

3. Action 3: Advance towards the reform of the assessment system for research, researchers and institutions to improve their quality, performance and impact

1.1. Purpose of the Action and expected outcomes

ERA Action 3 of the ERA Policy Agenda aims to advance towards a reform of the research assessment system, with the goal of assessing the quality, performance, and impact of research and researchers using more suitable criteria and procedures.

The assessment of research projects, researchers, and institutions is crucial for ensuring a well-functioning R&I system and to improve the quality, performance and impact of research. While some research funding and performing organisations have begun to enhance their assessment tools, the current system still often relies on inadequate and narrow methods, and the advancement in improving research and researcher assessment across Europe has been slow, limited, and fragmented.¹

In view of the objective to advance towards the reform of the assessment system for research, researchers and institutions to improve their quality, performance and impact, Action 3 aims to reward open science practices in terms of open collaboration, knowledge and data sharing to increase quality, efficiency and trust, establish coalitions between relevant stakeholders and identify potential administrative and legal barriers to institutional changes. The three **expected outcomes** outlined in the ERA Policy Agenda 2022-2024 are:²

- Analysis of legal and administrative barriers at national and trans-national level for a modern research assessment system;
- Create a Coalition of European research funders and research performers who agree on a new approach for research assessment, following wide and inclusive consultations at European and international level;
- Implementation plan of the coalition to roll-out the new approach, including pilots in different domains.

1.2. Implementation of the Action

The overarching aim of Action 3 is for research and researchers to be evaluated based on their intrinsic merits and performance rather than on the number of publications and where these are published, promoting qualitative judgement and peer-review, supported by a more responsible use of quantitative indicators.

The starting point of reforming the research assessment system was the **2018 Commission Recommendation**³ to Member States to set and implement clear policies to reward a culture of collaboration and sharing of knowledge and data.

The improvement of the research assessment system was set as a strategic objective in the **Commission Communication on a new European Research Area for Research and Innovation** and reiterated in the **Council Conclusions on the new European Research Area**⁴ of 1 December 2020. The **Council conclusions on attractive and sustainable researchers' careers and working conditions**⁵ of 28 May 2021 also stressed

¹ DG RTD, Action 3: Advance towards the reform of the Assessment System for research, researchers and institutions to improve their quality, performance and impact – Explanatory document.

² European Commission (2021), European Research Area Policy Agenda – Overview of actions for the period 2022-2024, p 6.

³ Commission Recommendation (EU) 2018/790 of 25 April 2018 on access to and preservation of scientific information, available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32018H0790>

⁴ Council conclusions on the European Universities initiative – Bridging higher education, research, innovation and society: Paving the way for a new dimension in European higher education 2021/C 221/03, available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52021XG0610%2802%29>.

⁵ Council conclusions on Deepening the European Research Area: Providing researchers with attractive and sustainable careers and working conditions and making brain circulation a reality, available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/49980/st09138-en21.pdf>

that research assessment system, which are an integral part of attractive and productive careers, should explore more talent-based and diversity-sensitive quality measurement systems.

Following the inclusion of the priority action for reforming the assessment system for research, researchers and institutions to improve their quality, performance and impact in the **ERA Policy Agenda 2022-2024** 'within the path set by the Council Conclusions on Research assessment and implementation of Open Science⁶ of 10 June 2022, steps were taken to foster alignment on research and assessment reforms.

In December 2021, the European Commission issued a call for expressions of interest from stakeholder organisations to join the **Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment (CoARA)**.⁷ As of September 11, 2023, the CoARA has grown to include 537 member organisations from around the world, all of whom have signed the agreement.⁸ The member organisations encompass various types, such as:

- Universities, and their associations;
- Research centres, research infrastructures, and their associations;
- Academies, learned societies, and their associations, and associations of researchers;
- Public or private research funding organisations and their associations;
- National/regional authorities or agencies that implement some form of research assessment and their associations;
- Other relevant non-for-profit organisations involved with research assessment, and their associations.

One of the most important milestones was the **agreement on reforming research assessment of July 2022**⁹, which was one of the expected outcomes set by the ERA Policy Agenda 2022 -2024 (see 7.2 Achievements). The agreement established a common direction for research assessment reform, while respecting the signatory organisations' autonomy. The core commitments include:

- Recognising the diversity of contributions to, and careers in, research in accordance with the needs and nature of the research;
- Base research assessment primarily on qualitative evaluation for which peer review is central, supported by responsible use of quantitative indicators;
- Abandon inappropriate uses in research assessment of journal- and publication-based metrics, in particular inappropriate uses of Journal Impact Factor (JIF) and h-index;
- Avoid the use of rankings of research organisations in research assessment.

The **European Research Council (ERC)**, which signed the agreement on reforming research assessment, also contributes to improving the quality, performance, and impact of research. The ERC set up a task force to conduct a comprehensive examination of the ERC's way to assess researchers and research proposals, considering concerns expressed by the research community. Subsequently, the Scientific Council of the ERC approved **modifications** based on the task force's recommendations, which are **implemented in the 2024 Work Programme**.

The ERC reaffirmed its commitment to excellence as the sole criterion for selecting researchers and projects and implemented a shift towards a holistic and comprehensive evaluation of researchers beyond traditional metrics.

