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Institutional experiences in open science

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Governing open science in the absence of national coordination: a longitudinal institutional case study

Governança da ciência aberta na ausência de coordenação nacional: um estudo de caso institucional longitudinal

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Abstract

Objective: This report presents a longitudinal institutional case study of the University of Milan, a large multidisciplinary university located in Northern Italy. It focuses on the development, consolidation, and long-term implementation of Open Science policies, infrastructures, and support services over a period of approximately twenty years. **Methodology:** The analysis situates the institutional experience within the Italian national context, one with limited regulatory, financial, and monitoring support for Open Science. This structural exogenous condition has resulted in a fragmented, uneven, and largely voluntaristic adoption of Open Science practices, characterised by a weak policy enforcement and the absence of coordinated national infrastructures. **Results:** In this context, the implementation of Open Science at the University of Milan has been primarily shaped by European policy frameworks, participation in international research alliances, and institutional governance choices, factors which have influenced both strategic planning and operational practices, compensating, in part, for the lack of national-level coordination. The study describes the establishment of a dedicated central directorate responsible for Open Science policies, monitoring, and training; the development of institutional repositories and diamond Open Access publishing infrastructures; and the implementation of structured and continuous

training programs. Particular attention is devoted to governance arrangements, the evidence-based operational approach, metadata curation workflows, monitoring practices, and the integration of Open Science into research evaluation processes. **Conclusion:** The report argues that the institutional positioning of Open Science outside the library system and within structures responsible for quality assurance and research evaluation has been a key factor in ensuring the sustainability of the multiple initiatives, their acceptance by the academic community, and the progressive development of the institutional Open Science model. The case highlights the central role that governance models, information infrastructures, and professional competences play in shaping Open Science practices in contexts where there is a limited national policy guidance and support.

Keywords: Open science policies; Open science practices; Open science support; Open science implementation; Monitoring

1 INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, open Science has emerged as a central paradigm in discussions of scholarly communication, research governance, and knowledge circulation. It is commonly associated with principles of transparency, accessibility, reproducibility, and societal engagement, and is increasingly embedded in European research policy frameworks. Open Science is understood not merely as a technical or publishing issue, but as a complex socio-technical system involving infrastructures, governance arrangements, professional roles, incentive structures, and evaluation mechanisms.

Despite the growing prominence of Open Science at international and European levels, its implementation remains highly uneven across national systems in Europe. Differences in regulatory frameworks, funding mechanisms, and evaluation cultures produce divergent institutional responses and degrees of maturity. Italy represents a particularly illustrative case, as Open Science adoption is largely decoupled from national regulation, dedicated funding, and systematic monitoring. Unlike several European countries (Netherlands, France etc.), Italy lacks a national open research information system, coordinated monitoring frameworks for Open Science practices, and stable funding schemes for non-commercial Open Access publishing.

At the same time, the Italian research evaluation framework, established following the 2010 university reform (commonly referred to as the Gelmini reform), remains strongly performance-based and heavily relies on proprietary bibliographic databases. This reliance raises critical issues related to data transparency, reproducibility of evaluation results, and the reinforcement of prestige-oriented and metric-driven assessment practices. Within such a framework, openness, data stewardship, and qualitative dimensions of research are weakly recognised and thus only marginally incentivised.

In this national context, institutional initiatives play a decisive role in shaping Open Science practices. Universities act as primary sites of policy experimentation, infrastructure development, and professional innovation. This report examines the case of the University of Milan, analysing how Open Science has been progressively embedded into institutional governance, infrastructures, and workflows despite limited—and in many respects non-existent—national support.

The report adopts a descriptive and process-oriented case study approach. Rather than evaluating outcomes in normative terms, the analysis focuses on governance choices, organisational arrangements, information infrastructures, and professional practices, with the aim of contributing to a deeper understanding of how Open Science can be operationalised in structurally constrained environments.

2 INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT

The University of Milan is a large public research-intensive university with a comprehensive disciplinary profile, excluding architecture and engineering. Research, teaching, and third mission activities are organised within 31 departments, supported by a complex set of central administrative, technical, and information management structures. This organisational complexity generates significant challenges in terms of coordination, standardisation, and information governance.

The academic community includes approximately 2,600 faculty members, 660 post-doc, and 1,550 PhD students, supported by more than 2,100 technical, library, and administrative staff. This population produces a high volume of heterogeneous research outputs and datasets across diverse disciplinary cultures. The scale and diversity of these outputs have direct implications for Open Science support services, particularly in relation to repository workflows, metadata quality control, and training activities.

