



**ONE SIZE DOES NOT FIT ALL:
ORGANIZATIONAL DIVERSITY IN NEW ZEALAND
TERTIARY SECTOR ETHICS COMMITTEES**

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INTRODUCTION

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Seeks to 'get inside' what has often seemed to be the inaccessible worlds of research ethics committees at tertiary institutions in New Zealand

There has been little public debate about the appropriate roles, practices and procedures for these committees

This in the face of strong critique in the literature about how research ethics committees operate

INTRODUCTION

Five of the six authors are members of five different committees: Massey, Unitec. U. of Canterbury, Waikato, and AUT

Each provides a narrative on how their committees work, and on learning/PD opportunities around ethical issues at their institutions

Safe to say that we were all surprised by the diversity of committees' organizational shapes and operational practices

Note: this project does not measure the effects of different practices or evaluate them directly

Rather, we aim to lay out the differences, and ask: What can be learned about the range of possibilities for committee processes, for access of researchers to committee deliberations, and for learning/PD opportunities?

BACKGROUND

Internationally, ethics committees were initially established to monitor biomedical research where participants might incur harm

Ethics committees have since extended their mandate to embrace the ethics of social science research, even when there is minimal risk of harm to participants (Hoonard, 2001)

Few would argue against the value of independent ethical review for any research project; but a number of strong critiques warrant attention

BACKGROUND

The gradual encroachment of ethics committees into areas of research outside of biomedical concerns – dubbed ‘mission creep’ by critics (Haggerty, 2004; White, 2007) – has raised fears among scholars that academic freedoms are being compromised

Increased surveillance of protocols has raised questions about the policing of appropriate methodologies and suppression of methodological innovation (Ozdemir, 2009)

Also some claim that ethics committee members have become grammarians (Bauer, 2000) interested primarily in pristine paperwork

BACKGROUND

Cases have been reported in which proposed studies have been declined on the basis of poor editorial work (Stark, 2012) rather than a lack of rigour in considering risk of harm to participants

Also committees have been accused of focussing on protecting the reputation of sponsoring institutions, which Iphofen (2009) labels 'research governance'

One danger here is that scholars have begun to seek ways of bypassing or short-circuiting ethical review (Bosk & Devries, 2004; Dingwall, 2008; Gunsalus et al., 2006; Hammersley & Traianou, 2011)

BACKGROUND

Since 1988 in NZ all university and funded health researchers have been mandated to seek ethical review for research projects

At the time, the Ministry of Health ethics committees were guided by an operational standard for health research, yet no equivalent national ethics statement has been produced to guide all University research in NZ (unlike the situation in Canada and Australia)

Academics are justifiably questioning of institutional efforts to temper their autonomy unnecessarily, but little is known – outside of local/individual experiences – about how ethics committees actually work

THE CURRENT PROJECT

This current project seeks to identify strengths of alternative approaches in particular institutional circumstances

It maintains a critical edge centred on improving appropriate access to committee processes and deliberations, and on improving the potential 'educative' (vs. governance) focus of ethics committees

THE CURRENT PROJECT

Some key findings:

- 1) No two committees share even broadly similar organizational structures. Four of the five committees are centralised, but the ways in which they operate differ significantly
- 2) Researchers have a variable range of access to advice and consultation, and they tend not to use the optional provisions that exist
- 3) All five committees are involved in facilitating (varying) learning opportunities within committees and/or in exchanges with others

Now some specifics on each of the above from the five narratives

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

AUT: Centralised committee with membership that includes one representative from each Faculty. The Faculty representative advises applicants, and explains the committee's decisions where necessary. In committee there is one primary presenter of applications; all committee members read all applications.

U. of Canterbury: Centralised committee which 'meets' via e-mail only. With the help of the committee secretary, the Chair collates a response to applicants derived from at least two-thirds of committee members, and also reviews/approves amended applications.

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

Unitec: Centralised committee; applications assigned to one primary and two secondary readers (higher-risk). No expectation that committee members will read other applications. Primary reader liaises with applicants and has the power to approve amended applications that have been brought to committee.

Massey: Centralised committee in which all committee members read all applications. Decisions are made by consensus (often alongside applicants) in committee.

Waikato: Devolved Faculty/School committees (nine) which determine their own membership and have various protocols around readership. In the Education committee, one designated member liaises with the applicant or supervisor.

RESEARCHER ACCESS TO ADVICE AND CONSULTATION

AUT: Applicants are encouraged to liaise with their Faculty representative prior to submitting their application (electronically, by phone, or in person). Where this occurs a more informed debate within committee often results. Post-committee meetings, Faculty reps may assist applicants to amend applications as well.

U. Canterbury (email committee): Fields numerous pre-application inquiries via e-mail, phone, or face-to-face (10-15 of these per week). There is an impression that an increased efficiency from these inquiries has enhanced researcher experiences of committee accessibility.

RESEARCHER ACCESS TO ADVICE AND CONSULTATION

Unitec: Before the committee meetings, the primary reader provides preliminary feedback to applicants (from three readers, most often via e-mail), usually allowing time for applicants' responses and amendments to be taken into account as part of committee deliberations. Researchers may attend meetings but very rarely do so. Primary readers liaise with applicants post-meeting to resolve any sticking points.

