

Focus Groups Report - HRS4R



HR EXCELLENCE IN RESEARCH

This report aims to present the final results, findings and conclusions of the data obtained through the focus groups conducted as part of the HRS4R application process.

Steering Committee & Working Group

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1. Context

The initial gap analysis was carried out through a quantitative internal survey to assess key areas of alignment with the principles of the *European Charter for Researchers and the Code of Conduct for the Recruitment of Researchers*. Based on the survey results, it became clear that a qualitative approach would provide greater depth and context to the analysis.

To foster deeper discussion and richer insights—particularly on topics such as performance evaluation, work-life balance, and diversity—Focus Groups were organized. These sessions enabled participants to share experiences, voice concerns, and offer diverse perspectives on critical areas: performance evaluation and recognition; work-life balance; diversity and inclusion; and the participation and career development of young researchers.

The qualitative insights from the focus groups complemented the broader quantitative data, resulting in a more comprehensive understanding of the key challenges and opportunities at Lusófona University and CICANT.

2. Methodological Approach

Two focus groups were conducted to capture diverse perspectives on performance evaluation and recognition, work-life balance, diversity and inclusion, and the participation of young researchers in career development. These thematic areas emerged from the findings of the previous quantitative phase of the gap analysis (Quantitative Survey Report - HRS4R), as part of a mixed-methods sequential explanatory design (Creswell, 2009). In this approach, the quantitative data provided a broad understanding of existing gaps, while the focus groups generated systematic qualitative insights to deepen interpretation, clarify findings, and contribute to the definition of a concrete and actionable improvement plan.

2.1. Participants

Participants were selected and invited by the HRS4R project team, ensuring diversity in experience, research areas, and gender representation. Invitations were made individually, and participants confirmed their availability through a scheduling tool (Doodle). The final composition of each group was determined by the availability of voluntary participants.

One focus group included experienced researchers and staff (4 participants / 2 women), while the second group comprised early career researchers, recently hired staff, and PhD students (5 participants, 3 of whom were women). This division was deliberate, allowing for the exploration of different professional perspectives within a context conducive to open and comfortable discussion.

Although international representation was considered during the selection process, specific nationalities will not be disclosed to preserve participant confidentiality. All participants are affiliated with CICANT at Lusófona University in Lisbon, where the majority of the Centre's activities take place.

2.2. Ethics and Informed Consent

Informed written consent was obtained from all participants at the beginning of each meeting. Given the internal scope of the research and the possibility of public dissemination of the findings, confidentiality was treated as a priority. Consequently, all focus group sessions were conducted in person at the university and were neither filmed nor audio recorded, ensuring a secure and comfortable environment for open dialogue.

2.3. Procedure

Each focus group session lasted approximately two hours and followed a semi-structured discussion guide covering four main themes. These were defined based on the results of the initial survey and additional observations, ensuring alignment with the principles of the European Charter for Researchers and the Code of Conduct. The themes addressed were:

- Performance evaluation and recognition (Principles: Transparency, Recognition, Career Development)
- Work-life balance (Principle: Working Conditions)
- Diversity and inclusion (Principles: Diversity, Gender Balance)
- Participation of young researchers and career development (Principle: Career Development)

Following the group discussions, a SWOT analysis was conducted, in which participants collaboratively identified key strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats regarding the current context and future development of CICANT.

2.4. Analytical Strategy

The analysis followed a thematic approach, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), allowing for the identification, analysis, and reporting of recurring themes across the focus group discussions.

Ethical considerations were central to the process, ensuring anonymity and protecting participants' identities. The findings are presented in a manner that reflects the depth and nuance of participants' insights while safeguarding sensitive information. To further ensure confidentiality, the analysis avoids direct quotations or verbatim transcriptions of individual contributions, opting instead for a synthesized narrative that captures the essence of the discussions.

3. Results

The results obtained reflect a two-tiered analytical approach. Firstly, as previously noted, a thematic analysis was conducted following the methodology proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), identifying and categorizing the main themes emerging from the group discussions (presented in section “3.1. Main Themes and Topics”). Secondly, a SWOT analysis was developed based on participants' contributions, aiming to identify strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats, and to support the formulation of concrete actions and areas for improvement (presented in section “3.2. SWOT Analysis”).

