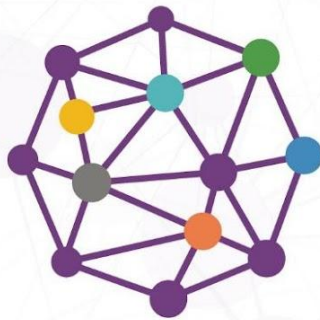




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SMART Researchers

Deliverable 2.1

SMART Researchers Strategic Action Plan (SAP) Framework for



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v0.3	21.03.2026.	Project Consortium	Review
v0.4	31.03.2026.	UNSFTS	Final version

Table with Acronyms

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

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1	Introduction	5
1.1	PURPOSE AND SCOPE OF THE STRATEGIC ACTION PLAN	6
1.1	Purpose and Scope	6
1.2	Project Context and Strategic Alignment	7
1.3	Institutional Context	7
1.3.1	Institutional Profile	7
1.3.2	Role in the SMART Researchers Project	8
1.3.3	Alignment of the SAP with Institutional Strategy and Governance	8
1.3.4	Target Beneficiaries	9
1.3.5	Existing Structures Relevant to SAP Implementation	9
2.	METHODOLOGY, DATA AND ORGANIZATIONAL READINESS	9
2.1	Methodological Framework for SAP Development	10
2.1	HR Audit and Capacity Assessment	10
2.2	Researcher Survey Findings	12
2.3	Organizational Readiness Assessment	14
2.4	Participatory Process and Co-Design Validation	16
3.	OBJECTIVES AND MEASURES PER PILLAR	18
3.1	Strategic Pillar Architecture	18
3.2	Objectives and Measures per Pillar (SMART Framework)	18
3.2.1	Template – Objectives and Measures (to be completed per pillar)	18
3.3	Phased Implementation Timeline and Resourcing	22
3.3.1	Implementation Roadmap (Strategic Level)	22
3.4	HUMAN CAPACITY AND STRUCTURAL ENABLERS	24
3.4.1	Human Resource Alignment	24
3.5	GOVERNANCE AND DECISION STRUCTURE	24
3.5.1	Governance Model	24
3.5.2	Review and Decision Cadence	25
3.5.3	Risk Escalation and Corrective Mechanism	25
4.	MONITORING, EVALUATION AND POLICY FEEDBACK	25

4.1 KPI MONITORING (Operational Level)	25
4.2 BENEFITS REALISATION TRACKING (Institutional Level)	27
4.3 POLICY FEEDBACK AND ALIGNMENT (Strategic Level)	27
5 REFERENCES AND RELATED DOCUMENTS	28
5.1 Reference List	28
5.2 Project Documents	28
5.3 Regulatory and Policy Frameworks Referenced	28

LIST OF TABLES

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

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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

Function of this framework document

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

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

NOTE: Instructions for institutions are given in **purple italic letters and important information in **red italic letters**. Both instructions and important information are to be deleted once the template is filled out.*



1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 PURPOSE AND SCOPE OF THE STRATEGIC ACTION PLAN

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

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

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

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

Evidence base and development logic

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

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

The development of the SAP is grounded in:

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

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

Strategic focus areas

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

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

Governance, implementation and transparency



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

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

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

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

The Strategic Action Plan is critically important for the University of Thessaly as it provides a structured, evidence-based mechanism to address significant gaps in research career development, while aligning the institution with European standards and priorities. According to the audits, UTH operates at an “initial/fragmented” level, with major deficiencies particularly in research careers and talent development, where systematic frameworks, appraisal systems, and structured career support are absent. At the same time, the institutional report highlights that research careers are already considered a strategic priority for UTH due to their role in driving innovation, enhancing competitiveness, attracting funding, and addressing societal challenges. In this context, the SAP becomes essential as it translates these strategic intentions into concrete, monitored actions, strengthening HR systems, improving transparency and career pathways, and institutionalizing support mechanisms aligned with the European Framework for Research Careers and the European Charter for Researchers. Consequently, the SAP is a necessary tool for transforming fragmented practices into a coherent, sustainable system that enhances researcher development, institutional performance, and long-term competitiveness.

1.2 PROJECT CONTEXT AND STRATEGIC ALIGNMENT

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

The SMART Researchers project responds to these challenges by:

- Establishing **Career Support Centres (CSCs)** as institutional hubs for continuous and structured career guidance;
- Developing and implementing **Strategic Action Plans** aligned with ERA principles and the European Charter for Researchers;



- Designing a **micro-credentialing and certification framework** based on the European Competence Framework for Researchers (ResearchComp);
- Strengthening institutional HR practices and talent development systems;
- Providing structured policy feedback to support EU-level harmonisation and standardisation of research career systems.

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

- Development of new instruments supporting research careers,
- Creation of sustainable institutional ecosystems for research talent,
- Implementation of European standards for researcher careers across sectors,
- Strengthening ESR competences and long-term employability.

1.3 INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT

1.3.1 INSTITUTIONAL PROFILE

Institution name: University of Thessaly (UTH)

Country: Greece

Legal status (public university, research institute, foundation, etc.): Public University

Number of academic/research or other staff: 910

Number of Early-Stage Researchers (R1 + R2): 1.856

Main research domains / faculties: School of Sciences, School of Agricultural Sciences, School of Technology, School of Economics and Business Administration, School of Health Sciences, School of Physical Education, Sport Science and Dietetics, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, School of Engineering

Brief description (max. 200–300 words):

UTH is a multidisciplinary higher education institution with a broad research base in the fields of as engineering, social sciences, humanities, and applied sciences. It actively participates in international and EU-funded research projects, indicating engagement within the European Research Area. Research careers are positioned as a strategic priority for the institution, contributing directly to innovation, institutional competitiveness, funding attraction, and the ability to address societal challenges.

The main mission is the promotion of scientific knowledge through research and the contribution to the cultural and economic development of the local community and wider society.

The University of Thessaly (UTH) operates a range of institutional structures supporting research, internationalisation, and researcher development. The International Relations Office¹ plays a central role in managing Erasmus+ programmes, mobility schemes, and international partnerships, while promoting the university's global engagement. Research and innovation activities are supported by the Center for European Projects (CEP)², which provides guidance on EU funding, project development, and administrative support within the Research Committee³, and by the

¹ <https://www.uth.gr/en/international/units/international-relations-office>

² <https://cep.uth.gr/>

³ <https://www.uth.gr/en/ereyna/environment/research-committee>

University Research and Innovation Center IASON (PAKEK IASON)⁴, which strengthens research capacity and innovation. Ethical compliance is ensured through the Research Ethics Committee⁵, which evaluates research proposals and safeguards adherence to ethical and legal standards.

