



University of
Strathclyde
Glasgow

Reforming Research Assessment at Strathclyde: A five-year CoARA action plan

Background

Strathclyde is committed to enabling research activity that adheres to the highest standards of research integrity, underpinned by a positive research culture.

Following seminal initiatives such as [the San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment \(DORA, 2013\)](#), [the Leiden Manifesto \(2015\)](#) and [the Metric Tide Report \(2016\)](#), there is now broad agreement amongst the research community that reform of research assessment is required to promote sustainable research quality and strengthen research cultures. Critical reflections on systems of research measurement and assessment have highlighted the consequences of poor research assessment practices, including the misapplication of narrow quality criteria leading to distorted incentives and unsustainable pressures on researchers (Curry et al., 2020)¹. In addition, the interactions between research assessment and other shifts in the academic landscape (such as the drive to open scholarship; concerns over research integrity; and overdue attention being paid to issues of equality, diversity, bullying and harassment) have become more apparent and urgent (Curry, Gadd & Wilsdon, 2022)².

As a result, sector discussions have shifted towards ‘responsible research assessment’, an umbrella term for approaches to assessment which **incentivise, reflect and reward the plural characteristics of high-quality research, in support of diverse and inclusive research cultures** (Curry et al., 2020). Embedding responsible research assessment practices enables research organisations to support positive research cultures, ensure that assessment practices stay relevant as research processes and the expectations of research evolve, and keep up with the increasing demands placed on research by the many societal, environmental, democratic and economic challenges we face. Responsible research practice is also sensitive to context, meaning that research organisations retain their autonomy and can design assessments that promote their institutional values.

As a socially progressive and values-led institution, Strathclyde recognises that world-leading research must be underpinned by a positive research culture that recognises and rewards quality in all its forms, promotes research integrity and supports the career development of all staff involved in research. To achieve this research assessment procedures must support our values as a signatory to DORA and our responsibilities under [the Concordat to Support Research Integrity](#), [the Concordat to Support Researcher Development](#) and [the Technician Commitment](#). Strathclyde has already undertaken action in this area, including revising the Research Code of Practice, our main research policy document, in line with sector developments for research integrity and producing an accompanying Guide to Good Research Practice as an interactive resource to promote best practice. Both of these documents include sections on best practice in research assessment. Under the Researcher Development Concordat, research culture has gained institutional profile, with the expansion to the remit of a sub-committee of the University’s Research and Knowledge Exchange Committee (the Research Development and Culture Sub-Committee) and the establishment of a Research Culture Concordat Working Group to drive progress. To support technical staff, an action plan has been implemented to address the Commitment’s themes of visibility, sustainability, career development and recognition. Strathclyde is committed to further development in this area and for this reason signed the [Agreement on Reforming Research Assessment \(ARRA\)](#) and became a founding member of the associated [Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment \(CoARA\)](#) in November 2022. This demonstrates Strathclyde’s dedication to making tangible improvements to research assessment, and research culture more broadly, in line with our shared University values to be bold, innovative, collaborative, ambitious and people-oriented.

¹ Curry et al. (2020). The changing role of funders in responsible research assessment: progress, obstacles and the way ahead. *RoRI Working Paper*, 3. <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.13227914.v1>

² Curry, Stephen; Gadd, Elizabeth; Wilsdon, James (2022). Harnessing the Metric Tide: indicators, infrastructures & priorities for UK responsible research assessment.. Research on Research Institute. Report. <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.21701624.v2>

Reforming Research Assessment

By joining CoARA, Strathclyde committed to reforming research assessment practices in order to recognise the diverse outputs, practices and activities that maximise the quality and impact of research. To this end, Strathclyde has agreed to base its actions relating to research assessment on the principles as set out in the Agreement on Reforming Research Assessment (ARRA). This includes designing assessment criteria and processes that emphasise quality, impact, diversity, inclusiveness and collaboration. Regarding the overarching conditions of research assessment, processes and practices should ensure that ethics and integrity: are never compromised by any counterincentives; safeguard freedom of scientific research; respect the autonomy of research organisations; and ensure independence and transparency of the data, infrastructure and criteria necessary for research assessment.

