

HR Excellence in Research

# Renewal Assessment: EC Consensus Report

[Back to Task \(/my/hrs4r/task/43441\)](/my/hrs4r/task/43441)

[Back to Case \(/my/hrs4r/369310?phase=renewal#43441\)](/my/hrs4r/369310?phase=renewal#43441)

[Printable Version \(https://euraxess.ec.europa.eu/my/hrs4r/case/18622/task/44880/document-type/renewal-assessment?print=true\)](https://euraxess.ec.europa.eu/my/hrs4r/case/18622/task/44880/document-type/renewal-assessment?print=true)

## Renewal Phase Assessment With Site Visit - EC Consensus Report

**Case number**

2019ES369310

**Name Organisation under assessment**

Fundació Privada I2CAT

**Organisation's contact details**

Gran Capita, 2-4, Ed. Nexus, 2 Planta. Desp. 203, Barcelona, Catalonia, 08034, Spain

**Submission date of the Internal Review**

14/11/2023

**Submission date to the European Commission**

10/06/2025

During the **award renewal assessment** report, progress against proposed actions, indicators and targets for success are assessed. An overview of progress and quality against the Charter and Code themes need to evidence how the HRS4R process has been embedded into the institutional policies.

The assessment is based on the submitted internal review of the institution optionally followed by a site visit to the institution.

A successful internal review and experts' assessment allows the participating institution to retain the 'HR award'.

## 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	nothing to declare
Does the narrative provided list goals and objectives which clearly indicate the organisation's priorities in HR-management for researchers?	Partly	The narrative adequately describes the context, but provides less detail on the HRS4R priorities. The institution's vision and mission are clearly presented, but the level of embedding is not as well articulated. However, management commitment is evident.

YES / NO / PARTLY

Recommendations

Has the organisation published an updated HR Strategy and Action Plan been updated with the actions' current status, additions and/or modifications?

Partly

An updated HRS4R action plan has been published, but the published documents on the web are quite confusing. Please refer to the link below for the "Final review of the Action Plan for the period 2021-2023": <https://i2cat.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Final-review-Action-Plan-2021-2023-Actions-2023-2026.pdf>. & New Action Plan for the period 2023-2026", but all dates refer to 2021, with comments in the situation referring to 2020. This makes it difficult to distinguish what has been achieved in 2021-2023. For instance, the remarks frequently state, "To this end, the organisation has committed itself to hiring a dedicated person for the year 2022 and to raising the number of employees by By 2022, the organisation's training budget is to be increased to more than double the current amount has been set for 2021". It is evident that this refers to the previous Action Plan and not the one under assessment. Please note that the Action Plan up to AW6 (p. 33) refers to actions in the period 2017-2020. As outlined in AW7 (page 34), the following actions have been scheduled for 2022, with the remainder planned for 2025-2026 (Action Plan 2025-2027). The site visit will certainly provide valuable insights.

The updated AP is however quite concise and should be developed further to clarify the scope and range of actions through additional, meaningful details. Some actions, such as "open an internal debate to...", "promote", or "enable", could benefit from more precise formulation.

In addition, it would be beneficial to include indicator reporting on the previous period's achievements, as this would facilitate a more comprehensive understanding of progress.

A significant proportion of the indicators and targets have been misunderstood and require substantial improvement (with missing elements to be completed) to ensure that milestones and event

	YES / NO / PARTLY	Recommendations
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?	Partly	The HRS4R process is overseen and managed by the Human Resources Director, and a dedicated working group has been established to implement the HRS4R actions. The management team is fully engaged and proactive in the SC. However, the contribution of representatives from R2-R3-R4 categories is less effective. Further clarification is required to determine the feasibility of establishing a steering committee and/or reference groups. I2CAT is a small institution, but the process should be consistent with best practice across the sector.

Is the OTM-R policy in place and publicly available?	Partly	The OTM-R policy has been in place, published and functional since 2017. However it appears that this is not currently available on their website and only the OTMR checklist submitted for the previous assessment is available to the public. During the site visit, there will be a discussion about its evolution over the course of this period and the amendments that were made.
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**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)**

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The institution's internal assessment has identified several issues that are believed to be significant and should be explored in more detail during the on-site visit. The majority of these issues stem from the limited scope and lack of detail in the presentations.

