The Agreement on Reforming Research Assessment

What it is and why the University is signing

Introduction

On 23 March 2023 the University Executive Board approved a proposal put forward by the Committee on Open Research and Research Integrity to sign the **Agreement on Reforming Research Assessment**.

This briefing explains what the Agreement is, why the University is signing it, and what the implications of signing are.

About the Agreement

The **Agreement on Reforming Research Assessment** (2022) was published by representatives from the European University Association, Science Europe, and the European Commission, and was developed through wide-ranging consultation with stakeholder organisations focused on EU Members States and Associated Countries. In the words of the Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment:

> *The Agreement on Reforming Research Assessment sets a shared direction for changes in assessment practices for research, researchers and research performing organisations, with the overarching goal to maximise the quality and impact of research. The Agreement includes the principles, commitments and timeframe for reforms and lays out the principles for a Coalition of organisations willing to work together in implementing the changes.*
>
> *Signatories will commit to a common vision, which is that the assessment of research, researchers and research organisations recognises the diverse outputs, practices and activities that maximise the quality and impact of research. This requires basing assessment primarily on qualitative judgement, for which peer-review is central, supported by responsible use of quantitative indicators.*
>
> *The reform movement underpinned by the Agreement and the Coalition aims to be an inclusive and collaborative space to advance together towards a higher quality, more impactful and more efficient and inclusive research system. It offers a platform for piloting and experimentation, developing new assessment criteria, methods and tools, and for joint, critical reflection,*

©University of Reading 2023

exchange of good practices and mutual learning, while fully respecting the autonomy of organisations.

Supported by the work of the Coalition, organisations will decide on the steps to take to implement the commitments and the pace in their reform journey, which can vary depending on the context […] and the strategic goals and mission of each organisation.

Institutions that sign the Agreement agree to undertake a reform of their research assessment criteria, tools and processes in line with its Principles and core Commitments. These build on and harmonise with the widely recognised principles of the **San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment** (DORA), the **Metric Tide** report (2015) and the **Leiden Manifesto for Research Metrics**, on which the University's **Statement on Responsible Use of Metrics in Research** is based.

The Principles:

- describe research assessment as an essentially qualitative exercise, in which quantitative indicators should be used responsibly and with appropriate qualification;
- emphasise the need for assessment to recognise a diversity of contributions and outputs beyond publications, and to be undertaken in a fair and transparent manner; and
- acknowledge and value the diversity in research roles and career pathways, and support practices that promote gender equality, equal opportunities and inclusiveness.

The Agreement recognises that current research assessment practices are often lacking in fairness, robustness and transparency, and that the case for reform is established and pressing. By signing the Agreement, institutions join the Coalition and agree to:

- 'share with each other and with their community how their organisation has started the process of reviewing or developing criteria, tools and processes in line with the core Commitments and according to an action plan with defined milestones, by the end of 2023 or within one year of signing the Agreement';
- 'regularly demonstrate progress towards reviewing, developing and evaluating criteria, tools and processes that fulfil the core Commitments, with a touch point at end of 2027 or within five years of signing the Agreement'.[1]

The Coalition is in the early stages of formation, but to date has 531 international signatories, including, in the UK, the universities of Edinburgh, Loughborough, Strathclyde and Swansea, UKRI and the UK Research Integrity Office. We expect that most UK institutions will join the Coalition in the coming years.

[1] https://coara.eu/agreement/the-timeframe/.

Background at this University

In March 2022 the Committee on Open Research and Research Integrity (CORRI) established a **Research Evaluation in Recruitment and Promotion Working Group**, chaired by Professor Adrian Bell, Research Dean for Prosperity & Resilience, and including representation from colleagues from professional services and the research community. The aim of the group is to identify and make proposals to CORRI on the best approach to implement effective and auditable responsible research assessment practices in the recruitment and promotion of researchers, and to include the use of Open Research criteria in relevant frameworks.[2]

Preliminary observation undertaken by the Working Group indicates that current practice in recruitment and promotion on the part of both candidates and committees largely lacks reference to principles of responsible research assessment, and that deprecated metrics such as the **H-index** and the **Journal Impact Factor** are still routinely referenced. Use of Open Research criteria was found to be practically non-existent. These findings have reinforced the need for the University to reform its policy and procedure and put in place the guidance and support that will empower members of staff adopt and use the best practice methods of research assessment practices.

Why the University has signed the Agreement

The San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA) is 10 years old this year, but research assessment practice has not evolved far or fast enough. Reform of research assessment is necessary, and will become more urgent as time goes on.

The University is committed to the use of fair and transparent methods for the selection, development and promotion of researchers based on the quality of their research. To give these principles effect, this University, like all others, needs to change. We will be signing the Agreement for the following reasons.

- Signing will be a significant milestone on the journey towards researcher assessment processes that are demonstrably fairer and more transparent than those currently used. This will promote better recognition of diverse roles and careers in research, and of a broader range of outputs beyond publications. The Agreement explicitly promotes gender equality, equal opportunities and inclusiveness and is in line with the University's commitment to diversity and inclusion.
- Research assessment reform needs global concerted action. The Agreement is a set of firm commitments to action. Signatories will form a 'coalition of the willing' who, through mutual learning, have the best chance of engendering real change.
- Joining the Coalition will ensure the University's interests are represented and that it has access to the latest resources and developments.

[2] See the University's Statement on Open Research: https://www.reading.ac.uk/research/research-environment/open-research.

- Over 40 international research funders have already signed. Many funders recognise the vital importance of fair and transparent research assessment to a healthy research culture, and have expectations that research organisations will adopt appropriate practices. Research England already expects institutions in receipt of QR funding to adhere to principles of responsible assessment.
- The next REF will seek to support institutions in developing better research cultures. Poor research assessment is one of the key drivers of poor research cultures. Signing the Agreement and committing to research assessment reform will position the University to respond to enhanced expectations around responsible research assessment that can be expected in the next REF.

What will happen after the University signs?

The Research Evaluation in Recruitment and Promotion Working Group will be undertaking a number of activities to give effect to the Agreement:

- We will implement a **Research Assessment Policy** that enacts the principles of responsible research assessment and that includes recognition of Open Research practices.
- We will make recommendations (via appropriate University governance processes) on adjustments to criteria specified in relevant HR policies and procedures, for example recruitment, academic probation, academic promotion and the professorial pay review process. We will engage with and keep UCU, the University's recognised trade union, informed of the work we are doing and where appropriate will arrange to formally consult on proposals via appropriate mechanisms if required.
- We will develop and provide guidance and resources to support staff with implementing the Research Assessment Policy.
- We will work with a range of Schools and colleagues to pilot, evaluate and refine the Policy, guidance and resources being developed.
- We will undertake regular communications to update relevant stakeholders on our work to seek feedback, as required and to enable all to feel they can engage positively with the principles of the Agreement and Research Assessment Policy.
- We will sign DORA. The University has not yet signed DORA, because it does not have in place the systems and procedures to implement the DORA commitments. It is the aim of the Working Group to move the University to a position where we can sign DORA with confidence. This will only take place when the new Policy and its operational underpinnings have been bedded in.

©University of Reading 2023

If you have any questions or concerns about the Agreement

We welcome the opportunity to develop the conversation about research assessment reform. If you have questions or would like to invite a member of the Working Group to speak to you and your colleagues, please contact the Working Group chair, Professor Adrian Bell (a.r.bell@reading.ac.uk).

©University of Reading 2023