

HR Excellence in Research

Renewal Assessment: EC Consensus Report

Renewal Phase Assessment With Site Visit - EC Consensus Report

Case number

2018ES359514

Name Organisation under assessment

University of Córdoba

Organisation's contact details

Campus de Rabanales, Cordoba, Spain

Submission date of the Internal Review

25/05/2023

Submission date to the European Commission

24/05/2024

Detailed assessment

1. Quality assessment

The quality assessment evaluates the level of ambition and the quality of progress intended by the organisation. If any statements have prompted a "no" or "partly" in the evaluation, please provide recommendations:

	YES / NO / PARTLY	Recommendations
Has the organisational information been sufficiently updated to understand the context in which the HR Strategy is implemented?	Yes	However, there seems to be a mistake in the calculation of reported number of staff (1,262.80) as it is lower than the number of researchers (2,079.86).
Does the narrative provided list goals and objectives which clearly indicate the organisation's priorities in HR-management for researchers?	Partly	Action plan needs a clear identification of current gaps, to better inform the choice of actions. Some priorities are clearly indicated (post-d contract stabilization, implementing OTM-R & C&C principles) but remains unclear how the organization plans to improve its practice in the upcoming period. Mostly because there are no new or foreseeable actions to be completed in the action plan.
Has the organisation published an updated HR Strategy and Action Plan been updated with the actions' current status, additions and/or modifications?	Partly	An extensive HRS4R page where all the information is available in Spanish can easily be found on the University website (https://www.uco.es/investigacion/portal/HRS4R/en/) but unfortunately is not accessible from the English version of the website, not the English version of the website (https://www.uco.es/internacional/extranjeros/en/) and the "Research" page is not available, making it impossible for a non-Spanish reader to find it (Investigacion under the Spanish site).
Are the implementation of the HR strategy and Action Plan sufficiently embedded within the organisation's management structure (e.g. steering committee, operational responsibilities) so as to guarantee a solid implementation?	Yes	
Is the OTM-R policy in place and publicly available?	Partly	OTM-R strategy is published and has been revised. However, it cannot be found from the English version of the website. It is available in English but from the Spanish website, just like the rest of HRS4R.

information.

During the transition period special conditions apply:

Institutions having started the HRS4R implementation prior to the publication of the OTM-R toolkit and recommendations by the European Commission (2015) may not have prioritised implementing the OTM-R principles yet. In this case, they should not be penalised but strong recommendations should be made to address these principles appropriately.

Does the internal assessment of the institution give rise to any issues you wish to explore in more detail during the site visit? (max 1000 words)

- Why were some actions from previous plans (R3, W3, W4, W6, W7, W10, W11, W12, W13, ERWT1) removed in the renewal report? Why were some actions added to the previous action plan (R4, R5, W6, W7 of current action plan) and how were they decided? Why are there no actions to be completed over the period 2022-2025? The current action plan has only 8 actions which are marked IN PROGRESS. Aren't there any new actions?
- What is the frequency of monitoring groups decided ("periodic" "regular" meetings...)?
- There are a very small number of R2 researchers/postdocs, only 5% in FTE. What is the reason for that?
- The change in the national regulations on hiring implies the conversion of temporary contracts to indefinite contracts. How is this implemented in UCO?
- There is a possibility of filing a complaint on the result of the competition related to recruitment. Did you receive complaints so far, what kinds?
- UCO is highlighting the advance in gender balance for selection of all management bodies, commissions and evaluation committees. What kind of advances have been made?
- How do the research integrity infrastructures (e.g. ethical committees) respond to a complaint, what is the process (anonymous enabled, duration of cases, number of case nature of issues)?
- Given quite a large number of international researchers and insufficient details on the translation process, we have concerns on the scale of translation of documents (for example, great most of the documents linked in the action plan are in Spanish). Is there a structured internationalization process?
- The level of engagement of researchers at the renewal stage looks insufficient. It appears that they have not been consulted, in scale, about the level satisfaction on implemented actions. Could you elaborate in more detail how the researchers have been involved in the process at this stage? If there were surveys after the initial period, did those surveys reveal? We would like to know more about the types of questions, % of participation, results.

