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FÓRAM NÁISIÚNTA NA HÉIREANN
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NATIONAL OPEN RESEARCH FORUM

ABOARD
RoAdmap to
EmBedding Open
ReseArch Practices
in IRelanD

Opening up Research in Ireland:
A System-Level Approach

Outcomes & Recommendations
from the **ABOARD** project

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Executive Summary

This paper presents the outcomes of the ABOARD consultation process, a national engagement initiative designed to inform the incentivisation of open research and the reform of research assessment within the Irish research system. Through international benchmarking, national surveys of researchers and research funders, collective intelligence workshops, and strategic stakeholder dialogues, the project gathered evidence from across the research ecosystem to identify shared ambitions, structural barriers, and opportunities for reform.

The consultation demonstrates strong support across researchers, funders, policymakers, and research support leaders for embedding open research practices and implementing Responsible Research Assessment (RRA). However, participants consistently highlighted systemic barriers, including the continued dominance of journal-based metrics, insufficient research data infrastructure, inconsistent incentives for open practices, and limited recognition of diverse research outputs, public engagement, and societal impact.

The consultation points to the need for coordinated, system-level action. Key recommendations from stakeholders include: developing balanced indicators that combine quantitative and qualitative measures of research contribution, aligning incentives for high quality open research practices across the system, and encouraging a more critical view of institutional rankings exercises.

To enable sustained system transformation, the paper recommends the establishment of a dedicated national capability - potentially a National Centre for System Impact - to drive research assessment reform, support evidence-informed policy making and societal impact, and build sectoral capacity for recognising research quality, culture and openness.

A. Context & Project Ambitions

The NORF National Action Plan for Open Research (2022) set out a clear ambition for the national research system with respect to incentivising Open Research and reforming research assessment.

Specifically, the aspiration was that:

> **'By 2030 a culture of open research will be embedded at every level of the Irish research system. The re-orientation of research recognition and rewards towards responsible research evaluation and open research metrics and practices will be well underway or complete, and approaches to research assessment will be broadly aligned at a system level across all stakeholders… Embedding open research through responsible research evaluation and assessment… will promote and support the quality and impact of Irish research'** (National Action Plan for Open Research 2022:6).

The ABOARD project was funded in response to this ambition and has had two major goals:

1. To develop proposals in relation to system-level incentivisation of Open Research informed by consultation with key sectoral stakeholder groups ('incentives' in this context, meaning making 'doing' Open Research possible and making doing it matter).

2. To support the reform of research assessment at sector level.

These goals were formulated in recognition of two important background features. These are:

- That effective incentivisation of Open Research practices requires basic alignment between all the major actors within a system – including the sponsoring government department, research-performing institutions, research funders and the researcher community.

- That the incentivisation of Open Research involves re-thinking research assessment practices and, as such, is fundamentally imbricated in the power relations of the academy and the broader research ecosystem. It is therefore a collective action problem which requires a whole-of-system approach.

The NORF *National Open Research Landscape Report* (2021) established that there existed a patchwork of incentivisation of Open Research practices across the sector. Many national funders were proactively engaged in this agenda, with higher education institutes (HEIs), in supporting various aspects of Open Research to some degree (with enthusiastic professionals within Library contexts being particularly active).

Similarly, with respect to Responsible Research Assessment (RRA), many organisations had signed the Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA), which recognizes the need to improve the ways in which researchers and the outputs of scholarly research are evaluated. This implied, at least on a theoretical level, a foundational agreement (or, perhaps more precisely, an absence of explicit disagreement) with this agenda in some research performers. However, as the report also noted, the sector was *"a long way from evincing full agreement with the statement that "harmonisation of recognition and reward of researchers with the basic aims of Open Science is a necessary condition for promoting research excellence"* (European Commission. Directorate General for Research and Innovation, 2017: 11).

B. What We Did

The ABOARD project was designed as a structured, evidence-informed national engagement process to examine how Open Research and Responsible Research Assessment (RRA) practices are currently incentivised within Ireland's Research ecosystem — and how they might evolve.

1. Evidence Review and International Benchmarking

The project began with the development of a foundational paper synthesising international best practice in Open Research and Responsible Research Assessment. This review identified global exemplars, emerging policy trends, and practical implementation approaches across higher education institutions and research funding systems.

