

Navigating the Shift: Responsible Research Assessment in the State of São Paulo's Main Universities



The insights presented here emerged from a workshop convened by USP, Projeto Métricas, and DORA, held in September 2025, bringing together institutional leaders and experts to shape Brazil's transition toward responsible research evaluation. We thank all who contributed to the event and look forward to remaining in this dialogue.

1. The mandate for research assessment reform


The 21st century has commenced amidst a scenario of profound rupture, driven by the pervasive influence of algorithms and ubiquitous connectivity. This global reconfiguration is imposed by a convergence of technological, geopolitical, and social forces that demand new institutional responses. Increasing societal challenges, especially in more recent years, such as political polarization, social exclusion and marginalisation, technological advances, environmental degradation and accelerated demographic aging, require a new generation of scholars equipped with skills in critical thinking and complex problem-solving. In this context, traditional, purely quantitative models of research assessment are inadequate to reward and thus promote such skills.

Overreliance on purely quantitative metrics such as publication counts and journal rankings has led to a publish-or-perish culture that rewards fast production of research results and bold claims rather than rigor, transparency and societal impact. Perhaps as a consequence of this, attempts to replicate published work in different areas of science have shown worrying low rates of reproducibility, and Brazil is no exception to the rule (BrRN, 2025). Moreover, rewarding publication counts rather than solid research has had a pernicious effect on generations of young scientists who are trained to follow metrics rather than the advancement of science and society as a goal.

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The problems outlined above have led to the emergence of various initiatives to reform academic evaluation. At the forefront of these is the San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA), an international initiative underpinned by a set of guidelines advocating for more holistic and responsible practices for evaluating the quality, impact and value of research and researchers' contributions. Recently, DORA published a global implementation guide containing practical steps for research assessment reform geared towards research performing organizations. In this white paper, we examine at how the state of São Paulo's public universities—the University of São Paulo (USP), the State University of Campinas (UNICAMP), the Federal University of São Paulo (UNIFESP), and São Paulo State University (UNESP)—along with the state's primary research funding agency, FAPESP, are navigating this critical transition.

These institutional efforts in São Paulo reflect and contribute to a broader national shift, as federal agencies like Brazilian Federal Agency for Support and Evaluation of Graduate Education (CAPES) as part of the national postgraduate plan and the National Council for Scientific and Technological Development (CNPq) adopt reforms that prioritize qualitative evaluation and equity, with the Brazilian Reproducibility Network supporting the transition toward responsible research practices across the country. We examine the strategic principles, practical initiatives, and persistent challenges involved in shifting towards a more responsible, qualitative, and meaningful system of academic evaluation in Brazil. The strategic principles are designed to align institutional goals with the fundamental values of science.

As we show, the path forward requires not only institutional commitment but also national coordination, capacity building, and cultural transformation. The time is ripe for Brazil's academic community to embrace a shared vision of meaningful evaluation that reflects the values of science and the needs of society.

2. Universities' Strategic Framework: Principles for Responsible Assessment

Establishing clear, guiding principles is a vital first step in reforming research assessment. Before implementing specific changes, a strategic framework ensures that new evaluation processes are not merely different but are purposefully aligned with the core values of scientific inquiry and the broader expectations of society. This approach moves beyond simple metrics to foster a culture where evaluation is understood as a tool for improvement, feedback, and strategic alignment with institutional and societal goals.

Inspired by Projeto Metricas' Priorities 2025-2026, which sets priorities for Brazilian modern universities' assessment framework, we consider the following key principles:

- **Impact Metrics:** Institutional impact must be assessed, based on knowledge advancement, including community needs, public health improvements, social inclusion, poverty reduction, and the strengthening of democracy using collaborative approaches.
- **Open Science:** Openness in science helps to increase transparency, accountability and allows for greater possibility of reproducibility, improving the functioning of scientific communication itself.
- **Governance and Internationalization:** Developing tools to evaluate global interconnectivity and cooperation, with a focus on interregional recruitment, distance learning, and collaborative research with all countries with special attention to those in the Global South.
- **Sustainable Development:** Prioritizing environmental management and biodiversity research, aligning scientific incentives with sustainable development goals and urgent conservation efforts.

