POLICY BRIEF

Implementing Research Ethics Governance in HEIs and RPOs

November 2025

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Why this policy brief?

Research institutions and individual researchers must conduct research ethically and in accordance with normative demands by both the academic system and society. A strong research ethics governance structure strengthens responsibility and trust in science. The irecs project has developed a four-pillar framework to guide the implementation of research ethics governance at Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and Research Performing Organizations (RPOs). This policy brief introduces the irecs framework and provides recommendations for action, specifically targeting leaders of HEIs and RPOs.

The irecs framework

The irecs framework is a four-pillar framework created to guide and assist the implementation of research ethics governance structures at Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) and Research Performing Organizations (RPOs). It offers a pragmatic way to plan, structure, and organize local efforts in a flexible manner. The four pillars of the framework correspond with four areas of action; for each pillar, various measures may be implemented.

Pillar 1: Ethics by training
Offer trainings in research ethics, including the ethics of emerging technologies

Why is it important?
Education, starting at an early stage and continuing throughout all career stages, enhances both the researchers' capability to integrate ethics into their practice and their appreciations of the importance of ethics for their work.

Pillar 2: Ethics by design
Provide administrative support for research ethics, with clear division of responsibilities

Why is it important?
Pragmatic, transparent, and supportive ethics guidance—whether from advisory services or relevant committees—enables researchers to embed ethical considerations throughout the entire research and innovation cycle.

Pillar 3: Ethics by scientific discourse
Conduct (and exploit) research on research ethics

Why is it important?
Developing new concepts of research ethics advances the field and lays a strong scientific foundation for research ethics governance efforts, including up-to-date guidelines and administrative procedures.

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Pillar 4: Ethics by exchange

Establish pathways for interdisciplinary exchange on research ethics

Why is it important?
Effective communication pathways and exchange networks enable actors to avoid repeating mistakes, adopt proven best practices, and generate added value as well as new learning opportunities.

Recommendations

We encourage leaders of HEIs and RPOs to implement actions across all four pillars of the irecs framework, always taking into consideration their organization's needs, resources and existing structures. The four pillars are mutually supportive to each other; each pillar, however, is likely to be nurtured to a different degree depending on the organization's profile.

Pillar 1: Ethics by training

Offer trainings in research ethics, including the ethics of emerging technologies, for researchers and members of research ethics committees.

Offer ethics trainings at early career stages and throughout a researcher's career.

Identify groups in need of training and offer ethics trainings tailored to their needs.

Assign responsibilities for coordinating ethics training programs and for conducting trainings.

Provide opportunities for trainers to maintain, improve, and certify their skills.

Allocate resources to sustain training programs.

Pillar 2: Ethics by design

Provide administrative support for research ethics.

Promote a culture of research ethics that recognizes research ethics as an asset, not as a burden.

Balance flexibility and accountability in the provision of administrative services.

Specify the division of responsibilities between different advisory or consulting services and between support services and individual researchers or research groups.

Provide opportunities for support staff and research ethics committee members to maintain and improve their skills.

Circulate information about available support services across the organization.

Allocate resources to sustain and scale up administrative support.

Pillar 3: Ethics by scientific discourse

Conduct research on research ethics topics and concepts.

Stimulate exchange between departments and organizational units to help identify emerging challenges.

Exploit existing scientific research to improve processes and guidelines.

Pillar 4: Ethics by exchange

Establish communication pathways and exchange networks, internally and/or externally to the organization.

Support interdisciplinary discourse, internally and/or externally to the organization.

Participate in existing networks as relevant and as applicable.

Respect privacy and confidentiality in exchanges.

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Further Reading

The irecs implementation guide
The irecs implementation guide provides practical advice on how to implement the irecs framework in practice.
https://www.irecs.eu/deliverables-and-reports/

How we did it

This policy brief is based on research conducted in *Task 5.3: Involve pilot universities*. During the project, three universities, members of the irecs consortium, took steps to improve research ethics governance in their respective institutional contexts; their experiences informed the irecs framework and related outputs. A consultation workshop with HEIs and RPOs leaders was organised by the European University Association (EUA) to discuss the irecs framework and inform related outputs. Recommendations were reviewed by irecs partners and the irecs Stakeholder Advisory Board.

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About irecs

"Improving Research Ethics Expertise and Competencies to Ensure Reliability and Trust in Science"

irecs aims to advance research ethics expertise and competences in new and emerging technologies. The project focuses on 4 emerging technologies (AI in health and healthcare; Extended reality; Genome editing (human/non-human); Biobanking) and develops, implements and disseminates training material for research ethics reviewers and (early career) researchers.

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Coordinator: Rheinische Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität Bonn (Bonn, Germany)
Consortium: 18 organizations from 11 countries

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