Results of interviews with research evaluation players

WP1 : Defining new research evaluation methods

FWB/CoARA project

- April 2025 -

CoARA
Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment

UCLouvain

FÉDÉRATION WALLONIE-BRUXELLES

Context

→ Phase 1: Inventory of the criteria and procedures for evaluating research projects and careers (recruitment and promotion) carried out in July 2024 within the five institutions of the Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles (**FWB**)

→ Phase 2 :

- Meet the players involved in research evaluation in order to gauge their current needs and constraints
- A methodological choice was made to survey only evaluators as part of this project
- The results, described here in condensed form, represent the opinions - the most frequently raised - of the panels of evaluators met within the five universities of the FWB
- This report could serve as a basis for prioritising future actions to be implemented within our respective institutions in order to meet the commitments of the **ARRA** (*The Agreement on Reforming Research Assessment*)

Methodology

→ Semi-structured face-to-face interviews (1h30)

→ Questionnaire sent in advance

→ People met = research evaluators

- Committee members :
  - Evaluating research projects
  - Academic recruitment
  - Academic promotion
- Maximising diversity :
  - Research fields and research institutes represented
  - Years of experience
  - Gender balance → within the limits of the constraints encountered

→ One panel per FWB institution :

ULB UNIVERSITÉ LIBRE DE BRUXELLES

UMONS Université de Mons

UCLouvain

LIÈGE université

UNIVERSITÉ DE NAMUR

Methodology

UCLouvain

34 interviews UCLouvain

Categories :
- CREC*
- FRIA/FRESH
- FNRS
- Promotion
- Recruitment

44% SSH*
29% SSS*
27% SST*

62% men
38% women

LIÈGE université

15 interviews ULiège

Categories :
- FRIA/FRESH
- FNRS (B&M* et C&P*)
- Sector council chairs (promotion)
- Faculty authorities (recruitment)

Balance of research fields

Gender balance

UMONS Université de Mons

34 interviews UMons

Categories :
- CRECH*
- FNRS – (B&M* et C&P*)
- FRIA/FRESH
- Recruitment
- Promotion

SSH* > SSS* ~ SST*

50% men
50% women

ULB UNIVERSITÉ LIBRE DE BRUXELLES

8 interviews ULB

Categories :
- FNRS
- Europe
- FRIA/FRESH
- Various foundations
- Faculties
- Central Nomination Committee

Balance between SEN*, SVS*, SHS*

75% men
25% women

UNIVERSITÉ DE NAMUR

9 interviews UNamur

Categories :
- FNRS
- Promotion
- Recruitment

Diversity of disciplines

66% men
33% women

*** Acronyms :**
B&M = Grants and Mandates;
C&P = Credits et Projects;
CREC/CRECH = Research Council;
SEN = Exact and Natural Sciences;
SHS = Humanities and Social Sciences;
SVS = Life and Health Sciences;
SSH = Humanities Sector;
SSS = Health Sciences Sector;
SST = Science and Technology Sector.

Questionnaire

→ General satisfaction with research evaluation processes

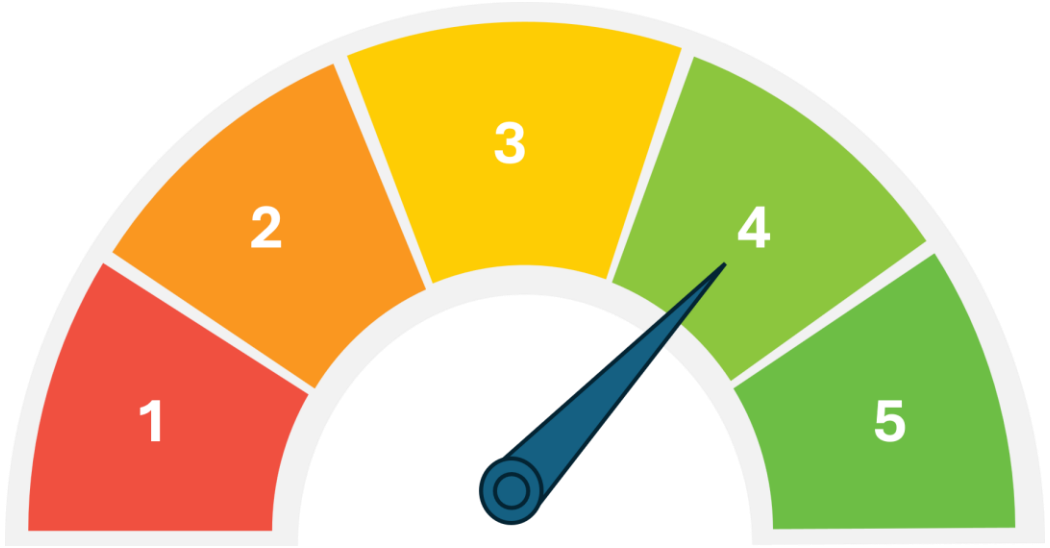
→ More specific questions on the criteria currently used :

- Essential criteria
- Criteria to be abandoned
- Criteria not yet sufficiently taken into account
- Metric factors
- Open Science & Equity, Diversity, Inclusion (**EDI**)
- Narrative CV
- Transparency of procedures & criteria

→ General questions :

- Difficulties encountered
- Improvements to be made
- Best practices

General Satisfaction



4/5 → Average and median satisfaction score for all evaluation processes given by the evaluators interviewed (all institutions and categories combined)

Criteria cited as essential and synonymous with good research

→ The **criteria** used **vary widely** depending on :

- Scientific discipline or research culture
- Career stage
- Instrument for which the candidate is applying
- Type of assessment committee

→ Importance of properly **contextualising the assessment**

→ Criteria related to the **research profile** seem **more essential** than those related to the **teaching profile** and **service** aspects

