

Research Ethics in a Business School Context: The Establishment of a Review Committee and the Primary Issues of Concern

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Published online: 16 July 2010
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Abstract This paper describes the establishment of and the issues experienced by the Research Ethics Committee (REC) of a Business School within a University in Ireland. It identifies the issue of *voluntarily given informed consent* as a key challenge for RECs operating in a Business School context. The paper argues that whilst the typology of ethical issues in business research are similar to the wider social sciences, the fact that much research is carried out in the workplace adds to the complexity of the REC deliberations. The use of deception in the design of research studies, pestering the local community and the potential for harm to the researcher are also discussed briefly in the context of business research. The experiences of the authors', two of whom have served as respective chairpersons of the business school REC since its inception in addition to being members of the university level REC, inform the discussion.

Keywords Deception · Research ethics · Research ethics committee · Research participants · Voluntary informed consent

Introduction

Academic research, regardless of the discipline within which it is undertaken, often raises challenging ethical issues. Formal procedures governing the ethical review of academic research in the medical domain have been in existence for decades. That said, many academic institutions have only recently established research ethics committees to consider non-clinical research involving human subjects, either in response to national or professional regulation or to comply with what is seen as best practice. The generally

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acknowledged remit of these committees is the protection of research participants and researchers, the promotion of ethical research practices and the protection of the reputation of the academic institution. These concerns must be delicately balanced against academic freedoms associated with creating and disseminating knowledge. Ideally, the aim should be to protect research participants from harm, while not insisting on unreasonably burdensome procedures. However, juggling these multiple objectives can be complicated and research ethics committees are often perceived by the academic community as nothing more than an additional layer of bureaucracy, particularly in disciplines such as business where the potential harm to participants is perhaps less than obvious.

There is an extensive literature on research ethics in the realm of social science (see, for example, Haggerty 2004; Mertens and Ginsberg 2009). However, to date, there is a paucity of literature on such a process in business schools. This is notable given that the types of dilemmas facing RECs in business academia are different to those that pertain to social sciences in general. The difference is due to the nature of the main stakeholders and the distinct pedagogical philosophies that exist in business academia (Pfeffer and Fong 2004; Chia and Holt 2008). The imperative to serve the interests of stakeholders, especially in the area of professional/executive education, means that there is more pressure on long standing elements of the university research ethics process. In particular, the need to gain the voluntarily given informed consent of research subjects has been questioned. To be more precise, it has been the concept of *voluntariness* that has proved controversial in operation of the REC. The problem the committee has repeatedly struggled with is how researchers gain voluntary consent in hierarchical and highly disciplined corporate environs.

This paper describes the establishment of and the primary issues experienced by the REC of a Business School within a University in Ireland from the perspective of the respective chairpersons of the committee since its inception. The first section describes the establishment of the committee in the context of the institutional background. The initial difficulties encountered upon formation are then examined and the approach the committee adopted to meet the challenges presented is outlined. The paper proceeds to discuss some of the ethical issues that the committee has grappled with in respect of business research, the primary issue being voluntarily given informed consent. Secondary issues include the use of deception in business research, the pest factor and the potential for harm to the researcher. These issues are discussed briefly in turn. The final section outlines the conclusions. Given the dearth in the literature on research ethics in a business school context, our objective is to share our experience in order to assist other fledgling committees through the establishment phase and beyond. The paper raises many issues, in most cases without attempting to advance solutions. Every research ethics application must be considered on a case by case basis. Committees (and indeed, committee members) will have different views as to how the balance between protecting research participants and the creation of knowledge should be struck. Our intention is to raise questions on the basis of our experience in order to stimulate a dialogue about research ethics in a business context.

The Institutional Background

The University of Limerick (UL) was established in 1972 as a National Institute for Higher Education and was granted university status in 1989. The initial focus of the institution was to develop applied undergraduate programmes in business, engineering and science, technology and the applied aspects of the humanities with the aim of equipping graduates to work in industry, commerce and the professions throughout

Europe. As a result of this original focus, the primary areas of research in UL were, and largely remain, software engineering, bioengineering, material science, work quality and productivity, social and environmental science and bio science. Since its initial foundation, however, the University has expanded its range of discipline areas to include architecture, psychology, nursing and midwifery and a graduate medical school was established in UL in 2007. The University now has four distinct faculties: Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences; Education and Health Sciences; Science and Engineering and the Kemmy Business School (KBS). At the time of writing it employs over 1,300 faculty and staff and caters for more than 11,300 students.

Research ethics in the formal sense was not a feature of the UL research landscape until 1999 when the UL Research Ethics Committee (ULREC) was established to consider all aspects of working with, or experimentation on, human subjects. In the subsequent years the process was rolled out to the individual faculties. The pace of this process varied from faculty to faculty with the most important variables being management leadership and faculty buy-in. In the case of the Business School Research Ethics Committee, the leadership of the School has been extremely supportive. This support is all the more important given the fact that committee members frequently have to adjudicate on applications from more senior academics which is acknowledged as an often challenging task (Tilley 2008).