3.1. Main Themes and Topics

3.1.1. Evaluation and Career Progression

Discussions around evaluation and career progression appeared to be particularly relevant for the group of more experienced staff compared to their less experienced counterparts.

Four main emergent themes were discussed to this extent: dissatisfaction with the evaluation strategy ($n = 13$); support needs ($n = 8$); need for structural changes ($n = 7$); and career progression of non-academic staff ($n = 3$).

Dissatisfaction with the evaluation strategy emerged as a central theme in the discussion, prompting concerns about an excessive focus on performance metrics and the number of approved projects. Participants criticized the lack of a peer review mechanism and

the absence of a structured system to track researchers' development over time. In terms of financial support, while the university was acknowledged for funding research-related activities—such as publications and conference participation—participants noted a significant gap in support for individual skill development and other areas highlighted in performance evaluations as needing improvement.

Additionally, most team members highlighted the need to improve the transparency of the evaluation systems. They recommended disclosing the names of evaluators, expanding the evaluators' team, and making the evaluation criteria more adaptable to different research profiles. Furthermore, participants suggested incorporating self-assessment into the process and implementing a rotation system for evaluators to ensure a diversity of perspectives and prevent a situation where the same evaluators are consistently involved.

Support needs related to evaluation and career progression were also discussed in the focus group, with a strong emphasis from less experienced team members. Key areas identified included difficulties in systematizing interdisciplinary work—an aspect considered central to CICANT's mission—as well as the need for additional training in areas such as writing narrative curricula, science management, and understanding future career paths and opportunities.

The need for structural changes also emerged as a significant discussion point regarding evaluation and career progression. Institutional divergences were highlighted, notably a phenomenon referred to as “bicephaly,” where CICANT and Lusófona University impose different requirements on the same staff members. This led to suggestions that CICANT should directly hire its staff or become more involved in the recruitment process.

Teaching was also a key focus in this context, with staff describing it as a “hobby” that is not highly valued by the research institution, contributing to stress and an increased risk of burnout. In alignment with concerns about overwork, participants pointed out how the “quantitative metrics-obsessed” system resulted in the precariousness of their work, where positive evaluations only led to greater workloads.

Finally, the career progression of non-academic staff was also discussed, with a call for clearer job functions, development opportunities, and formal recognition of merit.

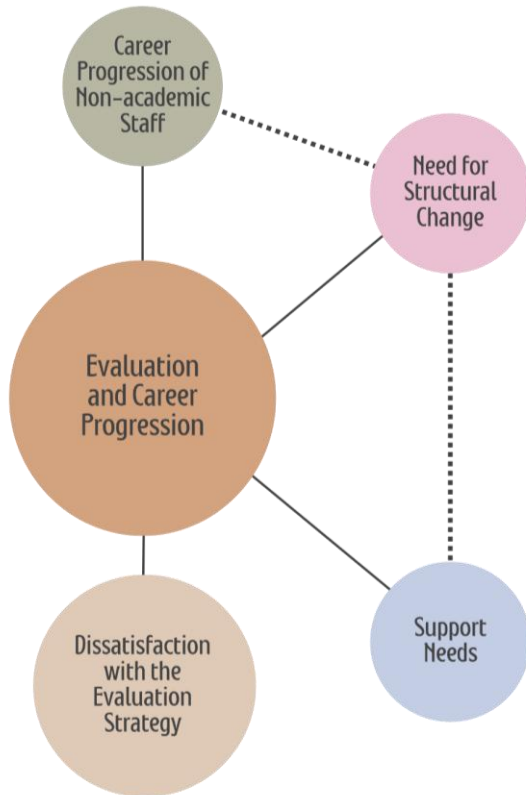


Figure 1. Emergent themes for evaluation and career progression. Source: authors' elaboration.

