Handbook of HRS4R for Widening Countries

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Table of Contents

Executive Summary

This document highlights the partnership Unite!, a European University Alliance established to drive transformative collaboration among nine leading European universities. The alliance focuses on advancing innovation, sustainability, and societal impact through the integration of education, research, and innovation. Its members include Technische Universität Darmstadt (Germany, the coordinator), Universidade de Lisboa (Portugal), Grenoble INP - UGA (France), Politecnico di Torino (Italy), Aalto University (Finland), KTH Royal Institute of Technology (Sweden), Universitat Politècnica de Catalunya - BarcelonaTech (Spain), Wroclaw University of Science and Technology – Wroclaw Tech (Poland), and Technical University of Graz (Austria). Together, these institutions aim to create a seamless academic and research ecosystem that transcends borders, empowering students, researchers, and staff with opportunities for mobility, interdisciplinary collaboration, and co-creation. Focused on addressing global challenges, Unite! emphasizes digital transformation, entrepreneurship, and the development of green technologies while strengthening European identity and global competitiveness, serving as a model for the future of higher education. The basis of this document is to use the strategies of non widening academic members of the consortium to inspire the processes designed and creared in the widening Higher Education Institutions.

Concerning the chapter's structure, the Handbook of the Human Resources Strategy for Researchers (HRS4R) for Widening Countries was designed to serve as a starting point for the universities of widening countries seeking to apply to this HR award. With the base guidelines along the three different phases of the process, and practical examples by the universities that compose the Alliance, it could be a useful help for the Higher Education Institutions that are committed to aligning their HR strategy with the European Charter for Researchers. Through the HRS4R process, institutions enhance working conditions, foster inclusive environments, and implement open, transparent, and merit-based recruitment (OTM-R). Achieving the HR Excellence in Research award boosts institutional growth, support the attractiveness of top talent, gives global visibility and competitiveness to widening countries and strengthens and balance the European Research Area.

Therefore, this document presents the guidelines for the HRS4R Accreditation, detailing the three main phases: Initial Phase, Interim Phase, and Award Renewal Phase, designed to align institutional HR practices with the European Charter for Researchers. In the Initial Phase, institutions commit to the Charter, identify a Strategic Committee and a Operational Working Team, conduct a GAP Analysis, complete an OTM-R Checklist, and develop an Action Plan to address identified gaps. Successful submission leads to the HR Excellence in Research recognition. The Interim Phase focuses on implementing the Action Plan, conducting self-assessments, and revising strategies. External evaluations and site visits ensure alignment with the Charter principles and long-term improvements. The Award Renewal Phase requires updated Action Plans and reviews to maintain accreditation, with evaluators assessing progress and sustainability. Key documents, including the Gap Analysis, Action Plan, and OTM-R Checklist, support strategic planning and compliance. The chapter emphasizes the iterative nature of the process, fostering continuous HR improvements and alignment with European standards.

The nine Unite! Alliance partners provide a wealth of diverse experiences to guide institutions from widening countries in the HRS4R accreditation process. Aalto University, a leader since 2012, has set a

benchmark with structured planning and continuous community feedback. Politecnico di Torino and WroclawTech emphasize strong institutional commitment, stakeholder engagement, and iterative improvements. Grenoble INP-UGA highlights the alignment of HRS4R with strategic goals to enhance recruitment and institutional visibility, while KTH demonstrates the benefits of integrating HRS4R actions into existing operational structures. Técnico Lisboa – the School of Engineering of Universidade de Lisboa that has the experience to lead with the HRS4R implementation, uses a multidisciplinary approach, incorporating focus groups and internal reviews to guide its process, and UPC underscores the importance of strategic plan alignment with HRS4R objectives. TU Darmstadt and TU Graz, though not formally applying, focus on balancing administrative demands with strategic priorities to support researchers effectively. These varied approaches offer valuable lessons and adaptable strategies for institutions seeking to align with the European Charter for Researchers.

To ensure successful implementation and sustain the HRS4R principles, institutions should engage a diverse team across all areas and career stages, develop effective communication plans, and use surveys and focus groups to capture a broader feedback. Aligning strategic plans with HRS4R actions, starting early for site visit preparations, and continuously monitoring progress through structured reviews and updates are also crucial. By adopting these best practices, institutions in widening countries can strengthen their research environments, align with European standards, and contribute to building a more integrated and dynamic European Research Area.

1 Introduction

The **Human Resources Strategy for Researchers (HRS4R) initiative**, under the **EURAXESS** framework, represents a significant opportunity for research institutions to enhance their working environment and elevate their standing within the global research community. By applying for the HR Excellence in Research Award, institutions align their policies with the **European Charter for Researchers** (formerly Charter & Code). This alignment ensures the promotion of open, transparent, and merit-based recruitment (OTM-R) practices, as well as fostering a supportive, inclusive, and development-focused environment for researchers.

Achieving the HRS4R award not only enhances the institution's appeal to high-quality researchers, offering better career opportunities and working conditions, but it also increases visibility on international platforms like **EURAXESS**. This, in turn, boosts the institution's chances of attracting global talent and securing European research funding, especially from programs like **Horizon Europe**.

Moreover, the application process itself, involving GAP analysis and the creation of an Action Plan, helps institutions critically assess and improve their human resources strategies. Although this is a voluntary mechanism, it implies an ongoing monitoring and continuous assessment (self-assessment and peer reviews) to obtain and maintain the Award, fostering long-term institutional growth, and making the organization more competitive and aligned with European standards.

This document aims to build upon the foundation of the HRS4R accreditation process, beginning with the initial steps of achieving the HR Excellence in Research Award and identifying the tangible benefits and insights gained throughout the process. By examining the experiences of the Unite! Partners that have successfully navigated the HRS4R accreditation, the document highlights the key advantages such as enhanced institutional reputation, improved recruitment processes, and alignment with European research standards.

In addition to capturing the lessons learned from institutions that pursued the accreditation, this document also gathers feedback from institutions that opted not to apply for the award. This perspective is essential for understanding potential barriers or reasons why some institutions may choose a different strategic path. By analyzing both groups, the document provides a well-rounded view of the HRS4R framework, its impact on research environments, and the diverse considerations institutions face when deciding whether or not to pursue this recognition.

2 Guidelines for the HRS4R Accreditation

2.1 HRS4R Implementation process

The HRS4R accreditation process consists of several well-defined phases, designed to guide institutions toward aligning their HR policies with the principles of the **European Charter for Researchers**. These phases ensure a thorough review, implementation of improvements, and continuous assessment of human resource practices. The key phases of the accreditation process are:

a. **Initial Phase**

- Initiation and Endorsement:
  - o Commitment to the Charter: The institution must formally endorse the European Charter for Researchers. This is done through an official letter of commitment, typically signed by the head of the institution, signaling a commitment to adopting these principles across the organization;
  - o Application Registration: Institutions create an organizational profile on the EURAXESS platform and assign a Human Resources Strategy for Researchers (HRS4R) administrator to lead the process.

- Application for the HR Award:
  - o Appointment of the HRS4R Strategic Commitee Members and respective roles; Appointment of the Working Team operational members and respective roles; Description of the main activities conveyed by both groups to organise the initial phase of HRS4R implementation;
  - o GAP Analysis: The GAP analysis identifies areas where improvements are needed. The institutions evaluate their current HR policies against the 20 key principles of the Charter for Researchers (Appendix A). This includes consultations with key stakeholders such as researchers, administrative staff, and department heads. The GAP analysis must also take into account the national legislation, to verify where the institutions can commit to fill the gaps and where efforts could be limited by national legislation;
  - o Institutions rate their compliance with each principle, identifying whether they are fully, partially, or insufficiently implemented. Justifications for each rating and any barriers to full implementation (such as the legal restrictions) are noted;
  - o OTM-R Checklist: Institutions also prepare an Open, Transparent, and Merit-based Recruitment (OTM-R) checklist to evaluate and improve their recruitment practices, ensuring they align with the principles of fairness and transparency;
  - o Initial Action Plan Design: Based on the results of the GAP analysis and the OTM-R Checklist, institutions develop an Action Plan that outlines specific steps to address the identified gaps. The plan should be strategic and focused on ambitious, but measurable, achievable goals. Institutions typically propose 20-25 actions, which should have clear indicators and timelines, considering priorities for the first 24 months.

Once the GAP analysis, OTM-R checklist, Action Plan, and the Process Description form are completed, institutions submit these documents through the EURAXESS platform. The European Commission then performs an administrative assessment to ensure compliance with required formats and guidelines.

If the submission passes the administrative check, an external assessment is conducted by independent experts. They evaluate the institution's overall HR strategy, the coherence between the GAP analysis and Action Plan, and how well the institution has engaged its community in the process.

If the evaluation is successful, the institution is granted the HR Excellence in Research Award, recognizing its commitment to the European Charter for Researchers. This award can be displayed publicly to highlight the institution's dedication to fostering a research-friendly environment.

The granting of the HR Excellence in Research Award marks the conclusion of the Initial Phase and signals the transition into the Implementation/Interim Phase. During this next stage, the institution focuses on executing the Action Plan and embedding the HRS4R principles into its daily practices and long-term strategies.

b. Interim Phase

- Implementation of the Action Plan (24 months)
    - After receiving the award, the institution begins implementing the Action Plan. Progress is monitored internally and externally, with the institution expected to deliver on its outlined commitments within the established timelines.

Two years after receiving the award, institutions conduct a self-assessment to review progress and submit an updated report on the implementation of the Action Plan. The institutions also propose new actions for the next three years and publish the revised version of the Action Plan or HR Strategy on its website (the URL must be indicated in the Internal Review form).