Which elements of the HR strategy and Action Plan would you like to focus upon during the site visits? (max 1000 words)

- What was the HRS4R monitoring process like? Let's discuss the qualitative and quantitative indicators to better implement the monitoring process.
- We would like to hear more about The Employment and Entrepreneurial Culture Observatory (UCOtalent).
- UCO refers to the development of surveys to assess the work of supervisors and mentors. It would be great to know the results of those surveys.
- Strengths and weaknesses analysis did not consider the state of play in transversal skills training. There is an action on continuous training of researchers, but it is not clear if this is a one-off program or continuous practice as part of the UCOs strategy, for example to increase employability of PhDs in industry. Could you elaborate on that during site visit?
- In the previous stages, visibility of ethical bodies was identified as an issue. Even though some measures have been implemented (welcome manual), it is not yet clear if the problem was addressed on a larger scale. Can you elaborate?
- Could you elaborate more on the mentoring programme you refer to in Action 20?

1. SITE-VISIT BASED Assessment

Please provide a brief answer to the following questions:

Note: Click on each question to open the editor.

1. Does the site visit confirm the impression made by the written self-evaluation report?

- Yes
- No
- Partly

2. What have been the benefits of implementing an HR Strategy in the organisation under review? How do you judge its overall impact and achievements?

Commitment of UCO to HRS4R process is high, which is commendable. The process is directly supported from within different structures of the UCO at the highest levels. All the actions in the action plan are included in the strategic plan of the organization. Such high level of embedment of HRS4R process in the strategic processes of UCO management strongly guarantees that all HRS4R intended benefits will be propagated in top to bottom fashion.

UCO is committed to implementing the new national and regional strategic calls that seek to attract researchers from abroad. Also, it has been successful at getting international funding, especially EU funding. Their results in this area are quite significant, numbers of foreign recruited staff are up thanks to attractive packages offered to newcomers. The governing team can be proud of their achievements in that regard.

One specific benefit of the process is that the HRS4R also helps the teams work transversally.

UCO reports a significant increase in international rankings (Times higher education & ARWU, and the University of Stanford classification based on the impact of publication due to the inclusion of talented research staff.

During the site visit meetings, interviewed researchers expressed the hard and explicit opinion that the process brought actual and practical benefits. For example, a big improvement was noted by researchers with regards to job offer publishing (use of EURAXESS network for example), resulting in collecting more applications and good candidates. However, there are no hard evidences to convincingly demonstrate the benefits to the overall researchers' community, at scale. The key reason is lacking engagement of researchers in the HRS4R process. The engagement of researchers is minor and mostly in the aspect of their involvement in the meetings of the Working Group. Even there, only researchers of more senior career stages were attending.

3. How do you judge the organisation's **level of ambition** with regard to its HR strategy for researchers, taking into account the initial state of play?

In overall, the UCO's level of ambition is high in a sense that it stands as the #1 university for research in Andalucia. They want to keep that up and have an ambitious plan for talent attraction and retention which is quite successful. UCO dedicates 15% of its new employment capacity to tenure-track jobs.

However, the HRS4R action plan does not fully project this ambition. One of the possible reasons for that could be a slight lack of overall understanding of the HRS4R process in the organization coming from the unfortunate circumstance of starting the renewal process at the moment of overhaul of the governing structure and the fact that until then the process was actually coordinated by the external consultancy. During the site visit, it was uncovered that some of the above misunderstandings rooted in exchanges with the consultancy. Taking into account all those challenges, UCO actually carried out the preparation for a site visit at the high level of quality, which is an evidence of strong commitment. The site visit had allowed assessors to understand that there was more being done in line with HRS4R than the report depicted.

Discussions with the governing team indicated that UCO wants to maintain a strong research activity. They are committed to attracting new talents and make good use of the Spanish employment legislation for that. The recent Spanish law that makes it mandatory to transform a research contract after 6 months into an open-ended contract puts a strain on institutions. But UCO is willing to make this effort as it has chosen a HR researchers strategy that offers the most stable option of research contracts.

