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CAUGHT IN THE LOOP: FACULTY NARRATIVES ON CHALLENGES WITH INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH COMMITTEES

ЗАСТРЯГЛИ В ЗАМКНУТОМУ КОЛІ: ВИКЛАДАЧІ ПРО ВИКЛИКИ В РОБОТІ З ІНСТИТУЦІЙНИМИ ДОСЛІДНИЦЬКИМИ КОМІТЕТАМИ

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: This study addresses critical inefficiencies in higher education institutions' [HEI's] research committee processes such as delays, poor communication, and outdated workflows that hinder productivity and cause faculty frustration. It aims to propose solutions like digitalization and improved monitoring to enhance Institutional Review Boards [IRB] effectiveness and research outcomes.

Мета. Це дослідження аналізує ключові моменти неефективності в процесах роботи дослідницьких комітетів закладів вищої освіти [ЗВО], зокрема, затримки, слабку комунікацію, застарілі робочі процеси, які уповільнюють продуктивність і викликають незадоволення викладачів. Дослідження пропонує рішення, такі як, цифровізація та покращений моніторинг для підвищення ефективності «Інституційних оглядових рад» [ІОР] для покращення результатів досліджень.

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Methodology: A narrative inquiry approach was used in this qualitative study, which stretched from 2021 to 2024. It used semi-structured interviews with ten faculty members to explore their lived experiences with research committee processes at a Gauteng HEI.

Results: The study exposed critical issues that include delays in feedback, poor communication, opaque processes, lack of researcher support, sudden postponements, slow certificate renewals, inadequate monitoring, and structural inefficiencies linked to office separation and lack of digitalization.

Conclusion: The study recommendations include implementing turnaround times, improving communication and transparency, digitalizing processes, enhancing researcher support, formalizing meeting schedules, introducing continuous monitoring, clarifying office roles, and nurturing cross-institutional collaboration to improve committee efficiency and researcher experience.

Keywords: efficiency, faculty experiences, Institutional Review Board (IRB), research ethics, research process, transparency.

Методологія. У цьому якісному дослідженні, яке тривало з 2021 до 2024 року, використано нарративний підхід – дослідження через опитування. Проведено напівструктуровані інтерв'ю з десятьма викладачами для дослідження їхнього досвіду роботи з дослідницькими комітетами у закладі вищої освіти провінції Гаутенг, Південна Африка.

Результати. Дослідження виявило критичні проблеми, зокрема затримки у наданні зворотного зв'язку, слабку комунікацію, непрозорі процеси, відсутність підтримки дослідників, раптові відтермінування, повільне оновлення сертифікатів, недостатній моніторинг та структурні моменти неефективності, пов'язані з роз'єднаністю офісів і відсутністю цифровізації.

Висновки. Рекомендації дослідження включають впровадження чітких термінів виконання, покращення комунікації та прозорості, цифровізацію процесів, підвищення підтримки дослідників, формалізацію графіків засідань, запровадження постійного моніторингу, роз'яснення офісних ролей та розвиток міжінституційної співпраці для підвищення ефективності комітетів і досвіду дослідників.

Ключові слова: ефективність, досвід викладачів, інституційна оглядова рада, дослідницька етика, дослідницький процес, прозорість.

INTRODUCTION

Higher educational institutions [HEIs] and journal houses have for several years fine-tuned research to ensure integrity, credibility, public trust in scientific inquiry, and usefulness of the research findings (Martin, 2018). Kirya (2019) concurs that they have devised mechanisms for that purpose, such as establishing research ethics committees and research committees, such as the Institutional Review Boards [IRBs]. Often, IRBs are labeled to reflect the HEI's name, however, in this study just IRB is used. IRBs play a crucial role in research ethics by ensuring that studies involving human subjects are conducted ethically and safely. Their primary responsibilities include review and approval, protection of human rights, informed consent, ongoing monitoring, as well as education and guidance (McNair, 2022).

On review and approval, IRBs review research protocols to ensure that they meet ethical standards, federal regulations, and institutional policies and are authorized to approve, recommend modifications, or disapprove research proposals based on these criteria (Perlstadt, 2024). They protect human subjects by protecting the rights, welfare, and privacy of research participants and ensure that risks are minimized and reasonable in relation to the anticipated benefits of the research (Shanahan, 2025).