This is an important phase to allow the institution to reflect and document progress, alter actions or timing of actions if necessary as well as to offer the opportunity to create new actions for the upcoming years.

At this stage, an external evaluation will assess the progress and quality of the actions and accompanying measures (such as embedding the HRS4R process). The institution receives important recommendations on how to continue the implementation of the revised Action Plan for the next 36 months.

- Implementation of the Revised Action Plan (36 months)
    - After receiving the recommendations, the institution begins implementing the Revised Action Plan. Progress is monitored internally and externally, with the institution expected to deliver on its outlined commitments within the established timelines.

At the end of the Interim Phase of the HRS4R process, a site visit is conducted by external evaluators. This visit is a critical part of the renewal and monitoring process, allowing evaluators to assess how well the institution has embedded the HRS4R principles and implemented its Action Plan.

- Site visit evaluation
  - o The evaluator examines the institution's progress in implementing the planned actions and measures outlined in the Action Plan. This includes checking the extent to which the institution has addressed the gaps identified in the GAP Analysis.
  - o Evaluators hold discussions with a variety of stakeholders, including researchers at different career stages, administrative staff, HR professionals, and leadership. This helps to gather insights into how well the HRS4R principles have been adopted and their impact on the research environment.
  - o The evaluators assess the quality of the changes implemented and the sustainability of these improvements. They look for evidence that the institution is fostering an open, transparent, and merit-based recruitment system (OTM-R) and has improved working conditions for researchers.
  - o At the end of the visit, the evaluators offer feedback, highlighting both the strengths and areas for further improvement. This feedback is crucial for shaping the institution's revised Action Plan for the next phase. On Appendix B there is a standard form of the EC Consensus Report of the Interim Assessment.

The site visit is an opportunity for institutions to demonstrate their commitment to the ongoing improvement of their HR policies and practices, ensuring that they remain aligned with the European Charter for Researchers.

c. **Award Renewal Phase**

The award renewal phase is a crucial part of maintaining the HR Excellence in Research Award and occurs every three years after the initial accreditation. During this phase, institutions must demonstrate continued commitment to the HRS4R principles by updating and refining their Action Plan based on the progress made during the previous interim period. The key steps in the award renewal phase include the following steps.

- Implementation of the Improved Action Plan (36 months)
  - o Institutions execute the revised actions designed to address gaps identified in earlier evaluations. Key elements of this phase include the execution of specific actions aimed at enhancing HR practices, engaging stakeholders such as researchers and administrative staff to foster commitment, and establishing mechanisms for monitoring progress through measurable objectives.

Three years after receiving the award, institutions conduct a self-assessment to review progress and submit an updated report on the implementation of the Improved Action Plan. At this stage, an external evaluation will assess the progress and quality of the actions and accompanying measures. The institution receives important recommendations on how to continue the implementation of the Further Improved Action Plan for the next 36 months.

- Implementation of the Further Improved Action Plan (36 months)
  - o After receiving the recommendations, the institution implements the Further Improved Action Plan. Progress is monitored internally and externally, with the institution expected to deliver on its outlined commitments within the established timelines.

After three years external evaluators, appointed by the European Commission, conduct a comprehensive review of the submitted documents. This may be followed by a site visit, where evaluators meet with key stakeholders, including researchers and HR staff, to assess how well the institution has embedded the HRS4R principles into its practices.

The evaluators provide detailed feedback on the institution's progress and offer recommendations for further improvement. These suggestions help the institution refine its strategies and maintain compliance with the European Charter for Researchers.

The HRS4R process will cyclically continue after the Interim Phase, with an assessment for HR Award renewal every 36 months (alternating the organisation of site visits performed by experts).

Figure 1 illustrates the structure of the HRS4R implementation process, which serves as a roadmap for institutions seeking to align their human resources strategies with the European Charter for Researchers. The process is designed to be systematic and iterative, ensuring that institutions can effectively identify gaps in their HR practices, develop actionable plans, and implement improvements over time.
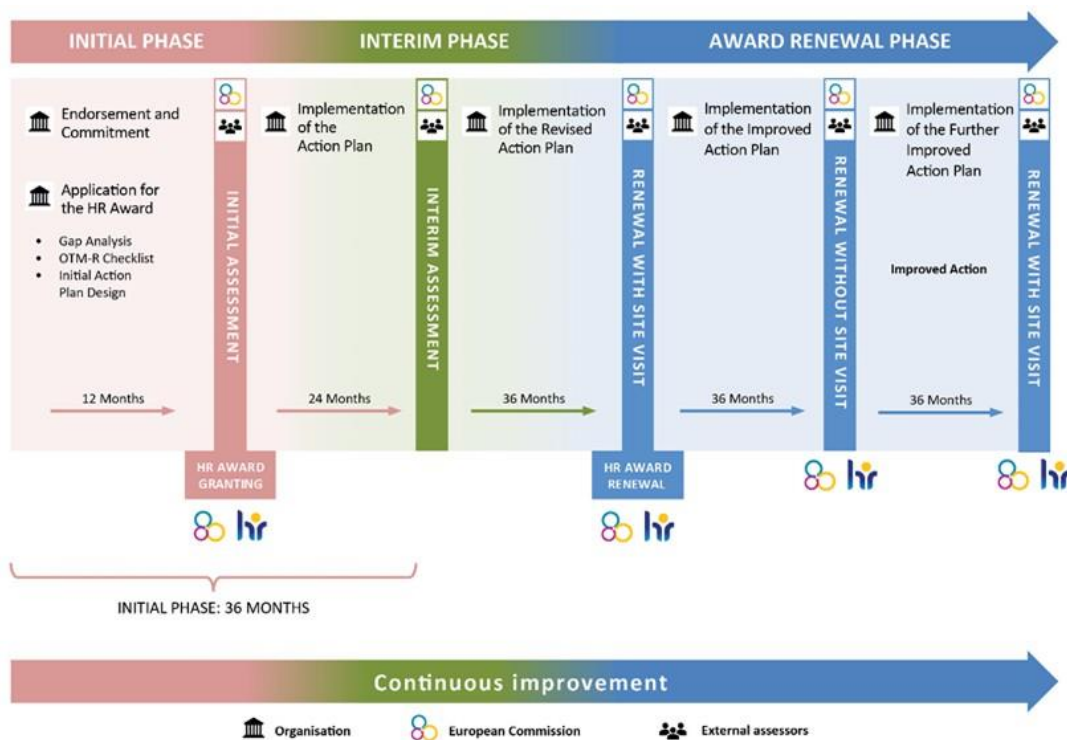

Figure 1 – Structure of the HRS4R Implementation Process[1]

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[1] Extracted from the "HR award Guidelines (under European Charter for Researchers - 20 Principles)" manual at https://euraxess.ec.europa.eu/hrexcellenceaward/hr-excellence, published at 12.12.2024.

2.2 Description of the required documents

To begin the HRS4R process, institutions must prepare several key documents to guide their application for the HR Excellence in Research Award. These documents not only reflect an institution's commitment to improving research environments but also provide a foundation for long-term strategic HR planning.

a. **Gap Analysis**

- The Gap Analysis compares the institution's current practices against the standards set out in the European Charter for Researchers. This document should provide a detailed assessment of existing HR policies, identifying strengths and weaknesses. The Gap Analysis is typically organized into four thematic areas:
    - Ethics, Integrity, Gender and Open Science
    - Researchers' Assessment, Recruitment and Progression
    - Working conditions and Practices
    - Research Careers and Talent Development
- The analysis helps institutions identify where improvements are needed to comply with European standards for researchers.

b. **OTM-R Checklist (Open, Transparent, and Merit-Based Recruitment)**

- Institutions must complete an OTM-R Checklist as part of the application process. This document assesses the institution's recruitment policies to ensure that they are open, transparent, and merit-based. It includes sections on job advertising, selection processes, and appointment transparency. The checklist allows institutions to critically evaluate their recruitment practices in line with European standards.

c. **Action Plan**

- Following the Gap Analysis, institutions are required to prepare an Action Plan that outlines concrete steps to address the gaps identified. This document includes:
    - A timeline for the implementation of each action
    - Clear responsibilities for each task (e.g., HR department, research units, etc.)
    - Expected outcomes and success indicators to measure progress
- The Action Plan serves as the roadmap for how the institution will improve its HR policies and create a supportive research environment.

d. **Internal Review (For Renewal Phase)**

- For institutions renewing their HR Excellence Award, a comprehensive Internal Review must be conducted at the end of the interim phase. This document details the institution's progress in executing the original Action Plan and highlights new actions to be included in the revised Action Plan. The review should demonstrate the impact of the improvements made since the initial award and assess areas where further enhancements are needed.

e. Progress Reports

- Throughout the HRS4R process, institutions are expected to provide progress reports at various stages. These reports summarize the status of the Action Plan's implementation, key achievements, and any challenges encountered. Regular reporting ensures transparency and accountability in the continuous improvement of HR policies.

f. Supporting Evidence (Optional)

- Institutions may also choose to submit additional documentation as supporting evidence, such as internal policies, training programs, or stakeholder feedback that demonstrates their commitment to the HRS4R principles. These documents can further reinforce the institution's dedication to creating a positive research environment.

By preparing these key documents, institutions ensure that they are fully equipped to engage in the HRS4R process and meet the high standards required for the HR Excellence in Research Award. The process is designed to be transparent, fostering an environment that supports researchers' careers and professional growth in line with European best practices.

