



REFORM OF RESEARCH ASSESSMENT: IMPACT ON DOCTORAL STUDENTS



HEA | HIGHER EDUCATION AUTHORITY
AN TÙDARÁS um ARD-OIDEACHAS



**Report on the workshop organised by the
Higher Education Authority (HEA), National
Research Integrity Forum (NRIF), National
Open Research Forum (NORF), National
Framework for Doctoral Education (NFDE)
Advisory Forum, and the CoARA (Coalition
for Advancing Research Assessment)
National Chapter**

The Royal Irish Academy, Dawson Street, Dublin 2

5 November 2024

01 AIM OF WORKSHOP

The aim of the workshop was to raise awareness among doctoral students and their supervisors of the current changes in the evaluation of research and researchers, and to contribute to the national conversation on research assessment reform. The workshop focused on doctoral students and their supervisors' experiences of research assessment reform and did not include other cohorts such as post-doctoral researchers. The workshop followed on from the highly successful workshop in 2023 on ["Advancing a Shared Direction for Research Assessment"](#) organised by the NRIF and the NORF.

- Share international and national perspectives on the movement to reform research assessment.
- Seek input from attendees on their awareness of changes occurring in research assessment, experiences with new forms of research assessment and what advice they would give to policymakers on the reform of research assessment.
- Share key messages arising from the workshop across the higher education sector.

An overarching theme that emerged from the workshop was that the reform of research assessment requires a significant culture change which will take some time to come to fruition. It was acknowledged that while it may be difficult to change dispositions and behaviours, there is optimism that this can happen with coordinated effort at national and institutional level and at the level of individual researchers.



○ Illustration by Beth McComish

02 BACKGROUND

Since 2023, the CoARA National Chapter has been raising awareness of the reform of research assessment at various conferences, and beginning the process of reviewing and developing criteria, tools, and processes for the Chapter members' institutional action plans. The CoARA National Chapter Co-Chairs, Dr David O'Connell and Dr Sally Smith are recipients of funding granted through the NORF Open Research Fund 2023 for the ABOARD Project (RoAdmap to EmBedding Open ReseArch Practices in IRelaND) which aims to develop system-level incentivisation of Open Research that is integrally connected to the reform of research assessment.

The work of the CoARA National Chapter is based on the Agreement of Reforming Research Assessment (2022) and is part of a broader global coalition that aims to work together to implement such changes. At a national level, their work is supported by Ireland's commitment to implement research assessment reform, one of the actions in the European Research Area (ERA) [Policy Agenda \(2022 – 2024\)](#), as well as via Action A3.3 'Align research assessment with the principles of open research' in Ireland's [National Action Plan for Open Research 2022 – 2030](#).

This workshop continued discussions on research assessment at the national and international levels. Previous initiatives and agreements, such as the [San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment \(DORA\)](#) (2013), the [Leiden Manifesto](#) (2015) and the [Hong Kong Principles](#) (2020) among others provided context for the workshop discussions and influenced the content.

Members of the NRIF workshop organising committee, which included members from the NRIF Steering Group, the NORF and the NFDE Advisory Forum, were invited to attend along with representatives of the HEA, Deans of Graduate Studies, and doctoral students and supervisors nominated from Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Ireland. Other attendees included representatives from CoARA, senior policy officials from the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research Innovation and Science (DFHERIS), Teagasc, Health Research Board and Directors from the Research Ireland Centres for Research Training.



3.1 OPENING REMARKS

The event began with a welcome from **Dr Deirdre Quinn** from the HEA, and opening remarks from **Professor Anita Maguire**, Chair of the NRIF, and **Dr Michelle Doran**, the National Open Research Coordinator at NORF.

Professor Maguire highlighted the positive engagement amongst attendees in the previous workshop and how this dialogue had helped to provide key recommendations relating to the reform of research assessment and how this reform should be led and implemented at national level, in line with international best practice to include particular focus on doctoral students and their supervisors as pivotal drivers of changes in research assessment. Professor Maguire also acknowledged what was needed to support the implementation of impactful and lasting reform, such as involving research students in the process and encouraging a whole-of-system approach to reforming research assessment. Dr Doran reiterated these sentiments and emphasised NORF's commitment to reforming research assessment via the National Action Plan for Open Research and the NORF Open Research Fund. She also noted how, if implemented fully, the National Action Plan for Open Research would positively affect academics at every career level.

