



**Karolinska  
Institutet**

# **Karolinska Institutet Research Assessment (KIRA) 2025–2026: Expert Panel Report**

**Part one: Overarching Site Visit Report**

# Overarching Site Visit Report

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## Expert Panel Members

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## Executive Summary

This report summarises findings from a structured site visit across 13 departments at Karolinska Institutet (KI) that took place on March 10–11, 2026. The site visit panel members received KIRA self-assessment documents and action plans prepared by each of the departments, and the panel members' site-visit assignments were defined in advance in several virtual meetings with KI leadership and KIRA support staff. The panel's task was to consider these self-assessments and associated action plans, and based on site-visit discussions, suggest possible ways forward for individual departments as well as for KI at the central level.

The report is structured in two parts. Part one, presented here, contains the expert panel's overarching conclusions and recommendations. These are organised into ten thematic sections that synthesise observations across departments and address KI-wide structures, processes, and strategic issues relevant to the long-term development of research at Karolinska Institutet.

Overall, the impression during the site visit was positive. Across departments, the general atmosphere was optimistic, and departmental representatives expressed pride in their work and general confidence in the KI's leadership and direction. KI is growing, and its leadership structure is evolving, reflecting its status as a successful biomedical research and educational organisation with international stature. However, continued development and growth must be accompanied by a sustained commitment to quality, and several structural, strategic, and operational themes require the attention of leadership to ensure long-term excellence and institutional cohesion.

Please note that the panel recognises the inherent constraints of a process of this kind, including limitations in time and information, and that some developments may already be under way. Accordingly, the panel has favoured offering constructive suggestions for further development rather than limiting its observations due to uncertainty. The panel is confident that KI is well placed to determine how this input is best utilised in support of long-term excellence and Institutional cohesion.

## 1. KI Vision and Strategy

Articulation of a coherent scientific and organizational vision at both institutional and departmental levels is a recurring gap identified across the site visit. Departments have divergent and often underdeveloped strategic directions, and there is a need for a cascading framework from KI central leadership that can be used as a template for departmental planning. Suggestions for consideration include:

- 1.1 Form a Scientific Strategy Council:** Establish a group of 6–10 scientific counsellors to develop the institutional vision, which can then cascade to departments. The council might include prominent KI faculty across departments with a particular aptitude for articulating a shared vision for KI at large.
- 1.2 Establish thematic Task Forces:** Model cross-cutting groups on Copenhagen University's approach covering areas such as AI, geopolitics, hospital relationships, and other emerging priorities. Some of these themes could be delegated to the above-mentioned scientific council.
- 1.3 Define a 5- to 10-year scientific vision:** KI central leadership (President and Vice President level leadership) should articulate a thematic framework for a long-term strategic vision and work with Heads of Department (HoDs) to translate it into cohesive departmental strategies.
- 1.4 Require structured departmental plans:** Each department head and dean should develop clear plans, strategies, and tactics aligned with KI's overarching aims. The KIRA exercise is an important step in this process and should be sustained.
- 1.5 Merger logic and governance:** Any anticipated future structural or departmental mergers should be guided by a clear, science-driven rationale that is independent of any fiscal advantages. This requires strong cross-site communication and more direct, continuous dialogue between departments involved and central leadership.

## 2. Salaries, Gender Balance, and Parental Leave

Salary security and gender equity were raised consistently across departments. While it should be noted the issue of gender equity was listed as a specific requirement of the KIRA exercise, current variability in departmental salary underwriting may be creating an undercurrent of unnecessary tension and precarity. With respect to gender equity and support for parents, particularly early-career faculty, might require targeted action.

- 2.1 Standardise salary security:** The current approach to underwriting and salary support varies significantly across departments and attempts should be made to harmonise salary support policies to ensure fairness and reduce inter-departmental tension.
- 2.2 Conduct a gender pay gap review:** Assess whether pay is equal across genders at all career stages.
- 2.3 Track and improve gender representation:** Monitor the proportion of women at PhD, postdoctoral, and faculty levels, and reduce barriers to achieve improvement over time.

**2.4 Address parental leave gaps:** While Sweden offers generous parental leave policies, KI leadership should continue to explore solutions to support faculty, particularly birthing parents, during periods of leave, including facilitating the provision of a senior staff scientist to maintain research group continuity.

### **3. Centralisation of Facilities, Faculty Recruitment, and PhD Programmes**

During the site visit, the joint announcement of six-year assistant professorships was frequently highlighted by department representatives as a successful example of coordinated management at KI. The panel believes there are strong arguments for KI to further explore the centralisation of selected key operational areas. While such centralisation and coordination entail certain challenges, they also offer substantial opportunities, provided that implementation is undertaken with appropriate caution and responsiveness to institutional diversity, legitimate local concerns, and established local capabilities.