4. How do you judge the organisation's efforts to ensure the implementation of the Charter and Code principles regarding the **Ethical and Professional Aspects of Researchers?**

The UCO's efforts regarding the Ethical and Professional aspects of researchers are good. The governing team expresses a clear will to improve in this area.

Training on ethics is mandatory for all R1 researchers, and new recruits have to take a risk prevention course before entering the laboratory. It is part of an on-line Welcome protocol that is implemented for researchers.

Other implemented measures include: publication of a portfolio of patents, Annual Plans for Scientific Dissemination, the creation of a Vice-Rectorate for Internationalization and a section dealing with International Research in the Vice-Rectorate for Scientific Policy.

However, there are some issues and challenges that need to be addressed in the future.

Although the infrastructure for handling the research integrity issues is in place, the interviewed researchers were not confident on who to consult in case of the complaint. Better communication is proposed.

UCO do not facilitate anonymous complaints or the work of ombudsperson office. In order to encourage open discussion, it is suggested to create the appropriate channels.

Under the umbrella of independence, the work of ethical committee remain hidden. While the effort to avoid conflicts of interests and just decision making is well regarded, the situation makes it impossible to establish state of play in research integrity challenges. A form of improved reporting is suggested to deal with that.

In general, the researchers of all career stages (including R1 and R2) are involved in the decision making in UC through the participation in research committee. However, appointed younger researchers do not act as representatives of the wider communities. This situation should be improved by considering the horizontal layers of organization of researchers in different career stages which could contribute to representativeness of the elected members of the research committees and better exchange of information and different initiatives for improvement.

Currently, even though researchers are actively using generative AI tools in research process, there is no ongoing initiative to discuss the ethical guidelines for using generative AI. It is suggested to start working on that, on the trail already created by other European universities.

5. How do you judge the organisation's efforts to ensure the implementation of the Charter and Code principles regarding the **Recruitment of Researchers? Is an OTM-R policy in place?**

The UCO's efforts regarding the Recruitment of Researchers reflect their strategy that seeks to attract high-level research staff as a way to guarantee the institution's research activity. Hence, UCO has developed and successfully implements a voluntary HR strategy to attract and retain high-level research talent. It also comes with higher salary offers, complementary funding for researchers (to hire a PhD student for example, enhancing a young researcher's ability to become an independent researcher) and a stabilization program for recruited high talent researchers to become research and teaching staff (tenure-track system). Special packages offered at the top of the grants awarded to the postdoc researchers are competitive and greatly appreciated by the researchers.

As a result, UCO is perceived as a good employer, capable of attracting many "Ramón y Cajal" grant laureates. Over the past couple of years, UCO successfully attracted an increasing number of those excellence researchers: 33 researchers in 2020, 39 researchers in 2021 and 45 researchers in 2022). UCO is considered as one of quite a few universities where the transition to a permanent contract after the prestigious postdoc grant, as designed by the national regulation, is actually carried out.

On OTM-R policy is in place and published in Spanish and English languages, although the information is only accessible via the Spanish version of the institution's website (<https://www.uco.es/investigacion/portal/HRS4R/en/>). It should be made available from the English version of the website, which is apparently under reconstruction.

The role of Principal Investigators in the recruitment process is decisive and UCO is very flexible in allowing many different important decisions to be made by PIs. They complete the job description via a platform, establish a gender-balanced recruitment committee and even design scoring mechanism according to their preferences (or the preferences of the actual job).

However, in some aspects this flexibility goes too far in terms of allowing for selecting truly best candidates. For example, PIs can choose whether an interview stage will be carried out or not, meaning that the candidates may be selected based solely on what is written in their biographies. This issue is connected to another issue - lack of participation of HR in recruitment process. It appears that HR department is in charge for buerocratic activities only and it does not provide expert assistance, for example the assistance in executing the interviews, assessment of the transversal skills and traits of the candidate and similar aspects which are exceptionally important but left unassessed in this process. It might be a good idea to standardize processes so as to insure fair treatment and quality control in HR recruitment processes.

