



**Position of the
European Network of Research Ethics Committees (EUREC)
on
Expanding the scope of RECs to research with and on humans beyond biomedical research**

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Introduction

The European Network of Research Ethics Committees (EUREC) is committed to upholding and advancing ethical standards in research involving human participants, thereby shaping the future of ethical research across Europe. By connecting research ethics committees (RECs), EUREC fosters a culture where ethical considerations are paramount. Originally established with a focus on biomedical research, EUREC recognises the necessity for ethical governance across diverse research fields. In response, EUREC seeks to broaden its scope to include the ethical reflection on research with and on humans beyond biomedical research* and invite RECs with a non-biomedical focus — including those working with research projects in the fields of social sciences, humanities, and emerging technologies — to join our network. Drawing on our extensive experience in biomedical research, EUREC is well-positioned to offer valuable insights on research governance and strong networking capabilities to support and advance research ethics across a wide range of disciplines beyond biomedical research.

This position paper emphasises the importance of fostering dialogue, exchange, and networking between RECs in various research domains. We believe that collaboration and mutual support between RECs in both biomedical and non-biomedical fields are essential for addressing the unique ethical challenges posed by different types of research methodologies. By bridging these communities, we aim to create a more cohesive and comprehensive approach to research ethics that benefits all stakeholders involved.

Background

RECs play a critical role in protecting the rights, safety, and well-being of individuals participating in research projects as well as in promoting scientific freedom and critical approaches. Traditionally, RECs have been associated with biomedical research, particularly clinical trials. However, ethical challenges are also prevalent in non-biomedical research involving human participants. Providing ethical guidance before, during, and after research is essential across all research domains. EUREC recognises that within disciplines, there exists robust ethics guidance that effectively addresses the specific challenges

* In our EUREC working group 2, we focus on both 'Research with Humans' and 'Research on Humans.' 'Research with Humans' refers to studies that involve direct interaction between researchers and participants, such as clinical trials or behavioural studies, interviews and surveys. In contrast, 'Research on Humans' involves studies where data is gathered from humans without direct interaction, such as observational research, or the use of pre-existing data sources.

encountered in research within those fields. For example, in social science research, ethical dilemmas can arise in studies involving populations with particular vulnerabilities such as children, the elderly, individuals with mental health conditions, or people in precarious social circumstances. In educational research, issues of consent and privacy as well as potential power imbalances are paramount when collecting data from or engaging with students. Similarly, in ethnographic research, researchers must navigate cultural sensitivities and power dynamics to ensure that participants are not exploited or misrepresented. In addition, the researchers themselves are also exposed to risks, for example when conducting social science research in fragile contexts, which must be carefully reviewed by RECs. These examples highlight the need for specialised ethical awareness and oversight beyond the biomedical field. Whereas disciplinary and professional guidance has produced clear expectations of good practice in some areas of research, there is a lack in some jurisdictions of a network of RECs to monitor adherence to such good practice.

Some countries have established specialised RECs and other ethics bodies to address the unique ethical considerations of human-centred research beyond the biomedical sphere. Countries like the UK, the Netherlands, and Germany have even developed national networks of RECs with a focus beyond biomedical research. However, despite these efforts, there remains an urgent need for broader dialogue and collaboration at the European level to ensure consistent and comprehensive ethical oversight across Europe and beyond.

Position Statement

EUREC recognises the importance of fostering collaboration and exchange of best practices among RECs dedicated to research with and on humans beyond biomedical research, like in the social sciences, computer sciences, or engineering. In addition, EUREC supports countries in establishing national networks of RECs with a focus outside of biomedicine. By broadening EUREC's scope to include RECs that are established outside biomedicine, EUREC aims to facilitate a cohesive and harmonised approach to research ethics across Europe by respecting cultural diversities.

We invite RECs with a focus outside biomedicine to create national networks and offer our support in doing so. Furthermore, we extend an invitation to representatives of RECs and network organisations of national RECs reviewing research with and on humans to participate in the discussions and exchanges of EUREC's working group 2.

Key points

- ▶ **Improving ethics governance systems for all research fields:** We recognise the need for effective ethics governance in all research involving human participants and personal data, not just biomedical research, and promote appropriate ethical oversight across diverse research areas.
- ▶ **Supporting specialised RECs:** We support the creation and development, with a well-defined mandate, of specialised RECs for various fields such as social sciences, humanities, and emerging technologies.
- ▶ **Addressing unique challenges:** We will highlight the unique ethical challenges in non-biomedical research, including the following:
 - **Informed consent in social science research projects:** Discussing the specific challenges of obtaining informed consent in social science research, either written or oral, including when carrying out research in countries with different cultural norms and practices. Acknowledging that there are situations where informed consent is not

possible (for example, in some participant observation studies) and supporting alternative ways of ensuring individual participants' interests are safeguarded in such public interest situations.

- **Protection and safety of research teams:** Emphasising the importance of not only safeguarding research participants but also ensuring the protection and safety of the entire research team, particularly when conducting research in fragile settings.
- ▶ **Building national networks:** We encourage the formation of national networks of RECs beyond biomedical research.
- ▶ **Supporting training initiatives:** We recognise the importance of training for REC members in all areas of research. We will encourage and support the development of training programmes that equip REC members with the necessary knowledge and skills to address the ethical considerations specific to their areas of focus, including the social sciences, humanities, and emerging technologies.
- ▶ **EUREC's working group 2:** We invite representatives of RECs and network organisations of national RECs reviewing research with and on humans to join EUREC's working group 2 activities, fostering a unified approach to research ethics.

Call to action

EUREC recognises that addressing the ethical challenges in research involving human participants requires collective action and commitment from all stakeholders. We call upon researchers, ethicists, policymakers, and funding agencies across Europe to join EUREC in our efforts to broaden the scope of research ethics oversight and improve reliable trust models for individuals participating in research projects.

1. Promote collaboration:

- ▶ Encourage collaboration among researchers and RECs from different fields to enhance ethical review processes.
- ▶ Include perspectives from various disciplines in discussions about research ethics.

2. Raise ethical awareness:

- ▶ Support initiatives to increase awareness of ethical considerations in all research fields.
- ▶ Promote education and training programs on ethics for researchers and REC members.

3. Develop and refine best practices:

- ▶ Create, refine, and share guidelines and models for ethical research in non-biomedical fields.
- ▶ Standardise ethical review processes to ensure consistency across disciplines.

4. Facilitate networking:

- ▶ Help establish and connect national networks of RECs focused on research with and on humans beyond biomedical research.
- ▶ Promote the exchange of ideas and best practices among RECs from different countries and fields.

5. Advocate for policy changes:

- ▶ Push for policy changes that recognise the importance of ethical oversight in all research areas.
- ▶ Seek more support and resources for RECs, including those focusing on non-biomedical research.

Conclusion

EUREC aims to address the ethical challenges in both biomedical and non-biomedical research involving human participants, thereby upholding the principles of respect, autonomy, justice, and beneficence and ensuring that research endeavours contribute positively to the advancement of knowledge and the well-being of individuals and communities. By contributing to the advancement of research ethics governance in non-biomedical research, EUREC is committed to promoting ethical research practices and safeguarding the rights and welfare of research participants across Europe.