

# Negotiating the Ethical Conduct of Educational Research in an Institutional Review Board Space: Perspectives from a University in Ethiopia

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## **Abstract**

Some international researchers assume that there is a lack of ethical review of research in many countries of the Global South. However, numerous African countries have recently introduced local and national research ethics guidelines. This article unpacks how ethical reviews of research in education are negotiated in a higher education institution in Ethiopia. It employs a critical analytical lens to challenge some of the assumptions of Beaty's (2010) Institutional Review Board (IRB) stakeholder model. The article begins with a discussion of the limitations inherent in the IRB model. Critical analyses of institutional documents and non-confidential, off-the-shelf IRB minutes are also conducted. The analysis shows that researchers within the medical and health sciences disciplines have well-established organisational engagement when it comes to handling issues related to research ethics. However, limited representation of the educational and social and behavioural science disciplines remains a challenge. Furthermore, ethical issues in conducting educational research are hardly addressed in the national guidelines for granting research ethics approval. This results in further marginalisation of the contributions of educational research to knowledge production.

**Key words:** educational research, ethics, Institutional Review Board (IRB), research ethics committees (RECs)

Certains chercheurs internationaux présument un manque de suivi éthique de la recherche dans plusieurs pays du Sud. Cependant, de nombreux pays d'Afrique ont récemment mis en place des recommandations au niveau

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local et national en ce qui concerne l'éthique de la recherche. Le présent article analyse comment le suivi éthique de la recherche en sciences de l'éducation est mené dans un établissement d'enseignement supérieur en Ethiopie. Adoptant un point de vue analytique critique, il remet en question certains présupposés du modèle de l'Institutional Review Board (IRB – comité d'éthique de la recherche) de Beaty (2010) basé sur la théorie des parties prenantes. L'article commence par considérer les limites du modèle de l'Institutional Review Board. Des analyses critiques sont également menées à partir de documents institutionnels et de comptes-rendus disponibles et non confidentiels de réunions de l'Institutional Review Board. Cette recherche démontre que les chercheurs en médecine et sciences de la santé ont des positions clairement établies et propres aux organismes auxquels ils appartiennent, qui leur permettent de faire face aux questions d'éthique de la recherche. Cependant, la sous-représentation des sciences de l'éducation, des sciences sociales et des sciences comportementales demeure problématique. De plus, les questions éthiques qui se posent dans la recherche en sciences de l'éducation sont à peine abordées dans les directives nationales qui permettent d'obtenir l'approbation du comité d'éthique de la recherche. Cela a pour conséquence d'éloigner un peu plus les contributions de la recherche en sciences de l'éducation de la production du savoir.

Mots clés : recherche en science de l'éducation, éthique, Institutional Review Board (IRB), Comités d'éthique de la recherche

### **Background**

The establishment of research ethics committees (RECs) in both the Global North and the Global South arose as a result of previous abuse of human research participants. However, there are slight differences in the sources of abuse and the contexts in which such abuse occurred between Africa and the Western world. Scholars argue that abuse in the Western world led scientists to design ways and norms to ensure the ethical conduct of research and research subjects' protection (Ndebele et al., 2014). For instance, abuses by Nazi scientists during the Second World War resulted in the formulation of the Nuremberg Code of Research Ethics in 1946. This was followed by the Declaration of Helsinki by the World Medical Assembly in 1964 (Ndebele et al., 2014; Vanderpool, 1996). The formulation of such regulations and codes of ethics later became wider and more international in scope, and included the International Ethics Guidelines for Biomedical Research Involving Human Subjects (the CIOMS Guidelines) of 1982, and the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Charter, among others (Ndebele et al., 2014; Vanderpool, 1996).

In Africa, cases of abuse of human participants led to the emergence of RECs. For example, foreign health workers conducted dangerous human experiments in Zimbabwe and Nigeria in the 1990s (Ndebele et al., 2014, p. 4). The current state of research ethics and its review guidelines in Africa are greatly influenced by the continent's history of colonisation, and its relationship with global organisations such as the World Health Organisation (WHO) and their financial and intellectual resources (Ndebele et al., 2014, p. 4). Although research ethics guidelines exist in Africa, some researchers contend that there is lack of ethical review of research, and insufficient attention to ethical issues overall in research in many countries in the Global South (Hyder et al., 2004; Benatar, 2002). Studies also show that a large number of research proposals from African countries are reviewed by IRBs in the United States (US), especially when they are funded by institutions based in that country (Hyder et al., 2004; Kass, Dawson, and Loyo-Berrios, 2003).

