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SECURE
Sustainable Careers for
Researcher Empowerment

Best practices in research assessment reform across Europe

Study document



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Best practices on reforming existing research assessment systems. Study document

Result of a pilot activity implemented as part of the SECURE project

**UEFISCDI – Executive Agency for Higher Education, Research, Development and
Innovation Funding**

March 2025

Contents

1. Introduction	4
2. Methodology.....	5
3. Best practices.....	6
3.1. The case of FNR Luxembourg: Reshaping research assessment with narrative CVs and other research culture initiatives	6
3.2. The case of UNL Netherlands: Making room for everyone’s talent.....	13
3.3. The case of DFG Germany: A long-term commitment to qualitative research assessment	22
3.4. The case of the European Research Council: Advancing research assessment with a strong focus on scientific excellence.....	28
4. Conclusions & lessons learned.....	34
Annex 1. Interview guide.....	35

1. Introduction

About UEFISCDI

The Executive Agency for Higher Education, Research, Development and Innovation Funding ([UEFISCDI](#)) is the main funder for competitive research in Romania and a policy adviser for science, innovation and higher education policies, under the ultimate authority of the Ministry of Education and Research (MEC). As a funding agency, UEFISCDI supports exploratory and applied research, in all branches of science and the humanities, and it funds research projects on a competitive basis. The Agency's prerogatives in the research area pertain to the implementation of the majority of Programmes under the National Research, Development and Innovation Plan (PNCDI IV), which is the main instrument for implementing the National Strategy on Research, Innovation, and Smart Specialization for 2022–2027.

The agency is a member of different European associations (e.g Science Europe, EARTO), offers support to SME's through EUREKA, EUROSTARS, and supports the Romanian participation to the Horizon Europe Programmes, by hosting the NCP unit. Over the years, UEFISCDI has established various strategic partnerships and cooperation agreements with several European research organizations (National Science Foundation – NSF, Swiss National Science Foundation – SNSF, L'Agence Nationale de la Recherche – ANR, EEA Financial Mechanism – Norway Research Council & The Icelandic Centre for Research - RANNIS), in order to facilitate the access of Romanian researchers to pan-European projects.

Purpose of the Study

This study was conducted by UEFISCDI as part of its pilot activities within the [SECURE – Sustainable Careers for Researcher Empowerment](#) project, funded by the European Union through the Horizon Europe programme. The project aims to develop coordination and support measures for enhancing research careers and reducing their precarity. A key aspect of fostering sustainable research careers is improving the way research and researchers are evaluated—an area in which funders, research organizations, and policymakers each have important responsibilities.

Against this backdrop, UEFISCDI undertook this study to explore and document **best practices in research assessment reform across Europe**, with the goal of supporting efforts at national and European levels to align with evolving principles such as those promoted by the Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment ([CoARA](#)). The study aims to contribute to the evidence base needed for policy development and institutional change, by showcasing concrete examples of research assessment reform already implemented or in progress.

Motivation for the Study

UEFISCDI has recently developed its institutional **Action Plan for CoARA** ([available here](#)), and this study was carried out in parallel as a learning and evidence-gathering process. The selection of cases—FNR Luxembourg, Universities of the Netherlands (UNL), DFG Germany, and the European Research Council (ERC)—reflects an intention to include both **research funding**

organizations and research-performing institutions, offering a diversity of perspectives and implementation contexts.

The primary motivation behind this review is to **inform research communities and policymakers** by presenting tested practices, reform approaches, and lessons learned from pioneering organizations in the field. Through structured interviews and desk research, this study sheds light on how different actors have approached reform—what has worked, what challenges were encountered, and what impact the changes have had so far. The hope is that these insights will **inspire and guide** future change initiatives at different levels across Romania and beyond.

2. Methodology

This study is based on a qualitative analysis of four in-depth interviews conducted with representatives of key organizations engaged in different research assessment initiatives across Europe. The selected cases represent a mix of research funding organizations and institutional-level actors, offering a range of perspectives and implementation experiences. The four interviews were conducted between September 2024 and March 2025.

All interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview guide, focusing on a common set of themes including motivations for change, description of the implemented approaches, stakeholder involvement, challenges encountered, observed results, and lessons learned. The interview guide, included as Annex 1, was designed to capture both strategic and operational dimensions of research assessment change processes, as well as contextual factors influencing their development.

The interviews were analyzed between February and March 2025, following a comparative approach aimed at identifying cross-cutting themes, unique practices, and transferable insights. Where relevant, the information provided during interviews was complemented by public documents, action plans, and institutional materials.

On this occasion, we would like to warmly **thank all the participants for their time**, openness, and contributions to this work. Their insights have been invaluable in documenting concrete practices and informing the development of evidence-based policy recommendations.

Looking ahead, UEFISCDI intends to expand this knowledge base by including additional examples in the future, particularly from research-performing organizations and research infrastructures. Continuing this work could contribute to a better understanding of how more inclusive and effective research assessment practices are being developed and implemented across different contexts, both nationally and in Europe.

3. Best practices

3.1. The case of FNR Luxembourg: Reshaping research assessment with narrative CVs and other research culture initiatives

1. About FNR

The Luxembourg National Research Fund (FNR) is the main research funding agency in Luxembourg, investing public funds and private donations into research projects across various scientific disciplines and the humanities. With a focus on strategic areas, FNR's mission is to create a sustainable, world-class research system that generates societal and economic impact, contributing to the country's economic diversification and future prosperity. FNR also plays a key advisory role to the Luxembourg government on research policy and strategy, while supporting efforts to strengthen the link between science and society and raising awareness of the importance of research.

FNR's strategic priorities include attaining scientific leadership in key areas, turning public research into a competitive advantage for Luxembourg, and anchoring science in society. By attracting talented researchers and fostering collaboration between public research and innovative industries, FNR helps build Luxembourg's knowledge-based economy, and it is committed to transparency, accountability, and fostering public engagement with science to address current and future societal challenges.

More information: <https://www.fnr.lu/what-we-do/>

2. Motivation for Reform/ Change

So we need to be flexible. We need to find things that make the whole process more efficient and less of a burden for us as well as everybody else.

FNR has always strived to be a progressive and agile funding agency, consistently positioning itself at the forefront of international developments in research policy. As a relatively small funding agency, FNR needs to operate with a high degree of flexibility. In this context, its decision to reform research assessment practices was driven by several key motivations. As an early advocate of Open Science, FNR had already been actively involved in promoting open access, implementing data management plans, and supporting Plan S. And rethinking research assessment was a natural extension of these efforts, ensuring that evaluation practices are aligned with broader practices and commitments.

Additionally, as a small country, Luxembourg relies on strong collaboration with international research funders. To ensure that Luxembourg's research remains attractive and competitive, the agency must stay aligned with evolving **global research assessment practices**, making it easier for Luxembourg-based researchers to collaborate across borders. This necessity to work with others reinforced FNR's interest in reforming its assessment processes, ensuring they reflect international best practices.

At the same time, efficiency concerns played a role in shaping the changes introduced. The previous system often placed a heavy burden on both applicants and reviewers, with traditional CV formats growing excessively long—sometimes even exceeding the length of the proposals themselves. An alternative, more concise approach was identified as necessary in order to make the process more effective.

The shift towards research assessment reform was also inspired by influential reports such as the [Wellcome Trust's 2020](#) study¹ on research culture, which highlighted the role of funders in shaping research environments. Thus, FNR recognizes research assessment as a powerful **policy lever**—a mechanism that could drive broader cultural change. And by rethinking how research is evaluated, FNR saw an opportunity to **shape incentives, influence institutional policies, and promote values such as openness, diversity, and societal impact**.

3. Description of the reform/ changes introduced

There is a saying in business. What is measured is what is done. If you change what is measured, then we change what people do. And so, if we want more diversity in research, we need to make that a target.

