



Changes to application  
processes to reduce  
likelihood of bias in  
outcomes: An FNR  
case study

## Introduction

Funding organisations are increasingly working to address inequalities in the grant life cycle. However, until recently, less attention has been paid to inequalities at the pre-award stage – which includes announcing opportunities, and preparing, submitting, and reviewing applications. A 2022-23 project on this topic, led by the [Elizabeth Blackwell Institute](#) at the University of Bristol with support from [MoreBrains Cooperative](#), resulted in [11 concrete recommendations](#) for how funders and institutions could help improve equality, diversity, inclusion, and transparency in the process of applying for research funding. Subsequent work with the Declaration on Open Research Assessment ([DORA](#)) funder discussion group identified three priority [recommendations](#) for funding organisations. This case study has been developed as part of a follow-up University of Bristol-funded project focusing specifically on how funders can implement some of these recommendations.

[Luxembourg National Research Fund](#) (Fonds National de la Recherche – FNR) responded to a call by DORA for examples of work currently being carried out by funding organisations on changes to application processes to reduce likelihood of bias in outcomes. This case study focuses on their work in this area to implement a narrative CV format.

The case study is based on information provided by FNR by email and via a 30-minute interview with Sean Sepcariu, Programme Manager, who has also reviewed it for accuracy.

## About FNR

FNR is the main funder of research activities in Luxembourg, investing public funds and private donations into research projects in various branches of science and the humanities. The organisation also supports and coordinates activities to strengthen the link between science and society and to raise awareness for research, as well as advising the Luxembourg government on research policy and strategy.

## The challenge

FNR is seeking to reduce biases during the proposal evaluation process. To enable the necessary culture change, in 2021 the organisation implemented a narrative-style curriculum vitae (CV), which allows applicants to include a broader range of their research outputs and outcomes for evaluation.

## Guidance for applicants, reviewers, and evaluators

As well as requiring a new format and templates for the applicants, changing to a narrative CV also had implications for reviewers and evaluators. FNR has worked to provide extensive guidance for applicants, including annual training opportunities. However, there has been less of a drive to provide formal support for reviewers, partly due to a lack of resources (FNR is a small funder), and partly to enable the reviewer/evaluator approaches to evolve organically over time.

In the meantime, evaluation panels are provided with a video, which is played at in-person sessions and sent as a link for written evaluations. FNR has also updated reviewer guidelines, to clarify how the materials they will be evaluating differ from previous versions and to provide guidance on what feedback FNR is seeking from their reviewers. FNR also anticipates that reviewers will simply become more accustomed to narrative CVs over time. The organisation recognises that this is a long-term initiative; the hope is that it will ultimately result in the current generation of early career researchers developing evaluation skills that are compatible with responsible research assessment in the future.

## The experience

The funding world has evolved into more of a community in recent years. As a relatively small national funder, FNR felt empowered to take this step because it aligns with the work of other funders in this area, as well as with efforts by organisations like the [Research on Research Institute \(RoRI\)](#) and DORA to evaluate the effectiveness of narrative CVs and provide best practices for implementing them.

## Results to date

Recognising that culture change takes time, FNR is taking the long view and looking out for incremental indications of change. However, feedback from both applicants and evaluators already shows a general and sustained acceptance of the change, and more data will be available in the future.

FNR has noticed different types of discussions in their panels and reviews.. For example, DORA is being mentioned by name, and parts of the narrative CV are being explicitly included in proposal evaluations. Even those who are potentially resistant or antagonistic to some DORA principles are taking part in discussions about these issues, and taking the time to understand how the narrative content meets (or doesn't meet) FNR goals.

Informal feedback indicates that many applicants were initially hostile to the narrative CV concept, often concerned that it would take longer to prepare their proposals. However, on reflection, applicants felt more positive about the process. Adapting to the process was relatively straightforward, with the CV simply acting as context for the proposal. By shifting the focus from pure citation metrics such as *h*-indices, proposals become focused on 'I have a good idea and I am motivated to see it through', i.e. it's the proposed work, not the CV, that is important.

FNR awards highlight examples of good research activities in Luxembourg in different areas. The emphasis of these awards has changed in recent years, both in terms of the achievements that are highlighted – from outstanding publication being broadened, for instance, to outstanding outreach or mentorship – as well as the forms and processes. This, in turn, has changed the language at the annual award ceremony, from frequent mentions of *Nature* and *Science* to a focus on teams and people, drive, and motivation: “You used to have individuals on stage, now you have whole teams.”

An additional benefit from this exercise was that FNR was able to remove some administrative burden from the pre-award processes by aligning reporting requirements across all programmes, assessing them to see what data was actually being used, and removing the redundant information.

## Conclusions

In FNR's opinion, this has been a good practice example of implementing change around responsible research assessment. Importantly, the organisation is ensuring that the community is well-supported through the transition both, by providing guidance and by encouraging feedback that FNR takes into account in order to further improve the processes.

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