

RESEARCH ETHICS ANNUAL REPORT

2020-21

Research Ethics, Dalhousie University

Research Ethics advances Dalhousie's research initiatives by providing knowledgeable guidance and timely research ethics review and oversight of research involving humans.



Annual Report 2020/21

Research Ethics, Dalhousie University

Fast Facts

- 4,000+ reviews of research involving humans conducted by Research Ethics Boards and staff.
- 404 new project submissions.
- Other ethical reviews included 248 amendments, 321 continuing reviews, 194 final reports. Ethical approvals were terminated for 26 projects for non-compliance with continuing review reporting requirements.
- 69% increase in new submissions and a 44% increase in amendments since 2010-11.
- 41% increase in new submissions and a 48% increase in amendments in the last 2 years.
- 18 work day average turnaround time for initial REB review to researchers for new project submissions.
- 2 Research Ethics Boards (Health Sciences, Social Sciences & Humanities).
- 24 Board meetings per year.
- 41 Board members (average of 4 new projects/month assigned to each Board member - 2 projects/month as a primary reviewer, 1-2 new projects/month to review at REB meetings; revisions and amendment reviews also regularly assigned).
- 1,162 researchers completed the TCPS online course on research ethics.
- 21% of new projects reviewed were funded research (funding held at Dalhousie); 7% were tri-agency funded.
- 94% of new submissions involved prospective research; 6% of new submissions were exclusively secondary use of information for research.
- 10% of new submissions to the University REBs were eligible for Board of Record Acknowledgement (multi-jurisdictional).
- 14,807 website page views (12,824 unique pageviews)

Core Principles:

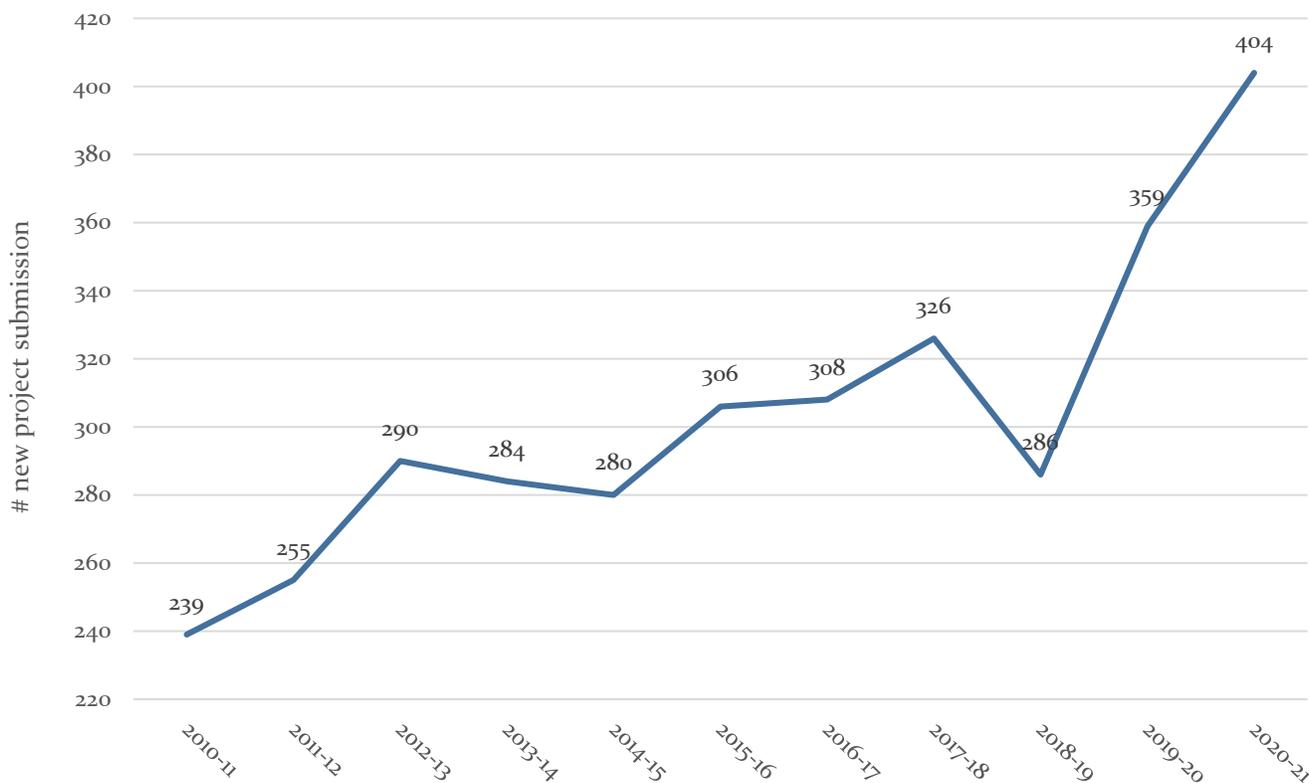
Respect for Persons
Concern for Welfare
Justice

