

BEYOND COMPLIANCE: DEVELOPING AND APPLYING A SITUATIONAL QUESTIONNAIRE ON RESEARCH ETHICS IN EUROPEAN PUBLIC RESEARCH ORGANISATIONS

ALÉM DA CONFORMIDADE: DESENVOLVENDO E APLICANDO UM QUESTIONÁRIO SITUACIONAL SOBRE ÉTICA EM PESQUISA EM ORGANIZAÇÕES PÚBLICAS DE PESQUISA EUROPEIAS

Article received on: 8/15/2025

Article accepted on: 11/14/2025

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The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest

Abstract

This paper explores the development and use of a situational questionnaire designed to understand how ethical principles are comprehended, interpreted, and acted upon within European public research organisations. Moving beyond compliance-focused and regulatory views of research ethics, the questionnaire captures both personal and organisational perspectives on ethically sensitive situations, including principles such as reliability, honesty, respect, and accountability. Building on previous methodological work, the tool was utilised within the Joint Research Centre's TTO Circle [1, 2] network to investigate how researchers and organisations perceive the need for ethical assessment across various scenarios. The findings highlight significant gaps between individual attitudes and institutional practices and reveal a tendency to prioritise well-established or formally regulated ethical areas over everyday research situations. The study demonstrates the usefulness of situational analysis in identifying tensions between autonomy and governance and underscores opportunities to strengthen ethics frameworks in research organisations through clearer, more transparent, and more context-aware approaches.

Keywords: Ethics. Principles. Survey. TTO Circle. JRC.

Resumo

Este artigo explora o desenvolvimento e a utilização de um questionário situacional concebido para compreender como os princípios éticos são compreendidos, interpretados e colocados em prática em organizações públicas de investigação europeias. Indo além das perspetivas da ética da investigação centradas na conformidade e na regulamentação, o questionário capta perspetivas tanto pessoais como organizacionais sobre situações eticamente sensíveis, incluindo princípios como a fiabilidade, a honestidade, o respeito e a responsabilização. Com base em trabalhos metodológicos anteriores, a ferramenta foi utilizada na rede TTO Circle do Centro Comum de Investigação [1, 2] para investigar como os investigadores e as organizações percebem a necessidade de avaliação ética em vários cenários. Os resultados destacam lacunas significativas entre as atitudes individuais e as práticas institucionais e revelam uma tendência para priorizar áreas éticas bem estabelecidas ou formalmente regulamentadas em detrimento de situações de investigação do dia a dia. O estudo demonstra a utilidade da análise situacional na identificação de tensões entre a autonomia e a governação e sublinha oportunidades para reforçar os quadros éticos nas organizações de investigação através de abordagens mais claras, transparentes e contextualizadas.

Palavras-chave: Ética. Princípios. Inquérito. TTO Circle. JRC.



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1 INTRODUCTION

As part of the H2020-funded NewHorizon project on responsible research and innovation, we explored the significance of non-regulatory and non-conventional ethics and research integrity issues in European public research organisations, aiming to go beyond standard ethics and regulatory procedures. In our daily work at the Centre for Innovation and Technology Transfer, we meet many researchers, and whenever we ask them, *“What do you think about ethics in research?”*, we consistently receive a very characteristic response: “----” (silence and a perplexed look in their eyes).

This experience motivated us to create a research tool for analysing perceptions of ethical behaviour in various situations within public research organisations, from both the researcher’s personal and institutional viewpoints. The work presented here expands on the development of a situational analysis questionnaire used to examine ethics principles in research within research organisations. Using this tool, we then carried out a brief survey on perceptions of ethical behaviour in different scenarios within public research organisations, again considering both the researcher’s personal perspective and the institutional view.

2 CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND AND MOTIVATION

2.1 Ethics beyond conventional and regulatory frameworks

The ethical issues we focused on extended beyond conventional concerns (such as integrity, responsibility, honesty, competence) [3], or more philosophical ones (dignity, non-maleficence) [4], and moved away from IPR-related issues (privacy, confidentiality, justice) [5]. The issues we aimed to analyse were also broader but, due to addressing specific situations, simultaneously more concrete than those included in the Consensus Statement [6]. Although this document emphasises that the responsibility for ethical research rests with everyone involved in research, particularly with leaders in research-performing organisations, it explicitly recognises that researchers’ morals alone cannot guarantee research integrity; good organisational and systemic conditions must also be established to support integrity. In short-term, project-based roles, the project

leader's role in fostering ethical standards is vital, as staff on shorter contracts are often not fully integrated into the organisation in the same way as permanent staff.

