Vrije Universiteit Brussel
Human Resources Strategy for Researchers
Report 2024-2027

Approved by the Academic Council on the 22nd of January 2024

HR EXCELLENCE IN RESEARCH

Table of Contents

1. Vrije Universiteit Brussel

1.1 Urban engaged university in Brussels

The Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB) is an urban engaged university in Brussels, sitting at the heart of Europe. With high-quality scientific research and tailor-made education, our university makes an active and committed contribution to a fair and more sustainable society.

The VUB has more than 21,000 students, from 145 countries, providing over 150 courses. About 4,000 employees contribute to the mission of our university every day, of whom 2/3 are researchers (Facts and Figures 2021-2022).

The VUB is a comprehensive university with 8 faculties within the scientific domains of Social and Human Sciences, Life Sciences & Medicine, Natural Science and (Bioscience) Engineering.

Education and research activities take place on several campuses: the Main Campus and the Usquare Campus in Ixelles, the Health Campus with a University Hospital in Jette, the Photonics Campus in Gooik and different teacher training locations: Diest, Leuven and Anderlecht.

1.2 EUTOPIA European University

In 2019, the VUB became a proud founding partner of EUTOPIA, one of the first 17 alliances selected by the European Commission (pilot phase 2019-2022). As of 2023, 10 European universities are involved in EUTOPIA MORE Erasmus+ European University Initiative (2022-2026).[1]

In the EUTOPIA MORE project Integrated Connected Communities are a key feature, i.e., integrated thematic networks where teachers, researchers, and students cooperate in cross-campus knowledge activities. These communities do not impose change but aim to strengthen existing good practices in challenge-based learning and research by creating interuniversity connectedness at a European scale.

By signing the EUTOPIA Inclusion Manifesto, the VUB pledges to transform its structures, practices and culture to foster openness and inclusion, which it recognises as fundamental to the creation of a socially relevant university alliance, geared towards inclusive excellence.

Finally, intensive cooperation is taking place between the HR Departments of the EUTOPIA partners with many joint actions being developed, e.g., fostering staff mobility with the development of a Researcher Mobility Portal (cf. action 8 Internationalisation and an optimal start at VUB).

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[1] EUTOPIA partner universities: Babeș-Bolyai University (UBB), Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB), Ca'Foscari University of Venice (UNIVE), CY Cergy Paris Université (CY), Technische Universität Dresden (TUD), University of Gothenburg (GU), University of Ljubljana (UL), NOVA University Lisbon (UNL), Pompeu Fabra University-Barcelona (UPF), University of Warwick (UW).

1.3 History and humanistic values

After the Belgian revolution of 1830, a progressive constitution was installed including the principle of freedom of education. In 1834, Pierre-Théodore Verhaegen, a liberal freethinker, lawyer and politician, advocated the establishment of a Free University. From this French-speaking "Université Libre de Belgique" and subsequently "Université Libre de Bruxelles", the Dutch-speaking Vrije Universiteit Brussel emerged on 28 May 1970.

At the VUB, we embrace humanism as the foundation of our university experience. Freedom, equality, and solidarity with society are the guiding principles that shape our commitment, respect, and empathy. Together with the principle of Free Inquiry they underline the importance of self-reflection and the development of a critical, open minded and creative attitude vis-à-vis scientific and social issues. From these values and mindset, the VUB DNA so to speak, it is only a small step to the principles stipulated by the European Charter and Code for Researchers.

1.4 VUB Governance

The university is centrally led by the Rector and four Vice Rectors, each responsible for a specific policy domain: Education and Student Affairs, Research, Innovation and Valorisation, Internationalisation. At the central level, the four main governing bodies are: the University Council, the Board of Directors, the Academic Council, and the Management Committee. Four consultative bodies support the Academic Council: the Education Council, the Research Council, the Innovation and Valorisation Council, and the International Policy Council. The various staff sections (Academic and Administrative & Technical Staff) but also students are represented in each of these councils. In addition, several central Departments and services support the day-to-day operational functioning of the VUB, such as the Infrastructure , Finance and ICT Department, People and Organisation (P&O), the Prevention and Environmental Service, and the Marketing and Communication Service.

At the decentralised level, the university consists of 9 faculties and the Brussels School of Governance, each headed by a dean or chair. Each faculty also consists of various Departments and research groups. The faculty council is the highest governing body of a faculty and determines the policy of the faculty in the field of education, research and services. It is composed of representatives from all levels of academic staff and students. The faculty board is responsible for the day-to-day management of the faculty and consists of at least the dean, the vice dean and the academic secretary.

Currently, our core processes and governance are being evaluated in order to improve administrative and governance efficiency (cf. 1.6 Strategic Planning and the 5th General Strategic Plan).

1.5 Human Resources policy for researchers

The HR policy of the VUB also has both a central and a decentralised component. The recruitment and appointment of researchers is supported and administratively monitored by the central HR Department (People&Organisation). The actual recruitment, selection, follow-up and supervision of researchers takes place at the level of the faculties, Departments and research groups. The regulatory framework regarding the recruitment, selection, follow-up and supervision of researchers is determined centrally by the Research Department and the Research Council.

1.6 Strategic planning and the 5th General Strategic Plan

VUB policies are based on multi-year General Strategic Plans (GSP) which are primarily inspired by the policy memorandum of the Rector and supported by a broad consultation, discussion and approval in the appropriate governing bodies of the VUB. The GSP forms the context in which the Vice Rectors and the faculties have drawn up their domain specific policy plans.

The current and 5th General Strategic Plan: "Cherish what is good, strengthen what we must" (2023-2027) is built around five major pillars. Four of these – VUB as a 'learning', 'open', 'connected', 'warm and 'appreciative' organisation – had already featured in the two previous policy plans. For GSP 5 a fifth pillar was added: VUB as an 'efficient' organisation. This new pillar is aimed at increasing organisational resilience. This is a necessary response to a number of developments in the political, cultural, social and financial environment. Improving governance and administrative efficiency is a top priority organisation-wide for the years 2023-2027.

Policy plans are monitored based on the PDCA cycle methodology (Plan-Do-Check-Act). PDCA cycles are defined at the level of the university and faculties. At each of these levels, policy plans or action plans are developed to which ideally qualitative objectives and/or critical performance indicators (KPIs) are linked. Periodic monitoring of these objectives measures project progress and the degree of realisation of the policy plans. If the objectives are not achieved, the reasons are documented, and remedial actions are proposed and the project planning and/or objectives are adjusted.

The university-level PDCA cycle is part of the GSP process which is, together with the multi-year budget, submitted to the Board of Directors for approval. It forms the university's external accountability to the government and to the public. The GSP monitoring process is coordinated by the Strategy and Policy Department.

2. HRS4R at VUB

2.1 History of the label 2011-2023

The VUB was one of the HRS4R pioneers and belonged to the second cohort of institutions when it first submitted its action plan in 2011 (reporting period 2012-2014). In those days, HRS4R was conceived as a project which was coordinated by the P&O Department. The renewal of the HRS4R-label in 2014 came with a gap analysis and a new action plan for the period 2015-2016.

Since then, the VUB witnessed an ongoing improvement process at the level of HR strategic planning. A series of measures were taken aimed at the implementation, refining, steering and upgrading of its HR policies for researchers, in compliance with the European Charter & Code for Researchers. Most of the actions envisaged in 2011 and 2014 are now incorporated into the day-to-day policies and practices of the relevant VUB stakeholders. Moreover, a significant growth in the number of students enrolled at all levels (bachelor, master and PhD), a multiplicity of prestigious European and other projects, and the continuous endeavours to apply best practices, has led to a general professionalisation of central support services and the digitalisation of processes.

However, the VUB did not succeed in overcoming the project status of HRS4R, namely, to embed HRS4R and its evaluation cycle in the organisation in a structural way. In addition, several key features necessary for attaining the label were lacking (see points 2.3, 2.4, 2.5, 2.6, 2.8 of this report). The initial renewal phase of the HRS4R-award that started in 2021 was subsequently put on hold leading to this second renewal phase.

2.2 About this report: approach and actors

With this report including new HRS4R actions for 2024-2027 (see point 3 of this report), the VUB seeks to formulate answers to the mandatory recommendations made by the external assessors and as formulated in the evaluation report (cf. site visit March 2023).

It contains the outline of how HRS4R will take shape at the VUB in the period 2024-2027 and was **drafted by a transversal team** (provisional Operational Committee) which was established to coordinate the current (second) renewal phase of the HRS4R label:

- Deputy Director of the **People&Organisation Department** – Majlinda Abduli
- Coordinator of the Researcher Training and Development Office, **Research Department** – Dr. Hannelore De Grande
- Policy Officer at the **Policy and Strategy Department** – Lisa Wouters

An intensive follow-up of the preparatory work done by the provisional Operational Committee has been carried out by the Rector, the four Vice Rectors, the General Manager of the VUB, the Director of the Rectorate, the Director of the Research Department, and the P&O Director - on 9 May, 26 May, 23 June, 8 September, 26 November and 1 December 2023.

On 25 November 2023, HRS4R was also discussed with the deans of the 9 faculties.

This report was submitted for advice to the Research Council (13 December 2023) and the Management Committee (18 December 2023) and was finally approved by the Academic Council (22 January 2024).

In the following chapters the essential building blocks of HRS4R and hence important points for improvement at the VUB are elaborated, namely:

- − Open Transparent and Merit Based Recruitment (OTM-R) (see point 2.3)
- − Communication and visibility of the label (see point 2.4)
- − HRS4R governance (see point 2.5)
- − Stakeholder involvement (see point 2.6)
- − Key features new Action Plan (see point 2.7)
- − Monitoring implementation progress and data evidence (see point 2.8)

2.3 Open Transparent and Merit Based Recruitment (OTM-R)

From the start, the VUB has embraced the OTM-R principles of the European Charter and Code for Researchers, namely open, transparent and merit based. These principles are very closely aligned with the VUB values of being: warm, open, learning and connected as a university community – and with the principles of the Enlightenment: critical thinking, Free Inquiry and humanism. The VUB today opts for growth, innovation and internationalisation. The VUB wants to create an attractive and supportive working environment in the heart of the city of Brussels and Europe. An ideal workplace for groundbreaking and high-tech research and qualitative career development for researchers, both nationally and internationally.

