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Organisation's contact details: Viale dell'Università, 03043 Cassino (FR), Italy

Endorsement for the European Charter for Researchers

HR Excellence in Research Award - Action Plan
University of Cassino and Southern Lazio (UNICAS)

This document is based on the new 20-principle European Charter for Researchers (2023 version).

To make it easier to link actions to improvement needs, all principles and their implementation ratings have been automatically retrieved from the Gap Analysis and added to the Action Plan. The first set of tables of proposed actions addresses each of the 20 principles, following the e-tool scheme. Additionally, a series of Action Groups has been identified. Each of the 7 Action Groups comprises a series of actions to be taken cooperatively and in coordination, to address general gaps highlighted in the analysis.

The following action plan outlines targeted actions and measurable parameters to assess the effectiveness of the measures.

More specifically, the Action Plan aims at:

- a) including tasks that address existing/emerging gaps, as identified in the Gap Analysis and the OTM-R Checklist, in a specific way,
- b) stating task ownership and detailing responsibilities (i.e., assigned to a specific department or a specific person/role within the organisation),
- c) establishing a clear and measurable timeframe for implementation,
- d) indicating how the state of achievement will be measured through precise and quantifiable key performance indicators (KPIs).

e) transforming a passive “dissatisfaction statement” that emerged in the survey into a proactive, structural awareness strategy.

The timeline covers the first two years (up to the interim phase Internal Review). Timing is indicated in quarters of a year.

The actions reflect a balance between short-term interventions (e.g., organising a workshop) and long-term systemic actions (e.g., fostering policy and cultural change).

General overview of the overall implementation process

The implementation of the Human Resources Strategy for Researchers (HR Excellence in Research) Action Plan at the University of Cassino and Southern Lazio (UNICAS) is designed as a dynamic, institution-wide modernisation process. Rooted in the 20 consolidated principles of the new 2023 European Charter for Researchers, the plan bridges the gaps identified in the institutional Gap Analysis and the Open, Transparent, and Merit-Based Recruitment (OTM-R) checklist with concrete, timed, and measurable structural reforms. This overview outlines the strategic governance framework, the operational timeline, and the monitoring mechanisms engineered to ensure sustainable, transformative change.

Governance framework and task allocation

To ensure accountability and deep institutional integration, UNICAS has established a multi-layered governance model that blends political leadership with operational executive units. The overall execution of the Action Plan is overseen by a dedicated **HR Excellence Task Force and Steering Committee**, ensuring that the university’s top management remains directly involved.

Responsibilities are clearly designated across specialised university organs and delegates:

The Ethical Committee and the Research Office (under the supervision of the Deputy Rector for Research) spearhead reforms related to research integrity, Open Science alignment, and ethical training workflows.

The Human Resources Office and other administrative units, headed by the General Director, oversee the integration of OTM-R standards, ensuring that hiring panels are trained in anti-discrimination practices and that the university’s regulations align with European recruitment codes.

The Deputy Rector for Infrastructure and Digital Services and the Communication and Branding Office are jointly responsible for the digital transformation required by the plan, particularly the creation of specialised bilingual portals.

The Centre for Disability, Inclusion, and Research (CUDIR), the Internationalisation Office, the Ethical Committee, the Teaching and Learning Centre, the Office for Technological Transfer and Third Mission, the Central Libraries Service (including Open Access), and the Guarantee Committee for Equal Opportunities provide technical and operational expertise to expand

welfare and inclusivity support infrastructures beyond the student body to encompass all contractual research staff.

Regarding the assignment of responsibilities and tasks, the D.D. 409/2025, complemented by the D.D. 509/2025, and renewed by the new General Director of UNICAS with D.D 498/2026 and 499/2026 assigns the responsibility for the years 2025-2027 to a working group (selected based on a wide representative of roles (administrative/researcher), experience (from ESR to R4), gender, domains (with equal representativeness of each of the five departments), headed by Prof. Cristina Corsi, Rector's Delegate for Competitive Projects and communication of research.

Implementation structure

Starting in 2027, a dedicated HR Excellence in Research Award Task Force will be established to oversee the implementation of the proposed actions. This task force will include representatives from university management and governance, among which the HR Office, departments, researchers' representatives, the Research Office, the Communication and Branding Office, the Centre for Digital Services, the Office for Internationalisation, the Ethical Committee, the Teaching and Learning Centre, the Technological Transfer Office and the Delegate for Third Mission, the Central Libraries Service (including Open Access related aspects), the Guarantee Committee for Equal Opportunities and the Service Centre for Disability, Inclusion, and Research – CUDIR. A coordinator of the task force, an experienced staff unit with expertise in HR management in an international context, will be appointed upon receipt of the first stage assessment.

This Action Plan works synergistically with the other programming documents of UNICAS, in particular the Strategic Plan 2026-2028 and the PIAO. The PIAO is a unified strategic planning and programming document that brings together all the main sectoral plans, including those relating to performance, corruption prevention, transparency, digital transition, staffing requirements, flexible working, and gender and other diversity issues. The PIAO is a three-year plan but is updated annually with results relating to the measurement, monitoring and evaluation of progress made.

As anticipated, fundamentally, the plan targets four types of actions: 1) information; 2) production of documents; 3) training; 4) transparency; 5) standardisation; 6) communication; 7) monitoring.

1) The first action is meant to spread awareness among actual and newly recruited researchers of their rights and their responsibilities. A dossier containing guidelines, especially on the Code of Good Practice in Research, Researchers' responsibilities, and research ethics, has to be disseminated through a series of events. "Welcome packages" have to be distributed to newly recruited researchers upon appointment, and to new PhD students during welcome events following the completion of the selection procedure.

