



ARE RESEARCH FUNDING DECISIONS RELATED TO APPLICANTS' ASSESSMENTS OF RESEARCH ETHICS AND INTEGRITY?

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Tellmann – TIK/University of Oslo - WCRI 04.06.2024



The Research Council of Norway (RCN) states on its website that it takes an active role in promoting research ethics and integrity, writing that “All projects funded by the Research Council are required to maintain high ethical standards”



In practice, this means that “All applicants for Research Council funding must clarify any ethical issues related to the implementation of their projects and provide an explanation of how these will be dealt with.” This self-assessment is evaluated by the panel of peers that review the application



The proposition of the current law on research ethics to parliament states that the research council shall take an active role in promoting research ethics

The role of the RCN in promoting ethics & integrity



406 applications for funding to the Research Council of Norway. The project is a collaboration with the RCN



Three thematic areas, six calls



The thematic areas are marine, education and medicine, i.e., high impact research in proximity with practice

Our data



The applicants are encouraged to assess any ethical aspects of their project, and they are prompted to do so in forms and instructions. However, it is not mandatory



Panels are prompted to assess ethical aspects of the project in the evaluation form



3 – 4 overarching criteria, scored from 1 to 7 (excellence, [quality], impact & project management)



Each have multiple sub-criteria, where ethics is a criterion under quality or excellence/quality

Ethics and RCN applications



We wanted to find out to what extent the research council's statements regarding ethics and integrity are followed in practice. How do researchers assess the ethical aspects of their project? And how do panels assess ethics?



We extracted all statements about ethics from the applications and the panel assessment



Subsequently we broke the statements and assessments down into their essential parts



Lastly, we labelled each application and assessment (document analysis & content analysis)

Our approach

After extracting and breaking down the ethics statement we were able to create a framework for sorting and labelling them

1. No information about ethics
2. Statement that ethics is not relevant
3. Compliance: “We will follow the rules and manage data responsibly”
4. Compliance and ethics measure(s): “We are following the rules and doing something” (e.g. stakeholder inclusion or open access)
5. Assessment: Includes ethical self-assessment
6. Aspirational: We are doing something good/ethical

Not a normative framework!

The application labels



Nothing: 79 (4,9)



Something: 327 (4,76)

Writing something
or nothing in
application



No information about ethics – 79 (4,9)



Statement that ethics is not relevant – 7 (5,11)



Compliance: “We will follow the rules and manage data responsibly” - 54 (4,97)



Compliance and ethics measure(s): “We are following the rules and doing something” - 49 (4,72)



Assessment: Includes ethical self-assessment - 148 (4,83)



Aspirational: We are doing something good/ethical - 69 (4,45)

The application labels

- Initially we wanted to sort the panel assessment based on how they assessed the applications (positive, negative and mixed).
- However, after extracting the data we realized that many were cursory. One example: «Ethical issues are addressed»
- We decided to code for whether the panel did a substantive assessment

This gave us the following framework:

1. No comment on ethics
2. Cursory positive (You have written about ethics)
3. Cursory mixed
4. Cursory negative (You should have written more about ethics)
5. Substantive positive
6. Substantive mixed
7. Substantive negative

The panel assessment labels

The assessment labels

	Positive	Mixed	Negative	Sum
Cursory	86 (4,99)	20 (4,6)	27 (4,53)	133
Assessment	12 (5,01)	20 (4,78)	11 (4,52)	43

No comment on ethics: 230 or 56 %

What does it all mean?

We should be careful in drawing conclusions based on the numbers. Panel assessments are notoriously complex and can be arbitrary. Panels are tasked with assessing a long list of factors, so it is not possible to isolate and quantify the effect of the ethical statements in the applications on the assessment

However, the burden of proof when it comes to whether the RCN is handling ethics in line with their own public statements, is on themselves

We have shown that panels mostly offer a cursory comment or ignore ethics. If they assess the ethics of projects, they only put it in writing about 10 % of the time in this sample

We have also shown that some applicants ignore ethics and still get funding, and that in the present sample, those who ignored ethics did better than those who addressed it. Only about half did an actual assessment of ethics



Only the funded projects are important. They are the ones that will be put into practice



A project is either ethical or it is not



The RCN does not need to be an ethical gate keeper that either approves or disapproves. It can assume a supportive function, like in the EU



Researchers can be reluctant to be open about ethical issues. They want to convince the panel, there is no incentive to do an honest self-assessment



It is possible that the causality also goes in the other direction. Panels tend to say that they are either satisfied or dissatisfied with the amount of information, so that is what they get

Our advice to the RCN