competition and to standards that may not always be supported by corresponding local conditions. Recognizing this duality is essential. It allows for a more realistic and sociologically informed understanding of academic careers – one that acknowledges both the transformative potential of internationalization and the need for critical reflection on the structural realities of knowledge production in semi-peripheral contexts.

10. Conclusions

10.1. Key Takeaways

This guide has explored the conditions under which research excellence in the social sciences and humanities can be cultivated within a contemporary academic environment marked by globalization, competition, and structural inequalities. Several key insights emerge from this analysis.

First, research excellence is not reducible to individual talent or isolated achievements. It is the outcome of **structured practices**, including strategic topic selection, rigorous research design, effective publication strategies, and sustained engagement with international academic networks. In an increasingly competitive landscape, success depends not only on what researchers study, but also on how they position their work within broader epistemic and institutional frameworks.

Second, the global academic system is characterized by an **unequal geography of knowledge production**, in which institutions and researchers from semi-peripheral regions must actively negotiate structural disadvantages. Internationalization, collaboration, and strategic alignment with global debates are therefore not optional, but necessary conditions for visibility and recognition.

Third, the contemporary research environment is shaped by the growing influence of **scientometric evaluation systems**, funding competition, and performance-based metrics. While these mechanisms can enhance transparency and comparability, they also risk narrowing the scope of scholarly inquiry. A balanced approach to excellence must therefore combine **quantitative indicators with qualitative assessments**, preserving the intellectual depth and critical potential of SSH research.

Fourth, sustainable research development requires moving beyond short-term outputs toward the creation of **durable epistemic infrastructures**. Networks, datasets, research programs, and institutional partnerships are essential for ensuring continuity, scalability, and long-term impact.

Finally, the guide emphasizes that academic success is not a purely individual endeavor. It is embedded within broader institutional and systemic contexts, requiring both **strategic agency and collective capacity-building**. For researchers and institutions alike, the challenge is to navigate these conditions in ways that enable both competitiveness and intellectual integrity.

10.2. The Role of ELABCHROM in Strengthening SSH Research

The ELABCHROM project has played a pivotal role in advancing research capacity and excellence at Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu. As a Horizon-funded Twinning initiative, it

has provided a structured framework for **knowledge transfer, institutional development, and international integration**, enabling ULBS to strengthen its position within the European Research Area.

One of the project's most significant contributions has been the creation of **transnational epistemic networks**, facilitated through conferences, mobility programs, and collaborative activities. These networks have not only enhanced individual research capacities but have also contributed to the formation of a coherent research community centered on cultural heritage studies.

At the level of scientific output, ELABCHROM has generated a substantial portfolio of publications, including an edited volume and multiple peer-reviewed articles in international journals. These outputs have contributed to the **accumulation of scientific capital**, increasing both individual visibility and institutional prestige.

Equally important is the project's contribution to the **institutionalization of research practices**. Through the development of mixed-methods research designs, the creation of datasets, and the establishment of the Cultural Heritage Laboratory, ELABCHROM has laid the foundations for sustained research activity beyond the project's duration.

The project has also demonstrated a strong capacity for **strategic scaling**, as evidenced by the development of the NESTRA proposal and participation in the European Partnership for Resilient Cultural Heritage. These initiatives illustrate how initial capacity-building efforts can evolve into more ambitious forms of engagement, positioning ULBS as an active contributor – and increasingly as a coordinator – within European research networks.

In this sense, ELABCHROM has functioned not only as a project, but as a **catalyst for institutional transformation**, enabling a shift from peripheral participation to more central involvement in the production of academic knowledge.

10.3. Future Perspectives

Looking forward, the consolidation of research excellence at ULBS will depend on the ability to build upon the foundations established through ELABCHROM and to adapt to the evolving dynamics of the global academic landscape.

A first priority is the continued development of **institutional research infrastructures**, including the expansion of existing datasets, the strengthening of research laboratories, and the creation of new platforms for collaboration and knowledge production. Such infrastructures are essential for sustaining long-term research programs and enhancing competitiveness in international funding schemes.

Second, further efforts are needed to deepen **international integration**, particularly through participation in large-scale European projects, strategic partnerships, and interdisciplinary networks. Maintaining and expanding these connections will be crucial for ensuring visibility and influence within global academic debates.

Third, the university must continue to invest in the **development of early- and mid-career researchers**, providing them with the resources, training, and opportunities necessary to build coherent research agendas and engage with international communities. Supporting the next generation of scholars is essential for ensuring the sustainability of research excellence.

At the same time, it is important to maintain a **critical perspective on the evolving academic system**. The increasing reliance on metrics, the pressures of productivity, and the broader neoliberal transformation of higher education pose significant challenges to the autonomy and social relevance of research. Addressing these challenges requires not only adaptation, but also reflection and, where possible, institutional innovation.

Ultimately, the future of research at ULBS will depend on its capacity to combine **strategic alignment with European and global frameworks** with a strong commitment to intellectual depth, methodological rigor, and social relevance. By continuing to invest in networks, infrastructures, and human capital, ULBS has the potential to further consolidate its position as a **regional center of excellence in the social sciences and humanities**, contributing meaningfully to both European and global knowledge production.

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