

HRS4R evaluation of the University of Camerino

1. Background

Name of the institution	University of Camerino
Country	Italy
Type of organisation	University
Reviewers	Hans M Borchgrevink, Trond Singaas, Helga Fazekas
Interviewees	Rector, Vice rectors, Directors, Heads of HR, representatives of relevant management departments, representatives of researchers
Date of the visit	10 July 2014
About the Organisation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Structure: 4 campuses, 7 academic schools + School of Advanced Studies + 6 Schools of Specialisation; • 56 labs and 15 libraries; • Fields of research for doctoral courses: Architecture, environment and design, Law, economy and society, Chemical, pharmaceutical Sciences and biotechnology, Life sciences and public health, Science and technology, with 17 Doctoral programmes; • Study programmes include 13 Bachelor degree areas, 4 One Tier degree areas, and 8 Master degree areas, of which 7 are taught in English. The study curricula are certified according to ISO 9001:2008 and are audited annually by an external agency AFNOR; • 7600 students (of which 900 from 50 countries, not many from Europe); • 32% of PhD candidates from abroad; • 560 employees, of which 290 in teaching/research (1 professor per 25 students). In 2012 women represented 15% of full professors, 32% of associate professors, 43% of researchers, and 50% in committees; • HRS4S Action Plan adopted in 2009 • HR Excellence in Research acknowledgement from the European Commission in 2010.

2. Introduction

This document presents the results of the evaluation of the University of Camerino, conducted by three peer reviewers on 10 July 2014. This evaluation constitutes the fifth step of the Human Resources Strategy for Researchers (HRS4R) process¹ aiming to support the implementation of the European Charter for Researchers and the Code of Conduct for Recruitment of Researchers (C&C)².

In order to produce their conclusions on the continuous improvement process resulting from the implementation of the C&C, the reviewers have analysed background documents at their disposal (e.g. action plans, self-assessment reports, monitoring data...) and have visited the institution. During this one-day visit, they have met different institutional stakeholders and beneficiaries (i.e. researchers).

Deloitte has merged the peer reviewers' individual reports into one single report. This report is divided in four sections:

1. Comparison between the action plan validated by the Commission for the acknowledgement of the institution as “HR Excellence in Research”, and the concrete actions implemented;
2. The existence and implementation of monitoring and actual follow-up of the action plan;
3. The identification of tangible results stemming from the implementation of the action plan;
4. The conclusion of the evaluation.

¹ For more information see : <http://ec.europa.eu/euraxess/index.cfm/rights/strategy4Researcher>

² For more information see : <http://ec.europa.eu/euraxess/index.cfm/rights/whatIsAResearcher>

3. Extent to which there is coherence between the institutional HR Strategy/Action Plan and the concrete actions implemented

The main document for evaluating coherence was the four-year self-assessment of 2014. Indeed, this document provided a good overview on actions that were decided in 2010 and their implementation up to 2014.

The process started in 2009 – 2010 with a questionnaire built on the Charter and Code principles and a gap analysis. The researchers of the of the university took part in this survey, and compared with experiences from other universities as regards internal surveys, the responses were considered to be fairly good. 38% of its respondents were researchers, and it allowed to identify seven issues to prioritise specific actions. Therefore, this questionnaire was the basis for formulating the Action plan. According to the peer reviewers, it made the plan legitimate and relevant to the academic community in the university.

They noted a substantial activity to follow up the Action Plan from the university, which they identified in the self-assessment report. The first action to be mentioned was the extended use of selection committees in recruitment processes. It is of special interest to observe the emphasis that was put on the assessment of candidates' creativity and autonomy, as a part of monitoring all aspects of the researcher's profession. The peer reviewers had the impression that the institution went very far in its recruitment work, compared with other universities in Italy.

The university also established a rewarding system as a way of achieving higher standards for research quality. This was defined in the Action Plan, and was followed up in a very fruitful way, as confirmed by the interviewed researchers during the site visit. Concerning the plans for setting up mentoring activities, they were launched last year, with a special focus on PhDs. The peer reviewers underlined that the University of Camerino is the only university in Italy to carry out this kind of activity. Researchers' career development plans were also designed, and the university is now going further with this action point.