6. How do you judge the organisation's efforts to ensure the implementation of the Charter and Code principles regarding the **Researchers' Working conditions and Social Security?**

The UCO's efforts regarding the researchers' working conditions and social security are good.

UCO has chosen to develop a working context of equal opportunities and non-discrimination, gender-balanced representation in management and representation bodies, an Equality Plan with training courses and activities that include family reconciliation, and the implementation of protocols that ensure risk prevention at work with courses that are adapted to a researcher' work environment.

The report mentions surveys on the opinion of new researchers on the Welcome Protocol, the level of satisfaction of new researchers with the work of their scientific tutors or mentors, about the stays carried out by training researchers, or about the relevance of the HRS4R award for the institution and researchers who are part of it. Unfortunately, the contents and results of such surveys were not shared so it is hard to know what value they bring. However, they could be a good source for bottom-up input from researchers to feed the HRS4R process and UCO is encouraged to exploit this source of information for HRS4R.

Also, UCO created a centralized database to record national and international stays of UCO staff and researchers, an Employment and Entrepreneurial Culture Observatory (UCOtalent) to help researchers strategizing on their career development and UCO places an emphasis on increasing leadership capabilities of young researchers to competitiveness in national and international calls, as well as in providing them with teaching experience so that they may receive their national R3 certification to advance in the research career.

It is worth noting the achievement by the current governing team regarding representation of all researchers categories in the institution's Research Commission: until 2022 this body was formed exclusively by R4 researchers. It now is fully gender-balanced and comprised of 15 researchers instead of 5, including 2 R1 & 2 R2. In the future, it might be interesting for UCO to strive to also balance representation of all researcher categories.

Some other challenges that need to be investigated and addressed have been uncovered during the interviews with the researchers.

Both PhD students and postdocs perceive administrative processes in UCO as overly bureaucratic and time consuming. That could mean two possible points for improvement. First, the administrative process efficiency could be improved while taking into account the requirements of national legislation. Second, the administrative assistance capacity should be strengthened with aim to take as much of the administrative burden from the researchers as possible.

The structure of PhD grants does not allow for effective use of funds in mobility, travel to conferences and other similar activities, very important for the career development. While the structure of the grants cannot be changed, it is very important to provide feasible funding for those activities by topping up the PhD grants or by providing different independent in-house support schemes for short and long term mobility.

Teaching engagement is considered too low, and it does not enable the researchers to gain experience in this aspect so to improve competitiveness in the next career stage funding calls and job advertisements. While there is a hard limit of maximum number of classes per semester as designed by the national regulation, UCO should put the best effort to act innovatively in creating the opportunities for young researchers to demonstrate and validate their pedagogical skills, through the summer school and other extra curricula programs.

According to the interviewed researchers, the distribution of the lab space is uneven. While the commitment to expand the working space is difficult to take due to exceptional funding needed, considering the initiatives for balancing the requirements for working space across different departments, research groups is a good start for solving this problem.

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

The organisation's efforts regarding the researchers' development and training are good.

Training for doctoral students is organized and includes transversal skills, specific classes in the various schools of the University (guidance for the development of a successful research career, good practices in research). However, the offer of transversal skills training is relatively low, especially those related to research proposal writing at the PhD level.

Training on HRS4R is given during UCO's annual congress for training researchers. Training may vary depending on the doctoral school, and is not mandatory (apart from Ethics course).

It is not clear if PhD students have the opportunity to ask to take some specific training outside of UCO's offer, nor if PhDs get to develop a personal career development plan. These could become future improvement avenues for the institution in the training area.

Please list one or more elements of good practice that you would recommend to other organisations – either in terms of action or in terms of coordination/process. (max 100 words)

- The development and implementation of effective tools (protocols, sometimes with applications or digital platforms, or databases) to manage research projects, research job recruitment process, training, onboarding.
- UCO's proactive strategy to attract and retain high-level research talents, including from abroad.
- The dedication to encourage research careers at UCO by choosing to uptake the most stable option of research contracts in the Spanish law.
- Call for funding postdoc positions with own funds.
- Leadership promotion programs.
- More senior PhD students acting as mentors of junior ones.