A new OTM-R policy vision text (2023) describes the recruitment process with the OTM-R principles as leitmotiv and can be found on the new VUB job website. See also annex 5.2 below for the full text.

Priorities in the further implementation of the OTM-R principles are the launching and development of a new job website (see action 4). This employer branding action is aimed at creating more international visibility for the VUB as an employer, increasing the numbers of vacancies published on Euraxess, and maximising the pool of qualified candidates for positions. Furthermore, to meet the OTM-R principles, P&O and the faculties will work together more intensively in the future to professionalise the overall recruitment process, to monitor and meet higher quality standards. A toolkit to support academic recruitment and selection is to be developed (see action 3) next to the optimalisation of the HR digital tool and the facilitating of its use (see action 5). Finally, the VUB will systematically evaluate the hiring and onboarding process by sending a survey to new hires. With this survey, the overall candidate experiences will be measured, and an assessment will take place if the OTM-R principles were applied during the selection procedure (see action 6).

2.4 Communication and visibility of the label

Two objectives are paramount for the period 2024-2027: firstly, to provide up-to-date information about HRS4R for internal and external stakeholders and secondly, increasing awareness and visibility of the label at the VUB. Four concrete actions contribute to achieving the set objectives.

2.4.1 A public webpage

A dedicated public webpage with information about HRS4R in general and at the VUB, that gives access to relevant documents and provides contact details is to be integrated into the new VUB job website Working for the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (see action 4). This site also contains the new OTM-R policy vision text (2023) and transparent information about the selection process, complaints procedure, and

general employment conditions. It is easily accessible via the menu bar on the VUB homepage. Moreover, cross-references will be made between this webpage and those on research (vision and mission) and those about the VUB (university of the future).

2.4.2 Communication via existing channels and formats

The VUB communicates at least once a year about HRS4R by means of the general online newsletter for researchers and the specific newsletter regarding training & development for PhD researchers, postdoctoral researchers and supervisors (Research Department) and the general newsletter for all VUB staff (Marketing and Communication Department). Also, (other) media items will refer to HRS4R via a tag system, creating an overview of all HRS4R and HRS4R related news and events posts.

Decisions related to HRS4R taken by central governing bodies will be posted on VUB.beslist (for VUB staff only) enhancing internal publicity. The integration of HRS4R into existing public reports such as the VUB Facts and Figures and the biennial Report to Society provides external exposure on the other hand.

2.4.3 Raising awareness during onboarding

We inform new colleagues about HRS4R during the welcome day for new employees organised three times per year, the annual newcomer's kick-off event for professorial staff and by means of the introduction e-learning module for PhD researchers.

2.4.4 The appointment of a communication advisor

A communications manager from the VUB Marketing and Communication Department (i.e. Ben Van Beeck) attends at least once a year a meeting of the Operational Committee to formulate HRS4R communication advice, draft a communication calendar, and in the end, to embed HRS4R in general communication processes and practices.

2.5 HRS4R Governance at VUB

From 2024 onwards a two-levelled structure will be implemented.

2.5.1 Operational level

An Operational Committee meets 3 to 4 times a year and is responsible for:

- Monitoring the implementation of the action plan (and documenting the associated process)
- Preparing the annual reporting to the Strategic Committee
- Preparing initiatives in the field of communication
- Contact point for internal stakeholders and liaison with the HRS4R/RTD office
- Coordinating the HRS4R evaluation cycle every 36 months (and documenting the associated process)

The Operational Committee is coordinated by Lisa Wouters and Chris Beirens from the Strategy Team of the **Strategy and Policy Department**, who will organise the meetings, set the agenda and watch over the link with strategic monitoring at the VUB (see 1.6 of this report).

The Operational Committee relies maximally on the cooperation of the **Research Department** and the Researcher Training & Development Team in particular, namely Dr. Hannelore De Grande, Dr. Loren Pauwels and Dr. Anne-Sofie Vanhaeght, together with the **P&O Department** and the Academic Recruitment Policy Officer in particular, namely Ragna Van Vossole, Majlinda Abduli and Elke Ceuppens.

Once a year internal stakeholders are invited to (voluntarily) join the Operational Committee to discuss and evaluate the progress of the implementation of the actions. Also, a discussion on this topic will take place every year at the level of the **Research Council**. These preparatory discussions will shape the annual report to the Academic Council (Strategic Committee).
Communications manager Ben Van Beeck also joins the Operational Committee at least once a year to discuss and develop communication initiatives and draft a communication calendar.

2.5.2 Strategic level
The **Academic Council** will take up the role of Strategic Committee and consequently, monitor at least once a year the implementation of the action plan on a strategic level.

The Academic Council is an established central governing body that is responsible for academic matters (including the approval of the appointment of professorial staff of 0.5 FTE and more) and is chaired by the Rector. Moreover, the four Vice Rectors, 9 faculties (deans), other staff sections and students are represented in this council. The General Manager, the Director of the Rectorate and the Director of P&O also attend this meeting.

See here for the current composition of the [Academic Council 2023-2024](#).

2.6 Stakeholder involvement

2.6.1 Involvement of researchers in the renewal phase
On 20 October 2023, the first VUB **HRS4R Stakeholder Forum** took place (world café format) during which, together with a diverse range of researchers including the Rector and Vice Rector for Research, priority actions were discussed within four themes:

- Recruitment and selection (lead by Majlinda Abduli and Ragna Van Vossole)
- Training and development (lead by Hannelore De Grande and Loren Pauwels)
- Wellbeing (lead by academic coordinator wellbeing Prof. Dr. Valéry Ann Jacobs and Noëmi Verreyen)
- Ethics, professionalism and equality (lead by Director Research Mieke Gijsemans en Lisa Wouters)

The group of attendees consisted of various profiles in terms of career phase (R1, R2, R3 and R4) and (domain-specific) background. Also, two academic directors joined the discussion. See annex 5.3 below for the attendees.

An executive summary highlighting the main takeaways of the discussions was sent to the attendees shortly after the workshop. In mid-November 2023, a feedback round was organised by mail. Forum participants, as well as other interested researchers, were asked to provide feedback on the draft version of the action plan. This input was again incorporated into the HRS4R actions 2024-2027.

2.6.2 Structural involvement of the research community (in the implementation process)

At least once a year, (representatives of) the research community are invited to the Operational Committee to discuss the implementation of the action plan (see also 2.5.1 of this report). When preparing a new action plan, (representatives of) the research community are consulted and asked to provide input, for example by means of a participatory workshop organised by the Operational Committee (cf. the above-mentioned world café). Furthermore, at the beginning of every new cycle, an (online) information session is set up, targeted at the broad VUB community to inform all our (interested) internal stakeholders about the new action plan.

Researchers of all faculties are also represented by their dean or representative in the Academic Council, the governing body which takes up the role of Strategic Committee and which will at least once a year oversee the implementation process.

The Operational Committee can be contacted for all questions related to HRS4R via HRS4R@vub.be

2.7 Key features of the new Action Plan

The HRS4R action plan of 2021, drawn up at the time of the 4th Generic Strategic Plan, lacked a clear structure and precise indicators, indicating the responsible unit of each action, providing timeframes etc. Above that, internal stakeholders weren't consulted during the drafting process.

Consequently, it was decided by the provisional Operational and Strategic Committee to make a tabula rasa and develop a whole new action plan that builds upon the action plan of 2014 and its self-evaluation, and that is in line with the current 5th strategic planning and monitoring cycle (2023-2027). Thus, aligning maximally with the contemporary policy context of the VUB, i.e. the Strategic Plan of the Rectorate, the Strategic Policy Plan of the Vice Rectorate Research 2022-2026, the Gender Equality Plan 2024-2026, and the Global Prevention Plan 2024-2028.

Strengthening our internal organisation is a priority in the GSP 5 (see 1.6 of this report). This entails the evaluation and simplifying of our core processes and governance, and adapting our internal organisation and services accordingly in the coming years. This may impact the implementation of the HRS4R actions.

The new action plan 2024-2027 is the outcome of a participatory and collaborative process. The input of internal stakeholders was integrated (see 2.6.1 of this report) and work was done transversally across the central support services and Departments.[2]

Finally, HRS4R and the new action plan was discussed by the Management Committee, the deans of the faculties, the Research Council and the Academic Council, aimed at creating support, transparency and accountability of the institution with regards to HRS4R and the implementation of the actions. Also, communication and awareness raising initiatives (see 2.4 of this report) will step by step enable a cultural change in the university towards more HRS4R-sensitivity. Last but not least, HRS4R will be embedded in the strategic monitoring of the VUB, performed by the Strategy and Policy Department which also coordinates the Operational Committee (see 1.6 of this report).

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[2] With the contribution of Simon Amez, Chris Beirens, Dimitri Bonnewijn, Elke Ceuppens, Sarah Inghelbrecht, Valéry Ann Jacobs, Annelies Jongert, Loren Pauwels, Robin Reul, Anne-Sophie Vanhaeght, Ragna Van Vossole, Noëmi Verreyen and Annelore Wils.

2.8 Monitoring implementation progress and data evidence

The monitoring of the implementation of the actions is carried out by the Operational Committee, together with the documenting of this process, and will be maximally embedded within the existing strategic monitoring processes (see 1.6 of this report). Unlike the previous HRS4R action plan (2014) clear responsible units and timeframes are indicated in the new action plan 2024-2027. Stakeholders were consulted for the drafting of the new actions and the main agents for implementing the actions (P&O and Research Department) are part of the Operational Committee. The Strategy and Policy Department, a unit that has know-how and experience in monitoring and reporting, coordinates the Operational Committee which will oversee implementation progress. In addition, at least once a year this progress will be discussed at the Academic Council (Strategic Committee) and communicated to VUB stakeholders and the researcher community. Also, by maximally aligning the HRS4R-actions with the current VUB policy context and plans, we ensure the implementation of these actions.

Furthermore, the VUB has made significant progress in the field of data quality and management over recent years, aimed at developing evidence-based policy. Central support services and Departments are increasingly using (Power BI) data dashboards for policy purposes; to collect, monitor, disclose and analyse data in a systematised way (cf. action 6 on data monitoring). The Operational Committee will investigate the optimalisation of data monitoring with regards to HRS4R.

An online Excel-document with a comprehensive overview of the implementation progress of the HRS4R-actions will be shared with the members of the Operational and the Strategic Committee which allows them to check upon the status of the actions at any time.

