

ESF Action Plan

**for implementing CoARA
Commitments 2026-2029**

About

Published by ESF

June 2026

Available at: <https://www.esf.org/publications/>

Citation

For citation purposes, please use the following:
European Science Foundation - ESF (2026)
ESF Action Plan for implementing CoARA
Commitments 2026-2029. Zenodo. DOI:
10.5281/zenodo.20799186

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Introduction

The European Science Foundation (ESF) is an independent, non-profit organisation that supports research stakeholders across Europe in the design and delivery of competitive research funding schemes. While ESF does not directly fund or award research, it plays a pivotal role in **grant evaluation, peer-review management, reviewer training, and technical and financial project monitoring** on behalf of universities, funding agencies, and public authorities.

Each year, ESF provides 10,000-12,000 assessment reports of research project and fellowship applications submitted to diverse calls across various national contexts, **annually mobilising 9,000-10,000 individual expert reviewers**. ESF has built a diverse and quality-driven [Community of Experts](#) of 11,000+ researchers across 90 countries composed of experienced evaluators across all fields of science. As such, ESF plays a key role in implementing qualitative, peer-review-based research assessment in international funding systems.

ESF's research assessment and grant evaluation processes reflect established best practices in peer review and responsible research evaluation. Our processes are guided by principles set out in the [ESF Principles for Research Assessment followed by ESF Reviewers](#) (2025), which draw on the ESF's [European Peer Review Guide](#) (2011), the [Global Research Council Statement of Principles of Peer/Merit Review](#) (2018), Science Europe's [Recommendations on Research Assessment Processes](#) (2020) and the [CoARA Agreement](#) (2022). These principles ensure that ESF reviews are conducted by qualified experts, in a trustworthy, impartial, transparent, respectful, and timely manner, while recognising a diversity of relevant research contributions and outputs rather than relying on single quantitative indicators. More recently, ESF also contributed to the work of the **CoARA Working Group "Improving Practices in the Assessment of Research Proposals"** and to the report [Improving Practices in the Assessment of Research Proposals – Discussing Ways of Implementing CoARA Commitments 1, 2 and 3 in Research Funding Criteria, Procedures and Culture](#) (2026).

As the **host organisation of the CoARA Secretariat** since December 2022, ESF has further aligned its internal guidelines with the CoARA commitments and is planning further actions to support the reform across the research ecosystem. In this capacity, ESF serves as a **capacity-builder and facilitator** for research assessment. It supports its diverse partner organisations in implementing transparent, fair, and responsible evaluation processes through:

- Designing efficient, fair and tailor-made evaluation processes, adapted to the scope and objectives of each call,
- (Co-)designing and updating evaluation criteria and reviewer guidance with grant evaluation partner organisations,
- Mobilising, training, and coordinating international expert reviewers and review panel members,
- Monitoring the quality and diversity of the ESF Community of Experts serving as reviewers,

- Recruiting and training a pool of 80+ scientific teams, ESF Research Associates, responsible for reviewer identification, review panel organisation, and quality checks of review reports,
- Providing robust IT tools and online platform for application collection, assessment, process monitoring, and
- Sharing lessons learned across diverse research contexts with ESF partner organisations and the wider research community through active participation in international networks.

As a signatory of the Agreement on Reforming Research Assessment (ARRA), ESF commits to further aligning its practices with the Agreement's commitments and to **implementing and amplifying reform across the European research ecosystem** through the grant evaluation support it provides. Its position as a trusted intermediary—bridging funding organisations, researchers, and policy authorities—enables it to act as a **multiplier of good practices**: every improvement introduced into its procedures has the potential to reach multiple public and private research funding organisations, universities, project consortia, and thousands of researchers across Europe.

This Action Plan outlines how ESF will contribute to the transformation of research assessment in line with CoARA commitments over the **next four-year period (2026–2029)**. It sets out concrete actions within our mandate, identifies areas where we can support and advise our partners, and establishes a framework for monitoring and reporting progress.