Under the initial regime, faculty and students planning to conduct research involving human subjects were obliged to complete and submit an application form consisting of seven pages of detailed questions to ULREC (see Appendix 1). The committee was charged with considering the ethics of proposed research involving human subjects and confirming whether or not the planned research was ethical. In terms of workload for the committee, the decision to include undergraduate and taught postgraduates within its remit was critical. This was a considerable burden in an institution which requires virtually every undergraduate student to complete an academic project in his/her final year. The increasing number of taught postgraduate programmes incorporating a research dissertation also added to the work load of the committee.

This was part of the context in which local research ethics committees within each of the faculties, and in some instances within discrete departments, were gradually convened to handle the more routine applications from both faculty members and students at a local level. To facilitate this local level review, expedited research ethics application forms were drafted for use in situations where the research did not involve vulnerable groups or sensitive issues, thus reserving ULREC and the more comprehensive application form for those projects involving potentially harmful research. More recently, ULREC has been renamed (University of Limerick Research Ethics Governance or ULREG) and reconfigured in terms of its remit so that it is now concerned only with policy and governance issues and all research ethics applications are now considered at the faculty level. This means that local committees are now charged with deliberating on the vast majority of applications. This in turn led to an intense discussion as to whether uni-disciplinary RECs should be allowed to approve applications (i.e., committees made up only of members whose area of expertise is the discipline area of concern). There are disciplines with very particular traditions in their workings with human subjects and the debates have centred around whether such uni-disciplinary committees should be “diluted” through co-opting faculty from other departments onto the committees. In the business school, the decision was made early on in the process that the REC would exist at the faculty level so as to avoid any potential difficulty in this regard. The basic organisational structure for research ethics within UL is set out in Fig. 1 below.

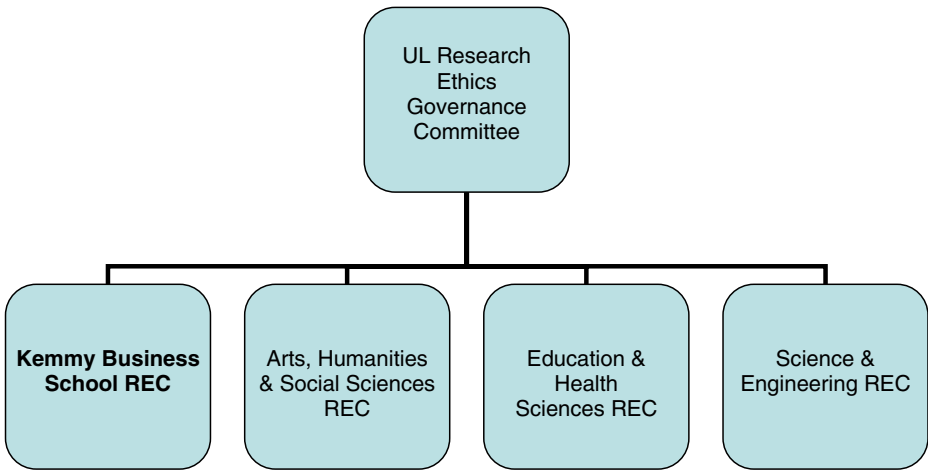


Fig. 1 University of Limerick research ethics review structure

The Kemmy Business School Research Ethics Committee (KBSREC) was established in 2006 to consider research ethics applications from faculty and students in the School. Cognisant of the need to recruit an appropriately suitable mix of members to sit on the committee, KBSREC consists of a chairperson, an administrator, a representative of each of the four departments within the business school (Accounting & Finance, Economics, Personnel & Employment Relations and Management & Marketing), a lay member and a postgraduate research student. The vast majority of the applications considered by the committee complete only Part A of the research ethics application form (over 95%. A copy of the KBS research ethics application form is set out in Appendix 2). Part A of the form contains a checklist system which allows the committee to quickly identify routine and unproblematic research. The committee meets once a month and considers an average of 60 applications at each meeting (circa 500 applications annually). Applications are circulated at least a week in advance of meetings to allow time for consideration. The main focus of the meetings is therefore to discuss the applications involving research that might be potentially harmful in some way. During the actual meetings of the REC, non contentious applications are processed quickly on the basis of the checklist system. In the case of more problematic applications, there are five choices for REC members: 1. clarify and send to the chairperson for chair's actions; 2. clarify and resubmit to the committee using Part A of the application form; 3. clarify and resubmit to the committee using both Part A and Part B of the application form; 4. rejection of the application; and 5. refer to ULREG for guidance.

The records of the KBSREC show that in the 3 years between March 2007 and April 2010 the committee considered 1,142 applications. Of those, 62% were approved immediately ($n=710$), 14% were asked to make minor revisions ($n=159$), 20% of applicants were asked to resubmit with more detailed information ($n=230$), 3% were asked to make substantial changes before being allowed to proceed ($n=33$), guidance from ULREC or another REC in the University was sought on three occasions while just seven applications were rejected (0.6%), see Table 1 below. It should be born in mind that in the case of resubmissions this frequently takes place under the guidance of a KBSREC member.

