One Size Does Not Fit All:
Organisational Diversity in New Zealand Tertiary Sector Ethics Committees

From their early beginnings in response to medical experimentation in Nazi concentration camps during World War II (enshrined in the 1947 Nuremberg Code) and reactions to the longitudinal Tuskegee Syphilis experiment 1932–1972 in the United States of America (USA), Institutional Review Boards – referred to in this paper as ethics committees– have taken on the role of monitoring biomedical research where participants might incur harm. However, concomitant with the growth of bureaucratic controls in research institutions (primarily universities), ethics committees have extended their mandate to embrace the ethics of social science research even when there is minimal risk of physical harm to participants (van den Hoonaard 2001).

While few would argue against the value of independent ethical review for any research project, a number of strong critiques warrant attention. The gradual encroachment of ethics committees into areas of research outside immediate biomedical concerns, dubbed 'mission creep' by critics of these developments (Haggerty 2004; White 2007), has raised fears among scholars that academic freedoms are being compromised. Increased surveillance of protocols has resulted in serious questions about the policing of appropriate methodology and suppression of methodological innovation (Ozdemir 2009), and has even led to the charge that ethics committees have become grammarians (Bauer 2000) whose primary concern is that applicants produce pristine paperwork. Cases have been reported where proposed studies have been declined on the basis of poor editorial work (Stark 2012) rather than a lack of rigour in considering the risks of harm to participants. Indeed, if pedantic attention to detail becomes the criteria for approval at the expense of rigorous researcher consideration of ethics, then ethics committees may come to 'undermine protection of human subjects' (Gunsalus et al. 2006, p. 1441). These concerns with detail on the one hand and extended policing of research proposals on the other, have seen committees accused of protecting the reputation of sponsoring institutions, what Iphofen (2009) labels research governance. One danger is that scholars have begun to seek ways of bypassing ethical review or developing satisficing practices that alienate them from the very system that is in essence designed to protect their interests and those of their participants (Bosk & Devries 2004; Dingwall, 2008; Gunsalus et al. 2006; Hammersley & Traianou, 2011)).

Since 1988 all university and funded health researchers in New Zealand have been mandated to subject their research proposals to ethics committees for formal ethics review. At the time the Ministry of Health ethics committees were guided by an Operational Standard for Health Research yet no equivalent National Ethics Statement (as found in Canada or Australia) has been produced to guide all University research in New Zealand. Ethics committees are part of the warp and weft of research university life in twenty first century Aotearoa New Zealand but we have had little public debate about the appropriate roles, practices and forms of university ethics committees. This paper seeks to initiate such a debate, beginning from the premise that whilst they are at the hub of research and academics are justifiably questioning of all institutions that appear to temper their autonomy unnecessarily, little is known about how they work.

42 In our experience, the lack of secure knowledge about ethics committees reflects the diversity of
43 protocols, practices and governance relations around which they take form in practice, often by
44 developing incrementally around particular challenges in specific circumstances. Many work
45 beyond the gaze of academics, or at least do not make fully clear their practices or invite external
46 scrutiny, contributing to the impression that they meet in secret (Ashcroft & Pfeffer 2001) or
47 behind closed doors (Stark 2012). In the USA, Stark (2012 p.16) reports that applicants are
48 invited to only 10% of ethics committee meetings. The international literature suggests that few
49 social scientists have gained access to the inner sanctum (see de Jong et al. 2012; Fitzgerald
50 2005; Hedgecoe 2008; Stark 2012). Partly as a consequence, ethics committees have yet to be
51 subjected to systematic research and appear wary of taking part in research in the face of
52 consistent critique from social scientists, who are argued to be "angry and frustrated ..[that]..
53 their work is being constrained and distorted by regulators of ethical practice who do not
54 necessarily understand social science research" (Israel and Hay 2006, p. 1). As John O'Neill
55 (2010, p. 229) observes in a memoir about his six years as a committee member and Chair at
56 Massey University:

> 57 When I first read the call for writing about lived experiences of ethics review, I bristled. I
> 58 feared that a request for stories of personal experience would solicit more polemics
> 59 'against the ethicists' on faceless committees who had supposedly misunderstood,
> 60 hindered, distorted or otherwise prevented vital, well- designed educational research
> 61 studies from taking place. This contribution attempts a corrective to such views by
> 62 providing a personal narrative of human ethics committee membership (2003–2009) in a
> 63 university setting that was largely positive and educative.