In implementing these commitments, ESF recognises that disciplines differ (in output types, publication norms, collaboration practices, etc.) and commits to avoiding one-size-fits-all evaluation processes or criteria, instead offering discipline-sensitive options and guidance. Likewise, in working with a wide range of organisations, ESF recognises that evaluation cultures differ across countries and that each organisation is unique and requires a tailored approach, including in its transition towards more responsible research assessment.

ESF Actions (2026–2029)

To structure ESF's contribution to research assessment reform under the CoARA Agreement, this Action Plan is organised into six interconnected areas of ESF activity. These reflect ESF's operational role as an organisation specialising in research assessment and research funding programme management, and map directly onto CoARA commitments, such as primary reliance on qualitative expert judgement supported by the responsible use of indicators; recognition of diverse research outputs; the design of evaluation criteria tailored to specific programmes, disciplines, and evaluation contexts; ensuring diversity in reviewer pools; transparent and fair peer-review procedures; reviewer recognition and training; and the continuous improvement of assessment systems.

Implementation and progress monitoring

ESF will implement this Action Plan through annual internal review cycles, coordinated by its research assessment teams, with periodic consultation of partner organisations and external experts. Progress will be reported internally on an annual basis and externally in line with CoARA reporting requirements. KPIs will include a set of qualitative and quantitative indicators, including reviewer diversity metrics, training uptake rates, reviewer feedback scores, and the adoption of revised assessment templates by partner organisations.

Each area includes (i) **ESF's current practice**, (ii) **planned actions for 2026–2029**, and (iii) **the main CoARA commitments** it supports.

Evaluation frameworks, criteria and assessment processes

Current practice

ESF designs and implements tailored evaluation frameworks for a wide range of funding organisations, universities and research performing organisations and programme types. In many cases, these evaluation frameworks are co-developed with partner organisations and are based on qualitative expert peer review and structured evaluation criteria and scoring approaches. For ESF-designed calls, ESF ensures that evaluation criteria reflect programme objectives and are tailored to disciplinary and evaluation contexts.

Planned actions (2026–2029)

ESF will further strengthen alignment of evaluation frameworks with responsible research assessment principles and the ARRA commitments by:

1. Ensuring that ESF-designed **evaluation criteria and frameworks are informed by the CoARA commitments** and broader Responsible Research Assessment (RRA), where feasible, through co-design processes with ESF partner organisations and integrating recognition of **Open Science practices** into evaluation criteria where relevant and agreed with partner organisations;
2. Developing **internal ESF libraries of evaluation criteria and scoring approaches** aligned with the CoARA commitments by type of funding programme (e.g., fundamental research projects, inter- and transdisciplinary research, mission-driven research, early-career researcher schemes) and by disciplinary context (e.g., STEM versus SSH fields);
3. Supporting partners in moving away from inappropriate indicator-heavy assessment designs through **co-developing structured review forms** within the ESF online platform that guide reviewers toward qualitative, evidence-based assessments, and by ensuring coherent structuring and weighting of evaluation criteria to prioritise qualitative assessment.

CoARA commitments supported

- ✓ **Commitment 2:** Base research assessment primarily on qualitative evaluation, for which peer review is central, supported by the responsible use of quantitative indicators.
- ✓ **Commitment 3:** Abandon inappropriate uses of journal- and publication-based metrics in research assessment, in particular the misuse of the Journal Impact Factor (JIF) and the h-index.
- ✓ **Commitment 6:** Review and develop research assessment criteria, tools, and processes.

Reviewer training and guidance

Current practice

ESF provides general and programme-specific guidance for reviewers and panel members, including ESF research assessment principles and practices, Conflict of Interest management and handling implicit biases. Training is delivered through online briefings for panel members and written guidance for expert reviewers. [ESF Reviewer Guidelines](#) highlight ESF's principles of research assessments for ESF reviewers (e.g., expert assessment, trust, impartiality, transparency, respect and timeliness) and include the principle of responsible research assessment, stating that “evaluation of research quality needs to be based on standards of quality within the relevant discipline and definition of excellence of the specific funding programme”.

