

UNVEILING RESEARCH ETHICS COMPLIANCE AND SUSTAINABILITY IN UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH: A FOCUS ON PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES IN EKITI STATE

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Abstract

This study examines research ethics compliance in undergraduate final-year projects within Faculties and Colleges of Education at public universities in Ekiti State, focusing on research ethics awareness, institutional policy frameworks, and supervisory practices. A qualitative research design was employed, utilising Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with final-year undergraduates and lecturers from selected public universities in Ekiti State. Undergraduate data were transcribed and analysed thematically using NVivo 14 software. The findings reveal that research ethics were primarily perceived as procedural compliance, with an emphasis on plagiarism checks and clearance documentation. In the absence of a formal policy, practices were informal and dependent on individual supervisors. The introduction of the new policy enhanced clarity, standardisation, and ethical awareness, although implementation challenges remained. Lecturers identified supervisory workload, limited ethics training, and delayed ethics exposure as barriers to sustainable compliance. The study recommends early integration of research ethics into undergraduate curricula, structured ethics training for supervisors and digitalised clearance processes for ethical research conduct.

Keywords: Research Ethics, Compliance, Undergraduate Research, Sustainability, Public Universities

Introduction

Sustainable research compliance is fundamental to the credibility of higher education, particularly at the undergraduate level, where research habits are established. Sustainable research compliance comprises the capacity of a university system to encourage and sustain ethical principles, institutional regulations, and international research standards involving students and lecturers. At the undergraduate stage, this process shapes students' understanding of scholarly integrity and responsible scholarship. The absence of early ethics education regularly leads to persistent misconduct and compromises the research culture. Nigerian public universities began formalizing research ethics in the early 2000s to address previous ethical lapses and correspond with global standards. The incorporation of innovative technologies in education further compelled institutions to confront emerging ethical issues.

Internationally, universities employ ethics review boards, plagiarism-detection tools, and mandatory methodology courses; however, compliance remains inconsistent, particularly when resources and training are limited.

In Nigeria, undergraduate research frequently suffers from inadequate supervision, limited exposure regarding ethical review, and is commonly viewed merely as a graduation requirement, which jeopardizes sustained compliance. Despite a reputable academic reputation, public universities in Ekiti State continue to face ethical issues, including plagiarism, improper citations and data fabrication. Although the National Universities Commission provides ethical protocols, the efficacy of these measures in daily undergraduate research is unclear. Achieving sustained research compliance requires continuous ethics education, effective mentorship, and robust

institutional values. In the absence of these parts, ethics policies risk becoming symbolic rather than substantive. Some universities in Ekiti State have recently extended their ethics policies to encompass undergraduate final projects. Although research ethics has received increasing attention in Nigerian higher education, empirical studies directly tackling undergraduate compliance—especially in Ekiti State public universities—remain limited. The existing literature mainly centres on postgraduate research or faculty-level compliance, resulting in a lack of understanding regarding the development of ethical awareness, attitudes, and practices among undergraduates. Filling this gap is critical, as undergraduates serve as a springboard for future researchers and academics. In response, this study investigates sustainable research compliance in undergraduate research by examining research ethics awareness, practices, and institutional support mechanisms in public universities in Ekiti State. By highlighting the perspectives of both lecturers and undergraduates, this research adds to current debates on research integrity and offers evidence-based recommendations to enhance responsible research training, supervision, and the implementation of research policies in Nigerian universities.

Research Questions

1. How do final-year undergraduates and lecturers across the Faculty/ College of Education view and comprehend research ethics and compliance practices within Ekiti State public universities?
2. What differences become apparent in undergraduate research compliance experiences between students who completed their projects without a formal Research Policy and those guided by a newly Senate-approved Research Policy?
3. How do lecturers' reflections on institutional policies, supervision practices, and administrative processes explain the sustainability of research ethics compliance in undergraduate research?

Review of Literature

Global Perspectives on Research Ethics and Compliance in Higher Education

Research ethics and compliance are widely recognised as central to academic credibility, integrity, and sustainability, particularly as higher education systems become increasingly complex and research-intensive. Global scholarship underscores responsible research conduct as foundational to scholarly honesty, transparency, and public trust. Core ethical principles—honesty, openness, accountability, and stewardship—are consistently identified as essential to research trustworthiness and compliance (Swain, 2023). These principles underpin established frameworks such as the Responsible and Ethical Conduct of Research (RECR), which emphasises ethical responsibility across all phases of the research process, from conceptualisation to dissemination (Swain, 2023).