2.2 Context: the JRC TTO circle network

The survey was conducted among members of the TTO Circle, which currently includes 31 members. This constitutes a limited dataset, but it is highly significant, as senior officials from public research organisations are involved in the TTO Circle's activities [1, 2]. The TTO Circle stands for the European Technology Transfer Offices Circle, a network of research institutions established to unite leading public research organisations to share best practices, knowledge, and expertise, conduct joint activities, and develop a common approach to international standards for the professionalisation of technology transfer. The European TTO Circle comprises the largest public research organisations across Europe. The network currently includes 31 organisations (with 198,349 scientific staff, 5,243 software products, 34,338 patents, and 4,143 start-ups). The partners signed a Memorandum of Understanding to formalise their collaboration and committed to enhancing Europe's capacity to create innovative products and services for the market.

A survey and analysis of research ethics attitudes and behaviours were conducted to assess the level of inclusivity for ethics and ethical evaluations in research scenarios.

3 METHODS: DEVELOPMENT OF THE SITUATIONAL ETHICS QUESTIONNAIRE

3.1 Identification of ethically relevant situations

Having considered this, our analysis was based on a specific set of situations described as potentially ethically problematic by a group of scientists from three different countries: Sweden, the UK, and Slovenia. In this group, Sweden represented the Nordic approach, the UK the Central European approach, and Slovenia the Balkan-region approach to ethical issues. The group selected the initial set of situations to be surveyed and analysed within the TTO Circle.

The questionnaire consisted of five main sections.

3.2 Structure and dimensions of the questionnaire

3.2.1 General principles of research ethics

The first set of questions centred on ethical principles in scientific research and explored whether, and to what extent, these principles would necessitate specific measures or solutions to enhance ethics and ethical attitudes in concrete situations. An example of the questionnaire matrices is provided in Figures 2–5.

The general principles cover topics such as reliability in ensuring research quality, honesty in developing, conducting, reviewing, and reporting research, respect for colleagues, research participants and society, and accountability for the research process from conception to publication, including its management and organisation.

The main aim of this part of the questionnaire was to distinguish between several principles which, in essence, should all be equally fundamental to research practice.

Four (4) principles were considered, and respondents were presented with five (5) categories of possible approaches featuring different levels of formalisation. These ranged from non-regulatory methods, through a code of conduct or local policy, up to a formal legal framework and on-the-spot enforcement. Additionally, the option “no particular solution is required” was included to accommodate respondents who believe researchers should act independently and exercise free will without external constraints, including regarding ethical behaviour (see Fig. 1).

3.2.2 Personal involvement in ethically sensitive situations

The second set of questions focused on a specifically chosen group of situations and examined whether each of these scenarios should, from the respondent’s perspective, be subject to ethical assessment.

This part of the questionnaire focused on the personal viewpoint of the respondent. The scenarios were therefore presented in a direct, personally engaging way. The aim was to involve respondents emotionally and encourage them to answer from their own personal perspective, regardless of any policies that might exist within their work environment.

The broader aim was to lay the foundation for later questions on organisational behaviour. The core idea was that the questions and the corresponding answers in this section would help to internalise the topic of ethics in everyday research life, presenting it as something that concerns all of us, before moving on to the formalised perspective of the organisation.

Examples of such situations include: “accepting invitations to panels that did not make a demonstrated effort in gender equality”, “asking a new student to do measurements and using these measurements in a paper without giving him credit”, or “the process by which senior authors decide the order of the author list”.

These situations were intentionally designed in a friendly and personalised manner to encourage authentic personal responses.

Figure 1

The connection between research principles and required ethical monitoring solutions.