Adopting more responsible assessment methods for research performance is key to attaining these aims; multifaceted evaluation methods that combine quantitative and qualitative measures, guided by international standards like DORA, to better assess societal impact and social inclusion.

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Collaborative workshops between DORA and Projeto Métricas have further refined these principles into three priority areas for immediate action^[1]:

1. Increasing awareness of responsible evaluation among the wider research community.
2. Training and capacity building for evaluators, administrators, university leaders and researchers.
3. Execution and appraisal of evaluation cycles following DORA principles.

The central challenge lies in embedding these principles and priorities deep within institutional processes. The transition can only succeed if the new approach connects with the values already imbued in university activities and in the way researchers are assessed for funding. Researchers are principally motivated by a desire to create new knowledge and to further the conditions of life; responsible evaluation embodies these values. Journal-level metrics and ranked lists do not substitute for judgment of scholarly merit. Evaluations should focus on the contribution of each selected output. When metrics are referenced, they must not be used as decision criteria or as a proxy for quality. For researchers to trust and understand the purpose of evaluation, its aims must be explicitly linked to these intrinsic motivations and broader institutional goals.

The move towards responsible assessment is a cultural change which demands a collaborative effort, since no single actor can induce the change alone. Clear guidelines and time to be understood and valued by the whole community, so it can be implemented. Training and capacity building are crucial to leverage a cultural change. Particular emphasis must be placed on young researchers who not only are directly impacted by research assessment when they apply for academic positions and/or promotions, but will form the next generations of reviewers. To this effect, part of the joint workshop held at USP in September was specifically addressed to the audience of USP's Post-Doctoral conference.

^[1] Projeto Métricas. (2022). Institutional challenges and perspectives for responsible evaluation in Brazilian Higher Education: Projeto Métricas DORA partnership summary of findings. Zenodo. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7259476>

3. Institutional Responses: Practical Initiatives at public universities in the state of São Paulo

This section provides the concrete steps taken by UNICAMP, USP, UNIFESP, and UNESP to implement responsible assessment principles. It highlights both structural changes and specific case studies, illustrating how each institution is uniquely adapting global principles to its local context and academic cultures.

These internal university efforts are significantly influenced by the policies and perspectives of the state's most important research funder, FAPESP, and national agencies, that follow in the next section.

UNICAMP: Pioneering Structural and Equity-Focused Initiatives

As a DORA Signatory since 2019, UNICAMP has been a proactive leader in this transition. The university established the EDAT (Office of Data and Support for Transformation) to create a robust data bank for institutional diagnosis and policy decisions. This was complemented by the implementation of the Reporting of Teaching Research and Outreach (RADEP) system, a tool that standardizes faculty reports by gathering quantitative data while also providing fields for qualitative description and self-evaluation.

The evaluation path is not to exclude quantitative indicators but to include well-defined qualitative ones. A powerful example is the “Mais Mulheres na Pesquisa” (More Women in Research) call, designed to address career progression barriers for women. The program focused on fostering a qualitative advancement in research through new international cooperation networks. High demand for the initiative led to its budget being doubled from R\$400,000 to R\$800,000, demonstrating a strong institutional commitment to using assessment to drive more equitable access to internationalisation.

USP: Integrating DORA Principles at the Unit and Central Levels

USP became a DORA Signatory in 2021 and has focused on bringing the Declaration's principles to a central sphere for dissemination across its many independent units. An initial analysis of academic plans submitted by these units revealed that most still relied heavily on quantitative metrics over qualitative aspects. In response, practical actions are being piloted at the unit level and being also discussed by central committees.

The Institute of Biomedical Sciences (ICB), for example, has adapted DORA principles for its faculty hiring process and for academic planning. This includes the conscious composition of hiring committees to ensure diversity, the creation of Vacancy Plans that outline a position's specific contributions to the unit, and a focus on a candidate's fit rather than only on their productivity index. As for academic planning, ICB added DORA principles to the research plan to be considered by the staff on making individual projects. Furthermore, the ICB has introduced a postgraduate course dedicated to discussing DORA and other responsible assessment frameworks, empowering the next generation of researchers with these principles.