2.3 Guiding questions on "How to start?"

For institutions starting the HRS4R process, it's important to ask guiding questions that help them reflect on their current human resource practices, identify gaps, and plan for improvements. Below some key guiding questions are presented.

a. Institutional Commitment and Strategy

- Why does your institution want to engage in the HRS4R process?
- What are the goals you hope to achieve with this accreditation?
- How does the institution's strategy align with the principles of the European Charter for Researchers?
- What existing policies support these principles?

b. Gap Analysis

- What are the current HR practices for recruitment, career development, and working conditions of researchers?
- Are there established frameworks in place that reflect transparency, merit, and equal opportunities?
- What areas need improvement to align with the European Charter for Researchers?
- What HR challenges have been identified, e.g., lack of diversity, career progression issues, etc.?
- What are the key areas where researchers' needs are not being fully addressed?
- How do researchers view the support they receive for career development?

c. Stakeholder Engagement

- How will different stakeholders (researchers, HR staff, leadership) be involved in the process?
- Who will take ownership of each stage of the Action Plan development and implementation?

- How will you gather input from your research community?

- Are there established channels for obtaining feedback from researchers on HR-related topics?

d.　Action Plan Development

- What specific actions will be prioritized based on the gap analysis?

- What changes can be implemented quickly, and which ones require long-term planning?

- What metrics and objectives will you use to measure progress?

- How will you define success, and how will you monitor the outcomes of your actions?

e.　Sustainability and Continuous Improvement

- How will the institution ensure the sustainability of the changes after receiving the HR Excellence Award?

- What structures will be in place to continue improving HR practices after the initial implementation/Interim phase?

- How will your institution prepare for future evaluations and renewals?

- What processes will be in place to monitor and revise the Action Plan regularly?

f.　Support and Resources

- What resources are available to support the HRS4R process?

- Does your institution have the necessary human, financial, and technical resources?

- What external support or partnerships might be needed to support the implementation?

- Are there opportunities to collaborate with other accredited institutions or external experts?

These guiding questions can help institutions thoughtfully approach the HRS4R process, ensuring a solid foundation for creating a sustainable and effective human resources strategy for researchers.

3 Sharing Experiences within Unite!

The application journey of the Unite! Alliance partners to achieve HR Excellence in Research (HRS4R) recognition consists of distinct stages that reflect each institution's progress in aligning with the principles of the European Charter for Researchers.

Figure 2 illustrates each partner's current stage in the HRS4R process. Aalto University, a frontrunner in this initiative, applied for recognition in 2012. Subsequent institutions have engaged at various points. This timeline highlights the commitment across Unite! to advance quality research environments and shared standards, offering a comparative view of progress and milestones achieved by each partner institution in their HRS4R journeys.
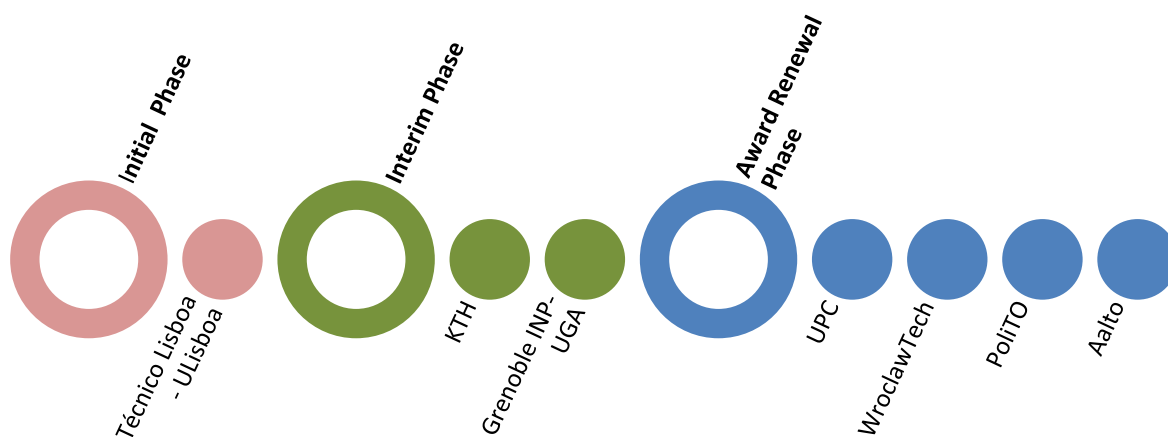

Figure 2 – Current stages of the Unite! Alliance partners in the HRS4R process

Aalto University was the first university in Finland awarded with the HR Excellence in Research by the European Commission. Committed to complying with HRS4R policies, Aalto has gone through the different steps of the HRS4R process: first internal audit with gap analysis and action plan in 2012, followed by interim assessment in 2015, and the first award renewal with site visit in 2019. In 2022/2023 they had the second award renewal, without site visit. At the end of December 2022 they submitted the internal assessment report and its main points - strengths and weaknesses, as well as the action plan for the strategic period of 2022-2024 - can be read online, at the Aalto HRS4R website.

Since this is a continuous process, the feedback from Aalto community is systematically collected in many different ways, for example by: statistical information; development workshops; regular meetings with the Academic Careers Working Group; interviews and discussions with the key tenure track actors; gathering feedback from applicants and those advancing on their career paths and from other stakeholders of key importance for the career system.

The information on the development processes of the career system is communicated in accordance with roles and responsibilities so that all actors are aware of the direction and measures of development. If necessary, seminars and workshops are arranged for passing on information, for example by holding HR workshops to ensure the spread of best practices.

ULisboa comprises 18 Schools that could have the designation of Faculty or Institute. The organization and functioning of the different schools are endowed with governing bodies, governed by their own

statutes, and can be structured into organic teaching and research units. In particular, only the Engineering school, Técnico Lisboa, invested in the HRS4R implementation process. This process trends to be an inspiration to the other schools of the University do the same HRS4R application process. The rectory of Universidade de Lisboa focus on developing some conditions to enbrace topics as wellbeing, mitigation of harasement, teachers training academy or related areas where is possible to perfom better a research environment across the different schools of the university.

As TUDarmstadt already meets a large number of the requirements of HRS4R, they do not believe that an application would have a sufficient impact on personnel policy to devote extensive resources to applying for the certificate.

At TU Graz, they continuously strive to uphold and enhance the principles of the European Charter for Researchers. However, after careful consideration, they decided not to pursue the Human Resources Strategy for Researchers (HRS4R) Award at this time. The primary reason for this decision lies in the significant administrative effort required for the application and certification process. While the HRS4R Award offers recognition and alignment with best practices, the resources needed to prepare and maintain compliance with the certification outweigh the immediate benefits it provides to the institution. The current focus of TU Graz is on implementing practical and impactful measures to support their researchers and staff, ensuring that their efforts directly contribute to their professional development and the quality of research. Allocating resources to these priorities, rather than to the administrative demands of the HRS4R application, better aligns with their strategic goals. This decision however does not diminish the commitment to fostering a supportive and innovative research environment. TU Graz remains dedicated to continuous improvement and will revisit the possibility of applying for the HRS4R Award if the balance between its benefits and administrative demands becomes more favorable in the future.

The next sections will delve into the experiences, challenges, and opportunities that Unite! Alliance partners have encountered this throughout the HRS4R accreditation process. Organized by the three phases—Initial Phase, Implementation/Interim Phase, and Renewal Phase—these sections will provide a detailed overview of partner institutions' insights and lessons learned at each stage.

For more information related to a specific Unite! partner and its HRS4R process, the direct links for their HRS4R pages are given above:

- [PoliTO HRS4R](#)
- [WroclawTech HRS4R](#)
- [UPC HRS4R](#)
- [Grenoble INP-UGA HRS4R](#)
- [KTH HRS4R](#)
- [Técnico Lisboa - ULisboa](#)

3.1 Initial Phase

In the Initial Phase of the HRS4R process, Unite! Partners defined a starting point to assess their HR practices and ensure alignment with HRS4R principles. They shared methodologies for forming working teams, identifying key members, and conducting information-gathering processes, such as surveys, focus groups, and interviews. This phase involved recognizing challenges and identifying opportunities for improving HR support systems, ultimately enabling each institution to develop an actionable Action Plan.

3.1.1 Experience from PoliTO

The HRS4R process has been widely participated in since the very beginning. All categories of the academic community are involved in the process: researchers and professors, administrative staff and institutional representatives. A solid internal organizational structure has been established in order to ensure institutional support for the initiative, involvement of representatives of all stakeholders and agile and efficient coordination of activities.

The Focus Group of Researchers was established at the launch of the HRS4R process and is periodically updated in order to ensure an equal representation of researcher categories (R1 – R4), departments and gender. The Focus Group contributed to the Gap Analysis and preparation of the Action Plan. The Administrative Working Group contributed to the Gap Analysis analyzing current regulations, policies and practices. The HRS4R Steering Board represents the management of the University and evaluates the results of the gap analysis and proposals for actions before they are submitted to the University's governing bodies.

High Institutional commitment to the principles of the European Charter for Researchers and the Code of Conduct for the Recruitment of Researchers was a major success factor for PoliTO's HRS4R process. The whole process was always led and supervised by an Institution's high-level representative: the Deputy Rector chaired the Steering Board and the Researchers' Focus Group from 2013 to 2018.

3.1.2 Experience from WroclawTech

In March 2016, the Wrocław University of Science and Technology (WUST) expressed its support for the principles outlined in the European Charter for Researchers and the Code of Conduct for the Recruitment of Researchers by signing a declaration. To discuss the implementation process, the Rector invited 26 key members of academic staff and university administration for a meeting. The Implementation Team was subsequently established (Internal Regulation 40/2016), which included the Rector, one Vice-rector, 6 Professors from different research areas and 15 people from the university administration. The team's tasks mainly included:

- Analysis of legal regulations, procedures, and practices applied at the university;
- Preparation of documentation and identification of areas requiring action to align internal regulations with the Charter and Code's requirements (GAP analysis);
- Development of the HRS4R Strategy, action plan, and responsibilities;
- Implementation of the Charter and Code provisions at the university.

