

EU-CONEXUS Research For Society

“A Study on the challenges of inter-campus EU-CONEXUS to implement actions required by HRS4R award”

2022

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Preamble

This document provides an overview of the work undertaken by the UNIZD team leading this deliverable in conjunction with six EU-CONEXUS alliance institutions. The UNIZD team includes (Andrea Tokić, Tomislav Klarin and Ivan Puzek), with the assistance of Eimear Fitzpatrick from associated partner institution SETU, who collectively analyzed the data received and prepared a joint study on the challenges associated with the implementation of the HRS4R at the Alliance level. The individual partner documents are the result of the teamwork of the members responsible for preparing the HRS4R award applications at their institutions, and the appointed representatives who submitted the final documents to UNIZD team are Marie de Chalendar (LRUniv), Julia Melnikova (KU), Madalina Stoian (UCTB), Marta Paula Talens Rubio (UCV), and Aris Tsopelakos (AUA).

A number of meetings were conducted with key consortium members to assist with the compilation of this deliverable report, meeting details are outlined below:

Appendix 1: Meeting Details

DATE	MEETING OUTCOME
JUNE 25TH 2021	<p>UNIZD provided an overview of the EC HRS4R process, the HR Excellence in Research Award and UNIZD's HRS4R application experience. It was collectively agreed that each institution should initiate the process of applying for the "HR Excellence in Research Award" individually as HRS4R cannot be applied for EU-CONEXUS as a consortium. A joint gap analysis and action plan for the Alliance will be produced based upon each individual documents from individual institutions. The UNIZD team (led by Andrea Tokić) will be designated responsibility for the collaborative study for the Alliance. Each partner should form a team for HRS4R who will communicate with Andrea Tokić regarding a joint study of challenges. A work plan has been prepared</p> <p>Andrea Tokić communicates regularly via email and online meetings with the person responsible for HRS4R at each partner institution. The institutions prepare teams and documents for HRS4R.</p> <p>Progress on the HRS4R application was reported regularly at monthly meetings</p>
31ST MARCH 2022	<p>Partners are in various stages of preparation of HRS4R documentation, some at the very outset whilst others are further along in the process, it was therefore agreed that Andrea Tokić will prepare a gap analysis survey, to be completed by all partner Institutions. Survey responses will inform a study on challenges associated with the HRS4R application process at each Institution.</p>
16TH JUNE 2022	<p>Presentation of deliverable D3.2: EU-CONEXUS RFS Study "A Study on the challenges of inter-campus EU-CONEXUS to implement actions required by HRS4R award." Suggestions and comments on the study to be submitted by June 23, 2022</p>
27TH JUNE 2022	<p>Review of deliverable D3.2 by the EU-CONEXUS Research Council</p>
30TH JUNE 2022	<p>Validation and upload of the Deliverable D3.2 to the Participant Portal</p>

Introduction

In 2005, the European Commission (EC) recommended the European Charter for Researchers and the Code of Conduct for the Recruitment of Researchers (Charter and Code). Launched in 2008, the Human Resources Strategy for Researchers (HRS4R) was created to support research performing and funding organisations in the endorsement and implementation of the Charter and Code in their policies and practices. Organisations can obtain the 'HR Excellence in Research Award' following a thorough analysis of their institution's HR policies. The award demonstrates their commitment to implementing the Charter and Code and identifies them as providers and supporters of a stimulating and favourable working environment for researchers. The Charter and Code lays out forty principles for employing and developing the careers of research staff. The four main thematic areas covered include:

- 1) Ethical and professional aspects
- 2) Recruitment
- 3) Working conditions and social security
- 4) Training and development for researchers.