At USP central level, DORA principles are being discussed as part of career evaluation steps and they were added to the instructions of individual academic planning. Additionally, the university has changed the hiring process, opening the possibility of qualitative evaluation of the academic and research plans of candidates. Recently, the committees responsible for institutional evaluation and faculty evaluation included DORA as a base material to be consulted so that faculty can prepare their development projects for the next five years. This action has made knowledge of the DORA principles mandatory for all faculty, although institutionally, it is still unclear how proposed projects will be evaluated.

UNIFESP: Building a Foundation for Systemic Change

UNIFESP is actively preparing to become a DORA signatory by building a strong institutional foundation. The process began with faculty participation in the Métricas course, which has since grown into a graduate hub engaging dozens of faculty and staff, including high-level administrators. A key structural change was the reorganization of the Data Office, which is now linked directly to the Rectory to ensure greater management involvement in disseminating a responsible evaluation culture.

The university has also proposed a significant policy change to its faculty progression committee (CPPD): requiring a comprehensive Work Plan in all faculty hiring processes. This plan would oblige candidates to outline their proposed activities in teaching, research, and extension, and would be tracked via a new platform designed to monitor faculty activities.

UNESP: Evolving from Quantification to Qualification

UNESP, a large university spread across 24 cities, is navigating the complexities of institutional change and intends to formally become a DORA Signatory as a subsequent step in its ongoing reforms. The university's Permanent Evaluation Commission (CPA) is consciously evolving away from its historical punitive and numerical character toward a more responsible assessment model. Two key shifts mark this evolution.

First, UNESP has implemented a collective Departmental Evaluation system, moving the focus from individual production metrics to a broader assessment tied to departmental planning. Second, its faculty hiring practices are shifting to qualify information, allowing committees to consider specific departmental needs that raw numbers and traditional metrics often fail to capture. Additionally, UNESP is undergoing a five-year self evaluation process, and the evaluation instruments applied to the 34 university units prioritize qualitative analysis instead of the collection of numerical information traditionally used. The overarching goal is to prepare the university to value qualification over pure quantification.

4. The Funding Agency's Perspective: The FAPESP Model and its Challenges

As the primary research funding agency in the state of São Paulo, FAPESP plays a critical role in shaping the research culture and defining the standards of evaluation. Its policies and practices send powerful signals to the academic community, influencing how research is proposed, conducted, and assessed.

FAPESP's evaluation flowchart relies on two critical decision-making stages: first, reviews by external ad hoc specialists, and second, a comprehensive panel discussion where members of the area committee deliberate on the proposals. This structure is designed to incorporate deep subject-matter expertise and broader strategic considerations.

However, FAPESP acknowledges significant internal challenges and has an official stance that aligns with responsible assessment principles. Key points include:

- **The Reviewer Challenge:** A very large number of ad hoc reviewers are still heavily influenced by simple, traditional metrics, creating a gap between the agency's goals and the practical reality of its review process.
- **Beyond the CV:** The agency explicitly directs its evaluators not to overvalue curricula vitae, emphasizing that new ideas should be stimulated and prioritized over past publication records.
- **"Basket of Metrics":** FAPESP advocates that metrics should never be used alone. It promotes the use of a "basket" of indicators combined with qualitative evaluation (such as including Best Thesis awards in evaluations) to achieve a more robust and fair assessment.
- **Warning Against Metric Fixation:** The agency directly cautions against the dangers of metric fixation by referencing Goodhart's law: "when a measure becomes a target, it ceases to be a good measure." This warning is underscored by the insight that an "incremental contribution to science tends to have more citations than a disruptive contribution," highlighting how metric fixation can penalize groundbreaking research.

While FAPESP's high-level principles are clear, the difficulty in ensuring they are applied consistently by thousands of reviewers highlights the same on-the-ground challenges faced by the universities themselves.

