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SECURE2



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TABLE OF ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

Abbreviation	Full Name
BZN	Bay Zoltan Alkalmazott Kutatasi Kozhasznu Nonprofit Kft.
ICoRSA	International Consortium of Research Staff Associations
IST	Instituto Superior Técnico
LPNU	Lviv Polytechnic National University
MS	Milestone
PLOCAN	Plataforma Oceánica de Canarias
SMPHU	Universitatea de Stat de Medicină și Farmacie Nicolae Testemițanu din Republica Moldova
UCY	University of Cyprus
UEFISCDI	Executive Agency for Higher Education, Research, Development and Innovation Funding
NOVA	Universidade Nova de Lisboa
RPO	Research-performing organizations
RFO	Research-funding organizations
RCF	Research Career Framework
ZUT	Zachodniopomorski Uniwersytet Technologiczny w Szczecinie / West Pomeranian University of Technology

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Executive Summary

This internal report provides the first consolidated baseline assessment of the eight SECURE2 pilot institutions using the **Research Career Framework (RCF) Maturity Mapping – Simplified Template** (The referenced resource is currently hosted within the SECURE2 internal collaborative workspace and will be replaced with a stable repository link upon final publication of the deliverable). The analysis identifies the starting point of each pilot in implementing RCF-aligned policies and practices, highlights consortium-wide trends, and provides strategic guidance for the next stages of the project.

Purpose of the Assessment

The RCF Maturity Mapping enables pilot institutions to self-assess their level of development across eight Action Areas: Strategy, Stability, Working Conditions, Skills Development, Mobility, Assessment, Career Pathways, and Interoperability. Scores range from **0 (Not Started)** to **4 (Leading)**. The results serve as the project foundation, allowing for clear understanding of the baseline and identification of gaps in provision to inform SECURE2's differentiated support model and long-term monitoring.

Key Findings

Consortium-Wide Baseline

- The overall consortium maturity level is **1.12** (Initiating → Developing).
- The highest-performing Action Area is **Working Conditions (1.99)**.
- The weakest Action Areas are **Stability (0.38)**, **Interoperability (0.57)**, and **Mobility (0.67)**.
- Maturity across pilots shows significant variation:
    - **Advanced pilots:** NOVA (1.85), UEFISCDI (1.35)
    - **Mid-range pilots:** ZUT, UCY, LPNU, IST
    - **Early-stage pilots:** PLOCAN, SUMPHU

Strengths Across Pilots

- Strong foundations in Working Conditions, supported by national HR frameworks.
- Growing strategic awareness and initial efforts in skills development.
- Advanced pilots show well-developed policies in assessment, pathways, and interoperability.

Weaknesses Across Pilots

- Limited long-term career structures, progression mechanisms, and tenure-like pathways.
- Insufficient mobility opportunities and limited cross-border researcher exchange.

- Weak alignment with ERA frameworks, Open Science practices, and national/international recognition systems.

Implications for SECURE2 Work Planning

The maturity baseline confirms the need for a **differentiated, readiness-based support model**:

- **Advanced pilots** will function as leaders in peer learning and best-practice transfer.
- **Mid-range pilots** require structured strengthening in pathways, assessment, and strategy implementation.
- **Early-stage pilots** need foundational frameworks, templates, clearer guidance and practice sharing.

Priority areas for SECURE2 pilots include:

- strengthening career stability mechanisms;
- developing mobility schemes;
- supporting alignment with ERA and CoARA principles;
- integrating RCF components across institutional systems.

Recommendations

Short-Term

- Develop RCF starter toolkits for early-stage pilots.
- Establish peer-learning clusters and thematic capacity-building sessions.
- Initiate low-cost mobility formats and consider how to strengthen internal governance structures.

Medium-Term

- Support structured implementation of responsible research assessment.
- Formalise career pathways and mobility policies across pilots.
- Strengthen interoperability with ERA frameworks.

Long-Term

- Introduce stability-enhancing mechanisms such as multiyear development plans and transparent progression systems.
- Embed RCF principles into institutional strategies and HR governance.
- Scale successful models beyond pilot institutions.

About the SECURE2 project

The SECURE2 project aims to pilot and implement recommendations from the European Framework for Research Careers (RCF) to improve research career progression, mobility, and working conditions within research-performing and research-funding organisations. Building on the previous SECURE project, SECURE2 expands the scope and duration of implementation activities through a four-year project framework, including a three-year pilot phase for testing more complex and long-term institutional reforms.

Objectives of SECURE2

- Create talent ecosystems for attractive research careers
- Implement standards for attractive research careers
- Strengthen early career researchers' competences and employability
- Co-develop and implement tailored RCF Action Plans
- Support sustainable mutual learning and Open Science capacity building

SECURE2 builds on the experience and tools developed in the SECURE project, particularly the RCF Action Selection Tool, to support institutional reform across eight pilot organisations. The project promotes collaboration between researchers, research managers and administrators through a multi-stakeholder approach involving consortium partners, consultations with the wider research community, and advisory board oversight. Key project activities include the development and implementation of institutional Action Plans, alignment of RCF recommendations with HRS4R principles, stakeholder consultations, training activities for researchers and RMAs, policy briefs, and dissemination of recommendations to support wider uptake of the RCF across Europe. The Implementation of action plans will be conducted in 8 pilots (table below).

Pilot Institution	Country	Organisation Type / Category
Plataforma Oceánica de Canarias (PLOCAN)	Spain	Research Infrastructure / RPO
Universitatea de Stat de Medicină și Farmacie „Nicolae Testemițanu" (SUMPHU)	Moldova	University / RPO
Lviv Polytechnic National University (LPNU)	Ukraine	University / RPO
Executive Agency for Higher Education, Research, Development & Innovation Funding (UEFISCDI)	Romania	Research Funding Organisation / RFO
University of Cyprus (UCY)	Cyprus	University / RPO
Universidade Nova de Lisboa (NOVA)	Portugal	University / RPO
Instituto Superior Técnico (IST)	Portugal	Technical University / RPO
Zachodniopomorski Uniwersytet Technologiczny w Szczecinie (ZUT)	Poland	Technical University / RPO

1 Introduction

This internal report presents a comprehensive analysis of the SECURE Research Career Framework (RCF) Maturity Mapping – Simplified Self-assessment tool completed by the eight SECURE2 pilot institutions. As one of the foundational activities in the early stages of SECURE2, this exercise provides a structured assessment of where each pilot currently stands in relation to key dimensions of the RCF and identifies the readiness of institutions to engage in deeper reform activities throughout the project lifespan. The comprehensive analysis was conducted under SECURE2 work package 1 dedicated to Audit and benchmarking.

The RCF Maturity Mapping tool enables institutions to self-assess their practices across eight core Action Areas that shape the quality, attractiveness, and sustainability of research careers. These Action Areas (Table 1.1.) include Strategy, Stability, Working Conditions, Skills Development, Mobility, Assessment, Career Pathways, and Interoperability. By scoring their existing structures, processes, and policies on a 0–4 maturity scale, institutions offer insight into the extent to which RCF-aligned mechanisms are already in place, emerging, or still absent.

Table 1.1. Overview of RCF Action Areas assessed in the SECURE2 benchmarking exercise

Action Area	Focus
AA1 – Strategy	Institutional strategic commitment to research careers
AA2 – Stability	Career stability and progression mechanisms
AA3 – Working Conditions	Employment conditions and HR practices
AA4 – Skills Development	Researcher training and competency development
AA5 – Mobility & Exposure	International and intersectoral mobility
AA6 – Assessment & Evaluation	Responsible research assessment practices
AA7 – Career Pathways	Structured research career progression
AA8 – Interoperability	Alignment with ERA and external frameworks

The data analysed in this report originates from the benchmarking templates submitted by each pilot, which provide a structured breakdown of maturity ratings across actions and descriptors within each Action Area. These inputs were harmonised and consolidated into a comparative dataset that allows for:

- A consortium-wide baseline, establishing the collective starting point for SECURE2 and identifying common strengths or systemic gaps across institutions.
- Institution-level maturity profiles, highlighting the specific areas where each pilot is advanced, developing, or at an early stage in adopting RCF principles.
- Gaps identified at each institution to inform strategic planning.
- Cross-pilot strengths and weaknesses, offering a high-level view of where the consortium demonstrates coherence and where significant disparities exist.
- Implications for SECURE2 work planning, ensuring that future activities within the relevant Work Packages respond to the real needs and readiness levels of pilot institutions.