The institution of RECs is relatively recent in African countries, including Ethiopia. Moreover, there is a gap in the research on such committees in Africa. Such studies generally focus on research in health science and related fields, creating the impression that this issue is less relevant to other disciplines (Beaty, 2010). Finally, most studies on research are based in wealthy countries in the Global North. This results in a "universal" notion of ethics that is imposed on quite different contexts, such as that of the African continent (Kass et al., 2007).

Less attention has been paid to what African institutions have done as their commitment to the ethical conduct of research at various levels. For example, the Protocol in the African Charter on Human and People's Rights and the Rights of Women, signed by members of the African Union, is one indication of the continent's commitments (Ndebele et al., 2014). Such statements notwithstanding, the study on which this article is based was motivated by the fact that research ethics guidelines as well as committees were designed and instituted for research in particular disciplines. In particular, issues related to ethics in educational research have received hardly any attention. Furthermore, in most cases, they have been treated as an appendage to practices in biomedical and health sciences.

Research institutions were established in countries like South Africa, Kenya, and Tanzania from the early 1970s to regulate the ethical conduct of research and to review research conducted in these countries (Ndebele et al., 2014). Recently, many African countries have also introduced national research ethics guidelines and established RECs, raising crucial questions about the ways in which these guidelines are negotiated within the institutional, cultural, and political dynamics of these countries. In South Africa, the first REC was established in 1966 at the University of the Witwatersrand.

Since then, major tertiary institutions in that country have developed their own RECs (Moodley and Myer, 2007). Kenya developed national guidelines for biomedical research in 2004 (Moodley and Myer, 2007; Ndebele et al., 2014), and in Zimbabwe, the Medical Research Council's REC has been in place since 1974 (Kass et al., 2007).

According to the Canadian Coalition for Global Health Research (2015), the notion of a national research ethics guideline is a relatively new development in Ethiopia, although in many ways, the guideline is more advanced than in other African countries. The country has national, regional, and institutional RECs that operate at different levels and with different mandates. The first national guidelines for research ethics were prepared and published in 1995 and they were reviewed four times by the National Research Ethics Committee (FDRE Ministry of Science and Technology, 2014).

RECs were established in the medical and health sciences even earlier. These were introduced to undergird the ethical standards in the country's focus on medical and health research and clinical trials. According to the National Research Ethics Review Guideline (FDRE Ministry of Science and Technology, 2014), ethics review committees (ERCs) were introduced at university level in the 1970s in the absence of a national research ethics review guideline like the one currently in place. Researchers in the field of educational studies who seek ethical clearance must follow the same guidelines as those used by and designed for researchers in the medical and health sciences.

In some contexts, such as Ethiopia's higher education institutions, policies that prioritise Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) fields tend to place less emphasis on research in disciplines such as educational studies and social and behavioural sciences. Moreover, research in the field of educational studies is usually considered to be exempt from IRB review (FDRE Ministry of Science and Technology, 2014). The resulting lack of oversight could compromise the ethical conduct of educational research.

### **Objectives**

Against the above mentioned background, this article unpacks how ethical reviews of research are negotiated in higher education institutions. It examines how the ethical conduct of educational research is negotiated in an IRB space in a higher education institution in Ethiopia. More specifically, it aims to capture the ethical review of educational research as an institutional practice in a public higher education institution and how the engagement of multiple stakeholders, including educational researchers, unfolds within this institution's IRB space in tandem with ethical conduct of educational research.

### Research Questions

For the purposes of this article, the ethical conduct of educational research in higher education institutions is framed as an outcome that is constantly impacted by the roles and interests of various IRB stakeholders. The issue of ethical review is addressed as an institutional practice by examining how these stakeholders impact educational research, and what the representation of educational researchers as stakeholders, looks like in the IRB under investigation. The article also identifies the lessons that may be learned from existing institutional practices, and national policies, frameworks and their institutions to ensure that ethics is maintained. A potential IRB model is examined to highlight its limitations. This provides clearer insight into how stakeholders interact and impact on the status of ethical review of research in educational studies.