The Problems Encountered

From the outset, there was widespread resistance from business faculty to the idea of a mandatory research ethics review process. As a relatively new university with deep practice oriented foundations and a traditional focus on teaching, the necessity of engaging in and publishing academic research was being strongly emphasised at the senior levels of the university as the new strategic focus. The introduction of a bureaucratic process of ethical review was seen to impose a further administrative burden on already overstretched academics. In addition to research students, many of the taught undergraduate and postgraduate students in the business school engage in human subject research in their final year projects and dissertations and hence were obliged also to engage with the research ethics process, imposing further work on their supervisors—the faculty. The committee struggled with justifying the costs associated with the added administrative load imposed on a faculty who did not see any real ethical issues in the research in which they were engaged. The research ethics review process was perceived as necessary in the realm of medicine but for many it was entirely unwarranted in a business school context where most of the human subjects in question are well educated professional adults and the issues of interest were rarely of a personal or sensitive nature. It should be noted that resistance to the process of formal ethics review is not unique to the KBS or to UL with other institutions attesting similar experiences (see, for example, Williams-Jones and Holm 2005; Tilley 2008).

The precise remit of the committee also generated some heated discussions both within the committee itself and within the broader faculty domain. Should poorly completed applications with multiple grammatical and typing errors (or indeed illegibly hand written), providing vague and/or contradictory information about what appears to be nevertheless a completely innocuous project be approved on the basis that there are no ethical issues involved? Should they be rejected on the basis that the applicants have failed to engage properly with the process and have demonstrated a lack of respect for research ethics review? Should the committee be concerned with ensuring that the researcher has demonstrated that he/she has taken the time to thoughtfully consider all potential harm that may be caused by the research by completing the application form carefully and comprehensively or should standard answers copied from other application forms that have been approved suffice? In this regard we are conscious of the suggestion that “*the functioning of ethics committees may actually encourage an abrogation of the responsibility of researchers to reflect upon the ethical issues associated with their own*

Table 1 KBSREC applications breakdown (April 2007–May 2010)

	Number	Percentage
Applications approved	710	62
Minor amendments needed	159	14
Resubmission requested	230	20
Requested to change the nature of the research	33	3
Advice sought from ULREC or other faculty RECs	3	0.3
Applications rejected	7	0.6
Total number of applications considered	1,142	100

research” (Allen 2008, p. 106). Is it necessary for research ethics approval to be sought for informal information gathering, for example by students as part of a group project or pilot interviews conducted to get a feel for issues in a particular industry? Should there be penalties for non-compliance with the recommendations of the committee or for completely disregarding the process? How could compliance be policed? The KBSREC still struggles regularly with these issues and as a committee the local REC is just part of a wider configuration of actors with responsibilities in this area.

The interaction of the KBSREC with other research ethics committees has occasionally resulted in confusion. Research carried out on patients and hospital employees clearly falls under the remit of the Irish Health Service Executive (HSE) and approval for such research must be sought from the HSE research ethics committee. However, uncertainty arises when a study carried out by UL faculty or students involves both HSE and non-HSE aspects. Furthermore, KBS faculty registered as PhD students at other academic institutions may be required to secure research ethics approval from both KBSREC and the institution where they are registered as a doctoral student. What entity should consider the ethics of research on human subjects involving the collaboration of academics from multiple institutions?

The issue of funding has also presented an ongoing predicament. Faculty committee members volunteer their service on the committee but dedicated administrative support is essential and there was a struggle to secure that support. The KBSREC has access to an administrator who is assigned to REC work for 12 hours a week. Attracting a lay member and a postgraduate student representative with no incentives to offer but the prospect of hours of advance reading and a half day monthly meeting was challenging. Tilley goes so far as to suggest that membership of a research ethics committee is one of the most onerous roles in a university context (2008, p. 95). However, recruitment was eventually achieved and the addition of these members has certainly enhanced the range of experience and perspective of the committee. In the first 2 years of the RECs existence, committee members were funded to attend research ethics training. However, ongoing training requirements do remain and there are new committee members who have requirements in this regard.

The KBSREC Approach

The response of the committee to the initial scepticism from faculty was to take an accommodating approach to the process of research ethics review and, as far as possible, this approach prevails. This said, it has been pointed out to faculty that unless REC procedures are followed, university researchers are not covered by the University of Limerick’s insurance policy and this has undoubtedly focused minds.

The chairperson and departmental representatives make themselves available to any individual who has a problem with the process, explaining the types of issues that may potentially harm participants and stressing that it is not the committee’s aim to hamper research activity or to impose onerous restrictions on academics or students. Tilley (2008) observes that much depends on the background, knowledge and experience of the chairperson as to the manner in which he/she will approach the ethics review process and we have found this to be true of both the chairperson’s role and the role of other committee members. Engagement on the part of the chairperson and committee members with stakeholders reduces the number of problematic applications and over time there has

been a growing awareness of the type of proposals that run the risk of being delayed or turned down. While all applications must be considered by the whole committee at monthly meetings, the chairperson routinely deals with clarifications and resubmissions on an ongoing basis to avoid primary research being delayed for lengthy periods. Following the example of other committees (see, for example, Tilley 2008), the research ethics application forms have been altered based on feedback in an attempt to make them more user-friendly. Increasingly, applicants will seek advice on the completion of forms from committee members in advance of submission, increasing the quality of the information on the forms and the likelihood that any ethical issues will have been ironed out prior to submission.

