

# COARA ACTION PLAN

## LUDWIG BOLTZMANN GESELLSCHAFT



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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Ludwig Boltzmann Gesellschaft (LBG) is committed to enhancing the quality and impact of research, *inter alia* through the implementation of the principles of the Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment (CoARA). This action plan outlines our approach to integrating the CoARA commitments in our main research assessment activities, namely (i) the regular evaluations of existing Ludwig Boltzmann Institutes (LBIs) by independent experts on the basis of research performance indicators, (ii) the establishment of new LBIs through a two-stage selection process and (iii) the implementation of the funding programme Clinical Research Groups (CRGs). In section 2 this document provides an overview of how the 10 CoARA principles have been implemented in these activities, including a self-assessment with recommendations. In section 3 we provide an overview of related LBG initiatives, such as the Ethics and Diversity Hub as well as our LExA leadership award. Section 4 summarises our activities so far and outlines next steps.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 ABOUT THE LUDWIG BOLTZMANN GESELLSCHAFT

The Ludwig Boltzmann Gesellschaft (LBG) is a publicly financed non-university research organisation with thematic foci on medicine, life sciences and social sciences. Together with academic and other partners, we operate the Ludwig Boltzmann Institutes (LBI)<sup>1</sup> at various locations in Austria. Created after strict selection processes, these institutes initiate new research topics, react flexibly to current social and scientific developments, and conduct interdisciplinary pioneering research. In addition, a new funding programme has been launched: the LBG Clinical Research Group (CRG) is Austria's first funding programme in the field of non-commercial, disease- and patient-oriented (translational), consortium-based clinical research.

### 1.2 THE LBG AND COARA

The Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment (CoARA) is an initiative aimed at reforming how research and researchers are assessed. This coalition was officially launched on December 1, 2022, following extensive stakeholder consultations and the publication of the Agreement on Reforming Research Assessment in July 2022. CoARA seeks to recognize diverse research outputs, practices, and activities that maximize research quality and impact as opposed to relying solely on quantitative indicators such as Journal Impact Factor or H-Index.

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://lbg.ac.at/forschung/?lang=en>

The coalition emphasizes the importance of qualitative judgment, with peer review at its core, supported by responsible use of quantitative indicators. The Agreement outlines ten commitments, setting a common direction for reform while respecting the autonomy of participating organizations. The coalition is composed of various stakeholders, including research funding and performing organizations, assessment authorities, learned societies, and researcher organizations.

At the time of writing (July 2024) 14 organisations in Austria have signed CoARA; global membership of CoARA stands at 760 organisations.<sup>1</sup> As a CoARA signatory, the LBG is committed to the principles of CoARA and has therefore 1) reformed its internal research assessment structure to incorporate a broader range of indicators and 2) initiated the Ethics & Diversity Hub (“Hub”), a new platform initiative dedicated to implementing Research Ethics and Integrity (REI) and Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) assessment, training and research.

In the context of the CoARA Agreement on Reforming Research Assessment, signatory organisations are invited to share with each other and with their community how their organisation has started the process of implementing the Core Commitments according to an action plan with defined milestones within one year of signing the Agreement. This document summarises the LBG’s activities in this regard.

## 2. IMPLEMENTATION OF COARA COMMITMENTS AT THE LBG

### 2.1. RESEARCH ASSESSMENT WITHIN THE LBG: OVERVIEW

The LBG conducts research assessment<sup>2</sup> primarily in the following contexts:

- a) The assessment of **research units**: in the context of evaluating existing Ludwig Boltzmann Institutes
- b) The assessment of **individual researchers and research teams**: in the context of setting up new Ludwig Boltzmann Institutes and setting up new clinical research groups (CRG<sup>3</sup>)

These activities are part of the performance agreement between the LBG and the relevant Austrian ministry (BMBWF). Therefore, the implementation of research assessment reform according to the CoARA commitments necessitates their integration into all these activities, which fall into the primary responsibility of the Center for Research Management & Funding (CeFF) within the LBG Head Office. CeFF is the LBG’s core research management unit and hosts a palette of research support activities

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://coara.eu/agreement/signatories/?category%5B0%5D=austria#signatories>

<sup>2</sup> See the definition of research assessment, as outlined in the declaration, page 2

<sup>3</sup> German: KFG

from grant management to research performance management, to ethics review and research assessment.

