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Ethical committee frameworks and processes used to evaluate humanities research require reform: Findings from a UK-wide network consultation

Jonathan R. Kasstan 🔘ᵃ and Geoff Pearson 🔘ᵇ

ᵃSchool of Humanities, University of Westminster, London, UK; ᵇLaw, University of Manchester Law School, Manchester, UK

ABSTRACT:
Background: Qualitative Humanities research is perturbed by ethical review processes that routinely invoke epistemological assumptions skewed towards positivistic or deductive research, giving rise to several concerns, including increased risk aversion by University Research Ethics Committees (URECs) and the evaluation of qualitative research designs according to STEM standards.
Methods/Materials: This paper presents findings from an AHRC-funded research network built to better understand how research ethics frameworks and processes might be reformed to more appropriately fit ethically challenging qualitative methodologies.
Results: There remains dissatisfaction with the current processes for awarding ethical approval and the subsequent management of ethical dimensions of projects. In spite of recent developments, UREC frameworks remain seriously flawed, with a wide divergence in the quality of expertise, procedures, and practices, leading to inconsistency in ethical approval awards.
Conclusions: These factors downgrade UK Higher Education research power in the Humanities and undermine our commitments to the researched. We propose a series of recommendations for reform.

1. Introduction

The structures, processes, and operation of research ethics in the social sciences and wider Humanities have received considerable and sustained criticism over a number of decades, both from among academics (De Vries and DeBruin 2004; Sikes and Piper 2010 *inter alia*) but also at times from politicians and other stakeholders outside of the academy (see, e.g., UK House of Commons, Science and Technology Committee Report on Research Intergrity 2018). The operation of University Research Ethics

Committees (URECs) in particular, but also ethical research gatekeepers at funding bodies, have been criticized most conspicuously by academics for an approach to granting ethical approval that is still locked into traditions associated with the Natural Sciences and relies too heavily on guidelines, rules, processes and practices that are drawn from medical and clinical psychological research (van den Hoonaard 2003; Sin 2005; Boden and Latimer 2009; Miller and Boulton 2007; Carniel et al. 2023 *inter alia*) and that bear little connection to what occurs in the field in practice (Miller 2013). URECs have also been characterized as being inclined to take a risk-averse approach that focuses too much on protecting the reputation of institutions and reducing the likelihood of them being subject to litigation (Guillemin et al. 2012) and for possessing inadequate expertise, especially to understand novel or risky methods or fields of study (*e.g.* De Vries and DeBruin 2004; Hammersley 2009). Conversely, it has also been the case that politicians have criticized Higher Education institutions for allowing unethical research to take place, as in a recent high-profile controversy in which the journal *Qualitative Research* found itself implicated (Brienza 2022; Bolton 2022; Retraction Notice 2022).

However, while there continues to be overwhelming dissatisfaction in the academic community with the operation of ethical approval practices and processes for managing research ethics, in particular for qualitative studies, in the Humanities, it is clear that many URECs and funding bodies are mindful of these criticisms and have taken steps to respond. At many institutions, URECs for invasive and noninvasive research have been de-coupled, and researchers with expertise in qualitative and descriptive approaches and methods (for example, ethnography and auto-ethnography) have been brought onto research ethics committees. Notwithstanding these positive developments and the undoubted hard work of many of those serving on ethics committees, it is clear that there is, at best, a wide divergence in the quality of expertise, procedures, and practices across URECs, and inconsistency in terms of whether research projects are awarded ethical approval or not. These factors downgrade UK Higher Education research power in the Humanities and impact on researchers, particularly Postgraduate and Early-Career Researchers (ECRs), as well as the communities with which university researchers collaborate.

This paper presents observations and analysis from a project established to understand the current challenges posed by ethical approval processes relating specifically to qualitative research studies conducted in the Humanities. After a discussion of the project background, approach, and methodology, we will set out the core findings, such as they relate to (a) the legitimacy of URECs and other ethical approval bodies, (b) the needs of researched communities, and (c) the challenges and complexities arising from developments in online research. We will conclude by considering, based on observations from the project, what

(if any) future URECs should have in Higher Education. We then put forward recommendations for confronting the criticisms identified.

This was by no means an easy task, and the project and recommendations should not be seen as speaking unanimously for researchers in the Humanities, or even a representative sample of them, or providing definitive solutions to the problems that they have identified. However, the project sets out the experiences of a significant number of research-active academics and adds to, and drives forward, the debate as to how we can better manage the challenge of conducting qualitative research.