- Recommendations for targeted support measures, guiding peer-learning, capacity building, policy co-development, and tailored interventions.

This baseline mapping report serves as an essential reference point for monitoring progress throughout the SECURE2 project. It also provides the evidence required to design tailored support pathways for pilots at various stages of reform maturity, enabling the consortium to adopt a differentiated, needs-based approach. The insights gained here will inform strategic planning, pilot implementation, capacity-building actions, and policy alignment efforts over the full duration of SECURE2.

This deliverable primarily contributes to SECURE2 Objective 4: "Co-Develop and Implement Self-Tailored RCF Action Plans for Inclusive and Sustainable Research Careers," by establishing the consortium-wide baseline required for institutional benchmarking, needs assessment, and differentiated support planning. The findings additionally contribute to activities under WP1 (Audit and Benchmarking), while informing implementation, capacity-building, monitoring, and policy alignment activities across subsequent Work Packages.

2 Methodology

The methodology of this internal report is based on a structured, harmonised, and comparative analysis of the RCF Maturity Mapping – Self-Assessment (SA) tool (see Annex 2: Screenshot of Self-Assessment Tool) completed by the eight SECURE2 pilot institutions. The process was designed to ensure consistency, transparency, and comparability across pilots while respecting institutional diversity and contextual differences. The methodological approach consisted of four interconnected components: (1) data collection, (2) data processing and harmonisation, (3) analytical framework, and (4) validation and synthesis of findings.

2.1 Data Collection

All pilot institutions were requested to complete the RCF Maturity Mapping – SA tool, designed to capture the extent to which RCF-aligned policies, practices, and support mechanisms are present within the institution (Annex 1). Each template contained:

- A Benchmarking sheet, where institutions scored their maturity across individual RCF actions using a standardised 0–4 scale;
- An Institutional sheet providing contextual information (institution name, department/unit assessed, contact points);
- Supporting sheets (Validation, Assessments, Coverage) used internally within the benchmarking framework.

All templates were submitted electronically and uploaded into the shared SECURE2 MS Teams workspace. Only benchmarking-related fields were used for cross-pilot analysis, ensuring comparability and avoiding inconsistencies arising from optional fields.

The benchmarking exercise was designed as an institutional self-assessment process rather than an individual survey. Pilot institutions were encouraged to complete the assessment collaboratively through consultation between relevant institutional stakeholders, including representatives from research management, HR units, leadership structures, research offices, and, where appropriate, academic staff and departmental representatives. Given the diversity of governance models across participating institutions, the exact composition of contributors varied between pilots. Institutions were encouraged to consider existing institutional policies, procedures, practices, and strategic documents when completing the self-assessment

Prior to the formal launch of the benchmarking exercise, SECURE2 organised a consultation and validation workshop with pilot institutions in September 2025. During the workshop, the RCF Maturity Mapping tool, scoring logic, and assessment methodology were jointly presented and discussed with pilot representatives. Pilots tested the tool and provided feedback regarding usability, interpretation of Action Areas, scoring consistency, and practical challenges related to evidence collection and documentation of institutional changes. Particular attention was given to the recognition that organisational practices and reform processes may not always be fully documented through formal evidence despite being operational within institutions. Feedback collected during the workshop informed clarifications to the guidance materials and supported a shared understanding of the benchmarking methodology across the consortium.

2.1.1 Ethical Considerations and Interpretation of Results

The SECURE2 RCF Maturity Mapping exercise was designed as a developmental benchmarking activity intended to support institutional learning, capacity-building, and tailored implementation planning. The exercise was not intended to rank institutions or evaluate institutional maturity, but rather to identify institutional readiness levels, contextual strengths, and areas requiring additional support.

Given the diversity of participating institutions, maturity results should be interpreted within the specific organisational and national context of each pilot. Differences in maturity therefore reflect varying levels of institutional development, available resources, governance structures, and prior experience with research career reforms, rather than comparative institutional quality.

All qualitative interviews and self-assessment activities were conducted on a voluntary basis. Participants were informed about the purpose of the exercise, the intended use of collected information, and the developmental nature of the benchmarking process. Institutions were encouraged to involve relevant staff members and senior management representatives to ensure institutional ownership and contextual accuracy.

Any personal data collected during interviews or communication activities (e.g., names, institutional roles, and contact details) were processed in accordance with applicable GDPR

requirements and institutional data protection procedures. Access to submitted materials was restricted to authorised SECURE2 consortium members involved in WP1 activities and stored within secure consortium-managed digital environments.

Benchmarking inputs and interview findings were analysed primarily in aggregated and thematic form to support SECURE2 implementation, peer learning, and institutional support planning. Participating institutions reviewed and validated their submitted maturity assessments and institutional profiles prior to inclusion in this report. Accordingly, all maturity results presented in this report should be understood as indicative developmental profiles intended to inform SECURE2 activities and monitoring throughout the project lifecycle.

2.2 Maturity Scale

The maturity scale used by all pilots corresponds to the standard definition included in the SECURE2 template:

- 0 – Not started: no evidence of activity or planning.
- 1 – Initiating: early discussions or initial activities present.
- 2 – Developing: clear progress with partial implementation.
- 3 – Established: systemic, consistent, and operational practice.
- 4 – Leading: advanced, exemplary practice aligned with emerging European standards.

Scoring was conducted using whole-number values to maintain consistency and comparability across institutions. The scale enables differentiation between early-stage, emerging, and established levels of implementation while supporting future progress tracking throughout SECURE2.

2.3 Action Areas Assessed

The template evaluates maturity across eight Action Areas reflecting the core components of the Research Career Framework (RCF):

- AA1 – Strategy
- AA2 – Stability
- AA3 – Working Conditions
- AA4 – Skills Development
- AA5 – Mobility and Exposure
- AA6 – Assessment and Evaluation
- AA7 – Career Pathways
- AA8 – Interoperability

Each Action Area is further divided into specific actions and descriptors, enabling more nuanced institutional self-assessment and comparative analysis.

2.4 Qualitative Interviews

To support pilot institutions and contextualise the benchmarking process, two qualitative interviews were conducted with each pilot institution. These interviews were facilitated by experienced consortium members involved in the original SECURE project and in the development of the RCF framework and maturity mapping tool.

The interviews served several purposes:

- clarifying interpretation of Action Areas and scoring logic;
- discussing institutional contexts and implementation realities;
- identifying institutional priorities and expectations;
- supporting alignment between pilot ambitions and SECURE2 objectives.

Institutions were encouraged to involve relevant staff members, including senior management representatives, to strengthen institutional ownership and ensure a broader organisational perspective. Interviews were intentionally conducted both at an early stage and toward the completion of the mapping exercise to support iterative reflection and validation.

While the quantitative analysis presented in this report is based primarily on maturity scores, qualitative insights collected during interviews were used to contextualise institutional profiles, interpret patterns observed across pilots, and identify emerging practices and implementation challenges.

2.5 Data Processing and Harmonisation

To ensure comparability across institutions, the following steps were undertaken:

- automated extraction of Benchmarking templates from institutional templates;
- identification and harmonisation of sheet-specific variations;
- conversion of maturity scores into standardised numeric format;
- handling of missing or inconsistent entries;
- calculation of institutional and consortium-wide maturity indicators.

Calculated indicators included:

- average maturity per Action Area (AA1–AA8) for each pilot;
- overall institutional maturity score;
- consortium-wide averages by Action Area;
- comparative maturity distributions across pilots.

All data processing was performed programmatically to minimise manual transcription errors and ensure reproducibility. Automated outputs were cross-checked against a sample of manually verified institutional templates. Additional consistency checks were performed to identify formatting anomalies, missing values, and inconsistencies in score aggregation prior to final analysis.

The final public version of this deliverable will be deposited in an open-access repository in accordance with Horizon Europe requirements and assigned persistent metadata and licensing information upon publication.

2.6 Analytical Framework and Synthesis

The analysis focused on three complementary levels:

2.6.1 Institution-Level Analysis

Identification of strengths and weaknesses within each pilot through:

- mean Action Area scores;
- distribution of actions within Action Areas;
- comparison with consortium-wide averages.

2.6.2 Cross-Pilot Comparative Analysis

Assessment of maturity variation across:

- the eight Action Areas;
- institutional maturity clusters;
- systemic strengths and gaps emerging across the consortium.