This evidence base ensured that the Irish engagement process was informed by international developments, including reform movements around research metrics, incentives, and responsible evaluation frameworks.

2. Researcher Self-Assessment Survey (Work Package 3)

The first major stakeholder engagement activity was a national Self-Assessment Survey of researchers.

Purpose: *To assess:*

- The current state of Open Research incentives in Ireland
- The use of research metrics and assessment practices
- Researchers' openness to reform
- The appetite for change across disciplines and career stages

Implementation:

- Conducted November 2024 – January 2025
- Hosted on Qualtrics
- Disseminated via ABOARD partners, institutional networks, LinkedIn and the ABOARD website
- Ethical approval granted by the Social Research Ethics Committee, University College Cork

Participation:

- 193 researchers
- 18 Irish institutions
- Broad disciplinary representation
  - » 61% STEM (Medicine & Health Sciences, Life Sciences, Engineering, Physical Sciences)
  - » 39% Arts, Humanities & Social Sciences
- Career stage distribution:
  - » Senior Lecturers / Associate Professors – 23%
  - » Professors – 20%
  - » Lecturers / Assistant Professors – 18%
  - » Postdoctoral Researchers – 14%
  - » Research Fellows – 10%
  - » Other research-related roles – 14%

The profile of respondents provides a robust cross-section of Ireland's research community.

3. Research Funding Organisation (RFO) Self-Assessment

In parallel, ABOARD conducted a Self-Assessment Survey of Irish Research Funding Organisations.

Purpose: *To examine:*

- Current funding policies relating to Open Research
- Approaches to research metrics
- Alignment with responsible research assessment principles
- Institutional readiness for reform

Implementation:

- Conducted November 2024 – January 2025
- Ethical approval granted by UCC's Social Research Ethics Committee
- Distributed via targeted engagement through ABOARD partners

Participating organisations (9):

- Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth
- Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine
- Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)
- Health Research Board (HRB)
- Health Research Charities Ireland
- Marine Institute
- Research Ireland
- Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI)
- Teagasc

This represented the majority of Ireland's core public research funding ecosystem.

4. Collective Intelligence Workshops (Work Package 4)

The survey findings informed the next phase: a series of Collective Intelligence Workshops held between March and May 2025. These workshops moved beyond diagnosis to co-creation.

Stakeholder Cohorts

Workshops were conducted with four distinct groups:

- Arts, Humanities & Social Sciences (AHSS) researchers
- STEM researchers
- Early-Career Researchers
- Research Funding Organisations

Workshop Outputs

Using structured facilitation methods, participants developed Declarative Statements across three key domains:

1. Ambition – What should Ireland aim for in Open Research and Responsible Research Assessment?
2. Enabling Structures – What policies, supports and infrastructures are required?
3. Indicators – What constitutes meaningful and responsible measurement?

These statements captured shared priorities, concerns, and reform pathways from each stakeholder group.

5. 1:1 Key Stakeholder Dialogue

Informed by the outcomes of the researcher and RFO self-assessment exercises, coupled with the Declarative Statements that were generated as an output of the Collective Intelligence Workshops, a series of 1:1 strategic 'dialogues' were undertaken with key influential stakeholder groups within the Irish research ecosystem.

These engagements were used to 'sense-check' findings from the consultation exercises and workshops, and to inform the development of recommendations seeking to strengthen Ireland's alignment with international Open Research and Responsible Research Assessment reform agendas.

Discussions were undertaken with the following stakeholder groups:

- Impact 2030 Implementation Group
- Royal Irish Academy (Academic Board)
- Young Irish Academy
- Irish Universities Association (IUA) – Institutional HR Directors Standing Committee
- IUA – Institutional Librarians Standing Committee
- Higher Education Authority
- CoARA National Chapter
- Technological Universities' Vice Presidents for Research
- Department for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science

C. Incentivizing Open Research and Reforming Research Assessment in the Irish Research System – Consultation Outcomes

The combined outputs of:

- International best practice review
- Researcher Self-Assessment
- RFO Self-Assessment
- Collective Intelligence Workshops
- 1:1 Stakeholder Dialogue

are synthesised below. This suite of considerations and recommendations focus on:

- Ambitions for Open Research incentivisation and research assessment reform.
- Changes to system structures that are required to realise this ambition.
- Insights on purposeful success indicators.