64

65 This article makes a first step in the New Zealand context to confront the problems created by
66 the failure to ask what ethics committees actually do and to subject their practices to external
67 scrutiny and constructive critique. It takes the novel form of asking five tertiary ethics committee
68 members, two of them chairpersons, to provide details on how their committees work and thus
69 engage in a first stage of dialogue. The outcome is unusual: although each of the committees
70 operates on similar ethical principles their organizational shapes and operational practices vary.
71 There is no national standard, arguably because different committees have taken the line that one
72 size does not fit all. The aim of this paper is to lay out this difference and to ask what it tells us
73 about transparency of process and the access of researchers to committees. Thus it is not an
74 effort to either measure the effects of different practices or evaluate them directly. Rather, it is to
75 ask whether attention to organisational form might point to a potential foundation for more
76 ethical ethics committees and overcoming the suspicion that their responsibilities to foster
77 ethical practice are being compromised by pedantry or overarching institutional interests.

78 The first part of the paper sets out invited commentaries from committee members four of the
79 eight Aotearoa New Zealand Universities and one polytechnic that describe how their
80 committees review applications. The second part takes the form of a discussion that builds on an
81 analysis of key points in the committee process and levels of access to its decision making.
82 Unsurprisingly, both commentaries from committee members and the jointly authored

83 discussion that follows emphasise the merits of practices and seek to identify strengths of
84 alternative approaches in particular circumstances. However, the reflection retains a critical edge
85 centred on improving appropriate access and wider practices of the committees. As such, the
86 paper walks the difficult edge between practitioner concern with best practice (in this instance
87 that of ethics committees) and critical social science of what is an institution that regulates how
88 (and even what) we come to know in universities.

89 **Massey University: A Traditional Centralised Ethics Committee that Admits Applicants**

90 I am the Chairperson of an ethics committee in a multi-centre New Zealand University. Each of
91 the three centres has its own independent ethics committee that meets monthly reviewing
92 between 15 to 20 applications from university staff and postgraduate students. One of these three
93 committees reviews all health applications from all three campuses meaning all the applications
94 reviewed by my committee are a mix of applications from social science and business. Low risk
95 applications are reviewed by the central office. The committee I chair reviews only high risk
96 applications.

97 The role of the Chair of the Committee outside monthly meetings is to assist applicants to refine
98 their submission and then set the agenda for the forthcoming meeting. In the meetings, my role is
99 to seek consensus in the discussions. Rarely does the committee vote on any decision. The
100 twelve members, a mix of academics and four community representatives, have received written
101 copies of applications some 7–10 days prior to each meeting. Like many ethics committees we
102 use a lead reviewer and a secondary reviewer process although each member is expected to have
103 read each application thoroughly.

104 From the outset of a meeting I expect each member will have adopted a position on each
105 application based on their professional knowledge, research experience, and epistemology.
106 Developing consensus, though, requires that committee members become flexible in revising
107 their opinions about an application. Views change and initial judgements morph through
108 discussion and debate. A recent example of this process occurred in response to a researcher who
109 planned to observe young people working and playing in groups while at school. The
110 committee's initial discussions were negative, deeming that observations of young people under
111 the age of 16 would require multiple consents – parents, teachers, mentors and the students
112 themselves – and gaining all of these approvals would make the research cumbersome and
113 perhaps even impossible. Some members believed that if one student participant declined to
114 participate, then the whole group observation would be jeopardised. Through lengthy debate and
115 discussion with the applicant the committee came to a view that the observations were indeed
116 low risk and would not impinge on the educational outcomes of students concerned. The
117 applicant assured the committee that if a student (or parent) declined to be observed, the research
118 could be conducted in other ways that still gave agency to the students. These assurances gave
119 the committee confidence to approve the study.

120 This situation highlights that members are often protective of and concerned about areas of
121 specific interest. For instance the members hold the privacy of all participants and the rights of

individuals to decline as inviolate. Yet sometimes these concerns may obscure the intentions of a study such as the one just mentioned, which seeks to understand the behaviour of young people outside of normal classroom activities. Thus reaching consensus can be time-consuming and sometimes even difficult. Yet there is a will on the part of the members to find agreement.

