

HR Excellence in Research

Renewal Assessment: EC Consensus Report

Renewal Phase Assessment With Site Visit - EC Consensus Report

Case number

2020IT491633

Name Organisation under assessment

Consiglio per la ricerca in agricoltura e l'analisi dell'economia agraria CREA

Organisation's contact details

Via della Navicella 2/4, Rome, Italy, 00184, Italy

Submission date of the Internal Review

30/04/2024

Submission date to the European Commission

14/11/2025

Detailed assessment

a. Quality assessment

The quality assessment evaluates the level of ambition and the quality of progress intended by the organisation.

If any statements have prompted a "no" or "partly" in the evaluation, please provide recommendations:

	YES / NO / PARTLY	Recommendations
Has the organisational information been sufficiently updated to understand the context in which the HR Strategy is implemented?	Yes	
Does the narrative provided list goals and objectives which clearly indicate the organisation's priorities in HR-management for researchers?	Yes	
Has the organisation published an updated HR Strategy and Action Plan been updated with the actions' current status, additions and/or modifications?	Yes	
Is the implementation of the HR strategy and Action Plan sufficiently embedded within the organisation's management structure (e.g. steering committee, operational responsibilities) so as to guarantee a solid implementation?	Yes	A Permanent Table was established, bringing together professionals with diverse expertise in research, management, administration, and governance. However, its composition and the number of members are described only in very general terms, and no details are provided about how it operates.

	YES / NO / PARTLY	Recommendations
Is the OTM-R policy in place and publicly available?	Yes	While CREA has various documents in place (publicly accessible) that govern the recruitment and selection processes for researchers, it is unclear whether a unified document exists that brings together all relevant principles and procedures in accordance with the OTM-R policy.

During the transition period special conditions apply:

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

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

The overall impression, based on the documentation provided, is that the HRS4R implementation has been conducted in a well-structured, clear, and transparent manner. The specific gaps were identified, and Action Plans were developed in the institutional context, as changes in top management, the adoption of a new Statute, and the reorganisation of the administrative structure.

Did the organisation obtain the Certification for gender equality? Further exploration of gender equality initiatives is required.

What initiatives are in place to increase the number of international researchers at the institution? There are currently only 20 international researchers.

CREA states: "An extended version of the Ethics thematic area is present at the following link." CREA did not provide the link.

What is the take-up on mobility and sabbaticals?

How is the "Trusted Advisor" to whom employees turn if they experience sexual harassment in the workplace working? How many complaints were lodged with the "Trusted Advisor"?

How does the organisation deal with bullying in the workplace?

Who monitors the implementation of flexible working hours? What issues have arisen from the implementation of flexible working hours?

How does the "Transparent Administration" section work? Are there any emerging issues?

The internal assessment is certainly detailed, and new actions and goals have been clearly identified. Nevertheless, we would like to better understand the process through which these new actions were defined, and what specific factors contributed to their adoption. A comprehensive survey was conducted in 2017; however, its results are not cited in the 2017 Gap Analysis to justify or support the identified gaps. Furthermore, the survey is available only in Italian, which limits accessibility and broader understanding. The institution states that two additional questionnaires were administered in 2020 (focusing on research project management) and in 2023 (addressing the effects of internships). The results of these surveys are reported to be reflected in the revised Action Plan, particularly in Actions 2 and 15. Overall, it would be useful to clarify how the findings from these surveys were integrated into the Action Plan, the extent to which they influenced the selection and formulation of specific actions, and whether, as a result, certain actions were prioritised.

Further clarification is needed regarding the mechanisms by which the research community was consulted in the design and drafting of CREA documents, including the HR Action Plan.

A Permanent Table was established, bringing together different professionals from various areas. However, its composition and the number of members are described only in general terms, and no specific details are provided regarding its structure or mode of operation. I would appreciate further clarification on the composition of the committee responsible for the implementation of the

HRS4R process, including its operational responsibilities, how its members are selected, and how it functions in practice

I would be interested to know what concrete benefits the organization has gained from implementing its human resources strategy, both internally (e.g., for researchers and staff) and externally (e.g., in terms of visibility, partnerships, or institutional development).

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

The HRS4R web page is comprehensive however, the 3-year plan is out of date (2021- 2023)

The original training Plan was completed in 2020, a new plan was approved in January 2024 to cover a three-year period, 2024-2026. Please provide details of the plan.

In January 2023, an international call for short internships abroad was published for CREA researchers and technologists, reserving 50% of the available resources for candidates under the age of 40. For this call, a budget of € 100,000 has been allocated. – How has this worked? Please provide details.