3.2 CONTEXT FOR THE WORKSHOP

Dr Sally Smith, Trinity College Dublin, who co-Chairs the CoARA National Chapter with **Dr David O'Connell**, University College Cork set out the context for why the workshop was taking place and discussed the current impediments regarding research assessment reform. They emphasised the need for culture change and a whole-of-system approach to encourage progress in the reform of research assessment. They also highlighted the role and purpose of the CoARA National Chapter in helping to progress reform, as well as the significant engagement that has occurred with members of the Chapter.

3.3 PRESENTATIONS AND PANEL SESSION

As part of the workshop three presentations were delivered by knowledge experts in the area of research assessment:

Dr Elizabeth Gadd, Head of Research Culture & Assessment at Loughborough University acknowledged that publication-based metrics do not necessarily reflect impactful research. Dr Gadd's presentation noted the negative mental health effects experienced by researchers due to the 'publish or perish' culture at work and the pressure on researchers to push themselves forward in their careers. She also acknowledged the benefits that CoARA provides for doctoral students by its recognition of the diversity of their contributions and its belief in moving away from the over reliance on publication- and numbers-based metrics, all of which builds on agendas set forth by previous initiatives such as DORA and the Leiden Manifesto to name but a few.

Professor Stephen Curry, Emeritus Professor of Structural Biology at Imperial College London stated that context is critical if you want the whole picture regarding research assessment. He also noted that purely metrics-based assessment can result in a number of negative incentives for researchers and negative impacts on research systems as a whole. He outlined how research assessment reform can continue to build upon its progress by developing a shared vision amongst stakeholders, obtaining leadership support, and developing research assessment action plans.

Dr Stefan Penders, Policy Advisor for Internationalisation at Universities of the Netherlands and Liaison for CoARA, spoke about the evolution of research assessment reform in The Netherlands and their aim to move beyond purely quantitative measures of research assessment. He referenced a position paper published in the Netherlands by the [Recognition and Rewards Programme](#) (a coalition of Dutch universities, university medical centres, research institutes, and research funders) that details the steps the programme will take to reform research assessment, including sharing good practices and experiments and encouraging an open dialogue around concerns, questions, and dilemmas.

The key topics raised included the:

- needs and experiences of doctoral students regarding changes in research assessment,
- unintended consequences of current research assessment methods,
- inherent problems with university rankings,
- suggestions on how to build flexibility in the system around research assessment to help meet the needs of all students and supervisors.



3.4 BREAKOUT GROUP DISCUSSIONS

After the panel session, the workshop continued with attendees divided into five breakout groups. The breakout groups were structured to ensure a balanced spread of broad research disciplines, students, supervisors, HEI representatives and policy makers, so that attendees could articulate their experiences of research assessment in their related discipline and career stages. Close attention was paid to student inputs in each breakout group to understand their current experiences. Attendees discussed and responded to the following questions:

- Before today, were you aware of the changes occurring in research assessment, what is your understanding of these changes, how would you raise more awareness of these changes, and have any changes to research assessment occurred within your institution?

- Have you participated in, or could you suggest any innovative methods of research assessment?
- How do you see the evolution of research assessment positively benefiting current and future doctoral students?
- What advice would you give policy makers on the reform of research assessment?

3.5 FEEDBACK FROM BREAKOUT GROUPS

At each table, attendees discussed current research assessment practices within their institutions. Attendees noted that Ireland may benefit from using international comparators to inform research assessment reform and learn from countries such as the Netherlands on how they are progressing in this area.



Attendees agreed that Institutions in Ireland are at various stages of integrating new methods of research assessment and that much more needs to be done to ensure that doctoral students and their supervisors are aware of ongoing discussions and debates within the reform 'movement'.