In terms of HR and institutional governance, functions are supported by the Administrative Staff Department⁶, as well as by the Strategic Planning Unit⁷, which contributes to institutional development and planning. Career development and lifelong learning are addressed through structures such as the Centre of Continuing Education and Lifelong Learning (KEDIVIM)⁸, which offers certified training and professional development programmes, while initiatives related to employability and entrepreneurship are supported by units such as DEKA⁹ and the Innovation-Technology Transfer Unit and Entrepreneurship Center¹⁰. Finally, inclusion and equality policies are promoted through the Gender Equality and Anti-Discrimination Committee¹¹, which aligns institutional practices with European frameworks on equality and diversity.

International positioning: University of Thessaly ranks ~1000-1200 (THE) and ~#1066 (CWUR), with best subjects in the Top 150-300 globally. Embedded in European ecosystems: 600+ Erasmus partnerships (40+ countries), member of European University Association, and active in EU-funded research consortia.

1.3.2 ROLE IN THE SMART RESEARCHERS PROJECT

UTH acts as the leading academic partner of the Greek cluster in the project, with a multi-dimensional role across implementation, capacity building, and institutional transformation. WPs involved include primarily WP2, where UTH contributes to HR audits and the development and implementation of SAP, as well as WP3 and WP4 activities related to training, micro-credentialing, and digital infrastructure. UTH also has an active role in WPs 1 and 6. Key responsibilities focus on aligning institutional HR practices with European standards, supporting SAP implementation, and contributing to training design and delivery for early-stage researchers (ESRs).

Regarding CSCs, UTH plays a central role in their establishment and operation, using them as institutional hubs to deliver career guidance, mentoring, and to foster partnerships with external stakeholders, thereby enabling intersectoral mobility and practical implementation of SAP measures. In terms of contribution to the micro-credentialing framework, UTH is actively involved in developing and delivering ResearchComp-aligned training programmes and supports the integration of these micro-credentials into institutional career development systems.

⁴ <https://www.uth.gr/en/research/units/university-research-and-innovation-center-iason-pakek-iason>

⁵ <https://www.uth.gr/en/research/environment/research-ethics-committee>

⁶ <https://www.prd.uth.gr/en/administrative-staff/>

⁷ <https://www.uth.gr/en/university/institutional/strategic-planning-unit>

⁸ <https://learning.uth.gr/>

⁹ <https://cas.uth.gr/login?service=https%3A//deka.uth.gr/casservice>

¹⁰ [oneplanet – oneplanet](#)

¹¹ <https://www.uth.gr/en/life/support/gender-equality-and-anti-discrimination-committee>

For internal coordination structure, UTH ensures project implementation through its institutional leadership and dedicated teams aligned with specific work packages, coordinating activities across academic and administrative units and ensuring integration of project outputs into long-term institutional structures. The Research committee (ELKE) is a decision-making unit for project management. They use a central shiftwork for internal management and a council body. The council body consists of 7 departments representatives which support the decision-making process through voting. UTH's role combines strategic alignment, operational delivery, and institutional embedding of project results to ensure sustainability and impact.

1.3.3 ALIGNMENT OF THE SAP WITH INSTITUTIONAL STRATEGY AND GOVERNANCE

A. Strategic alignment

The Strategic Action Plan at the University of Thessaly is designed to be embedded within existing institutional governance by reinforcing and operationalising key strategic priorities related to researcher development and organizational improvement. It aligns with the HR Strategy by introducing structured, evidence-based processes for recruitment, evaluation, and career progression, addressing previously identified inconsistencies and lack of standardisation in HR practices. In relation to the Research Strategy, the SAP strengthens the institution's capacity to support researchers through improved career pathways, training opportunities, and talent development mechanisms, which are essential for sustaining research quality and output. The SAP also supports the Internationalisation Strategy by fostering mobility, cross-sector collaboration, and participation in European initiatives, thereby enhancing UTH's integration within the broader research ecosystem.

Furthermore, the SAP is consistent with Gender Equality and Institutional Development Strategies (<https://www.uth.gr/en/life/support/gender-equality-and-anti-discrimination-committee> & <https://www.uth.gr/en/university/institutional/strategic-planning-unit>), as it promotes structured monitoring, transparency, and inclusive practices, particularly in recruitment and career development processes. It also contributes to broader institutional governance as it introduces clear monitoring, evaluation, and continuous improvement mechanisms aligned with European standards for research careers.

B. Adoption and approval mechanism

Adoption Body:

Approval procedure:

The body responsible for the formal adoption of the SAP at the University of Thessaly is the Research Council, which oversees research policy, strategic alignment, and institutional development. The draft SAP is subject to a structured internal review process coordinated by the Research Council. This includes evaluation by a committee of experts, who assess the document's alignment with institutional priorities, European frameworks, and feasibility of implementation. The review process results in a

reasoned report, providing recommendations and required adjustments. Following this expert review, the revised SAP will ensure that key institutional stakeholders are consulted and that the proposed measures reflect institutional needs and capacities. Based on this process, the Research Council proceeds with the final decision-making and formal approval. The entire adoption procedure is expected to be completed within a three-month period, ensuring timely validation and alignment with project timelines.

C. Institutional embedding mechanism

The SAP will be structurally embedded within the institutional governance system of the University of Thessaly through clearly defined responsibilities, coordination mechanisms, and integration into existing planning and monitoring processes. Strategic oversight and institutional support for SAP implementation will be ensured by the Vice-Rector. This role guarantees alignment of the SAP with the university's research strategy and secures the necessary institutional commitment for its implementation. The operational coordination and implementation of SAP measures will be supported by the HR units and the Research Committee (ELKE), which will act as the main coordinating bodies across pillars. These units will ensure coherence in implementation, support the execution of activities, and facilitate coordination between academic and administrative structures.

The SAP will be integrated into the university's annual work plans, ensuring that planned actions are systematically implemented and aligned with institutional priorities. In terms of resourcing, the implementation will rely primarily on existing institutional capacity, with staff costs covered internally through the utilisation of already trained personnel, ensuring feasibility and sustainability without creating additional financial burden. Monitoring and reporting of SAP implementation will follow a quarterly reporting cycle, allowing for regular tracking of progress, early identification of challenges, and timely corrective actions where necessary.

