

CoARA Action Plan 2025:

Health Research Board, Ireland

1 About the HRB

The HRB (www.hrb.ie) is Ireland's primary health and social care research funding agency. We invest approximately €60 million annually to support research to inform health and social care policy and practice, which in turn improves people's health and contributes to economic growth.

We collaborate with a broad range of stakeholders to create an enabling environment for high-quality health research, and we have a specific remit to support patient-oriented research, population health sciences and health services research. Our grants span projects and programmes, research training and career awards, grants for collaborative research networks and research infrastructure awards. Our funded researchers work in both academic and healthcare settings and our policies and practices enable us to fund high quality research that addresses areas of current and emerging need that can be translated to maximise the impact for patients, their families and the healthcare system.

We work in partnership with the research community and with other research organisations both nationally and internationally, to actively develop collaborations to advance health research that supports effective decision making and improves health and social care.

2 HRB and responsible research assessment

The HRB has relatively modest resources compared with other large public research funders but has a longstanding reputation as a progressive organisation with a culture of listening, learning, collaboration and continuous improvement. As a funder on a small island, the HRB relies heavily on international peer review for selection of successful grant applications. Therefore, we have sought to work with, and learn from, other funders around the world when it comes to best practices in peer review (and grant assessment/management more generally) and piloting of innovative new tools and practices.

We joined [Science Europe](#) in 2013 and actively participate in its governance and working groups, many which are highly relevant to the reform of research assessment agenda. We also participate on the [Global Research Council](#) working group for responsible research assessment and we became a signatory of [San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment \(DORA\)](#) and a member of the [Ensuring Value in Research Funders' Forum \(EVIR\)](#) in 2017.

Reflecting the values and previous activities of the HRB, the HRB became a [CoARA](#) signatory in October 2022. In the first instance, we are participating in the working group on [improving practices](#)

[in the assessment of research proposals](#) and we are a member of the CoARA National Chapter in Ireland, where we work with other funders and research performing organisations. In 2024, we established an internal Community of Practice on research assessment to share insights, resources, perspectives and to collectively reform and evaluate our assessment practices, guided by the principles and commitments of CoARA.

3 HRB and CoARA

As a member of the Coalition, this document presents the actions planned by the HRB to implement the principles and commitments set out in [The Agreement on Reforming Research Assessment](#).

We are committed to a common vision where the assessment of research, researchers and research organisations recognises the diverse outputs, practices and activities that maximise the quality and impact of research; where assessment relies primarily on qualitative judgement, for which peer-review is central, supported by responsible use of quantitative indicators. We will work collaboratively with others to advance together towards a higher quality, more impactful and more efficient and inclusive research system. We are open to piloting and experimentation, developing new assessment criteria, methods and tools, and for joint, critical reflection, exchange of good practices and mutual learning.

The current HRB Strategy (<https://www.hrb.ie/about/strategy-2025/>) will end in 2025 and work is already underway to develop a new five-year Strategy (2026-2030). This Action Plan includes actions for 2025, and an updated Action Plan will be developed to align with the new strategy and associated implementation periods.

In formulating and presenting our actions, we have listed under each of the ten commitments of the CoARA Agreement existing processes and practices which we are committed to building on, reviewing and sustaining as well as additional areas of focus for 2025. Throughout our response, we also considered if there were any practices we should stop on reflection. None were identified. Actions are set out in the table below.

4 Conclusion

The HRB is already doing much which implements the CoARA commitments, other opportunities have arisen during the preparation of this plan, and better practices will continue to emerge. We will therefore annually review the implementation of actions in this plan and will remain open to adding new ones as appropriate.

We will keep actions under consideration since the implementation context may change over time. Resourcing actions appropriately is always a crucial component of success and inevitably will impact on what can be done.

The HRB puts strong emphasis not just on what we are doing to advance evidence-informed care, but also on how we are doing it. We see CoARA as an important touchstone for the continued development of our practices and look forward to engaging with others on this journey.

CoARA Commitment	HRB Actions
1. Recognise the diversity of contributions to, and careers in, research in accordance with the needs and nature of the research	<i>We will continue to:</i> - Provide a variety of schemes, each with its own focus, applicant team requirements and eligibility criteria, depending on the nature of the objectives of the scheme. - Provide support for researchers from a variety of disciplines, backgrounds and settings. Health research by its very nature, especially population health, requires the expertise of researchers from a wide range of disciplines and non-health fields (e.g., data sciences, humanities and social sciences, environmental sciences). - Recognise the importance of teams and provide direct and indirect support for the increasingly varied roles that are critical to advance high quality and impactful research but are not traditional researcher roles. This includes technical roles but also roles in knowledge brokering, regulation and governance, programme management, business development, data stewardship and public and patient involvement for example. - Provide funding within grants to enable the backfill of health and social care staff, thus incentivising them (and their managers) to pursue research with protected time and without the service being negatively impacted. - Consider professional background, career breaks and changes in career when assessing the past productivity and perhaps non-linear career progression of an applicant. - Operate a social benefits policy which provides additional costs for maternity, adoptive or paid sick leave of HRB-funded staff including post-graduate researchers. - Operate a gender policy which focusses on gender balance in decision making and in research teams, and the gender dimension in research content. Host institutions which are higher education institutions are required to have achieved a minimum of Athena Swan bronze accreditation to receive funding. - Use a narrative CV format for applicants where appropriate to recognise a broader range of research activities, contributions and outputs and to focus on quality and impacts rather than quantity of outputs.

