

# SCOPE

*Contemporary Research Topics*

work-based learning 7

November 2025

Article

<https://doi.org/10.34074/scop.6007012>

## ETHICAL BECOMING: AN ALTERNATIVE ETHICS FRAMEWORK FOR PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE RESEARCH

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# ETHICAL BECOMING: AN ALTERNATIVE ETHICS FRAMEWORK FOR PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE RESEARCH

Sam Mann, Ruth Myers and Glenys Forsyth

## INTRODUCTION

Garnett (2007) described how developing the work-based doctorate means institutions need new structural capital (such as policies and practices) to protect this doctorate from colonisation by inappropriate academic perspectives. In this article, we contribute to that structural capital by exploring the needs and drivers for a strengthened approach to the role of ethics in work-based doctorates. We see this article as a starting point for discussion.

This article draws on understandings outlined in “Ethical Becoming: Mapping the Demands of Professional Practice Research” (Mann et al., 2025), to frame and put forward a practical response. In that companion article, we position Professional Practice research ethics within interwoven domains of ethical self, research ethics, and professional ethics. We share several problematic implications of current procedural approaches to Professional Practice research ethics and draw together a conceptual framing to support an emergent and agential “ethical becoming.”

This second article reflects on the challenges posed by Mann et al. (2025) and develops an alternative approach as a starting point for future discussion. In our conversations we alternated between contextual and more theoretical perspectives to arrive at a more refined position, and so we adopt this alternating approach here. We base this discussion around the context of the Otago Polytechnic Doctor of Professional Practice (DPP).

We introduce the concept of an Ethical Licence, drawing upon and extending *Research Ethics as Practice* (Forsyth, 2022). We propose an Ethical Licence will more fully support the emergent, on-the-ground, in situ ethical demands of Professional Practice research. The licence locates this ongoing learning within the interwoven domains of Professional Practice research ethics described above. We then return to the context of the DPP to test the applicability of the licence approach.

## OTAGO POLYTECHNIC DOCTOR OF PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE

The Doctor of Professional Practice (DPP) is a third-generation professional doctorate (Costley & Lester, 2012; Stephenson et al., 2004; Wildy et al., 2015). The first-generation professional doctorates were developed by specialising within a PhD structure, and the second generation, by taking this specialisation to the work-place. The third-generation professional doctorates were developed from the ground up, focusing first on practice-led, self-determined development and then ensuring that the level of qualification was sufficiently doctoral. Karetai et al. (2023) argue that the decolonising fabric of the DPP—in privileging self-determination, identity, and multiple ways of knowing—takes DPP research beyond work-based practice to much wider identity-practice as the site for inquiry. This effectively makes the DPP a fourth-generation professional doctorate.

There are several principles underpinning the fourth-generation doctorate. The learner is the expert in their own field (hence we have “mentors” rather than “supervisors”), the research is practice-led and, crucially for this discussion, the doctorate is explicitly designed to be self-determined: the candidate manages their own journey (Wildy et al., 2015).

The Otago Polytechnic DPP Programme Document describes this journey:

The programme outcomes to be produced by these candidates are real time projects with tangible results that have a *useful purpose within a responsible set of values and ethical considerations* [emphasis added]. It is a work-based doctorate which is a trans-disciplinary, learner-centred research and development programme, offering benefit for both the individual professional development of the practitioner, and their area of practice. Motivationally this group is much less likely to be interested in pursuing research as an end in itself, or contributing to the stock of academic knowledge, than in using an inquiring and innovative approach to practice and producing knowledge that has direct application to their professional endeavours. (Otago Polytechnic, 2017, p. 19)

The goals of practice-led research are to “transform the world from ‘what is’ to something better ... concerned with intervention, innovation, and change—rather than designing research according to what is measurable, publishable” (Scrivener, 2000, p. 1). Combined with the control resting with the practitioner (Wildy et al., 2015), and the ethos of practice as research (Costley & Lester, 2012), the fourth-generation doctorate is geared to addressing complex organisational and social issues. It is developed specifically for the “swampy lowland” (Schön, 1983, p. 42), “mess” (Ackoff, 1997), and “wicked problems” (Rittel & Webber, 1973) of real practice situations. All this results in a situation that does not allow “intellectual imperialism based on pre-defined contexts or methodologies” (Stephenson et al., 2004, p. 2)—and this includes the approach to ethics. The “useful purpose within a responsible set of values and ethical considerations” (Otago Polytechnic, 2017, p. 19) of the programme’s outcome brings ethics to the fore of DPP learning, lifting it beyond what is seen by many learners as a compliance hurdle.

