

ERIC Forum Implementation Project Report on harmonizing the presentation of ERIC Activity Reports for impact assessment section

Work Package 4 - Deliverable 4.5

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| Author(s) | Regina Günster, Carla Marques Wood, Pauline Audergon, Natalie Haley, Claudia Alén Amaro, Harald Schwalbe |



Executive summary

Annually, all ERICs are obliged to provide activity reports to the European Commission that must report on scientific, operational and financial aspects of their activities. However, ERICs have the freedom to decide on the format and additional elements of these reports. Here we analysed Annual Reports from 22 different ERICs to identify common impact reporting themes. We found that the level of detail given in the reports, the areas covered, as well as quantitative ESFRI KPIs used, vary from ERIC to ERIC which reflects their unique nature. To make the reported performance indicators easily accessible to readers whilst respecting the ERICs' nature we recommend that each ERIC summarises their impact and performance in a double-page spread at the beginning of the report using a selection of quantitative KPIs accompanied by short explanatory paragraphs. Additionally, clearly defined activity sections where the KPIs are revisited, described in more detail and put into longitudinal context are recommended to improve interpretation of the information presented. Overall, these recommendations aim to improve the identification and interpretation of the infrastructure's key impacts in a given year.

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Background

According to the ERIC Regulation (Article 17.1)¹, all European Research Infrastructure Consortiums (ERIC) are obliged to provide annual activity reports to the European Commission and make them publicly available. Activity reports are seen to be not only a means to an end to fulfil the obligations of the ERIC regulation, but also a tool to raise awareness among key stakeholders such as funding agencies, scientific communities, and industrial partners. Activity reports provide an annual opportunity for each ERIC to present achievements and success stories and feature its partners.

As per the Regulation, Activity Reports of ERICs must feature sections dedicated to scientific, operational and financial aspects of their activities. However, ERICs have the freedom to decide on the format and additional elements of these reports. As a result, the level of detail given in the reports, as well as the areas covered, vary from ERIC to ERIC. This makes it challenging to assess the impact of ERICs and evaluate their performance.

To develop a common approach to a "Monitoring and Impact Section" of ERIC Activity Reports, published annual reports were reviewed to identify common activity and impact areas. A survey among ERICs and preparatory ERICs was previously conducted by the ERIC Forum project (D4.1 survey)² regarding ERICs' use of key performance indicators (KPIs). This survey identified that all surveyed ERICs either use KPIs or are in the process of implementing them. Therefore, to identify common KPIs used for impact assessment, we analysed the use of the 21 quantitative European Strategy Forum on Research Infrastructures (ESFRI) KPIs published in the working group report 'Monitoring of Research Infrastructures Performance'³.

Methodology

A total of 89 annual activity reports from 22 different ERICs across five different domains were collated (see references). The reports were collected from the websites of each respective ERIC (available online 23.11.20222) and covered the time range from 2017-2021.

All annual reports were reviewed by a lay person to assess if the following sections were included and easily identifiable: Timeline, Foreword, Nodes/Centres/Facilities, Science/Research, Training, Finances, Governance, Management, Communication/Outreach, [EU] Projects (Appendix II).

Additionally, the latest annual reports (year 2021) were analysed in more detail by experienced research infrastructure project managers to identify additional impact sections (Annex III) as well as any numerical (ESFRI) KPIs used (Annex IV). The analyses were made to the reviewers' best efforts.



Results

Analysis of the overall structure of annual reports

Initial comparison of the 89 annual reports revealed extensive variation in reports that ranged from 2-126 pages in length. Overly wordy reports made it hard to identify key information whilst short reports were lacking in detail. The majority of reports were between 25-75 pages long, with many of the reports longer than 75 pages including extensive financial sections and annexes. We found that reporting the finances at the end of the report and including lengthy tables, detailed statistics and abbreviations in an annex improved the readability of the report.

