

IMPLEMENTING RESEARCH ASSESSMENT REFORM: PRACTICAL LESSONS FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF RIJEKA

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Introduction

The reform of research assessment has become a central issue in European research policy, driven by the need to move beyond traditional, metric-based evaluation models towards qualitative, responsible, and Open Science-aligned approaches. The Agreement on Reforming Research Assessment (ARRA), developed by the Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment (CoARA), outlines principles for transitioning towards fairer, more inclusive, and transparent assessment frameworks, incorporating interdisciplinary research, Open Science, knowledge transfer, and societal engagement (CoARA, 2022).

As an early signatory of CoARA, the University of Rijeka (UNIRI) has played a leading role in research assessment reform in Croatia. It is currently the only Croatian institution to endorse CoARA and has actively engaged with national stakeholders to initiate discussions on ARRA principles. UNIRI has implemented institutional policy changes, structural transformations, and pilot initiatives, drawing from its participation in European-funded projects, particularly OPUS, SECURE, and OSCAR. Additionally, it has contributed to the YUFE4Postdocs initiative, a joint effort of the Young Universities for the Future of Europe (YUFE) alliance partners, which has piloted narrative CVs as an alternative researcher evaluation model (YUFE, 2023).

Drawing on lessons learned from these initiatives, this paper presents a case study of research assessment reform at UNIRI, offering practical insights into challenges, solutions, and policy recommendations that can guide other institutions navigating similar transitions.

The Need for Reform

Conventional research assessment models remain heavily reliant on quantitative indicators, such as journal impact factors, citation counts, and h-indices, which fail to capture the full diversity of research contributions and their broader societal relevance (European Commission, 2021). In response, UNIRI has implemented a responsible and transparent assessment framework, ensuring that evaluation processes align with the evolving needs of research careers and societal impact.

One of the most significant institutional changes has been the removal of CV-based evaluation in institutional research project applications. Rather than requiring a standalone CV, researchers' qualifications and contributions are integrated into the project proposal, ensuring that assessments prioritise the quality, feasibility, and impact of the proposed research rather than past publication records (University of Rijeka, 2024a). Preliminary observations suggest that this change has led to greater engagement from early-career researchers (ECRs), as well as an increase in interdisciplinary proposals, indicating a shift towards a more inclusive and innovation-driven evaluation system. However, further systematic assessment of this reform's long-term impact is needed.

Challenges in Research Assessment Reform and Lessons from OPUS

Despite these advancements, the implementation of Open Science and research assessment reforms has presented several key challenges, many of which were identified through the OPUS project pilot at UNIRI (University of Rijeka, 2024b).

Standardising Research Assessment and Open Science Policies Across Disciplines

A major challenge has been the complexity of standardising research assessment and Open Science policies across diverse scientific disciplines. The heterogeneous nature of academic fields and the independent legal status of faculties at UNIRI have made it difficult to establish uniform policies that are applicable across the university. This challenge has been compounded by low awareness and engagement with Open Science principles, leading to inconsistent implementation across faculties.

To address these issues, UNIRI has adopted a stakeholder-driven approach, ensuring that researchers, faculty leadership, and university decision-makers are actively involved in the policy development and approval process. Engagement strategies such as OS Cafés, targeted training sessions, and formal discussions in university governance bodies have been introduced to build awareness, secure commitment, and foster policy alignment. However, further institutional mechanisms are needed to ensure ongoing faculty engagement and compliance with Open Science policies.

Building Institutional Support for Open Science and Research Assessment Reform

The Centre for Open Science and Scientific Information Management (COZ), housed within the University Library, has functioned as a central hub for Open Science training, policy implementation, and researcher support, providing guidance on Open Access publishing, research data management, and assessment reform (University of Rijeka, 2024a). However, findings from OPUS highlight the need for expanded institutional investment, particularly in ensuring dedicated full time staff and greater integration between COZ and university management.

Similarly, the Science Outreach Centre (SOCRI) has played a critical role in documenting and evaluating public engagement activities, ensuring that contributions beyond scholarly publications—such as science communication, policy engagement, and outreach efforts—are recognised in researcher evaluations. However, its reliance on voluntary contributions from faculty members presents a sustainability challenge, reinforcing the need for dedicated staff and long-term funding to maintain its activities (University of Rijeka, 2024b).

Policy Recommendations for Research Assessment Reform

Based on UNIRI's experiences, the following recommendations can support institutions implementing similar reforms:

- Co-create policies and procedures with stakeholders, complemented by internal consultations, to ensure greater alignment and adherence to standardised rules across faculties.
- Strengthen Open Science support structures by securing dedicated staffing and financial resources for centres such as COZ and SOCRI.
- Monitor and evaluate the long-term impact of narrative CVs and qualitative research assessment models, ensuring alignment with national and European research evaluation frameworks.
- Advocate for national alignment with CoARA principles, ensuring that research assessment reform efforts are embedded within Croatia's national funding and policy structures.

Conclusion

UNIRI's experience provides valuable lessons for institutions seeking to transition towards qualitative, Open Science-aligned, and responsible research assessment models. The removal of CV based evaluation, piloting of narrative CVs, and investment in Open Science support structures have contributed to more holistic and transparent research assessment practices. However, institutional resistance, policy standardisation challenges, and resource constraints highlight the need for continuous policy dialogue, evaluator training, and stronger national alignment with European research assessment reforms.

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