



Improving the ethics approval process for non-university researchers

By Tricia Cerone and Philippa Smales
18 February 2019

[Part one](#) of this post outlined ways in which non-university affiliated applicants (independent practitioners, consultants, and NGO workers) could navigate ethics approval processes through Human Research Ethics Committees (HRECs) when so required. This post looks at how these processes play out in practice and can affect international development research.

In the process of producing the guide [Ethics requirements for publication of research: a guide for Australian researchers, NGOs, and independent practitioners](#), Research for Development Impact (RDI) Network members provided examples of how international development research has been constrained by rigid HREC application processes. The HREC of a leading Australian university recently refused to process an un-affiliated, external, 'more than low-risk' research application, even when the research was to be carried out by a well-known Australian NGO, was funded by an Australian government department, and when an external peer review board had been established. This piece of research did go ahead, as the peer review board deemed that the research could be carried out ethically, and that despite being high-risk, it was very important.

As per the [National statement on ethical conduct in human research 2007](#), HRECs are within their rights to not process external applications. However, it is disappointing to see quality and considered research being turned away due to an NGOs' un-affiliated status.

There is no denying that there are indeed risks involved when conducting research with vulnerable overseas populations and within high-risk contexts. Consider an evaluation of an education project for girls with intellectual disabilities, or research on health care for victims of rape after natural disasters. However, this does not mean that such research or project evaluations should not be undertaken. In fact, it could be argued that the challenges and risks associated with such work deem the research essential, assuming those risks and challenges are adequately addressed, in order to ensure work is carried out ethically and in the best way possible in the circumstances.

In a second example, recommendations made by an HREC as part of the ethics approval process were inappropriate for the research context and restricted the depth to which the research could be conducted. The HREC responded to a well-known Australian NGO ethics application with requirements that a series of concessions be made in the research process and methodology. If these were implemented, it would have prevented the project from achieving its originally-intended aims and would significantly reduce the value of the research for that project. The NGO went ahead with the research due to its importance as part of the monitoring, evaluation and learning for the project.

Many academic journals and Australian publishers require authors to declare that ethics approval has been received prior to accepting research for publication. As this approval cannot be granted retrospectively, much of the invaluable research conducted by non-university affiliated researchers is not widely shared with academic and university-affiliated researchers. Therefore, rather than building upon and expanding the evidence base, different organisations and academics alike often end up 'reinventing the wheel'.

There are three ways to move beyond these limitations.

Option 1: The capacity of existing HRECs could be expanded. Dialogue between the existing HRECs and NGOs as part of this process could help to create new ways to address ethical concerns specific to the international development field. This could be achieved through the involvement of external international development specialists in the HRECs where required.

Option 2: New HRECs need to be created to assess the needs of independent, non-university affiliated researchers. Keep the current HRECs as they exist for academic and medical research applicants and create new committees for non-university affiliated researchers, made up of committee members who have knowledge of the context in which non-university affiliated researchers work. Committees which assess potential ethical risks in international development, need to have some understanding of the contexts of the countries in which the research is being carried out.

Option 3: More emphasis should be placed on the validity of up-front peer review systems (which are frequently used by non-university affiliated researchers) to ensure that research is done in a sound and ethical manner. Such systems can be equally, if not more, appropriate to assess the risk involved in development research, as potential ethical concerns are evaluated by a panel of experienced internal and external practitioners. Validating these systems within academic publication requirements would ensure that more quality research is able to be shared and disseminated as widely as possible.

Although the first two options are more desirable, they would require either substantive

change by existing HRECs or the creation of new ones. In either case, it would need to be with a fee structure that NGOs and non-university affiliated research bodies could afford. The RDI Network is currently looking into the third option, which seems the most feasible. This involves looking for examples in other countries and sectors, and using that information to develop a guide for ethical peer review groups.

The RDI Network works in partnership with ACFID, if you would like more information on this and other topics on research and international development please visit the RDI Network [website](#). Read part one of this post [here](#).

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Link: <https://devpolicy.org/improving-the-ethics-approval-process-for-non-university-researchers-20190218/>

Date downloaded: 23 April 2024



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