

Research assessment as an institutional lever for sustainable development: aligning research incentives with societal goals

Research assessment is often viewed as a technical process for evaluating research performance. However, assessment systems also function as institutional mechanisms that shape incentives, influence researcher behaviour and help determine which activities are recognized and rewarded within the research ecosystem. This opinion piece argues that research assessment should be understood as an institutional lever for sustainable development. While quantitative indicators such as publications, citations and grant income have facilitated large-scale evaluation, an over-reliance on such measures can narrow research agendas and under-recognize activities that contribute to openness, collaboration, integrity and societal impact. Drawing on contemporary discussions surrounding research assessment reform, including initiatives such as the San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment, the Leiden Manifesto and the Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment, this article contends that reforming assessment is not merely an administrative exercise but an opportunity to better align research incentives with societal needs. By recognizing a broader range of research contributions, assessment systems can help create conditions that support trustworthy, inclusive and impactful research. In doing so, they may strengthen the contribution of research systems to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals and the broader public good.

Keywords

research assessment, sustainable development goals, research integrity, open science, societal impact, research culture

Introduction

Research assessment plays a central role in shaping research. Decisions relating to hiring, promotion, funding and recognition influence not only the careers of individual researchers but also the priorities of institutions and the direction of knowledge production ([Moher et al., 2018](#)). While assessment systems are often presented as technical mechanisms for evaluating research performance, they also function as powerful systems of incentives that shape behaviour across the research ecosystem ([Hicks et al., 2015](#)).

In recent decades, assessment practices have frequently relied on quantitative indicators such as publication counts, citation metrics, journal impact factors, grant income and other measurable outputs. These indicators have provided institutions with efficient means of evaluating research activity at scale. However, growing concern has emerged regarding the unintended consequences of over-reliance on such measures, including pressures associated with publish-or-perish cultures and the narrowing of research agendas ([Hicks et al., 2015](#)). At the same time, activities that contribute to research quality, openness, integrity and societal impact have often received less recognition within traditional assessment frameworks ([Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development \[OECD\], 2026](#)).

These concerns extend beyond the research sector itself. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) call for co-ordinated action to address complex social, economic



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and environmental challenges, including climate change, inequality, public health and sustainable innovation ([United Nations, 2015](#)). Achieving progress in these areas depends upon research systems that encourage collaboration, openness, interdisciplinary approaches and engagement with society. Yet many of these contributions have historically received limited recognition within traditional assessment frameworks.

This opinion piece argues that research assessment should be understood as an institutional lever for sustainable development. The activities that institutions choose to recognize and reward shape researcher behaviour and institutional priorities. Consequently, reforming research assessment is not simply a matter of improving evaluation practices; it is an opportunity to align research incentives more closely with sustainable development and the broader public good.

‘research assessment should be understood as an institutional lever for sustainable development’

Research assessment as an institutional lever

Research assessment is often discussed in terms of metrics, evaluation criteria and performance indicators. However, it is more usefully understood as an institutional system that shapes incentives across the research ecosystem ([Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development \[OECD\], 2026](#)). Through decisions relating to hiring, promotion, funding, tenure and recognition, assessment systems signal which activities and outputs are most valued by institutions. Researchers are likely to respond to the incentives communicated through these signals.

Contemporary assessment systems frequently incorporate indicators such as publication counts, citation metrics, journal impact factors, grant income and other measurable outputs. While such measures can provide useful information, they also influence behaviour by linking rewards to particular forms of achievement. As [Moher et al. \(2018\)](#) note, assessment systems used for hiring, promotion and tenure play an important role in determining which contributions are recognized and rewarded within academia. Consequently, assessment frameworks do not merely evaluate research; they help shape the research culture within which knowledge is produced.

The influence of assessment extends beyond individual researchers. By affecting who receives funding, secures academic positions, gains visibility and accesses opportunities, assessment systems also influence the distribution of resources and prestige across institutions and disciplines. In this way, research assessment contributes to determining not only what research is conducted, but also which forms of knowledge and impact are prioritized.

This institutional role is particularly important when considering the societal contribution of research. If assessment systems primarily reward publication outputs and other quantitative indicators, researchers are likely to optimize for those outcomes. Conversely, if assessment systems recognize activities such as open science, collaboration, mentorship, societal engagement, research integrity and responsible research practices, they create incentives for behaviours that contribute to a broader range of scientific and societal objectives. Research assessment therefore functions as a powerful institutional lever capable of influencing the direction, culture and impact of research.

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When incentives and societal goals diverge

The incentives embedded within research assessment systems have contributed significantly to scientific productivity and the expansion of global knowledge. However, concerns have grown regarding the unintended consequences of assessment systems that place substantial emphasis on quantitative indicators of performance. When career progression, funding and recognition are closely linked to measurable outputs, researchers may be encouraged to

- 3 prioritize activities that are most likely to be rewarded, even when these do not fully align with broader societal objectives.

