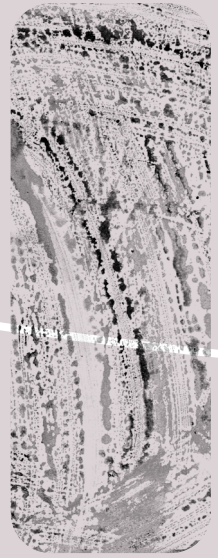


Insights from Administrators

MARANA DYARGALI



Racheal Laugery

Interviewed By:

Associate
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Racheal Laugery is the Senior Research Ethics Officer at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS) having worked in the area of research ethics for over a decade. We hear from Racheal about her role supporting researchers to manage the research ethics process, including giving advice to Higher Degree Research (HDR) students and academic staff on research ethics. Racheal explains how the team work to tailor their advice, providing one on one consultations, as well as running ethics clinics. The aim of the team is to be able to facilitate high-quality research by encouraging UTS researchers to think ethically and to consider risk throughout the life of their research projects.

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Racheal works as part of a small team to provide support for the university. When she first started, the number of human ethics applications were around 180 a year. Today, the team manage and oversee approximately 600 human ethics applications, as well as managing additional processes around animal ethics and biosafety. UTS have five ethics committees, one of which is an executive for the human ethics committees. Racheal also introduces the work of the Indigenous Research Advisory Panel to guide the UTS commitment to Indigenous research ethics. Racheal discusses the work of the ethics committee to align with the vision of the UTS 2027 Strategy.

About Racheal

Racheal Laugery has worked in the field of research ethics for a little over ten years in a variety of roles and is currently Senior Research Ethics Officer. She provides individualised expert advice on research ethics to HDR students and staff, not just through the preparation and submission of ethics applications, but throughout the research lifecycle. She plays a key role in the continuous improvement of processes and systems to streamline the UTS research ethics process and to raise the profile of ethics to a value-add activity for excellent research. Some of her key functions include undertaking reviews of applications prior to dissemination to Committees, reviewing responses to Committee outcomes, reporting to governing bodies and regulators, inspecting facilities and providing expert advice and training to research staff and students. Racheal studied a Bachelor of Arts majoring in Security and Counter-terrorism. During her free time she loves traveling, hiking, cycling and art.

JDS What is important about building relationships with the people you advise and why is it important in consultations and negotiations with different stakeholders?

RL You need to build trust with researchers. Some people really enjoy ethics and they find the process very informative, enlightening and beneficial. Others see it as a bureaucratic barrier getting in the way of what they want to do and love. There are a lot of different viewpoints, and we try to work with all of these with a positive attitude. When we build relationships, both parties learn about what the other is doing, why they are doing it and why they are passionate about it. Knowing this helps us see things from one another's perspective, which helps us as we work together to address any ethical issues while ensuring the best outcomes for the research. The relationship becomes a partnership, and it's no longer an 'us and them' thing. This is important when it comes to researchers working with communities and other stakeholders, because researchers will engage with ethics early in the process, and they ensure consultation and negotiations are being done in the best way possible to meet the standards of the NHMRC guidelines and AIATSIS Code. We try to support researchers in that process, while respecting the relationship between the researcher and the community.

JDS Could you explain what happens when someone puts in an application in our space? What happens as it goes to the research advisory group?

RL The Ethics Secretariat do an initial check when the application comes through to provide feedback prior to the application going to the Committee. For example, I look at what sort of consultation has been done with the community and I use my knowledge of the AIATSIS Code, the National

Statement and NHMRC guidelines to make sure that those things are being addressed. We then send it through to both the Indigenous Research Advisory Panel (IRAP) and the Ethics Committee simultaneously. One person from the IRAP will sit as a primary reviewer for that application at the meeting. We will also have a member of the Ethics Committee as a secondary reviewer. The representative for the IRAP is invited to attend the meeting to speak to the application, or if they are not able to attend, we will refer to their written feedback. It is preferable for them to attend in person to avoid having to interpret their written comments. If the IRAP member or Committee have any comments on the application, we forward the response to the Chair and the IRAP member for review and approval.

JDS Are there any examples or insights that you can provide from some of the good stories or some where things went wrong? And what does that mean for you, as key administrators, navigating the relationships that you have with the process and looking at the outcomes that we are all trying to achieve?

RL Most of the applications we receive that are with or about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are from Indigenous researchers, or involve a supervisor that is an Indigenous academic. Sometimes we receive applications where none of the research team are Indigenous, but the researcher has worked in the community for many years and has built trust with the community. You could be deeply involved with the community, but if you haven't done research before, you might not know or be familiar with Indigenous ethical principles. Also, having a dual role in the community can introduce ethical dilemmas so this has to be carefully managed.