2. Materials and methods

Our findings are drawn from a network-establishing project (entitled *Rethinking Research Ethics in the Humanities: Principles and Recommendations*) which was funded by the Arts & Humanities Research Council between 2021 and 2023. The purpose of the project was to identify key questions and problems contributing to ethically challenging qualitative research in the Humanities and to identify solutions to mitigate or overcome the identified challenges. The investigators began by identifying academics who had published extensively in the area of academic research ethics, along with those holding key roles on URECs and funding councils. Sampling at this stage was therefore necessarily purposeful, but open calls were also published on social media and mailing lists. Respondents were invited to a scoping seminar (held online due to COVID-19 restrictions in place at the time), at which broad themes and challenges were identified that would form the framework of a subsequent, more focused workshop (Workshop 1). The seminar also assisted in further identifying attendees for Workshop 1, setting up the first iteration of what was to become the *Rethinking Research Ethics* network.

Workshop 1 was held at Manchester University: all Network participants were invited to attend, and, in addition, a general invitation was sent out through social media and mailing lists to solicit further interest and to ensure broad participation across Humanities disciplines. It drew together a wide range of academics from all levels of the academic career (although limited resources meant that the pool of participants was drawn overwhelmingly from United Kingdom). In contrast to the earlier scoping seminar, postgraduates and ECRs were particularly well represented at Workshop 1, but professors of research ethics and representatives (including chairs) of URECs were also in attendance. Participants communicated their concerns about research ethics frameworks and processes and debated possible solutions. The project investigators then drafted an initial report setting out the general themes and concerns that had arisen; a toolkit of relevant literature, crowd-sourced from our own scoping review, as well as input from Workshop 1 participation, which we categorized according to the identified

themes; and a set of draft recommendations in response to the criticisms raised. Interim findings were then presented in a dedicated panel at the annual Ethnography Symposium (University of Suffolk 25/08/22). Further online consultation of the draft principles and recommendations took place between September and December 2022 with Network participants.

In the final stage of the project, Workshop 2 was held at the University of Westminster at which delegates drawn from the Network debated, amended, and agreed the recommendations for academics, research funders, and URECs. The final report, setting out our principles and recommendations, was published in May 2023 (Kasstan, Pearson, and Brooks 2023 – henceforth "the Report") and has subsequently been disseminated to the Network both online, through our personal networks, and through a launch at the 2023 Ethnography Symposium (VU University, Amsterdam 24/08/2023).

We do not intend to retread the contents of the report here, which was largely descriptive of the findings, other than to highlight the seven core areas identified within it where research ethics processes were deemed to be failing. Instead, this paper represents not only a synthesis of the findings in the Report but also the first rigorous analysis of the project and its recommendations, setting them in the context of the many academic debates on academic research ethics over the past decades. We have categorized these seven core areas as follows: (1) The politics of research ethics; (2) The role of ethics committees, (3) Procedures and practices for informed consent, (4) Anonymity and protecting research participants, (5) Online research and online threats, (6) The use of covert methods, and (7) Post-field ethics and challenges. At the time of writing, and as far as we are aware, the Report has already led to the establishment of meetings and working groups at both the AHRC and several UK URECs, to consider how to incorporate, or otherwise respond to, the recommendations with the aim of improving their processes for managing ethical approval applications, awarding ethical approval, and supporting and protecting researchers and participants in the longer term. We will leave it to further research, to be undertaken by the Network, on the longer-term impacts of these meetings and working groups.

It is important at this stage to be clear that the arguments which we are putting forward in this paper are not the result of findings from a traditional research study. In total, 64 academics agreed to be named as contributors to the seminar, workshops, and/or the final report, and, in addition to this, there were a number of additional unnamed contributions at all stages. While we endeavored to ensure that invitations reached both senior academics and postgraduates/ECRs and those who had worked on ethics committees, as well as those with no experience of working in such a capacity, we do not claim that the participants to this project were representative, either in terms of demographic composition or career status, of academia in the United Kingdom. Participants were approached either because of our knowledge of

their interests in research ethics or their engagement in ethically challenging qualitative research, and others approached us when we disseminated information about the Network. However, the participants were largely self-selecting, and, therefore, likely to possess strong views (and most probably critical views) about research ethics that may not reflect the broader spectrum of qualitative researchers in the Humanities. Furthermore, not every participant endorsed every principle or recommendation, leading at some points in the final Report to inconsistencies, and recommendations that can be interpreted in some cases to be contradictory or in conflict with one another. The data underpinning what we are presenting here is therefore representative of the broad consensus that we identified from the project and our arguments in this paper reflect the discussions and recommendations contained in the final Report (for further details, see Kasstan, Pearson, and Brooks 2023, 5).