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Recommendation – Keep it concise and include lengthy tables etc at the end of the report

Three RIs (3/20) choose to report on timeframes across calendar years which is likely because they became an ERIC mid-year. However, the exact timeframe of reporting was not always apparent beyond the years indicated. Additionally, the cross-year reporting does not align with the RI's budgetary period which is usually aligned with calendar years, so the activities presented cannot be directly linked to the financial reports provided. For this reason and to improve standardisation amongst ERICs, we recommend reporting in calendar years.



Recommendation – Report in Calendar years

Initial analysis focused on how the requirements of the ERIC regulations (scientific, operational, and financial activities) were reported. All reports included information on the scientific research of the infrastructure (89/89). The majority reported on their operational activities (governance (72/89) and management (67/89)) and despite the requirement to do so, not all reports contained financial information (84/89). Organigrams visualising the governance and management structure were very useful in giving an overview of the organisation and are therefore recommended.

Overall, there was no common structure to the activity reports and even RIs from the same domain choose different ways of reporting their activities. Additionally, even if the information was included, it was sometimes hard to identify. Therefore, we recommend making key activity areas of the RI, as well as the required sections, easily identifiable with a clear headline and paragraph.

Recommendation – Ensure that information on the scientific, operational, and financial aspects are reported.
Recommendation – Use clearly identifiable section, ideally with an index.
Recommendation – Include a governance organigram



Impact reporting in annual reports

Twenty annual reports from 2021 were analysed in detail to assess how they address the RIs impact. As a baseline the 21 ESFRI KPIs were used. Overall, we found that none of the suggested 21 quantitative ESFRI KPIs were reported by all ERICs.

Enhancing collaboration in Europe

The total number of members of the RI was the most commonly used KPI. However, no ERIC reported this metric broken down by number of ESFRI countries (ESFRI #7) and non-ESFRI countries (ESFRI #19). Additionally, if applicable the number of observers was reported. The majority of ERICs included information on their constituent parts (for the cases of distributed infrastructures) which were described as nodes, centres, facilities, data centres, partner sites, national hubs, research sites etc. as applicable to their infrastructure. Even ERICs from the same domain have a different nomenclature for their constituents making it difficult to compare the modes of operations of different ERICs. Therefore, we recommend to clearly define the naming convention at the beginning of the report.

Overall, including a map showing an ERIC's members and constituent parts made the identification of members and partners easier and is therefore recommended.



Recommendation – Report the number of members, (observer) and constituent parts. Recommendation – Include a map of members and constituent parts to give an easy overview Recommendation – Define the nomenclature for your constituent parts at the beginning of the report.

Enabling scientific excellence

Providing services is the core activity of all ERICs and takes shape in a variety of forms including physical and remote access to instrumentation, access to data and datasets, survey data, clinical trials, funding, instrumentation, expertise etc. Therefore, all annual reports included information on the ERIC's scientific activities and services provided (89/89). In case of the ERICs not yet operational, this included services in preparation.

However, less than half of the annual reports included numeric data on the number of user requests for access (ESFRI #1) and number of users served (ESFRI #2). This was partially because not all ERICs are operational yet, users of open access data are hard to track, and most operational ERICs choose to report their service provision with different metrics. This included the number of projects and access visits supported, data sets made available, surveys performed, data correlated etc. as relevant to the infrastructure. Some RIs choose multiple service KPIs to report their scientific activities and impact. Customisation of metrics to the unique character of each RI is essential for meaningful reporting and supported by the ERIC Forum (Deliverable 4.1) and acknowledged by ESFRI. Therefore, the metrics used need to be clearly defined in any (annual) report to ensure that the reader understands the KPIs related to service and that they are not comparable across ERICs.