While much of this practice is standard, this ethics committee is unusual in that it is open to both the public and researchers. While the public never attends, the provision opens a potential line of transparency[1]. Researchers are encouraged to attend and speak to their application. As Chair I find their attendance a rich learning resource for committee members and I would hope the researchers. Researchers in this case include not only tenure-track faculty members but also postgraduate students and their supervisors. Indeed, the Committee requires the supervisor to attend the meeting with their student. Some supervisors encourage their students to attend the meeting in order to capitalise on the educational potential. In many instances supervisors may speak for the student while the Committee wrestles with the application. Supervisor support is necessary as some of the conversations across the committee table can be rigorous and exacting. On occasions supervisors and students have been surprised and even shocked by the robustness of the discussion. A supervisor may contribute to the Committee's work by advocating for the student and his or her research proposal. These exchanges offer rich learning opportunities for researchers, students and committee members, and may help the inexperienced to develop clearer understandings of the ethical issues that the research provokes.

Unitec: Lead Reviewer Corresponds with Applicant Prior to the Meeting

I have served five years as a member of the Unitec research ethics committee, and am also an academic staff member at this tertiary institution. Our ethics committee reviews all research ethics applications across the Institute, for both faculty and postgraduate student projects, although projects involving medical interventions are referred to a Health and Disability ethics committee. Each month the committee, made up of an equal number of teaching staff and external (unaffiliated) members, meets to discuss, on average, ten high risk applications (and to note, or discuss as appropriate, negotiations and decisions surrounding any low-risk applications, for which only one reader is assigned).

Staff members submit all ethics applications: their own, and their students' – though students have written their applications by themselves in the vast majority of cases, with varied levels of supervision in the process. High risk applications are assigned a total of three readers: a primary reader and two secondary readers. Both academic and external persons take the lead role. Prior to the committee's monthly meeting, the two secondary readers post comments about applications on our institution's secure ethics committee web page, and the primary reader then composes feedback to the applicant (cc-d to any project supervisor).

[1] If members of the public were to attend, the committee has the provision to address sensitive issues *in camera* should these concern relationships between the committee and the University or involve socially or commercially sensitive research.

157 Applicants are invited to respond to this provisional feedback prior to the meeting, so that their
158 responses can be taken into account during the upcoming committee discussion. The committee
159 encourages an engaged process of feedback with applicants and supervisors because ethical
160 processes are not always intuitive. Much of the feedback is technical: 'please state that
161 participants will be confidential, not anonymous', and 'please align withdrawal provisions
162 throughout the application'. At times, however, the feedback is in the form of a developmental
163 question: 'the readers consider that research into one's own counselling practice entails a
164 conflict of interest, in that the researcher might be inclined to represent their practice in the most
165 positive light possible. Can you please explain how you will mitigate against this possibility?'
166 Or 'please detail your recruitment process within the participating schools so that the committee
167 can be assured that no one who has line management duties in relation to a participant will know
168 who accepts and who declines your invitation to participate'. Usually, the primary reader sends
169 only one e-mail to the applicant prior to the committee meeting where the application will be
170 discussed, and more often than not – I'd say in about 75% of cases – the applicant replies before
171 the meeting date.

172 Applicants may, upon request to the Chairperson, attend the ethics meeting when their
173 application is being discussed, but this opportunity is very rarely taken up (it has occurred once
174 during my five years on the committee). The meetings are not open to the public. During the
175 meetings, the primary reader presents the 'gist' of her or his assigned applications, along with
176 the content of any applicant feedback received. The committee then discusses and debates any
177 changes that are still required. Usually the sub-committee of readers have already covered the
178 bulk of a given application's rough spots. The deeper institutional memory of the committee as
179 a whole acts as a safeguard to errors or misunderstandings at the sub-committee stage, such as
180 when a sub-committee missed the point that ethnographic observation in a public place did not
181 require consent, whereas observation in a person's home did.

182 Following the meeting, the primary reader works with the applicant until the application is
183 accepted or (rarely) declined. Often the process is straightforward, although not always quick.
184 For example, I was primary reader for an application that initially wanted to obtain employee
185 phone numbers from a company's CEO, but it took some time for the applicant to realise the
186 need to protect employees' privacy. On other occasions, there can be extensive back-and-forth
187 communication before an application is finalised, especially on those occasions when
188 communication takes the form of heated e-mail exchanges about the appropriateness of the
189 ethics committee's advice. These can often involve debates about academic freedom. While
190 most are resolved in the usual round of post-meeting e-mails, a small number require phone
191 consultations or face-to-face meetings. Some result in resolution through the exercise of
192 committee powers or occasionally revisiting and modifying the role and scope of the ethics
193 committee. Included in these cases are occasions when staff members of particular departments
194 consistently object to ethics advice that is otherwise agreed-upon across the institution. In these
195 cases, ethics presentations to the departments in question are arranged to discuss issues with staff
196 and students.

