

A framework for research ethics committees



John Oates



Annual Conference 2017



Survey of ethics review practices in UK universities Funded by the Nuffield Foundation

115 universities contacted, 78 (68%) completed questionnaire

28% had recently been, or were currently, establishing RECs

57 (50%) had established systems

There was great variety in structures, methods and scope

Two main models dominated:

central single REC and devolved review

“universities should have a common set of principles and standards of ethical review for research”



AREC Spring Conference March 2008

Human Rights, Dignity and Ethics

AREC University Sector Sub-Committee Workshop: Governance and Structures:

“.... the university REC sector has no uniform approach to the quality of decision making. Each university takes responsibility for its own system and issues of competence and credibility are beginning to emerge across the sector as the various disparate systems begin to mature, i.e. the initial rush to “set up something” has tended to be replaced by a period of reflection and evaluation. Professor Anthea Tinker summarised the findings of her national survey of University RECs which showed a very disquieting picture of the position in 2004”

Proposed UREC principles:

Independence

Competence

Transparency

Facilitation

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Transparency – the REC should have open documentation about processes and procedures and be accountable to the community for its decisions open; audit and review.

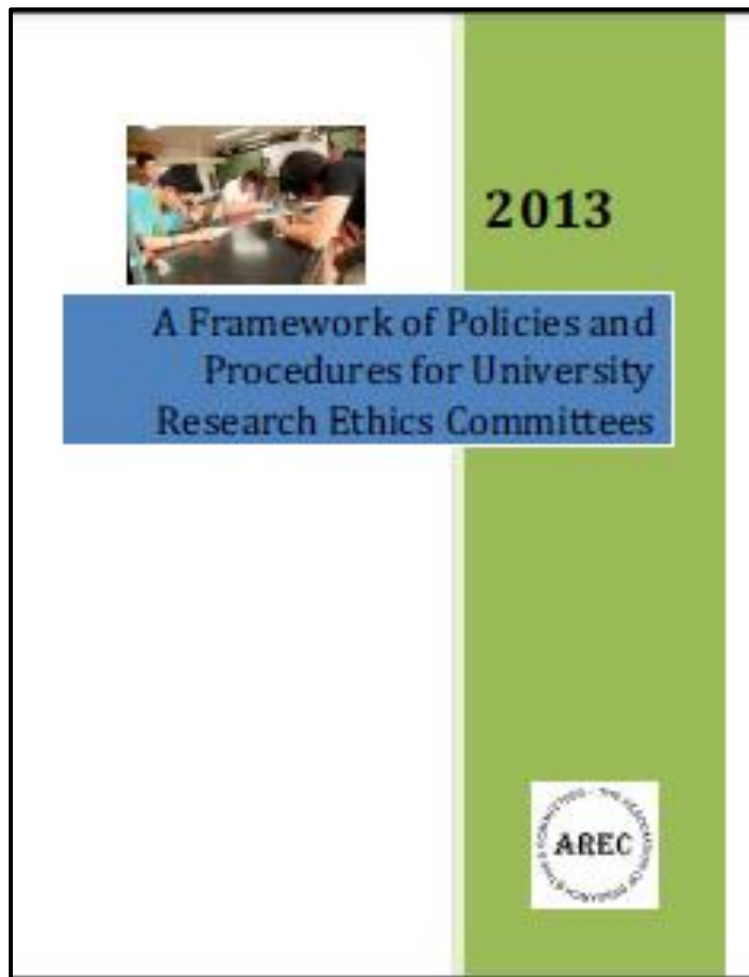
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Transparency – the REC should have open documentation about processes and procedures and be accountable to the community for its decisions open; audit and review.

Facilitation - dissemination and education role; support and advice service; website with FAQs etc; responsive mode; encourage ownership of ethical judgement by researchers – i.e. the REC should communicate readily and operate on the basis of helping the research community.