These caveats notwithstanding, the level of consensus from Network participants was in our view remarkable. We did not have a single contribution to the project that suggested that the current systems of ethical approval and management were not in need of urgent and extensive reform (we remind the reader that serving UREC members, including committee chairs, participated in the drafting of the Report at all stages). When we began, we had anticipated that we may identify a difference of opinion between those with experience of working on URECs and those without, expecting UREC members to be more sympathetic to the current principles, structures, systems, and processes. This was not the case: even among UREC chairs involved in the Network we identified similar criticisms to those advanced by doctoral candidates and ECRs with no experience of working in ethical approval processes. The high level of agreement on the core issues which we will discuss in the following sections thus makes us confident that the findings of this project are valid and reflect broader concerns within and across the Higher Education sector in the United Kingdom. We move next to our synthesis and analysis, where we draw out three core areas of discussion, considering how these relate to previous research in this area and the challenges posed to implementing genuine and long-term change.

3. The perceived legitimacy of URECs and ethical approval processes

Central to the criticisms and concerns raised by the Network was the role of URECs and the processes and practices for securing ethical approval at the institutional level. The breadth of disapproval we identified at the operation of URECs was extensive, and simply repeating all the concerns here would entail an article in itself, but our analysis identified that fundamentally this could be boiled down to a crisis of legitimacy. The legitimacy of URECs acting as gatekeepers in determining which research projects can go ahead,

and how, has been identified in previous scholarship (e.g., Sikes and Piper 2010; Hammersley 2009; McAreavy and Muir 2011; Carniel et al. 2023 *inter alia*). However, our concerns are not grounded from a theory standpoint in terms of what it means to be ethical, but, rather, they reflect the *perceived legitimacy* of the institutions and processes at work in securing ethical approval, and the effect that this perceived illegitimacy can have upon their operation. The overwhelming dissatisfaction with URECs and the processes surrounding their operation can therefore be characterized as a failure by URECs to secure legitimacy or moral authority among academics conducting qualitative research in the Humanities. While there was, perhaps surprisingly, wide support for the principle of URECs possessing this power, how they are seen currently to wield it was seen as illegitimate, a criticism that was broadly acknowledged by the participants of the Network, including those who also held UREC positions.

The traditional concerns of URECs still relying on standards and benchmarks more appropriate for clinical or Natural Sciences research were still reflected in the views of many Network participants. However, it was broadly recognized that URECs at most institutions had developed their focus and expertise to reflect the needs of qualitative research. Some Higher Education institutions have maneuvered to split URECs into different committees, so that, for example, invasive research committees were not assessing the ethical viability of noninvasive research projects, and *vice versa*. The formation of URECs for the Humanities or non-STEM subjects was broadly seen as a positive development, but it was also seen to mirror the problematic growth of ethical regulation (for a discussion, see Hammersley 2010) and had not brought with it any identifiable increased sense of legitimacy. Instead, participants expressed an additional concern about inconsistency in the quality of ethical-approval boards and processes, and a frustration that whether approval would be granted was largely a matter of chance depending on what institution approval was sought from or even depending on the timing of an application or the makeup of a particular ethical review committee.

In spite of the development of URECs to encapsulate more expertise from committee members in qualitative methods (such as ethnographic approaches), participants complained of a broad lack of expertise either in their own methods or in the application of these methods to their particular field (see also Hammersley 2009). Notably, disciplinary and sub-disciplinary codes of ethics, which may be expected to play a central role in ethical approval decision-making, often appeared to be side-lined in committee discussions, even when relied upon by applicants in the construction of their research designs. This disconnect increased the sense among some participants that decisions of URECs were unpredictable, even capricious, and that, even when approval was granted, it was likely to be conditional upon "prescriptions and proscriptions" that could "produce obstacles to researchers doing their work

well, in both methodological and ethical terms" (Hammersley 2015, 446). Seen as a blockage to conducting research using the most appropriate methodological tools for the job, URECs were overwhelmingly remarked on by participants to be an obstacle to be overcome.

In addition to the concerns about the constitution and expertise of URECs, Network participants also re-emphasized some of the core concerns with the operation, processes, and activities of URECs that we have already touched upon. In this respect, two core concerns were broadly represented. First, URECs were, as a matter of routine, acting *ultra vires*, concerning themselves and intervening in issues that were not seen as being within their purview. Data storage resource and adherence to General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) protocols often formed part of the ethical approval process, and issues of institutional brand management, potential criticism by government or media, and risk of litigation were identified as forming key parts of ethical discussions at some URECs.