Summary

Research Ethics at Dalhousie University was managed with 2.8 full-time permanent staff positions: a director and a manager and a part-time ethics support specialist. The staff coordinated and supported the work of two Research Ethics Boards: Health Sciences and Social Sciences and Humanities. There were 24 Board meetings scheduled and 41 Board members (35 of whom were members of the University; 6 were community members). The Research Ethics Boards and staff conducted over 4,000 reviews of project submissions, including review of 404 new research projects, 248 amendments, 321 continuing reviews, 194 final reports and 26 ethical approval terminations for non-compliance with continuing review reporting requirements, quarterly reports from research ethics boards at affiliated hospitals (IWK Health Centre, Nova Scotia Health and Horizon Health) and annual reports from unit-level research ethics committees. Research Ethics authorized 61 release of funds agreements with researchers to permit research-related activity to proceed prior to the requirement for research ethics review; the office also coordinated the peer review process on behalf of the University Committee on Laboratory Animals.

This report offers an overview of the activity of Research Ethics for the period April 1, 2020 to March 31, 2021.

Historical - New REB Submissions (2011-2021)



Notable this year

REB Review During COVID-19 Pandemic 🌍 Throughout the year, the Dalhousie Research Ethics Boards operated under its standard operating procedures for **REB Review During Publicly Declared Emergencies**. Research Ethics and the Research Ethics Boards remained operational during the publicly declared emergency, working virtually throughout the year.

In addition,

- The Research Ethics Boards conducted reviews and held meetings during their regularly scheduled summer break in August 2020 to facilitate uninterrupted research ethics review during this exceptional period.
- A substantial number of new projects were undertaken related to COVID-19 that required rapid and/or priority review in the first half of the year.
- There was a 26% increase in the number of amendment requests over the previous year, in large part due to requirement to adapt research projects to public emergency and university protocols.
- Notwithstanding Dalhousie REB approval, any research conducted during the COVID-19 emergency was required to comply with federal and provincial public health advice as well as directives issued by Dalhousie University (or other jurisdictions/facilities where the research occurred) regarding preventing the spread of COVID-19.
- As of 22 May 2020, Dalhousie researchers wishing to conduct in-person data collection from human participants (on-campus or in the field) were required to follow the University Return to Research process. This process was independent of REB approval.

Successes

- This year the Boards enjoyed the benefit of relative stability in REB leadership and membership.
- Board members demonstrated generosity and flexibility in the early months of the pandemic, agreeing to rapid reviews of COVID-19 research and to conducting reviews in August, a period where they can normally rely on a break from REB service.
- Research ethics staff and Boards were well-positioned to use available technology to operate virtually throughout the year.
- The adoption of the board of record review model in 2019 continues to help to mitigate some of the impact of increasing volume, accounting for 10% of new submissions this year.

Challenges

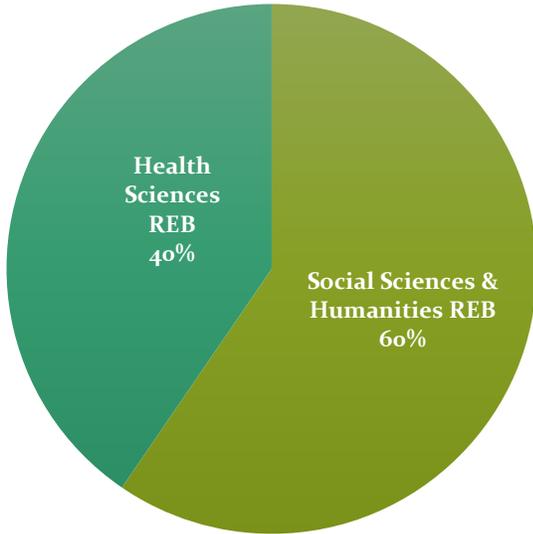
- Over the fall and winter, with demands on the REBs unrelenting, and combined with other challenges of life during a pandemic, members were increasingly challenged to meet the review demands. Likewise, the volume and complexity of inquiries to staff has been very high. Looking ahead to 2021-22, based on another twofold increase in submissions in April and May 2021, this trend is expected to continue.
- Increasing volume resulted in limited capacity to undertake initiatives that were not directly related to the review of specific projects.