One consequence is the emergence of a publish-or-perish culture, in which publication volume, citation performance and other metrics can become dominant indicators of success ([Hicks et al., 2015](#)). While many researchers maintain high standards of integrity and professionalism, such incentive structures can encourage behaviours that prioritize short-term outputs over longer-term scientific contribution. Concerns have been raised regarding issues such as selective reporting and salami-slicing of results, which can emerge within highly competitive research environments ([Fanelli, 2009](#)). At the same time, activities that support research quality, reproducibility and openness have often received less recognition within traditional assessment systems ([Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development \[OECD\], 2026](#)).

‘Concerns have been raised regarding issues such as selective reporting and salami-slicing of results’

The effects extend beyond individual behaviour. Assessment systems can influence which research questions are pursued, which disciplines attract investment and which forms of impact are valued. Research that is interdisciplinary, locally focused, community-engaged or oriented towards long-term societal challenges may not always align easily with conventional assessment indicators. As a result, activities that are often essential for addressing complex social, environmental and economic challenges may receive less recognition than more readily measurable outputs ([Sachs, 2015](#)).

The incentives embedded within assessment systems can also interact with broader inequalities within the global research landscape. Although open access publishing has increased the availability of research outputs, high article processing charges can create barriers for researchers and institutions with limited resources. Consequently, access to publication, visibility and recognition can remain uneven despite efforts to make research more accessible ([Lacey, 2026](#)). Similarly, disparities in research capacity, infrastructure and funding continue to influence participation in global knowledge production ([Schneegans et al., 2021](#)).

Research is also operating within an increasingly complex governance environment. Alongside expectations relating to publication and impact, researchers are now required to navigate issues such as research integrity, open science, data stewardship, research security, export controls and ethical compliance. These responsibilities are critical to the responsible research practices and increasingly form part of the broader governance environment within which research is conducted ([Science Europe, 2025](#)).

From a sustainable development perspective, this misalignment is significant. Assessment systems influence not only what is measured, but also the activities and behaviours that researchers prioritize. Conversely, if assessment systems recognize openness, collaboration, societal engagement, stewardship, integrity and responsible research practices, they are more likely to encourage contributions that support sustainable development and the broader public good ([Sachs, 2015](#)). The challenge is therefore not simply how research is assessed, but whether assessment systems reward the behaviours needed to address the complex challenges facing society.

Reforming research assessment

Growing recognition of the limitations of metric-driven assessment has prompted a broader movement for research assessment reform. Prominent examples include the San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment ([Declaration on Research Assessment \[DORA\], \(2012\)](#)), the Leiden Manifesto ([Hicks et al., 2015](#)), and more recently the Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment (CoARA) ([Arentoft et al., 2022](#)). Collectively, these initiatives challenge the over-reliance on journal-based metrics and advocate for more responsible, transparent and context-sensitive approaches to research evaluation.

‘The challenge is therefore not simply how research is assessed, but whether assessment systems reward the behaviours needed to address the complex challenges facing society’

4 While differing in scope and implementation, they share a common objective: ensuring that assessment systems support high-quality, trustworthy and societally relevant research rather than narrow indicators of performance. Among these initiatives, CoARA has emerged as one of the most ambitious and internationally co-ordinated efforts to reform research assessment.

At its core, CoARA reflects a simple but important proposition: research quality cannot be adequately captured through a narrow set of quantitative indicators. The initiative encourages organizations to move beyond an over-reliance on publication metrics and to recognize a broader range of contributions, including open science practices, societal engagement, interdisciplinary research, research leadership, mentoring, collaboration and contributions to research culture. Similar arguments have been advanced by [Moher et al. \(2018\)](#), who contend that hiring, promotion and tenure systems should recognize a wider range of activities that contribute to the quality, openness and value of research.

Importantly, CoARA should not be viewed solely as a technical reform of assessment practices. Rather, it represents an effort to reshape the incentives that influence researcher behaviour. Assessment systems communicate what institutions value. By broadening the range of recognized contributions, CoARA seeks to encourage behaviours that support transparency, collaboration, integrity and engagement with society. In this respect, the initiative is concerned not only with how research is evaluated, but also with the type of research culture that institutions seek to promote.

The initiative also reflects wider developments in research governance. Rather than relying on regulation or formal enforcement mechanisms, CoARA operates through voluntary commitments, shared principles and collective action. Participating organizations commit to reviewing and reforming their assessment practices while working collaboratively to share experiences and develop approaches to implementation ([European Commission, 2021](#)). This model recognizes that lasting change requires not only new policies but also changes in institutional norms and expectations.

Reforming assessment will not be straightforward. Existing systems are deeply embedded within academic structures, funding mechanisms and institutional cultures. Institutions also operate within wider research ecosystems shaped by national and international research assessment mechanisms, funding models, university rankings, publisher practices and disciplinary norms, many of which continue to reward conventional quantitative indicators ([Hicks et al., 2015](#); [Wilsdon et al., 2015](#)). Consequently, institutions seeking to broaden assessment practices may experience tension between their commitments to responsible research assessment and the external criteria by which institutional performance continues to be judged. Quantitative indicators remain attractive because they are relatively simple, comparable and scalable. Moreover, meaningful reform requires cultural change among researchers, promotion panels, senior leaders and other decision-makers who have long relied on metric-based approaches to evaluation ([Moher et al., 2020](#)). Nevertheless, the growing momentum behind CoARA reflects increasing recognition that assessment systems should reward a wider diversity of research contributions if they are to meet contemporary societal expectations. Institutional commitment is therefore an essential starting point, but sustained progress is likely to depend upon co-ordinated action across governments, research funders, publishers, university ranking organizations and the wider research community ([Arentoft et al., 2022](#)).