Attendees also acknowledged that it may be necessary to increase assessment literacy within and across HEIs, as there is often a gap in the knowledge of supervisors that hinders change. It was discussed that this could be a future area of consideration. If supervisors are provided with better supports in understanding research assessment reform changes, this may help them to better support doctoral students.

In this respect, the CoARA National Chapter is helping to coordinate a national approach to the reform of research assessment. Many of the Chapter's member institutions are in the process of developing action plans to implement the principles and commitments set out in the CoARA [Agreement on Reforming Research Assessment](#).

It was also noted that some students in attendance were in support of being designated as students rather than as employees, but this area was outside of the remit of the focus of the workshop.

Attendees made many suggestions for innovative methods of research assessment, such as:

- public or external/international interdisciplinary review panels (rather than an internal panel, researchers would be evaluated via a public, external or international panel)
- open peer review - which can consist of three modifications to traditional peer review process:
 - open identities: authors and reviewers are aware of each other's identity
 - open reports: review reports are published alongside the relevant article (rather than being kept confidential)
 - open participation: the wider community (and not just invited reviewers) can contribute to the review process
- mentoring and journal clubs (having a mentor or specific club within the HEI to discuss research)
- impact statements (this would demonstrate the value of the research, and the actions needed to create impact in a particular area of study)
- public forums (rather than an internal panel, the general public could evaluate the research) and community feedback (similar to public forums and open peer review, the research community familiar with the subject area would evaluate the research)

ENCOURAGING A CULTURE CHANGE

Group discussions reinforced the need for new methods of assessment that were fit for purpose and appropriate to the field of study. Attendees acknowledged that there should be a move away from university rankings (although some HEI representatives also noted the importance of such for attracting international students to institutions) and traditional metrics (which the USI had raised before this workshop). This would be essential in encouraging a culture change and prioritising research quality and research impact.

However, doctoral students also acknowledged that their career development may be impeded by engaging with or promoting research assessment reform at such an early stage of their careers, potentially placing themselves at a disadvantage as early adopters of new methods of research assessment. It will be important for HEIs and funders to provide incentives for students to engage with the new methods of research assessment and help create a cultural shift that will benefit research systems as a whole.

FUNDING, SKILLS, AND TRAINING

There was a broad consensus that the reform of research assessment could have many positive effects. It would help doctoral students to develop skills outside of academia and provide students with the time and space to develop these skills. Attendees accepted that there is a need to develop training tools and national frameworks to measure impact and engagement, which would support students in their development. However, attendees acknowledged that the evolving conversation around doctoral funding continues and that this is a source of stress for many students, which may impact the adoption and involvement of students in skills-based development.

TOP-DOWN APPROACH

In summary, an approach involving all relevant stakeholders is needed when engaging with reform of research assessment and developing training tools for students' skill development. It is important that key stakeholders such as the HEIs and research funding agencies also recognise students' individual needs and acknowledge the stressors that may impact their involvement in this movement.



04

KEY MESSAGES

Common themes discussed amongst the breakout groups included the following:

- **Awareness building**
- **Systematic change from the top down/culture change**
- **Added pressure on students**
- **Pre-existing structures**
- **Research recognition**

4.1 AWARENESS BUILDING

A key message from the event was that there needs to be greater emphasis on research assessment reform and recognition of these changes both within and outside the institution. Many students had little or no awareness of the movement around reform and, while it was clear at the end of the event that they had gained a deeper understanding, their initial knowledge **indicates a need to build awareness and increase assessment literacy for doctoral students and supervisors both inside and outside of higher education institutions**. For this reason, it is essential that as the growth of research assessment reform continues, the conversation around these changes must involve all relevant stakeholders who can assist institutions in building on the momentum initiated, to change & adapt.

4.2 SYSTEMATIC CHANGE FROM THE TOP DOWN/CULTURE CHANGE

If any real change or effect is to be achieved, **awareness-raising and support must be driven by an institution's leadership**, which will legitimise unique cultural and systematic change. While many institutions are CoARA signatories, it was noted that kick-starting much-needed reform actions is difficult and progress towards action plans is slow. It is important, therefore, to encourage supervisor and student attendees to become ambassadors for reform to encourage progress.

