

## **COARA ACTION PLAN**

**ADOPTED BY  
THE BOARD OF TRUSTEES OF THE F.R.S.-FNRS  
ON 9 APRIL 2025**

## 1. FOSTERING SCIENTIFIC EXCELLENCE: THE ROLE OF THE F.R.S.-FNRS IN RESEARCH SUPPORT AND EVALUATION

---

- **The Role of the F.R.S.-FNRS in supporting basic scientific research**

The **Fund for Scientific Research** (F.R.S.-FNRS) is a funding agency dedicated to promoting and supporting basic scientific research within the French-speaking Community of Belgium (Wallonia-Brussels Federation - FWB). Guided by a strong commitment to **scientific excellence**, the F.R.S.-FNRS offers a range of funding opportunities, including temporary and permanent positions, grants for research teams, funding for international collaborations, and recognition through scientific prizes. It employs over **2,000 researchers at various career stages**, ranging from doctoral students with fixed-term contracts to senior researchers holding permanent positions. These researchers operate across all scientific disciplines within the five universities of the FWB, which integrate them into their academic environments and ensure access to advanced research infrastructures.

The F.R.S.-FNRS supports research through both a **bottom-up approach**, driven by investigator-led initiatives, and a top-down approach, organizing targeted calls to address societal or strategic challenges. Over time, associated specialized funds have been created to support **strategic research**, focusing on fundamental research in predefined scientific sectors identified as strategically important due to their proximity to **potential applications** or **societal needs**. These funds are also designed to foster **disruptive innovations** with significant impact, particularly in areas such as **health** and **sustainable transitions**, addressing challenges that are closer to short- or medium-term applications compared to purely fundamental research. These associated funds benefit from other subsidies and complement the core mission of the F.R.S.-FNRS. Under the auspices of the F.R.S.-FNRS, these specialized associated funds are closely aligned with the evolving landscape of research, and as such the F.R.S.-FNRS and its associated funds form an integrated system.

The F.R.S.-FNRS actively promotes **international collaborations** by facilitating researcher mobility, supporting scientific missions, enabling collaborative projects, and contributing to knowledge dissemination through conferences, symposia, publications, and research networks.

As a **National Contact Point** (NCP) for European research and innovation programs, the F.R.S.-FNRS encourages researchers from the French-speaking Community to actively participate in these initiatives. It also serves as a key hub for the **Euraxess network** and integrates the **Observatory of Research and Scientific Careers-F.R.S.-FNRS**, tracking and supporting researchers affiliated with the universities of the Wallonia-Brussels Federation. Furthermore, the F.R.S.-FNRS aligns its strategies with evolving scientific policy priorities, such as open science and gender equality policies.

- **Supporting scientific excellence through rigorous evaluation procedures**

Since the 2010 reform of its evaluation framework, the F.R.S.-FNRS has developed internationally recognized expertise in **peer review**. Its evaluation processes adhere to international standards and are guided by the core principles of **excellence, transparency, confidentiality, and research ethics**.

Excellence is ensured by focusing on the **intrinsic quality** of research proposals and applicants, while transparency is achieved through the **clear communication of evaluation criteria and procedures**, which are publicly accessible on the F.R.S.-FNRS website. At the end of the process,

applicants receive **detailed, anonymous evaluation reports**, promoting fairness and accountability.

The F.R.S.-FNRS organizes several funding calls annually, the two primary ones being the “Grants and Fellowships” and “Credits and Projects” calls. Additional calls target strategic fundamental research of excellence in specific areas, meant to contribute to sustainable transitions or address key societal challenges.

Each funding application is evaluated by an appropriate number of qualified remote experts, ensuring that neither too few nor too many reviewers are assigned. Their legitimacy is assessed based on their **scientific expertise and experience**, as well as their ability to evaluate **objectively and impartially**, with rigorous checks in place to eliminate conflicts of interest. Evaluation criteria are tailored to the specific call or funding program, the type of instrument, and the applicant's career stage. The objectives and procedures are transparently communicated and made publicly available on the F.R.S.-FNRS website. Certain funding instruments, such as the FRESH funding scheme and the WELCHANGE program, incorporate societal impact into their evaluation criteria. Similarly, technology transfer potential, including the possibility of future intellectual property valorization, is considered for programs like WELBIO and WEL-T. Depending on the call's objectives, scientific commissions are adjusted to include members from outside academia or with expertise in knowledge transfer and valorization. The F.R.S.-FNRS emphasizes **diversity among evaluators**, ensuring gender and institutional balance while fostering turnover among experts. On average, for each of the two main annual calls for proposals, approximately 30% of the remote experts have never previously evaluated for the F.R.S.-FNRS.

