

# Ethical Governance in Chinese Universities: An Overview of Research Ethics Committees



 **Dr. Dan LI**

Central South University, China; Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Belgium

## OBJECTIVES

This study aims to provide a comprehensive overview of Research Ethics Committees (RECs) in Chinese universities, encompassing both medical and non-medical studies, such as social, psychological, educational, and behavioral research. The primary objective is to identify major challenges faced by existing RECs in Chinese universities and draw meaningful implications from the findings.

## METHOD

This study investigated a group of Chinese universities known as "Double First-Class," comprising 42 comprehensive universities. The information collection process consisted of three steps.

1. Searches were conducted on Baidu, the largest Chinese search engine, as well as Bing, using keywords such as (research/scientific/science and technology/medical/biomedical/academic/human participants/animal/experiment/animal welfare/education/social science) \*(ethics/review/board/committee) \*(university name) to identify relevant university webpages concerning RECs or institutional review boards (IRBs).
2. Then the university websites were visited, and the homepage search engine was utilized to further investigate pertinent information using the aforementioned keywords.
3. The webpages of all faculties and secondary schools within the universities were manually examined to validate and supplement the information obtained in the previous steps.

## RESULTS

- All universities have established their RECs. However, these committees exhibit diverse characteristics in terms of their structure, name, affiliation, and administrative arrangement.
- A standardized format for RECs has not yet been established.
- Among the 42 Double First Class universities, only 28.6% (12 universities) explicitly require ethical reviews for non-medical disciplines. These non-medical RECs are either constituent units operating under the purview of the university-level RECs or autonomous review committees established within schools or departments.
- The foundation of RECs aligns with the two pivotal milestones: the foundation of the National Science and Technology Ethics Committee Formation Plan in 2019, and the issuance of "Opinions on Strengthening the Governance of Science and Technology Ethics" in 2022.

## DISCUSSIONS

### CHALLENGES

**(1) Insufficient attention paid to research ethics review.** There is a lack of government regulatory emphasis. Then, insufficient attention from funding agencies is another concern. Finally, the lack of attention from university management is also evident.

**(2) Inadequate ethics review systems and regulations.** First, there is an absence of comprehensive ethical frameworks and regulatory mechanisms in disciplines other than medical science. Second, there is no registration or certification mechanism for RECs in China. Third, the review process lacks standardized operating procedures (SOPs), resulting in low consistency in review outcomes and an inability to ensure procedural fairness. The fourth issue pertains to the improper composition of REC members, with insufficient representation from non-disciplinary experts such as legal, sociological, and especially ethical professionals, as well as underrepresentation of female and community representatives.

**(3) Inadequate education and training.** There is a lack of a regular ethical training system specifically targeting researchers, REC members and other stakeholders.

**(4) Challenges faced by RECs in non-medical fields.** Existing non-medical RECs in these searched universities are limited to fields which involve human experimental research and quantitative studies, and therefore are not established in other social sciences and humanities.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

Strategies and Recommendations for Establishing RECs in Chinese Universities:

**(1) Strengthening top-level design and implementation.** Drawing on the successful establishment of medical RECs in Chinese medical institutions and leveraging the country's strong governance capabilities, a top-down mechanism that is led by the government, supported by professional associations and implemented by research institutions can be devised.

**(2) Enhancing the research ethics review process in universities.** For instance, it is important to clarify the relationships within university RECs and refine the ethics review processes and documentation requirements.

**(3) Providing ethics education.** It is imperative to extend ethics education to various stakeholders, including REC members, staff, faculty, students, and other administrators.

**(4) Accelerating the development of RECs in non-medical fields.** First, research activities in non-medical disciplines also involve with human participants. Second, from a pragmatic aspect, establishing RECs for non-medical sciences is beneficial for Chinese researchers and their studies. Moreover, the establishment of RECs contributes to the growing awareness of citizens' rights and protection.

**This study does not recommend directly applying a universal model of RECs.** Instead, it emphasizes the importance of drawing lessons from multiple models to drive beneficial reforms. Furthermore, regardless of whether it is medical or non-medical research, ethical review encounters differences in the application of ethical principles due to varying cultural backgrounds.

### REFERENCES

1. An, Q., Lin, X., Sang, Z., & Qian, M. (2023). Practice of common ethical standards in the field of counseling and psychotherapy in mainland China. *Ethics & Behavior*, 33(3), 183-192.
2. Braunschweiler, P., & Goodman, K. W. (2007). The CITI program: An international online resource for education in human subjects' protection and the responsible conduct of research. *Academic Medicine*, 82(9), 861-864.
3. Brown, C., Spiro, J., & Quinton, S. (2020). The role of research ethics committees: Friend or foe in educational research? An exploratory study. *British Educational Research Journal*, 46(4), 747-769.
4. Chattopadhyay, S., & De Vries, R. (2013). Respect for cultural diversity in bioethics is an ethical imperative. *Medicine, Health Care and Philosophy*, 16, 639-645.
5. Sikes, P., & Piper, H. (2010). Ethical research, academic freedom and the role of ethics committees and review procedures in educational research. *International Journal of Research & Method in Education*, 33(3), 205-213.



CLPS CENTRE FOR LOGIC &  
PHILOSOPHY OF SCIENCE  
RESEARCH GROUP

### CONTACT INFORMATION

Dr. Dan LI  
Central South University  
dan.li@csu.edu.cn