The emergent themes related to this discussion are visually summarized in Figure 1. While these themes are all interconnected with the central topic of evaluation and career progression, the discussion underscored how the need for structural change brought to light specific support needs and the unique career progression challenges faced by non-academic staff, who were perceived by the group as being overlooked in the current system.

3.1.2. Work Conditions and Work-Life Balance

Regarding the emergent theme work conditions and work-life balance, three main sub topics were discussed. The first involved the high workload and demanding work routine ($n = 3$), which were directly linked to various psychological pressures ($n = 4$). These two subtopics were, to some extent, mediated by personal strategies ($n = 3$) adopted by the participants to minimize the impact of the first on triggering the latter, as we will explain.

Participants discussed the high workload and highly demanding work routine, describing it as "factory-like," which leads to "overwork, mental load, and pressure to

publish." They also highlighted the expectation to work outside business hours in order to meet deadlines and avoid falling behind.

The second sub topic – psychological pressure – clearly emerged as a direct consequence of the high workload and demanding work routine. Participants described an "ethic of paranoia," stemming from the uncertainty about the potential consequences of failing to meet deadlines and expectations. In some instances, they reported feeling judged when attempting to balance their work and personal life, with comments such as “If they always had availability, why don't they now?”.

In an effort to mitigate these psychological impacts, participants reported adopting strategies that were more personal and individual in nature, rather than institutional or structural. These strategies, illustrated in Figure 2, included taking advantage of the flexibility of working from home, learning to "say no," and adjusting productivity expectations.

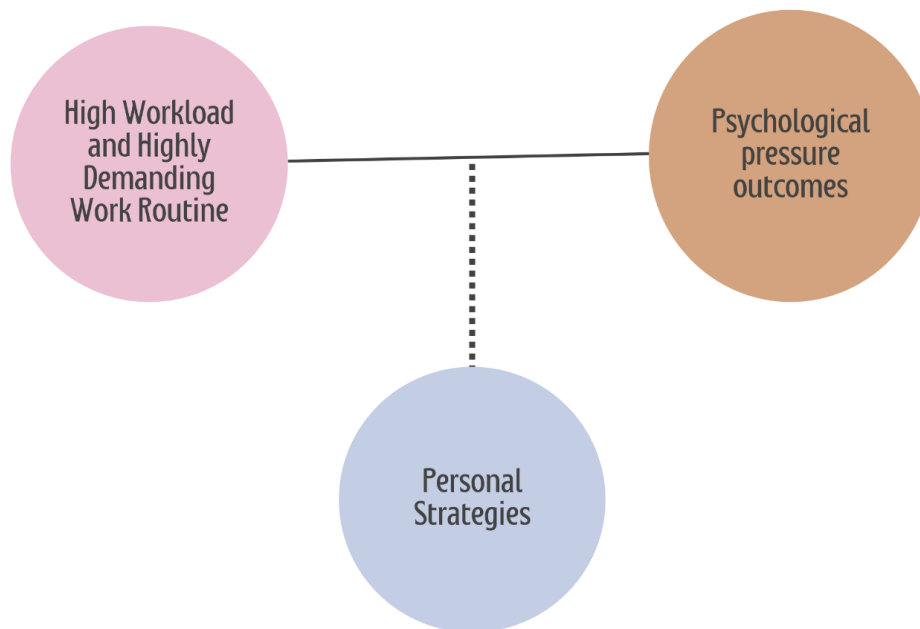


Figure 2. Emergent themes for work conditions and work-life balance. Source: authors’ elaboration.

3.1.3. Mental Health and Well-Being

As an emergent theme, mental health and well-being sparked complex and multifaceted discussions, primarily centred around two subthemes: training and capacity-building related to mental health ($n = 5$) and the structural health impacts of the workload ($n = 11$). The overall visual representation of these discussions is schematised in Figure 3.