2.6.3 Consortium Baseline Assessment

Development of a collective maturity baseline to support:

- future monitoring and impact evaluation;
- alignment of SECURE2 support activities with institutional readiness;
- identification of areas requiring joint policy development.

2.6.4 Validation and Quality Assurance

Basic validation checks were implemented to ensure reliability:

- identification of missing or zero-value Action Areas;
- detection of non-numeric or misformatted entries;
- consistency checks across templates.

While institutional scoring was not modified, anomalies were flagged for contextual interpretation during analysis.

2.7 Limitations

The methodology acknowledges several limitations inherent to institutional self-assessment approaches:

- self-reporting bias, where institutions may over- or under-estimate maturity levels;
- variability in interpretation of Action Areas and descriptors across institutional contexts;
- evolving institutional practices and preliminary data submitted during early project stages.

To minimise variability in interpretation, SECURE2 organised consultation and validation activities prior to the benchmarking exercise, including methodological guidance, interactive discussions, and clarification of scoring approaches. Ongoing dialogue, follow-up assessments, and triangulation through project activities will further support consistency and longitudinal interpretation throughout the project duration.

3 Overview of SECURE2 Pilot Institutions

The SECURE2 project engages a diverse group of **eight pilot institutions** representing different national contexts, organisational models, and levels of institutional maturity in implementing research career reforms. Together, these pilots form the practical testbed for validating, adapting, and scaling the Research Career Framework (RCF) across Europe. Their diversity is a strength: it allows SECURE2 to design support models that are sensitive to institutional realities, while ensuring transferability and alignment with European Research Area (ERA) objectives.

The pilot group includes research-performing organisations, research funders, and specialised research infrastructures. This mix is essential for capturing the complexity of research careers, which span multiple institutional types and governance models. Pilots are geographically distributed across EU and Widening countries, ensuring broad coverage of challenges and opportunities relating to research careers, mobility, stability, and institutional capability.

Below is an overview of each pilot institution. It is important to note that some pilot institutions participating in SECURE2 were also actively involved in the previous SECURE project. In particular, NOVA, Plocan, UEFISCDI and UCY had prior exposure to the Research Career Framework (RCF) through earlier pilot activities. This previous engagement contributed to a higher level of institutional awareness, familiarity with RCF concepts, and early-stage implementation experience. As a result, their comparatively higher maturity levels

observed in this assessment may partially reflect this cumulative learning process and continuity of institutional capacity-building rather than SECURE2 activities alone.

3.1 Platform Oceanic of the Canary Islands (PLOCAN), Spain

PLOCAN is a research infrastructure operating at the interface of marine science, innovation, and technology. Its participation brings a valuable perspective on research careers within specialised infrastructures. As a pilot, PLOCAN contributes experience in operational research environments and highlights the specific needs of technical and scientific personnel working in project-driven settings. Its maturity profile suggests strong internal working conditions but limited structural mechanisms for strategic development and career stability.

3.2 "Nicolae Testemițanu" State University of Medicine and Pharmacy (SUMPHU), Moldova

SUMPHU represents the medical and health sciences sector within the consortium. As a university from a Widening country with evolving research governance structures, SUMPHU provides insight into the needs of early-stage institutions beginning to align with contemporary European research career principles. Its participation is crucial for testing foundational RCF support measures, templates, and capacity-building interventions that address systemic gaps.

3.3 Lviv Polytechnic National University (LPNU), Ukraine

LPNU is one of the largest technical universities in Eastern Europe and contributes a perspective rooted in engineering, applied sciences, and innovation ecosystems. As a Ukrainian institution operating under conditions of instability and transformation, LPNU adds an important contextual dimension, demonstrating how research career reforms can progress despite external constraints. LPNU shows strong working conditions but requires more development in mobility and interoperability structures.

3.4 Executive Agency for Higher Education, Research, Development and Innovation Funding (UEFISCDI), Romania

UEFISCDI is the principal national research funding body in Romania. As the only **funder-level** pilot in SECURE2, it plays a critical role in demonstrating how research career reforms can be promoted not only within organisations but across the national system. UEFISCDI brings advanced experience in assessment reform, pathway structuring, and interoperability, positioning it as a key peer-learning hub for other partners. UEFISCDI's role in SECURE2 as pilot will bring the perspective applicable for Research Funding Organizations (RFOs).

3.5 University of Cyprus (UCY), Cyprus

UCY is a comprehensive, research-intensive university with established academic structures and ongoing reform processes. Its maturity profile reflects substantial progress in skills development and assessment practices. UCY's involvement provides a valuable example of how RCF principles interact with established institutional policies and how reforms can be scaled across faculties and research domains.

3.6 Universidade Nova de Lisboa (NOVA), Portugal

NOVA is one of the leading universities in Portugal, known for its dynamic governance, modern management approaches, and strong research performance. It is the most advanced pilot in terms of RCF maturity, with consistent strength across all Action Areas. NOVA serves as a reference model within SECURE2, offering examples of well-developed career pathways, assessment frameworks, and support mechanisms aligned with ERA values and CoARA principles.

3.7 Instituto Superior Técnico (IST), Portugal

IST is a leading technical university and a central node in Portugal's engineering and technology research ecosystem. Its maturity profile shows good strategic orientation and well-developed career pathways, complemented by emerging interoperability mechanisms. IST's experience illustrates the dynamics of research career development in large STEM-focused institutions where technical and academic career tracks coexist.

3.8 Zachodniopomorski Uniwersytet Technologiczny (ZUT), Poland

ZUT is a Polish technical university with a broad portfolio of scientific disciplines. As a Widening partner, ZUT offers insights into emerging reform efforts within Central and Eastern Europe. Its maturity scores indicate balanced but modest progress across several Action Areas, with particular strengths in skills development and working conditions. ZUT provides an important reference point for understanding institutional reform trajectories in similar national contexts.

4 Consortium-Wide Maturity Baseline

The consortium-wide maturity baseline provides an aggregated view of the eight SECURE2 pilot institutions' readiness to implement the Research Career Framework (RCF). By synthesising the maturity results across all Action Areas, this section identifies common patterns, shared challenges, and areas of strength that characterise the SECURE2 pilot cohort as a whole. Establishing this baseline at the start of the project is critical for informing the

design of targeted interventions, monitoring progress, and ensuring alignment with the broader objectives of the European Research Area (ERA).

4.1 Overall Baseline Score

Across all pilots, the **average consortium-wide maturity level is 1.09**, positioned between *Initiating* and *Developing* on the RCF maturity scale (0–4). This represents an early-to-emerging stage of research career reform implementation across the cohort.

This baseline indicates that while some elements of RCF-aligned policies and practices are already in place, there remains substantial scope for institutional development, particularly in areas requiring structural changes or system-level alignment.

4.2 Distribution of Maturity Levels Across Pilots

Maturity scores vary significantly across the eight pilot institutions:

- **NOVA (1.85)** and **UEFISCDI (1.35)** are the most advanced pilots, with several Action Areas approaching the *Established* level.
- **UCY (1.09)**, **ZUT (1.12)**, **IST (1.00)**, and **LPNU (1.02)** form a mid-range group, demonstrating partial progress and initial structures but lacking cohesive and fully operational frameworks.
- **PLOCAN (0.87)** shows early-stage maturity but with strong pockets of excellence (notably in Working Conditions).
- **SUMPHU (0.31)** represents the earliest-stage pilot, with most Action Areas yet to be initiated.

This diversity is central to the SECURE2 pilot strategy, enabling the development of flexible, scalable, and context-sensitive interventions.

4.3 Consortium Averages by Action Area

Analysis of mean Action Area scores across pilots reveals key strengths and systemic gaps:

Action Area	Pilot Average	Interpretation
AA1 – Strategy	**1.39**	Strategy development underway but not yet fully embedded.
AA2 – Stability	**0.38**	Lowest-scoring area; limited structural stability in research careers.
AA3 – Working Conditions	**1.99**	Strongest area; many institutions show advanced HR practices.
AA4 – Skills Development	**1.30**	Training mechanisms present but fragmented.
AA5 – Mobility and Exposure	**0.67**	Weak area; mobility opportunities not systematically supported.
AA6 – Assessment and Evaluation	**1.19**	Assessment reform is emerging but not fully implemented.

AA7 – Career Pathways	**1.35**	Increasing clarity of pathways, but limited operationalisation.
AA8 – Interoperability	**0.57**	Early-stage alignment with external frameworks and ERA standards.