197 **University of Canterbury: The Email Ethics Committee**

While I no longer serve on the University of Canterbury Human Ethics Committee (HEC), I served on the committee from 2002–2012 and was Chair from 2007–2012. In taking on the role of Chair I was aware that we had to institute a better process of review to ensure both researcher buy-in and a willingness of the best staff available to serve on the committee. In conversation with the then HEC administrator who also served as administrator for other committees I became aware of the processes followed by our Animal Ethics Committee: the (mainly) meeting-less committee.

In 2007, before taking up the position of Chair I called a committee meeting of all 12 committee members and outlined how I wanted the ethics committee to operate. I wanted the Human Ethics committee to be a meeting-less committee when it came to reviewing applications. There would be twice-yearly meetings to address matters of composition of the committee, changes to forms and necessary bureaucratic tidying. Monthly meetings to review applications would no longer be held. Instead the HEC would now operate an on-going review system wherein applications would be sent out to committee members on a rolling basis, when they came in to the Human Ethics secretary. Applications would then be circulated primarily by email, but some applications could be sent as paper copies for the minority who still wished to work on paper.

Committee members were to review applications within a two week period, between receiving them and returning their comments by email to the HEC secretary. As chair, my role was to review every application and make comments. At minimum comments from two-thirds of the committee i.e. eight of twelve ensured that feedback included comments from committee members within the college of the applicant, a Law-rep comment and a Maori-rep comment (where necessary). This meant that I also increased the size of the committee to ensure that every college in the university was represented and that we had two law representatives. I also made use of the ability of the Chair to second additional members as required.

The HEC secretary collated my comments and those from committee members. I would then meet with the secretary twice-weekly to collate a response to the applicant after reviewing all comments received. These requirements were then sent by email back to the applicant/s and they would in time send back, by email, a response and an amended application. I reviewed these, and if all points were met I would approve the application. This process reduced the time required for review and approval to less than one month on average. Most importantly, no longer were applicants tied to a set submission date or a fixed date for submitting revisions and responses. The changes also seemed to prompt an increased interest from academics in serving on the HEC, something I took to indicate support for the increased efficiency of the process.

A second change instituted at this time was to sort applications by risk. Not all applications required full review as many were of lower risk. As a result a low risk application form was created mainly for students at Masters level or below. These applications were reviewed first by the student's programme and then by the HEC Chair. Usually the Chair approved these low risk applications within a week. The success of this low risk, high risk system meant the committee extended this process to include low risk review for PhD students and staff. Operating under strict criteria for low risk research, these latter applications involved an initial review by the

238 applicant's home programme, then by HEC Chair and members of the HEC rostered on a
239 revolving list to ensure workloads were shared and kept manageable.

240 The low and high risk distinction and the meeting-less HEC had a number of positive effects.
241 Unlike some ethics committees with a lay Chairperson (e.g. Otago), being an academic Chair I
242 am on site and on-call throughout the week. In an average week I fielded 10–15 application
243 inquiries; these included emails, phone calls and face-to-face meetings. These pre-application
244 enquiries, from both staff and students, were invaluable as they smoothed the application
245 process. In these consultations I would discuss the research and outline the ethical issues
246 required. Anecdotally, I discovered that my increased availability worked to restore faith in the
247 HEC. The number of applications received by the HEC increased, and I began to deal routinely
248 with queries from researchers and students. The open-door/email/phone policy increased
249 accessibility for researchers to the process, meant that amendments could be made efficiently,
250 'on the spot', and arguably fostered a new commitment to ethics review.

251 The new system represented a new philosophy. The HEC assumed all researchers wanted to be
252 ethical. The roles of the HEC was to improve, not limit research. The aim was to work for a
253 solution with researchers and to be pragmatic - yet ethical. As a result, very few applications
254 were rejected. The high success rate was due to the level of pre-discussion undertaken with
255 researchers. Therefore when an application came to the committee for review most of the
256 difficult points had already been identified, discussed and worked through. The changes to our
257 forms, and differentiating between high risk and low risk applications, were also crucial. The
258 committee continually identified problems with the application form and made changes. Plus we
259 collated a list of the common mistakes researchers made and in response made explicit related
260 criteria in the application forms.

261 The success of the meeting-less ethics committee system was demonstrated when Canterbury
262 suffered its series of 2010–2011earthquakes. The shutdown of the University, and the dislocation
263 of departments, staff and HEC members did not stop the ethics review system. The meeting-less
264 review system continued unimpeded and via phone-calls, emails and when necessary face-to
265 face meetings with researchers. Even in these circumstances, the HEC system was able to
266 succeed as normal. Researchers remained supportive of the system in place which meant that
267 research and research review could continue as usual.