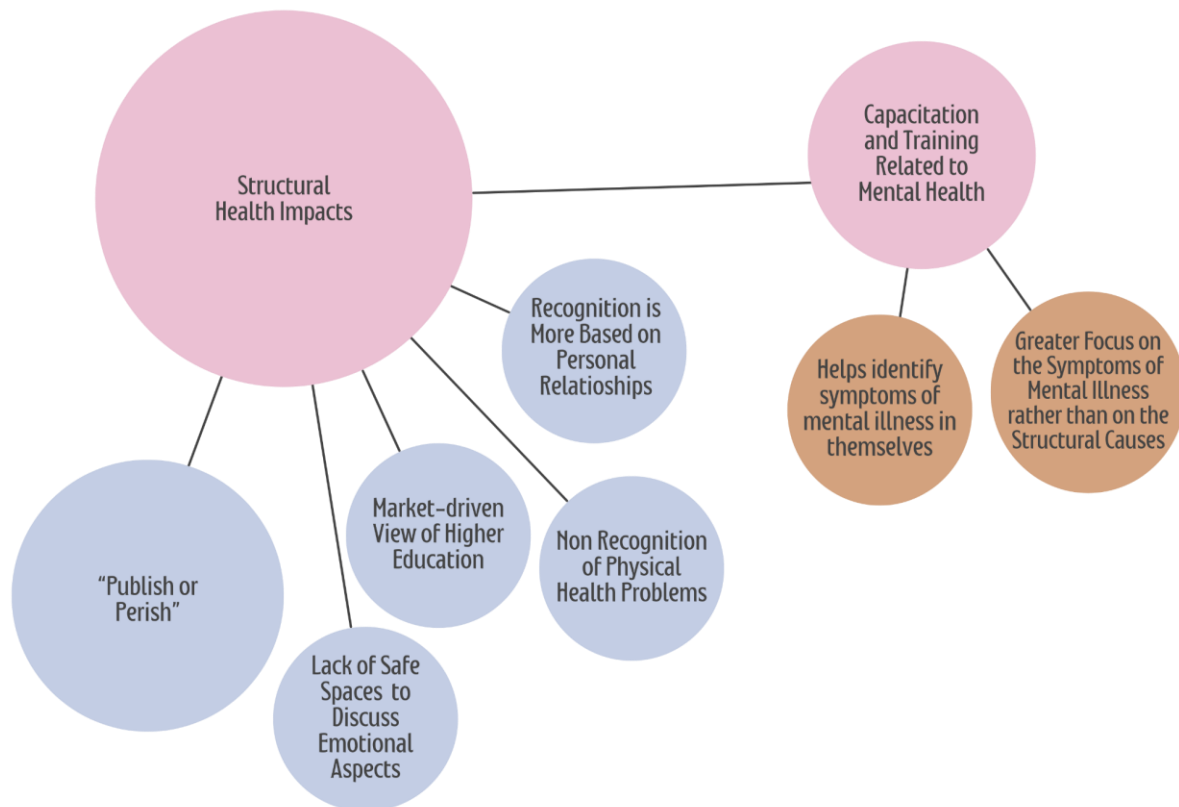


Figure 3. Emergent themes for mental health and well-being. Source: authors' elaboration.

Given its complexity and the frequency with which it was discussed, it is important to highlight that within the subtheme of structural health impacts of the workload, the most prevalent topic was the pressure to publish ($n = 7$), with one participant even describing it as a “publish or perish” mentality. Other related issues mentioned included the lack of perceived safe spaces to discuss emotional challenges at work, the market-driven perspective on higher education, the failure to recognize physical health problems related to work (e.g. tendinitis), and the observation that recognition of one’s merit often hinges more on personal relationships than on institutional support.

Additionally, the capacitation and training related to mental health were another relevant theme in the discussion, mentioned by the participants through two lenses. First, as something that helps them identify symptoms of mental illness in themselves in the training actions ($n = 2$), that might enable them to seek help (although the lack of dissemination of the psychology support services availability is noted). Secondly, participants highlighted how there is a greater focus on the symptoms of mental illness rather than on the structural causes ($n = 2$), mainly in the work-related ones, explaining how health benefits or healthcare access is insufficient, since it doesn't target disease prevention or health promotion.

3.1.4. Diversity and Inclusion

As an emergent theme, discussions around diversity and inclusion revealed complex institutional tensions, primarily focused on two subthemes: governance and structural barriers ($n = 4$), and perceptions of diversity at CICANT ($n = 5$). These tensions are represented in the overarching dynamic, as illustrated in Figure 4.

