

To CoARA and the members of swissuniversities

swissuniversities

3001 Berne, December 13, 2024

Dr. Martina Weiss
General secretary
T +41 31 335 07 40
martina.weiss@
swissuniversities.ch

swissuniversities
Effingerstrasse 15, P.O. Box
3001 Berne
www.swissuniversities.ch

Agreement on Reforming Research Assessment: swissuniversities' CoARA Action Plan

Dear Rector / Director,
Dear Colleagues,

In September 2022, swissuniversities, the Rectors' Conference of the Swiss Universities, signed the [Agreement on Reforming Research Assessment](#) and became a member of the Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment ([CoARA](#)). swissuniversities' signature stands for its commitment to support the efforts towards the development of career assessment and research evaluation criteria: The promotion of (young) academic and scientific talents and careers constitutes indeed a key factor in the success of Swiss higher education institutions and their impact on society.

By signing the agreement, swissuniversities aims to foster critical reflection on research assessment among its member institutions. At the same time, swissuniversities also recognises that individual institutions may position themselves differently, and at different paces, with regard to reforming research assessment. Therefore, the implementation of the reform and associated discussions with research communities should be in the first place driven forward by the Swiss higher education institutions themselves, in accordance with their own institutional setting and strategies.

As a member of CoARA and a signatory of the Agreement, swissuniversities is invited to share an action plan presenting how the Core Commitments are to be implemented within the institution. swissuniversities' action plan presents specific aspects of Reforming Research Assessment that are promoted within the institution to the extent that they correspond to swissuniversities' role, profile, and mission as the Rectors' Conference of Swiss Universities. That is, the role of swissuniversities regarding the Agreement is twofold:

- to encourage and coordinate the discussions on reforming research evaluation between its member institutions, and
- to support projects or initiatives on advancing research assessment conducted within and/or between Swiss higher education institutions through programmes coordinated by swissuniversities.

The Action Plan of swissuniversities, presented in the Appendix, should be understood as a non-exhaustive inventory of activities and initiatives that are supported or promoted within swissuniversities. In this respect, the Action Plan is a “living document,” which will be updated periodically depending on the ongoing discussions within swissuniversities’ bodies and the adoption or implementation of new initiatives or programmes. The activities and initiatives are organised into the two main dimensions mentioned above that correspond to the role and mission of swissuniversities regarding the CoARA Agreement.

The Board of swissuniversities approved the Action Plan at its meeting on 13 December 2024 and decided to send it to the members of swissuniversities and CoARA. The Board takes the opportunity to invite its member institutions to consult the Action Plan (presented in the Appendix), as well as the [Agreement on Reforming Research Assessment](#) and, in line with their institutional conditions, strategic objectives and missions statements, to further engage in relevant reflections and discussions on the topic. In the same spirit, swissuniversities’ members are also encouraged to participate in initiatives and programmes coordinated by swissuniversities that aim at advancing research assessment.

The Board of swissuniversities looks forward to the publication of the action plan and hopes that it will provide a fruitful framework for further discussion and reflection on research evaluation.

If you or your institution have any question on this topic, please contact Dr. Magali Mari (magali.mari@swissuniversities.ch).

Kind regards,

Dr. Luciana Vaccaro
President

swissuniversities

swissuniversities
Effingerstrasse 15, Postfach
3001 Bern
www.swissuniversities.ch

Agreement on Reforming Research Assessment: CoARA Action Plan for swissuniversities

swissuniversities is the Rectors' Conference of the Swiss higher education institutions (hereafter HEIs, which include universities, universities of applied sciences and universities of teacher education). This umbrella organization is the common voice of Switzerland's HEIs and promotes cooperation and coordination between them. One of the roles of swissuniversities is to represent the interests of the Swiss HEIs at the national and international levels. By signing the [Agreement on Reforming Research Assessment](#), swissuniversities aimed to foster critical reflection on research assessment among its member institutions, while also recognising that they may position themselves differently, and at different paces, with regard to reforming research assessment.

From this perspective, swissuniversities' Action Plan reflects specific aspects of Reforming Research Assessment that correspond to swissuniversities' role, profile and mission. swissuniversities' involvement in the reform is to be understood as supporting the efforts towards the development of career assessment and research evaluation criteria, but not to implement it in a top-down perspective. Therefore, while swissuniversities encourages the reform of research assessment, its development and implementation should in the first place be proactively and continuously discussed and considered within Swiss HEIs.

