

CoARA Action Plan for the ZHAW Zurich University of Applied Sciences

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Introduction and Overview

The ZHAW Zurich University of Applied Sciences (ZHAW) has become a member of the Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment (CoARA) at the end 2022. In accordance with the commitments of this membership, the ZHAW has drafted an action plan outlining the conceptualisation, testing and implementation of changes in research assessment practices until the end of 2027. The ZHAW is a university of applied sciences and has chosen focus areas in accordance with the nature of our research activities. In particular, we have identified 3 levels and 4 dimensions that are of particular relevance to us: hence our action plan is running under the headline “addressing three levels and four dimensions”. We have found partners across Switzerland and Europe who are willing to discuss and develop these levels and dimensions with us. We thus have been able to be included in the first wave of CoARA working groups and will potentially participate in further such groups.

The levels of research assessment we will consider are: the researcher, organizational units within the university, and the university as a whole. The four dimensions we want to focus our discussion on are: assessment of practice-based / transdisciplinary research and development and its impact, integration of Open Science (OS) contributions into research assessments, the responsible use of quantitative research assessment indicators, and career assessment of researchers. We have identified 11 Milestones we will work on until the end of 2027.

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1. Starting Point: Addressing Three Levels, Four Dimensions

Research assessment is an important development area for the ZHAW Zurich University of Applied Sciences as well as for the applied sciences in general. Hence, we have led discussions with a whole range of institutions in Switzerland and across Europe to help implement the San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA) and we see a great opportunity for CoARA to do exactly that: help implement new research assessment approaches based on a coordinated effort of higher education institutions and research funders. In addition, our work and collaboration within CoARA so far has also been very fruitful particularly within the CoARA working groups we participate in and co-lead, the latter of which addresses the assessment of impact in transdisciplinary and practice-based research. This working group has already substantially increased our interactions and contacts across Europe with respect to the topic of research assessment.

We have identified three separate, yet interconnected levels of currently practiced research assessment and our action plan will address these three levels:

1. individual researchers: assessment of research activity during hiring processes and career promotion, during yearly performance assessments etc.
2. research units within the university (research groups, institutes, centers, departments): assessment of research activity during strategy / positioning processes, during quality assessments, during resource allocation etc.
3. university as a whole: assessment of research activities during accreditation processes and rankings etc.

In addition to these three levels, we have also identified the four most relevant dimensions of research assessment in our context that we want to address in the coming four years:

1. **Assessment of practice-based / applied / transdisciplinary research and development and its impact:** this dimension of research assessment has been a longstanding challenge particularly for universities of applied sciences and research disciplines of an applied nature.
2. **Integration of open science contributions into research assessments:** for the further anchoring of open science practices in research activities across all disciplines, additional incentives within research assessment processes need to be established.
3. **Development of a concept for the responsible use of quantitative research assessment indicators:** quantitative indicators to assess research activities will still play an important role in the future (alongside qualitative indicators); their responsible use needs to be clarified for stakeholders on all three levels (individual researcher, research units, university).
4. **Development of a concept for career assessment of researchers:** The assessment of researchers throughout their careers is a process shaped by higher education institutions themselves.

These four dimensions map directly to the CoARA core commitments:

- Dimension 1 maps to the CoARA core commitment “Recognise the diversity of contributions to, and careers in, research in accordance with the needs and nature of the research”
- Dimension 2 maps to the CoARA core commitment “Review and develop research assessment criteria, tools and processes”
- Dimension 3 maps to the CoARA core commitments “Abandon inappropriate uses in research assessment of journal- and publication-based metrics, in particular inappropriate uses of Journal Impact Factor (JIF) and h-index” and “Avoid the use of ranking of research organisations in research assessment” as well as “Base research assessment primarily on qualitative evaluation for which peer review is central, supported by responsible use of quantitative indicators”
- Dimension 4 maps to the CoARA core commitment “Recognise the diversity of contributions to, and careers in, research in accordance with the needs and nature of the research”

2. Operational Action Plan 2024-27

The ZHAW will approach the four prioritized dimensions with the following concrete measures:

2.1. Dimension 1: Assessment of Practice-based / Applied / Transdisciplinary Research and Development and its Impact

Phase 2023-25: Laying the Foundations

The ZHAW co-leads a CoARA working group (WG) on dimension 1 entitled “Towards transformations: Transdisciplinarity, Applied/Practice-Based Research, and Impacts” (see published abstract in the annex). At the start in June 2023, this WG consisted of 38 members including universities, technical universities, universities of applied sciences, research funders, and umbrella organisations; additional organisations have been joining and will continue to join the group. The work was subdivided into three subgroups: (a) transdisciplinarity subgroup, (b) practice-based/applied sciences subgroup and (c) impact subgroup. By 2025 sub-group (a) will co-develop interoperable standards and guidance for science organisations regarding call designs, proposal formats, assessment criteria, panel design, processes and reporting; sub-group (b) will develop recommendations for universities, research organisations and funders with respect to quality assessment of applied / practice-based research with a specific focus on social and health sciences as well as regional development; and sub-group (c) will improve the understanding and measurement of societal outcomes and impacts and develop guidelines for research and funding organisations, The sub-groups

have planned touching points along their work to exchange with the other sub-groups and in 2025 the results of all three sub-groups will be integrated to provide the foundations to broaden, enrich or adapt assessment of research activities at the involved institutions.

Milestone 1: member of a CoARA working group on applied research

Milestone 2: summary of the results of the working group

Phase 2025-27: Promoting Change

Based on the work in phase 1, the ZHAW will use its internal processes to prepare a discussion and decision of the ZHAW board to test, implement and promote changes to its research assessment approach on the three identified levels: individual researchers, research performing units within the university, the university as a whole.

Milestone 3: decision by the ZHAW board regarding the implementation of changes

2.2. Dimension 2: Integration of OS Contributions into Research Assessments

Open Research Data (ORD):

Representatives of the ZHAW are involved in the Swiss national ORD Strategy Council and the ORD Coordination Group, as well as related bodies such as the Sounding Board of Researchers and various subject-specific Taskforces. Through this engagement, ORD contributions in general are expected to gain more attention/visibility and weight in the research assessment exercises as well. In addition, the ZHAW has already started the internal discussion on how to specifically integrate contributions to ORD into its assessment of research activities and has developed an initial approach that will be verified in a discussion on a national level with other higher education institutions and funding organisations. This discussion will likely take place in three workshops during the course of 2024 (depending on an application for third-party funding) and will lead to consolidated recommendations on how to integrate contributions to ORD into research assessment processes. These processes will subsequently be submitted to the ZHAW board for approval.

Milestone 4: internal discussion on integration of ORD contributions into research assessment

Milestone 5: acquisition of 3rd party funding to lead Swiss national discussion

Milestone 6: summary of the results of the Swiss national discussion

Open Access Publications (OA):

Representatives of the ZHAW are actively involved in the discussion on revising the Swiss national Open Access strategy. One of the issues raised in this context has been more dedicated support for the so-called Green road to Open Access or self-archiving of author manuscripts in institutional or subject-based repositories. As

demonstrated by the project GOAL that is lead by the ZHAW (<https://opengoaal.ch/>), the Green road is particularly important for broadening access to publications in practice-oriented journals and professional magazines. By increasing the share of Open Access publications through the GOAL project's work and mobilizing support for the Green road to Open Access at institutional and political levels, ZHAW will actively help raise the visibility of this type of publications and, consequently, the recognition of diverse contributions of their authors.

Milestone 7: leading and completing the project GOAL

2.3. Dimension 3: Development of a Concept for the Responsible Use of Quantitative Research Assessment Indicators

Throughout 2023, the ZHAW representatives are participating in a Swiss national lecture series on the responsible use of scientometrics ("Swiss Year of Scientometrics"). During this seminar series the ZHAW has the opportunity to exchange practices and views with around 20 other Swiss institutions and receive input from international research-on-research experts. In addition, in 2023 the ZHAW has dedicated its annual retreat of the research committee to the use of scientometrics in research assessment and has particularly exchanged practices with the ETH Zurich on this occasion. For 2024-26 we will work on a concept for the internal use of quantitative indicators based on these exchanges; in the writing of the concept, we will consult additional experts on specific and very focussed issues of responsible use of scientometrics. The concept will subsequently be submitted for discussion and approval by the ZHAW board.