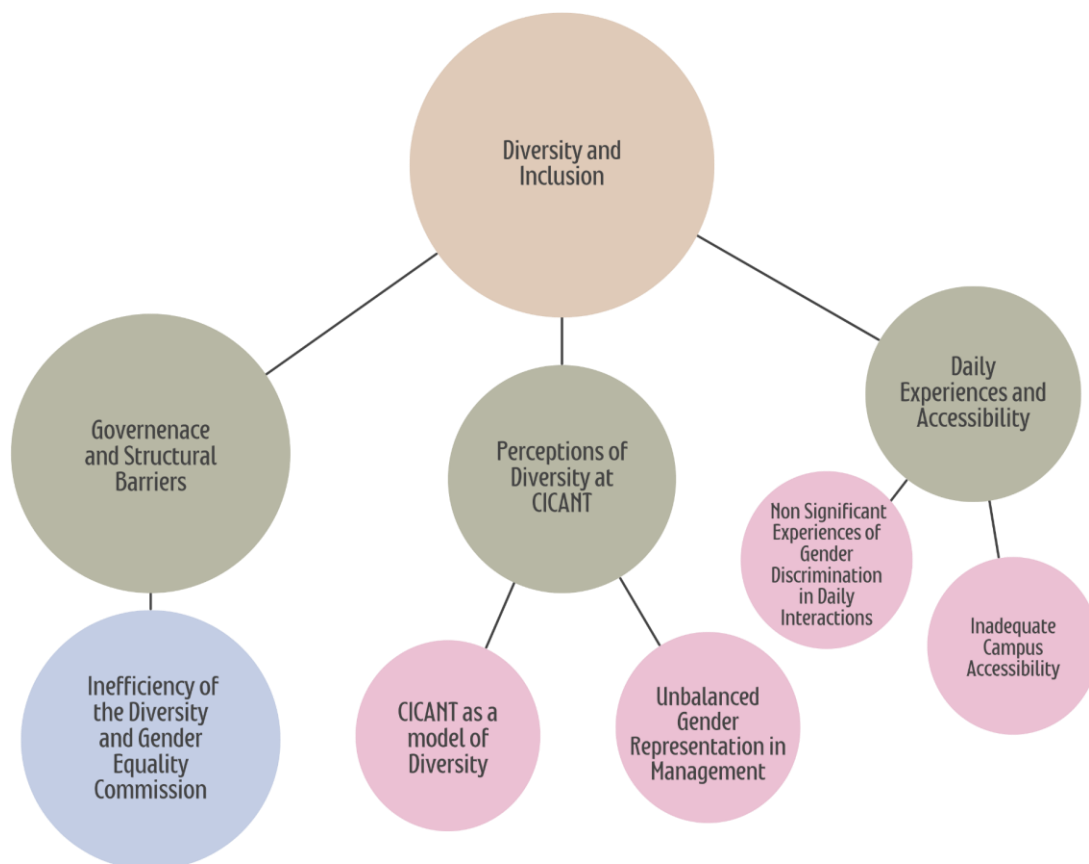


Figure 4. Emergent themes for diversity and inclusion. Source: authors' elaboration.

Within the subtheme of governance and structural barriers, the most prevalent issue was the perceived inefficiency of the Diversity and Gender Equality Commission – *Comissão de Igualdade de Género e Diversidade* ($n = 3$). Participants felt that the commission was unable to effectively integrate relevant concepts that could bring about meaningful change. Furthermore, they highlighted a paradoxical disconnect between CICANT's expertise in diversity and the committee's bureaucratic constraints imposed by higher university leadership, suggesting a systemic misalignment between intentions and practical implementation.

Conversely, perceptions of diversity at CICANT were framed through contradictory lenses. While the center was praised as a model of diversity ($n = 3$) – highlighting its international student body, proactive recruitment of external talent, and openness to integrating outsiders – participants simultaneously critiqued its unbalanced gender representation in management ($n = 2$).