However, the peer reviewers learnt during the interviews that there were several obstacles to the implementation of the action plan. Above all, obstacles are created by national limitations that are out of the university's control. For example, concerning the action point on social security provisions, including sickness, parental benefits and pension rights, the university set, to some extent, some mitigation actions to compensate the lack of national/local regulations or support in this area. According the peer reviewers, there was no need of any other specific mitigation action to complete the implementation of the Action Plan.

The peer reviewers observed a leadership committed in the HR strategy, and considered this as a facilitating factor for change.

In addition, the university was involved in both internal and external processes to make the principles of C&C known inside and outside the university. In particular, the HR logo was used in documents, flyers and in the booklet for PhDs. The peer reviewers particularly highlighted this booklet, as a very interesting prototype to promote the HR strategy within the academic community. Indeed, during the site visit, they noticed that there was extensive information provided to the academic community, and that it was, as a result, well aware of

the process. However, a peer reviewer underlined that there was no integrated communication strategy, and advised that the individual initiatives should be combined.

According to the peer reviewers, the report was well prepared and supported by specific materials. The goals were well documented and served the needs of the university. The report and the visit to the site made it clear that the University of Camerino, like many other Italian universities, operates within a narrow framework. Nevertheless, the university managed to go on developing and following up the Action plan in an exemplary way. Therefore, the University of Camerino serves as a good example of an initiator in the first cohort and the steering groups.

4. Extent to which there is a follow-up/monitoring mechanism put in place

The University of Camerino has done its self-assessment of the Action plan through a monitoring process as part of the Quality Assurance System that was preexistent. The peer reviewers found it wise and effective to include assessment and monitoring processes into one quality system for the whole university. More specifically, there are procedures for annual monitoring of the Charter & Code principles on recruitment. The monitoring of the Action plan was initiated by placing responsibility on formal positions and departments of the university, and by setting deadlines for actions. In the first self-assessment in 2012 there was a monitoring activity to see whether the actions were implemented or not. The second assessment was performed in May 2014, in good time before the site visit by the peer reviewers. For each action, the university has listed up the extent of implementation.

In addition, the University follows other evaluation and monitoring schemes. For example, the accreditation of PhD and Master degrees follows the Ministry system. Since 2008, the internal monitoring of progress of candidates includes research output, didactics/teaching performance, funds attracted, and scientific outcome. Furthermore, the study curricula are certified according to ISO 9001:2008 and are audited annually by an external agency AFNOR. Internal audit mainly focuses on teaching and is not externally monitored. As far as the external audit is concerned, it is performed by a French firm (AFAC).

While the peer reviewers observed that, overall, the monitoring schemes were very efficient at the university, a peer reviewer suggested that the staff could be included in this process in a proactive way. Indeed, they are surveyed and evaluated, but they do not participate in the process. This peer reviewer mentioned that they could be included through working groups and workshops focusing on particular points of the charter and reflecting regularly on the continual improvement process.

The University provided strong statistics on key performance indicators. An important aspect of this is that each researcher had a record of achievements, which were monitored and used as a basis for rewards. This project was launched recently, as the first of its kind in Italy, and was expected to give great value in enhancing quality. A peer reviewer found it regrettable, though, that no statistical overview on publications or international (co-)publications by field was available.

5. Extent to which there are tangible results stemming from the implementation of the institutional HR Strategy/Action Plan

The peer reviewers reported tangible results on several points. Indeed, the university provided figures on increasing scientific output in 2008-2010, and constant quality in 2011-2013 (but with falling citations in top-10 journals). Moreover, external funding increased, 3-fold for early-stage researchers.

As far as gender quality is concerned, in 2012, women represented 15% of full professors, 32% of associate professors, 43% of researchers, and 50% of committees members. A peer reviewer mentioned that, although it was not required, longitudinal statistics might bring in new perspectives on this gender theme. Furthermore, based on an initiative by the University as a C&C signatory, a recent Italian law guaranteed full salary during maternity leave for early-stage researchers. The University pays for the moment full salary during maternity leave for PhD candidates on its internal budget and plans to extend this to postdocs. It also provides extra support for low-income families and has agreements with the municipality on priority for researchers' children in nurseries. Cooperation with regional childcare institutions appeared to be very helpful, but a peer reviewer pointed out that these opportunities were not always taken advantage of. For example, it might be helpful for foreign researchers to find reliable and flexible childcare solutions, and to be supported in this process. The same peer reviewer also underlined the need to reinforce incentives to encourage women to return to work faster after their maternity leave, and to strengthen the role of men in childcare. This approach would be even more interesting to increase the international recruitment of young female researchers.

