



## What should 21<sup>st</sup> century cross-disciplinary research evaluation look like?

### Workshop report

On 23 February 2024, EASSH hosted a workshop entitled ***What should 21<sup>st</sup> century cross-disciplinary research evaluation look like?*** The aim of this workshop was to facilitate meaningful discussion and foster mutual exchange on research assessment methods in the context of the current debates in Europe and globally on the reform of research evaluation. The aim was also to set up a preliminary agenda for the CoARA working group on “Evaluating SSH globally”, which EASSH, ENRESSH, and the Federation of Finnish Learned Societies will coordinate from late 2024.

The evaluation of research is typically discussed from different perspectives and with reference to various dimensions: evaluation of research institutions and groups; evaluation of research funding programmes; evaluation of research projects; evaluation of individual researchers and their scientific contributions. So far, much of this debate has centred on each of these aspects in isolation, without fully recognising the interconnections between them. The national methodology for evaluation of institutions or research investment programs, for instance, directly impacts the evaluation and selection of projects eligible for funding. Subsequently, the methodology influences the evaluation of individual academic researchers by their host institutions for career progression.

The research evaluation and the implications of the outcomes are significant for funders, institutions, and researchers alike. It should not, therefore, be a surprise that proposing changes to evaluation in research provokes debate and dispute. For this reason, the reform of research evaluation needs to involve researchers and stakeholders from various scientific fields, representing diverse research and evaluation practices, while avoiding an artificial division between 'hard' and 'soft' sciences. By bringing together different perspectives, disciplines, and approaches, we aim to foster a more integrated and comprehensive understanding of research evaluation practices.

EASSH invited participants from prestigious institutions, research evaluation agencies from European and non-European countries, international foundations, and publishers to discuss why and how we need to evaluate our research and why now is the moment to reform the evaluation approaches in place today.

The workshop covered three main aspects: the global debate on research evaluation today; evaluation from an institutional perspective; and evaluating research for societal benefits.

### Why do we evaluate research today?

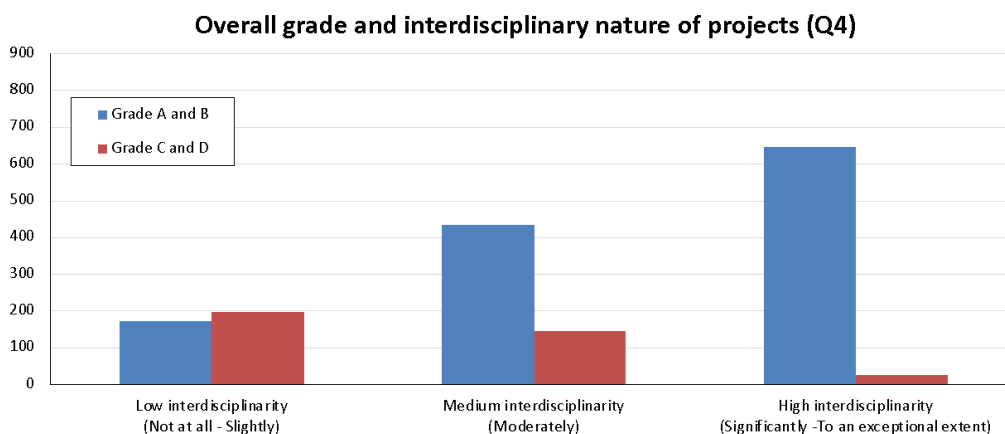
The opening keynote was given by Angela Liberatore, head of the scientific department at ERCEA (European Research Council Executive Agency), who launched the new ERC procedure for research evaluation. The ERC is well-known for supporting bottom-up research and their paper on [Evaluation of research proposals: The why and what of the ERC's recent changes](#) (21 February 2024) focuses on how competition for funding requires quality and fairness for allocation decisions.