5. The national perspective: Federal funding agencies and research associations

The Brazilian Federal Agency for Support and Evaluation of Graduate Education (CAPES), the federal postgraduate research funding body, has recently abandoned its system of classifying research according to graded lists of journals (the Qualis ranking), gradually moving away from a previous system that judged the value of research purely on the basis of its publication location and perceived prestige.

The agency opened a possibility for research area committees to choose a way where the assessment of papers also considers directly the metrics of the paper itself (article-level metrics) such as citations, field weighted citation index, altmetrics, etc. It also opened the possibility of considering qualitative indicators for the journals so that good national open access journals, such as those indexed in Scielo can be well valued in the process. That said, change in the assessment criteria used by research area committees has been modest up to now, as some of these committees have replaced the Qualis system by journal ranks based on other metrics such as the field weighted citation index, Journal Impact Factor, CiteScore or H5 index.

Another point that CAPES adopted towards a responsible evaluation is related to the emphasis on how the training master and PhDs and the science done in the graduate programs reach and impact the society. The programs will be evaluated in the dimensions of science outreach activities, contributions to sustainable development goals, good practices in science, among others.

The National Council for Scientific and Technological Development (CNPq) has changed the selection process of its Productivity Fellowships, now requiring a narrative CV that represents a selection of the strongest publications, requiring justification of their impacts and allowing a variety of types of publication. Furthermore, extra time is granted for candidates in maternity or adoption processes to ensure greater gender equity in the system. There are incentives for overcoming gender, ethnic and regional inequalities, and any candidate with a complete PhD is allowed to apply for any level of fellowship.

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Uptake of this new system has been widespread; 43 of 49 scientific committees now use narrative CVs, and all have implemented the maternity and adoption requirements. The new selection criteria for early career researchers for the fellowships is still in its implementation phase, and therefore, it is too early to judge its success. The incentives for reducing inequalities are being used, but at present, they have yet to generate any quantifiable results.

The implementation of these more responsible practices brings the agency closer to other international funding sources such as Schmidt Fellowships, giving Brazilian researchers invaluable experience that will help them in internationally competitive calls for research funding.

The Brazilian Reproducibility Network (BrRN, *Rede Brasileira de Reprodutabilidade*) suggested changes for CAPES in this transition by writing recommendations to value open and reproducible science in the assessment of graduate programs. The BrRN considers that, while the general direction set by the CAPES Evaluation Directorship aligns with DORA, implementation of these principles by area committees has been limited up to now - and are bound to change slowly, as evaluation criteria are set for the next 4-year period.

The BrRN is working to identify the opportunities and bottlenecks inherent in this transition to better align with DORA. These include cultural resistance among researchers, which has led some areas to de facto recreate the *Qualis* ranking by qualifying publications according to other journal-based metrics. Beyond the cultural bottlenecks from the academic community, the system currently has limited capacity for representing technical productions and a wider variety of research outputs in the CNPq Lattes database and the Sucupira platform.

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Based on these perceived bottlenecks, the RBR makes the following recommendations for funders to close the remaining gaps in responsible evaluation:

- Encourage the use of research portfolios of selected outputs (as currently done by CAPES and CNPq), making clear statements for reviewers that journal-based metrics should not be used to evaluate these.
- Value and incentivise open productions, encourage CAPES and CNPq to increase the range of technical outputs that can be included in their databases.
- Train evaluators and scientists in responsible evaluation.
- Set clear goals and milestones for progress.

This wider range of methodologies, indicators and perspectives involved in responsibly evaluating research and research producing institutions follows a broader global trend towards greater diversity of perspectives on the roles, performance and valuing of research activities, such as those found in companies such as Times Higher Education, who are moving towards a greater focus on interdisciplinary research, indicators other than just citations or publication locations and a greater emphasis on social impact.



