

Input Paper: Research assessment reform as a key part of the ERA Act

The paper, submitted as an input to the ongoing ERA Act consultation, examines persistent challenges in the implementation of research assessment reform across Europe while highlighting concrete and diverse examples of effective practice.

Building on these insights, it recommends that the ERA Act should (i) explicitly enshrine the principles of responsible, qualitative, and open research assessment; (ii) establish a European Research Assessment Observatory to monitor implementation, support mutual learning, and align ongoing initiatives; (iii) invest in a dedicated European initiative, (iv) propose an ERA wide national system of incentives; (v) systematize training for evaluators, panels and the stakeholders involved; (vi) ensure that all voices are included in the discussion and (vii) develop interoperable technical infrastructure that prioritises consistent, high-quality, and broad-ranging data.

Introduction

Reforming research assessment is a cornerstone for achieving Open Science and the ambition of the European Union to realise the “fifth freedom”, the free circulation of knowledge and thus a renewed and credible European Research Area (ERA).

There is consensus among stakeholders that reform should move beyond a narrow focus on publication-based metrics, such as journal impact factor and h-index, which have long dominated the research landscape. Instead, new systems must recognize the full range of research outputs, including Open Science contributions, societal impact, research data sharing, and infrastructure development. Responsible metrics should be at the core of reform: while quantitative measures have their place, indicators must be contextualized by field and career stage.

While the 2022 Agreement on Reforming Research Assessment (CoARA) marked an important step, implementation across Europe remains uneven. The CoARA agreement represents the voluntary backbone of this transformation, yet its sustainability depends on the alignment of national frameworks, funding conditions, and institutional cultures, and subsequently mutual recognition of a broader and more responsible assessment practice within the different fields of research.

While research assessment is being addressed as part of the current ERA Policy Agenda (2025-2027) through Structural Policy 5, the forthcoming ERA Act provides a valuable opportunity to consolidate and scale these efforts by embedding the principles of responsible, qualitative, and open assessment into the legal and policy foundations of the ERA.

This paper, informed by practitioner discussions held during the EARMA Open Science Thematic Group World Café (October 2025), identifies practical challenges and emerging good practices in assessment reform and suggests policy recommendations for the ERA Act.

Challenges & Opportunities

With almost 800 CoARA members, the movement towards assessment reform has a strong momentum in Europe. However, **fragmentation and uneven implementation** is a challenge. Even in countries with strong policy frameworks, institutional uptake remains inconsistent. Furthermore, there is a **persistence of legacy metrics**. Across Europe, researchers continue to experience pressure to publish in high-impact journals, even when open access and alternative dissemination routes are encouraged.

A second obstacle relates to **cultural resistance and fear of change**. While many training opportunities exist for early-career researchers, recruitment and promotion as well as proposal evaluation, funding evaluation and promotion panels are often insufficiently trained in new

assessment approaches. The result is a “preaching to the converted” dynamic, where those already committed to reform engage in dialogue, but institutional decision-makers remain anchored to older evaluation logics.

A third challenge is **the lack of recognition for research support professionals**. Data stewards, open science coordinators, and research managers play a central role in enabling responsible assessment, yet their contributions are seldom acknowledged in institutional reward structures.

Finally, **infrastructural issues** remain a critical bottleneck. The development of interoperable systems emphasising consistent high-quality, broad-ranging data, is integral to widening assessment. For example, compliance with the Barcelona Declaration is heavily dependent on appropriate technical infrastructure." A related aspect concerns **the dependency on proprietary bibliometric systems**. The reliance on commercial databases such as Web of Science and Scopus restricts transparency and limits Europe's capacity to evaluate research on its own terms. Efforts such as Germany's **Kompetenznetzwerk Bibliometrie**, and open platforms like **OpenAlex** show a path toward publicly governed, transparent alternatives. However, these remain isolated initiatives in the absence of European-level coordination.

However, the World Café discussions at the EARMA Open Science Thematic Group Event revealed several rich initiatives that demonstrate how reform can be implemented effectively: **Italy's** model allows early-career researchers to select varied metrics for assessment, supporting researcher autonomy and responsible evaluation. **France** has developed strong policy foundations for Open Science through national coordination between ministries, libraries, and research institutions, while **Germany** is investing in open, transparent data infrastructures to avoid dependence on commercial bibliometric systems. In **Norway** the National Board of Scholarly Publishing has decided to gradually implement data from OpenAlex, as a first step to reduce dependence on commercial bibliometric systems.