- 2) The second action (production of documents) is strictly related to the first. A series of regulatory documents and guidelines, establishing the internal rules for enforcing the charter for Researchers, have to be issued and made available to all researchers and HR Office staff.
- 3) Training has to be planned on specific topics (ethics in research, IPRs, data protection, cybersecurity, sustainability, etc.), to ensure professional growth and enforcement of the Charter's principles.
- 4) Transparency has to be imposed specifically on recruitment procedures, career progression and rewarding mechanisms. Evaluation criteria for competitions, commissions and jury selection procedures have to be publicised and made available to potential candidates upon the opening of recruitment calls.
- 5) Following national regulation and in accordance with the Charter, procedures for research assessment and criteria for recruitment have to be standardised.
- 6) All opening, regulatory documents, support dossier, guidelines and protocols affecting researchers' quality of life have to be made available in English.
- 7) With the support of the newly established Task Force, ensure periodic monitoring of the efficiency and implementation of the actions.

n	ACTION GROUP	Art. involved	Time	Responsible Unit	Target/outcomes	Severity
1	INFORMATION Spread awareness among actual and newly recruited researchers of their rights and their responsibilities. A dossier with guidelines, especially concerning the Code of Good Practice in Research, Researchers' responsibilities and research ethics, has to be disseminated via a series of events and distributed via the Welcome Packages as outlined in Action 2.b (ACTION 2) to newly recruited researchers upon appointment, and to new PhD students during the welcome events following the completion of the selection procedure. Among other things, the onboarding materials must include clarification of research freedom - Upgrade the existing survey on "staff satisfaction perception" to a Researchers' Well-being and Satisfaction Survey. - Informational and awareness actions focused on diversity to amplify outreach, structural onboarding, and visibility.	all	Q1-Q8	Deputy Rector for Research; Research Office; Deputy Rector for Infrastructure and Digital Services; HR Office; Legal Office; International Relationships Office	<u>Goals:</u> - Ensure mandatory distribution during onboarding of concise guides on contractual obligations, IP rules and GDPR. - Improve onboarding for international researchers. - Define guidelines for flexible work arrangements <u>Expected impact:</u> - Improved awareness of researcher rights and responsibilities. - 90% positive response on a new survey about the European Charter for researchers. - Greater compliance and reduced administrative errors. - Better understanding of research needs and working conditions. - More attractive and supportive working environment. - Demystify university governance mechanisms and representative roles to dismantle the perceived gap between early-career researchers and senior administration, thereby strengthening the overall feeling of belonging at UNICAS.	Medium to high
2	PRODUCTION OF DOCUMENTS Creation of a working group to:	1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 9,	Q1-Q6	Deputy Rector for Research;	<u>Goals/outcomes:</u> - guidelines for Good Practice in research (IT/ENG)	High

	- draft the Guidelines for Good Practice in Research, emphasis on UNICAS' commitment to sustainable research and responsible behaviour, and specifically the aspiration to the achievements of the Agenda ONU SDGs (ITA/ENG); - compile the Welcome Package Document to instruct the newly recruited researchers of their rights and responsibilities, tools and opportunities (ITA/ENG). - Adopt clear supervision guidelines for doctoral programmes. - Update OTM-R policy according to the new Charter	10, 11, 13, 15, 16		Research Office; Deputy Rector for Infrastructure and Digital Services; CAsE and Rector's Delegate for sustainability; General Director, HR Office; Legal Office; Rector's Delegate for Doctoral Programmes; Coordinators of the Doctoral Schools	- availability of the welcome package for newly recruited researchers. - Publish concise guides on contractual obligations, IP rules and GDPR. - Update Gender Equality Plan in line with EU standards. <u>Expected Impact:</u> - Improved supervision quality and PhD satisfaction	
3	EDUCATION and TRAINING Training has to be planned on specific topics (ethics in research, IPRs, Open Science, ethics, etc.), to ensure professional growth and enforcement of the Charter's principles. A starting point is to offer training on the use of the FOSTER portal (https://www.fosteropenscience.eu/resources), an e-learning platform that provides resources to inform on Open Science and tools to develop strategies to integrate Open Science practices into daily workflows. - Offer DMP (Data Management Plan) and Open Access support training. -Introduce mandatory ethics & integrity training for PhD and research staff. - Introduce training in budget management and financial reporting. - Improve user-friendly online reporting dashboards. - Update annual cybersecurity and data protection training. - Create awareness sessions on IP, patents and spin-offs. - Another priority is to provide training on plagiarism, copyright and responsible AI use.	1, 3, 4, 6, 15, 16	Q1-Q8	Deputy Rector for Research; Research Office; Deputy Rector for Infrastructure and Digital Services; Deputy Rector for Third Mission; General Director; HR Office; Ethical Committee; Rector's Delegate for Competitive Projects; Rector's Delegate for Doctoral Programmes; Coordinators of the 5 Doctoral Schools; Libraries staff; Technological Transfer Office and Rector's Delegate for Technology Transfer, Business Creation, and Spin-offs.	<u>Goals:</u> - Responsible research practices adopted institution-wide. - Introduce mandatory ethics & integrity training for PhD and research staff. - Strengthened ethical culture and compliance across UNICAS. - Consolidate support services for international/EU project preparation <u>Expected Impact:</u> - Safer, more compliant research environment. - Greater visibility and impact of UNICAS research - Enhanced innovation and technology transfer outcomes	High