4.4 Key Strengths at Consortium Level

Several strengths emerge when analysing the consortium as a whole:

- **Working Conditions (AA3)** is the most mature Action Area. Many pilots have well-defined contractual practices, HR structures, and employment frameworks aligned with European standards.
- **Strategy (AA1), Skills (AA4), Assessment (AA6), and Pathways (AA7)** all show consistent early development, indicating that institutions are beginning to articulate coherent research career structures.
- **Advanced pilots** (NOVA, UEFISCDI) have robust models that can serve as references for peer-learning and cross-institution capacity building.

These strengths provide a solid foundation for implementation pilots and cross-pilot collaboration activities.

4.5 Systemic Gaps and Areas of Underdevelopment

Across the consortium, several Action Areas demonstrate low maturity and require coordinated interventions:

- **Stability (AA2)** is the weakest area, reflecting the absence of stable career structures, tenure-track-like mechanisms, or predictable progression pathways in most institutions.
- **Mobility (AA5)** remains severely underdeveloped, limiting researchers' opportunities for inter-sectoral and international exchange.
- **Interoperability (AA8)** is at an early stage across the cohort, indicating insufficient alignment with European frameworks, limited recognition of career stages, and incomplete integration of ERA-relevant mechanisms.

Even in Action Areas showing early progress (e.g., Assessment or Strategy), the maturity levels suggest that institutions lack fully operational and systemic approaches.

These gaps highlight priority areas for SECURE2 capacity-building actions, policy pilots, and peer-learning mechanisms.

4.6 Cluster Analysis: Institutional Maturity Groups

The maturity results naturally divide the pilots into three clusters:

4.6.1 Advanced Pilots

NOVA, UEFISCDI

- Strong performance across most Action Areas
- Demonstrated capacity to lead peer-learning and contribute best practices

4.6.2 Mid-Range Pilots

ZUT, UCY, LPNU, IST

- Partial implementation in several Action Areas
- Require support to consolidate structures and move toward systemic adoption

4.6.3 Early-Stage Pilots

PLOCAN, SUMPHU

- Key gaps in strategy, stability, mobility, and interoperability
- Require intensive support, templates, and hands-on guidance

SECURE2 will operationalise differentiated support models aligned with these clusters to maximise impact and ensure realistic, achievable progression.

4.7 Implications of the Baseline for SECURE2

The maturity baseline confirms that:

- SECURE2 must implement **tailored, differentiated support pathways** reflecting institutional readiness.
- Peer-learning mechanisms between advanced and early-stage pilots will be essential for scaling good practices.
- Capacity-building programmes need to prioritise weak Action Areas (Stability, Mobility, Interoperability).
- The project should adopt realistic milestones for maturity progression, calibrated to the baseline scores.

This consortium-wide maturity baseline forms the reference point for all subsequent monitoring activities and will be revisited periodically to assess progress, identify emerging needs, and adjust implementation plans accordingly.

5 Pilot-by-Pilot Analysis

This section provides a detailed assessment of each SECURE2 pilot institution, based on their completed RCF Maturity Mapping – SA tool (Table 2). For each pilot, the analysis highlights (1) the overall maturity score, (2) strengths across the eight Action Areas, (3) key gaps or weaknesses, and (4) implications for SECURE2 implementation. Together, these profiles form the foundation for the differentiated support pathways to be deployed throughout the project.

Table 2: Overview of Pilot Institutions and Maturity Levels

Pilot Institution	Overall Maturity Score	Key Strengths	Key Gaps / Weaknesses

PLOCAN	0.87	Very strong AA3 (3.4)	Very low AA1, AA2, AA5, AA8
SUMPHU	0.31	Initial progress in AA1	Nearly all Action Areas at 0
LPNU	1.02	Strong AA3 (3.0)	Weak AA5, AA8
UEFISCDI	1.35	Strong AA3, AA6; good structure	Weak AA1 (0.6), AA2 (0.2), AA5 (0.4), AA7 (1.2), AA8 (0.8)
UCY	1.09	Skills, Assessment	Low Stability, Mobility, Interoperability
NOVA	1.85	Highest maturity	Minor gaps in AA2, AA8
IST	1.00	Strategy, Pathways	Weak AA2, AA6
ZUT	1.12	Balanced strengths	Weak AA2, AA8

5.1 Plataforma Oceánica de Canarias (PLOCAN), Spain

Overall maturity score: 0.87

Strengths:

- **Working Conditions (AA3)** is exceptionally strong (**≈3.4**), reflecting robust HR structures, clear employment practices, and well-established operational frameworks typical of advanced research infrastructures.
- Evidence of emerging efforts in **Strategy (AA1)** and **Skills (AA4)**, though not yet systematically embedded.
- Clear organisational identity and operational mandates support future RCF adoption.

Weaknesses:

- Very low maturity in **Stability (AA2)**, indicating limited long-term career structures or progression mechanisms.
- **Mobility (AA5)** is nearly absent, with few mechanisms supporting inter-institutional or international researcher movement.
- **Interoperability (AA8)** remains rudimentary, reflecting limited alignment with ERA or cross-system frameworks.

5.1.1 Implications for SECURE2

PLOCAN requires foundational support in designing career stability frameworks, defining mobility schemes, and aligning internal policies with broader research career pathways. However, its strong working conditions and infrastructure context provide a solid platform for implementing reforms.

5.2 "Nicolae Testemițanu" State University of Medicine and Pharmacy (SUMPHU), Moldova

Overall maturity score: 0.31

Strengths

- Some initial development in **Strategy (AA1)**, suggesting recognition of the importance of structured career development.
- High institutional motivation to engage in SECURE2 and benefit from capacity-building activities.

Weaknesses

- All Action Areas except Strategy are at or near **0 (Not Started)**.
- Lack of systemic HR structures, career development processes, or mobility mechanisms.
- Limited interoperability and assessment processes.

5.2.1 Implications for SECURE2

SUMPHU is the **earliest-stage pilot** and will require intensive, template-based support, hands-on mentoring, and step-by-step guidance. It serves as a key testbed for developing foundational tools suitable for institutions with minimal pre-existing structures.

5.3 Lviv Polytechnic National University (LPNU), Ukraine

Overall maturity score: 1.02

Strengths

- Very strong **Working Conditions (AA3 ≈ 3.0)**, reflecting consistent contractual and HR practices.
- Emerging progress in **Strategy (AA1)** and **Skills (AA4)**.
- Clear institutional interest in modernising career development mechanisms despite ongoing external challenges.

Weaknesses

- Significant gaps in **Mobility (AA5)**, driven both by internal and geopolitical constraints.
- Low maturity in **Interoperability (AA8)**, indicating weak alignment with external frameworks and recognition systems.

5.3.1 Implications for SECURE2

LPNU represents a mid-stage pilot with strong internal HR foundations. It would benefit most from mobility-focused measures, interoperability guidance, and structured support to professionalise assessment and pathway mechanisms.

5.4 Executive Agency for Higher Education, Research, Development and Innovation Funding (UEFISCDI), Romania

Overall maturity score: 1.35

Strengths

- Strong Working Conditions (AA3 = 2.1)
- Very good performance in Assessment (AA6 = 2.2)
- Solid Skills Development (AA4 = 1.2)

- Clear initial structure in Career Pathways (AA7 = 1.2)
- Good Interoperability foundations (AA8 = 0.8)

Weaknesses

- Strategy (AA1 = 0.6) and Stability (AA2 = 0.2) remain low
- Mobility (AA5 = 0.4) is underdeveloped
- Career Pathways not yet systemic (AA7 = 1.2)

5.4.1 Implications for SECURE2

UEFISCDI demonstrates a consistent but moderate maturity profile, with strong potential to support peer-learning in assessment reform and HR conditions, while needing targeted support in Strategy, Stability, Mobility, and structural Career Pathways development.

5.5 University of Cyprus (UCY), Cyprus

Overall maturity score: 1.09

Strengths

- Well-developed **Skills Development (AA4)** and **Assessment (AA6)** structures.
- Growing emphasis on strategic thinking around research careers.
- Positive institutional engagement with modernisation processes.

Weaknesses

- Weaknesses in **Stability (AA2)**, indicating limited long-term research career structures.
- Underdeveloped **Mobility (AA5)** and **Interoperability (AA8)**.

5.5.1 Implications for SECURE2

UCY is a prototypical mid-range institution requiring support to consolidate reforms, particularly around mobility, stability, and interoperability. It is well suited for piloting structured assessment and skills frameworks.