While it is acknowledged in the literature that the interaction between research ethics committees and researchers is often marred by distrust and conflict (Allen 2008), the accommodating approach taken by the KBS committee since its establishment in 2006 has served to largely dissipate the resistance of the KBS faculty to the research ethics process. The majority of the faculty in the business school are at least tolerant of the process with many individuals now actively supportive of it. Research ethics has become an important component of all research methods modules and students are alerted well in advance that, depending on the nature of their research, they may be required to apply for research ethics approval. As faculty have engaged with the process and interacted with the committee, their attitude has softened considerably. Furthermore, as funding bodies and journal editors have increasingly demanded proof that research ethics approval has been secured for research projects, the process has become more palatable to academics, who now view it as something externally demanded as well as internally imposed. It is worth noting that, with the exception of health related research, to date the major funding agencies in Ireland (for example, Enterprise Ireland, Science Foundation Ireland and the Irish Research Council) have been content to rely on the research ethics review processes put in place by third level institutions in order to address research ethics and have not sought to shape how university and faculty level RECs operate.

Having outlined the challenges associated with the initial establishment of the committee, the remainder of this paper will focus on the ethical issues encountered by the committee in its role as reviewer of research ethics applications, with particular emphasis on the issue of voluntarily given informed consent.

Voluntarily Given, Informed Consent

Informed consent is one of the fundamental cornerstones of research ethics. It places an onus on the researcher to take appropriate measures to explain comprehensively and intelligibly the objectives and implications of the research to potential participants so they can make a fully informed decision about whether to voluntarily contribute to the research study (Kitchener and Kitchener 2009). Arguably, the majority of the ethical problems encountered in applications considered by the KBSREC since its establishment have involved the issue of informed consent in one guise or another.

Universities have traditionally operated according to a liberal tradition, which emphasises the notion of personal autonomy, and this is embedded in our thinking on research ethics (Fischman 2000; Christians 2005). The inviolability of the person, found in Rawlsian conceptions of justice (Rawls 1972), is influential and for individuals to enter an arrangement they must do so on a voluntary basis. One such arrangement, at least as posited

by research ethics committees, is agreeing to be a research subject. The main problem for the committee has been how to protect individuals from being coerced into becoming research subjects. If consent is to be truly voluntary there are clearly issues around whether such consent can be given where power relationships are asymmetric.

Consider a situation where a manager in a large corporation asks one of his charges to participate in a research project. The manager is pursuing a Masters programme at the Business School and this research is deemed to be a necessary part of his/her masters dissertation. In this instance we will take it as a given that such research does fall within the remit of the local research ethics committee. There are various distinct scenarios to consider and what follows captures some of the issues that have been debated during our committee meetings. The research may be focused on a highly technical issue, for instance whether or not a new technological innovation is functioning well. This type of research is, in the main, low risk and even though the issue of voluntarily given informed consent remains, the prospect of harm is seen as minimal. Such a project could be approved using the checklist procedure which attempts to capture how sensitive the research might be. Other studies are clearly more sensitive and in these instances more attention is given to the problem of achieving real consent on the part of the participant. Many of the more contentious research ethics applications originate in the human resources management (HRM) area of the Business School. Again we might use the scenario of a manager producing a Masters dissertation, only this time it is on bullying in the work place. On this occasion there is a greater need to protect the research participant and to consider whether in fact it is appropriate for a line manager to use his/her charges as research subjects. This need for greater protection stems, in part, from notions of selfhood. The bullying issue has the potential to expose the self in a way that the aforementioned technical issue simply does not. HRM students have also opted to look at the “glass ceiling”, race/culture in the workplace, and well being at work. All of these are problematic for a research ethics committee as they imply a degree of vulnerability on the part of research participants and given the obvious difficulties in refusing to participate in a study being carried out by a line manager, there is a clear need for some controls in these areas.

On the other side of argument, there is the desire within the HRM community to improve practice and ensure practitioners are more reflective. Indeed the desire for excellence itself has been an important element within the tradition of ethical thinking (Rawls 1972). Many of the projects reviewed by the committee are clearly motivated by this altruistic desire for improvement and the creation of a more benign workplace environment. As a committee, we are conscious of the danger that RECs may serve to restrict, or indeed, prohibit certain research methodologies or the conduct of research with particular communities on ethical grounds (Van Den Hoonaard 2006; Allen 2008). It is also worth noting that many of these projects will take place anyway, irrespective of whether a university research committee grants approval. The only difference is that they will not be a part of an academic project. This leaves the REC open to accusations of “gold plating” and/or being out of touch.

At the heart of these difficulties for a business school REC is the nature of contemporary economic life. Whilst the free market economy in which we live privileges the ideas of freedom and choice and the individual, it also creates highly disciplined hierarchical organisations in which personal autonomy is very limited. It is difficult to envisage how freely given consent can be achieved in this environment. At the same time, it may be difficult for a university research ethics committee to hold this particular line on *voluntary* informed consent as the philosophy of Business Schools is

increasingly more aligned to commercial entities as they become more responsive market driven institutions.