268 **Waikato University: A Devolved Ethics Review System**

269 This contribution tells three sides of the story of how devolved ethics committees operate at the
270 University of Waikato. It begins with my role on the University's central Human Research
271 Ethics Committee before describing how supervisors and their students interact with the
272 devolved committee in the Faculty of Education. I also describe the submission of my PhD
273 ethics application involving a sensitive topic. In the end I highlight some strengths of the
274 devolved system over a more traditional homogenised ethics committee system.

275 The University of Waikato utilises a system of devolved committees. The central Human
276 Research Ethics Committee is an advisory committee to the Vice-Chancellor. Its membership is
277 constituted by a chairperson appointed by the Academic Board; one academic staff member
278 appointed by each of the seven Faculty Boards on the nomination of the Dean; one person (not a
279 staff member) appointed by the University Council; one postgraduate student appointed by the
280 Vice-Chancellor; and the possibility of co-opted members (University of Waikato 2013).

281 The Human Research Ethics Committee is responsible to the Academic Board for the
282 promotion, review and monitoring of ethical practice in human research carried out by
283 staff or students of the University and for monitoring compliance with the University's
284 Human Research Ethics Regulations (University of Waikato 2013).

285 The ethical conduct in human research and related activities regulations (University of Waikato
286 2008) presents standards of ethical conduct and procedures for applying and monitoring these
287 standards. As part of its responsibility the central committee has facilitated a series of
288 university-wide ethics conversations to support development for ethics committee members, and
289 for researchers and staff.

290 As a member on the central committee, I have been involved in the review of research proposals,
291 reviewing a complaint, and making a contribution to the aforementioned ethics conversations. I
292 liaise with the Faculty of Education Research Ethics Committee and report on committee matters
293 to the Faculty of Education Board. The grist of regular ethical review of research applications,
294 however, lies within the work of the devolved Faculty and School committees.

295 Every proposal for human research to be carried out by staff or students of the University must
296 be referred to the relevant Faculty or School committee (or, where none exists, to the central
297 University Human Research Ethics Committee). There are nine devolved committees (Arts &
298 Social Sciences; Computing & Mathematical Sciences; Education; Law; Maori & Pacific
299 Development; Science & Engineering; Psychology; Management; and Centre for Science and
300 Technology Education Research) (University of Waikato 2013) . The relevant faculty or school
301 determines the membership of each committee.

302 Within the Faculty of Education at Waikato, the student's supervisor takes responsibility to liaise
303 with the committee however the student prepares the application and submits it. Students are
304 not invited to attend the ethics committee meeting, but are welcome to request, with their
305 supervisor, to attend the ethics meeting with the committee. Generally, all communication stems
306 from a designated committee member who speaks to the supervisor. The supervisor can request
307 to speak to the committee or vice versa if there seems to be an issue that could be more easily
308 worked through face-to-face but it is the exception rather than the rule. There is also an
309 opportunity for the supervisor to clarify with a committee member any issue prior to the
310 meeting. Many of our postgraduate students do not live locally so requiring attendance at
311 committee meetings could be problematic.

312 My own recent experience of this devolved system is illustrative of the flexibility and openness
313 built into the system, should a researcher wish to exercise it. My recent PhD project (see

314 Flanagan 2013) explores social constructions of sexuality in childhood. The project involved
315 interviewing teachers, counsellors and parents, inviting responses to a series of vignettes, and
316 asking participants to provide any of their own stories about experiences of children whose
317 actions have been perceived by adults as sexual. It also included interviews with primary school
318 children. The topic is sensitive, and could extend any ethics committee's skills, as well as a
319 concern for participant and institutional risk.

320 With a background in ethics, including formerly chairing one of the Health and Disability Ethics
321 Committees, I sought an ethical review of my study based on consultation. My intention was to
322 engage the committee in a dialogue about the ethical issues within and around my research
323 rather than to achieve a 'ticked box' approval. I sought the conversation that considered the
324 serious matters of people's lives and experiences, their relationships and identities at the core of
325 my research. I wanted a substantial response that engaged with my study. I encountered a
326 process that was respectful and dialogical. Including questions of care for me and how I was
327 going to be practicing as a researcher, it became a discussion about how this project could go
328 well rather than if it should go ahead or not.