1. Researchers & Funders
– Ambitions

a) Early Career Researchers

Overarching Priorities:

- The community has a very strong appetite to open up their research, especially in terms of open data and open access publishing, and is eager for incentivisation measures to enable this.

Specific Ambitions:

- Early Career Researchers (ECRs) recognised that learning the skills needed for Open Research, including the use of Open Research data, is a vital prerequisite for their community and recommend that funding be made available to meet this need.
- ECRs make significant attempts to ensure their research data is appropriately open but national data infrastructure is holding them back, as is the difficulty in accessing the vital skills of Research Data Stewards.
- ECRs welcome the strong signals from

many funders but note that the importance of Open Research elements and public engagement in funding applications in terms of scoring and weighting is often not clear enough – their question in this regard is whether these elements 'really' matter?

'Watchouts'

- Journal Impact Factors (JIFs) and H-indices still hold enormous sway in the system.
- Public engagement and its incentivisation is of considerable importance but should not be universally 'mandated' – these activities are not priorities for all research.
- Undertaking Open Research practices is effortful, and ECRs are a particularly overloaded research cohort. It is important, therefore, that any implemented incentivisation methodologies should not unduly increase their burden.

b) AHSS Researchers

Overarching Priorities

- The community strongly welcomes research assessment reform
- Open access with respect to traditional publication types is broadly supported

Specific Ambitions

- It is of singular importance to this cohort that diverse/'non-traditional' research output types are appropriately recognised. This includes creative outputs and research-for-policy outputs.

- The practice and results of engaged research, societal impact, and positive research leadership must be recognised and rewarded.

'Watchouts'

- Recognition of pertinent differences in

disciplinary research practice is extremely important.

- Any incentivisation of open access must not come at the expense of the freedom to publish where researchers deem appropriate.
- FAIR ('Findable, Accessible, Interoperable, and Reusable') data imperatives can be challenging for some AHSS research output types. What constitutes 'research data' is a question that many must grapple with in these conversations.

c) STEM Researchers

Overarching Priorities

- The community is very knowledgeable about, and supportive of, the Open Research agenda; however, these researchers articulate major impediments to engagement and implementation.
- The community is alive to the influence of rankings and there is a desire to have that tension addressed by sectoral and institutional leaders.

Specific Ambitions

- The cost of Article Processing Charges (APCs) can be prohibitive and therefore open access mandates can introduce a bias in favour of wealthier institutions.
- Open data practices can be particularly difficult for health researchers as there is a significant compliance burden in relation to anonymisation, GDPR and so forth. An uplift in training and guidance resources is needed, underpinned by the development of career structures for professional support staff in these areas.
- There is interest in, and recognition of the value of, narrative CVs.
- Research data infrastructure is urgently required – currently, there is no national 'all discipline' resource for the appropriate and secure deposition/archiving of metadata for others' use.

- There is strong interest in finding mechanisms to reward and recognise peer review activities.

'Watchouts'

- While there was agreement that there should be a move away from a sole focus on quantitative metrics to assess research activity, the view was that their use should not be abandoned entirely.
- Incentivisation relating to the Open Research agenda cannot feel to researchers like 'do research as usual **and also do** open research.
- The interest in narrative CV methodologies is counterposed by questions as to the practicalities of implementation vis-à-vis reviewer burden.

d) Research Funders

Overarching Priorities

- The research funder cohort has a very high level of ambition with respect to enabling both Open Research and to practicing Responsible Research Assessment.
- Many national research funders are very progressive and are strong sectoral leaders in advancing these entwined agendas.

Specific Ambitions

- Ambition is particularly strong in terms of:
  » Rewarding and incentivising public engagement, societal impact and evidence-for-policy.
  » Open access, particularly in order to enable access to academic research by non-academic beneficiaries – 'if it's publicly funded, it should be publicly available'.
- There is a pressing need to inform policymakers about the **system-wide** importance of Open Research – the argument has not yet been successfully made to this cohort.

- Research funders are very aware of relevant developments occurring in other jurisdictions – there is a clear appetite to trial models that have worked with international funders, as well as to innovate nationally.

'Watchouts'

- Funders are aware of debates about what constitutes 'good' research and recognise that these are far from settled matters. However, the group cautioned that some elements of the traditional concept of 'research excellence' remain important and subtlety in the critique of this notion is required.
- Funders find elements of Open Research practice difficult to monitor within their portfolios.

