A Survey of the Role, Remit and Conduct of University Research Ethics Committees in the UK

Abstract

The ethical review of research is important to all research activities in higher education institutions (HEIs). This paper reports the findings of a research project undertaken to examine how different HEIs manage the ethical review of research. This project follows up on the earlier work of Tinkler and Coomber (2004) who examined the role, remit and conduct of University Research Ethics Committees (URECs). Anonymous questionnaires were sent to 137 HEIs in the UK with 46 responses (33.6%). The data was analysed descriptively using SPSS. There are numerous commonalities between HEIs but also many variances. A number of recommendations are offered.

Keywords

research ethics, research ethics committees (RECs), university research ethics committees (URECs), ethical review

Shirley Jones (shirley.jones@anglia.ac.uk), Dr Leslie Gelling (leslie.gelling@anglia.ac.uk)
Faculty of Health, Social Care and Education
Introduction
Research is at the very centre of what universities do. They undertake research to expand existing knowledge, provide training for future researchers and embed research in all teaching and learning activities. Anglia Ruskin University’s Research and Scholarship Strategy 2008-2013 and the Faculty of Health and Social Care’s Scholarship and Research Strategy 2009-2014 both make it clear that research is a core requirement for all academic staff. A key part of all research is an examination of the ethical implications and it has now been established that all research involving human participants should undergo ethical review before the research can commence.

In nursing, medicine and the allied health professions the ethical review of research has been well established for some time and a rigorous ethical review process has been in place in the National Health Service (NHS) since the 1980s. This is now co-ordinated by the National Research Ethics Service (NRES), which is part of the NHS’ Health Research Authority (HRA). Universities, however, have been slower to adopt the same rigorous approach to the ethical review of research. It is only in the last decade that universities have established formal research ethics committees, commonly known as University Research Ethics Committees (URECs) but also using a multitude of other titles. Unlike the ethical review of research undertaken in health and social care, where there is a single application form and a standardised application process, universities each have their own unique procedures and ways of working.

In 2004, Tinkler and Coomber published a report on the role, remit and conduct of URECs in the UK (Tinker and Coomber, 2004; Tinker and Coomber, 2005). A questionnaire was sent to 115 universities with 87 responding. Subsequently they also undertook telephone interviews with 30 of the respondents. They found that whilst there was a growing recognition of the importance of ethical scrutiny, the level of scrutiny and how it was organised varied widely between universities. Based on their findings, they made 13 recommendations encompassing organisational models, guidance and support for ethical scrutiny, training for staff, students and REC members, composition of RECs including lay members and regular audit of processes in order to develop best practice. It is far from clear how widely these recommendations were adopted or how the report might have impacted on the role, remit and conduct of URECs across the UK. This project sought to offer some insight into how ethical review of research in universities might have changed.

Aims
The aims of this research project were:

• To map the current state of ethical review of research involving human participants in universities in the UK.
• To identify strategies that might be implemented at Anglia Ruskin to further support the ethical review of research for students and staff.

Methodology
A questionnaire was designed based on the findings and recommendations reported by Tinker and Coomber (2004). The questionnaire comprised 19 questions, including a combination of fixed response and open questions. In addition to seeking demographic information, the questionnaire invited respondents to provide information about how ethical review was organised and managed in their institutions. The questionnaire ended with an open question inviting respondents to comment more generally about the ethical review of research. Hard copies of the questionnaire were posted to 137 Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in the UK. Where they could be identified on the institution’s websites, the questionnaire was sent directly to an individual with responsibility for research, or the ethical review of research, in that institution. It was hoped that this would encourage a greater number of responses. All questionnaires were anonymous to encourage honest and frank responses.

Research ethics approval was obtained from the Faculty Research Ethics Panel (FREP) in the Faculty of Health, Social Care and Education (FHSCE) at Anglia Ruskin. All potential participants were provided with a brief covering letter, a participant information sheet, the questionnaire and a pre-paid envelope for the return of the completed questionnaire. Informed consent was implied by the return of the completed questionnaire. Because the questionnaires were completed and returned anonymously, it was not possible...
to send reminders to non-responders. Data were analysed descriptively using SPSS.

Findings and discussion

46 (33.6%) responses were received from 12 regions of the UK (see Figure 1). Unsurprisingly, the region with the most responses was London (n=9, 20.1% of responses), followed by the South East (n=7, 15.2%) and the South West (n=5, 10.9%). Only one response (2.2%) was received from the East of England. Responses were returned from both ‘older traditional’ and newer post-1992 universities.

![Figure 1: Participating HEIs](image)

One of the main criticisms of research ethics committees (RECs), both in the NHS and in universities, has been the time taken to review an application and to inform researchers of the outcome of the review. Participants in this research reported vastly different times for duration of ethical review. Some (n=17, 37%) reported being able to complete a review within two weeks but 11 respondents (23.9%) reported that ethical review could take as long as eight weeks (see Figure 2).

![Figure 2: Time taken for ethical review](image)

One of the reasons for this delay has been that RECs have not met frequently enough to provide an ethical review process that meets the needs of researchers. Participants in this project were asked ‘How often does your REC meet?’ and there was a wide variety of responses (see Figure 3). Eleven (23.9%) URECs met on a monthly basis, but six (13%) met every six weeks, and the majority (n=25, 54.3%) met less often than six-weekly. This could mean that an applicant might be waiting to have their application reviewed for six weeks or more and receiving notification of the outcome might take even longer. For research staff such a delay can cause significant problems, especially if the project is being funded. For students, however, especially undergraduates and masters students, such a delay can make it impossible...
for them to undertake research projects in light of time constraints on submission of course work. Researchers in the NHS faced similar problems but the NRES addressed this by introducing time limits for ethical review; 60 days (but in reality usually much shorter) for most projects and 14 days for those projects deemed to be ethically uncomplicated. Some universities have taken action to speed up ethical review, introducing fast track processes, which could have considerable benefits to staff and might make it possible for more undergraduate and masters students to engage in meaningful research.