329 The work of the devolved committees shifts concern from approval to the development of an
330 application. For student applications, the committee is positioned as a group of consultants
331 bringing their research expertise to the student's project. The committee responds to the
332 supervisor in the first instance, and then with a letter that goes to the student. So the supervisor
333 hears verbally soon after the meeting and has an understanding before the letter is received.

334 The Human Research Ethics Committee seeks to facilitate periodic "ethics conversations", about
335 three times each year. These conversations invite the wider research community at the
336 University to think about the particular events or aspects of ethics that come up during research.
337 Topics have included: ethics for research using digital technologies; issues around the use of
338 incentives for participation in research; academic freedom, research methodology and ethics
339 review; vulnerable populations and research; Māori research ethics: how different are they?;
340 reporting of sensitive disclosures from research participants; storing data from research studies:
341 privacy, security and reproducibility. These conversations are aimed to inform members of the
342 ethics committees as much as researchers and to be a form of professional development around
343 ethics review or ethical concerns.

344 Auckland University of Technology: A Centralised Ethics Committee with Strong
345 Advisory Focus

346 The Auckland University of Technology Ethics committee (AUTEC) consists of up to seventeen
347 members including a chairperson appointed by Council on recommendation of the Academic
348 Board; one representative from each Faculty appointed by their Dean (Faculty representatives);
349 an appointee of Council; an appointee of the Auckland University Student Movement; an
350 appointee of the Pro Vice Chancellor Māori Advancement; an appointee of the Pro Vice
351 Chancellor Research; and four to six other members co-opted by the Committee, the majority of
352 whom are community representatives from outside the University. AUTEC's composition is

353 tailored to ensure that it has appropriate medical, scientific and other research expertise. It aims
354 to include at least one member who is a lawyer and at least two Māori members. Every member
355 is appointed for a term of three years with the exception of the Executive Secretary whose
356 membership is ex officio. The latter may attend meetings and vote on resolutions as an ordinary
357 member of the Committee.

358 AUTEC meetings are presided by the Chair or their nominee. Meetings are non-public in order
359 to safeguard intellectual property and commercial sensitivity. Together with the agenda the
360 Chair assigns each application to a principal presenter. If possible, the Chair takes into
361 consideration members' expertise and background. Faculty representatives are typically not
362 assigned applications from within their own Faculty because they may have already provided
363 feedback. Despite assignment of principal presenters, members are expected to have read all
364 submissions. Hence, the burden of content presentation and comprehensive ethical
365 considerations does not rest with one member only. Rather the principal presenter leads the
366 discussion while other members agree or disagree with raised concerns and may add further
367 issues. Applications are identified by presenters as either high or low risk, with high-risk
368 applications tending to attract more debate.

369 As a Faculty representative on AUTEC, I represent my Faculty on fortnightly committee
370 meetings and act to inform it where necessary in debates over issues specific to applications
371 from within the faculty. I meet with the Executive Secretary bi-monthly to discuss any issues
372 relating to their role, share information about new policies and guidelines, and consider new
373 initiatives such as an on-line application system. I also represent AUTEC within the Faculty,
374 advising applicants, explaining the committee's decisions where necessary and organising
375 outreach presentations and guest lectures.

376 This position embodies the tension produced by disciplinary difference in methodological
377 traditions. Methodological differences between the Natural Sciences, Social Sciences and the
378 Fine Arts keep committee members constantly learning, but conflicts are rare in practice given
379 the commitments of all involved to ethical practice. Questions continually arise like: Does this
380 auto-ethnography even require ethical approval since the only human participant is the
381 researcher herself? Can eccentric muscle contractions be measured without inflicting pain on the
382 research participant? These are debates devolved Ethics committees probably circumvent; yet,
383 diverse perspectives are invaluable for cross-disciplinary applications.

384 Applicants are encouraged to discuss applications with their Faculty representatives prior to
385 submission. Feedback may be provided electronically, via phone, or in person. Although
386 consultation is not mandatory, the application form requires researchers to state whether they
387 have sought advice. The question reminds applicants that support is available. The Committee
388 recognises that applications written with assistance tend to be of higher quality, require less
389 discussion time during the meeting, and are more likely to be approved without conditions or
390 with only minor amendments. This increases the significance of Faculty representatives within
391 the committee structure and emphasises the merits of the role, even though in practice there can
392 be resistance to seeking or following advice, which cannot guarantee a successful application.
393 The advisory role of the Faculty representatives is supplemented by the Ethics Secretariat's full

394 time Ethics Advisor. The Advisor serves as an alternative contact and also a substitute for times
395 Faculty representatives are on leave.