D. Public accessibility and transparency

The Strategic Action Plan is intended to be publicly accessible as part of the project's commitment to transparency and broader institutional uptake across the European Research Area. More specifically, the SAP is expected to be published on the institutional website of the University of Thessaly (<https://cep.uth.gr/> &/or <https://ee.uth.gr/>), as well as integrated within outputs linked to the Career Support Centres (CSCs), which function as visible hubs for career development and dissemination activities. In addition, given its role as a formal HR and governance instrument, the SAP will be included in an HR policy repository. In terms of transparency commitments, the SAP will be publicly accessible, as explicitly required by the framework to ensure openness and policy learning. Furthermore, progress reports and monitoring summaries will be produced and used for continuous improvement, with elements expected to be shared externally to support policy feedback and dissemination activities. To reinforce transparency, UTH will also adopt structured reporting practices, including regular publication of implementation updates, clear documentation of progress indicators, and externally accessible

summaries of monitoring outcomes, ensuring accountability and alignment with best practices in research governance.

1.3.4 TARGET BENEFICIARIES

The Strategic Action Plan primarily targets Early-Stage Researchers, specifically R1 (first-stage researchers) and R2 (recognized researchers), who represent the core beneficiaries of improved career pathways, structured development systems, and enhanced employability mechanisms. Evidence from the institutional report confirms that these groups, particularly R1 researchers, constitute a significant proportion of the research community at UTH and are most affected by gaps in career support and training structures. Secondary beneficiaries include HR professionals, who will benefit from clearer procedures, monitoring tools, and standardized practices; research supervisors and department heads, who will gain structured frameworks for mentoring, evaluation, and career progression management; and external stakeholders (industry and public sector), who benefit indirectly through improved researcher skills, mobility, and collaboration opportunities aligned with labour market needs.

In terms of scale, 80-85 early-stage researchers are expected to directly benefit from SAP-related interventions, including training, career support, and certification activities, with targets reaching 25-30 of ESRs trained and supported across participating institutions. Beyond direct beneficiaries, the SAP will also generate systemic benefits by strengthening collaboration with external partners, improving employability pathways, and enhancing knowledge transfer between academia and other sectors, expanding its impact beyond the immediate research community.

1.3.5 EXISTING STRUCTURES RELEVANT TO SAP IMPLEMENTATION

UTH demonstrates the existence of several core institutional structures relevant to researcher development, though many operate at a basic or fragmented level.

The HR Office exists but requires significant strengthening and reform, particularly in standardising procedures, monitoring, and supporting career progression, as current practices are inconsistently applied.

The Research Office is functionally present, supporting participation in EU-funded projects and research activities, and will be strengthened by the Career Support Centres (CSCs) to better align research support with career development.

While an Ethics Committee is established at the policy level, the goal is set to undertake actions to improve its operational framework through systematic training and monitoring protocols.

Structures such as a Career Centre (<https://career.uth.gr/>) will be enhanced through the CSCs, which will centralise career guidance, skills development, and external engagement.

The International Office function is implicitly present through active participation in EU projects and will be strengthened and linked to CSCs to support mobility and collaboration. Gender equality structures exist at a policy level but lack systematic monitoring and operationalisation and will therefore be strengthened and embedded within SAP governance and CSC activities.

In addition, UTH is committed to enhance its transparency framework by refining: a) increase in dissemination of the recruitment process and evaluation procedures, b) structured mentoring systems, and c) formalised career progression frameworks, enhancing the existing structures and ensuring consistency, accountability, and alignment with modern researcher development practices. These improvements will be operationalised through the CSCs as integrated coordination hubs, reducing fragmentation and enabling a more coherent institutional support system.

To align with SAP requirements, UTH is establishing a formal adoption framework where the plan is ratified by senior governance and made publicly available. This includes assigning specific accountability roles to foster institutional ownership and long-term viability.

2. METHODOLOGY, DATA AND ORGANIZATIONAL READINESS

2.1 METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK FOR SAP DEVELOPMENT

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

The methodology combines four interrelated evidence streams:

1. **HR Audit and Capacity Assessment** – institutional maturity baseline
2. **Researcher Survey** – ESR perception-based evidence
3. **Participatory consultation processes** – co-design and validation
4. **Policy alignment review** – alignment with HRS4R, the European Charter for Researchers, and the European Framework for Research Careers

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

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

This approach ensures that the SAP is:

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

The development process adheres to principles of:

- Transparency
- Co-design

- Accountability
- Evidence triangulation
- Institutional embedding

2.1 HR AUDIT AND CAPACITY ASSESSMENT

(Evidence-based institutional baseline)

Template Table – HR Audit Baseline

Pillar	Average Score (0–4)	Interpretation (150–250 words per pillar)
Pillar 1 – Ethics, integrity, gender & open science	2.08	This pillar reflects a developing system (1-2), indicating that UTH has established formal references to ethics, integrity, gender equality, and open science within institutional and national frameworks, but lacks consistent operationalisation. The score suggests that the institution is positioned beyond ad hoc practices yet remains limited in terms of systematic implementation and evidence-based monitoring. The pillar represents a structural gap rather than a strength, as key elements such as training, surveys, audits, and monitoring mechanisms are either insufficiently developed or inconsistently applied. The absence of routine evidence (e.g., logs, reports, training records) indicates that compliance is largely formal rather than embedded in institutional practice. Systemic causes include the lack of structured training cycles, weak monitoring and audit mechanisms, and insufficient documentation of implementation, which limit the institution’s ability to demonstrate compliance and continuous improvement. Corrective measures are required but not urgent at a foundational level. Priority should be given to operationalising existing policies through systematic training, documented monitoring processes, and periodic evaluation mechanisms, ensuring that ethical and open science principles are translated into measurable institutional practices.

Pillar 2 – Assessment, recruitment & progression (OTM-R)	1.75	This pillar demonstrates an initial / fragmented maturity level (1-2), indicating that recruitment and progression practices at UTH are largely driven by formal legal compliance rather than structured institutional systems. The score reflects limited traceability and weak feedback mechanisms. The pillar constitutes a significant structural gap, as current practices need further support in standardisation and transparency, which are core requirements of OTM-R (Open, Transparent and Merit-based Recruitment) principles. While some procedural elements exist, they are not supported by consistent documentation, monitoring, or evaluation frameworks, limiting institutional accountability and comparability. Systemic causes include the absence of unified recruitment workflows, limited dissemination and publicity regarding human resources, resulting in fragmented and less transparent processes. Immediate corrective measures are required. The institution must prioritise the encouragement of standardised recruitment procedures in all recruitment processes, implementation of evidence-based workflows (templates, registers, documented decisions), and introduction of systematic feedback and review mechanisms, to ensure increase of transparency, fairness, and alignment with European standards.
Pillar 3 – Working conditions and practices	2.58	This pillar reflects a developing to moderately structured system (2-3), indicating that UTH provides a stable contractual and operational baseline, but lacks systematic institutionalisation of people management practices.

