

**University of Florence**  
**CoARA Action Plan 2024-2028**

*Version 1.0, 28/05/2024*

## Introduction

Since early 2022, the University of Florence (UNIFI) has adhered to the establishment of the [European Coalition on the Reform of Research Assessment \(CoARA\)](#). In November 2022, UNIFI signed the [Agreement on Reforming Research Assessment \(ARRA\)](#), officially joining the Coalition.

By endorsing the CoARA Commitments, the University of Florence aims to contribute to the reform of the assessment of research, researchers and research organisations, with proper recognition of the diverse outputs, practices and activities, to enhance the quality and impact of research.

The University of Florence's contribution to the Coalition activities is twofold. On the one side this Action Plan outlines the activities to be implemented within the organisation to meet the CoARA commitments. On the other side, since 2023 UNIFI has adhered to three CoARA Working Groups and to the Italian National Chapter and it has been actively contributing to the activities and deliverables foreseen in each one of them.

Additionally, the University of Florence has been committed to the HR Excellence in Research (hereinafter HRS4R) process since 2014, obtaining the HRS4R award in 2018. Taking into account the strong synergies between the European Charter and Code Principles and the CoARA Commitments, the efforts of the University of Florence will be based on a strong and continuous coordination and harmonisation between the measures proposed in the CoARA Action Plan and those included in the periodic [HRS4R Action Plans](#). Both plans enjoy strong political support from the University governance and are part of the broader framework of the University's periodic Strategic Plans, which encompass all institutional commitments.

## Vision and mission

In its [Strategic Plan 2022-2024](#) the University of Florence points out its commitment towards inclusiveness, sustainability and responsibility.

### Vision

The University envisions consolidating its *status* as a leading academic and research Institution, excelling both nationally and internationally, by focusing on key areas such as:

- **Education:** Training of responsible and skilled citizens, who are well-prepared to tackle contemporary societal, professional, and technological challenges;
- **Research:** Conducting high-quality, internationally-recognized research that addresses global challenges and contributes significantly to societal growth. This involves strong collaboration and dialogue with relevant stakeholders;
- **Community Engagement and public outreach:** Promoting welfare and democracy through the transfer of research findings. The University aims to foster a collaborative, open, and inclusive environment that supports personal and professional development beyond its walls.

- **Inclusivity and Sustainability:** Enhancing inclusion policies and fostering sustainable growth in alignment with the UNs' 2030 Agenda, the EU Cohesion Policy 2021-2027, the National Research Plan (PNR) and Italy's Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR).

## Mission

The mission of the University of Florence encompasses:

- Promoting high level research and teaching activities, with a constant commitment towards innovation and inclusivity;
- Contributing to technological advancements and addressing societal challenges, while fostering social, cultural, and economic growth at local, national, and international levels.

As far as **Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)** are concerned, the University of Florence strategic planning specifically focuses on:

- 3 - Good Health and Wellbeing
- 4- Quality Education
- 5 - Gender Equality
- 7 - Affordable and Clean Energy
- 8 - Decent Work and Economic Growth
- 9 - Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure
- 10 - Reduced Inequalities
- 11 - Sustainable Cities and Communities
- 13 - Climate Action
- 16 - Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions
- 17 - Partnerships for the Goals

All Actions and activities promoted by the University of Florence are constantly inspired, among others, by the following core values:

- Sustainability
- Responsibility
- Inclusion
- 360-degree health
- Transparency and Rule of Law
- Internationalisation and Cooperation
- Expertise and excellence
- Lifelong learning
- Right to Education and Training
- Plurality, diversity and care to the contribution of all disciplines

UNIFI's strategic objectives are defined over **four strategic areas. Each area encompasses specific actions accompanied by relevant quantitative and qualitative indicators and targets:**

1. **Innovative Teaching**, addressing the challenges of society, work, and technology through innovative teaching methods and curricula.

2. **Innovative Research**, advancing high-quality, internationally recognized research that pushes the boundaries of knowledge and innovation.
3. **Research Impact on Society**, enhancing democracy and welfare by transferring research outcomes to society and maximizing their positive societal impact.
4. **Responsibility, Sustainability and Quality**, fostering a culture of responsibility, and promoting environmental, economic and social sustainability, along with quality assurance measures.

In essence, CoARA's principles align with the University of Florence's strategic objectives to enhance research quality, promote open science, ensure integrity in research, foster diversity and inclusion, support young researchers, and encourage interdisciplinary research.

## State of the Art of Research Assessment at UNIFI

The research assessment framework at UNIFI is primarily bound by national legislation. The evaluation is performed by the National Agency for the Evaluation of the University System and Research (hereinafter ANVUR), following the guidelines and principles set forth by the Ministry of Education and Research (hereinafter MUR), namely the Evaluation of Research Quality (VQR) in its last version [Ministry Decree 998](#) issued on August 1st 2023.