These issues are about competing claims. On the one hand are the inviolability of the individual, personal autonomy and notion of the private sphere, and on the other, the building of capacity among the post graduate community and the further integration of university business schools with one of their principal stakeholders.

In the spirit of academic freedom, rather than prohibiting such research on research ethics grounds, KBSREC may recommend, for example, that, where possible, mature students swap organisations when carrying out their research in order that the researcher does not work in the organisation which is the focus of the study. Another alternative is for the researchers to use an on-line survey using software to ensure the anonymity of participants and thereby eliminate any feelings of duress. In so far as participants can freely choose to participate or not as they desire, the committee is typically happy to approve the proposed research.

Academics also have to overcome this problem of voluntary informed consent. For many years faculty based researchers have used students as research participants. This reasonably common practice presents a problem when the researcher is responsible for grading students who then feel under duress to be involved in the research in case non-participation affects their course grade. Using dedicated teaching time to conduct research on a captive participant group may also present an ethical issue if the issue being researched is not part of the curriculum. In such instances, the committee usually recommends that research be conducted outside class time with an independent party engaging with the student participants and keeping the identities of those participating from the researcher who is grading the students. The fact that participation is entirely voluntary needs to be strongly emphasised.

Informed Consent and Representation

Another related issue is how student researchers represent themselves and who owns the data collected when part time students are also employees of an institution who may be supporting them in the context of time and funding. If an employer company wants the student employee to conduct specific research as part of the educational qualification (e.g., market research as to the desirability of a particular product or a focus group as to what customers seek when selecting a service provider), should the participants be made aware that the student researcher works for a commercial organisation in order to be in a position to give informed consent to be involved in the research? In general terms, the KBSREC will provide approval for such research projects only on the basis that potential participants are informed that the research has a dual use and has been commissioned by a commercial enterprise. Students must also typically identify themselves, not only as UL students, but as employees of a particular entity in the event that this is relevant to the research project in question. One germane project involved a student who was employed by a company operating within a specific industry, proposing to carry out interviews with representatives from other companies within the industry as to their perception of the challenges being faced by the industry and how they planned to tackle those challenges. KBSREC insisted that the researcher identify him/herself as an employee of a rival company so that potential participants could decide whether to contribute to the research with the benefit of full information as to the nature of the research project and who was carrying out the research. Employees of the Irish Revenue Commissioners (Revenue) are one of the student cohorts in

the KBS and particular care is taken that these students identify themselves as Revenue employees where they undertake primary research as part of their research projects. This is to protect both the researcher and the research subject. If we take the example of research on tax compliance; the researcher may uncover information on non-compliance and may feel he has to report it to a line manager for fear that in the future he/she might be accused of “sitting on the information”.¹ For the research participant, it changes the nature of the relationship if the researcher is a Revenue employee. The position of the REC in this instance has a cost. This insistence that the Revenue employees identify themselves as such effectively means that primary research on tax compliance carried out by Revenue students using taxpayer participants is nigh on impossible.

Other Issues for KBSREC

While voluntarily given, informed consent is the primary issue KBSREC grapples with on a regular basis, other research ethics issues identified as prevalent in a social science context also arise in the realm of business research. These include the use of deception in research design, the nuisance factor and the potential for the researcher to be harmed. Each of these issues is considered briefly below in the context of the applications considered by KBSREC.

Deception

While not commonly employed in business research, the use of intentional deception has, nevertheless, an established tradition in the field of social science (Homan 1980). Baumrind (1985, p. 165) defines it as “*withholding information in order to obtain participation that the participant might otherwise decline, using deceptive instructions and confederate manipulations in laboratory research, and employing concealment and staged manipulations in field settings*”. The use of deception raises a plethora of ethical problems. The costs include harm to the participants, the researcher, the academic community and society at large (Baumrind 1985). “*The practice of using masks in social research compromises both the people who wear them and the people for whom they are worn*” (Erikson 1967, p. 367). The justification advanced for the use of deception is that certain essential research would not otherwise be possible and, in such cases, the end justifies the means.

The use of deception in the business research considered by the KBSREC is not frequent but the committee has had to deliberate on its appropriateness on occasion. The use of deception in research is not by any means prohibited by KBSREC; however, the potential benefits of the research are critical to the committee’s deliberations when deception is integral to the research design. In other words, the benefits must clearly outweigh the costs in this regard. Hence it is unlikely that undergraduate researchers would be permitted to use deception in the course of their studies.