Comprehensive support is provided throughout the evaluation process. Panel members, including scientific commission presidents, receive tailored guidance and pre-meeting briefings from F.R.S.-FNRS moderators—the latter ensuring procedural compliance and fairness without participating in the evaluations themselves. Remote reviewers are provided with **detailed instructions** on scoring criteria, evaluation objectives, and alignment with DORA principles (San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment), which prioritize qualitative over quantitative assessments. Applicants can also include **narrative sections** in their proposals, providing reviewers with additional context on aspects such as publication strategies, career interruptions, mobility, interdisciplinarity, and open science practices.

**Recent initiatives highlight the F.R.S.-FNRS's commitment to continuous improvement.** The F.R.S.-FNRS has recently implemented several changes in its scientific commissions to enhance evaluation processes, including:

- Restructuring scientific commissions to address increasing workloads, reduce the number of potential conflicts of interest, and ensure context-appropriate assessments for doctoral applications. Indeed, while each of the 14 thematic scientific commissions of the F.R.S.-FNRS (composed of local members affiliated with FWB universities and international members) previously evaluated doctoral-level, postdoctoral, and senior-level applications, since 2023, each of the 14 thematic scientific commissions has been divided into two distinct commissions. Structurally, each scientific commission has maintained its scientific scope but has been split into:
  - International Commissions (CS-INTL), composed of international members, responsible for evaluating postdoctoral and senior-level applications. This separation significantly reduces the likelihood of conflicts of interest by minimizing the involvement of local members affiliated with FWB universities.
  - Doctoral Commissions (CS-FNRS Doctorats), composed of local members from FWB

universities, responsible for evaluating doctoral-level applications, where familiarity with local academic contexts is important for effective assessment.

Each CS-FNRS Doctorats is chaired by the president of the corresponding CS-INTL. This ensures tailored evaluations that respect local academic contexts while maintaining international standards.

- **Promoting gender equity:** Women's representation among international commission members and presidents has significantly improved, rising from respectively 28.6% and 14.3% in 2020 to 55.1% and 57.1% in 2023. Notably, this remarkable progress was achieved without the implementation of quota policies during this period. Furthermore, these advancements were accomplished prior to the adoption of a [new decree](#) scheduled to come into effect in January 2025.
- A right of reply (rebuttal) has been introduced for Research Associate (CQ) applicants between the two evaluation stages—after remote expert reviews and before scientific commission meetings—enabling applicants to clarify potential misunderstandings. Additionally, open science practices are now explicitly recognized as part of the evaluation process.

Finally, feedback collected through satisfaction surveys of reviewers and commission members is used to improve procedures and align them with international best practices. Following the evaluation process, [analytical reports](#) are produced to ensure the proper execution of the calls and the absence of bias in the evaluation procedures. These reports are published to promote transparency and accountability.

## 2. HOW ARRA ALIGNS WITH THE F.R.S.-FNRS STRATEGY

Research assessment has always been a fundamental part of the mission of the F.R.S.-FNRS, reflecting its commitment to supporting scientific excellence, fostering innovation, and addressing societal impacts. By endorsing the San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA) in 2022 and the Agreement on Reforming Research Assessment (ARRA) in June 2023, the F.R.S.-FNRS strengthened its commitment to improving its evaluation practices. For the F.R.S.-FNRS, reforming research assessment is not an administrative obligation but an opportunity to reshape the research ecosystem to better serve science, society, and researchers themselves.