		The score suggests that this pillar represents a relative strength compared to others, although it remains constrained by inconsistent monitoring and limited formalisation of HR practices. While basic working conditions are in place, the need for improvement of structured feedback systems, well-being frameworks, and systematic HR metrics limits the institution's ability to ensure continuous improvement. Systemic causes include fragmentation of HR responsibilities, lack of formalised monitoring systems, and limited integration of staff feedback and well-being mechanisms into institutional processes. These factors result in variability in researcher experience and reduce the effectiveness of existing structures. Corrective measures are recommended but not urgent at a systemic level. Priority should be given to systematising HR practices through structured staff feedback mechanisms, documented monitoring (e.g., HR indicators), and periodic review processes, to strengthen consistency and support long-term institutional development.
Pillar 4 – Research careers and talent development	0.58	This pillar reflects an emerging maturity level (0-1) and represents the most critical structural gap at UTH. The very low score indicates that systematic career development frameworks are largely lacking, with key elements such as appraisal systems, Individual Development Plans (IDPs), and structured talent development mechanisms either missing or implemented only on an ad hoc basis. This confirms a structural absence of career development systems, combined with fragmentation of responsibilities and a lack of formalised support structures, as required by the framework for low-scoring pillars. Career development and talent management are not institutionally coordinated, limiting both researcher progression and retention.

		Systemic causes include the absence of a defined career development framework, lack of mentoring standards, and insufficient integration of training and appraisal into HR systems, resulting in weak institutional support for researcher careers. Immediate corrective measures are essential. The institution must prioritise the establishment of structured career development systems, including annual appraisal cycles, IDPs, mentoring frameworks, and continuous professional development plans, forming the core intervention area of the SAP.
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Interpretation guidance

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



2.2 RESEARCHER SURVEY FINDINGS

(Perception-based institutional evidence)



Template Table – Researcher survey results

Pillar	Mean score (1-5)	Key strengths identified	Key gaps identified	Interpretation (100–200 words)
Pillar 1 – Ethics, integrity, gender & open science	3,73	Strong awareness of ethical standards, academic freedom, gender equality, and work-life balance.	Limited institutional training, insufficient guidance on research ethics, weak support for open science, recognition and flexibility.	ESR perception indicates a relatively positive institutional climate, particularly in terms of awareness and values related to ethics and equality. This partially confirms the HR Audit, which identified that formal frameworks exist. However, there is an overestimation of institutional performance at the perception level compared to structural maturity. While ESRs experience a supportive ethical environment, the audit highlights the absence of systematic implementation mechanisms such as training, monitoring, and documented procedures. This divergence suggests that informal culture compensates for weak institutionalisation, masking underlying structural deficiencies. The policy-practice gap is therefore significant: principles are understood and valued but not consistently operationalised. This indicates the need to move from awareness-driven compliance to evidence-based implementation,

				ensuring that institutional practices match perceived standards.
Pillar 2 – Assessment, recruitment & progression (OTM-R)	3,43	Positive perception of teamwork in promotion processes.	More publicity in recruitment processes, insufficient recognition of non-linear and mobile career paths, despite the need for a more inclusive approach, imbalance in evaluation criteria.	ESR perception reflects moderately positive experiences, suggesting that some elements of recruitment and progression are functioning in practice. However, this only partially aligns with the HR Audit, which identified this pillar as initial and fragmented, with limited traceability and quality assurance. This indicates an overestimation of institutional performance, where researchers perceive processes as more structured than they are. The reported need for strengthen of transparency, an adoption of a holistic approach, and the limited recognition of diverse career paths further highlights inconsistencies between formal procedures and actual experience. The policy-practice gap is therefore evident: even though ESRs perceive elements of fairness and collaboration, the underlying system lacks standardisation and evidence-based processes. This suggests that informal or

				local practices may create positive experiences, but these are not supported by institutional frameworks, limiting scalability and consistency.
Pillar 3 – Working conditions and practices	3,29	Generally positive working environment and stable baseline conditions.	Variability in support, limited structured feedback, and insufficient formalisation of institutional support mechanisms.	ESR perception suggests a relatively satisfactory working environment, which broadly confirms the HR Audit findings that a stable contractual and operational baseline exists. However, the audit also highlights inconsistencies in monitoring and formalisation, which are less visible at the perception level. This indicates a partial alignment with slight overestimation, where researchers experience acceptable conditions, but systemic weaknesses remain in terms of structured HR practices and continuous improvement mechanisms. The policy-practice gap is moderate: while day-to-day conditions are perceived positively, the absence of formalised support systems (e.g., structured feedback, well-being frameworks, HR metrics) limits institutional effectiveness. This suggests that operational stability is not yet

				matched by strategic HR management, requiring systematisation rather than fundamental redesign.
Pillar 4 – Research careers and talent development	3,41	Strong individual-level support (e.g., supervision relationships).	Limited access to training, insufficient mentoring structures, limited transparency, barriers to mobility, weak institutional career support.	ESR perception indicates a moderately positive experience, suggesting that researchers perceive career development support as more developed than it structurally is. However, this strongly contradicts the HR Audit, which identified this pillar as having an emerging maturity level (0.58), with no systematic career development frameworks in place. This represents a significant overestimation of institutional performance, driven primarily by strong individual supervision relationships, rather than formal institutional support. The findings reveal a critical policy-practice gap: while researchers rely on informal and person-dependent support, the institution lacks structured systems, such as training frameworks, mentoring programmes, and career planning tools. This imbalance highlights a hidden structural weakness, where positive

				individual experiences mask the absence of institutionalised career development mechanisms. As a result, support is inconsistent, non-scalable, and dependent on local conditions. This pillar therefore requires systemic intervention, as both perception and audit evidence confirm the lack of sustainable, formalised career development structures.
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Interpretation guidance



2.3 ORGANIZATIONAL READINESS ASSESSMENT

Benchmark definition

Organizational readiness is assessed across three dimensions:

