Reforming Academic Assessment at the University of Fribourg: Interpretations and Examples

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Context

In July 2022, the University of Fribourg (Unifr) became a signatory of the *Agreement on Reforming Research Assessment* (ARRA)[1]. By doing so, Unifr joined the Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment (CoARA), an international coalition that shares a common ambition: to ensure that research assessment recognizes the diversity of scholarly contributions, relies primarily on peer-based judgment, and uses quantitative indicators responsibly.

Within Unifr, research and academic assessment take place across a wide range of contexts, disciplines, and career stages. Faculties and departments retain autonomy in defining and implementing assessment practices that are appropriate to their missions and epistemic cultures. At the same time, as an ARRA signatory, Unifr is expected to reflect on how its practices relate to the commitments of the Agreement and to demonstrate progress over time.

This document was developed by the Working Group dedicated to implementing the ARRA at the University of Fribourg. Rather than formulating guidelines, recommendations or best practices, it proposes *possible interpretations* of the relevant ARRA commitments in the specific context of Unifr. It also provides *illustrative examples* of how these commitments may already be, or could be, implemented within the university.

The document is intended as a practical point of reference for committees, faculties, departments, and other actors involved in academic assessment, while fully respecting institutional and disciplinary autonomy. It aligns with the university's values and its Code of Conduct on Scientific Integrity.[2]

Scope and Definitions

This document focuses on the assessment of academic staff in the context of recruitment and promotion procedures at the University of Fribourg.

The term "promotion procedures" denotes the promotion of professors from the basic category to the superior category, the promotion from assistant professor to full professor, the promotion of temporary MER/MA to permanent, and other similar promotion and stabilization processes. The term does not, however, include qualification processes such as the evaluation of PhD or habilitation theses and defenses.

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[1] Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment (CoARA) (2022). *Agreement on Reforming Research Assessment*, 20 July 2022. https://www.coara.org/agreement/the-agreement-full-text/

[2] University of Fribourg (2026). *Code of Conduct – Scientific Integrity at the University of Fribourg*, adopted by the Rectorate on 9 March 2026, particularly the section "Evaluation and expertise", p. 2. https://www.unifr.ch/research/assets/public/Ethics/Code%20of%20Conduct_final_en.pdf

The term “assessment” is used broadly to refer to the evaluation of researchers and their activities, including research, teaching, supervision, leadership, service, and engagement with society.

While the ARRA comprises ten commitments, the scope of this document is intentionally limited to those commitments that are most directly relevant to recruitment and promotion procedures at Unifr. In particular, questions concerning the diversity of academic contributions and careers, the centrality of qualitative and peer-based assessment, the responsible use of indicators, and the transparency of evaluation criteria correspond mainly to Commitments 1, 2, 3, and 7.

The six remaining ARRA commitments are:

- **Commitment 4:** Avoid using rankings of research organisations for research assessment.
- **Commitment 5:** Dedicate the resources necessary to implement organisational reforms in research assessment.
- **Commitment 6:** Review and further develop research assessment criteria, tools and processes.
- **Commitment 8:** Share practices and experiences to support mutual learning within and beyond the Coalition.
- **Commitment 9:** Report on progress in adhering to the Principles and implementing the Commitments.
- **Commitment 10:** Evaluate assessment practices, criteria and tools using robust evidence and current research on research, and make data openly available to support further evidence gathering and research.

While some of these commitments also have implications for recruitment and promotion, they primarily concern broader institutional or cross-cutting reform processes and are therefore not addressed in detail in the present document. This does not diminish their relevance to Unifr's overall implementation of the ARRA.

The interpretations and examples provided below are illustrative rather than exhaustive and do not imply uniform application across all faculties or procedures.

Interpretation of selected ARRA Commitments at Unifr

Commitment 1: Recognise the diversity of contributions to, and careers in, research

Interpretation at Unifr

At Unifr, research careers and contributions take diverse forms that vary across disciplines and career stages. Academic work encompasses not only publications, but also teaching, supervision, leadership, service to the academic community, knowledge and technology transfer, and engagement beyond academia. Recognition of this diversity reflects the plurality of research cultures and practices across disciplines, as well as the university’s combination of basic, applied, and practice-oriented research.

Example of implementation at Unifr

In recruitment or promotion procedures, candidates may be invited to describe a selection of contributions they consider most significant. These include, but are not limited to:

- **research outputs**, such as publications in peer-reviewed journals, monographs, edited volumes, conference papers, or other discipline-specific scholarly outputs, discussed in terms of their content, originality, and relevance;
- **teaching materials and pedagogical contributions**, such as course design, syllabi, teaching resources, innovative teaching formats, or contributions to curriculum development;
- actions that contribute to a **positive work culture**, such as mentoring practices, inclusive team management, or engagement in equality, diversity, and well-being initiatives;
- **support for early-career researchers**, including supervision practices, co-authorship arrangements that encourage independence, or concrete forms of career guidance;
- practices related to **open science**[3], such as open-access publishing, sharing of data or materials where appropriate, and efforts to promote transparency and reproducibility;
- forms of **scientific leadership**, such as coordinating research projects or networks, contributing to academic governance, or fostering collaboration within and beyond the university, including knowledge and technology transfer and societal engagement.