The assessment of research units at LBG follows a set of evaluation standards (indicators) capturing qualitative and quantitative evaluation criteria. The set of indicators currently stands at approximately 100 and includes measures on publication activity and grant acquisition, but also on DEI, career support provided to junior researchers, social and economic impact, open science, citizen and patient participation, knowledge transfer, REI, and public engagement. With this wide range of ways to measure research quality, LBG aims to assess, reward and incentivise high-quality, responsible and socially just research beyond citation counts and journal impact factors. The set of indicators is regularly reviewed and amended in order to fine-tune existing assessment criteria and develop new ones to capture under-valued dimensions of good research practice.

a) Assessment of research units:

- Evaluation of existing LBIs: LBIs are periodically evaluated by 3 independent international experts and 1 independent scientific quality assurance expert. The process includes an on-site visit. Experts have to prepare an overall evaluation report, for which the LBG provides a template based on its set of indicators.
- Other: Independent from their evaluation, the LBIs also have to prepare a multiannual research and development plan (until 2026/2029) for which LBG provides a template based on mainly qualitative indicators.

b) Assessment of individuals and teams.

- Selection of new LBIs: LBIs are established through a call for proposals according to the principle “people, not projects”. The call has a two-stage selection process consisting of a peer-review proposal and interview (“Hearing”) stage. Proposals undergo a pre-selection by an international external expert jury. The jury is provided with an evaluation template based on mainly qualitative indicators.
- CRG are set up through a two-stage call. A scientific expert commission shortlists proposals of high quality, which are invited to submit a full proposal. These are peer reviewed and applicants are invited for an interview (“hearing”) – together with the written review this forms the basis for a recommendation to fund (or not) each proposal.

## 2.2. COMMITMENT 1: DIVERSITY OF CONTRIBUTIONS

Commitment 1 broadens the recognition of the diverse practices, activities and careers in research, including diverse outputs beyond journal publications, including also peer review, training and mentoring, teaching, leadership and supervision, public engagement and policy impact. This commitment also includes the recognition and valorisation of diverse roles and careers in research.

Implementation at the LBG/LBI level:

Assessment of research units: in the context of the periodic evaluation of existing LBIs, the evaluation report (“results” section) includes not only a field for publications but a much broader range of research outcomes such as participatory research initiatives, outreach, open science, data management, 3<sup>rd</sup> party funding, research ethics and integrity, teaching, reviewing and consulting, and conference organisation.

Assessment of individual researchers and research teams: for new LBIs, applicants are asked to provide the publications they considered their best, without explicit reference to impact factor. Evaluators are instructed to also consider diversity, inclusion and collaboration as one of the key main principles (together with quality and impact). For setting up new clinical research groups (CRG) applicants are *inter alia* asked to provide measures to promote promising early career researchers, e.g. through mentoring. The prospective addition of DEI criteria to research assessment will be a further step towards valuing and incentivising diverse and equitable research practices (see section 3.1 below).

When we set up new LBIs we include open innovation experts and take their evaluations into account when deciding which new institutes to fund. Although not formally a signatory, the LBG *de facto* complies with the principles of the Leiden Declaration.

Room for improvement: ensure CoARA is integrated in the revised set of indicators due in Q3/2024.

### 2.3. COMMITMENT 2: BASE RESEARCH ASSESSMENT PRIMARILY ON QUALITATIVE EVALUATION

Commitment 2 stresses the move towards research assessment that focuses primarily on quality, while recognising that responsible use of quantitative indicators can provide added value.

Implementation at the LBG/LBI level:

The set of indicators used to assess research performance across all research units uses qualitative measures such as teaching activity, international collaboration, public engagement and policy impact, as well as REI and DEI criteria. Peer-review is central to the assessment of existing research units as well as for the establishment of new LBIs and CRGs. The processes established for these purposes, and the guidelines established for reviewers, put great emphasis on the qualitative judgements of the independent experts forming the respective juries and panels.

Futhermore, the LBG has recently revised its set of indicators for research assessment based on the CoARA principles (see Section 2.1). This set of indicators will demonstrate the excellence and impact of the LBIs and will subsequently also be used as the basis for institute evaluations, performance monitoring, and support the management of the institutes.