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Figure 3: How often does your REC meet?

It is important that there is a balance between a UREC having too few applications to review and having too many to review. If there are too many applications members of the UREC might not have sufficient time to undertake a thorough review of each application but if there are too few applications the UREC might not acquire the necessary experience. Respondents in this project were asked, ‘How many applications do you review at every meeting?’ The majority (n=17, 37%) reported reviewing up to three applications at a meeting. Surprisingly, four respondents (8.7%) reported reviewing in excess of 15 applications at a single meeting. Questions about the quality of the review process should be asked of any UREC considering so many applications in a single sitting.

Allowing a researcher to attend a UREC meeting can have both advantages and disadvantages. On the positive side, having a researcher attend a meeting makes it possible for them to answer questions about the research and to clarify any misunderstandings about what the research will involve. However, having researchers attend meetings also risks conflict, especially in universities where both researchers and the majority of UREC members are academic colleagues. Participants in this research were asked, ‘Do you allow applicants to attend the meeting to speak about their research or to answer questions?’ 21 respondents (45.7%) reported not allowing researchers to attend review meetings and 16 (34.8%) did allow attendance. It would be interesting to explore this further to consider the advantages and disadvantages between the two approaches, and to consider what alternatives might be available.

Considering the ethical issues and applying for ethical approval can be a complex and challenging process. Key to helping researchers through this process is providing training for researchers. Participants in this research were asked, ‘Do you provide training for students and staff?’ 39 respondents (84.8%) reported having training available for students and 40 (87%) respondents reporting having training available to staff. Given the importance of training it is difficult to understand why all the institutions did not have training available. It is also not clear how many applicants took advantage of the training made available to them.

RECs are dependent upon the experience and expertise of the members of the committee. In planning a REC’s workload it is essential that there is a large enough membership to ensure that members are not over-burdened by the work and have sufficient time to undertake thorough reviews. Having a reasonably sized membership also contributes to ensuring reasoned debate and discussion about ethical issues raised by applications. Participants in this research were asked how many members were in their REC. Two RECs (4.3%) had up to five members, which would not seem to be a large enough membership to share the workload or support discussion (see Figure 4). The majority of RECs had between six and 20
members \((n=44, 95.7\%)\) but one REC (2.2\%) reported having more than 20 members, which might make it difficult to manage a REC’s workload.

![Graph showing membership distribution of RECs.](image)

**Figure 4: How many members does your REC have?**

Like many committees, much of the work of a REC is undertaken and co-ordinated by someone providing administrative support. This role is important because RECs and the ethical review process generate a considerable volume of documentation, although this is increasingly being managed electronically. Participants in this research were asked what level of administrative support was available to their REC.

There were contrasting approaches to the provision of administrative support with 13 respondents (28.3\%) reporting having up to 20\% full time equivalent (FTE) support, with a further 13 REC (28.3\%) having between 21\% and 60\% FTE support. In contrast, a further 13 respondents (28.3\%) reported having 100\% FTE administrative support. Given the importance of administrative support to the effective co-ordination of REC functions, it is surprising that some RECs function with significantly less administrative support than others.

![Pie chart showing administrative support levels.](image)

**Figure 5: Does your UREC meet the needs of your applicants?**

Respondents were also invited to indicate how well they thought their UREC met the needs of their research community (see Figure 5). 37 respondents (80.4\%) reported that they were meeting the needs of their researchers but, more worryingly, five respondents (10.9\%) reporting not meeting these needs. Sharing best practice could help URECs better meet the needs of their local research community; both staff researchers and student researchers.

**Recommendations**

This research suggests that many of the problems reported by Tinker and Coomber (2004) are still prevalent now. The following recommendations are offered, with some commentary on the current
The situation at Anglia Ruskin University:

- The workload of URECs has grown in recent years as HEIs have increasingly recognised the need to make the ethical review of research a central part of their research activities. To function effectively, the UREC should have appropriate administrative support. At Anglia Ruskin University there is administrative support available but there needs to be some consideration of whether the current level of support is sufficient to ensure that Faculty Research Ethics Panels (FREPs) are able to undertake appropriate auditing of research projects.

- Many of the problems encountered in reviewing applications are the result of poorly prepared applications. Research ethics training should be made available to all staff and students. At Anglia Ruskin University there is a comprehensive programme of training in research ethics but, despite being mandatory for some supervisors, the take up of this training is not always as good as it should be. Some consideration should be given to ensuring that supervisors attend the available training and the training should be made as accessible as possible.

- URECs should continually evaluate and develop their ways of working to meet the changing needs of researchers. At Anglia Ruskin University Fast Track Ethical Review (FTER) and Departmental Research Ethics Panels (DREPs) have recently been introduced and will give researchers multiple review options to meet the needs of their research. The Research Ethics Sub-committee (RESC) and FREPs should continually be considering how they might further support researchers and research students.

- There needs to be further research to explore the potential of standard processes for ethical review in HEIs, similar to the standard process used for ethical review in the NHS.

Conclusion

The ethical review of research is essential to ensuring research integrity wherever research happens and HEIs are focusing greater efforts on ethical review of research than ever before. This paper has summarised the key findings of a project undertaken to examine the ethical review of research across HEIs in the UK. There are considerable commonalities of purpose across URECs but also much diversity in processes and ways of working.

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References