Informed consent requires ensuring that participants are provided with information to be fully aware of the risks and benefits before participating in the study (Wexler & Largent, 2023). According to Capili and Anastasi (2024), ongoing monitoring means IRBs

are expected to conduct periodic reviews of ongoing studies to ensure compliance with ethical standards and approved protocols with authority to suspend or terminate studies if ethical violations occur.

Resnik (2021) explains that IRBs are established to also provide *education and guidance* to be resourceful for researchers, offer guidance on ethical considerations and assist them to navigate complex ethical landscapes. Research committees play a vital role in safeguarding ethical standards and institutional protocols. However, inefficiencies in these processes can become significant roadblocks for faculty and researchers. This study investigates such challenges through the lived experiences of ten faculty members, aiming to spotlight system gaps and offer actionable solutions.

– **Research Problem**

HEIs aim to uphold ethical standards in research, yet inefficiencies in IRB processes create significant challenges for faculty and researchers, hindering productivity and compliance. This study was stimulated by interminable complaints from study supervisors of postgraduate students in this HEI, mainly for master's and doctoral degrees amid top management's concerns that these students stay too long in the system as the HEIs lose government subsidies due to extended periods of their enrolments.

– **Research Purpose**

The purpose was to investigate researchers' experiences with IRB processes, identify systemic gaps, and propose actionable solutions to improve efficiency, transparency, and support in research ethics oversight within HEIs. The study also investigated issues of ongoing monitoring by the HEI's IRB, as well as whether the IRB provides education and guidance to researchers on campus.

METHODOLOGY

A narrative inquiry approach was employed in this qualitative research design study from 2021 to 2024 with semi-structured interviews conducted with ten faculty members (A–J) across diverse departments in various academic divisions of a selected HEI in Gauteng Province of South Africa. Participants were encouraged to reflect on specific experiences with the institutional research committee processes, focusing on principal touchpoints such as protocol submission, feedback timelines, and communication clarity. These questions were intended to determine the level of efficiency, transparency, and support in research ethics oversight, IRB monitoring and the provision of education and guidance to researchers.

RESULTS

The study generated eight themes: *delays in feedback, lack of transparency and communication, opaqueness of agenda and review process, providing education and guidance, unscheduled postponement, delays in certificate renewals, deficiency in monitoring, and structural challenges: separation and digitalization.*

Theme 1: Delays in feedback

Faculty members widely reported slow feedback after meetings, especially in terms of protocol signoffs. Respondent C shared,

“After each meeting, it takes weeks before we even hear if the protocol was discussed. Sometimes, it feels like our work disappears into a void.”

In concurrence, respondent J added,

“We hear that reviewers often take long to submit their feedback to the committee chairperson, and the committee depends heavily on the reviewers just like the journals. But by now a good committee chair should have addressed and solved the dilemma, as this has been long.”

Theme 2: Lack of transparency and communication

There are unclear timelines and vague statuses for the researchers, one such being “under review”, which has occurred as a shared frustration. Respondent E noted,

“‘Under review’ could mean anything. It gives no sense of urgency or what is happening behind the scenes.”

Respondent H added:

“We just want confirmation that our item made it onto the agenda [of the forthcoming meeting] so we can relax. A simple email would do.”

Respondent J lamented:

“They will not communicate. When you make enquiries, they tell you that ‘you have a tendency to do this or that’ but they never communicate. Tendency means they observed you for some time, and if they felt you do research wrong, why don’t they communicate. It is as if they put traps for researchers.”

Theme 3: Agenda and review process opacity

The lack of agenda circulation and anonymity of reviewers created a sense of exclusion. Faculty member G stated,

“If we don’t even know what’s on the agenda, how do we prepare? Not disclosing reviewers makes it feel like a secret trial.”

Faculty member D corroborated by saying,

“It will be more comforting if there was a mechanism to track the actual occurrence, instead of being told it is under review. They seem to say it is under review even when it has not been allocated a reviewer, because we wait for months and months even when we got the impression of under review.”

Theme 4: Providing education and guidance

Respondent F was strong in condemning that,

“The committee does not work like research committees of serious HDEs. In other HDEs, IBRs of other HDEs ensure that the researchers and research supervisors are educated in the things they need to do, and they are guided as well, for them to be comfortable and understanding.”

In agreement, Respondent J added,

“We have to figure out things for ourselves, no guidance and no empowerment, but blame comes in flood form.”

Theme 5: Unscheduled postponements

Sudden postponements without notice were particularly disruptive. Respondent B remarked,

“It’s disheartening when meetings are postponed, and we find out from a group chat days later.”