Like most institutions, Otago Polytechnic operates three levels of approval for institutional research ethics: Category A is for high risk (vulnerable people, stress, deception, sensitive subjects, conflict); Category B is for low/moderate risk (personal data, minor stress, external partners, surveys), and Category C is for minimal risk research (public data, prior approvals).

## PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE ETHICAL LICENCE TO OPERATE

“Category A” describes a level of scrutiny not, as is commonly assumed, the specific instrument used to manage this level of rigour. We propose an alternative high-scrutiny process for Professional Practice. This might be codified as a form which we refer to as “Category A2” (to distinguish it from existing instruments, which we refer to as “A1”). We propose an approach whereby Professional Practice Learners apply for a Category A2 Ethical Licence to Operate (“Licence”) (see Figure 1). This would act like a driver’s license, giving permission to operate within a set of protocols and endorsed for different contexts. We do not argue for the replacement of the current process or forms (A1 or B) as most research in the institution will continue to use them.

This licensing process is in alignment with Forsyth’s (2022) model of developing a “professional self” (p. 40) in which candidates must consider the moral imperatives underpinning the changes that their project may be aiming for as well as the ethical implications of the impact that their research may have on their organisation or professional practice. Whereas Forsyth saw this process as formative, and to be followed by formal research ethics (A or B), we see the License itself being at the level of Category A, with agreed processes and protocols for Professional Practice autoethnographic research and endorsed for different contexts. Only when there is a specific ethically significant event (we refer to these as “ethicable”), such as a survey or interview, would B or A1 approval

be required. If the research was to cross other boundaries such as the unexpected involvement of vulnerable participants, then the process of updating the context endorsement of A2 might require B or A1 approval.



Figure 1. Category A Ethical Licence to Operate (“Licence”).

Such a structure was originally proposed in the original Doctor of Professional Practice Programme Document (Otago Polytechnic, 2017) (though the Licence was then seen at the level of Category B):

A significant learning from the MPP [Master of Professional Practice] is of the challenges of applying ethics processes to work-based professional practice research. The issue with standard approaches is twofold: timing, and the nature of work-based professional practice research not really aligning with existing ethics processes. The ethics process for the DPP (and the MPP) has a separation of ethical understanding from process of ethics. Both of these are managed by a two stage Category B Ethics Delegation (which may result in a requirement for a Category A). When required for the project ethics approval must be obtained from the Otago Polytechnic Ethics committee (Category A). (p. 41)

The process in the Doctor of Professional Practice Programme Document describes a process of “B1 Ethical Awareness”:

As part of the learning agreement, learners will be required to complete a series of tasks (i.e., a workbook) that is aimed to help them demonstrate an understanding of ethics of practitioner research. This will also form part of the Learning Agreement professional presentation/discussion. Through a series of exercises, thoughtful responses are prompted on:

- General ethical understanding.
- Ethics of profession.
- Codes of Ethics for their profession/s.
- Research ethics (understanding of premise and mechanics of research ethics).
- Professional change ethics.
- Practitioner Research Ethics.
- Research project, a discussion of specific challenges raised by the current research. (Otago Polytechnic, 2017, p. 41)

The programme document then goes on to describe a B2 process by which conventional research ethics are used to approve of research instruments. “Depending on the research design,” it continues, “this may need to be done more than once, and may result in a requirement that Category A is completed” (Otago Polytechnic, 2017, p. 42).