The Action Plan of swissuniversities, presented hereafter, should be understood as a non-exhaustive inventory of activities and initiatives that are supported or promoted within the institution. In this respect, the Action Plan is a "living document," which will be updated periodically depending on the ongoing discussions within swissuniversities' bodies and the adoption or implementation of new initiatives or programmes.

The activities and initiatives are hereafter organised into two main dimensions that correspond to the role and mission of swissuniversities regarding the CoARA Agreement:

- A. Encourage and coordinate critical discussions on key themes for HEIs, including the theme of reforming research evaluation and consider research assessment in policymaking¹.

One of the roles of swissuniversities and its bodies is to encourage and provide a framework for critical discussions and reflections around key themes relevant for HEIs. Among these themes is the reform of research assessment. In this context, the activities of the Swiss National Chapter are followed with close interest and inform the reflections and discussions of swissuniversities' bodies². Up to now, two important topics on which swissuniversities and its member institutions have worked concern academic careers evaluation and the interface between research assessment and Open Science.

Regarding the first topic, swissuniversities recognises the need to broaden research assessment criteria, to consider a more diverse set of contributions in academic career evaluation, and to drop the inappropriate use of impact factors. Moreover, swissuniversities facilitates and encourages discussions regarding institutions' participation in certain ranking systems.

Examples:

- swissuniversities signed the San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment ([DORA](#)), signalling to its member institutions a concern in evaluating academic careers with new criteria.
- swissuniversities acknowledges the importance of reforming academic career assessment and participates in its development by being involved in the [CoARA Working Group "Reforming Academic Career Assessment"](#) since October 2023.
- Critical reflection and exchanges started in Summer 2024 within different bodies of swissuniversities following the decision of a big Swiss university to stop providing data to the THE-Ranking in favour of other forms of evaluations based on multidimensional standards.
- Via its network Euraxess, swissuniversities is involved in discussions and exchanges at the national and international levels about the renewed European Charter for Researchers.
- swissuniversities' Chamber of universities issued a [list of "Recommendations and good practices for equal opportunity in appointment procedures"](#), including recommendations on research assessment. In 2024, a [report](#) was published on the extent to which the "Recommendations and good practices for equal opportunity in appointment procedures" were applied in Swiss HEIs. Further analyses might be planned in the future.

¹ Activities and initiatives listed in this section map onto the Core Commitments (1) "Recognise the diversity of contributions to, and careers in, research in accordance with the needs and nature of the research," (3) "Abandon inappropriate uses in research assessment of journal- and publication-based metrics, in particular inappropriate uses of Journal Impact Factor (JIF) and h-index," (4) "Avoid the use of rankings of research organisations in research assessment" and (6) "Review and develop research assessment criteria, tools and processes."

² The Swiss National Chapter is supported by the Swiss National Science Foundation and the Swiss Academies of Arts and Sciences, and includes some member institutions of swissuniversities. While swissuniversities itself is, for now, not an active member in the Swiss National Chapter, exchanges and coordination with the National Chapter are pursued.

With regard to the second topic, swissuniversities works specifically on the development of research assessment in the perspective of Open Science. This topic has been addressed, among others, in two national strategies that have thus far focused on open access (OA) to publications and open research data (ORD):

- [The OA Strategy](#), revised in 2024 by swissuniversities and the Swiss National Science Foundation, continues and further develops its former version by considering current international and national developments as well as past experiences, with the overarching aim of further advancing the OA transformation in Switzerland. One of the six pathways to achieve the strategy's objectives focuses on the broadening of research assessment criteria. With this pathway, the strategy aims to foster discussions within research communities and institutions on enlarging research assessment practices to ensure high-quality OA publications as opposed to emphasise on publication quantity. The strategy also stresses that these developments must be contextualised internationally, for example through participation in relevant international initiatives such as DORA and CoARA.
- [The ORD Strategy](#), which is supported by swissuniversities, the Swiss National Science Foundation, the ETH Domain, and the Swiss Academies of Arts and Science, aims to promote better, more effective, and more impactful research by facilitating access to, and reuse of, research data. One of the 4 objectives of the strategy includes the integration of ORD practices and contributions in research assessment and career evaluation systems. In the strategy's associated [ORD Action Plan](#), a specific measure is designed to incentivise, recognise, and reward researchers' contributions to the development of ORD practices, and to adapt accordingly evaluation criteria and assessment procedures when hiring academic staff and allocating research funding.