6. Overcoming Barriers: A Synthesis of Key Challenges

Despite clear progress and commitment from institutional leadership, the transition to responsible research assessment faces significant and recurring obstacles. A synthesis of the difficulties identified across USP, UNICAMP, UNIFESP, and UNESP, along with those from FAPESP, CNPq and CAPES (as reported by the BrRN in the latter case), reveals a set of common challenges that must be addressed for the transformation to be successful and sustainable.

Cultural Resistance and Fear of Change

The most pervasive barrier is a deep-seated cultural resistance to change, which manifests at all levels. It is a bottom-up problem, as seen with students who fear their advisors' preferences for publishing in high-impact journals, and a top-down one, evident in faculty committees where some members still favor hiring candidates based purely on the highest production levels.

This resistance is often rooted in a fear of the unknown—a concern that moving away from established quantitative metrics will be viewed negatively by peers or put the institution at a competitive disadvantage. But it can also reflect a lack of knowledge about different approaches to assessment, or insecurity about using criteria that appear to be less objective.

After decades under a numerical system, many are hesitant to embrace a new path. Setting the new approach in a small community may be a good strategy towards establishing and demonstrating its viability and gain before implementing for large and diverse communities.

Systemic and Normative Hurdles

Existing institutional and governmental structures often hinder the shift toward qualitative assessment. A core systemic difficulty is that all university norms for career progression, hiring, and reporting are still based heavily on quantitative data. Requirements from external control bodies like the Federal Court of Accounts (TCU) often reinforce this internal inertia. Furthermore, there is a recurring critique from “non-converted” faculty and administrators that qualitative evaluation is inherently too “subjective,” making it difficult to implement in a standardized and transparent manner.

The frequent intervention of the judiciary in hiring and career progression decisions means that this cultural resistance is reinforced by a fear of having decisions entangled in complex legal cases, to be judged by non-experts. Therefore, there is more discomfort around moving away from simple and known quantitative measures. Nevertheless, public universities in the state of Sao Paulo have made significant strides in recent months, such as the possibility of using academic projects (research, teaching, outreach plans) in hiring competitions as an alternative to written examinations.

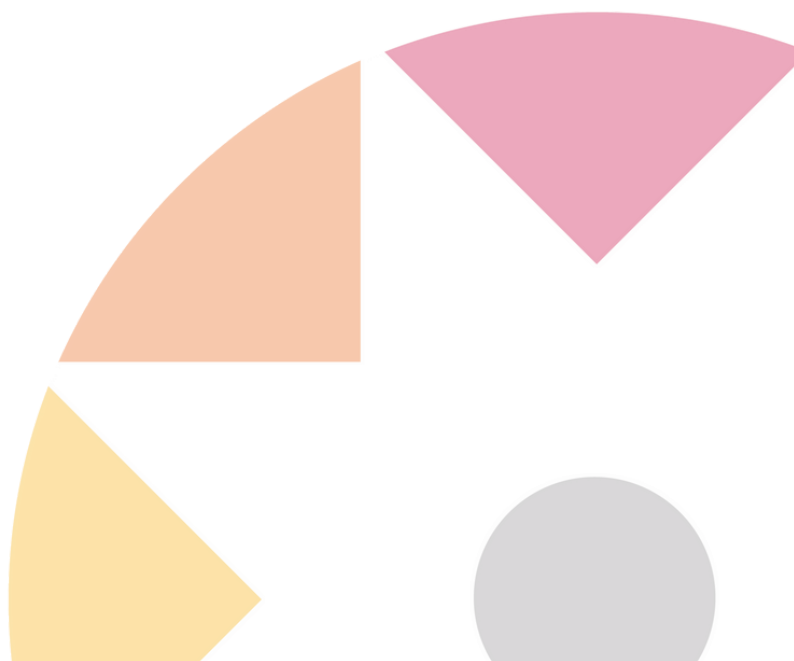
There are also technological limitations in the platforms used to record research outputs, which are sometimes limited in the range of outputs that they can capture. Although the Lattes database spans a wide variety of outputs, records for open science outputs such as preprints, datasets or open peer review are still lacking. This means that these platforms will require investment and support to update sufficiently to ensure that they align with the aims of responsible assessment by funding agencies. Responsible assessment requires information systems that make open and diverse outputs visible and auditable. Lattes, Sucupira, and grant platforms should include fields for dataset DOIs, code repositories, software artifacts, preprints, registered reports, standardized contribution statements, and peer-review or editorial service.