4	TRANSPARENCY Transparency has to be imposed specifically on recruitment procedures, career progression and rewarding mechanisms. Evaluation criteria for competitions, commissions and jury selection procedures have to be publicised and made available to potential candidates upon opening of the calls for recruitment. Additionally, internal information dashboards had to be set up to map past and present gender distributions across institutional bodies, accessible to all university researchers to ensure transparency.	4, 6, 7, 10, 11, 16	Q2-Q4	Deputy Rector for Research; Research Office; General Director and HR Office; Departments; Centre for Disability, Inclusion and Research (CUDIR)	<u>Goals:</u> - Strengthen monitoring of gender balance in leadership roles. - Maximise institutional transparency and the reach of strategic university communications across all research tiers (R1–R4). <u>Expected Impact:</u> - Higher transparency and trust in financial processes. - More transparent and competitive recruitment process. - More equitable distribution of opportunities and leadership roles.	Medium
5	STANDARDISATION - Following national regulation and in accordance with the Charter, procedures for research assessment have to be standardised. - Establish clear guidelines recognising mobility achievements and formalise mobility as a merit in recruitment and appraisal.	4, 5, 6, 7, 10, 11, 16	Q2-Q4	Deputy Rector for Research; Research Office; Rector's Delegate for Competitive Projects; Rector's Delegate to Doctoral Programmes; International Office	<u>Goals:</u> - Standardise project validation procedures and publish guidelines. <u>Expected Impact:</u> - Improved procedural knowledge and project success rate. - Better recognition of international and intersectoral experiences.	Low
6	COMMUNICATION - Elaborate the English version of the relevant documents, codes, regulations, calls, guidelines, etc. - Create a clear ethics webpage with procedures, contacts and forms Substantially, UNICAS aims to consolidate its digital strategy by undertaking a high-impact institutional action to launch a comprehensive International Researcher Portal (covering Ethics, Freedom, GEP, and Open Science, among others).	All	Q2-Q6	Deputy Rector for Research; Research Office; Deputy Rector for Infrastructure and Digital Services; Deputy Rector for Third Mission; Communication and Branding Office; General Director and HR Office; Centre for Disability, Inclusion, and Research (CUDIR)	<u>Goals:</u> - Translation of all relevant documents (University's internal regulations and codes of conduct, etc). - Incorporate information and links about anti-discriminatory policy in English. - Ensure all positions are posted in English and on EURAXESS. - Enhance dissemination of anti-discriminatory initiatives and policies. <u>Expected Impact:</u> - Improved public perception and societal impact. - More inclusive and diverse research environment.	High
7	MONITORING With the support of the WG and the Steering Committee, ensure periodic monitoring of the efficiency and implementation of the actions.	All	Q1-Q8	Steering Committee, WG, UNICAS Quality Assurance		High

Timeline and responsibilities

A phased implementation approach will be adopted. Responsibilities are assigned to specific persons or offices.

The implementation roadmap spans a strategic 24-month horizon (divided into quarters, Q1 to Q8) and systematically balances quick, high-impact administrative actions with long-term cultural and structural interventions. The plan organises its work into 7 distinct Action Groups, progressing through three overlapping operational phases:

1. The direct policy and regulatory baseline phase (Q1–Q3)

The initial quarters focus on establishing the legal and administrative foundations. Key actions include updating the internal University Ethical Code (Action 1.a) and revising the institutional regulations governing Open Science and Open Access in alignment with Horizon Europe mandates (Action 3.b). During this phase, the university begins drafting standardised English templates to prepare for the modernisation of recruitment workflows.

2. The practical skill upskilling and cultural onboarding phase (Q3–Q5)

Once the regulatory baseline is set, the focus transitions to empowering individual researchers and mitigating identified survey satisfaction gaps. This phase launches mandatory Research Ethics and Integrity training courses for all newly enrolled PhD students (R1) and incoming research staff (Action 1.d). Concurrently, the structured annual "EU Funding and Research Management Masterclass Series" (Action 6.b) is deployed to build transferable project design skills among early-career tiers (R1/R2). To address panel vulnerability concerns, mandatory pre-commission briefing protocols regarding gender equity and unconscious bias are also enacted during this window.

3. The digital localisation and long-term institutional consolidation phase (Q4–Q6)

To ensure the global visibility of UNICAS's research environment, a massive digital strategy is operationalised under Action Group 6 (Communication). All translated internal guidelines, recruitment tools, and welfare resources are integrated into a single-click, high-impact Researchers' Portal. This portal serves as the primary gateway for onboarding international talent, making all open positions transparently available in English on the EURAXESS platform.

Monitoring and evaluation

A biannual review process will be implemented to ensure progress and address emerging challenges. Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) include:

- Percentage of researchers trained in ethics and Open Science.
- Adoption rate of the OTM-R policy in recruitments.
- Increase in the number of structured career development plans.
- Uptake of mentorship programmes by early-career researchers.
- Utilisation of family-friendly policies among researchers.

The monitoring process is governed by a multi-layered architecture designed to separate strategic steering from day-to-day operational audits, mitigating risks and administrative bottlenecks early.

Operational execution (Q1–Q8): Individual subactions are driven directly by their respective responsible bodies assigned in the Action Plan. Day-to-day implementation and progress updates are managed by key institutional units, including the Human Resources Office, the Research Office, the Ethical Committee, and the UNICAS Quality Assurance, ensuring that specialised tasks remain with their natural administrative owners.