Reviewers are guided to consider a variety of relevant research outputs and activities when assessing applicants' achievements, and if any quantitative publication-based metrics are provided in the applications, reviewers should use these with due care, based on what is reliable and acceptable within their discipline or field, and not use these as the main basis of judgement. The ESF guidelines also provide general quality requirements for assessment reports to ensure substantiated, fair and unbiased qualitative expert review.

Planned actions (2026–2029)

ESF will enhance reviewer training by:

- Developing and implementing an **online training module** for reviewers participating in ESF-managed evaluation processes, introducing ESF review quality standards and the RRA principles/CoARA commitments;
- Setting up an **online library of targeted guidance materials and practical resources** for ESF reviewers covering responsible use of metrics, handling implicit bias, evaluation of Open Science practices, evaluating inter- and trans-disciplinary research, and disciplinary specificities in research assessment, based on international best practice;
- Strengthening reviewers' awareness of responsible assessment practices, including the responsible use of metrics, through **review quality checks and feedback provided**,

where necessary, to external reviewers by ESF scientific teams (who will receive dedicated training in Responsible Research Assessment);

- Evaluating training effectiveness through **post-training feedback and reviewer performance indicators** in assessment reports.

CoARA commitments supported

- ✓ **Commitment 2:** Base research assessment primarily on qualitative evaluation, for which peer review is central, supported by the responsible use of quantitative indicators.
- ✓ **Commitment 3:** Abandon inappropriate uses of journal- and publication-based metrics in research assessment, in particular the misuse of the Journal Impact Factor (JIF) and the h-index.
- ✓ **Commitment 7:** Raise awareness of research assessment reform and provide transparent communication, guidance, and training on assessment criteria and processes.

ESF Community of Experts

Current practice

ESF maintains a large, discipline-sensitive international [Community of Experts](#) comprising more than 11,000 reviewers across 90 countries. Through structured recruitment, profiling, and reviewer assignment processes, ESF ensures broad disciplinary coverage as well as geographical and gender diversity. ESF scientific teams support reviewer identification, panel composition, and quality assurance, including validation of Community membership and review reports.

To promote transparency and diversity in assessment processes, ESF applies programme-specific reviewer selection criteria and provides partner organisations with diversity indicators, including gender and geographical balance. Reviewer selection is not based on publication-based metrics alone, but on a structured multi-criteria expertise assessment (e.g., evaluation experience, career stage, disciplinary expertise, and a diversity of research outputs and profiles, including intersectoral expertise from industry and other non-academic sectors).

Around 60% of the approximately 10,000 assessment reports delivered annually by ESF are provided by members of the Community. To ensure appropriate expertise and continuously renew the pool, ESF also regularly identifies reviewers beyond the existing Community, contributing to its expansion and diversity across disciplines, sectors, and national contexts.

Planned actions (2026–2029)

ESF will further develop the **diversity within its Community of Experts** by:

- Strengthening **diversity of the ESF Community of Experts** across disciplines, geography, research career paths (e.g., researchers with hybrid careers in academia and industry) and career stages (e.g., including more early-career researchers);

- Enhancing **expert profiling within the ESF Community of Experts** to better capture diverse expertise and creating sub-colleges for researchers with evaluation experience in inter- and transdisciplinary research, intersectoral experience and knowledge transfer, leadership roles and responsibilities, ethics and research integrity, as well as Open Science practices;
- Enhancing **diversity within review panel members pools** and testing **new panel composition models** such as mixed academic and non-academic panels, with analysis of their impact on evaluation discussions and outcomes.

CoARA commitments supported

- ✓ **Commitment 1:** Recognise the diversity of contributions to, and careers in, research, in accordance with the needs and nature of the research.