AREC Working party

David Anderson-Ford *Brunel University*

Timothy Stibbs *University of Manchester*

John Oates *The Open University*

Lorna Carter *University of Oxford*

Gella Richards *Roehampton University*

Bridget Egan *Winchester University*

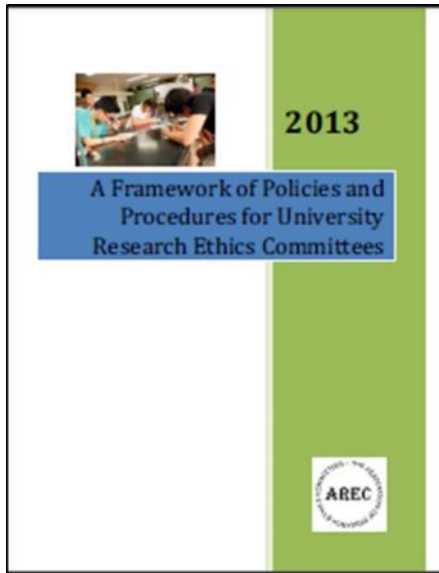
Editorial

Birgit Whitman *University of Bristol*

Andrew Rawnsley *Teesside University*

John Oates *The Open University*

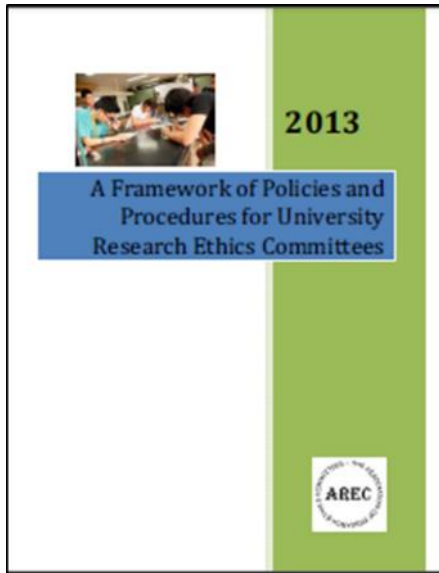
Bridget Egan *Winchester University*



INDEPENDENCE

Ensuring that conflicts of interest specific to universities are mitigated by sufficient external or impartial scrutiny and/or involvement.

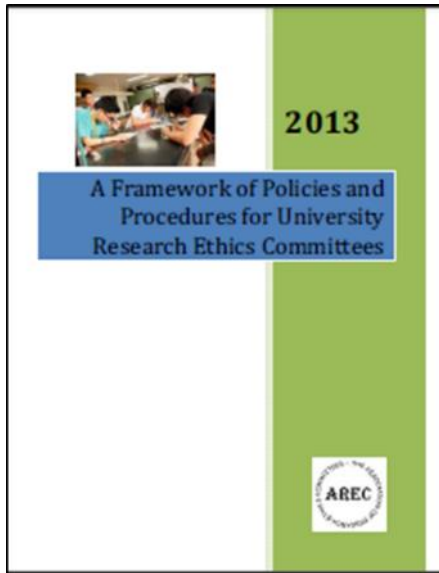
Demonstrating independence is one of the major challenges for URECs, as the traditional defence that 'academic freedom' is itself a guarantee of independence is not necessarily going to withstand public scrutiny



COMPETENCE

Ensuring that membership of committees is informed by relevant expertise and decision making is consistent and coherent.

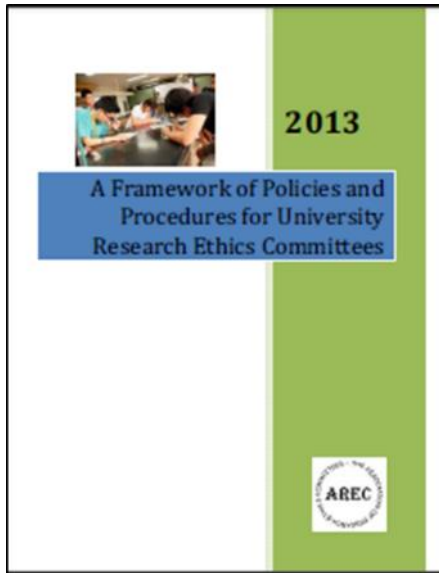
Judging whether universities achieve good competency standards for their RECs is not simple.