Timeline:

- Q1 2025: **first report** of the implementation progress to the Strategic Committee (prepared by the Operational Committee, with the input of our internal stakeholders and Research Council).
- Q1 2026: **mid-term evaluation** of the implementation progress discussed by the Strategic Committee (prepared by the Operational Committee, with the input of our internal stakeholders and Research Council).
- Q4 2026 - Q1 2027: **final evaluation** and preparation for the next renewal phase discussed by the Strategic Committee (prepared by the Operational Committee, with the input of our internal stakeholders and Research Council).

3. Self-evaluation 2014-2023 and HRS4R actions 2024-2027

3.1 Ethical and professional aspects

3.1.1 Strengths and weaknesses

The VUB supports its research community by raising awareness of ethical issues and providing guidelines how to address them. The VUB also provides a regulatory framework, training and services to ensure researchers meet their ethical obligations and to obtain the necessary authorisations.

- The VUB **Charter for Researchers** (2019) stipulates good conduct and the ethical requirements and expectations for researchers and supervisors. They are made aware of the Charter (printed version), when starting their collaboration and research.
- A **dedicated Legal and Ethics Office** (Research Department) was established which coordinates several ethical committees and published a VUB Ethics Casebook. Other policy officers providing support and advice are the Data Protection Officer, the Contact Point for Ethics and International Cooperation (human rights impacts) and the Access and Benefit Sharing Office (use of genetic materials, Nagoya Protocol).
- VUB organises **trainings and workshops** on research ethics and integrity. It is also one of the main components of the doctoral training program. VUB cooperated with other Flemish universities towards creating an online research integrity course: Mind the GAP, which is mandatory for VUB PhD researchers.
- Every year an **Ethics Week** takes place and every two years an Award for Excellent Supervisors is organised whereby ethical and professional aspects form part of the evaluation.

The **ethics and integrity policy** at the VUB is compliant with European and Belgian legislation but remains, by nature, a work in progress. Every year a new cohort of researchers and supervisors starts their projects. Throughout the discussions at the HRS4R Stakeholder Forum and during a brainstorming session among starting PhD researchers during the Ethics Week of 2023, it appeared that the VUB Charter for Researchers was not generally known among researchers. Also, the Charter is lacking guidelines on more recent subjects such as artificial intelligence, open science and collaboration outside academia.

Equality, diversity and inclusion actions have been implemented and subsequently embedded in the university processes and practices (Gender Action Plan 2014, Equality Action Plan of 2019 and of 2021), powered by an equality team and academic coordinator. In order to address gender balance in diverse governing bodies, gender balance was embedded into regulations. Furthermore, a robust reporting helpline was established were employees can report via a confidential channel concerns related to harassment, gender bias and discrimination. An LGBTQI+ policy is implemented, embracing diversity in all its forms. The VUB provides gender bias training programmes to selection committees on recognising and mitigating unconscious biases. Additionally, tutorials on gender in research have been developed and the monitoring of gender balance in (permanent) selection committees takes place. However, the overall monitoring of gender and diversity parameters is rather limited and happens to a large extent manually. This inhibits longitudinal fine-mazed monitoring aimed at developing evidence-based targets and policies.

Finally, the VUB has invested substantially in providing information, documents and templates in English and most information for researchers is accessible through internal sharepoint sites, yet communication remains a point of attention.

3.1.2 Remarks

Academic Freedom is one of the cornerstones of the VUB, embodying the university's commitment to fostering an atmosphere of intellectual curiosity and unrestricted inquiry. In the last years, this Academic Freedom has been put under pressure, both from inside influences as well as external ones.[3] At the VUB we recognize that Academic Freedom is indispensable for the cultivation of innovative ideas, critical thinking and the advancement of knowledge. During the renewal of the Charter for Researchers in 2024, extra attention will be paid to integrating guidelines on how to foster free inquiry while taking into account certain limitations (e.g. bans of cooperation with certain countries, certain legal constraints,…). The new framework that is being offered by the European Commission will be very informative and supportive in this respect.

Research is undergoing a shift in the way it is being conducted, disseminated and accessed, emphasising transparency, collaboration and accessibility. More specific guidelines are needed on how to publish open access, share data, involve citizens in the research process, and support researchers and research teams with infrastructure and training. The implementation is set out in the policy plans of the Research Department, following the KPI's of the Flemish government.

In October 2023, approval was granted for a new Gender Equality Plan 2024-2026, offering a comprehensive overview of the equality policy and associated measures. The implementation of this plan is spearheaded by a dedicated HR equality advisor (P&O), with support from the Strategy and Policy Department. The Rectorate's Policy Plan 2023-2027 (GSP 5) prominently features equality as one of its guiding principles.

Discussions at the HRS4R Stakeholder Forum underscored the intricate connection between equality issues and the growing internationalisation of the academic working environment, where cultural diversity is becoming the norm, presenting both advantages and challenges. Furthermore, researchers today operate within a highly competitive and individualistic context. The VUB is committed to fostering a supportive and inclusive working atmosphere, and the new plan includes various actions aimed at achieving this objective. Notably, investments are being made in cultural communication training for researchers and their supervisors.

3.1.3 HRS4R actions 2024-2027 related to ethical and professional aspects

Action 1	Enhancing the awareness around ethics and integrity rules in research practices
Principles Charter and Code	Research freedom, Ethical principles, 3 Professional responsibility, Professional attitude, Accountability, Good practice in research, Relation with supervisors, Continuing professional development
Responsible unit	Research, P&O
Timing	Updated Charter for Researchers (Q4 2024) Framework Academic Freedom (Q1 2025) Mind the GAP training (continuous) VUB Ethics Week (continuous)

The VUB supports its research community to reflect upon the ethics of research and its impact on participants and stakeholders, the environment and society, by raising awareness of ethical issues and

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[3] Verhaeghe, P.P. (2023). The academic intimidation and harassment of scientists at Flemish universities in Belgium. Brussels: Department of Sociology – Vrije Universiteit Brussel.

providing guidelines on how to address them. The VUB also provides a regulatory framework, lectures, workshops, and e-learnings embedded in the (mandatory) training offer, and services to ensure that researchers meet their ethical obligations, including obtaining the necessary authorisations for their research. These efforts will be continued and updated, to meet new developments in academic research practices and with special attention to communicate effectively to the VUB research community.

Specific initiatives:
  - **Update of the Charter for Researchers**: the VUB Charter for Researchers (2019) is a normative framework providing comprehensive guidelines for stimulating an optimal research environment and promoting good scientific practices. All newly enrolled researchers receive a printout. The Charter will be updated, including new domains such as Artificial Intelligence, Open Science, and the intimidation of researchers, and based on the input of researchers in all stages of their career. In addition, the Charter is to be integrated into the new PhD-introduction e-learning which is mandatory for all PhD researchers. It will also pay special attention to the situation of postdoctoral researchers (see also action 4.2).
  - **Continuation of the e-learning on ethics integrity and good scientific practices 'Mind the GAP' which is mandatory for PhD researchers**. Actively disseminating this tool to postdoctoral researchers is the next step.
  - **Continuation of awareness raising activities**: information, training and awareness raising activities are organised for the VUB research community, e.g., the annual VUB Ethics Week.
  - **Implementation of a framework to ensure academic freedom** to protect researchers against intimidation (by colleagues, external parties, trolling on social media, etc.), which has a direct impact on the researchers' mental or physical wellbeing, but it also entails risks, in time, causing more reluctance to share scientific findings or to participate in public debate, as a form of 'self-censorship'. Intimidation therefore threatens academic freedom. A set of differentiated curative and preventive actions and measures needs to be implemented, e.g., the integration of guidelines in the updated Charter for Researchers.

Targets
  - An updated Charter for Researchers is available and disseminated
  - A Framework to ensure academic freedom and to act upon intimation
Indicators
  - Mind the GAP training: yearly numbers of participants
  - VUB Ethics Week: yearly numbers of participants

Action 2	Stimulating equality and inclusion for all researchers
Principles Charter and Code	Non-discrimination, Selection (Code), Gender balance, Access to career advice, Participation in decision-making bodies
Responsible unit	P&O, Strategy and Policy Department
Timing	Gender and diversity anti-bias training for selection committees (Q4 2024) Training inclusive communication and intercultural competences (Q3 2024) Pilot mentoring program with a focus on career development (Q2 2025) Gender and diversity data dashboard (Q3 2024) Yearly data reporting to the Academic Council (continuous)

The Gender Equality Plan (2024-2026) gives an overview of the actions and measures within different domains related to gender and equality, targeted towards academic staff. Especially of interest in the context of HRS4R is the anti-bias training and the optimalisation of diversity monitoring aimed at developing evidence-based policies and targets. Furthermore, the VUB aims at creating an inclusive and supporting working environment, respecting sociocultural differences, and stimulating professional and personal growth of researchers and their wellbeing.

Specific initiatives:
- **Gender and diversity anti-bias training for all permanent selection committees: the** VUB aims to establish a bias-proof recruitment policy and equal opportunities in career development. The anti-bias training focuses on the role of implicit gender and diversity bias in recruitment and selection processes. A new format in English will be developed, namely a combination of theory and practice with a low threshold for participation, that will raise awareness and inspire the members of selection committees in faculties to recruit and select in a more inclusive way (see also action 2.1).
- **Monitoring of gender and diversity parameters**: the establishing of a data monitoring dashboard, enhancing an evidence-based gender and diversity policy, and facilitating (internal/external) reporting. We will continue the monitoring of gender balance in central boards and permanent selection committees, hence expand the monitoring during the academic career and selection process (gender, age, and country of origin, anonymised and aggregated).
- **Optimising the training offer, e.g., training on inclusive communication and intercultural competences**: these are workshops introducing inclusive communication and intercultural skills to handle intercultural differences in the workplace, aimed at creating an inclusive and respectful academic environment (integration into the VUB LRN platform is planned, see also action 4.1).
- **Pilot mentoring programme with a focus on career development**: start-up of a pilot mentoring programme with a focus on career improvement, followed by an evaluation.