Strengths and weaknesses

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

Strengths

- Involvement of top management (Rector and many Vice-directorates) in HRS4R project.
- Well-written report in good English. Action plan lists very specific, clear and measurable actions.
- Reconfiguring the Research Commission on 2022 to include researchers of all career stages is a very positive step.
- 16 actions/22 of previous plans were successfully implemented.
- Progress demonstrated in areas such as attractiveness (# of international researchers soared tremendously, going from 21 in 2019 to 712; 30% doctoral students come from abroad = 540/1,800), excellence in research (number of "Ramon y Cajal" researchers is climbing sharply = 7 between 2019-2019, and 8 in 2022 alone), international ranking (climb in Times, ARWU, Stanford impact publications). In overall, Strategy for recruitment of high talent researchers and its implementation is quite positive practice.
- Improved transparency and recruitment policy (assessment criteria published, EURAXESS publications).
- Achieved gender balance in recruitment committees, management bodies and commissions (+ women leadership is promoted in the organization).
- Greater stability for contract-based researchers (although it is a result of Spanish work regulations).
- Significant increase in funds obtained from competitive calls.
- Implementation of tools (applications, databases) to implement and/or monitor integration, mobility, indicators.

Weaknesses

- Lack of information on how gaps with C&C principles implementation are identified for the renewal phase: researchers contributions to the action plan are not precisely described. In addition, weaknesses and this renewal stage are very difficult to spot, as strength and weaknesses analysis did not highlight any.
- Lack of ambition in the presented renewal report, mostly because there are no targets set to improve the current situation over the next period.
- Indicators are often too vague or values not provided, which doesn't allow for proper assessment by experts of achieved progress. Great most of the indicators focus on measuring the progress of the actions (for example, documentation), rather than the desired outcomes or impact (for example, number of affected researchers, satisfaction by researchers and similar).
- Some actions were removed from previous plan, or renumbered, and some added, but without an explanation on those changes
- Lack of description of a clear and regular monitoring process.
- Lack of description of the updated working group (with gender and researcher category information)
- HRS4R information on the website is only available from the Spanish version and not the English version. In addition, many documents linked on the English HRS4R page Spanish language.

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

- Currently, strength and weaknesses analysis is not focused and sufficiently clear. Improve strength and weaknesses analysis to clearly highlight actual current concerns and gaps and thus, by clearly motivate the proposed action plan.
- Provide composition of steering committee and working group, indicating gender, research category when applicable.
- Increase the engagement of researchers in future renewal activities. Include a scheme (survey, focus groups or similar) to collect researchers contribution to the development of the action plan in a bottom-up approach
- Increase the use of quantitative targets to facilitate better measurement of progress.
- Increase the use of indicators measuring the outcomes and impacts, rather than progress of action's implementation.
- Describe the monitoring process that is put in place or develop it. It should be solid, include frequency of meetings, have minutes recorded, list of decisions, and follow-up
- Publish the current action plan and OTM-R policy at English version of the website.

General Assessment

Which of the below situations describes the organisation's progress most accurately? Tick the right situation regarding the award renewal application.

- Accepted**
- Pending **minor** modifications
- Pending **major** revisions

Explanation

- **Accepted:** The organisation is progressing with appropriate and quality actions as described in its Action Plan. **There is evidence that the HRS4R is further embedded. The next assessment will take place in 36 months.**
- Pending **minor** modifications: The organisation is, for the most part, progressing with appropriate and quality actions as described in its Action Plan, but could benefit from alterations as advised through the Assessment

process. **There is some evidence that the HRS4R is further embedded.**

The institution is requested to submit within 2 months a revised file taking into account the recommendations of the assessors.

- Pending **major revisions**: The organisation is not deemed to be implementing appropriate and quality actions and this raises some concern for the future efforts to implement actions closely aligned to the Charter and Code.

There is a lack of evidence that the HRS4R is further embedded.

The institution is requested to submit within 12 months a revised file taking into account the recommendations of the assessors.

Until then, the HR Award will be put as "pending".

