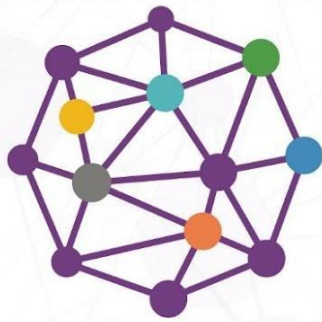




Funded by
the European Union



SMART
Researchers

Deliverable 2.1

SMART Researchers Strategic Action Plan (SAP) Framework for ESR Career Development

WP 2 - Transforming career support systems
for ESRs development



Call: HORIZON-WIDERA-2024-ERA-02

Project number: 101216967

Project acronym: SMART Researchers

Project duration: from September 1, 2025, to August 31, 2028

COORDINATOR

University of Novi Sad Faculty of Technical Sciences (UNSFTS), Serbia

PARTNERS

**Minds Europe – Institute for Research Excellence and Technological Advancement
(MEI), Serbia**

**Foodscale Hub Entrepreneurship and Innovation Association (FSH), Serbia
HR Road (HRoad), Serbia**

University of Thessaly (UTH), Greece

Institute of Entrepreneurship Development (IED), Greece

Scientific Events - PM² Certification Center (PM2CC), Greece

**University of Split, Faculty of Economics, Business and Tourism (UNISTFEBT),
Croatia**

Institute for Development and International Relations (IRMO), Croatia

Sparky Solution (SPARKY), Croatia

European Academy (EA), Latvia

Project URL: <https://smartresearchers.eu/>

Disclaimer

This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon Europe research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 101216967



DOCUMENT CONTROL INFORMATION

Project Title:	SMART Researchers: Strategic Micro-Credentialing and Skills Recognition for a Dynamic ESRs Talent Ecosystem
Acronym:	SMART Researchers
Project Number:	101216967
Document Title:	Strategic Action Plan
Deliverable:	D2.1
Work Package:	WP2- Transforming career support systems for ESRs development
Due Date:	31.8.2026.
Delivery Date:	1.7.2026.
Status:	Draft <input type="checkbox"/> / Final <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Type:	R-Document, report <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> / DEC-Websites, patent filings, videos, etc. <input type="checkbox"/> / DMP <input type="checkbox"/> / OTHER <input type="checkbox"/>
Dissemination Level:	SEN-Sensitive <input type="checkbox"/> / PU-Public <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Description of the Deliverable: (3-5 lines)	This Deliverable presents the Strategic Action Plan (SAP) Framework for ESRs career development, within the SMART Researchers project. The document outlines strategies to enhance ESR career support and it aligns institutional HR practices with a Council Recommendation on a European Framework for Research Careers and the European Charter for Researchers, to implement the standards for attractive research careers. Key elements include clear researcher roles and career paths, recruitment processes promoting sectoral mobility and interdisciplinary collaboration, support for intersectoral and interdisciplinary careers, focusing on skills for the twin transitions, and enhanced monitoring and evaluation systems for career progression.
Key Words:	<i>Strategic Action Plan; ESR; HR; career development; Horizon Europe; SMART Researchers.</i>

Document Author(s) and Reviewer(s):

Author Name	Organization Acronym	E-mail
Sanja Tišma	IRMO	sanja.tisma@irmo.hr
Dubravka Prelec	IRMO	dubravka.prelec@irmo.hr

Reviewer Name	Organization Acronym	E-mail



Sanja Tišma	IRMO	<i>sanja.tisma@irmo.hr</i>

Document history:

The Document Authors are authorized to make the following types of changes to the document without requiring that the document be re-approved:

- Editorial, formatting, and spelling
- Clarification

To request a change to this document, contact the Document Author(s) or Project Coordinator.

Changes to this document are summarized in the following table in reverse chronological order (latest version first).

Version	Date	Prepared by	Short Description/Changes
v0.4	1.7.2026.	IRMO	Final version
v0.3	17.6.2026.	IRMO	Review and updates
v0.2	17.4.2026.	IRMO	Formatting and first version
v0.1	23.3.2026.	IRMO	Initial draft structure created

Table with Acronyms

Acronym	Full Form
CSC	Career Support Center
ESR	Early-Stage Researcher
EFRC	European Framework for Research Careers
ERA	European Research Area
HE	Horizon Europe
HR	Human Resources
HRS4R	Human Resources Strategy for Researchers
SAP	Strategic Action Plan
MEPF	Monitoring, Evaluation and Policy Feedback
SO	Specific Objective
WP	Work Package
OTM-R	Open, Transparent and Merit-based recruitment of Researchers
KPI	Key Performance Indicator

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1	Introduction	6
1.1	PURPOSE AND SCOPE OF THE STRATEGIC ACTION PLAN	6
1.2	Project Context and Strategic Alignment	7
1.3	Institutional Context	8
1.3.1	Institutional Profile	8
1.3.2	Role in the SMART Researchers Project	9
1.3.3	Alignment of the SAP with Institutional Strategy and Governance	9
1.3.4	Target Beneficiaries	12
1.3.5	Existing Structures Relevant to SAP Implementation	13
2.	METHODOLOGY, DATA AND ORGANIZATIONAL READINESS	13
2.1	Methodological Framework for SAP Development	13
2.1	HR Audit and Capacity Assessment	14
2.2	Researcher Survey Findings	18
2.3	Organizational Readiness Assessment	24
2.4	Participatory Process and Co-Design Validation	28
3.	OBJECTIVES AND MEASURES PER PILLAR	31
3.1	Strategic Pillar Architecture	31
3.2	Objectives and Measures per Pillar (SMART Framework)	31
3.2.1	Template – Objectives and Measures (<i>to be completed per pillar</i>)	31
3.3	Phased Implementation Timeline and Resourcing	36
3.3.1	Implementation Roadmap (Strategic Level)	36
3.4	HUMAN CAPACITY AND STRUCTURAL ENABLERS	38
3.4.1	Human Resource Alignment	38
3.5	GOVERNANCE AND DECISION STRUCTURE	39
3.5.1	Governance Model	39
3.5.2	Review and Decision Cadence	40
3.5.3	Risk Escalation and Corrective Mechanism	40
4.	MONITORING, EVALUATION AND POLICY FEEDBACK	41
4.1	KPI MONITORING (Operational Level)	41
4.2	BENEFITS REALISATION TRACKING (Institutional Level)	43



4.3 POLICY FEEDBACK AND ALIGNMENT (Strategic Level)	43
5 REFERENCES AND RELATED DOCUMENTS	44
5.1 Reference List	44
5.2 Project Documents	44
5.3 Regulatory and Policy Frameworks Referenced.....	44

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. HR Audit Baseline
Table 2. Researcher survey results
Table 3. Organizational Readiness
Table 4. Participatory process documentation
Table 5. Objectives and Measures (to be completed per pillar)
Table 6. Institutional SAP Roadmap
Table 7. Institutional roles for SAP delivery
Table 8. SAP governance structure
Table 9. Review framework
Table 10. Escalation logic
Table 11. KPI monitoring overview
Table 12. Institutional Benefits Tracking
Table 13. Policy feedback mechanism

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This Deliverable presents the Strategic Action Plan (SAP) Framework for ESR career development, within the SMART Researchers project. The SAP will outline strategies to enhance ESR career support and align institutional HR practices with a Council Recommendation on a European Framework for Research Careers and the European Charter for Researchers, to implement the standards for attractive research careers.

Function of this framework document

This Framework serves as a structured template guiding each partner institution in:

- Translating project objectives into institutional actions,
- Ensuring internal coordination and ownership,
- Defining measurable objectives, KPIs, and milestones,
- Monitoring risks and implementation progress,
- Securing long-term institutional integration beyond project duration.



1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 PURPOSE AND SCOPE OF THE STRATEGIC ACTION PLAN

The Strategic Action Plan (SAP) provides a structured, institution-wide framework for planning, implementing, monitoring, and institutionalising career development measures for Early-Stage Researchers (ESRs) over five years (2026–2031).

For the purpose of this Framework, ESRs are defined in accordance with the Council Recommendation on a European Framework for Research Careers as:

- **First Stage Researchers** – researchers undertaking research under supervision up to the point of a PhD or equivalent level of competence and experience;
- **Recognised Researchers** – researchers holding a PhD or equivalent level of competence and experience who are not yet fully independent in leading research, attracting funding, or managing research groups.

