

The CoARA action plan of the Estonian Research Council for the continuous improvement of research evaluation

Anu Noorma, Director General

Helen Post, Head of the Department of Research and Development Funding

Background

The Estonian Research Council (ETAG) was established in 2012 in the public interest to support the execution of [national research policies](#). One of the main activities in fulfilling this task is to conduct evaluations of research activities, systems, and actors that have various objectives and are aimed at different target groups. The activities carried out in ETAG are based on the values outlined in [the development plan](#): **reliability, expertise, efficiency, openness, and cooperation**. Therefore, the improvement and modernization of various evaluation processes have been under constant attention. It has been important for ETAG to maintain close contact with the parties of the research system within Estonia and to use the experiences of network in the international cooperation.

In 2022 ETAG joined [the Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment](#) (CoARA) and signed The Agreement on Reforming Research Assessment expressing the readiness for further specific activities to improve research assessment.

Reforming evaluation practices

Some aspects of the ten CoARA commitments have been common practices in ETAG for quite some time:

- the evaluation is mostly qualitative and based on peer review (CoARA commitment nr 2) which is highlighted by the evaluation of the main funding instrument of ETAG ([personal research grants](#)). Quantitative data are used only as background information when it is relevant.
- ETAG does not use Journal Impact Factors and rankings of research organisations in its evaluations (CoARA commitment nr 4),
- evaluators are advised in [the guidelines for the expert panel](#) to use publication-based metrics (e.g. citations) responsibly or steer away from them completely if possible (CoARA commitment nr 3).

Actions that have been taken prior formulating CoARA Action Plan:

In recent years ETAG has made significant improvements to its assessment processes:

- Previously, the applications of personal research grants were assessed by outside reviewers who evaluated 1-2 proposals after which Estonian expert panels compiled the final evaluations. **At the beginning of 2022**, ETAG reformed the evaluation of its main funding instrument and switched to evaluating applications in international expert panels. This reform was needed to enhance the quality and fairness of the assessment by having evaluators with broader and higher expertise as well as less conflict of interest.
- **In 2023** an international panel was also used to evaluate Centres of Excellence program that funds the most prominent research projects in Estonia.
- ETAG continuously improves guidelines for the expert panels which is a document that includes information about the tasks of the panel members, guidelines for reviewing, expert panel

meetings, conflict of interest *etc.* For calls started in 2024 the guidelines for evaluation were made more specific to advise the experts to focus on the quality of the scientific content of the application especially when evaluating the applicant. This document is made publicly available. Additionally, ETAG conducts meetings with the experts to guide them and is in touch with them constantly during the evaluation process.

- Before every funding call ETAG reviews the evaluation criteria that will be used by the experts in compiling their reviews and evaluations.
- In 2023-2024 ETAG tested the capabilities of artificial intelligence (OpenAI) to compile and phrase the main criteria based on information found in evaluation guidelines of different funding schemes which are publicly available.

Publicly available documents:

- Evaluation guidelines for personal research grant applications - [postdoctoral grants](#), [starting grants](#) and [team grants](#),
- [Evaluation guidelines for Centres of Excellence](#) applications,
- [Guidelines for the Expert Panels](#) of personal research grants

Collaboration

Since 2023 ETAG is a member of a CoARA working group on “Improving practices in the assessment of research proposals” where competences are shared, and best practices compiled.

At the end of 2023, ETAG had a meeting with major universities of Estonia, the Estonian Academy of Sciences, the Estonian Young Academy of Sciences (who has also joined CoARA in 2023), and the Ministry of Education and Research to introduce CoARA and discuss which aspects of the reform are the most crucial and should be focused on in the Estonian context.

Action plan 2024-2027

The action plan is drawn up based on the commitments set in the Agreement on Reforming Research Assessment. Action plan is considered when creating early activities of ETAG, updated, and reported together with annual report.

To fulfil the obligations set in the Action Plan, ETAG must consider the needs and possibilities of Estonia indicated [Estonian Research and Development, Innovation and Entrepreneurship Strategy 2021—2035](#)

The planned activities of ETAG to review and reform the evaluation practices are summarized by 8 tasks in Table 1 and described in detail according to CoARA commitments as follows:

- **CoARA commitment number 1. Recognise the diversity of contributions to, and careers in, research in accordance with the needs and nature of the research:**
 - 1) Smaller changes in the evaluation of on-going instruments will be made (Task 1) and have been made to recognize the different contributions and careers.
 - 2) ETAG is going on to introduce narrative CV-s in evaluation. For that experiences of other funding institutions will be analysed, R&D institutions and researchers will be involved in discussions of the best usage of narrative CV-s. First meetings will be held in **winter of 2025** (Task 1).
 - 3) Latest in 2027, the reports about changes in the evaluation system is prepared (Task 1).

- CoARA commitment number 2. Base research assessment primarily on qualitative evaluation for which peer review is central, supported by responsible use of quantitative indicator and CoARA commitment number 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:
 - 1) Evaluation in ETAG is already mostly qualitative (JIF has not been used in evaluation and h-index has been used to a small extent). The aim is to reduce the usage of quantitative indicators (e.g. citations) even more and stop even collection of bibliometric data (continuously in Task 1). To achieve this ETAG starts several discussions with the [Evaluation Committee](#) of the Estonian Research Council who is responsible for the evaluation of personal research grants. **ETAG will start these discussions in autumn 2024** when preparing for the next year's call. This will be continued in the following years if needed.
 - 2) ETAG will continuously train evaluators to responsibly use metrics in evaluation and focus on the qualitative aspects of the proposals (Table 1. Task 2). To achieve this ETAG will have meetings with the evaluators and renew the guidelines on an ongoing basis. In 2025 there will be public release the evaluation report of governmental evaluation of R&D performing institutions.