An information campaign was conducted between March and April, to inform and engage doctoral students and academic staff about an anonymous questionnaire survey to obtain feedback on their working conditions and professional development. The survey was conducted between 11-25th April 2016 and included 435 respondents. The survey results indicated the need for actions to improve the flow of information and familiarize researchers with existing practices or regulations, due to the significant number of questions that received a high "don't know" response rate. An important element of the actions taken was continuous and effective communication with employees regarding existing solutions and ongoing initiatives.

An internal documentation analysis was conducted by comparing the guidelines in the Charter and Code with applicable national legal acts and internal regulations at Wrocław University of Science and

Technology and afterwards, the Action Plan was formulated. In May, the developed document containing the HRS4R Strategy (GAP analysis, Action Plan, and OTM-R checklist) was submitted to the European Commission.

3.1.3 Experience from UPC

The motivation for UPC's application for the HRS4R in 2013 stemmed from the submission of a project where possessing the HRS4R award was considered a significant advantage during the evaluation process. In this context, the process was initiated by two members of the International Projects Office, who became the coordinators of the process.

Under the supervision of the Vice-Rector's Office for Quality and Language Policy, the working team was organized into two main groups: the Steering Committee and the Task Force.

The Steering Committee included the vice-rectors of UPC, the Directors of the Teaching and Research Staff Area and the Research and Transfer Area, as well as the two members from the International Projects Office. This committee was responsible for developing the guidelines for the process and monitoring the progress of the strategic and action plans.

The Task Force, responsible for implementing the defined actions, comprised representatives from various units, including:

- International Projects Office (2 members),
- Office of Sustainable Management and Equal Opportunities (1 member),
- International Relations Bureau (2 members),
- Libraries, Publications, and Archives Service Communication Service (1 member).

The process began with an initial meeting of the Steering Committee, followed by three meetings of the Task Force. Information was gathered through individual meetings with key personnel responsible for their respective areas only about the researchers.

In the initial phase, no surveys or focus groups were conducted.

3.1.4 Experience from Grenoble INP-UGA

Since 2019, the schools that currently make up Université Grenoble Alpes (UGA) have been involved in a common process of obtaining accreditation for their strategies, in accordance with the HRS4R Accreditation. This process is part of the university's' continuous improvement approach and, more generally, helps to improve working conditions for all staff. The HRS4R project is part of Axis 3 of UGA's Strategic Plan, "Through a responsible employer policy, make UGA and its divisions a place for sharing, fulfillment, initiative and learning for staff members".

Obtaining the award also helps to reinforce the attractiveness and international influence of UGA, particularly in terms of staff recruitment. On the Euraxess Jobs European employment portal, the HR Excellence in Research award allows candidates to identify work environments that are particularly stimulating and supportive for researchers.

In September and October 2019, the first HRS4R Steering committee meeting was held, including Research governance and Human Resources governance. A meeting for discussions between the General Management delegate for "Research, Innovation and Evaluation" and the Laboratories was organized to present the HRS4R accreditation, its implications and challenges.

From October to December, different working groups within the academic and scientific community were launched and organized, with representatives of laboratories, elected councils and trade unions. The aim was to draw up a shared assessment of the situation, an essential prerequisite for any transformation project, to ensure that as many people as possible are on board.

Mid January 2020, meetings with the experts and local points of contact regarding the major challenges of the European commission were held, in relation to the following topics: gender, open and transparent recruitment, open science, ethics, evaluation of research and supervision of PhD, on the basis of the assessment realised the previous months. By the end of January, a first draft version of the diagnosis was submitted to the HRS4R Steering committee, being then able to send the statement of purpose to the European Commission.

During February and March, before containment was instituted due to the COVID pandemic, working groups with researchers were organised to draft action proposals based on the diagnosis, and a public conference was held to present the analysis of differences and the action plan to the community.

The validation of the HRS4R diagnosis, action plan and commitments by the members of the Steering committee was performed in May, and presented to every central council in June and July. After discussions and approvals, the whole project file was submitted to the European Commission in July. The project file was examined by the European Commission from September to December, supplementary comments and questions were received in January 2021, and indicators and supplementary information was added.

3.1.5 Experience from KTH

In August 2019, the endorsement letter was signed by the KTH President and submitted to the EC HRS4R-Team.

A project leader (former project leader for EU C&C at SUHF, The Association of Swedish Higher Education Institutions) was hired by KTH during the Initial Phase in order to pursue the preparations and application procedures for the implementation process.

A steering committee had been appointed by the KTH President in order to assure overall responsibilities within research, quality assurance, administration and internationalization. The steering committee consisted of the Dean of Faculty, Vice President of Research, University Director and Vice President of International relations. The steering committee's role was also to overlook the progress of the process and to approve the final application before the President's decision on it.

A project group had also been created which had the operative responsibility of the process. The project leader had the coordinating responsibility of the whole process and was draftsman for the steering committee. Both the steering committee and the project group had regular meetings. The project group consisted of the project leader, the Head of Research Support Office, the Head of HR, a representative from the Communications department and a quality assurance officer. In addition to these permanent members, affiliated persons participated temporarily, according to their areas of responsibility. There was also an administrative working group, which contributed to the gap analysis and the OTM-R Checklist,

analyzing regulations, policies and practices. The group was represented by staff from the HR-Department, Department of Learning, Research Support Office and postgraduate education advisors.

Parallel to the fulfillment of the gap analysis and the planning of the future implementation, the entire organization was informed in meetings as well as via the web site and via directly addressed newsletters. Invitations to information meetings with group discussions, was sent by the project leader to the management of each school including representatives of its administration, and representatives of all research groups, i.e. R1 – R4 (2 people per group R1-R4, a total of 8 people), appointed by each school. The aim with the meetings was to provide information about the EU Charter and Code for Researchers, and about the progress of the work at KTH, providing space for questions and opinions, and coordinating common issues for decision-making basis for possible development projects. However, due to Covid-19 and the pandemic situation, these meetings could not be completed.

After the Steering Committee's approval of KTH´s application and action plan, they were submitted for assessment by the European Commission. The assessment of KTH´s case came out as 'pending minor modifications'. More information regarding the research community´s involvement in the gap analysis and Action Plan was requested. KTH was recommended by the Commission´s HRS4R-team to use questionnaires to be transacted within the next 24 months, before the first interim assessment. The questionnaire was supposed to be a consulting action amongst the stakeholders which would compensate for what could not be completed in meetings during spring 2020 due to the pandemic situation.

Some identified advantages of the HRS4R strategy work during the Initial Phase was that it made it clearer to identify what kind of resources and what supply and support we had, versus what we lacked and what we needed to develop based on the EU Charter and Code areas and principles. It was/is also very good with external and independent assessors.

Identified challenges were, as certainly for many other large universities, to involve functions and staff and to get them interested in the work.

3.1.6   Experience from Técnico Lisboa – ULisboa

The HRS4R process started in November 2023, after the submission and approval of the Endorsement Letter.

The Working Group was defined in a multidisciplinary approach, integrating 3 elements from the Human Resources Direction, 1 Researcher and 1 member from the Planning, Studies and Quality Direction. This approach allowed a comprehensive understanding of the Institution's current situation and enabled a more integrative definition of the Action Plan. The working team was supervised by a Strategic Steering Committee composed by the Human Resources Director, the Vice-President for International Affairs, the President of the Scientific Council and one R3/R4 Researcher.

This overall composition allowed an efficient data collection process, that was composed by several stages during the application first year:

- Desk-research on other National and International HRS4R applications. This research was fundamental in order to better define the road-map of our application process, since it allowed us to understand where the focus could be and build on some best practices.

- OTM-R: was fully filed by the HR and validated by the Supervision Commission; although the data collection was not hard, the tunning of the information was somehow time-consuming, since due to the decentralization of some processes, namely the recruitment, the data needed to be verified by other elements other than the HR department.

- Gap Analysis: the kick-off of the Gap Analysis data collection started with the identification of the Units and Departments that were theoretically responsible for the topics and the allocation of responsibilities to the working team. Overall there was a need to mainly contact the Legal Direction, the IT Direction, the Quality, Planning, Studies and Quality Direction and the Human Resources Direction, this clearly showed that all the planned actions will required the cooperation of more than one particular team, and that this process will certainly involve almost everyone department in the Institution. Furthermore, the Gap Analysis, also showed that being a public institution there are legal constraints to which the school is binded and that remove some flexibility in some areas of action.

- Action Plan: the actions planned were defined jointly considering the needs analysis from the focus group, the identification of critical areas in the gap analysis and some best practices from other institutions, but also considering a rationale of sustainable implementation.

The stakeholders were defined as being all researchers in the Institution, from the stage R1 to the stage R4, for whom the working team organized two focus group sessions to collect information and feedback on each one of the Principles of the Charter for Researchers. Both focus group took place on the 9th July 2024:

- Group 1 for R1 and R2 Researchers: a total of 34 researchers were invited to participate in the focus group, from which 25 replied to the invitation. 15 accepted to take part and 14 ended up participating in the focus group.

- Group 2 for R3 and R4 Researchers: a total of 55 researchers were invited to participate in the focus group, from which 35 replied to the invitation. 14 accepted to take part and 12 ended up participating in the focus group.