FNR introduced several key changes in its research assessment approach to promote qualitative evaluation and reduce reliance on traditional metrics:

- **Narrative CVs:** FNR replaced unstructured, often lengthy CVs with structured two-page narrative CVs (currently with no section word count) that highlight a broader range of research contributions, and that is linked to a more qualitative approach for evaluation. The template for FNR's narrative CV drew inspiration from the Royal Society's [Resume for Researchers](#), and extensive information about it as well as about its adoption process can be found here - <https://www.fnr.lu/narrative-cv/>.
- **Revised reporting framework:** The reporting process was streamlined to minimize administrative burden, by reducing as much as possible the information requested while still making sure that all crucial information is collected, as well as to ensure alignment

¹ Wellcome Trust. Report *What researchers think about the culture they work in*. <https://wellcome.org/reports/what-researchers-think-about-research-culture>

with assessment criteria. Reports now ask questions that are in alignment with narrative CVs, ensuring continuity in evaluation.

- **Dedicated budget lines for Open Science and diversity:** In major funding schemes (e.g., Centers of Excellence, talent attraction grants), FNR introduced fixed budget lines that must be allocated to open science, diversity, and training initiatives (through dedicated plans in the case of diversity and Open Science). These funds are co-financed by research institutions, ensuring shared responsibility.
- **FNR Awards:** The previous "Outstanding Scientific Publication" award was replaced with "Outstanding Scientific Achievement" to emphasize the value of a broader variety of contributions to science, beyond publications. Additionally, a new category for "Outstanding Mentorship" was introduced. More information about all of these can be found here: <https://www.fnr.lu/fnr-awards-new/>
- **Guidance for reviewers:** To support a more holistic evaluation, FNR co-produced an educational video with DORA, providing reviewers with guidance on assessing research based on a broader approach in relation to outputs, quality and impact. This video is shown to review panels and has been translated into different languages.
- **National Working Groups on Research Culture and Gender:** FNR established national working groups on research culture and gender, bringing together representatives from Luxembourg's universities and research institutions to serve as discussion fora for topics relating to improving the research culture and assessment.
- **Postdoc Quality Framework** (in progress): FNR is developing a framework to define supervision and career development guidelines for postdoctoral researchers, with direct involvement from postdocs in the design process.
- **Trends under Review conference series:** FNR launched the "Trends Under Review" forum to facilitate discussions on key topics such as open science, research culture, and science communication. This ongoing series brings together international experts and local researchers for keynote speeches, panel discussions, and interactive face to face exchanges, fostering dialogue on evolving research practices. Through them, the organization tries to create a dedicated space for critical conversations and knowledge-sharing, to explore different practices, challenges and opportunities associated with them. For more information: <https://www.fnr.lu/trends-under-review-a-forum-for-the-luxembourg-research-community/>
- **PEP CV initiative:** In collaboration with five other funders, the **Marie Curie Alumni Association**, and the **Young Academy of Europe**, FNR is actively contributing to the **PEP-CV initiative**—a community-driven platform *for everyone active in the research and innovation sector to engage in simple peer mentoring exchanges to discuss how to best present a diverse range of experiences, achievements, and career paths in all types of narrative-style CVs.* (PEP CV platform, <https://pep-cv.mariecuriealumni.eu/>) The initiative encourages collaboration and knowledge-sharing rather than focusing solely on providing examples. By fostering a mentoring culture, it aims to create a supportive community that can drive progress through shared experiences and collective input.

4. Implementation process

a. Stakeholder involvement

It's important for us to try to involve people as much as possible, as much as it works, depending on the initiative.

For the changes implemented by FNR, stakeholder engagement was tailored on a case by case basis, depending on the specificities of each initiative. In the case of the narrative CV, stakeholder input was minimal during the development phase, as the format was adapted from internationally recognized models such as the Royal Society's Résumé for Researchers, which was developed based on a comprehensive stakeholder involvement process, and similar templates used by SNSF and NWO. Once introduced, FNR actively sought feedback through surveys and consultation loops to refine and improve its implementation based on the experiences of applicants and reviewers. The surveys were especially useful in providing evidence on researchers' opinions regarding and adoption of the narrative CV template.

For the **revised reporting framework**, a more extensive **stakeholder consultation process** was necessary. FNR engaged a broad range of actors, including **researchers, research facilitators, finance departments, and university administrative staff**, ensuring that the new framework met the needs of all involved. The consultation process took place in several stages: first, gathering input on ideal reporting expectations; then, reviewing a draft version of the framework; and finally, sharing the final documents in advance (allowing stakeholders to prepare their processes) before moving forward with full implementation and broad communication. At the heart of this change process, was the desire to reduce the administrative burden for all parties involved. In this case, especially, stakeholder involvement, together with the broad communication, were especially considered as key driving factors that contributed to the success of the change process

Additionally, as part of its ongoing commitment to improving research conditions, FNR is establishing a **Postdoc Quality Framework** to enhance supervision and career development for postdoctoral researchers. A dedicated working group, including representatives from all institutions as well as postdoctoral researchers themselves, is being formed to ensure that the framework accurately reflects their needs and provides meaningful support.

b. Challenges encountered and strategies for overcoming them

Implementing research assessment reforms at FNR came with its share of challenges, particularly **resistance to change, resource constraints, and the need for strong evidence to support reforms**. While some researchers expressed concerns about changes such as the introduction of the narrative CV, particularly regarding its effectiveness and shift from traditional assessment methods, FNR approached these discussions with a strong commitment to **evidence-based decision-making**. In this context, it was of increased relevance that they have gathered feedback

on the new template, including from reviewers, and that feedback showcased the usefulness of the proposed changes.

A key strategy in overcoming resistance was **communication and active listening**. FNR placed great importance on maintaining **an open dialogue with the research community**, ensuring that feedback was not only collected but also acted upon. This is also the case with removing, for example, the word limit attributed to sections in the narrative CV. When changes were not feasible, the agency took the time to **clearly explain the rationale**, preventing the perception that reforms were being imposed without consideration for the researchers' concerns. Maintaining this transparent dialogue helped foster trust and reduce resistance.

Resource constraints also posed a significant challenge. As a small funding agency without a dedicated policy group, implementing reforms required staff to take on additional responsibilities beyond their primary roles.

5. Initial results and expected impact

a. Initial results

One of the most noticeable early effects of FNR's research assessment reforms has been a **shift in the way people talk about research evaluation**. While there may not yet be concrete data, there is clear evidence of a **changing vocabulary** within discussions, both in **review panels and broader research conversations**. Mentions of metrics, impact factors, and journal names have become less frequent, making way for discussions that focus more on mentorship, achievements, societal impact, and the actual outputs of research. This change in language reflects a **gradual cultural shift**—as people talk about different things, they also begin to **think differently** about what constitutes research excellence.

In review panels, this shift is also becoming visible. For example, when discussing applications, panel members increasingly **highlight a broader range of contributions**. A researcher's achievements are now considered **valuable beyond just high-impact publications**. The **narrative CV format** has played a key role in driving this shift, helping build **momentum for a more holistic assessment approach**.

That said, cultural change happens **slowly and at different speeds across different levels** of the research ecosystem. While conversations at the review panel level are slightly evolving, introducing these changes at higher governance levels require strong, long-term evidence before endorsing new approaches. However, change can be supported by champions for reform across all generations, who can play a crucial role in normalizing new assessment practices and ensuring continued progress.

Overall, the response to FNR's reforms has been **largely positive**, and the **momentum behind the research assessment reform movement is growing**. By implementing and continuously refining new approaches, FNR is not only shaping research culture within Luxembourg but also contributing to broader shifts in research assessment internationally.

b. Impact

And then maybe even most importantly, is that research as a career becomes attractive and stays attractive for people to come to and stay. And not just researchers, but like anybody who wants to work in research, whether they are technicians or data analysts or management or finance people or anybody else. So that research is seen as valuable because good stuff comes out of it, and within it people are treated correctly. This way it becomes a good culture to work in and to believe in.