CREA states: “*An extended version of the Training and development thematic area is present at the following link:*” CREA did not provide the link.

CREA is drafting a “10-year Strategic Vision Document” with the participation of Research Centers. Is the document complete? Please provide details.

How is the role of Technical Scientific Director working?

CREA has appointed an Extraordinary Commissioner. What impact is this role having on the organisation and HRS4R?

CREA did not consult with research staff during the drafting of the internal review. What is CREA doing now to consult research staff? What processes are in place to ensure the views of the research community are being captured?

Is the research community (R1-R4) represented on all HRS4R committees and working groups?

Please provide more details on the conversion of fixed-term contracts into permanent positions following calls for internal competition. What happens if an individual is unsuccessful as a result of the internal competition?

Details about public engagement activities. Further details are requested regarding the institution's initiatives and strategies for engaging with the wider public, including how researchers are supported and encouraged to participate in such activities.

Regarding the evaluation of Individual Researchers, it appears that a formal system for the independent evaluation of individual researchers' scientific activities is not in place. Clarification on whether such a system is planned in the future, and what its structure might be.

In the section on Working Conditions, some actions appear to have been left unaddressed, as no comments or observations are provided. Additional details would be valuable—particularly concerning funding and salaries, work-life balance, support for researchers with families, and measures in place to promote a positive and inclusive research environment.

More information is needed on job instability and career development opportunities for temporary researchers. Clarification on the multi-year plan for recruiting permanent researchers, including its timeline and alignment with long-term institutional needs, would also be helpful. It is essential to highlight both the *opportunities* this plan presents, such as improved career paths and workforce

stability, and the *challenges* it may encounter, including funding limitations, administrative hurdles, and integrating temporary staff into permanent roles.

b. SITE-VISIT BASED Assessment

Please provide a brief answer to the following questions:

Note: Click on each question to open the editor.

1. Does the site visit confirm the impression made by the written self-evaluation report?



☒ **Yes**

☐ **No**

☐ **Partly**

2. What have been the benefits of implementing an HR Strategy in the organisation under review? How do you judge its overall impact and achievements?



There are many benefits to implementing the HRS4R strategy in CREA which include:

HRS4R is significant in unifying CREA, which was formed by merging distinct institutions with their own rules and practices. HRS4R, with its principles and requirements that address the roles, responsibilities, and entitlements of researchers and research staff, has brought consistency across the CREA organisation, which is nationwide in 84 locations.

The implementation of the HRS4R strategy has greatly improved CREA's international scientific collaborations. CREA has launched several calls for research placements at EU and non-EU universities and research institutions, which have contributed to the successful acquisition and coordination of multiple EU-funded projects under programmes such as Horizon 2020, AGROECOLOGY Calls, EJP Soil, and Horizon Europe. Over the past decade, the number of high-quality publications co-authored by CREA researchers in collaboration with European partners has also significantly increased.

The number of high-quality publications produced by CREA researchers in collaboration with other EU colleagues has significantly increased with the implementation of HRS4R.

The human resources planning process for the recruitment of research staff has significantly improved with the introduction of OTM-R.

HRS4R has enhanced the international reputation and visibility of CREA.

CREA has made significant progress in strengthening its ethical and professional framework. Key internal documents (Code of Ethics, internal regulations) have been adopted, and aspects related to researcher responsibility and training have been addressed.

3. How do you judge the organisation's **level of ambition** with regard to its HR strategy for researchers, taking into account the initial state of play?



The institution is to be recommended for its level of ambition as it aspires to become a center of excellence in its scientific field at the European level. This ambition is reflected in the enthusiasm of its management, staff, and researchers, who feel supported and value being part of the institution.

The level of ambition throughout the organisation, from the management team to the research community, is very high. CREA's ambition is reflected in the development of a new 10-year strategic plan, which aims to make CREA a world-class research organisation and focuses on the sustainability of the world's food supply and the sustainability of mankind.

The plan incorporates all the HRS4R principles and clearly sets out CREA's ambitions. CREA's ambitions include the creation of new food technologies and the creation of new food varieties.

The strategic ambition requires CREA to produce technology to increase food productivity with a low environmental impact, at lower costs.

While the on-site achievements and current state of play meet expectations for an institution of CREA's size and reputation, the organisation could reflect this level of ambition in the formal sections of the report.

In the next two years, the institution plans to implement several actions, including a new Regulation for training and updating aligned with national legislation and the creation of dedicated spaces for individual researchers on the CREA website. It is anticipated that the Action Plan will be further strengthened to reflect a more ambitious approach to human resources strategy for researchers.