The national legal framework provides a comprehensive set of criteria for assessing research organisations such as higher education institutions and individual researchers. VQR is a strategic tool that plays an increasingly crucial role in measuring the quality of universities, directly influencing the distribution of resources allocated by MUR to each University, in particular the performance-based share of the Fondo di Finanziamento Ordinario (FFO) – the Ordinary Financing Fund for the Italian University system.

In alignment with national guidelines, UNIFI has implemented the following internal regulations for research assessment:

- [Regulation for Research Assessment and Self-Assessment Activities](#), including basic principles underpinning research assessment at the University level.
- Regulation for the [Evaluation of Professors and Researchers](#), which sets forth the criteria and procedures for evaluating faculty members.
- Regulation for the annual [evaluation of](#) tenured professors and researchers concerning [research and teaching activities performed](#).
- Regulation including relevant [criteria for Professors and Researchers Career Advancement](#).

At a central level, UNIFI has established an internal Quality Assurance (QA) system to monitor the conditions under which research activities are carried out, i.e. to define the research objectives, to implement necessary measures to achieve them while removing - whenever possible - any obstacles and barriers, to observe the smooth progress of the planned activities and to verify the degree to which the objectives have been met.

Through this system UNIFI continuously monitors the scientific output of faculty members, ensuring transparency and facilitating continuous improvement through IT tools that support analysis, review, and evaluation activities.

At central level the QA System is based on the following bodies:

1. **Evaluation Board (Nucleo di Valutazione)**. Established by the University Statute, this external board is responsible for assessing research activities and related support activities. In line with ANVUR's guidelines, it conducts evaluations of facilities and personnel to promote both organisational and individual performance ([link](#))
2. **Quality Praesidium (Presidio Qualità)**. This internal body oversees the implementation of the University's QA procedures, supports and enacts QA policies for training and research, and promotes a culture of quality. It carries out surveillance, monitoring, and internal auditing activities. Additionally, the Quality Praesidium organises information and training activities for personnel and contributes to the initiatives related to the implementation of quality policies linked to training and research ([link](#))
3. **Research Observatory (Osservatorio della Ricerca)**: Established by resolutions of the Academic Senate and the Board of Directors in March 2018, the Research Observatory ([link](#)) is composed of 10 high-profile scientific experts across the three main ERC fields (Physical Sciences and Engineering, Life Sciences, and Social Sciences and Humanities). The Observatory monitors research activities and quality of research outputs through a continuous improvement approach. It prepares periodic reports to verify the consistency and enhance the quality of research activities and inform the Departments' strategies, working closely with the Quality Praesidium, the Evaluation Board, and the Departments (see the next Paragraph).

Research activities within the University are performed at the **Department level**, where Departments are responsible for establishing, declaring, and pursuing quality research and third mission (outreach) policies aimed at realising their strategic vision in alignment with the University's policies. Each Department must submit to UNIFI Governing bodies an Annual Report, which serves as a critical tool for defining departmental strategies and policies for QA of teaching, research, and third mission (outreach) activities. The report monitors results and identifies objectives for the year/triennium to come. It provides a concise presentation of the Department's organisation, activities, and resources and includes essential elements of the self-assessment process with reference to its activities and objectives. Departmental reports must be approved by the Department Council before being forwarded to the Evaluation Board, the Quality Praesidium, and the Academic Senate.

## Key challenges of Research Assessment

Since the existing research assessment framework at UNIFI is primarily bound by **national legislation**, the full and widespread application of new research evaluation methods, in agreement with the CoARA principles, will require robust support at the national level to be applied by individual universities. The criteria for allocating financial resources to Italian universities (particularly the FFO performance-based share and tied funds) and the national procedures for recruiting university professors (Abilitazione Scientifica Nazionale, ASN) heavily rely on research quality assessment protocols that clearly influence the approach that institutions and individual researchers take towards their activities.

However, it is noteworthy that these procedures are increasingly incorporating aspects consistent with CoARA's principles (e.g. peer review, responsible use of quantitative indicators, research impact, diversification of research outputs). Furthermore, the involvement of ANVUR itself within CoARA emphasises a strong national commitment towards the implementation of CoARA Commitments.

### UNIFI's Commitment and Strategic Objectives

Despite the constraints of national legislation, the University of Florence has room for intervention. UNIFI's signature of the CoARA Agreement (November 2022), shortly after adopting the Strategic Plan 2022-2024 (June 2022), highlights an existing strategic commitment to enhancing the quality and impact of research in society. This commitment promotes a collaborative, inclusive environment attentive to personal and professional growth. In particular, the following objectives from Strategic Area "2. Research Quality" of the Strategic Plan align closely with CoARA principles:

- 2.1.3 - Develop University criteria for the qualitative assessment of research and outreach activities, taking into account the diversity and complexity of the fields;
- 2.1.4 - Promote Open Access and Open Science policies;
- 2.2.3 - Educate for integrity in research;
- 2.3.2 - Foster diversity and inclusion in research teams;
- 2.3.3 - Support the scientific autonomy of young researchers;
- 2.4.3 - Promote inter- and trans-disciplinary basic research.