FACILITATION

Ensuring that procedures are administered efficiently and effectively, balancing duties of care with enabling and support of ethical research

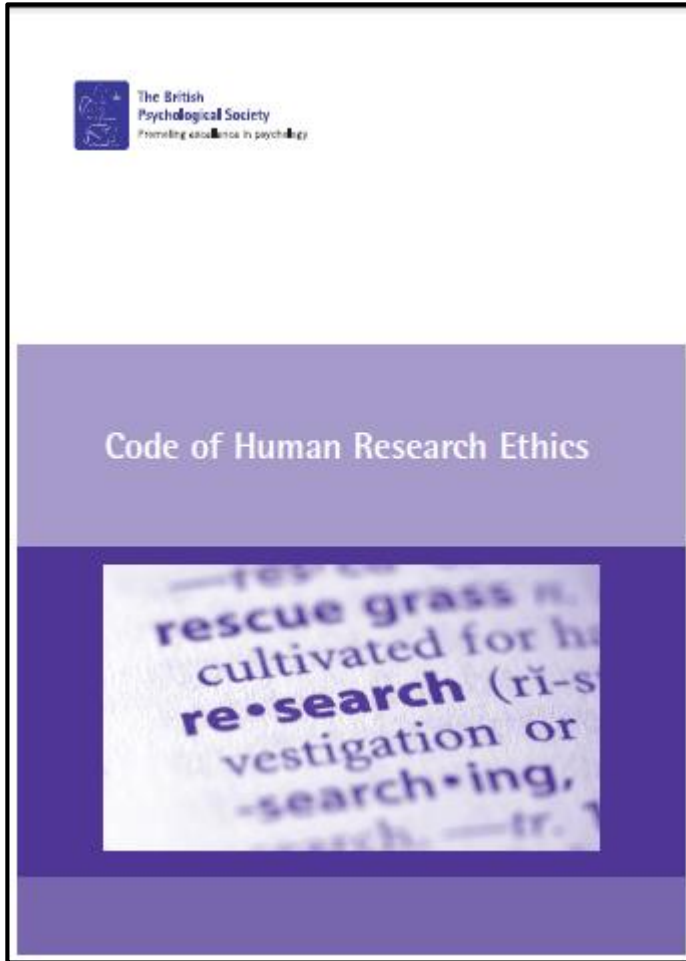
While the primary responsibility of URECs is to protect the interests and welfare of those who participate in or are otherwise potentially affected by research, they are also an integral part of universities and have an additional role in facilitating good research. It is the experience of most URECs that they have to balance the two responsibilities. For instance, there is evidence of researchers complaining that RECs are irksome barriers.



OPENNESS

Ensuring that decisions taken by RECs are open to public scrutiny and responsibilities discharged consistently.

There is public expectation for RECs to be transparent and accountable, and the essential details of all research projects reviewed by NHS RECs, together with those RECs' ethics opinions, are publicly available. The consensus is that universities and researchers should act in co-operation with funding bodies, in deciding what, in the interests of transparency, should be made public, and what, in the interests of the researcher/university, should remain confidential.



