GRC Session Highlights Responsible Research Assessment Developments and Future Challenges

13th Global Research Council (GRC) Annual Meeting (AM) – Riyadh, Saudi Arabia | 2025

Side session title: Unlocking Insights: The Future of Responsible Research Assessment

Organising organisations: NSERC (Canada), RDIA (Saudi Arabia) and UKRI (United Kingdom) on behalf of the GRC Responsible Research Assessment (RRA) Working Group, with presenters and panelists from the Research on Research Institute (RoRI, UK), NRF (South Africa) and MBIE (New Zealand).

Attendees: 31 registered participants.

1. Overview: The GRC RRA Working Group, co-chaired by **Shawn McGuirk** (NSERC, Canada) and **Mohammed Ahmad Alshamsi** (RDIA, Saudi Arabia), dedicated a side session to mark the launch of two key publications from the working group.

Following opening remarks by the co-chairs, the session opened with a presentation by **Peter Kolarz** (Head of Programmes, RoRI), who introduced the Transforming Assessment: the 2025 GRC survey of funder approaches to RRA report and described findings from the 2025 GRC RRA survey of 50 funding organizations.

Next, **Nosisa Dube** (NRF, South Africa) presented the newly published RRA Case Study Booklet. The collection includes 14 case studies across four GRC regions, which were developed using a standardized template and aligned with the 11 Dimensions of RRA**.** It is accessible on the Global Research Council's webpage via the working group's digital library.

Finally, **Alejandro Adem** (NSERC, Canada) chaired a panel that included **Prue Williams** (MBIE, New Zealand), **Thandi Mgwebi** (NRF, South Africa), and **James Wilsdon** (Executive Director, RoRI) to further explore challenges and opportunities in RRA adoption.

2. Key takeaways:

- The survey results revealed that while conventional indicators such as research feasibility, methodological soundness, novelty, and track record remain key to research assessment, funders are increasingly incorporating newer factors like societal impact, equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI), and alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) - thereby, reinforcing the value of the GRC's EDI and MLE working groups in promoting EDI and fostering collaboration to address global challenges. These emerging criteria are supplementing—not replacing—traditional metrics, thereby broadening conventional notions of research excellence.
- The survey found that no RRA framework has been universally adopted; adoption rates notably vary between the Global North and Global South for any given framework.
- Assessment methodologies continue to rely heavily on qualitative evaluations of research outputs, while use of journal impact factors appears to be waning.
- Incremental reforms such as the use of international reviewers, virtual panels, embedding EDI, narrative CVs and two-stage application processes are increasingly

common. Comparatively, more radical approaches like application anonymization, partial randomization, sandpits, and distributed peer review remain limited in application.

- According to the survey and in alignment with the Annual Meeting theme, artificial intelligence (AI) in research assessment emerged as a key area of both interest and concern. Current uses focus primarily on automating reviewer assignments and administrative tasks. Despite optimism about AI, worries persist over its impact on integrity, transparency, and human judgment. The panel echoed the survey findings and reinforced the need to mitigate risks and set clear frameworks for AI's responsible use.
- Overall, the survey recommends that funders: (1) foster a culture of experimentation to test and compare innovations; (2) publish the results of process experiments to share insights; (3) engage and consult with relevant stakeholders for buy-in; (4) encourage funders to use the survey findings and the 11 Dimensions of RRA when considering their own implementation, and (5) recognize AI's dual potential (benefits and risks).
- Most case study submissions focused on three of the 11 Dimensions, regarding EDI, the assessment of individual contributions, and funders' roles in shaping institutional policy. However, the booklet also highlights underdeveloped areas, particularly the assessment of societal and economic impacts and funder responsiveness to global challenges. These gaps were further highlighted by Williams during the panel discussion, where she cited New Zealand's COVID-19 response fellowship scheme as a process-level innovation and rapid response mechanism to retain early-career researchers.
- Mgwebi further framed RRA as not only a technical reform but also as a matter of justice and relevance, especially in the African context. She stressed that funders influence both institutional culture and researcher behavior and emphasized the need to value local knowledge and engagement. She proposed the development of a continent-specific RRA charter, encouraged support for diverse research outputs and collaborative approaches, and called for embedding RRA in evaluation and promotion systems.
- Wilsdon raised that the momentum for RRA reform has slowed since the initial spark when DORA and the Leiden Manifesto first emerged, and noted rising political tensions towards EDI. He advocated for funders to engage in methodologically robust experimentation and for better alignment between reform and efficiency – including by reducing assessment pressures and thoughtfully integrating AI – while cautioning on the risk of increasing bureaucratic burden as a result of poor implementation strategies.

3. Follow-up activities:

- The working group will rely on these products and the outcomes of these discussions to fulfil its commitment for the additional 2 years of its mandate, which includes the development of a self-assessment tool for RRA maturity. Participants were encouraged to engage in this work at the next regional meetings and to contribute case studies to the digital library.
- The working group raised its interest in further exploring the annual meeting's theme of AI, with regards to the responsible onboarding and use of AI in research assessment.

- Mohammed Alshamsi was thanked for his leadership role as Co-Chair for the first four years of the working group; he announced that he will continue to serve as a group member once a new Co-Chair is appointed for the next two-year term.