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Enhancing Research Ethics Training in the Age of AI: Insights from a European Multi-Institutional Needs Assessment

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The rapid growth of artificial intelligence (AI) in scientific research introduces new ethical challenges that existing governance structures are often unprepared to address. The BriGRETE project—Bridging the Gap: Research Ethics Training and Education —aims to strengthen research ethics education and institutional support mechanisms across Europe. This abstract presents the results of a comprehensive needs assessment carried out with Research Ethics Committees (RECs) and researchers in seven European countries, focusing on current ethics practices, knowledge gaps, and training priorities, particularly in relation to emerging areas such as AI.

Using a mixed-methods approach, we collected qualitative data from 17 REC interviews and quantitative responses from 449 researchers. REC members identified common barriers such as high workload, insufficient resources, and the absence of tools to manage proposal reviews effectively. Most committees still rely on unsecured communication systems like email, and many lack the expertise to assess AI-driven research proposals confidently. These constraints hinder communication with researchers and reduce the overall efficiency and transparency of ethics oversight. There was a strong call for digital case-management tools and training on emerging ethical domains—particularly AI, data protection, and bioethics linked to advances in biomedical technologies and health research.

Researchers similarly expressed concern about gaps in training and institutional support. While the majority recognised the importance of ethics in research, nearly one-third cited time constraints, lack of clear guidance, ethical grey areas, and insufficient access to training as major barriers. Notably, 43% of researchers identified the ethical implications of AI and machine learning as their most pressing training need—followed by topics like data protection and publication/authorship ethics. Both groups showed strong interest in additional training and more specifically in blended training formats that combine online courses with interactive workshops and emphasised the need for standardised and compulsory ethics curricula.

These findings have direct implications for ethics education policy and practice. We outline how the BriGRETE project is responding by designing a modular curriculum tailored to researchers' and RECs' needs, including dedicated AI ethics modules, case-based learning materials, and digital case management tools to streamline ethics review. Our results also align with European frameworks such as the European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity and the EU AI Act, highlighting the urgency of preparing the research community for forthcoming regulatory requirements.

Ultimately, the study underscores an urgent need for enhanced research ethics education that is both comprehensive and adaptable. By improving the availability, relevance, and delivery of ethics training—especially in relation to emerging scientific areas and technologies such as AI —the BriGRETE project seeks to promote a culture of ethical research and empower both researchers and ethics reviewers to navigate complex ethical landscapes with confidence.

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