Beyond traditional research practices, scholars have highlighted the ethical implications of emerging digital tools and technologies. Abuadas and Albikawi (2025) note that the proliferation of digital research platforms, data analytics tools, and artificial intelligence has introduced new ethical risks related to data privacy, authorship, and consent. Consequently, institutions are increasingly expected to respond through comprehensive ethics policies and structured training programmes that extend beyond regulatory compliance.

Taken together, these global perspectives highlight the importance of ethics education and institutional governance as interrelated components of

sustainable research cultures. However, translating these global ideals into national and institutional contexts remains uneven, particularly in developing higher education systems.

Research Ethics, Governance and Institutional Practices in the Nigerian Context

Within Nigeria, research ethics governance has evolved through national regulatory frameworks that safeguard academic standards and research integrity. The National Universities Commission (NUC, 2022) mandates that universities uphold minimum academic and ethical standards, including mechanisms for quality assurance and responsible research conduct. Despite these policy directives, empirical studies suggest that implementation across institutions remains inconsistent.

Systematic reviews of ethics governance in sub-Saharan African higher education institutions reveal that while many universities have adopted formal research ethics policies, enforcement varies widely across faculties and disciplines (Okeke & Van Wyk, 2023). In contexts where institutional policies are weak or inadequately operationalised, ethical practices often become informal, supervisor-dependent, and inconsistently applied—conditions that undermine sustainable compliance and accountability.

Recent literature further emphasises the role of institutional capacity building in strengthening research ethics cultures. Studies on research ethics leadership argue that developing competencies among ethics committee members, supervisors, and early-career researchers is critical for embedding integrity within institutions. Salwén et al. (2025) contend that effective research Integrity education requires ethics-inclusive pedagogical approaches that extend beyond procedural or regulatory compliance. Similarly, Oji and Alordiah (2024) align these capacity-building

strategies with global best practices, advocating comprehensive ethics training for researchers, institutional review boards, and academic administrators alike.

While these studies provide valuable insights into institutional ethics governance, they largely adopt a broad institutional or professional focus, offering limited attention to undergraduate research contexts.

Undergraduate Research and Ethical Compliance

Emerging empirical work examining undergraduate research reveals persistent gaps in ethical awareness, supervision, and compliance. Although much of the extant literature prioritises postgraduate and professional research ethics, undergraduate research presents unique challenges due to the formative nature of students' research experiences. Fajobi (2021) reports that undergraduate students frequently encounter inconsistent ethical guidance, which hampers their ability to internalise ethical norms and apply them effectively in research practice.

Empirical evidence from Nigeria further reinforces these concerns. A recent evaluation of undergraduate research-informed consent forms found significant deficiencies in compliance with national ethical standards, with many documents lacking essential elements required by the Nigerian National Code of Health Research Ethics (Chime, Orji, Udeh, et al., 2025). These shortcomings indicate systemic weaknesses in ethical supervision and highlight the need for strengthened institutional mechanisms for ethics training, review, and approval at the undergraduate level.

Scholars have therefore called for targeted ethics education tailored to undergraduate researchers. Francesca et al. (2023) argue that structured Responsible and Ethical Conduct of Research (RECR) training is essential for embedding integrity and preventing misconduct among

undergraduates, yet such initiatives are often absent or poorly institutionalised within university curricula. This gap underscores the need to introduce ethics awareness early in undergraduate research programmes, rather than treating ethical compliance as a peripheral or administrative requirement.

Across the reviewed literature, three key insights emerge. First, ethical conduct is universally acknowledged as foundational to scholarly credibility; however, undergraduate students often receive limited ethics training beyond administrative procedures such as plagiarism checks. Second, while institutional research ethics policies are critical for compliance, inconsistent implementation and oversight significantly undermine their effectiveness, particularly at the undergraduate level. Third, sustainable research ethics compliance depends on institutional capacity building through coherent policies and targeted ethics education for students, supervisors, and ethics committee members.

Despite these developments, a notable gap persists in empirical research that explicitly examines the co-evolution of undergraduate awareness of research ethics and institutional practices following the adoption of formal ethics policies, particularly within public universities. This study seeks to address this gap by interrogating undergraduate ethical compliance within the broader framework of institutional research ethics governance.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in two complementary theoretical perspectives: the Responsible and Ethical Conduct of Research (RECR) framework and Institutional Theory. Together, these

frameworks provide a robust lens for explaining how undergraduate research ethics awareness and compliance are shaped by both individual ethical competence and institutional structures.