The number of publications (ESFRI #3) is a commonly used indicator for the quantity and quality of science enabled reported in 13 of the 20 analysed annual reports. However, it is not always clear to



the reader what is included as a publication in those statistics. Therefore, we recommend to clearly define the inclusion criteria in the report. The percentage of top (10%) cited publications (ESFRI #4) was only reported by one ERIC and found to be one of the more challenging KPIs in the D4.1 survey. Additionally, respondents to the D4.1 survey noted that tracking of publications is challenging overall, as not all scientists properly acknowledge the research infrastructure and the use of external platforms to collect publications and related data is often challenging. This might prevent more ERICs from reporting their number of publications. Additionally, none of the ERICs reported the share of publications per ESFRI member country (ESFRI #17) with only one RI reporting the number of publications per member (not weighted as suggested in the ESFRI KPI #17 though).

Recommendation – Clearly define the criteria for including a publication in your KPI

Delivery of education and training

Education and training are key activities of ERICs. These aspects are usually addressed in a narrative by the RIs listing and explaining the training activities conducted. Summarising these activities as the number of training activities held is therefore a recommended KPI. This should include in-person training, remote training, internships, webinars, videos, academic programmes supported etc. Those activities can be underpinned by metrics on the number of training activities held, number of trainees per activity. However, no consistent metric is used across the reports and only two ERICs reported a total number of people trained. No ERIC reported the total number of person hours for which people external to the RI have made use of training opportunities (ESFRI #6). The number of master and PhD students using the RI (ESFRI #7) was only reported as a percentage by one ERIC. This is not surprising as most RI did not report a total number of users and consequently no sub-categories can be reported.

Recommendation – Include a number and narrative about the training activities held

Facilitating economic activities

Industry interaction and collaboration were reported by approximately half of the ERICs in narrative form (11/20) with only two RIs additionally reporting the share of users and publications associated with industry (ESFRI #9). This KPI has previously been highlighted as challenging to report in the D4.1 survey. Additionally, income from commercial activities (ESFRI #10) was only reported by three RIs which indicated that commercial activities are not a key priority for most ERICs and only permitted on a limited basis (ERIC Regulations Article 3.2¹).

Outreach to the public

Communication and outreach to a variety of stakeholders was reported in 74 of 89 reports. In reporting, the ERICs used a mostly narrative form, supported by selected KPIs, with twitter statistics and website visits the most commonly used metrics (ESFRI #13). Outreach through direct contact was not included in most reports (ESFRI #11), likely due to the ongoing restriction of the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, outreach through printed, broadcast and web-based media (ESFRI #12) was reported by half of the RIs. Overall, the target audience of the reported activities was not always clear. For ERICs that did not specifically report on their outreach activities, some of the activities were



implied in other activity sections. To make outreach activities easily identifiable we recommend to reported them in a clearly defined section with appropriate KPIs and defined target audiences for each RI.



Recommendation – Use a clearly defined communication/outreach section Recommendation – Specify the target audience for selected activities

Optimising data use

The ERA Policy agenda action 1 is to "Enable Open Science, including through the European Open Science Cloud (EOSC)"⁴, thus open and FAIR data are a clear priority for the future of the ERA. The number of data sets made available (ESFRI #14, adapted) was reported by four RIs, all in the environmental and social & cultural innovation clusters. Additionally, most ERICs reported narratively on their efforts towards data management, FAIR principles and /or their interaction with the European Open Science Cloud. KPIs covering FAIR principles and EOSC were identified and these KPIs are currently not covered by the ESFRI KPIs but clearly an area of importance to the ERICs.

Policy making and inter-ERIC collaboration

ERICs participate in different ways to policy making. This includes participation in policy-related activities, standardisation of procedures across facilities and leading by example. Half of the ERICs reported their policy influencing activities in their annual reports narratively. However, only two RIs quantify this through the ESFRI KPIs participation in policy-related activities (ESFRI #15) and subsequent citation in policy-related publications (ESFRI #16). Participation in policy making activities often varies from year to year, and related publications are hard to identify, therefore those KPIs were identified as hard to collect in the D4.1. survey and this is also reflected in the annual reports. In addition to (common) policy making activities, ERICs interact, network, and share experiences with each other. This was highlighted by the fact that nearly all RIs (19/20) reported ERIC-ERIC collaboration in [European] projects and beyond.