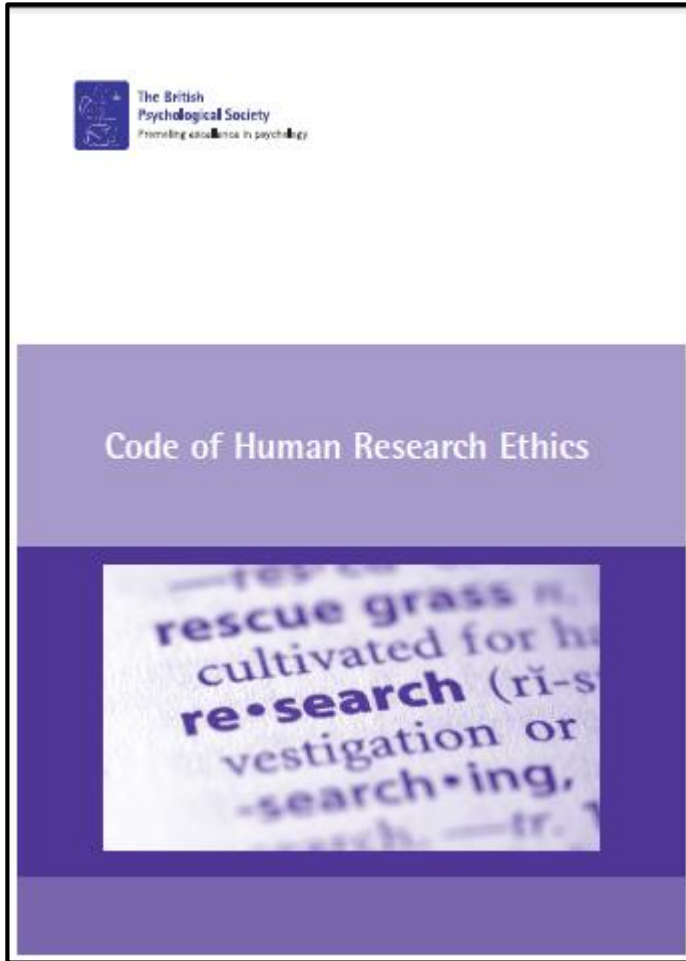
2014

Independence

The ethics review process should be independent of the research itself.

Value statement:

This principle highlights the need to avoid conflicts of interest between researchers and those reviewing the ethics protocol, and between reviewers and organisational governance structures. It is conditioned by the fourth principle, which requires recognition of the responsibility of RECs and the need to formulate this clearly. It also invokes the need for external membership of RECs (eschewing the problematic term 'lay'). It is important to recognise the distinction between the review of research ethics and the subsequent governance of approved research, since independence is a core principle in the review process while different considerations may apply in the ongoing governance of research once approved through an ethics review process.



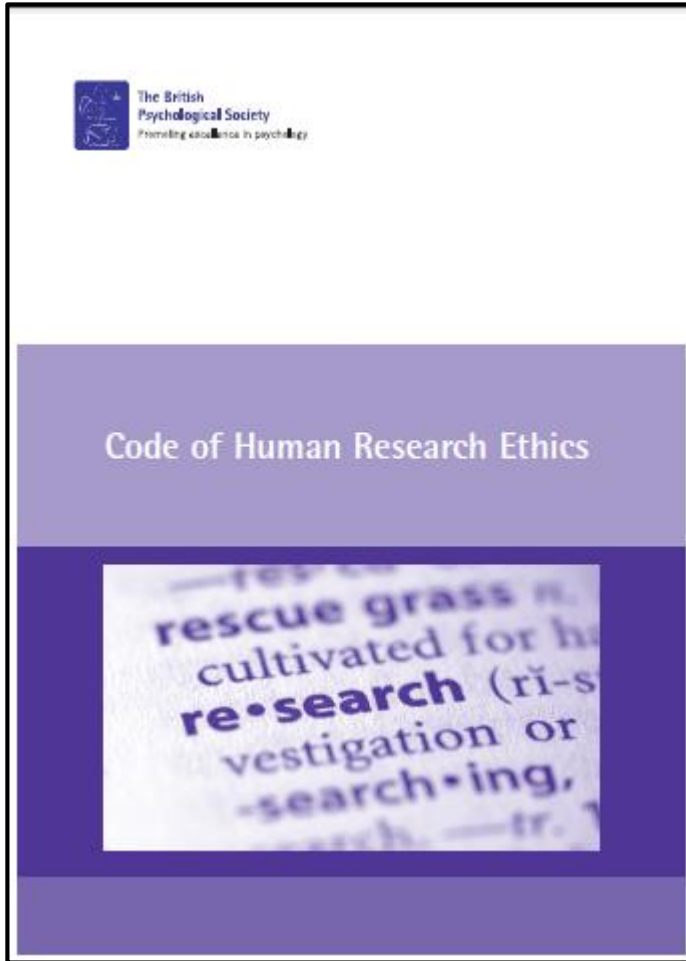
2014

Competence

The ethics review process should be conducted by a competent body.

Value statement:

This second principle addresses the need for research protocols to be properly evaluated by reviewers with appropriate expertise, and highlights the need for careful consideration of the range of membership and ethics specific training of RECs.