Respondent I questioned,

“But, if for a good reason there is a postponement of a meeting, why as working committees do the research committees do not convene within a short time to ensure the efficiency of the committee.”

Theme 6: Delays in certificate renewals and research clearance

Timeliness in issuing certificates and feedback was another critical theme. Faculty member A explained,

“Renewals can take months, and in the meantime, research halts. Clearance letters sometimes only go to students, leaving supervisors in the dark.”

Respondents I also stated,

“The renewal is done by one person, who wants the requests to come by email. We do that. But when we need the renewed certificates, we wait as if the committee first sits to discuss the renewal. Why do they not have guidelines for others in the research office to use because the chairperson’s turnaround time is very long.”

Theme 7: Monitoring deficiency

There is a strong feeling that the IRB in the HEI of this study is not involved in any monitoring, let alone ongoing monitoring. Respondent A observed,

“Are they even aware of it? The research committee on this campus need to be monitored, because they do as they like, and they are abusive. They inform you what to do, they do not suggest. They are not even knowledgeable in many fields.”

Theme 8: Structural challenges: Separation and digitalization

The combining of offices and offline processes, especially for contract research, have hampered workflow. Respondent A observed,

“There’s confusion over which office does what. Why isn’t contract research even online yet?”

DISCUSSION

This study draws attention to significant inefficiencies and structural challenges within the processes of research committees. These inefficiencies inhibit research productivity and generate frustration among faculty members (Aguilar, 2024), (Tuchyna, Kamynin, 2022). These challenges are categorized into eight themes. They stress systemic gaps that require urgent attention to enhance the effectiveness of IRBs in HEIs.

Delays in feedback: The continual delays in feedback and protocol approvals reflect inefficiencies in the workflows of research committees. Faculty members expressed frustration over prolonged waiting periods. According to Simsek et al. (2015), these stall research progress and diminish motivation. Effective strategies, such as implementing stricter turnaround times and increasing reviewer accountability, are essential to address these delays.

Lack of transparency and communication: There is a lack of clear communication regarding review statuses and timelines that worsen researchers' frustrations. There are also vague terms such "under review", which fail to provide clarity or urgency. Dai et al. (2015) warn that this leaves researchers uncertain about the status of their submissions. Transparent communication mechanisms, including automated updates and timely notifications, could significantly improve faculty satisfaction and trust in IRB processes.

Agenda and review process opacity: The study reveals the absence of agenda circulation and anonymity of reviewers, which the respondents claim to be encouraging a sense of exclusion among faculty members. According to Gobat et al. (2025), this lack of transparency undermines trust and collaboration between research committees and researchers. Introducing mechanisms for agenda sharing, while maintaining reviewer confidentiality, could balance transparency with ethical considerations.

Providing education and guidance: Respondents reported that they were not supported by research committees in terms of education and guidance. According to Blatch-Jones et al. (2025), such a gap leaves researchers to navigate complex ethical landscapes on their own, increasing the likelihood of errors. Masso et al. (2025) recommends that research committees should prioritize training programs that empower researchers with the knowledge needed to comply with ethical standards. In this way it will nurture a supportive research environment.

Unscheduled postponements: The participants complained about sudden meeting postponements without formal notification as they say it disrupts research timelines and erodes trust in the research committee's reliability. Huynh et al. (2015) advocate creating procedures for timely communication concerning changes, as it can alleviate disruptions and maintain operational efficiency.

Delays in certificate renewals and research clearance: Another experience entailed delays in issuing research clearance certificates and letters. This deters ongoing projects, particularly when renewals depend on a single individual's approval process because most of the time, the individual is not available. Aliu et al. (2025) counsel about delegation of responsibilities and digitalizing renewal workflows to streamline operations and reduce bottlenecks.

Monitoring deficiency: There is a reported lack of expected ongoing monitoring of researchers by the research committee of this HEI as required for IRBs. This raises concerns about compliance of the research committee with ethical standards during research execution. Implementing robust monitoring frameworks can ensure adherence to approved protocols while fostering accountability among researchers.

Structural challenges: separation and digitalization: Some structural inefficiencies, particularly the joining of offices and a dependence on offline processes, were found to exist in the systems of the HEI of this study. The study exposed that these structural inefficiencies impede efficiency of the workflow. This can be difficult as this HEI does things mostly manually, involving many files for many people. Schneider and Kokshagina (2021) propose the digitalization of all research-related processes. They enlighten that digitalization is fundamental as it can improve accessibility, reduce confusion, and enhance operational clarity, including contract research applications.