1. In the context of scientific research, do you think the following principles require any of the following solutions? *

	non-regulatory awareness raising via the listing of community expectations	a code of conduct or local policy	legal framework	enforcement	no particular solution is required
Reliability in ensuring the quality of research, reflected in the design, the methodology, the analysis and the use of resources;	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Honesty in developing, undertaking, reviewing, reporting and communicating research in a transparent, fair, full and unbiased way;	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Respect for colleagues, research participants, society, ecosystems, cultural heritage and the environment;	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Accountability for the research from idea to publication, for its management and organization, for training, supervision and mentoring, and for its wider impacts;	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Figure 2

The situations listed to be assessed with respect to the necessity of ethical assessment from a personal point of view.

2. Do you consider this to be a SITUATION IN NEED OF AN ETHICAL ASSESSMENT? *

	YES	NO
STEM cells research	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
research involving animals	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
research involving children	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
research involving adults	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
the process that senior authors decide who is included in author list of a publication	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
the process that senior authors decide the order of the author list	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
using an ICT tool for internal submission seen by everyone so anyone can request authorship	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
scheduling meetings outside 'core working hours'	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
organizing conferences that require travel at weekends	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
accepting invitations to panels that did not make a demonstrated effort in gender equality	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
formation of an interview board for hiring processes	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
asking a new student to do measurements and using these measurements in a paper without giving credit	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
researching new topics without a broad social agreement through a consultation on consequences	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
activities that result in personal financial benefit for the researcher	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

3.2.3 Organizational perspectives on research ethics

The third part of the enquiry examined a similar but less personally engaging set of situations, this time from the organisation's perspective. The main question was whether the organisation itself perceives the situation as requiring an ethical assessment. Our goal was to identify differences between researchers' personal involvement in ethically sensitive situations encountered in their professional lives and how much these situations are recognised and addressed at the institutional level. Unlike the previous questions, this section focused on simple, straightforward situations that are easy to understand in any research setting. These situations lack strong emotional connotations

and are less likely to be misinterpreted. They are not necessarily situations in which the respondent is personally involved. The aim was to prompt respondents to adopt an administrative or managerial viewpoint and to express their perceptions of the management's attitudes and practices organisation.

3.2.4 Institutional remedies and governance tools

The fourth set of questions focused on possible remedies or solutions that organisations might utilise to handle situations requiring ethical assessment, and it looked at how often such tools are actually used.

The suggested solutions covered a wide spectrum. At the least formal end, they included measures such as awareness-raising activities, like explicit statements of expectations from the research community, mainly aimed at promoting reflection on ethical issues. Other recommended measures comprised informal and formal guidelines, a code of conduct, and local policies. More formal and rigorous measures involved establishing an ethical review committee (or multiple committees across different research fields) and implementing and enforcing detailed procedural documents or policies. At the highest level of formalisation, national legislation was regarded as a legal framework. Respondents also had the option to state that their organisation does not consider ethical issues in the relevant contexts.

Additionally, several open-ended questions were included to explore why and how a particular research organisation recognises or neglects ethical aspects in specific situations. These questions allowed respondents to describe in their own words how ethics in research is understood and addressed. In this section of the questionnaire, we focused on research ethics issues that go beyond mere regulatory compliance, again mainly from a personal perspective. Special attention was given to unique, marginal, or innovative views.

We were interested in issues that respondents viewed as important beyond existing regulations, such as animal welfare or informed consent, but that might also relate to the management of science and technology, international collaborations, and similar areas.

Figure 3

The situations listed to be assessed with respect to the necessity of ethical assessment from an organizational point of view.

3. Does your organisation consider there to be ethical aspects and take them into account in the following settings? *

	YES	NO	I am not sure
prizes/awards committees	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
performance reviews	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
recruitment	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
letters of recommendation	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
governing bodies	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
steering or advisory boards	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
internal faculty funding	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
editorial boards	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
project invitations	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
visibility	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
project coordination	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
CV preparation	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
announcement of positions	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
speaking events	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
choosing research topics	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Figure 4

The possible tools to address the situations in need of ethical assessment, from an organizational point of view

4. In what form does your organisation take ethical issues into account? *

	YES	NO
Awareness raising via listing of the expectations from the community	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Informal guidelines	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Formal guidelines	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Code of conduct or local policy	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Ethical review committee	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Field and context dependent ethical committees	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Procedural documents (in terms of policy)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Legal framework (in terms of national legislation)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My organisation does not take ethical issues into account in the described settings	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

3.2.5 Matching perceived ethical needs with available tools

In the final part, the questionnaire focused on linking situations identified as needing ethical assessment with the practical tools available to address them. In particular, this section emphasised the real-world application of these tools.