FNR's ultimate goal is to **change research culture for the better**, ensuring that a more diverse range of research roles and contributions are recognized and funded. Beyond researchers, this includes key roles such as technicians, data analysts, and research managers, making research an **attractive and sustainable career path** for a wider community. A positive research culture means people see the value of research not just in its outcomes, but in how it treats those who contribute to it.

At the same time, these reforms are part of a broader **global shift** in research assessment. While funders once worked independently, initiatives like CoARA and DORA have fostered stronger international collaboration. There is now a growing effort to align policies, build trust, and create a more connected research ecosystem at the European and global levels. By working together, funders and institutions can ensure that research culture evolves in a way that benefits both individuals and the scientific community as a whole.

6. Lessons learned

Communicate! Communicate! Communicate!

One of the most critical lessons from FNR's experience in research assessment reform is that **open communication and dialogue with the research community are essential**. Reforms can only be successful if they are developed with, rather than imposed on, the people they affect. Actively seeking feedback at all stages and demonstrating that this input is genuinely considered fosters trust and engagement. Without meaningful conversations and transparency, even the most well-intentioned reforms risk being met with resistance or skepticism.

Another key takeaway is the importance of **acknowledging existing challenges rather than avoiding them**. Issues such as chronic underfunding or structural barriers cannot always be resolved immediately, but ignoring them can undermine reform efforts. Being upfront about these realities—while keeping the focus on the specific changes being implemented—helps build

credibility and ensures that researchers see reform as part of a broader effort to improve the research system rather than an isolated initiative.

FNR has also learned that **certain areas of the research ecosystem, such as postdoctoral careers, require greater attention**. The development of the Postdoc Quality Framework is an important step toward making postdoc positions more attractive and sustainable, addressing a gap that exists not only in Luxembourg but in many other research systems. Similarly, initiatives like PEP-CV, which also encourages recognition for mentorship and broader research contributions, highlight the need for new, practical tools that go beyond traditional assessment measures.

Finally, the reform process has underscored the **value of international collaboration**. Meaningful change cannot happen in isolation, and working together—whether through Science Europe, CoARA, or bilateral exchanges—strengthens reform efforts across borders. Moving forward, the focus should be on practical initiatives rather than just policy documents and agreements. Experimentation, piloting new assessment models, and testing different approaches in real-world contexts will be key to ensuring that research assessment continues to evolve in a way that is both effective and sustainable.

7. Conclusions and plans for the future

FNR's research assessment reforms have been successful in driving positive change, but meaningful transformation takes time. Beyond policy adjustments, shifting research culture requires allowing new practices to take hold, giving researchers and institutions space to adapt. Rushing change too quickly can be counterproductive, making it equally important to take a step back, reflect, and assess the impact of these reforms before pushing forward with further changes.

Moving ahead, FNR will continue to strengthen key initiatives. The Postdoc Quality Framework will help make postdoctoral careers more sustainable and attractive, while PEP-CV will be further developed, including integration with ORCID to help with the recognition of mentorship.

Furthermore, reducing the administrative burden will continue to be a critical focus—ensuring that as reforms evolve, they do not create unnecessary complexity but instead make research assessment more efficient.

Information about the interview

Date: 03.09.2024

FNR representative: Sean Sapcariu, Programme Manager

3.2. The case of UNL Netherlands: Making room for everyone's talent

1. About UNL

Universities of the Netherlands (UNL) represents Dutch universities and works to support high-quality academic education and research. Universities play an essential role in addressing important scientific and societal questions, contributing to a strong knowledge society. In this context, UNL facilitates collaboration among universities, formulates joint ambitions for education and research, and advocates for the necessary conditions to achieve these goals. It provides data and insights on the university sector, supports knowledge exchange, and engages in discussions with policymakers. By making universities' ambitions and contributions more visible, UNL helps strengthen the sector's position at both national and international levels.

More information: <https://www.universiteitenvannederland.nl/en>

2. Motivation for Reform/ Change

SEP more and more evolved into a tool for dialogue on quality. Because it does not relate to finances, it gives much more room for dialogue and to also be a little vulnerable as a research unit when doing such an assessment. I think it really helps to speak with each other about research quality and to not relate this to funding.

The reform of research assessment in the Netherlands was initially driven by the country's **ambitious Open Science agenda**, which has been a priority since 2013. Open Science requires changes in how research is evaluated, encouraging open access publishing, data and software sharing, and citizen science initiatives. To support this transition, the [Recognition & Rewards](#) programme was introduced alongside the **Strategy Evaluation Protocol (SEP) 2021-2027**, aiming to shift the focus from traditional research metrics and academic careers to a broader evaluation of academic contributions and more diversity in academic career paths.

A key reason for the reform was the **mismatch between what is valued in academia and what is rewarded**. While academic work includes education, research, impact, leadership, and patient care, evaluation systems have historically focused on a narrow set of research output indicators—such as journal impact factors and publication counts.

Another key motivation was the [Science in Transition](#) debate, which highlighted concerns about the **misuse of metrics** in research assessment, similar to discussions that led to the UK's [Metric Tide](#). This movement emphasized the need to move away from reliance on journal impact factors and publication counts and toward a system that values teaching, impact, and leadership. Additionally, challenges in academic culture, such as **low funding success rates and heavy**

reliance on external funding for career progression, reinforced the need for a more balanced and supportive evaluation system.

3. Description of the reform/ changes introduced

We saw there is a mismatch between what we deem important in academic work and what we reward academic staff for.

The proposed changes under the "Room for Everyone's Talent" position paper are structured around five main ambitions:

a. Diversification and Vitalization of Career Paths

- The reform enables greater variety in career paths, allowing academics to develop expertise in research, education, impact, leadership, and patient care.
- Academic careers are more flexible, with opportunities to shift focus over time rather than following a single, rigid trajectory.
- Skills and experiences from outside academia are recognized as valuable contributions to an academic career.

b. Finding a Balance Between the Individual and the Collective

- Academic assessment moves beyond individual achievements to also recognize team contributions at the department, faculty, and institutional levels.
- Institutions foster a more inclusive work culture, recognizing that collaborative efforts are key to addressing complex academic and societal challenges.
- The reform does not diminish the importance of disciplinary expertise but ensures that interdisciplinary and collective contributions are equally valued.

c. Focus on Quality

- The emphasis on quantitative metrics, such as journal impact factors and publication counts, is reduced in favor of a broader, more qualitative approach.
- The reform introduces holistic evaluations that assess academic quality based on scientific integrity, creativity, and contributions to science, academia, and society.
- The Strategy Evaluation Protocol (SEP) 2021-2027 integrates these principles by encouraging assessment committees to evaluate a wider range of academic outputs.

d. Stimulating Open Science

- Open Science is at the core of the reform, ensuring that research is more accessible and transparent.

- Academics are encouraged to engage in activities such as open access publishing, data and software sharing, and citizen science initiatives.
- Institutions ensure that efforts toward Open Science are formally recognized in career progression and research evaluations.

e. Encouraging Academic Leadership

- Leadership is recognized as a key competency for academics at all career stages, from early-career researchers mentoring students to senior faculty leading departments.
- Institutions provide leadership training programs and structured career pathways that integrate leadership development.
- Strong academic leadership is seen as essential for creating an inclusive and supportive work environment and ensuring the success of the reform.