The SAP aims to strengthen institutional HR systems, enhance career pathways for ESRs, and establish sustainable, structured support mechanisms aligned with European standards for research careers.

Evidence-based and development logic

The SAP is developed as an integral component of the Horizon Europe project:

SMART Researchers: Strategic Micro-Credentialing and Skills Recognition for a Dynamic ESRs Talent Ecosystem

The development of the SAP is grounded in:

- HR Audit and Capacity Assessment results,
- Researcher Survey findings,
- Participatory workshops and stakeholder consultations,
- Alignment with HRS4R principles,
- The European Framework for Research Careers,
- The European Charter for Researchers.

Together, these inputs ensure that the SAP is evidence-based, participatory, and aligned with both institutional realities and European policy frameworks.

Strategic focus areas

The SAP addresses identified HR and structural gaps and focuses on the following core strategic elements:

1. **Clear definition of researcher roles and career paths**
Establishing transparent career trajectories within and beyond academia, enabling ESRs to make informed career decisions.
2. **Recruitment reforms**
Strengthening OTM-R principles, promoting diversity, sectoral mobility, and interdisciplinary collaboration.
3. **Structured career progression frameworks**
Embedding entrepreneurship, innovation, and transversal competencies required for the green and digital transitions.
4. **Intersectoral and interdisciplinary career support**
Formalising pathways toward both academic and non-academic careers through structured institutional support mechanisms.

Governance, implementation and transparency



The SAP will be implemented by institutional leadership teams and relevant governance bodies, with continuous monitoring and evaluation mechanisms ensuring alignment with:

- The Council Recommendation on a European Framework for Research Careers,
- The European Charter for Researchers,
- ERA policy priorities.

Early-Stage Researchers will remain actively engaged throughout the process—from co-design to implementation—ensuring that institutional reforms reflect their real needs and experiences.

Following adoption, the SAP will be made publicly accessible to ensure transparency and contribute to broader policy learning and institutional uptake across the European Research Area (ERA).

For the IRMO, the SAP represents a key instrument for systematically strengthening human resources management and advancing research career development, particularly for Early-Stage Researchers. In light of identified challenge, such as the absence of structured career support mechanisms, limited formalisation of career pathways, and fragmented approaches to skills development, the SAP enables a transition towards a coordinated and strategic institutional framework. Through the establishment of the CSC as a central operational structure and the introduction of structured competence development programmes, the SAP will enhance institutional capacity, increase the attractiveness of research careers, and support IRMO's deeper integration into the ERA.

1.2 PROJECT CONTEXT AND STRATEGIC ALIGNMENT

Early-Stage Researchers in less research- and innovation-advanced countries in Europe often face structural challenges, including precarious employment conditions, limited mobility opportunities, insufficient career support structures, and weak recognition of transversal competencies. These systemic barriers reduce institutional competitiveness and limit Europe's capacity to fully leverage its research and innovation potential—particularly in the context of the green and digital transitions.

The SMART Researchers project responds to these challenges by:

- Establishing **Career Support Centres (CSCs)** as institutional hubs for continuous and structured career guidance;
- Developing and implementing **Strategic Action Plans** aligned with ERA principles and the European Charter for Researchers;
- Designing a **micro-credentialing and certification framework** based on the European Competence Framework for Researchers (ResearchComp);
- Strengthening institutional HR practices and talent development systems;
- Providing structured policy feedback to support EU-level harmonisation and standardisation of research career systems.

Project objectives and outcomes are fully aligned with ERA priorities through:

- Development of new instruments supporting research careers,
- Creation of sustainable institutional ecosystems for research talent,
- Implementation of European standards for researcher careers across sectors,



- Strengthening ESR competences and long-term employability.

1.3 INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT

1.3.1 INSTITUTIONAL PROFILE

Institution name: Institute for Development and International Relations

Country: Croatia

Legal status: public research institute

Number of academic/research or other staff: 50

Number of Early-Stage Researchers (R1 + R2): 16

Main research domains: social sciences (economics, political science, sociology, etc.)

Brief description:

The Institute for Development and International Relations (IRMO) is a public research institute established in 1963, specialising in interdisciplinary research in the fields of international relations, public policy, and sustainable development. The Institute operates within the social sciences, particularly economics, political science, and sociology, and is actively engaged in both the national and European research landscape.

IRMO's mission is to develop and transfer knowledge and skills for the competent scientific interpretation of contemporary international economic, political, and cultural relations, and to contribute to the sustainable development of Croatia.

IRMO's vision is to position itself as a leading European research institution in the field of international relations and cooperation for sustainable development.

IRMO's strategic priorities focus on strengthening scientific excellence, increasing the societal relevance of research, and intensifying international cooperation. IRMO is strongly involved in European and international projects and programmes, further enhancing its international visibility and contributing to the development of research capacities.

Research activities are organised across four main scientific departments: the Department of International Economic and Political Relations, the Department of European Policies, the Department of Culture and Communication, and the Department of Resource Economics, Environmental Protection and Regional Development (new title: Department for Sustainable Development). This organisational structure enables an interdisciplinary research approach and effective integration of diverse thematic areas. Key research topics include European Union public policies, European integration processes, regional, urban and rural development, cultural and media policies, as well as issues related to resource economics, environmental protection, energy, and climate change. Research also covers international economic and political relations, foreign policy, security issues, and broader processes of global and national development.

In the area of human resources management, IRMO has established core formal frameworks, including Code of Ethics, Gender Equality Plan, and transparent recruitment procedures in line with the principles of Open, Transparent and Merit-



based Recruitment of Researchers (OTM-R). However, findings from the institutional assessment highlight the need to further strengthen structured career development mechanisms, including systematic mentoring programmes, career planning, training, and institutional support for ESRs.

1.3.2 ROLE IN THE SMART RESEARCHERS PROJECT

Within the SMART Researchers project, IRMO actively participates in all work packages and leads Work Package 5 (WP5), which focuses on monitoring, evaluation, and policy feedback. Under WP5, IRMO is responsible for establishing the project monitoring and evaluation methodology (MEPF framework), developing performance indicators, continuously tracking project progress, and evaluating the impact of project activities.

In other work packages, IRMO contributes as follows: in WP1, it participates in the strategic management and coordination of the project; in WP2, it conducts an institutional analysis for its own purposes, carries out a researcher survey, maps existing human resources management (HRM) practices, and develops the SAP; in WP3, it establishes the Career Support Centre (CSC) and develops career support services; in WP4, it contributes to the development of the competence framework and educational content for micro-credentials; in WP6, it supports dissemination through communication activities and participation in conferences.

Sanja Tišma, PhD, leads the IRMO team. Jakša Puljiz, PhD, leads WP5 and is responsible for coordinating monitoring, evaluation, and policy feedback activities, including the development and implementation of the MEPF framework, preparation of evaluation reports, and tracking of project indicators. Within WP5, IRMO is responsible for producing two policy briefs: Senada Šelo Šabić, PhD, leads the preparation of the first policy brief (D5.3 Policy Brief 1: early implementation results, including the establishment of the CSC, initial integration of the ResearchComp framework and micro-credentials), while Daniela Angelina Jelinčić, PhD, leads the preparation of the second policy brief (D5.4 Policy Brief 2: long-term sustainability and scaling of results, including the institutionalisation of micro-credentials and strengthening of research career systems). Dubravka Prelec contributes to the project as a human resources expert, focusing on research career development and the improvement of HRM practices, and serves as Head of the CSC.

1.3.3 ALIGNMENT OF THE SAP WITH INSTITUTIONAL STRATEGY AND GOVERNANCE

A. Strategic alignment

The SAP is embedded within the existing institutional governance framework and is fully aligned with IRMO's key strategic and operational documents. Its development and implementation directly contribute to the achievement of IRMO's long-term development objectives, particularly in the areas of human resources management, scientific excellence, and organisational development.



The SAP is aligned with the following key institutional documents:

IRMO Development Strategy 2017–2027

IRMO's mission and vision, as defined in the Development Strategy for the period 2017–2027, position the Institute as a research institution that actively contributes to the development of the Republic of Croatia within the international context. The Strategy emphasises continuous growth in scientific productivity, participation in international projects, publication of research results, and a strong presence in both the academic community and the wider public.

