Transferable Principles and Good Practices for the Evaluation of Research Projects

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ARIA project
Advancing Responsible Research Assessment at UEFISCDI

Disclaimer

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1. Introduction

Deliverable D1.1 was developed within Activity 1 of the ARIA project - Advancing Responsible and Inclusive Assessment at UEFISCDI, funded under the Horizon Europe programme - CoARA Boost Cascade Funding Call 2.

The ARIA project, implemented by UEFISCDI during the period 1 September 2025 - 31 August 2026, has as its main objective the acceleration of the adoption of the CoARA principles in internal research assessment processes. It represents a concrete step in the implementation of UEFISCDI's Action Plan for Reforming Research Assessment, published on 10 February 2025.

Deliverable D1.1 presents a set of principles and good practices for the design and implementation of assessment processes within research funding programmes, with a focus on qualitative evaluation and alignment with the CoARA principles. Thus, the document serves as a transferable guide for institutions wishing to adopt CoARA principles in their research funding programmes.

The CoARA principles represent an international framework dedicated to reforming research assessment, focusing on promoting scientific quality, equity, transparency, and the recognition of diverse contributions and career trajectories of researchers. These principles support a more inclusive and responsible evaluation that takes into account the disciplinary context, the variety of outputs, and the scientific, social, economic, and technological impact of research projects. The adoption of CoARA principles in selection and evaluation processes contributes to creating a more balanced and innovative research environment, reducing excessive reliance on quantitative indicators, and fostering a culture that recognizes researchers' authentic contributions.

This document is of a guidance nature and presents general principles and good practices, formulated in the spirit of the CoARA principles, which can be adapted according to the institutional context, without describing, evaluating, or imposing specific institutional practices and without substituting applicable national or institutional regulations.

2. Principles and Good Practices in Research Project Evaluation

The following presents good practices in the evaluation of research projects, reflecting the principles of scientific quality, fairness, transparency, and recognition of research contributions and researchers' career trajectories, in accordance with the CoARA principles. These practices incorporate the main commitments of the CoARA Agreement, including:

- Recognition of the diversity of contributions and career trajectories in research, according to its specific nature and context.

- Basing research evaluation primarily on qualitative criteria, with a central peer review, supported by the responsible use of quantitative indicators.
- Avoiding the inappropriate use of publication- or journal-based metrics, in particular the Journal Impact Factor (JIF) and h-index, in research evaluation.

Each of the good practices presented below contributes to the implementation of these CoARA principles, supporting a responsible, fair, and transparent evaluation process:

a. Robust and well-operationalized qualitative peer review.

A research project evaluation process can be conducted by international reviewers. It may include clear mechanisms for individual assessment to reach consensus, manage disagreements, prepare an interim evaluation report and a consensus report, allow responses from applicants/project directors (rebuttal), as well as panel deliberation for cases without consensus and/or for projects exceeding a scoring threshold.

Consistency between reviewers' comments and the scores awarded can be reinforced by requiring the identification of strengths and weaknesses for each criterion and sub-criterion, as well as through procedural monitoring mechanisms.

CoARA link: This practice aligns with CoARA commitments on qualitative assessment and central peer review, ensuring a responsible, consensus-based evaluation.

b. Qualitative assessment focused on the intrinsic scientific quality of the research project.

The assessment of research projects can focus on originality, novelty, ambition, methodology, alignment with the current state of knowledge, and the potential contribution to knowledge development, without imposing metrics in the evaluation form and without requesting indicators such as the Journal Impact Factor or h-index in the actual evaluation.

CoARA link: This reflects CoARA's commitment to reducing reliance on bibliometric indicators and prioritizing qualitative assessment of research.

c. Introduction of the narrative CV and a limited number of research outputs in the evaluation tools.

The integration of a narrative CV or a narrative section into the traditional CV template, along with limiting the track record to a maximum number of outputs (for example, a

limited number set according to the specifics of the competition, such as ten research outputs), can support a focus on quality, relevance, and impact over quantity, and can create the basis for a more contextualized evaluation.

CoARA link: This approach promotes the recognition of the diversity of researchers' contributions and career trajectories, in line with CoARA's commitments to acknowledging varied contributions.

d. **Providing supporting materials on the use of the narrative CV and the diversity of research outputs in evaluation**

It may be useful to provide applicants and evaluators with instructions on how to complete and interpret the narrative CV or the narrative section of the traditional CV, as well as on how the research outputs reported in the track record are considered and valued. Developing and widely disseminating such supporting materials could foster a shared understanding of expectations and strengthen a qualitative approach aligned with the CoARA principles.

CoARA Link: This measure reflects CoARA's commitments to support the qualitative and context-sensitive evaluation of researchers' contributions, to recognize the diversity of outputs and career trajectories, and to promote a more responsible, inclusive, and discipline-appropriate assessment.

e. **Qualitative evaluation of the project director's profile.**

The evaluation of the project director can be carried out based on dedicated sections in the application form and the CV and track record template, emphasizing qualitative and contextualized descriptions of scientific capacity, creativity, leadership, relevance of previous activity, and ability to lead impactful research, in accordance with the CoARA principles.

CoARA link: This supports the CoARA principles regarding the recognition of the context and the authentic contributions of researchers.

f. Recognition of research trajectories and contributions beyond traditional scientific outputs

The CV + track record template used in funding programs may include sections that allow the reflection of a wide range of experiences and contributions (scientific

publications, patents, software, technologies, datasets, models, methods, theories, algorithms, protocols, contributions to public policies, strategies, workflows, collaboration with societal actors, etc.), as well as roles (including project management, teaching, supervision, trainer, mentor, other held positions, and other relevant professional experiences), including career breaks.