The aim of these principles is to make institutions more appealing to researchers by allowing them to carry out their research in a suitable and stimulating environment. The EC continuously develops HRS4R by adding new criteria and conditions: Open, Transparent and Merit-based Recruitment (OTM-R) of researchers was introduced in the strengthened HRS4R implementation procedure that entered in force on 1st January 2017, and more attention was given to embedding the HRS4R within the institution, to involve the research community in the process and to provide evidence and indicators for each of the proposed actions. HRS4R is based on a voluntary, structured and monitored auditing mechanism, centred on a continuous assessment cycle based on gap-analysis and action plans for ongoing monitoring, self-assessment, peer reviews.

As an intermediate step in the creation of such HRS4R strategies for individual institutions, one of the outcomes of the RFS project is a study on the challenges for an EU-CONEXUS interuniversity campus to implement actions required by HRS4R award.

As the documentation required for a collaborative HRS4R application remains in process in the majority of partner institutions, this report should serve as the basis for preliminary analysis of the documentation that will be delivered later in the process. Furthermore, this document will form the starting point for the common action plan for the medium-term goals in 3 to 5 years.

Methodology

In preparation of this task, the coordinator of this deliverable (UNIZD) developed a HRS4R analysis template mapped to the core principles of the Charter and Code. The template acts as an aid to assist institutions assess their HRS4R progress against the 4 thematic areas of the Charter and Code. Reflecting on each of the forty principles, project partners have identified key strengths, weaknesses and challenges faced by their individual institution in applying for HRS4R. This task is similar to conducting a “mini gap analysis” at local level in keeping with the wider EC requirement of conducting a Gap analysis in preparation of application to HRS4R.

Each project partner has completed their individual mini gap analysis, identifying crucial weaknesses and key challenges at individual and institutional level and at wider alliance level, providing a baseline snapshot of the current human resource practices in operation at their organisations. Informed by the outcomes of the mini gap analysis common weaknesses and key challenges on the alliance level have been incorporated and determined.

Subsequently, a consolidated Draft Gap Analysis document and Draft Action Plan identifying medium term plans for a 3-5 year period were prepared and distributed to all partners for review. Following consultation, an agreed plan was developed (see below) outlining the gaps and the actions planned for a medium-term period to achieve required HRS4R goals at alliance level. This agreed document has been prepared in accordance with “Deliverable D3.3: Study on “Good practices on talent management, research and internationalisation accelerators” , created and accepted in previous steps.

It should be emphasized that partner institutions are at different stages of applying for the HRS4R award and to that end, individual gap analysis and action plans are being developed for each of the institutions which will be further informed by the completion of the mini gap analysis performed in this task.

As the process of completing gap analysis and developing Institutional action plans remains ongoing, it must be highlighted that this document captures initial assessments of the challenges faced by individual institutions in implementing HRS4R at the Alliance level.

The Alliance Action Plan identifies proposed joint activities that could be carried out jointly at the alliance level. Leaders/ Sponsors of each primary action will be identified once partner institutions have developed individual HRS4R action plans. At this stage an Alliance mapping study of the Jointly Planned Actions against Individual Planned Actions will be conducted to identify Actions of commonality and determine Merging of Actions with a view to expanding to all Alliance members.

Results

General gaps

HRS4R is a voluntary initiative without financial support instruments to support its implementation at institutional level. All partners have identified that their institution lacks the financial resources to implement certain activities to close some of the identified gaps within the Gap Analysis. Another challenge identified is the lack of dedicated resources to manage the HRS4R process at the institution, which would greatly facilitate the implementation and monitoring of activities, the embedding of HRS4R at institutional level. This challenge is also addressed in deliverable D3.3. “Good practices in Talent Management, research and internalization accelerators”, section “Areas of improvement, item 43, pp18).

1. PRINCIPLE - ETHICAL AND PROFESSIONAL ASPECTS

Gap and challenge 1. Lack of robust, coordinated and monitored research ethics governances and administrative processes.