These achievements may be considered in relation to the **net academic age**[4], allowing trajectories affected by parental leave, care duties, illness, part-time work, or non-research employment to be read in context.

Commitment 2: Base assessment primarily on qualitative evaluation, with peer review at its core

Interpretation at Unifr

Assessment processes at Unifr traditionally rely on peer judgment by disciplinary experts. Within the ARRA framework, this emphasis on qualitative evaluation highlights the role of contextualised, narrative, and reflective assessment of academic work, while recognising that quantitative indicators may sometimes be used as supportive information.

Example of implementation at Unifr

Evaluation committees may focus their deliberations on expert reports, interviews, and candidates' self-descriptions of their work, using indicators such as publication counts or teaching evaluations as contextual background rather than as proxies for quality.

In this context, candidates may be invited to present their academic trajectory and contributions using narrative formats that allow for contextualization beyond traditional CVs focused primarily on publication lists. Such narrative descriptions can provide space to explain the significance of research and teaching activities, contributions to the research community, and the evolution of career paths, including non-linear elements. Reference frameworks such as the SNSF guidelines on narrative CVs[5] may serve as points of orientation for both candidates and assessment committees.

Assessment discussions may draw on a range of qualitative considerations, for example:

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[3] See also University of Fribourg (forth.) *Open Science Policy*. https://www.unifr.ch/research/en/openscience/

[4] Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF) (n.d.). *Net academic age: Explanatory notes and examples*. https://www.snf.ch/media/en/Of9kzylTRoaTlliN/SNSF_net-academic-age.pdf

[5] Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF) (n.d.). *Your curriculum vitae – all about the CV format*. https://www.snf.ch/en/gKcnwW6aEft4bMPF/page/your-curriculum-vitae-all-about-the-cv-format

- **originality of research contributions**, including the specific contribution and added value of selected publications, the candidate's role (such as sole or first authorship), and the extent to which the work advances or consolidates new theoretical perspectives, methodological approaches, or empirical findings;
- **teaching quality**, examined through multiple sources of evidence such as peer observation or collegial review of teaching, students' feedback, teaching materials, documented teaching activities, and reflective statements in which candidates articulate their pedagogical approach and teaching vision;
- **evaluation formats beyond written applications**, which may include public lectures, research or teaching presentations, teaching demonstrations, or short written or recorded statements outlining a candidate's future research agenda or teaching philosophy;
- **career sustainability**, considered through the development of the candidate's research agenda (which may be non-linear and changing), including the evolution of research topics, publication and employment trajectories, engagement with emerging developments in the field, or experience in securing competitive funding both inside and outside academia;
- **research ethics and integrity**, as reflected in how candidates demonstrate practices related to acknowledgment of contributions, management of conflicts of interest, data management, or responsible supervision and mentoring. Matters related to confirmed breaches of research integrity are addressed through existing institutional procedures and, where applicable, may inform assessment discussions in accordance with those frameworks.

Commitment 3: Move away from inappropriate uses of journal- and publication-based metrics

Interpretation at Unifr

Within the ARRA framework, this commitment can be read as highlighting the limits of journal- and publication-based metrics in the assessment of individual researchers. At Unifr, such indicators may function as familiar reference points in some disciplines and can provide contextual information, but they are not taken as direct measures of research quality or impact, nor as substitutes for peer-based judgment.

Example of implementation at Unifr

In assessment discussions, metrics such as journal impact factors, journal rankings, or cumulative citation indicators may appear as background information but are not used as decisive criteria. In particular, the publication venue is not treated as a proxy for the quality of an individual contribution, and numerical thresholds (for example, relating to numbers of publications or minimum impact factors) are not used as evaluation standards. Instead, such indicators may be considered, where relevant, as one element among others in a broader qualitative discussion of a candidate's work.

Commitment 7: Raise awareness and ensure transparency of assessment practices

Proposed interpretation at Unifr

Transparency in assessment supports trust among candidates and assessors. At Unifr, this includes clarity about the elements considered in the assessment and about the procedural steps. It is essential to acknowledge that both the elements taken into account and the organization of procedures may vary across faculties and departments, depending on disciplinary traditions, institutional contexts, and the purpose of the assessment.

Example of implementation at Unifr

Job advertisements or faculty websites may describe the types of activities and contributions typically taken into account in recruitment or promotion procedures.

In some cases, faculties may choose to make evaluation criteria more explicit and accessible. Making such information available can support candidates in assessing the alignment between their profile and the position, and can contribute to a shared understanding within evaluation committees. This may take the form of communicating evaluation criteria alongside a job offer, for example through a document published on a faculty website and referenced in the job advertisement

Concluding remarks

This document provides an interpretative and illustrative account of how selected ARRA commitments could relate to academic staff assessment at the University of Fribourg. It does not spell out binding rules or procedures, nor does it limit faculty-level autonomy. Rather, it aims to support shared understanding, reflection, and dialogue around assessment practices. As these practices continue to evolve, the interpretations and examples presented here may be revisited and adapted in light of experience and ongoing discussion.