Massey: Unusual, in encouraging applicants (with supervisors, if applicable) to attend meetings and speak to their applications. Pre-meeting, the Chair can assist applicants with submissions.

RESEARCHER ACCESS TO ADVICE AND CONSULTATION

Waikato: Like the situation at Unitec, applicants (with supervisors as applicable) are able to attend meetings but rarely do so. As stated earlier, communications occur with the applicant or supervisor via one committee representative. Pre-meeting consultation is possible through this channel; post-meeting, supervisors hear of committee decisions prior to a letter being sent to a student applicant. Reported goal: committee as a group of consultants for the applicant.

LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

AUT: Faculty representatives organize outreach presentations and guest lectures. They represent a 'faculty' perspective in debates about applications, and also represent the committee within the faculty. On this centralised committee there is a rich diversity of methodological perspectives (all cttee members read all applications).

U. Canterbury: Impression of a renewed commitment to the ethics review process due to numerous pre-meeting consultations (initiated by applicants) and also a rolling deadline for applications. Business as usual in the wake of 2010-2011 earthquakes.

LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

Unitec: On occasion, post-meeting, primary reader liaison with applicants to resolve sticking points results in extensive phone or in-person consultations. At times presentations to departments can follow (when sticking points become patterned), and at times the role and scope of the ethics committee is clarified and modified (action research e.g.: PD presentation to UREC, and new protocols).

Massey: Centralised committee that encourages applicant and supervisor attendance. The process of 'wrestling' with applications can entail a lengthy and often time-consuming process of debate, and modifications of individuals' positions. Open to the public (never happens, but represents an additional potential line of transparency).

LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

Waikato: Devolved system (9), but there is also one central cttee which reviews a few outlying applications but is primarily an advisory cttee to the Vice-Chancellor: responsible for the promotion, review and monitoring of ethical practice in human research. Facilitates a series of University-wide ethics conversations to support development for ethics cttee members as well as U. Waikato staff (topics have included ethics for research using digital technologies; academic freedom; Māori research ethics; reporting of sensitive disclosures from research participants).

DISCUSSION

Although all these ethics cttees were established in the wake of the Cartwright inquiry (Cartwright, 1988) their formats and operating procedures are heterogeneous

The narratives of committee organization point to a number of issues that take variable shapes, including:

- the process of feedback and applicants' access to advice
- the degree of applicant engagement in cttee decision-making
- the ease and efficiency of the process
- the role of lead reviewers

DISCUSSION

- the question of whether all committee members read all applications
- trade-offs between electronic and face to face processes
- the extent and nature of cross-disciplinary debate, and
- provisions made to accommodate and resolve different ethical concerns and interpretations

DISCUSSION

Our narratives do not allow us to comment on the effectiveness of any particular processes or procedures. But the diversity of practice is in itself worthy of consideration, both as an empirical observation and as a field of contest

There is variability of access and transparency. Overall, greater transparency might be achieved for many, if not most committees. This might lead to changes in practice and/or a better uptake of access (e.g. attending meetings at Unitec or Waikato, where this provision is allowed but rarely taken up. Note, could be quite important as these are the only two committees where there is not necessarily an expectation that all/most committee members read all applications)

DISCUSSION

Overall there might be scope for the development of some shared guidelines fit for purpose in a NZ cultural, academic and legislative context

On the other hand, institutions have clearly developed approaches that reflect their own institutional forms and research profiles; this has created variable systems that we believe are locale-appropriate

One key factor shaping the variability is size. Consider the situation for two key institutions not included among the five narratives: Auckland and Otago. Logistically the volume of ethics applications for these institutions would prohibit Massey's open-door approach

DISCUSSION

However, size and workload are not the only factors shaping practices that are locale-specific

Waikato, for example, has deep traditions of both Māori and feminist research and a tradition of devolved practice, arguably reflected in the devolved structure of its ethics committee practices

The flexibility provided by the meeting-less Canterbury process has been validated and reinforced by the effects of the earthquakes

We also note that at Waikato, the devolved model means that the review of ethics applications is likely close to peer review, whereas for more centralised ethics committees insider knowledge is more diffuse

DISCUSSION

At AUT, ethics review is both devolved and diffuse: 'Faculty representatives are typically not assigned applications from within their own Faculty because they may have already provided feedback'

Finally, the five narratives suggest multiple ways that learning opportunities have been facilitated:

- AUT: faculty-level outreach presentations
- Canterbury: extensive pre-meeting consultations

DISCUSSION

- Unitec: presentations to departments and to the cttee in the wake of sticking points
- Massey: open-door processes within committee
- Waikato: a central cttee facilitating University-wide developmental conversations

DISCUSSION

Key conclusion: NZ ethics committees are far from faceless bodies of experts who hand down decisions. Engagement, albeit to various degrees, has been encouraged by the development of institution-specific approaches rather than a one-size-fits-all approach

These narratives also allow for comparisons and improvements

In addition, they could stimulate further research on how various approaches to ethics review and professional development are experienced by researchers, which could foster more concerted debate

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