As part of this commitment, the F.R.S.-FNRS continuously updates its procedures and regulations to remain aligned with the highest international standards. Its approach to advancing research assessment is shaped by several strategic priorities, which were defined prior to signing the agreement and are embedded in its broader strategic plans: the PHARE [20.25 plan](#) (2020-2025) and the [PHARE 100](#) strategic plan. These priorities, which will be further reinforced under the current Action Plan, include recognizing diverse contributions to science and society, promoting open science, and moving beyond traditional metrics. Examples of initiatives are outlined below.

### a) Recognizing contributions to science and society

While the F.R.S.-FNRS's primary focus remains on fundamental research, it also acknowledges the significance of supporting research that delivers direct societal and economic value. For example, the Fund for Strategic Fundamental Research (FRFS), supported by the Walloon Region, demonstrates this commitment by financing excellence in targeted areas, such as:

- Health and biotechnology through the WELBIO program
- Sustainable transitions and technology through the WEL-T program.

In collaboration with the WEL Research Institute (WELRI), the FRFS oversees program calls, evaluation processes, and administrative management. This partnership ensures that research projects integrate valorization efforts, accelerating the translation of scientific discoveries into societal and economic benefits.

The F.R.S.-FNRS's [PHARE 100](#) strategic plan, particularly its "Society" axis, further emphasizes the importance of aligning research priorities with societal needs. By addressing these societal priorities, the F.R.S.-FNRS shows that it is possible to support projects with real-world impact (*i.e.*, those that are more applicable and closer to creating economic value) while staying fully dedicated to excellence in fundamental research. This balanced approach aligns perfectly with the ARRA's core principles.

## **b) Advancing Open Science**

Another pillar of the F.R.S.-FNRS's strategy is its dedication to advancing open science which broadens access to knowledge and enhances the availability of research outputs, ensuring they can benefit society widely. Therefore, in its previous [PHARE 20.25 plan](#) (2020-2025), the Fund committed to further evolving its regulations and support mechanisms for researchers to better align with open science policy. The Fund has pledged to expand and strengthen its initiatives in this area in its latest [PHARE 100](#) strategic plan.

The F.R.S.-FNRS implemented its open access policy for scientific publications in 2013, less than a year after the European Commission issued its recommendations on the matter. This policy was recently updated in 2023. Among the changes adopted is an increase in the funding limits for expenses related to publishing open access results through the gold road. This applies not only to publications in scientific journals but also to monographs and collective works, to better account for the specificities of different scientific fields.

Additionally, a Data Management Plan (DMP) is required from recipients of PDR, WELBIO, and WEL-T funding.

The F.R.S.-FNRS Board of Trustees has also recently approved the valorization of researchers' open science practices as part of the application evaluation process.

## **c) Moving beyond traditional metrics**

The F.R.S.-FNRS, a signatory of the DORA declaration, recognizes the shortcomings of traditional metrics, such as citation counts and journal impact factors, which often fail to capture the full scope of researchers' contributions, particularly in innovative or interdisciplinary fields.

To address this, the F.R.S.-FNRS provides applicants with opportunities to explain, in a narrative way, various aspects of their career and research activities (*e.g.*, career interruptions, interdisciplinarity, mobility, open science), and does not require them to mention their h-index (but they can indicate it if they wish). Applicants can also explain their publication strategy, providing context for a lower level of activity if necessary.

By adopting a more qualitative approach, the F.R.S.-FNRS aims to reward creativity, interdisciplinarity, and innovative contributions that cannot be fully appreciated through conventional bibliometric indicators. Indicators like the h-index or journal impact factors, are indeed tailored for disciplinary research and often fail to capture the impact of interdisciplinary work, which spans multiple fields with diverse citation practices. Similarly, disruptive research

may challenge established norms and take time to gain recognition, often appearing in less-established journals not prioritized by conventional metrics.

This shift is especially relevant given the F.R.S.-FNRS's focus on high-risk/high-reward initiatives through its [PHARE 100 plan](#), demonstrating its commitment to supporting transformative research that addresses complex global challenges and has the potential to lead to groundbreaking discoveries.

#### **d) Collaboration and international alignment**

Lastly, by participating in workshops organized by CoARA, working groups organized by Science Europe or other key actors in science policy and research evaluation, the F.R.S.-FNRS benefits from a global network of organizations dedicated to improving research assessment methodologies. This collaboration enables the F.R.S.-FNRS to benchmark its practices against international standards, share insights, and adopt new approaches. This aligns with its commitment to expanding and strengthening science policies as outlined in the [PHARE 100 plan](#).