The article poses the following fundamental questions:

- How is the ethical conduct of educational research negotiated in an IRB space in a higher education institution in Ethiopia?
- Which stakeholders reinforce (or undermine) the ethical conduct of educational research in Ethiopian higher education institutions?
- How do the roles of the IRB's various stakeholders play out and affect the ethical review of research in educational studies in an Ethiopian higher education institution?

### Research Design and Methods

A qualitative research method was employed to gain in-depth understanding of the ethical issues surrounding educational research, specifically IRBs in Ethiopia. A critical analytical lens was adopted to analyse the data. The notion of "critical" is used in the sense that the research sought to "question the basic beliefs and practices that maintain forms of domination" and the framework in which IRBs operate in this light (Postman, 2015, p. 5). Postman (2015) adds that critical educational research tends to expose "how particular forms of knowledge are systematically excluded" (p. 5). In a sense, the "critical" aspect of the approach also entails what Tripp (1992) calls "socially-critical". Socially-critical research in education is not only a means of challenging existing practices but also a way of "seeking to understand what makes the system be the way it is". Tripp (1992) also argues that in socially-critical research, outcomes will be embedded in "political actions as well as in the development of academic knowledge". Thus, beyond mere analysis of the qualitative data, the study falls within the purview of the "critical" in its approach.

The critical analytical lens or the socially-critical approach, to use Tripp's (1992) terminology, is used to challenge some of the assumptions of Beaty's (2010) IRB stakeholder model. The article begins with a historical review

of the origins of IRBs, followed by a discussion on the different types of IRBs. It uses IRB models as the conceptual framework, focusing on Beaty's (2010) model, and touching on its inherent limitations. The model is then used as a frame of reference to discuss issues relating to the ethical conduct of educational research in a higher education institution in Ethiopia, with a view to gaining insights that can be generalised to other higher education institutions in the country or possibly in other African countries.

The institution was selected using the following procedure. A total of eight higher education institutions that have established their own IRBs and scientific journals were initially selected. From these, an institution was selected taking into account the convenient accessibility of its Research and Publication Office (RPO) to the researcher, such as the willingness of RPO staff to share institutional documents, and to reflect on their experiences and observations of how the IRB operates within the institution. This institution has regular full time enrolment of more than 5,000 students. Its schools, faculties and colleges offer undergraduate and graduate programmes and an RPO has been established at university level.

Critical analyses of institutional documents were employed to capture qualitative data on the IRB under study. The National Research Ethics Guideline of Ethiopia; five randomly-selected, non-confidential, off-the-shelf sets of IRB minutes; and an unpublished IRB report from the university were used, along with insights gleaned from the author's own experiences and first-hand observation at the eight universities, including the one with the IRB that was selected as the focus of this study. The first two types of documents were obtained by e-mail request. The institution remains anonymous at the request of faculty in its RPO.

### **Conceptual Framework: IRB Models**

IRBs operate in different models across different contexts. In some countries, they are hosted by institutions that have a relationship with universities or other organisations that conduct research, such as hospitals. Due to neoliberal influences on higher education, a number of research organisations that are independent of higher education and training centres have emerged. Private IRBs that are not attached to any organisation are also emerging in various countries (Stark, 2012).

Devising a model to best represent the operations and organisational structure of IRBs would be problematic due to differences in their contexts and location. In line with this, Stoppe (1985) argues that there is variability in the structures and functions of IRBs and classifies their structure and function into three models.

The first is the centralised IRB (CIRB), which reviews every research proposal involving human subjects. The second is the Ad Hoc IRB Sub-

group (AHIS), in which “one or several members of the IRB serve in an ad hoc fashion to review specific projects” (p. 9). This ad hoc group ultimately passes the reviewed document, along with the Board’s recommendations, to the IRB, which is responsible for final approval. Finally, the Dispersed Independent Group (DIG) represents a model in which a sub-IRB review process deals with the review of research on human subjects at departmental, school/college, institute or centre level. The groups are empowered to decide at these levels without necessarily referring cases to the IRB.