Particular emphasis is placed on the development of human resources as a key prerequisite for achieving institutional objectives. In this context, the SAP directly supports Objective 2 – Development of human resources, while also contributing to the achievement of other strategic objectives of IRMO:

Objective 1 – Improving the quality of scientific research

Objective 3 – Organisational development

Objective 4 – Strengthening IRMO's visibility

The SAP operationalises these strategic priorities through measures that include career development, skills enhancement, promotion of excellence, mobility and international cooperation, and strengthening organisational support for research activities.

Programme Agreement – Development and Performance-Based Funding Plan (2024–2027)

The SAP is aligned with the priorities defined in the Programme Agreement, particularly under Specific Objective 1.4 Strengthening human resources for research. The Plan translates and operationalises activities foreseen under the basic, development, and performance-based funding components, providing a framework for their systematic implementation, monitoring, and evaluation.

IRMO Human Resources Management Plan 2026–2030

The SAP is fully complementary to the Human Resources Management Plan, which provides the foundation for the strategic management of staff. Alignment is reflected in the following key areas:

- systematic planning and monitoring of career development, including mentoring and individual career plans
- continuous education and skills development of staff
- introduction of transparent performance evaluation mechanisms and promotion of excellence
- strengthening international mobility and networking
- development of measures for staff retention and motivation
- improvement of organisational processes and administrative support

In this way, the SAP serves as an implementation instrument for achieving the objectives of this Plan.

Gender Equality Plan (2022–2027)

The SAP is aligned with IRMO's Gender Equality Plan, which promotes equality between women and men across all aspects of work and decision-making. The SAP integrates gender equality principles through measures related to human resources



management, work-life balance, non-discrimination, and gender-sensitive communication and research.

Code of Ethics (2026)

The SAP is aligned with IRMO's Code of Ethics, which defines standards of professional and ethical conduct. The implementation of the SAP is grounded in the principles of integrity, transparency, accountability, and mutual respect, with the Ethics Committee playing a role in monitoring the application of these principles.

B. Adoption and approval mechanism

The authority responsible for the final adoption of the SAP is the Director of IRMO. The drafting of the SAP was carried out through a participatory process during April 2026, involving the director, Quality Assurance Department, Secretary of the IRMO, as well as researchers of the Department of Resource Economy, Environment Protection and Regional Development at R1 and R2 levels and mentors, who actively contributed as co-creators of the document. Upon completion of the consultation process, the final version of the SAP will be prepared and presented at the Scientific Council session. The adoption was planned for July 2026.

C. Institutional embedding mechanism

The SAP will be structurally embedded within IRMO's institutional governance system through clearly defined responsibilities, organisational mechanisms, and regular planning and monitoring processes.

Support for the implementation of the SAP is ensured at the level of the Director of IRMO, who acts as the executive sponsor. The Director actively participated in the development of the Plan and will ensure institutional support and the necessary resources for the implementation of the planned activities. This guarantees full alignment of the SAP with the Institute's governance structures and strategic priorities. The operational implementation of activities will be carried out through the four scientific departments as the core organisational units. Additional coordination and expert support will be provided by the Department for Quality Assurance and Career Development, which will play a key role in implementing measures related to human resources development, monitoring career progression, and coordinating activities foreseen under the SAP.

The SAP will be integrated into regular institutional planning processes, particularly through annual work plans and the Institute's financial planning, thereby ensuring its feasibility and long-term sustainability. Planned activities will be linked to relevant budget lines, enabling systematic monitoring of their implementation.

The implementation of the SAP will be monitored through a regular annual reporting cycle. The annual review will enable the evaluation of completed activities, the identification of challenges, and, where necessary, the adjustment of measures and priorities in line with IRMO's development needs.

D. Public accessibility and transparency

The adopted SAP will be made publicly available to ensure transparency of its content and implementation. The SAP will be published on IRMO's official website, under the "About the Institute" section, in the "IRMO Documents" subsection. In addition, the document will be accessible via the internal portal, ensuring that staff have easy access to all relevant information.

Transparency of SAP implementation will be further ensured through regular progress reporting. Information on implementation will be included in the annual report on the implementation of the Human Resources Management Plan, while summaries of monitoring and key results will also be made available to external stakeholders through IRMO's public communication channels.

1.3.4 TARGET BENEFICIARIES

The primary target groups of the SAP at the IRMO level include ESRs (R1 and R2) and their mentors. A total of 16 ESRs (14 R1 and 2 R2) are involved as direct beneficiaries of activities focused on competence development, micro-credentials, mentoring, and career development. Mentors, i.e. researchers at more advanced career stages (R3 and R4), of whom there are 11 at IRMO, also play a significant role in mentoring researchers and in the preparation and delivery of training activities, thereby directly contributing to the quality and relevance of the training programmes.

Secondary target groups include institutional stakeholders responsible for the implementation and sustainability of the SAP, primarily the Head of Department for Quality Assurance and Career Development, who ensures the integration of project activities into institutional human resources management practices. This group also includes the Director of IRMO, the Heads of Scientific Departments (the Director's Collegium), the Secretary of IRMO, and the Scientific Council, all of whom ensure institutional support and the long-term sustainability of the reforms.

An important target group also consists of external stakeholders, namely IRMO's partner institutions, including universities and faculties, professional associations with which IRMO collaborates, as well as representatives of the private sector and the state and public sector. Their role is particularly important in ensuring the relevance of competencies, strengthening intersectoral cooperation and mobility, and linking the research and policy environments.

In total, the direct involvement of approximately 30–35 participants at the IRMO level is expected, alongside broader institutional and societal impact.



1.3.5 EXISTING STRUCTURES RELEVANT TO SAP IMPLEMENTATION

The SAP foresees a combination of strengthening existing structures, their partial reform, and the integration of key functions into the Career Support Centre as a central hub for research career development.

IRMO already has an established institutional framework that supports researcher development within existing organisational units, primarily the scientific departments, while professional services provide administrative and expert support to these processes. The human resources management function has been carried out through monitoring the needs and career development of researchers via administrative structures (the Secretariat) and the governing body (the Director's Collegium).

The newly established CSC will be set up within the Department for Quality Assurance and Career Development and represents a new institutional structure that will be further developed and strengthened through the project, particularly in the areas of career counselling, systematic monitoring of mentoring, and the development of researchers' competencies.

IRMO does not have a dedicated research office; instead, activities related to project preparation and implementation, as well as international cooperation and networking, are carried out within existing organisational structures - namely scientific departments and centres. Professional support for projects is provided through the Director's Office and administrative services. Through the establishment of the Career Support Centre and the implementation of the SAP, these functions will be further strengthened and partially reformed, with stronger integration into the CSC and alignment with European standards for research career management.

IRMO has an established Ethics Committee that ensures compliance with ethical standards in research. Its role remains stable, with further strengthening in the context of new project activities.

In the area of gender equality, IRMO applies relevant policies and practices, which will be further strengthened and integrated into the activities of the CSC and human resources management functions, particularly in the areas of equal opportunities and inclusiveness.

2. METHODOLOGY, DATA AND ORGANIZATIONAL READINESS

2.1 METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK FOR SAP DEVELOPMENT

The SAP is developed through an evidence-based, participatory, and governance-aligned methodological framework designed to ensure institutional ownership, policy alignment, and operational feasibility.