## 2.4 COMMITMENT 3: ABANDON INAPPROPRIATE USE OF JOURNAL- AND PUBLICATION-BASED METRICS, IN PARTICULAR JIF AND H-INDEX

Commitment 3 aims to reduce the dominance of a narrow set of quantitative journal- and publication based metrics.

Implementation at the LBG/LBI level:

Both in the evaluation of LBIs (research units) and CRG (individuals and teams) JIF and H-index are **not** given as relevant indicators for assessment in the templates provided to its international expert commissions and reviewers. However, publications as such are listed as significant outputs in the evaluation of LBIs (results section). Although not formally a signatory, the LBG complies with the San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA).

*Room for improvement:* guidelines should be uniformly clear on the fact that publications should be provided open access<sup>1</sup>; however, this might be contingent on the LBG developing a policy for open access to publications. Furthermore, applicants for new LBIs and CRG should be actively discouraged to provide JIF or H-index in the guidelines. Staff involved in hiring should receive guidance to not use publication-based metrics in candidate assessment.

## 2.5. COMMITMENT 4: AVOID THE USE OF RANKINGS

This commitment is intended to avoid that metrics used by international rankings “trickle down” to research and researcher assessment.

Implementation at the LBG/LBI level:

We do not use university rankings in the evaluation of our LBI and do not include them in the guidance for our panels and reviewers to set up new LBI and CRG. We do not use rankings of degree granting institutions in evaluating candidates for research roles.

## 2.6. COMMITMENT 5: COMMIT RESOURCES TO REFORMING RESEARCH ASSESSMENT AND COMMITMENT 6: REVIEW AND DEVELOP CRITERIA, TOOLS AND PROCESSES FOR THE ASSESSMENT OF RESEARCH UNITS, PROJECTS, TEAMS AND RESEARCHERS, WITH THE DIRECT INVOLVEMENT OF RESEARCHERS AT ALL CAREER STAGES

Commitment 5 aims to ensure that organisations allocate the necessary resources to improve research assessment practices within their agreed timeframe. Commitment 6 is split into sub-commitment 6.1. which focuses on criteria for assessing research units and organisations, while sub-commitment 6.2 focuses on projects, teams and individual researchers. Both emphasise the need to involve researchers directly.

Implementation at the LBG/LBI level:

The LBG regularly reviews processes and the associated documentation (guidelines, forms) when setting up new LBIs and CRGs, including reviews of the progress of implementing the CoARA commitments. The documents for evaluating LBIs (reporting and self-evaluation template) will be evaluated in Q3/2024, which will provide further opportunity for integrating CoARA commitments. The

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<sup>1</sup> This is already integrated into the periodic research development plan.

LBG has also involved LBI directors in the discussion of reforming indicators and plans to hold an organisation-wide consultation on REI and DEI assessment criteria in 2025/2026.

The LBG publishes the criteria for new LBIs and CRG on its website.

Additionally, the LBG initiated the Ethics & Diversity Hub (“Hub”), a new platform dedicated to implementing REI assessment, training and research (see below). The Hub informs the development of REI and DEI assessment criteria and conducts stakeholder consultation on reviewing qualitative indicators.

Room for improvement: CoARA supports the use of narrative CVs<sup>1</sup> as part of its broader commitment to reforming research assessment. The LBG could try out narrative CVs in its own evaluations.

## 2.7. COMMITMENT 7: RAISE AWARENESS OF RESEARCH ASSESSMENT REFORM AND PROVIDE TRANSPARENT COMMUNICATION, GUIDANCE AND TRAINING, COMMITMENT 8: EXCHANGE PRACTICES AND EXPERIENCES TO ENABLE MUTUAL LEARNING, COMMITMENT 9: COMMUNICATE PROGRESS MADE ON ADHERENCE TO THE PRINCIPLES AND THEIR IMPLEMENTATION

Commitment 7 is intended to ensure the further uptake of qualitative research assessment within research communities. Commitment 8 aims to ensure organisations exchange and make use of information for mutual learning. Commitment 9 ensures that organisations update each other on the progress made.