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

Template Table – Organizational Readiness

Dimension	Evidence source (Audit/Survey)	Current status (Low/Moderate/High)	Main constraints	Required institutional changes
Structural readiness	HR Audit (overall: 1.75; Pillar 2: 1.75; Pillar 4: 0.58; Pillar 1: 2.08) & Survey (limited transparency, weak institutional support structures)	Low	Fragmented HR systems across all pillars; weak institutionalisation of procedures; absence of structured career development frameworks; limited traceability and monitoring; reliance on compliance rather than systems	Establish formal governance structures; standardise HR procedures across recruitment, evaluation and career development; introduce monitoring systems (templates, logs, audits); institutionalise career frameworks (appraisal cycles, IDPs, mentoring, CPD).
Operational readiness	HR Audit (Pillar 3: 2.58; Pillar 2: 1.75; Pillar 1: limited implementation evidence) & Survey (gaps in training, mentoring, mobility; limited accessibility and transparency of opportunities)	Moderate	Stable operational baseline but lack of structured tools; inconsistent access to training and mentoring; weak coordination across units; limited operationalisation of policies;	Reorganise and structure existing resources; introduce operational tools (training systems, mentoring registers, HR monitoring tools); improve coordination across HR, research and support units; enhance accessibility, transparency

			insufficient visibility and accessibility of development opportunities.	and visibility of opportunities.
Cultural readiness	Survey (Pillar 1: 3.73; Pillar 2: 3.43; Pillar 3: 3.29; Pillar 4: 3.41) & qualitative findings (strong supervision, positive working environment, high ESR engagement)	Moderate-High	Overreliance on informal and person-dependent practices; mismatch between perceived and actual institutional performance; limited culture of accountability and evidence-based management; weak institutional feedback loops.	Transition from informal to system-based practices; strengthen leadership accountability mechanisms; embed continuous feedback and monitoring culture; leverage strong ESR engagement and positive supervision practices to support institutional reforms.

The organizational readiness of the University of Thessaly to implement the Strategic Action Plan is uneven, reflecting a clear imbalance between structural limitations and stronger cultural readiness.

Governance structures are currently not sufficient to fully support SAP implementation. The HR Audit identifies an overall “initial/fragmented” maturity level (1.75), with weaknesses across multiple pillars, particularly in recruitment systems (1.75) and research career development (0.58). These findings indicate that institutional procedures, monitoring mechanisms, and career development frameworks are not systematically formalised. As a result, implementation capacity is constrained by the absence of standardised processes and clear accountability supportive mechanisms.

At the same time, executive commitment is evident through institutional participation in the project and alignment with European frameworks, but this commitment is not yet translated into operational governance structures. Implementation will therefore require formalisation of roles, procedures, and reporting systems.

From an operational perspective, the institution demonstrates a stable baseline. Working conditions are relatively well established (Pillar 3: 2.58), and the institution maintains active research engagement. However, both audit and survey findings highlight the absence of structured tools, including limited access to training, mentoring, and mobility opportunities, as well as weak coordination across units. This suggests that resources exist but require reorganisation and systematisation rather than expansion.

Cultural readiness represents the strongest dimension. Survey results indicate positive perceptions across pillars (e.g., ethics: 3.73; recruitment: 3.43; careers: 3.41), reflecting strong engagement and supportive supervision relationships. However, this creates a misalignment, as positive individual experiences coexist with weak institutional systems. This indicates an overreliance on informal practices and limited accountability structures.

The main structural barriers include fragmented HR systems, absence of formal career development frameworks, lack of monitoring mechanisms, and dependence on informal support practices. These factors may delay implementation if not addressed systematically.

Overall Organizational Readiness Level: Moderate

The University of Thessaly demonstrates moderate organizational readiness, characterised by strong cultural engagement, but limited structural capacity. While researchers report positive experiences in supervision, collaboration, and institutional climate, the HR Audit reveals low institutional maturity, particularly in governance, career development systems, and monitoring mechanisms. This indicates a clear gap between perceived and actual institutional performance. Operationally, the institution has a stable baseline although lacks structured tools and coordination systems. Implementation of the SAP is therefore feasible but dependent on structural reform, including the formalisation of governance, procedures, and accountability mechanisms.

The combination of engaged stakeholders and existing resources supports readiness; however, without systematic institutionalisation, implementation may face delays.

2.4 PARTICIPATORY PROCESS AND CO-DESIGN VALIDATION

The SAP must be validated through structured consultation.



Template Table – Participatory process documentation

Activity Type	Participants	Date	Key topics discussed	Key decisions / Priorities Confirmed
Focus group	ESR representatives, HR representatives, Faculty/leadership	27/4/2026	Validation of researcher experiences across all four pillars; access to training, mentoring and mobility; working conditions; publicity in recruitment and evaluation; institutional support gaps.	Confirmation of major gaps in career development (Pillar 4) and recruitment publicity (Pillar 2); validation of need for structured institutional support systems and improved access to opportunities, prioritisation of actions related to mentoring

The validation process at the University of Thessaly was based on the conduct of a targeted focus group with the participation of Early Stage Researchers (ESRs), Human Resources (HR) representatives and faculty/management members. Before the focus group, the key findings of both the HR Audit and the ESRs survey were shared with the participants, to ensure a shared and comprehensive understanding of the needs of the institution, beyond individual experiences. This approach enhanced the quality of the dialogue and allowed for a more informed and convergent assessment of priorities.

The main reform priorities that emerged from the process mainly concern the development of research careers (Pillar 4) and improving publicity and encouraging more structured procedures in recruitment and evaluation (Pillar 2). In addition, particular emphasis was placed on the need for structured institutional support systems, including mentoring mechanisms, as well as improving access to training and mobility opportunities.

There was a strong consensus among participants on the validation of researchers' experiences and the existence of significant institutional gaps. In particular, deficiencies in structured professional development services, limited access to training and mobility opportunities, as well as issues related to working conditions and publicity in recruitment and evaluation processes were confirmed. The need for a more systematic and institutionalized approach to supporting researchers was a common point of reference.

Despite the general convergence, areas requiring further alignment were also identified, notably in terms of the degree of institutional responsibility for individual initiative in career development, as well as in the way existing informal practices, such as mentoring and supervision, are formalized. These differences indicate the need for further institutional clarification and coordination.

The degree of influence of the ESRs in shaping the final priorities was decisive. Through their participation in the focus group and their contribution to validating the findings, the ESRs contributed substantially to highlighting the key challenges and to shaping realistic and targeted interventions. Their active involvement ensured that the final priorities reflect the real needs of the research community and strengthen the element of co-ownership in the planning process.

3. OBJECTIVES AND MEASURES PER PILLAR

3.1 STRATEGIC PILLAR ARCHITECTURE

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

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

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

3.2 OBJECTIVES AND MEASURES PER PILLAR (SMART FRAMEWORK)

3.2.1 TEMPLATE – OBJECTIVES AND MEASURES *(TO BE COMPLETED PER PILLAR)*



Pillar	SMART objective	KPI	Baseline (2025)	Target (2031)	Interim target (Mid-term)	Responsible owner	Due date	Key initiatives/actions
Pillar 1 – Ethics, integrity, gender & open science	Establish a fully operational institutional system for ethics, integrity and gender equality with training workshops and documented implementation mechanisms.	annual workshop (ethics, integrity, gender equality)	No systematic training.	5	3	Research committee and lifelong learning center	2029 (mid) - 2031 (full)	Develop annual training/workshop programme; introduce onboarding modules; maintain training attendance registers; implement periodic reporting.
Pillar 1 – Ethics, integrity, gender & open science	Implement a structured monitoring and audit system for ethics and research integrity compliance.	# of documented audits, monitoring reports and corrective actions per year.	No systematic monitoring or audit.	Annual institutional audit cycle fully implemented.	At least 1 audit cycle implemented.	Research committee	Due date 2029 (mid) - 2031 (full)	Introduce audit procedures; establish compliance monitoring; develop reporting templates; ensure follow-up mechanisms.

