

# CoARA Action Plan Austrian Science Fund (FWF)

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Discovering  
what  
matters.

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## **About the Austrian Science Fund (FWF)**

The Austrian Science Fund (FWF) was established by the Austrian government in 1968 to fund research “intended to generate new insights and to broaden and advance knowledge, and which is not profit-driven.” Since then, the FWF has stood for progress, innovation, and a research culture that attracts and supports the best and most talented researchers. These outstanding researchers are key for ensuring the competitiveness of Austria’s universities and research institutions and for generating new insights that benefit the economy and society as a whole.

The FWF funds and supports outstanding researchers and their teams in their work at the cutting edge of research. They are given the freedom they need to conduct independent research and take unexpected directions. The international peer review process ensures quality in the selection of the best researchers and ideas from all disciplines. For this reason, FWF funding is recognized as a prestigious distinction in the scientific community.

The FWF’s investments in basic research are efficient and have considerable leverage in the knowledge and innovation sectors. This is guaranteed by the selection of the best projects based on the highest quality standards. FWF funding has a long-term effect, because new scientific findings have the potential to revolutionize entire fields of research and strengthen the foundations for a wide range of innovative solutions. A strong basic research community attracts the most talented minds and their expertise. This helps strengthen Austria’s economy, improve the quality of life, and ensure the well-being of future generations.

The Austrian Science Fund (FWF) signed the Agreement on Reforming Research Assessment (CoARA) in March 2022.

## **1 CoARA Commitments**

1. Recognize the diversity of contributions to, and careers in, research in accordance with the needs and nature of the research
2. Base research assessment primarily on qualitative evaluation for which peer review is central, supported by responsible use of quantitative indicators
3. Abandon inappropriate uses in research assessment of journal- and publication-based metrics, in particular inappropriate uses of Journal Impact Factor (JIF) and h-index
4. Avoid the use of rankings of research organizations in research assessment
5. Commit resources to reforming research assessment as is needed to achieve the organizational changes committed to
6. Review and develop research assessment criteria, tools and processes
7. Raise awareness of research assessment reform and provide transparent communication, guidance, and training on assessment criteria and processes as well as their use
8. Exchange practices and experiences to enable mutual learning within and beyond the Coalition
9. Communicate progress made on adherence to the Principles and implementation of the Commitments
10. Evaluate practices, criteria and tools based on solid evidence and the state-of-the-art in research on research, and make data openly available for evidence gathering and research

## **2 Research Assessment at FWF**

The [Austrian Science Fund \(FWF\)](#) has been actively developing and addressing research assessment for many years, pursuing a holistic strategy across several key areas. These are

1. Bias prevention
2. Evaluation criteria
3. Equal opportunities
4. Open science
5. Integrity/ethics
6. Cooperation

On the following pages these key areas will be described in more detail.

### **1. Bias Prevention**

The FWF both reflects on potential bias in its procedures and actively works to minimize unconscious bias.

For 25 years, the FWF has regularly and systematically reviewed its decision-making procedures and programs with regard to potential bias, goal achievement, and long-term impacts. This has resulted in more than 30 studies and evaluations, which are usually carried out by external national and international experts after a public call for tenders. All studies and evaluations are published on the FWF website and archived for the long term, see: [FWF - Studies and Publications](#). The results are integrated into the continuous further development of programs and processes.

As part of the reorganization of the career programs and the associated consultation process, the FWF committed itself in 2019 to implementing training to raise awareness of unconscious bias, offering bias training sessions for employees and the Scientific Board in 2021-2022 and again in 2024. The aim of the training was to discuss and reflect on the decision-making process and to check for possible unconscious biases. Strategies for dealing with this were discussed as part of the training. The FWF also offers [informational material](#) and [recommendations](#) for external reviewers.

### **2. Assessment Criteria**

In 2013, the FWF signed the [DORA Declaration](#) and has since implemented several of the elements it includes, such as moving away from the use of the journal impact factors as an instrument for measuring quality, in its funding practices and guidelines.

A broader recording of scientific achievements is implemented and not only peer-reviewed publications are taken into account, but also other research achievements such as data, databases, preprints, software, etc. have to be considered in the proposal stage. Furthermore, career breaks are also taken into account in the CV. Since 2018, the FWF has required CVs with narrative elements from applicants in their research proposals (see [Application guidelines Principal Investigator Project \(PROFI mode\)](#)).