- 1) Action plan: results achieved in the 2021-2023 period, along with any difficulties and challenges encountered.
- 2) Monitoring process: it is unclear whether only meetings are held (as it seems) and how the results of these consultation meetings are summarised and then used for further monitoring. It is unclear how the institution provides feedback to researchers, how the consultation of researchers takes place and what the real weight of the voice of researchers is in the implementation of the development of the Action Plan.
- 3) The measurement of progress is another issue to be discussed. It is vital to clarify the way in which it is specified in the review (percentage of achieved actions and evolution of the institution during phases of HRS4R implementation), since such methods are empirical and less precise.
- 4) With regard to the distinction between public and non-public information, it should be noted that the institution's recruitment policies are not available on the internet. Consequently, it is not possible for foreign individuals to access this information.
- 5) The level of transparency in the recruitment process for foreign researchers.
- 6) How effectively do the actions of the AP address the needs of the researchers, despite the statements made in the review? "The initial idea was drafted by the working group, in collaboration with upper management and the HR department. This draft was circulated among the relevant stakeholders to ensure that the proposed implementation met the needs and circumstances of all involved parties. As this appears to be a dissemination through stakeholders, it would be beneficial to discuss the specific methods and actions that have been employed to ensure that the researchers' needs and specific issues are addressed by the AP.
- 7) As stated in the review by i2CAT, a key challenge was to integrate the day-to-day activities of all employees involved in the process with the work to be completed, in order to ensure the successful execution of the actions. Consequently, several actions were postponed in relation to the initial planning schedule. This issue should be high on the agenda during the visit.

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

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It is important that the Action Plan, and the stage of its implementation, is explained in order to address the issues mentioned above in the quality assessment.

The information gathering process would be more efficient if i2CAT were to conduct an internal survey in conjunction with focus groups. This would improve and guide the data collection process concerning HR. The general approach is considered to be fair; however, there is a need to make it more efficient.

The following aspects will be considered for further investigation:

- 1) The role of researchers within the WG and their involvement in the decision-making process.
- 2) the monitoring process in practice: from the narrative, it is not evident who is responsible for what, or how achievements and/or problems are addressed in a proactive way.
- 3) The alignment of organisational policies with the HRS4R is a key priority. The narrative does not provide a detailed account of the implementation of HRS4R-inspired changes in the institution's policies, nor does it address their effectiveness.
- 4) Involvement of the research community: it is claimed that "the implementation of the different actions was done in close collaboration with the working group and with those persons that played a role in every specific action". However, it appears that the working group consists solely of R1 representatives, with no members from the R2-R4 categories.
- 5) Gender balance and gender equality plan: results achieved, feedback from researchers, and future plans.
- 6) Career progression and professional growth: results achieved, feedback from researchers, and plans for the future.
- 7) how the institute is communicating the results of its HR approach, both internally and externally.

## **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? v

i2CAT is a remarkable organization operating as a research and innovation center within CERCA (umbrella of 42 Catalan research centers). It works with advanced digital technologies such as 5G/6G, immersive and interactive technologies, cybersecurity, artificial intelligence, blockchain, space communications etc.

The institute is actively supporting its research staff at their professional growth using own resources and external funding.


The institute's HR Strategy is under consideration and the results are showing up. The process involved a reasonable number of stakeholders, and included regular updates and improvements - therefore reflecting the institute's commitment and vision. The approach has been thorough and consistent, and its achievements are reflected by the action plan.

i2CAT has put some efforts to increase its visibility and involvement every year, and their approach is appreciated by its stakeholders. The HR strategy is embedded in the institution's overall strategy and is aligned and coherent in regard to HRS4R.

From the documentation and the discussions during the site visit, it is clear they have involved their stakeholders in the implementation. They need to find better ways (in terms of deeper and more significant contributions) to involve them in the monitoring process.