- Despite training opportunities to Board members regarding research ethics review of research involving Indigenous communities, the Boards continue to operate without sufficient expertise in this important area.
- Recruitment of Board members continues to be a challenge as well as the diversity of members.
- Board chairs, staff and researchers have been challenged by the ethical implications of using technology, especially video-conferencing, to conduct research virtually. Requests to Information Technology Services for ITS-endorsed guidance on what platform to use that will protect research participant privacy has not been entirely successful, and this continues to cause delays in research.

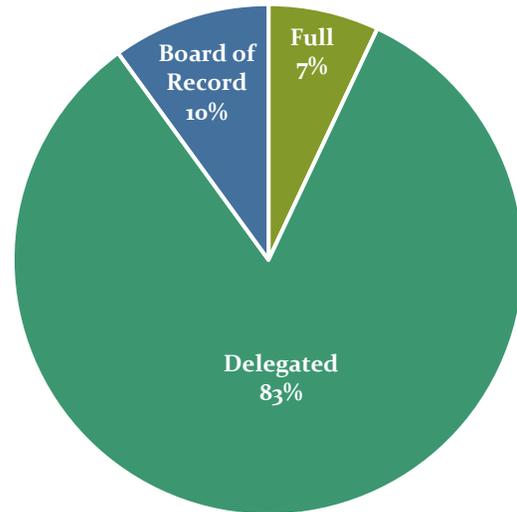
“Thank you so much! Also thank you all at REB for keeping it all together during the pandemic. It is very difficult to keep administrative efficiency and the fact that you have been able to reliably turn these processes around on time is laudable.” (Faculty member)