Greene, Braff, Nelson, and Reid (2010) discuss an alternative IRB model for the ethics review process. The focus of this model is inter-institutional research review. It thus provides an alternative approach to the review of multi-site research. This model focuses on data-only studies in health research. Despite its origins in health research, it can be adapted to educational and social and behavioural studies conducted in multiple sites where researchers apply for ethical clearance in all the institutions.

It is suggested in this model that the lead principal investigator (PI) who originated the study submits the application to her/his institution. S/he also recruits a non-lead PI at a partner institution that is expected to submit an application to the IRB within her/his own institution. This model assumes that local contexts and issues have been addressed in the lead PI institution’s IRB review. The IRBs at the partner institutions cede the review to the lead IRB, which is the home institution of the PI. The model is attractive for its ability to avoid bureaucratic bottlenecks and to create a conducive environment for researchers to conduct their studies across institutions. This organisational-structural model differs from Beaty’s (2010) IRB Stakeholder model which is discussed in the following section, and will be used as a frame of reference to reflect on an IRB in a university in Ethiopia.

### **Beaty’s (2010) IRB Stakeholder Model**

Beaty’s (2010) IRB Stakeholder model focuses on the various stakeholders involved in the Informed Consent Process. Compared to the aforementioned two models, it is comprehensive not only in identifying the various stakeholders but also in establishing the researcher’s interaction with these stakeholders at various levels. Despite the fact that the model discusses research in the US context, it clearly depicts the level of influence of various actors and research funding agencies such as pharmaceutical companies that sponsor research in institutions. It shows how interest groups can influence the consent process, which stakeholders are involved in this process, and how researchers interact with different stakeholders for the purpose of achieving consent.

However, Beaty’s (2010) IRB Stakeholder model does not adequately

reflect the “stakeholders” and contexts in the conduct of ethical research in the Global South. Nor is the model intended to reflect the institutional realities within which ethical review boards operate in various institutions in this part of the world. For example, it does not explicitly state the institutional composition of IRB members, does not deal with the limitations inherent in the representation of different disciplines, and does not address the dominance of certain disciplines and professions, which is common in the historical development of the ethics committee itself.

Due to its focus on the consent process, the IRB Stakeholder model also does not address the review processes through which researchers from disciplines such as educational and behavioural sciences have to pass. Finally, this model does not provide a clear picture of the relationships among stakeholders and researchers who belong to various disciplines. As discussed in the previous sections, the historical emergence of ethical guidelines and RECs shows that they are designed to serve the needs of research/ers and research participants in the medical and health sciences. Beaty’s IRB Stakeholder model can be used as a frame of reference to understand the structure and function of IRBs, and the different stakeholders surrounding them, but it is not sufficient to show how ethical research is conducted, marginalised, negotiated, and approved in the areas of educational research in the Global South. It can, however, serve as a springboard to discuss crucial issues surrounding RECs in Africa, and other regions in the Global South.

### **Ethics in Educational Research: A Brief Literature Review**

As noted previously, IRBs emerged in response to major violations of human rights and ethical standards. However, these violations were first noted and considered in medical and health science research. Ethical principles and guidelines such as the Nuremberg Code and the Helsinki Principles were conceived following histories of abuse of research subjects. Howe and Moses (1999) argue that ethical principles and frameworks appeared in the medical and health disciplines from the outset, and ethics in educational research has followed these developments. Thus, Howe and Moses (1999) observe that “Codes of ethical conduct for social and educational researchers are a relatively recent development” (p. 54). However, they did not remain in an auxiliary position. Specific disciplinary approaches have undergone significant development and changes have also occurred in the inquiries in the ethics of social and behavioral sciences research (*ibid*).

The ethical values and moral principles adopted for biomedical and health research include respect for persons, beneficence, and justice, which is primarily concerned with protecting participants from physical harm (Miser, 2005). However, the educational researcher has a different ethical



concern. Hers/his is primarily focused on the privacy and confidentiality of the research participants, including through their informed consent, and protection of members of vulnerable populations (Howe and Moses, 1999).

Howe and Moses (1999) add that IRBs themselves lack expertise to conduct an ethical review of educational research proposals. Oakes argues that social and behavioural researchers perceive IRBs' ethical reviews as only appropriate for biomedical research (as cited in Beaty, 2010). Similarly, Ijsselmuiden and Faden (1996) question the application of moral absolutism across cultures and raise concerns about cultural sensitivity in addressing first-person informed consent. However, most scholars agree that the exemption status of educational research should be determined not by the individual researcher but by the IRB (Miser, 2005, p. 170).