The University produces around 10,000 scholarly outputs annually, of which over 65% are available through some form of Open Access amongst green, gold, and diamond models. This proportion reflects both institutional policy choices and the influence of European funding requirements. The University participates actively in European networks and alliances, including LERU and 4EU+, as well as being a member in thematic initiatives such as OPERAS, COARA, and the Barcelona Declaration on Open Research Information. These forms of participation have played a crucial role in shaping institutional Open Science strategies, providing normative reference points, loci for strengthening and constructive networks and opportunities for policy learning.

3 GOVERNANCE MODEL FOR OPEN SCIENCE

A defining characteristic of the University of Milan's approach is the allocation of responsibility for Open Science to a dedicated central directorate, namely the **Performance, Quality Assurance, Evaluation and Open Science Policies Division**. This governance model differs significantly from prevailing practices within the Italian higher education system whereby Open Science responsibilities are typically assigned to library systems and are framed primarily in relation to Open Access publishing and transformative agreements.

At the University of Milan, the library system is exclusively responsible for negotiating and administering transformative agreements with commercial publishers. Open Science policy development, monitoring activities, training programs, and the alignment with research evaluation processes are managed independently by the central directorate. This organisational separation reflects a deliberate conceptual distinction between Open Science as

a set of research practices and values, and transformative agreements as contractual and financial instruments within the scholarly publishing market.

This governance choice has significant implications. By situating Open Science within structures responsible for research evaluation and quality assurance, the University has embedded openness-related practices into core institutional decision-making processes. This positioning facilitates alignment between Open Science objectives and strategic planning, performance monitoring, and internal resource allocation. It also contributes to the institutional legitimacy of Open Science, framing it as an integral component of research quality rather than as an ancillary or technical service.

4 POLICY FRAMEWORK

The University of Milan was the first Italian university to explicitly include Open Science objectives in its strategic plans (2020–2022; 2022–2024; 2025–2030). Over successive planning cycles, these documents reveal a gradual evolution in institutional priorities. Initial phases emphasized the development and consolidation of technical infrastructures, while later plans increasingly focus on cultural change, skills development, and long-term sustainability.

The institutional Open Access policy was adopted in 2014 and revised in 2020 to reflect changes in international recommendations and European policy frameworks. A Research Data Management policy was issued in 2017 and updated in 2022, providing guidance on data stewardship, preservation, and reuse. In 2025, a comprehensive Open Science policy was submitted to institutional governance, consolidating previously separate policy areas into a unified framework, giving both researchers and university staff a coherent and updated policy.

A key feature of this policy development process is its close alignment with infrastructural deployment and the allocation of dedicated human resources. This alignment is critical for reducing the implementation gap often observed between policy statements and operational practices.

5 INFRASTRUCTURES AND METADATA MANAGEMENT

5.1 Institutional repository

The institutional repository has been operational since 2005 and is currently based on the IRIS CRIS platform with a DSpace institutional repository central module. Although this infrastructure is widely adopted across Italy, it does not feed into a national open research information system. Consequently, metadata quality, completeness, and interoperability depend primarily on institutional practices rather than on coordinated national standards.

At the University of Milan, a dedicated team of six staff members validates, enriches, and standardises metadata and full-text submissions prior to publication. This process-oriented approach to metadata curation reflects an understanding of metadata as a critical institutional asset rather than solely as a by-product of research administration. Only outputs deposited in the repository are eligible for institutional and national research monitoring and evaluation processes, reinforcing researcher engagement with the system.

Repository data are used for annual reporting, internal resource allocation, and the calculation of performance indicators, including Open Access uptake at the departmental level. The repository currently hosts over 318,000 records, including approximately 88,000 Open Access publications, and has recorded more than 27 million downloads. Interoperability with OpenAIRE, PubMed LinkOut, CORE, and Unpaywall enhances the visibility and reuse of institutional outputs.

5.2 Research data repository

The research data repository, based on the Dataverse software, was adopted in 2018 to support FAIR research data archiving and the deposit of replication datasets. The service is managed by a specialised team consisting of a coordinator and three data stewards with a background in doctoral and postdoctoral research, who provide constant support across the research data lifecycle, including dataset description, licensing, documentation and deposit.

As of 2025, the repository hosts over 500 datasets and has exceeded 500,000 downloads, indicating increasing adoption by both the UNIMI research community, which increasingly deposits research data on Dataverse, and the broader global community, which visualizes and downloads the datasets. In 2024, the repository obtained the CoreTrustSeal, a prestigious certification that is currently only held by the UNIMI dataverse amongst all other Italian repositories and reflects compliance with international standards for trustworthy digital repositories.