5.6 Universidade Nova de Lisboa (NOVA), Portugal

Overall maturity score: 1.85 (highest among pilots)

Strengths

- Consistently strong across all Action Areas, including Strategy, Stability, Conditions, Skills, Mobility, Assessment, Pathways, and Interoperability.
- Demonstrates advanced alignment with ERA and CoARA principles.
- Possesses established governance structures supporting continuous improvement.

Weaknesses

- Only minor gaps remain in Stability and Interoperability relative to the overall high performance.

5.6.1 Implications for SECURE2

NOVA is the **highest scoring pilot** and will serve as a model for good practices. It is positioned to support other institutions through structured peer-learning and mentoring.

5.7 Instituto Superior Técnico (IST), Portugal

Overall maturity score: 1.00

Strengths

- Strong foundations in **Strategy (AA1)** and **Working Conditions (AA3)**.
- Well-developed **Career Pathways (AA7)** and emerging **Interoperability (AA8)** practices.

Weaknesses

- Gaps in **Stability (AA2)**, suggesting limited long-term institutional mechanisms for research careers.
- **Assessment (AA6)** requires further development to reach systemic implementation.

5.7.1 Implications for SECURE2

IST can progress quickly with targeted support in assessment reform and stability mechanisms. It offers valuable experience for STEM-focused institutions facing similar challenges.

5.8 Zachodniopomorski Uniwersytet Technologiczny (ZUT), Poland

Overall maturity score: 1.12

Strengths

- Balanced early-stage progress across most Action Areas.
- Strong emphasis on **Skills Development (AA4)** and **Working Conditions (AA3)**.
- High engagement and readiness to adopt modern career frameworks.

Weaknesses

- Major gaps in **Stability (AA2)** and **Interoperability (AA8)**.
- Mobility mechanisms (AA5) require further structuring and strategic integration.

5.8.1 Implications for SECURE2

ZUT is well-positioned to benefit from structured support in mobility, stability, and interoperability, while leveraging its strengths to accelerate adoption of skills and assessment mechanisms.

6 Maturity Analysis by Action Area

This section provides a detailed examination of maturity levels across the eight Action Areas (AAs) of the Research Career Framework (RCF). By analysing consortium-wide averages and patterns in pilot scores, this section identifies structural strengths, systemic gaps, and reform priorities that should guide SECURE2 implementation activities. Each Action Area is presented with: (1) a brief description, (2) the average maturity score across pilots, (3) cross-pilot patterns, and (4) implications for SECURE2.

6.1 Action Area 1 – Strategy

Consortium-wide average: 1.39

6.1.1 Overview

This Action Area assesses the existence of clear, institution-wide strategies for research career development, including long-term commitments, strategic alignment with institutional missions, and integration of RCF principles into overarching governance frameworks.

6.1.2 Cross-Pilot Findings

- Most pilots demonstrate **initial or emerging strategic awareness**, reflected by scores between 1 ("Initiating") and 2 ("Developing").
- A few advanced pilots (NOVA, UEFISCDI) show **near-established strategies** with structures that could serve as templates for others.
- Early-stage pilots (SUMPHU, PLOCAN) lack formal strategies but indicate intention to develop them.

6.1.3 Implications

- SECURE2 should prioritise **strategy-building support** for early- and mid-stage institutions.
- Advanced pilots should lead **peer-learning sessions** on strategy design, multi-year planning, and governance alignment.

6.2 Action Area 2 – Stability

Consortium-wide average: 0.38 (lowest-scoring)

6.2.1 Overview

This Action Area focuses on predictable, transparent, and sustainable career structures—such as long-term employment opportunities, tenure-like pathways, and progression frameworks.

6.2.2 Cross-Pilot Findings

- This is the **weakest Action Area in the consortium**, with most pilots at 0 ("Not Started") or 1 ("Initiating").
- Limited examples of structured progression mechanisms exist, even in advanced institutions.
- Institutional constraints (legal, financial, structural) heavily shape this area.

6.2.3 Implications

- SECURE2 must provide **model frameworks for stability**, adaptable to different regulatory environments.
- Emphasis should be placed on developing **minimum viable stability mechanisms**, even in contexts where long-term contracts are constrained.

- This area requires **long-term systemic support** and will be a central focus in policy-level activities.

6.3 Action Area 3 – Working Conditions

Consortium-wide average: 1.99 (highest-scoring)

6.3.1 Overview

This Action Area evaluates employment conditions, contractual clarity, HR practices, physical and digital research environments, and overall quality of employment.

6.3.2 Cross-Pilot Findings

- Most pilots exhibit **well-developed working conditions**, often supported by national-level regulations.
- PLOCAN and LPNU have particularly strong scores (≈3), reflecting advanced HR structures.
- Even early-stage pilots show reasonable foundations in this area.

6.3.3 Implications

- This Action Area forms the **strongest baseline** for SECURE2 implementation.
- Strong working conditions provide a **stable platform** for career pathways, assessment reform, and mobility measures.
- SECURE2 should leverage these strengths to support reforms in weaker Action Areas.

6.4 Action Area 4 – Skills Development

Consortium-wide average: 1.30

6.4.1 Overview

This Action Area assesses training, professional development, transferable skills programmes, and institutional support for researcher upskilling.

6.4.2 Cross-Pilot Findings

- Many pilots have **existing but fragmented** training schemes.
- Advanced institutions provide structured programmes with assessment and evaluation mechanisms.
- Early-stage institutions lack coordinated skills frameworks but show motivation to develop them.

6.4.3 Implications

- SECURE2 should support **development of skills frameworks**, including competency maps, training modules, and tracking systems.
- Peer-learning between advanced and mid-stage pilots can accelerate alignment with ERA skills expectations.

6.5 Action Area 5 – Mobility & Exposure

Consortium-wide average: 0.67

6.5.1 Overview

Mobility is central to modern research careers, reflecting researcher exchange, internationalisation, and exposure to non-academic environments.

6.5.2 Cross-Pilot Findings

- Mobility is one of the **least developed Action Areas**, especially in early-stage institutions.
- Barriers include limited funding, administrative burdens, external constraints (e.g., geopolitical context for LPNU), and lack of structured mobility programmes.
- Advanced pilots demonstrate some mechanisms but still fall short of systemic implementation.

6.5.3 Implications

- SECURE2 needs to design **structured mobility models**, including short-term visits, exchanges, and intersectoral placements.
- A consortium-level **mobility framework** should be developed, focusing on low-cost and scalable formats.

6.6 Action Area 6 – Assessment & Evaluation

Consortium-wide average: 1.19

6.6.1 Overview

This Action Area focuses on responsible research assessment, transparent evaluation processes, and alignment with CoARA and ERA reform principles.

6.6.2 Cross-Pilot Findings

- Several pilots show promising early reform efforts (UCY, UEFISCDI, NOVA).
- Mid-range institutions demonstrate partial implementation, often lacking consistency or formalisation.
- Early-stage pilots show minimal progress.

6.6.3 Implications

- SECURE2 should prioritise **capacity building on responsible research assessment**, including guidance on indicators, metrics, and qualitative evaluation.
- Advanced pilots with CoARA experience must support others in adapting robust assessment models.

6.7 Action Area 7 – Career Pathways

Consortium-wide average: 1.35

6.7.1 *Overview*

Career pathways refer to structured, transparent, and predictable routes for progression in research roles, including academic and non-academic tracks.

6.7.2 *Cross-Pilot Findings*

- UEFISCDI and NOVA demonstrate strong pathways linked to national and institutional frameworks. In the case of UEFISCDI, this maturity applies to existing funding programmes for research career development.
- Mid-range pilots show emerging efforts but lack consolidation.
- Early-stage pilots have minimal pathway structures.

6.7.3 *Implications*

- SECURE2 should highlight **template-based career pathway models**, adaptable across disciplines and institutional types.
- A focus on defining entry points, progression criteria, and exit routes will support long-term system alignment.

6.8 Action Area 8 – Interoperability

Consortium-wide average: 0.57

6.8.1 *Overview*

Interoperability measures how well institutions are aligned with external systems (national, European, sectoral), including recognition of career stages, Open Science practices, and alignment with the ERA Talent Platform.

6.8.2 *Cross-Pilot Findings*

- This is a **major gap area**, with most institutions at 0 ("Not Started") or 1 ("Initiating").
- Even advanced pilots score below 3, indicating significant room for improvement.
- Lack of integration with external frameworks limits cross-border career consistency.