The ARRA synthesizes and expands upon existing initiatives to create a single, comprehensive document relating to responsible research assessment, with defined commitments and collaborative structures. These shared commitments for research assessment reform, to be achieved in an agreed timeframe, will enable recognition of the diverse outputs, practices and activities that maximise the quality of research and its resulting impacts, facilitate a move away from inappropriate uses of journal- and publication-based metrics, and reinforce trust in research. Our CoARA commitments include:

1. **Recognise 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 organisations in research assessment.

These core commitments are supported by six practical commitments - three commitments to enable the move towards new research assessment criteria, tools and processes, and three commitments to facilitate mutual learning, communicate progress and ensure that new approaches are evidence informed:

5. **Commit resources to reforming research assessment** as is needed to achieve the organisational 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.

As a member of CoARA, Strathclyde agrees to communicate progress made and exchange good practice with other members of the Coalition. A key method for achieving this is through the creation of a five-year action plan for reform, which all members of CoARA are required to produce. To align with the timeframe for the Research Excellence Framework, the national UK research assessment exercise, which has significant influence on many of the research assessment processes within UK HEIs, Strathclyde has agreed that this action plan will cover the five-year time period January 2024 – December 2028 to allow for evaluation of REF 2028 preparations and submission.

Scope

Strathclyde's ambition for responsible research assessment applies across the institution to all processes and procedures where research assessment occurs. As stated in the ARRA, research assessment encompasses:

- The assessment of research performing organisations and research units, by assessment authorities, research funding and research performing organisations, for the purposes of allocating funding; public investment accountability; informing decisions on research priorities and improving the definition and implementation of research strategies.
- The assessment of research projects by assessment authorities, research funding and research performing organisations, and prize awarding organisations; for the purposes of allocating funding, informing project management and future research funding decisions, and making prize and award decisions.
- The assessment of individual researchers and research teams by research funding and research performing organisations and prize awarding organisations; for the purposes of allocating funding, recruitment and hiring promotion, professional development review, and prize and award decisions.

It should be noted that processes such as recruitment, promotion and professional development review can include research assessment regardless of the contract type of the staff member. For example, teaching-only staff are often engaged in secondary research to inform research-integrated teaching and many are also involved in primary research. As such, any staff member engaged in research will be considered to fit with the term 'researcher' in the definition above. Similarly, research-enabling staff, such as research technical professionals or those in professional services directorates and faculty offices, contribute to the research endeavour in a variety of ways and should therefore be considered part of the 'research team' in the definition above. As part of our commitment to recognise the diversity of contributions to, and careers in, research, Strathclyde commits to using a broad approach to the terms 'researcher' and 'research team' to include all staff involved in the research endeavour when identifying in-scope research assessment processes.

Performance reviews of institutions, which often consider activities beyond research, are outside the scope of the ARRA. Nonetheless, it is recognised that research performance often plays a key role in performance reviews and benchmarking at an institutional level, and therefore the learning from reforming in-scope processes will be fed into these wider evaluation activities to avoid trickle-down effects on research and researcher assessment. For example, where the use of institutional rankings to benchmark is unavoidable due to the current higher education context, mitigations will be encouraged to reduce impact on researchers, research projects and research units, such as communicating the limitations of such measures and advising on appropriate communications.

Our vision for reform

As articulated in our People Strategy, Strathclyde strives to create an exceptional, values-led work environment where colleagues feel deeply connected with the University's Strategic Plan and have the skills, motivation and reward for delivering it. In order to achieve this, it is pivotal that research assessment processes align with the University's values and recognise and reward the diverse range of contributions to the research endeavour. Moreover, research assessment processes must accurately and appropriately assess what they set out to, without creating incentives for behaviours that are contrary to our values and goals. Strathclyde will deliver a coordinated approach to embed responsible research assessment practices across the institution, thereby supporting sustainable and diversified research quality, strengthening the research culture, and promoting research integrity.