A research study proposing to send fictional CVs to companies recruiting graduates in an attempt to study racism was denied ethics committee approval. The cost to the recruiting companies in terms of wasted effort (scrutinising fictitious CVs and contacting

¹ The KBSREC rejected a proposal from one student/professional to investigate racism in the workplace on the grounds that no clear answer was given to the question as to what the researcher would do if they uncovered evidence of racism.

the fictitious candidate if selected for interview), as well as the potential harm to society that would be caused if employers suspected that fictitious CVs were in circulation, was considered too high a cost to justify on the basis of the potential benefits of the research. Another important consideration was the impact such a study would have on the work placement function within the university. Given the potential risks associated with this research, the committee also considered what was regarded as the low likelihood of the research being published and this was an important consideration. Registering on dating websites under the guise of a desire to meet a compatible romantic partner when the real motivation was to conduct a content analysis of the advertisements posted on the site (only accessible by registered members who had paid a registration fee) represents another example. KBSREC recommended that the research be confined to advertisements openly published in papers or magazines and therefore already in the public domain rather than carried out on advertisements which the authors trusted were only made available to members registered with the site who presumably had the appropriate motivation for scrutinising the content.

'Pest' Factor

Leaving aside the issue of the use of deception or misrepresentation in research, public tolerance for academic research and the goodwill of research participants are finite resources. Even in 1973, Warwick argued that the sheer overexposure of the public to all types of research was likely to contaminate the research environment for other uses. He suggests that the greater the nuisance value of social research, the more difficult carrying out field research will become, warning that "*a lack of concern for professional integrity may spell the death of field research*" (Warwick 1973, p. 36). KBSREC has heard anecdotal evidence to suggest that some institutions located in the vicinity of the University have been contacted by UL faculty and students with such regularity that they refuse to take any calls from the institution at this point. The issue of nuisance is of grave concern to the committee especially in the context of the sheer volume of undergraduate and taught postgraduate students doing primary research involving human subjects. Potentially valuable research carried out by qualified academics may prove impossible to undertake if the potential participant population is contaminated by overexposure to badly conducted research carried out by undergraduate students which will never be of benefit to anyone beyond the student. In this context, ULREG has established a working group to examine the 'pest' factor associated with student projects with a view to developing policy in this regard.

Harm to the Researcher

The protection of both KBS faculty and student researchers is also part of the remit of KBSREC. Many of our student researchers are relatively young and inexperienced. What happens in the event that researchers uncover racial discrimination in a workplace, evidence of bullying or blatant disregard for the law? Do they have a responsibility to report such findings to the authorities? If a UL researcher fails to report evidence of malpractice and greater harm is subsequently caused, is he/she partially responsible? Is the University liable in any manner? These kinds of questions remain for the most part unanswered. KBSREC is conscious of the potential for researchers to be upset by and/or unable to properly cope with the emotional distress of research participants who are being questioned about sensitive issues, for example, failure to be promoted at work, being made redundant or sexual

harassment in the workplace. Inexperienced researchers are typically steered away from research of a sensitive nature for their own, as well as the potential participants', protection. Thus far the committee has not had to consider research proposals which would place the researcher in physical harm.

Conclusions

In the 4 years since its initial establishment, KBSREC has undoubtedly made significant progress in terms of integrating itself into the fabric of the research culture of the Kemmy Business School. Much of the resistance to research ethics review has dissipated and most KBS faculty not only engage with the process but ensure that their students are both aware of it and are guided through it as part of their UL education. There have been some rather predictable consequences. It is becoming clear that the appetite among the undergraduate and taught post-graduate population to take on high-risk research projects is in decline. As the data in Table 1 show, outright rejection of applications are rare but the every existence of the REC is resulting in these groups steering (or being steered away) from areas where the REC may impose a delay or ask for substantive changes to the project. Should this development be welcomed? One the one hand, inexperienced researchers are less likely to be working on sensitive issues and so the risk to both informants and themselves may be lessened. On the other side of the argument, researchers (often professional in their own right) are perhaps less likely to embark on a research project that really inspires them and generates passion in others.

In terms of the typology of ethical issues that arise in the conduct of business research, in the main they are similar to those in other social sciences. For the KBSREC the efforts have centred on ensuring that consent is voluntary and informed, deciding whether the use of deception in the research design is warranted, discussing the overexposure of society to research that is largely valueless and the protection of both researchers and research participants. That said, there are important distinctions in that much of the research, in particular in the management and human resources areas, is carried out in the work place environment. This raises some profound questions about how to ensure consent is voluntary in organisations where power is distributed asymmetrically.

In outlining the experience of KBSREC from its inception, both in the context of its evolution and in terms of the types of issues that have been encountered and considered by the committee, we hope to be of assistance to other research ethics committees in the business context and, perhaps, in other social science disciplines. This paper raises many important questions. Our objective in so doing is to stimulate a dialogue about research ethics in a business context, an area suffering from neglect in the extant literature but nonetheless relevant to all business academics engaged in primary research.

Appendix 1

**University of Limerick Research Ethics Committee (ULREC)
Application Form**

1	Title of Research Project

2	Period for which approval is sought

3	Project Investigators
----------	------------------------------

3a Principal Investigator	
Name	
Department	
Position	
Qualifications	
Telephone Number	
e-mail address	

3b Other Investigators		
Name	Qualifications & Affiliation	Signature

4	Head of Department(s)
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I have read through this application and am aware of the possible risks to subjects involved in this study. I hereby authorise the Principal Investigator named above to conduct this research project.