4. How do you judge the organisation's efforts to ensure the implementation of the Charter and Code principles regarding the **Ethical and Professional Aspects of Researchers**?

The organisation has put in place an ethics committee, including a code of ethics, professional conduct policies, and procedures. The *Code of Ethics and Professional Behaviour* (Decree No. 37, 12 March 2020) provides all research staff with clear, internationally aligned guidance on ethical conduct throughout all research phases, i.e., from planning and collaboration to data production, use, and dissemination. The Code has been integrated into employment contracts since 2020, and both the CREA and EU (ALLEA) Codes of Ethics are publicly available on the institution's website. The *Statute of CREA*, approved in January 2024, includes a specific article establishing an *Ethics Committee* as an independent body responsible for promoting and fostering ethical reflection in research and experimentation.

CREA has established internal regulations governing administrative and budgetary responsibilities related to project funding.

CREA has developed and implemented guidelines for data protection.

All employees are trained on ethical and professional conduct.

CREA has implemented a whistleblower policy.

There is a commitment to ethical and research professionalism in the new 10-year strategic plan.

It is very clear that the management team is committed to ethical and professional behaviour throughout the organisation, and this is communicated at every opportunity.

The effort to implement the Charter and Code principles related to ethics is shared among administrative staff, researchers, and top management. This collective approach ensures a high level of institutional commitment, not only to the Charter and Code but also to research excellence more broadly.

new actions are planned, including the creation of a dedicated section on the CREA website for individual researchers. This initiative aims to increase the national and international visibility of CREA's researchers and their professional achievements.

5. How do you judge the organisation's efforts to ensure the implementation of the Charter and Code principles regarding the **Recruitment of Researchers**? Is an **OTM-R policy** in place?



CREA has put a lot of effort into implementing an OMT-R policy. Recruitment is guided by a rolling 3-year recruitment plan. Open, transparent, and merit-based guidelines are in place for candidates. OTM-R guidelines are in place for selection board members, and selection boards are complemented with external independent members. The feedback from the research community reflects well on the OTM-R policy, as they perceive the policy to be open, fair, transparent, and merit-based. Positions are advertised on Euraxess. Notably, over 96 new hires (including 33 researchers) and 367 career advancements for research staff occurred between 2020 and 2023. The process has continued throughout 2024.

CREA is committed to OTM-R and has trained managers and selection board members on how to conduct selection procedures in an open, fair, transparent manner. However, there still appears to be some recruitment occurring outside the OTM-R policy. Some short-term positions are recruited outside the OTM-R process. The institution must ensure that, going forward, all research positions must be through the OTM-R process. All research positions must be advertised on Euraxess.

Recruitment notices are now published on the EURAXESS portal, increasing accessibility for EU candidates. CREA also publishes general information about the selection process in both English and Italian, ensuring transparency for international applicants.

CREA developed (2021) and implemented DEMETRA®, a digital recruitment in-house platform. It includes predefined evaluation grids, automating and standardising candidate assessments.

There has been a notable increase in the number of R3 and R4 researchers, supported by internal mobility between profiles and enhanced opportunities for career progression.

CREA maintained a dedicated web page on job opportunities in order to promote international research positions.

Interviews revealed that early-career researchers (R1) perceive the process for announcing and filling new positions could be improved, and consider that the institution's vision for human resource development could be clearer. They would also appreciate being informed earlier about upcoming opportunities and recruitment plans, to better plan their career progression within the institution.

6. How do you judge the organisation's efforts to ensure the implementation of the Charter and Code principles regarding the **Researchers' Working conditions and Social Security**?



The research community is very happy with their working conditions, and they feel very supported by the organisation in maintaining good working and social conditions. The research community believes they have excellent access to training programmes, career development programmes, laboratories, laboratory equipment, and work-life balance initiatives. The research community feels that there is equity across the system.

Mentoring and coaching are established in some units of the institution, and the management team should ensure that mentoring and coaching are rolled out to all units. CREA has created a collaborative environment that fosters a strong sense of belonging among researchers. Work-life balance is promoted across the organisation.

CREA has published guidelines for mobility, sabbaticals, networking, tele-working, conflict resolution, flexible work arrangements, a committee for equal opportunities, gender equality policy, the administrative transparency process, and the Trusted Advisor.

CREA adopted a "Code of Conduct for the fight against acts and behaviours harmful to the dignity of staff members", thus guaranteeing its commitment to support employees who feel they are victims of harassment or any form of behaviour that is a threat to their dignity in the workplace.