Recognising the multi-faceted nature of research assessment, which lies within the remit of multiple teams across Strathclyde, the University will establish an institutional Responsible Research Assessment Framework to promote comprehensive reform, overseen by a dedicated Working Group with representatives from the groups responsible for delivery of research assessment processes. The Working Group will agree the core principles of responsible research assessment to be promoted across the institution, will implement reforms to research assessment processes and will develop the Responsible Research Assessment Framework to bring together relevant policies and guidance and promote transparency in research assessment. To develop greater literacy and competencies in responsible research assessment across the institution, training and development will be incorporated into the Responsible Research Assessment Framework. The Working Group will sit directly under the University's Research and Knowledge Exchange Committee (RKEC) to maintain a high profile for research assessment reform and to enable dynamic interaction with all relevant RKEC sub-committees and groups (in particular the Research Sub-Committee, the Research Development and Culture Sub-Committee and the REF Strategic Leadership Group).

Capitalising on the wide remit of the Research Policy and Information Team - which includes leading on delivery of the REF 2028 submission and ensuring compliance with research initiatives such as CoARA, DORA and the Research Integrity Concordat – responsible preparations for the REF 2028 submission will be a key feature of activities in this monitoring period. Given the significant amount of funding attached to the REF results, REF can have a permeating effect on internal research assessment processes within universities. Examples of poor practice to boost REF performance have been noted in the sector. As a people-oriented organisation, Strathclyde will uphold its commitment to responsible research assessment throughout REF preparations and deliver the REF 2028 submission without compromising on our responsibilities as a member of CoARA. The Strathclyde REF Code of Practice will form a core part of the Responsible Research Assessment Framework, as an exemplar of responsible research assessment practice. Beyond the Research Policy and Information Team, all teams represented on the Working Group will be supported to review and revise key research assessment processes, working together to share good practice and learning across the institution. Throughout the process, the Working Group will regularly engage with the diverse research community to ensure reforms are appropriate and of benefit. Including the voice of the research community in this way will also promote engagement with reforms and enable identification of potentially negative unintended consequences. Engagement across the institution will also be encouraged via transparent communication about revised processes and regular progress reports.

This vision translates into the following actionable objectives:

1. To understand the challenges and opportunities for reforming research assessment at Strathclyde in consultation with the diverse research community.
2. To establish a comprehensive Responsible Research Assessment Framework to support research quality and research integrity at Strathclyde.
3. To embed consideration of RRA into key research assessment procedures, ensuring transparent communication of assessment criteria and processes.
4. To complete the REF 2028 exercise without compromising on Strathclyde's values and responsibilities.
5. To communicate progress made and raise awareness of research assessment reform both internally and externally.

Actions

Strathclyde is committed to undertaking the activity necessary to achieve our objectives by the end of 2028. In line with the need for responsible research assessment to be sensitive to its context and in recognition that notions of best practices will change in this timeframe, broad aims and actions are outlined for each year of the action plan. For the calendar years 2025-2028, these overarching actions will be refined into specific actions by the Responsible Research Assessment Framework Working Group each year. Progress against actions from the previous year and a detailed action plan for the following year will be presented to the Research and Knowledge Exchange Committee (RKEC) at the November meeting each year. For the calendar year 2024, the detailed action plan has been approved by RKEC.

2024: Establish and Engage

Drawing on knowledge gained through development of Strathclyde's activity under the Researcher Development Concordat, the first year of the action plan will focus on identification of the challenges and opportunities relating to research assessment reform at Strathclyde and building relationships with necessary stakeholders to foster engagement going forwards. The primary outcomes for this year therefore are the completion of a gap analysis on research assessment, the establishment of the institutional working group and initial engagement activities with the research community. During this year, consultations on the draft REF 2028 guidance and panel criteria will be a key opportunity to support reform of research assessment nationwide.

- 1.1 Establish an institutional working group to develop the Responsible Research Assessment Framework and lead on delivery of the action plan.
- 1.2 Undertake a gap analysis on research assessment to identify the challenges and opportunities at Strathclyde.
- 1.3 Support national reform of research assessment via REF 2028 consultations.
- 1.4 Raise awareness of research assessment reform at Strathclyde via internal communications.
- 1.5 Engage with CoARA working groups, national chapter and/or general assembly as appropriate to support systemic reform, exchange good practice and monitor global progress.