General Recommendations

any of the above statements have prompted a "no" in the evaluation, please provide suggestions of modifications in the form below.

- If the general assessment is "pending minor modifications" the recommendations are split into:
 - Immediate mandatory recommendations (to be implemented for award renewal, resubmission within 2 months)
 - Other recommendations (to be carried out during the award renewal phase).
- If the general assessment is "pending major revisions" the recommendations are split into:
 - Mandatory recommendations (to be implemented for award renewal, resubmission within 12 months)
 - Other recommendations

Immediate mandatory recommendations *

- Make HRS4R information, including OTM-R, available from the English version of the institutional website. Publish the entire action plan.
- Formalize the composition of the Working group and define a solid monitoring system with regular meetings dedicated to HRS4R review and follow-up, produce minutes to meetings and plan for corrective action when deviations are noted.
- Include new actions for short-term, mid-term and long-term effect to render the current action plan more ambitious for the next 2-3 years (maybe by turning observed challenges into new actions).
- Prepare a comprehensive plan of engagement of researchers with the process in the future. The plan should foresee engagement at scale, through surveys or other feedback collection exercise, such as focus groups involving representatives of all career stages. The surveys could take different approaches, from assessing overall satisfaction with state of play in each of the 40 principles of Charter and Code, to directly investigating the impact of the actions from the action plan and/or inviting for feedback on gap analysis.

Other recommendations *

- Improve communication on HRS4R strategy internally. Consider introducing it in the welcome package and onboarding process.
- Increase the use of quantitative targets to facilitate better measurement of progress. Increase the use of indicators measuring the outcomes and impacts, rather than progress action's implementation. In the future, provide values of the indicators and measures of improvement achieved when reporting on HRS4R. Also include explanations and narrative on achievement or non-achievement of actions.
- Improve strengths and weaknesses analysis to clearly highlight actual current concerns and gaps and thus, by clearly motivate the proposed action plan.
- In the future, ensure full understanding of the HRS4R process by considering and analysing the action plans and other documentation produced by the other similar universities working under the same regulation umbrella (regional Andalusia government or in general, Spanish universities).
- Put more effort in strengthening the infrastructure for handling research integrity issues and in communicating how this infrastructure works to the researchers. Consider introducing anonymous complaints and associated process for handling them. Introduce reporting process related to the work of the ethical committee and ensure exchange ideas with the members on how to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the ethical committee work.
- Facilitate meetings of the younger researchers communities (R1, R2) with their representatives in the research committee, to ensure better communication on the decisions in their contexts but more importantly, to increase the inclusivity and to enable submission and discussion of ideas and initiatives for improvement. In addition, try to increase balanced representation of younger researcher categories (R1-R2) in the Research Commission.
- Work to design guidelines for ethical use of generative AI.
- Consider standardizing HR recruitment process. Consider introducing interviews as mandatory. Work on strengthening the capacity of HR department to assess horizontal and traits of the candidates, in the interviews and/or beyond. Provide continuous trainings for PIs on how to conduct the interviews.
- Work on strengthening the administrative staff capacity to reduce the bureaucracy burden to the researchers. Include an English training plan for administrative staff to increase their language and inter-cultural communication skills.
- Consider topping up the PhD grants or providing independent in-house funding schemes for short and long-term mobility.
- Consider creating the opportunities for young researchers to demonstrate and validate their pedagogical skills, through the summer school and other extra-curricular programs.
- Consider the initiatives for balancing the requirements for working space across different departments and research groups.
- Consider increasing the offer of transversal skills training, especially those related to research proposal writing at the PhD level.

the organisation deserves to be commended on their ambition, their actions, evidence of good practice and/or their implementation process, please provide a commentary supporting it (max. 2000 words)

The organisation deserves to be complimented on their voluntary HR strategy that seeks to attract and retain high-level research talent, which has proven to be quite successful, yielding other improvements in funds obtention, in international rankings, etc.

The current governing team is committed to strengthening research activity at UCO; they are using HRS4R as a framework to implement their overall strategy, which will most definitely improve HRS4R embedding in the institution.

Keep up the good work!