6.8.3 *Implications*

- SECURE2 must support pilots in aligning with **ERA frameworks**, including Open Science, CoARA, European Charter and Code, and the ERA Talent Platform.
- A shared interoperability roadmap will be essential for long-term sustainability.

6.9 Summary of Action Area Findings

The Action Area analysis demonstrates:

- **Strongest areas:** Working Conditions (AA3).
- **Moderate development:** Strategy (AA1), Skills (AA4), Assessment (AA6), Career Pathways (AA7).
- **Weakest areas:** Stability (AA2), Mobility (AA5), Interoperability (AA8).

These patterns highlight the need for SECURE2 to concentrate efforts on **structural reforms**, particularly stability, mobility, and interoperability, while using strong Action Areas as leverage points to accelerate overall institutional transformation.

7 Cross-Pilot Strengths and Weaknesses

This section consolidates the findings from the maturity assessment to identify patterns that emerge across the eight SECURE2 pilot institutions. By analysing strengths and weaknesses at the consortium level, this section provides a clearer understanding of shared capacities, systemic challenges, and institutional clusters. These insights guide the design of targeted support mechanisms, peer-learning activities, and implementation priorities for the remainder of the project.

7.1 Cross-Pilot Strengths

Across the consortium, a number of Action Areas demonstrate relatively strong or emerging maturity. These strengths form essential leverage points for SECURE2 implementation.

7.1.1 Working Conditions (AA3) as a Common Strength

- This is the **highest-scoring Action Area** across all pilots (**average 1.99**).
- Many institutions already operate within well-defined HR frameworks, supported by national labour laws and institutional policies.
- Strong working conditions provide a solid foundation for advancing additional elements of the RCF, such as pathways, assessment, and skills development.

7.1.2 Early Strategic Engagement (AA1)

- While not yet at an advanced stage, most pilots demonstrate **strategic awareness** of research career development needs.
- Institutions recognise the importance of embedding career structures into their missions and are willing to formalise strategies during SECURE2.

7.1.3 Growing Efforts in Skills Development (AA4)

- Structured or semi-structured training programmes exist at most institutions.
- The presence of skills ecosystems (courses, workshops, centres for transferable skills) provides an important entry point for strengthening researcher development.

7.1.4 Advanced Practices in Leading Institutions

- NOVA and UEFISCDI demonstrate **near-established** maturity in several Action Areas, particularly Assessment, Interoperability, and Career Pathways; in the case of UEFISCDI, this is notably reflected through existing funding programmes supporting research career development.
- These institutions form a strong foundation for **peer-learning leadership** within the consortium.

7.1.5 *High Engagement and Motivation*

- All pilots show strong commitment to the project and openness to reform.
- Even early-stage institutions (SUMPHU, PLOCAN) express readiness to build structures from the ground up.

These strengths indicate that the consortium has substantial potential to develop, scale, and institutionalise RCF reforms over the course of the project.

7.2 Cross-Pilot Weaknesses

Several Action Areas show consistently low maturity levels, pointing to systemic gaps that require targeted support.

7.2.1 *Stability (AA2) is the Weakest Area Across All Pilots*

- Average maturity score: **0.38**
- Few institutions have structured, long-term career routes or tenure-like mechanisms.
- High reliance on short-term contracts limits predictability, attractiveness, and progression opportunities.

7.2.2 *Limited Mobility and Exposure (AA5)*

- Average maturity score: **0.67**
- Scarce formal mobility programmes, insufficient external partnerships, and limited funding.
- Geopolitical constraints (e.g., LPNU) further challenge mobility implementation.

7.2.3 *Low Interoperability (AA8)*

- Average maturity score: **0.57**
- Institutions lack alignment with EU frameworks (ERA, CoARA, ESF career stages, Open Science).
- Limited integration with external recognition systems and national/international HR structures.

7.2.4 *Assessment and Pathways Not Yet Cohesive (AA6 & AA7)*

- Despite promising early efforts, reforms remain fragmented.
- Mid-range institutions lack systematic assessment criteria, evaluation frameworks, and clear progression routes.
- Early-stage institutions require templates and baseline models to initiate reforms.

7.2.5 *Structural and Resource Constraints*

- Some institutions face national-level regulatory constraints (contractual limitations, public-sector hiring rules).
- Limited institutional capacity, public funding and HR resources may result in slow implementation, particularly in early-stage pilots.

7.3 Institutional Clusters and Shared Patterns

Analysis of scores reveals three clear clusters:

7.3.1 Advanced Pilots

- **NOVA**, **UEFISCDI**
- Strengths across all AAs; able to mentor others; strong candidates for hosting peer-learning events. In the case of UEFISCDI sharing their experience from the RFO perspective.

7.3.2 Mid-Range Pilots

- **ZUT**, **UCY**, **LPNU**, **IST**
- Demonstrate partial development in most areas; need consolidation, guidance, and structured capacity-building.

7.3.3 Early-Stage Pilots

- **PLOCAN**, **SUMPHU**
- Require foundational templates, framework design support, and hands-on guidance.

These clusters allow the project to design **differentiated support pathways**, ensuring interventions are realistic, achievable, and aligned with institutional readiness.

7.4 Systemic Opportunities for SECURE2

From the cross-pilot analysis, several opportunities emerge:

7.4.1 Opportunity 1: Leverage Strong Working Conditions

Strong AA3 scores can act as a foundation for building more advanced structures such as pathways, assessment, and stability mechanisms.

7.4.2 Opportunity 2: Use Advanced Pilots as Peer-Learning Leaders

NOVA and UEFISCDI can serve as reference institutions, hosting workshops, sharing templates, and guiding policy adoption. UEFISCDI, drawing on its profile, can provide templates and guidance derived from funding programmes that are applicable across RFOs

7.4.3 Opportunity 3: Focus on Structural Weaknesses

Mobility, stability, and interoperability require project-wide coordinated actions to develop scalable models applicable across diverse institutional contexts.

7.4.4 Opportunity 4: Strengthen Action Area Integration

Many AAs develop in silos (strategy, skills, assessment). SECURE2 can help integrate them into holistic career frameworks.

7.4.5 Opportunity 5: Adaptability Across Institutional Types

The diversity of pilots (universities, funders, infrastructures) offers broad testing opportunities for RCF implementation in different organisational settings.

8 Implications for SECURE2 Work Planning

The maturity baseline and cross-pilot analysis have significant implications for the design, sequencing, and prioritisation of SECURE2 activities. The findings highlight the necessity of a differentiated, evidence-based support model that recognises the varying degrees of readiness across pilots while ensuring coherence and alignment with the overarching goals of the Research Career Framework (RCF) and ERA reform agenda.

8.1 Need for a Differentiated Support Model

The consortium's maturity distribution clearly divides pilots into three clusters (advanced, mid-range, early-stage), each requiring distinct forms of support:

- **Advanced pilots (NOVA, UEFISCDI):** Require refinement-oriented engagement and can act as *peer-learning leaders*, sharing tools, policies, and experience.
- **Mid-range pilots (ZUT, UCY, LPNU, IST):** Need structured strengthening activities, such as strategy development, assessment reform support, and guidance on mobility and interoperability.
- **Early-stage pilots (PLOCAN, SUMPHU):** Require foundational frameworks, hands-on mentoring, and tailored templates to initiate RCF adoption.

SECURE2 work planning must therefore adopt **custom support pathways (NEEDS ANALYSIS)**, ensuring realistic progression and maximising impact.

8.2 Prioritisation of Weak Action Areas

The weakest Action Areas across pilots—**Stability (AA2), Mobility (AA5), and Interoperability (AA8)**—require substantial attention:

- **Stability (AA2):** Solutions must consider regulatory constraints and focus on "minimum viable stability mechanisms," such as transparent progression criteria, multi-year development plans, and structured career stage definitions.
- **Mobility (AA5):** The project must introduce scalable mobility schemes (short visits, job shadowing, virtual exchanges) tailored to institutional capacity and geopolitical constraints.
- **Interoperability (AA8):** SECURE2 should support alignment with ERA frameworks, Open Science practices, national recognition systems, and CoARA principles.

These areas must be prioritised in WP3 implementation pilots, WP4 capacity-building actions, and WP5 policy alignment efforts.