The findings of this study—particularly the coexistence of formal ethics policies with low undergraduate compliance—are best understood through this integrative framework. Limited RECR training constrains students' ethical literacy, while weak institutional enforcement mechanisms reduce the practical salience of ethical norms. Together, these dynamics account for the persistent gap between policy adoption and ethical practice observed in undergraduate research.

Methodology

A qualitative research design was utilised, using Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) to gather real-life experiences from final-year undergraduates and lecturers in the selected public universities' Faculties and Colleges of Education in Ekiti State. For clarity, one of the public universities selected for this study ran a collegial system in place of a Faculty, which is run by the second university.

Distribution of Participants

Final-year undergraduate students were purposively selected and grouped into broad disciplinary clusters within the selected public universities' Faculty/College of Education. The FGD 1 – 4 comprised 2023/2024 graduating students, who completed research projects prior to the approval of a formal Research Policy; and 2024/2025 final-year students, whose projects are being guided by a newly Senate-approved Research Policy:

| FGD | Department | No of Participants | Cohort |
|-----|--|--------------------|--------------------------|
| 1 | Language and Arts Education | 10 | Final year Undergraduate |
| 2 | Social Science and Educational Foundations | 10 | Final year Undergraduate |

| | | | |
|---|--|----|--|
| 3 | Science and Mathematics Education | 10 | Final year Undergraduate |
| 4 | Vocational, Technology, and Human Kinetics Education | 10 | Final year Undergraduate |
| 5 | All departments in the respective Faculty / College of Education | 10 | Project supervisors across education disciplines, Faculty level or college-level research/ethics committee members |

Findings

The three research questions raised for the study were expanded into five thematic areas through the use of the NVivo 14 software, as presented:

Theme 1: Varied Understanding of Research Ethics among Undergraduates Across undergraduate FGDs, participants showed uneven understanding of research ethics, often reducing compliance to a focus on plagiarism avoidance rather than a wider ethical frame-work.

“When we hear research ethics, what comes to mind immediately is plagiarism. Nobody really explained issues like consent or data protection to us until final year.” (Undergraduate, Language and Arts Education FGD).

“We were told to make sure Turnitin percentage is low, but no one really discussed why ethics matter beyond passing the project.” (Undergraduate, Science Education FGD)

“The issue of research ethics was not introduced to us until after our final examinations. We thought that only Medical Students need any research certificate for their experiments” (Undergraduate, FGD 1-4)

These excerpts demonstrate that students tend to approach research ethics procedurally rather than in a principled manner.

Theme 2: Policy Absence and Informal Integrity Practices (Pre-Policy Cohort) Students from the 2023/2024 graduating cohort consistently described ethical compliance as informal, dependent on

supervisors, and inconsistently enforced. Also, findings showed that not all public universities in Ekiti State had a clear-cut Research Ethics Policy.

“Everything depended on your supervisor. Some insisted on strict referencing, others did not even ask for an ethics form.” (Undergraduate, Social Science Education FGD)

“There was no clear guideline from the faculty. We just followed what previous students told us.” (Undergraduate, Vocational and Technology Education FGD)

“In our college, only the Students' Union Affairs Unit mentioned the need to abide by research guidelines at Pre-examination talks.” (Undergraduate, Language Education FGD)

The excerpts accentuate the lack of institutional standardisation in moral practices prior to the implementation of the Senate-approved Research Policy.

Theme 3: Emerging Ethical Awareness under the New Research Policy

Participants from the 2024/2025 cohort reported improved clarity, though implementation difficulties continued.

“Now we know that before data collection, we must get ethical clearance. It makes the work more serious, even though the process is stressful. Also, relevant hints of the new policy were presented to all final year students during the Students' Union Day celebration.” (Undergraduate, FGD 1-4)

“The policy helped us understand that research is not just writing but a responsibility to participants.” Our HoD

pasted the new policy on our WhatsApp group. “(Undergraduate, Educational Foundations FGD)

“Our HoD organised a departmental seminar to educate us on the Research Ethics Policy approved by my university. This information helped us prepare for project writing a lot.” (Undergraduate, Language Education, Social Science, and Educational Foundations FGD)

“Great thanks to the university, Dean, HoD and the Centre for Research and Development (CERAD) for ensuring we don’t copy out seniors “(Undergraduate, Social Science and Educational Foundations, Vocational, Technology, and Human Kinetics Education FGD)

“In our Department, the HOD really enforced the policy and gave strict directives to a few of us studying Mathematics Education.” (Undergraduate, Science and Mathematics Education FGD)

These excerpts indicate initial improvements in students' ethical awareness, therefore supporting the argument for the sustainability of research compliance.