Name	Department	Date	Signature

5	Study Descriptors
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<i>Please indicate the terms that apply to this research project</i>			
Healthy Adults	<input type="checkbox"/>	Healthy Children (< 18 yrs)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Patient Adults	<input type="checkbox"/>	Patient Children (< 18 yrs)	<input type="checkbox"/>
'Potentially Vulnerable' Adults	<input type="checkbox"/>	'Potentially Vulnerable' Children	<input type="checkbox"/>
Physical Activity	<input type="checkbox"/>	Questionnaire/Interview	<input type="checkbox"/>
Medical Devices / Drugs	<input type="checkbox"/>	Video Recording/Photography	<input type="checkbox"/>
Food/Drink Supplementation	<input type="checkbox"/>	Collection of Personal Details	<input type="checkbox"/>
Measure Physical in Nature	<input type="checkbox"/>	Measure Psychological in Nature	<input type="checkbox"/>
Body Tissue Samples	<input type="checkbox"/>	Observational	<input type="checkbox"/>
Body Fluids Samples (e.g. blood)	<input type="checkbox"/>	Record Based	<input type="checkbox"/>

6 Project Design

6a Justification for Research Project *(Include reference to published work)*

6b Hypotheses or questions to be answered

6c Plan of Investigation

6d Research procedures

6e Associated risks to subjects

6g Statistical approach to be used and source of any statistical advice

6h Location(s) of Project

7 Subjects

7a How will potential research participants be sourced and identified?

7b Will research participants be recruited via advertisement (poster, e-mail, letter)?

YES NO

If YES, please provide details below, or attach the recruitment advertisement if written.

7c How many subjects will be recruited?

Male Female

Provide further information if necessary

7d What are the principal inclusion criteria? *(Please justify)*

7e What are the principal exclusion criteria? *(Please justify)*

7f What is the expected duration of participation for each subject?

7g What is the potential for pain, discomfort, embarrassment, changes to lifestyle for the research participants?

7h What arrangements have been made for subjects who might not adequately understand verbal explanations or written information in English?

7i Will subjects receive any payments or incentives, or reimbursement of expenses for taking part in this research project?

YES NO

If YES, please provide details below, and indicate source of funding:

8 Confidentiality of collected data

8a What measures will be put in place to ensure confidentiality of collected data?

8b Where will it be stored?

8c Who will have custody and access to the data?

8d Data to be stored for 7-10 years after publication (*Please provide details of storage of data during this period*)

9 Drugs or Medical Devices

Are Drugs or Medical Devices to be used?

YES NO

If YES please complete 9a to 9c

9a Details of the Drugs or Devices (including name, strength, dosage, route of administration)

9b Details of Clinical Trial Certificate, Exemption Certificate or Product Licence (The Product Licence must cover the proposed use in the Project – see Guidelines No. 11)

9c Details of any Risks (Both to subjects and staff; indicate current experience with the drug or device)

10 Professional Indemnity

Does this application conform to the University's professional indemnity policy?

YES NO

If NO please indicate the professional indemnity arrangements in place for this application (attach policy if necessary):

11 Information Documents

Please note: failure to provide the necessary documentation will delay the consideration of the application. Please complete the checklist below:

<i>Documents</i>	<i>Included?</i>	
Subject Information Sheet	YES <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	N/A
Parent/Carer Information Sheet	YES <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	N/A
Subject Informed Consent Form	YES <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	N/A
Parent/Carer Informed Consent Form	YES <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	N/A
Questionnaire	YES <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	N/A
Interview/Survey Questions	YES <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	N/A

Recruitment Letters/Advertisement/e-mails, etc	YES <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	N/A
Risk Assessment Form(s)	YES <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	N/A
Acceptance of UL Child Protection Form	YES <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	N/A

Please ensure any additional documents are included with this application. These should be attached as a single document and included in the e-mail submission.

12 Declaration

The information in this application form is accurate to the best of my knowledge and belief, and I take full responsibility for it.

I undertake to abide by the ethical principles outlined in the UL Research Ethics Committee guidelines.

If the research project is approved, I undertake to adhere to the study protocol without unagreed deviation, and to comply with any conditions sent out in the letter sent by the UL Research Ethics Committee notifying me of this.

I undertake to inform the UL Research Ethics Committee of any changes in the protocol, and to submit a Report Form upon completion of the research project.

Name of Principal Investigator
Signature of Principal Investigator (or Head of Department*)
Date

**Please note: where the Principal Investigator is not a permanent employee of the University of Limerick, the relevant Head of Department should sign this declaration.*

1. Once completed, this form along with a single document containing and additional documentation should be submitted **electronically** to the Vice President Academic and Registrar's Office at Anne.ODwyer@ul.ie
2. In addition, **10 copies** of the fully signed application and any attachments should be submitted to:
 The Secretary,
 University of Limerick Research Ethics Committee,
 Graduate School,
 University of Limerick

Appendix 2



UNIVERSITY of LIMERICK

O L L S C O I L L U I M I N I G H

Kemmy Business School Research Ethics Committee Application Form

Faculty and PhD Research Students (please note that your answers must be typed)

Name: _____
 E-mail Address: _____
 Date: _____
 Title of Project: _____
 Names of other
 researchers involved: _____

Does the proposed research involve working with human subjects¹? Yes No

If not please proceed to sign and date the form and attach to your project.