The methodology combines four interrelated evidence streams:

1. **HR Audit and Capacity Assessment** – institutional maturity baseline
2. **Researcher Survey** – ESR perception-based evidence
3. **Participatory consultation processes** – co-design and validation



4. **Policy alignment review** – alignment with HRS4R, the European Charter for Researchers, and the European Framework for Research Careers

These streams form a structured diagnostic-to-action pathway:

**Baseline Diagnosis → Gap Identification → Priority Setting → Institutional Validation →
Action Design → KPI Structuring**

This approach ensures that the SAP is:

- Data-informed
- Institution-specific
- Strategically aligned with EU policy frameworks
- Co-created with internal stakeholders
- Feasible within institutional governance constraints

The development process adheres to principles of:

- Transparency
- Co-design
- Accountability
- Evidence triangulation
- Institutional embedding

2.1 HR AUDIT AND CAPACITY ASSESSMENT



Table 1. HR Audit Baseline

Pillar	Average Score (0–4)	Interpretation (150–250 words per pillar)
Pillar 1 – Ethics, integrity, gender & open science	2,67	<p>IRMO has established basic foundations and key policies; however, systematic strengthening of operational tools, training, and monitoring mechanisms is needed to ensure consistent and effective implementation of the principles of integrity, equality, and open science. There is a solid level of formal compliance in the areas of integrity, equality, and research management, supported by clearly established key documents such as the Code of Ethics, the Gender Equality Plan, and the GDPR framework. The existence of disciplinary procedures and designated staff indicates institutional commitment to regulatory requirements and the core principles of responsible research. In addition, initiatives in the area of open science, including the repository and initial data management practices, represent a positive direction of development.</p> <p>However, the operational implementation of these policies is lacking, as there are no structured training activities on ethics, integrity, and data protection. There are no systematic mechanisms for promoting diversity and inclusion within human resources management practices. Monitoring systems (e.g. organisational culture surveys) are underdeveloped, channels for reporting irregularities are insufficiently defined, and practices related to conflict of interest management are limited, all of which reduce the effectiveness of the existing formal frameworks.</p>
Pillar 2 – Assessment, recruitment & progression (OTM-R)	3,33	<p>IRMO has strong foundations and well-developed formal procedures; however, further development should focus on strengthening transparency, digitalising processes, and establishing feedback and appeal mechanisms, thereby bringing the system closer to the full implementation of OTM-R principles.</p> <p>Key strengths include clearly defined and documented procedures for recruitment, promotion, and appointment, which are aligned with national legislation and further elaborated through internal regulations. Transparent calls for applications, public job advertisements (including EURAXESS), and clearly defined competency-based criteria represent examples of good practice. In addition, gender-balanced selection committees and transparent promotion procedures further demonstrate the institution’s commitment to fairness and merit-based principles.</p> <p>Further progress is needed at the operational level, particularly regarding the lack of structured and individualised feedback for candidates, which reduces transparency and the overall candidate experience. Formalised appeal mechanisms and guidance on legal remedies are not in place. There</p>



		are no digital tools implemented for managing recruitment processes. Moreover, an operational framework for mobility is lacking, despite being identified as important at the strategic level.
Pillar 3 – Working conditions and practices	3,33	<p>IRMO provides stable and transparent working conditions; however, further development should focus on strengthening employee well-being, formalising HRM practices, and introducing systematic mechanisms for monitoring employee satisfaction and needs.</p> <p>IRMO demonstrates a high level of formal compliance in the area of working conditions, particularly in terms of employment contracts, social protection, and the transparency of salaries and career progression, all of which are clearly defined and grounded in the national legislative framework. Safety standards, including occupational health and safety and risk assessment, as well as technical support for remote work, further confirm the stability and reliability of the working environment. Flexible working arrangements, including remote work, are also regulated and functional.</p> <p>Although a clear formal framework exists, the operational level of employee support shows certain weaknesses. The most notable shortcomings relate to the lack of developed well-being and mental health programmes, as well as the absence of structured mechanisms for collecting employee feedback (e.g. surveys, focus groups). Support for returning to work after extended absences is also not formalised and is instead handled on an ad hoc basis.</p> <p>Furthermore, while basic data on work activities is monitored (e.g. work attendance records), there is a lack of an analytical approach to HRM through action plans and the systematic use of data.</p>
Pillar 4 – Research careers and talent development	1,58	<p>IRMO has certain foundational elements in place (mentoring, mobility), but the research career development system is neither structured nor strategically integrated. The SMART Researchers project represents an opportunity to establish a comprehensive system through the development of the Career Support Centre (CSC), the introduction of micro-credentials, and the strengthening of structured human resources management practices.</p> <p>Structural absence of career systems</p> <p>IRMO currently lacks an integrated and strategically aligned system for research career development. Although individual elements exist, such as formalised mentoring and recognition of mobility in career progression, there is no comprehensive framework covering continuous professional development, career guidance, leadership development, and systematic competence management in line with the ResearchComp framework. There are no structured training programmes or formalised systems for tracking career development.</p>



		<p>Fragmentation of responsibilities Responsibilities for research career development are distributed across different levels (mentors, scientific departments, management), without a clearly defined central system or coordination mechanism. Activities such as mentoring, training, and mobility are implemented in a fragmented and unsystematic manner, often depending on individual initiatives, without an institutionally aligned approach or systematic monitoring of outcomes.</p> <p>Lack of formalised support structures There are no formalised career support services (e.g. career counselling, individual development plans, structured onboarding, or leadership development programmes). Performance evaluation mechanisms are not linked to career planning, and systems for talent recognition and retention are underdeveloped. Existing activities are carried out on an ad hoc basis, without standardised procedures or an institutional framework.</p>
--	--	-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

The HR Audit serves as the baseline benchmark for mid-term and final evaluation.



2.2 RESEARCHER SURVEY FINDINGS

Table 2. Researcher survey results

Pillar	Mean score (1-5)	Key strengths identified	Key gaps identified	Interpretation (100-200 words)
Pillar 1 - Ethics, integrity, gender & open science	4,36	<p>A strong values-based and cultural framework (integrity, freedom, openness):</p> <p>High level of awareness and compliance with ethics and integrity principles;</p> <p>Academic freedom and an open research culture;</p> <p>Support for open science and the sharing of results;</p> <p>Positive perception of gender equality and work-life balance;</p> <p>Recognition of researchers' contributions and support for mobility.</p>	<p>Institutional tools and procedures are perceived as weaker than individual practices;</p> <p>Insufficient training and guidance;</p> <p>Inadequate infrastructure and incentives for open science;</p> <p>Underdeveloped formal mechanisms for preventing discrimination;</p> <p>Diversity and inclusion are not sufficiently embedded in HR practices;</p> <p>Systems supporting sustainable science are not developed.</p>	<p>The results of the researcher survey and the institutional analysis are largely aligned in their assessment of the situation in the areas of ethics, integrity, equality, and open science. IRMO has a strong values-based and cultural foundation, with a high level of awareness among researchers regarding ethical standards, academic freedom, and open science. Key formal frameworks are in place, such as the Code of Ethics, the Gender Equality Plan, and GDPR mechanisms, indicating a good level of formal compliance.</p> <p>However, the need to strengthen operational implementation has been identified. In particular, there is a need for more systematic training, further development of infrastructure, and stronger tools for policy implementation.</p> <p>Differences are evident at the level of detail and critical assessment. Researchers express a generally positive perception, while the institutional analysis more precisely identifies specific gaps. These include the absence of training on ethics and integrity, underdeveloped mechanisms for inclusiveness, weak monitoring systems, unclear</p>



				<p>channels for reporting irregularities, and limited management of conflicts of interest.</p> <p>The institutional analysis provides a more critical assessment of operational shortcomings and highlights a strong need for the systematic strengthening of the implementation of existing policies and documents.</p> <p>Survey results tend to overestimate the operational level of the system. Researchers rate institutional support highly (e.g. training, mechanisms, open science), whereas the institutional analysis indicates that systematic training is lacking, and that monitoring systems and channels for reporting irregularities are weak.</p>
Pillar 2 – Assessment, recruitment & progression (OTM-R)	4,01	<p>Transparent and open recruitment procedures;</p> <p>Clearly defined job calls (requirements, benefits, expectations);</p> <p>Career breaks and non-linear career paths are not penalised;</p> <p>Transparent and formally defined promotion systems;</p> <p>Recognition of teamwork and co-authorship;</p> <p>Overall positive perception of fairness</p>	<p>Insufficient recognition of qualitative criteria in promotion processes (quality, impact, open science, collaboration);</p> <p>Strong focus on quantitative indicators;</p> <p>Lack of systematic feedback to job applicants;</p> <p>Limited implementation of evaluation criteria in practice;</p>	<p>The results of the institutional analysis and the researcher survey are largely aligned and indicate that IRMO has a stable and well-structured system for the recruitment, assessment, and career progression of researchers. Both sources confirm the existence of strong formal foundations, including transparent, open, and merit-based procedures, clearly defined criteria, and alignment with national legislation. The public advertisement of job vacancies, including through EURAXESS, as well as formally regulated and transparent promotion systems, are also positively assessed.</p> <p>At the same time, both the institutional analysis and the survey identify a key challenge in the operational implementation of existing policies. In particular, the lack of systematic and individualised feedback to candidates following selection procedures is highlighted, affecting transparency</p>