Facilitating international cooperation

International collaboration beyond Europe is common in some ERICs whilst others currently report no international collaborations or are in the process or expanding their internationalisation. Half of the infrastructures reported internationalisation activities (12/20). However, beyond the number of international ERIC members, observers, and facilities, this was mainly reported narratively. The number of international users was reported by only three RIs and the number of international trainees by none of the ERICs.

Optimising management

Even though RIs reported that revenues are difficult to report (D4.1 survey) most RIs (19/20) report on this KPI by virtue of providing the yearly financial data.

Summary and overall recommendations

Overall, no common content, common reporting structure or common set of KPIs could be identified in the annual reports analysed. This is due to the diverse nature of the ERICs which necessitates a unique set of impact indicators for each research infrastructure. Therefore, it is unlikely that a unified monitoring and impact reporting section will fulfil the needs of all ERICs. Reviewing the reports, we



found that Infographics, 'RI in numbers' sections, and executive summaries were a good way to convey key information to the reader in a concise way. However, without accompanying narrative the unique nature of the indicators makes their interpretation difficult.

We recommend that each ERIC summarises their impact and performance in a double-page spread at the beginning of the report using a combination of quantitative KPIs accompanied by short explanatory paragraphs.

An example layout is presented in annex I but we recommend that each RI selects impact and performance sections, KPIs and additional information as appropriate for its activities.

Additionally, clearly defined activity sections where the KPIs are revisited, described in more detail and put into longitudinal context were found helpful for the reader.



Recommendations

- Summarise key KPIs in a double spread at the beginning of the annual report
- Accompany the KPIs by short summaries of the metrices reported on
- Use clearly defined sections throughout the report
- Revisit the key KPIs at the beginning of each respective section and, if available, show longitudinal data
- Include additional information and methodology on the KPIs in each activity section



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Annual reports

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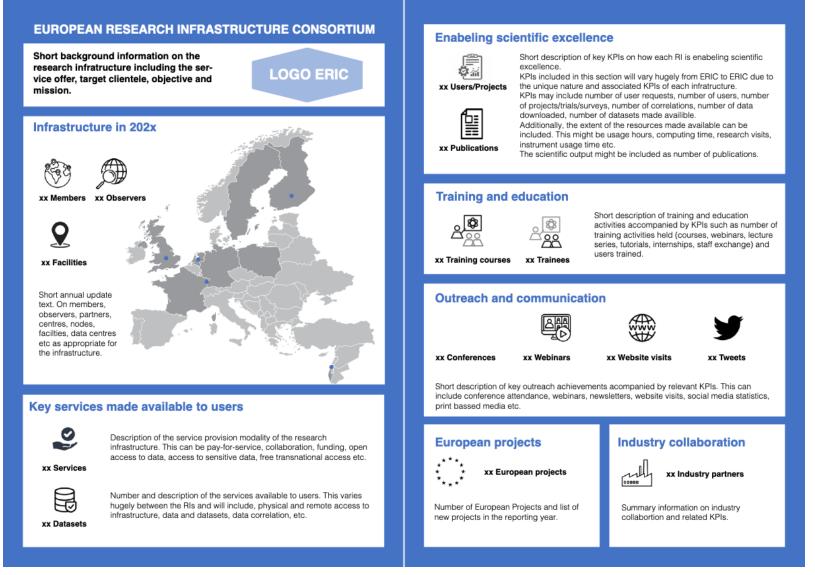
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Appendix I – Impact summary section – mock up

