



CoARA ACTION PLAN (2024-2027)

University of Macerata

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Introduction and context

The University of Macerata (Unimc) signed the CoARA Agreement (ARRA) in November 2022. In the first semester of 2023, the newly appointed Rector, Pro-Rectors and Delegates prioritised the development of a three-year Strategic Plan (2023-2025), formally adopted in June 2023. Discussions about the CoARA roadmap were launched in this context of overall change. Unimc joined the Italian National Chapter after signing the agreement, participated in the kick-off meeting of September 7th, 2023, and signed up to collaborate with the activities of WP3.

Unimc specialises in the Social Sciences and Humanities (SSH); STEM disciplines and the Life Sciences are barely represented in the composition of Unimc faculty. In most SSH disciplines (with the exception of economics and psychology) JIF and h-index are not considered proxies for quality, while peer review (despite its limits) has long been deemed the gold standard of research assessment. Awareness of the relevance of qualitative assessments based on peer review is already widespread at Unimc, due to the prevalence of disciplinary areas that are accustomed to this approach.

Unimc has a long-standing commitment to the principles and requirements of the European Charter for Researchers and the Code of Conduct for the Recruitment of Researchers, which the University has been implementing since it was first awarded the HR Excellence in Research seal (HRS4R) in 2014. In 2021, the Unimc HRS4R strategy was reviewed by the European Commission and the award was extended for six more years. Responsible practices based on the OTM-R (Open, Transparent, Merit-based Recruitment) principles have been embedded in the University's policy ever since.

In short, the University's SSH specialisation coupled with a strong commitment to uphold European standards of excellence have created a fertile ground where CoARA principles can take root and engender positive change.

Approach and Strategy

The process of internal discussion and consultation which led to the drafting of the new Strategic Plan provided the opportunity to reconsider the University's policy agenda and to outline newly defined objectives. Foremost among these is the increased relevance attributed to the diversity of research contributions, beyond journal publications, embedded in the University's 'Third Mission' strategy.

Reflections on the CoARA principles were part and parcel of this internal debate, even though a more structured strategy to implement the CoARA agreement emerged only in 2024. This strategy entails:

- Establish a local CoARA committee (Vice-Rector for Research, Rector's Delegates for national and international projects, Grant Office staff, and the VQR working group)

- Analyse the CoARA core principles with reference to the specific context of Unimc and its SSH orientation
- Consult with Departmental Research Delegates or Representatives
- Produce a first draft of the Unimc Coara Action Plan, gain feedback from the academic community, revise and submit.

Key challenges

Four key challenges have been identified, which have mostly to do with the tension between local and national approaches to research assessment, since the latter define the space of possibility.

1) Complying with national regulations, yet to be fully revised

The processes of research evaluation carried out locally are contingent to a large extent on the Italian National Framework for research evaluation which sets the standards for 1) career progression (ASN – National Scientific Qualification) and 2) the research quality assessment exercise (VQR). Room for maneuver, therefore, is limited to what is possible and realistic given the requirements outlined in the national framework. This is a challenge only to the extent that any planning for change, at the local level, cannot disregard the current framework. The National Agency responsible for quality assurance in universities (ANVUR) is in the process of revising academic career procedures and recruitment practices, as indicated in the ANVUR CoARA Action Plan (October 2024). Once this process is completed, universities will be in a better position to finesse their own plans accordingly.

2) Shifting to purely qualitative methods of research assessment, while dealing with vast quantities of data

Since 2013 Unimc has adopted a model for internal research evaluation (VTR) and the allocation of financial resources that is not based on peer review, as the number of publications to be assessed each year is conspicuous. However, the model includes proxies for quality (i.e., national journal lists; journals indexed in Scopus or WoS; international co-authorship, Q1 and Q2 journals etc.) that are mostly derived from standards recognised by different academic communities and disciplinary sectors (represented locally in 5 evaluation committees aggregated according to CUN disciplinary areas). The challenge is to shift this model towards greater alignment with qualitative methods and increased recognition of diverse contributions. This challenge is acknowledged in the University's Strategic Plan (2023-2025), which is attuned to core commitments no. 1 and 2 in the ARRA.

3) Partial adoption of Open Science practices

The adoption of Open Science (OS) practices is still in its early stages at Unimc, even though there is growing awareness of the benefits of OS and Open Access in particular. Over the past two years, the University has launched several initiatives to promote OS, build capacity in data stewardship, and encourage greater engagement. The challenge consists in embedding the culture of OS across the various dimensions of research and incentivising colleagues – in the humanities, in particular – to swing towards OS practices.