Ex ante evaluation remains firmly anchored to peer-review assessment as Angela Liberatore said in citing Ted Hewitt, President of Canada’s Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council: “I’d say peer review is not perfect but it’s still the best system that we have”<sup>1</sup>. In evaluating research proposals, the ERC asks its peer reviewers to focus particularly on the scientific merit of the proposal. Intellectual capacity, creativity, and commitment of the Principal Investigator are also evaluated via a standard or narrative CV. While the focus of evaluation at ERC remains academic excellence, the agency is also true to its commitment to prevent any form of bias from the evaluation process (gender, affinity, publication, contribution, geography and so on).

Angela Liberatore presented the ERC’s approach to Scientific Assessment of Projects (SAP) or ex-post assessment of finished projects. This phase is entrusted to a peer-review process (although different reviewers from those awarding the project) and focuses on qualitative and quantitative analyses. It is not based on bibliometrics but on the scientific content of project’ outputs. The results of this analysis confirmed that ERC projects are both highly innovative and deliver major scientific advances. The results also showed that projects falling in the following best two categories – breakthrough, and major scientific advance – are highly complex and of interdisciplinary nature.

## Ex post assessment – Grade and interdisciplinarity



**Q4: Has the research performed found recognition or applicability outside its main field?**

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The results of the ex-post assessment analysis led to the understanding that the best researchers are not just exceptional minds for highly scientific achievements but are also embedded and affected by the main societal challenges of this world. As a result, they engage with the physical, social, and human world to respond to the critical questions of how to progress and evolve to safeguard the planet and all its living beings. The analysis reveals that evaluation processes must encourage the best possible environment for bright minds to prosper and develop.

<sup>1</sup> <https://erc.europa.eu/news-events/maqazine-article/peer-review-not-perfect-still-best-system-we-have>

## What do national ministries, policymakers, and stakeholders expect from research evaluation systems?

The second part of the workshop showcased panels focusing on the three main aspects: the global debate on research evaluation today; evaluation from an institutional perspective; and evaluating research for societal benefits.

Each panel combined a short introduction by the panellists followed by questions and discussion with all workshop attendees.

The **first panel discussion**, chaired by Joe O'Hara (President of the World Education Research Association), focused on ***Evaluation of institutions: what do National ministries, policy makers, and stakeholder expect from research evaluation systems?*** Representatives of research councils from Norway and Italy (Jon Holm, Marilena Maniaci and Marco Malagarini), and a former head of the EUA Council for Doctoral Education (Alexander Hasgall, now head of international funding policy, Swiss National Science Foundation) were called upon to present their strategies to ensure that governmental evaluation agencies can identify the best contributions of researchers. These strategies focused on the evaluation of researchers' host universities, rather than paying attention to the individual assessment of scholars. Furthermore, they were invited to address the value of research evaluation today for society and policymakers.

The panellists agreed in identifying a major value of research assessment in the continued improvement of universities and research institutes that use the results to better frame their strategic developments and potentials. In other words, research assessment can, when undertaken effectively, **improve the quality and efficiency of institutions**. Marilena Maniaci and Marco Malagarini highlighted that ANVUR's assessment shows that data-driven analysis helps to determine the strengths and weaknesses of research areas within the institution. It helps in setting benchmarks and goals for future performance, aligning them with the institution's overall strategic objectives. It also informs national accreditation systems and influences resource allocation between research, personnel, and infrastructure and encourages faculty development and recruitment. Finally, evaluations enhance collaboration and competitiveness, promote interdisciplinary research and foster innovation revealing emerging trends in research.

Finally, looking ahead, the panel identified that some innovative features are emerging in evaluation. In particular, a **wider definition of scientific output**, responding to the international recommendation for a proper recognition of the diversity of research activities and practices. A **new formulation of criteria concerning scientific methodology**, with the goal of promoting, where applicable, the reproducibility of the results, transparency about the methods and procedures adopted. A formal commitment for **evaluating exclusively on research quality**, regardless of the language or the type and place of publication. Finally, panellists agreed that it is necessary for a formal commitment to **mandatory training aimed at experts and reviewers** to promote consistent application of evaluation rules.