It is however important to aggregate all the documentation and details into a better structure (see recommendations for the Action Plan), and ensure all important documents are available to the public through the website and specifically the HRS4R portal.


The main benefits of implementing an HR strategy in the organisation under review are the increased level of internationalisation and the general improvement in working conditions and the environment. The overall impact of the HRS4R is very positive, both in terms of the implementation process and the final perception of it by employees.

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 level of ambition can be considered good even if the new action plan does not contain any special or innovative actions. It seems to be more of a completion of what has already been done, and a need to arrive at final policies that have not yet been formalised in written documents. The high turnover of young researchers is a problem. Consequently, they are trying to explore approaches and actions to support talent retention.

Researchers are satisfied with their involvement and the institute's approach, working groups seem to be in place, and stakeholders feel the decisions being taken are their own decisions as well. Researchers highlighted the many ways in which they communicate internally, with events such as "i2gether" being used to gather people and get/give feedback.


i2CAT's policies on recruitment processes should be published and be clear, so that foreign researchers may understand clearly what they can expect from working at the institute.

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's efforts to ensure the implementation of the Charter and Code principles regarding the ethical and professional aspects of researchers are in line with those of other small institutions in Spain. From an ethical point of view, it seems that the principles have been implemented well, since employees have declared themselves happy with their situation and have not experienced ethical bias. In terms of professional aspects, young researchers are integrated into their own team and appear satisfied with their conditions. As all institutions, i2CAT investigated the current situation by way of internal surveys, regular meetings on different subjects, gender balance etc. Gender balance is in constant improvement, the number of women shifted from 20 to 30% in 7 years (which is higher than the global average level).

The institute endorses freedom of scientific research, data protection management (according to EU regulations), and transparent financial management. From the submitted documentation and the discussions from the site visit, i2CAT is also promoting a favorable working environment for researchers - in line with the Charter and Code provisions.

Some recommendations are that research integrity should be better embedded (within as many internal structures as possible), and the policy on gender balance and equality should be published on the website.


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? 

The organisation's efforts to ensure the implementation of the principles of the Charter and Code regarding the recruitment process are very good. The OTMR has been established, and feedback from employees, especially young researchers, confirmed that the recruitment process was clear and the criteria transparent. Several team leaders in the organisation are not Spanish and are well integrated, with some having progressed in their careers.


Researchers feel the recruitment approach is fair and comprehensive (as well as abiding to the Catalan general rules for public recruitment), and i2CAT strives to attract more people each year. This is not easy, since talent discovery and retention is getting harder, and the institute aims very high in terms of excellence.

Recruitment uses a ticketing system for job opening, which has been mentioned positively by the researchers.

In conclusion, the Charter and Code principles have been observed by i2CAT, and information on how to apply for a position and a detailed description of the working conditions and environment are easy to obtain/find.

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?** 

In terms of working conditions, they have implemented a hybrid working system. Stakeholders praised i2CAT as a place which provides stable and permanent employment. The discussions on working conditions made with employees showed the stakeholders' concern on the rising costs of living in Spain and in particular in Barcelona, and concerns about well-integrating new employees from abroad (which the institute is managing well). Foreign employees at i2CAT come from 24 nations. Due to the small size of the main building, it is not possible to accommodate all employees at the same time, so a booking system has been implemented. Each employee has to be present one day per week only. Although this organisation seems to allow a balance between private and working life, only half of those interviewed said that they considered it the best way of working. Some prefer to work from home and plan their own activities, while others prefer to have more opportunities to meet other groups and expand their horizons through collaboration with other employees. Young researchers need to spend more time with their peers and supervisors, and as long as this is granted to them, the system is sustainable.

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

Stakeholders reported this issue as being one which was very well approached by the institute.

Training is provided under three levels - programmed, on-demand and strategic. Researchers suggest more courses on non-scientific i.e. soft skills and smaller issues should be organized.

The working environment is friendly to researchers, and their personal development needs further internal support and applicable solutions for their issues.