- 3.1 Centralise core research facilities:** Establish state-of-the-art core facilities as a central institutional pillar at KI, removing fragmentation across departments. This commitment will involve capital investment and long-term operational planning. Facilities must remain accessible and affordable to the entire community.
- 3.2 Develop coordinated KI-level computational and digital infrastructure:** Establish institution-wide solutions for data, computing capacity, and digital platforms, while accommodating the specific needs of individual departments. For example, the infrastructure needs for high-performance computational structural biology, biomedical computing and genomic/transcriptomic database analysis are quite distinct, as are their specific data-privacy and security standards. The application of artificial intelligence (AI) in biomedical research and clinical care applications should be encouraged.
- 3.3 Centralise PhD programmes:** Run doctoral programmes centrally, possibly with thematic organization, under KI oversight to ensure quality and consistency. A change in the current model will most likely require long-term commitment and broader policy reforms outside of KI.
- 3.4 Standardise faculty recruitment:** Implement central processes with defined rules for search committees, including the inclusion of external members. Where possible provide consistent and predictable central financial planning to allow ongoing faculty recruitment efforts and avoid demographic gaps.
- 3.5 Commission change management support:** Consider engaging a management consulting agency to support the transition to more centralised structures, although the role of consultants in most cases should be to facilitate operational transitions and not in strategic planning.
- 3.6 Improve legal support:** Provide more efficient, pragmatic and service-oriented legal services, including standardised templates for MTAs, DTAs, and RCAs, developed through dialogue between central legal and departments.

#### 4. Careers and Human Resources (HR)

Career progression structures particularly at mid-career level are insufficiently clear and seem to be inconsistently applied, which risks talent loss and demoralisation among promising mid-career faculty.

- 4.1 Support mid-career faculty:** Introduce dedicated career development support for faculty at the consolidator stage, where the current grants and awards landscape create a notable gap. Allocate some institutional support for promising mid-career faculty.
- 4.2 Clarify tenure track pathways:** Develop a more unified, transparent career structure for junior and mid-career faculty, giving clearer long-term professional perspective.
- 4.3 Review professor headcount:** Consider whether KI has the right balance of professors with respect to employees and core funding; fewer, better-supported professors may be preferable to a larger number with diluted resources.
- 4.4 Broaden recognition in research assessment:** KI should continue to develop evaluation practices that recognise a wider range of academic contributions, including open science practices that indicate transparency and reproducibility of research (such as data sharing, open access publishing and pre-prints), as well as contributions to teaching, supervision, and academic leadership.

#### 5. Communication Between KI Leadership and Heads of Department (HoDs)

Given the multiple KI campuses, some HoDs feel disconnected from central KI leadership, which undermines trust and limits the flow of information on shared challenges. Structural improvements to communication should be considered.

- 5.1 Introduce regular 1-to-1 meetings:** The President or Vice President should meet individually with each HoD periodically to maintain direct connection, surface common issues, and ensure HoDs feel visible in a direct reporting line to KI's top leadership.
- 5.2 Facilitate cross-departmental communication:** Create mechanisms for HoDs to connect with each other across campuses without requiring dean intermediation, particularly on shared operational challenges (e.g. GPU/server capacity, AI strategy). These types of interactions were noted in some cases and should be broadly encouraged.
- 5.3 Establish a HoD forum:** Create an HoD forum, held approximately once a year and modelled on Copenhagen University's HoD retreat, with HR facilitation, seminars, and peer learning. Consider a parallel or partially joint forum for administrative leadership (e.g., administrative heads) to support alignment while allowing role-specific development.
- 5.4 Manage change actively:** Change processes create both winners and losers, leadership should draw on industry change management experience to support those most affected, reframing changes around shared benefit: "what is the gain of function for everyone?"

**5.5 Increase leadership visibility:** The President and Vice President should invest in greater visibility and proactive communication across all sites. It should be noted that leadership has used social media to greater effect than in the past.

## 6. Professionalisation of Departmental Leadership

HoDs are in demanding roles that require management skills many have not been trained for specifically. Although some programs are already in place, greater structural and developmental support is needed to enable effective leadership.

- 6.1 Provide leadership training:** Help HoDs develop an identity as institutional managers and leaders, not only as researchers.
- 6.2 Introduce peer mentoring (intervision):** Establish structured peer mentoring or group reflection sessions for HoDs to share challenges and solutions.
- 6.3 Provide dedicated administrative support:** While each department seems to employ a business or financial manager, each HoD should have access to at least 0.5 FTE personal administrative support as a minimum standard.
- 6.4 Develop standardised operational guidelines:** Issue clear guidance on administrative support, scientific director roles, and subdivision structures to reduce inefficiency and inconsistency.
- 6.5 Build cross-departmental coordination networks:** Establish matrix-style networks for sharing best practices across admin, finance, and HR, with links to KI central functions. These networks might be organized thematically based on shared departmental research or educational missions.