		and transparency of procedures.	<p>A rigid legal framework limits flexibility in career progression;</p> <p>Career development often depends on individual initiative;</p> <p>Underdeveloped institutional mechanisms for career support;</p> <p>Occasional influence of informal networks and limited competition;</p> <p>Insufficient recognition of diverse contributions (e.g. policy impact, societal impact).</p>	<p>and the overall quality of the candidate experience. Both sources also point to the need for further system development to ensure consistent and effective application in practice.</p> <p>Differences between the two sources are reflected in their analytical focus. The institutional analysis emphasises structural and procedural shortcomings, such as the absence of formalised appeal mechanisms, the lack of digital tools for process management, and the limited operationalisation of mobility. In contrast, the survey places greater emphasis on the quality of evaluation practices, including insufficient recognition of qualitative criteria such as scientific quality, societal impact, and open science, as well as the fact that career development often depends on individual initiative. The survey tends to overestimate transparency in practice while underestimating the strength of the formal system. Researchers perceive the system as fair and transparent, although there are no formal appeal mechanisms and limited feedback in relation to recruitment and promotion procedures.</p> <p>The survey highlights challenges related to the evaluation of performance, whereas from an institutional perspective, a formal system for monitoring and evaluating performance does exist and is used in day-to-day practice.</p>
Pillar 3 – Working conditions and practices	4,13	Stable and transparent working conditions;	Underdeveloped mechanisms for conflict resolution and handling complaints;	The results of the HR survey and the institutional analysis for Pillar 3 are largely aligned, particularly in the assessment that IRMO provides stable and transparent working conditions and has a strong formal framework in the areas of employment,



		<p>High level of awareness of rights and obligations;</p> <p>Transparent evaluation criteria and clear institutional policies;</p> <p>Representation of researchers in decision-making processes;</p> <p>Policies in place for safety, mental health, and protection against harassment;</p> <p>Flexible working conditions and support for work-life balance;</p> <p>Positive working culture (collegiality, good communication, administrative support);</p> <p>Promotion of open science and dissemination of results.</p>	<p>Job insecurity and limited support for R1/R2 researchers and fixed-term employees;</p> <p>Insufficient support for transitions between career stages;</p> <p>Perception of lower salaries and limited financial stability for early-career researchers;</p> <p>Lack of systematic training (Open Science, intellectual property, data management);</p> <p>Underdeveloped support for career development and employment continuity;</p> <p>Partially outdated infrastructure and limited resources.</p>	<p>safety, and work organisation. Both sources confirm the existence of functional policies, including flexible working arrangements, clear procedures, and a positive working environment characterised by good communication and collegiality. There is also agreement that the key challenge lies in operational implementation, particularly in the lack of structured mechanisms for collecting employee feedback and the further development of support systems.</p> <p>Differences emerge in terms of focus and perspective. The institutional analysis primarily highlights shortcomings in the HR system, such as the absence of well-being and mental health programmes, the lack of an analytical approach to human resources management, and the absence of formalised support for returning to work. In contrast, the survey emphasises the perceived job insecurity, limited support for career transitions, and underdeveloped mechanisms for conflict resolution. The survey tends to overestimate the quality of support systems while underestimating the stability of working conditions. Researchers assess working conditions very positively, whereas the institutional analysis points to gaps in well-being provision, HR analytics, and structured support mechanisms. The HR survey highlights insecurity among R1/R2 researchers, while from an institutional perspective, the system is stable and grounded in the legislative framework.</p>
--	--	-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

<p>Pillar 4 – Research careers and talent development</p>	<p>3,91</p>	<p>Support for interdisciplinary and intersectoral mobility;</p> <p>Promotion and recognition of continuous learning;</p> <p>Recognition of diverse career paths (academic, policy, industry);</p> <p>Well-developed mentoring culture and positive working relationships (trust, collaboration);</p> <p>Recognition of teaching, mentoring, and innovation activities;</p> <p>Support for the development of transversal skills (communication, leadership, project management);</p> <p>Promotion of entrepreneurial and innovation-related competencies;</p>	<p>Lack of formal career structures (strategy, career pathways, planning);</p> <p>Underdeveloped career guidance and employment support services;</p> <p>No systematic mechanism for matching mentors and researchers;</p> <p>Lack of training for mentors (mentoring, people management);</p> <p>Career development support often depends on individual initiative and the quality of mentors;</p> <p>Insufficiently structured individual career development plans;</p> <p>Uneven access to training, mobility, and mentoring (depending on resources, time, and awareness);</p>	<p>The results of the researcher survey and the institutional analysis for Pillar 4 show a high level of alignment in key findings, with some differences. Both sources confirm that IRMO has certain foundational elements of career development, particularly in the areas of mentoring, mobility, and continuous learning, and that there is a positive and collegial working culture that supports researchers' development. However, both sources also recognise that these elements are largely informal and depend on individual initiative and the quality of individual mentors.</p> <p>Both the institutional analysis and the survey results indicate the absence of a structured and strategically integrated career development system. In particular, gaps are identified in formal career guidance mechanisms, the lack of systematic training and education, and the absence of clearly defined career pathways and individual development plans. Both sources also highlight inconsistencies in access to mentoring, training, and mobility opportunities.</p> <p>Differences are evident in the level of detail. The institutional analysis emphasises structural issues such as fragmented responsibilities, the absence of a central coordination mechanism, and the lack of formalised HR tools. In contrast, the survey analysis highlights variability in the quality of mentoring, limited access to training, and the dependence of career development on individual initiative.</p>
-----------------------------------------------------------	-------------	----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------



		Overall positive and collegial working environment.	Limited resources (funding, time) for career development; Underdeveloped institutional support for careers outside IRMO.	The HR survey significantly overestimates the level of system development, as it interprets informal practices as an institutional system. It does not fully capture the structural underdevelopment of the system (fragmented and ad hoc), with researchers generally providing relatively positive assessments of mentoring, mobility, and career development, while the institutional analysis demonstrates that a comprehensive system is not in place (no strategy, no development plans, no formal structures).
--	--	-----------------------------------------------------	---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------



2.3 ORGANIZATIONAL READINESS ASSESSMENT

Benchmark definition

Organizational readiness is assessed across three dimensions:

1. Structural readiness (governance, policies, procedures)
2. Operational readiness (resources, staffing, tools)
3. Cultural readiness (leadership commitment, openness to reform, ESR engagement)

Each dimension must be rated:

- Low readiness
- Moderate readiness
- High readiness

Table 3. Organizational Readiness

Dimension	Evidence source (Audit/Survey)	Current status (Low/Moderate/High)	Main constraints	Required institutional changes
Structural readiness	HR Audit results and researcher survey findings	Moderate	<p>Absence of an integrated career development system – activities (mentoring, training, mobility) are not consolidated within a unified framework;</p> <p>Fragmentation of responsibilities, with career development carried out across multiple levels (Director, Collegium, departments, mentors, Scientific Council, HR services) without central coordination;</p> <p>Lack of formal HRM tools, including the absence of individual development plans, structured training programmes, career guidance, and onboarding systems;</p> <p>Limited institutional infrastructure: the CSC has not yet been established;</p> <p>Disconnection between evaluation and career development: early performance assessment is not linked to development planning;</p> <p>Absence of talent recognition and retention systems;</p>	<p>Establish an integrated career development system;</p> <p>Strengthen the Career Support Centre (CSC) as the central coordination body;</p> <p>Introduce key HRM tools (individual development plans, onboarding, training);</p> <p>Link performance evaluation with career development;</p> <p>Develop talent recognition and retention systems;</p> <p>Introduce monitoring and analytics in HRM;</p> <p>Formalise mentor training.</p>

