

## EURAXESS

### Renewal Phase Assessment With Site Visit - EC Consensus Report

**Case number**

2022SI726281

**Name Organisation under assessment**

University of Maribor/Univerza v Mariboru

**Organisation's contact details**

Slomškov trg 15, Maribor, 2000, Slovenia

**Submission date of the Internal Review**

15/03/2022

**Submission date to the European Commission**

17/08/2023

## Detailed assessment

### a. 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	Apart from information included in the "Internal report" there is a very informative set of documents published by the university on their website
Does the narrative provided list goals and objectives which clearly indicate the organisation's priorities in HR-management for researchers?	Yes	
Has the organisation published an updated HR Strategy and Action Plan been updated with the actions' current status, additions and/or modifications?	Yes	The information may not be easy to find (as is often the case) but it is very comprehensive, including also the Analysis of the implementation level of principles 2022 and many related documents like: - Instructions on Recruitment at the UM (valid from 7 April 2020) - Gender Equality Action Plan of the University of Maribor 2021-2025 -Code of Ethical Conduct of the University of Maribor -Strategy of the University of Maribor 2021-2030, etc
Is the implementation of the HR strategy and Action Plan sufficiently embedded within the organisation's management structure (e.g. steering committee, operational responsibilities) so as to guarantee a solid implementation?	Yes	

**YES / NO / PARTLY    Recommendations**

Is the OTM-R policy in place and publicly available?

Yes

**During the transition period special conditions apply:**

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

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

The university of Maribor is HRS4R awarded since a very long time, during the site visit assessor would like to explore:

- the mechanism in place to monitor/report on the progress of the implementation of the actions
- the perceived added-value of the OTM-R policy
- if the overall the implementation of the HRS4R has improved the recruitment process/work environment
- if the institution is still engaged in the HRS4R process
- the training actions put in place
- the issue of researchers involvement in the process of reflection on the HRS4R
- the role of Vice-Rector for Human Resources

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

The HR strategy and Action Plan are sound, but some part appear to be not consistent or unclear, in particular regarding to future development of the proposed actions ( in particular "Development of incentive system for excellence in research" and "Enhance mobility of teaching and non-teaching staff"

More in details:

Research environment and working conditions. The expectation of stable/permanent employment seems of crucial importance to the researchers in the institution. This is hardly surprising, but universities usually have very limited means to provide permanent employment. What other measures have been taken/considered in order to provide career development perspectives

Recruitment. It looks like a lot of effort has been made to improve the recruitment practices at the University. It is also mentioned that there is some resistance among the staff when it comes to reforming recruitment procedures.

Research assessment. The internal assessment mentions changes in the research assessment practices, aimed at a more qualitative approach and taking into account different forms of research contribution, differences among research fields and societal impact of the research. Assessors would learn more about the specific measures taken or planned in this respect.

## b. 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? ▼

Thanks to his long running HRS4R the institution has a good international approach in dealing with researchers recruitment, career development, setting incentives to increase international research standards, The overall impact is positive and several achievements are in place, starting from the embedding of the HRS4R in the Strategic Plan to the general awareness that HRS4R is considered a prerequisite for participation in other EU funded opportunities such as MSCA Actions or Erasmus funded European Alliances.

The most visible benefits of implementing HR Strategy seem to lie in recruitment. This is the area in which the researchers themselves notice most significant changes. The changes entail introduction of clear procedures and criteria, as well as administrative support. The university is striving to increase its international visibility (e.g. by the means of Euraxess but also participation in many international/regional networks). It has already succeeded in attracting a considerable number of foreign PhD students (who constitute 25% of the PhD students). The others are mostly graduates of the same university and this issue is needing attention to avoid "inbreeding" o careers too local.

There is still room for improvement, since foreign researchers still need an English speaking environment, both from the administrative point of view and the communication with the professors.

Ethical aspects and professional responsibility are another sphere in which the university succeeded to implement significant changes in HR Strategy. The ethical codes are not only in place, but they are being developed and elaborated.

Training activity is quite well developed. Not only do they offer a broad range of courses, including those on transferable skills, but the courses are increasingly popular, achieving surprisingly high participation rates. That partly results from the option of remote participation, but must for sure reflect very good quality of training.

All in all, the interviews confirm coordinated effort and structural approach to the changes which are introduced in a concerted way across all the faculties and strongly embedded in the overall strategy of the university.

### 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?

Also due to his long running HRS4R the institution has a "medium" level of ambition. The interviews give the impression of commitment and ambition of the University authorities, including the rector. The authorities seem set on increasing the university's international recognition and competitiveness. They are dedicated to the implementation of the Charter and Code and actively participate in many international networks and European initiatives that aim at improving quality of research environment (eg. CoAra).

Obstacles to his enhancement are seen outside the institutions, such as:

- the national law that makes compulsory that university courses have to be taught in slovenian, thus limiting the attraction of international faculty members
- the salary level that are blocked in a national "grid"
- difficulties in Visa and migration related problems.