The focus group experience was an added value to HRS4R application, it helped the team to understand that the researchers community is willing to take part and being directly involved in such processes considering that 67% of the invited researchers replied to the call which allowed the preparation of following-up actions, namely interviews to 8 of the participants in the focus group and the launching of a survey that will allow to have a deeper understanding of how our researchers position themselves and our Institution within the Charter for Researchers. The decision to deepen the data collection was based on the fact that many of the researchers that weren't able to participate indicated that they were willing to cooperate if other actions were put in place.

Técnico Lisboa is currently waiting for the technical validation of the submission.

3.1.7   SWOT Analysis – HRS4R Initial Phase

S — Strengths

- **Collaborative and Inclusive Approach:** High levels of participation across academic and administrative staff in partner institutions (e.g., PoliTO's involvement of all categories of the academic community, Wroclaw Tech's inclusion of 26 key members).
- **Institutional Commitment:** Strong support and leadership from senior representatives (e.g., PoliTO, UPC and ULisboa).
- **Structured Processes:** Establishment of dedicated working groups, focus groups, and steering committees to ensure efficient coordination and stakeholder representation (e.g., PoliTO's structured governance and R1-R4 researcher involvement).
- **Comprehensive Gap Analysis:** Systematic review of policies, regulations, and practices to identify areas for improvement, supported by robust data collection (e.g., WroclawTech's detailed GAP analysis and OTM-R checklist).
- **Engagement of Researchers:** Direct involvement of researchers across all career stages (e.g., focus groups at ULisboa and workshops at INP-UGA).
- **Best Practices Sharing:** Use of desk research and benchmarking with other institutions to guide action plans (e.g. ULisboa's adoption of practices from national and international applications).

W — Weaknesses

- **Resource Intensity:** Significant time and effort required for data collection, coordination, and alignment with HRS4R principles (e.g., Técnico Lisboa/ULisboa's time-consuming OTM-R tuning).
- **Variability in Stakeholder Engagement:** Challenges in maintaining consistent participation levels across all groups (e.g., KTH's difficulty engaging functions and staff).
- **Legal and Structural Constraints:** Public institutions face rigid legal frameworks that limit flexibility in certain areas of action (e.g., Técnico Lisboa/ULisboa's constraints due to national regulations).
- **Limited Initial Tools:** Some institutions, such as UPC, did not use surveys or focus groups in the initial phase, potentially missing critical insights.

O — Opportunities

- **Improved HR Systems:** Opportunity to enhance HR practices and align them with the European Charter for Researchers and the Code of Conduct.
- **Enhanced Research Environment:** Strengthened working conditions and professional development opportunities for researchers (e.g., Grenoble INP-UGA's focus on improving staff fulfillment and initiative).
- **Global Visibility:** Increased attractiveness to international researchers through the HR Excellence in Research award (e.g., Grenoble INP-UGA's use of the Euraxess Jobs portal).
- **Scalability and Knowledge Sharing:** Potential for sharing successful methodologies and frameworks across the Unite! network to promote consistency and collaboration.
- **Deeper Stakeholder Engagement:** Continued use of surveys and focus groups to ensure stakeholder involvement and actionable feedback (e.g., Técnico Lisboa/Ulisboa's follow-up interviews and surveys).

T — Threats

- **Pandemic Disruptions:** Interruptions to planned meetings and activities due to COVID-19 (e.g., KTH's incomplete group discussions).
- **Resistance to Change:** Potential reluctance among stakeholders to adopt new policies or practices.

3.2 Interim Phase

In the Interim Phase of the HRS4R process, Unite! Partners share valuable feedback on engaging stakeholders, managing resource and logistical challenges, tracking progress with effective metrics, and adapting strategies to meet evolving needs. The partners' approaches to documenting achievements and preparing for external evaluations are shared.

3.2.1 Experience from PoliTO

The organizational structure, created ad hoc, ensured institutional support for the initiative, integration in the University's broader global strategy, involvement of researchers and of all stakeholders, monitoring of the implementation of the Action Plan, compliance with the European accreditation deadlines and rules and agile and efficient coordination of the entire process. It also promoted the activation of synergies among the structures of the administration and the collaboration among support staff and researchers at different career stages, enabling the definition and the implementation of new shared actions and the optimization of processes and activity flows.

A new Rector was elected, who appointed a Vice-Rector for Quality, Welfare and Equal Opportunities who was also in charge for the HRS4R and chair the Focus Group of Researchers, and involved in all the phases of the HRS4R process: gap analysis, action plan, implementation and revision.

The researcher community was strongly involved in the implementation process; during this phase all the academic community was asked to fill in an anonymous survey to assess the implementation of the principles of the European Charter for Researchers at Politecnico di Torino. Training courses in transferable skills and action outcomes were presented as part of the HRS4R and the HR Excellence in Research logo was used.

During the implementation/Interim phase, the Administrative Working Group met the Focus Group once a year to present the state of the art of the Action Plan and receive inputs for further improvements. They contributed to the Gap Analysis and were responsible for the implementation of the actions. For each action, a working team and a leader were identified and a common template was used to describe completed and ongoing activities, future deadlines and activities to be started; critical issues were also discussed to identify encountered problems that might affect the work plan. Milestones and indicators for each action were identified and verified during the whole period.

3.2.2 Experience from WroclawTech

In June 2016, WUST received the HR Excellence in Research Award from the European Commission. The implementation of the Action Plan was monitored by the HRS4R Monitoring Group (Internal Regulation 103/2016), which submitted reports to the Rector. The oversight of the actions related to the university's award of the HR Excellence distinction was assigned to the Vice-Rector for Organization and Development (Internal Regulation 109/2016). The implementation of the tasks took place from January 2016 to March 2023 within two time periods (24 months + 36 months).

During the first period (2016-2018), the corrective and self-improvement actions included in the Action Plan started to be implemented, involving the University Authorities and Units to ensure greater integration of units and researchers. Particular attention to the synergy of administrative units and researcher support staff were taken. A Unit or leader was designated for each action and a common template

"Control Protocol" was used to describe actions completed and in progress, deadlines for the next period and actions to be started. Monitoring of progress, outcomes and review of implemented activities was the responsibility of the Monitoring Group (meeting quarterly) and implementation reports were submitted to the Rector of the University.

The University's authorities (2016-2020) term of office supported the implementation of the tasks defined in the European Charter and Code and maintained the scope of tasks of the Pro Vice-Rector for Organisation and Development in the area of supervision and continued implementation of procedures leading to the award of the HR Excellence in Research distinction to the University.

Cyclical reporting meetings were held with representatives of the University's Organisational Units that implemented the tasks, with presentations, discussion of the progress of the tasks, and reported risks or difficulties in the implementation. A Control Sheet was filled in, distinguishing completed and/or uncompleted actions resulting from the Plan and schedule of actions, as well as uncompleted actions intended for implementation at a second date. To build awareness of the European Charter and Code among the WUST community, the HR logo was attached to the documents.

The Action Plan was revised, the schedule of actions modified, with close attention to expanding and amending the OTM-R Policy, and the documentation sent for evaluation.

In February 2019, the received evaluation report stated that the Organisation is making progress in implementing the relevant and high-quality actions described in the action plan and there is evidence that the HRS4R strategy is being further implemented. In the assessment, the auditors highlighted the University's commitment to the HRS4R strategy and efforts in relation to promoting and displaying the HR Excellence logo, strategy and action plan on the website. The auditors' recommendations included spreading the dissemination and fostering awareness of the Charter and the Code and strengthening the monitoring process of the implementation of the principles and the OTM-R policy.

During the second period (March 2019 to March 2022), all the auditors' recommendations were addressed by revising the Action Plan and completing the performance indicators. In order to strengthen the awareness of researchers and other employees of the University, an extensive information and promotional campaign was prepared (e.g. an interview with the Coordinator of the Implementation Team, with a dedicated Pro Vice-Rector; a new version of the website was developed, comprehensively describing the process of implementation of the Charter; informational meetings with scientists in each department; engaged the University's social media).

An internal audit through a survey was conducted. Prior to the direct launch of the survey, an additional promotional campaign was carried out using various communication channels, including: e-mailing to Deans with a letter from the Vice-Rector for Organisation and Development, inviting them to take part in the survey and encouraging their unit's employees; e-mailing from Deans to employees; announcements in the University's Electronic Information Bulletin about the dates of meetings in the units with representatives of the Monitoring Team; e-mailing to survey participants; interviews on the University's social media (FB, News on the University's website); placing information about the survey on University-wide screens. Both Polish and foreign employees were invited to the survey. Based on the respondents' answers, an analysis was prepared with a summary of positive evaluations and areas for improvement. An internal analysis of legal acts, documents and practices in force at the university was also carried out again. Based on both analyses, a new Action Plan was developed.

Particular attention to the organisation of processes under the OTM-R Policy was paid, by developing: a comprehensive scheme of procedures for open competitions for the position of academic staff; a new

ordinance; a guide for applicants; good practice in recruiting researchers; a feedback form; a guide for newly employed. Regular briefings with HR assistants were held and the number of competitions in the Faculties for a particular position monitored, taking into account: the overall number of applications; the number of applications from outside the University; the composition of the committees; the number of interviews with applicants; the number and quality of appeals against decisions of the selection committees.

The next stage of the evaluation was the organisation of a site visit by the European Commission auditors. The visit was prepared based on the guidelines set out on the Euraxess website. Information about the visit was communicated on the University's social media encouraging a large participation of researchers (R1-R4) in meetings with the delegation of European Commission representatives. During the two-day visit in April 2022, meetings were scheduled with the University Authorities, the Team for the Charter and Code and numerous meetings with representatives of researchers at each career stage (R1-R4), the Doctoral Students' Council and representatives of the University's Organisational Units. A report assessing the effects of implementing the Charter and Code principles was received within a month of the site visit.