The Knowledge and Training Gap

A significant challenge is the widespread lack of knowledge about DORA and the principles of responsible evaluation among researchers at all levels, administrators and university leaders, despite the significant advances being made by a number of organizations in recent years. This knowledge gap generates resistance and misunderstanding.

Institutions recognize a critical need for comprehensive educational work and training for evaluators, faculty, and administrators on how to use, interpret, and trust qualitative indicators. The experience at UNICAMP is telling: even in a call specifically designed to promote qualitative advancement, evaluators reverted to focusing on traditional metrics like the H-index and citation counts, underscoring the urgent need for effective capacity building. At USP, the training of graduate students in the Life Systems Biology course shows how young researchers can be engaged in helping to spread the principles and the discussion. CAPES' initial attempt to ask for qualitative assessment of a small number of outputs selected by each graduate program similarly found many reviewing boards merely using quantitative journal-based metrics on this limited sample.

Overcoming these significant challenges is the central task in charting a path toward a more meaningful system of evaluation.



7. Conclusion: Towards More Meaningful Evaluation

Public universities in São Paulo, empowered by larger systemic changes at FAPESP, CAPES, CNPq, and with the help of organizations such as DORA, Projeto Métricas and BrRN are actively engaged in a complex but committed transition towards responsible research assessment. The evidence indicates a clear shift away from a singular reliance on quantitative metrics and towards a more holistic, qualitative, and impact-oriented framework for evaluating academic work. Practical initiatives, from creating new data offices to redesigning hiring processes and launching equity-focused programs, demonstrate tangible progress.

However, this report also highlights the central tension defining this transformation: the forward momentum of these initiatives is consistently met with deep-seated cultural and systemic resistance by researchers and evaluation committees. The fear of change, the inertia of existing regulations, and a persistent knowledge gap regarding new evaluation methods are formidable barriers that require sustained and strategic intervention.

These are recognizable challenges that the DORA community has faced for the past decade. This is why for the past years DORA has not only worked to raise awareness on current assessment issues but also on implementing its principles. This implementation focus sparked the creation of the Practical Guide for Implementing Responsible Research Assessment at Research Performing Organizations under Project Tools to Advance Research Assessment (TARA), financed by Arcadia. This resource is designed to provide practical guidance, resources, and illustrative examples to assist research performing organizations, including academic leaders, faculty, and staff, in shaping and delivering responsible research assessment practices. Drawing on DORA's decade of learning, the Guide supports developing a strategy and reforming existing policies toward more holistic and inclusive approaches to assessment. It outlines nine key activities to catalyze reform and offers potential interventions for embedding responsible assessment principles into critical career moments, such as recruitment, hiring, and promotion decisions.

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Projeto Métricas has run a year-long professional training course in university governance and responsible evaluation aimed at university leaders, administrators and researchers for the past six years, creating a network of over 500 professionals from every region in Brazil engaged in responsible research assessment transition. It holds frequent events and workshops and conducts regular research into the implementation and progress of responsible evaluation in Brazil.

The Brazilian Reproducibility Network can support agencies and universities with practical tools and training. Contributions include portfolio and contribution-statement templates, discipline-sensitive rubrics, short reviewer training modules, and pilot design. Collaboration on these instruments can shorten the time from policy to practice.

Success in this transition will be measured not by the adoption of a new set of metrics, but by the creation of an academic culture where “meaningful evaluation” is intrinsically linked to the core values that motivate scientists: the creation of knowledge and the betterment of life for the society the university serves. Thus, how we look at numbers to understand what is or are the meanings behind them is a way of moving forward in responsible assessment.