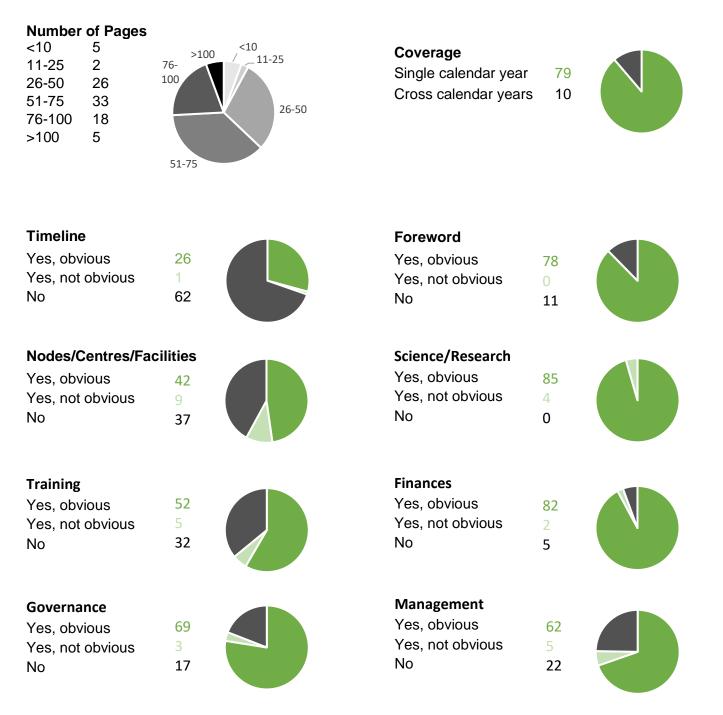


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Appendix II - Analysis of annual report sections

Analysis of 89 annual reports from 22 different ERICs spanning the years 2017-2021 to assessed if the sections below were present, and if so, how obvious the data were presented.

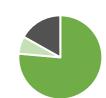


ERIC Forum has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement N. 823798



Communication/Outreach

Yes, obvious Yes, not obvious No



68

15

| [EU] Projects | |
|------------------|--|
| Yes, obvious | |
| Yes, not obvious | |
| No | |

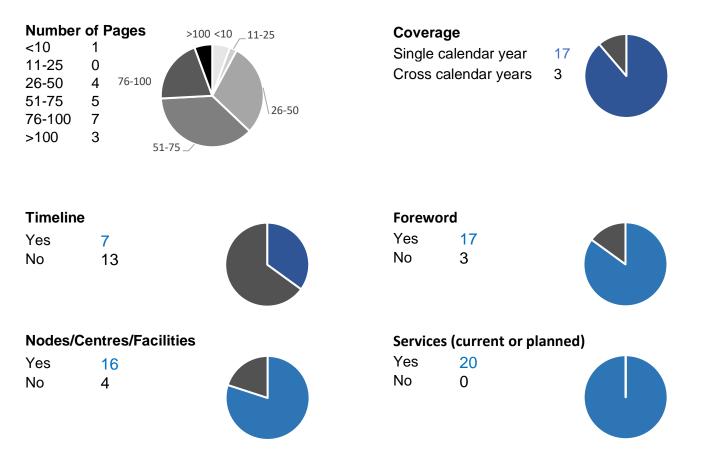


61

16

Appendix III - Analysis of the 2021 annual report - sections

20 annual reports from the year 2021 were analyses in more detail to assess if the information detailed below was included.





| Science/F Yes No | Research 18 2 | |
|-------------------------------|--------------------------|-----|
| Finances Yes No | - ERIC 19 1 | |
| Governar Yes No | nce 16 4 | |
| Training - | - Operational st | aff |
| Yes No | 2 18 | |
| Industry o | collaboration | |
| Yes No | 11 9 | |
| Communi | ication/Outreac | h |
| Yes No | 17 3 | |

Training for scientists

Yes 14 No 6



Finances - Nodes

Yes 0 No 20



ManagementYes15No5



ERIC interaction/networking

Yes9Only trough projects10No1



Internationalisation

Yes 12 No 8



[EU] ProjectsYes19No1

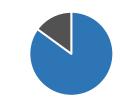


17

3

EOSC or FAIR data

Yes No



Appendix IV – Analysis of the 2021 annual report – quantitative ESFRI KPIs

20 annual reports from the year 2021 were analyses in more detail to assess if the 21 quantitative ESFRI KPIs were reported.