Theme 4: Lecturers’ Perspectives on Policy Gaps and Supervisory Burden
Lecturers acknowledged the importance of the new policy but expressed concerns about workload, enforcement, and uneven capacity.

“The policy is a step in the right direction, but supervision load makes it difficult to mentor students deeply on ethics.” (Lecturer, Faculty of Education FGD)

“The Research Ethics Policy is a good step in the right direction provided the University Management encourages us with necessary logistics in departments.” (Lecturer, College of Education FGD)

“Ethics should not be introduced at the project stage alone. It should be embedded from first year.” (Lecturer, Research Coordinator FGD)

Furthermore, lecturers felt that the ethics policy was unrealisable without operational support from “a university system that shows less commitment to retraining a significant number of academics in tech-driven research processes”. This situation reveals a structural tension between policy aspirations and the functional realities within public universities in Ekiti State.

Theme 5: Sustainability of Research Compliance as a Joint Responsibility

Both lecturers and students emphasised that sustainable compliance requires shared ownership rather than punitive enforcement. In this instance, the participants vehemently concluded that:

“If ethics is treated only as a requirement to graduate, students will always look for shortcuts.” (Lecturer, Faculty Ethics Committee Member)

The undergraduates could not agree less with that excerpt, as they expressed their thoughts on the “shortcuts students usually use in writing projects with the aid of what they called 'third-party ghostwriters

“When supervisors explain why ethics matter, students are more willing to comply, not just fear punishment.” (Undergraduate, Language Education FGD)

One of the recommendations for sustaining Research Ethics policies in knowledge systems, as stated by participants in FGD 5, summarises the commitment of Heads of Departments: *“The buck of sustaining the implementation of Research Ethics in universities starts and ends at the desk of the HoD.*

An outstanding and overwhelming finding on the existence of Research Ethics Policies in public universities was revealed in FDG 5. The excerpt goes thus:

“Not all public universities in Ekiti, arguably, have established research ethics policies regarding final year undergraduates’ ethical conduct in project writing. These policies (REP) are not well

spelt out, though they are applicable to Postgraduate students in quite a number of universities. For instance, at my university, the REP was fully activated in 2024/2025 after the university's Research Ethics Committee presented a proposal on the research ethics policy, and it was approved."

Overall, narratives from the FGDs revealed that the introduction of the Research Policy for the 2024/2025 cohort led to clearer guidance, greater openness, and reduced confusion among students. In contrast, the absence of such a policy for previous cohorts led to inconsistency, frustration, and procedural uncertainty. Students reported challenges in dealing with requirements, including plagiarism checks with Eaglescan software and obtaining ethical clearances, due to the lack of organised direction. Under the current policy, however, students experienced a more predictable process and demonstrated greater awareness of ethical standards in academic writing.

The study also identified system-wide challenges in the development, implementation, and sustainability of research policies across public universities in Southwest Nigeria. These problems include inadequate funding, limited administrative capacity, insufficient sensitisation, resistance to change among staff and students, and weak monitoring mechanisms. Notwithstanding these difficulties, participants stressed the value of institutionalised policies in promoting research honesty inside Nigerian public universities.

Discussion

This study examined sustainable research compliance in undergraduate research through analysing the experiences and perceptions of final-year students and lecturers within the Faculties and Colleges of Education in Ekiti State public universities. The analysis shows the interrelationship among procedural ethics,

institutional policy, and capacity development programs in forming undergraduate research practices.

The study further revealed that undergraduate research ethics is predominantly perceived in procedural terms, with a focus on plagiarism checks, similarity indices, and the processes involved in obtaining formal ethical clearance certificates. Students often view compliance as fulfilling administrative requirements rather than as embodying honesty, transparency, and accountability. This finding is consistent with Fajobi (2021) and Chime et al. (2025), who observed that undergraduate researchers often engage in ethics superficially, emphasizing rule-following over ethical reasoning. Salwén et al. (2025) argue that sustainable ethics education necessitates didactic methods that foster reflexivity, ethical judgment, and principled decision-making—capacities found to be underdeveloped among the students in this study.