6 OPEN ACCESS PUBLISHING INFRASTRUCTURES

The University operates a diamond Open Access publishing platform supporting both journals and books. The journal platform, launched in 2008 using OJS, currently hosts 72 journals and represents the largest diamond Open Access journal platform in Italy. The platform has recorded over 11 million downloads to date. Most titles are indexed in DOAJ, and ongoing efforts focus on improving indexing and discoverability in open discovery services such as OpenAlex and OpenAIRE.

In 2020, the Milano University Press was established to support the publication of diamond Open Access monographs using OMP. The platform has recorded over 200,000 downloads to date. Books are indexed in DOAB and include PRISM metadata to ensure transparency regarding peer-review processes. Publishing workflows are partially outsourced for technical hosting, layout, and print-on-demand services, allowing the institution to focus on editorial oversight, quality control, and policy alignment.

7 TRAINING AND RESEARCH SUPPORT SERVICES

Training and capacity-building constitute a central pillar of the University of Milan's strategy for Open Science, reflecting the institution's awareness that infrastructure and policy alone are insufficient to produce lasting cultural transformation. Over the past two decades, the University has developed a highly structured and long-term program aimed at equipping researchers, PhD students, technical staff, and administrative personnel with both practical

skills and a deep understanding of the ethical, cultural, and strategic imperatives underpinning Open Science practices. The University's approach emphasizes continuity, breadth, and integration with institutional workflows, thereby ensuring that Open Science becomes an embedded feature of research culture rather than a series of ad hoc initiatives.

The training program is designed to span the full research lifecycle, beginning with early-career researchers and extending through doctoral training, postdoctoral mentoring, and professional development for administrative staff. Regular seminars and workshops are organized throughout the academic year, covering an extensive range of topics, including Open Access models (green, gold, and diamond), Research Data Management (RDM), FAIR data principles, metadata standardization, ORCID adoption, copyright issues, data stewardship responsibilities, responsible research assessment, and the prevention of predatory publishing. Sessions are customized for specific audiences, reflecting the different roles and responsibilities of faculty, PhD students, postdoctoral fellows, and administrative personnel. This tailored approach ensures that the training is directly relevant to participants' professional activities and disciplinary contexts, fostering practical skills that can be immediately applied to ongoing research projects.

A particularly notable component of the University's training framework is its dedicated program for PhD students. Each year, approximately ten PhD candidates participate in a structured combination of group instruction and individual mentoring. The program begins with general workshops which introduce Open Science principles, RDM best practices, the use of the data repository and the preparation of Data Management Plans (DMPs) and become more complex and detailed as the course progresses. Following this structure covering around 10 hours of training, each doctoral student is assigned a data steward who provides one-to-one guidance on the preparation, validation, and iterative refinement of a DMP specific to their research project. The DMPs are carefully reviewed to ensure compliance with FAIR principles and with ethical, legal, and technical requirements some of which, depending on researchers' choices are subsequently archived in the University's Dataverse repository. DMPs are updated annually or whenever significant changes in research design or data collection occur and ultimately form part of the doctoral thesis submission package, thereby embedding Open

Science principles directly into the research lifecycle. This approach not only ensures compliance with institutional policies and European frameworks, but also cultivates a generation of researchers for whom transparency, reproducibility, and FAIR data management are integral to the practice of science.

All training activities are closely integrated with the University's technical infrastructures. Workshops on the institutional repository guide researchers in submission workflows, full-text management, and metadata quality control, emphasizing the importance of standardized, high-quality metadata for discoverability, re-use and impact. Similarly, sessions on Dataverse address practical considerations for FAIR data archiving, replication dataset deposition, and long-term stewardship. Training on Open Access publishing platforms—including both diamond Open Access journals and books—covers peer review processes, editorial workflows, publication ethics, and compliance with European and institutional mandates. By combining theoretical knowledge with hands-on practice, the University ensures that training is immediately applicable and reinforces institutional goals of transparency, accessibility, and reproducibility. As a norm, all training material is shared with participants (with a CC-BY-SA license) to ensure the highest possible circulation of information on open science at UNIMI.

Beyond technical skills, the University's training programme emphasizes the cultural and strategic dimensions of Open Science. Researchers are encouraged to critically evaluate publication options, research metrics, and evaluation criteria, fostering an informed and reflective approach to scholarly communication. Training sessions also serve as venues for community-building, allowing participants to share experiences, discuss challenges, and disseminate best practices. International perspectives are incorporated through engagement with European Open Science initiatives such as OpenAIRE, COARA, and the Barcelona Declaration, enabling participants to situate local practices within broader global and policy frameworks and to appreciate the strategic implications of European mandates for institutional planning.