Those limitations are perceived by all the interlocutors as a major barrier to the further implementation of C&C principles. They understandably cause a lot of frustration (same obstacles indicated in the previous assessment), but they might also have a slightly demotivating effect as there are not many new activities proposed in the Action Plan.

At the same time, many actions could still be put in place at the institutional level, but this is not immediately clear to the panel we interviewed

The university conducts regular surveys on the perception of the fulfilment of the C&C principles by the researchers. The results are carefully analysed and there is clearly a strong will to provide actual and potential researchers with best possible working conditions.

#### 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?**



Ethical and professional aspects of researchers are well developed, minorities are engaged in the HRS4R review process, a complaint system is in place, a code of conduct is well established with a strong focus on preventing harassment and behaviors of offensive nature.

Well being and job satisfaction of researchers and employees are promoted, the University of Maribor provides career counselling on additional career development possibilities and created an office dedicated to this

The university has updated and unified its Ethical codes, and has a specified mechanism for handling a complaint and intervention in case of a possible violation.

The interviews confirmed that junior researchers are aware that there are regulations in this regard, but none of them had any experience nor particular interest in them. So far there has been no case of complaint which may be a good sign (no violation happens) or a bad sign (the mechanisms are not trusted). The UM administration is well aware of the latter risk and takes effort to raise awareness of the problem and explain how to do in case of it.

Activities aimed at reducing discrimination against LGBTQ+ persons are in place. Not only did the UM address the problem, but the measures have been proposed by the community LGBTQ+ itself. The bare fact that such a community is visible and heard gives a good testimony to the open and tolerant culture of the institution.

The teachers are supposed to teach 3 months abroad, according to the national rules for habilitation. This is increasing the mobility of researchers.



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?



University of Maribor has adopted new Guidelines for the Employment of Higher Education Teachers and Researchers, based on the OTM-R

The recruitment is realised by a Commission for the Review of Applications and Selection of Candidates

In accordance with the selection principles set out in the Code of Conduct for the Recruitment of Researchers, selection boards should be set up for all research profiles (R1-R4).

The OTM-R checklist is published on the website of the UM, it is well known and appreciated also by HR professionals of the institution.

The implementation of the Charter and Code principles regarding the recruitment of researchers is quite well developed at central level. More can be done in publishing the 100% of the vacancies on Euraxess (and other international portals, in case) including some relevant positions of Research Management. Only a part of the faculties is publishing the PhD open positions on the EURAXESS website, if the research programme is allowing international candidates (7 out of 17 faculties), some of them on LinkedIn

As mentioned the university faces a serious limitations to successful recruitment and retention of researchers: the salaries are mid-low when compared to the salaries in private sector or foreign institutions/companies. Moreover Maribor is located 30 km from the Austrian border, which makes it really easy for people to migrate in search of better remuneration.

On the more senior level there is another barrier in the form of habilitation process that differs between institutions, which also impedes mobility (as habilitation determined one's position at the university). Nonetheless the university seems dedicated to attracting people from outside. It started to posting vacancies on Euraxess and adapted its recruitment procedures to make the vacancies more available to "outsiders" (eg. timelines). Recruitment of foreigners became easier because of improved administrative support.

It was also mentioned by young group leaders that they appreciate clear guidelines and administrative help when it comes to recruitment.

It should also be noticed that the problem of low salaries was mentioned mostly by senior researchers and administration. The younger generation seems to care greatly for other aspects of their work at the university, such as quality of supervision, infrastructure and research and possibilities of career development. This is taken into account by the university (we noticed the library open till midnight) but could probably be explored further in order to convince potential candidates (as well as researchers who are already there) that coming to/working in Maribor (for a while or for life ) is a good investment in their career. One of the ways to do it, would be to increase the use of English language (eg. offering courses, workshops in English), which would be beneficial both to foreign and domestic researchers.

Recently the university has started a collaboration with industry in regard to recruitment of PhD scandidates. The details are not known yet, but it seems to be a very good move not only in terms of recruitment, but maybe also training and career development of researchers.

## 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?**



Researchers' Working conditions and Social Security are well developed by the institution, giving a positive overall impression both to the assessors and to international researchers considering to move to Maribor for life or for a part of their career.

Services such as libraries and research infrastructures are state of the art. Quality of life in the region and in the city is an asset that should be protected and promoted by the university's governance also as an attraction factor

The interviewed researchers seem satisfied with their working conditions, with the exception of salaries. Another problem is the instability of positions for young researchers, which is a quite common problem in academic institutions and probably can not be solved directly, only maybe relieved by enhancing other aspects of the research work and environment .

Also mentioned and probably easier to address is the administrative burden on researchers, which on top on teaching obligations makes it difficult to concentrate on research.

The options of on-line communication and meetings as well as 1-day per week of remote work make it easier for researchers to combine their work with personal life. Still many of their obligations are related to teaching and those do not seem flexible.

In details:

The University of Maribor has an Action Plan on Equal Opportunities and a Gender equality plan.

The PhD candidates are employed. They are compulsory included in a research programme.

The students in Slovenia are studying for free and the state is paying their medical and social insurance.

The professors are paid during the sabbatical year.

The University of Maribor has a dedicated Vice-Rector for Human Resources.