3.2.3   Experience from UPC

The Steering Committee and the Task Force remained unchanged, and information was collected through individual meetings with key personnel responsible for their respective areas. In addition to gathering data on researchers, information about professors was also included.

An alignment of the UPC Strategic Plan with the HRS4R Action Plan was carefully considered to ensure coherence between the university's broader institutional objectives and the specific goals of the HRS4R initiative. This alignment allows for a more integrated approach, ensuring that the strategies and actions outlined in the HRS4R plan complement and reinforce the university's long-term vision. By creating synergies between the two plans, UPC aims to maximize the impact of its efforts, streamline resource allocation, and enhance the effectiveness of its policies in fostering a supportive and inclusive environment for researchers and academic staff.

3.2.4   Experience from Grenoble INP-UGA

In April 2021, a presentation of the award and the recommendations was held, marking the transition to the implementation/interim phase. From May to July, the Steering committee for implementation of the Action Plan was expanded and the Monitoring committee setted up. During this period, INP-UGA also organized meetings with the Action Leaders and initiated the action deployment phase. Between September and December, the expanded Steering committee focused on monitoring the Action Plan. Statements of purpose were drafted for action leaders and communication activities were launched to keep stakeholders informed.

In March 2022, the project was presented at a social conference attended by trade union representatives from across UGA. This was followed by an enlarged Steering committee meeting, to review the progress and update action tracking sheets. From May to September different materials were developed: a research community survey, an internal evaluation method and its schedule, and the OTM-R policy.

An internal survey targeting researchers and teacher-researchers ran from October 2022 to January 2023. During this period, mid-term internal evaluation seminars were also conducted. In November 2022, a

progress report detailing the status of the 27 actions outlined in the plan was developed. Following this, in December, the initial results of the survey were shared, providing updates on the OTM-R policy, and a testimony from Nathalie Modjeska, Head of the Structural Programs Department at Université de Montpellier was included.

The Action Plan for 2023-2026 was revised in March 2023, and the OTM-R charter presented while incorporating insights from the internal survey. In June the application was submitted to the European Commission and in July INP-UGA received the confirmation of administrative eligibility, allowing it to proceed to the award renewal phase.

Since autumn 2023, INP-UGA have continued the communication efforts regarding OTM-R and shared results from the researcher survey while actively following up on the Action Plan and implementing the OTM-R Charter.

During the initial phase, INP-UGA encountered difficulties in articulating the strategic plans of the various stakeholders. We then encountered problems in implementing the action plan during the implementation/interim phase. Indeed, some of the objectives were unclear, and some of the resources had been poorly estimated or anticipated. However, the implementation of the HRS4R strategy was, for us, an excellent tool for developing a concerted HR policy for teaching and research staff from the outset.

3.2.5 Experience from KTH

In May 2021, the European Commission announced that KTH had received the HR Excellence in Research award. This information was disseminated through comprehensive newsletters via the intranet throughout KTH´s organization.

The HRS4R officer from the HR-department coordinated and participated in steering committee meetings. Here, the information and recommendations from the EC Consensus Report, which were received in connection with the HR Excellence in Research award, was raised and discussed, as well as the set up of the continued work on the new revised action plan and the upcoming interim assessment in 2023.

The initial action plan stated that KTH should have a separate steering group and implementing committee during the Implementation/Interim Phase. However, it turned out and was decided internally at KTH, that the most sustainable, qualitative, including and effective way to work at KTH, was instead to work integrated with the HRS4R-strategy and the actions via KTH´s Operational plan and already existing bodies (the operational plan consists of assignments/projects decided by the President and the University Director, after a broad anchoring within the entire organization through referral bodies as for example School managements, various schools and departmental functions, as well as the Central Staff Collaboration group with trade union/employee representatives).

The interim report and the revised action plan 2023, was drawn up through a preparation work carried out by representatives from the HR-department and the Dean of faculty and the Vice Dean of Faculty coordinated by the HRS4R-officer. The HRS4-officer followed up the status of the old activities with responsible performers, and overlooked and ensured that the new actions in the action plan were in accordance with EU Charter and the Code and its principles.

In June 2023, above documents were submitted to the EC HRS4R-team for follow up and assessment. In August 2023, the European Commission announced that the interim report and revised action plan was approved, and a new Consensus Report was received by KTH from EC HRS4R-team.

S — Strengths

- **Robust Monitoring Structures:** Institutionalized monitoring and reporting processes, such as WUST's Monitoring Group and PoliTO's annual reviews, ensured systematic tracking of progress.
- **Stakeholder Engagement:** Strong involvement of stakeholders at all levels, including researchers, administrative staff, and leadership (e.g.,INP-UGA's social conferences with trade union representatives and KTH's integration into operational plans).
- **Alignment with Broader Strategies:** Efforts to align HRS4R Action Plans with institutional strategies, as demonstrated by UPC and KTH, improved coherence and impact.
- **Comprehensive Action Implementation:** Detailed and well-structured action tracking and reporting systems, such as templates and control sheets used by PoliTO and Wroclaw Tech, ensured clear accountability.
- **Effective Communication:** Wide-reaching communication efforts, such as newsletters, surveys, and social media campaigns (e.g., Wroclaw Tech's multi-channel campaigns), fostered awareness and engagement.
- **Adaptability to Feedback:** Integration of external recommendations into revised Action Plans, as seen with WUST and KTH, demonstrated flexibility and commitment to continuous improvement.

W — Weaknesses

- **Resource Allocation Challenges:** Underestimation of resources needed for some actions, as reported by Grenoble INP-UGA, led to delays and inefficiencies.
- **Complex Coordination:** Managing synergies among multiple stakeholders and units posed logistical difficulties, particularly in larger institutions (e.g., challenges at KTH and Grenoble INP-UGA).
- **Varying Stakeholder Involvement:** Ensuring consistent and broad participation across all stakeholder groups remained a challenge in some institutions.
- **Inconsistent Follow-Up:** Delays in implementing or completing certain actions due to insufficient follow-up mechanisms (e.g., uncompleted actions at WroclawTech in the first implementation period).
- **Ambiguity in Objectives:** Some objectives were unclear, making them harder to achieve and measure effectively (e.g., Grenoble INP-UGA's initial phase challenges).

O — Opportunities

- **Enhanced Awareness of European Standards:** Broad dissemination of HRS4R principles, such as WroclawTech's and KTH's communication efforts, provided opportunities to instill a stronger culture of research excellence.
- **Improved Recruitment Practices:** Development of detailed OTM-R policies and recruitment guides (e.g., WroclawTech and Grenoble INP-UGA) promoted transparency and inclusivity in hiring.
- **Alignment with Institutional Priorities:** Integrating HRS4R actions into broader operational plans, as seen with KTH and UPC, increased the strategic value of the initiative.
- **Leveraging Feedback:** External audits and recommendations, such as those from the European Commission, provided clear pathways for refining and improving strategies.
- **Cross-Institutional Learning:** Sharing best practices within the Unite! network can foster innovation and reduce redundancies in the HRS4R processes across institutions.

T — Threats

- **Sustainability Risks:** Risk of losing momentum in implementation due to changes in leadership or shifting institutional priorities (e.g., transitions in university governance structures).
- **Resistance to Change:** Reluctance among certain stakeholders to adopt new policies or practices could impede progress.
- **Pandemic Disruptions:** The COVID-19 pandemic introduced uncertainties and limitations in stakeholder engagement and meeting schedules.
- **Regulatory Constraints:** Variations in national and institutional regulations could hinder the alignment of policies with HRS4R principles.
- **Monitoring Fatigue:** Over-reliance on reporting mechanisms and frequent assessments might overwhelm stakeholders and reduce enthusiasm for the initiative.

3.3 Award Renewal Phase

Finally, the Award Renewal Phase of the HRS4R process, captures the partners' approaches to continuous improvement, documenting achievements, and preparing for external evaluations to maintain sustainable alignment with HRS4R standards.

3.3.1 Experience from PoliTO

During the site visit, the councilors met the Steering Board, the Focus Group of researchers and the Administrative Working Group, thus demonstrating the broad participation of researchers in the definition of PoliTO's HR strategy.

A key success factor for the renewal phase was the complete integration of the HRS4R into the University's Strategic Plan: all actions were directly linked to the priorities of the PoliTO Strategic Plan and integrated into the corresponding Action Plan and monitoring system. The Director-General is a member of both the Control Board of the Strategic Plan and the HRS4R Steering Board, ensuring the coordination and alignment of the Strategic Plan and the HRS4R.

The academic community was asked again to fill in an anonymous survey to understand their perception of the implementation of the principles of the European Charter at Politecnico di Torino and results were analyzed and discussed with the Focus Group of Researchers, the Steering Board and the University's governing bodies and used to build the new Action Plan.

In 2023, Politecnico di Torino celebrated the 10-year anniversary of the HR Excellence in Research Award with a series of initiatives aimed at supporting the career development of researchers (launch of the Coaching service, on-boarding meetings for research fellows and assistant professors, meetings at departments to support participation in individual research funding, extension of job placement and career guidance initiatives to doctoral candidates and the survey mentioned above).

PoliTO also held the national event 'Enhancing research careers. Strategies and tools inspired by the European Charter for Researchers', where representatives from the European Commission, the Ministry of University and Research, Confindustria and several Italian universities discussed policies and initiatives for attractive and sustainable research careers within and beyond university and the benefits of implementing the European Charter for Researchers. The day's proceedings, and particularly what emerged during the afternoon session, contributed to the drafting of a document addressed to the Ministry of University and Research illustrating benefits, obstacles and good practices faced by the 15 Italian universities that have been awarded the HR Excellence in Research Award in implementing a Human Resources Strategy for Researchers (HRS4R).

