

# Topic: Research Ethics

October 2023

## When: Wednesday 11/10/23, 10-11 AM

During the round table, the participants discussed the challenges and potential improvements in the ethics review process. The focus was to address the following questions:

1. How can institutions be convinced that robust ethics review requires time and resources?
2. How can time/ space for an ethics review be created?
3. How to make research ethics training and guidance more meaningful and useful?

This article summarises the key themes and discussion points along with resources that were shared in the chat.

### How can institutions be convinced that robust ethics review requires time and resources?

It was thought that institutions don't need to be convinced of this, as they are aware of the reputational risk of not completing robust ethics reviews. However, the community needs to be convinced that it adds something meaningful to the research and the researchers, especially not just those receiving the review.

It was noted that incentives and recognition are important for those who are research ethics committee (REC) members and chairs especially due to the time burden involved. Additionally, it was noted that it takes time to develop skills and knowledge to complete a thorough ethics review. Tensions can form when

researchers feel it is yet another task that they must do in their spare time and that it isn't appreciated by others. There was some mention of barriers between researchers and ethics committees. Ethical research is a consequence of researchers and RECs working together. It's really important that RECs start from a position of trusting researchers.

### Key points and information from the chat:

Messaging about ethics committees should be linked to the purposes of the organisation and demonstrate how they protect the institution, participants, and researchers.

Clear ethics frameworks and policies are needed at institutions, including guidelines on accepting funding from certain sources. An example was shared:

- Diligence Framework for External University Activity at Newcastle, draws upon their institutional values. Different activities use different measures to assess those partnerships. They all use the same processes to identify potential risks, and share information across the institution. [Due Diligence Framework for External University Activity.pdf \(ncl.ac.uk\)](#).

### How can time/ space for an ethics review be created?

The need for adequate time and resources for ethics review was discussed. The challenges of balancing ethics review with other responsibilities and workload pressure were highlighted. Institutions recognise the importance of ethics review but to demonstrate this they should allocate sufficient time and resources for researchers, ethics committee members, and support staff to effectively carry out their roles. This includes considering the workload allocation (see example from chat below), expanding the number of committee members, and providing support for administrative tasks.

The importance of shifting the focus of ethics committees from regulatory and legal compliance to ethics was discussed and noted that this can reduce the burden on the REC members. Discussions highlighted that ethics committees play a crucial role in safeguarding the rights and well-being of research participants.

It was noted that 'ethics' is about things that need to be discussed and governance/compliance are things that can just be ticked off. This is important because there may be governance issues that need to be talked about first that may raise ethical questions e.g., how much to pay a participant or the wording around how radiation risk is expressed to participants. Once they have been talked about and agreed upon then a policy can be written and referred to and this then becomes a governance question and no longer an ethics issue. This in turn can reduce the burden further on committees. Therefore, it can be useful for the ethics committee to discuss and feedback on some overlapping governance issues to prevent risk-related statements from being overly technical and inaccessible to participants.

Therefore, there is a need for ongoing evaluation and improvement of the ethics review process to address any issues or concerns. It is important to involve all stakeholders in discussions and make necessary changes to ensure the process is effective, efficient, and meaningful. By evaluating the process there may be further scope for, governance teams, where available, to take on additional compliance checks e.g. participant information sheets to allow the REC to focus on how well the information sheet is doing its core purpose of providing relevant and comprehensive information to support informed consent. For example, its role should be to look at an information sheet and ask if it indicates respect, compassion, and empathy for a participant.

### Key points and information from the chat:

- Technology, such as Moodle, can streamline the administrative aspects of ethics review. It was mentioned to be inexpensive compared to other commercially available systems and can work well for record keeping.
- An Ethics Committee shouldn't be doing typographical and grammatical checks.
- Applications should be filtered to receive a proportionate level of ethics review. Triageing projects into different risk categories can be helpful.
- Triage - three levels of review, for example from the University of Portsmouth.
  - Undergrads and taught Masters reviewed at school, level as the purpose is pedagogic.
  - "Low" risk staff/post-grad research can self-certify, everything else is looked at by the faculty committees.
  - "High" risk: Includes human participants (taking tests, being observed, answering questionnaires, taking part in interviews/focus groups etc.); Gathers or uses personal/confidential information about human participants; Include "Relevant material" as defined by the Human Tissue Act 2004; Include animals (and you do not already have permission from the University's AWERB committee to proceed); Has an environmental impact; Impacts cultural heritage (excavation, destructive sampling, samples obtained from other nations etc.); Require review from an external committee (NHS, MODREC, PHE/UKHSA, HMPPS etc.); Has health and safety concerns that cannot be met by normal risk assessment; Has any security concerns including to foreign (non-UK) nations.
- Number of hours in workload allocation =  $(H \times Q \times R)/N$   
 where:  
**H** = 1.5 hours as the average time taken for an ethics review  
**Q** = 3 reviewers required to give a quorate review

**R** = number of reviews that the faculty ethics committee conducts per calendar year

**N** = number of members on the faculty ethics committee

## How to make research ethics training and guidance more meaningful and useful?

It was highlighted that there is a need for clear communication and training on research ethics. The importance of training sessions and discussions to raise awareness and understanding of research ethics among researchers, especially early career researchers was raised. By providing meaningful and useful training, researchers can better navigate the ethics review process and understand the ethical implications of their research.

### Key points:

- Open and robust discussions in ethics training are important, and formal debates could be used to address differing viewpoints. An example was given where a trainee strongly opposed the ethics review process, and this gave rise to an exciting and memorable learning experience for all trainees.
- Ethics review is complex and requires nuanced discussions.
- Offering training not only to REC members and chairs but also to researchers and governance staff to ensure they all receive the same message.
- To promote the benefits of ethics review to early career researchers to help remove barriers between researchers and ethics committee and consider the concept of trust, compliance and reputational risk which can be linked to misconduct and the ethos of the institution.
- There were concerns about researchers not engaging with the ethics process, especially with university-funded research that can slip below the radar. This is a real concern and was thought to be a major challenge.

### Shared content:

The role of ethics: <https://doi.org/10.1080/08989621.2023.2239712>



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