Network participants also objected to what was seen as unwelcome intervention by URECs with regard to the feasibility of approaches or particular research methods. Again, this was not seen as being within the scope of URECs, a position which was exacerbated by the concerns about expertise identified earlier. Here, we would suggest, the debate is more nuanced. Whereas URECs should not as a matter of course be able to stop an ethically unproblematic project as a result of feasibility concerns, given that the academic, and often a supervisor, reviewer, or funder will have already supported the approach proposed, whether a project raising ethical concerns can ever achieve objectives upon which its ethical justifications rely, may of course be directly relevant to a UREC's decision. Conversely, we find it noteworthy that another area where URECs are seen as intervening beyond their core role, that of risks to the researcher, was not broadly seen as problematic; we will return to this issue in §5 below.

The second major concern with the operation of URECs was that they continue to spend a great deal of their time "managing the unknown" (McAreavy and Muir 2011, 398), by trying to predict problems that may arise during the course of the research. Again, their engagement in this process was made more problematic by concerns about levels of expertise, not just concerning epistemologies and methodologies but particularly in relation to the communities under research, which we will return to in the next section. Moreover, the overwhelming experience of the Network was that such predictions rarely, if ever, developed into reality as the research progressed. In contrast, problems that did assail researchers in the field were almost always unpredicted. In many ways, the concerns expressed here mirror academic disquiet about the development of the "risk society" (Beck 1992; Giddens 1990, 1999), the empowerment of official discretion (see Douglas 1992, 42), and the development of the "culture of control"

(Garland 2001) more widely. However, as we will return to, the experience of the Network was that URECs typically shied away from involvement in day-to-day surveillance of projects and tended to disengage completely with projects post-field (i.e., after data collection was complete). Yet a frequent observation arising from this project was that problems posing risks to the researcher arose *after* the completion of the primary research, often on or following publication. Further, when such problems did occur and having failed to predict or mitigate them, URECs were usually either unable or unwilling to engage.

MacAreavy and Muir link this (rightly, we would argue) to a "lack of respect within academic circles" toward the ethics committees (2011, 367). However, we should clarify that while Network participants broadly demonstrated such a lack of respect toward the functioning of URECs, this did not seem to equate to a lack of respect for identified members, or at least not academic members. This was illustrated in discussions involving members (including chairs) of URECs who received no individual criticism and who also indicated sincere sympathy with criticisms from non-UREC members. We identified, therefore, not so much of a "them and us" culture (402) between URECs and academics who had not served on ethics committees, but rather a feeling that the demands and processes of URECs stripped away from UREC members what it was to be an academic with both a critical and inquisitory mind. This has clear implications for the value of URECs, and their reviewing and decision-making processes in particular being more transparent.

URECs maintained power through the realities of the practices of academic research, from funding to publication, and the legally enforceable employment relationship with academics, but the gap between this and the moral authority they need to encourage academics to engage in good faith with their processes resulted in unethical behavior from those seeking approval. Indeed, several participants in the network described the current processes of gaining ethical approval as *encouraging* unethical behavior from researchers. The contributions from Network participants confirmed what has been known for some time that "academics 'play the game' by adopting strategies to obtain ethical approval" (McAreavy and Muir 2011, 396). In this project, we found that there were two typical responses on the part of academics seeking ethical approval to the perception of illegitimacy and lack of moral authority by UREC and ethical approval processes: (1) pushback and (2) disengagement. Both of these reactions raise concerns for the functioning and utility of ethical approval processes.

Pushback was the most obvious and occurred where applicants employed tactics which they justified in light of the apparent illegitimate blockages of URECs. Some participants admitted writing proposals for an initial or partial review that obfuscated methods or data to be collected so that a departmental or school-level ethics head would be likely to interpret it in a way that would

not see them elevate the proposal for full review. Others re-imagined research projects as *service evaluations*, that is, a small-scale evaluation of some aspect of a service that does not meet the bar for ethical review (e.g., a needs assessment, or an evaluation of an intervention). Many institutions do not require ethical approval for service evaluations, but researchers were still able to publish academic work from the data gathered from such smaller-scale projects at a later date (for a discussion and critique, see also Chen and Fawcett 2017). Further, others faced with requirements from URECs to change data-gathering approaches agreed to do so, but once in the field defaulted to the initial practices that they felt were most appropriate. For instance, participant information sheets and consent forms were amended in light of UREC requirements, but when given to potential participants, researchers regularly advised them that tick boxes or bullet points were simply standard, "for show only," or could in reality be ignored (we return to ethical instruments below). All of these tactics had the effect of undermining the UREC processes and ensuring that what happened in the field was a long way distant from what was agreed in order to gain ethical approval from the start.