Pillar 1 – Ethics, integrity, gender & open science	Operationalise and monitor the Gender Equality Plan through measurable indicators and annual reporting mechanisms.	% of Gender Equality Plan actions implemented and monitored annually.	Gender equality exists at policy level but lacks systematic implementation and monitoring.	≥80% of actions implemented and monitored; annual report published.	Monitoring system established; first report produced.	Research Committee / Gender Equality Committee	Due date 2029 (mid) - 2031 (full)	Develop implementation roadmap; define KPIs; integrate gender into HR processes; publish annual progress reports.
Pillar 1 – Ethics, integrity, gender & open science	Strengthen institutional implementation of Open Science practices through formal guidelines, training and monitoring mechanisms.	% of research units applying Open Science practices; existence of institutional guidelines.	Limited institutional guidance and implementation.	≥70% of units applying Open Science guidelines.	Guidelines developed and pilot implementation started.	Research Office	Due date 2029 (mid) - 2031 (full)	Develop Open Science policy; provide training; integrate into research workflows; monitor adoption.

Pillar	SMART objective	KPI	Baseline (2025)	Target (2031)	Interim target (Mid-term)	Responsible owner	Due date	Key initiatives
Pillar 2 – Assessment, recruitment progression (OTM-R) &	Establish a fully standardised and transparent recruitment system aligned with OTM-R principles across all units.	% of recruitment procedures using standardised templates and documented evaluation criteria.	Fragmented procedures; limited publicity	≥95% of procedures standardised and documented. 15% increase the use of publication platforms	≥60% adoption across units	Research Committee	Due date 2029 (mid) - 2031 (full)	Develop more strict recruitment feedback templates; define evaluation criteria; introduce scoring systems; publish guidelines
Pillar 2 – Assessment, recruitment progression (OTM-R) &	Implement a structured and transparent evaluation system including feedback mechanisms for all recruitment and promotion procedures.	% of candidates receiving documented feedback; existence of formal evaluation reports.	Limited traceability and lack of feedback mechanisms.	≥90% of procedures include documented feedback	Feedback system piloted and operational	HR Office / Research Committee	Due date 2027 (mid) - 2031 (full)	Introduce feedback protocols; create evaluation report templates; ensure documentation and communication procedures

Pillar 2 Assessment, recruitment progression (OTM-R)	- &	Integrate recognition of diverse career paths (academic, intersectoral, mobility) into recruitment and progression criteria.	% of procedures including criteria for mobility, interdisciplinary experience and non-linear careers.	Limited recognition of diverse career paths	≥50% of procedures include expanded criteria	Revised criteria and approved piloted.	Career Centre	Due date 2029 (mid) - 2031 (full)	Revise evaluation criteria; include mobility/interdisciplinarity; align with European frameworks.
Pillar 2 Assessment, recruitment progression (OTM-R)	- &	Establish an institutional monitoring and reporting system for recruitment and progression (OTM-R compliance tracking).	Annual institutional report on recruitment procedures; % of procedures monitored.	No systematic monitoring or reporting.	Annual monitoring system fully operational; ≥90% coverage.	Monitoring system established; first report produced.	Research Committee / HR Office	Due date 2029 (mid) - 2031 (full)	Develop monitoring framework; collect recruitment data; publish annual reports; ensure compliance tracking.

Pillar	SMART objective	KPI	Baseline (2025)	Target (2031)	Interim target (Mid-term)	Responsible owner	Due date	Key initiatives
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Pillar 3 – Working conditions and practices	Establish an institutional system for monitoring working conditions, including well-being, workload, flexibility, and work-life balance.	Existence of institutional monitoring system; number of annual reports produced. 2 events for raising awareness	No systematic monitoring; limited evidence of structured HR metrics.	Fully operational monitoring system with annual reporting. 2 events	Monitoring system established; first report produced. 1 event	HR Office / Research Committee (ELKE)	Due date 2029 (mid) - 2031 (full)	Develop monitoring framework; define indicators (well-being, workload); conduct annual surveys; publish reports.
Pillar 3 – Working conditions and practices	Implement a formal staff feedback and engagement system to support continuous improvement of working conditions.	% of researchers participating in annual feedback processes; # of actions implemented based on feedback.	Feedback mechanisms not systematically implemented.	≥70% participation; annual action plans implemented.	Feedback system operational; ≥40% participation.	HR Office / CSC (Career Support Centre)/ Research Committee (ELKE)	Due date 2029 (mid) - 2031 (full)	Introduce annual staff surveys; create feedback channels; ensure follow-up action plans; communicate results.

Pillar 3 – Working conditions and practices	Improve accessibility and transparency of institutional support services (training, mobility, well-being, administrative support).	% of researchers reporting awareness of available services; centralised access platform established	Limited accessibility and visibility of opportunities	≥80% awareness; centralised access system fully operational	Centralised platform developed and launched.	Research Committee (ELKE)/ CSC	Due date 2029 (mid) - 2031 (full)	Develop central information platform; consolidate services; improve communication; integrate support services.
Pillar 3 – Working conditions and practices	Strengthen coordination between HR, research and administrative units to ensure consistent implementation of working condition policies.	Existence of coordination mechanism. Annual focus group with representatives.	Fragmented responsibilities and weak coordination.	Formal coordination mechanism established; 5 FGs public reports	Coordination structure established and operational. 2 FGs public reports	HR Office / Research Committee (ELKE)	Due date 2029 (mid) - 2031 (full)	Establish coordination committee; define roles; align HR and research services; monitor implementation.