Implementation at the LBG/LBI level:

The staff members of CeFF have communicated the intent and purpose of the CoARA commitments internally in a variety of meetings with key stakeholders in our institutes, ranging from junior to senior research and various categories of administrative staff, also through regular Scientific Advisory Board meetings. We will also implement training on REI and DEI for all researcher career stages as a component of research assessment reform (see below). We will further promote CoARA and research assessment reform in national fora, such as AUFOS (a network of grant offices of Austrian non-university-based research organisations) and at EARMA (the European Association of Research Managers and Administrators). For this purpose, we are also happy to present the action plan and engage in discussion with other stakeholders. As required we will also upload our action plan to the ZENODO repository to enable sharing of information. As for the regular research assessment processes to evaluate the progress of existing institutes, these include strict conflict of interest processes, right-to-reply procedures and open (non-anonymous) reviewing. Evaluation processes broadly correspond to the SCOPE framework for research evaluation. Assessment frequency has been reduced according to the principle of “assess less, but better”.

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<sup>1</sup> A narrative CV is defined by the Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA) as a CV format that provides a structured written description of a person’s contributions and achievements that reflects a broad range of relevant skills and experiences, more than can often be seen in a traditional academic CV. They are highly flexible and can be used by a range of people and organisations in a range of contexts within research and innovation (R&I), from applying for funding, to recruitment to a role. See <https://www.ukri.org/what-we-do/supporting-healthy-research-and-innovation-culture/research-and-innovation-culture/supporting-the-community-adoption-of-r4r-like-narrative-cvs/narrative-cvs-what-they-are-and-why-use-them/>



## 2.8. COMMITMENT 10: EVALUATE PRACTICES, CRITERIA AND TOOLS AND MAKE DATA OPENLY AVAILABLE

The commitment is intended to ensure that assessment approach decisions are evidence based. As an example, the declaration mentions making data available for research on research. Data sharing should be the minimum commitment.

Implementation at the LBG/LBI level:

As mentioned earlier, the LBG regularly evaluates its practices; currently, activities are also ongoing to provide new and better tools and we will integrate CoARA requirements. We will share data based on the “as open as possible as closed as necessary” principle. Our Open Innovation in Science Center has contributed to “research on research” and we will explore whether our experiences with CoARA relevant tools can be shared through this channel as well. LBG has developed guidelines on research data management, which are translated into strategies on the Institute level and, as required, data management plans for third party funded projects. We have also recently introduced the CREED research data repository for our research staff and we will establish a professional research information system.

### Box: CREED

The goal of the Digital Data Repository for Published Research (CREED) is to maximize scientific data management and stewardship by archiving and annotating centrally all the processed raw data produced and used by researchers affiliated to the LBG to publish their scientific articles.

CREED is a major instrument in the assurance of research data management and scientific integrity, by following and implementing the FAIR data management principles as commonly required nowadays by the major research funding organisations (e.g. European Union, FWF, FFG, etc). CREED not only will help to serve this purpose, it will also enable the LBG to efficiently monitor and curate its intellectual and digital property over time.

Main features of CREED:

- Institutional digital repository to archive all processed data used to publish scientific articles by LBG-affiliated researchers, including the possibility to index author credits per data set.
- Friendly and intuitive web user interface (UI) allowing registered researchers to upload their publications and respective raw data, and register author credits per data set.
- External users are able to search CREED articles for processed data used in published manuscripts, but downloading of data sets is only possible upon request and permission managed via the platform.
- Generation of a CREED-specific DOI per article to facilitate the location as well as the citation and acknowledgement of the data source.
- CREED web user interface (UI) based on open source software in order to allow flexibility for future adaptations, corrections, and expanding features.

- CREED articles should cover processed data from scientific manuscripts published from 2024 onwards.

Room for improvement: take further measures to make research data available on the principle of “as open as possible, as closed as necessary”. Integrate research on research aspects into evaluations. Integrate ORCID<sup>1</sup> into evaluations.

## 2.9. OVERVIEW TABLE – SELF ASSESSMENT

Based on the discussion on how LBG addresses the commitments above we provide a self-assessment overview in the table below. We provide a compound assessment based on the activities in evaluating existing LBIs, establishing new LBIs and our CRG funding activities.