The second response to confronting the perceived barrier to ethical approval was that of disengagement, whereby applicants engaged with URECs to the least possible extent necessary to gain ethical approval. In some cases, this meant not adopting the best methods to answer the research question, thereby doing a disservice to both the academy and the researched community. In other cases, it involved an applicant avoiding drawing attention to ethical questions or dilemmas posed by the research that had become apparent to them during the drafting of the research proposal. Network participants recounted situations where they had given silent prayers of thanks when URECs had not spotted what they thought were flaws in the ethics application. Other examples of disengagement abound too from our observations of the project. For instance, applicants admitted relief when, due to a pressing deadline, they were sent to the invasive-research UREC rather than the noninvasive one, as they believed there was less chance a particular problem would be identified by non-experts in their given area. Further, researchers admitted to being less than open in the UREC meetings themselves. A synthesis of the above would be, we suggest, that there is little incentive for researchers to direct URECs to concerns that the committee had not already identified. Some Network participants were also of the view that they as applicants remained fearful that URECs would take any opportunity to derail the proposal, rather than work collaboratively to identify solutions that would benefit them and the researched. This implies that the process of securing ethical review is seen much less as a collegial conversation, and more a top-down affair very much in line with academic gatekeeping (for a discussion, particularly in threatened communities, see, e.g., Shanks and Paulson 2022).

Taken together, it is clear that the lack of legitimacy that was perceived in UREC committees and processes and a distrust and fear of their operation was contributing to academics not engaging in an open, trusting, and collaborative endeavor. The ethics committees, notwithstanding the presence of respected individual academic personnel on them, remained for many qualitative researchers opaque and a danger to progress. Perhaps most concerningly, some ECRs recalled as recent postgraduates being advised to engage in resistance tactics and practices of pushback and disengagement by their supervisors. Learning and mastering the rules of the game, appeared to be one of the core elements of research training for ECRs. It should be a central concern that observations on this project echo the problem identified over a decade before that ethical regulation in Higher Education "runs counter to the collegiate ethos that still prevails within academic life" (McAreavy and Muir 2011, 402).

4. The needs of the researched communities

Much of the perceived legitimacy – or lack therefore – of URECs (and the issues identified above that stem from this) reverberate into other areas of practice. A further core finding of the network concerns the creep of standardized procedures and instruments at the expense of due consideration to the researched communities with which academics collaborate. This concern is by no means new, and about which a body of literature already exists (see, e.g., Sin 2005; Wiles et al. 2008; Lawton et al. 2017 *inter alia*). What concerns us here is the intensification in the dissemination of such practices in light of efforts to introduce standardized frameworks into an audit "culture" in recent years.

Standard participant information sheets and consent forms have been characterized as "ritualistic" (Sin 2005, 279) forms of practice in qualitative research that are sanitized of social context to such an extent that their use can be "disciplining and normalising" (Butz 2008, 240) for research participants themselves, in effect causing harm rather than preventing it. Despite this, normalizing ethical review processes have continued unabated. The UK's Research Integrity Office co-published with the Association of Research Managers and Administrators a guidance document (Carpenter et al. 2020) providing recommended benchmarks for standards of ethical review, as well as guidance on implementation and consistency (e.g., Appendix 1: "Consent forms and information sheets must be included in the application and where there are separate participant groups, separate consent and information forms for each group must be supplied"). Such recommendations are not surprising when couched in the context of the document's overarching aims of (a) synthesizing developments in academic work on ethics and integrity; (b) supporting research organizations in

achieving high standards of research ethics review; and (c) providing a means for the valid audit of ethical processes (Carpenter et al. 2020, 10). The document, widely adopted in UK UREC governance, acknowledges wide variation in organizational and management structures in research institutions, recognizing that this makes a one-size-fits-all template difficult to achieve. It thus advocates for a "principles-based approach to defining what counts as best research ethics practices [and] offers the flexibility and adaptability that is required" (11). These principles are intended to be worked into an institution's ethical code of conduct.