The contrast between pre-policy and post-policy cohorts highlights the influence of formal institutional systems on research compliance. Students who conducted research prior to the Senate-approved Research Policy reported inconsistent ethical guidance, largely dependent on individual supervisors, reflecting enforcement gaps identified by Okeke and Van Wyk (2023). Conversely, students guided by the new policy demonstrated a clearer understanding of ethical clearance processes, procedural documentation, and data responsibilities. The results support observations by the National Universities Commission (2022) and UNN (2022) that when effectively implemented, official policies can standardize practices and enhance ethical awareness. However, the study also indicates that policy development alone is insufficient. Several students described ethics processes as bureaucratic and stressful, suggesting that compliance

without comprehension may reinforce a procedural rather than value-based approach to research ethics. Swain (2023) similarly notes that ethics governance may be counterproductive if not supported by pedagogical initiatives, underscoring the need for guidelines to be complemented by structured training and active mentorship. Lecturers highlighted that sustainable research ethics requires more than policy visibility; it depends on institutional capacity and supervisory engagement. Overburdened supervisors, limited formal ethics mentoring, and the late introduction of ethics instruction were identified as barriers to effective guidance. Smith (2025), Gordon et al. (2025), and Oji and Alordiah (2024) emphasize that structured ethics training for supervisors and early-career researchers is essential for advancing a culture of responsible conduct. In the Faculties of Education, where students are prepared as future educators and researchers, the role of supervisors in exemplifying ethical behavior is critical. The results place sustainable research compliance as a shared obligation among students, lecturers, and institutions

Participants advocated for supervision that promotes discussion, initial introduction to ethics, and mentorship that focuses on understanding unduly harsh enforcement. This method aligns with Salwén et al. (2025) and Francesca et al. (2023), who argue that embedding ethics within curricula and engaging students in a contemplative learning approach promotes the internalisation of ethical principles rather than mere procedural compliance. Sustainability of research ethics, therefore, requires alignment among policy, pedagogy, and capacity building. While the Senate -approved Research Policy is an important move toward formalising ethical supervision, the study shows that the longevity and efficacy of compliance depend on the early integration of research ethics into undergraduate curricula, on-

going ethics training for supervisors and research committees, and institutional support structures that improve clearance processes while maintaining a pedagogical focus. By centering both undergraduate and lecturer perspectives during a period of policy transition, this study offers empirical evidence for the co-evolution of research ethics awareness and institutional practice in Nigerian public universities, therefore extending previous findings on undergraduate ethics compliance (Chime et al., 2025).

Conclusion

This study examined sustainable research compliance in undergraduate research within the Faculties of Education in Ekiti State public universities, focusing on ethical awareness, institutional policy systems, and skills development mechanisms. The results show that while the introduction of a Senate-approved Research Policy has improved procedural compliance, undergraduate understanding of research ethics remains largely superficial, oriented toward avoiding plagiarism and obtaining administrative clearance rather than principled moral evaluation. Lecturers highlighted that effective research ethics compliance depends not only on policy but also on supervisory engagement, training, and institutional support. Overloaded supervisors and late-stage introduction of summary, sustainable research compliance is a collective institutional responsibility that encompasses students, lecturers, and policy systems. Early integration of ethics into the curriculum, strengthening supervisory capacity, and incorporating structured ethics training are essential for advancing a research culture in which ethical conduct is internalized rather than treated as a procedural obligation. Embedding ethics early in the curriculum, enhancing supervisory capacity, and integrating structured ethics training are critical to developing a research culture

where ethical conduct is internalised rather than merely procedural.

Recommendations

Based on the study's findings, the following suggestions are offered to strengthen sustainable research compliance at undergraduate levels in Ekiti State public universities:

- ✚ Public Universities should endeavour to establish functional Research Ethics Committees (RECs) at the departmental, faculty, and university levels to properly monitor all research activities involving academics and students.
- ✚ Centres for Research and Development in Universities should implement regular training programmes for lecturers, supervisors, and members of ethics committees. Such training enhances the capacity to mentor students effectively, ensures consistent interpretation of institutional policies, and strengthens overall research governance.
- ✚ Research Ethics Clearance Certificates (RECC) and documentation processes should be digitised to create a clear, accessible, and efficient workflow. Cutting down bureaucratic bottlenecks allows students to focus on ethical reasoning rather than procedural compliance, fostering a more substantive engagement with research ethics.
- ✚ Universities should consider workload adjustments, co-supervision arrangements, or dedicated ethics mentorship programmes to ensure lecturers can provide sustained guidance.
- ✚ Institutions should promote dialogue, reflection, and mentorship around research ethics through workshops, seminars, and peer-learning forums.

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Vague Terminology

“Capacity building,” “sustainable compliance,” “shared responsibility” are used frequently without operational definition. Define key terms early in the Introduction or Methodology.

Overuse of Acronyms

REC, RECC, FGD, CERAD, NUC, etc., may confuse readers if not clearly defined upon first use. Spell out all acronyms at first mention per APA guidelines.

Consider triangulating FGD data with document analysis of university policies.

Clarify Policy Impact: Differentiate between policy existence and policy implementation in findings and discussion.