



‘Sharing experience to better implement  
the Human Resources Strategy for Researchers’

**Consensus Report**  
(to be filled by the lead assessor)



## RENEWAL PHASE<sup>1</sup> – assessment with a SITE VISIT

Name of the Organisation under assessment: UNIVERSITEIT ANTWERPEN

This assessment is composed **in CONSENSUS** by the assessors on (date): 15/03/2019

### DETAILED ASSESSMENT

#### 1. QUALITY ASSESSMENT

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

#### 1A. DESK-BASED ASSESSMENT

	YES	NO
Has the <b>organisational information</b> been sufficiently updated to understand the context in which the HR Strategy is implemented?	YES	
Does the <b>narrative</b> provided list goals and objectives which clearly indicate the organisation’s priorities in HR-management for researchers?	YES	
Has the organisation published an <b>updated HR Strategy and Action Plan</b> been updated with the actions’ current status, additions and/or alterations?	YES	
Is the implementation of the HR strategy and Action Plan <b>sufficiently embedded</b> within the organisation’s management structure (e.g. steering committee, operational responsibilities) so as to guarantee a solid implementation?	YES	
Is the <b>OTM-R policy</b> <sup>2</sup> <b>in place and publicly available</b> ?	In progress	

Look ahead at the questions to be addressed during the site visit, listed in part 1B:

<sup>1</sup> Last update 2.2.2018

<sup>2</sup> 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.*

Does the internal assessment of the institution give **rise to any issues you wish to explore** in more detail during the site visit?

Which elements of the HR Strategy and Action Plan would **you like to focus on** during the site visits?

- Suggest the use of term doctoral candidates instead of the misleading expression 'PhD students'.
- Suggest making reference to and use of the "European Framework for Research Careers", its 4 profiles and the respective 'necessary competences' and 'desirable competences', which could extremely facilitate the work of selection committees (above all in view of the implementation of the OTM-R).
- Review those actions that could be checked visually, such as processes & policies documents or tools (recruitments process, well-being policy, ...) that UA has elaborated; check those actions that are reported to be completed and the follow up of those actions that are ongoing or planned.
- Try to understand what information the UA researchers have about the HRS4R.
- Get more detailed information on how progress of the action plan implementation is monitored.
- Get more detailed information on policies on diversity and equal opportunities, and on development and promotion of leadership roles.
- Acquire elements on the selection process for academic staff (e.g. tools for assessing candidates), in view of the OTM-R implementation, and ask whether a mechanism to assess whether OTM-R delivers on its objectives is in place or planned.
- From the documents which have been provided, the HRS4R appears to be deeply embedded within the organisation's management structure. How much this is translated into everyday practice and widespread across all the strata of the organisation's population is left for the site visit to assess: in other words, we should assess if the HR Strategy and the Action Plan are in line with reality.
- Furthermore, the assessor team will try to get insights on the perceived 'added value' for the Institution of having undertaken the C&C and the HRS4R processes.

**1B. SITE-VISIT BASED Assessment (to be completed jointly by the assessors after the site visit)**

Please provide a brief<sup>3</sup> answer to the following questions:

