

# Slowly forward, almost backward. Reforming European Research Evaluation in Italy: Executive Summary

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### 1. COARA commitments and Italian signatories

#### *a. Commitments*

- I. recognize the diversity of researchers' contributions and careers
- II. base research evaluation primarily on qualitative evaluations focused on peer review, supported by responsible use of quantitative indicators
- III. abandon the inappropriate use in research evaluation of journal- and publication-based metrics such as JIF and H-index
- IV. avoid the use of rankings of research organizations in research evaluation ([Pievatolo](#), 3)

COARA's commitments assume prior adherence to the practices of Open Science, which have long been supported and promoted by the European Union.<sup>1</sup>

#### *b. Italian signatories*

The Italian institutions that have joined COARA form the largest national group, after those of Spain and immediately before those of Poland ([Borrelli](#), 2);<sup>2</sup> the Italian ANVUR is among

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1 "Research assessment should enable evaluating the performance of researchers and research to achieve the highest quality and impact. As highlighted in the 2022 Paris call on research assessment, in the scoping report 'Towards a reform of the research assessment system' published by the Commission in 2021 and based on a broad consultation with stakeholders, in the Council Conclusions on 'Research assessment and implementation of Open Science' of 10 June 2022, and in the Agreement on Reforming Research Assessment published in July 2022, a proper evaluation of performance requires a recognition of increasingly diverse research outputs, activities and practices, including collaboration and open sharing of outputs, and ensuring high research integrity standards and societal impact of research. Researcher assessment should therefore move to a more balanced approach between the quantitative and qualitative evaluation of research, by favouring qualitative assessment with peer-review, supported by responsible use of quantitative indicators": summary included in the [Recommendation of 18 December 2023 on a European framework to attract and retain research, innovation and entrepreneurial talents in Europe](#).

2 At the round table, Barbara Pasa, whose university has not yet joined COARA but is likely to do so, said that her colleagues ignore everything about COARA, starting with the meaning of the acronym.

the 20 assessment agencies that have signed the COARA agreement. Of the 61 Italian state universities, 39 have joined.

## 2. Implementation of commitments by April 19, 2024

### a. Universities

In terms of local assessment, universities could have implemented commitments III and IV immediately. However, all but two<sup>3</sup> of the 26 universities known to us continue to provide data to QS and THE. And only 8 out of 26 universities say they do not use containers (like journals) to assess content ([Borrelli](#), 18). The University of Bologna has launched a process of discussion, awareness raising and internal review, but is aware that "the most important challenge is the national regulations on the recruitment of researchers and university professors, where there are some issues that cannot be resolved without legislative action."<sup>4</sup>

### b. Research institutions

The CNR has initiated the reform by incorporating the principles contained in the first three commitments of CoARA in the procedure for the career advancement of researchers and technologists. The CNR is also very active in the field of research on research, by participating in national and international projects for the definition of criteria and the development of infrastructures allowing to recognize and promote open science practices. The action plan to be published will include further actions, particularly in the field of education and outreach to the scientific community, which can only be the main actor in the ongoing reform.<sup>5</sup>

The other signatory organizations (INGV, ISPRA, INFN and OGS: 5 out of 20) have only just begun to analyze the processes of the agreement: organizations such as INGV welcome the recognition of their diverse research activities and the initiative of researchers, as well as the reform of peer review, although with doubts about open peer review due to the strong antagonism between schools of thought.<sup>6</sup>

### c. Scientific societies

While AISA has already prepared its action plan, there are scientific societies, such as the American Chemical Society, that profit from publishing activities, including those outsourced to oligopolistic commercial publishers, and are unlikely to embrace the principles of open science.<sup>7</sup>

### d. ANVUR

Thanks to the latitude of the COARA commitments, ANVUR has maintained the use of bibliometrics in the VQR 2020-2024, flanking it with a mandate to accompany it with qualitative judgments,<sup>8</sup> and has minimized the Open Access requirement ([Pievatolo](#), 6-7).