The aim here was to understand the link between the theoretical assessment of the need for ethical evaluation and the institutional preparedness to respond to such needs.

To this end, a complex matrix was created to provide insight into the type and strength of remedies that respondents believed necessary at the institutional level to adequately tackle ethical concerns in specific situations. The aim was to assess the appropriate “strength” of the remedy relative to each situation. The initial assumption of the study was that some situations would require more robust measures than others, while recognising that not all situations would merit the same level of institutional intervention, given the widely acknowledged need to retain a degree of autonomy for researchers.

Figure 5

The usage of the tools to address the situations in need of ethical assessment, from the organizational point of view

ADDITIONAL 3: What type of INPUT do you think SHOULD be AVAILABLE from your Public Research Organization on ethical issues in the following settings (non optional extention of question 3)

	1. Awareness raising	2. Informal guidelines	3. Formal guidelines	4. Code of conduct	5. Ethical review committee	6. Several field dependent ethical committees for different contexts, situations, settings	7. Several field dependent ethical committees for different fields of science
prizes/awards committees	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>				
performance reviews	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>				
recruitment	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>				
letters of recommendation	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>				
governing bodies	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>				
steering or advisory boards	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>				
internal faculty funding	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>				
editorial boards	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>				
project invitations	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>				
visibility	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>				
project coordination	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>				
CV preparation	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>				
announcement of positions	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>				
speaking events	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>				
choosing research topics	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>				

4 SURVEY IMPLEMENTATION IN JRC TTO CIRCLE ORGANISATIONS

4.1 Data collection procedures

A dedicated online platform was created to ensure that each institution could submit only one response. The platform consistently provided access to basic information about the study and respondents' rights, and it allowed responses to be reviewed before final submission, but not altered afterwards.

The developed situational analysis questionnaire was uploaded to this platform, and the corresponding link was distributed to selected representatives of the member public research organisations within the TTO Circle. These designated representatives completed the questionnaires. In total, we collected 22 completed questionnaires from 31 institutions. The TTO Circle organisations constitute a representative sample of leading European public research organisations, and a response rate of almost 71% indicates a high level of engagement with ethical issues among these institutions.

4.2 Sample characteristics and research fields

The participating research organisations are active in a variety of research fields (Fig. 6), with most also involved in research and development within the IT sector (85% engineering sciences, 10% language, information and communication, 60% digitalisation, ICT, big data). These organisations are therefore closely linked to ethical issues relevant to IT specialists and other experts working in research, which is essential for understanding how scientific findings and facts relate to the concept of truth as perceived and accepted by the wider society.

At the same time, a broader question emerges: is scientific and research activity itself protected from ethical challenges? Moreover, how are specific situations, principles, and themes addressed when they occur within the research community, whether from the personal viewpoint of an individual researcher or from the institutional standpoint of the organisation as a whole?

5 RESULTS

5.1 Personal attitudes towards ethical assessment

The importance of including ethical assessment for each of the four principles (reliability, respect, honesty, and accountability) was explored in the first set of questions. Over 68% of respondents supported implementing a code of conduct or local policy to promote reliability in research quality.

In contrast, the only principle for which respondents chose the option “no practical solution is required” – albeit only in 9% of cases – was *respect for colleagues, research participants, society, ecosystems, cultural heritage, and the environment*. This finding can be understood in at least two ways: either respect for those involved in research is already perceived as very high (and therefore no further measures seem necessary), or respondents believe this area should remain largely unregulated and entrusted to individual research autonomy. It is worth noting, however, that 45% of respondents indicated that non-regulatory measures would be needed, and a further 45% that a code of conduct or local policy would be required to promote mutual respect within the research community.

Non-regulatory measures, awareness-raising activities, and a code of conduct or local policy were, in fact, the most frequently selected responses across all four principles examined (reliability, honesty, respect, and accountability). Compared to more than 77% of respondents who supported non-regulatory measures, awareness-raising, a code of conduct, or local policy, only 21% on average endorsed the use of a legal framework, and just 14% preferred direct enforcement (see Fig. 7).