Timeline milestones and external audits

Progress monitoring follows a phased, 24-month horizon:

- **Quarterly Internal Audits (Q1–Q8):** Governed by Action Group 7 (Monitoring), the newly established HR Excellence Task Force acts as the technical engine of the framework. It will conduct internal reviews of individual action groups every quarter to verify that designated institutional task owners (e.g., the Research Office, the Centre for Digital Services, the HR Office, etc.) are advancing towards their scheduled deadlines.
- **6-Month interim reviews (end of Q2 & Q6):** The high-level Steering Committee, chaired by the General Director and senior researchers, and by the Head of the Research Office, conducts formal milestone reviews at Month 6 (end of Q2), Month 12 (end of Q4), Month 18 (end of Q6) and Month 24 (end of Q8) following official notification of the award. These audits will verify task ownership adherence, clear operational bottlenecks, and authorise the reallocation of administrative resources if specific units face delays.

Evaluation tools and targeted mitigation

To provide an authentic, qualitative assessment of structural reforms, UNICAS will deploy specific tools focused on planned timeline and stakeholder experience:

- **Targeted pulse surveys (annual):** To prevent the vulnerabilities of temporary, non-structured staff from being obscured by senior satisfaction metrics, UNICAS will deploy micro-surveys targeting R1 (PhD) and R2 (Postdoc) groups exclusively. These surveys will dynamically monitor shifts in contractual clarity, institutional belonging, and mentoring program uptake, directly counteracting historical "precarity anxiety" and ensuring timeline objectives align with researchers' well-being.
- **Stakeholder feedback loops:** UNICAS will hold regular meetings with European partner universities, particularly within the Alliance EUT+, to benchmark progress, share best practices, and align action timelines with broader European standards. The whole UNICAS researchers' group will be interviewed with a new survey, to be held at the beginning of Q8, to assess the reception of the actions' efficiency.

Data-Driven KPIs: Progress is measured through hard outcome metrics rather than simple event tallies.

Progress across the specific action boxes is monitored through the following targeted metrics:

- **OTM-R and recruitment compliance:** UNICAS will audit the percentage of selection panels formally verifying full OTM-R compliance. This is supported by tracking the

volume of international vacancies explicitly published on the EURAXESS portal to measure global outreach and procedural transparency.

- **Open Science and repository growth:** Progress in research dissemination is quantified by measuring a targeted 20% increase in Open Access publication uploads within the institutional IRIS repository and/or online research portals by Q6, ensuring verified alignment with European open science standards.
- **Working conditions and digitalisation:** The university will track document production rates across administrative and research sectors to measure the modernisation of work-life balance provisions.
- **Ethical and gender equality monitoring:** The update of the Gender Equality Plan (GEP) and the implementation of gender/diversity compensation measures will be tracked through periodic and exact metrics, including the gender balance ratio in academic committees and the number of training modules delivered on ethics, research integrity, and gender bias awareness.
- **Researcher Development and Integration:** Progress in supporting early-stage researchers is measured through the registration and participation rates of R1 (PhD) and R2 (Postdoc) researchers in newly established structured mentoring schemes, transversal and soft skills training courses, and dedicated welcome services.

KPIs present specific metrics when possible, but in most cases, the achievement of the goal is determined by the publication (or not) of the document or the accomplishment of the initiative.

Governance and data collection

Responsibility for tracking these indicators is strictly aligned with the monitoring architecture of Action Group 7 (Monitoring). The **HR Excellence Task Force** serves as the central data-aggregation unit, collecting periodic metric updates from the specific responsible bodies (such as the HR Office, Research Office, and the Quality Assurance Committee). These compiled KPIs are systematically reviewed during the 6-month interim audits at the end of Q2, Q4, Q6 and Q8, allowing the **Steering Committee** to evaluate the compliance with the timeline against hard statistical data and implement targeted corrective actions if specific indicator thresholds are not met.

By interlocking transparent task allocation, a strategic timeline, and proactive checks to mitigate demographic biases, the UNICAS implementation strategy ensures that pursuing the HR Excellence in Research Award serves as a genuine catalyst for a highly competitive, inclusive, and internationalised research ecosystem.

Governance and monitoring: oversight framework of the Steering Committee and task force

The regular oversight and quality assurance of the HR Excellence in Research Action Plan at UNICAS rely on a multi-layered governance framework that structurally separates strategic steering from operational execution. This dual-committee architecture comprises the Steering Committee and the HR Excellence Task Force, which will replace the Working Group and be

responsible for operational and practical implementation. These two groups will work together to guarantee accountability, maintain implementation timelines, and manage potential institutional risks.

The Steering Committee serves as the high-level political and strategic authority overseeing the entire transformation process. Chaired by the General Director, the Deputy Rector for Research, the Rector's Delegate for Competitive Projects and the senior administrative Head of the Research Office, with the support of a staff unit from the International Office, this body ensures that the action plan remains permanently aligned with the macro-objectives of the UNICAS Strategic Plan. Meeting regularly (biannually) and on an ad hoc basis for urgent adjustments, the Steering Committee evaluates interim reports, formally signs off on major regulatory revisions, and uses its executive power to reallocate administrative resources if specific operational units face delays.

The HR Excellence Task Force acts as the engine of the monitoring framework, maintaining direct oversight of day-to-day implementation. This technical working group consists of legal experts, human resources administrators, staff of the Centre for Digital Services, and representatives of other relevant Centres and Committees. The Task Force also acts as a direct bridge between the central administration and individual departments. Its primary monitoring functions include:

- Continuous Internal Auditing: Conducting quarterly reviews of individual action rows to verify that designated task owners are advancing towards scheduled deadlines (spanning Q1 to Q8).
- KPI Verification: Systematically gathering quantitative and qualitative performance data from data-generation bodies (e.g., repository metrics from the Research Office or training completion logs from the Doctoral Schools).
- Risk Mitigation: Identifying operational bottlenecks early, particularly for complex cross-departmental interventions such as the launch of the centralised Researchers Portal, and proposing corrective measures to the Steering Committee.