- B. Support projects and initiatives on advancing research assessment through federal project contributions.³

As part of its planning, swissuniversities proposes the strategic direction of specific programmes funded via federal project contributions every four years. These programmes are supported by the [Swiss Higher Education Council](#) based on applications submitted by swissuniversities. They are coordinated by swissuniversities who distributes the federal funds, to institutions eligible for contributions, for example by means of project calls. As a rule, the Swiss Confederation pays out federal project contributions only if the eligible HEIs participating in projects make an overall contribution that is at least equal to the federal contribution. In this way, eligible HEIs can conduct – jointly or individually – innovative projects on specific topics. The topic of research assessment is part of several programmes coordinated by swissuniversities.

Examples for the period 2021–2024:

- Competitive bottom-up calls for eligible Swiss HEIs have been organised through [the programme Open Science I](#) – Phase A, Open Access, in the years 2021–2024. The aim of the calls is to address the many dimensions that intervene in the evaluation of scientific research outputs or Open Science practices, be it at the scale of

³ Activities and initiatives listed in this section map onto the Core Commitments (5) "Commit resources to reforming research assessment as is needed to achieve the organisational changes committed to," (8) "Exchange practices and experiences to enable mutual learning within and beyond the Coalition," and (9) "Communicate progress made on adherence to the principles and implementation of the Commitments."

research institutions or of individual researchers. A total of 4 projects ([HI-FRAME](#), [Openness Score](#), [SYoS](#), and [TOBI](#)), involving 6 institutions in Switzerland, have been funded or are currently supported with a total amount of CHF 649,960 (federal contributions only).

- [The programme Open Science I](#) – Phase B, Open Research Data (ORD) supports the implementation of specific action lines defined in the Swiss ORD Action Plan (see above). One action line aims to develop, implement, and adapt assessment processes to establish ORD practices as a prerequisite for recruitment and career advancement. A first call focused on the exchange of best practices among higher education and research institutions as well as other national and international stakeholders, ideally with an active participation in CoARA. An important collaborative project ([recORD](#)), involving 14 institutions, is currently supported with a total amount of CHF 240,000 (federal contributions only).
- Within [the programme “Diversity, inclusion and equal opportunities in the development of higher education institutions \(2021–2024\)”](#), two calls have been organised to support projects from one or more HEIs that aim to implement exchanges and global activities for the promotion of diversity, inclusion and equal opportunities. Among the funded projects, a collaborative initiative ([Better Science Initiative](#)) has been created, involving 6 Swiss HEIs, which calls for a shift in academic culture towards greater sustainability, diversity and equal opportunity. The initiative proposes 10 calls to action to draw attention to the problems of an accelerated and consuming science system and to encourage discussions on excellence in higher education.

Examples for the period 2025–2028:

- With [the programme “Promotion of young talents”](#), swissuniversities aims to improve the attractiveness of academic careers, while taking into account the challenges of equal opportunities and reconciling family and professional life. Each Swiss university is invited to develop and submit an action plan, that will be funded and implemented in the years 2025–2028, to promote the next generation of academics in accordance with its respective institutional and strategic framework⁴. A list of [13 fields of action](#), including a field of action dedicated to the evaluation of scientific careers and redefinition of excellence, is proposed to universities to guide them in the elaboration of action plans.
- As part of [the programme “Equal opportunities”](#), eligible HEIs can implement appropriate solutions by submitting project proposals on different action levels. For example, one part of the programme will support, in the period 2025–2028, all interested HEIs in their efforts to strengthen equity in terms of structures, staff and processes. This can include themes such as (i) strengthening the organisation and promotion of inclusive career paths that consider diversity, and (ii) overcoming obstacles and inequalities as part of a systemic change in structures, framework conditions and organisational cultures. New recruitment, but above all staff development, are considered as essential in this respect.

[The programme Open Science II](#) continues the work of its predecessor, Open Science I, and aims to consolidate and strategically develop open science at Swiss HEIs and in research communities in the long term. Open Science II, which will be

⁴ This part of the programme “Promotion of young talents” is exclusively addressed to eligible universities rather than to the other types of HEIs.

implemented by swissuniversities under the leadership of the Delegation Open Science, is structured in three dimensions: open access to scientific publications, open research data, and further innovative areas of open science. The topic of research assessment is considered as a transversal premise that should continue to be addressed in all dimensions of open science. Moreover, the Delegation Open Science will integrate the CoARA principles, where applicable, into the evaluation of proposals submitted to the calls of the programme Open Science II. Future support of research assessment initiatives is thus planned within the programme Open Science II for the period 2025–2028.