Additionally, the **Gender Equality Plan** and the annual **Action Plans** aimed at maintaining the **HRS4R award** further support the fulfilment of CoARA commitments.

### Identified Challenges

Leaving aside the external research assessment by ANVUR (VQR) and focusing on the processes where the University of Florence can intervene, the following challenges have been identified:

- **Promoting a culture of research integrity:** Establishing and maintaining high standards of integrity in research and evaluation practices.
- **Promoting the Responsible use of quantitative indicators:**
  - Utilising metrics and indicators responsibly, ensuring they are paired with qualitative assessments for faculty members recruitment, with proper consideration of outreach activities
  - Developing and implementing qualitative and inclusive assessment criteria in the recruitment procedures for Early Stage Researchers - ESRs (PhD students, tenure-track researchers - RTT, postdoctoral fellows...) by offering at the same time dedicated training sessions to evaluation boards on the same principles
  - Strengthening qualitative evaluation criteria that acknowledge the diversity and complexity of various research fields for allocation of internal grants and University research funding.
- **Fostering Diversity and Inclusion:** Ensuring that research teams are diverse and inclusive, providing equal opportunities for all researchers.
- **Supporting Early Stage Researchers:** Enhancing the scientific autonomy and career development of ESRs.
- **Encouraging Inter- and Trans-disciplinary Research:** Promoting research that crosses disciplinary boundaries to address complex global challenges.

## Action Plan Implementation

The process of reforming internal research evaluation methods will involve different actors in the various project phases of preparing, implementing and monitoring the CoARA Action Plan:

- For the definition of the strategic aspects of the Plan (key principles, priority areas of intervention, etc.) the **steering committee** set up for the HRS4R process is going to be involved, including the Rector, Vice Rector for Research (Prof.ssa Debora Berti), Vice Rector for Legality and Transparency (Prof. Erik Longo), Vice Rector for Human Resources (Prof. Luigi Burrone) and a representative from the Statistics Department (Prof. Bruno Bertaccini).
- UNIFI representatives in CoARA Working Groups: Prof. Stefano Cannicci (representative in the “Improving practices in the assessment of research proposals” WG, and Rector’s Delegate for PhD students), Prof.ssa Maria Paola Monaco (representative in the [TIER - Towards an Inclusive Evaluation of Research](#) WG and Rector’s Delegate for Inclusion Policies) and Dr. Giovanni Forzieri (representative in the TTT Impact WG).
- a **working group** will be set up to provide technical support for the preparation, implementation and monitoring of the Plan, with representatives from the following administrative areas: Research Infrastructures and Services, Human Resources, Central Management (Planning Support, QA and Evaluation Unit).
- The **Research Observatory** will be involved for advice on evaluation methods and tools.
- For the integration of the new evaluation methods in the research Quality Assurance processes, the **Quality Assurance Committee** will be involved.

- In order to **foster the participation of the academic community**, the Committee of Department Directors, the Research Commission and Research Ambassadors in the Departments are going to be involved.

An annual monitoring of the Action Plan and the methods developed is envisaged, and a review of the Action Plan after the first two-year period. The review will also take into account the evidence that will become available in the Coalition following the gradual implementation or testing phase of the new methods in the various institutions. To this end, UNIFI will make available within the framework of the working groups the elements gathered in order to foster a shared approach.

Any financial/staff/infrastructural resources required for the implementation of the foreseen measures (including communication measures) will be assessed against budgetary constraints and the overall sustainability of the plan, and submitted to the competent governing bodies (Board of Directors) for approval.



## Action Plan

ID	Actions	Related CoARA commitments	Deadline	Responsibility
1	<p><b>Gap analysis</b> The process of reforming research evaluation methods will start with a gap analysis of existing practices on various processes (recruitment and career progression, individual evaluation of researchers, allocation of university funding to researchers and projects, distribution of resources to departments, etc.).</p>	All	Q2 2025	COARA Working Group
2	<p><b>Participation in COARA Activities</b> Participation in the CoARA Working Group on “Improving practices in the assessment of research proposals”</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Recognise the diversity of contributions</li> <li>2. Base research assessment primarily on qualitative evaluation</li> <li>3. Abandon inappropriate use of journals and publication based metrics</li> <li>6. Review and develop research assessment criteria, tools and processes</li> <li>8. Exchange practices and experiences</li> <li>9. Communicate Progress</li> </ol>	Q3 2028	COARA WG Representative  COARA Steering Committee
3	<p><b>Participation in COARA Activities</b> Participation in the CoARA Working Group on “TIER - Towards an Inclusive Evaluation of Research”</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>6. Review and develop research assessment criteria, tools and processes</li> <li>8. Exchange practices and experiences</li> <li>9. Communicate Progress</li> </ol>	Q3 2028	COARA WG Representative  COARA Steering Committee
4	<p><b>Participation in COARA Activities</b> Participation in the TTT Impact Working group “Towards Transformations: Transdisciplinarity, Applied/Practice-Based Research, and Impact”</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>6. Review and develop research assessment criteria, tools and processes</li> </ol>	Q3 2028	COARA WG Representative  COARA Steering Committee
5	<p><b>Participation in COARA Activities</b></p>	All	Q3 2028	COARA