4) Diversity of outputs and careers

While the University is committed to recognising the relevance of research outputs beyond scientific publications (i.e., valorization of research results; knowledge and technology transfer; public engagement; life-long learning etc.), as reflected in the Strategic Plan, there remains some uncertainty especially as regards early career researchers and the national criteria whereby they are assessed for career progression. Scientific publications still carry most of the weight in the ASN evaluation process. The challenge is to find the right balance – internally – between national expectations and local changes, between an emphasis placed on publishing journal articles or monographs that generate scientific impact and rewarding activities with high social impact and local relevance.

Commitments and Actions

Core commitment #1 - Recognise the diversity of contributions to, and careers in, research in accordance with the needs and nature of the research.

The University of Macerata is already committed to expanding the range of research contributions that are evaluated *in the process of recruiting and career progression*. The new internal criteria regulating this process, approved by the University Senate in September 2023, reward project coordination, the ability to attract funds, and Third Mission/Social Impact activities, alongside publications.

Good practices of team work and collaboration are already in place, and have been for a few years now. They are incentivised via internal calls for project proposals that allocate funding to interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary research groups to stimulate collaboration.

Action 1 - *Finalise the Unimc Open Science plan; consolidate and expand initiatives to promote Open Science practices and the sharing of results; collaborate with the OS working group to discuss the feasibility of providing university funding (via the VTR exercise) only for outputs that are open and shared in FAIR repositories.*

Timeframe: 2024-2027

Targets:

- OS Plan formally adopted by the end of 2024 (approved by the University Senate)
- Number of OS initiatives (> 3)
- Meetings of OS working group and the research assessment committee (CAT) (>2)

Action 2 - *Initiate a process of revision of the current criteria for the annual internal research assessment exercise (VTR), which allocates research funds to individual researchers/professors. The research assessment committee (CAT) will be tasked to reflect on how best to reward quality and the diversity of contributions drawing on CoARA's suggestions.*

Timeframe: 2024-2025

Targets:

- *Meetings of CAT (> 2)*
- *Criteria redefined by the end of 2025 (approved by the University Senate)*

Action 3 - *Organize training sessions on Narrative CV for PhD students and ECRs, and implement personal and career development plans, in line with ARRA and HRS4R principles.*

Timeframe: 2025-2026

Targets:

- *Career Plan in use by the end of 2025, refined if needed in 2026;*
- *Number of training sessions on Narrative CV (2)*

Action 4 – *Consider revising the current guidelines for salary progression to include activities beyond teaching and publications.*

Timeframe: 2026-2027

Target: new guidelines issued by the end of 2027 (approved by the Senate and the Board of Trustees).

Core commitment #2 - Base research assessment primarily on qualitative evaluation for which peer review is central, supported by responsible use of quantitative indicators.

As regards *hiring procedures* at Unimc (which depend on national regulation), qualitative evaluation (peer review) is already the primary means for assessing candidates' publications in most disciplines within the SSH remit. Hiring committees are expected to assess the intrinsic quality of candidates' publications.

Unimc also uses *external* peer review to evaluate the project proposals submitted, by interdisciplinary research groups, in response to internal calls for funding.

While the centrality of peer review is broadly recognised by the academic community and supported by University's policies, peer review ought not to be considered an unproblematic practice. To uphold high standards or research integrity, internal peer review processes need to be scrutinised and periodically re-assessed to ensure transparency and fairness.

Action 5 – *Establish a working group on responsible use of quantitative indicators for the disciplinary areas within and beyond the SSH remit that rely on JIF, h-index and other metrics. This working group has the mandate to provide inputs to the internal research assessment committee (CAR) dealing specifically with outputs from those disciplines.*

Timeframe: 2025-2026

Targets:

- *Working Group established in 2025*
- *Meetings of the WG (> 2)*
- *Brief report to be issued by 2026.*

Core commitment # 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.

As already clarified, this commitment is only marginally relevant in the context of Unimc, given its strong SSH component. Use of journal- and publication-based metrics, in the internal research assessment system, does not qualify as 'inappropriate' since it reflects national standards that set the terms for career progression (ASN). For example, journal lists (*Fascia A – ANVUR*) are used in the ASN procedures to assess candidates in all SSH domains; applicants are expected to submit a given number of publications in listed journals, depending on their disciplinary area. Given this context, it is but reasonable for the University to adopt a similar approach, in its internal distribution of research funds to individuals. **Action 5** (above) is meant to stimulate more awareness of inappropriate uses of JIF and h-index, with specific reference to STEM disciplines, economics and psychology, and to suggest ways to mitigate the use of quantitative criteria.

Core commitment # 4 - Avoid the use of rankings of research organisations in research assessment.

Unimc does not use rankings for research assessment purposes and stands firm in the belief that current ranking systems are neither fair nor responsible.

Supporting commitment # 5 - Commit resources to reforming research assessment as is needed to achieve the organisational changes committed to.