4.3 ADDED PRESSURE ON STUDENTS

Attendees acknowledged that doctoral students face multiple pressures while working towards their PhD, with many dealing with significant workloads and economic and professional issues that impact their mental health and wellbeing. It was agreed **that research students are the cohort of researchers most impacted by the changes within this area and that policymakers at international, national and institutional level who are in a position to shape the movement and implement change, do so but with the student voice included. This would give students the space to engage and allow their voice and contributions to be included more fully with assessment reform**.

Barriers that discouraged students from engaging fully with this movement included a lack of awareness of changes taking place, workload, financial pressures, institutional pressures, the current overemphasis on quantitative metrics, and concerns for career development when engaging with assessment reform.

4.4 PRE-EXISTING STRUCTURES

Attendees agreed that reforming research assessment can enhance a student's journey by allowing them to upskill and grow as a researcher. While publications are important, **the creation and development of skills should also be prioritised**. Institutions already have many structures in place to enhance the student journey, but they are often not accessible or are unknown to students. Therefore, there is an opportunity to build and expand on the professional development modules that students already take. By building on what is already provided, researchers can enhance their skills and participation in the international environment and drive change at the national level.

4.5 RESEARCH RECOGNITION

Group discussions highlighted the need for a broader understanding of what constitutes 'research' or a publication. The intense focus on publication metrics is negatively affecting students who have fewer opportunities to publish given the nature of their research. Additionally, the many research outputs that a student produces are often ignored and students feel pressured for volume rather than quality. Attendees felt that **research assessment should be viewed more in terms of research recognition, acknowledging the many different types of impactful research outputs** (research culture development, leadership, societal impact etc.) rather than purely publication-based outputs. Looking at research assessment in this way could enhance career opportunities nationally and internationally.

05 RECOMMENDATIONS

Key recommendations from the workshop:

- Start small but start together. "A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step." Stakeholders must work together to progress reform in research assessment. Making small changes now to how research is assessed will compound over time and lead to a change in culture.
- Change must start from the top, but it also needs a collective mobilisation of all stakeholders to make progress. This will include consultation with supervisors, students, and stakeholders at a national and disciplinary level. The key role of the Deans of Graduate Studies in supporting and advocating for coherence across the system is evident.
- Modules or initiatives that promote broad skills provide value for students and are fundamental to enhancing their professional development. It will be important to make students more aware of resources related to research assessment to help progress towards reform.
- While generating a substantial body of new knowledge in the discipline to a publishable standard will remain the central requirement of the PhD, undertaking a PhD encompasses more than just a research thesis. Its outputs and the outcomes for the candidate are diverse and wide-ranging, and recognition of this is essential for the research assessment reform movement to succeed at a national and disciplinary level. Balancing these aspects requires care to avoid unintended consequences.

06 EVENT CLOSE & ARTIST

Dr Deirdre Quinn from the HEA provided closing remarks for the day, providing an in-depth summary of the event and highlighting the progress made at the workshop. She concluded that this is one of many steps that need to be taken to enable reform of research assessment.

Beth McComish is a multidisciplinary artist who created the illustration featured in this report.

Beth captured the key points discussed during the workshop and provided visual designs of the themes and points of discussion throughout the day.





FOR MORE INFORMATION VISIT:

[HTTPS://WWW.IUA.IE/FOR-RESEARCHERS/RESEARCH-INTegrity/](https://www.iua.ie/for-researchers/research-integrity/)

[HTTPS://COARA.EU/WORKING-GROUPS/NATIONAL-CHAPTERS/COARA-NATIONAL-CHAPTER-IRELAND/](https://coara.eu/working-groups/national-chapters/coara-national-chapter-ireland/)

[HTTPS://NORF.IE/](https://norf.ie/)

NORF NATIONAL
OPEN
RESEARCH
FORUM

HEA | HIGHER EDUCATION AUTHORITY
AN TÚDARÁS um ARD-OIDEACHAS