In addition to the application process, the FWF has also implemented the DORA guidelines in its instructions for reviewers. The review of an application must not put applicants at a disadvantage for non-research related reasons such as age, gender, etc. For example, instead of considering the applicant's actual age, the review process should focus on how the length of the individual's research career corresponds to their research achievements to date. The FWF's commitment to equal opportunities also means considering breaks or delays in applicants' research careers (e.g., due to parental leave, long-term or chronic illness, disability, caring responsibilities, etc.), which may have led to publication gaps, atypical career paths, or limited international research experience. Furthermore, only the ten most important academic publications and the ten most important additional research achievements of the applicant are to be considered when evaluating a research proposal. Reviewers are explicitly informed about the above-mentioned considerations and provided with examples illustrating what the FWF expects.

The FWF emphasizes to reviewers, that as a signatory to the Agreement on Reforming Research Assessment, it is important to the FWF that reviewers should refrain from using journal-based metrics such as journal impact factors, Article Influence Scores, or the h-index when assessing research performance. In addition, reviews that rely exclusively on metrics such as journal impact factors are excluded as reviews of the proposal.

### **3. Equal Opportunities and Diversity**

The FWF supports the CoARA goals through targeted measures to promote the diversity of researchers, research topics, and careers. The FWF's activities and measures contributing to more equal opportunities and diversity in research funding include the implementation of a [Gender Equality Plan](#), published [guidelines on Promoting A Safe And Inclusive Research Culture](#), and the consistent [monitoring](#) of funding statistics. The aim is to ensure equal opportunities for all genders and to recognize the diversity of researchers and their research projects and approaches.

To promote diversity and equal opportunities, the FWF has set up an [Equal Opportunities and Diversity in Research Funding unit](#) to develop appropriate actions. One measure is the consideration of gender dimensions in research projects, which

not only strengthens scientific quality but also raises awareness for gender equality and diversity issues. Career programs such as ESPRIT and ASTRA, in which 50% of the funding is reserved for female principal investigators, aim to increase the number of women in research. The FWF also offers informational material and recommendations for external reviewers.

In order to take the life situations of researchers into account, the FWF offers flexible funding conditions. These include recognition of career breaks due to childcare, illness, or flight & asylum seeking, as well as additional financial support in the form of child allowances. Researchers with caregiving responsibilities can benefit from project-related measures, such as flexible options for interrupting projects or changes in project management in connection with pregnancies. Furthermore, additional project funding for gender equality measures can be applied for within funded projects in collaborative programs.

The FWF is also committed to a balanced gender distribution in research teams and on FWF executive committees and juries to ensure a variety of perspectives in decision-making processes and research. In collaborative programs this balance is taken into account as a decision-relevant criterion. In addition, the FWF promotes fair and balanced decisions through bias awareness measures (training and information materials) for reviewers, Scientific Consultants, and staff.

In order to monitor these measures in the long term, the FWF maintains a comprehensive [monitoring](#) and reporting system that allows for the systematic analysis of developments with regard to gender equality.

#### **4. Open Science**

The FWF is committed to promoting [open science](#) by ensuring that research is accessible, transparent, and reproducible. The FWF signed the Berlin Declaration on Open Access to Knowledge in the Sciences and Humanities, in 2003 and since 2004, has an [Open Access Policy for Peer-reviewed Publications](#) in place which requires open access for all FWF-funded peer-reviewed publications. As one of the first funding organizations worldwide to introduce an open access mandate for publications, almost all publications resulting from FWF-funded grants are now openly available and free to read for everyone online.

As a signatory of Plan S and a member of [cOAlition S](#), the FWF aligned its open-access policy to peer-reviewed publications with Plan S. That means since 2021, all peer-reviewed publications such as journal articles resulting from FWF projects need to be published in an open-access format with a CC BY license.

The FWF has an [open-access policy for book publications](#) in place to ensure that all book publications resulting from FWF funded projects are open access available.

Since 2019, the FWF requires a Data Management Plan (DMP) ([Research Data Management — FWF](#)) for funded projects, emphasizing adherence to the FAIR (Findable, Accessible, Interoperable, Reusable) principles for research data. The data management plan needs to describe how data and its metadata are collected, organized, stored, published, shared, and archived for a given project. Furthermore, the FWF requires [open access to the data](#) underlying publications since 2019.