	- In the research career portfolio, ask applicants at all levels including leadership to identify a mentor for the period of the grant. <i>In addition, we will:</i> Identify potential improvements to the information requested of applicants in order to recognise the diversity of contributions, expertise and careers. In particular, we will reflect on the planned outputs from the CoARA Working Group on <i>Improving practices in the assessment of research proposals</i>, including 'Criteria for the selection of research' (WP1) and 'Information requested from applicants' (WP3).
2. Base research assessment primarily on qualitative evaluation for which peer review is central, supported by responsible use of quantitative indicators	<i>We will continue to:</i> - Base our research assessment process primarily on international peer review. - Select expert written peer reviewers aligned to the specific content of each application and compose panels with a more generalist perspective, covering the spectrum of applications in a call. - Provide a public review to almost all schemes, where members of the public are asked to rate the quality of public and patient involvement in the development of the application and throughout the proposed work. This feeds into the selection process. - Recognise the time and effort of our panel members and public reviewers through a payment. All scientific reviewers are also offered recognition of their review service in their ORCID account. - Discourage and disallow the use of host institution rankings, journal impact factors or h-index as part of our assessment criteria, or as part of the consideration for an assessment criterion. - Ask individual reviewers to score applications using a nine-point scale with associated narrative descriptors and Panels to come to a consensus score, based on qualitative assessment criteria. Whilst there are generic descriptors in the HRB scoring matrix used for most schemes, we use bespoke descriptors or behaviourally linked anchored rating scales, particularly in low volume, high value schemes. - Operationalise a code of conduct for reviewers which addresses various dimensions of the assessment process.

- Provide applicants whose applications will be discussed by panel with a time-limited opportunity to respond to (anonymised) reviews from scientific and public reviewers. The applicant response has an important role in the final funding decision.
- Provide briefing to peer reviewers on the HRB approach to research assessment and the specifics of the call ahead of receiving applications for review and provide additional briefing to panel chairs about their role.
- Provide the verbatim comments from all written reviewers (peer, panel members and public reviewers) as feedback to applicants, as well as a summary of the panel discussion including the main reasons for the funding decision made.
- Only use quantitative metrics at the level of a grant scheme or grant portfolio rather than at the level of individual, centre or university (when assessing the impact of our investments).
- Use randomisation for selection of successful applications in a small number of appropriate grant schemes, such as summer scholarships and conference and events sponsorship schemes. To ensure transparency, we invite reps from host institution research offices to attend the selection process.

In addition, we will:

- Continuously review potential improvements in our peer review and panel processes. In particular, we will consider the outputs from the CoARA Working Group on *Improving practices in the assessment of research proposals*, including 'Selection of and guidance to reviewers on responsible research assessment practices' (WP3) outputs expected during 2025 and 'innovative assessment processes for research proposals' (WP1). We will also consider the recommendations arising from the related CoARA WG on Recognising and rewarding peer review.
- Begin work to refresh guidance for panel chairs and panel members.
- Provide staff training, in particular about handling situations where a panel member does not adhere to our guidance.

3. Abandon inappropriate uses in research assessment of journal- and publication-based metrics, in particular Journal Impact Factor (JIF) and h-index	<i>We will continue to:</i> - Discourage and disallow the use of journal impact factors or h-index as assessment criteria, or as part of the consideration for an assessment criterion. This is specifically referenced in the code of conduct for reviewers and in the panel briefing for career path schemes. - Limit the number of references in a CV, typically asking for the five most relevant to this application. Where a letter of support is requested from the host institution, we give guidance on what we expect to be covered. - Responsibly use metrics to understand the impact of our investment at the level of scheme or portfolio rather than at the level of individual, centre or university.
4. Avoid the use of rankings of research organisations in research assessment	<i>We will continue to:</i> - Avoid the use of host institution ranking as assessment criteria, or as part of the consideration for an assessment criterion.
5. Commit resources to reforming research assessment as is needed to achieve the organisational changes committed to	<i>We will continue to:</i> - Hold bi-monthly meetings of our Community of Practice in research assessment where all funding-related staff can ask questions, share ideas, discuss reforms and/ or pilots and their implementation. - Contribute to the CoARA General Assembly, to the Irish National CoARA Chapter and to the Working Group on <i>Improving practices in the assessment of research proposals (IPARP)</i>. - Contribute in-kind resources to related work as members of Science Europe, the Global Research Council and the Ensuring Value in Research Funders' Forum. <i>In addition, we will</i> - Develop a new HRB CoARA Action Plan for 2026.

