

The Nexus between Obligatory Monitoring by Research Ethics Committees and Researcher Integrity at South African Universities

Shaun Schoeman, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa, Research Ethics and Integrity

Eleni Flack-Davison, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa, Research Ethics and Integrity

Non-Medical research has increased over the past decade; especially as South African universities have become more research-intensive. Non-Medical Research Ethics Committees are obligated to monitor research they approve as part of statutory requirements and compliance. Monitoring has often been seen as a tick-box and policing exercise and often not done with careful ethical consideration by researchers. Monitoring holds great potential for improving and aiding in creating a research integrity culture within universities to ultimately produce researchers that are ethical. Through a dedicated monitoring system that is both educational and directed at non-medical nuances, it will change the negative lens on monitoring. This paper emphasises the benefits of leveraging REC monitoring in fostering ethical, transparency, responsibility, and accountability among researchers.

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Regulatory Obligation of Monitoring for Non-Medical Research Ethics Committees / RECs

- Register with the National Health Research Ethics Council / NHREC
- Comply with NHREC DoH 2015 Guidelines and draft NHREC DoH 2024/25 Guidelines
- Responsible to review and approve research studies involving human participants
- Monitor the research it approves (Declaration of Helsinki 2013)
- Rational - Review and approval process may not sufficiently protect humans participating in research studies (Kruger et al., 2014)
- Raises the need for on-going monitoring
- Monitoring is less practiced, due to capacity and funding constraints as opposed to the review and approval function of RECs

Monitoring

- NHREC DoH 2024 draft Guidelines mandate monitoring
- Involves passive and active monitoring by RECs
- Integral part of the ethics process, upholding research integrity
- Monitoring procedures detailed in RECs Standard Operating Procedures (SoP)
- Two forms of monitoring:
 - Passive monitoring: Paper-based, using reports and information
 - Active monitoring: Site visits, investigating serious/adverse events based on research risk
- Addresses complaints and queries, necessitating investigation when raised

Research Integrity and Monitoring

Monitoring is:

- To promote ethical behaviour and prevents ethical breaches and ensures researchers conduct research with integrity.
- to ensure that data collection for approved research projects adheres to approved protocols without deviation (Kruger et al., 2014)
- Fosters a culture of research integrity, safeguarding participants, researchers, and institutions
- Enables and encourages compliance
- Conducted by Research Ethics Committees (RECs) to ensure adherence to

- approved protocols, participant protection, and accurate data reporting
- Essential for ethical data collection and researcher integrity throughout the process
- Monitoring by RECs can help identify and prevent research misconduct and ethical violations (Brown et al., 2013)
- Monitoring serves as a function to foster research integrity within universities (Kombe et al., 2014)

Monitoring Framework

- Shift away from a tick-box approach is crucial
- Potential to cultivate a culture of research integrity in universities, fostering ethically sound research, and trustworthy innovation and reliable policy
- RECs' monitoring can foster transparency, accountability, and responsible conduct among researchers
- Essential to develop a suitable monitoring framework benefiting RECs, universities, researchers, and stakeholders
- Framework encompasses passive and active monitoring tailored to research risk levels, involving researchers from project initiation
- Research Ethics and Integrity training vital for improved understanding and higher-quality ethics applications, ensuring research conducted with integrity
- Mandatory research integrity courses for all university students, embedded in digital platforms
- Advanced ethics courses at postgraduate level, addressing ethical dilemmas
- Passive monitoring includes annual reports, consent material review, and meetings with REC chairs/members.
- Active monitoring involves site visits by REC members or dedicated research integrity offices
- Establishment of an inspectorate, comprising REC and RIO volunteers trained for site visits, inspections, and investigations
- Researchers informed about monitoring post-ethics certification to ensure ethical conduct
- Framework emphasizes researchers' role in the ethics process, promoting ethical behaviour and integrity

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