The members of the local CoARA committee will contribute on an in-kind basis. Members of the OS working group will also commit staff capacity. Financial resources are available to further actions on Open Science and to provide training on interdisciplinary and collaborative practices.

Supporting Commitment # 6.1 and 6.2 - Review and develop research assessment criteria, tools and processes.

Commitment 6.1 concerns "criteria for assessing research units and research performing organisations, while promoting interoperability". These units (Departments) and organisations are assessed at the national, not the local, level. Therefore, no action is planned. Unimc performs internal processes of research assessment, with a limited scope, to prepare the ground for the national evaluation of research quality (VQR).

Action 7 – *This action responds to Commitment 6.2 ("review and develop criteria, tools and processes for the assessment of research projects, research teams and researchers"). Carry out a review of the current documents and regulations concerning the recruiting of junior and senior*

research fellows, postdocs and research assistants to identify gaps and, if needed, to update guidelines in the light of CoARA principles.

Timeframe: 2025-2026

Targets:

- *Review completed by 2025*
- *New guidelines issued by 2026*

Supporting Commitment #7 - Raise awareness of research assessment reform and provide transparent communication, guidance, and training on assessment criteria and processes as well as their use.

Unimc is already in the habit of communicating assessment criteria openly and transparently. The guidelines for the internal research assessment exercise are published on the University's website, and modifications are communicated promptly. External peer reviewers, in charge of assessing research teams and projects, are provided with clear indications as to the criteria that should guide their evaluation. These indications and criteria are well-known to applicants as they are included in the call for proposals. They are solely based on a qualitative approach.

Action 8 – Engage the University's Departments (five in total) in open discussions about ARRA and its implementation, to be held at least once a year, during one of the monthly meetings that Departments are demanded to schedule. This action is meant to promote CoARA commitments, to provide transparent communication about the implementation of the action plan, and to receive feedback from the academic community.

Timeframe: 2025-2026-2027

Target: at least 1 annual event in each Department.

Supporting Commitment # 8 - Exchange practices and experiences to enable mutual learning within and beyond the Coalition.

This commitment will be pursued by participating actively in the work of the National Chapter, Work Package no. 3 in particular, and by collaborating with European CoARA working groups. Since Unimc is part of a regional network of universities in central Italy (HAMU), it would be interesting to initiate a conversation within this network to exchange knowledge and experiences.

Action 9 – As regards activities beyond the Coalition, Unimc commits to disseminating knowledge of the CoARA principles among the eight members of the European Reform University Alliance (ERUA2), cooperating with partner universities to identify effective strategies for implementation. Three universities within ERUA2 (including Unimc) have already signed the ARRA. There is therefore room for improvement. Discussions have already started at the annual gathering of ERUA2 in June 2024.



Timeframe: 2024-2027

Target: all universities within the ERUA alliance to sign the ARRA by 2027.

Supporting commitment # 9 - Communicate progress made on adherence to the principles and implementation of the Commitments.

As already specified in **Action 8**, the progress made will be communicated during the meeting/assembly to be organised once a year in all Departments.

Action 10 – *Monitor the implementation of the CoARA Action Plan on a yearly basis, as part of the annual report on research activities.*

Timeframe: 2024-2027

Target: The annual research report to include a section on the implementation of CoARA action plan.

Supporting commitment # 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.

It is habitual for Unimc to monitor research activities on a regular basis, as this exercise is mandated by the University Quality Committee (PQA), as requested by the national regulation (AVA3). The annual reporting includes assessment of quantity and quality of publications, number of new post-doc positions filled, international mobility of faculty (incoming and outgoing), national and international research projects that have received funding. Each year, the internal research assessment committees (CAR and CAT) evaluate publication data and make decisions on what criteria to alter, based on the evidence provided.

So far, scant attention has been paid to disseminating the results of research on research in the Unimc academic community. Efforts in this direction are contingent on the interest of individual scholars in meta-research. However, gaining a deeper understanding of how peer review itself could be reformed is of relevance to a university that specialises in the SSH. Active participation in the CoARA working group 'Evaluating SSH globally' will provide the stimulus to advance reflections on the evidence provided by meta-research.



Timeline

ACTIONS	2024	2025	2026	2027
Action 1				
• Adoption of OS plan				
• Promote OS				
• OS WG on VTR revisions				
Action 2				
• CAT to revise VTR criteria				
Action 3				
• Narrative CV and Career plans				
Action 4				
• Revise guidelines for salary progression				
Action 5				
• WG on quantitative indicators				
Action 7				
• Review of documents				
Action 8				
• Engagement of Departments				
Action 9				
• Disseminate CoARA principles in ERUA2				
Action 10				
• Monitor implementation in annual research report				