Targets
- An updated anti-bias training for the selection committees of all faculties
- Training on inclusive communication and intercultural competences
- Pilot mentoring programme
- Gender and diversity data monitoring dashboard is up and running for a yearly monitoring
- Data reporting to the Academic Council once a year

Indicators
- Anti-bias training: numbers of participants
- Training inclusive communication and intercultural competences: number of participants
- Pilot mentoring programme : a qualitative evaluation of the format

3.2 Recruitment and Selection

3.2.1 Strengths and weaknesses

The VUB is glad to report significant progress of its recruitment and selection procedures. Staff procedural regulations were upgraded in the period 2013-2017, to ensure professional recruitment and selection procedures and to enhance equality and fairness in each phase. The composition of selection committees for professorial positions is no longer ad hoc per vacancy but each faculty has a **permanent selection committee**, composed of professorial staff representing the various Departments within one faculty and is gender balanced where possible.

Recruitment and selection policy at the VUB is subject to open competition. The introduction of a user-friendly **digital HR system** and application tool (TEO) in 2019 signified an enhanced accessibility for potential national and international candidates. Jobs posted on the VUB-jobsite allow for immediate online application where all relevant documents (CV, diploma, research concept) can be uploaded. Vacancies for researchers are (when processed by the digital HR system) published simultaneously on EURAXESS and other jobsites. However, the use of the digital HR system for recruitment and selection is perceived as administratively complex and time-consuming.

Furthermore, the VUB, through its **L(ea)RN platform**, offers several internal training sessions for professorial staff and members of selection committees, including workshops such as 'how to conduct a good selection interview'. Together with Université Libre de Bruxelles, the VUB has designed a 'joint checklist for the selection of PhD researchers for supervisors. By introducing this checklist, the universities aim at a more uniform and unbiased approach to selection and hiring. In 2021 additional e-learning modules are made available to hiring managers and project supervisors, providing guidance in processing job vacancies and applications through the digital HR system.

The recruitment of professorial staff and researchers is a **decentralised competence** of the faculties and research units, as a part of their academic and administrative autonomy, especially when recruiting PhD researchers and professorial staff for positions less than 0.5 FTE. The final decision on the appointment of professorial staff for positions of 0.5 FTE or more, is taken by the Academic Council. The Academic Council makes decisions based on a well-substantiated recommendation from the relevant faculty and ensures compliance with legal requirements outlined by the HR Department. A possible weakness of the recruitment procedure may be the less systematic recruitment methodology and practices, as the process within the faculties is mainly carried out by (often highly overstretched) professorial staff rather that HR professionals. Some professors don't use the digital HR platform when they hire researchers of which may have an impact on the (international) publication of vacancies and the overall OTM-R compliance. Hiring professors may also put an emphasis on the academic merits and records of candidates, while giving less attention to (inter)personal skills and factors such as fit-in, growth potential etc. The time to hire, i.e. the amount of time it takes to shortlist, interview and hire researchers, differs from faculty to faculty due to internal procedures. Moreover, several points of improvement were raised during the HRS4R Stakeholder Forum concerning **international recruitment**.

3.2.2 Remarks

The newly drafted OTM-R policy vision text (2023) provides guidelines for OTM-R compliant recruitment and selection procedures for all researchers. These processes will be further digitised and hiring managers will be encouraged to use the digital HR tool, which will positively impact the (international) publication of vacancies and simultaneously enables the monitoring of HR data related to the hiring process. In addition, employer branding is another way to increase the visibility of VUB as an international employer.

At the same time, any global HR strategy is more than just adequate tools and software, where the human factor plays a central role in recruitment and selection. The recruitment of researchers (at all levels) is not conducted by HR professionals but by academics. The VUB is aware of these challenges

and therefore introduces a variety of initiatives to support its professorial staff (e.g. a toolkit, trainings, individual support on demand). There is a need for a more coherent approach to recruitment and selection while observing the balance with the academic freedom of professorial staff to recruit and select researchers based on the OTM-R principles.

The development of a recruitment toolkit was deemed very valuable at the HRS4R Stakeholder Forum. Its use should ensure that a clear profile and clear selection criteria are set from the very start, regardless of the ever-present time pressure and deadlines. Also, it should bring more uniformity and professionalism to the recruiting practices at the VUB – thus the researchers present at the Forum.

Another priority discussed at the HRS4R Stakeholder Forum relates to creating more visibility for VUB as an international employer, our research, research groups and vacancies. This should enable the VUB to attract enough qualified national and international candidates who meet the requirements. Furthermore, we should take quantitative criteria and metrics into account but also screen the soft skills of candidates. Furthermore, the improvement of recruitment processes should be more evidence-based, e.g., using data on inflow and outflow of talent. Finally, the enhancement of the accessibility of the digital HR platform was extensively discussed at the HRS4R Stakeholder Forum, together with the availability of SPOCs (such as the business partners of P&O) that are readily approachable for questions and support during the recruitment, selection and (administrative) onboarding process.

3.2.3 HRS4R Actions 2024-2027 related to recruitment and selection

Action 3	A toolkit to support academic recruitment and selection
Principles Charter and Code	Non-discrimination, Recruitment (Code), Selection (Code), Transparancy (Code), Judging merit (Code), Gender balance
Responsible unit	P&O
Timing	Toolkit (Q1 2024) Information sessions (Q2 2024) E-learnings (Q3 2024) Workshops (Q4 2024)

Recruitment and selection is an important HR process since a lot of important decisions are taken during this process which have a major impact on individual careers, the functioning of research groups and the VUB as a university. Faculties and professorial staff are the owners and are responsible for this process. Nonetheless, P&O seeks to take up a more substantial and active role in the future:

- P&O takes up the role of facilitator, supporter, HR expert, and partner in running the recruitment and selection process and supporting the important decisions taken by the faculties.
- To meet OTM-R principles, P&O and the faculties will work together more intensively in the future to professionalise the overall recruitment process, to monitor and meet higher quality standards and to grow towards a balanced workforce, i.e., a mix of national and international academic staff productively working together on research and education.

P&O will develop a **toolkit providing to all decision makers involved in the recruitment and selection process, in particular members of selection committees, the necessary information.** Overall, the

toolkit is geared at stimulating explicit thinking and decision-making when recruiting and selecting and generating a qualitative matching process between candidates and the available position. Roles and expectations of the actors involved in the process will become clearer and more explicit.

The toolkit gives an overview of tips, tricks, tools, and methods. Step-by-step visualisation and process-flow will lead the way and answer all possible questions during every phase of the process with easily accessible click-through written information.

It will provide support in the following domains:
- The designing of the best possible 'ideal' profile (within the financial context).
- The drafting of a clear and inclusive vacancy text.
- The conducting of a well-structured, non-biased and inclusive job interview.
- The use of a specific evaluation and selection method and its implications.

Besides the written information this toolkit will provide, there will be also more easy access to getting **personal advice and information** about specific cases and difficulties in recruitment processes.
P&O will also organise **information sessions** to launch the toolkit, **e-learnings** about the use of the toolkit, and **training opportunities** to assist supervisors, members of selection committees and other decision makers to improve their (inclusive) recruitment skills. Finally, sharing experiences and peer learning will be facilitated.

Targets
- Toolkit is online and available for all stakeholders
- Information sessions, e-learnings, workshops

Indicators
- Toolkit: number of users
- Toolkit info sessions, e-learning and workshops: number of participants
- Toolkit: qualitative evaluation of its impact on users and the application of the toolkit recruitment and selection process

Action 4	Employer branding
Principles Charter and Code	Recruitment, Recruitment (Code), Transparancy (Code)
Responsible unit	P&O
Timing	New VUB job website (Q1 2024) Training on the use of the digital HR tool to publish vacancies in English (Q4 2024) Updating the static content on job platforms (Q1 2024)

This employer branding action is aimed at creating more international visibility for VUB as an employer and maximising the pool of qualitative candidates for positions. It also seeks to contribute to implementing the OTM-R principles, and particularly the principle of open recruitment.

Specific initiatives:
- **Developing a new job website (Dutch/English) which becomes the reference site for employer branding and guides potential candidates to the information they need to apply.**

The 'Working for the Vrije Universiteit Brussel' webpages contain: an overview of current vacancies, information on employment conditions (renumeration, work life balance, employee benefits, health and mobility), what it means to work and live in Belgium (immigration and visa, work/residence permit, social security and taxes, bank account, healthcare), the OTM-R policy vision text and information about the recruitment and selection procedure including the complaints procedure (contact information), and a dedicated section on HRS4R.

- **Optimising the publication of vacancies on (international) job platforms.** Vacancies for professorial staff are being published in Dutch and most of them in English on the VUB jobsite, Academic Positions, and Euraxess. However, vacancies for PhD and postdoctoral researchers are not so visible. We want to support and motivate our faculties and research groups to publish their vacancies for all researchers through our digital HR system, which are then automatically multi-posted on Academic Positions and Euraxess.

- The regular **updating and standardising of the static content on all (international) job platforms**, especially on Academic Positions, Euraxess, Glassdoor and the VUB job website, in combination with more dynamic recruitment campaigns to highlight our university and our vacancies internationally. P&O, together with internal partners, will also work on an actualised long-term vision on employer branding.

Targets
- On average we receive more than 5 candidates for every vacancy published through the digital HR system
- 60% of all candidates meet all the need-to-have criteria
- The number of vacancies for PhD and postdoctoral researchers published by the digital HR system is doubled
- Actualised and standardised employer content on Academic Positions and Glassdoor

Action 5	Optimising the digital hiring process and its use
Principles Charter and Code	Recruitment (Code), Transparancy (Code)
Responsible unit	P&O
Timing	Digitalisation of the appointment process (continuous) Training for administrative supports in faculties (continuous) E-learnings on each stage in the process (Q4 2024) Information and training hiring managers and selection committees (continuous)

Although the recruitment and selection of researchers takes place at the level of the faculties, the legal and administrative HR compliance is monitored by P&O. The **VUB digital HR system is designed to guide hiring managers through the various recruitment steps**: the opening of a job position, the processing and screening of applications, selecting, sending feedback, hiring and onboarding. To fully ensure an OTM-R proof hiring procedure – from vacancy to onboarding – VUB wants to **facilitate and stimulate the use of its digital HR tool**.

Specific initiatives:
- The **digitalisation of the appointment process** for all researchers while paying attention to the usability and practicality of the digital HR tool.
- Provide a **vacancy template** which will include the various recruitment steps aligning with the OTM-R principles.
- Intensive **training** by P&O for the administrative supports in faculties twice a year and the continuation of information and training sessions for members of selection committees of all faculties (see also action 2.1).
- Provide **e-learnings** on each stage of the (administrative) process.