6. Review and develop research assessment criteria, tools and processes

We will continue to:

- Use a wide spectrum of assessment processes tailored to the nature of each grant scheme. These range from pre-applications to using interviews, including non-scientific panel members such as public reviewers or knowledge users, virtual panels, panel review only and many others.
- Learn from and share ideas and experiences with other funders around research assessment, through fora such as EViR, Science Europe, Global Research Council, the [Research on Research Institute](#) and CoARA.
- Provide peer and public reviewers with detailed guidance.
- Prohibit the use of generative Artificial Intelligence (gen AI) by reviewers.
- Operationalise a code of conduct for reviewers which addresses various dimensions of the assessment process.
- Continue to revisit the most appropriate assessment format for existing schemes. For example, we introduced a public review parallel to the scientific review for most schemes in 2017 and re-engineered the assessment process for a summer scholar scheme to full randomisation after stringent eligibility checks in 2023.

In addition, we will:

- Consider the outputs from the CoARA Working Group on *Improving practices in the assessment of research proposals*, and possible action or pilots.
- Consider the positive and negative consequences for the assessment process arising from AI and develop a response to these, including the enhanced use of emerging AI-based tools that support the peer review and assessment process.
- Consider our policy position on the use of AI in applications.
- Explore a variety of strategies to secure the necessary breadth, number and quality of peer reviewers.
- Pilot innovative assessment formats for specific schemes.
- Explicitly use scheme logic models to frame assessment criteria and application forms.

	- In the interest of reducing burden for applicants and reviewers, conduct an initial review of our application forms to remove information which is currently requested but not strictly required for eligibility or selection stage.
7. Raise awareness of research assessment reform and provide transparent communication, guidance, and training on assessment criteria and processes as well as their use	<i>We will continue to:</i> - Develop detailed guidance notes and FAQs for each grant announcement and make them publicly available on our website. - Provide guidance on our approach, practices and policies around research assessment, in a dedicated section on our website. - Host briefing meetings/webinars for potential applicants, which may be recorded and available on our website. - Request that reviewers watch a short video about unconscious bias before accessing applications on our online grant management platform. - Provide a short briefing on unconscious bias at the start of each panel meeting. - Provide applicants with a time-limited opportunity to respond to reviewers' comments before panel meetings. - Provide opportunities for representatives from the research offices of our host institutions to observe panel meetings (subject to non-disclosure agreements and conflict of interest rules). Observers are encouraged to share their observations about HRB processes with others in their institution and beyond. - Hold regular meetings with research office staff from our host institutions and include reform of research assessment on agendas as appropriate. - Conduct bibliometric analysis on publications arising from HRB-funded research. As per the most recent report published in 2024, we situate the analysis within the broader context of the HRB's approach to research assessment as signatories of DORA and CoARA. - Share learning and process improvements with other funders through a variety of fora. - Require all applicants to undergo training in research integrity and facilitates such training also for research administrators including HRB staff.

	- Support open science practices through our Open Access Policy and the HRB Open Research publishing platform - HRB general grant T&Cs and policies support CoARA principles and are kept under review <i>In addition, we will:</i> - Publish the HRB CoARA Action Plan on the HRB website and deposit in the repository for CoARA action plans. - Post an annual progress report on the HRB website. - Expand the research assessment section of our website. - Advocate, as a member of the steering group for the Ensuring Value in Research Funders' Forum, for the inclusion of responsible research assessment in the updated guiding principles.
8. Exchange practices and experiences to enable mutual learning within and beyond the Coalition	<i>We will continue to:</i> - Share our practices and experiences with other funders as a member of various international groups. <i>In addition, we will:</i> - We will promote responsible research assessment practices in our co-funding partnerships and in groups we participate in.
9. Communicate progress made on adherence to the Principles and implementation of the Commitments	<i>We will:</i> - Post annual progress reports on the HRB website.
10. Evaluate practices, criteria and tools based on solid evidence and the state-of-the-art in research on research, and	<i>We will continue to:</i> - Conduct research on research and participate in externally-led projects where suitable, and publish relevant information on the research assessment section of our website.

**make data openly available for
evidence gathering and research**

- Provide annual updates on the gender breakdown of applicants and panel members in line with the HRB's [gender policy](#).
- Provide details of panel members on the website.
- Provide summary details of all [approved grant applications](#) on the website.

In addition, we will:

- Explore potential new areas for research-on-research as part of annual business planning.
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