

# Action Plan 2026–2029

## HR Excellence in Research



HR EXCELLENCE IN RESEARCH

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Institute  
of Agrifood Research  
and Technology



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## Introduction

IRTA obtained the HR Excellence in Research Award in 2015, reflecting its commitment to implementing the principles of the European Charter for Researchers and to continuously improving the working environment, recruitment practices, career development opportunities and institutional support offered to researchers.

The present HR Excellence in Research Action Plan 2026–2029 is included in IRTA's award renewal process and represents the next stage in the institution's long-term HRS4R journey. It builds on previous implementation cycles and reflects the progress made in areas such as open, transparent and merit-based recruitment, researcher career development, training, equality, research integrity, Open Science, data management and working conditions.

This Action Plan has been designed as a practical and strategic tool to guide IRTA's priorities for the next three-year period. It responds to the gaps and improvement needs identified through the internal review and is aligned with IRTA's broader institutional strategy, including the Strategic Plan 2024–2027, the Equality Plan, the CoARA Action Plan and other institutional initiatives linked to responsible research, talent development and researcher support.

The 2026–2029 Action Plan marks a shift from establishing individual actions towards embedding sustainable institutional mechanisms. Its purpose is not only to implement specific activities, but also to consolidate practices, improve monitoring, strengthen accountability and ensure that the principles of the European Charter for Researchers become increasingly integrated into IRTA's governance, culture and everyday research environment.

## Evolution of the HR award process at IRTA

Since obtaining the HR Excellence in Research Award, IRTA has progressively developed its Human Resources Strategy for Researchers through successive action plans. Each cycle has contributed to strengthening institutional policies and practices and to aligning IRTA's research environment with the principles of the European Charter for Researchers.

The first implementation cycle focused on establishing the basic framework for excellence in human resources for researchers. This included the development of key institutional policies and procedures related to ethics, gender balance, recruitment and researcher training.

Subsequent action plans placed increasing emphasis on career development and researcher support. The 2019–2021 period focused particularly on career development for consolidated researchers and PhD candidates, including training initiatives, support for doctoral researchers and improvements to recruitment and promotion procedures.

The 2022–2024 Action Plan broadened this approach by expanding career development support to R1–R4 researchers, strengthening the annual training plan, introducing actions related to FAIR data and Open Science, improving recruitment outreach and developing initiatives linked to talent attraction, gender balance and researcher engagement.

During the 2024–2026 cycle, IRTA further consolidated institutional support mechanisms. Progress was made in areas such as onboarding, recruitment, Open Science and data management, PhD support, leadership development, international staff support and inclusive working environments. At the same time, IRTA began to connect HRS4R more explicitly with broader institutional priorities, including the Strategic Plan 2024–2027, CoARA, equality and the professionalisation of researcher recruitment and career development.

The 2026–2029 Action Plan represents a new stage in this evolution. The focus is now on embedding, monitoring and improving the mechanisms already developed, while addressing new and emerging priorities. This includes strengthening responsible research assessment, consolidating OTM-R practices, improving researcher experience, supporting international and early-career researchers, and developing a more structured institutional approach to career development and talent management.

## Gap Analysis and Internal Review

The 2026–2029 Action Plan has been developed based on the internal review of IRTA’s current practices and the updated Gap Analysis against the principles of the European Charter for Researchers. The Gap Analysis has been used to identify areas where IRTA’s policies and practices are already well established, as well as areas where further development, consolidation or monitoring is required.

The results of this analysis have informed the definition of priorities and actions for the next implementation period. In particular, the Action Plan focuses on gaps related to the embedding of Open Science and FAIR data practices, responsible research assessment, monitoring of recruitment and OTM-R processes, researcher onboarding, international researcher support, working conditions, mentoring, supervision, leadership development and career-stage specific support.

Each action included in the Action Plan is linked to one or more principles of the European Charter for Researchers and responds to an identified improvement need. This ensures coherence between the Gap Analysis, the Internal Review and the proposed actions. The purpose is not only to address remaining gaps, but also to consolidate good practices and strengthen IRTA’s capacity to monitor progress and evaluate impact over time.

## Strategic priorities for 2026–2029

The 2026–2029 Action Plan is structured around a set of strategic priorities that reflect the results of the internal review and the improvement needs identified across the four pillars of the European Charter for Researchers.

First, IRTA aims to further embed responsible research practices across the institution. This includes strengthening research integrity, ethics, Open Science, FAIR data, data stewardship, equality and responsible research assessment. IRTA’s participation in CoARA provides an important framework for advancing these priorities and for aligning internal assessment and progression practices with emerging European standards.