	Participation in the COARA Italian National Chapter			Steering Committee
<b>6</b>	<p><b>Carrying on the HRS4R process</b> Continuous implementation within the University of Florence of the European Charter and Code Principles.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Recognise the diversity of contributions</li> <li>2. Base research assessment primarily on qualitative evaluation</li> <li>6. Review and develop research assessment criteria, tools and processes</li> <li>7. Raise awareness of research assessment</li> <li>8. Exchange practices and experiences</li> <li>9. Communicate Progress</li> <li>10. Evaluate practices criteria and tools</li> </ol>	Continuously during the 5 years	HRS4R Working Group and Steering Committee
<b>7</b>	<p><b>Promoting a culture of research integrity</b> Revision of the existing internal guidelines on research integrity by taking into account ethics related implications of the more recent scientific and technological developments</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>7. Raise awareness of research assessment</li> </ol>	Q3 2025	TBD
<b>8</b>	<p>Transposition in the <b>internal calls for funding</b> (research projects, infrastructure, public engagement and outreach activities) of qualitative criteria, also by incorporating the results of the CoARA WGs UNIFI is part of (in particular the WG on “Improving practices in the assessment of research proposals” and the “TTT Impact” WG).</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Recognise the diversity of contributions</li> <li>2. Base research assessment primarily on qualitative evaluation</li> <li>6. Review and develop research assessment criteria, tools and processes</li> <li>10. Evaluate practices criteria and tools</li> </ol>	Q3 2028	TBD
<b>9</b>	<p><b>Continuous training of evaluation committees/boards members</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Awareness-raising on the responsible use of quantitative metrics, through information material that distinguishes the cases in which their use is considered appropriate, also following the arguments of the Leiden Manifesto</li> <li>- Drawing up and disseminating guidelines for the assessment of projects financed by the University in line with CoARA principles, also by making use of the outputs/deliverables of the CoARA WGs. For example, <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- TIER Working Group</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Recognise the diversity of contributions</li> <li>2. Base research assessment primarily on qualitative evaluation</li> <li>6. Review and develop research assessment criteria, tools and processes</li> <li>7. Raise awareness of research assessment</li> <li>8. Exchange practices and experiences</li> <li>9. Communicate Progress</li> </ol>	Q3 2028	TBD

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Tool-guide to counteract systematic and unconscious biases in evaluation processes;</li> <li>- Recorded gender counter-stereotype training courses for evaluators.</li> <li>- TTT Impact Working Group, the “White paper on societal impact of research” expected for Q3 2024.</li> </ul>			
10	<p><b>Awareness raising</b> about CoARA’s principles and their implementation within UNIFI through:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- university website (news, ads, dedicated section)</li> <li>- internal newsletters</li> <li>- soft skills training focused especially on Early Career Researchers (ECRs) to raise their transversal competences</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>7. Raise awareness of research assessment</li> <li>8. Exchange practices and experiences</li> <li>9. Communicate Progress</li> </ul>	Continuously during the 5 years	COARA Working Group
11	<p><b>Participation in the policy reflection</b> on the revision of National criteria for VQR (e.g. via the participation of UNIFI’s Rector in the Conference of Italian University Rectors - CRUI and the participation of UNIFI’s Head of the Research Infrastructure and Services Area in the CODAU - Conference of Directors General of University Administrations - working groups, and other policy fora)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>6. Review and develop research assessment criteria, tools and processes</li> <li>8. Exchange practices and experiences</li> </ul>	Continuously during the 5 years	UNIFI Governance
12	<p><b>Monitoring, reviewing and updating the Action Plan</b> communicating regularly on the achieved progress, also by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Including ad hoc questions in the HRS4R consultation of the academic community scheduled for 2026-2027</li> <li>• Making use of the results of WP3 of the Horizon Europe CoARA Boost project</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>6. Review and develop research assessment criteria, tools and processes</li> <li>7. Raise awareness of research assessment</li> <li>8. Exchange practices and experiences</li> <li>9. Communicate Progress</li> </ul>	Continuously throughout the 5 years	COARA Working Group and Steering Committee