However, emerging from the Network was the clear sense that current ethical approval processes continue to require significant amounts of this normalized, ritualistic paperwork (such as detailed information sheets, referral sheets, and long consent forms) to be considered and completed by research participants. Such standardized approaches do not empower participants. Instead, they can reinforce the hierarchical power of the research institution over participants; deter participants altogether; and can negatively impact trust between the researcher and the community with which the researcher is collaborating. Further still, such approaches run counter to wider institutional missions, now commonplace in UK academia, that seek to *decolonize*. While we do not wish to contribute to this debate here, we note only that this issue was raised among Network participants. Indeed, more recent work has highlighted that these ritualistic practices can be interpreted as a further form of colonial "violence," particularly when applied to threatened or minoritized communities with whom researchers collaborate, and where locally sensitive practices can be more appropriate (see, e.g., Tauri 2018; van Driem 2016).

Connected to this is the hierarchical approach that URECs have toward communities. Network participants viewed the mandatory use of physical forms in research as extractive – rather than collaborative – between institutions, researchers, and communities. This not only runs contrary to good practice even within Medical sciences and Psychology, in which models such as *Patient Participant Involvement* mandate that researchers demonstrate close collaboration with participants in the design and conduct of research projects from the very beginning (e.g., Locock et al. 2016), but it also necessarily feeds through into the way URECs approach ethical review, as well as their wider understanding of research context and relationships. This having been said, Carpenter et al. are careful to make clear that governance should not prohibit research and social justice (see 2020, 35). However, it is at least clear from our observations that the "principles-based approach" may not be as flexible as originally intended or designed. Indeed, existing scholarship points to the dangers inherent in relying on *principles* in ethical regulation. As others have argued: "principles are useful, so long as they are treated as reminders of what ought to be taken into account, rather than as premises

from which specific ethical judgments can be derive" (Hammersley 2015, 433). Hammersley's argument is predicated on the understanding that "conclusions about what is and is not ethical must begin from the specific cases concerned, and initial judgments about these, rather than being derived from a set of principles" (441). Our observations would suggest that this caution has not been given due attention at the UREC level. Our findings serve then as a reminder that there should be less focus on the physical form of ethical processes (that is, written participant-information sheets, debrief sheets, etc.), which can be inappropriate for particular types of research in the Humanities, and more focus on the extent to which processes can ensure that participant communities and participants themselves are empowered to be partners in the research production process.

That the needs of the researched communities are being deprioritised in favor of a principles-based framework manifested itself in other ways during consultation with Network participants. Returning to the very constitution of URECs, in addition to the concerns that their members did not reflect the array of disciplines, approaches, and methods of applicants (certainly, those represented in the Network), there was also a broader concern that they did not represent the wider communities that were the subject of academic research. While it has been argued elsewhere that this is in-and-of-itself is highly idealized (see, e.g., Humphreys 2010), it has at least become a common expectation (certainly in the UK academic system) that URECs should be comprised of a wide range of types of actors (including non-academic *lay* members). Principles here too have been proposed in published guidance such as Carpenter et al. (2020), but quite how a committee arrives at identifying and appointing its members remains much less transparent. In terms of academics serving on URECs, the problems we identified were principally associated with resources and governance. Among more established academics in the Network who had previously sat on, or who continue to serve URECs, it was observed that the selection process is often arbitrary, dependent on the availability of serving faculty, and constrained by the creep of other forms of regulation within the wider university structure (e.g., so-called "work allocation models"). This can be contrasted with a "deliberative institutional environment" approach (Carniel et al. 2023, 152), that is, where membership is instead representative of the research conducted within an institution, where relationships between researchers and URECs are fostered, and where a climate of mutual benefit between researchers and UREC is promoted. Concerning non-faculty membership, problems abound in defining the role of, the representativity of, and participants for lay membership in URECs (for a discussion, see also, e.g., Hedgecoe 2016; Legood 2005). As UK Research and Innovation increasingly prioritizes impact on the researched communities in their allocation of research funding, it is perhaps unsurprising that the view among Network participants was that funders should

incentivize institutional investment in URECs, particularly to encourage wider levels of expertise and greater representation of academic and lay communities.

5. Researching online

Not unrelated to the discussion above concerning standardized instruments associated with ethical review, a further theme of ethical review shortfall identified by Network participants was that many URECs were out-of-step with the realities faced by researchers in the ever-shifting space of online research. In particular, they expressed concerns about the relevance of informed-consent processes online. Existing work has already highlighted the extent to which online research problematizes the application of familiar frameworks and processes in ethical review as they relate to consent. For example, in one notable study, Carter et al. (2016) marshal evidence from online-survey responses among $n = 30$ academics who were surveyed about their attitudes toward the ethical challenges of social-media research. They observe significant variation in attitudes impacting decision-making in ethical review, with no clarity among their research participants on the conditions under which consent for online research is required, despite well-established and openly available guidelines (e.g., franzke et al. 2020). It is also commonly known that the usual tools to manage informed consent and anonymity, as well as standard practices or assumptions associated with research designs, such as sample size, often do not work when researching online communities. For example, with some types of online research, the identities of research participants may not be transparent, nor might it be clear how best to contact them, or whether they fall into a vulnerable category or not. Equally, there have been calls for a new ethical framework for online research, particularly in terms of *big data* projects involving the use of scraping techniques from social-media platforms (e.g., Vayena et al. 2016), while others have warned of the need for URECs to urgently familiarize themselves with the complexities of online research (Hibbin, Samuel, and Derrick 2018) writ large.