Additionally, it may be useful to develop a guidance document or relevant references that provide evaluators with orientation points and examples of good practices for the qualitative assessment of a broader range of contributions.

When applying for a funding competition, it is recommended that applicants have flexibility and are not strictly limited to a predefined list of results and activities, receiving only a few illustrative examples. This allows them to provide information on the outcomes and activities they consider most relevant, acknowledging the differences that may exist between research disciplines.

Furthermore, the evaluation criteria of research projects can promote and recognize a wide range of research outputs, in accordance with CoARA principles.

Explicitly mentioning these types of outputs could better guide applicants and evaluators and strengthen alignment with CoARA regarding the recognition of a broad diversity of contributions.

CoARA link: This approach reflects CoARA's commitments to recognize the diversity of contributions and professional trajectories in research, as well as to support the qualitative, contextualized, and responsible assessment of results, taking into account the specifics of the discipline and the nature of the research.

g. **Avoiding bibliometric indicators in the qualitative evaluation of principal investigators/project directors, as well as in determining their eligibility.**

Bibliometric and journal-based indicators (such as Journal Impact Factor, h-index, or Q1/Q2 classifications) can be avoided in the qualitative evaluation of principal investigators/project directors, as well as in determining their eligibility.

Clear guidance for evaluators on avoiding the implicit use of these bibliometric indicators can be useful to support the implementation of CoARA principles and promote qualitative, context-aware assessment.

CoARA link: This practice aligns with CoARA's commitment to abandon the inappropriate use of publication- or journal-based metrics.

h. Recognition of extended impact dimensions.

The evaluation of impact can include scientific, social, economic, and technological impact, as well as the impact of the project on the project director and the research team, with a focus on substance and relevance rather than quantitative indicators.

CoARA Link: This supports responsible assessment and the recognition of the diversity of impact types in research.

i. Explicit integration of Open Science practices, including research data management aligned with FAIR principles, in the evaluation of the research project.

For example, the evaluation criteria may explicitly include Open Science practices, research data management in accordance with FAIR principles, as well as dimensions of ethics, gender equality, inclusion, and diversity. Additionally, the rules regarding eligible costs may cover expenses that support the implementation of these requirements (e.g., open access publication, dissemination, access to third-party research infrastructures). These elements implicitly recognize contributions such as datasets and support alignment with the CoARA principles.

j. Integration of ethics, gender equality, inclusion, and diversity dimensions.

The evaluation criteria of research projects may explicitly include dimensions of ethics, gender equality, inclusion, and diversity in accordance with the CoARA principles. Additionally, the presence of a Gender Equality Plan at the host institution may be required, in line with the applicable funding program requirements, to support the implementation of these principles.

k. Procedural transparency and the availability of public aggregate statistics.

A transparent research project evaluation framework may include the publication of evaluation procedures and criteria, the sharing of evaluation reports with applicants, the publication of results lists and lists of evaluators after the completion of competitions, where legally permissible, as well as the publication of aggregated analyses of evaluation outcomes (e.g., score distributions or success rates by domain) without compromising confidentiality. Such analyses can support institutional learning and the continuous improvement of the evaluation process. Additionally, the public

communication of aggregated statistics on applicant participation and profiles contributes to increased transparency and accountability, in accordance with the CoARA principles.

I. **Strengthening evaluator training.**

The introduction of training or calibration mechanisms for evaluators can provide common benchmarks for interpreting the narrative CV, consistently applying evaluation criteria, recognizing potential biases, and avoiding the implicit use of bibliometric indicators. Such benchmarks contribute to a more uniform application of the qualitative approach and reduce variations between evaluators, supporting fair and consistent assessments across different research funding contexts.

CoARA Link: This recommendation reflects CoARA's commitment to providing training and guidance for evaluators, promoting transparency, consistency, and responsible application of research evaluation criteria.

3. Conclusions

Deliverable D1.1 synthesizes a coherent set of principles and good practices for the evaluation of research projects, aligned with the principles and commitments of CoARA, aiming to support qualitative, fair, transparent, and responsible assessment. The presented good practices target both the evaluation of research projects and the assessment of principal investigators/project directors, emphasizing intrinsic scientific quality, contextualization, and recognition of the diversity of contributions and professional trajectories in research.

The document highlights the importance of robust qualitative peer review, the use of narrative CVs, limiting reported research outputs to the most relevant, avoiding the inappropriate use of bibliometric indicators, and recognizing a wide range of research outputs and types of research impact. It also underlines the role of procedural transparency, public reporting of aggregated statistics, and the integration of ethics, gender equality, inclusion, diversity, and Open Science practices into the evaluation processes.

By formulating this set of good practices in a general and transferable manner, Deliverable D1.1 can serve as a guide for funding bodies interested in adopting CoARA principles in research evaluation. In this respect, the document contributes to supporting research assessment reform, in line with European initiatives for modernizing evaluation systems, and to consolidating a culture of assessment based on quality, responsibility, and recognition of genuine contributions in research.

4. References

Principii CoARA - Arentoft, M., Berghmans, S., Borrell-Damian, L., Bottaro, S., Faure, J.-E., Gaillard, V., Glinos, K., Albacete, J. L., Morais, R., Morris, J., Schiltz, M., & Stroobants, K. (2022). Agreement on Reforming Research Assessment. Zenodo. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.13480728