Pillar	SMART objective	KPI	Baseline (2025)	Target (2031)	Interim target (Mid-term)	Responsible owner	Due date	Key initiatives
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Pillar 4 – Research careers and talent development	Establish and operationalise a Career Support Centre (CSC) as the central institutional structure for researcher career development.	CSC formally established and operational ; # of services delivered annually.	No centralised career support structure; fragmented support.	Fully operational CSC delivering integrated services institution-wide.	CSC established and pilot services launched.	Research Committee (ELKE) / HR Office	Due date 2029 (mid) - 2031 (full)	Establish CSC; define mandate and services; allocate staff; launch pilot services (career guidance, mentoring, training support).
Pillar 4 – Research careers and talent development	Develop and institutionalise a micro-credential and certification framework aligned with ResearchComp.	Number of micro-credentials developed and awarded; % of ESRs certified.	No structured certification framework.	≥10 micro-credentials developed; ≥60% of ESRs certified.	Framework developed; ≥3 micro-credentials piloted.	CSC / Research Committee (ELKE)	Due date 2029 (mid) - 2031 (full)	Design micro-credential framework; align with ResearchComp; develop certification pathways; implement digital tracking of credentials.
Pillar 4 – Research careers and talent development	Implement structured training programmes for ESR transversal skills (ResearchComp-aligned).	% of ESRs participating in structured training programmes.	Training provision ad hoc and not systematised.	≥90% ESR participation in structured programmes	Training programmes launched; ≥50% participation.	CSC / HR Office/ Research Committee (ELKE)	Due date 2029 (mid) - 2031 (full)	Develop structured training curriculum (self-management, cognitive, collaborative skills); deliver

								regular training cycles; monitor participation.
Pillar 4 – Research careers and talent development	Integrate the CSC into institutional governance and implement structured career development systems.	CSC formally embedded in governance; % of researchers with IDPs; % participating in mentoring programmes.	No formal career development systems; no IDPs or structured mentoring.	CSC fully integrated; $\geq 70\%$ researchers with IDPs; mentoring system operational.	Governance integration completed; pilot IDP and mentoring systems implemented.	Rectorate / HR Office/ Research Committee (ELKE)	Due date 2029 (mid) - 2031 (full)	Formalise CSC in governance structure; introduce annual appraisal cycles; implement IDPs; establish mentoring programmes; monitor participation.

3.3 PHASED IMPLEMENTATION TIMELINE AND RESOURCING

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

Implementation is structured across four strategic phases:

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

3.3.1 IMPLEMENTATION ROADMAP (STRATEGIC LEVEL)

Template Table: Institutional SAP Roadmap

Phase	Timeframe	Key focus	Key staff to be included	Main measures implemented	Expected outcome
Initiation	Year 1	Governance setup, system design, baseline consolidation, institutional approvals.	Rectorate; HR Office; Research Committee (ELKE); Legal/Compliance Unit; Faculty representatives; Administrative units	Establish SAP governance structure; formal approval of SAP; design of CSC model; development of HR standardisation frameworks (recruitment, evaluation); design of training programmes and micro-credential framework; development of monitoring and audit systems; consolidation of baseline data.	Governance structures operational; SAP formally adopted; system designs completed; institutional readiness established.
Rollout	Years 1-3	Implementation of core systems and launch of priority measures.	Rectorate; HR Office; Research Committee (ELKE); Legal/Compliance Unit; Faculty representatives; Administrative units; IT support.	Establish and launch Career Support Centre (CSC); implement structured training programmes; introduce recruitment standardisation and evaluation systems (OTM-R); launch micro-	Core systems operational; structured services delivered; increased participation in training and career support; improved transparency and accessibility.

				credential framework; introduce monitoring systems (ethics, HR, working conditions); implement feedback and engagement mechanisms. Researchers to be frequently informed of relevant funding opportunities based on their field of expertise. Providing institutional data, legal documents, and validations required for international portals, as well as relevant support. Facilitating connections between different departments or external academic and industry partners for interdisciplinary projects.	
Consolidation	Years 3-4	Integration into institutional processes, monitoring,	Rectorate; HR Office; Research Committee (ELKE); Legal/Compliance unit;	Full integration of CSC services into institutional operations; expansion of training and certification	Systems stabilised and consistently applied; measurable improvements in KPIs; increased institutional coherence and efficiency.

		and system optimisation.	Faculty representatives; Administrative units.	programmes; systematic KPI monitoring; refinement of HR procedures; strengthening coordination across units; alignment with institutional strategies.	
Institutionalisation	Years 4-5	Formal embedding into governance, regulations, and budgeting structures.	Rectorate; HR Office; Research Committee (ELKE); Legal/Compliance Unit; Faculty representatives; Administrative units Institutional Office.	Formal integration of CSC into governance structure; incorporation of HR systems (appraisal, IDPs, recruitment standards) into institutional regulations; long-term budgeting for career development structures; full alignment with European frameworks; sustainability planning.	Full institutional embedding of reforms; sustainable HR and career systems; long-term impact ensured beyond project duration.

3.4 HUMAN CAPACITY AND STRUCTURAL ENABLERS

3.4.1 HUMAN RESOURCE ALIGNMENT

Template Table: Institutional roles for SAP delivery

Role / Function	Core responsibility	Competency Profile	Institutional unit
SAP Coordinator	Head of the SMART project	-Strategic planning and project management -Strong engagement of existing and new network -Communication skills	Research Committee (ELKE)
Pillar 1 Lead	President of Research Ethics and Integrity Committee (REIC)	-Knowledge of research ethics & integrity -Research experience -Knowledge of regulations on research ethics and personal data protection -Representation of diverse academic fields to ensure balanced decisions	Research Committee (ELKE)
Pillar 2 Lead	Head of the Department of EU-Funded Programmes and Initiatives	-Knowledge of HR policies in academia - Experience with recruitment, evaluation and career development -Awareness of EU gender	Research Committee (ELKE)

		requirements in research -Experience with national and EU research strategy	
Pillar 3 Lead	Head of the Department of for Training and Lifelong Learning Programs	-Experience in design, implementation, and evaluation of training programs -Knowledge of EU funding frameworks and educational initiatives -Expertise in education and lifelong learning policies and frameworks -Strong organizational, coordination, and communication skills	Research Committee (ELKE)
Pillar 4 Lead / CSC Lead	Vice-Rector of research and life long education	-Strategic leadership and governance experience - Institutional policy development - Decision-making and oversight capabilities - Experience with national and EU research strategy	Rectory Authority
HR Representative	Head of HR Office	-Knowledge of HR policies in academia - Experience with recruitment, evaluation, and career development	HR Office

		- Understanding of researchers' working conditions	
Monitoring & data officer	Legal Officer	- Knowledge of GDPR and data protection regulations - Experience in compliance monitoring and reporting - Analytical and data management skills	Research Committee (ELKE)

For SAP implementation, it is necessary to demonstrate:

- Organizational ownership
- Leadership accountability
- Feasibility without requiring financial commitments

3.5 GOVERNANCE AND DECISION STRUCTURE

3.5.1 GOVERNANCE MODEL

Template Table : SAP governance structure

Role	Function	Decision authority	Reporting line
Sponsor (Rector / Vice-Rector/Dean)	Strategic oversight	Approves annual SAP updates	Rectorate
SAP Steering Committee	Coordination and monitoring	Validates KPI changes	Dean
Pillar Leads	Operational delivery	Accountable for objectives	Vice-Rector of research and life long education
CSC Lead	Career system implementation	Responsible for Pillar 4	Vice-Rector of research and life long education

