



Reforming research assessment in Europe: YERUN's take on the issue

In September 2020, the European Commission (EC) launched its [Communication on a new European Research Area \(ERA\) for R&I](#) which lays out four priorities for the new ERA. One of these priorities, "Deepening the ERA", contains the strategic objective of improving the current research assessment system in Europe. This strategic objective has been further reiterated in the [Council Conclusions on the new ERA](#) of December 2020 as well as in the [Council Conclusions on attractive and sustainable researchers' careers and working conditions](#) of May 2021. The topic of research assessment is therefore high on the European Union (EU) agenda and the EC is now developing an initiative by which a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) would be signed by research performing organisations, research funding organisations, and national assessment agencies. Such an agreement would bring together all stakeholders interested in changing the research assessment system through a set of actions based on commonly established principles.

The Young European Research Universities Network (YERUN) greatly welcomes the attention that is being given to this crucial topic at EU level as well as the proposal to embrace a more qualitative approach in research assessment. The topic is complex and YERUN acknowledges the EC's constructive work, with the support of stakeholders, towards defining common principles and actions that guide future changes in the research assessment system.

This initiative represents a change in research culture, in what is assessed as excellent and what principles underpin its evaluation. Change will require resources, investments and commitment but also, and very importantly, time to be taken forward and embraced by both existing and upcoming research generations. Rather than opting for simplistic, hurried solutions, this initiative should instead trigger and facilitate the discussions towards a joint understanding of what research excellence is, and what research impact means for our society today.

With this position paper, YERUN contributes to the initiative by providing recommendations aimed at making it more inclusive, effective, and attractive for the university sector:

1. Understanding what "research assessment" means for universities.

The EC's initiative refers specifically to "research assessment". YERUN members acknowledge that the topic is complex and that change needs to start from somewhere. However, from the point of view of universities, the crucial challenge is that research assessment needs to find its appropriate place alongside the assessment of other core academic tasks, including education and service to

society. This means that research only cannot be a stand-alone element guaranteeing academic progression and that any form of assessment must be embedded within a broader career cycle composed of recruitment and selection, training and development, evaluation and promotion. In addition, assessment takes place at various levels (e.g. institutional, departmental, team, and individual), each with unique characteristics that require dedicated measures. To get universities on board, it is crucial that any proposed changes allow for a broader perspective of "academic assessment" to be taken into account.

Furthermore, referring to "academic assessment" opens the debate on how higher education institutions are evaluated and assessed, the role that research productivity plays in this assessment, and the overall relationship of higher education institutions with other sectors. Research assessment is also subject to external pressure of quantitative indicators at both national and international levels. This is why YERUN believes that both research assessment and academic assessment are relevant aspects to be considered when planning and implementing the reform of the assessment processes.

2. Fostering the circulation of existing good practices, embracing diversity and respecting autonomy.

The current research assessment landscape provides a diverse landscape of initiatives and progress across Europe. There are differences between countries, across disciplines, and among the different levels and processes of evaluation (hiring, promotion or different career levels), all of which are valuable. Many universities are already spearheading changes in research assessment which go in the direction of the principles and actions that the EC is putting forward (1),(2),(3),(4). While trying to involve as many actors as possible in a systemic change in research assessment, the EC should also facilitate the circulation and further uptake of the many existing practices that are already being implemented by individual institutions in different contexts and disciplines. Moreover, it is important that the autonomy of the institutions in the approach they choose is respected when implementing change, and that the EC continues to play a supporting role in this implementation phase.

3. Distinguishing the discussion on the reform of research assessment from the discussion on researchers' precarious careers.

A fundamental cause of precarity in research careers is rooted in the shortcomings of the current research funding system. The balance between sustainable funding and project-based funding is more

(1) **University of Konstanz:** Selection of Zukunftskolleg Research Fellows: "Criteria include diverse knowledge and qualifications such as leadership and teamwork skills, teaching or management experience, mobility and independence." Link [here](#).

(2) **University of Antwerp:** changed its recruitment policy in order to steer away from quantitative metrics and focus more on quality and potential. In addition, the university embeds education, research and service, as well as leadership skills, into the academic career promotion mechanism.

(3) **Maastricht University (UM):** Recognition & Rewards programme. UM co-leads the university sector's participation in the Dutch nationwide initiative launched by public academic institutions and funders of research. The programme aims to modernise the system of recognition and rewards of academics and research. Its main goals are the diversification and vitalisation of career paths, balancing individuals and the collective, focusing on quality, stimulating Open Science, and encouraging academic leadership. Link [here](#).

