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Editors

RESEARCH EVALUATION AND SCIENTIFIC AUTONOMY UNDER PRESSURE

Conference Proceedings

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FROM COMMITMENT TO PRACTICE: IMPLEMENTING ARRA COMMITMENT 2 IN CAREER PROGRESSION PROCEDURES AT THE NATIONAL RESEARCH COUNCIL OF ITALY

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Keywords: Responsible research assessment, Career progression, Policy implementation, CoARA, Research performing organisation

Background and rationale

The global shift toward responsible research assessment (RRA) reflects growing concerns about the limitations of quantitative, metric-driven evaluation and is embodied in initiatives such as DORA, the Leiden Manifesto, the Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment (CoARA), and the Agreement on Reforming Research Assessment (ARRA) (Arentoft et al., 2022). Setting a shared direction for changes in research assessment practices, the ARRA places particular emphasis on the need to “base research assessment primarily on qualitative evaluation for which peer review is central, supported by the responsible use of quantitative indicators” (ARRA Commitment 2). The overarching aim is to promote a shift towards assessment criteria that prioritise qualitative judgements of research quality, while recognising that quantitative indicators may play a supportive role when used responsibly and contextually.

While the ARRA has garnered substantial international support (923 signatories as of 23 January 2026), the transition from high-level commitments to their operationalisation remains challenging. As institutions move from signing the agreement to implementing its principles, a persistent gap often emerges between institutional policies and their practical application (CoARA Working Group ACA, 2024). Recent empirical studies have explored institutional responses to this reform agenda primarily through large-scale surveys and quantitative analyses of assessment policies and attitudes (CoARA Working Group ACA, 2024; Hyrkkänen et al., 2023; Barnett et al., 2024; Lim et al., 2025). These studies indicate an increasing engagement with ARRA-aligned frameworks at the strategic level, yet also highlight enduring tensions in achieving the intended balance between qualitative judgement and quantitative indicators in assessment practices. Traditional metrics, such as Journal Impact Factor and citation counts, continue to play a dominant role, while the

qualitative recognition of diverse research outputs and activities related to Open Science, societal impact, and science communication remains limited or inconsistently applied (Pontika et al., 2022; Hyrkkänen et al., 2023; CoARA Working Group ACA, 2024).

Although this body of literature provides valuable insights into policy development and institutional intentions, it largely overlooks the critical phase of implementation, where assessment principles are translated into concrete evaluation criteria and procedures.

Case study and methods

Addressing this gap, the study presented here examines the implementation of ARRA principles within career progression procedures at the National Research Council of Italy (CNR). Conducted as a pilot activity within the GraspOS project (GA n. 101095129, January 2023 - December 2025), the study analyses four competitive calls for career progression launched by CNR in 2023, following its signature of the ARRA in 2022. These calls introduced ARRA commitments as a novel evaluation framework and, for the first time in CNR, included the use of Narrative CVs and an explicit emphasis on qualitative merit.

Based on a comprehensive documentary analysis of 4,090 evaluation criteria defined by 90 different evaluation committees, the study examines four competitive career progression calls launched by CNR in 2023 following its signature of the ARRA late 2022. Official call documents, attachments, and committee-defined evaluation criteria were systematically collected from the CNR public portal and analysed using a structured qualitative content analysis conducted through iterative discussion and shared coding among team members. The criteria were coded against a shared analytical matrix developed by the research team to assess compliance with ARRA Commitments 1–4 and the explicit recognition of Open Science practices. In line with Open Science principles, the preprint version of our manuscript is publicly available on Zenodo, together with the study's underlying data and Data Management Plan (Di Donato et al., 2026a; Di Donato et al., 2026b; Provost, 2026).

Within this framework, the present contribution focuses specifically on ARRA Commitment 2, examining how the balance between qualitative evaluation and the responsible use of quantitative indicators is operationalised in practice. Criteria were classified as predominantly qualitative or quantitative based on whether the assessment required substantive expert judgement of the content or relied primarily on mechanical, metric-based scoring schemes and dubious quality proxies. By analysing career progression procedures in relation to institutional strategies and formal policies, this work offers a detailed, practice-oriented assessment of how responsible research assessment principles are enacted within a national research performing organisation.

Findings

The analysis reveals a pattern of partial and uneven implementation of ARRA Commitment 2 across CNR career progression procedures. Three recurring patterns emerge.

- First, compliance with qualitative assessment principles is often selective: while many evaluation committees formally prioritise qualitative judgement, a substantial share continues to rely on quantitative or purely mechanical criteria for specific contributions, frequently applied independently of the intrinsic quality of the assessed product or qualification

- Second, while research outputs are more frequently subject to qualitative judgement, qualifications and other contributions, such as teaching and evaluation, are often assessed through fixed scoring schemes, indicating the persistence of metric-based logics in specific assessment domains. As a matter of fact, variations emerge across evaluation committees. While all committees operated within the same institutional framework, they differed in how they defined and applied evaluation criteria for these contributions, revealing heterogeneous interpretations of qualitative assessment principles across disciplinary clusters.
- Third, although the Narrative CV sections are generally aligned with ARRA Commitment 2, the level of detail and interpretative guidance provided to evaluation committees varies considerably, reflecting heterogeneous understandings of what qualitative assessment entails in practice.

Overall, the findings point to uneven and selective implementation of Commitment 2, highlighting the challenges institutions face in translating qualitative assessment principles into coherent and consistently applied evaluation criteria within career progression procedures. By offering a practice-oriented analysis of these dynamics, the study provides RPOs with a valuable perspective for evaluating their own assessment procedures. This echoes the E of the SCOPE Framework for Research Evaluation (Himanen et al., 2024), which calls on organisations to “Evaluate your Evaluation”, encouraging critical reflection on how qualitative assessment is operationalised, the identification of areas for improvement, and the refinement of implementation strategies to better align assessment processes with intended career development outcomes. These findings may be complemented by future research employing alternative analytical and methodological approaches.

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