Involvement of the research community and main stakeholders

UNICAS is committed to ensuring the systematic and meaningful involvement of the research community and all principal stakeholders throughout the implementation process. Our approach is designed to align with the principles of the European Charter for Researchers, fostering a transparent, participatory, and continuously improving environment.

To this end, an annual survey will be administered to researchers. This survey will measure the appreciation rate of the implemented actions, with particular attention to tracking increases in satisfaction and identifying the specific factors contributing to these changes. The survey results will provide critical evidence for monitoring progress and for informing the ongoing refinement of our research human resources strategy.

Furthermore, we will systematically assess the outcomes of all training and information events associated with the HR Excellence in Research process. Attendees will be invited to provide feedback regarding the relevance, effectiveness, and impact of these activities. This continuous feedback loop will ensure that our training provision remains fully aligned with the evolving needs and expectations of the research community and stakeholders.

We also recognise the importance of active stakeholder engagement in strengthening the dialogue between the academic sector, society, and the productive fabric of our territory. To facilitate this, we will invite the main stakeholders to regular meetings, providing a structured forum for open discussion, knowledge exchange, and collaborative problem-solving. These interactions will support the development of mutually beneficial partnerships and reinforce our commitment to societal impact and innovation.

In addition, we will maintain regular exchanges with partner universities, both nationally and across Europe, especially the partner university of the Alliance EUT+. These collaborations will enable the sharing of best practices, promote harmonisation of actions, and ensure that our implementation of the HR Excellence in Research Award remains consistent with European standards and objectives.

In summary, our application for the HR Excellence in Research Award is underpinned by a robust and inclusive engagement strategy. Through annual surveys, systematic evaluation of training outcomes, regular stakeholder meetings, and ongoing collaboration with partner institutions, we will create a dynamic and responsive framework that supports excellence in research and strengthens relationships among our institution, the research community, stakeholders, and society at large.

A few gaps have already been addressed: an intensive consultation with UNICAS staff (researchers and administrative staff) preceded the launch of the University's new Strategic Plan (PSA). Several meetings have been held with stakeholders, and the Rector and the governance have been involved in meetings and department boards to discuss key points and incorporate comments and adjustments.

Alignment of organisational policies with the HR Excellence Award framework

UNICAS formally adopts the European Charter for Researchers as the foundational cornerstone of its institutional research strategy. Rather than treating the HR Excellence in Research Award as a separate administrative exercise, UNICAS fully integrates these 20 consolidated principles into its core regulatory architecture, positioning human resource modernisation as a primary engine for academic excellence and global competitiveness.

Policy alignment is driven by a top-down legislative integration that systematically anchors European mandates into the university's statutory governance instruments. This process is structurally synchronised with the UNICAS Strategic Plan 2026-2028, ensuring that high-level budgetary and operational decisions directly inform the execution of the HR Excellence in Research Award Action Plan. Every strategic objective targeting research expansion (*Ambito Ricerca*) and service delivery (*Ambito Servizi & Infrastrutture*) is paired with specific policy updates overseen by designated administrative bodies.

To ensure that policy alignment effectively alters operational realities, the HR Excellence Task Force tracks implementation milestones via precise, data-driven key performance indicators. This continuous monitoring framework guarantees that institutional rules dynamically adjust to protect vulnerable non-structured tiers (R1/R2) and eliminate localised informational barriers. By establishing a unified Researchers Portal in English and adhering to the OTM-R code, UNICAS firmly endorses this HR strategy as its definitive research roadmap, establishing an open, equitable, and world-class research ecosystem.

Relevant gaps and priority actions

Collecting the **20 principles** under an umbrella organisation, UNICAS, the most relevant gaps lie in **Open Science**, **Research Security**, **Institutional Transparency**, **Continuous Professional Development** and **Gender Equality**. About the latter, to address systemic dissatisfaction with gender balance on commissions, career progression, and roles, UNICAS commits to promoting active institutional transparency and establishing structured internal communication channels and briefings to ensure that all research staff (especially R1–R4 selection committee members) are fully informed about institutional Gender Equality Plan (GEP) mandates, diversity targets, unconscious bias resources, and fair evaluation guidelines before commissions are formed.

With regard to Open Science and Research Security, UNICAS' short-term objectives are:

- Design and deploy a dedicated training track on Open Science practices, specific Open Access repositories, and Data Management Plan (DMP) creation tools.
- Establish an institutional Open Science toolkit utilising open e-learning resources (e.g., integrating pathways from the FOSTER portal).

In the medium to long term, UNICAS will:

- Address and eliminate the specific dissatisfaction gaps identified in the researcher survey regarding Open Science support.
- Systematically increase the institutional rate of open-access publications and FAIR (Findable, Accessible, Interoperable, Reusable) data depositions across all UNICAS departments.

Institutional transparency will be achieved by addressing the information gap and the sense of isolation identified in the researcher survey, ensuring that strategic communication about university plans and missions permeates all researcher tiers (R1–R4). UNICAS will foster a culture of “open governance” by increasing awareness of the specific roles played by researcher representatives on governing bodies and by stimulating democratic, active participation in institutional life to strengthen professional identity and the overall sense of belonging at UNICAS.