396 In making its decisions AUTEC uses a consensus model. While a voting system is in place,
397 votes are rarely necessary as debate normally identifies sticking points and a potential resolution.
398 Most applications are approved subject to a number of conditions which address major issues
399 like lack of consultation with key stakeholders or minor problems like spelling mistakes in the
400 participant information sheet. Once applicants have received the memorandum, they may either
401 demonstrate that conditions have been met or provide specific reasons why certain conditions
402 should not be met. Faculty representatives may assist in formulating these responses. After all
403 conditions have been met or justly rejected, the Ethics Secretary to whom this responsibility is
404 devolved grants final approval. The Secretary also approves modifications or alterations to
405 previously approved applications which mostly concern time extensions or projects being
406 withdrawn. Only about 6% of new applications are deferred, at which point two or three
407 volunteering AUTEC members form a subcommittee which meets with the applicant during
408 preparation of their resubmission.

409

410 **Discussion**

411 The commentaries above demonstrate clearly that although these ethics committees were
412 established in the wake of the Aotearoa New Zealand Cartwright Inquiry held from 1987–1988
413 (Cartwright 1988) their formats are heterogeneous. No two committees share even broadly
414 similar approaches in *organizational structure* (see Table 1). Four of the five ethics committees
415 (Massey, Canterbury, Unitec and AUT) are centralised , but the way in which they operate
416 differs significantly. AUT has incorporates representatives from each faculty into the central
417 committee and devolves key advisory functions. The University of Canterbury operates a
418 centralised ethics committee which meets via email. The Unitec ethics committee is centralised
419 but operates in a distinctive collaborative style: the lead reviewer corresponds with applicants
420 prior to the committee meeting. Massey University's ethics committee is a traditional
421 centralised committee that meets monthly, but invites applicants to attend committee meetings.
422 Waikato, on the other hand, devolves ethics review to the faculty level.

423 Table One about here

424

425 The narratives of committee organisation point to a number of issues with respect to committee
426 organisation and practice, issues that shape the work of ethics committees, the ease and
427 efficiency of the process for researchers and institutions, the nature of the outcomes of
428 applications, and the levels of trust in the process. These include speed of approval, the role of
429 lead reviewers, demarcating between high and low risk applications, workload for committee
430 members, trade-offs between electronic and face to face processes, retaining institutional

431 memory on committees, the process of feedback and access to advice, and the extent and nature
432 of cross-disciplinary debate and provisions made to accommodate and resolve different ethical
433 concerns and interpretations. That these are resolved differently by different committees in New
434 Zealand points not only to the complexities of ethics review but a the multiple points at which
435 suspicions about the process can arise. Each represents a potentially rich field for engaged
436 debate among New Zealand social researchers.

437 One of the issues revealed in the narratives is that of access and transparency, which we
438 highlighted above as crucial to the wider debates about the review process. The narratives
439 confirm that greater transparency might be achieved in the work of ethics committees in New
440 Zealand. Decisions are generally made in committee and by committees. While researchers do
441 have a variable range of access to advice and to consultation, our collective experience suggests
442 that they tend not to use the provisions that do exist. In fact, while the narratives only provide
443 perspectives from within the committees and accounts of organisational structure, they point to a
444 surprising level of access. Massey has provisions whereby researchers and the public can attend
445 Committee meetings, while Waikato and Unitec allow researchers to attend them. Waikato's
446 devolved structure facilitates access for both individual researchers and disciplinary interests,
447 and promises applicants an opportunity to liaise with the lead reviewer after the meeting. Unitec
448 provides for feedback from the lead reviewer to the applicant prior to the committee meeting,
449 while AUT faculty representatives also have a pre-Committee consultative role that can allow
450 researchers to seek advice and reviewers to seek clarification. These pre-committee engagements
451 can stimulate a more informed debate within committee. Although University of Canterbury and
452 Massey University's lead reviewers did not correspond with the applicant prior to the committee
453 meeting both Chairpersons were adamant that they were willing and able to meet regularly with
454 applicants prior to their submitting a full application. .

455 Our narratives do not allow us to comment on whether this access is effective in practice, or
456 whether it can be represented as a transparent and open process for researchers. They do allow
457 us, however, to recognise the variability of access and transparency and to suggest the need to
458 explore why researchers appear not to take up these opportunities, or, if they do, whether in
459 practice they provide for greater access and an improved experience.