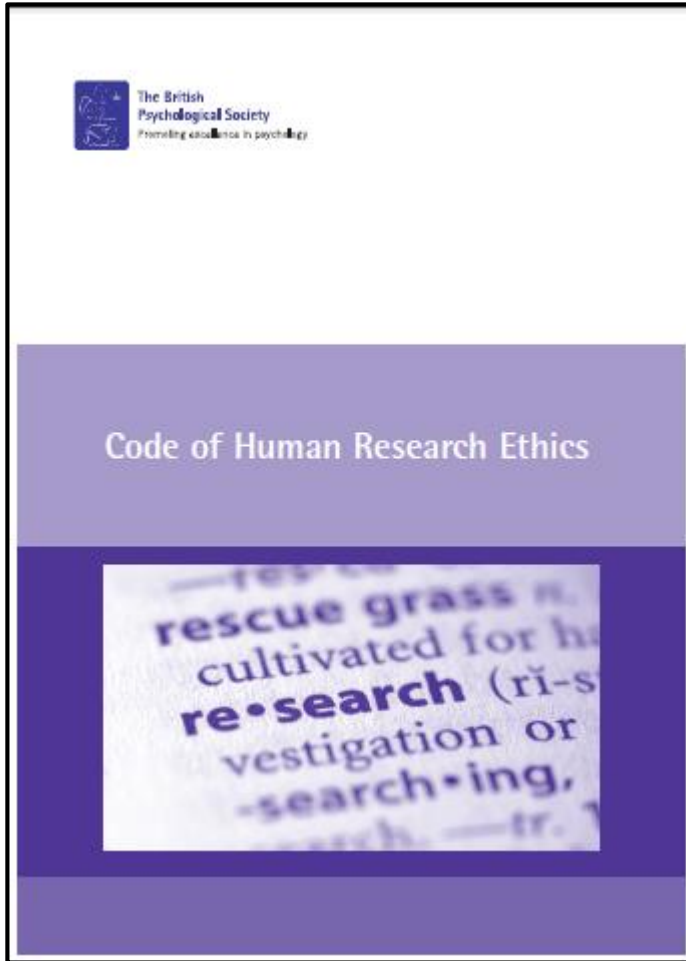
2014

Facilitation

The review process should facilitate the understanding and implementation of ethical practices.

Value statement:

In addition to the core duty of responding to applications for ethics review with constructive responses, this principle invokes a responsibility to educate, inform and support researchers in the development of their research protocols. RECs should be responsive and avoid delaying valuable research.



2014

Transparency and accountability

The review process should be accountable and open to scrutiny.

Value statement:

RECs need to recognise their responsibilities and to be appropriately located within organisational structures that give transparency to the REC operation and procedures to maintain and review standards.

Research should be conducted with integrity and transparency

RECs should ensure that they fulfil their role and responsibilities with integrity and record their decisions and feedback in a transparent way.

Lines of responsibility and accountability should be clearly defined

2016

The remit and responsibilities of the RECs should be clear; RECs should be committed to training and development to enable them to fulfil their role. Where the REC feels that it does not have the expertise to review a proposal, it should seek the help of independent bodies or external members. The REC's performance is subject to review by the research organisation.

The independence of research should be maintained, and where conflicts of interest cannot be avoided they should be made explicit

RECs should be able to conduct ethics review in a wholly independent and impartial manner without any conflicts of interest and with a focus clearly on the ethics of research proposals. Independence can be achieved by a committee composed of members from a wide range of disciplines and includes external members, within a policy and governance structure that establishes the right of the REC to pass opinions free of influence.



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Dr Janet Lewis AcSS

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Professor Martyn Hammersley AcSS, The Open University

Summary of Symposium 1
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SYMPOSIUM 2: VALUES

Responsible to Whom? Obligations to Participants and Society in Social Science Research - 'Stimulus' Paper
Dr Matt Sloat, University of Sheffield

Response (1) to 'Responsible to Whom? Obligations to Participants and Society in Social Science Research' Professor Rosemary Hunter AcSS, University of Kent and Socio-Legal Studies Association

Response (2) to 'Responsible to Whom? Obligations to Participants and Society in Social Science Research'
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Are We Asked to 'Other' Ourselves? Social Scientists and the Research-ethics Review Process
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Dr Nathan Emmerich, Queen's University Belfast

SYMPOSIUM 3: STANDARDS

Developing Standards for Research Practice: Some Issues for Consideration- 'Stimulus' Paper
James Parry, UK Research Integrity Office

Response (1) to 'Developing Standards for Research Practice: Some Issues for Consideration'
Susan V Zimmerman, Executive Director, Secretariat on Responsible Conduct of Research; (Canadian Institutes of Health Research; Natural Sciences and Engineering Council of Canada; Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada)

Summary of Symposium 3
Dr Nathan Emmerich, Queen's University Belfast

Social science is fundamental to a democratic society and should be inclusive of different interests, values, funders, methods and perspectives.