<p>1. Does the <b>site visit</b> confirm the impression made by the written self-evaluation report?</p> <p>Definitely. The impression made by the written self-evaluation report was more than confirmed by the site visit, during which the deep and substantial comprehension of the implications of having adhered to the HRS4R process emerged with crystal clear evidence. Furthermore, during the numerous interviews with researchers (R1 to R4) and managers, including the top management of the University (in total, +30 persons in 4 thematic, 1 introductory and 1 debriefing sessions were interviewed), the amazing enthusiasm about the endeavour was evident as well.</p>
<p>2. What have been the <b>benefits</b> of implementing an HR Strategy in the organisation under review? How do you judge its overall impact and achievements?</p> <p>In each and every interview session, the assessor team asked, through open questions, about the perceived benefits of implementing the HRS4R in the Institution. A reply obtained invariably in all Sessions was that “possibly most of the ‘actions’ included into the Institution’s AP would have been done even without adhering to the C&amp;C and the HRS4R, <b>HOWEVER the HRS4R provides a general framework within which those actions acquire an overall coherence and make the Institution perceive with clarity a global, medium-to-long term vision</b>”. Other interesting arguments were that “the adherence to the HRS4R and to the ‘continuous improvement’ principle subtended to it represents an ‘insurance’ against unforeseen and unforeseeable ‘deviations’ linked to changes in the top management priorities”, and that “the adherence to the HRS4R and, in particular, <b>the preparation of the documents in view of the site visit</b>, was the occasion to rationalise elements which sometimes are present in the day-to-day life of the Institution, but remain ‘implicit’ and left to the goodwill of individuals”. Another specific and interesting argument was that “having adhered to the HRS4R, the responsibility for the doctoral research projects could not be anymore left only to the individual supervisors, but must be shared with the Institution, which now supervises and monitors the doctoral candidates’ recruitment procedures and the advancement of their projects; this has already a visible impact in the number and quality of doctoral candidates recruited and on the number of theses successfully accomplished”.</p>
<p>3. How do you judge the organisation’s <b>level of ambition</b> with regard to its HR strategy for researchers, taking into account the initial state of play?</p> <p>Although the starting point of the UA was definitely already high quality, the HRS4R represented a quantum leap in terms of global vision and level of ambition, especially in terms of cohesion and coherence among the actions brought about by different Faculties and Managing Departments. According to the assessor team, the level of ambition is high and realistic at the same time. The difficulty in achieving concrete and substantial progress in areas such as gender (and, more generally, under-represented groups) equal opportunities, or dual careers is well perceived but still the risk of setting unrealistic objectives is avoided. As one person said during the interviews “but identifying the gaps is already a first step toward filling those gaps”.</p>

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<sup>3</sup> Note by the assessor team: In view of the amount of work that the site visit implies, both for the Institution to be visited and for the visiting assessor team, and in view of the importance of the exercise, the assessor team does not see why the answers should necessarily be brief; on the contrary, the assessor team believes that the more detailed these answers are, the more useful they can be for both the Institution and the EC.

<p>4. How do you judge the organisation's efforts to ensure the implementation of the Charter and Code principles regarding the <b>Ethical and Professional Aspects of Researchers</b>?</p>
<p>Undoubtedly, the Institution has been working very hard and also brilliantly in these directions. An ethical Code of Conduct for researchers has recently (2018) been adopted and an Ethics Checklist is available for researchers to be applied (mandatorily!) to all their research projects, also for disciplinary areas which 'traditionally' were not accustomed to take care of these aspects. Once again, this would be done probably even in the absence of the adherence to the C&amp;C principles, but, within its framework, it acquires coherence with actions brought about in other fields by other Departments (e.g. HR &amp; gender, Health and Safety etc.).</p>
<p>5. How do you judge the organisation's efforts to ensure the implementation of the Charter and Code principles regarding the <b>Recruitment of Researchers</b>? Is an <b>OTM-R policy</b> in place?</p>
<p>The adoption of an OTM-R policy is in progress. Although the starting point is already high quality (the fact that about one third of the senior researchers are international strongly supports the openness of the recruitment procedures), the C&amp;C and the OTM-R policy documents, produced at EU level, provided renewed impulsion in this direction. Positions are widely advertised, and the Institution aims at further improve the quota of international and 'external' recruitment. In this sense, the regulations concerning the language might constitute an obstacle, although definitely not unsurmountable (foreign researchers have a 3-year time for acquiring a Dutch language certificate). This said, the fact that bachelor-level courses must be given in Dutch and only a limited proportion of master-level courses can be given in a different language (i.e. in English) might represent an obstacle to recruiting international personnel who, besides research, have also teaching duties. Furthermore, this may limit the appeal of the Institution for foreign students, which is a pity, in view of the excellent quality of this Institution. About the transparency and merit assessment in the recruitment process, guidelines and templates for the calls have been produced, as the Institution is fully aware that the more the call text is detailed, the more transparent is the process of selection. Evaluation of merit is clearly perceived as the most complex aspect of the whole process. The Institution has decided to leave to the Faculties the freedom to identify their own criteria, which should be multi-dimensional (they are working on panels of around 20 indicators, grouped in 3-4 areas), and this process is now under way. The general idea can be summarised as follows: "You are <u>free</u> to identify the criteria, but you are <u>responsible for and bound to</u> develop and establish criteria".</p>
<p>6. How do you judge the organisation's efforts to ensure the implementation of the Charter and Code principles regarding the <b>Researchers' Working conditions and Social Security</b>?</p>
<p>In this domain, the commitment of the Institution is original and admirable. Besides the seriousness the safety-related issues are dealt with, special attention is given, e.g., to social security issues for international students and researchers, in general a complex and sometimes/frequently cumbersome domain, depending on the country of origin and also on the National Regulations. It was interesting to know that the difficulties with VISA and residence permits increased so much in the most recent years that sometimes both the hosts and the potential guests lose interest in the mobility because of the time and costs involved. Obviously, a remedy for this situation does not lie within the reach of the Institution's powers. Perhaps the most intriguing and, to the knowledge of the assessor team, unique initiative was the 'stress survey' conducted to assess the wellbeing of the research personnel. What emerged from the survey is that factors such as the increasing shortage of stable, long-term positions, the growing proportion of fixed-term (especially short-term) contracts, the exacerbated competition for positions and contracts, based on the publish-or-perish axiom, the low success rate of applications for project funding, all these factors undermine the wellbeing of researchers and the quality of the conditions in the working environment. Interestingly (and commendably), the results of the stress survey were made known to the Flemish Government, which, in consequence of it, decided to increase the funding for research project, in order to increase the success rate of the applications and to reduce the pressure on the researchers' population.</p>