Furthermore, VUB will monitor the OTM-R compliance of the recruitment process through a yearly survey (see also action 2.4).

Targets
- Digitalisation of the appointment process for all researchers
- Increase the number of hiring procedures via the HR digital system
- A vacancy template is available
- Training for the administrative supports in all faculties twice a year
- E-learnings of the administrative processes in the HR system
- Information and training sessions for members of selection committees of all faculties

Indicators
- The number of hiring procedures via the HR digital system
- Use of the e-learnings

Action 6	Monitoring HR data and OTM-R compliance
Principles Charter and Code	Recruitment, Transparency (Code), Supervision
Responsible unit	P&O
Timing	Baseline survey OTM-R compliance of the recruitment process (Q3 2024) HR data dashboard in Power BI (Q2 2024)

At the VUB, **data-driven HR policies** encompass the utilisation of data analytics to enhance faculty and staff recruitment, retention, and facilitate professional development, while simultaneously promoting diversity and inclusion within the academic community. **The analysis of data related to employee satisfaction, performance, and turnover empowers VUB and particularly its Departments and faculties, to make well-informed decisions aimed at refining its human resources strategies.** Furthermore, data-driven methodologies can provide valuable insights for efficient planning and resource allocation concerning research projects and academic programmes. In addition, these practices can play a pivotal role in ensuring compliance with labour laws and regulations.

P&O will systematically **evaluate the hiring and onboarding process** by sending a survey to new hires. Through this survey, the overall candidate experiences will be measured, and an assessment will take place if the OTM-R principles were applied during the selection procedure. The initial baseline measurement will take place in 2024, followed by yearly monitoring.

In general, every job advertisement includes a designated contact person. If this one is not specified, the candidate can use the generic email address indicated on our jobsite. Questions or complaints sent to this general email can be effectively monitored.

Targets
- HR data dashboard via Power BI is up and running for a yearly monitoring of HR data
- Yearly survey of OTM-R compliant recruitment process

Indicators
- Number of new policy proposals and processes resulting from the HR data and trends
- Number of contacts between researchers and business partners
- Number of international hires and international payroll
- Number of participants in training regarding international recruitment

3.3 Working conditions

3.3.1 Strengths and weaknesses

To promote psychological and physical wellbeing of employees VUB introduced several initiatives, e.g., establishing the 'Wellbeing Team' within People&Organisation, training initiatives under the umbrella of the VUB LRN platform and a dedicated academic coordinator for wellbeing was appointed.

Most of the (internal and external) wellbeing partners provide **guidance and support** for all staff (e.g., the confidential counsellors) and some have a focus on researchers such as the ombudspersons for PhD researchers. Also, multiple partners (e.g. the Brussels University Consultation Centre and the external prevention service) have been engaged to reinforce individual coaching, team coaching and support trajectories for staff. On top of that the Prevention and Environmental Service supervises all matters relating to (physical) safety and wellbeing, risk management and transgressive behaviour.

A **central reporting point** (Report it helpline) was launched in 2016 where all staff members can address issues of harassment, discrimination and inappropriate behaviour. Furthermore, a code of conduct on diversity, equality and inclusion was approved in 2019. However, some cases of transgressive behaviour at the VUB (and other Flemish universities) in recent years made clear that further action was needed. With the development of its **'You Are Not Alone' policy** (YANA) the university is putting maximum effort into prevention and better support for victims (e.g., the Report it helpline was expanded to 1.5 FTE, a university-wide campaign, the organisation of bystander training and the development of a new disciplinary regulation and procedure).

The university has experienced a particularly strong growth, in number of students, research projects, and staff, and this growth must be firmly framed with a view to sustainability and wellbeing. Focusing on the human factor within the organisation, many valuable initiatives were taken to promote physical and **mental wellbeing** and to enhance **optimal working conditions** (in accordance with the seven well-being domains as defined in the Belgian law on Occupational Well-Being: occupational safety, health, psychosocial aspects, ergonomics, occupational hygiene, workplace aesthetics, workplace culture). However, some very well-conceived initiatives that were introduced are not widely known among staff members. Some researchers (especially R1 and R2) hesitate too long before approaching the wellbeing partners or don't know which support channels exist.

Other initiatives to mention are:
- In 2016 an information chart regarding 'Maternity protection' was designed which contains a process flow for pregnant researchers in matters relating to their health & safety and that of their foetus during the different stages of pregnancy.

- A 'family friendly' international mobility policy was introduced; instead of long stays abroad, short stays and focus on international networking were introduced and sabbatical leaves in periods of 3, 6, 9 or 12 months were installed.
- Various manuals, training and support services were launched, providing guidance to supervisors, providing them with the necessary skills to create optimal working conditions for themselves and their researchers (monitored by a supervisor survey).

3.3.2 Remarks

The prevention measures are bundled in the Global Prevention Plan (GPP 2024-2028), which helps to manage the risks specific to the organization and improve staff wellbeing. In yearly Annual Action Plans, the GPP is elaborated in concrete terms, by listing the concrete prevention activities for the coming working year.

The legislation on well-being at work also requires employers to identify risks in the field of wellbeing, which can differ per statute and the nature of the job. Based on this risk analysis, employers formulate measures to ensure the well-being of employees. To this end the university adds the results of internal surveys (e.g., a VUB wellbeing survey, an annual survey for PhD researchers on their perception of supervision, guidance, training needs and general job satisfaction) to acquire the most complete view on researchers' needs. Unfortunately, not all surveys results the past years were representative or detailed enough to design concrete preventive wellbeing actions. Furthermore, the development of a more comprehensive and data-based helicopter view on the wellbeing of researchers at VUB is a working point in order to develop effective policies.

At the HRS4R Stakeholder Forum it was stated that the VUB is a growing university which is experiencing some growing pains. When new researchers join our university, they often remark that "everybody seems to know everybody". While this social cohesion is nice up to a certain level, it is not always easy for newcomers to get involved. Therefore, communication is key. Firstly, to find the right answer to your question, aided by a clear overview of all the existing wellbeing partners and a go-to place or contact point (e.g., Team Wellbeing P&O). Secondly, for communication in more complex processes (e.g. onboarding) where multiple stakeholders are involved and should work in a coordinated manner. And thirdly, on the level of respectful interpersonal and professional communication.

Another priority mentioned at the Stakeholder Forum was the need for more role clarity which will facilitate working together more effectively. The people who lead should be identified and trained as such.

Finally, the VUB has made substantial investments in enhancing administrative support for international researchers. This includes furnishing comprehensive information on the VUB website prior to their commencement at VUB, covering aspects such as visa procedures, taxation, social security, and healthcare. Also, a dedicated team of HR experts was created (P&O), proficient in international employment law to address queries from current and prospective staff members. Additionally, guidelines have been developed for both supervisors and researchers pertaining to each researcher's statutory position, ensuring a seamless onboarding process. However, the Stakeholder Forum has made explicit that further efforts are needed to create a warm welcome and swift enrolment, especially for R1 and R2 and/or international researchers. Social networks and buddy or mentoring programmes contribute to this goal and are highly appreciated.

3.3.3 HRS4R Actions 2024-2027 related to working conditions

Action 7	An integrated and evidence informed health and well-being policy
Principles Charter and Code	Good practice in research, Working conditions, Research environment, Complaints/appeals, Relation with supervisor
Responsible unit	P&O, Prevention and Environmental Service
Timing	2024-2028: within the framework of the 4-year Global Prevention Plan a yearly action plan is drafted and implemented

The Global Prevention Plan is drafted by a dedicated psychosocial risks policy officer of the Prevention and Environmental Service and the Wellbeing Team of P&O and is consulted with a core team Psychosocial wellbeing, consisting of academic experts, representatives of the unions and policy advisors from several Departments. The Committee for Prevention and Wellbeing at Work (including union representatives) and the Work Council (including representatives of staff) formally approve the plan. Wellbeing experts embedded in different Departments at VUB will work more intensively together in the near future. The creation of this **interdisciplinary network will stimulate knowledge sharing and enable the further enhancement of an integrated and evidence-based wellbeing policy**.

Through our work and stakeholder consultation in the past years, the need for **a university wide vision and approach** on wellbeing and health, for all staff and with nuances per group (statute, age, specific needs, etc.) became very clear.

We observed that the current channels and support systems and actions aren't clear for our researcher community. To help researchers to find the right support at the right time we are mapping all actors and teams that work on wellbeing and developing a **communication plan** (website and communication campaign). In this plan every team will present themselves, communicate contact information (how to reach this team) and give concrete information such as training, tips, and tricks (prevention) and self-help tools.

The development of a **more comprehensive and data-based helicopter view on the wellbeing** of researchers at VUB is the ultimate goal. Available data, namely the 5-yearly wellbeing surveys, the yearly PhD survey and supervisor survey (RTDO), the yearly monitoring of the complaints made to the Report it Helpline (Prevention Service), and the monitoring of HR data (P&O), will be further scrutinised and from these lessons learned the plans for the next wellbeing survey will be outlined, and new policy actions are drawn.

Specific initiatives:
- Yearly preventive actions, such as **training and communication** campaigns.
- Expansion and evaluation of the network of **confidential counsellors**.
- **Analysis of figures** regarding absenteeism (long-term and short-term), outflow and advancement (and reasons), requests for help at P&O, reports to the Report it Helpline (transgressive behaviour), requests to the confidential counsellors.
- Continuously **monitoring** the wellbeing of academic staff via 5-yearly wellbeing survey. Adapting the data collection and analysis of the next wellbeing survey based on insights of the last two wellbeing surveys and other available surveys used as policy instrument. Additionally, insights from the PhD survey (a.o. measuring several indicators of job satisfaction, plus monitoring expectations) and supervisor survey are also taken into account. A new survey will focus on the specific situation of postdoctoral researchers.

- Outlining existing **processes and procedures** related to wellbeing, and structurally embed them.
- Defining the **roles and responsibilities of the chain of command** to support managers, reduce role conflict and role ambiguity and to promote accountability. This will create clarity with staff and lessen toxic behaviours, which influences the wellbeing and productivity of staff.
- Expand and **develop policy notes** regarding absenteeism, re-integration, transgressive behaviour, interpersonal relations at work (e.g., the policy-preparing research by the academic coordinator for wellbeing and the P&O policy pager for managers), and shocking events.
- Expand **training offer** on wellbeing via the LRN platform.