Our Network identified that one important area here was online research on or with nefarious or hostile sub-cultures such as far-right movements, an area which in terms of scholarship is burgeoning but still in its relative infancy (see Fuchs 2018) and which complicated the task of the researcher engaging with URECs. It is well established that the study of particular sub-cultures (including online ones) can be difficult when such communities harbor strong negative opinions toward institutionalized forms of knowledge (i.e., universities and academics, who can be seen as "part of the system" against which such sub culture rally), with an inherent distrust of anything perceived as imposed, official, or formal, let alone the inclination to read lengthy information sheets and sign consent forms (see Lavorgna and

Suguira 2020, 262). As these formal instruments do not permit deception, researchers are not afforded the opportunity to conceal their own identities, and it is required that they fully disclose their research aims when undertaking online interviews, surveys, or other forms of data collection with such groups. As a result, tensions are likely to occur which can affect both the quality of the research and the safety and wellbeing of researchers themselves.

These tensions can have a nefarious effect, as recent literature has also attested, impacting on the researcher's private and public self, to the detriment of the researcher who is immediately known to participants. Conversely, participants can hide behind the safety of aliases (Lavorgna and Suguira 2020, 264). Network participants operating in this space articulated concerns around harms such as networked harassment, threats to livelihood, and vicarious trauma. With ethical approaches to research seeking to minimize "undue harm" (e.g., Morrison, Silke, and Bont 2021), testimony from Network participants made clear that the remit of URECs should extend more openly to researcher safety, which tends to get overlooked in discussions of ethical concern around particular research projects, particularly in relation to informed consent (for a critique of the institution failing to support their own researchers, cf. Dove and Douglas 2023; King 2023; Mattheis and Kingdon 2021). Among URECs, it is acknowledged in the literature that there is little available advice on this issue, and in more recent work scholars have placed particular emphasis on journals publishing reflections on research in the space of online methods and online threats, with a view to building up an evidence base that can then be deployed in decision-making processes, namely for URECs (see, e.g., Conway 2021).

Our observations among Network participants in relation to online research and online threats are therefore timely, not least for ECRs who are innovating in this space, and who find themselves balancing the demands of researching hostile online communities (and mitigating risks associated with doxing, spotlighting, pile-ons, etc.), and the wider demands imposed by academia; namely, the measurement of value through impact, the precarity of employment, securing academic employment through publishing, and university reputation management (Vaughan 2024). In light of these concerns, it was the view of Network participants that URECs, working with the wider Higher Education institution, should permit researchers to restrict official online information (e.g., on University or Departmental websites) where there is, for example, a risk of doxing related to their research, or consider the value of a covert or hybrid identity for the researcher. Relatedly, basing ethical decisions on fixed notions of what is "public" or "private" is not always sufficient, and is no substitute for a personal, in-depth understanding and insight about the research context. URECs should therefore not seek to apply binaries such as "public" vs. "private" to online research to begin with.

6. Conclusions and recommendations

We have sought here to offer a transparent account of the views obtained as part of our work on the *Rethinking Research Ethics* project. We reiterate here that it was not our aim to seek the endorsement from every participant or stakeholder who attended the Network's activities, or who participated in consultation exercises. Rather, we have focused here on areas where strong consensus was found and not least on the unanimous agreement that the current system of awarding ethical approval and managing ethics in Higher Education is in urgent need of fundamental reform. It was the unequivocal view of the Network that URECs were failing, and we have argued here that this has contributed to a wider perceived crisis of legitimacy. Yet, while some participants were of the view that URECs were not best placed to manage research ethics and should be replaced altogether at the same time, it was a surprise to observe the generally held view that URECs should not be abandoned altogether. On the contrary, many of these otherwise highly critical Network participants wanted to see URECs *do more* in terms of protecting and guiding researchers, particularly in the realm of online research and online threats. Others were of the opinion that the role of URECs should not include considering questions of risk to and wellbeing of the researcher. However, the overwhelming majority of participants were of the view that reformed URECs still have a role to play in both awarding ethical approval and managing ethics and risks to the researcher on an ongoing basis (including "post-fieldwork"). We interpret this as empirical support for Carniel et al. (2023)'s position that greater collaboration between Humanities researchers and URECs is needed. Emerging too from this work is the clear sense that there is a need to understand how ethical review can be more productively placed at the center of a research design, and less as simply an "add-on" to projects, or as some aspect of "the game" to be overcome. There then needs to be a focus on a different kind of ethics: one that can produce *ethical* ethics frameworks and processes that are not distanced from the practice of research and not focused only on institutional protection. Indeed, recent scholarship has explicitly called for a more "compassionate research ethics" that is collaborative, relational, and more befitting of a re-imagined research culture (see King 2023 on a *culture of care* for URECs). To address, then, the criticisms raised (many of which have long been well attested in the literature as we have seen), and to achieve change, we propose a series of recommendations.