What really shines in a great application is the way the principles of the AIATSIS Code and NHMRC guidelines are addressed. The researcher doesn't provide a blanket statement that says, "I will apply the AIATSIS guidelines"; in the excellent applications we've received, researchers go into detail on how they've adhered to or will adhere to these



principles within the context of their specific project. They describe how the project was initiated, what consultation they've done with communities and stakeholders and how. They also describe what feedback they've received from communities, how it's influenced the research design, and how they plan to continue the consultation process throughout the remainder of the project. They also describe how the results will be shared in a way that works for the community as custodians of Indigenous knowledge, and their respect for the community really shows in their responses. It's really obvious when these principles haven't been addressed, we usually get one-liner responses and that doesn't really give us any information.

For smaller and remote communities, people might overlook the potential for participants to be reidentified, particularly when stories are shared by community members which may also identify others, so special consideration needs to be given to how this will be managed. Sometimes research involves discussing sensitive topics such as experiences with the law, discrimination and housing. Good applications give careful consideration how potential distress is managed, but great applications consider how to do this in a way that is culturally appropriate. One Indigenous person or community is not the same as another, so what works for one might not work for another and that's why consultation is really important.

In terms of a story where something went wrong, I have a recollection of one project where there was no consideration, or respect, for the community where the research was being conducted. You could see there was a goal in mind at the end that was not for the benefit of the community. We had a member of the Indigenous Research Advisory Panel reviewing that application. They and the Research Ethics Manager did a huge amount of work ensuring we met our responsibility and obligation towards the community involved and to support the research team in addressing this.

The AIATSIS Code and the NHMRC guidelines have really good questions and guiding principles that have undergone huge revisions following consultation with a wide range of stakeholders. However, I think having examples from our own researchers is the best way to lead high quality research

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by showing how to put principles of ethics in Indigenous research into practice. Examples of lived experience, not just guidelines, are easier to relate to and learn from.

***JDS** Would you be able to shed some light on what is being used for data storage?*

RL In ethics, we rely heavily on the Indigenous Research Advisory Panel for their expertise, but the panel and the research we do at UTS are not homogenous either. I think the more we discuss this the more sensitive we will be to the diversity of Indigenous peoples and communities. I think many of us could benefit from further training about Indigenous communities and research, including Ethics Committees. I went to a great ARMS presentation this year that talked about Indigenous peoples in New Zealand. The speaker said that because she was Maori there was an assumption and she must know every Maori and every Indigenous person in her country, even in her city, and she had to try to drum into people that, "we're not a homogenised group, we're actually very different and we think differently". That really left an impact on me. She also talked about researchers coming up to her saying, "this is groundbreaking research that is going to benefit Indigenous peoples", and she would ask them, "Why? Where's the evidence that this is going to benefit Maori people? And who are 'Maori'?" I think we can ask the same questions in the Australian context.

The National Statement is going to change next year and the concept of vulnerability is going to be reintroduced. The National Statement will recognise that life stages determine vulnerability and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people will be taken out of the National Statement as a vulnerable group. This is a positive move forward, because although there needs to be additional

considerations to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, they shouldn't be grouped as vulnerable.

JDS Our strategy is about achieving Indigenous led, community driven, on Country research. Do you have any thoughts about how we achieve that at UTS?

RL There are two categories of research to consider here, HDR and academic. On the HDR side, there needs to be guidance from the supervisor right from the very start because by the time the project comes to the Ethics Committee, it is too late. The project will already have been through a stage one assessment and so much time and effort will have already gone into the design. Is it then the Ethics Committee's responsibility to say the research does not align with the strategy? In terms of academics, for the most part I think we're doing research that is Indigenous led and community driven but perhaps where we let ourselves down is with contract research. Researchers need to request and negotiate for the research to be Indigenous-led and community driven from the beginning of the negotiations, rather than agreeing to the contract and then trying to work it into the strategy and ethics requirements. It is a really tricky thing, because obviously the university needs money, particularly now, and there might be pressure from organisations to get the contract signed. I have no answer to what might be the best way forward with that, because on one hand we need the money, on the other hand we might be working with an organisation knowing the work is not going to be Indigenous led or initiated.

JDS Is there something that you personally would be committed to, in your role with us, which you would like to share as a statement to a broad audience about what we are going to achieve leading up to the UTS 2027 vision?

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RL We have so many wonderful researchers who are already engaging with the strategy, but to fully embrace the strategy we need engagement from everyone. Mentoring researchers on how to do Indigenous research will contribute to that. There needs to be a willingness from all students and staff to want to see the vision. It is going to be easier to move forward in the 2027 strategy if we can see the vision and work towards it together. This will make it much easier to facilitate high quality research, because people will want to embrace the process and embrace best practice.

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