- Among the most frequently cited factors: quality of the CV, originality of the research topic and publication metrics (number of publications)
- Quality of the candidate during the interview

Criteria cited to be given greater consideration

- **Societal impact** (depending on how it is understood, viewed positively or negatively → definition required)
- **Atypical career paths**
- **Originality**/innovation of the research topic
- Services to the institution (such as scientific mediation)
- Quality of **team management/supervision**
- **External recognition** (invitations to conferences)
- **Non-academic** experience

Criteria cited as needing to be abandoned

- **Metric factors without contextualisation** → continue to use metrics but contextualise them → **H-index** most cited, to be contextualized
- Importance of **international experience** (particularly for young researchers)
- **Societal**/economic *impact* (depending on understanding, viewed positively or negatively → definition required)

Metrics cited as still in use

- Yes, but already in a **reasoned** and 'qualitative' **manner**
- Especially **H-index**, impact factor, number of citations and number of publications → often already contextualised usage
- Importance of **contextualisation**:
  - In relation to age/seniority
  - In relation to the field of research
- Rather consider the **general publication profile**
- Less reliance on metrics among young academics
- Metrics are more commonly used in the Health Sciences Sector and the Science and Technology Sector than in the Humanities Sector

Open Science criteria

- Widespread lack of knowledge → partly favourable to the use of such criteria
- Most frequently cited limiting factor: the **cost**
- Open Data is seen as a **necessity** → but there is a **fear of losing exclusivity** over data published in Open Access or preprints

Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) criteria

- **Rarely used/valued** → more for the gender balance in committee compositions than in research projects
- Excellence ‘must’ prevail… → for an **equivalent quality**, little bonus to make the distinction
- Rather **awareness**
- Beware of **abuses** (e.g. the imposition of quotas)

In favour of using narrative CVs?

→ Yes, but …

- **Not used or rarely used**
- Rather **favourable** to its use, **if there is no redundancy** with other narrative aspects of the files → narrative: better understanding the **career path**
- **Time-consuming** for everyone
- Risk of homogenisation (artificial intelligence tools)
- Form often takes precedence over content
- Need for training in writing (structured, concise, etc.)
- **Difficult** to evaluate: remain objective and critical

Satisfaction with the transparency of criteria and procedures

- **Mixed** feedback: 50/50
- Often broad outlines but **details unknown**
- **Gap** between theory and practice
- **Not** always favourable to **absolute transparency** (e.g. anonymous composition of promotion committees)

Difficulties raised by the evaluators interviewed

- Difficulty in establishing **common criteria** across all disciplines evaluated
- Need to **calibrate committees** before the evaluation, lack of guidelines
- Committees **not specialised in all research fields** → under-represented disciplines → problem of political issues when evaluation by a single expert
- Fear of novelty and innovation → understanding 'risk', what threshold?
- Complex integration of **interdisciplinarity**
- Issue of the quality of **external expertise** → feedbacks not always usable → expectations not well defined, criteria misused, often conflicts of interest
- **Time-consuming** and laborious evaluation procedures

Other difficulties not related to evaluation: Recruitment difficulties, lack of attractiveness and competition from the private sector, lack of funding and unfair competition

Good practices mentioned by the evaluators met

- Overall, **good work quality** by the committees (honesty, collegial discussions)
- Assessment generally already **more qualitative** than quantitative
- Well-established practices of **contextualising** criteria
- Reasonable and **responsible use** of **metric** factors
- **Multi-criteria** analysis
- Candidate **interviews** (in person) are highly appreciated when possible
- **Feedback** to candidates → only if it brings an educational aspect
- The combination of **external evaluation/peer review** and **local** scientific committee is highly appreciated

Areas for improvement suggested by the evaluators 1/2

→ In terms of criteria :

- Improve **transparency** (procedures, criteria and their weighting)
- Rethink the place of **Open Science**
- Better integrate **narrative descriptions** (narrative CVs, atypical career paths, etc.)
- Include a criterion to assess the potential **impact** or potential **returns of research** (on beneficiaries, society, researchers, etc.)
- Systematise constructive **feedback** to candidates (debate between oral or written)
- Systematise candidate **interviews** (if possible)
- Establish a **rebuttal right** to external reviewers

Areas for improvement suggested by the evaluators 2/2

→ Regarding evaluators :

- Carefully read the candidate's **significant articles** to assess the quality of their publications
- Encourage the publication of **results**, even if they are **negative**
- Recognise that **needs evolve** over the course of a career
- **Calibrate** evaluators prior to the evaluation (method, definitions, scores, etc.).
- **Training** of evaluators (encourage member overlap)
- **Feedback** to **evaluators** on funded projects and their success → with a view to improve evaluations
- Support from a **human resources team** to assess the fit between personality and institution (promotion & recruitment)

Interested in going further?

All the project reports and deliverables are permanently available on the CRef Interuniversity Research Support Platform, **PINDARE** :

CONSEIL DES RECTRICES ET RECTEURS FRANCOPHONES

PINDARE platform

For more information about the Coalition for advanced research assessment (**CoARA**), click here.

Contacts

UCLouvain :

- **Clothilde Collet** - *clothilde.collet@uclouvain.be*

ULB :

- **Daniele Carati** - *daniele.carati@ulb.be*

ULiège :

- **Gérôme Arnold** - *gerome.arnold@uliege.be*

UMons :

- **Valomanda Rakotondrahaso** - *valomanda.rakotondrahaso@umons.ac.be*

UNamur :

- **William Riguelle** - *william.riguelle@unamur.be*

NB. - The FNRS was invited to take part in all the discussions of this working group, without in any way influencing the reports or decisions taken by the FWB institutions