Targets
- Specific survey among postdoctoral researchers
- The chain of command is clear for all staff
- Managers/supervisors know what their role and responsibilities are and where to find support to execute their role and responsibilities
- All teams that work on wellbeing are mapped and the information is clearly communicated (website and communication campaign)

Indicators
- Number of visitors on dedicated webpages on wellbeing
- Number of trainings offered on wellbeing and number of participants for those trainings
- Number of cases per wellbeing partner
- Yearly monitoring witnessed and experienced harassment, discrimination, or transgressive behaviour among PhD researchers
- Number of absences
- Lead time of reintegration processes
- Evolution of general wellbeing, by the next wellbeing survey (2027)

Action 8	Internationalisation and an optimal start at VUB
Principles Charter and Code	Professional attitude, Contractual and legal obligations, Non-discrimination, Recognition of mobility experience (Code), Research environment, Value of mobility
Responsible unit	Research Department (RTDO), P&O, International Relations and Mobility Office
Timing	Financial support for international mobility (continuous) VUBuddy system (continuous) E-learning introduction to PhD candidates (Q2 2024) Updated registration procedure and tool for PhD candidates (Q4 2025) Supporting PhD and Postdoctoral researcher community (continuous) International website and flows (Q1 2025) Trainings for supervisors and support staff on international employment (continuous) Go live of the Researcher Mobility Portal (Q2 2025)

Internationalisation is highly valued at VUB: we welcome international researchers to consider working at VUB (see also action 2.2) and have invested in better information flows for professorial

staff and support staff who want to hire international researchers. To provide an optimal start at VUB to all researchers, and especially to those coming from abroad, several initiatives are taking place to make them **feel more at home in the first months**. At the same time VUB also stimulates its researchers to go on a stay abroad and increase their **international aspirations and experiences**.

Specific initiatives:
- We facilitate the **international mobility experience** by transparent information flows (webinar, dedicated web pages) for all researchers for national and international career opportunities and financial incentive via the Doctoral Schools for PhD candidates.
- A dedicated **team at P&O: 'HR international'** for researchers and supervisors and which facilitates questions regarding international payroll, taxes and administrative procedures.
- The **Researcher Mobility Portal offers** tailored information on labour related matters, social security, and taxation all from one Portal interface. The Portal would be accessible as a web application to support the mobility of EUTOPIA researchers (and potentially staff members) and administrative staff.
- Broad **information services**: a [website](#) for international researchers, clear guidelines for supervisors regarding international hiring, and Q&A articles. P&O also organises a yearly training.
- An improved and **simplified registration procedure** for PhD candidates.
- The development of an **e-learning introduction** for PhD candidates.
- A quarterly informative **welcome day** on campus in English.
- A yearly **kick-off event for new professors.**
- Create a welcoming environment for starting PhD candidates via the **PhD VUBuddy system** (starting PhD candidates are matched with more senior researcher, twice a year and on voluntary basis).

Targets
- Dedicated web pages with information on international mobility
- An operating Researcher Mobility Portal for EUTOPIA researchers
- E-learning introduction to PhD candidates
- Updated registration procedure and tool for PhD candidates

Indicators
- % intention of mobility (PhD survey), % joint PhDs of total PhD candidates, number of mobility grants by Doctoral Schools/FWO for PhD researchers
- The number of views on website and knowledge articles
- The number of participants per faculty and per statute for the welcoming events and the % of all new starters that joins these events
- Number of starting PhD candidates in PhD buddy system

3.4 Training and development

3.4.1 Strengths and weaknesses

Training and Development of Research staff has received much attention in the last years: this resulted in a **multiplication of training sessions**, more diversity in topics to choose from and more training tailored to specific subgroups of researchers. In 2015 the offer was still scattered over several Departments and often the full offer was not known to the researchers. The Departments of Educational Affairs, Research and People&Organisation structurally collaborated to provide a common training offer. "L(ea)RN", the *learning platform* launched in 2019, brings together the training and development programmes of these three Departments. Some training programmes are accessible to all staff members, while others are available for a target group (R1, R2, R3, R4, administrative staff).

The doctoral office transformed into the **Researcher Training & Development Office** (RTDO), and no longer solely caters for PhD candidates, but for researchers in different stages of their career.

RTDO and the Doctoral Schools introduced its *compulsory doctoral training* in 2019-2020, offering PhD researchers a clear and well-structured framework in which they can develop into broadly skilled and independent researchers, prepared for the next career step – in or outside academia. The compulsory doctoral education frame not only merits successfully completing courses and trainings, but aims for a broad spectrum of research activities in the domains of research output, teaching and societal outreach, domain-specific and transferable skills. Between 2019 and 2022, the online Portfolio system in which PhD researchers can keep track of the fulfilled parts of their training programme has been further adapted to meet the conditions set in this compulsory programme and easily produces an overview of all research activities they participated in to be used for future career opportunities.

In the last years, a lot of attention was given to the *further optimization of the extensive training offer for young researchers,* mainly by focusing on (i) perpetuating efficient working agreements with external workshop providers, via individual agreements as well as Flemish interuniversity tender agreements; (ii) promoting place- and/or time-independent **professionalisation formats** such as digital workshops, e-learning modules, blended learning trajectories, digital peer writing sessions, etc.; (iii) addressing content gaps in the offer (interdisciplinary skills, how to communicate research to policy makers, gender dimension, …) relative to recommendations of the ERA actions and the ways forward in the vision document of EUA-CDE.

PhD researchers do not complete their doctoral training in an ivory tower. During the course of their PhD, they develop **transferable skills** which prepare them for various careers and are encouraged to reach beyond the traditional boundaries through interdisciplinary thinking, international and/or intersectoral mobility, developing entrepreneurship, and translating their research to a broad audience.

RTDO collaborates with other Departments within the university to optimise the training offer and to ease administrative procedures. It structurally collaborates with other Flemish universities and with its sister university Université Libre de Bruxelles and is well-connected within Europe with active memberships in the EUA-CDE, the PRIDE network, Orpheus, and EUTOPIA, one of the European University Alliances.

3.4.2 Remarks

The starting point of VUB LRN was the launch of the platform bringing together the full training offer for all VUB staff. However, VUB LRN is more than the platform, it contributes to a learning organisation and attractive work culture by creating development opportunities for all VUB staff members. In this way, it aims to support employees and teams in the successful execution of their tasks and enable both professional and personal growth within the work context. VUB LRN works together on the following

themes: leadership, team development and guiding academics in the development of necessary competencies to grow with *future challenges* (such as AI, open science,…).

Translation of the fulfilled research activities in the framework of the doctoral training programme into specific skills and competencies is the next step to better prepare PhD researchers for their further career. The research competence framework of the European Commission will be used to this end.

The pandemic showed that qualitative training and education is possible even when physical gatherings are impossible. This period accelerated the development of *blended and online training modules* from diverse providers. The Nature Masterclasses and Datacamp platform is offered to all researchers in 2023. Next to that, the PhD introduction days will be transformed into an online onboarding module in 2024 as well.

We further want to *optimise data collection* with respect to our training offer and started a project with the IT Department to elaborate on the possibilities to gather all training-related data automatically. This will allow us to make the monitoring and evaluation much more efficient and effective.

From the HRS4R Stakeholder Forum we learned that certain researchers don't know the existing offer or get lost in the substantial offer, not knowing where to start. A possible solution could be to create specific *tracks* with recommended training geared towards the individual experience, statute or role.

Also, the importance of the group and its *social cohesion* for one's research experience was highlighted. Financial support for team building activities is appreciated, but the professionalisation element in it is questioned at the same time. There are other ways to professionalise teams, for example training followed by an individual group member who shares this with the group afterwards. This could be formalised through a *train-the-trainer formula*. In general, *learning from peers* seems to work well, although it takes time and isn't valorised.

Above all, skill development takes time, yet there is barely any *time* to take on training courses, especially felt among postdoctoral researchers and professorial staff. The transfer of skills to the context of your work is simply not accomplished by a short one-off training session but requires a few iterations of reflection, time to practice, exchange and further support. If the VUB finds certain skills (such as leadership skills) important, it must signal this by making space and giving appreciation for such training trajectories.

3.4.3 HRS4R Actions 2024-2027 related to training and development

Action 9	Skills and competences for all researchers
Principles Charter and Code	Dissemination, exploitation of results, Public engagement, Teaching, Continuing professional development, Access to research training and continuous development
Responsible unit	Research Department (RTDO), P&O
Timing	Training offer (continuously) Data dashboard on doctoral training (Q4 2024) Competency framework (Q4 2024)

The VUB invested heavily in training and development for all staff in the last five years. The VUB LRN platform brings together training initiatives from different Departments (P&O, Research, Education Department). It contributes to building a learning organisation and an attractive work culture from a holistic perspective by creating development opportunities for all VUB staff members. In this way it aims to support employees and teams in successfully carrying out their tasks and enabling professional and personal growth within the work context. Furthermore, the PhD Office broadened its scope by supporting not only PhD researchers, but researchers in all stages of their career, and hence is called the Researcher Training and Development Office (RTDO). Specific training is being offered tailored to the needs of PhDs, postdoctoral researchers, and supervisors. In the upcoming years, we want to further consolidate and improve the training offer, both on specialist as well as transferable skills training and combine training formats and trajectories.

Specific initiatives:
- Finding a good balance between **on-campus and online trainings**.
- Making the training offer more **inclusive** by meeting the needs of specific groups, e.g., adapting current trainings for researchers with disabilities, and offer more e-learnings to cater for voluntary fellow researchers who often work full-time outside the university.
- Evaluate the use of **e-learning platforms** Datacamp and Nature Masterclasses.
- Offer and communicate about **training tracks** geared towards experience (e.g., start of your PhD career, towards the end of your PhD).
- **Monitoring** the use of the current training offer and the specific training needs.
- Integrate the **competency framework** of the European Commission in the doctoral training programme.
- Increasing **visibility of training for educational purposes** for teaching assistants and other researchers involved in educational duties.
- **Collaboration with other Departments** for the same target groups (e.g., early starting professorial staff, see also action 4.4 on engaged leading) or on specific topics (e.g., preparing researchers for future challenges, e.g., working with AI tools).