Commitment	Assessment LBG implementation	Recommendation
1-Recognise diversity of contributions	Good – diversity criteria integrated into the LBI assessment set-up and evaluation, CRG evaluation	Further integrate CoARA in LBI eval criteria in Q3/2024
2- Qualitative evaluation	Good – The LBI assessment relies on peer review and qualitative indicators, using qualitative criteria (and quantitative where applicable)	
3-Abandon inappropriate journal metrics	Medium - JIF and H-Index are not explicitly requested	Guidelines should explicitly discourage applicants to provide these figures;  LBG should strengthen and make more explicit OA policy
4- Avoid use of rankings	Good- International rankings are not part of the LBG assessment	
5- Commit resources	Good – The LBG regularly reviews assessment criteria and has set up a Ethics & Diversity Hub	Pilot narrative CV for institutions/individuals
6-Review and develop criteria for assessment	Good – see comment for criterium 5	
7-Raise awareness	Good – The LBG provides information about research assessment internally and externally	

<sup>1</sup> ORCID (Open Researcher and Contributor ID) is a unique digital identifier assigned to researchers and contributors to help distinguish their work from others, especially those with similar names. It connects with various databases, research organizations, and publishers, ensuring that a researcher’s body of work, including publications, grants, datasets, and other outputs, is properly attributed to them.

8-Exchange practices and experience	Good – see comment on criterium 7	
9-Communicate progress made	Good – The LBG will upload report on Zenodo	
10-Evaluate practices, criteria and tools; make data available	Medium to good – The LBG regularly evaluates its practices, criteria and tools; data is repositied through the LBG’s own CREED system	Further actions can be taken to disseminate the results and – as far as possible – relevant data; evaluations take “research on research” evidence into consideration.  Integrate ORCID.

## 3. OTHER RELEVANT ACTIONS

### 3.1. RESEARCH ETHICS AND INTEGRITY ACTIVITIES AS PART OF RESEARCH ASSESSMENT REFORM AT LBG

We see REI and DEI as integral component of research assessment. Therefore, we are developing appropriate assessment procedures as well as planning to implement REI and DEI awareness raising and training in consultation with research staff.

In particular, we are planning the following actions to integrate REI and DEI in the CoARA implementation in our organisation:

- Ensuring staff competencies for the development of REI and DEI assessment procedures and criteria
- Developing a research integrity promotion plan, integrate it into the LBG’s overall research ethics and integrity policy, and complement it by assessment procedures to capture adherence
- Updating existing DEI policies to capture additional diversity dimensions
- Creating incentives for good REI and DEI practice for research staff
- Developing REI and DEI Continuous Professional Development (CPD) modules and trainings for internal and external researchers
- Consulting research and research administration staff in developing REI and DEI assessment structure

Most notably so far, the LBG has initiated an **Ethics & Diversity Hub (“Hub”)**<sup>1</sup> as a new collaboration platform dedicated to implementing REI assessment, training and research. The Hub houses a voluntary research ethics committee (REC) for non-clinical research with human participants, engages

<sup>1</sup> <https://lbg.ac.at/lbg-ethics-and-diversity-Hub/>

in capacity building through talks and webinars, participates in REI research, and provides accessible advice and support on REI to internal and external researchers at all career stages.

The Hub prepares the ground for greater diversity in career paths and profiles by leading on the assessment of the *status quo*, which will enable the development of measures to improve diversity, and by developing measures to promote diversity such as trainings and public talks.

Going forward, relevant stakeholders will be actively involved in the development of REI and DEI assessment through staff consultations, discussions and workshops. Measures to raise awareness and incentivise good REI and DEI practice will be tailored to specific staff groups, e.g. research group leaders, post-doctoral researchers, junior researchers, and administrators.

Internal staff training on good practice in REI and DEI will be delivered either by qualified internal staff or external specialists. Staff will also be invited to contribute to areas where they have already established good practice models and share with others in the organisation.

All training materials and non-confidential documents will be made Open Access via the LBG website so that it is also available externally. LBG staff continuously contribute to national and international networks to share learnings and develop good practices.

Key challenges are cultural and resource-related. Culturally, there is some reluctance on part of research staff to adopt new (especially qualitative) assessment models due to workload concerns and entrenched practices. On the resource side, due to current organisational change there is some room for manoeuvre around staff resources allocated to the REI and DEI components of research assessment.