## Evaluation global practices, the SSH perspective

The second panel discussion, chaired by Michael Ochsner, focused on the ***Evaluation global practices, and the SSH perspective***. Panellists in this session included UKRI (Steven Hill), the Global academic

network for Latin America and the Caribbean (Laura Rovelli) and the Nordic Institute for Studies in Innovation (Gunnar Sivertsen).

All panellists highlighted how evaluation processes undertaken in their specific locations and research systems were paying **better attention to the challenge of evaluation in different disciplinary cultures**. The panel highlighted how evaluation appropriate for different disciplines helped to recognise the importance of SSH research results for both policymakers and society at large. From the discussion it emerged how bibliometric approaches, while still important, are no longer the only tool for evaluation in the STEM disciplines. Furthermore, they do not capture the contribution of the SSH. The panel discussed how methods developed in different disciplines are used in 'mixed' evaluation methods. For example, qualitative assessment approaches developed in SSH evaluations can easily be transported into other disciplines for a more effective and objective analysis, which transcend pure journal rankings.

South America came with an important call for consistency. Laura Rovelli said that **fragmentation among evaluation systems produces systematic distortions** because of quantitative standard bias overcoming elements of specific disciplines and contexts. However, fellow panellist, Gunnar Siverson, highlighted that the **harmonisation of principles rather than methods** was necessary, as research is also linked to local realities, resources, opportunities, and investments. Panellists then called for **open access ecosystems** and for more open access databases. They argue that this would bring more diversity among reviewers. The panel also discussed the importance of **multilingualism as a key factor for science communications and translational research**. All agreed that there is currently a growing momentum towards broader and more inclusive ways to assess research, understand 'research on research' insights, and contextualise research results.

Finally, research must be **considered in the dimension of social impact rather than economic growth**, where SSH have a comparative advantage, said Steven Hill. **Impact case studies** reported by SSH faculties to the REF (Research Excellence Framework) exercise in 2021 demonstrated a much faster impact on policymakers than hard science studies.

There is an emerging consensus that future research evaluation design will rely on the results from 'research on research'. This emerging field of research will feed into the ongoing reform of research evaluation in the CoARA community and working groups.

### **Evaluating challenge-based research interdisciplinarity and the value added of research evaluation – Evaluating projects for societal benefits**

The final panel discussion chaired by Alexandra Oancă focused on **Evaluating challenge-based research Interdisciplinarity and the value added of research evaluation – Evaluating projects for societal benefits** and invited publishers (Liz Allen), as well as research performing and evaluation networks to compare their views (Sumathi Subramaniam, and Zoe Bulaitis).

The attention of this panel focused on mission-related topics that must privilege sustainable 'value creation', which means not just technology and energy, but healthy societies and well-being as well. The panel acknowledged that **social impact remains difficult to assess** but must be a principle in particular for top-down funding programmes. A call for a 'holistic approach' to research evaluation comes from people with experience in both the private and public sectors.



The following issues were highlighted: training and capacity building in evaluation research; regular feedback to reviewers; the importance of bias awareness training; training in constructive feedback; bringing in non-academic experts where needed; tailored guidance on the evaluation task; segmented peer review/panel evaluations; assigning experts based on different aspects of the article/proposal.

The panellists highlighted that, in the process of reforming research assessment, it is important to rely on what has been achieved already from evaluation analysis (ENRESSH position papers). “Let’s not reinvent the wheel”. Furthermore, different types of knowledge need to be appreciated by the system, as research today is not just what happens in academia, but especially what has societal relevance.

*Public Humanities*, the new open access journal of Cambridge University Press will be launched at the end of 2024. It will give more visibility to how the humanities address major societal challenges following an interdisciplinary approach.