Monitoring and evaluation are central to the University's training model. Participation in seminars, workshops, and mentoring programmes is systematically recorded, and pre- and post-training surveys assess changes in knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Quantitative indicators, such as the number of participants completing training modules, and usage statistics for the institutional repository and Dataverse, are complemented by qualitative feedback on the perceived relevance and applicability of the training. These metrics inform continuous improvement, enabling trainers to refine content, adjust methodologies, and introduce new modules in response to evolving institutional needs, emerging technologies, and policy changes.

The University also places considerable emphasis on professional development of training staff. Trainers include experienced librarians, data stewards with PhD-level research experience, and specialists in scholarly communication and publishing. Continuous professional development ensures that trainers remain up-to-date with European and international Open Science policies, technical tools, and emerging best practices. Trainers additionally participate in mentoring networks and contribute to peer-to-peer knowledge exchange, reinforcing a culture of shared expertise across departments and career stages. This investment in human resources ensures that the training programme maintains a high standard of quality and is capable of adapting to the rapidly changing scholarly communication landscape.

Over the past two decades, the University's comprehensive training strategy has yielded measurable impacts. Awareness and adoption of Open Science practices among researchers have increased significantly, leading to improved metadata quality and completeness in the institutional repository, greater compliance with Open Access and RDM policies, and the consistent integration of FAIR principles into research workflows. The training program has facilitated a culture of transparency, reproducibility, and ethical responsibility, positioning the University of Milan as a national leader and model for other institutions seeking to implement sustainable and community-driven Open Science initiatives.

As part of these positive developments, the University's strategic plan for 2025–2030 explicitly emphasizes the centrality of open science training in fostering cultural change. Future developments include a shift toward more personalized and department-specific training modules, advanced workshops on emerging aspects of Open Science such as machine-readable metadata, open peer review, as well as expanded international collaborations to bring European and global best practices to the University community. By embedding training at the heart of its Open Science strategy, the University of Milan not only equips researchers with the practical skills necessary for compliance and efficiency but also cultivates a deep awareness of how scientific publications and data function in the global academic research system, fostering a cultural shift towards major sustainability, implementation, and long-term maturity of Open Science practices across the institution.

8 CHALLENGES AND DISCUSSION

The University of Milan case highlights several critical challenges associated with implementing Open Science in the absence of strong national coordination. The lack of a national Open Science strategy limits economies of scale, creates duplication of effort, and places a disproportionate burden on individual institutions to develop infrastructures, policies, and professional competences.

Limited interaction with consortial library governance structures further restricts transparency regarding publishing expenditures and constrains opportunities for collective assessment of transformative agreements. This fragmentation complicates the evaluation of cost-effectiveness and reinforces asymmetries in negotiations with commercial publishers.

At the same time, the case demonstrates how institutional governance choices can partially mitigate these structural constraints. The positioning of Open Science within research evaluation and quality assurance structures has facilitated its integration into core institutional processes. This contrasts with models in which Open Science (mainly open access) is framed primarily as a library service, potentially limiting its strategic visibility and organisational impact.

The emphasis on metadata stewardship and the exclusive use of open and internal data sources for research monitoring since 2023 further illustrate the role of open science competences in supporting responsible research assessment. By reducing locally dependence on proprietary databases, the institution has increased transparency and reproducibility in evaluation processes, aligning practice with emerging international recommendations.

Training activities emerge as a critical enabling factor, supporting not only compliance but also cultural change. Continuous, role-specific training helps translate abstract policy principles into everyday research practices, addressing a well-documented gap in Open Science implementation.

Overall, the case suggests that in contexts characterised by weak national coordination, institutional capacity-building in governance, information infrastructures, and professional skills becomes central to the sustainability of Open Science.

9 CONCLUSIONS

This longitudinal case study illustrates how a research-intensive university can develop a coherent and sustainable Open Science ecosystem in the absence of strong national policy support. Key enabling factors include the institutional positioning of Open Science within research evaluation and quality assurance structures, sustained investment in metadata quality and information infrastructures, and a strong emphasis on training and skills development.

The experience of the University of Milan underscores the central role of governance models, information infrastructures, and professional competences in shaping Open Science practices beyond the traditional boundaries of library services. The case contributes to ongoing discussions on institutional responsibility for Open Science and offers insights relevant to similar contexts characterised by fragmented national frameworks.

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