Progress concerning the mobility of researchers was recorded. Intersectoral mobility was promoted through agreement with regional enterprises, and career plans for researchers were designed to improve skills, primarily for R1 and R2 researchers. The candidates are evaluated every 3 years (on scientific/education/teaching/funding issues). The main remaining problem in this area is that the salaries defined by the Ministry are not compatible to attract top international researchers.

However, the university set an efficient individual performance appraisal system, which includes monetary incentives. These are partly set by the government. This system was very well received by the staff, who underlined its transparency during the interviews. It is used by researchers to estimate their own performance, and by the institution, to allocate resources fairly and enhance the motivation of the employees. Starting this year, every researcher was compared with the average outcome on each parameter and scored according to defined transparent criteria, and the best 15% were given increased salary by redistribution of internal budget according to recent Ministry regulations (2013).

A peer reviewer also highlighted an interesting recruitment process, which includes the consultation of external experts by Skype for the selection of PhD candidates. This combines the use of new media with the opportunity to integrate external consultants.

Moreover, a mentoring initiative was launched, and according to the representatives of the university, it was very well accepted. Nevertheless, the peer reviewers reported that it should

be better structured, with clear guidelines. Indeed, the PhD candidates said during the interviews that they would prefer more structured courses of 1-2 months on some topics, e.g. in transferable skills like communication, statistics, epidemiology and research methodology. They would also like closer contact with their mentors and feel closer support by their leaders. Including the leaders appeared to be a challenge, since the leaders reported that they would need more training to play the role of mentors (they underlined the difference between mentoring and supervision). The peer reviewers suggested to make leaders more accountable and to steer young leaders in this direction early on, through better interdisciplinary/faculty coordination and stimulation of scientific creativity.

In addition, the peer reviewers mentioned the employee questionnaires created to evaluate HRS4R as a very positive tool to support the gap analysis, and considered it as a good practice. A new questionnaire-based gap analysis will be performed soon in the university, focusing on Open recruitment and portability of grants, Social security and pension needs of mobile researchers, Attractive employment and working conditions, and Enhancing training, skills and experience of European researchers, including employability, career plans, mobility experiences and long-distance mentoring.

The interviews with researchers confirmed that these initiatives were useful schemes, and promoted a good approach to stimulate research quality and scientific publications. It was also reported that creativity was improved, as well as the competitiveness of researchers. As a result, more PhDs apply for nationally funded research projects and the number of scientific publications increased. In addition, the researchers from all stages pointed out increasing quality in working conditions.

6. Conclusions

According to the peer reviewers, the University of Camerino is a pioneer as far as the HRS4R process and C&C implementation is concerned in Italy, but also at the European level.

They reported that it was deeply involved in improving the HR in research, and that it was committed in implementing the C&C principles in their system. Therefore, it is generally in line with these principles, including transparency and gender/family-friendly initiatives. There was also a strong emphasis on individual performance, and the flexible initiatives it launched improved the research quality, the recruitment and the working conditions.

The interviews and the review were generally in line with the university's self-assessment report of May 2014, which was of an excellent format. There was full coherence between the initiatives launched and the Action Plan, which was fully integrated in the pre-existent Quality Assurance System.

A large number of employees from management, administration and research departments were present during the site visit, which showed the strong commitment of the institution as a whole.

Therefore, the peer reviewers praised the commitment and openness of the Rector, the vice-rectors, the employees responsible for the C&C process, and the staff in general.

Given the heavy workload it implies, a peer reviewer suggested that a professional HR officer could be hired (perhaps part-time at the beginning and then full-time), in particular for an institution of such a size (more than 500 employees). As a matter of fact, an external professional could introduce new interesting structures and policies.

In addition, a peer reviewer encouraged the university to improve its series of annual statistics (in particular on students, funding and scientific output), to strengthen the bases for evaluation of the effects of the actions it implemented.

To finish, a last remark concerned the need to go on optimising the use of funding for successful researchers and to attract leading foreign researchers.

Recommendations

UNICAM should continue its good work on

- competitive individual reward systems for researchers including recruitment of frontline foreigners
- training of mentors and clarification of their role compared to supervisors.

They should improve on

- recruitment of women research leaders, and
- longitudinal bibliometrics for the institution and by field, including international (co-) publications
- longitudinal statistics on research personnel, by field, position and gender.