### **3. THE F.R.S.-FNRS AND THE 10 COMMITMENTS OF THE ARRA**

---

Table 1 below outlines, for each of the ten core commitments, the practices currently implemented by the F.R.S.-FNRS (examples of good practices in place) and the actions it plans to undertake to align with the ARRA principles.

Commitment (ARRA)	What F.R.S.-FNRS does	What F.R.S.-FNRS is planning
1) Recognize the diversity of contributions to, and careers in, research in accordance with the needs and nature of the research	<p>Depending on the funding instrument and the researcher's career stage, the F.R.S.-FNRS encourages diverse research contributions, supports open access publishing, and requires Data Management Plans (DMP) for funded PDR and WELBIO and WEL-T INVESTIGATOR projects.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ F.R.S.-FNRS permanent researchers are required to submit a five-year report describing various aspects of their activities, including services to the university community and society (e.g. participation in evaluation committees, media publications, public seminars, faculty responsibilities), their involvement in collective research dynamics, training and supervision activities.</li> <li>➤ For promotion to the rank of Research Director (DR), permanent researchers are assessed in part on their record of master's and doctoral theses' supervisions.</li> <li>➤ The F.R.S.-FNRS Board of Trustees has recently approved the valorization of researchers' open science practices as part of the application evaluation process. Moreover: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ The F.R.S.-FNRS implemented an open access policy for scientific publications in 2013 (updated in December 2023), requiring recipients to make their results publicly available by depositing their publications in institutional repositories.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<p><b>1.1. Promoting the recognition of Open Access activities</b></p> <p><u>Action 1.1.A.</u> Ensure that remote reviewers and panel members acknowledge and appropriately value researchers' open science practices during the application evaluation process.</p> <p><b>1.2. Expanding the scope of research contributions</b></p> <p><u>Action 1.2.A.</u> Building on current practices in the five-year activity report evaluations, expand the scope of F.R.S.-FNRS assessment criteria for some funding instruments (and adapt the application forms accordingly) to include broader contributions, such as training and supervision activities, participation in evaluation committees, and services to the academic and wider community. Examples include peer review tasks, involvement in scientific commissions or scientific committees, public outreach through media or seminars, and administrative responsibilities.</p> <p><u>Action 1.2.B.</u> Recognize and reward diverse research outputs made openly accessible, such as data, software, models, methods, theories, algorithms, protocols, workflows, exhibitions, strategies, and policy contributions.</p> <p><u>Action 1.2.C.</u> Within the framework of assessments for promotion to the rank of Research Director, recognize</p>



	<p>Additionally, the Fund allows recipients to charge open access publication fees to the research budget allocated, up to €2000 per publication (scientific article, book chapter) and €5000 per book.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>o A Data Management Plan (DMP) has been required from recipients of Research Projects (PDR), WELBIO and WEL-T INVESTIGATOR programs.</li> </ul>	<p>contributions to the career development of junior researchers.</p> <p><b>1.3. Enabling diversity in career paths and profiles</b></p> <p><u>Action 1.3.A.</u> Enable candidates with experience outside the academic sector to describe their work (results, contributions, achievements, etc.) in a dedicated section of the application form, allowing remote reviewers/panel members to assess its relevance to the submitted proposal.</p> <p><b>1.4. Strengthening the role of the DMP</b></p> <p><u>Action 1.4.A.</u> Extend the submission of a DMP to other funding instruments (currently limited to funded PDR, WELBIO and WEL-T INVESTIGATOR programs).</p> <p><u>Action 1.4.B.</u> Integrate specific questions on data management into the research proposal forms for F.R.S.-FNRS applicants. These questions will require researchers to detail their plans for data handling, storage, and preservation both during and after the project. The responses will evaluate applicants' preparedness for responsible data stewardship, reinforcing F.R.S.-FNRS's commitment to Open Science principles and compliance with ethical guidelines.</p>
2) Base research assessment primarily on qualitative evaluation for which peer review is central, supported by responsible	The F.R.S.-FNRS prioritizes qualitative peer review by emphasizing research content over metrics, enabling applicants to explain career nuances and publication strategies, while raising panel members' awareness of unconscious biases in evaluation, in	<p><b>2. Continue efforts to raise awareness among evaluators</b></p> <p><u>Action 2.1.A.</u> Continue raising awareness among remote reviewers and panel members about the importance of prioritizing qualitative evaluation in</p>