A secondary subtheme, daily experiences and accessibility ($n = 2$), highlighting instances of minimal gender discrimination in everyday interactions, which contrasted with another participant's observation of inadequate campus accessibility.

3.2. SWOT Analysis

Following the group discussions, a SWOT analysis was carried out to capture participants' perspectives. Each participant was asked to write down their priorities for each of the four categories, using color-coded notes: strengths (blue), weaknesses (yellow), opportunities (green), and threats (pink). The analysis presented in Figure 5 reflects the collective thoughts and ideas shared during this collaborative exercise.

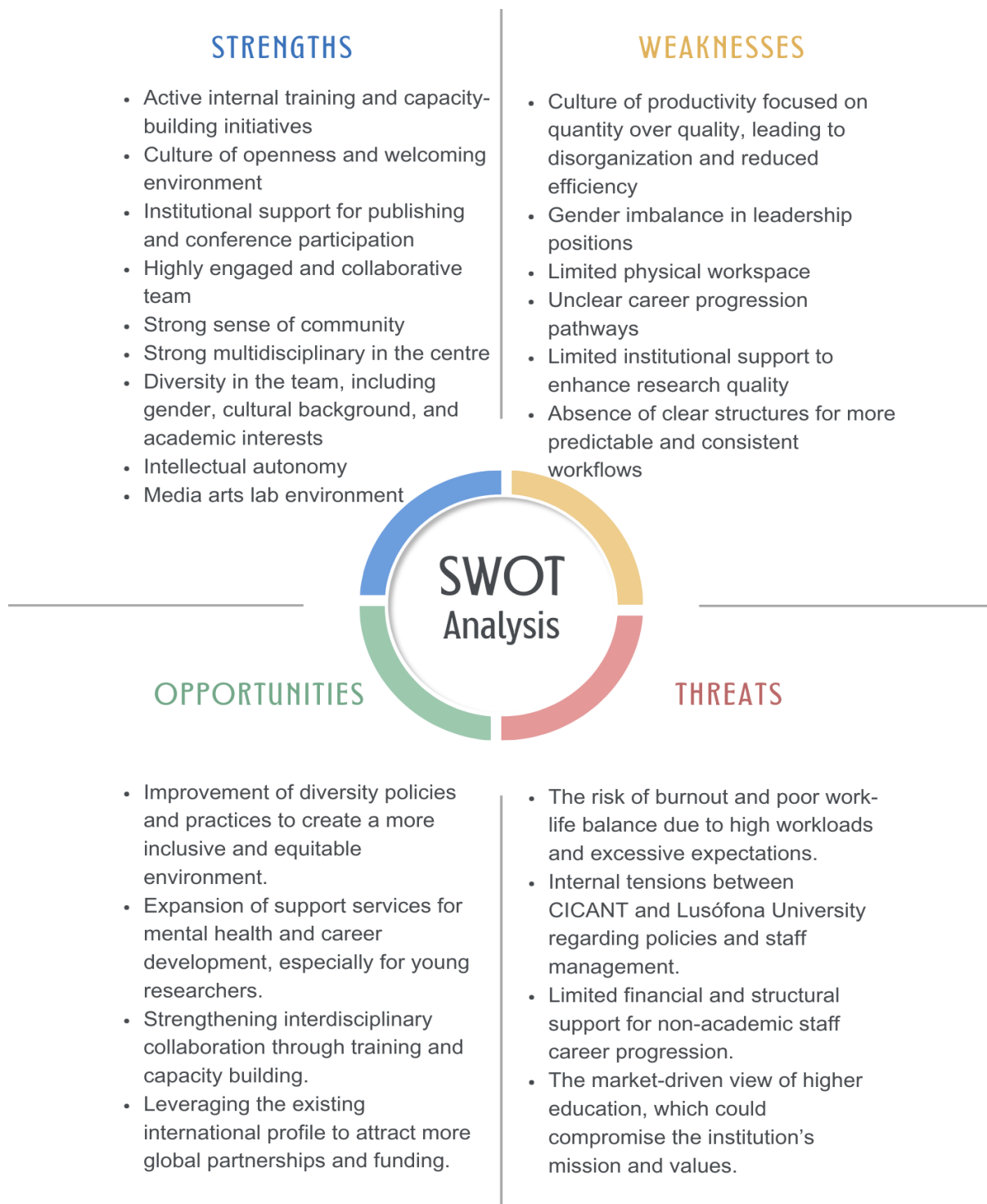


Figure 5. SWOT Analysis. Source: authors' elaboration.