Targets
- Data dashboard on doctoral training
- Competency framework

Indicators
- Number of online and on-campus trainings
- Number of courses followed in e-learning platforms of Datacamp and Nature Masterclasses
- Number of adapted trainings for researchers with disabilities
- % of research assistants who followed at least one training to improve educational skills
- Number of trainings related to AI
- Evaluation forms, feedback from yearly PhD survey
- Qualitative evaluation of the use of e-learning platforms

Action 10	Career development
Responsible unit	Research (RTDO), P&O, Rectorate
Principles Charter and Code	Evaluation/appraisal systems, Judging merit (Code), Recognition of mobility experience (Code), Stability and permanence of employment, Career development, Access to career advice, Teaching, Supervision and managerial duties
Timing	Career workshops for researchers (continuous) Webinar series on careers for researchers (continuous) Charter & personal development plan for postdoctoral researchers (Q4 2025) Supporting PhD and Postdoc community (continuous) Stakeholder meeting with non-academic partners (continuous) Exit survey (Q1 2024) Renewed competency profiles and procedures for evaluation and promotion (Q4 2025)

VUB makes use of a multidimensional approach to the career development of researchers, already set out in our long-term plans of 2018-2023 of RTDO and by P&O and will be continued in the upcoming years with initiatives that were not yet rolled-out in the last term, complemented with new initiatives:

- **Webinar series on career options after a PhD**. To inform and inspire PhD and postdoctoral researchers about the very wide range of – maybe unknown – career paths after their PhD, we organise a webinar series where alumni share their professional experiences after finishing their PhD at the VUB.
- Install a VUB-wide **exit-survey for researchers who defended their PhD and left the VUB**. A pilot survey was installed in the faculty of Medicine & Pharmaceutical Sciences. The questionnaire used for this pilot will be revised and updated as well as the communication plan. With this survey we want to capture as much feedback as possible on experiences with the doctoral trajectory (the support in terms of supervision as well as training), the skills development, and to get a better view on the career path of PhD holders outside of academia.
- Transparency regarding long term postdoctoral positions via development of a **postdoc charter** including a personal professional development plan specifically designed for postdoctoral researchers.
- Building/continuing **learning communities on every level of a research career**. For PhDs there are PhD networks for every Doctoral School offering social activities as well as content workshops to their peers. For Postdocs there is a Postdoc community. The Postdoc community aims to bring postdoctoral researchers together via a shared online space and events (1) providing a network for sharing experiences and (2) inform postdocs about a wide range of training courses, events, funding opportunities and university policies relevant for them (including a range of initiatives specifically tailored to the needs of postdoctoral researchers on topics such as Adaptive Leadership for Postdocs, Postdoc Supervisor Training, etc.). Finally, there is the learning community for chairs of large research groups.
- **Stakeholder Meetings with non-academic labour market partners**. The Stakeholder Meeting provides a forum for representatives of the five Flemish universities and representatives of companies and organisations to debate the employability of PhDs and postdocs with the aim to jointly undertake actions to optimise the transition of PhD holders to the labour market.

- Both RTDO as well as team Wellbeing (P&O) offer **individual career support**. For team wellbeing this is open to all staff and focuses on information and advice about internal mobility**,** while RTDO focuses on different career paths (in- as well as outside academia) for PhDs and postdoctoral researchers. The coaches of both teams are sparring partners for employees, helping them to gain insight into their own possibilities. P&O, together with internal partners, will also work on a vision of career development for the whole university.

Moreover, the VUB is a place where everyone's talent is recognised and can flourish. To meet this goal, VUB wants to develop and implement **a new model of recognising and valuing academic careers** (cf. GSP 5, Policy Plan of the Rectorate 2023-2027).

This policy regarding the talent growth paths of researchers is aimed at creating more space for professorial staff to differentiate in their career development. Therefore, the VUB wants to value a range of (academic) talents and give more appreciation and recognition to different career paths. In addition to individual (career) choices, talents and contributions at the team level are also considered. A central steering committee has been set up by the Rectorate with the purpose of:

- **Drafting renewed competency profiles for professorial staff**
- **Aligning/ renewing the procedures for evaluation and promotion**

Targets
- Postdoc charter
- Personal development plan for postdoctoral researchers
- VUB wide Exit survey for PhD holders
- A renewed competency model for professorial staff
- Aligning/ renewing the procedures for evaluation and promotion

Indicators
- Number of career-related initiatives
- Number of individual career coaching sessions
- Number of events organised for and/or by the different learning communities

Action 11	Stimulating team development
Principles Charter and Code	Research environment, Working conditions, Relation with supervisors, Continuing professional development
Responsible unit	VUB LRN (P&O, Education Department, Research Department)
Timing	Financial support for team buildings (yearly application period in December - January) Teambuilding inspiration (continuous) Trajectory-based support (continuous) On-demand advice for team development inquiries (continuous) Procedure for team development inquiries (Q4 2024) Screening of the LRN offer (Q4 2024)

VUB LRN aims to actively support the development and growth of VUB teams. We want colleagues to be able to evolve purposefully not only individually, but also as a team. The academic context is characterised by self-organisation, self-management, and autonomy, which makes cooperation in a

highly diverse working environment anything but obvious. We work in teams to carry out our daily tasks and processes, but also to meet complex educational, research and societal challenges.

To support teams in increasing their effectiveness and learning capacity, we need to pay conscious attention to the targeted and context-specific development of teams and their team members. Group development can also have a positive impact on the well-being and motivation of each of the team members.

We believe it is important for teams to have the opportunity to participate in formal trainings, as well as in activities that bring the team closer together in an informal setting. We believe this makes a positive contribution to team functioning, especially in this post-pandemic period and in the context of hybrid work.

Specific initiatives:
- We screen the existing VUB LRN **open offer** and identify which VUB LRN initiatives can be used for team goals and development.
- We provide more **trajectory-based support** for teams and, where relevant, these will be incorporated into VUB LRN processes and ways of working around team development.
- We provide an accessible and transparent **application procedure,** through which teams can apply for financial support for their teambuilding. For this purpose, a total budget of 100,000 euro is provided annually, which is distributed among the VUB teams whose application has been approved.
- We provide an **inspiration platform** where teams can go to get ideas to shape their team building, both in terms of content and fun.
- We provide **on-demand advice** for teams looking for a training or education programme.
- We develop a **clear procedure for team development** inquiries that can be easily accessed on the VUB LRN sharepoint page.

Targets
- There is a minimum offer for teams based on the screening of the existing offer
- Employees find and use the application process for financial support for their team building
- Employees find and use the inspiration page for team buildings

Indicators
- Number of applications for financial support (compared to the previous calendar year).
- Inspiration page for team buildings: number of page visits and time spent on the page (compared to the previous calendar year).
- Team satisfaction with courses/tracks organised after advice by VUB LRN (qualitative measure).

Action 12	Engaged leading in academic positions
Principles Charter and Code	Good practice in research, Supervision and managerial duties, Mentoring/supervision
Responsible unit	VUB LRN (P&O, Education Department, Research Department)
Timing	Implementation of "Engaged leading" behavioural framework in training offer (continuously) Tracks and trainings for priority groups (partly delivered, priority group 3) (Q3 2024) Evaluating updated format of the supervisor training (Q4 2024)

The VUB's vision of "Engaged leading" views leadership as a collective activity, involving formal and informal leaders working with intent and enthusiasm towards shared goals. This vision was developed bottom-up and describes clear behavioural expectations about the kind of leadership that all VUB staff should aim to represent. The vision is disseminated throughout the university through accessible communication actions, but more importantly by embedding its framework for leadership behaviours incrementally in VUB LRN's leadership development offerings. In these initial stages, customised leadership development initiatives are designed, tested, and embedded for three priority groups: low-threshold initiatives for *all types of staff* regardless of leadership function (priority group 1), tracks for *emerging leaders* (priority group 2), and tracks for *mid-career and senior faculty leaders* (priority group 3). Additional training initiatives are organised as needed.

Specific actions:
- "Engaged leading" behavioural framework is **systematically embedded** in new and renewed trainings or programmes as a vision for VUB leadership and/or as a reflection tool.
- Organising and continuously evaluating **low-threshold initiatives** for *all types of staff*, including a yearly "Engaged Leading Week" with lectures, workshops, and trainings; stand-alone, basic leadership trainings for junior academic profiles (e.g., leadership training for PhD's, for Postdoctoral researchers).
- Organising and continuously evaluating **tracks for *emerging leaders***: yearly programme "Academic leadership days for early career professorial staff" including training, peer learning and networking opportunities; updating and expanding the "Supervisor training" for doctoral supervisors with a session on how to have motivational conversations with your PhD candidates.
- Designing and testing a pilot **track for mid-career and senior faculty leaders**, i.e., pilot "Strategic leadership" for mid-career to senior professorial staff involved in university governance and policy.
- Organising **stand-alone, needs-based trainings for academic leaders** (e.g., how to handle transgressive behaviours and bystander intervention, insight into wellbeing of teams, constructive conflict resolution, equitable decision-making).
- **Individual coaching offer** on leadership and people management questions for professors (recurring offer).

Targets
- Use of the behavioural framework in trainings as a criterion for selecting new training courses
- Development and testing of pilot programme "Strategic leadership" for mid-career and senior professorial staff

Indicators
- Attendance number and participant satisfaction of recurring stand-alone training offer
- Attendance number, participant satisfaction and internal evaluations (incl. trainer feedback) of recurring programmes and tracks
- Number of individual leadership coaching sessions

4. Conclusion

With the new HRS4R governance structure described above, the detailed OTM-R policy vision text, the planned initiatives in the domain of communications, stakeholder consultation and monitoring, and finally the new action plan for 2024-2027, the VUB makes a fresh start that will eventually lead to the greater visibility and anchoring of HRS4R in the institution. Above all, it will contribute to developing the VUB into a truly international research institution with a warm, fair and evidence-based HR policy with optimal working conditions and career opportunities. With this action plan, the VUB is taking an important step in that direction. Moreover, in the future it is possible that a strengthened approach could be envisaged at the EUTOPIA level, conforming to the renewed principles of the Charter, which is a new European framework to attract and retain research, innovation and entrepreneurial talents in Europe.