Guiding principles



Culture change is a **fundamental change of beliefs**; not just change in rules of the game



Changing culture is difficult and **takes a long time**



Broad dialogue in academia is needed: we listen to concerns, questions & dilemmas from academic community



Sharing good practices and experimenting will initiate desired movement



Balance: giving room for ideas (**diverging**) and bringing together good practices (**converging**)



Importance of **good leadership in academia** to make change work

..... RECOGNITION & REWARDS

In order to reach these ambitions, the **Recognition & Rewards** programme is based on six key principles that shape its approach and implementation:

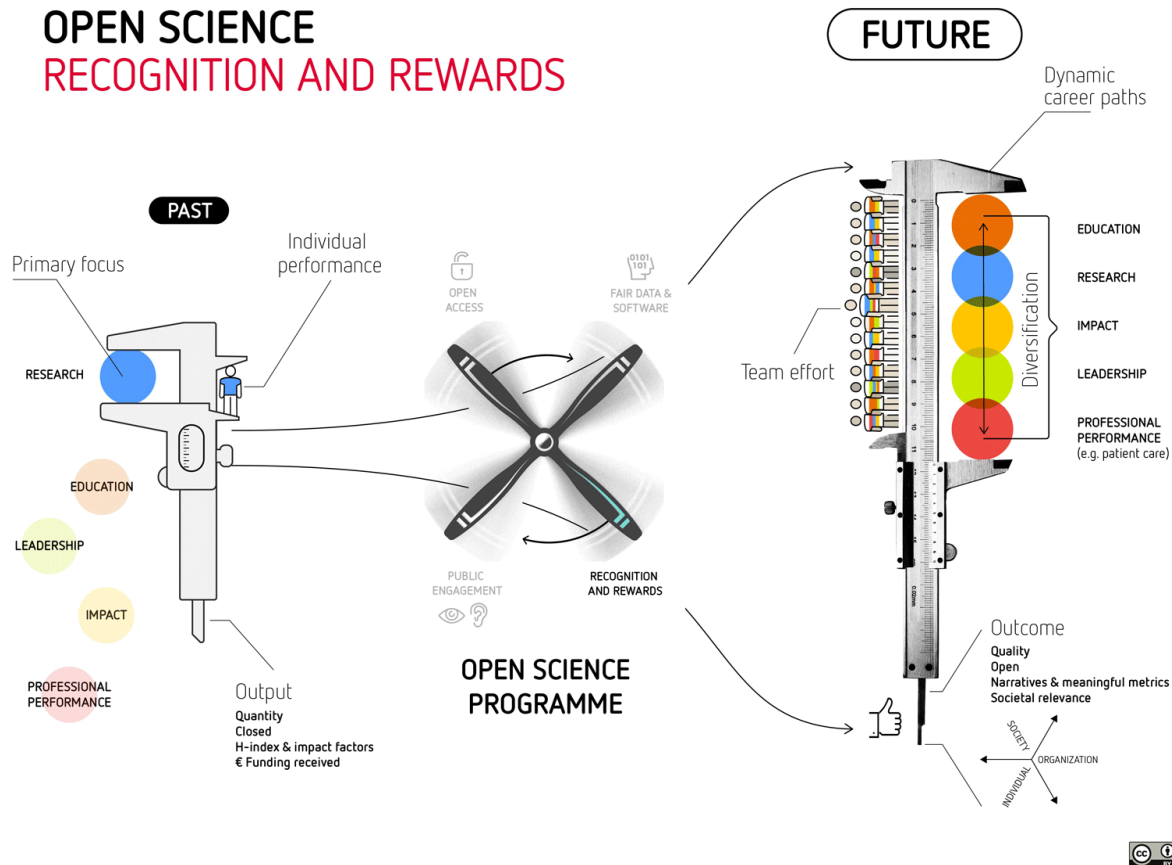
- *Culture change is a fundamental change of beliefs; not just change in rules of the game*
- *Broad dialogue in academia is needed: we listen to concerns, questions & dilemmas from academic community*
- *Balance: giving room for ideas (diverging) and bringing together good practices (converging)*
- *Changing culture is difficult and takes a long time*
- *Sharing good practices and experimenting will initiate desired movement*
- *importance of good leadership in academia to make change work*

Moreover, the programme was designed to address a long-standing mismatch between what is valued in academic work and what is actually rewarded. Traditionally, evaluation criteria have focused narrowly on research outputs, overlooking other vital academic contributions. A widely

shared visualization from Utrecht University illustrates this issue: while academia involves education, research, impact, leadership, and patient care, existing assessment systems primarily measure only research output through publications and citation metrics. The reform seeks to introduce a more advanced and inclusive assessment framework that recognizes a wider range of outputs, including exhibitions, software, and public engagement.



OPEN SCIENCE RECOGNITION AND REWARDS



Infographic 1: Recognition and rewards. Utrecht University. <https://www.uu.nl/en/news/open-science-track-recognition-and-rewards-presents-infographic>

Additionally, the Strategy Evaluation Protocol (SEP) 2021-2027 reflects key elements of the Recognition & Rewards reform, ensuring that evaluation committees take a broader view of research quality. While SEP was originally a benchmarking tool, it has now evolved into a framework for structured dialogue about research quality rather than a mechanism for ranking institutions. Moreover, the SEP assessment is not linked to funding allocation, preserving its role as a formative tool for guiding institutional development.

Importantly, the reform is not a top-down directive but a collaborative effort across universities, research institutes, and funding organizations. Institutions have the flexibility to develop their own assessment criteria and protocols, with national platforms such as the Recognition & Rewards

Festival fostering knowledge exchange and discussions. This ensures that changes are tailored to institutional needs while maintaining a coherent direction across the research sector.

By embedding these principles and changes, the Recognition & Rewards programme is fostering a long-term cultural shift in academic assessment, ensuring that academic work is evaluated in a way that reflects its full diversity, impact, and societal relevance.

4. Implementation process

a. Stakeholder involvement

We really try to be open, including open to concerns. This is one of our strategies that we take very seriously - to stay open for dialogue and invite people who are more critical.

The development of the **Strategy Evaluation Protocol (SEP) 2021-2027** and the **Recognition & Rewards** reform was shaped through extensive collaboration among key academic institutions in the Netherlands. While these two initiatives followed different processes, both engaged universities, research institutes, and funders in shaping new approaches to research assessment.

For the **SEP**, the process began with a review of the previous version, analyzing how it had been used and identifying areas for improvement. A committee was formed to lead this effort, consulting with deans, university leaders, and research institutions. The draft was then opened for feedback from all institutions using the SEP, leading to further refinements before a formal approval process by institutional boards. The Ministry of Education played an important role in the process also.

The development of **Room for Everyone's Talent**, one of the main elements of the Recognition & Rewards programme, initially began within Universities of the Netherlands (UNL) but soon expanded by involving research institutes (including from NWO and KNAW), university medical centers, and funders. Initially, UNL drafted a proposal outlining key areas that require change. Recognizing the need for broad institutional involvement, multiple meetings were held with academic leaders and research organizations, leading to an expanded position paper endorsed also by rectors and institutional boards. The process was fast-paced, with a clear deadline set for its formal launch at an international meeting in November 2019.

Both documents emphasize ongoing dialogue and adaptation. The Recognition & Rewards Festival and institutional committees continue to provide platforms for sharing best practices and refining implementation. This approach ensures that the changes are not imposed from the top down but are shaped collaboratively, with universities and research institutions taking the lead in adapting research assessment to better reflect the full breadth of academic contributions.

b. Challenges encountered and strategies for overcoming them

During the implementation of the changes to the current recognition and rewards systems, several challenges have been encountered, including resistance to change, concerns from early career academics, and the impact of budget cuts on research funding.

One of the primary challenges has been resistance to change, particularly from academics who are concerned about the transition away from traditional assessment models. To address this, the institution has adopted an open and communicative approach. They have remained receptive to concerns, particularly from critical voices, and have made efforts to ensure dialogue remains open. Academics who raised concerns were encouraged to share their views, allowing the institution to consider and address their worries. This strategy has helped create a more inclusive and collaborative environment for implementing changes.

Another encountered challenge has been engaging early career academics, such as PhD students and postdocs, who are often uncertain about how to navigate the evolving research assessment landscape. While senior academics have become more familiar with the concepts underlying the Recognition and Rewards programme, younger researchers are still adjusting to the idea of moving beyond traditional quantitative metrics. The shift towards a more holistic approach, that takes into consideration a broader variety of research contributions, has raised questions about where early career researchers should focus their efforts. The aim for the future is to have an increased involvement from early career academics in such activities and encouraging institutions to engage them at the local level. And one action undertaken in this regard refers to including representatives from early career academic associations in the programme's Steering Board. However, the ongoing transition has made it difficult to provide clear, immediate answers, and there is an understanding that change will not happen overnight.