While this process is still described in the approved Doctor of Professional Practice Programme Document, the letter of approval from New Zealand Qualifications Authority recommended to Otago Polytechnic that it should send DPP ethics applications to the Otago Polytechnic Ethics Committee. It is worth noting that this recommendation does not preclude a Licence process, just that it be overseen by the Otago Polytechnic Research Ethics Committee (OPREC). Although the usual pattern is that category B applications are delegated to academic departments while category A is considered by OPREC, the NZQA approval letter does not actually specify A nor the A1 form.

While the intention of the DPP programme document was for a high level of scrutiny via a B1/B2 process, and the B was intended to show an alternative, we can appreciate that it might look like we were trying to avoid a higher level of scrutiny (A1). For this reason, the current proposal makes it clear that the A2 is at an equal if not higher level of scrutiny to category A1.

We propose an Ethical Licence (A2), applied for as part of the preparation of the Learning Agreement, on the basis of an evaluated “ethical awareness” and articulation of the parameters within which the research can proceed—the agreed path, deviation from which would require conventional ethics consideration. So, what might such an Ethical Licence A2 process look like? First, how might ethical awareness be evaluated?

## TOWARDS A SELF-EVALUATION FRAMEWORK FOR ETHICAL AWARENESS

We cannot expect learners to miraculously be able to articulate their ethical awareness. We suggest using critical evaluative questions to frame and support ongoing and emergent responses throughout Professional Practice Research.

Previously, we have developed the Necessarily-Insider Research Framework (NIRF) (Mann et al., 2024). This framework is informed by Carol Costley’s (2018) approach to Professional Practice, Tracy’s Big Tent criteria (López & Tracy, 2020; Tracy, 2010) and Patton’s Developmental Evaluation (2015). It sets up 12 Principles of Professional Practice and 16 Quality Criteria, posing 192 evaluative questions from which to select from to guide research journeys. By adopting this evaluative question approach, NIRF acknowledges the complexity and messiness of practice in an authentic, emergent, and responsive manner and adapts to different situations without enforcing a rigid, one-size-fits-all method.

Foregrounding the significance of ethical questioning throughout Professional Practice research journeys, NIRF arranges ethical evaluative questions under a Quality Criteria column and Professional Practice Principle row. Examples of Ethical Quality Criteria include:

- Worthy Topic – Does the approach address ethical dilemmas in practice research?
- Developmental Purpose – How does the approach evolve in response to emergent ethical challenges?
- Credibility – How do you know your ethical reasoning is sound?

Examples of Ethical Professional Practice Principles include:

- Transdisciplinary – Are ethical practice standards from multiple fields considered and respected?
- Reflexivity – What protocols ensure safety of reflections?
- Transgressive – Whose transgressive agenda does the research contribute to?

Ethics can also be seen across various other aspects of the NIRF – a row on “collective” and a column on “Co-creation,” for example. Similarly, Te Tiriti is purposefully integrated into all aspects in terms of partnerships and collective ways of being, knowing, and doing. NIRF evaluative questioning contributes to learning informing the Ethical Licence.

## ETHICAL BECOMING, ETHICAL MATURITY

We draw on maturity models (Mann & Bates, 2017; Willard, 2005) to structure a self-assessment of ethical practice not as a checklist of compliance, but as a journey of ethical becoming (Table 1). These models describe development as a continuum from avoidance and compliance to fully integrated, values-driven transformation.

While Willard’s (2005) model for sustainability maturity was written for business sustainable maturity, the descriptors are adapted here as the basis for the maturity of individuals in terms of their adoption of ethical principles. Practice evolves from regulatory avoidance through compliance and efficiency, into transformative integration and ultimately purpose-driven impact. Crucially, progression beyond Stage 3 is not incremental but transformational—requiring deep personal and professional internalisation. As Willard (2005, p. 29) writes, “Stage 5 companies are successful businesses so that they can continue to do the right things.” This shift in motivation and identity is at the heart of ethical becoming as living ethical practice.

We propose that ethical maturity be developed and demonstrated through reflective self-assessment across eight key ethical themes (listed below, derived from the NIRF evaluative questions). For each theme, reflective questions support the learner to locate themselves within a maturity rubric—such as Theme 1: Relational Ethics and Ethics of Care (see Table 2)—in order to guide their ethical development over time.