## Undisciplined evaluation: where next for the funding and assessment of transdisciplinary research?

The final talk was carried out by James Wilsdon, Director of RORI (Research on Research Institute) at UCL, who presented ***Undisciplined evaluation: where next for the funding and assessment of transdisciplinary research?*** He described the need for a new approach to the evaluation of research in the context of the changing demands by policymakers on the research system.

Funders increasingly take a mission-driven approach to research investment, which continues to encourage multi- and transdisciplinary research as the route to tackling the major societal challenges. The ‘mission’ approach also seeks to engage non-academic partners into the multi-discipline research collaborations, creating layers of complexity for the evaluation of research and research funding.

James Wilsdon identifies how these science policy driven changes in the conduct of research demand a new approach to the ‘management of science’ and the practice of assessment, particularly when related to ‘Mode 2’ knowledge production.

He argued that the social sciences, by deploying **‘whole systems’ thinking approaches**, can provide the ‘secret sauce’ to research evaluation in the multi-discipline, mission-driven research environment now and in the future. James Wilsdon also made the case for more investment in research on research or what he is calling ‘meta-science’, research on research policy. This would contribute to a better understanding of the interactions between scientific research, policymaking, and improved societal outcomes.

Gabi Lombardo closed the workshop thanking all the speakers and participants. The workshop is a starting point for the work that EASSH will continue with the [CoARA working group](#) on “Evaluating SSH globally”. The working group will be launched in spring 2024. Gabi Lombardo invited everyone to follow EASSH developments and activities.



## Annex 1: Programme

- 9.00 Welcome coffee
- 9.30 Opening: Welcome by **Silvana Colella**, EASSH president
- 9.40–10.30 Keynote: **Angela Liberatore**, Head of Scientific Department, ERC  
***Why do we evaluate research today?***
- 10.30–11.30 Panel discussion: ***Evaluation of institutions: what do National ministries, policymakers, and stakeholders expect from research evaluation systems?***  
Chair: **Joe O'Hara**, President of the World Education Research Association

### Speakers:

**Marilena Maniaci**, Consiglio Direttivo, ANVUR – Agenzia Nazionale di Valutazione del Sistema Universitario e della Ricerca

**Alexander Hasgall**, former scientific coordinator, Swiss University Conference programme "research performance in the SSH"

**Jon Holm**, Special Adviser, Research Council of Norway/ENRESSH (virtually)

**Marco Malgarini**, Research evaluation manager, ANVUR – Agenzia Nazionale di Valutazione del Sistema Universitario e della Ricerca

- 11.35–12.30 Panel discussion: ***Evaluation global practices, the SSH perspective***  
Chair: **Michael Ochsner**, Senior Researcher, FORS

### Speakers:

**Steven Hill**, Director of research, UKRI

**Laura Rovelli**, Global academic network for Latin America and the Caribbean (CLACSO/FOLEC) (virtually)

**Gunnar Sivertsen**, NIFU – Nordic Institute for Studies in Innovation

### *12.30–14.00 Lunch*

- 14.00–14.45 Panel discussion: ***Evaluating challenge-based research Interdisciplinarity and the value added of research evaluation – Evaluating projects for societal benefits***  
Chair: **Alexandra Oancă**, EASSH Fellow, Postdoctoral Fellow at KU Leuven

### Speakers:

**Sumathi Subramaniam**, Head of Brussels Office, NORCE

**Liz Allen**, Director of Open Research Development & Innovation, F1000 – Taylor & Francis (virtually)

**Zoe Bulaitis**, Vice-chair ENRESSH, Assistant Professor of Liberal Arts and Natural Sciences, University of Birmingham

### *14.45-15.00 Coffee break*

- 15.00–15.45 ***Undisciplined evaluation: where next for the funding and assessment of transdisciplinary research?***  
**James Wilsdon**, Director of RORI, UCL UK
- 15.00–16.45 Discussion time: ***What do we need to evaluate research in the 21<sup>st</sup> century to maximise its quality and impact?***  
Moderator: **Jon Deer**, Treasurer of EASSH, Director of Research and Enterprise at City, University of London
- 16.45–17.00 Closing of the event: **Gabi Lombardo**, Director of EASSH