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Viewed through this lens, CoARA represents more than an assessment initiative. It provides a practical framework through which institutions can broaden the range of contributions recognized and rewarded within research systems.

Although these initiatives were not originally framed around the SDGs, they seek to reshape the incentives that govern research behaviour and institutional priorities. In doing so, they create opportunities to better align research assessment with broader societal and developmental objectives. From a systems perspective, such reforms represent interventions

5 at important leverage points within the research ecosystem, but their long-term effectiveness will depend on complementary changes across the wider system.

Research assessment and sustainable development

The relationship between research assessment and sustainable development is often overlooked. Discussions of the SDGs frequently focus on research outputs, innovation and evidence-informed policy-making ([United Nations, 2015](#); [Sachs, 2015](#)). Less attention is given to the institutional systems that influence what research is undertaken, how it is conducted and which contributions are recognized and rewarded. Yet assessment systems play an important role in shaping these outcomes.

‘The relationship between research assessment and sustainable development is often overlooked’

Addressing challenges such as climate change, public health, inequality, biodiversity loss and sustainable economic development requires research systems that support openness, collaboration, interdisciplinarity and engagement with society. These challenges rarely fit neatly within disciplinary boundaries, nor can they be addressed through isolated research efforts. Progress depends on the ability of researchers, institutions, policymakers, industry and communities to work together towards shared goals.

From this perspective, the activities promoted through assessment systems matter. Where assessment frameworks primarily reward publication outputs and other quantitative indicators, researchers may have limited incentive to invest time in activities such as data sharing, stakeholder engagement, mentoring, research integrity initiatives, interdisciplinary collaboration or contributions to research culture. While these activities may not always generate immediate measurable outputs, they are often essential for producing trustworthy, accessible and societally relevant research.

Reforming assessment therefore has implications beyond academic evaluation. By recognizing forms of contribution that have traditionally received less attention within assessment systems, initiatives such as CoARA can help create conditions that support sustainable development. Greater recognition of open science practices aligns with efforts to improve access to knowledge and strengthen global research participation ([United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization \[UNESCO\], 2021](#)). Recognition of collaboration and partnership supports the development of networks needed to address complex societal challenges. Greater emphasis on research integrity, stewardship and responsible research practices contributes to trustworthy and accountable research systems.

In this respect, assessment reform aligns particularly closely with several SDGs. It supports SDG 4 (Quality Education) through the recognition of mentoring, researcher development and inclusive research cultures. It contributes to SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure) by encouraging innovation systems that value diverse forms of research contribution. It reinforces SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions) through the promotion of transparency, accountability and research integrity. It also supports SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals) by recognizing collaboration and knowledge sharing as valued research activities.

As [Sachs \(2015\)](#) argues, sustainable development depends upon institutions that are capable of aligning scientific and technological progress with broader societal objectives. Research assessment may appear to be a technical aspect of research management, yet it functions as one of the institutional mechanisms through which priorities are established and behaviours are shaped. Consequently, the reform of research assessment should be viewed not simply as an administrative exercise, but as part of a broader effort to strengthen the contribution of research systems to sustainable and inclusive development.

‘sustainable development depends upon institutions that are capable of aligning scientific and technological progress with broader societal objectives’

Conclusion

Research assessment is often presented as a technical process for evaluating research performance. However, it is more accurately understood as an institutional system that shapes incentives, influences behaviour and helps determine what types of research activities are valued and rewarded. The consequences of assessment therefore extend far beyond promotion decisions, funding allocations and institutional rankings; they influence the culture, direction and societal contribution of research itself.

As expectations of research continue to evolve, assessment systems must also evolve. Addressing complex societal challenges requires research environments that value openness, collaboration, integrity, stewardship and engagement alongside more traditional measures of academic achievement. If these contributions remain under-recognized, researchers will continue to face incentives that are not always aligned with broader societal needs.

'The consequences of assessment ... influence the culture, direction and societal contribution of research itself'

Initiatives such as CoARA represent an important opportunity to rethink what is valued within research systems. While reform will not be easy, the question is no longer simply how research should be assessed, but what behaviours assessment systems should encourage. If institutions reward narrow outputs, researchers will optimize for narrow outputs. If institutions reward activities that contribute to openness, trustworthiness, collaboration and societal impact, researchers are more likely to contribute to sustainable development and the broader public good.

Viewed in this way, research assessment is not merely a mechanism of evaluation. It is an institutional lever capable of shaping the contribution of research to a more sustainable, inclusive and equitable future.

Abbreviations and Acronyms

A list of the abbreviations and acronyms used in this and other *Insights* articles can be accessed here – click on the following URL and then select the 'full list of industry A&As' link: <http://www.uksg.org/publications#aa>.

Competing Interests

The author has declared no competing interests.

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