The cultural barriers to moving towards qualitative REI and DEI assessment can be addressed through awareness raising and stakeholder engagement to identify and resolve issues of concern. The resource question could be addressed through a range of measures, including third party funding or staff capacity building.

The Ethics & Diversity Hub is actively engaged in research on research<sup>1</sup> and participates in networks and events to stay up to date with current research on REI and DEI aspects of research.

The organisation has currently committed staff resources to REI and DEI assessment that are also pooled in the Hub. We have also proposed a project to the CoARA boost cascading grant so that we can allocate additional resources to the Hub to roll out a range of additional activities: further develop REI assessment criteria, engage institutional stakeholders, ramp up capacity building across all career stages, and develop policy and implementation guidance for future REI practice and assessment in accordance with the LBG's long-term scientific strategy.

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/steapp/collaborate/research-research-institute-rori>

### 3.2. LEXA – LEADERSHIP EXCELLENCE AWARD IN RESEARCH<sup>1</sup>

Leadership as a competence does not yet receive enough attention in the scientific working environment. Many researchers reach leadership positions without having learned the necessary leadership skills beforehand. Yet the research environment in particular is characterised by specific challenges, such as high performance pressure, the acquisition of third-party funding, complex and changing organisational and hierarchical structures, and heterogeneous and international research teams, which place a great strain on leadership work. At the same time, a manager in the scientific environment continues to be expected to meet high professional standards. And finally, the challenge for a modern manager not only to advance his or her own research career, but also to assume responsibility as a coach and mentor for the career development of young researchers and for the transfer and sharing of knowledge (e.g. in the context of teaching or open innovation in science) is often not (sufficiently) addressed.

The novel award LExA underlines the relevance of leadership competencies in the scientific environment. With the Leadership Award, the LBG wants to highlight individuals who not only master these challenges, but meet them in a joyful and positive way, thus being a role model and inspiration for young researchers. In this regard, better conditions for young researchers and their research work can be created in the medium term and, as a result, better research results can be achieved.

An international jury of experts evaluates the incoming nominations based on modern leadership criteria, with the selection being made in a two-step process. The jury does not focus on management competencies (i.e. the ability to manage and oversee people, processes and resources in an efficient manner), but rather on leadership skills, i.e. the ability to influence and motivate others through one's own vision, positive attitude and role model character, to contribute and develop according to individual strengths.

The nomination is made by people who can judge the leadership work of the nominee, e.g. colleagues, employees or superiors. A self-nomination is not possible.

## 4. CONCLUSIONS AND NEXT STEPS

By integrating the CoARA's commitments into our evaluation processes, we have taken significant steps to recognize the diversity of contributions and promote more holistic and responsible research practices. Key achievements include:

- We have established a new set of key research performance and organisational indicators: our criteria for research assessments value diverse outputs including participatory research initiatives, outreach, open science, data management, 3rd party funding, research ethics and integrity, teaching, mentoring, and community engagement.

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://cc.lbg.ac.at/lexa/?lang=en>

- qualitative evaluation: our evaluations are mainly based on qualitative peer-review.
- resource commitment: establishing the Ethics & Diversity Hub (Hub) as platform and tool to pool resources and staff capacity building, we have dedicated resources to ongoing training, awareness, and development of equitable research practices.
- We have started an award to reward leadership in research.

Moving forward we will:

- further integrate relevant diversity and inclusion indicators into our research assessment
- develop an in-house policy for research ethics and integrity based on the recommendations of the ERC
- ensure that publications are made openly accessible, fostering broader dissemination and impact of research findings.
- implement ongoing training on research ethics and integrity tailored to different staff groups.
- regularly evaluate our practices and make relevant data openly available to support research on research and continuous improvement.
- further integrate CoARA commitments into all evaluation templates and guidelines.
- promote a culture of mutual learning and exchange good practice through active participation in CoARA and other research networks.

The LBG is committed to upholding the principles of CoARA and fostering a research environment that values quality, integrity, and diversity. By sharing our progress and collaborating with other CoARA members, we aim to contribute to the global effort in reforming research assessment and enhancing standards for excellence in research.