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FAIR-IMPACT project response to “FAIR Assessment Tools: Towards an “Apples to Apples” Comparisons”

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Disclaimer

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Background

At the end of 2022, the FAIR Metrics subgroup of the EOSC Association Task Force on FAIR Metrics and Data Quality published “FAIR Assessment Tools: Towards an “Apples to Apples” Comparisons”¹ which describes some work done and suggestions for future developments in the area of FAIR assessment tools and specifically their harmonisation. The FAIR-IMPACT project appreciates the opportunity to respond to this document to detail our views and intended contributions².

The report describes a series of hackathon events that were organised with the aim to design a common metadata provision approach that could harmonise FAIR assessment tool results. The report covers the rationale and outcomes of these events, and depicts the current status and next steps for this field of developments.

FAIR-IMPACT’s response

FAIR-IMPACT works to realise the goal of implementing standards, tools and services that allow researchers to find, access, reuse and combine results from assessments. One of our overall objectives is to expand FAIRness assessment metrics and tools to cover a broader scope of digital objects (data, software, semantic artefacts) as well as to add community-specificity to the metrics and tools and to harmonise tools with similar purposes. Several of the FAIR-IMPACT project partners involve developers or contributors to FAIR assessment tools, working to further develop and harmonise the tools and their outcomes. The project’s Synchronisation Force³ also works to bring together experts on the topic of FAIR metrics and assessment, to further harmonise upcoming developments. Given these focus areas in our work, we feel it is important to align ourselves with larger views and developments to benefit the community as a whole.

In line with these focus areas and activities, we appreciate the community-driven, bottom-up approach of the Apples to Apples initiative and support the implementation of the collectively identified solutions for harmonisation. The workshops were attended by some of our project members, who have worked to implement the outcomes of the workshops in their tools. We see benefit in the continuation of this approach and would continue to attend if this were organised.

¹ <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7463421>

² Note: Some authors of the original paper are members of the FAIR-IMPACT project. They have not contributed to this response document, not influenced the response given.

³ <https://fair-impact.eu/synchronisation-force>



The report acknowledges, rightfully so, that the harmonisation on which we are focusing should not only be facilitated by assessment tool developers, but also data publishers and the larger EOSC ecosystem. The alignment between assessment tools, trustworthy digital repositories, and registries could be improved, and FAIR-IMPACT will work to develop guidelines and a prototype to show the potential for such improvements. We hope to better connect data FAIRness, repository trustworthiness, and other metadata qualities to aid EOSC Interoperability and broader network developments.

While we agree with the approaches and results of the report, we would like to remark that the background as depicted by the authors does not fully resonate with us. For example, we do not think it is “unfortunate” that the FAIR principles have been interpreted differently by different communities and developers, as the original intent of the principles was always to be minimally defined and open to dynamic discussion and interpretation by communities. The creation of multiple interpretations and implementations of the principles is in our view in line with the expected developments of these principles. There should be a continuous parallel focus on harmonising these different standards, tools, and guidelines, but we do not see that the continuous exploration of independent applications is a demerit to the scientific community. Although the FAIR Principles define a vision, they leave room for interpretation and thus the possibility for a diversity of FAIRness scores returned by different tools or methodologies. FAIRness assessment is by nature the task of going from high-level principles to a concrete and measurable and comparable score. This process removes ambiguities and subtleties that human beings would have in their own interpretation of the principles to replace them by concrete metrics and tests that can be counted or measured. It can thus be expected that this process leads to diverse results. Each FAIRness assessment score should only be taken as the FAIR score according to that specific tool or methodology, not an universally correct one.

Another description of the current landscape that has become more persistent recently is the concern for negative judgements and gamification of “the system” related to the FAIR principles. While we understand the general concern that these scenarios would be detrimental to the scientific ecosystem, we do not currently see any evidence for either of them. The continuous circulation of these potential future issues as if they are a current fact could lead to them gaining more gravity and, through that, increase concerns in a self-fulfilling prophecy. As of the writing of this document, we are not aware of any funder, publisher, or policy-maker implementing a FAIR adherence policy that mentions a specific FAIR assessment score as a requirement, nor a specified punishment when data does not reach a certain score. Many developers of assessment tools have indicated from the start that their scores should be described and interpreted in a transparent manner, and should always occur in parallel with qualitative support. We suggest focusing efforts on repeating and highlighting this fact to let it gain traction instead of potential future misinterpretations.