



## **COARA Action Plan 2024-2028**

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### **Introduction**

The University of Ferrara (Unife) joined the European Coalition on the Reform of Research Assessment (COARA) at the end of 2022, signing the *Agreement on Reforming Research Assessment* (ARRA) which emphasises the need to establish new shared rules for assessing research, researchers and research institutions.

The guiding principles of the University of Ferrara align with the 10 commitments of the ARRA, which aim for a new approach to research where inclusiveness, collaboration, transparency, quality, impact and efficiency are the cornerstones of the system. The University of Ferrara acknowledges that the assessment of research and researchers should recognise all types of research outputs, practices and activities and consider different career stages.

Unife has taken the opportunity provided by COARA to continue its long-established path toward changing its approach to research evaluation.

## Guiding principles

The University Statue recognises that all disciplines have equal dignity and that equal opportunities in accessing to research funding, facilities and tools should be guaranteed. The University has consistently promoted equal opportunities without discrimination based on gender, career stage or research area.

As shown by criteria already adopted for allocating internal resources dedicated to research, the University prioritises quality over quantity in research assessment. Unife is firmly confident that greater attention should be paid to the impact and the content of research rather than the publication itself. Another fundamental principle is the equitable distribution of resources. The University of Ferrara is committed to ensuring that younger and under-represented groups of researchers have fair development opportunities in our academic community promoting several calls dedicated to young researchers. Additionally, the University strongly believes that research contributions are not limited to traditional publications and is committed to supporting and rewarding all forms of research activities, including *Public Engagement* and technology transfer.

## Challenges

One of the main challenges is the national regulatory framework and the subsequent procedures related to the periodic exercises of national Research Quality Assessment (Valutazione della Qualità della Ricerca, VQR) and the National Scientific Habilitation (Abilitazione Scientifica Nazionale, ASN). The change should be realised taking account of it. National assessment procedures are one of the factors considered by the Ministry for the distribution of funds and resources. The current way of operating the assessment of research and research outputs can have a significant impact on several aspects including how researchers are trained and recruited conditioning individual and collective behaviours in terms of research content and methodologies, ability to improve interdisciplinary skills and scientific design. A particular internal challenge is represented by the fact that the University of Ferrara is a multidisciplinary academia where disciplines with different editorial practices and evaluation criteria coexist. A further task is to identify new criteria and indicators alternative to the traditional ones, which could consider the complexity of the activities in which the academic community is involved (teaching, research, clinical activity, Third Mission, *Public Engagement*).

## Involvement of stakeholders

The University of Ferrara is aware that the reform which is undertaking compels a deep cultural change and therefore requires, for its implementation, a long time and a strong involvement of the academic community. Therefore, it adopted a bottom-up process involving research staff, at all career stages, and the administrative staff in the analysis and identification of the processes to be changed, within the constraints of national law. To inspire the largest involvement, proposals will be discussed in all advisory boards (e.g., the

Research and the Third Mission Council and the Open Science Committee). The path will be carried out considering the University Quality Assurance System, involving the University Quality Committee. For a more effective reform, the University of Ferrara should consult with the external context through participation in national/international networks in which the best practices adopted by other institutions are studied, in order to evaluate their possible adoption or adaptation. At a national level, the University takes part in interest groups such as CRUI, CODAU, ITRN and, at international levels, is actively enrolled in several Coalition's *Working Groups* and in the National Chapter.

The University of Ferrara is committed to open communication and collecting feedback is crucial for the success of the reform. Therefore, the elements contributing to the reform will be discussed and debated internally. The collected results will be presented to the academic community and feedback and suggestions will be requested. The approval of the reform will be carried out by the Central Academic Bodies, such as the Academic Senate and the Board of Directors.

## Implementation

Aware that change can meet resistance, the University decided to take a gradual, step-by-step approach to achieve incremental results while involving the entire academic community.