Figure 6

The distribution of research fields of the interviewed research organizations.

Main research fields of your organisation (tick all that apply)

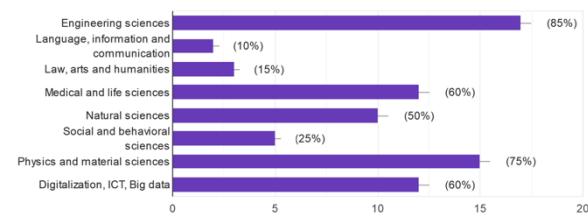
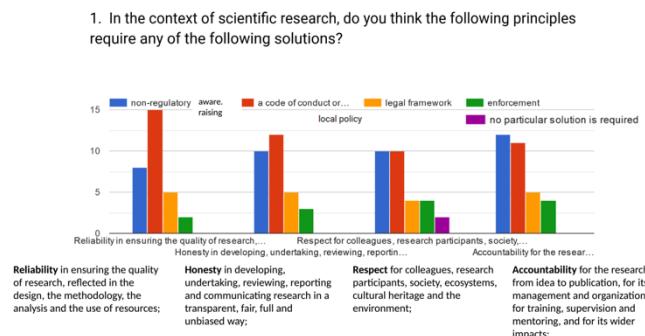


Figure 7

The solutions needed to assure the four basic principles in the context of scientific research.



The second set of questions examined the perceived importance of ethical assessment at the personal level concerning specific, common research scenarios. Several situations notably prompted a strong preference for ethical assessment: research involving animals (95%), research involving children (91%), stem cell research (86%), activities that lead to personal financial gain for the researcher (86%), research involving adults (82%), and asking a new student to perform measurements and then using those measurements in a publication without giving credit (82%).

On the other hand, certain situations clearly prompted the opposite view, specifically that ethical assessment would *not* be required. For example, 77% of respondents did not see scheduling meetings outside core working hours as an issue needing ethical review, and 73% shared the same opinion regarding organising conferences that involve weekend travel. It would be valuable to examine how responses to these questions vary by gender; however, such data were not accessible.

There was also a series of situations where only a narrow majority supported ethical assessment. These included researching new topics without a broad social consensus reached through consultation on consequences (57% in favour of ethical assessment), the process by which senior authors determine who is included in the author list of a publication (55%), the process by which senior authors determine the order of the author list (55%), and the formation of an interview panel for hiring procedures (53%).

Conversely, another set of situations slightly favoured *not* implementing ethical assessment: using an ICT tool for internal submission where all entries are visible and anyone can request authorship (59% against ethical assessment), and accepting

invitations to panels that have not demonstrated an effort towards gender equality (55% against ethical assessment).

5.2 Organisational attitudes and existing practices

As expected, organizational attitudes were more complex than individual attitudes. Out of the 16 items, an average of nearly 18% of respondents indicated uncertainty about how ethical issues are handled within their organisation. This indicates a significant lack of transparency or communication regarding institutional approaches to ethics.

Simultaneously, several settings clearly demonstrated an institutional tendency towards ethical evaluation. Among respondents familiar with their institution's stance, 83% reported that recruitment procedures are subject to ethical evaluation. Moreover, 65% indicated that job announcements are deemed to require ethical evaluation, and 70% stated that ethical considerations are acknowledged and taken into account regarding the composition and functioning of governing bodies. Similarly, 56% reported that ethical issues are considered and addressed concerning advisory boards.

Conversely, some settings clearly showed a reluctance to recognise certain activities as involving ethical aspects. Among those aware of their organisation's stance, 78% reported that letters of recommendation are not seen as ethically relevant and are not treated as such. Similar proportions were found for project invitations (75%) and the operation of editorial boards (70%). A comparable trend was observed for CV preparation (73%) and speaking engagements (73%). Importantly, 64% of respondents indicated that internal faculty funding allocation and memberships are not regarded as involving ethical considerations either.