PART A

Research Purpose: (50-100 words)

Research Methodology: (100-150 words)

¹ Examples of research involving human subjects include (but are not limited to): carrying out interviews; conducting a survey; distributing a questionnaire; carrying out focus groups; observation of individuals or groups

1. Human Subjects

Does the research proposal involve:

- | | | | |
|-----|--|------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| (a) | Any person under the age of 18? | Yes <input type="checkbox"/> | No <input type="checkbox"/> |
| (b) | Adult patients? | Yes <input type="checkbox"/> | No <input type="checkbox"/> |
| (c) | Adults with psychological impairments? | Yes <input type="checkbox"/> | No <input type="checkbox"/> |
| (d) | Adults with learning difficulties? | Yes <input type="checkbox"/> | No <input type="checkbox"/> |
| (e) | Adults under the protection/
control/influence of others (e.g. in care/ in prison)? | Yes <input type="checkbox"/> | No <input type="checkbox"/> |
| (f) | Relatives of ill people
(e.g. parents of sick children)? | Yes <input type="checkbox"/> | No <input type="checkbox"/> |
| (g) | People who may only have a basic knowledge
of English? | Yes <input type="checkbox"/> | No <input type="checkbox"/> |

2. Subject Matter

Does the research proposal involve:

- | | | | |
|-----|--|------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| (a) | Sensitive personal issues? (e.g. suicide, bereavement,
gender identity, sexuality, fertility, abortion,
gambling)? | Yes <input type="checkbox"/> | No <input type="checkbox"/> |
| (b) | Illegal activities, illicit drug taking, substance abuse
or the self reporting of criminal behaviour? | Yes <input type="checkbox"/> | No <input type="checkbox"/> |
| (c) | Any act that might diminish self-respect or cause
shame, embarrassment or regret? | Yes <input type="checkbox"/> | No <input type="checkbox"/> |
| (d) | Research into politically and/or racially/ethically
sensitive areas? | Yes <input type="checkbox"/> | No <input type="checkbox"/> |

3. Procedures

Does the proposal involve:

- | | | | |
|-----|--|------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| (a) | Use of personal or company records without consent? | Yes <input type="checkbox"/> | No <input type="checkbox"/> |
| (b) | Deception of participants? | Yes <input type="checkbox"/> | No <input type="checkbox"/> |
| (c) | The offer of disproportionately large inducements
to participate? | Yes <input type="checkbox"/> | No <input type="checkbox"/> |
| (d) | Audio or visual recording without consent? | Yes <input type="checkbox"/> | No <input type="checkbox"/> |
| (e) | Invasive physical interventions or treatments? | Yes <input type="checkbox"/> | No <input type="checkbox"/> |
| (f) | Research which might put researchers or
participants at risk? | Yes <input type="checkbox"/> | No <input type="checkbox"/> |

4. (a) Who will your informants be?

- (b) Do you have an **pre-existing relationship** with the informants and, if so, what is the nature of that relationship?
- (c) How do you plan to gain **access to /contact/approach** potential informants?
- (d) What arrangements have you made for **anonymity and confidentiality**?
- (e) What, if any, is the **particular vulnerability of your informants**?
- (f) What arrangements are in place to ensure that informants know the **purpose of the research** and what they are going to inform about?
- (g) How will you ensure that informants are aware of their **right to refuse** to participate or **withdraw** at any time?
- (h) What are the **safety issues** (if any) arising from this research, and how will you deal with them?
- (i) How do you propose to **store the information**?

If you have answered **YES** to any of the questions in **PART A, sections 1-3**, you will also need to comply with the requirements of **PART B** of this form.

If you have answered **NO** to all of the questions in PART A, sections 1-3 above, please ignore PART B of the form.

You should return **8 hard copies** of this form to Michelle Cunningham, Administrator, S2-07, Schuman Building, University of Limerick. This form should be submitted before research begins.

Student Signature: _____ Date: _____

Supervisor Signature: _____ Date: _____

PART B

This part of the application form is only relevant where researchers have answered 'YES' to any of the questions in sections 1-3 of PART A.

Please attach a report to this application addressing the following questions with a maximum of 300 words per question.

You **must** answer the following questions:

1. What are the ethical issues involved in your research?
2. Explain why the use of human participants is essential to your research project.
3. How will you ensure that informed consent is freely given by human participants?

Answer the following questions **where relevant** to your research project and after consultation with your supervisor **and** a member of the KBS Research Ethics Committee:

4. How will you protect human participants if your research deals with sensitive issues?
5. How will you ensure that vulnerable research participants are protected? (Please state clearly if you abide by the Child Protection Guidelines and/or have Garda Clearance where necessary)
6. How will you protect human participants if your research deals with sensitive research procedures?
7. Outline how you intend to comply with any established procedures which have been approved by ULREG for your research.
8. How will you manage data protection issues?

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