2025: Review and Revise

The aim of activity in 2025 will be to identify priority procedures based on the gap analysis and design necessary reforms. Colleagues responsible for delivery of the processes will be supported to develop responsible assessment reforms using the [INORMS SCOPE framework](#), a practical step-by-step process designed to support the design of responsible research assessment practices. Once the reforms have been designed, colleagues will complete equality impact assessments and develop the guidance and infrastructure necessary for effective implementation. Throughout, the Working Group will communicate on their activities internally and externally to promote transparency and share good practice. It is expected that the final submission guidance for REF 2028 will have been published in late 2024, therefore revisions to the Strathclyde REF Code of Practice and associated procedures will be finalised in this year.

- 2.1 Identify priority procedures for this reporting period, based on the outcomes of the gap analysis.
- 2.2 Design reforms to priority procedures in accordance with RRA principles, evidence and best practice and in consultation with the research community.
- 2.3 Develop necessary resources to implement reforms, such as guidance documents or training for those involved.
- 2.4 Revise the Strathclyde REF Code of Practice in line with best practice in responsible research assessment to provide an example of implementation of the principles of responsible research assessment for future reforms.
- 2.5 Communicate progress made internally to staff and students, including promoting transparency in reforms and disseminating success stories.
- 2.6 Engage with CoARA working groups, national chapter and/or general assembly as appropriate to support systemic reform, exchange good practice and monitor global progress.

2026: Implement and Innovate

In 2026, proposed reforms will be implemented with ongoing monitoring to check reforms are addressing our commitments. This will include adherence to the Strathclyde REF Code of Practice in REF 2028 preparations and the Research Quality Review. Guidance and criteria relevant to the reformed procedures will be made available under the Responsible Research Assessment Framework to promote transparency and engagement with reforms. As with all years, the Working Group will continue to engage with the research community and communicate on activities internally and externally.

- 3.1 Implement reformed procedures with ongoing monitoring, such as user feedback, to inform further refinements.
- 3.2 Promote transparency in research assessment via the publication of guidance and criteria relevant to reformed procedures as part of the Responsible Research Assessment Framework.
- 3.3 Prepare for the REF 2028 submission through the procedures established in the Strathclyde REF Code of Practice.
- 3.4 Communicate progress made internally to staff and students and externally via CoARA working groups, national chapter and/or general assembly as appropriate.

2027: Refine and Repeat

Recognising that responsible research assessment must be adaptable and responsive to changes in the University and the sector, as well as feedback from those involved, reforms will be implemented for two years before formal evaluation. This will enable lessons about implementing responsive adjustments to be incorporated in the Responsible Research Assessment Framework. It will also allow a greater number of staff to experience reforms in procedures that do not necessarily apply to all staff involved in research each year, such as promotion, recruitment and reward and recognition procedures. As such, in 2027, necessary adjustments identified in 2026 will be made to refine procedures and the procedures will be run again. Continued monitoring will inform ongoing refinements. Communication internally and externally will promote transparency and engagement. In late 2027, the REF 2028 submission will also be completed.

- 4.1 Refine reformed procedures where required based on emerging feedback from those involved as well as evidence and developments from the sector to ensure reforms are responsive to evolving challenges and opportunities.
- 4.2 Complete another iteration of reformed procedures to implement adjustments and give opportunity for more individuals to engage with procedures.
- 4.3 Complete the Strathclyde REF 2028 submission.
- 4.4 Communicate internally to staff and students and externally via CoARA working groups, national chapter and/or general assembly as appropriate, including a progress report to CoARA in fulfilment of the requirement to report after 5 years of signing.

2028: Evaluate and Evolve

In 2028, a formal evaluation will be conducted to assess the success of reforms in addressing the CoARA commitments and the stated objectives of this action plan. This will include gathering feedback from those involved in reformed procedures (including those who run the procedures as well as those they apply to) to understand varied perspectives on whether reforms were appropriate and of benefit. Equality impact assessments will also be revisited to monitor the impact of reforms. Outcomes from these evaluations will be used to inform further adjustments and to develop implementation guidelines for future research assessment reforms.

- 5.1 Run formal evaluations of reformed procedures, including the Research Quality Review and REF 2028 preparations, to identify strengths, weaknesses and areas for further improvement.
- 5.2 Develop implementation guidelines for research assessment reform based on the outcomes of reforms achieved in this monitoring period, including practical recommendations for implementing the principles of responsible research assessment effectively.
- 5.3 Communicate progress made internally to staff and students and externally via CoARA working groups, national chapter and/or general assembly as appropriate.