The FWF's policy developments are supported by various funding initiatives such as the FWF [Open-Access Block Grant](#), the funding program to support [open-access book publications](#) and the funding program to support [digital publications](#). Furthermore, the FWF initiated several pilot programs such as [the Journal Funding Initiative](#) (2013) or [the Open Research Data Pilot](#) (2016) to test new funding models.

Since 2011, the FWF also supports [open science infrastructures](#) and alternative open access infrastructures such as Scoap3, Open Library of Humanities, Scipost, Europe PMC, arxiv, ORCID, OA Switchboard, OAPEN, and DOAJ.

The FWF considers open research information as a critical element of open science and therefore makes information from FWF-funded projects available as openly as possible. The project information is available on the [FWF Research Radar](#) page and funding statistics can be looked up on the FWF [statistics dashboard](#). Persistent identifiers are crucial elements for open research information. The FWF includes and requires [ORCIDs](#), [Grant DOI](#), and [ROR IDs](#) in its research information to ensure the interoperability of its research information. In 2024, [the FWF signed the Barcelona Declaration](#) to work with other institutions to open up research metadata.

## **5. Integrity and Ethics**

In 2003, the FWF introduced guidelines for good scientific practice and called on research institutions to set up corresponding ombuds' offices.

In 2008, the [Austrian Agency for Research Integrity \(OeAWI\)](#) was founded on the initiative of the FWF. The OeAWI now has 49 institutional members (mainly public universities, private universities, universities of applied sciences, non-university research institutions, and funding organizations). While anyone can contact the OeAWI, it primarily serves as an independent body to handle serious cases of suspected violations of the guidelines for good scientific practice of its member organizations. To this end, common guidelines have been drafted and are updated at regular intervals.

Since 2008, the FWF has dealt with more than 100 suspected cases of non-compliance with the guidelines for good scientific practice in connection with applications for project funding by the FWF. If serious, suspected cases are usually handed over to the OeAWI. The FWF publishes the cases it has dealt with, including the sanctions imposed, annually on its website in the form of aggregated statistics, see: [Statistics on suspected violations of the Guidelines for Good Scientific Practice](#)

## 6. Cooperation

The FWF cooperates with several international and national institutions and organizations to exchange best practices and experiences. This ensures a continuous flow of information and the development of a shared knowledge base on which to build.

These institutions include: [Science Europe](#) regarding various research policy areas and policies, [Research on Research institute \(RoRi\)](#) to commission empirical analyses, [cOAlition S](#) to align open science activities and strategies with other funding agencies worldwide. The FWF also maintains a bilateral exchange with other national funding agencies to learn from each other. Also on a national level, the FWF works together with institutions and organizations such as [Open Science Austria \(OSA\)](#), [Austrian Platform for Research and Technology Policy Evaluation \(fteval\)](#) regarding research evaluations, and the [Austrian Agency for Scientific Integrity \(ÖAWI\)](#) concerning research integrity.

## 3 Prospects and Challenges

The FWF will continue its long-standing efforts to review and evaluate its own procedures and further develop its research assessment processes to better align with the CoARA commitments in the coming years. For example, the FWF plans to include sustainability aspects in its applications to ensure and promote awareness of these aspects, and will continue to drive developments with regard to the CV format.

New developments in research assessment can lead to new challenges for research management and new responsibilities for research institutions. Furthermore, changes in assessment processes need constant reflection and monitoring and unintended side effects must be taken into account at all times. For example:

- **Bias Prevention:** Differences in approval rates for certain groups are not always directly attributable to a systemic bias in the decision-making process. Researchers at well-equipped and well-organized research institutions, for example, might tend to have better conditions for their research.
- **Assessment Criteria:** Additional criteria can lead to the unintended introduction of new metrics. Exclusively narrative CVs, for example, can lead to excessive self-

promotion, causing reviewers turning to external sources of information for a quick overview of the information.

- **Equal Opportunities and Diversity:** While measures to increase the participation of under-represented groups in research should ideally be evidence-based, there is still a lack of comprehensive data that adequately reflects the diversity of the scientific community. However, collecting researchers' personal data may conflict with data protection regulations, the right to privacy, and confidentiality requirements.
- **Open Science:** It may not always be sensible to make all steps of the scientific process, including its evaluation, immediately accessible to everyone.
- **Integrity and Ethics:** A sensible balance must be found between the serious investigation of suspected cases and the protection of the rights of suspects.
- **Cooperations:** Parallel initiatives and simultaneous work at different levels (national, international) and by different organizations must be avoided.