			Lack of monitoring and analytics, with no systematic tracking of employee development.	
Operational readiness	HR Audit results and researcher survey findings	Moderate	<p>Fragmented HRM function (no central coordination; the Secretariat and HR services operate primarily as administrative units);</p> <p>Lack of digital tools and systems for tracking career development;</p> <p>Absence of systematic training (currently conducted on an ad hoc basis) and structured competence development;</p> <p>The Career Support Centre (CSC) is not yet operational.</p>	<p>Strengthen the HRM function through strengthening the CSC as the operational hub;</p> <p>Introduce digital tools for tracking recruitment, training, and career development;</p> <p>Develop and implement structured training programmes;</p> <p>Standardise mentoring, mobility, and career development processes;</p> <p>Introduce monitoring and analytics within HRM;</p> <p>Strengthen the CSC operationally and integrate it into HRM processes.</p>
Cultural readiness	Researcher survey findings	High	<p>Dependence on individual initiatives;</p> <p>Uneven quality of mentoring and support for early-career researchers;</p> <p>Career development culture is not fully institutionalised;</p> <p>Lack of systematic mechanisms for inclusion and feedback.</p>	<p>Institutionalise the culture of career development through clear and binding practices;</p> <p>Introduce regular feedback mechanisms (surveys, focus groups);</p> <p>Ensure consistent quality of mentoring through training and shared institutional standards;</p> <p>Reduce dependence on individual initiatives through structured processes;</p> <p>Strengthen the continuous involvement of early-stage researchers in decision-making;</p> <p>Ensure consistent implementation of core values in practice (ethics, equality, development).</p>

IRMO's governance structures provide a solid foundation for the implementation of the SAP. The decision-making hierarchy is clearly defined through the Director, the Director's Collegium, the Scientific Council, and organisational units, ensuring a formal framework for decision-making and implementation. The establishment of the Career Support Centre (CSC) represents an important step towards the centralisation and coordination of career development activities. However, the existing fragmentation of responsibilities between management, departments, mentors, and administrative services indicates the need for further strengthening of coordination mechanisms to ensure consistent and effective SAP implementation.

The executive leadership demonstrates a high level of commitment to the implementation of the SAP. This is reflected in the establishment of the CSC, the development of the Human Resources Management Plan, and the active role of the Director and governing bodies in its preparation and implementation. Furthermore, the participatory approach to developing the SAP, which involved researchers at different career stages and mentors, confirms the institution's openness to reform and readiness for change.

IRMO possesses the basic institutional capacities required for SAP implementation, including existing organisational structures and professional services. However, effective implementation will require the reallocation and strengthening of resources, particularly in the areas of human resources management, digital tools, systematic training, and analytics. The CSC is identified as the key operational driver of these activities, but it is still in the establishment phase and requires further staffing and organisational reinforcement. It is important to emphasise that IRMO already has positive initiatives and good practices in the areas of mentoring, mobility, and skills development. However, these activities are largely implemented informally and on an ad hoc basis, without a unified institutional framework, which limits their systematic application and monitoring.

The main structural barriers to SAP implementation do not stem from a lack of strategic direction, but from challenges related to its operationalisation. Key risks include insufficient operational capacity of the CSC, fragmented responsibilities, a lack of formalised HR tools (such as individual development plans, structured training, and career guidance), and the absence of monitoring and analytics systems. In addition, there is a risk of uneven implementation across departments and dependence on individual initiatives if activities are not standardised and institutionalised.

Overall level of organisational readiness: MODERATE

Justification: IRMO demonstrates institutional willingness and commitment of its governance structures to implement the SAP. The governance framework provides a solid basis for implementation, with a clearly defined decision-making hierarchy (Director, Director's Collegium, Scientific Council, and organisational units). Executive leadership is formally committed to implementation, as reflected in the adoption of the SAP, its integration into strategic documents, and the active role of the Director and governing bodies. The participatory approach to SAP development further confirms openness to reform and the inclusion of researchers in decision-making processes.



2.4 PARTICIPATORY PROCESS AND CO-DESIGN VALIDATION

The SAP must be validated through structured consultation.

Table 4. Participatory process documentation

Activity Type	Participants	Date	Key topics discussed	Key decisions / Priorities Confirmed
Focus group	IRMO staff	1. 4. 2026	Establishment of the CSC, Human Resources Management Plan and development of researchers' careers	Priority: establishment of the Career Support Centre (CSC) as a central hub; development of an integrated career system (individual development plans, mentoring, training); strengthening transparency and support for researchers
Workshop	Director, Project Coordinator, Secretariat, and Quality Assurance Department	15. 4. 2026	Role of the CSC, SAP implementation, and operational capacities	Priority: establishment and role of the CSC; integration of SAP measures into governance processes; ensuring resources (human and financial); institutionalisation of the career development system
Consultation meeting	ESRs	16. 4. 2026	Presentation of the researcher survey findings, defining of measures and activities for the SAP	Priority: introduction of career guidance and individual development plans; development of structured training programmes (ResearchComp); strengthening mobility and mentoring quality; ensuring feedback mechanisms



The participatory consultation process for SAP development was conducted through three structured consultation activities in April 2026: a focus group with IRMO staff, a consultative meeting with the director, project manager, secretariat and the Department for Quality Assurance, and a workshop with ESRs. This comprehensive process enabled the identification of clear reform priorities for IRMO, with participants particularly emphasising the need for greater transparency, predictability and accessibility of development opportunities across all stages of a research career.

Main reform priorities emerging from consultations

The identified priorities are directed primarily at transforming the HRM system and creating a more structured framework for research career development. Three key reform pillars emerged clearly from the consultations:

1. **Establishment of the Career Support Centre:** founding the CSC as the central institutional, coordinating and operational body for directing research career development activities.
2. **Introduction of an integrated career development system:** formalising and consolidating existing activities through the introduction of individual career development plans and the development of systematic training programmes based on the European ResearchComp framework and an innovative micro-accreditation system.
3. **Strengthening support for ESRs (R1 and R2 levels):** intensifying career counselling and structured support for this group of researchers, who have until now received insufficient institutional support, alongside mandatory strengthening of the implementation of ethics, open science and OTM-R principles.

All consultation activities underlined the necessity of integrating SAP measures into IRMO's regular management processes, with adequate human and financial resources secured.

Areas of consensus

All stakeholders involved expressed full agreement on the need to move away from the prevailing ad hoc approach and to institutionalise informal and fragmented career development practices. A strong and broad consensus was reached on the following operational measures:

- the central role of the CSC as the operational driver and coordinator of SAP measures;
- the introduction of transparent and structured career pathways within IRMO;
- the introduction of mandatory written feedback for all candidates involved in recruitment procedures, directly ensuring transparency in hiring;
- the implementation of modern HR tools for the effective monitoring of human resources development processes;
- the development of systematic support programmes for ESRs, including the formalisation of mentor training, the establishment of shared institutional mentoring standards, and the systematic monitoring of mobility as integral components of regular institutional practice;

- IRMO's foundational values (ethics, integrity, academic freedom and collegiality) were recognised as the firm and non-negotiable basis on which reform measures must be built.

Areas requiring further alignment

Certain complex issues require further alignment between different levels of management, scientific departments and researchers themselves:

- **Operationalisation of qualitative aspects of work:** criteria for evaluating researchers' qualitative contributions (such as contributions to open science, the societal and policy impact of research, mentoring, knowledge transfer and interdisciplinary collaboration) need to be aligned within existing national regulatory and financial frameworks and applicable regulations and national evaluation systems;
- **Consistent implementation and allocation of responsibilities:** the allocation of responsibilities between the CSC, scientific departments and mentors in implementing career development activities needs to be precisely defined. A further challenge is ensuring consistent implementation of planned measures across all scientific departments, particularly regarding available resources, organisational capacities and access to professional development opportunities. In this respect, the need for clearer coordination mechanisms and regular monitoring of implementation has been identified to reduce differences between departments and ensure the long-term sustainability of reform activities;
- **ESRs involvement:** the modalities for the regular inclusion of ESRs in SAP monitoring and evaluation processes, as well as the operational mechanisms for collecting their feedback, need to be agreed upon.

Level of ESRs influence in final priority setting

The level of influence of ESRs on the final determination of priorities was exceptionally high, direct and measurable. The results of the researcher survey were one of four foundational sources of evidence for SAP development, on an equal footing with the institutional analysis, participatory consultations and policy alignment review.