Monitoring, quality assurance and evaluation of review processes

Current practice

ESF applies structured quality assurance mechanisms to ensure the consistency, fairness, and reliability of peer review outputs. This includes internal quality checks of all evaluation reports by scientific teams before they are delivered to ESF partner organisations, adherence to ESF and programme-specific guidelines and criteria, the collection of reviewer feedback after larger evaluation campaigns, and process-level monitoring (e.g. reviewer pool diversity). To ensure transparent and fair assessment, ESF has published its Guidelines for Reviewers and provides all programme-specific information and guidance, including evaluation criteria and conflict of interest rules, within the online platform for each evaluation campaign.

Planned actions (2026–2029)

ESF will strengthen its quality assurance and monitoring systems by:

- Introducing an **internal qualitative assessment system** to monitor the quality of the review reports, including adherence to the CoARA commitments and RRA principles, in addition to other criteria (expertise, clarity, etc.);
- Expanding **reviewer self-assessment** regarding their level of expertise on the topic of the assessed application across ESF evaluation processes;
- Implementing systematic **reviewer feedback surveys and post-panel exit surveys** on ESF processes, evaluation criteria, and guidance;

- Expanding **systematic diversity monitoring** by tracking, in addition to gender and geographical balance, other relevant diversity aspects across ESF reviewer pools and panels, and by providing enhanced diversity KPIs to partner organisations after each evaluation process.

CoARA commitments supported

- ✓ **Commitment 6:** Review and develop research assessment criteria, tools and processes.
- ✓ **Commitment 10:** Evaluate practices, criteria and tools based on solid evidence and state-of-the-art research on research and make data openly available for evidence gathering and research.

Peer recognition and culture change

Current practice

ESF contributes to the recognition of peer review as a key scholarly contribution by publishing annual reviewer lists on the ESF website and issuing certificates to reviewers

Planned actions (2026–2029)

ESF will further expand recognition and culture change initiatives by:

- Exploring options for the **structured recognition of peer review contributions**, including potential integration with ORCID and ESF recognition mechanisms;
- Strengthening the **evidence-based understanding of reviewer engagement and motivations** through ESF reviewer surveys (e.g., combined with reviewer feedback surveys on ESF processes, evaluation criteria, and guidance);
- Supporting a **culture of recognition and inclusiveness** by showcasing diverse reviewer contributions, including the participation of non-academic experts and early-career researchers in the peer review process, and highlighting innovative forms of engagement in ESF-supported evaluation processes.

CoARA commitments supported

- ✓ **Commitment 1:** Recognise the diversity of contributions to, and careers in, research, in accordance with the needs and nature of the research.

Peer learning, pilot activities and landscape monitoring

Current practice

ESF contributes to research assessment reform by supporting research-on-research pilot initiatives and experiments led by ESF partner organisations, as well as knowledge exchange within the research-on-research community and international knowledge-sharing networks. This includes testing new evaluation approaches and collaborating with CoARA-related initiatives.

Planned actions (2026–2029)

ESF will strengthen its system-learning role by:

- Supporting **structured pilots on innovative assessment practices** by ESF partner organisations (e.g., narrative CV-related evaluation experiments, structured review forms, adapted evaluation criteria, Open Science criteria, new review panel formats, bias mitigation interventions), and using pilot outcomes to inform ESF partner organisations and broader dissemination activities;
- Strengthening **evidence collection** from ESF-managed peer review activities for research purposes and engaging in **research on peer review processes** to inform ESF's own practices and the broader CoARA community;
- Enhancing **cross-organisational knowledge exchange** with ESF partner organisations and external stakeholders, and contributing to CoARA's shared knowledge base and international research assessment reform initiatives;
- Supporting **organisational capacity for research assessment** reform by dedicating staff time to landscape mapping of good practices, updating internal tools and templates, updating training materials, and participating in relevant CoARA-related activities and events.

CoARA commitments supported

- ✓ **Commitment 5:** Commit resources to reforming research assessment as is needed to achieve the organisational changes committed to.
- ✓ **Commitment 8:** Exchange practices and experiences to enable mutual learning within and beyond the Coalition.
- ✓ **Commitment 10:** Evaluate practices, criteria and tools based on solid evidence and state-of-the-art research on research, and make data openly available for evidence gathering and research.