After joining the Coalition, by the end of 2022, the University of Ferrara undertook a reflection process whose first result was, in 2024, the review of the previous "Open Access Policy" that became the "University Policy on Open Science", released in January 2024. In particular, as Open Access is identified as an added value in evaluation processes, the opportunity of testing new assessment criteria, both qualitative and quantitative, as well as new indicators, also digital, based on Open access contributions, is envisaged. In 2024, the University also undertook the pathway to obtain the HR *Excellence in Research Award*, which European Commission recognises to the institutions that, through a personalised action plan, start aligning their human resources policies with the principles of the European Charter and the Code of Researchers. The University will take advantage of several points of contact between the principles of the European Charter of Researchers and the commitments of the Coalition exploiting synergies in order to achieve cultural change and overcome resistance. The University also joined the EOSC Association (European Open Science Cloud Advancing Open Science in Europe) which operates to promote Open Science at the service of new knowledge creation, inspiring education, stimulating innovation and endorsing accessibility and transparency.

In addition, a stepwise revision of internal calls for the inhouse distribution of funding has started, prioritizing high-quality research results over mere numerical productivity, enhancing and encouraging collaboration, multidisciplinary, interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity.

In the coming years, recruiting principles will be revised focusing on comprehensive research quality, instead of considering only quantitative factors, encouraging the consideration of a wide range of research results and avoiding bias.

Below are the areas in which the University of Ferrara will take in the period 2024-2028 to implement change.

### **Recognition of the different contributions of researchers' activities to career development**

Within the self-government allowed by the current regulatory and institutional framework, it is well established that to obtain quality research the full acknowledgement of every researcher, regardless of the discipline and the field of research, is crucial. The principles for fostering and encouraging quality research include but are not limited to ensuring the individual freedom of researchers; adopting assessment practices that do not discourage particularly complex, long and uncertain research lines, also supporting studies exploring new fields, proposing new ideas, alternative and critical approaches to existing paradigms; acknowledge the value of various disciplines that have equal dignity and rigor, while distinguishing the variety of approaches, techniques and methodologies; recognise the value of interdisciplinarity, multidisciplinary and collaboration between scholars; the University considers the social role of research, as the impact that research produces in the social and cultural context in which it operates, involving understanding societal needs and interacting with the community to bring positive effects; the enhancement of teaching. However, these principles are totally embraced by the *Human Resources Strategy for Researchers* (HRS4R) to which the *HR Excellence in Research Award* is linked.

The University also recognises the importance of all activities carried out by researchers and is taking concrete measures to ensure that the various research contributions are valued. For several years, the University of Ferrara has provided funding for researchers through a call for proposals to evaluate "Third Mission" activities. In this context, a considerable effort has been made to strengthen computing resources in order to track and trace more effectively contributions to the third mission.

### **Strengthening, encouraging and exploiting the qualitative assessment of research, supported by responsible use of quantitative indicators**

After joining the Coalition, the University of Ferrara is committed to a reflection on the processes and methods adopted in assessing the results of research and research academic staff. However, adopting the peer-review for this assessment is not easily feasible. In accordance with the national regulatory framework, the Academia is considering modifying the approach based on the direct use of quantitative bibliometric indicators, recognising that the number of citations and impact indicators of the journal are not inevitably an index of quality and of the class of merit of a scientific publication. As established by the "Policy on Open Science", the University plans to test new evaluation criteria based on Open Access contributions. For the definition of the new assessment principles, attention will be paid to distinguishing elements that can be quantitatively measured (number of publications, number of citations, amount of funding obtained) with respect to elements for which a

quantitative assessment in terms of excellence, quality, value and impact is more appropriate.

The periodic exercises of National Research Quality Assessment and the procedures for the National Scientific Habilitation of researchers, although only partially, take into account bibliometric indicators, as the JIF and the H-index. These indicators cannot therefore be completely abandoned. However, the University of Ferrara believes that they should not be the major basis of evaluation and should be associated with qualitative parameters. The University is committed to evaluating the practices that other national and international institutions, whether members of the Coalition or not, will make available on new indicators, metrics and criteria alternative to the H-index and the Journal Impact Factor. The University of Ferrara encourages its researchers to contribute to the international debate and actively collaborate with colleagues from other institutions in the development and validation of these new parameters that will need to be adapted to the differences between disciplines and the different career stages. To this end, Unife promotes an in-depth discussion of the diversities in methodologies and assessment tools across the diverse areas, to share needs, criticalities and possible solutions. These discussions will first be implemented internally, across all levels of academic careers and, subsequently, to be shared with the broader academic community. The debate will also include an extensive discussion about the aspects and effects of using AI in the evaluation phase.