Lastly, budget cuts in the Netherlands have created an additional challenge, as reduced funding for universities threatens to impact research careers and the implementation of progressive initiatives. In this sense, there are concerns that budget cuts could lead to a return to traditional, quantitative-based assessment systems that favor individuals with the highest number of publications. To counter this, there is a need to advocate for continued support of progressive ideas within recognition and rewards, even amid financial constraints. The hope is that despite the economic challenges, institutions will prioritize the long-term goals of the new recognition system, ensuring that progress towards these changes remains steady.

5. Initial results and expected impact

a. Initial results

The ambitions of the programme are well supported and its effects can be seen in practice, including in policies, leadership, and the fact that the focus seems to be shifting more to quality. At the same time, there are big differences between subject areas. It is also noticeable that not all job categories have the same experiences, and that men have more positive experiences than women.

Recognition & Rewards Culture Barometer. First measurement report. 26 April 2024, p.33 ([link](#))

The initial response to the Recognition & Rewards programme has shown strong support for its ambitions, but its impact is still in the early stages. According to survey results from the Culture Barometer, in which approximately 12% of academics in the Netherlands participated, findings indicate that while researchers hope that changes will take effect, they do not yet fully see them in practice. However, those who have noticed changes generally view them as positive, which is an encouraging sign for the implementation process.

The transition has also raised several concerns, particularly among early-career academics who are unsure how the new system will affect their career progression, especially in an international context. Some researchers worry about how their CVs and track records will be evaluated if they pursue academic positions in countries that still rely on traditional metrics. Additionally, there is skepticism about whether the reform will be fully realized, with some fearing that the changes may not be consistently implemented across institutions.

Despite these concerns, progress is being made as *Room for Everyone's Talent* is now being operationalized through various initiatives at the university level. The gradual nature of this transformation means that visible changes will take time, but the strong initial support indicates that the academic community is engaged in the process.

b. Impact

We aim for a healthy and inspiring environment for all our academic staff, in which all talents are valued, such as teaching, research, impact, patient care and good leadership in academia. (...) And I think that for SEP we're striving for good quality research and that's the main reason why we have such an assessment protocol.

The long-term ambition of the Recognition & Rewards reform is to create a healthy and inspiring academic environment where all talents are valued. The reform envisions a system in which teaching, research, impact, patient care, and leadership are recognized as integral contributions to academia. By moving away from rigid assessment criteria and fostering a more inclusive approach, the reform aims to support a more diverse and balanced academic culture that enables researchers to develop their careers in different directions without being limited by traditional performance metrics.

For the Strategy Evaluation Protocol (SEP), the long-term goal remains ensuring high-quality research while broadening the perspective on what constitutes quality. SEP continues to evolve as a tool for assessing research performance in a way that encourages meaningful discussions on research quality rather than relying solely on quantitative indicators. The expectation is that this shift will lead to a more holistic and constructive evaluation process, reinforcing a research culture that prioritizes integrity, creativity, and societal impact alongside scientific excellence.

6. Lessons learned

Work together and form a coalition. I think that really helps.

One of the most important lessons from the Recognition & Rewards programmes has been the importance of collaboration. Forming a coalition of institutions and stakeholders has been essential in keeping momentum, even as leadership changes occur at different universities. The existence of a national program ensures continuity, so when key figures in the initiative transition to new roles, the broader effort remains intact and continues to progress.

Another key takeaway is that change cannot happen through policy documents alone. While developing position papers, protocols, and guidelines is an important step, real transformation requires continuous dialogue and active implementation. The focus should not only be on writing strong frameworks but also on ensuring that these frameworks are embedded in institutional practices.

Finally, an essential recommendation for other organizations considering similar reforms is to prioritize the sharing of good practices. The reform process should not end once a policy is finalized—it must remain a living process, where institutions actively exchange experiences, refine their approaches, and adapt to challenges. Ensuring that the changes are implemented with the same vision that guided their development is crucial to achieving long-term success.

7. Conclusions and plans for the future

The Recognition & Rewards programme has gained broad support across the Netherlands, with academics and institutions aligning with its ambitions. One of its key successes has been the implementation of new career tracks at several universities, providing more flexibility for academics to develop in areas beyond traditional research outputs. Another major achievement is the shift in how research is evaluated, particularly by funders, who have introduced evidence-based CVs in research grant applications. This marks a significant step toward more qualitative and holistic assessment practices.

Beyond national impact, the reform has also attracted international attention, with other countries looking to the Netherlands as an example. The initiative is further strengthened by international support, particularly through the CoARA, within which there is a Dutch National Chapter that cooperates closely with Recognition & Rewards. These global collaborations reinforce the momentum of change and provide legitimacy to the reform efforts.

Looking ahead, the reform follows the roadmap set by *Room for Everyone's Talent*, with ongoing initiatives planned through 2026. While some targets for 2024 are still in progress, the national program continues to evolve. The current funding structure, supported by universities, university medical centers, research institutes, and the Ministry of Education, is secured until December

2026. However, discussions are already underway to extend the initiative beyond 2026, ensuring that the Recognition & Rewards movement continues to shape academic culture and research assessment in the years to come.

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Information about the interview

Date: 14.10.2024

UNL representative: Kim Huijpen, Programme Manager for the Recognition & Rewards Programme

Reviewed in March 2025 by Stefan Penders, Policy Advisor Internationalisation, Recognition & Rewards Programme, UNL

3.3. The case of DFG Germany: A long-term commitment to qualitative research assessment

1. About DFG

The Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG, German Research Foundation) is Germany's central self-governing research funding organization, responsible for promoting research of the highest quality across all scientific disciplines. It supports knowledge-driven research at universities and non-university research institutions. In doing so, it strives to ensure that different types of project and different perspectives are represented. In general, the DFG plays a vital role in shaping the conditions and standards of academic research. It also advises state institutions and public organizations on research policy, supports international collaboration in research and provides funding to enhance the transfer of knowledge from research to society.

The DFG's mission is to ensure that science in Germany remains of the highest standard by providing funding for research projects, fostering competitive opportunities, and establishing rigorous review and evaluation processes. It is an association under private law, with its members comprising universities, research institutions, and scientific associations. In this context, the DFG promotes fair, science-led competition, supports early career researchers, and strives to contribute to the development of a modern and sustainable research culture, both in Germany and internationally.

More information: <https://www.dfg.de/en/about-us/about-the-dfg>

2. Motivation for Reform / Change

We have long made sure that our review is primarily qualitative. For example, we have limited the number of publications that applicants can list in their applications and CVs 16 years ago. More recently, we have made changes to how publications are handled, now asking applicants to not just list their publications, but to state explicitly how their previous works link up to the project which is applied for.

The DFG's decision to support the reform of research assessment practices was driven by a long-standing commitment to a fair and predominantly qualitative research evaluation process, long before the launch of CoARA initiative. As early as 1998, the DFG issued a **memorandum entitled “Safeguarding Good Scientific Practice”**, which recommended - among other things - that review processes should prioritize qualitative assessments over quantitative metrics. This recommendation was driven by the recognition that focusing on the content and ideas behind a research proposal, rather than on external metrics like publication counts and impact factors, would lead to better identification of high-quality research. Over the years, the DFG gradually introduced changes such as limiting the number of publications that applicants could list and encouraging reviewers to focus on qualitative aspects rather than numerical proxies for success.

The organization's ongoing commitment to evolving its practices, including its involvement in CoARA, reflects a desire to stay at the forefront of developments in research assessment and to motivate other organizations to also align their practices with a qualitative model of research assessment which recognizes diverse contributions to research.