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3 The two universities that do not provide data to THE e QS do so because they are not asked.

4 Francesca Masini, intervention in the round table discussion.

5 Francesca Di Donato, intervention in the round table discussion.

6 Anna Grazia Chiodetti, intervention in the round table discussion.

7 Stefano Bianco, intervention in the round table discussion.

8 Speaking at the round table, Massimo Grassi noted that both the papers to be evaluated and the qualitative motivations for the evaluation can be written with generative AI systems: this renders meaningless the game of evaluating texts understood as "products". Daniela Tafani added that language generators predict text strings on a probabilistic basis. As they have no reference to truth and falsehood, they are almost useless for research and, in general, almost only useful for fraud, manipulation and propaganda.

Nevertheless, it has managed to violate them by imposing bibliometric requirements<sup>9</sup> that are strict and not complementary to qualitative judgments, for researchers to be:

- drawable to be part of the 75% of GEV members in the 2020-2024 VQR.
- appointable by ANVUR if the draw does not produce groups with the required qualifications
- appointable by ANVUR in the 25% of GEV members from which ANVUR itself selects the coordinators.
- eligible for national scientific qualification (ASN)
- drawable as ASN commissioners ([Pievatolo](#), 8).

ANVUR seems unwilling or unable to abandon forms of quantitative assessment based exclusively and not complementarily on journals. By doing so, it contributes to perpetuate monopoly and oligopoly situations both nationally and internationally ([Pievatolo](#), 11) This jeopardizes the outcome of the COARA initiative in Italy: locally encouraging researchers to deviate from ANVUR evaluation criteria may harm universities whose funding is also determined by the results of the latter.

### **3. Who evaluates research? Who is entitled to do so and for what purpose?**

COARA does not explicitly address these issues, leaving itself open to the criticism that it is based on an model of "responsible technocracy."<sup>10</sup>

A serious legal and philosophical discussion should begin with three questions ([Caso](#), 2-3):

- 1) Who has the power to evaluate?
- 2) Does this power come from law (and administrative hierarchy) or from science?
- 3) And if the power to evaluate depends on law and administrative hierarchy, why is it hidden behind quantitative indicators?<sup>11</sup>

In Italy, the law - and not the scientific community - assigns the power to evaluate public research to the government, and in particular to the ministry of university and ANVUR. ANVUR is not an independent agency, but an emanation of the ministry. Therefore, the evaluation power of the ministry and ANVUR is bureaucratic and not scientific ([Caso](#), 11; [Pievatolo](#), 15-16).

COARA should take into account the above three questions and the Italian experience. These questions and experiences are closely intertwined with other fundamental questions concerning the European Union, which plays such an important role in COARA, and COARA itself:

- i. When the European Union uses the term "open science", what concept of science is it referring to? To a notion of science that is instrumental to the market and political power, or to an autonomous and independent science?

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9 On the basis of proprietary forms of bibliometrics when open alternatives are being promoted elsewhere ([Galimberti](#))

10 [Baccini](#), 15. Moreover, it is not clear to whom the evaluators are responsible or accountable.

11 They publish books and academic articles on research evaluation in order to gain legitimacy beyond the bureaucratic hierarchy. This is a mission impossible ([Caso](#), 15-17), because the discussion among governmental evaluators acting as scholars and the evaluated scholars is not a discussion among peers: this fundamentally violates the principle of peer review.

- ii. When COARA discusses how to reform research evaluation, does it take into account the current laws, the distribution of evaluative power they establish, and the kind of evaluation that they determine? ([Caso](#), 24)

#### **4. Executive recommendations**

1. For the Italian feasibility of the European evaluation reform, consider whether and how the ANVUR could - or could not - honor the commitments it has signed, so that they can be made implementable by all Italian institutions under its heel.

2. Encourage COARA to reflect on the legal rules of evaluation, the distribution of evaluation powers they determine and the nature of evaluation itself.