The effectiveness of IRBs is determined by their power and responsibilities, especially on issues related to decisions to grant ethical clearance for a particular research project. Klitzman (2011) argues that IRBs "have power as gatekeepers." However, the extent to which they are empowered, especially in decisions that challenge authority, remains controversial. One reason could be the organisational space in which IRBs operate. There may be times when the interests of various stakeholders are in competition and conflict (Beaty, 2010). Furthermore, decisions made by IRBs may be determined not only by the ethical validity of the research, but also according to the ideological orientations of influential members, by politics, or by the concerns of funding agencies. Similarly, studies have shown that, in reviewing a proposed research project, some IRBs have considered the project's potential sociopolitical consequences (Ceci, Peters, and Plotkin, 1985), even though such considerations are incompatible with their legal mandate (*ibid*).

The capability of IRBs to exercise authority and power also appears to be limited by their relationships with funding agencies. For example, an IRB may issue an ambivalent decision that could appear to favour funding agencies, implying that those who pay the piper call the tune. Vanderpool (1996) argues that an IRB's authority is often manifested in requests that principal researchers modify their research protocols. However, when it comes to sponsors and/or donors of particular research projects, IRBs are often constrained. "It takes courage for local IRBs to turn down protocols that offer significant revenue and prestige" (Vanderpool, 1996, p. 135). They thus need to ensure that they exercise their power and authority in various ways.

MacKay (1995) argues that IRBs should maintain consistent record keeping because this empowers them when controversies arise. MacKay (1995) adds that one way to empower IRBs is larger and more diverse committees. Operational procedures in IRBs usually fall short of clearly drawn

authority and mandates. This is attributed to the lack of a clearly defined scope to delimit the extent to which committees might exercise authority (ibid).

While a few country-specific studies of IRBs have been conducted in the Global South, research on African countries is a more recent phenomenon (Yakubu, Hyder, Ali and Kass, 2017; Louw and Delpont, 2006). African approaches to ethics and morality are neglected in mainstream conversations (Metz and Gaie, 2010). Mutenherwa and Wassenaar (2014) state that the application of Western ethical standards to all African communities would be incongruent with and inappropriate for the research contexts, as it would not sufficiently address ethical concerns in educational research in Africa. Indeed, the notion of research itself is understood by many African scholars as “colonial violence on the African subjectivities” that leaves no room for local perspectives (Warikandwa, Nhemachena, and Mpfu, 2017, p. 65). The sum of these factors results in contested terrain for the ethical conduct of educational research in Africa. Having painted the overall picture, the following section reflects on perspectives on an IRB in a higher education institution in Ethiopia.

### **Reflections on an IRB in an Ethiopian University**

As noted previously, IRBs are not only hosted in educational and research institutions. Independent private IRBs are also emerging in some parts of the world. However, there is no record of private IRBs having operated in Ethiopia. Rather, they are hosted by universities and some foreign-funded health research centres. In the university selected for analysis, the IRB has a number of stakeholders, most of which are non-governmental organisations with a vested interest in clinical trials and pharmaceutical research. Many of the foreign partner organisations are based in the US or Europe and they provide significant levels of research funds for protocols by members of the institutions. They include the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the WHO, the Thule Institute, and the Marie Stopes Clinic local branch, all of whom promote medical and health research. None of these organisations has a partnership with social sciences and educational departments or researchers in the university.

As a major stakeholder, the Government of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (EPRDF) allocates limited funds for research by academics. According to Lerra (2016), the government allocates an annual “recurrent budget”, a block budget for universities to cover their management, teaching and learning, and research and community services. The proportion that goes to research is minimal. A recent case study on an Ethiopian university’s expenditure on research from 2005 to 2007 found that it was less than expenditure on any component of the recurrent budget

(Lerra, 2016). The lack of research funding, coupled with the attention paid to disciplines such as STEM, seems to relegate educational research to a subordinate or marginal status and impacts its ethical conduct. Most of the research funds in the institution under study are assigned to research in health sciences and natural and computational sciences.