By implementing its own reform steps, the DFG has ensured that review processes are centered on the substance and relevance of research, rather than on external factors that may not fully capture the quality of scientific work. This includes requiring applicants to not just list their publications but to explicitly explain how their previous work is connected to the project at hand. The DFG has also worked to ensure that its review boards, which consist of scientists elected from the academic community, are well-informed about these reforms. This ongoing process is aimed at maintaining alignment with evolving best practices and fostering a research culture that values ideas and contributions over traditional, quantity-based measures of success.

3. Description of the reform/ changes introduced

The DFG has introduced several key adjustments in its research assessment process, aligning with the CoARA commitments while continuing to build on long-standing efforts to improve the quality of evaluations:

- **Hybrid CV Forms:** New CV templates were introduced, incorporating both optional narrative elements and traditional scientific contributions. These forms aim to provide a more comprehensive view of an applicant's contributions.
- **Two boxes for scientific contributions:**
 - One box is dedicated to standard peer-reviewed articles, as a traditional measure of scientific output.
 - The second box ("category B") is designed for non-traditional contributions, such as data sets, open-source software, or other scientific contributions that may not fall under the conventional journal publication model. This ensures that a wider variety of scientific contributions are recognized in the evaluation process.
- **Explanation of Relevance:** Applicants are now required to explain how their previous work is relevant to the research proposal they are submitting. This change ensures that applicants cannot simply list prestigious publications without linking them to the new project. Also, this measure is designed to shift the focus from reputational metrics to the content and ideas behind the research, encouraging a more qualitative assessment.

The guiding principles behind these adjustments align with the first two commitments of CoARA, which focus on recognizing a diversity of contributions in research, and ensuring that the review process is as qualitative as possible.

4. Implementation process

a. Stakeholder involvement

Every four years, we have elections in which around 150 000 people from the research communities can vote and have their representatives included in our review boards. Researchers also comprise the majority in our decision-making boards. Therefore, scientists are part of the DFG - scientists drive the DFG's decisions. This way, stakeholder involvement is always secured by how we work.

The implementation process of the DFG's research assessment reforms involved broad stakeholder engagement, deeply embedded in the structure of the organization. The DFG is unique compared to many other research funders in that it is not a ministry or authority, but an organization “owned” by the scientific community. The members of DFG's review boards are members of the scientific communities, elected by these communities every four years. Researchers, nominated by the DFG's member organisations, also form the majority in all its decision making boards. This means that decision-making within the DFG is always driven by the academic sector and thus supported by the research community.

Stakeholder involvement is thus inherently integrated into the DFG's operations. Furthermore, the DFG regularly consults with various stakeholders, including universities and research institutions, which are its member organizations. Additionally, the DFG works closely with the [Alliance of Science Organizations](#) in Germany, collaborating with them from the outset of the reform process. This ongoing collaboration ensures that the views and needs of the scientific community are consistently considered. The DFG's structure ensures that researchers are always involved in the decision-making process, making stakeholder involvement a key feature of its approach to any desired change.

b. Challenges encountered and strategies for overcoming them

There were no significant challenges to the implementation of its research assessment reform steps, but the DFG did note some **resistance to change and a degree of cultural inertia in some parts of the research communities**. In part, this is due to the fact that quantitative metrics of research performance have been relatively prevalent in some disciplinary communities. Although the hesitation to embrace a fully qualitative review mode has decreased over time, there are still occasional instances where quantitative information is conveyed in reviews. The DFG sees its role in carefully contextualizing such data, while continuing to emphasize the value of qualitative assessments, and hence of the reform of research assessment culture.

The DFG also notes a worry **about a potential dilution of the commitment to excellence in research** in some quarters of the academic scene. Some were concerned that by emphasizing diversity, equity, and inclusion, the focus would shift away from the primary goal of identifying and funding excellent research. These concerns are not widespread within the DFG, but have

surfaced in discussions with other players in the research sector. The DFG has addressed these concerns by maintaining that throughout the CoARA, excellence in research is the central focus of research assessment, and that diversity considerations, for example in the *Agreement on Reforming Research Assessment*, are intended to ensure that all scientifically valuable contributions to research are adequately recognized in research assessment, not at all to replace or detract from the search for scientific excellence.

Additionally, the DFG notes the danger of **increasing administrative burdens on researchers**. The need to consider the ecological sustainability of projects and dual-use concerns in international collaborations has raised concerns about the additional layers of complexity for applicants and reviewers. While these changes are seen as necessary, some researchers may perceive them as adding more "tick boxes" to the application process. However, these measures are separate from the adjustments introduced for research assessment purposes and the CoARA commitments, which focus more on recognizing diverse contributions and careers in science.

5. Initial results and expected impact

a. Initial results

The initial results of the DFG's research assessment developments are still emerging, as the changes were only recently implemented and a full evaluation is not expected for another two years. However, early indications suggest that the reforms are perceived positively. Reviewers have generally responded well to the introduced changes, though it is too soon to draw definitive conclusions.

One notable outcome is that a good percentage of applicants are making effective use of the optional narrative fields, and of the box for non-traditional types of scientific contribution, which allows them to list contributions such as data sets, open-source software, and other scientific outputs that do not fall under traditional peer-reviewed articles. This indicates that the reforms are helping to broaden the scope of what is recognized as valuable research output. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the new CV forms and the measures to support a predominantly qualitative review process are gaining acceptance within the academic community, although it is still early in the implementation phase.

b. Impact

In terms of long-term impact, the DFG continually aims to improve its ability to identify and fund truly excellent research. While the organization does not focus on societal goals, the expectation is that by recognizing a broader range of research contributions, including non-traditional outputs, it will be better equipped to support innovative and high-quality research projects. Something similar is true with respect to the diversity in the applicant pool (for instance diversity of gender): a large and diverse applicant pool is an important factor in a funder's ability to fund excellent projects. In general, the DFG emphasizes that its primary goal is to foster excellence in research, with diversity and equity being important but subservient to this overarching objective. The hoped-

for impact of its continuing improvements is a more nuanced and comprehensive approach to research assessment that prioritizes the quality of research ideas and contributions.

6. Lessons learned

I think it's similar to cities that have banned cars in their city center. In the beginning everybody was against it. But once you have it, people don't want to go back to the status quo ante. Similarly, once qualitative assessment becomes the norm, people are not so much tempted to look at numbers. Then there is no more sort of pressure or activity needed because the system is stable, and everyone likes it.

The DFG's experience with developing its research assessment practices has led to several key lessons learned that can offer valuable insights to other organizations considering similar changes:

- **Cultural shifts take time:** Changing the academic publication culture is a slow process. Despite efforts, changing the entrenched publication culture remains challenging, as sometimes researchers can be resistant to shifting from traditional publishing models that involve targeting mainly the well known reputable journals for publishing and that sometimes prioritize speed over care, and quantity over depth. This inertia in the system should be considered when planning reforms, as the process of change will likely be gradual.
- **Stability leads to acceptance:** Once qualitative review becomes the norm, the pressure to revert to traditional, quantitative methods diminishes. The DFG's experience suggests that once a system is established and widely accepted, the need for further advocacy decreases. This stability helps the system function effectively over time. Other organizations should be patient and focus on ensuring the stability of the reforms once implemented, as this will likely lead to greater acceptance in the long run.
- **Global challenges in changing publication culture:** The DFG has also learned that while local reforms are essential, global challenges remain. The slow pace of change in publication culture requires much more international collaboration and resources. In this case, significant investment in alternative publication models, such as diamond open access, is needed. The DFG strongly advocates for more public funding for such initiatives, as seen in its support for the [Science Europe Diamond Open Access plan](#) and the [ORE \(Open Research Europe\)](#) project. Organizations should therefore consider supporting or collaborating on global initiatives that promote alternative publication models.

7. Conclusions and plans for the future

The DFG's reform process has seen significant successes, particularly in continuing to ensure that qualitative review is the standard approach within its research assessment system. Research assessment in the DFG continues to be firmly based on evaluating the content and ideas of research proposals rather than relying on quantitative metrics. The more recent adjustments, such as the introduction of new CV forms and the recognition of non-traditional publications, are still too early to fully assess, but they are expected to bring positive benefits in the long run.