⁶ Council conclusions on Research assessment and implementation of Open Science, Council document 10126/22 available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/56958/st10126-en22.pdf>

⁷ <https://coara.eu>

⁸ <https://coara.eu/coalition/membership>

⁹ Agreement on reforming research assessment (2020), available at: https://coara.eu/app/uploads/2022/09/2022_07_19_rra_agreement_final.pdf

To support diversity and fairness the changes will consider factors such as career stage and personal context, avoiding bias towards specific research types or outputs. The Scientific Council will closely monitor the effects of these changes and make refinements as needed in response to feedback from applicants, evaluation panels, and the broader scientific community.¹⁰

Another example represents the Open and Universal Science funded under the 'Widening participation and strengthening the ERA' part of a Horizon Europe Call (Work Programme 2021-2022).¹¹ The project develops coordination and support measures to reform the assessment of research and researchers at Research Performing Organisations (RPOs) and Research Funding Organisations (RFOs) towards a system that incentivises and rewards researchers to take up Open Science practices.¹²

In addition to the CoARA and the ERC, national authorities and the European Commission are **relevant actors** in the implementation of Action 3. National authorities play a vital role in developing policies and legislative frameworks that support this reform and encourage collaboration among stakeholders.¹³ The European Commission acts as a facilitator in the preparation of the Agreement and has joined the Coalition as a research and innovation funder. The Commission participates on equal terms with other members of the Coalition in its operations.¹⁴

Figure 1, below, which builds on data provided by the 2023 OECD STIP Survey, shows that most policy initiatives associated with Action 3 were implemented with a **budget** of less than EUR 1 million. 26 policies fall under a budget of less than EUR 1 million, while 10 policies are allocated between EUR 1 million and EUR 5 million. Additionally, eight policy initiatives received a budget of EUR 5-20 million, four initiatives received EUR 20-50 million, three initiatives received EUR 50-100 million, and four initiatives received EUR 100-500 million. Only one policy initiative benefited from funding exceeding EUR 500 million¹⁵.

The policy initiatives with a high estimated budget expenditure were national-level funding programmes. The policy initiatives, benefitting from a budget of over EUR 100 million per year, were deployed in Hungary, Greece, Romania and Croatia, whilst the one policy initiative with over EUR 500 million was French. For instance, the General Secretariat for Investment in France holds the responsibility of maintaining the coherence of the State's investment policy. It accomplishes this by conducting assessments of investment projects and providing support while also facilitating thematic investment evaluation mechanisms.

National policy examples

At the national level, several policy debates are taking place related to Action 3. For instance, **Slovenia** has commissioned several research projects under the framework of Targeted Research Programs (CRP) to support the reform of science assessment in the country. Additionally, seven signatories of the Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment (CoARA) are actively involved in the implementation of Action 3. In **Estonia**, debates surrounding the diversification of research assessment reforms are gaining momentum. It is crucial to highlight that due to the high autonomy of Estonian research organisations, the development of career paths and researcher assessment systems is taking place in a decentralised manner.

Concerning the **types of policy instruments** employed to promote the objectives of Action 3, governance support (76%) is by far the most used policy instrument. Direct financial support (i.e., grants and public funding to promote the open science model) was also used, albeit significantly less (12%). Guidance, regulation, and incentives (6%)

¹⁰ <https://erc.europa.eu/news-events/magazine-article/research-assessment-ScC-view>.

¹¹ <https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/portal/screen/opportunities/topic-details/horizon-widera-2021-era-01-45>

¹² See Open Universal Science website, <https://opusproject.eu/about>.

¹³ DG RTD, Action 3: Advance towards the reform of the Assessment System for research, researchers and institutions to improve their quality, performance and impact – Explanatory document.

¹⁴ <https://coara.eu/agreement/faq>

¹⁵ 'Secrétariat général pour l'investissement (SGPI)', French government website, available at : <https://www.gouvernement.fr/secretariat-general-pour-l-investissement-sgpi>

and collaborative infrastructures (5%) were less common, whilst indirect financial support was the least used instrument.

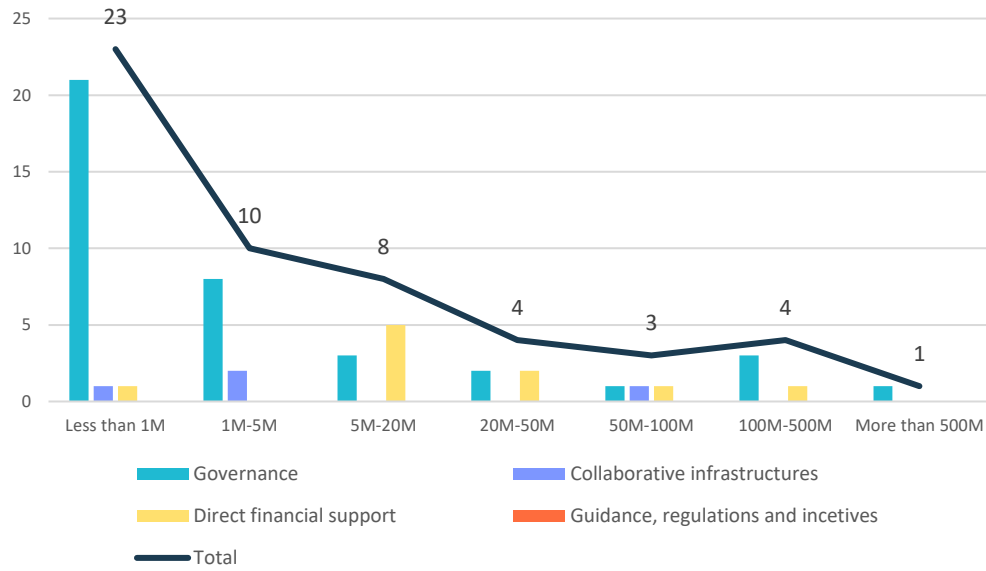


Figure 16: Action 3: Distribution of budget per policy instrument