In the **Netherlands**, the narrative CV is broadly implemented as the preferred format to address the merit of the candidates to national funding.¹ Similarly, in **Portugal** the national funding foundation (FCT) addresses the merit of the candidate of all the calls (individual and project funding) using the narrative CV. Also, several institutions make available the possibility for professors and other researchers to opt for qualitative evaluation (based in several aspects of their career and addressing the specificity of particular areas).

Finally, some universities and research centers across Europe have voluntarily dropped out of commercial ranking systems.

Recommendations

Infrastructure - Data - People

1. The **principles of responsible and open assessment** should be explicitly codified in the ERA Act as included in the Agreement on Research Assessment Reform. These principles should require that evaluation processes should include qualitative criteria, be transparent, and evidence-based, and that they recognise a diversity of research outputs and roles. Assessment should value openness, reproducibility, collaboration, and societal relevance alongside academic excellence.
2. The Commission should establish a **European Research Assessment Observatory**. This body could track and benchmark implementation of CoARA commitments, monitor the use of open infrastructures, and support mutual learning and sharing of best practices between Member States. Such an observatory should seek to align and maximise on the diversity of projects - complete and ongoing - that seek to support the advancement of research assessment, e.g. GRASPOS, ABOARD, OPUS.
3. Seeking to leverage existing initiatives, such as NOR-CAM, FIN-CAM and the OpenAIRE Monitor infrastructure, it would prove timely for the EU to invest in a **dedicated European**

¹ <https://recognitionrewards.nl/>

- initiative** - provisionally entitled EU-CAM - which could include not only an assessment matrix but also support the creation of an open bibliometric and impact data system.
4. In recognition of the uneven adoption of research assessment reform and the reality of a “first mover disadvantage”, particularly for smaller institutions that remain disproportionately reliant on traditional metrics and rankings—a ERA wide **national system of incentives** should be considered. Such a system could include:
 - a. **Dedicated Funding Streams:** Competitive grants or performance-based allocations for institutions that implement responsible research assessment frameworks aligned with Open Science principles.
 - b. **Recognition in National Rankings:** Adjust national evaluation exercises to reward institutions that adopt qualitative, narrative-based assessment and broaden criteria beyond publication metrics.
 - c. **Capacity-Building Support:** Support for development of
 - d. **shared infrastructure** (e.g., national repositories, data management platforms) and training programs to reduce the resource burden on smaller institutions.
 - e. **Public Recognition and Awards:** Establish national awards or accreditation schemes for institutions demonstrating leadership in reform, creating reputational benefits that offset perceived risks.
 - f. **Collaborative Pilots:** Fund multi-institutional pilots to test new assessment models, enabling smaller institutions to participate without bearing full implementation costs."
 5. **Systematic training** of evaluators, reviewers, and recruitment panels, as well as HR-personnel and Research Managers, is needed to ensure that reforms are implemented consistently and fairly.
 6. **Regular reviews and inclusive consultation processes** must recognize the voices of all research contributors, including support staff, early-career researchers, and non-traditional roles.
 7. The development of **interoperable technical infrastructure that prioritises consistent, high-quality, and broad-ranging data** is fundamental to widening research assessment and enabling meaningful reform. Without shared standards and systems, efforts to move beyond narrow publication metrics risk fragmentation and inequity. This should include
 - a. Horizon Europe or Digital Europe calls specifically for interoperable research information systems, focusing on persistent identifiers (ORCID, DOI), metadata standards (CERIF, Dublin Core), and APIs for data exchange.
 - b. Ring-fenced funds for smaller institutions to adopt and integrate these systems.
 - c. Compliance with open, interoperable standards (e.g., OpenAIRE guidelines, EOSC interoperability framework) in all EU-funded projects.
 - d. An EU-wide interoperability roadmap aligned with CoARA principles, ensuring national systems can connect seamlessly. Encourage national-level coordination through EU-funded networks to avoid duplication and fragmentation.
 - e. Funding for technical training programmes for research offices and IT teams on implementing interoperable systems.

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