

CHANGER

CHALLENGES AND INNOVATIVE CHANGES IN RESEARCH ETHICS REVIEWS

EUROPEAN POLICY BRIEF

Towards a future-proof ethics review in a changing research landscape

January 2026



Policy Brief at a glance

CHALLENGE	POLICY RECOMMENDATION			
	1	2	3	4
<p>1</p> <p>Structural and operational shortcomings in RECs hinder the effectiveness, quality and consistency of ethics reviews</p>	<p>2</p> <p>Lack of capacities to engage with the full range of ethical and societal implications posed by contemporary research</p>	<p>3</p> <p>Lack of systematic peer learning and knowledge exchange hinder consistency and quality in ethics reviews across countries</p>	<p>4</p> <p>The “ex ante” ethics review occurs prior to the start and after the design of research, as an one-time, paper-based assessment</p>	
	<p>Enhance interdisciplinarity and engagement in RECs</p> <p>Strengthen interdisciplinary in RECs Incentivise REC member service and engagement via career development</p> <p>Short term</p> <p>MS, RPOs and HEIs</p> <p>Strengthened ethical oversight Attraction of qualified ethics professionals in RECs</p>	<p>Systematic capacity assessment and capacity building in RECs and researchers</p> <p>Systematically self-assess REC efficiency Systematic training</p> <p>Short/medium term</p> <p>Funders, MS, RPOs and HEIs</p> <p>Monitoring ethics review efficiency and consistency Capacity building to address emerging ethical challenges</p>	<p>Knowledge exchange and peer learning among RECs and researchers</p> <p>Create spaces and structures for knowledge sharing, and peer exchange</p> <p>Medium term</p> <p>EU, MS, RPOs and HEIs</p> <p>Cultivation of a common culture of rigorous ethics reviews</p>	<p>Shift towards a supportive ethics review infrastructure</p> <p>Promote a supportive role for existing ethics expertise in institutions</p> <p>Medium term</p> <p>Funders, RPOs and HEIs</p> <p>Reflexivity and ongoing responsiveness to emerging challenges Improved research quality</p>
	HOW	WHO	WHEN	TARGET

RECs: Research Ethics Committees; MS: Member States; RPOs: Research Performing Organisations; HEIs: Higher Educations Institutes;

WHY IS RESEARCH ETHICS REVIEW IMPORTANT FOR POLICY?

Trust in science, technology and innovation, as well as social robustness of their innovative outcomes are dependent on the ethical qualities of research. For this reason, research projects go through ethical review by Research Ethics Committees (RECs). RECs conduct ethics reviews at different levels and types of research, aiming to ensure adherence to ethics standards. They act as “intermediary institutions” between science and society, contributing to societal trust in research and innovation. Novel and disrupting technologies pose new challenges for research ethics and human rights, while changing research landscapes –including transdisciplinary research– challenge established ethics infrastructure. Herein, the CHANGER project consortium focuses on challenges in ethics reviews and presents targeted policy recommendations to embed ethics-by-design approaches and dialogue-based ethics support throughout the research lifecycle.

WHY THESE POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS?

These policy recommendations foster a shift from reactive and compliance-based ethic review to a proactive and supportive ethics review model throughout the entire lifecycle of research, which eventually improves the quality of research. In addition, the recommended policy actions are flexible and can be implemented across all fields of research, and across countries, with diverse research governance frameworks, and diverse research and development performance. They can serve as a common foundation for strengthening ethical oversight and support mechanisms in research.

CHALLENGES IN THE ETHICS REVIEW INFRASTRUCTURE

The following challenges in ethics reviews were identified through a scoping review, focus groups and interviews with ethics experts from all major research domains and across countries, from January 2024 to June 2025.

1. Systemic challenges in ethics reviews

RECs face a range of systemic shortcomings, both structural and operational in nature, that hinder their overall effectiveness, the quality of ethics review and the consistency of oversight.

- **Limited interdisciplinarity in RECs**
- **Insufficient access to technical expertise**
- **Voluntary service of REC members, inadequate recognition of their work**
- **Limited institutional support and resources**

2. Insufficient capacities to respond to emerging challenges

Most RECs lack the capacity to engage with the full range of ethical and societal implications posed by contemporary research particularly in artificial intelligence (AI), genomics, and biotechnology.

- **Rapid scientific innovation often exceeds current ethics review capacity**
- **New research practices raise human rights risks not fully addressed in ethics reviews**
- **Researchers are unprepared for emerging ethical challenges, due to lack of continual ethics training**

3. Lack of knowledge sharing and peer learning

There is a lack of systematic peer learning and knowledge exchange, not only between ethics review experts and RECs from different European countries, but also within a country or even within a REC. This hinders consistency and quality in ethics reviews across countries and institutions.

- **Fragmented opportunities for sharing experiences and best practices among ethics experts but also researchers**
- **Under-resourced existing networks of ethics professionals**

4. Effectiveness of the current ethics review model

The current “ex ante” ethics review occurs prior to the commencement and after the design of research, typically involves a one-time, paper-based assessment of the proposed research and focuses on compliance with ethical and -in some cases- regulatory standards.