## 7. Hospital and KI Relationships

The lack of structural mirroring between KI departments and hospital departments creates friction, though translational research is nonetheless functioning reasonably well. A more deliberate and resourced strategy for KI-hospital network collaboration is recommended.

- 7.1 Strengthen leadership relationships:** The KI President should prioritise building a close working relationship with hospital network leadership.
- 7.2 Explore joint appointments:** Develop a strategy for joint KI-hospital faculty appointments. KI might fund honorary consultant contracts to make the relationship mutually beneficial.
- 7.3 Build philanthropy infrastructure:** Clinical settings offer untapped philanthropic potential (as demonstrated by endowment examples in MED-H and DENTMED). KI should expand the staff and develop the strategy and vision needed to develop private fundraising.
- 7.4 Support pharma-funded clinical trials:** A strategy and framework around industry-sponsored clinical trials could generate meaningful research opportunities and revenue for both KI and hospital partners.

## 8. Algorithm for Distribution of Central Funding

Despite recent reforms, there is a widely shared perception that the current funding distribution algorithm remains somewhat opaque and does not adequately reward all forms of impact.

Ongoing review and reform are recommended.

- 8.1 Increase transparency:** Publish a clear, accessible account of how central funding is distributed across departments.
- 8.2 Broaden the definition of impact:** Although improvement is noted, the current formula might have tipped too far from impact–indexes and citations towards competitive grants (e.g., ERC), which do not fund most clinical research activities, and might disadvantage clinical research departments. Societal impact – including clinical guideline development and government advisory roles – should be considered as well.
- 8.3 Reward teaching contributions:** Teaching load is highly unequal (e.g., NVS delivers approximately 30% of all KI teaching) and should be better reflected in funding allocations.
- 8.4 Review student fee recovery:** Recognise that current fee–recovery policies can create financial challenges for departments with substantial teaching responsibilities. While the broader policy context sits beyond KI’s control, KI may consider ways to mitigate negative impacts on departments and individual investigators, including exploring whether a pro–rata reimbursement model for students who withdraw could be advocated or supported.

## 9. Departmental Scientific Vision and Cross–Departmental Programmes

Many departmental reports show under–developed articulation of a departmental scientific vision. This highlights the need for stronger, more structured processes to support departments in defining their scientific identity, priorities, and long–term direction in alignment with KI’s overarching vision (see Section 1). At the same time, cross–departmental connectivity is being enhanced through existing Strategic Research Programmes, but could be extended.

- 9.1 Strengthen departmental scientific vision:** Departments should be supported and expected to articulate a coherent forward–looking scientific strategy aligned with KI’s overarching aims. Structured processes such as KIRA should be used systematically to support this work, potentially complemented by external Scientific Advisory Boards (SABs) to provide critical reflection, external perspective, and scientific benchmarking.
- 9.2 Sustain Cross–Departmental Research Programmes:** Strategic Research Programmes such as StratNEURO and StratDiabetes/Endocrinology are highly valued for enabling cross–disciplinary connectivity. While long–term funding for these programmes depends on national government decisions, KI should actively support and encourage networking structures and provide complementary and seed funding where feasible to help sustain collaboration.

**9.3 Identify new network opportunities:** Consider whether emerging research areas could benefit from new cross-departmental thematic networks, particularly at the basic science–clinical interface.

## **10. Industry, Innovation, and Knowledge Transfer**

KI has significant untapped potential in industry engagement and innovation, and a clearer institutional position is needed.

**10.1 Develop a basic science–industry strategy:** Clarify KI's approach to relationships with pharma and technology companies, particularly in relation to IP and research collaboration.

**10.2 Support spinouts and startups:** Consider whether KI should take a more active role in supporting the commercialisation of research, including the specific implications of Sweden's professor's privilege framework. The faculty IP privilege is both an advantage and a disadvantage, and a coordinated leadership effort is needed in this area.

## **Concluding Remarks**

The Expert Review Panel wishes to record its appreciation for the openness and constructive spirit in which this site visit was conducted. Staff and leadership across all 13 departments engaged in open, high-quality dialogue, which reflects well on KI as an institution. The panel leaves the visit with a clear sense that KI has the scientific talent, the international standing, and the appropriate leadership to address the challenges identified in this report.

Taken together, the ten themes in this report point to a consistent underlying need: greater coherence. While KI is a large and complex institution, its core missions are biomedical research, translational research and education, and it does not have the added complexities of more typical research university structures. As such, KI requires a coherent and more consistently communicated institutional vision, more standardised operational structures, and stronger channels of communication between central leadership and departments. None of these are insurmountable challenges, but they require deliberate, sustained focus from the President and members of the KI leadership team.