7. How do you judge the organisation's efforts to ensure the implementation of the Charter and Code principles regarding **Researchers' Development and Training**?

In this area as well, the Institution has deployed smart efforts. The establishment of a Talent Center (especially targeting doctoral graduates) in 2017, which conducts career counselling, organises and structures training, networks the target population with potential employers and testimonials is a visible witness of these efforts, although its impact cannot (yet) be measured. Furthermore the "Dive-into" initiative, composed of 3 pillars: the Dive-into-Projects and Dive-into-Business open to all profiles of researchers (R1 to R4) and the Dive-into-PhD, reserved to master students indicated the commitment of the Institution for the full expression of its researchers' population's potential (even for people who are not yet part of this population, as the master students). Although the first two Dive-into components are open to all researchers' profiles, the attendance of R3 and R4 is limited, but this is commonplace everywhere in Europe and beyond. Rather, extremely 'courageous' and therefore laudable has been a very recent initiative (January 2019) of a dedicated training for the Deans of the Faculties. The initiative was appropriately prepared with individual contacts to explain and share the objectives and this was at the basis of its success, demonstrated by a 100% attendance by the 'trainees', a result that is not commonplace at all.

Please list one or more **elements of good practice** that you would recommend to other organisations – either in terms of action or in terms of coordination/process.

**Several elements of good practice** could (and should) made known and recommended among the 'circle' of Research Institutions signatories of the C&C and awarded the HRS4R logo, and, *à plus forte raison*, to the non-signatories<sup>4</sup>. Some of these elements have been quoted in the previous Section of this report, but all of them deserve to be mentioned in a list which has not a priority order, because it would be hard if not impossible to establish a hierarchy of importance:

- the establishment of a "**Talent Centre**" to take care of the career development of early career researchers (R1 & R2);
- the development of the "**Dive-into**-" initiative to provide cross-sectoral training to all researchers' profiles (R1 to R4) and also for master-level students interested in doctoral training; 'dedicated' training activities for senior academic staff (including 'leadership track' for Deans);
- a Doctoral School which developed a "**Framework for Doctoral Education**" which is both structured (30 'points' to be acquired in 7 'competence categories' spanning from research skills and techniques to communication skills, career management teamwork etc.) and flexible (the candidate can acquire points in a minimum of 4 competence categories at his/her choice, with a maximum of 15 points in a single area);

<sup>4</sup> Note by the assessor team: The assessor team believes that the UA HR Department would be ready to help other Institutions by providing details on the good practices that are listed here and that could not be further detailed in this report.