As a consequence, the organisation has shown a good training programme because it is tailored to meet employees' requests. It seems that the range of training on offer matches the employees' expectations. Some more technical training could be offered.

In terms of researcher development, the training could be more extensive, but there have been no complaints on this topic.

**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)**

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### **Strengths**

- 1) The institution has established an effective feedback system for employees, who know how to raise an issue if necessary.
- 2) The job description and recruitment process have been implemented in such a way that recruits do not complain and perceive it as open and transparent.
- 3) The approach of i2CAT towards HRS4R is remarkable, especially in an environment which is getting more difficult each year in terms of funding and recruitment.
- 4) Their proposal-writing team is very efficient (funding from EU programs is the main source within the overall budget of the institute - the total amount from competitive sources reached 24 million EUR during 2020-2024).
- 5) They have a good strategy towards internationalization, creating an international scientific board which would support their initiatives.

All issues which have been observed positively during this assessment are potential models of good practice, and although the institute is quite small (in comparison with universities or other, bigger research bodies), clear procedures or mechanisms are in place.

### **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)

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**Strengths:**

- a) The Governance client is clear and SC is a practical example of this as well as a catchy website that has been updated with an infographic that allows quick access to the HRS4R section.
- b) There is a clear commitment to training and to being more competitive at an international level and efforts made to improve the working conditions and working environment.

**Weaknesses**

- a) The engagement of researchers has not been clearly detailed, nor it is clear how consultation takes place in practice, whether a survey has been conducted and whether the results have been published and presented, and how the various categories of researchers are involved and their feedback is taken into account in the decision-making process.
- b) It is not evident how a foreigner can obtain information about the institution's policies and how they can therefore become involved.
- c) The policy on gender balance and equality is unclear because it is not explicitly visible on the website. The narrative states that some action has been taken, so the willingness to act in this regard is evident. However, the narrative does not allow us to infer the results achieved during the assessment period.
- d) although i2CAT's application is quite concise, not too lengthy (and therefore provided with sufficient details), and most of the necessary documentation can be found on their website, there is enough information to understand the structure of the organization, however there is a need to discuss the relations with internal and external stakeholders.
- e) The clarity and detailing of the proposed actions from the AP should be discussed, as well as monitoring progress and reporting past achievements.
- f) Indicators should be revised entirely, to provide the means of monitoring/measuring the achievements (or the results of actions). It is important to ensure clear links (coherence) between the proposed actions from the AP and the identified issues (gaps), therefore solutions should also summarize the needs, and provide the necessary indicators and targets.

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

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It should be noted that the majority of the indicators included in the Action Plan are actually milestones, deliverables or simply confirmation of the execution of certain tasks. It should be noted that such instruments are not designed to measure progress or performance, at least not in a direct sense, and certainly not without allowing for comparisons. In order to effectively monitor the progress and successful completion of the proposed actions, it is strongly recommended that appropriate targets and quantitative or qualitative indicators be added.

The documentation would benefit from increased transparency and accessibility. This could be achieved by clarifying the distinction between references to the 2021-2023 plan, the previous plan and the 2023-2026 plan.

The method and extent to which the survey was conducted to verify the status of implementation remains unclear. Policies should be made public, especially those on recruitment, and not only on the intranet.

Most of the indicators included in the Action Plan are actually milestones, deliverables or just confirmation of execution of certain tasks. Such instruments do not measure progress or performance (at least not directly and certainly without allowing comparisons). It is strongly recommended to add proper targets and (quantitative/qualitative) indicators in order to properly monitor the progress (and successful completion) of the proposed actions.

## 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

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## Recommendations \*

The assessors confirm that researchers stated frequently that i2CAT is a likeable working place which encourages and promotes common projects and joint ideas, and therefore they have high confidence in the institute, as it promotes and ensures excellence: job stability, security, and trust at the working level. However, the salaries are low (due to the public status of the institute), there is a need for further support, sometimes basic (such as providing software licenses) and preventing overburn and overload, by hiring more people when/where necessary.

Researchers have good opportunities through the research centers network and memberships of different association at national and international levels.