Second, IRTA will continue to strengthen open, transparent and merit-based recruitment. This includes improving recruitment safeguards, reinforcing the use of digital recruitment workflows, reviewing job advertisements from an inclusive perspective, monitoring candidate pools and improving the candidate experience. Recruitment will be increasingly understood as part of a broader institutional talent strategy rather than as a purely operational process.

Third, the Action Plan seeks to improve working conditions and the overall researcher experience. This includes strengthening onboarding, improving access to information and support services, supporting international researchers, increasing transparency in HR processes, promoting wellbeing and inclusion, and reinforcing mechanisms for early conflict detection and referral.

Fourth, IRTA will consolidate research career development as a strategic institutional priority. The Action Plan includes actions related to career-stage support, mentoring, supervision, leadership development, mobility, funding advice, training and succession planning. These actions aim to provide researchers with clearer, more structured and more visible support throughout their careers.

Finally, the Action Plan places strong emphasis on monitoring, evaluation and continuous improvement. Each action is linked to responsible units, timelines and indicators. This approach will help IRTA assess

progress more systematically and ensure that actions produce meaningful and measurable improvements for the research community.

## Governance and stakeholder involvement

The implementation of the 2026–2029 Action Plan will be supported by IRTA's HRS4R governance structure and by the involvement of institutional leadership, support units and the research community.

The HRS4R Working Group plays a central role in the follow-up and implementation of the HR Excellence in Research process. It brings together representatives from the People department, including the HR Director, Scientific Direction, representatives of researchers from R1 to R4 and a researcher representing the Workers Council. This composition ensures that the process includes both institutional and researcher perspectives and that the Action Plan remains connected with the needs of the research community.

The HRS4R coordination team will act as the central point for monitoring the implementation of the Action Plan, collecting updates from responsible units, identifying possible delays or implementation risks, and supporting coordination across departments. Each action has been assigned to a responsible unit, ensuring ownership and accountability.

Scientific Direction and the People department will maintain close coordination, particularly for actions related to recruitment, researcher training, career development, onboarding, mobility, progression and talent attraction. This coordination has become increasingly important following the clearer distribution of responsibilities between Scientific Direction and People. Scientific Direction now focuses more strongly on strategic career development, while People has incorporated dedicated expertise for R1–R4 recruitment and training.

The research community will continue to be involved through representation in the HRS4R Working Group, through Heads of Programmes and research coordination structures, and through participation in specific activities such as training needs identification, onboarding feedback, career development initiatives, surveys, CoARA-related discussions and actions linked to Open Science and data management.

Internal communication will also be essential. IRTA will use internal communication channels to explain the objectives of the HRS4R process, share progress, promote participation and increase awareness of available services and opportunities. The aim is to ensure that HRS4R is perceived as a useful framework for improving the research environment and supporting researchers' careers.

## Implementation, monitoring and evaluation model

The 2026–2029 Action Plan has been designed using a system-based approach. Rather than describing only recurrent activities, the actions are formulated as institutional mechanisms to be established, reviewed, consolidated or embedded. Recurrent activities such as annual training, seminars, Introduction to IRTA sessions and feedback surveys are therefore considered outputs, indicators or evidence of implementation.

This approach reflects IRTA's current stage in the HR Excellence in Research process. In previous cycles, the institution focused on creating policies, services and programmes. The next phase aims to ensure that these mechanisms are fully integrated into institutional practice, are visible to researchers, are consistently implemented across the organisation and are monitored through clear indicators.

Each action in the 2026–2029 Action Plan includes a defined responsible unit, timing and indicators. The responsible unit will lead implementation and provide information on progress to the HRS4R coordination team. Where an action requires the involvement of several units, the coordination team will facilitate collaboration and clarify responsibilities.

Progress will be monitored periodically against the established timeline. The status of actions will be classified using categories such as New, In progress, Completed or Extended. This will allow IRTA to maintain a clear overview of the implementation process and to identify actions requiring additional support or timeline adjustments.

Evaluation will combine quantitative and qualitative evidence. Depending on the action, indicators may include documents produced, procedures updated, training sessions delivered, participation data, satisfaction surveys, recruitment data, candidate feedback, onboarding feedback, support service usage, CoARA milestones, equality indicators or evidence of consultation with researchers and supervisors.

The monitoring process will also be connected with other institutional frameworks, including the Strategic Plan, Equality Plan, CoARA Action Plan, training planning and recruitment monitoring. This will help avoid fragmentation and ensure that HRS4R implementation remains aligned with broader institutional priorities. The implementation of the 2026–2029 Action Plan will be supported by IRTA's HRS4R governance structure and by the involvement of institutional leadership, support units and the research community.