5. Annexes

5.1 Lexicon

Throughout this report we use the European [research profiles descriptors](#):

- PhD researcher = R1 (first stage researcher)
- Postdoctoral researcher = R2 (recognised researcher)
- Professorial staff = R3 and R4 (established and leading researcher)

Abbreviations:

- VUB: Vrije Universiteit Brussel
- P&O: People&Organisation, the VUB HR Department
- LRN: read as L(ea)RN, VUB learning platform (P&O, Education Department, Research Department)
- GSP: Generic Strategic Plan
- PDCA: Plan-Do-Check-Act cycle methodology
- KPIs: critical performance indicators
- RTDO: Researcher Training & Development Office (Research Department)
- TEO: VUB digital HR and hiring system, tool or platform

5.2 OTM-R policy vision text (2023)

What does open, transparent and merit-based recruitment (OTM-R) mean for VUB?

The VUB has always embraced the basic principles of the European Charter for Researchers and the Code of Conduct for recruitment: open, transparent and merit-based. These principles are entirely in line with VUB's values — welcoming, open, learning and connected as a university community — and the principles of the Enlightenment: critical thinking, free inquiry and humanism. In applying these values, VUB chooses growth, innovation and internationalisation. The university aims to create an attractive and supportive work environment in the heart of the city of Brussels and Europe. It should be the ideal workplace for pioneering and high-tech research and meaningful career development for researchers, both Belgian and international.

In practice, OTM-R within VUB's recruitment process is:

OPEN & TRANSPARENT: Anyone who meets the requirements of the position and is eligible for the job is invited and welcome to apply. This means that every potential candidate, researcher or member of teaching staff, junior or senior, gains an open and transparent insight into:

- − our uniqueness and what it means to be part of the university community;
- − the minimum requirements or selection criteria to be considered for the job ('need to have');
- − other expectations or selection criteria that are taken into consideration and that add value ('nice to have');
- − what the selection, onboarding and evaluation process looks like for researchers and teaching staff, and how we guarantee equal opportunities for all potential candidates and researchers, including groups with specific needs. See also the VUB Gender Action Plan, available via our general Equality Pages.

We undertake to communicate all relevant information to the potential candidate, researcher or teaching staff member as proactively as possible, especially in the event of unforeseen circumstances or situations that deviate from the normal process.

Feedback at every stage of recruitment and, by extension, throughout the careers of researchers and teaching staff is essential to ensure the relationship between candidate, employee and employer remains clear, healthy and productive. The importance and value of this is substantial and essential for all stakeholders, from the beginning to the end of the employee's career.

MERIT-BASED: Recognition and appreciation of acquired knowledge, expertise and skills are essential in a university in which we want to create equal opportunities for students while expecting excellence from our academic staff.

The objective is to create a fruitful learning and working environment that facilitates and attracts excellent research and teaching.

In our **selection criteria** at the beginning and throughout the further career of researchers and teaching staff, we take into consideration both important bibliometric research indicators and a broad range of other experiences and skills. Together, these quantitative and qualitative criteria help identify the ideal match between person and position.

This also requires us to have the courage not to award a position when it is clear that mutual expectations cannot be aligned and that our university is not the ideal learning, working or research environment for a candidate or colleague who appears on paper to be very valuable. This sometimes requires unconventional and nuanced choices, but VUB would not be VUB if this was not a part of our identity.

How do we monitor the quality of our recruitment and selection process?

The European Charter and the Code motivate VUB to continue to evolve and grow in translating these principles into HR processes, as expressed in our action plan, HR Strategy for Researchers. These efforts have been recognised several times with the HR Excellence for Research Award.

The ideal recruitment process at VUB focuses on open, transparent, inclusive and supportive communication that provides a positive experience for each applicant. We are committed to the following:

1. **Recruitment:** Improved communication about the values and identity of VUB via our employer branding on various publishing and social media channels, national and international, and on our job site in both Dutch and English.

   With this, we aim to attract a pool of candidates that will allow us to choose the applicant who is the best match for the position. In practice, this means:
   a) the pool should not have too many or too few candidates;
   b) a majority of candidates meet all the minimum requirements for research, teaching, language and growth potential;
   c) there is a positive cultural fit with VUB, the faculty and the research group or Department.

2. Use of an **e-tool and digital application platform**, in both Dutch and English, with sufficient monitoring of our intake. The e-tool is an important support to the recruitment and selection process at VUB. Using this digital tool and the platform, we can professionalise, streamline and facilitate access to our process for all candidates and members of the selection committee(s) in a uniform and comparable manner. We are also investing heavily in training for all members of selection committees about their role in recruitment, leadership, equality and diversity (e.g. bias training). Lastly, we are able to better monitor our intake numbers and use them as a foundation for targeted improvement and quality initiatives.

3. Development of a **toolbox** that supports managers and members of selection committees with practical guidelines, tips and methodologies for carrying out the selection process in an open, transparent, qualitative, fair and inclusive manner. The OTM-R principles are an integral part of this.

4. **Quality control and compliance** of the recruitment and selection procedures by specialised staff from People&Organisation.

5. **Feedback** to all candidates about the selection process and the result of their application. This is done by email, but may be expanded and personalised on request.

What do our recruitment and selection processes look like in practice?

Online applications

- We **publish** all academic vacancies on our own job site and on the sites of Euraxess and Academic Positions.
- We are committed to clear Dutch and English communication in our **job postings** that we publicise via several national and international channels. In these postings, potential candidates will find details of:
    - our individuality as VUB and the Department, research group or service in which they will work;
    - the specific teaching or research area of the position;
    - the specific duties of the position;
    - the selection criteria;
    - the selection procedure.

Every Dutch and English job posting will contain a link to our job site.
- Via the **job site**, candidates apply directly for the position that suits them best or can send a spontaneous application. After creating an account, they can:
    - create an alert for jobs that interest them;
    - manage their application;
    - apply for a new open vacancy.
    - A complete **application file** contains a CV, motivation letter and a copy of the requested qualifications. Other attachments can also be uploaded.
    - In the event of problems with online applications, candidates can contact a member of the People&Organisation staff via rekrutering@vub.be.

Selection procedure

- Applications cannot be submitted after the deadline.
- Members of the selection committee make the first **pre-selection** of candidates based on their CV and motivation letter.
- Candidates chosen in this pre-selection stage are invited to an interview with the selection committee via email through the application platform.
- The members of the selection committee are all experts in the relevant discipline and all apply the OTM-R principles in carrying out their duties.
- VUB strives to be an inclusive workplace. Candidates with specific needs can always ask for reasonable adjustments where necessary by contacting the People&Organisation service via rekrutering@vub.be.
- During the **structured interview**, the selection committee discusses with candidates the expectations of the position as described in the job posting. This is done for every candidate in a standardised and skills-based manner.
- If teaching duties are part of the role, the candidate must provide a written vision of education and give a **trial lesson** for members of the selection committee and a relevant audience.
- The selection committee may also use **other selection methods** to ensure optimal screening.
- Based on all the information provided about the retained applicants, the members of the selection committee discuss and rank the candidates.

- Questions about the **content of the position, the procedure and outcome of the selection process** should be directed to the contact person mentioned in the job posting.
- Unsuccessful candidates are informed via email at the end of the selection process.

Onboarding

- Following a final interview and mutual agreement, the highest ranked candidate is nominated to fill the position.
- The People&Organisation service invite the chosen candidate by email to provide all the data required for the **preparation of the personnel file and the contract**.
- Once all details have been provided and the necessary documents delivered, People&Organisation process the file, draw up the contract and provide the candidate with information by email about signing the contract and other useful information.
- On the **first day of employment**, reception staff and the relevant manager greet the candidate.
- People&Organisation organises a **general welcome day** four times a year that allows new staff to get to know all the services provided by VUB.
- Centralised and decentralised training initiatives relating to security form part of the onboarding process. It is important that new staff members participate in these initiatives.

5.3 Attendees HRS4R Stakeholder Forum

name	researcher stage	function	faculty/department	sex	nationality	present on forum	written feedback on action plan
Noëmi Verreyen	POLICY	wellbeing officer	P&O	F	Belg	x	
Jan Danckaert	POLICY	Rector	Rectorate	M	Belg	x	
Pieter Ballon	POLICY	Vicerector	Research	M	Belg	x	
Mieke Gijsemans	POLICY	Director	Research	F	Belg	x	
Hannelore De Grande	POLICY	Coordinator Training & Development	Research	F	Belg	x	
Majlinda Abduli	POLICY	Deputy Director	P&O	F	Belg	x	
Lisa Wouters	POLICY	Policy advisor Strategy & Policy	Rectorate	F	Belg	x	
Valéry An Jacobs	POLICY	Academic Wellbeing coordinator	Faculty Engineering	F	Belg	x	
Loren Pauwels	POLICY	Policy Advisor Training & Development	Research	F	Belg	x	
Ragna Van Vossele	POLICY	Policy Advisor Academic Careers	P&O	F	Belg	x	
Guillaume Dotreppe	R1	PhD representative	Engineering	M	Belg	x	
Masoumeh Rahimi	R1	unpaid PhD candidate	Arts & Humanities	F	Non-Belgian	x	
Yara Bouckaert	R1	PhD representative	Psychology & Educational Sciences	F	Belg	x	
Jeremy De Plecker	R1	teaching assistant	Medical Sciences	M	Belg	x	
Mary-Ann Isaacs	R1	PhD researcher	Psychology & Educational Sciences	F	Non-Belgian	x	
Bruno Tassignon	R2	Postdoc	Sports & Rehabilitation Sciences	M	Belg	x	
Lara Vesentini	R2	Postdoc	Medical Sciences	F	Non-Belgian	x	
Pan Honghui		Postdoc	Social Sciences & Business Solvay School	F	Non-Belgian	x	
Arjen Mentens	R1	PhD researcher	Engineering	M	Belg	x	
Bram Spruyt	R3	chair Flemish interuniversity working group diversity	Social Sciences & Business Solvay School	M	Belg	x	
Lara Pivodic	R3	ERC starter grant holder	Medical Sciences	F	Non-Belgian	x	
Paul Wylleman	R4	Academic Director	Psychology & Educational Sciences	M	Belg	x	
Wim Versees	R4	Member Research Council	Sciences	M	Belg	x	x
Luc Huyghens	R4	Academic Director	Medical Sciences	M	Belg	x	
Liesbeth De Donder	R3	Member Research Council	Psychology & Educational Sciences	F	Belg		x
Eleni De Becker	R3	Member Doctoral Schools Council Human	Law & Criminology	F	Belg		x
Leo Van Grunsven	R4	Director Doctoral Schools Life Sciences &	Medical Sciences	M	Non-Belgian		x