Regarding the incisiveness of the actions, although the focus on "translation" and "webpages" may appear excessive, we stress that our actionable items across multiple principles only apparently revolve almost entirely around translating documents into English, updating links, and adding info tabs to the UNICAS website (e.g., Actions 1.b, 2.a, 3.c, 4.c, 5.b...). Indeed, in light of the Gap Analysis, no structural obstacles have been identified for key processes,

including internationalisation and amplifying UNICAS' attractiveness to global talent. Conversely, the decision not to provide an official website for research matters, recruitment, and other issues relevant to the European Charters for Researchers (e.g., staff training, support, and tools) has been identified as an “ideological” constraint on openness and on attracting external and international talent.

To align the Action Plan with the new 2023 European Charter for Researchers on Continuous Professional Development and Career Progression, UNICAS will implement a structured professional development framework. The expected outcome is a maximisation of the long-term career autonomy and professional progression of early-stage researchers (R1/R2) by equipping them with highly valued, transferable project design skills. At the same time, R3 and R4 researchers need a clear career progression framework and assessment.

Pillar 1: Ethics, integrity, gender, and open science – synthesis of strengths and weaknesses

The University of Cassino and Southern Lazio (UNICAS) demonstrates a robust and structurally integrated commitment to Pillar 1 of the European Charter for Researchers. By systematically mapping the results of its comprehensive internal survey against both the Human Resources Strategy for Researchers and the UNICAS Strategic Plan 2026-2028, the institution has established a clear baseline for institutional transformation. The alignment between high-level strategic objectives (*Ambito Ricerca and Ambito Servizi & Infrastrutture*, i.e. Research and Infrastructure and Services in the new Strategic Plan 2026-2028) and the granular definitions in the Action Plan ensures that regulatory compliance is translated into sustainable, everyday practice.

Institutional strengths

A primary strength of the UNICAS strategy lies in the structural formalisation and cultural mainstreaming of research ethics and integrity. The survey results confirm a strong foundation: 84.7% of respondents reported full awareness of ethical principles, and 85.9% confirmed familiarity with the existing University Ethical Code. To capitalise on this, Action 1.a elevates this framework by directly updating the Ethical Code to align with the consolidated 20 principles of the new Charter. Rather than treating ethics as a passive regulatory boundary, UNICAS is introducing mandatory, systematic training on research integrity for all newly enrolled PhD students (R1) and incoming research staff within their first six months (Action 1.d). This ensures that structural awareness is embedded from the earliest career stages.

In the domains of Gender Equality and Open Science, UNICAS benefits from direct alignment with its macro-institutional targets for the 2026-2028 triennium. Open Science is no longer treated as an isolated administrative mandate but is driven by Strategic Objective S4.2, which actively promotes open-access publication and data dissemination via dedicated institutional infrastructure. This strategy is backed by concrete operational commitments in the Action Plan (Actions 3.a to 3.d), including hands-on masterclasses on repository tools such as IRIS and on the use of digital platforms to create compliant Data Management Plans (DMPs). Similarly, gender equity is structurally supported by an active Gender Equality Plan (GEP) and the

institutional presence of the *Comitato Unico di Garanzia* (CUG), providing a firm operational architecture to defend and promote diversity across the university.

Institutional weaknesses and gaps

Despite these strong foundations, the Gap Analysis and survey feedback reveal critical vulnerabilities that require targeted structural interventions. A significant operational weakness is the lack of visible transparency and localised communication regarding the composition of selection and evaluation committees. The internal survey revealed a clear dissatisfaction gap regarding the gender balance within these panels, alongside a notable 28% awareness deficit, with researchers admitting to being completely unaware of existing panel diversity policies. This underscores a disconnect between centralised policy formulation and the real-time operational transparency experienced by researchers.

A lingering structural gap persists regarding the operational scope of support infrastructure. While the Service Centre for Disability, Inclusion, and Research (CUDIR) serves as a major inclusion asset, its practical services have historically been dedicated exclusively to the student body, leaving a support gap for contractual research staff facing similar challenges.

Corrective strategy and alignment with the European Charter for Researchers

To bridge these gaps, the UNICAS Action Plan transitions from passive information dissemination to active policy enforcement, systematically harmonising with Horizon Europe eligibility mandates and the European Charter for Researchers. Under Actions 4.a-4.c, UNICAS is implementing a mandatory briefing protocol that guarantees 100% of selection committee chairs are fully updated on gender balance rules and unconscious bias guidelines prior to commission formation, directly answering survey dissatisfaction.

Simultaneously, the structural exclusion of staff within support systems is resolved through Action 5.a, which formally extends CUDIR's specialised accessibility and inclusivity resources to encompass all active researchers. By upgrading the severity of Open Science and GEP adjustments to "Medium" and consolidating its digital presence into a unified Researchers Portal (Action Group 6), UNICAS ensures that the pursuit of the HR Excellence in Research Award acts as an authentic catalyst for a transparent, equitable, and globally competitive environment.

Pillar 2: Researchers' assessment, recruitment, and progression – synthesis of strengths and weaknesses

UNICAS addresses Pillar 2 of the European Charter for Researchers by enhancing the ecosystem for recruitment and career development, steering toward more transparent and merit-based procedures. By correlating the results of its institutional survey with the Open, Transparent, and Merit-Based Recruitment (OTM-R) checklist and the UNICAS Strategic Plan 2026-2028, the university establishes a clear methodology to enhance its international appeal. The plan explicitly links human resource modernisation with the macro-objectives of the university's research sphere (*Ambito Ricerca*), transforming administrative hiring into a strategic tool for institutional growth.