Thus, most educational and social science researchers are unable to secure funding. When proposals from these colleges within the university are accepted, they are usually underfunded. This is consistent with Beaty's (2014) argument that "The funding is not as substantial for their research as for Biomedical projects" (p. 14).

The author also observed a clear pattern in researchers' utilisation of the media, which can be considered as another type of stakeholder. In most cases, researchers in the medical and health sciences and STEM fields have easy access to the media to disseminate their research findings. However, hardly any research outcomes that pertain to educational issues, such as the quality of education, instruction, pedagogy, governance, social justice, and human rights, are reported in the media. The author also observed that social science and educational research findings are rarely publicised. This could be due to news agencies' interest in covering the government's higher education policy orientation, which is focused on STEM disciplines. Thus, educational researchers have to contest for space and attention to the ethical conduct of their research as well as communication of the results of this research to members of the community.

Community members are essential stakeholders in the IRB under discussion. Indeed, as stated in many IRB models and guidelines, the IRB should include a community member with no affiliation to the university that hosts it. The country's national guideline also makes this recommendation. In the university discussed here, a community member was recruited to serve on the IRB from the time of its establishment. In most cases, however, the community member is a passive listener among academics who discuss the proposals using professional jargon and review protocols that are written in very technical academic language. This renders the role and contributions of the community member almost insignificant. Moreover, the signed IRB minutes show that the community member did not attend meetings on a regular basis.

Unlike Beaty's IRB model, social and behavioral scientists are not represented in the IRB group and it primarily deals with research from the bio-medical and health sciences. Discussing the ethical frameworks for health research in South Africa, Dhali and McQuoid-Mason (2010) stress that the primary objective of RECs should be "protecting the innocent and vulnerable from harm" (p. 2). Nevertheless, educational research in the institution under investigation is considered to be exempt from ethical

reviews. Only technical aspects of the research are evaluated by committees at the department and college levels in order to decide on the number of proposals that could be funded by the institution. As a result, consent processes, research participants' autonomy, benefits and privacy, and similar issues that matter most in maintaining ethical standards in research in education are not given due consideration.

The composition of the IRB also poses limitations. The minutes show that it comprises a chair; members from the medical, psychological, legal, veterinary, and public health disciplines; and a community member. No representative of educational studies sits on the IRB Committee and there is no separate panel within the IRB to review proposals from disciplines such as educational studies. Similarly, researchers are not required to apply for exemptions from IRB review despite acknowledgment in the national guidelines that such should be provided. This could be viewed as another way in which ethics in educational research is compromised. The researcher also observed challenges relating to language barriers that might have contributed to the conclusion that a project should qualify for exemption. For example, the notion of "research subjects," when literally translated into Amharic, the official language of Ethiopia, means a person on whom physical bodily trials are conducted, as is the case in much medical or pharmaceutical research. This suggests that there is no need to apply for IRB review for research in educational studies, especially that which involves human participants through approaches such as interviews, narration, and observation, among other non-physical methods.

A critical reading of the National Research Ethics Review Guideline provides insight into the extent to which ethics in educational research are compromised. The guideline specifies that "IRB membership should have a healthy mix of representation by different genders, disciplines, sectors, and laypersons" (FDRE Ministry of Science and Technology, 2014, p. 15). The reality observed in the university selected for analysis was in stark contrast. For instance, membership was neither diverse nor large enough to ensure the representation of all faculties, colleges and/or schools by at least allowing for a sitting member of each of these on the IRB. This would enable the professional views and expert opinions of academics from different disciplines such as the social and behavioural sciences to be heard. The guideline states that there should be a minimum of five members (FDRE Ministry of Science and Technology, 2014, p. 27), but does not set a limit. The open-endedness of this statement should have enabled the institution to recruit representatives from the social sciences and educational studies rather than stick to the minimum number. It was encouraging, however, that the IRB in the selected university had recruited a female academic member to address gender issues and representation.

Based on the first pages of the meeting minutes, most of the IRB members had additional leadership responsibilities beyond serving on the IRB, such as directorships or the role of officer. This is in addition to their main responsibilities of teaching and conducting their own research. This remains a challenge to the ethical, timely, and thorough review of protocols, as competing priorities may make it difficult for IRB members to approve documents within the time frames proposed by researchers.