The survey findings and the workshop discussions directly shaped the content and priorities of the SAP across all four pillars. ESRs clearly highlighted challenges related to the structural fragmentation of the support system, limited visibility of career opportunities, contract insecurity, and the need for more accessible career counselling and mentoring.

As a direct response to these expressed needs, the SAP incorporates concrete measures aimed at:

- introducing individual development plans and structured training programmes;
- strengthening support for transitions towards non-academic careers and enhancing mobility;
- developing structured training programmes;



- conducting regular biennial surveys on researcher satisfaction and needs.

The participatory approach has thus not remained a mere formal procedure. ESRs played the role of active co-creators of the reform process, and their continued involvement in monitoring implementation and shaping future policy is secured in the long term and institutionalised through the formally established **ESR Advisory Panel** within the governance structure of the HRS4R process itself.

3. OBJECTIVES AND MEASURES PER PILLAR

3.1 STRATEGIC PILLAR ARCHITECTURE

The SAP operationalises institutional reform across four structurally defined pillars aligned with the European Framework for Research Careers and the European Charter for Researchers:

1. **Ethics, Integrity, Gender and Open Science**
2. **Researchers' Assessment, Recruitment and Progression (OTM-R)**
3. **Working Conditions and Practices**
4. **Research Careers and Talent Development**

Each pillar translates diagnostic findings from Section 2 into measurable institutional commitments for the period 2026–2031.

3.2 OBJECTIVES AND MEASURES PER PILLAR (SMART FRAMEWORK)

3.2.1 TEMPLATE – OBJECTIVES AND MEASURES

Pillar 1	SMART objective	KPI	Baseline (2025)	Target (2031)	Interim target (Mid-term)	Responsible owner	Due date	Key initiatives/actions
Pillar 1 - Ethics, integrity, gender & open science	Institutionalise training on ethics and integrity;	Percentage of employees who have completed mandatory training on ethics and integrity	0	≥80%	40%	Head of CSC	31.12.2031	Development of internal training programmes on ethics and integrity Delivery of training on ethics and integrity
Pillar 1 - Ethics, integrity, gender & open science	Formalise and strengthen open science and inclusiveness policies through operational tools and procedures.	Number/percentage of training sessions on open science and GDPR conducted annually	1	10 (2 educations per year)	5	Head of CSC	31.12.2031	Development of training programmes on open science Delivery of training on open science

Pillar 2	SMART objective	KPI	Baseline (2025)	Target (2031)	Interim target (Mid-term)	Responsible owner	Due date	Key initiatives
Pillar 2 - Assessment, recruitment & progression (OTM-R)	Improve the transparency and quality of candidate and staff evaluation	Percentage of candidates receiving written feedback	0	100%	100%	Secretariat	1. 6. 2026	Introduction of feedback mechanisms for candidates in recruitment procedures Introduction of qualitative criteria for staff performance evaluation
Pillar 2 - Assessment, recruitment &	Introduce formal appeal mechanisms and digital HR tools	Appeal mechanism established and in use	0	100%	100%	Secretariat	1. 1. 2027	Establishment of an appeal mechanism



progression (OTM-R)	for recruitment and process tracking							Record-keeping system for cases established
Pillar 2 – Assessment, recruitment & progression (OTM-R)	Develop an operational framework for mobility in line with OTM-R principles	Introduction of the system	0	100%	50%	Secretariat	1. 1. 2028	HRM system implemented HRM system actively used

Pillar 3	SMART objective	KPI	Baseline (2025)	Target (2031)	Interim target (Mid-term)	Responsible owner	Due date	Key initiatives
Pillar 3 – Working conditions and practices	Develop systematic well-being and mental health programmes for early-stage researchers	Well-being and mental health programme established	0	Program me delivered 5 times (≥2 activities per year)	3	Head of CSC	1. 1. 2031	Development of a well-being and mental health programme for ESRs Continuous implementation of the programme
Pillar 3 – Working conditions and practices	Monitor the satisfaction of early-stage researchers through regular feedback mechanisms	Survey conducted	1	Conduct ed once every two years, ≥70% response rate	1	Head of CSC	31. 12. 2031	Introduce regular feedback mechanisms (surveys, focus groups) to monitor employee satisfaction



	(surveys, focus groups)							
--	-------------------------	--	--	--	--	--	--	--

Pillar 4	SMART objective	KPI	Baseline (2025)	Target (2031)	Interim target (Mid-term)	Responsible owner	Due date	Key initiatives
Pillar 4 - Research careers and talent development	Establishment of the Career Support Centre (CSC)	CSC established	0	1	1	Director	1. 6. 2026	Revision of internal documents Formal integration of the CSC into the institutional structure Strengthening the capacities of the CSC
Pillar 4 - Research careers and talent development	Development and institutionalisation of a micro-credentials and certification framework aligned with ResearchComp	Number of developed and implemented micro-credentials	0	1	1	Head of CSC	1. 6. 2027	Development of the framework Institutionalisation Establishment of a certification system
Pillar 4 - Research careers and talent development	Implementation of structured training programmes for transversal skills for ESRs	Number of training sessions delivered annually (ResearchComp competencies)	0	16	10	Head of CSC	1. 6. 2031	Training programmes developed Training delivered Certification system implemented



D2.1. SMART Researchers Strategic Action Plan (SAP) Framework for ESR Career Development



	Development of individual development plans	Percentage of researchers with an individual development plan	0	≥80%	40%	Head of CSC	31. 2031	12.	<p>Framework for the development of individual development plans prepared</p> <p>System for developing individual development plans introduced</p> <p>Monitoring, reporting, and evaluation system implemented</p>
--	---------------------------------------------	---------------------------------------------------------------	---	------	-----	-------------	----------	-----	--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------



3.3 PHASED IMPLEMENTATION TIMELINE AND RESOURCING

This section operationalises the Strategic Action Plan and demonstrates implementation realism.

Implementation is structured across four strategic phases:

1. **Initiation (Year 1)**
Governance setup, baseline consolidation, system design, internal approvals.
2. **Rollout (Years 1–3)**
Implementation of priority measures and launch of core initiatives.
3. **Consolidation (Years 3–4)**
Integration into institutional processes, KPI monitoring, adjustments.
4. **Institutionalisation (Years 4–5)**
Formal embedding into regulations, HR systems, and budgeting structures.

3.3.1 IMPLEMENTATION ROADMAP (STRATEGIC LEVEL)

Table 6. Institutional SAP Roadmap

Phase	Timeframe	Key focus	Key staff to be included	Main measures implemented	Expected outcome
Initiation	6/2026-6/2027	Establishment of the institutional framework	Director SAP Coordinator Head of CSC IRMO Secretary Heads of Scientific Departments	Establishment and initial operationalisation of the CSC; definition of the SAP governance structure; development of HRM policies (individual development plans, mentoring, training)	CSC established and basic institutional framework for SAP implementation in place
Rollout	6/2026-12/2027	Implementation of key systems	SAP Coordinator Head of CSC HR Representative (CSC) Pillar Leads Monitoring & Data Officer	Introduction of IDPs; launch of structured training programmes (ResearchComp); development and implementation of HRM tools and procedures; establishment of monitoring and evaluation systems	Operational HRM systems in place and initial standardisation of practices achieved
Consolidation	2028-2029	Standardisation and scaling	Director SAP Coordinator Head of CSC Pillar Leads Monitoring & Data Officer	Strengthening the CSC as a central body; integration of HRM functions; scaling of micro-credentials; enhancement of monitoring systems (HR analytics); harmonisation of implementation across departments	Harmonised and coordinated implementation of the SAP across the entire institution
Institutionalisation	2031	Long-term sustainability	Director Scientific Council SAP Coordinator Head of CSC	Integration of SAP measures into regular governance and funding processes; continuous monitoring and policy review; ensuring the sustainability of the CSC and HRM systems	Fully integrated and sustainable research career development system