Institutional strengths

A primary strength of the UNICAS strategy is its commitment to absolute procedural transparency and the systemic internationalisation of recruitment channels. The survey data highlights a strong foundation: 84.7% of researchers report satisfactory awareness of recruitment standards, and 85% recognise the fairness of the university's selection criteria. To build on this baseline, UNICAS has closely aligned its actions with Strategic Objective R1.5 of the new Strategic Plan, which focuses specifically on enhancing the university's capacity to attract high-quality external and international researchers.

This strategic mandate is operationalised through a series of concrete interventions in the Action Plan. Action 10.b mandates that 100% of the university's research vacancies are published in English not only on the global EURAXESS portal, but also on the institutional website supplemented by standardised English-language application templates. Furthermore, UNICAS is actively modernising its evaluation metrics to align with the new Charter's holistic view of research careers. Actions 7.c/10.d and 9.a shift the assessment paradigm away from rigid bibliometric-only evaluations toward a balanced framework that formally values the "co-tutelle" of PhD theses, international mobility, intersectoral experiences, and public engagement (*Terza Missione*), creating a fairer path for diverse career trajectories.

Institutional weaknesses and gaps

Despite these strong indicators, the Gap Analysis exposes structural weaknesses regarding early-career progression and localised informational barriers. A critical vulnerability lies in the lack of formalised career track visibility and progression mapping for early-stage researchers. The survey revealed a distinct "precarity anxiety" and dissatisfaction among R1 (PhD students) and R2 (Postdocs) regarding their long-term career prospects and transition pathways into permanent academic or industrial roles.

Newly arrived international or early-stage researchers often lack immediate, transparent access to standardised institutional guidelines that detail how internal promotions, variations in merit scoring, and non-traditional career paths are evaluated by selection committees.

Finally, an operational weakness persists in the lack of feedback loops for unsuccessful candidates. While recruitment is generally perceived as fair, there is no formal, institutionalised mechanism to provide constructive, qualitative feedback to applicants, which is a key recommendation of the OTM-R code.

Corrective strategy and strategic plan realisation

To mitigate these weaknesses, the UNICAS Action Plan implements targeted, structural changes that convert passive compliance into measurable career security. To resolve the anxieties of early-career tiers and satisfy Strategic Objective R1.5 (dedicated to improving the quality and retention of young research talent), Action 20.a establishes a formalised institutional mentoring system paired with a structured, annual portfolio review process for R1 and R2 staff. Concurrently, the information deficit is resolved through the deployment of the comprehensive Researchers Portal (Action Group 6). This digital infrastructure centralises services, information, documents, regulations and tools into a single-click English interface, ensuring that junior and international applicants have the same access to information as long-standing

internal staff. By establishing rigorous KPIs, such as tracking the percentage of international applicants attracted through EURAXESS and auditing selection committees for OTM-R adherence, UNICAS ensures its recruitment and assessment practices serve as an authentic engine for equity, transparency, and global excellence.

Pillar 3: Working conditions and practices – synthesis of strengths and weaknesses

UNICAS addresses Pillar 3 of the European Charter for Researchers by establishing a stimulating, stable, and highly inclusive working environment. By systematically mapping internal survey findings against the 20 principles of the new Charter, the Open, Transparent, and Merit-Based Recruitment (OTM-R) framework, and the UNICAS Strategic Plan 2026-2028, the institution creates a structured strategy to improve researcher well-being. The Action Plan bridges operational workplace adjustments with macro-institutional goals, ensuring that changing working conditions actively drive retention and research productivity.

Institutional strengths

A primary strength of the UNICAS strategy lies in its flexible, modern approach to the workplace and its integration within international university networks. The survey data reflect an exceptionally strong baseline regarding core working freedoms and environments: 90.1% of respondents express satisfaction with the university's overall research environment, and over 91.8% appreciate its diversity and non-discriminatory culture. UNICAS capitalises on this by embedding working condition updates into Strategic Objectives G2 (Digitalisation) and S4 (Services and Infrastructures) of the 2026-2028 Strategic Plan.

This policy is translated into concrete, multi-departmental actions. Action 13.b endorses flexibility and hybrid workplace guidelines tailored to the research community, boosting work-life balance. Simultaneously, the university leverages its participation in the European University of Technology (EUT+) initiative to dismantle geographical boundaries. Actions 10.a, 10.b, 11.a and related communication initiatives establish a comprehensive international researcher infrastructure. This is backed by Action Group 6 (Communication), which consolidates internal regulations, security rules, and funding opportunities into a single, high-impact English Researchers Portal, facilitating immediate onboarding for cross-border talent.

Institutional weaknesses and gaps

Despite these high overall satisfaction scores, a critical look at the Gap Analysis reveals structural vulnerabilities in job stability, intellectual property, and service accessibility. The most severe gap under this pillar relates to the deep-seated "precarity anxiety" and systemic information deficits regarding social security rights among temporary staff. R1 (PhD students) and R2 (Postdocs) report a profound lack of clarity regarding contractual long-term stability and funding extensions, a vulnerability heavily rooted in the national framework.

Furthermore, a significant operational gap exists regarding institutional support infrastructures. As already highlighted above, while the Service Centre for Disability, Inclusion, and Research (CUDIR) is highly valued, its operational mandate has historically focused exclusively on the student body. This leaves contractual research staff who require tailored workplace accessibility or inclusivity measures without a dedicated administrative support track.