The Code of Conduct specifies the responsibilities, tasks and activities of the Trusted Advisor, which include listening, managing and providing advice and assistance to employees in situations of bullying or sexual harassment. It provides clear and comprehensive instructions regarding the procedure to be followed, maintaining confidentiality, and preventing any possible retaliation. Similar guarantees are extended to any witnesses that might be involved in the resolution of the case.

Improvements to internal networking platforms, VPN access, and renewed subscriptions enable researchers to access editorial resources and internal networks remotely.

The CREA website has been made more user-friendly with an active internal working group continuously improving access and transparency. However, Action 18 remains incomplete, with plans to enhance search functionality and document access expected by 2026.

Some challenges remain: Job instability and limited career development for temporary researchers; infrastructural disparities across locations; access to databases still evolving; ongoing website usability improvements needed; financial constraints limiting staff recruitment and full policy implementation.

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



The implementation of development and training for researchers is excellent. There is a huge number of training and development programmes for researchers to choose from. The research community is very satisfied that their training and development needs are being met.

CREA produces an annual Training Plan as part of the broader document "Integrated Activity and Organisation Plan (PIAO)".

The PIAO, within its "Organisation and Human Capital Section," must also include staff training strategies by highlighting strategic priorities for retraining and enhancing skill levels and professionalism across the organisation. CREA's annual training plan contains a broad range of training programmes from managerial programmes, conflict resolution, leadership skills, to ethical principles, etc.

CREA has developed initiatives for short-term international mobility, regulations for the awarding of scholarships, research grants, PhD scholarships, and study visits abroad.

CREA adopts a participatory approach by enabling employees to identify their specific training needs and by promoting the use of internal expertise. Since 2020, technical, scientific, and administrative staff have been able to contribute as trainers through the *Register of Internal Teachers*, established via internal calls.

Training activities are monitored through the internal *Monitor* database, which records staff participation in all courses.

CREA has adopted a *Regulation on the awarding of scholarships, research grants, doctoral scholarships, and study stays abroad for training purposes*, which was further revised in 2021 based on feedback and suggestions from researchers, removing age limits for grants and providing scholarships to high school diploma holders under 30.

Some challenges remain: Despite improvements, training for supervisors remains insufficient, especially regarding the involvement of CREA supervisors for PhD students and research grant holders.

Adequate financial resources are needed to support the increased number of training initiatives, especially for international mobility and specialist courses.

Please list one or more elements of good practice that you would recommend to other organisations – either in terms of action or in terms of coordination/process. (max 500 words)

The Trusted Advisor is an excellent initiative.

The sense of pride and belonging to the institute is exemplary, everybody enjoys working in the institution.

The general work environment is excellent, and there is a real sense of camaraderie.

The emphasis on work-life balance in the institution.

The commitment of the management team.

The adoption of remote and smart working, along with flexible working hours, ensures continuity of research activities while supporting a healthy work-life balance.

The existence of a multi-annual (three-year) recruitment plan represents a good practice at CREA, as it supports human resource planning and helps define research priorities and strategic directions; however, it could be better communicated and explained to early-stage researchers (ESRs) to enhance transparency and understanding of career development opportunities.

A notable good practice is the *CREA 2025–2034 Strategic Vision*, which sets clear guidelines for research activities over the next ten years, articulates CREA's strategic positioning at national, European, and international levels, and establishes the next steps for the institution and its staff.

Strengths and weaknesses

On the basis of the information submitted and taking into account the organisation's national research context, how would you as an assessor judge the HR Strategy's **strengths and weaknesses?** (maximum 1000 words)

Strengths

The commitment of management and staff to the HRS4R process.

The Permanent Table for HRS4R of CREA is made up of more than 50 percent of researchers and technologists.

The appointment of an independent Ethics Committee.

The appointment of a Data Protection Officer (DPO) for CREA.

CREA publishes on the EURAXESS website for all competitions. Notable progress has been made in aligning recruitment and selection processes with the principles of the European Charter and Code for Researchers and the OTM-R strategy. Key developments include: Adoption of Guidelines for Selection Committees; Development of Guidelines for the recruitment and career progression of researchers and technologists in line with the OTM-R strategy.

The publication of a three-year staff requirement plan for 2024 - 2026.

The HRS4R web page is comprehensive.

The publication of the evaluation grid used by DEMETRA® indicates the criteria by which researchers are evaluated.

The working and social security conditions at CREA were found to be generally positive.

The initial internal survey was robust and well-designed, providing a strong foundation for subsequent phases of HRS4R implementation.

Enhanced conflict management, including the introduction of a "Trusted Advisor" for harassment cases; flexible working hours fully implemented during the pandemic, supported by formal agreements; continuous improvement of the CREA website for better transparency and accessibility.