All social science should respect the privacy, autonomy, diversity, values, and dignity of individuals, groups and communities.

All social science should be conducted with integrity throughout, employing the most appropriate methods for the research purpose.

All social scientists should act with regard to their social responsibilities in conducting and disseminating their research.

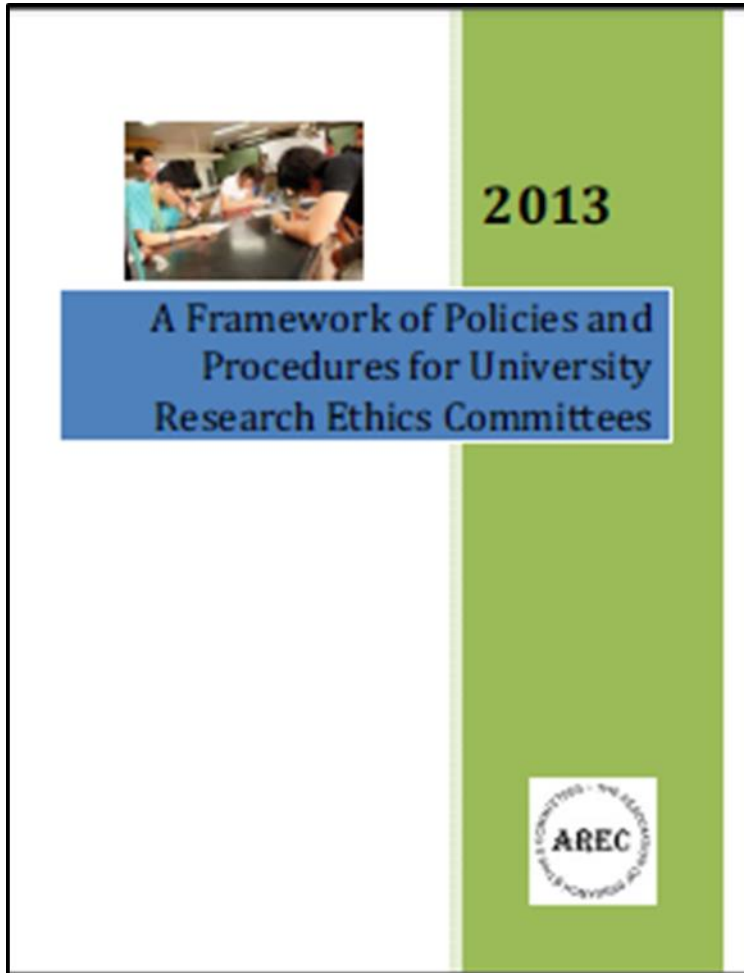
All social science should aim to maximise benefit and minimise harm.



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<https://www.arma.ac.uk/research-ethics/Framework-of-policies-and-procedures.pdf>

Independence

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Demonstrating independence is one of the major challenges for URECs, as the traditional defence that 'academic freedom' is itself a guarantee of independence is not necessarily going to withstand public scrutiny.

Competence

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Judging whether universities achieve good competency standards for their RECs is not simple. There are several issues that need to be addressed by any institution seeking to uphold this principle.

Facilitation

Ensuring that procedures are administered efficiently and effectively, balancing duties of care with enabling and support of ethical research

While the primary responsibility of URECs is to protect the interests and welfare of those who participate in or are otherwise potentially affected by research, they are also an integral part of universities and have an additional role in facilitating good research. It is the experience of most URECs that they have to balance the two responsibilities. For instance, there is evidence of researchers complaining that RECs are irksome barriers

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Thank you

john.oates@open.ac.uk