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

Researchers' development and training are well promoted by the institution, both internally and with external consultants. A rich programme of training sessions is proposed through an online platform, with the possibility to access the recordings for researchers that are not available at the moment. The participation rate is very high, showing the effectiveness of the proposed actions

The training offer covers a wide range of topics, including development of "soft" and transferable skills. Not only the offer is impressive, but also the participation in the training, which is raising dramatically and reaching surprisingly high levels. On-line tools have been adopted which helps, but the quality must also be excellent to ensure so high participation.

The regulations pertaining to language are an obvious impediment to training in English. Although the regulations relate to undergraduate education, clearly the Slovenian language strongly dominates at the institution. The offer of courses in English is very limited, which is felt acutely by foreign researchers. Expanding the training and career development support in English would be particularly beneficial to this group, but also would help to create more international environment to local researchers.

More than 80 events were organised for training the staff, mostly online or hybrid

The University of Maribor has a Career center and organises a fair for companies for recruiting young researchers from the university

The regulations for recruitment are translated into English and published on the website

**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 500 words)**

A good practice is the good collaboration among the PHD School and the local companies in order to attract, train and recruit good PhD candidates promoting Maribor not only as a university, but as an ecosystem rich of opportunities during and after the PhD training period.

Intense training activity (also covering transferable skills)

Addressing the problem of discrimination against LGBTQ+ persons by listening to the ideas of the community LGBTQ+ itself.

The HRS4R webpage of the university is very consistent, having all the documents published (successive Action Plans, by eg), including other useful documents for HR. The most recent documents include:

HR Strategy Action Plan for Researchers 2022-2025

Analysis of the implementation level of principles 2022

OTM-R Checklist 2022

Instructions on Recruitment at the UM (valid from 7 April 2020)

Gender Equality Action Plan of the University of Maribor 2021-2025

Code of Ethical Conduct of the University of Maribor

Strategy of the University of Maribor 2021-2030

## 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:

- Open, Transparent and Merit-Based Recruitment Policy is well developed
- The institution is well aware of the importance of the HRS4R process
- Revision of the Code of Ethics (which proves to be a "living document"); introducing tools for identification of violations of the Code; establishing rules for authorship and co-authorship; protection of whistleblowers and taking into account students.
- Guidelines for the Employment of Higher Education Teachers and Researchers at the University of Maribor, have been developed and adopted based on the Charter & Code, applying the OTM-R
- changes introduced in the recruitment system with a timeline adjusted to the needs of "outsiders"; rules for advertising the vacancies and guidelines for the appointment and work of the selection boards.
- the university strives to provide equal opportunities, and to engage the LGBT+ persons in the HRS4R process.
- much is also done in terms of training researchers.

### Weaknesses:

- the use of Euraxess portal for vacancies advertising is in place for only some faculty / position
- The internal assessment does not say much about the weaknesses of the current practice

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

Assessors suggest a general revision of the Action plan, because it has unclear parts. In particular planned activities should be more detailed and associated to a proper set of indicators.

The right set of indicators should not only make it easier for assessors, but - predominantly - help the institution with the implementation process.

In accordance with the selection principles set out in the Code of Conduct for the Recruitment of Researchers, selection boards should be set up for all research profiles (R1-R4).

## 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

If 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

### Recommendations \*

Assessors invites the institution to post all the vacancies on the Euraxess portal (now the situation is jeopardized) including the relevant positions on the management side, such as research management, international relations, accounting and finance, education management.

Those key positions should be re designed to reach a more international standard, also in terms of using english as common working language, both in relevant official documents and in dealing with researchers

Those actions are important also for the "side effect" in terms of perception of the university as a welcoming, open, transparent and merit-based place to work.

A review of the Action Plan is suggested, with more precise indicators and timing

The institution should offer more training/courses in English, explore possibilities of further and deeper collaboration with industry.

The institution should consider possibilities of lessening administrative burden on researchers and try other (than a survey) forms of involving researchers in the implementation process (discussions, focus groups, working groups).

If 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 this. (max. 2000 words)

The overall institutional commitment in the HRS4R process is sound and clear: the governance is on board, researchers are aware of it, the university management adopted a HRS4R proactive mindset .

At the same time since the HRS4R is now part of everyday life in Maribor University, the level of ambition is not very high. There is room for improvement in particular in passing from a brain drain /brain gain approach to a brain circulation one. More in general, there is room for improvement in the "triangle" between local, national, and EU regulations,

Assessors appreciate the University's endurance to increase its international profile and to improve its HR strategy. In spite of serious limitations it strives to attract researchers from outside/ abroad and to improve the quality of training and working conditions of researchers. Its HR Strategy is evidently embedded in overall vision and strategy and is complimented by participation in regional and international networks as well as initiatives aimed at improving research conditions. There is clear evidence of strong dedication of the UM authorities to the implementation process.

Maribor University is part of the university alliance ATHENA – Advanced Technology Higher Education Network, a federation of mid-size higher education institutions in nine European countries. This can give new energy to the HRS4R process both at the institutional level and in the university alliance level, setting a common operational standard in the HR approach.