<p>use of quantitative indicators</p>	<p>line with the principles of transparency, ethics, and the DORA declaration.</p> <p>More particularly:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Candidates applying for a grant or fellowship are not required to mention their h-index (but they can do it if they wish). Besides, they have the option to discuss their publication strategy (authors' order, choice of journals, etc.), which allows them, for example, to justify a lower level of activity.</li> <li>➤ Since the 2022 Grants and Fellowships call, applicants for Postdoctoral Research fellowships and Research Associate positions are invited to include the five most representative publications of their career in their application file in full-text format. Additionally, applicants must specify the role they played in the production of each publication. The goal is to emphasize that the scientific content of an article is more important than publication metrics or the reputation of the journal in which it was published. This approach, aligned with the DORA declaration to which the F.R.S.-FNRS is a signatory, encourages evaluators to focus on the intrinsic quality of the publications rather than the names or impact factors of the journals where a researcher's work has been published.</li> <li>➤ During the F.R.S.-FNRS scientific commission meetings, a moderator (member of the F.R.S.-FNRS staff), who does not participate in the</li> </ul>	<p>research assessment, with peer review as the cornerstone, complemented by the responsible use of quantitative indicators.</p> <p><u>Action 2.1.B.</u> Review the guides provided to applicants and evaluators to ensure consistency with this commitment.</p> <p><u>Action 2.1.C.</u> Extend the rebuttal process to other funding instruments (including promotion requests).</p>
---------------------------------------	---	---

	<p>evaluation of applications, ensures the smooth conduct of the procedure by making sure that regulations are followed and that no bias or irregularity compromises the fairness of the evaluation. He/she also addresses any questions related to the evaluation procedure that may arise during the meetings. In addition, the moderator assists the President by briefing him or her on the current regulations and key points of attention before and during the meeting.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Certain parts of the application forms include sections where applicants can provide remote evaluators and members of the scientific commissions with explanations about various aspects of their career and research activities (publication strategy, periods of inactivity, mobility, interdisciplinarity, previous work, open science practices, and any additional comments the applicant wishes to address to the evaluators).</li> <li>➤ Since the 2024 Grants &amp; Fellowships call, applicants to Research Associate positions (CQ) have been granted access to remote evaluations during the process and are now offered the opportunity to reply (rebuttal). This approach aims to allow applicants, if they wish, to clarify any misunderstandings raised by a remote reviewer or to refute specific allegations. The rebuttal phase occurs between step 1 (evaluation by remote reviewers) and step 2 (evaluation by the scientific commissions). For example, researchers can use this opportunity to</li> </ul>	
--	---	--