### **Responsible use of rankings of research organisations in research assessment**

The University of Ferrara collects and sends its own data for ranking processing. The Academia, however, does not consider these rankings, which regard only institutions, to evaluate neither researchers nor other organisations, but exclusively for reputational purposes.

### **Awareness of the research evaluation reform and full sharing**

The University is sure that the implementation of the reform process of research assessment, which, as already mentioned, requires a cultural change, can be successful only with the highest involvement of the academic community at all levels. The reform process will involve not only the University Governance but also the Vice Rector for Research, the Research and Third Mission Council, the University Research Quality Committee, all research staff, and the administrative staff involved in the relevant procedures. To achieve this reform, the University plans to revise the Internal Regulations that will transpose the indications of the European Charter and the Code of Researchers, verifying the presence of open, transparent and merit-oriented recruitment policies. The revised documents will be made available to evaluated researchers and to the evaluators. The academic staff involved in the Working Groups of the Coalition and in the National Chapter will share the progress at the national level and within the institution. The most suitable tools for such sharing will be established each time. For a long time, the University of Ferrara has provided training on Open Science and Open Access topics. Further initiatives are planned to include also the FAIR principles and the COARA vision.

## **Exchange of good practices and experiences**

The reform of research assessment is a process involving, with variable intensity, all the world's research institutions, as well as assessment agencies and Countries. Therefore, its implementation cannot be separated from the exchange of good practices and experiences, that can contribute to a better understanding of transformation, to the identification of causes of resistance and ways to overcome them in addition to identifying, developing and validating new assessment methodologies. As anticipated, the experiences and good practices sharing will start within the institution and regional network, promoting collaboration and mutual learning. The University is also contributing to national and international debate on the reform of research assessment (for example through the national COARA chapter), sharing our insights and learning from others in the field.

## **Transparent communication**

Given the relevance of reforming the research assessment system, the broadest possible communication and sharing of the reform process with researchers will be warranted. Through extensive information and the several bodies and organisations already present and active in the University (Department Councils, Research and the Third Mission Council, Research Quality Committee), criteria, tools and processes that are under review will be disclosed. Subsequently, the decisions taken by the working groups will be disseminated in the academic community after approval by the competent Bodies.

The regulations and the guidelines will be easily available through the University website and other channels.

## **Monitoring and evaluation**

The University's Quality Assurance system is based on the Deming cycle, which will also be applied to monitor this Action Plan. The objectives related to the implementation of this plan will be included in the scope of the planning tools already in use and, together with the actions necessary for their achievement, will be monitored in the regular planning and control cycle. The ongoing monitoring of this plan will be at least biennial. Feedback will be collected, and changes will be made as necessary, also considering the degree of acceptance and satisfaction expressed by the academic community, involving all relevant stakeholders in this evaluation process and ensuring that everyone can contribute to shaping the future of research assessment. The Academic Bodies are responsible for approving new versions of the plan.

## **Conclusions**

To guide the institution toward the reform, the University employs the existing planning tools, including related objectives in the Strategic Plan and in the Integrated Plan of Activities and Organization (Piano integrato di attività e organizzazione, PIAO), such as the development and improvement of the research environment, the promotion of the exploitation and the monitoring of research products with environmental, economic and social sustainability within the Institutional repository SFERA; the support for cultural change towards Open

Science, to foster and sustain the openness of research data and publications; strengthening the capacity for developing Third Mission initiatives through the exploitation and protection of intellectual property, enhancing and expanding Public Engagement, increasing resources for business creation and the commercialisation of research results, and activating, increasing, and consolidating relationships with relevant organisations and local stakeholders; and promoting gender equality in recruitment and career progression.

This Action Plan, after the approval of Academic Bodies, will be made public through the institutional website and the repository Zenodo, both in the Community “UnifeZen” (dedicated to staff affiliated with the University of Ferrara) and in the Community “*Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment - Action plans from signatories and members*”.

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