Profile of New Research Ethics Submissions

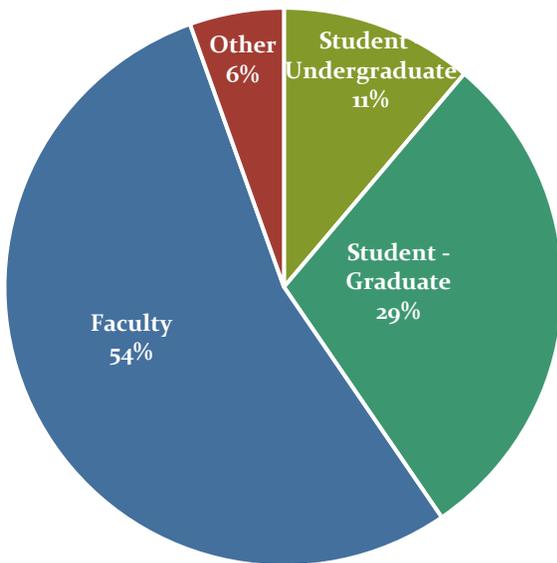
Board Assignment



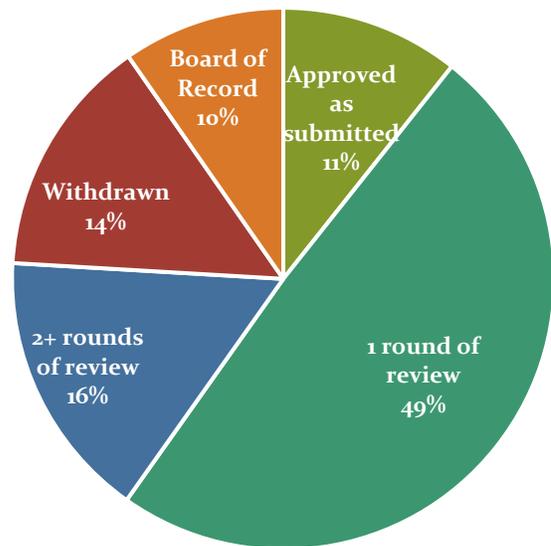
Proportionate Review



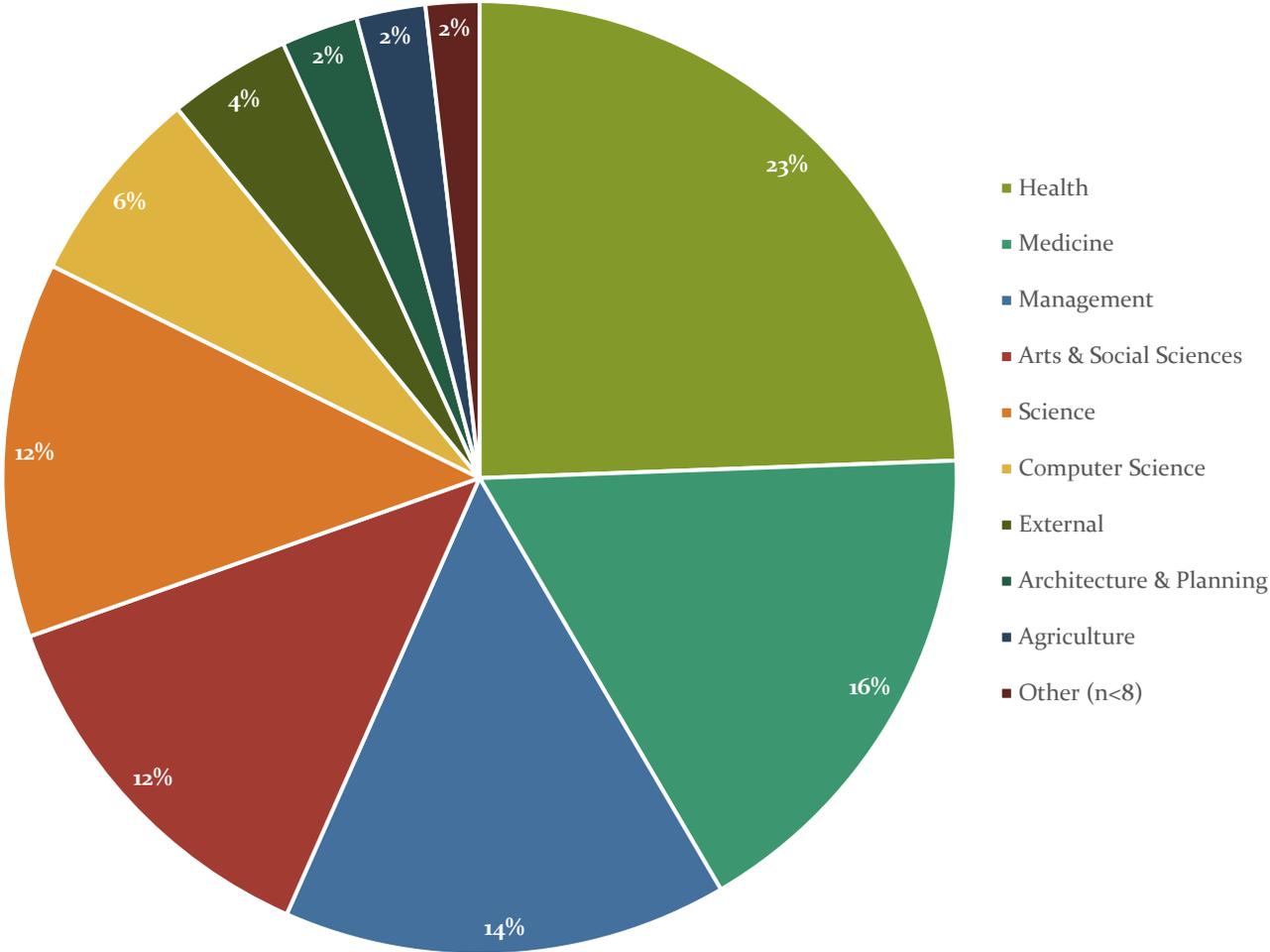
Researcher Profile



Rounds of Review (application to approval)



Submissions by Faculty



“Thank you for the time, care, and attention with which you reviewed my research ethics application. As I have worked to address your concerns, it has been made clear to me that at all times, you have had the best interests in my potential research participants top of mind.”

(Doctoral student)

Board Membership*

● Health Sciences Research Ethics Board

Lori Weeks (Chair)

Sean Barrett
Martha Brilliant
Sarah Burm
Gail Dechman
Merle Emms
Sanaz Gerami

Gordon Gubitz
Melissa Helwig
Christine Herman
Jennifer Isenor
Melanie Keats
Michel Ladouceur
Mary McNally (*ad hoc*)

Sarah Moore
Sam Stewart
Christine Stilwell
DJ Tokiwa
Swarna Weerasinghe
Igor Yakovenko

● Social Sciences and Humanities Research Ethics Board

Karen Foster (Chair)

Peter Arthur
Megan Bailey
Rachel Banks
Julie Blais
Catherine Bryan
John Cameron
Louise Carbert

Steven Dukeshire
Liesl Gambold
Niki Kiepek
Sean MacKinnon
Joseph Malloch
Debbie Martin (*ad hoc*)
Jill McSweeney-Flaherty
Rick Nason

Lorn Sheehan
Oksana Shkurska
Hannah Steeves
Cathie Watson
Jeff Waugh
Diane Zwicker
David Vince

Staff*

Catherine Connors (Director)
Angela Hersey (Manager)
Cali Goud (Ethics Support Specialist - 80%)

* as of March 31, 2021

“I just want to add that despite all the work, the REB is by far the most interesting and enjoyable committee I’ve served on in my 15 years at Dal - thanks to the REB chair, staff and all of you.”
(REB member)