The project management team has acquired an extensive knowledge and expertise in the European initiative and requirements and the PM is a lead assessor for the European Commission for the HRS4R process and coordinated a national working group of the Italian universities holding the HR Excellence in Research award.

3.3.2 Experience from WroclawTech

WUST is currently in the process of completing the first part of the Renewal Phase i.e. the 36-month period, which will end with the submission of the documentation in May 2026.

The team is being reorganised. The actual team consists of representatives of the main administrative units of the University and representatives of each Faculty (14 faculties compose the Wrocław University of Science and Technology) that employs researchers. The idea is for each Faculty to be represented by at least one person. Such a representative is in contact with the Dean of the Faculty and deals with the promotion of the European Charter for Researchers in their environment.

Following the auditors' visit and the receipt of a positive assessment, regular reporting meetings are being held, with representatives of the Organisational Units of the University implementing tasks. A representative of each Organisational Unit made a presentation and discussed the progress of the tasks, reporting any risks or difficulties in implementation. Subsequently, a Control Sheet was filled in, distinguishing completed and/or uncompleted actions resulting from the Action Plan and schedule, as well as uncompleted actions marked for implementation at a second date. During the meetings, we diagnosed several areas for improvement, e.g.: the problem with the tightness of the monitoring system for the arrivals of foreign guests or lack of incentive programmes for researchers in the humanities, who are outside the main scientific disciplines pursued at the University. All presentations and meeting minutes were uploaded to a dedicated google drive that can be accessed by all team members.

Currently, with the change of University Authorities (term 2024-2028), the European Charter for Researchers team is part of the Division run by the Vice-Rector for Community Development and Integration. The team coordinator meets periodically with the HR assistants discussing the processes for recruiting researchers in the Faculties under the OTM-R policy. WUST keep a record of the competitions for each year at each Faculty, share good practices and review in detail the cases of "complaints and appeals" against the decisions of the selection committees. As a result of these actions the OTM-R Policy was updated (in 2023 and 2024).

A survey among the academic staff (R1-R4 researchers, invitations were sent out to 2496 people) was launched according to the principles of the new Charter and Code (20 questions). The survey was preceded by a presentation by the Vice-Rector at the Rector and Dean's College and emails sent to the Deans, together with a letter from the Vice-Rector for Community Development and Integration, inviting them to take part in the survey and encouraging their staff to participate in the survey. We report on the survey process in the University's Electronic Information Bulletin. The survey questionnaire was drawn up in Polish and English.

3.3.3 Experience from UPC

During the renewal phase, adjustments were made to the working team to enhance its effectiveness. An academic leader was appointed to head the team, reflecting an internal decision to strengthen academic representation. Additionally, an administrative member from the Doctoral School was included to provide further support and expertise. The rest of the team composition remained unchanged.

Additionally, feedback and suggestions from PhD students were actively incorporated into the preparation of the Gap analysis and the development of the Action Plan.

A new strategic plan was developed, accompanied by a matrix that maps and aligns the UPC's strategic objectives with the HRS4R strategy, ensuring a cohesive and mutually reinforcing framework for institutional growth and researcher support.

A comprehensive survey is conducted every three years, covering all areas, and in the renewal phase some specific questions related to the HRS4R process were included. This approach is aligned with the institution's internal policy, which limits the availability of such surveys to renewal periods only, rather than administering them annually. The questions added to the survey were the following:

Level of Knowledge of Legal and Contractual Obligations

Do you know the duties and obligations derived from your contractual relationship with the UPC? Evaluate the following statements:

- I am aware of the rights and duties derived from labor legislation (regional, national, institutional regulations, collective agreements, etc.)
- I am aware of the rights and duties derived from intellectual property regulations at the UPC
- I am aware of the rights and duties derived from the code of ethics and conduct and the regulations on conflicts of interest

Selection and Promotion Processes

If you have participated in a competition, selection process, internal promotion call, etc., in the past year as a candidate, evaluate the following statement:

- I understand the operation and evaluation criteria that have been used for my hiring or assessment by the UPC

Access to Professional Guidance

Evaluate the following statements:

- I have received sufficient information from the UPC to identify existing professional development opportunities and pursue my long-term research career at the UPC
- I have received sufficient information from the UPC to identify existing professional development opportunities and pursue my long-term research career outside the UPC

3.3.4 SWOT Analysis – HRS4R Award Renewal Phase

S — Strengths

- **Integration into Strategic Plans:** Complete alignment of the HRS4R strategy with institutional priorities, as seen in PoliTO and UPC, ensured sustainability and coherence.
- **Broad Stakeholder Engagement:** Active involvement of diverse stakeholders, including researchers (R1-R4), administrative staff, and faculty representatives
- **Comprehensive Surveys and Feedback Mechanisms:** Use of detailed surveys to capture perceptions and identify areas for improvement (e.g., WroclawTech's survey of 2,496 researchers and UPC's targeted HRS4R-related questions).
- **Continuous Improvement:** Iterative updates to policies and practices based on feedback and monitoring results, such as WroclawTech's OTM-R policy updates and PoliTO's integration of survey results into new action plans.
- **Knowledge Sharing and Advocacy:** Engagement in national and international discussions, such as PoliTO's hosting of events to share best practices and challenges with other universities and stakeholders.
- **Sustainability of Efforts:** Long-term initiatives like PoliTO's 10-year celebration, which included career development programs and broader awareness campaigns, reflect a commitment to lasting impact.

W — Weaknesses

- **Resource and Team Adjustments:** Challenges in maintaining and adapting team composition for optimal efficiency, as evidenced by WroclawTech's reorganization and UPC's team adjustments.
- **Gaps in Monitoring Systems:** Identified weaknesses in monitoring systems, such as tracking foreign guest arrivals and incentivizing underrepresented research disciplines (WroclawTech).
- **Limited Frequency of Surveys:** Some institutions, like UPC, limited surveys to renewal periods, potentially missing ongoing feedback opportunities.
- **Over-Reliance on Administrative Processes:** Administrative-heavy processes, such as detailed tracking systems and reporting mechanisms, may overburden staff and slow decision-making.

O — Opportunities

- **Enhanced Career Development:** Initiatives like PoliTO's coaching services, onboarding meetings, and job placement programs highlight opportunities for institutional growth and researcher support.
- **National and International Collaboration:** Events and working groups, such as PoliTO's national event, provide platforms for sharing practices, influencing policy, and building partnerships.
- **Improved Communication Strategies:** Opportunities to strengthen communication channels and promote awareness, such as WroclawTech's use of multilingual surveys and UPC's targeted questions on legal and professional obligations.
- **Focused Inclusion Strategies:** Addressing gaps in support for less-represented research areas, such as humanities at WroclawTech, can broaden the impact of HRS4R initiatives.
- **Leveraging Expertise:** Institutions like PoliTO, with experienced project managers and assessors, can lead capacity-building efforts within the HRS4R community.

T — Threats

- **Leadership Transitions:** Changes in university leadership, such as WroclawTech's new authorities, could disrupt the continuity of HRS4R initiatives.
- **Stakeholder Fatigue:** Repeated surveys, meetings, and audits might lead to disengagement among participants.
- **Regulatory Constraints:** Variability in regional, national, and institutional regulations might hinder full alignment with HRS4R standards.
- **Challenges in Implementation:** Difficulties in addressing identified gaps, such as WroclawTech's issues with monitoring and incentivizing humanities researchers, could slow progress.
- **Sustaining Long-Term Alignment:** Maintaining alignment with evolving HRS4R standards and ensuring continuity across strategic and operational levels can be resource-intensive.