In Ethiopia, the Ministry of Science and Technology is the primary body responsible for IRB oversight (FDRE Ministry of Science and Technology, 2014, p. 15-16). As noted above, issues may arise in relation to power in IRBs' decision making. Although its work falls at the interface of the academic and the political, the Ministry is primarily political in its structure. This could have a positive impact on administrative decision-making and a project's ability to secure funding from the government. However, it could also be a shortcoming when it comes to exercising objectivity in deciding what is ethical and what is not. Moreover, the guidelines are prepared with health research(ers) in mind. Indeed, ethical standards in the guidelines refer to standards in health research. For instance, they state that, "High ethical standards in health research can be achieved only when investigators aspire to such standards in their research activities" (FDRE Ministry of Science and Technology, 2014, p. 21). This illustrates that health research is the primary concern of the guidelines, with the implication that research in other areas of expertise is either neglected altogether or is subordinated to health research. Moreover, the guidelines do not explicitly address ethical perspectives on other disciplines such as education or the behavioural and social sciences, even though they are meant to govern ethical conduct of research in all disciplines. This lack of attention to these other disciplines may reflect their marginalisation.

The list of participants who were involved in the preparation and final approval of the national guidelines shows that almost all were from colleges of medical and health sciences and veterinary medicine, with some from non-governmental organisations in areas also related to health research. The name of only one participant from the social and behavioural sciences – from the School of Social Work – appears on the list. This lack of representation is evidence of a less inclusive task force in designing the national guidelines, and is a result of general neglect of the need for ethics in educational and other social science research. Section 7.2.1 of the National Research Ethics Review Guideline states that, "Research activities that meet the requirements for one or more exempt research categories must be endorsed by the IRB" (FDRE Ministry of Science and Technology, 2014, p. 41). Despite this, no application for exemption has been submitted to the IRB by the College of Education of the institution under study.

Hardly any attention is given to the ethical aspects of this type of research and how meeting high standards of ethical research can benefit study participants and community members. As a result, the status of ethics remains at the discretion of the researcher. Furthermore, where research is conducted outside the university's premises, the IRB has few means to actively monitor the consistency of a researcher's ethical conduct. As per the guideline, the IRB is responsible for "monitoring research to ensure adherence to the approved protocol in order to safeguard the rights and welfare of research participants" (FDRE Ministry of Science and Technology, 2014, p. 59). However, the IRB simply relies on a written report by the principal investigators to decide whether to follow up on questions of research ethics, which is in itself questionable.

## **Conclusions and Recommendations**

### **Conclusions**

Beatty's (2010) IRB Stakeholder model is useful in showcasing the different stakeholders involved in IRBs in institutions, including higher education institutions. As a conceptual frame, it was used in this study to grasp the potential limitations of the operations of IRBs. These include limitations in terms of representation of diverse stakeholders such as gender and active community members. Moreover, the lack of representatives from disciplines such as educational studies inherently undermines the ethical conduct of research in such disciplines.

This analysis of an IRB at a higher education institution in Ethiopia shows that non-governmental organisations have a major stake in health sciences research. The IRB mainly focuses on the medical and health sciences disciplines with no representative from the College of Education. Educational research has hardly any stake in the IRB space, further marginalising its contributions to the country's socio-political development. Furthermore, the IRB primarily serves researchers in the biomedical and public health sciences, which reflects the historical origins and development of IRBs, as well as the marginalisation of other disciplines such as the social sciences and humanities.

It is encouraging that Ethiopia has developed a national research ethics approval guideline. However, it remains problematic that it is primarily designed for research in the science fields, and rarely addresses issues in educational research. Ethical conduct of educational research is negotiated in the presence of an IRB which is loosely connected to the educational researcher. Maintaining ethical standards remains at the discretion of the educational researcher in the absence of representation in the IRB, limited ethical review and monitoring, and minimal professional support to adhere to ethical principles.

### Recommendations

It is essential to either modify the national guideline so as to include the educational and social sciences, or to adopt a separate guideline to govern the ethical conduct of educational research. It might also be a productive alternative to set up separate RECs for other disciplines, as is common practice in most universities in North America, although this appears to be a remote possibility and difficult to achieve due to a lack of resources, including insufficient budget allocations to cover the operational costs of separate IRBs. Stakeholders such as the media should also consider dissemination of research from other disciplines.

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