2. Researchers & Funders
– Insights on System Reform

Overarching Priorities

- Reform of assessment of researchers must go hand-in-hand with reform of assessment of Research Performing Organisations.
- Sectoral investment in data infrastructure and data stewards (and their career pathways) is essential. There is a recommendation that a national research portal or Current Research Information System (CRIS) be investigated (as there are numerous problems associated with the use of proprietary systems).
- The Irish Research eLibrary (IReL) needs greater investment to ensure a better deal for researchers. In addition, a National Open Access Platform should be established with strong incentives in place for researchers to publish therein.
- The Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DHFERIS) should be at the forefront of this agenda, driving change through policy and funder levers –a role for the System

Performance Frameworks should be investigated.

Specific Insights:

- Consideration should be given to recognising public engagement with research, including evidence for policy, citizen science and societal impact activities as research activities by RPOs, and by policymakers in their assessment of RPOs' research performance.
- Staff within Technological Universities must be enabled to undertake research to an appropriate degree, this is a matter of foundational importance for any discussion of research policy or practice in these institutions.
- Mentorship and training are crucial to enable researchers – especially ECRs – to engage with open research practices.
- Support for narrative CV implementation is critical.
- All research performers in the system (including, for example, the Health Service Executive) need to be included within future conversations as should all researcher types (e.g. independent scholars).

'Watchouts'

- Measurement of Open Access progress must be sensitive to disciplinary practices.
- Researchers' choices regarding their preferred publishing outlets must be respected.
- Early Career Researcher precarity means that it is very challenging for them to prioritise learning about, and then 'doing', Open Research.

3. Researchers & Funders
– Insights on Success Indicators

Overarching Priorities

- Any indicators that are developed and adopted must be accompanied by appropriate support and incentivisation mechanisms.

- There should be a mixture of quantitative and qualitative indicators developed for the sector.
- There should be specific indicators developed for both RPOs and RFOs.

Specific Insights

- A national research culture survey should be rolled out that captures a range of research culture issues including Responsible Research Assessment and supports provided for Open Research by institutions. Development of indicators could be progressed through development of this survey, the results of the first iteration of which would provide a baseline.
- It is vital that there are appropriate indicators and/or case-studies on societal impact (for example, policy impact, informing clinical guidelines, community impact etc.) and research leadership (including contribution to capacity building and to the health of disciplines).
- There should be exploration of 'DOI-ing' a range of outputs types (for example, code files, methods papers, engaged research outputs) to enable visibility and to potentially serve as an indicator to track diverse outputs.
- Open data sets (in FAIR mode), preprint and open code would be useful indicators.
- The impact of research on pedagogy, curriculum and other educational outputs must be included.

Watchouts

- Any indicators should only be introduced once the overall reporting burden on RPOs has been assessed - 'the horror of more measures' is a prevailing sentiment within the sector.
- Institutional research missions vary – not all researchers should be incentivised to do all types of open research activity. Therefore, consideration should be given to indicators that relate to 'inputs that enable structural

change' over and above those that count 'raw outputs'.
- Any indicators purporting to relate to 'research quality' should be based on conceptions of quality that have been determined on a disciplinary basis.

4. Other Stakeholder Groups
– Priorities and Ambitions

As described above, and following the completion of the formal elements of the consultation process, a series of 1:1 strategic dialogues were undertaken with key influential stakeholder groups from across the Irish research ecosystem.

Overarching Priorities

- Policymakers consulted as part of the dialogue process expressed a clear understanding of the importance of Open Research practices in underpinning a vibrant and impactful research ecosystem. They were also aware of the need for research assessment reform in supporting the delivery of such an ecosystem.
- Policymakers also appreciated the significance of their organisations in effecting meaningful change at a systems level, particularly in the area of research assessment reform.
- Consultation with professional cohorts from the RPOs also expressed strong support for Open Research practices and their importance in delivering impactful and robust research outcomes; however, they also were acutely aware of the challenges of implementing (and sustaining) transformational change within their organizations.

Specific Ambitions

- The need for change in how research is undertaken – and the types of activities, behaviours and outputs that are rewarded – was articulated by all cohort groups consulted. However, there is less clarity and

agreement on the specific actions required to deliver on that change.

- DFHERIS and the Higher Education Authority (HEA) have vital leadership roles if systems-level transformation is to be delivered.
- Mentorship and training for researchers and research management professionals will be critical enablers and will require appropriate investment.