- **Static ethics reviews limit ongoing, real-time ethical oversight of research**
- **Tick-box reviews fail to capture ethics issues posed by emerging research**
- **Researchers view RECs as primarily bureaucratic and “policing” bodies**

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

To tackle the emerging challenges in ethics reviews, we propose the following policy actions and examples of practical measures on how to implement them.

1. Enhance interdisciplinarity and engagement in RECs

The interdisciplinary composition of RECs should be strengthened with technical expertise and AI ethics expertise, while incentives and formal recognition for REC member contributions should be provided. Such actions strengthen the ethical oversight, promote fair recognition of REC service, incentivise engagement of REC members by aligning it with career development pathways, and attract qualified ethics professionals. **Member States (MS), Research Performing Organisations (RPOs) and Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are invited to take stock of these policy actions in the short term and provide practical support to RECs.**

Example measures

- Establish national/EU registries of ethics review experts by area of expertise
- Integrate REC service into academic/professional evaluation and promotion criteria
- Issue formal, verifiable certificates recognising REC members' service
- Formally recognise REC duties as substantive responsibility and adjust workloads accordingly

2. Systematic capacity assessment and capacity building

The capacity of RECs should be systematically self-assessed, to monitor their efficiency for ethics reviews. **European and national funding organisations are invited to allocate research funds in the medium term for the development of such self-assessment tools.**

Systematic training should also be provided to REC members, particularly on disruptive technologies and innovation, as well as new research practices, building capacities to address emerging ethical challenges and risks to human rights. Such actions ensure that RECs remain equipped to provide timely, informed, and comprehensive evaluations across disciplines and technologies. At the same time, junior and senior researchers should receive continual and case-based training in these areas, building capacities to anticipate ethical issues and better embed ethics in their research design. **MS, RPOs and HEIs are invited to promote and support ethics education programs in the short term.**

Example measures for RECs

- Develop benchmarking tools for RECs to self-assess their capacities
- Provide continual and interactive training in ethical challenges of emerging technologies and innovation, and new research practices

Example measures for researchers

- Develop context-specific tools for researchers to ethically self-assess their research
- Provide continual, interactive and case-based training in emerging technologies and innovation, and new research practices

3. Knowledge exchange and peer learning among RECs and researchers

Opportunities should be created for structured reflective discussions within and between RECs and researchers, supporting knowledge sharing, peer exchange, and collective advancement of ethics reviews. This will enable REC members (but also researchers) to gain exposure to diverse practices, disseminate innovative review practices, and cultivate a common culture of rigorous ethics review across Europe. This policy action is intended to complement and reinforce capacity-building (policy action 2) in RECs. **RPOs, HEIs and MS (in case of regional RECs) are invited to support peer learning, while the EU is invited to establish funding schemes for peer exchange programs in the medium term.**

Example measures

- Hold regular internal debriefings of complex cases within RECs
- Organise annual conferences or workshops for RECs and researchers
- Establish national REC networks and platforms
- Dedicate EU funds for structured peer exchange programs between RECs across the EU (e.g. reciprocal visits, joint training activities) via channels, such as the European Universities alliances

4. Shift towards a more supportive ethics review infrastructure

Emerging technologies and new forms of research demand ongoing ethical guidance. Existing ethics expertise in institutions should therefore assume a more supportive role throughout the life cycle of research projects, to foster reflexivity in researchers and eventually improve research quality. This supportive function however, must not be interpreted as a transfer of responsibility. The role of ethics experts should be understood as strengthening rather than substituting researcher-led accountability. **As a medium-term goal, funding organisations are invited to recognise supportive ethics structures as a quality criterion that increases the prospects for securing funding. RPOs and HEIs are encouraged to establish ethics support structures as part of broader institutional reforms that enhance their overall research competitiveness in the medium term.**

Example measures

- Designated REC members (not participating in the approval process) to provide ethics-by-design guidance to researchers
- Establish institutional ethics helpdesks to provide real-time support and practical guidance to researchers



FURTHER READING

1. CHANGER D2.1 Report on the scoping review. [Available here](#)
2. CHANGER D2.2 Report on case studies – findings and recommendations. [Available here](#)
3. CHANGER D2.3 Report on current ethics review recommendations. [Available here](#)
4. Dove, E. Research Ethics Review. In: The Cambridge Handbook of Health Research Regulation (pp. 177–186). Cambridge University Press 2021.
5. Kritikos, M. Research Ethics Governance. In: Handbook of Research Ethics and Scientific Integrity. Springer 2019.

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PROJECT IDENTITY

CHallenges and innovative chaNGes in research Ethics Reviews (CHANGER) aims to promote changes in research ethics reviews by strengthening researchers' capacities to incorporate ethical judgements in the project design, and by supporting capacity building of Research Ethics Committees to address new challenges posed by new technologies, new players and new forms of research.





CONSORTIUM



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