Milestone 8: concept for the responsible use of quantitative research assessment indicators

2.4. Dimension 4: Development of a Concept for Career Assessment of Researchers

The ZHAW is involved in the CoARA WG "Reforming Academic Career Assessment" (while simultaneously representing the umbrella organisation of the Swiss universities, swissuniversities). This WG kicked off its work in late October 2023. Its activities will be structured in two phases: 1) developing and conducting a survey among research institutions and other stakeholders as well as mapping existing initiatives and their lessons learned (November 2023 – April 2024); 2) developing a modular toolbox for research institutions and conducting feasibility studies (May 2024 – October 2025). By actively contributing to this work and serving as a potential pilot institution for planned feasibility studies, the ZHAW is expected to become one of the early adopters of the toolbox and adjust its own procedures for career assessment of researchers accordingly.

Milestone 9: member of CoARA working group on career assessment

Milestone 10: modular toolbox supporting change in career assessment at research institutions

Milestone 11: feasibility studies on career assessment

3. ANNEX

Published abstract describing the **CoARA Working Group “Towards transformations: Transdisciplinarity, Applied/Practice-Based Research, and Impacts”**:

New real-world challenges and frontiers in science require collaborations across a range of actors in order to arrive at solutions. Climate change is a case in point. For research to play a transformative role in how our societies are shaped locally, in Europe, and world-wide, science systems need to adopt new assessment approaches. Our working group involves 40+ organisations. It aligns three distinct yet interconnected streams of activities towards transformations and will deliver shared workshops and products.

Transdisciplinarity forms a critical and self-reflexive research approach that co-produces new knowledge by integrating different scientific and non-scientific insights in order to tackle complex societal challenges. Despite its crucial importance for transformative change, current funding and evaluation schemes reflect deficits and inconsistencies in assessing the specific qualities, preconditions and success factors of excellent transdisciplinary research. Therefore, together with diverse stakeholders this subgroup aims to co-develop interoperable standards and guidance for science organisations regarding call designs, proposal formats, assessment criteria, panel design, processes and reporting.

Applied/practice-based research can deliver contributions to solving challenges and problems related to ongoing transformations (societal, economical, ecological, or digital). Applied sciences involve partners from outside academia (e.g. from the private, public or third sectors) into their research activities. This subgroup, which involves in particular also Universities of Applied Sciences, is dedicated to the quality assessment of applied / practice-based research. It will develop recommendations for universities, research organisations and funders with particular respect to societal and economic impact and regional development.

Generating societal **Impacts** is increasingly expected. Following a scheme in the UK (‘REF’), impact can be defined as ‘an effect on, change or benefit to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life, beyond academia’. Our subgroup will improve the understanding and measurement of societal outcomes and impacts. It will develop guidelines for research and funding organisations, and it intends to equip early career researchers with relevant knowledge, including narrative CVs, to broaden professional perspectives. Our work will begin with a stocktaking of existing approaches.

Published abstract describing the **CoARA Working Group “Reforming Academic Career Assessment”**:

The Working Group on Reforming Academic Career Assessment (ACA) is based on the premise that ACA systems should adequately reflect the different tasks, functions and roles academics fulfil over the course of their career. The aim is to broaden the reflection on research assessment to ACA, taking into account the full range of work conducted by academics in research, teaching and learning, innovation, management/leadership and service to society.

The WG brings together a critical mass of academic stakeholders to 1) define the objectives and principles of reforming ACA, from the perspectives of institutions and academic staff being assessed, and to 2) develop an adaptable toolbox for ACA, considering all university missions and the broad scope of

activities, skills and competences of academic staff at different stages of their career. The toolbox will be flexible, sustainable and cater for different institutional profiles and national contexts. It will also provide room for a diversity of career focuses and trajectories.