8.3 Leveraging Strengths for Reform Acceleration

Strong Working Conditions (AA3) provide a solid platform on which other RCF components can be built. SECURE2 should use this advantage to:

- strengthen Pathways (AA7) and Skills (AA4),
- align HR structures with Strategy (AA1),
- integrate assessment reforms (AA6) within existing HR support mechanisms,
- connect institutional practices with ERA-aligned frameworks (AA8).

The existing strengths within the consortium accelerate opportunities for systemic reform.

8.4 Enhanced Role of Peer-Learning

The maturity analysis highlights clear opportunities for structured knowledge-transfer activities:

- NOVA and UEFISCDI can support thematic peer-learning on assessment, pathways, and interoperability. UEFISCDI adapting its contribution to its profile as a Research Funding Organisation (RFO)
- Mid-range institutions can share practical experiences on skills development, working conditions, and early-stage strategy adoption.
- Early-stage pilots will benefit from templates, mentoring, and capacity-building formats adapted to their context.

Peer-learning should be integrated into WP3 (implementation pilots) and WP4 (skills and training). It should target a broad audience across institutions and include senior leaders and policy makers.

8.5 Implications for Monitoring and Evaluation

The baseline maturity results establish the reference point for:

- **periodic monitoring cycles**,
- **progress tracking**,
- **evaluation of pilot advancement**, and
- **adaptation of SECURE2 support measures** over time.

Future monitoring must include both quantitative progress (maturity score changes) and qualitative evidence of implementation.

8.6 System-Level Implications

The presence of a national-level funder (UEFISCDI) and diverse institutional types increases the relevance of SECURE2 outputs for broader system reform. Work planning should:

- strengthen linkages between institutional and national frameworks,
- ensure outputs are transferrable to other institutions beyond the pilot group,
- support alignment with ERA policies, including the ERA Talent Platform and CoARA.

9 Recommendations

Based on the maturity analysis, the following recommendations outline concrete steps to guide SECURE2 implementation and ensure effective, sustainable reform of research careers across the consortium.

9.1 Short-Term Recommendations (Months 1–12)

9.1.1 Develop an RCF Starter Toolkit for Early-Stage Pilots

- Provide templates for strategy design, career pathways, assessment, and mobility.
- Include clear instructions, examples from advanced institutions, and adaptable formats.

9.1.2 Establish Peer-Learning Clusters

- Pair advanced pilots (NOVA, UEFISCDI) with mid-range and early-stage pilots.
- Focus thematic clusters on: assessment reform, pathway design, mobility frameworks, interoperability alignment.

9.1.3 Conduct Targeted Capacity-Building Sessions

- Prioritise sessions on Stability (AA2), Mobility (AA5), and Interoperability (AA8).
- Include practical case studies, policy examples, and implementation roadmaps.

9.1.4 Initiate Minimum Viable Mobility Schemes

- Launch short-term, low-cost exchange formats such as virtual shadowing, research visits, and skills residencies.

9.1.5 Strengthen Internal Governance for Research Careers

- Encourage pilots to designate internal RCF coordinators or working groups.
- Support alignment between HR, research offices, and institutional leadership.

9.2 Medium-Term Recommendations (Months 12–36)

9.2.1 Implement Structured Assessment Reform

- Embed responsible research assessment practices aligned with CoARA.
- Develop clear evaluation criteria, guidance for panels, and communication tools.

9.2.2 Consolidate Career Pathways Across Pilots

- Translate pathway templates into institution-specific models.
- Introduce transparent entry points, progression guidelines, and clear expectations for each career stage.

9.2.3 Develop Institutional Mobility Policies

- Formalise mobility rules, incentives, and support mechanisms.

- Strengthen external partnerships and intersectoral exchange options.

9.2.4 Deepen Interoperability with ERA Standards

- Standardise career stage definitions across institutions.
- Connect internal systems to ERA Talent Platform developments and national frameworks.

9.3 Long-Term Recommendations (Months 36–48)

9.3.1 Formalise Stability Mechanisms

- Support pilots to introduce multiyear employment structures, tenure-like pathways, or transparent progression systems.

9.3.2 Integrate RCF Reforms into Institutional Strategy

- Ensure that RCF principles become embedded within institutional governance documents, HR policies, and long-term planning.

9.3.3 Scale SECURE2 Outputs Beyond Pilots

- Transform pilot outputs into transferrable models (guidelines, toolkits, templates).
- Engage additional institutions at national and European levels through dissemination and policy uptake activities.

9.4 High-Level Recommendations for Sustainability

9.4.1 Maintain Continuous Monitoring

- Use maturity mapping as a diagnostic tool at key project milestones.
- Incorporate qualitative self-reflection and evidence-based progress measurement.

9.4.2 Promote Alignment with ERA and CoARA

- Support pilots in continuously updating policies in line with emerging European frameworks.

9.4.3 Ensure High Visibility of Pilot Achievements

- Highlight success stories, best practices, and progress through communication activities, reinforcing institutional commitment and promoting adoption.

10 Conclusion

This internal report provides the first comprehensive maturity baseline for the eight SECURE2 pilot institutions, mapping their alignment with the Research Career Framework (RCF) across the eight Action Areas central to modern, competitive, and sustainable research careers. The results demonstrate a consortium with significant diversity in maturity levels, institutional

capacities, and systemic contexts—ranging from advanced actors with well-established structures to early-stage institutions initiating foundational reforms. The findings presented in this report should be interpreted as developmental benchmarking profiles intended to support institutional learning, strategic planning, and tailored implementation pathways within SECURE2

The overall consortium maturity level (**1.12**) signals that, while important building blocks exist—particularly in Working Conditions (AA3), Strategy (AA1), Skills (AA4), and Pathways (AA7)—substantial development is needed in the structurally weaker areas of Stability (AA2), Mobility (AA5), and Interoperability (AA8). It should also be noted that some actions and action areas were not applicable to Research Funding Organisations (RFOs), which may partly explain lower scores in certain dimensions.These findings underscore the importance of SECURE2's mission: supporting institutions in strengthening research careers, improving the attractiveness of the European Research Area, and creating fair, transparent, and sustainable systems for researchers at all stages.

The diversity across pilots is not a challenge but a strategic asset. Advanced institutions such as NOVA and UEFISCDI provide robust models and experiences that can be transferred across the consortium. Mid-range pilots (ZUT, UCY, LPNU, IST) offer fertile ground for structured capacity-building, consolidation, and testing of scalable frameworks. Early-stage pilots (PLOCAN, SUMPHU) highlight the need for foundational templates, mentoring, and hands-on support—providing an opportunity to develop adaptable tools that can benefit many similar institutions across Europe.

The implications and recommendations presented in this report form a clear roadmap for the next stages of SECURE2:

- adopting differentiated support pathways tailored to institutional readiness;
- prioritising structural reforms in the weakest Action Areas;
- leveraging strong Working Conditions as a foundation for system-wide improvements;
- engaging advanced pilots as peer-learning leaders;
- aligning all activities with ERA, CoARA, and Open Science principles.

As SECURE2 progresses, this maturity baseline will serve as a reference point for monitoring improvements, adjusting implementation strategies, and documenting the project's impact. The baseline provides shared understanding, collective direction, and a firm foundation upon which SECURE2 will build sustainable, effective, and long-lasting reforms in research careers across Europe.

The findings affirm both the **need** and the **potential** for transformative change. SECURE2 is well positioned to support this transformation through structured interventions, capacity-building, and evidence-based policy development. By working collaboratively across diverse institutions and contexts, the consortium can drive meaningful progress towards a modern, interconnected, and resilient European research career ecosystem.