Some institutions revealed that they do not have a (separate) research ethics committee within their organisation, and whereas institutions do follow research ethics documents and regulations, it is not always in a co-ordinated and monitored way. There is also a lack of guidelines/procedures to assist researchers to oversee practical and sensible research projects along with other ethical issues that were identified. Legislation and regulations on intellectual property rights are very complex and not clearly communicated at institutional level. There is a need to develop, promote and deliver clear, up to date, relevant and high quality information, education and training in research ethics, intellectual property, technology transfer, and research integrity such as research misconduct, authorship, plagiarism to ensure good research practice.

Action plan

Indicator/Target

1.1.1. Motivate partners to develop improved, robust, coordinated and monitored research ethics governance and administrative processes.

1.1.2. Increase awareness of ethical issues in research projects (workshops, seminars, lectures, etc.).

1.1.3. Increase communication and information about intellectual property rights.

1.1.4. Training for young researchers on ethical and professional aspects, intellectual property rights and (self-)plagiarism issues/software.

1.1.5. Establish train the trainer programmes on research integrity and ethics, improve the uptake of research integrity training through promotional activities and increased communication.

1.1.6. Participate in discussion/ collaborative national and European forums where research ethics and integrity to promote good research practice is the primary focus.

1.1.7. Explore possibility to further develop educational resources for research ethics and integrity training and explore the feasibility of integrating within current academic programmes where relevant.

1.1.8. Networking and exchange of best practices.

Gap and challenge 2. Dissemination and open science issues

There is a lack of a digital tools to monitor research activity and facilitate the creation of indicators. There is also a lack of a registry of research results. There is a lack of dissemination of research results. New trends in science, especially related to data sharing, open data, open science, etc., are not well understood. Accordingly, research results are not sufficiently shared and disseminated to society.

Action plan

Indicator/Target

1.2.1. Organize annual conference to increase visibility of the research community and exchange knowledge (in accordance with D3.3., "Research", item 25, pp 12)

1.2.2. Education related to data sharing, open data, open science. (partly in accordance with D3.3., section "Research", items 28, pp 13).

1.2.3. Organize education related to how to commercialise research results, how to work with stakeholders, how to transfer knowledge to community etc. (In accordance with D3.3, section "Talent management", item 9, pp. 8)

1.2.4. Networking and sharing of good practice.

2. PRINCIPLE - RECRUITMENT AND SELECTION

Gaps and Challenges

All institutions follow national and institutional laws related to recruitment and selection that promote transparency and selection of appropriate candidates, but the mini-gap analysis has shown that these procedures can be improved and point to the need for more robust OTM-R practices.

The publication of job adverts on Euraxess is not yet underway or has just commenced in some institutions, hence the pool of researchers attracted to the positions is limited to internal recruitment and/or geographic area. This limits the institution in attracting a wider pool of high calibre researchers from a more diverse pool. Other issues identified include a lack of transparency around internal competitions whereby, research vacancies are advertised exclusively in some areas which potentially creates issues around equity, fairness, transparency and discrimination among potential international researchers. The job adverts are not always descriptive enough and person specifications are limited to the information pertaining to the host organisation, job title and research field; there is very limited information provided on the specific skills required, experience, duties and responsibilities required for the role. In certain cases, selection committees are not adequately trained in areas such as the recruitment and selection process, unconscious bias awareness, equality, diversity and inclusion. There is a major need for such training to ensure OTM-R practices can be introduced and upheld. Unsuccessful candidates are sometimes not given adequate feedback on the selection process, hence the appeals mechanism are not fit for purpose and candidates cannot learn from the process.

Action Plan

OTM-R ensures that the **best person for the job is recruited**, thus bringing benefits to researchers, institutions and the wider research system. More specifically, OTM-R makes research careers more attractive, ensures equal opportunities for all candidates and facilitates mobility. Overall, it will contribute to an increase in the cost-effectiveness of investments in research. Owing to the fact that recruitment and selection of staff is highly regulated by national and institutional laws across each partner jurisdiction, the scope of joint action plan activities has been narrowed to overcome these gaps for all partners. Each institution should address these gaps individually in accordance with their specific laws and practices within the Institution they are operating. Hence, the joint Action Plan will identify actions that are less regulated by law and focus on joint alliance action items. The core OMT-R practices outlined below should be adhered to by each individual institution.