(4) **University of Bremen:** General Evaluation Criteria for Tenure Track Professors. The University of Bremen has developed a catalogue that defines criteria in the areas of a) research and development, b) academic teaching, c) academic self-administration and d) extra-academic qualification. The extra-academic qualifications include leadership skills, team competences, diversity competences and conflict management. Link [here](#).

challenging than ever. Most researchers' contracts depend on the availability of project funding. Once a project ends, even if its results are outstanding and the researcher receives a positive evaluation, the researcher's employment contract cannot be extended if the funding is discontinued. This reduces the attractiveness of research careers and is a responsibility that funders providing research funding on a project basis, rather than on a sustainable basis, often seem to downplay. Diverting such responsibility to research assessment would not be a solution. We can change the evaluation criteria, but precarity is not going to be solved if this root cause is not tackled.

4. Building a culture of qualitative assessment through adequate guidance, support, and resources.

An evaluation system that embraces a more qualitative approach requires that experts sitting in the evaluation panels have a common understanding of what it actually means to evaluate qualitatively, and that they possess the tools needed to recognise the qualitative aspects that the EC's initiative aims to introduce (i.e. Open Science, societal engagement, collaboration with other sectors, teaching excellence, etc.). Furthermore, it is important to keep in mind that the transition will require guidance, as well as more resources and time. At the moment, there are few easily available indicators to assess research quality. More joint collaboration to develop resources for qualitative assessment (e.g. provision of constructive feedback, managing the process of peer-review, etc.) should be funded and promoted. It will be important that the implementation phase includes clear EU incentives and instruments to sustain this change.

5. Enabling constructive dialogue among a wide range of stakeholders.

Commitment from universities, research funders, agencies, and national governments will be key for the EC's initiative to have a true impact. This can only be reached if the benefits are clear to every party involved. In countries where universities are subject to legislation and guidelines on what indicators to include in their research/academic assessment, it will be important to establish a constructive dialogue with the relevant policy makers at all levels (EU, national, and regional) in order to get them on board and to develop a joint approach in qualitative research assessment. Involving a wide range of stakeholders can also contribute to the alignment between the different assessment tools used at various levels (individuals, institutions, rankings, initiatives, proposals, etc.).

6. Ensuring that a “coalition of the willing” does not become a “coalition of the able”.

The EC's initiative is expected to be taken forward by a so-called “coalition of the willing”, i.e. actors wishing to embark on this process through an agreement at European level that is linked to an implementation agenda. However, it will be crucial to ensure that this initiative is attractive to all concerned actors and not only to those that have the sufficient autonomy and resources to implement changes. Otherwise, the initiative would leave institutions behind, risking exacerbating the already existing discrepancies and gaps at European level. Success and inclusivity go hand in hand.

7. Taking forward the initiative in the ERA Policy Agenda.

Reaching consensus among institutions willing to drive the change should be considered as a starting point. Continued support for implementation will be crucial, particularly during a transition phase with

universities adapting at different paces. In order to do that, political support is absolutely key. In this spirit, the EC should ensure that the topic of reforming research assessment is also included in the ERA Policy Agenda and that the university sector is actively engaged in discussions about its further development.

As representatives of young European research universities, YERUN invites EU policy makers to consider and implement the above-mentioned recommendations. YERUN also reaffirms its commitment to playing an active part in this co-creation process and to taking the initiative forward.



- About YERUN -

The Young European Research University Network (YERUN) is an umbrella organisation of young and research-focused universities in Europe, that strengthens and facilitates cooperation in the areas of scientific research, academic education and services which benefit society. The network's activities revolve around three main lines of action: policy advocacy, members' collaboration and communication. Through these activities, YERUN contributes to place young research universities on the map of Europe.

- YERUN Members -

University of Antwerp, Autonomous University of Madrid, University of Bremen, Brunel University London, University Carlos III de Madrid, University of Cyprus, Dublin City University, University of Essex, University of Eastern Finland, University of Konstanz, University of Limerick, Maastricht University, Nova University Lisbon, University Paris Dauphine, University of Rijeka, University Rome Tor Vergata, University of Southern Denmark, UiT-The Arctic University of Norway and Ulm University.



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