460 To conclude, this paper suggests that the diversity of practice in itself is worthy of consideration,
461 both as an empirical observation and as a field of contest. It suggests the consideration of the
462 merits of greater standardisation of practice. This might offer the development of particular
463 expertise and further refinement of a model fit for purpose in a New Zealand cultural, academic,
464 and legislative context. With all committees struggling with similar issues, there are possibly
465 grounds for suggesting such an approach. However, it is also clear from the narratives above that
466 institutions have developed approaches that reflect their own institutional forms and research
467 profiles. In fact, we believe that this has created systems that are locale-appropriate.

468 Perhaps the most significant dimension of the institutional specificity is size. For example, the two
469 institutions not included among the five narratives are Auckland and Otago University. Logistically both
470 Universities volume of ethics applications prohibits them adopting the open door approach described in
471 Massey University narrative. Moreover, in 2013 both Otago and Auckland universities doubled the
472 number of ethics committees from one to two each. The point being made here is that the ways in which

473 ethics committees organise their review processes, and the philosophies that underlie them, are shaped
474 by the workload demands placed on these structures. A commitment to 'immediate and personal
475 attention' may be easier to execute when the number of applications is small.
476
477 Size of institution and workload alone, however, are not the only features of locale that condition ethics
478 committee organization and practice. Waikato University, for example, has deep traditions of both
479 Maori and feminist research and a tradition of devolved practice, which are all arguably reflected in the
480 devolved structure of its ethics committee practices. Other committees have taken shape around
481 particular faculty structures and moments in wider university reorganisation and reflect particular
482 initiatives. The flexibility provided by the meeting-less Canterbury process, for example, has been
483 validated and reinforced by the earthquake. Our point is again that ethics committees have been
484 affected by the specificity of place and the way that is negotiated by different agents, such as the
485 Canterbury Chair who initiated the meeting-less process.

486 Were Massey University ethics committee to increase its volumes from 20 to 80 applications per
487 month this would severely curtail their open door policy. The point being made here is that the
488 ways in which ethics committees organise their review processes, and the philosophies that
489 underlie these are, to a large extent, determined by the work demands placed on these structures.
490 Indeed we suggest that differences between committees are related to the differences in the size
491 of the workloads in that 'immediate and personal attention' may be easier to execute when the
492 number of applications is small

Commented [HG1]: Repeats text that appears above

493 The attention to local specificity builds a level of responsiveness and reflexivity about the work
494 of the ethics committees into their design, a responsiveness that we suggest strengthens ethical
495 engagement. At Waikato University their devolved model means review of ethics applications is
496 more likely close to peer review whereas at more centralised ethics committees insider
497 knowledge is more diffuse. At AUT, ethics review is both devolved and diffuse. For example,
498 "faculty representatives are typically not assigned applications from within their own Faculty
499 because they may have already provided feedback." An unanswered research question would
500 ask does centralisation of ethics review contribute to the frustration that Israel and Hay
501 highlight? That is, is the formalisation that is often associated with non-devolved systems
502 perceived by applicants to be inflexible, unresponsive and slow. Moreover, the sense that ethics
503 committees behave in a non-transparent way augments the disillusionment attributed to users of
504 ethics review processes

505 Our narratives suggest that processes have been constructed to facilitate learning opportunities
506 within the committees and in their exchanges with others. It is our firm view that New Zealand's
507 ethics committees are far from a faceless body of experts who hand down decisions, and that this
508 has been encouraged by the development of institution-specific approaches rather than a one-
509 size-fits-all approach. While clearly a partial view, it is our view that developing case specific
510 and locale-appropriate approaches has allowed for, if not fostered, dialogue and collegial
511 engagement rather than enforcing compliance. The provisions described in these narratives allow
512 for committees to educate and be educated by their constituents, even if we are unable to claim
513 that this is the case in practice.

514 This paper has sought to get inside what have heretofore appeared to be the inaccessible worlds
515 of ethics committees. We have presented a particular and partial reading of a set of narratives
516 about the organisation and practices of New Zealand ethics committees, which suggest that
517 researchers need to be mindful when discussing ethics committees in general that one size does
518 not fit all. One outcome of this research is that it has made ethics committees accessible. The
519 five narratives open a door, providing a benchmark for researchers, postgraduate students or
520 professional associations to survey researchers across institutions gauging researcher satisfaction
521 levels with different types of ethics review. While we recognise that there is a fundamental
522 tension existing between ethics committees and researchers, the preceding narrative attempts to
523 throw some light on the sources of these tensions and ways that some of this 'mistrust' might be
524 removed. Our hope is that these narratives will stimulate further empirical research on how they
525 are experience by researchers and foster more concerted debate.

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