OPEN: Research vacancies must be advertised openly and widely to ensure to reach a wider pool of candidates.

TRANSPARENT: the recruitment process must be simple and clear. External candidates must have access to the same information as Internal candidates.

MERIT-BASED: selection for roles must be based on the researchers' merit. The selection panel must ensure the best possible candidate secures the position

2.0 Action Item - Implementation of Open and Transparent Merit Based Recruitment Practices (OTM-R)

Indicator/Target

2.1. Regular training sessions for recruiters (principal investigators, hiring managers etc.) on - OTM-R good practice, unconscious bias awareness and interview skills techniques.

2.2. Regular recruitment training sessions for end users (system usage, developing job specs; interview feedback etc.).

2.3. Encourage each partner to develop an onboarding package & checklists for researchers and their managers to help new researchers become acclimatised to their new role, bringing them on board with regard to institutional culture, understanding of job function etc. (partly in accordance with D3.3., "Internationalisation", item 39., pp 16

2.4. Increase awareness of importance of open, transparent and merit-based recruitment via public tender. Sharing best practice in recruitment procedures which are open, efficient, transparent, supportive and internationally comparable, as well as tailored to the type of positions advertised (partly in accordance with D3.3., "Areas of improvement", item 44, pp 18)

2.5. Encourage advertising job offers in English.

2.6. Advertising all Open Research Vacancies on the EURAXESS Portal

2.7. Publishing job offers at the EU-CONEXUS level whenever relevant

2.8. Creating a common database in the alliance to include foreign experts into selection process. In advance of any recruitment and selection process getting underway, ensure that principal investigators (PI's) and hiring managers and any other individuals (internal and external) who are involved in recruitment and selection of funded research staff have received appropriate training including unconscious bias awareness and interview skills techniques training,

2.9. Improve feedback to candidates – best practices

2.10. Encouraging research contracts between the alliance's member countries for young researchers assigned to European research projects.

3. PRINCIPLE - WORKING CONDITIONS AND SOCIAL SECURITY

Gap and challenge 1. Improving the employment conditions for Researchers.

A gap identified by some partners includes the difficulties for young researchers and doctoral students in gaining teaching experience at the university. Moreover, their continued and professional development is very often not under adequate supervision, it is not coordinated, captured or supported. A lack of facilities, space, equipment, and material resources have been identified as major challenges for researchers. Financial resources have also been identified as an issue, as there is a lack of funding for research, publications, dissemination activities such as conference attendance, mobility and supervision. Regarding the continued professional development of researchers, not all stages of the researcher career are catered for. There is a lack of career guidance support for researchers particularly at the postdoctoral researcher levels.

In the context of this principle and the principle of "working conditions and social security" it should be noted that some institutions do not have a gender equality plan in place at their Individual Institution.

Action plan

Indicator/Target

3.1.1. Sharing best practices within the Alliance for career development strategies and practices (in accordance with D3.3., "Talent management", item 10 and 11, pp 8-9)

3.1.2. Researchers become mentors to students (in accordance with D3.3., "Talent management", item 3, pp 5)

3.1.3. Involvement of PhD candidates and young researchers in teaching (in accordance with D3.3., "Talent management", item 1, pp 4)

3.1.4. Provide mentoring programs for young researchers at the alliance level. (in accordance with D3.3., "Ongoing initiatives within EU-CONEXUS Alliance", items 1 and 2., pp 20-21)

3.1.5. Training mentors on how to guide younger researchers in their careers. Sharing best practices. (in accordance with D3.3., "Ongoing initiatives within EU-CONEXUS Alliance", items 1 and 2., pp 20-21)