	correct potential inaccuracies regarding their CV, publication, or research project raised by the remote reviewers.	
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	See best practices detailed in the section on Commitment #2.	<p><b>3. Continue efforts to raise awareness among evaluators</b></p> <p><u>Action 3.1.A.</u> Continue raising awareness among remote reviewers and panel members in the scientific commissions to the need for eliminating inappropriate uses of journal- and publication-based metrics in research assessment, particularly the misuse of Journal Impact Factors (JIF) and h-indexes.</p> <p><u>Action 3.1.B.</u> Review the guides provided to applicants and evaluators to ensure consistency with this commitment.</p>
4) Avoid the use of rankings of research organizations in research assessment	<p>The F.R.S.-FNRS avoids using institutional rankings in research assessments, focusing instead on the quality of the research environment and valuing both external and internal mobility within the Wallonia-Brussels Federation, with attention to potential access barriers.</p> <p>➤ At the F.R.S.-FNRS, rankings of research organizations are not considered for the establishment of final rankings of research proposals. The research environment is evaluated in terms of intellectual and material resources, as well as any potential collaborations established to ensure the successful execution of the project.</p>	<p><b>4. Continue efforts to raise awareness among evaluators</b></p> <p><u>Action 4.1.A.</u> Continue promoting awareness among remote reviewers and panel members of scientific commissions about the importance of refraining from using rankings of research organizations in research assessment.</p> <p><u>Action 4.1.B.</u> Review the guides provided to applicants and evaluators to ensure consistency with this commitment.</p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Well aware of the biases (family constraints, financial burdens, etc.) in access to mobility (and notably costly stays), the F.R.S.-FNRS does not value only mobility carried outside but also within institutions of the Wallonia-Brussels Federation.</li> </ul>	
5) Commit resources to reforming research assessment as is needed to achieve the organizational changes committed to	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ No additional budget has been allocated to implement the agreement: the staff of the F.R.S.-FNRS integrates this reform among the other tasks assigned to the funding agency. This is because our procedures are already highly aligned with the ARRA.</li> <li>➤ We have recently increased the remuneration for remote experts to encourage and reward their commitment to our evaluation procedures.</li> </ul>	<p><b>5.1. Using existing tools and competencies</b></p> <p><u>Action 5.1.A.</u> Leverage the F.R.S.-FNRS's internal resources, including communication tools, to share updates and manage reforms effectively (e.g., utilizing the F.R.S.-FNRS website, internal systems/tools, and qualified staff members).</p> <p><u>Action 5.1.B.</u> Establish an internal task force composed of current staff from key departments, such as Analysis, Evaluation and Foresight, Communication, and Research Administration.</p> <p><b>5.2. Embed ARRA principles into existing processes</b></p> <p><u>Action 5.2.A.</u> Review current research assessment workflows and identify areas where ARRA-aligned modifications/adjustments can be implemented, avoiding additional costs.</p> <p><b>5.3. Strengthen collaboration and exchanges on ARRA principles</b></p> <p><u>Action 5.3.A.</u> Continue engaging with other funding agencies, institutions and/or organizations adhering to ARRA principles to exchange resources and strategies.</p>

<p>6) Review and develop research assessment criteria, tools and processes</p>	<p>Evaluation criteria are tailored to each call, funding instrument, and career stage. Transparent procedures, tailored scientific commission compositions, rebuttal opportunities and constant adaptation of research assessment approaches ensure fairness and alignment with international standards.</p> <p>➤ Evaluation criteria are adapted according to the call for projects being organized (or the program being launched), the funding instrument under consideration, and the career stage of the researcher. The objectives and procedures are clearly communicated to the applicants and made available on the F.R.S.-FNRS website. Certain funding instruments or programs consider the societal impact of the project as part of the evaluation process. This is the case, for instance, with the FRESH funding instrument and the WELCHANGE program. Additionally, considerations of the Principal Investigator (PI) regarding the technology transfer potential (e.g., potential valorization for future intellectual property that could arise from the proposed program) are included as evaluation criteria in the context of the WELBIO and WEL-T programs. Depending on the objectives of the calls for projects or funded programs, the composition of scientific commissions is also adapted. These commissions may, for example, include members working outside the academic sector or in the fields of knowledge transfer or valorization.</p>	<p><b>6.1. Continue efforts to monitor our evaluation procedures</b></p> <p><u>Action 6.1.A.</u> Conduct a satisfaction survey among applicants who have submitted funding requests to the Fund. This initiative aims to evaluate the Fund's application selection processes and gather feedback from stakeholders beyond the evaluators.</p> <p><b>6.2. Continue to adapt evaluation criteria to the objectives of the call for projects/program, the funding instrument, and the career stage of the applicant</b></p> <p><u>Action 6.2.A.</u> In line with recognizing diverse contributions and further aligning with ARRA commitments, undertake a review and, if needed, revise or rephrase the evaluation criteria.</p>
--	---	--