4 Conclusions

After gathering the information from the partners within the Unite!widening alliance in the various phases of the implementation of the accreditation process, a consensual point is that although this process can be an extra work for the institutions, if its implementation is well aligned, coordinated and integrated with the institution's own strategies, the end result is truly positive. This allows for a continuous process of improving the working conditions of the researchers and also bringing renown to the institutions.
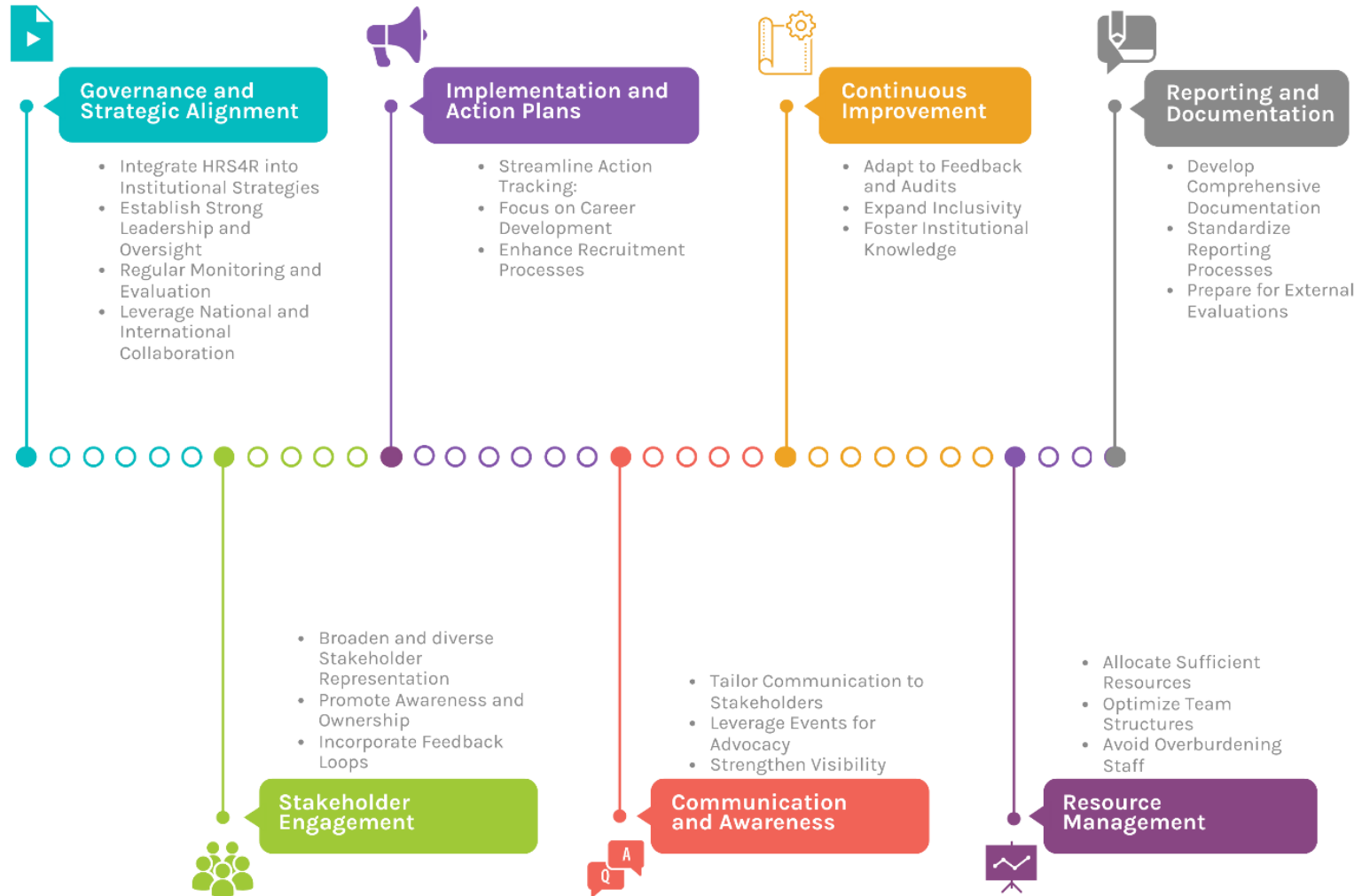
To ensure a successful implementation of the HRS4R process and to align the institution's practices with the principles of the "HR Excellence in Research" award, a list of practical recommendations was created based on the experience within the Unite! Alliance:

- Establish a **multidisciplinary and diverse working team**, including both administrative and academic staff from different areas and career stages.
- Implement a **communication strategy** to raise awareness about the HRS4R Award. This can include organizing seminars, maintaining a dedicated webpage, distributing newsletters, and leveraging other outreach efforts.
- Utilize **surveys** as an effective tool to gather input from the community. This may involve creating a dedicated survey or incorporating specific HRS4R-related questions into existing surveys.
- Ensure that survey questions are **tailored to respondents' experiences**, reflecting their roles and responsibilities. Include a mix of open and closed questions, keeping the number of questions manageable.
- Organize **focus groups and interviews** to include researchers from diverse disciplines and career stages (R1 to R4) for comprehensive feedback.
- Align the **University/School Strategic Plan** with the proposed HRS4R Action Plan by developing a matrix that maps and integrates information from both plans.
- Maintain **up-to-date information** on the institution's website about the progress of the HRS4R process to ensure transparency and keep the community informed.
- Ensure that **HRS4R Award information** is prominently displayed on the institution's homepage for visibility.
- Develop a **Gantt chart** to visualize and manage the timeline for implementing the HRS4R Action Plan, ensuring efficient progress tracking.
- Collaborate with **Unite! partners** to identify specific implementation points and contact persons via their websites.
- Promote **regular meetings** with stakeholders to monitor the implementation of the Action Plan and address challenges promptly.
- Plan for **site visits** with an average duration of three days, ensuring meetings with specific stakeholders during the visit.
- Begin preparing for site visits at least **six months in advance**, selecting participants, and sharing all necessary information and documentation. Include everyone involved in the organization of the site visit. For example, create a **video presentation** showcasing the university's achievements related to the HRS4R process.

Based on the above recommendations, the next figure emphasizes the roadmap practical tips, according 7 dimensions, to the HEIs of Widening countries follow if they decide to apply to the HRS4R recognition:

HRS4R ROADMAP
Practical Recommendations

Governance and Strategic Alignment

- Integrate HRS4R into Institutional Strategies
- Establish Strong Leadership and Oversight
- Regular Monitoring and Evaluation
- Leverage National and International Collaboration

Implementation and Action Plans

- Streamline Action Tracking:
- Focus on Career Development
- Enhance Recruitment Processes

Continuous Improvement

- Adapt to Feedback and Audits
- Expand Inclusivity
- Foster Institutional Knowledge

Reporting and Documentation

- Develop Comprehensive Documentation
- Standardize Reporting Processes
- Prepare for External Evaluations

Stakeholder Engagement

- Broaden and diverse Stakeholder Representation
- Promote Awareness and Ownership
- Incorporate Feedback Loops

Communication and Awareness

- Tailor Communication to Stakeholders
- Leverage Events for Advocacy
- Strengthen Visibility

Resource Management

- Allocate Sufficient Resources
- Optimize Team Structures
- Avoid Overburdening Staff

Appendix A

The European Charter for Researchers is a set of principles underpinning the development of attractive research careers to support excellence in research and innovation across Europe. The focus of the European Charter for Researchers ('Charter for Researchers') is the rights and responsibilities of researchers, employers, funders and policy makers; it consists of 20 key principles. These are classified under the following four pillars:[2]

PILLAR 1 - ETHICS, INTEGRITY, GENDER AND OPEN SCIENCE

1. ETHICS AND RESEARCH INTEGRITY
2. FREEDOM OF SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH
3. OPEN SCIENCE
4. GENDER EQUALITY
5. EMBRACING DIVERSITY
6. THE RESEARCHER
7. FREE CIRCULATION OF RESEARCHERS
8. SUSTAINABILITY OF RESEARCH

PILLAR 2 - RESEARCHERS ASSESSMENT, RECRUITMENT AND PROGRESSION

1. RESEARCHERS' ASSESSMENT
2. RECRUITMENT
3. SELECTION
4. CAREER PROGRESSION

PILLAR 3 - WORKING CONDITIONS AND PRACTICES

1. WORKING CONDITIONS, FUNDING AND SALARIES
2. STABILITY OF EMPLOYMENT
3. CONTRACTUAL AND LEGAL OBLIGATIONS
4. DISSEMINATION AND EXPLOITATION OF RESULTS

PILLAR 4 - RESEARCH CAREERS AND TALENT DEVELOPMENT

1. VALUING DIVERSE RESEARCH CAREERS
2. CAREER DEVELOPMENT AND ADVICE
3. CONTINUOUS PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT
4. SUPERVISION AND MENTORING

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[2] COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION of 18 December 2023 on a European framework to attract and retain research, innovation and entrepreneurial talents in Europe (C/2023/1640)

Appendix B

Implementation Phase Interim Assessment - EC Consensus Report

Case number: _____
Name Organisation under assessment: _____
Submission date of the Interim Assessment Internal Review: _____
Submission date: _____

Quality assessment

The quality assessment evaluates the level of ambition and the quality of progress intended by the organisation.

If any statements have prompted a "no" or "partly" in the evaluation, please provide recommendations:

	YES / NO / PARTLY	RECOMMENDATIONS
Has the organisational information been sufficiently updated to understand the context in which the HR strategy is implemented?		
Does the narrative provided list goals and objectives which clearly indicate the organisation's priorities in hr-management for researchers?		
Has the organisation published an updated HR strategy and action plan been updated with the sections' current status, additions and/or modifications?		
Is the implementation of the HR strategy and action plan sufficiently embedded within the organisation's management structure (e.g. Steering committee, operational responsibilities) so as to guarantee a solid implementation?		
Has the organisation developed an OTM-R policy?		

Strengths and weaknesses

On the basis of the information submitted and taking into account the organisation's national research context, how would you as an assessor judge the HR Strategy's strengths and weaknesses? (maximum 1000 words).

Strengths

Weaknesses (comments for improvement)

If relevant, please provide suggestions for modifications or revisions to the (updated) HR strategy: (maximum 2000 words)

During the transition period special conditions apply:

Institutions having started the HRS4R implementation prior to the publication of the OTM-R toolkit and

recommendations by the European Commission (2015) may not have prioritised actions implementing the OTM-R principles yet. In this case, they should not be penalised but strong recommendations should be made to address these principles appropriately.

At this point of the INTERIM assessment, the institution does not jeopardise maintaining the HR award.

Nevertheless, the institution is advised to take into account the comments and recommendations of the assessors to meet all assessment criteria at the next assessment (in 36 months).

Recommendations

Which of the below situations describes the organisation's progress most accurately? Tick the right situation and add comments/general recommendations accordingly.

HRS4R embedded	○
HRS4R embedded, corrective actions needed	○
HRS4R embedded, strong corrective actions needed	○

Explanation

- **HRS4R embedded**: There is evidence that the HRS4R is further embedded.
- **HRS4R embedded, corrective actions needed**: There is some evidence that the HRS4R is further embedded.
- **HRS4R embedded, strong corrective actions needed**: There is a lack of evidence that the HRS4R is further embedded.

Additional comments *