Looking to the future, the DFG plans to continue its alignment with evolving best practices and expand on the progress already made. In doing so, the DFG also looks beyond research assessment, to areas like infrastructure for open science, including diamond open access publishing, as well as infrastructure for data and software development. Improvements in these areas are essential for ensuring that the systems in place can support the continued evolution of research culture, of which research assessment is only a part. Only if researchers can submit their scientific work to well-funded, easily accessible and widely accepted platforms which go beyond traditional journals can the evolution of research culture become sustainable. The DFG is committed to advancing initiatives in these areas.

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Information about the interview

Date: 18.10.2024

DFG representative: Matthias Kiesselbach, Director in the Division "Research Culture"

3.4. The case of the European Research Council: Advancing research assessment with a strong focus on scientific excellence

1. About ERC

The European Research Council (ERC), established by the European Union in 2007, is the premier European funding organization dedicated to supporting excellent frontier research. It provides competitive funding to creative researchers of any nationality and career stage, enabling them to pursue groundbreaking projects across all scientific disciplines in Europe.

The ERC operates under the Horizon Europe framework program and it follows a bottom-up approach to funding, allowing researchers to propose projects on any topic without predefined thematic priorities. Its sole evaluation criterion is scientific excellence, assessed in two key components: the excellence of the principal investigator and the excellence of the research project. Unlike some other funding bodies, the ERC does not evaluate proposals based on socioeconomic impact or other external considerations, ensuring a main focus on scientific inquiry.

More information: <https://erc.europa.eu/about-erc/erc-glance>

2. Motivation for Reform/ Change

The ERC's decision to reform its research assessment system was driven by **both external and internal considerations**. Externally, the European Commission's efforts to establish a 'coalition of the willing' and the subsequent creation of the Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment (CoARA) reflected a growing movement to improve research evaluation practices. The ERC Scientific Council engaged in these discussions and shared concerns about the limitations of traditional assessment methods, particularly their reliance on narrow indicators that might not fully capture research quality and impact.

Internally, the ERC has always maintained a **process of continuous self-evaluation**, gathering feedback from applicants and panel members to refine its procedures. The Scientific Council identified specific concerns regarding the assessment of young researchers and career trajectories, recognizing that improvements were needed to ensure a better balanced and comprehensive evaluation of both applicants and their research projects. A structured review process was undertaken to define key evaluation characteristics, methods for assessing them, and the appropriate balance between different assessment criteria.

3. Description of the reform/ changes introduced

The ERC implemented a set of significant changes starting with the 2024 calls, with the primary objective of enhancing the fairness, transparency, and effectiveness of research assessment.

These reforms focus on emphasizing the qualitative evaluation of projects while ensuring that applicants' track records are assessed in a broader and more holistic manner.

The key changes introduced fall into four main categories:

1. Broad assessment of the applicant (PI):

- The predefined profiles for applicants were removed to allow for greater flexibility in career trajectories.
- The CV and track record were merged into a single document, limited to four pages, with an optional template.
- The CV now consists of three structured sections:
 - Personal details - information concerning education and key qualifications of the applicant, current and previous positions held;
 - Research achievements and peer recognition
 1. Research achievements (limited to 10 entries) - where applicants can list any relevant research outputs (as there are no specific indications intentionally on the type of outputs that can be provided), together with brief narratives about how these have advanced the field and demonstrated their ability to successfully execute the proposed project.
 2. Peer recognition - Selected examples of significant peer recognition (e.g., prizes, awards).
 - Additional information - A new section for noteworthy contributions to the research community was introduced, providing evaluators with additional context (e.g., career breaks, diverse career paths). However, this section is not directly evaluated.

2. Qualitative assessment of applicants:

- The numerical scoring system (1-5 scale) used for applicants in individual reviews was replaced with qualitative labels: Outstanding, Excellent, Very Good, Good, and Non-Competitive.
- This change reduces the granularity of numerical rankings for PIs, ensuring that evaluators focus more on the research proposal itself rather than on overly specific rankings of the applicant.
- The numerical evaluation (1-5) remains for research projects, reinforcing the shift toward project-based assessment over applicant-based evaluation.

3. Refinements in the evaluation criteria for research proposals:

- The term "high-risk" was removed from evaluation criteria due to its ambiguity and was replaced with "ambition" to more accurately describe the expectation for ground-breaking projects.
- The requirement to assess whether a project develops new methodologies was removed. Instead, the focus is now on whether the methodology is appropriate for achieving the project's objectives, recognizing that innovative ideas do not always necessitate new methodologies.

4. Increased focus on the research proposal over PI track record

- A major component of the reform was adjusting the balance in evaluation to ensure that the research proposal itself is given more emphasis in the assessment process. While the PI's expertise remains important, panels are now explicitly instructed to focus more on the research project.
- This shift ensures that the ERC continues to fund high-quality, original, and ambitious research proposals, without placing excessive emphasis on the applicant's past achievements. The goal is to support the best ideas, regardless of the applicant's career stage or institutional background.

4. Implementation process

a. Stakeholder involvement

The implementation process involved an articulated approach, with constant monitoring, feedback, and stakeholder engagement throughout the change process.

A dedicated task force, composed of members of the ERC Scientific Council and supported by staff from the ERC Executive Agency (ERCEA), was tasked with assembling and analyzing background materials to prepare for discussions within the Scientific Council. All decisions were made by the Scientific Council, with deliberations informed by the work of the task force.

Stakeholder involvement included:

- **Ongoing feedback from evaluation panels:** Continuous monitoring and feedback were collected from evaluation panel members, ensuring that the voices of those directly involved in ERC assessments were considered throughout the change process.
- **Participation in the core working group on research assessment at European level:** Key members participated in the activities of the Commission's research assessment initiatives. Notably, representatives from the Open Science Working Group were involved in these activities, contributing to the overall discussions.
- **Analytical workshop:** A two-day analytical workshop was organized with participants from the ERC Scientific Council members, ERCEA staff, and 15 invited experts. These experts represented a variety of disciplines and career stages and came from different geographical backgrounds. The workshop aimed to gather input on the state of research assessment and explore new initiatives in the field. The workshop also included representatives from other organizations experimenting with different research assessment models.
- **Summary and internal discussions:** The input gathered from the workshop was compiled into a report that was discussed internally within the ERC, providing valuable insights to guide the reform process.

This inclusive and iterative process, with constant stakeholder input and participation, ensured that the change process was comprehensive and considered a wide range of perspectives.

b. Challenges encountered and strategies for overcoming them

During the implementation process, the ERC encountered several challenges, each requiring careful consideration and adaptation. One of the key difficulties was **ensuring that scientific excellence remained the sole criterion for selection** while also acknowledging the broader responsibilities that modern researchers often take on. Activities such as peer review and teaching were recognized as important but were not to be evaluated in the same way as scientific achievements. The solution was to allow applicants to list these activities in their CVs to provide context in the assessment of applicants' research achievements and peer recognition, but without having them evaluated, ensuring that the focus remained on their scientific work.

Another challenge arose with the introduction of narrative CVs, which sparked **concerns about potential biases**. Critics worried that the new format could favor native speakers or individuals more skilled in self-promotion. To address these concerns, the ERC limited the length of the narrative sections to prevent excessive elaboration and ensure fairness in the evaluation process. The effectiveness of this approach is still being assessed as the process unfolds.

Balancing flexibility with standardization was yet another challenge. While the new CV template allowed applicants to present their diverse research contributions, there were discussions about the risk of providing too much structure. Some worried that offering specific guidance for the narrative sections could inadvertently create expectations, making it difficult to capture the full scope of an applicant's achievements without imposing undue constraints. The ERC carefully navigated this by ensuring that the narrative sections maintained flexibility while still offering enough structure to ensure a consistent evaluation. These challenges were addressed through ongoing dialogue, thoughtful adjustments, and a commitment to maintaining the focus on scientific excellence as the guiding principle.