3.1.6. Organizing training on available project funding opportunities at the EU level and how to apply for projects. (partly in accordance with D3.3., "Research", item 35, pp 15; D3.3., "Areas of improvement", item 45, pp. 19; Also in line with the training programme on transversals skills currently being developed as a milestone in WP3)

3.1.7. Encourage researchers to network (through JRI) and involve at least one Alliance member in each research project (in accordance with D3.3., "Research", item 31, 32, and 33., pp 14-15)

3.1.8. Each institution should publish a Gender equality plan.

3.1.9. Increase communication and information about Gender equality (on web, etc.)

3.1.10. Establish relations with alliance member countries to organise awareness-raising days on gender equality in research (in accordance with D3.3, section “Ongoing initiatives within EU-CONEXUS Alliance”, item 1. pp. 20)

Gap and challenge 2. Mobility

In the current career plan, teaching and research mobility is recognised, although not as a sufficiently valued merit. The university should recognise the value of mobility as a strategy for the professional development of researchers at all stages of their careers.

Action plan

Indicator/Target

3.2.1. Increase communication to raise awareness about mobility opportunities.

3.2.2. Increase mobility between EU-CONEXUS partners. (in accordance with D3.3., “Internationalisation”, item 39., pp 16)

3.2.3. Develop joint projects with EU-CONEXUS partners. (in accordance with D3.3., “Research”, item 31., pp 14)

4. PRINCIPLE - TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT

Gaps and Challenges - Ensure Researchers are supported to pursue their career aspirations by continuously developing and promoting Researcher Development Programmes.

A lack of research funding and fellowship opportunities for postdoctoral positions have been identified. The research environment needs to be improved with up to date research equipment. A database of researchers and their interests is also needed. There is also a lack of a database to manage postdocs and their professional development. Not all researchers have the opportunity to teach because not all research areas have students (degree programmes). It is difficult to reach target groups with advertisements for training opportunities. The diversity of continuing education offerings is limited due to funding constraints. Participation in professional trainings abroad is hindered by financial constraints. The relationship between mentor/supervisor and candidate is in some cases unclear and poorly defined. Lack of support for supervisors: expertise is expected to be sufficient - there is insufficient training on how to lead a young researcher. Expenses to attend international conferences, such as travel and subsistence costs are not always funded. Lack of engagement from researchers -not all researchers are willing to develop

their skills, they prefer to focus on the research. Not all researchers want to be involved in the decision-making that can be made within their area of responsibility, which reduces the relevance of the decisions made for the present and future of the university.

Action plan

Indicator/Target

4.1. Create an Alliance database of researchers and research interests (ongoing activity)

4.2. Explore possibilities to share research equipment of researchers from partner institutions and improve the use of their own infrastructures and services through joint projects and/or mobility. (in accordance with D3.3., section "Research", items 21 and 22., pp 11-12)

4.3. Establish a list of different education/trainings in EU-CONEXUS, so that researchers from different countries can participate in trainings/seminars/lectures. The list of trainings, among other relevant topics should include before mentioned:

1.1.4. Training for young researchers on ethical and professional aspects, intellectual property rights and (self-)plagiarism issues/software.

1.1.5. Establish train the trainer programmes on research integrity and ethics, improve the uptake of research integrity training through promotional activities and increased communication.

1.2.2. Education related to data sharing, open data, open science. (partly in accordance with D3.3., section "Research", items 28, pp 13).

1.2.3. Organize education related to how to commercialise research results, how to work with stakeholders, how to transfer knowledge to community etc. (In accordance with D3.3, section "Talent management", item 9, pp. 8)

2.1. Regular training sessions for recruiters (principal investigators, hiring managers etc.) on - OTM-R good practice, unconscious bias awareness and interview skills techniques.