## Alignment with institutional strategies

The 2026–2029 Action Plan is aligned with IRTA's broader institutional strategy and with several key policy frameworks that guide the development of the organisation.

The [Strategic Plan 2024–2027](#) provides the main institutional framework for IRTA's priorities. Developed through a participatory process involving representatives from different staff groups, it reinforces the importance of research excellence, institutional development, talent, collaboration and impact. The HRS4R Action Plan contributes to these strategic objectives by translating the principles of the European Charter for Researchers into practical actions affecting recruitment, working conditions, responsible research, training and career development.

The Action Plan is also aligned with [IRTA's Equality Plan](#). Actions related to inclusion, non-discrimination, inclusive recruitment, working conditions, pay transparency, wellbeing and safe working environments contribute to implementing equality priorities and to ensuring that IRTA provides a fair and supportive research environment.

IRTA's participation in CoARA is another important element of alignment. The CoARA Action Plan supports the reform of research assessment and encourages the recognition of diverse research contributions, broader definitions of excellence, responsible use of indicators and fairer assessment practices. These priorities are reflected in actions related to recruitment, progression, promotion and researcher evaluation.

The Action Plan is also connected with IRTA's Open Science and FAIR data priorities. Actions related to data management, data stewardship, Open Science training and good research practice support researchers in meeting current expectations for responsible and transparent research.

Finally, the Action Plan is aligned with IRTA's evolving HR strategy and with the professionalisation of researcher recruitment and career development. The clearer coordination between Scientific Direction and the People department, together with dedicated support for R1–R4 recruitment and training, provides a stronger institutional basis for implementing the Action Plan and supporting researchers throughout their careers.

## Action Plan 2026-2029

E-tool action ID	Timing	Action	Responsible unit	GAP Principle(s)	Indicator(s) / Target	Status
51	Q4 2026	Consolidate a PhD support and doctoral development framework.	Scientific Direction	10 Non-discrimination; 30 Access to career advice; 36 Relation with supervisors.	PhD support activities delivered; mentoring/guidance available (buddy figure); satisfaction/feedback collected; improvement actions identified.	In progress
52	Q4 2026	Consolidate an inclusive, safe and supportive working-environment policy framework.	People Department; Equality Commission	10 Non-discrimination; 24 Working conditions; 27 Gender balance; 34 Complaints/appeals.	Relevant policies/protocols approved or updated; staff communication completed; complaints/referral channels available; equality measures monitored.	In progress
54	Q4 2026	Develop and launch an institutional Open Science policy and support framework.	Scientific Direction (data steward's section)	4 Professional attitude; 7 Good practice in research; 8 Dissemination, exploitation of results.	Open Science Policy drafted/approved; guidance/training delivered; FAIR data/data management support available.	In progress
55	Q4 2026	Launch a responsible research assessment reform framework.	Scientific direction /CoARA working group	7 Good practice in research; 11 Evaluation / appraisal systems; 28 Career development.	Assessment review process launched; criteria reviewed; responsible assessment principles communicated; link with CoARA roadmap established.	In progress
57	Q1 2027	Embed a diversified and inclusive recruitment outreach strategy.	People Department; Equality Commission	10 Non-discrimination; 13 Recruitment (Code).	Inclusive-language review applied; candidate pools monitored by sex/profile.	New
58	Q4 2026	Embed an international researcher support pathway covering immigration, language and administrative integration.	People Department	10 Non-discrimination; 24 Working conditions; Value of mobility.	Language/onboarding materials available; HR English training delivered; immigration support cases monitored; researcher feedback collected.	In progress
59	Q3 2027	Establish an introduction to IRTA day for R2 postdoctoral fellows.	Scientific Direction	22 Recognition of the profession; 30 Access to career advice.	Introduction to IRTA day for R2 delivered; materials available; attendance recorded; feedback collected.	New
60	Q4 2027	Embed a coherent career development framework for R1-R4.	Scientific Direction; People Department	30 Access to career advice; 38 Continuing Professional Development.	Career framework documented; consultation space available; number of users/consultations monitored; satisfaction feedback collected; career support materials available.	New