- The IUA Librarians Group emphasized the importance of institutions embracing research output rights retention as a key Open Research principle.
- Institutional ranking exercises are firmly embedded as a source of information that informs certain University management decisions. Any actions supporting institutional research and researcher assessment process reform within our university sector needs to be cognisant of this reality.

D. Delivering on the Ambition – Overall Project Recommendations

Most stakeholders in the Irish research ecosystem, notably researchers, funders and policymakers, are aware of the flaws of the current incentivisation framework.

It is becoming clear that the assessment models that determine whether researchers can obtain employment, promotion, and grant funding, and whether institutions are competitive with respect to national performance regulations and exercises that influence reputation, are seriously deficient. They are deficient because not only do they fail to enable holistic judgements of long-term value (including value to a range of publics including citizens and policymakers), but they also actively work against that value being produced.

When it is rational, and in fact necessary, for a researcher to prioritise publishing their article in a high impact factor journal as opposed to making their research open, engaging with an NGO, policymaker or a public health initiative, or mentoring colleagues, it must be recognised that there is a problem. In addition, when the system incentivises our research performing organisations to focus on citations rather than actual research significance (whether intellectual or societal) or healthy research environments, it is equally indicative of a flawed system. Recognition of this issue is widely,

although not universally, present in the Irish research system.

Discussions of this problem invariably include the observation that matters concerning the recognition and reward of Open Research practices are inherently connected to 'culture change'. While clearly correct, this observation often acts as a block to meaningful engagement with the issue, with statements averring that 'culture change takes time' and 'culture change is difficult' invariably coming next and often terminating further analysis or thought. 'Culture', it is implied, is something that is fundamentally 'about' the voluntary actions of individuals and therefore will authentically change in the desired direction only when mysterious shifts inside hearts and minds have occurred.

What is missing in narratives of this type is that 'culture change' is sensitive to so-called top-down forces that, in altering rules and expectations, can be vital in catalysing effective change.

The current national situation can be

characterised as one in which many funders are engaged and eager to do more, many researchers are informed and keen to see (nuanced) change, policymakers are keenly aware of the importance of reform, and HEIs are happy to commit to public initiatives but face challenges, to various degrees, with respect to fostering profound engagement with this agenda. It is therefore our contention that a reliance on the various actors in the Irish research system 'self-organising' to bring about system-level incentivisation of Open Research and effective reform of research assessment is unlikely to produce significant results in the short or even medium term.

The change that is urgently required is more likely to be brought about by a coherent suite of initiatives encompassing clear policy objectives (including 'as is' and 'to be' statements), associated with tightly aligned delivery mechanisms including:

- Funding
- Reporting
- Infrastructural elements.

While it is not the case that we are advocating for the concept, structure and reach of these objectives and mechanisms to be determined in a wholly 'top-down' manner (consultation plainly being crucial to success, including consultation with sister NORF projects that were funded under the 'culture' strand), it is clear to us that it is national research policymakers that have the authority and scope to advance this agenda at a systems level.

Our recommendation is that a specific unit, team or national centre be established (for example, a National Centre for System Impact) to drive system-level change in research assessment reform, evidence-informed policymaking, research engagement and societal impact.

Regardless of its precise configuration, sectoral location or oversight body, this unit or Centre

should be tasked with (and evaluated on its ability to):

- Build capacity for system change in the areas of research culture benchmarking, research assessment reform, evidence-informed policymaking, citizen engagement and societal impact
- Develop and implement nationally- relevant models for the evaluation of research impact
- Co-create and deliver a portfolio of interventions across all stakeholder groups (researchers, research performers, research funders, policymakers)
- Evaluate change and delivery

Structures relating to similar policy areas in other jurisdictions (such as UPEN, NCCPE, the Dutch recognition and rewards programme) could be informative in designing the approach for Ireland but it is recommended that these inter-related agendas are combined in one national body here.

ABOARD was a structured national reflection on how research quality, openness, and impact are recognised and rewarded.

The project has provided:

- A shared evidence base
- Sector-wide stakeholder consensus
- Clear reform signals
- A suite of actionable recommendations

The outputs are designed to inform national policy development and strengthen Ireland's alignment with international Open Research and Responsible Research Assessment reform agendas.

ABOARD

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