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RESEARCH EVALUATION AND SCIENTIFIC AUTONOMY UNDER PRESSURE

Conference Proceedings

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La Conferenza RESSH 2026 a Firenze

Questo volume raccoglie gli atti della Conferenza RESSH 2026, ospitata a Firenze dal 22 al 24 aprile nell'ambito della serie di conferenze RESSH promosse da ENRESSH – European Network for Research Evaluation in the Social Sciences and Humanities, la rete internazionale che riunisce la comunità scientifica impegnata nello studio della valutazione della ricerca nelle scienze umane e sociali.

Questa edizione è organizzata congiuntamente da ENRESSH e dall'Istituto di Informatica Giuridica e Sistemi Giudiziari del Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche (CNR-IGSG), che curano anche il volume. RESSH 2026 riunisce oltre 170 autori provenienti da 30 differenti paesi attorno a un tema di stringente attualità: la valutazione della ricerca e l'autonomia scientifica nell'era delle trasformazioni geopolitiche, delle crescenti preoccupazioni per la sicurezza e della onnipresenza dell'intelligenza artificiale.

I contributi raccolti spaziano tra prospettive concettuali, empiriche e di policy, affrontando questioni cruciali quali la libertà scientifica, l'integrità della ricerca, la diversità delle pratiche valutative, l'impatto delle metriche sulle carriere e sui percorsi accademici e il ruolo crescente degli strumenti di intelligenza artificiale nei processi di valutazione. Il programma di RESSH 2026 si articola in due interventi di apertura, tredici sessioni tematiche, una sessione poster e un evento collaterale dedicato alla presentazione di un volume sui temi di interesse della Conferenza, riflettendo la ricchezza e la pluralità del dibattito in corso a livello internazionale.

Un ringraziamento sentito va ai componenti del Comitato scientifico e di programma, ai presidenti delle sessioni, alle due relatrici invitate e a tutti i revisori, il cui lavoro ha contribuito a definire la struttura e la qualità del programma. La più profonda gratitudine è rivolta agli autori: sono infatti i loro contributi a dare vita a questo volume e ad alimentare un dibattito vivo, ricco e stimolante, testimonianza del valore e della qualità del loro lavoro.

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WHAT IS INCLUSIVE EXCELLENCE? REFLECTIONS ON EXCELLENCE AND EQUALITY IN RESEARCH EVALUATION

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Keywords: Research evaluation, Inclusive excellence, Gender, Academia, Equality

This contribution was developed in the context of the CoARA Working Group TIER - Towards an Inclusive Evaluation of Research. It investigates how the notions of excellence and gender are interlinked and explores how excellence can be de-gendered. Finally, we try to develop an idea of a more (gender) inclusive excellence concept in the context of CoARA by bringing in various perspectives.

European-level data confirms the structural patterns that motivate this study. According to the She Figures 2024 report (European Commission), gender balance has been achieved at the doctoral level (women represent ~48–50% of PhD graduates across the EU), yet this parity does not translate into senior academic positions: only 30% of Grade A positions (full professors, senior research leaders) are held by women, dropping to 19% in engineering and 24% in natural sciences. The Glass Ceiling Index quantifies this progressive attrition, with women more represented at early career stages but leaving academic careers at higher rates than men before reaching senior positions. Additional structural barriers compound this trajectory: women are more likely to hold precarious or part-time contracts, have lower success rates in securing competitive research funding, and move less internationally — a key factor for career advancement.

Our contribution focuses on research assessment and what defines the boundaries of excellent research work. We argue that the current definition of excellence is, first, based on formal indicators such as the number of citations of one's works and the number of research outputs produced by researchers and research groups. Second, excellence is constructed when these indicators are applied in practice, introducing potential bias factors such as (gendered) assumptions, power relations, and field differences.