In some settings, the balance of institutional attitudes was more moderate. For example, prizes and award committees showed a slightly positive stance, with 58% supporting ethical assessment. Conversely, other areas displayed a slightly negative stance: performance reviews (64% rejecting ethical assessment), visibility (60% rejecting ethical assessment), and the choice of research topics (58% rejecting ethical assessment).

5.3 Use of ethics tools and preferred institutional inputs

Regarding the ways organisations address ethical issues, most rely on awareness-raising measures, especially listing expectations from the research community (72%), and on formal guidelines (76%). Less formal tools, like informal guidelines, are also used by 66% of organisations, while more formal mechanisms such as a code of conduct or local policy are reported by 57%. Additionally, 53% of organisations utilise an ethical review committee. Over 62% have a procedural document (like a policy) to manage and implement ethical considerations. Conversely, the least used tools are field- and context-specific ethical committees (76% do not use them) and a legal framework based on national legislation (53% do not have such a framework).

Interestingly, 83% of respondents stated that their organisations do not fail to consider ethical issues in the described settings, implying that only 17% work in institutions that do not recognise or address the importance of ethical issues and ethical assessment in these contexts.

We also examined the type of institutional support that respondents would like to see provided in settings where ethical assessment might be necessary. For project invitations, visibility, prizes/awards, and committees, the most frequently requested form of input from research organisations was awareness-raising. In the case of performance reviews, respondents predominantly called for formal guidelines, whereas for project coordination, they most often requested a code of conduct (alongside awareness-raising of comparable intensity). Notably, for CV preparation, there was an equal demand for awareness-raising and a legal framework in terms of national legislation.

Respondents indicated that governing bodies should operate under formal guidelines concerning the ethical aspects of their work. In recruitment, speaking engagements, and internal faculty funding allocation, a large majority requested procedural documents in the form of policies, closely followed by demands for formal guidelines.

6 DISCUSSION

6.1 Tensions between individual autonomy and institutional regulation

The set-up matrix of questions facilitated an analysis of the use of ethical principles in public research institutions from multiple perspectives, including general attitudes, more personalised viewpoints, organisational standpoints, and possible remedial measures. The analysis revealed a clear bias among researchers towards already established procedures, which were most frequently identified as requiring ethical assessment, whereas issues affecting everyday life – such as work–life balance or the alignment of research topics with the cultural and social environment – were less frequently emphasised. This pattern suggests that researchers tend to perceive ethics primarily through the lens of formalised or already institutionalised processes, while day-to-day aspects of research practice are more readily left to individual judgement and autonomy.

A similar tension appears in the responses concerning the four ethical principles (reliability, respect, honesty and accountability). Reliability in ensuring research quality—reflected in research design, methodology, analysis, and resource use—emerged as the most unifying principle, with over two-thirds of respondents supporting the introduction of a code of conduct or local policy. Conversely, respect for colleagues, research participants, society, ecosystems, cultural heritage, and the environment was the only principle where some respondents indicated that “no practical solution is required”. This can be seen either as a sign that respect is already regarded as sufficiently embedded in daily practice, or as an indication that some researchers prefer to leave these aspects mainly unregulated and governed by individual autonomy.

Additionally, the analysis of specific situations revealed that respondents clearly endorse ethical assessment in contexts that are already widely recognised as ethically sensitive, such as research involving animals and children, stem cell research, research involving adults, activities leading to personal financial gain for the researcher, or the use of a student’s work in a publication without proper credit. Simultaneously, situations related to everyday working conditions – like scheduling meetings outside core hours or organising conferences that necessitate weekend travel – were largely not seen as requiring ethical assessment. This again indicates a distinction between “traditional” or

officially recognised ethical domains and areas of practice where ethical considerations are less explicitly discussed, despite their importance for fairness, inclusion, and well-being in research environments.

Taken together, these findings emphasise a tension between individual autonomy and institutional regulation: researchers often favour autonomy in areas related to everyday practice, while they are more accepting of formal regulation and ethical assessment in areas that are already institutionalised or closely tied to recognised ethical risks. This tension is essential for understanding how new or emerging ethical issues, for example those related to work-life balance or the social acceptability of certain research topics, might be integrated into existing ethics governance frameworks.