2.2. Regular recruitment training sessions for end users (system usage, developing job specs; interview feedback etc.).

2.4. Increase awareness of importance of open, transparent and merit-based recruitment via public tender. Sharing best practice in recruitment procedures which are open, efficient, transparent, supportive and internationally comparable, as well as tailored to the type of positions advertised (partly in accordance with D3.3., "Talent management", item 12, pp 9)

3.1.1. Share best practices for career development strategies and practices (in accordance with D3.3., "Talent management", item 10 and 11, pp 8-9)

3.1.4. Provide mentoring programs for young researchers at the Alliance level. (in accordance with D3.3., "Ongoing initiatives within EU-CONEXUS Alliance", items 1 and 2., pp 20-21)

3.1.5. Train mentors on how to guide younger researchers in their careers. Sharing best practices. (in accordance with D3.3., "Ongoing initiatives within EU-CONEXUS Alliance", items 1 and 2., pp 20-21)

3.1.6. Organe training on available project funding opportunities at the EU level and how to apply for projects. (partly in in accordance with D3.3., "Research", item 35, pp 15; D3.3., "Areas of improvement", item 45, pp. 19)

4.4. Organise an Alliance Researcher Development Programme with a view to expand the Training and Development offerings received at a local level to develop transferable skills training, career development, leadership and people management skills and professional skills for researcher leaders. Workshops, seminars, webinars with the aim of improving Researchers softer skills such as: conflict management, time management, communication skills, social skills, leadership, teamwork, networking etc.,

4.5. Expand well-being in the workplace initiatives to incorporate a more holistic approach to researcher wellness.

4.6. Develop job shadowing for researchers elected to governing bodies to gain insight into other systems and share best practices.

Final Remarks

This study describes the challenges partner institutions face in implementing the principles of the Charter and Code required by HRS4R award on inter-campus EU-CONEXUS level. Primarily it focuses on areas that are currently ongoing and require additional development. The aim of this study is to capture and highlight the strengths identified both individually and collectively within the Alliance. Although more needs to be achieved to better align HR policies with the Charter and Code, the majority of partners HR functions are already integrating these principles into their policies, and activities in line with EC guidelines are planned in their development strategies. Freedom of research is ensured in all partner institutions, research is conducted in accordance with codes of ethics, non-discrimination on any grounds is promoted, and recruitment and selection are needs-based and mostly transparent. All partners are focused on increasing internationalization and mobility of researchers, investing in additional training and development opportunities for researchers and mentors, and are highly motivated to create better networking of researchers between partner institutions. Given the commitment of institutional leaders to enhance networking amongst alliance partners, we strongly believe that the challenges outlined in this study would be better addressed through collaborative efforts, as some partner institutions already have very well-developed best practices and have held the HR Excellence in Research award for many years, hence there is a unique opportunity to share knowledge and resources. The next phase of this task will undoubtedly be influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has disrupted the way we do research, making future timing uncertain, however it has also presented us with new avenues to explore. This is reflected in the actions proposed above.

In summary, the alliance Action Plans intend to focus on establishing professional development programmes for researchers; putting in place researcher networks, strengthening the research support infrastructure across the institutions and developing research policies and practices to better support researchers to conduct their research. The alliance Action Plan will also focus on attracting, recruiting and valuing researchers; building upon the synergies established with members of this EU-CONEXUS alliance; exploring careers paths beyond academia, advancing the gender agenda in the research staff context and celebrating the outstanding contributions Researchers bring to the wider research system without whom our institutional research ambitions could not be realised.

Conclusion

While some gaps remain in alignment to the Charter and Code principles, the alliance Action plan intends to close these gaps as we progress. The Alliance is fully committed to the HRS4R goals and will continue to adopt proactive initiatives to realise the aims of the Action Plan, ensuring that the value and impact of implementing this strategy is primarily felt by researchers. This review has encouraged each partner institution to re-evaluate their progress in the provision of support at all research career stages, and provides a clear roadmap for continuous improvement going forward and a collective aim to achieve the HR Excellence in Research designation.

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