First, Institutions should work to de-couple URECs from concerns of brand management, feasibility, and data protection. As we have shown, testimony from the Network makes clear that these concerns (which sit outside of the remit of URECs) remain a psychological barrier to progressing projects that are seen as ethically challenging. Further work here would also assuage wider concerns that URECs are not being used as a conduit through which academic freedom is restricted on such grounds (see Hedgecoe 2016, 496). Second, URECs should not

place particular emphasis on the physical form of ethical processes (e.g., written participant-information sheets, debrief sheets), which can be inappropriate for many types of research in qualitative Humanities research. They should instead place emphasis on the extent to which processes can ensure that participant communities and participants themselves are empowered to be partners in the research production process. In other words, there needs to be a greater appreciation at the UREC level of more inclusive models of knowledge production as part of ethical review (e.g., principles of participatory or community-based research methods). Third, Institutions should reconfigure URECs, and the frameworks by which URECs operate, to provide ongoing (including post-research) ethical and practical support for researchers. As we have said, while there was no unanimous agreement on this point, the testimony received makes clear that URECs need to consider consulting urgently on the matter (see also King 2023). Fourth, URECs should bring in *ad hoc* expertise on methods or fields of study in the Humanities on a more consistent basis, to begin to reduce widespread disparities in ethical approval. Lastly, URECs should consider ways in which best practice and resources can be shared on a cross-institutional basis (styled, for instance, on *The Research Ethics Application Database*, see Tolich and Emma 2020).[1] This should include a greater focus on the importance of disciplinary-level codes of practice and through the establishing of cross-institutional UREC working groups.

It is clear that UREC frameworks remain seriously flawed, with a wide divergence in the quality of expertise, procedures, and practices. Owing to the long-standing debate in the literature on many of these criticisms, the findings presented here indicate that the step change ethical reform that qualitative Humanities research clearly needs is yet to take place. It is also clear that a sector-wide approach is now needed. Implementing these recommendations would, we suggest, contribute to a wider corrective in terms of how the perceived illegitimacy of URECs and their undermining of qualitative Humanities research.

We finish, however, with a cautionary note. Our recommendations will most likely demand significant additional investment from Higher Education institutions and funders, at a time when research funding in the UK is already under pressure. Nevertheless, we contend that the risks of doing nothing to alleviate the ongoing concerns with research ethics in the Humanities are too great, and the chance of minor reforms or those focused merely at an institutional level achieving meaningful change is too small.

Note

1. See a similar proposition for Scottish institutions by Dove and Douglas (2023, 186–9).

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Notes on contributors

Jonathan Kasstan is a Senior Lecturer in French and Linguistics at the University of Westminster. He has also held research and teaching posts at Queen Mary University of London and the Sorbonne University. He works with threatened and severely endangered language communities, with a particular research focus on quantitative and qualitative approaches to structured variation and language change, and community-based research methods. He is the Principal Investigator on the AHRC-funded research network Rethinking Research Ethics Frameworks and Processes in the Humanities (AH/V001043/1).

Geoff Pearson is Professor of Law at the University of Manchester and Academic Director of the N8 Policing Research Partnership. His primary areas of research are policing, particularly public order, football crowd management and regulation, and human rights. He primarily utilises ethnographic methods and has previously written on the merits and ethics of covert participant observation. His most recent monographs are A New Agenda for Football Crowd Management (2022, Palgrave), Police Street Powers and Criminal Justice (2020, Hart), and An Ethnography of English Football Fans (2012, MUP).

ORCID

Jonathan R. Kasstan 🄳 http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4134-5876
Geoff Pearson 🄳 http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2458-5184

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