We recommend:

1) Update the description of each indicator/target in the action plan (and future ones) so that they are clearly identified and distinguished. Each goal is linked to a target and monitored by indicators, enabling the implementation of monitoring and the identification of contingency plans if needed.

A large part of the indicators and targets have been misunderstood and should be improved (and filled-in where missing), to avoid the use of milestones and event achievement instead of indicators. Such instruments do not measure progress or performance (at least not directly and certainly without allowing comparisons). It is strongly recommended to add (quantitative/qualitative) indicators ("no. of", "percent of", "increase by" etc.) in order to properly monitor the progress (and successful completion) of the respective actions. Proper targets (the desired/proposed/minimum value of the indicator) should also be added.

The impact indicators presented by the institute are mostly results however should be interpreted in close relation with their outcome at different levels (research community, national etc.).

It would be also useful if indicator reporting on the previous period's achievements could be included as well (to better understand progress).

Solutions should therefore summarize needs, and provide the necessary indicators and targets (which have to be revised entirely).

2) There is potential for improving the Action Plan by better supporting monitoring activities (from actual implementation to impact) and create better measurement indicators from the proposed milestones (considering targets - quantitative and qualitative).

3) The information gathering could be more efficient if i2CAT used their survey system in conjunction (doubled) by focus groups which would improve and guide the data collection process. Although the general approach is fair, however it needs to be more efficient.

4) The clarity and detailing of the proposed actions from the Action Plan should be improved and the document revised accordingly, as well as reporting on past achievements. The updated AP is quite concise and should be developed a bit, to clarify through additional, meaningful details, the scope and range of actions. Some actions start with "open an internal debate to...", or "promote", or "enable", and should be better formulated.

For the next assessment, the institution is kindly recommended to:

1) Update the website so that foreigners can easily access important information about working life and opportunities provided by the institution. This is really needed to increase internationalisation, which seems to be a key point for governance.

2) Support group exchange and cross-fertilisation by promoting events where they can meet in person. Some events have been organised, but they seem insufficient.

3) Continue to support young researchers with a dedicated training programme to improve their professionalism and career development.

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4) Take care of the HRS4R monitoring systems and reporting. The current level can be improved. The monitoring process should provide reports that are publicly available to employees and assessors.

5) Reporting should contain surveys, gaps and conclusions, and changes to the action plan should be clearly defined in relation to the schedule. The organisation should use the end of the previous action plan as the starting point for the next one, but the previous action plan and the current one should not be mixed in the narrative, otherwise the progress made will remain unclear.

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)

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i2CAT's application is quite concise, not too lengthy (and therefore provided with sufficient details), and most of the necessary documentation can be found on their website. The site visit provided enough information to understand the structure of the organization.

Although the approach towards HRS4R is very good, i2CAT needs to promote further the Charter and Code within its research community, and highlight/connect the benefits (which the researchers praised during the site visit) to HRS4R.

HR strategy should incorporate a stronger monitoring and evaluation mechanism to track progress over time. We suggest not only to list actions and indicators, but also include a review mechanism where the effectiveness of each action is assessed, allowing for necessary adjustments.

**Some further comments:**

1) The feedback system is working well because the HR manager is highly proactive. In future, try to consolidate this practice so that it becomes independent of the HR manager and more sustainable. Up to now, the HR department has provided great support to help international staff join, and everything seems to be running smoothly. In any case, the supervisors seem well involved and highly proactive in checking the situation of their own group — at least those who were interviewed.

2) The working environment seems to be very good, so the organisation should be happy with that. However, the level of happiness is unrealistic: it was evident that most of those interviewed are essentially living their own lives rather than the institution's, because they are working from home. Working one day per week in the office is the most common way of doing this. This seems to create a sense of detachment from real life: when asked, they said they neither needed cross-fertilisation among groups nor social events where they could share experiences. This suggests that, while the hybrid work model is effective, it could be a limiting factor in terms of the organisation's vision of internationalisation. Foreigners do not have any real opportunity to integrate into the system and are essentially in a closed system where their potential is not fully realised.