ESR Advisory Panel	Consultative input	Advisory	Head of the SMART project
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3.5.2 REVIEW AND DECISION CADENCE

Template Table: Review framework

Review type	Frequency	Responsible body	Output
Operational review	Quarterly / Semi-Annual	Career Support Centre (CSC); HR Office; Research Committee (ELKE).	Progress reports on implementation of actions; KPI tracking updates; identification of implementation issues; corrective action plans.
Strategic SAP review	Annual	Rectorate; SAP Steering Committee; HR Office; Research Committee (ELKE).	Annual SAP performance report; strategic adjustments to objectives and measures; alignment with institutional strategy and EU frameworks.
Mid-term review	Year 3	Rectorate; SAP Steering Committee; Research Committee (ELKE).	Comprehensive evaluation report; assessment of KPI achievement; validation of reform progress; recommendations for adjustments and scaling.

Final review	Year 5	Rectorate; Research Committee (ELKE).	Final impact assessment report; evaluation of institutionalisation of reforms; sustainability plan; integration into long-term institutional strategy.
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3.5.3 RISK ESCALATION AND CORRECTIVE MECHANISM

Template Table: Escalation logic

Risk Level	Trigger	Escalation path	Corrective window
Moderate	Deviation from KPI targets ($\leq 20\%$ gap); delays in implementation of specific measures; low participation in training or services.	Escalation to HR Office / CSC coordination team; internal review within operational units; reporting to SAP Steering Committee.	1-3 months
High	Significant KPI underperformance ($> 20\%$ gap); delays in key deliverables (e.g., CSC services, recruitment system, training programmes); repeated operational issues.	Escalation to SAP Steering Committee; involvement of Rectorate; formal corrective action plan required; reallocation of resources if needed.	3-6 months
Critical	Failure to implement core structural commitments (e.g., CSC not operational, no training system, no monitoring system); systemic failure across multiple pillars; risk to SAP objectives or compliance.	Immediate escalation to Rectorate and institutional leadership; activation of institutional governance bodies; external/internal review triggered; strategic intervention and restructuring of implementation approach.	6-10 months

4. MONITORING, EVALUATION AND POLICY FEEDBACK



The Strategic Action Plan (SAP) is monitored through a structured three-level framework:

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

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

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

4.1 KPI MONITORING (OPERATIONAL LEVEL)

KPI monitoring tracks the implementation of objectives defined per pillar.

Template Table : KPI monitoring overview

Pillar	Objective reference	KPI	Monitoring tool / data source	Reporting Frequency	Responsible Role
Pillar 1	P1-O1, P1-O2, P1-O3, P1-O4	% training participation; # audits; % GEP implementation; % Open Science adoption.	Training records; audit reports; GEP reports; Research Office data.	Annual	Pillar 1 Lead
Pillar 2	P2-O1, P2-O2, P2-O3, P2-O4	% standardised recruitment; % feedback provided; % updated criteria; % monitored procedures.	HR recruitment system; evaluation forms; QA reports.	Annual	Pillar 2 Lead
Pillar 3	P3-O1, P3-O2, P3-O3, P3-O4	% staff participation in surveys; % awareness of services; # coordination actions.	Staff surveys; HR data; CSC platform analytics.	Annual	Pillar 3 Lead
Pillar 4	P4-O1, P4-O2, P4-O3, P4-O4	CSC operational; % ESR training participation; # micro-credentials; % IDPs/mentoring.	CSC system; training records; certification registry.	Semi-Annual (CSC)	CSC Lead

Monitoring output:

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

4.2 BENEFITS REALISATION TRACKING (INSTITUTIONAL LEVEL)

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

Template Table: Institutional Benefits Tracking

Expected institutional benefit	Indicator	Measurement source	Target year
Increased transparency and standardisation in recruitment and progression processes.	% of recruitment procedures using standardised criteria and documented evaluation.	HR reports; QA monitoring reports.	2031
Operationalised and institutionally integrated Career Support Centre (CSC).	CSC fully integrated into governance and delivering services across all faculties.	CSC annual reports; institutional governance documents.	2031
Improved researcher and engagement with institutional support structures.	% of researchers reporting satisfaction with career support, training and working conditions.	Annual staff/researcher surveys.	2031
Increased access to and participation in structured training, mentoring and career development opportunities.	% of ESRs participating in training and mentoring programmes.	CSC records; training attendance data	2031
Integration of ResearchComp-aligned skills development and certification into institutional HR framework.	# of micro-credentials implemented and recognised	CSC certification registry; HR policy documents.	2031

	within HR processes.		

4.3 POLICY FEEDBACK AND ALIGNMENT (STRATEGIC LEVEL)

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

Template Table: Policy feedback mechanism

SAP output	Institutional integration mechanism	External feedback channel	Review frequency
Standardised recruitment and evaluation systems	Integration into institutional HR regulations and procedures; formal adoption by Rectorate/Senate; alignment with European Charter and Council Recommendation principles.	HRS4R reporting cycles; national research policy bodies; consortium-level policy reports.	Annual
Establishment and governance integration of Career Support Centre (CSC)	Formal inclusion in institutional governance structure and service framework; integration into HR and researcher support policies; contribution to institutional strategy.	Consortium reporting; national and ERA-level discussions on researcher careers and support structures.	Annual
Micro-credential framework aligned with ResearchCom p.	Integration into HR development policies, training regulations and certification systems; alignment with European skills frameworks and Council Recommendation	ERA working groups; consortium policy outputs; national qualification and skills discussions.	Annual
KPI monitoring and institutional performance	Integration into institutional quality assurance and performance management systems; use for internal	HRS4R action plan updates; national quality assurance frameworks; consortium monitoring reports.	Annual

tracking system	policy updates and decision-making.		
Gender equality and Open Science implementation	Integration into institutional strategies, HR policies and research governance; alignment with European Charter principles and ERA priorities.	European Charter/HRS4R processes; national and EU-level policy reporting; consortium dissemination activities.	Annual

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

5 REFERENCES AND RELATED DOCUMENTS

5.1 REFERENCE LIST

If applicable

5.2 PROJECT DOCUMENTS

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

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

5.3 REGULATORY AND POLICY FRAMEWORKS REFERENCED

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

- [Council Recommendation on a European Framework for Research Careers](#)
- [European Charter for Researchers](#)
- [ERA Policy Agenda 2025-2027 | European Research Area Platform](#)
- *Institutional frameworks to be added*