8. Acknowledgements

This white paper is the result of the workshop “Localising the Global: Towards Responsible Research Assessment in Brazil”, held on 15 September 2025 at the University of São Paulo, by initiative of Professor Paulo Nussenzveig, Provost for Research and Innovation. The event was co-hosted by USP, Projeto Métricas, and the Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA), and brought together a diverse group of speakers, institutional leaders, researchers, and administrators from across Brazil. Given the importance of training the next generation of researchers, part of the joint workshop was specifically addressed to the audience of USP’s Post-Doctoral conference. We extend our sincere thanks to all participants for their valuable contributions, insights, and commitment to advancing responsible research assessment.

The workshop was organized in the backdrop of the launch of DORA’s “A Practical Guide to Implementing Responsible Research Assessment at Research Performing Organizations”. This guide offers action-oriented strategies, resources, and examples for institutions seeking to develop or reform research assessment practices. It supports organizations at all stages: from those initiating an RRA strategy to those refining existing systems or taking first steps toward more inclusive and holistic evaluation.

The Guide's Portuguese version is available at <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17783097> and its translation from English was made possible by the help of Instituto de Ciências Biomédicas, Projeto Métricas and the Brazilian Reproducibility Network. Many thanks to Patrícia Gama, Justin Axel-Berg, Eduarda Centeno, Olavo Amaral, Ricardo Ceneviva, Isis Trajano and Juliana Fernandes.

The Practical Guide is part of Project TARA, and complements other tools including Reformscape, Building Blocks for Impact, and Debiasing Committee Composition. Together, these resources form a comprehensive suite designed to support research-performing organizations in their journey toward meaningful evaluation. Project TARA is generously supported by Arcadia, a family charitable foundation dedicated to preserving cultural heritage, restoring nature, and promoting open access to knowledge. Since 2002, Arcadia has awarded more than \$1.2 billion to organizations around the world, and we gratefully acknowledge their support.

The views expressed in this piece are meant to reflect our individual views and not necessarily those of the institutions to which we are affiliated. Correspondence concerning the piece is welcomed to info@sfdora.org.

9. Glossary of institutions and acronyms

BrRN – Brazilian Reproducibility Network

<https://www.reprodutibilidade.org/en>

CAPES – Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior

<https://www.gov.br/capes>

CNPq – Conselho Nacional de Desenvolvimento Científico e Tecnológico

<https://www.gov.br/cnpq>

DORA – Declaração de São Francisco sobre Avaliação da Pesquisa

<https://sfdora.org>

EDAT – Escritório de Indicadores para Transformação Institucional, Unicamp

<https://dados.unicamp.br/>

EGIDA – Escritório de Gestão de Indicadores de Desempenho Acadêmico, USP

<https://www.egida.usp.br/>

FAPESP – Fundação Estatal de Pesquisa de São Paulo

<https://fapesp.br>

ICB – Instituto de Ciências Biomédicas (USP)

<https://www.icb.usp.br>

Projeto Métricas – Projeto de Métricas de Pesquisa (FAPESP/CRUESP)

<https://metricas.usp.br>

RADEP – Relatório de Atividades de Docência, Extensão e Pesquisa - Unicamp

<https://prdu.unicamp.br/ccrh-e-camaras/cidd/sistema-radepl/>

Unesp – Universidade Estadual Paulista "Júlio de Mesquita Filho"

<https://www.unesp.br>

Unicamp – Universidade Estadual de Campinas

<https://www.unicamp.br>

Unifesp – Universidade Federal de São Paulo

<https://www.unifesp.br>

USP – Universidade de São Paulo

<https://www.usp.br>

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Cite as:

Amaral, O., Axel-Berg, J., Bittencourt, L., Camarotto, R., Canuto, S., Ceneviva, R., Centeno, E., Freire Junior, O., Gama, P., Klein, M., Lawrence, R., de Moura Rocha Lima, G., Marcovitch, J., Nunes, F., Nussenzweig, P., Paschoareli Jr, D., Souza Filho, A. G., & Paiva Trajano, I. (2025). Navegando pela Transição: Avaliação Responsável de Pesquisa nas Principais Universidades do Estado de São Paulo. DORA. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17872216>

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