	<p>➤ The F.R.S.-FNRS is constantly studying and implementing new ways of valorizing researchers' contributions and new assessment approaches, to meet the demands of the scientific community and comply with international recommendations on research assessment. For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- From the Grants and Fellowships 2025 call, Open Science (OS) practices implemented by researchers are now eligible for consideration in the evaluation of applications. Specifically, candidates are optionally invited to describe their OS practices in an additional section of the application file. This narrative format allows evaluators to recognize their efforts in this area.</li> <li>- From the Grants and Fellowships 2024 call, Research Associate (CQ) applicants have been granted a right of reply (rebuttal) to clarify misunderstandings originating from the remote peer review process (see Commitment #2).</li> </ul> <p>➤ We regularly conduct satisfaction surveys among panel members and remote reviewers to assess their level of satisfaction with the evaluation criteria and procedures (e.g., guides made available). Suggestions for improvements are also collected, enabling us to continuously enhance our procedures.</p>	
--	---	--

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ We constantly monitor our evaluation processes to ensure there is no bias created by our procedures and changes thereof.</li> </ul>	
<p>7) Raise awareness of research assessment reform and provide transparent communication, guidance, and training on assessment criteria and processes as well as their use</p>	<p>The F.R.S.-FNRS ensures a rigorous and transparent evaluation process by providing clear guidance to candidates and personalized support to panel members, and remote reviewers, emphasizing fairness, procedural compliance, and alignment with international standards like DORA.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ The F.R.S.-FNRS communicates with all targeted groups involved in the evaluation process, including candidates, remote reviewers and panel members of the scientific commissions and juries. At each funding call, panel members receive clear, comprehensive guidance, detailing their evaluation mission, funding instruments, criteria, and any updates. Commission Presidents benefit from personalized support, including briefings with a moderator (administrative staff) before meetings to clarify procedures, address questions, and ensure rule compliance. During meetings, moderators oversee fairness and procedural adherence, mitigating biases or irregularities without participating in evaluations.</li> <li>➤ Remote reviewers are provided tailored instructions, outlining funding objectives, criteria weighting, scoring systems, and the importance of justifying scores and rationales. They are reminded of the principles of the San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA), upheld by the F.R.S.-FNRS. The Analysis,</li> </ul>	<p><b>7. Continue efforts to support panel members and remote reviewers in understanding and applying instructions related to their evaluation tasks.</b></p> <p><u>Action 7.1.A.</u> Create a guide on the prevention of unconscious biases, including gender bias, specifically designed for panel members and juries.</p> <p><u>Action 7.1.B.</u> Complement the guide with a video to effectively engage evaluators, enhancing the impact of existing written instructions.</p> <p><u>Action 7.1.C.</u> Develop a checklist for remote reviewers and panel members that reinforces key principles, such as adhering to qualitative evaluation standards (e.g., DORA compliance, ARRA commitments), recognizing potential biases, and appropriately considering criteria and contributions specific to each funding instrument. This checklist can be featured as reminders within the IT submission platform (e-space) and supported by a video to more effectively engage evaluators alongside the written instructions.</p>



	<p><i>Evaluation &amp; Foresight</i> service and administrative officers support remote reviewers throughout the process, ensuring technical assistance and guidance. This structured yet personalized approach guarantees a rigorous and transparent evaluation process, aligned with international standards.</p>	
<p>8) Exchange practices and experiences to enable mutual learning within and beyond the Coalition</p>	<p>The F.R.S.-FNRS participates in several working groups, among them:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Working group on defining new indicators for research evaluation within the FWB/CoARA project conducted by all Wallonia-Brussels universities</li> <li>• Science Europe Working group on Open Science</li> <li>• Science Europe Working group on Research Culture</li> <li>• CoARA Working Group on Improving practices in the assessment of research proposals</li> </ul>	<p>The F.R.S.-FNRS will continue its participation in working groups related to CoARA and, more broadly, to the improvement of research assessment, drawing on best practices to implement its actions.</p>
<p>9) Communicate progress made on adherence to the Principles and implementation of the Commitments</p>	<p>At this stage, the F.R.S.-FNRS has simply announced on its website that it has signed the Agreement on Reforming Research Assessment.</p>	<p><b>9. Communicate the progress of the F.R.S.-FNRS regarding progress on implementing ARRA principles</b></p> <p><u>Action 9.1.A.</u> Create a dedicated webpage for ARRA commitments to centralize all relevant information, FAQs, and updates.</p> <p><u>Action 9.1.B.</u> Publish detailed updates on the F.R.S.-FNRS website regarding progress on implementing ARRA principles.</p>