3.4 HUMAN CAPACITY AND STRUCTURAL ENABLERS

3.4.1 HUMAN RESOURCE ALIGNMENT

Table 7. Institutional roles for SAP delivery

Role / Function	Core responsibility	Competency Profile	Institutional unit
SAP Coordinator	SMART Researchers Project Coordinator	Strategic management and decision-making; stakeholder coordination; communication and leadership skills	Project Implementation Unit / Project Team
Pillar 1 Lead	Head of the Ethics Committee	In-depth knowledge of research ethics and integrity Knowledge of GDPR and open science principles Ability to develop and implement ethics-related policies Analytical and advisory skills	Ethics Committee
Pillar 2 Lead	Secretary of IRMO	Knowledge of the legal and administrative framework for recruitment Experience in implementing OTM-R principles and HRM procedures Organisational and management skills Ability to ensure transparency and compliance Administrative and procedural expertise	Secretariat
Pillar 3 Lead	Director	Strategic and operational management of the institution Decision-making and resource management Knowledge of institutional policies Leadership and change management Ability to ensure high-quality working conditions and organisational culture	Director's Office

Pillar 4 Lead / CSC Lead	Head of the CSC	<p>Expertise in research career development (ResearchComp)</p> <p>Experience in professional development, mentoring, and training</p> <p>Ability to design and deliver programmes (individual development plans, training, micro-credentials)</p> <p>Coordination and advisory skills</p> <p>Knowledge of EU HR standards (HRS4R)</p>	CSC
HR Representative	Head of the CSC	<p>Operational expertise (career development, training)</p> <p>Support to researchers and associates</p> <p>Analytical and organisational skills</p> <p>Communication and advisory competencies</p> <p>Knowledge of HRM tools and systems</p>	CSC
Monitoring & data officer	Head of the CSC	<p>Data analysis and development of indicators (KPIs)</p> <p>Knowledge of evaluation and reporting methodologies</p> <p>Accuracy, analytical thinking, and ability to interpret data</p>	CSC

3.5 GOVERNANCE AND DECISION STRUCTURE

3.5.1 GOVERNANCE MODEL

Table 8. SAP governance structure

Role	Function	Decision authority	Reporting line
Sponsor (Director)	Strategic oversight	Approves annual SAP updates and key decisions	Director's Collegium

SAP Coordinator	Coordination and monitoring	Validates KPI changes, coordinates implementation	Director
Pillar Leads	Operational delivery	Accountable for objectives	SAP coordinator/Director's Collegium / Director
CSC Lead	Career system implementation	Responsible for Pillar 4	SAP coordinator/Director's Collegium / Director
ESR Advisory Panel	Consultative input	Advisory	SAP coordinator

3.5.2 REVIEW AND DECISION CADENCE

Table 9. Review framework

Review type	Frequency	Responsible body	Output
Operational review	Quarterly / Semi-Annual	Head of CSC	Note
Strategic SAP review	Annual	Director's Collegium	Report on the implementation of the HRM Plan
Mid-term review	Year 3	Director's Collegium	Note
Final review	Year 5	Director's Collegium	Report

3.5.3 RISK ESCALATION AND CORRECTIVE MECHANISM

Table 10. Escalation logic

Risk Level	Trigger	Escalation path	Corrective window
Moderate	Delays in the implementation of specific activities (e.g. training, individual development plans, establishment of tools); uneven implementation across departments	Pillar Lead / SAP Coordinator / discussion at the Director's Collegium	1-3 months
High	Failure to implement key measures (e.g. CSC not functioning operationally,	SAP Coordinator / Director	1-3 months

	absence of an individual development plan system, low staff participation); lack of resources or coordination		
Critical	Systemic disruption of SAP implementation (multiple pillars not functioning); failure to institutionalise measures; loss of leadership support or resources	Director / Scientific Council / strategic review of the SAP	3-6 months

4. MONITORING, EVALUATION AND POLICY FEEDBACK

The SAP is monitored through a structured three-level framework:

1. **Operational KPI Monitoring (Are we delivering what we committed?)**
2. **Benefits Realisation Tracking (Is the institution improving structurally?)**
3. **Policy Feedback and Regulatory Alignment (Is SAP influencing institutional and ERA-level frameworks?)**

Monitoring is directly linked to the SMART objectives defined under each pillar (Section 3.1) and follows the governance and review cadence defined in Section 3.5.

The system is designed to ensure clarity, feasibility, and institutional accountability without administrative overburden.

4.1 KPI MONITORING (OPERATIONAL LEVEL)

KPI monitoring tracks the implementation of objectives defined per pillar.

Table 11. KPI monitoring overview

Pillar	Objective reference	KPI	Monitoring tool / data source	Reporting Frequency	Responsible Role
Pillar 1	Ethics training Open science & inclusiveness	Percentage of employees who have completed training on ethics and integrity ($\geq 80\%$); number of open science activities per year	Training records; HRM database; repository	Annual	Pillar 1 Lead
Pillar 2	Evaluation transparency Appeals & digital HR tools Mobility framework	Percentage of candidates receiving written feedback (100%)	Recruitment documentation; records	Annual	Pillar 2 Lead
Pillar 3	Well-being programme ESR satisfaction monitoring	Researcher survey conducted every two years ($\geq 70\%$ response rate)	Researcher survey; internal reports	Annual	Pillar 3 Lead/CSC Lead
Pillar 4	CSC establishment Micro-credentials Training programmes IDPs	Percentage of researchers with an individual development plan (80%); percentage participating in CSC activities ($\geq 50\%$)	CSC records; HRM database	Semi-Annual (CSC)	CSC Lead

Monitoring output:

- Annual SAP Implementation Review Report
- Mid-term review (Year 3)
- Final evaluation (Year 5)



4.2 BENEFITS REALISATION TRACKING (INSTITUTIONAL LEVEL)

While KPIs measure activity completion, benefits tracking assesses whether structural improvements are occurring.

Table 12. Institutional Benefits Tracking

Expected institutional benefit	Indicator	Measurement source	Target year
Increased researcher satisfaction	Increase in researcher survey indicators ($\geq +15\%$)	Researcher survey conducted every two years	2028
Operationalised Career Support Centre (CSC)	CSC provides regular services (career guidance, training) to $\geq 50\%$ of researchers	CSC records and reports	2027
Integration of ResearchComp into the HRM framework	Individual development plans and ResearchComp-based training introduced	Documents and CSC programmes	2028
Increased transparency of recruitment	Systematic provision of feedback to candidates (100%)	Recruitment records	2027

4.3 POLICY FEEDBACK AND ALIGNMENT (STRATEGIC LEVEL)

SAP is not only an internal HR instrument but also a strategic alignment mechanism with European research career frameworks.

Table 13. Policy feedback mechanism

SAP output	Institutional integration mechanism	External feedback channel	Review frequency
Development of policies (IDPs, mentoring, training)	Inclusion in internal regulations and procedures	HRS4R Action Plan and reporting	Annually
Establishment and operation of the CSC	Integration into the organisational structure and HRM governance	HRS4R and ERA networks (exchange of practices)	Annually
Improvement of OTM-R practices	Updating recruitment and evaluation procedures	EURAXESS / HRS4R reports	Annually

Development of micro-credentials and ResearchComp	Integration into training programmes	Project partners; policy briefs	Semi-annually
Policy recommendations (WP5)	Use in internal strategic documents	National and EU policy discussions (ERA, Ministry of Science, Education and Youth)	By SMART Researchers project phases (M18 / M36)

SAP implementation will be monitored through structured performance tracking aligned with ERA principles.

5 REFERENCES AND RELATED DOCUMENTS

5.1 REFERENCE LIST

N/A

5.2 PROJECT DOCUMENTS

The following project documents provide the operational context and complementary resources for the SAP:

- [Grant Agreement No. 101216967 – SMART Researchers](#)
- [Annex 1 – Description of the Action \(DoA\)](#)
- [Consortium Agreement \(CA\)](#)

5.3 REGULATORY AND POLICY FRAMEWORKS REFERENCED

The SAP is aligned with the following EU, international, and institutional frameworks:

- [Council Recommendation on a European Framework for Research Careers](#)
- [European Charter for Researchers](#)
- [ERA Policy Agenda 2025-2027 | European Research Area Platform](#)
- Programme Agreement – Proposal for the Development and Performance-Based Funding Components 2024–2027
- IRMO Development Strategy 2017–2027
- Gender Equality Policy
- Human Resources Management Plan of the Institute for Development and International Relations 2026–2030
- Code of Ethics