#1 - Number of user requests for access

13 0

7

| Number | 7 | |
|-----------------|----|--|
| Indirect number | 1 | |
| Narrative only | | |
| No | 12 | |

#3 - Number of publications

| Number |
|-----------------|
| Indirect number |
| Narrative only |
| No |



#5 - Number of master and PhD students using the RI

| Number | 1 |
|-----------------|----|
| Indirect number | 0 |
| Narrative only | 2 |
| No | 17 |



#2 - Number of users served

| Number | 4 | |
|-----------------|----|--|
| Indirect number | 6 | |
| Narrative only | | |
| No | 10 | |

#4 - Percentage of top (10%) cited

| publications | | |
|-----------------|----|--|
| Number | 1 | |
| Indirect number | 0 | |
| Narrative only | | |
| No | 19 | |

#6 - Training of people who are not RI staff

| Number | 2 | |
|-----------------|----|--|
| Indirect number | 0 | |
| Narrative only | 12 | |
| No | 61 | |



#7 - Number of members of the RI from ESFRI countries

15

4

Number Indirect number Narrative only No



#8b - Share of publications per ESFRI

| member country | |
|-----------------|----|
| Number | 1 |
| Indirect number | 0 |
| Narrative only | |
| No | 19 |



#9b - Share of publications with industry

| 1 |
|----|
| 0 |
| |
| 19 |
| |



#11 - Extent of outreach and engagement achieved by direct contact

| Number | 13 |
|-----------------|----|
| Indirect number | 0 |
| Narrative only | |
| No | 7 |



#13 - Outreach via the RI's own web and social media activities

| Number | 1 |
|-----------------|---|
| Indirect number | 0 |
| Narrative only | 2 |
| No | 4 |



#8a - Share of users per ESFRI member

| country | | |
|-----------------|----|--|
| Number | 1 | |
| Indirect number | 5 | |
| Narrative only | | |
| No | 14 | |

#9a – Share of users associated with industry

| industry | | |
|-----------------|----|--|
| Number | 2 | |
| Indirect number | 0 | |
| Narrative only | 2 | |
| No | 16 | |

#10 - Income from commercial activities

| Number | 3 | |
|-----------------|----|--|
| Indirect number | 0 | |
| Narrative only | | |
| No | 17 | |

#12 - Outreach through printed, broadcast

| and web-based | media | |
|-----------------|-------|--|
| Number | 5 | |
| Indirect number | 0 | |
| Narrative only | | |
| No | 10 | |

#14 - Number of publicly available data sets

| Number | 5 | |
|-----------------|----|--|
| Indirect number | 0 | |
| Narrative only | | |
| No | 15 | |



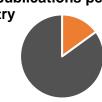
#15 - Participation by RIs in policy related activities

| Number | 2 |
|-----------------|----|
| Indirect number | 0 |
| Narrative only | |
| No | 11 |



#17 - Share of users and publications per non-ESFRI member country

| Number | 0 |
|-----------------|----|
| Indirect number | 0 |
| Narrative only | |
| No | 17 |



#19 - Number of members of the RI from non-ESERI countries

| Number | 1 |
|-----------------|----|
| Indirect number | 12 |
| Narrative only | |
| No | 7 |



#21 - Revenues

| Number | 19 |
|-----------------|----|
| Indirect number | 0 |
| Narrative only | |
| No | 1 |



#16 - Citations in policy related publications

| Number | 1 | |
|-----------------|----|--|
| Indirect number | 0 | |
| Narrative only | 1 | |
| No | 18 | |

#18 - International trainees

| Number | 0 | |
|-----------------|----|--|
| Indirect number | 0 | |
| Narrative only | | |
| No | 20 | |

#20 - Extent of resources made available to

| users - total | | |
|-----------------|----|--|
| Number | 6 | |
| Indirect number | 0 | |
| Narrative only | | |
| No | 14 | |