## **Annex 2: Concept Note**

### **What should 21<sup>st</sup> century cross-disciplinary research evaluation look like?**

The evaluation of research has seldom held such a central position in European or global science policy discussions. The initial debate that gave rise to DORA (Declaration on Research Assessment) and the Leiden framework for responsible evaluation has now been joined by the CoARA (Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment) movement. This new 'community-led' initiative aims to develop previous debates while addressing the challenges posed by emerging technologies in research evaluation. Despite peer review maintaining its status as the gold standard for evaluation, it remains both resource-intensive and time-consuming; it is also not immune to some weaknesses related to reviewer selection criteria, potential biases induced by the reputation of the journal or the author (in the case of single-blind review), and the difficulty for the reviewer to detect cases of academic fraud. The CoARA movement's bottom-up approach, coupled with innovative tools and mechanisms, the impact of technology, and the peer review process as the reference standard, all characterise current debates around research assessments.

At the same time, funding research serves as a vital mechanism for all advanced countries, acting as a catalyst for innovation and supporting the economic growth policies of most governments. International funding initiatives, like the European framework programmes, are evolving to foster projects and collaborations that stimulate high-risk fundamental research and cross-border cooperation. While economic growth remains a key driver for public investment in science, the transformative power of the Sustainable Development Goals, as well as Green and Digital Transition policies, have emphasised the relevance of addressing other social and environmental challenges through research insights. The substantial financial investments made annually by nations and supranational communities, such as the EU, must also be measured in terms of the advantages brought about by such research. Understanding the quality and diversity of the research supported by these investments is equally crucial. The challenge of evaluation at this level includes not only the scale and scope of the programmes, but also the diversity of contributions from different scientific communities. Not all research can be evaluated according to one method.

Public (and often also private) funding for scientific research is increasingly allocated through competitive means. However, few areas in science policy evoke such intense and polarised debates as the most effective methods for evaluating research and researchers. While there is a consensus that gaining a deeper understanding of research and its societal impact, from knowledge creation to public policy, is beneficial and advantageous, the evolving landscape of scientific funding and the need for sustainable resources have prompted all stakeholders in this ecosystem to reconsider evaluation approaches, across the various levels from programmes to projects to researchers themselves.

The evaluation of research is typically discussed from different perspectives and with reference to various dimensions: evaluation of research institutions and groups; evaluation of research funding programmes; evaluation of research projects; evaluation of individual researchers and their scientific contributions. So far, much of this debate has centred on each of these aspects in isolation, without fully recognizing the interconnections between them. The national methodology for evaluation of institutions or research investment programs, for instance, directly impacts the evaluation and selection of projects eligible for funding and, subsequently, influences the evaluation of individual academic researchers by their host institutions for career initiation or progression. In addition, the reform of research evaluation needs to involve researchers and stakeholders from various scientific



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fields, representing diverse research and evaluation practices, while avoiding an artificial division between 'hard' and 'soft' sciences. By bringing together different perspectives, disciplines, and approaches, we aim to foster a more integrated and comprehensive understanding of research evaluation practices.

The goal of the workshop is to facilitate meaningful discussions and foster mutual exchange on research assessment methods during times of reforms and rapid social change. We gather key stakeholders, including funders and funding recipients, as well as scholars, policy makers, and representatives from various sectors like think-tanks and civil society organisations. Additionally, we aim to include perspectives from foundations and charities, which play a vital role as significant funders of world-class research worldwide, driven by their philanthropic missions and objectives.

The participants' role will be to actively challenge and discuss evaluation methods and processes, ensuring that the objectives of assessing research are aligned with the overarching goal of responsibly investing funds, both public and private, for the benefit of current and future generations.

The workshop is setting the path towards a broader scope agenda, aimed at promoting data analysis, pilot schemes and re-thinking about how the current evaluation system has supported research and what best practice can be retained or biases can be removed.

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