		<p><u>Action 9.1.C.</u> Develop targeted communication materials for different audiences:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Researchers/candidates: Provide clear guidelines on how the ARRA principles benefit them and influence evaluation practices.</li> <li>- Reviewers: Highlight changes in evaluation processes or criteria stemming from ARRA commitments.</li> </ul>
<p>10) Evaluate practices, criteria and tools based on solid evidence and the state-of-the-art in research on research, and make data openly available for evidence gathering and research</p>	<p>The F.R.S.-FNRS monitors each call for biases and publishes summaries online, while satisfaction surveys from remote reviewers and panel members inform continuous process improvements.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ At the F.R.S.-FNRS, each call is closely monitored to check for potential biases. A summary of the analyses is published on the website.</li> <li>➤ At the F.R.S.-FNRS, satisfaction surveys conducted among panel members and remote reviewers are used to assess and guide improvements to the evaluation process.</li> </ul>	<p><b>10. Continue efforts to publish analysis reports and satisfaction surveys in open access</b></p> <p><u>Action 10.1.A.</u> Continue efforts to publish analysis reports and satisfaction surveys for reviewers and panel members in open access on the F.R.S.-FNRS website. Additionally, aim to provide these documents in English to reach a wider audience, including non-French-speaking researchers and international organizations/institutions/funding agencies.</p>

*Table 1. Current practices and planned actions by F.R.S.-FNRS for aligning with the 10 core ARRA commitments*

## 4. CONCLUDING REMARKS: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES OF ARRA AND BEYOND

---

The F.R.S.-FNRS supports basic scientific research in the French-speaking Community of Belgium, offering diverse funding opportunities and promoting international collaborations. It combines bottom-up and top-down approaches, supporting both fundamental and strategically focused research. The funding agency aligns with international research assessment standards, emphasizing transparency, diversity, open science, and a shift towards more qualitative evaluation methods, while also adapting its practices to meet evolving societal needs and global standards. In that regard, ARRA is an important stepping stone, allowing the fund to pursue its efforts, benchmark its practices and rethink specific aspects of its evaluation processes, despite the lack of additional budget to implement the agreement.

A key pending question is **how to effectively assess excellence across the diverse contributions of the researchers**. While traditional metrics, such as publication counts and journal impact factors, provide standardized benchmarks, they fail to encompass the full range of research outputs and activities, including open science practices, interdisciplinary or high-risk approaches, and societal engagement. The F.R.S.-FNRS must find a balance between maintaining rigor and consistency while adopting a more inclusive evaluation framework that acknowledges varied career paths and contributions. Achieving this balance will require refining existing methodologies to ensure they are both comprehensive and practical for candidates and evaluators alike.

Thus, as assessments shift toward more qualitative and contextualized approaches, **there is an increasing need for tools and frameworks that can accommodate diverse profiles without adding unnecessary complexity**. For instance, integrating narrative CVs, career context explanations or other contributions into the evaluation process necessitates clear guidelines for evaluators. Comparing highly diverse profiles could add complexity to the evaluation process, making it essential to design and implement thoughtful strategies that ensure both fairness and clarity.

**Training evaluators offers a particularly significant opportunity for improvement.** Qualitative evaluations are often perceived as more demanding, requiring additional time and effort. To address this, the F.R.S.-FNRS must provide comprehensive training for evaluators, equipping them with practical tools, clear criteria, and guidance to apply these new approaches consistently and rigorously. Recognizing and rewarding evaluators for their enhanced efforts will be crucial to fostering engagement and sustaining these reforms over the long term.

More broadly, the transition to a new evaluation framework will require consideration of the **implications it may have for the academic community**. Broadening evaluation criteria to recognize a wider range of contributions, while intended to be inclusive, may give rise to perceptions of heightened demands on researchers. The pressure to meet diverse and high expectations risks intensifying existing challenges in the academic landscape, such as job insecurity and mental health concerns, further reducing the appeal of academic careers. However, the F.R.S.-FNRS is committed to implementing these changes with care and ensuring that the new framework does not exacerbate these challenges, but rather fosters a supportive and sustainable environment for researchers.