The SWOT analysis provides a comprehensive overview of participants' perspectives on the key strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats impacting their experience within CICANT. It is important to note that many of the issues identified transcend the Centre itself,

reflecting broader institutional dynamics within Lusófona University and the COFAC group, as well as wider social challenges prevalent in the academic landscape.

4. Main Findings for the Gap Analysis and Operationalisation Paths for the Action Plan

The main findings from the focus group discussions are outlined below across four key areas, reflecting recurring themes and concerns raised by participants. Each section highlights critical gaps and proposes corresponding action plan pathways.

Regarding performance evaluation and recognition, participants stressed the need for more transparency and a shift away from overly quantitative approaches, as detailed in Table 1.

Table 1. Key gaps and respective proposals for the action plan related to performance evaluation and recognition. Source: authors' elaboration.

Key gaps related to performance evaluation and recognition Principles: Transparency, Recognition, Career Development	Action Plan Paths
<u>Issues of Transparency</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Anonymous evaluators and non-personalized criteria. - No system to track researcher progression over time. - Lack of alignment between institutional evaluation expectations (CICANT vs. University). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Introduce peer review and self-assessment in evaluations. - Publish evaluator names and rotate them periodically. - Define clear evaluation criteria adaptable to different research main areas. - Align evaluation standards and clarify expectations between the centre and the university. - Align the relevance of teaching between the research unit and COFAC - Improve the communication channels between the University, the research unit and the researchers as some of the actions that already exist are unknown. For instance the

	PURE, a platform that tracks the researcher progression over time
<u>Recognition Deficits</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Overemphasis on quantitative metrics over qualitative contributions. - Merit perceived as tied to personal networks rather than institutional standards. - Teaching perceived as secondary and undervalued by the research unit. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Expand evaluation to include qualitative achievements (e.g., museum exposition for Arts` researchers). - Cross-review evaluations. - Implement the Recognition of Development in Evaluations.
<u>Career Development Barriers</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - No funding for skill development (vs. production outputs). - Non-academic staff lack clear career paths. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Create individualised development plans with funding for training (including non-academic staff). - Present career path possibilities to PhD students. - When possible, allocate a Fixed Percentage of Project Budgets for Development - Clear career plans for non academic staff - Offer financial support or resources for staff to pursue relevant certifications and microcredentials, enhancing their competencies.

Discussions indicated that workload is a challenge, emphasizing that in the work-life balance equation, work generally is a priority, as illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2. Key gaps and respective proposals for the action plan related to work-life balance. Source: authors' elaboration.

Key gaps related to work-life balance Principle: Working Conditions	Action Plan Paths
<u>Unmanageable Workloads</u>	- Formalise policies for flexible

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - "Factory-like" pressure to publish and unpaid overtime. - Teaching is treated as a "hobby", potentially leading to burnout. 	<p>deadlines and overtime compensation.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Workload Audits and time tracking through the conduction of workload surveys to understand actual time spent on research, teaching, administration and extension and use this data to rebalance duties or advocate for more hires/funding. - Full implementation of flexible contracts or roles like: x% research; x% teaching; x% work with community and x% administration work and/or full implementation of taylor-made individual working Plans
<p><u>Psychological Strain</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Fear of judgment when setting boundaries, - Reliance on individual coping strategies due to lack of institutional support. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Normalise and promote work-life balance through leadership examples. - Promote clear communication around expectations, allowing researchers and staff to express limits and needs. - Lusofona's Strategic Plan 2025-2030 intend to embed a "Sustainability & Wellbeing" Culture making it a priority.