6.2 Implications for ethics governance in public research organisations

The distribution of institutional orientations revealed that organisations tend to focus on situations involving ethical considerations closely tied to financial benefits or research-career gains, such as recruitment, job announcements, and the composition and functioning of governing bodies. Conversely, daily research activities and routine work – including letters of recommendation, project invitations, editorial board duties, CV preparation, speaking engagements, internal funding decisions, and memberships – are less frequently viewed as involving ethical issues. This pattern indicates that institutions are more inclined to formalise ethics in areas where decision-making has immediate and observable impacts on resources and career advancement, while other aspects of research life remain relatively less regulated.

The analysis of the ways organisations tackle ethical issues revealed that the organisational level of ethical responsibility is higher than the individual level. Most organisations reported using awareness-raising measures and formal guidelines; many also have informal guidelines, codes of conduct, local policies, ethical review committees, and procedural documents like policies. Legal frameworks and field- or context-specific ethical committees are less commonly used, but overall, institutions have already established a variety of tools for addressing ethical concerns. This creates a potential foundation for enhancing ethical assessment in specific settings in future years.

Importantly, the types of input that respondents prefer to receive from their organisations in situations where ethical assessments may be necessary indicate that the

research community is actively calling for more transparent and systematically organised rule sets. In several areas – such as project invitations, visibility, prizes and awards, and committees – respondents mainly requested awareness-raising activities. In performance reviews, they asked for formal guidelines, while in project coordination they supported a code of conduct (alongside awareness-raising). In some situations, such as CV preparation, respondents expressed equal support for awareness-raising and legal regulation, and in recruitment, speaking events, and internal funding decisions, they strongly preferred procedural documents in the form of policies, accompanied by formal guidelines.

These findings suggest that, although organisations do consider ethical issues and often lead the way towards a more reflective and ethically informed research culture, there is still considerable scope for improvement in how clearly, consistently, and transparently ethical frameworks and procedures are structured and communicated. For ethics governance in public research organisations, this means moving beyond simply having ethics tools to their coherent integration into daily research practice, with well-defined responsibilities, accessible procedures, and visible support for researchers. In this context, the situational ethics questionnaire can serve not only as a diagnostic tool but also as a guide for institutions aiming to better align their ethics governance with the expectations and needs of their research communities.

7 CONCLUSIONS

The set-up matrix of questions allowed an analysis of the use of ethical principles in public research institutions from multiple angles, including general attitudes, more personalised views, organisational perspectives and potential corrective actions. The analysis showed a clear bias among researchers towards already established procedures, which were most often identified as requiring ethical assessment, while issues related to everyday life (such as work–life balance or aligning research topics with the cultural and social context) were less frequently highlighted. The distribution of institutional orientations also indicated that organisations tend to focus on situations involving ethical aspects that are closely connected to financial benefits or research-career advantages, while routine research practices and everyday research work presently receive less attention.

The analysis of how organisations approach ethical issues revealed that the organisational responsibility level surpasses the individual level, indicating potential for enhancing ethical evaluation in specific contexts in the future. Furthermore, the types of input respondents wish to receive from their organisations when ethical assessments are necessary suggest that the research community is advocating for more transparent and systematically organised rule sets. This indicates that, although organisations consider ethical concerns, there is significant scope for improving how ethical frameworks and procedures are clearly structured, consistently applied, and openly communicated within the research community. Future research will focus on further applying the questionnaire to a selected group of relevant public research organisations across Europe, particularly within the JTC TTO Circle [1, 2].

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to express our gratitude to Michael Bernstein for the time and support he provided in developing our approach to the questionnaire and for supplying several important documents in the field. We also wish to thank Johan Benesch (Chalmers University) and Huw Jones (Aberystwyth University) for their valuable and inspiring support during the early stages of formulating the research questions.

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Authors' Contribution

All authors contributed equally to the development of this article.

Data availability

All datasets relevant to this study's findings are fully available within the article.

How to cite this article (APA)

Stres, Špela. (2025). BEYOND COMPLIANCE: DEVELOPING AND APPLYING A SITUATIONAL QUESTIONNAIRE ON RESEARCH ETHICS IN EUROPEAN PUBLIC RESEARCH ORGANISATIONS. *Veredas Do Direito*, 22(7), e223949.
<https://doi.org/10.18623/rvd.v22.n7.3949>