Weaknesses

Only 20 of the 938 researchers are international.

There is no evaluation system (performance appraisal) in place for individual researchers.

CREA did not consult with research staff during the drafting of the internal review.

The titles of the actions in the Action Plan are too brief and lack sufficient detail, making it difficult to understand how they will be implemented in practice. Including *sub-actions*, along with SMART indicators, clearly defined responsible units (rather than the vague term "competent units"), and updated timelines would significantly improve the plan's clarity and enable more effective monitoring of progress.

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

Make sure all documents on the HRS4R web page are up to date.

Ensure the research community (R1-R4) is briefed and consulted regarding the HRS4R process.

The documentation provided is clear and well-structured; however, we look forward to a more ambitious Action Plan from the institution in the future, addressing current priorities such as research assessment reform (COARA) and the Open Science initiative.

Continually review the HRS4R action plan and develop new actions as issues emerge from the research community.

General Assessment

Which of the below situations describes the organisation's progress most accurately? Tick the right situation regarding the award renewal application:.

Accepted



Pending modifications



Pending modifications - **extended deadline**



Explanation

- **Accepted:** The organisation is progressing with appropriate and quality actions as described in its Action Plan. **There is evidence that the HR Excellence in Research is further embedded. The next assessment will take place in 36 months.**
- Pending modifications: The organisation is, for the most part, progressing with appropriate and quality actions as described in its Action Plan, but could benefit from alterations as advised through the Assessment process. **There is some evidence that the HR Excellence in Research is further embedded.**
The institution is requested to submit within 2 months a revised file taking into account the recommendations of the

assessors.

- Pending modifications - **extended deadline**: The organisation is not deemed to be implementing appropriate and quality actions and this raises some concern for the future efforts to implement actions closely aligned to the Charter and Code. **There is a lack of evidence that the HR Excellence in Research is further embedded.**
The institution is requested to submit within 12 months a revised file taking into account the recommendations of the assessors.
Until then, the HR Award will be put as "pending".

General Recommendations

If any of the above statements have prompted a "no" in the evaluation, please provide suggestions of modifications in the form below.

- If the general assessment is "pending modifications" the recommendations are split into:
 - Immediate mandatory recommendations (to be implemented for award renewal, resubmission within 2 months)
 - Other recommendations (to be carried out during the award renewal phase).
- If the general assessment is "pending modifications - extended deadline" the recommendations are split into:
 - Mandatory recommendations (to be implemented for award renewal, resubmission within 12 months)
 - Other recommendations

Recommendations *

Ensure all research groups (R1- R4) are represented on the steering and working groups.

Develop a communications strategy to ensure regular communication on the HRS4R process and other institutional initiatives.

When developing institutional strategies, ensure there is institutional consultation and that strategies are not developed in a top-down manner.

Conduct a new survey and gap analysis. Researchers' opinions are central to the development and continuous improvement of the HR quality process. Gathering updated feedback will allow the university to identify strengths, weaknesses, and areas for development more accurately.

Continue to develop initiatives that strive for greater cohesion across the organisation, as the organisation is very dispersed and diverse.

Develop a strategy and policy that values translational research.

Ensure the English version of the website is developed and launched at the earliest opportunity.

Ensure all research positions, short-term and long-term, are recruited through the OTM-R policy.

Examine if there are possibilities to reduce the administrative burden for researchers.

All research positions must be advertised on Euraxess.

Update the Action Plan with information from March 2024 to the present, including actions taken, progress made, and results achieved. Leverage the 2025–2034 Strategic Vision Document and the 2023 Commission recommendations, including the European Charter for Researchers, to develop an updated and enhanced Action Plan (Open Science, Advancing Research Assessment CoARA, dual research, security research, other policies).

Prioritise actions according to the university's strategic objectives.

Always provide evidence and supporting documentation when reporting and documenting actions, including approval authorities, dates, and relevant references.

Constantly review and update the action plan, also, develop new actions as issues emerge, and ensure all actions are SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound).

If the organisation deserves to be commended on their ambition, their actions, evidence of good practice and/or their implementation process, please provide a commentary supporting this. (max. 2000 words)

Congratulations on a well-organised site visit and administration. The CREA team deserves recognition for their solid foundational work in HR and research management, with clear potential to further enhance the quality and impact of HRS4R.

The commitment of the management team.

The Trusted Advisor is an excellent initiative.

The sense of pride and belonging to the institute is exemplary; everybody enjoys working in the institution.

The general work environment is excellent, and there is a real sense of camaraderie.

The emphasis on work-life balance in the institution.