Participants expressed concern about the mental health implications of academic and research work, not only in the Centre, but within academia. Discussions involved structural causes, the need for proactive strategies and for creating a sustainable and health-promoting research environment, as presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Key gaps and respective proposals for the action plan related to mental health and well-being. Source: authors' elaboration.

Key gaps related to mental health and well-being	Action Plan Paths
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Principles:	
<u>Governance Weaknesses</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Pressure to increase workload - Lack of safe spaces to discuss emotional issues. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Promote workload regulation policies - Establish realistic project timelines and output expectations - Create formal spaces, such as counseling or mental health workshops, to help staff cope with emotional stress and work pressure. - Encourage peer-to-peer support networks where staff can openly discuss emotional concerns and share coping strategies.
<u>Contradictions in Practice</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Existing psychological support services are primarily student-focused, while researchers feel uncomfortable discussing work-related emotional issues within institutional spaces. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Promote more horizontal, peer-led spaces for open discussion of mental health and work-related emotional challenges within the center. - Expand access to external mental health support services.

Participants highlighted that CICANT is the most diverse centre at Lusófona University, involving diversity among students and researchers, as well as strong projects related to this theme. Concerns regarding this matter involve the institution on a broader scale, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Key gaps and respective proposals for the action plan related to diversity and inclusion. Source: authors' elaboration.

Key gaps related to diversity and inclusion	Action Plan Paths
Principles: Diversity, Gender Balance	
<u>Governance Weaknesses</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Diversity and Gender Equality Committee seen as ineffective due to bureaucratic constraints and institutional misalignment with 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Grant autonomy to the Diversity Committee to implement changes and show the academic community the results of such changes. - Ensure that the committee has

<p>CICANT's research.</p>	<p>greater autonomy and decision-making power, enabling it to act more effectively on issues of diversity and gender equality within CICANT and the wider institution.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Include researchers and staff from CICANT in the design and evaluation of diversity and gender equality initiatives, ensuring that their voices and concerns are represented and addressed. - Set up mechanisms for monitoring the progress and effectiveness of diversity and gender equality policies, ensuring that measurable outcomes are achieved and adjustments are made as necessary.
<p><u>Contradictions in Practice</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Praise for international diversity but gender imbalance in leadership. - Campus accessibility gaps. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Conduct an accessibility audit (physical and procedural). - Ensure that the new Lisbon campus to be built by 2030 takes accessibility into account. - Require gender and inclusion impact statements in internal project proposals (mirror Horizon Europe practices). - Include a Diversity Equity and Inclusion assessment criterion when evaluating internal project applications - Develop Thematic Working Groups Linked to Research Areas: Let committee members lead micro-projects or issue briefs on these themes, connecting DEI to the real research work. - Organize annual "Equity in Research" days, open seminars, or lunch talks.

Regarding participation of young researchers and career development, discussions rely on limited support and need of more clarity, as present in Table 5.

Table 5. Key gaps and respective proposals for the action plan related to participation of young researchers and career development. Source: authors' elaboration.

Key gaps related to participation of young researchers and career development Principle: Career Development	Action Plan Paths
<u>Limited Support for Staff (specially non academic staff and early career scholars)</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Need training in narrative CVs, management, and career planning. - Difficulty navigating interdisciplinary expectations. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Develop mentorship programs pairing junior and senior researchers. - Offer workshops on alternative career paths (e.g., industry, policy). - Establish a structured onboarding program for the Centre. - Offer annual workshops on how to craft narrative CVs aligned with frameworks like DORA and Horizon Europe's R4R (Researchers for Researchers) principles.
<u>Precarity Risks</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Good evaluations lead to higher workloads, not promotions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Clarify promotion criteria and link rewards to sustainable workloads. - Develop clear guidelines on workload distribution that prevent overloading individuals who are excelling in their work. Implement a system that ensures workload expectations are balanced with personal development opportunities and career progression. - Develop specific development tracks for high-performing staff, such as leadership training, project management courses, or specialized mentoring, to prepare them for promotion and greater responsibilities within the institution.

5. References

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- Creswell, J. W. (2009). *Qualitative, Quantitative and Mixed Methods Approaches*. SAGE.