- an **International Staff Office** which offers ‘parental care’ for international personnel and their families, from small, everyday issues to more substantial problems;
- the assessor team would like to underline with great appreciation and **congratulate the efforts that the UA is deploying to favour inclusion of people with immigration background**;
- a realistic **Gender Action Plan**, which, in the short term, aims at promoting awareness and knowledge about gender (and more generally under-represented groups’) issues, and, in the medium term, plans to adopt actions to increase staff diversity;
- a sensible **strategy on ethics-related issues**, encompassing an ‘ethics checklist’ very useful for researchers to pre-check potential ethics issues connected to their research projects, before submitting applications for scrutiny by external ethics committees, supplemented with a Code of Conduct for researchers to promote a responsible approach to research and innovation, not based on a police-like attitude, but rather on a ‘helpdesk’ for researchers;
- a forward-looking, realistic **approach to Open Science**, including the development of adequate technological infrastructures (open to collaboration with other research institutes in Belgium and beyond);
- a de-centralised (UA is ‘dispersed’ over 3 main locations, which are anyway reciprocally reachable with a max 25 minutes bicycle ride) **structure overseeing safety-related issues**, including occupational health and training of incoming staff;
- the ‘**stress survey**’, which successfully mapped problems which may diminish wellbeing of researchers and cause suboptimal working conditions, thus giving substance to the statement that the HRS4R also signals an Institution where research can be conducted with pleasure and satisfaction, and, more important, had an impact on political decisions (i.e. to increase funding and, therefore, improve success rate of applications for project funding);
- the commitment to develop an **OTM-R Policy**, combining top-down guidelines with bottom-up criteria, aiming at obtaining a widespread (if not unanimous) consensus around it, which is the only possible guarantee that the policy will be consistently adhered and that the necessary changes of mindset are achieved, with the time it unfortunately, but necessarily, requires.

## 2. STRENGTHS, WEAKNESSES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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**?

If relevant, please provide **suggestions for alterations or revisions** to the (updated) HR strategy:

From the submitted documents and, most importantly, from the site visit, the assessor team **could not pinpoint real weaknesses** at the level of the Institution, while the **numerous strengths** are listed above.

There are of course **challenges** the Institution has to cope with, which are general in nature (e.g. gender- and minority groups-related issues), and other challenges which are more context-specific (e.g. the language issue). However, all these challenges are known and faced by the Institution with an approach that is realistic and ambitious at the same time. It should be acknowledged as well that the national research context also offers opportunities that are not available everywhere: research funding is above the EU average level and the Flemish Government is taking care of the inputs coming from research institutions (e.g. the stress survey results) and adopts policies demonstrating an attention that is not frequently seen elsewhere (e.g. 'forcing' the research institutions of the Region to collaborate with each other in the domain of doctoral education by linking of a fixed percentage of the funding to collaborative inter-institutional initiatives).

The only **suggestion** that the assessor team expressed was to insert OTM-R-related aspects in the Code of Conduct for Ethics of the UA, while our warm **recommendation** is just to continue with unchanged enthusiasm on the path undertaken.

## GENERAL ASSESSMENT

Which describes the organisation's progress most accurately?	Additional comments	TICK the right option
<p>1. The organisation is progressing with appropriate and quality actions as described in its Action Plan. <b>There is evidence that the HRS4R is further embedded.</b></p> <p><i>The next assessment will take place in 36 months.</i></p>	<p>The UA represents a leading example of embedding the HRS4R into the organisation's management structure and into the everyday life of the Institution. The HRS4R at UA is not perceived as an additional bureaucratic burden, but as an opportunity to frame the already operational as well as the future good practices of the Institution into a global, long-term vision</p>	<p>XXX</p>
<p>2. The organisation is, for the most part, progressing with appropriate and quality actions as described in its Action Plan, but could benefit from alterations as advised through the Assessment process. <b>There is some evidence that the HRS4R is further embedded.</b></p> <p><i>The institution is requested to submit within 1-2 months a revised file taking into account the recommendations of the assessors.</i></p>		
<p>3. The organisation is not deemed to be implementing appropriate and quality actions and this raises some concern for the future efforts to implement actions closely aligned to the Charter and Code. <b>There is a lack of evidence that the HRS4R is further embedded.</b></p> <p><i>The institution is requested to submit within 12 months a revised file taking into account the recommendations of the assessors.</i></p> <p><i><u>Until then, the HR award will be put as 'pending'.</u></i></p>		