Researchers are thus evaluated on their ability to adhere to a standard ideal model of worker (Acker, 1990) that entails complete dedication to one's job and the capacity to

build meaningful networks that increase one's institution's prestige and funding: all of these elements are connected to a certain mode of knowledge production, focused on resources and prestige, related to what Slaughter and Leslie (1997) define as academic capitalism. This system is gendered in nature: research has revealed that, so far, white men are the most favored group within research institutions due to the way knowledge is produced and assessed (Ward & Rodriguez, 2025). Indeed, this system can only function if, while some researchers dedicate themselves entirely to remunerative research, others carry out what can be defined as "academic care work" — all those activities that do not necessarily produce patents, papers, or financially driven outcomes but are vital to institutions, such as teaching, group care, organization, and dissemination. These activities are largely carried out by women in most cases (van den Brink & Benschop, 2012; Gaiaschi, 2025; Järvinen & Mik-Meyer, 2025). Dissemination and outreach activities, which are crucial for legitimizing public funding spent on research, are also barely covered by this definition of excellence.

This leads to an imbalance between women's and men's career opportunities within academia and research institutions: a research world that was historically built for a certain type of man, one that inevitably places women and other under-represented groups at the margins. This disparity in evaluation systems and career opportunities for men and women contributes to the Matthew Effect, as resources tend to go to already established, prestigious researchers and networks. Moreover, women often have to navigate a "chilly climate" (Britton, 2017), marked by microaggressions and gender-based violence, especially in male-dominated fields (Nowrouzi-Kia et al., 2025; Kocsis, 2025).

Analyzing the perceptions of 1,682 researchers (from various institutions, countries, and fields of study) on evaluation systems, using a scale from 1 to 5 (where 1 = not important and 5 = very important), we found that most respondents believe their career was assessed mainly through the following criteria: high-impact publications ($M=4.16$), research grants ($M=4.04$), citations ($M=3.77-3.85$), and H-index ($M=3.72-3.81$), while teaching, peer review, and open access were ranked lowest ($M=2.08-2.81$). Overall, traditional metrics outsourced non-traditional contributions by more than 1.2 points ($d>1.2$, $p<.001$).

Women rated all criteria significantly higher than men (18 out of 20 criteria), indicating that academic excellence is perceived as more challenging for women. The largest gender gaps were found for open access, peer review, and data sharing ($ds\approx 0.30$), all of which relate to scientific infrastructure and are also the least rewarded by institutions and funding agencies.

Additionally, 31.2% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the definition of excellence is gender-biased. Specifically, regression analysis using a Cumulative Link Mixed Model (CLMM; $N=1,277$) revealed gender as the main predictor of the perception of gender bias in definitions of excellence on a Likert scale (1=Free from bias, 5=Totally biased), with women 3.45 times more likely than men to perceive bias in the current definition of excellence. Age, field of research, and career stage were not significant predictors of the perception of bias in evaluation, indicating a stable gender gap irrespective of these variables.

Turning to strategies for redefining excellence, the acceptance of using criteria other than traditional bibliometrics was moderately high ($M=3.37$) and significantly higher for women ($M=3.56$) than for men ($M=3.13$; $p<.001$). Women also reported a greater perceived negative effect of career interruptions on evaluation ($d=0.51$). Finally, bias training for evaluation committees and institutional changes to address career gaps and bias detection tools were identified as the most effective strategies for change.

In addition to the quantitative data collected through the survey, we investigated best practices implemented in European countries to mitigate gender bias in research assessment, including, among others, narrative CVs, gender-blind recruitment and assessment, and greater recognition of teaching, dissemination, and administrative work.

Through the analysis of these data, we conclude that an inclusive excellence framework could incorporate a more qualitative approach to research evaluation, a more nuanced use of bibliometric indicators to avoid their misuse, and the promotion of a broader range of research activities, fully recognizing them as part of what excellent research entails. More broadly, this would also mean acknowledging the current neoliberal turn experienced by universities and research institutions and taking steps to counter it, in order to establish impactful research and its dissemination (through formal teaching or otherwise) as the primary focus of research activities, rather than money and prestige.

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