– **Broader Implications**

The challenges presented emphasize systemic issues rather than isolated incidents. Academic researchers feel played down in the research oversight process. For some of them, this reduces their motivation and delays scholarly productivity. The opacity in communication and lack of technological integration worsen these issues. According to Becker and Mongeon (2025), these findings align with existing literature on IRB inefficiencies. For example, Tzermpinou (2023) highlights that IRBs' delays of work of researchers tend to lack transparency and use outdated systems that act as obstructions to effective research oversight.

Whitney (2016) counsels that addressing these challenges requires administrative reforms and a cultural shift towards inclusivity, transparency, and respect for faculty time. There are examples of successes from other HEIs showing that simplified workflows, digitalization efforts, and improved communication can substantially improve research committee efficiency (Gautham & Pearlman, 2021).

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

These implications for practice notes are intended to enhance research committee efficiency and experiences of academics involved. Based on the identified challenges and themes, the following implications for practice are suggested to improve the effectiveness of IRBs and research committees in HEIs: turnaround times & reviewer accountability, transparency & communication, increase openness in agenda & review processes, prioritize researcher education & support, formalize communication around meeting schedules, streamline certificate renewals & research clearance, strengthen ongoing monitoring & compliance, and address structural inefficiencies through digitalization. The details are:

– Implementation of strict turnaround times and reviewer accountability

It would be helpful to conduct empirical studies to quantify the way delays in the research committees' feedback and protocol approvals affect research timelines, faculty motivation, and overall productivity. Also, they could consider exploring the effectiveness of various interventions (e.g., stricter deadlines, reviewer incentives) in reducing turnaround times. As a result, to improve this aspect, research committees in HEIs should start by determining clear, realistic deadlines for feedback and protocol approvals to minimize delays and maintain research momentum. They should also develop accountability measures for reviewers, such as performance tracking and regular feedback, to ensure timely responses.

– Improvement of transparency and communication

The committees could investigate which communication tools and practices (such as automated notifications, status dashboards) can most effectively improve transparency and researcher satisfaction. They may also investigate the impact of clear versus vague status updates on researcher trust and engagement with research committee processes. Hence, these committees need to introduce automated systems that provide real-time updates on review status and expected timelines to keep researchers informed. These systems could also have prompts that are intended to remind researchers. They should also replace indefinite status descriptors such as "under review" with specific, actionable updates for honesty and openness to decrease uncertainty and researcher frustration.

– Improvement of openness in agenda and review processes

There was an indication of a lack of balance between transparency and confidentiality in research committee processes, including the effects of agenda sharing and anonymous versus open reviewer feedback. This could be investigated. Another practice could be to investigate faculty perceptions of inclusion and trust under different models of agenda and feedback dissemination.

The officials, such as the secretariat of committees, should circulate meeting agendas in advance to researchers, such as supervisors and postgraduate students, to allow them to anticipate and prepare for discussions relevant to their submissions. They should maintain reviewer anonymity for ethical reasons, in line with journal review processes as

part of training for publication in the journals. However, research committees should still consider sharing general feedback themes to encourage a sense of inclusion and trust.

– **Prioritization of research education and support**

It is necessary to assess the outcomes of structured training programs and guidance initiatives on researchers' understanding of ethical standards and research committee requirements. Also, best practices need to be identified and followed for ongoing researcher support, as well as their impact on compliance and error reduction. One inefficiency of the research committees was their lack of education and support to researchers, which seems to lead to deficiencies in the HEI research system.

Research committees, therefore, need to create and implement regular training sessions and guidance materials on ethical standards and committee processes. They should also assign dedicated support personnel or liaisons to assist researchers in traversing complex ethical requirements, reducing the risk of errors. Any changes that they introduce, should be workshopped to the HEI researchers.

– **Formalization of communication around meeting schedules**

Understanding the consequences of unscheduled postponements and last-minute changes on research progress and faculty perceptions of committee reliability is important; hence they should be analysed. Also, the effectiveness of formalized scheduling and notification protocols in minimizing disruptions could be tested. The HEI research committees should address deficiencies shown in communication and meeting schedules by instituting protocols for timely notification of meeting changes or postponements to minimize disruption to research timelines. For improvement in communication, they should employ digital communication instruments to ensure all stakeholders receive updates promptly and reliably.