Finally, there is an evident awareness gap regarding intellectual property rights (IPR) and commercialisation pathways. Researchers frequently report that while they understand basic academic freedom, they lack procedural clarity on how to navigate the university's internal regulations regarding patenting, spin-offs, and knowledge transfer to industry.

Corrective strategy and strategic plan realisation

To systematically close these gaps, the UNICAS Action Plan transforms passive workplace administration into a proactive, protective infrastructure aligned with Strategic Objective R5, which focuses explicitly on improving the quality and retention of young research talent. To address institutional exclusion within support networks, Actions 5.a and 5.b endorse CUDIR's specialised accessibility and inclusivity resources to encompass all active researchers and secure an equitable workplace.

Concurrently, the lack of professional predictability is countered through Actions 7.b, 9.a and 20.a, which establish a structured institutional mentoring network and an annual portfolio review process. This provides early-career researchers with clear pathways for career stabilisation and skill building. Furthermore, the information deficit on intellectual property is resolved via Actions 6.c and 16.a, which update, translate into English, and widely publish standardised guidelines for project validation, co-tutelles, and IPR management. By employing rigorous performance indicators, such as monitoring researcher smart-working adoption rates and tracking the resolution of accessibility requests, UNICAS ensures its working environment serves as an authentic engine for stability, safety, and global competitiveness.

Pillar 4: Research careers and talent development – synthesis of strengths and weaknesses

UNICAS addresses Pillar 4 of the European Charter for Researchers by establishing a proactive framework for professional growth, lifelong learning, and continuous career development. By integrating internal survey metrics with the 20 consolidated principles of the new Charter, the descriptive Action Plan, and the UNICAS Strategic Plan 2026-2028, the institution establishes a clear pathway to nurture research talent. The strategy effectively maps operational talent interventions against macro-institutional targets, ensuring that professional upskilling is directly linked to regional, national, and international research competitiveness.

Institutional strengths

A primary strength of the UNICAS strategy is its systematic focus on the professional empowerment of early-career researchers (R1 and R2), transforming career development from an informal process into a structured institutional asset. This matches Strategic Objective R5 of the 2026-2028 Strategic Plan, which is explicitly dedicated to enhancing the quality, retention, and attraction of young research talents.

This strategic commitment is translated into high-impact operational interventions within the Action Plan. Action 6.b and Action Group 3 establish a structured, annual "EU Funding and Research Management Masterclass Series" designed specifically to equip R1 (PhD students) and R2 (Postdocs) with transferable skills in competitive proposal design, European call scouting, and project management.

Furthermore, UNICAS actively embraces modern training paradigms outlined in the new Charter. The institution leverages its participation in the European University of Technology (EUT+) initiative to embed cross-border mobility and intersectoral experience into career progression. In parallel, the action plan introduces formal certification frameworks, expanding the opportunities for students and doctoral candidates to acquire transversal competencies (such as intellectual property management and open science exploitation) to the broader ESR group, thereby drastically improving the employability of its researchers in both academic and non-academic sectors.

Institutional weaknesses and gaps

Despite these strong foundations, a critical analysis of the Gap Analysis exposes structural vulnerabilities regarding non-academic career paths, mentorship formalisation, and demographic information gaps. A prominent weakness under this pillar is the historical lack of formal, structured mentorship frameworks across departments. While informal advising exists, the survey highlighted that junior researchers lack dedicated, officially recognised career development plans and systematic tracking to guide their professional progression.

Finally, there remains an institutional gap regarding structured synergies with non-academic sectors. While the university achieves strong results in technology transfer, researchers frequently note a distinct lack of formalised "academia-to-industry" bridges, industrial postdocs, and intersectoral mobility paths, leaving many early-stage researchers unprepared for career transitions outside of conventional university settings.

Corrective strategy and strategic plan realisation

To systematically address these vulnerabilities, the UNICAS Action Plan implements targeted structural changes that make talent development a measurable institutional workflow. To resolve the lack of guidance for junior tiers and directly fulfil the mandate of Strategic Objective R5, Action 20.a establishes a formalised institutional mentoring system paired with a mandatory, annual portfolio review process. This mechanism ensures that every R1 and R2 researcher receives documented career counselling tailored to both academic and alternative employment markets.

Concurrently, the information gap regarding career opportunities is mitigated through Action Group 6 (Communication), which deploys a comprehensive Researchers Portal. This portal centralises all call-scouting toolkits, mobility funds, and transversal training catalogues into a single-click English interface, ensuring equal access to information for international and early-career staff. By utilising precise performance indicators, such as measuring the annual number of R1/R2 researchers completing project management tracks, verifying credential issuance, and tracking specialised pulse surveys to eliminate seniority data bias, UNICAS guarantees that its talent development framework acts as an authentic engine for professional autonomy, equity, and global research excellence.

Conclusion and next steps

UNICAS acknowledges the gaps identified in implementing the European Charter for Researchers. The action plan outlines a clear pathway to achieving alignment with HR

Excellence principles. Continuous monitoring and improvement will be key to fostering an open, transparent, and supportive research environment.

Immediate next steps:

1. Formally establish the HR Excellence Task Force.
2. Assign responsibilities to specific units and individuals.
3. Initiate policy development processes for priority actions.
4. Engage researchers and stakeholders in the implementation process.
5. Schedule the first progress review at month 6 (end of Q2) after the notification of the achievement of the Award.

By addressing these gaps through a structured action plan, UNICAS aims to strengthen its research environment and enhance its attractiveness to national and international researchers, reinforcing its commitment to excellence in research and innovation.

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