E-tool action ID	Timing	Action	Responsible unit	GAP Principle(s)	Indicator(s) / Target	Status
61	Q4 2027	Establish a succession and talent-retention framework for key scientific and leadership area.	People Department	25 Stability and permanence of employment; 27 Gender balance; 28 Career development.	Map of key positions completed; succession plan designed/approved; engagement interviews held; retention/development actions documented.	In progress
62	Q4 2027	Upgrade the institutional training system and align annual training with the current career-stage needs.	People Department; Scientific Direction	38 Continuing Professional Development; 39 Access to research training and continuous development.	Improved e-learning platform deployed; annual needs analysis completed; training plan aligned with R1-R4 needs; participation monitored by profile/gender; satisfaction tracked.	New
63	Q4 2029	Embed targeted training on equality, ethics, IPR, RRI and responsible research practice.	People Department; Scientific Direction	2 Ethical principles; 7 Good practice in research; 10 Non-discrimination.	Training modules delivered; participation tracked by profile; IPR training included; annual plan includes ethics/RRI/equality content; satisfaction collected.	In progress
64	Q4 2028	Embed pay-transparency and fairness monitoring in remuneration, benefits and collective-negotiation follow-up.	People Department; Management; collective agreement negotiation team	10 Non discrimination; 24 Working conditions; 26 Funding and salaries.	Benefits access reviewed; negotiation topics documented; equality-related remuneration indicators monitored.	New
65	Q4 2028	Institutionalise the CoARA research assessment reform roadmap at IRTA.	Scientific Direction; CoARA working group	7 Good practice in research; 11 Evaluation / appraisal systems; 16 Judging merit (Code).	DORA signed/implemented; CoARA National Chapter participation; roadmap milestones achieved; criteria reviewed.	New
66	Q4 2029	Embed Open Science, FAIR data and data-stewardship support into research practice.	Scientific direction (data management section)	7 Good practice in research; 11 Evaluation / appraisal systems; 8 Dissemination, exploitation of results.	Open Science promotion campaign delivered; FAIR/Open Science training included; Data Steward support in use; number of consultations monitored; materials disseminated.	New
67	Q4 2027	Establish HR governance, service transparency and organisational-information systems.	People Department	3 Professional responsibility; 6 Accountability; 10 Non-discrimination.	HR helpdesk operational; ticket categories and response data monitored; job-position map available; HR service information published; user feedback collected.	In progress
68	Q4 2028	Create a centre-based early-support and referral network for conflict prevention.	People Department	34 Complain /appeals; 36 Relation with supervisors.	Reference persons designated; training completed; referral/resource guide published; communication to staff completed;	New

E-tool action ID	Timing	Action	Responsible unit	GAP Principle(s)	Indicator(s) / Target	Status
					cases/queries monitored confidentially.	
69	Q4 2027	Embed participatory strategic planning for the 2028-2030 IRTA Strategic Plan.	Scientific Direction	22 Recognition of the profession; 35 Participation in decision-making bodies.	Participatory process designed; representatives involved; consultation activities held; HR award for research principles considered in strategic plan; final plan approved/published.	New
70	Q1 2028	Establish an integrity and ethics committee to support IRTA's specific ethics committees as well as research integrity practices (e.g., authorship, supervision, etc.).	Scientific Direction; Quality Unit	2 Ethical principles; 3 Professional responsibility; 7 Good practice in research.	Research integrity practices determined; Committee composed; governance system established; Training modules delivered; update and conflict resolution meetings held.	New

## OTM-R and continuous progress

Open, Transparent and Merit-based Recruitment remains a central component of IRTA's HR Excellence in Research strategy. The 2026–2029 Action Plan includes several actions directly linked to the continuous improvement of OTM-R practices and to the professionalisation of researcher recruitment.

These actions include the review of recruitment safeguards, the use and optimisation of ATS-based workflows, the improvement of recruitment documentation, the review of job advertisements from an inclusive-language perspective, the monitoring of candidate pools by sex and profile, the diversification of outreach channels and the reinforcement of candidate communication and feedback practices.

The Action Plan also aims to further align recruitment and progression with responsible research assessment principles. In connection with IRTA's CoARA commitments, recruitment and evaluation practices will increasingly recognise diverse research contributions, CV gaps, mobility, intersectoral experience and non-linear career trajectories. This will help ensure that assessment criteria reflect a broader and more responsible understanding of research excellence.

Continuous improvement is a key principle of the Action Plan. The implementation of actions will be monitored through indicators and periodic follow-up, and the plan may be adjusted when justified by monitoring results, stakeholder feedback, institutional developments or recommendations from assessors. Any relevant changes will be documented and integrated into future internal reviews.

The 2026–2029 Action Plan should therefore be understood as a living document. Its purpose is not only to complete a set of actions, but to support continuous institutional learning and to ensure that the principles of the European Charter for Researchers remain embedded in IRTA's policies, practices and long-term strategy for researchers.

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