11 Annex I

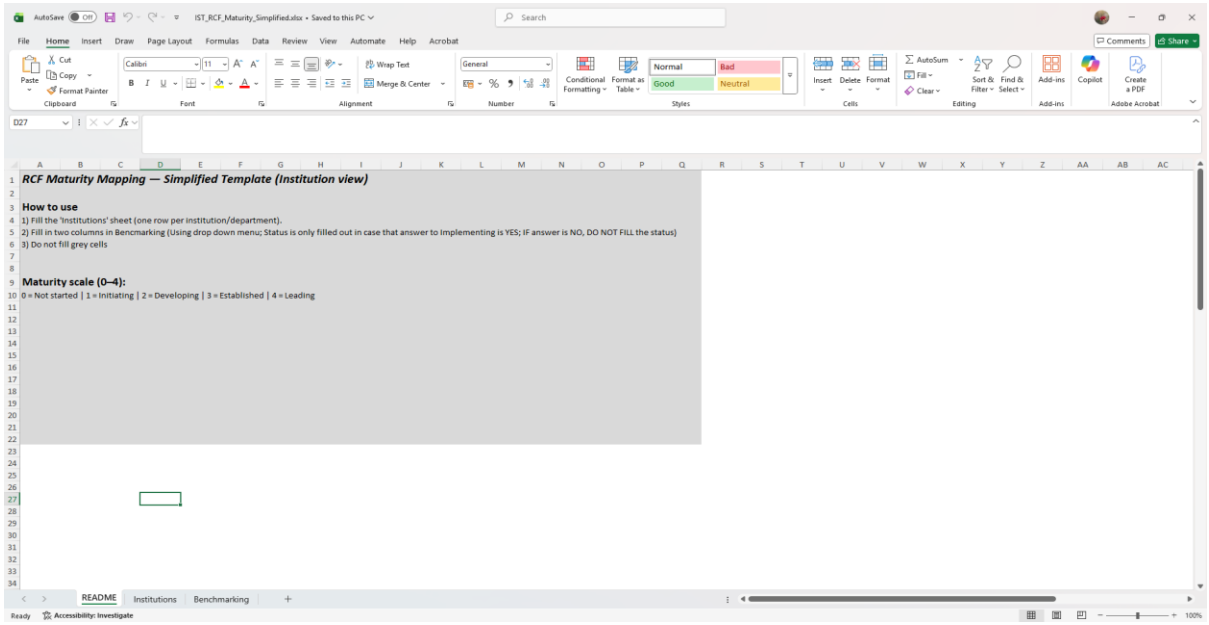
11.1 SECURE 2 RCF Maturity summary

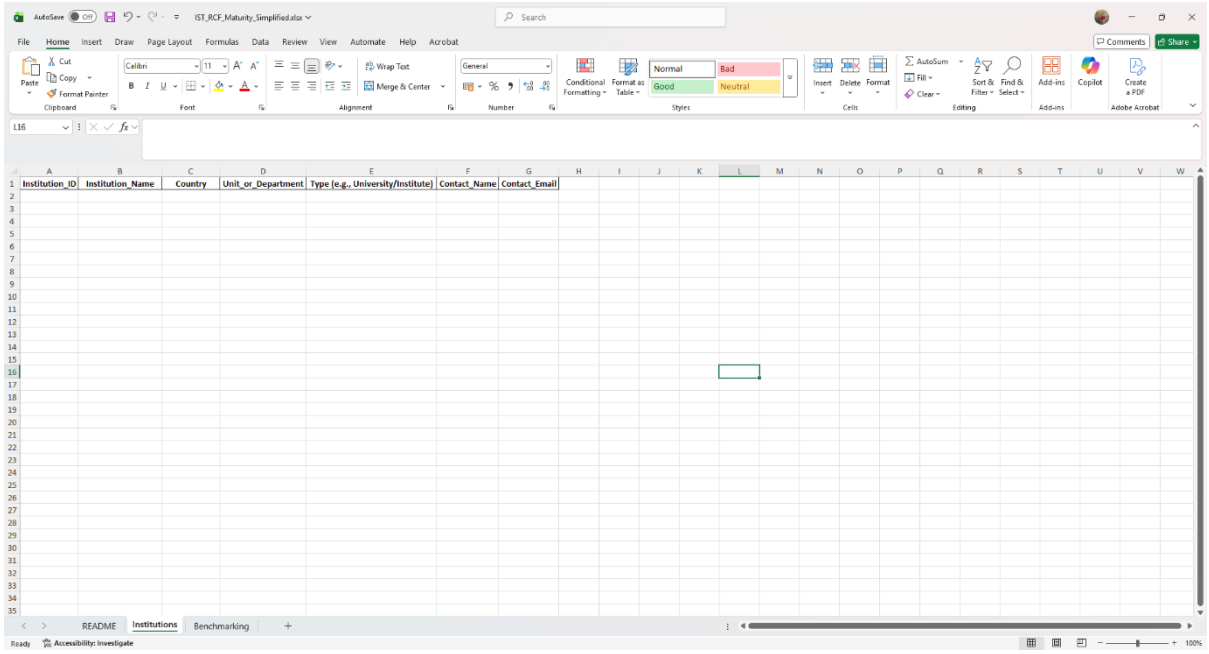
Institution	Overall Avg	AA1	AA2	AA3	AA4	AA5	AA6	AA7	AA8
PLOCAN	0.87	0.22	0.00	3.40	1.40	0.00	0.60	1.10	0.20
ZUT	1.12	1.40	0.40	2.00	1.60	1.20	1.20	0.80	0.40
SUMPHU	0.31	1.40	0.00	0.20	0.70	0.20	0.00	0.00	0.00
LPNU	1.02	1.40	0.20	3.00	1.40	0.20	1.20	0.80	0.00
UEFISCDI	1.35	0.60	0.20	2.10	1.20	0.40	2.20	1.20	0.80
UCY	1.09	1.20	0.20	1.40	1.40	0.80	2.00	1.10	0.60
NOVA	1.85	2.40	1.50	2.30	1.60	1.80	2.10	2.10	1.00
IST	1.00	1.80	0.20	1.50	1.10	0.40	0.40	1.40	1.20

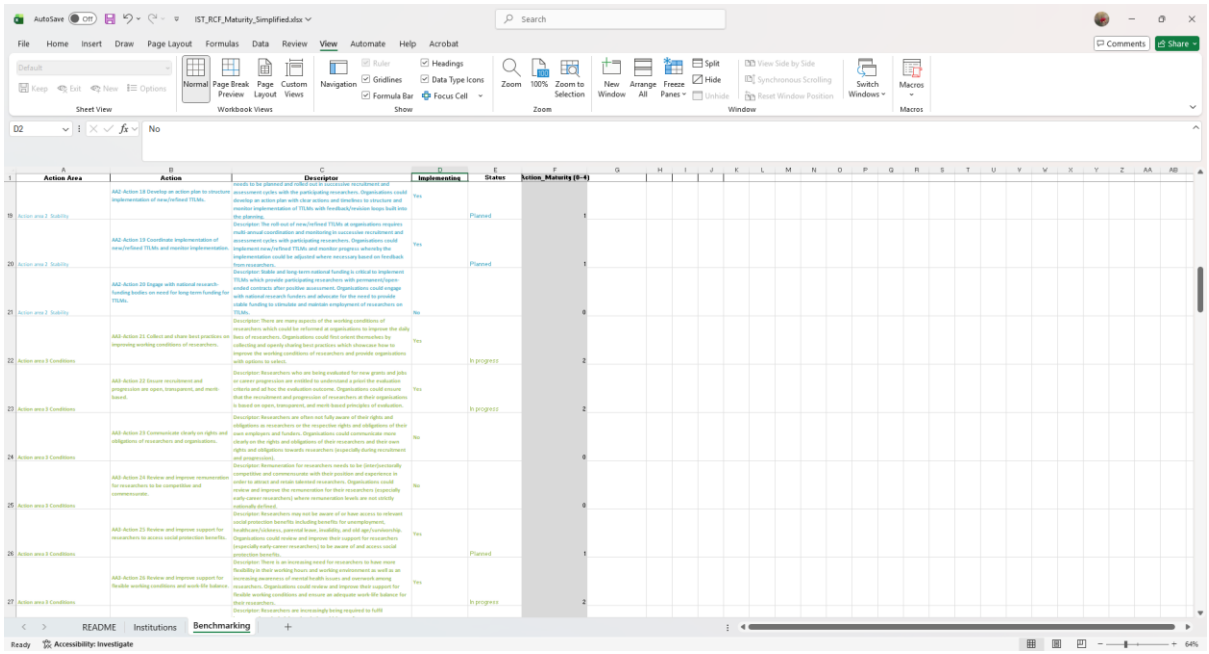
AA1- Action Area 1 Strategy
AA2- Action area 2 Stability
AA3- Action area 3 Conditions
AA4- Action area 4 Skills
AA5- Action area 5 Mobility
AA6- Action area 6 Assessment
AA7- Action area 7 Pathways
AA8- Action area 8 Interoperability

Annex 2

Screenshot of Self-assessment tool






IST_RCF_Maturity_Simplified.xlsx
README
Institutions
Benchmarking
Ready
Accessibility: Investigate



SECURE

Sustainable Careers for Researcher Empowerment



WP1 *Internal report on Pilot RCF maturity*

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https://secureproject.eu/