– **Modernization of certificate renewals and research clearance**

It is necessary to understand the impact of digitalizing research clearance and certificate renewal workflows on efficiency, error rates, and user satisfaction. In the modern state, failure to follow the best practices of digitalization could lead to underperformance and inefficiencies, as realized in this study. There are improved results/outcomes on delegating approval responsibilities to multiple staff members as compared to a single individual.

Also, failure to streamline permit issuance and certifications showed deficiencies and therefore, they should be improved. On this aspect, research committees should delegate renewal responsibilities to several qualified staff members to ensure that there are no more bottlenecks caused by individual unavailability. They should also consider digitalizing the renewal and clearance process to enable online submissions, tracking, and approvals to expedite workflow.

– **Reinforcement of ongoing monitoring and compliance**

Another practice may be to develop and pilot robust monitoring systems for ongoing research oversight and then evaluate their effectiveness to determine compliance and accountability. This is to eventually ensure they comply and that there is accountability. The committees can investigate academic and committee member experiences with different monitoring approaches. The study revealed the inexistence of monitoring and compliance. Therefore, monitoring systems should be established, such as policy.

Then the practice of monitoring should be ensured for effectiveness and continuity. Research committees should implement structured monitoring frameworks to ensure

continuous oversight of research activities and adherence to approved protocols. Further, these committees need to schedule regular check-ins and compliance reviews to encourage accountability and maintain ethical standards throughout project lifecycles.

– **Addressing of structural inefficiencies through digitalization**

Case studies are important and should be conducted on HEIs' implementation of digital platforms for research management. This should mainly be to focus on operational clarity, accessibility, and workflow efficiency. Moreover, comparing manual processes with digital systems in terms of administrative burden, error frequency, and stakeholder satisfaction could be made. The old ways, such as manual processes, caused much of the underperformance and other inefficiencies in the research system. It is therefore time for research committees to migrate from manual, paper-based processes to integrated digital platforms for all research-related activities.

These should include even the contract research applications. Research committees should invest in digital infrastructure that centralizes documentation, restructures workflows, and enhances accessibility for both committee members and researchers. It is expected that adopting these practices could assist HEIs to manage and bridge systemic gaps, reduce and eventually eliminate identified inefficiencies, and also transform campus research into a more supportive and transparent research environment. Such initiatives can improve satisfaction among researchers and increase research productivity while strengthening the HEI's commitment to ethical research standards.

– **Cross-institutional and contextual comparisons**

Collaborations of institutions have emerged to add synergies and for more institutions to grow quicker and better. In the case of HEIs in developing countries that are poor, sharing of equipment and resources, even human resources, have shown to be effective in quicker growth. The research committees may compare the identified challenges and solutions across different HEIs, disciplines, and national contexts to identify universal versus context-specific issues and best practices. They could also investigate the way institutional culture, resources, and policy frameworks influence the effectiveness of research committee reforms.

CONCLUSIONS

This study addresses critical inefficiencies in HEIs' research committee processes such as delays, poor communication, and outdated workflows that deter productivity and cause faculty frustration. The findings reveal systemic gaps such as feedback delays, lack of transparency, deficient research support, and inadequate monitoring that jointly hinder academic progress and research productivity.

To overcome these challenges, the study proposes administrative reforms emphasizing a cultural shift toward inclusion, transparency, and respect for academic time and labor, alongside practical solutions such as digitalizing processes, improved communication strategies, robust monitoring frameworks, and continual research support. Implementing these measures can enhance the effectiveness and reliability of IRBs, promote a helpful and efficient research environment, encourage ethical compliance, and quicken intellectual output. Future research is encouraged to build on these insights by developing and evaluating targeted interventions that optimize research committee operations across diverse institutional contexts.

To enhance IRBs' effectiveness and improve research outcomes, the study proposes targeted solutions grounded in participants' narratives. These include

- developing clear, easy-to-follow guidelines and expanding authorized signatories to reduce approval backlogs;
- establishing and enforcing short turnaround times with automatic status updates;
- ensuring timely agenda circulation while preserving reviewer anonymity; and
- formalizing communication to notify all stakeholders about meeting changes, avoiding informal channels.

Furthermore, the study recommends full digitalization of research processes, including contract research applications, alongside continual monitoring and support to promote research continuity and empower researchers. Clarifying overlaps across offices is advised to enhance accountability, while including all researchers and supervisors in feedback loops ensures transparency. Finally, collaborating with research committees from other HEIs is encouraged to broaden expertise and increase competitiveness.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

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