5. Initial results and expected impact

a. Initial results

The feedback received following the implementation of the changes has been largely positive, though it remains early to draw definitive conclusions. While it is too soon to fully assess the impact, the initial responses have been encouraging. Specifically, the introduction of the narrative CV did not provoke any pushbacks. Some minor concerns were raised regarding potential biases in the narrative format, but these remain preliminary at this stage. At this point, the feedback is still limited, and the ERC plans to conduct a more thorough assessment once all 2024 calls are completed.

b. Impact

While it is still early to assess the long-term impact of the changes, the primary goal of the reforms is to improve the evaluation process and ensure that funding is allocated to excellent research. By implementing these changes, the ERC aims to enhance the quality of the evaluation, thereby fostering an environment where outstanding research can be recognized and supported.

6. Lessons learned

One of the key lessons the ERC has learned during this reform process is the importance of structured consultations with all stakeholders involved—reviewers, panel members, and others. These consultations are invaluable, as they provide different perspectives and allow the organization to continuously improve. The ERC has found that constant self-reflection on its practices is essential; it's crucial not to assume that existing methods are perfect, but to always question whether they are still appropriate and if there is room for improvement.

Another important takeaway is the need to learn from experience. There are no theoretical models that can dictate exactly how reforms should be implemented. Each experience provides insights into what works and what doesn't, and it's important to adapt and learn along the way. Additionally, transferring practices from one organization or context to another does not always work. Each organization has its own specifics that must be considered when applying changes.

The ERC's experience also highlighted that reforming funding selection processes is distinct from reforming career assessment, and the two should be treated differently. The organization's focus remains on funding based solely on scientific excellence, a principle that should be preserved and emphasized.

Advice for other organizations

For other organizations considering similar reforms, the ERC advises focusing on consultations with relevant stakeholders and being open to their feedback. Continuous self-reflection and learning from experience are essential, as there is no one-size-fits-all approach to reform. It's important to recognize the uniqueness of each organization and the contexts in which they operate. Lastly, reforms should be approached with care, considering both the broader goals and the specificities of the organization and the funding mechanisms involved.

7. Conclusions and plans for the future

The ERC continuously monitors its practices and plans to assess the recent changes over time. While the initial reactions from panels and applicants have been positive, it is still too early to fully evaluate the long-term impact. This ongoing monitoring process allows the ERC to stay attuned to any issues or potential areas for improvement.

In the future, maintaining a continuous feedback loop with applicants and panel members can ensure that reforms remain responsive and adaptable. While no immediate changes may be anticipated in the short term, long-term adjustments could be considered based on insights gathered through monitoring and feedback. It is crucial to avoid rushing changes and instead focus on gradual, sustainable improvements to the research assessment process.

Ultimately, refining practices and remaining open to new ideas that emerge from feedback helps ensure that reforms are part of a broader, long-term effort to enhance research funding and assessment.

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Information about the interview

Date: 11.03.2025

ERC representatives participating:

- Elena-Simona Toma, Policy Analyst
- Anna Pelagotti, Policy Expert

4. Conclusions & lessons learned

The examples presented in this study highlight a variety of approaches to research assessment reform/ change processes across different institutional and national contexts. Despite these differences, several common insights emerge.

First, research assessment reform is clearly a **long-term and evolving process**. Whether implemented as part of broader strategic programmes or through targeted initiatives, these reforms require time, continuity, and ongoing commitment. Many initiatives are being rolled out gradually, often based on multi-year plans with built-in mechanisms for review, adaptation, and stakeholder feedback. Sustained funding and institutional support are key to maintaining momentum and ensuring long-term impact.

Second, **the cultural dimension of change is essential**. Shifting how research and researchers are evaluated involves rethinking long-standing practices and beliefs, particularly around publication norms and the use of quantitative indicators. These cultural shifts tend to face initial resistance, but once new approaches—such as more qualitative, narrative-based evaluation—are accepted, they can become stable and self-sustaining. Patience and careful implementation are therefore critical.

A recurring theme across all cases is the **importance of stakeholder engagement**. Meaningful and transparent consultation with researchers, reviewers, and institutional representatives helps build trust and ensures that reforms are aligned with the realities of the research system. Inclusive processes also allow organizations to respond to feedback, refine tools, and improve implementation strategies over time.

It also became evident that **acknowledging and addressing structural challenges** within the research system—such as underfunding, administrative burden, or gaps in support for specific groups like early-career researchers—is vital for the credibility and success of any reform. Avoiding these issues can weaken support and impact; addressing them openly fosters a more constructive and credible reform process.

In parallel, reforming research assessment also opens the door to rethinking broader systemic issues, such as the control and dissemination of scientific knowledge. A shared aspiration among many actors is to return ownership of research outputs—including publications and data—to the academic community, reducing dependence on commercial publishing models.

At the same time, the experiences reviewed here confirm that **there is no universal model** for research assessment reform. Each organization must tailor its approach to its specific mission, governance structure, and cultural context. Nonetheless, there is great value in learning from others, sharing experiences, and identifying elements that can be adapted or translated across different systems.

Finally, an important distinction was noted between **assessing research for funding purposes and assessing researchers for career progression**. While related, these two areas require different tools and guiding principles. Reforms in both areas should be sensitive to their specific aims while maintaining core values such as fairness, transparency, and scientific quality.

In conclusion, **successful research assessment reform** depends on **collaborative processes, open dialogue, and a willingness to learn and adapt**. It is an ongoing journey that combines experimentation, reflection, and sustained commitment.

Annex 1. Interview guide

Interview guide – Best practices for Research Assessment Reform // Recognition & support of diverse research careers

Respondent's name:

Respondent's job title/position:

Organization:

Introduction to the organization

Please provide a brief description of your institution/ organization, including information about its role, mission and potential areas of research focus (for research performing organizations):

Motivation for reform/ change

What are the reasons behind your organization's decision to reform its research assessment system?

Description of the reform/ changes introduced

*What are the key changes implemented? Please provide details about the specific reforms/ changes introduced, and their main elements.
What are the guiding principles behind the reform? What are the objectives pursued through the*

implemented changes? What did your organization aim to achieve through these changes?

Implementation process

– Stakeholder involvement

Were any specific stakeholders involved in the reform process? Please highlight any consultation, workshops or other stakeholder involvement processes conducted.

– Challenges encountered & strategies for overcoming them

*What challenges has your organization encountered during implementation? (e.g. resistance to change, resource constraints or any other types of difficulties encountered)
Explain how the institution addressed these challenges. Include information regarding specific strategies or actions taken for overcoming them and ensuring successful implementation.*

Initial results and expected impact

– Initial results

*What were the initial results observed after reform/ changes implementation? (e.g. changes in the behavior of researchers, improvements in the diversity of recognized contributions, certain shifts in the organization's research culture)
What type of feedback did you receive from researchers, reviewers or other stakeholders regarding the newly introduced changes? Please include both positive reactions, as well as any areas that need further consideration.*

– Impact

What potential long-term impact is expected as a result of the newly introduced reforms/ changes? (e.g. in relation to the organization's research output, research culture, reputation, alignment with broader academic or societal goals, and other)

Lessons learned

What are the key takeaways, the most important lessons your organization has learned from the reform process? (e.g. concerning the implementation process)

What pieces of advice or recommendations would you give to other organizations considering similar reforms/ changes? What can they learn from your case? Which elements are essential? Which pitfalls should they avoid?

Conclusions & plans for the future

Please, summarize the successes of the reform process in the case of your organization, reinforcing how these changes have positively impacted research assessment.

What are the future plans within your organization when it comes to research assessment?

References and supporting materials

*References to key documents, guidelines or publications that informed the reform process
Supplementary information - please provide the links to any relevant additional materials such as sample narrative CVs, guidelines for reviewers, information packages, feedback reports from stakeholders, templates used for assessment etc.*