- CoARA commitment number 6. Review and develop research assessment criteria, tools and processes:
 - 1) Assessment criteria are continuously improved and reformed (Table 1. Task 1). ETAG plans to incorporate AI and other digital tools to increase the quality and efficiency of evaluation. **In 2024** ETAG has started to investigate the possibilities of AI usage and therefore has involved two companies specialising in machine learning and AI. They analyse the procedures of ETAG to find ways to automate (e.g. making the finding of conflicts of interest easier, finding evaluators with best qualifications etc.) (Task 5).
 - 2) [Estonian Research Information System](#) is continuously developed according to the users and funders requirements. During 2025 the classification system of research fields will be updated. Additional options will be added to make use of system more comfortable and faster for reviewers in the review process and policymakers for the research based decision making process (Task 5)

- CoARA commitment number 7. Raise awareness of research assessment reform and provide transparent communication, guidance, and training on assessment criteria and processes.
 - 1) ETAG will organize series of meetings (Task 4) with both policy makers (Task 8) and R&D institutions to discuss CoARA and the ways in which the commitments can be implemented. **In 2024-2025** ETAG will give an overview of changes in evaluation and CoARA to the board of ETAG, The Research and Development Council and Ministry of Research and Education (Task 8). Additional meetings with policy makers will take place to raise awareness of CoARA and its commitments among policy makers of different ministries.
 - 2) **In 2026** ETAG will organise a research forum called "TeadusEst" where the topic is research evaluation and its reformation including CoARA (Task 4). "TeadusEst" is held annually, and the target group is researchers and their communities.

- 3) Involvement of other R&D partners especially partnering with [Estonian Young Academy of Sciences](#) (EYAS) and [Estonian Academy of Sciences](#) (EAS) into the discussions will increase the number of Estonian institutions joined with CoARA (Task 7).
- **CoARA commitment number 8. Exchange practices and experiences to enable mutual learning within and beyond the Coalition:**
 - 1) ETAG takes part of the CoARA working group on “Improving practices in the assessment of research proposals” meetings and shares its experience in proposal evaluation as well (Task 6). In the working group tools for an even more quality evaluation are developed which ETAG can then incorporate into its processes where needed.
 - 2) ETAG mostly contributes to the work package 2 “Selection of and guidance to reviewers on responsible research assessment practices” but also provides input to other work packages when needed.
 - 3) Network in national level with other CoARA members and publicly available information about actions will be incorporated to new ETAG website after 2025. (Task 4).
 - **CoARA commitment number 9. Communicate progress made on adherence to the principles and implementation of the Commitments:**

This action will be linked with tasks 4, 7, 8. ETAG will actively contribute to the relevant actions under the network of [Science Europe](#) and [Global Research Council](#) (Task 6)
 - **CoARA commitment number 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:**
 - 1) Evaluation practices and their impact on research are constantly analysed, and the results of the statistical analysis are made public (Task 3). **In 2025 and 2028** ETAG will publish a statistical report called “Estonian Research” (Task 3).
 - 2) Current feedback system of project evaluation will be analysed according to the CoARA principles and step-by step updated. Results are discussed in conference and reported publicly after that in 2026 (Task 1)
 - 3) Report of regular evaluation of Estonian R&D institutions including suggestions for the future will be published in 2025 (Task 7)
 - 4) Capabilities of ETIS will be continuously developed for better evidence-based use by all partners (Task 5)
 - 5) ETAG is partner in joint project of OECD and JRC project “Building capacity for evidence informed policymaking in governance and public administration in a post-pandemic Europe”. The final report in 2025 with suggestions will be publicly available and further used by ETAG in the developing of collaboration of all ministries carrying out R&D activities in Estonia (Task 8).

Tabel 1. Temporal distribution of the tasks in Action Plan

* Tasks that are continuously done and therefore not marked in the table with special deadline or milestone

Tasks	2024	2025	2026	2027
1. Updating the conditions of research grants *	Analyse of the feedback system	Introduce narrative CV	Use of narrative CV	Internal report of application CoARA principles
2. Sharing information and training of evaluators*	Process of governmental evaluation	Evaluation report		
3. Creating publicly available statistics*	Report Estonian Research 2025		Updated ETAG website includes CoARA	Report Estonian Research 2028
4. Organizing events for information and awareness among researchers		ETAG website about CoARA	TeadusEST 2026	
5. Inclusion of AI and other technical means to improve evaluation	Analysis of the possibilities	Testing in ETIS	Incorporate to ETIS	
6. Improve competencies of ETAG by incorporating international knowledge	Participation of CoARA WG	Participation in SE and GRC	Report of CoARA WG actions	
7. Creation a network with universities and R&D institutions to increase the number of CoARA members	Informing ETAG Board about CoARA	Partnering with EYAS		Networking with new Estonian partners in CoARA
8. Improve competencies of national research funding ministries and other organisations about research evaluation	Report of joint project with OECD and JRC	Networking with other Ministries	Introducing joint the statement of research evaluation	