To qualify for an Ethical Research Licence, learners should:

- Achieve at least Level 3 (Instrumental – moving toward integration) in all eight themes, and
- Hold an average rating of at least 3.5, indicating movement toward ethical integration and becoming.

By adapting this maturity model to ethical professional practice, we aim to support learners in locating themselves within a relational, developmental, and reflective ethical space—where ethics is not about compliance or form-filling, but about maturing their stance as researchers, collaborators, and members of a wider professional and cultural ecosystem.

Stage	Description
1. Avoidance	Ethics is unconsidered or resisted; minimal engagement with ethical ideas.
2. Compliance	Ethics is procedural and institutional—focused on forms and approval.
3. Instrumental	Ethics is used to protect reputation or enable research; it is applied when required.
4. Integrated	Ethics is embedded across the project; relational and contextual concerns guide action.
5. Becoming	Ethics shapes identity and leadership; practice is motivated by care, justice, and transformation.

Table 1. Ethical Becoming Maturity Model.

Maturity Stage	Descriptor	Reflective Indicators
1. Avoidance	Relational ethics is unconsidered or dismissed. Ethics is viewed as abstract, external, or irrelevant. Relationships are instrumental, extractive, or assumed.	Participants treated as data sources.  No attention to care, dignity, or connectedness.  No awareness of ethical responsibilities beyond institutional compliance.
2. Compliance	Ethics is addressed procedurally (for instance through consent forms or institutional review) but without deep engagement. Respect and care are present but passive or generic.	Informed consent is obtained as a box-ticking exercise.  Relationships are courteous but formal.  No ongoing ethical engagement beyond start of project.
3. Instrumental	Relational ethics is seen as useful for project success (for example, recruitment, access). Care is conditional and context-specific. Place and positionality are acknowledged, but not integrated.	Ethics of care invoked to build trust or manage risk.  Cultural or place-based considerations are addressed when needed.  Ethical relationality is project-serving rather than practice-defining.
4. Integrated	Relational ethics is embedded throughout the project. Care and connection are sustained across roles and time. Ethics of place is respected and relational dynamics are consciously navigated.	Relationships are reciprocal, context-sensitive, and valued.  Ethical care is maintained across project phases and roles.  Place, power, and connectedness are actively considered and discussed.
5. Becoming	Ethics of care and relationality form part of practitioner identity. Research is an enactment of ethical responsibility to people, communities, and place. Ethical reflexivity is ongoing and shapes leadership.	Care and dignity are enacted as foundational, not additional.  Practice sustains long-term relationships, not just project tasks. The practitioner sees themselves as part of an ethical ecosystem, not apart from it.

Table 2. Ethical Maturity for Theme 1: Relational Ethics and Ethics of Care.

## KEY ETHICAL THEMES

### Relational ethics and ethics of care

- How are relational ethics and ethics of care seen in respect, dignity, and connectedness?
- How do I promote an ethics of care and relational ethics, including ethics of place?
- How does my ongoing approach to relational ethics improve research and practice?

These questions emphasise compassionate, relationally grounded, and ongoing ethical engagement across all research stages and stakeholders.

### Critical ethical self-awareness

- How do I know my ethical reasoning is sound?
- Is my deep reflexive scrutiny evident?
- How transparent and self-reflexive am I about my positionality, and identities across contexts?
- What is the role of ethics in research and practice?

This theme calls for integrity in practice through self-awareness, positionality, and visible ethical alignment, with an ongoing attention to learning.

### Complex contexts

- How does my research deal with the notion that it cannot offer true anonymity nor informed consent? (Ellis, 2007; van den Hoonaard, 2003)
- How are my ethical considerations nuanced in the face of complexity?
- How are practice and research ethics extended in time and space, and to others more broadly?
- Does the approach challenge conventional boundaries and norms?
- How does the approach to innovation recognise complex change and uncertainty?

These questions reveal a situated and nuanced approach to ethics where standard protocols may not suffice and ongoing ethical discernment is paramount.

### Moral courage and unintended consequences

- How can I be sure I am not making something else worse?
- Especially if stepping outside the norm, how do I know the research is the right thing to do (and continues to be)?
- How have I considered whether I should make a difference? And, if I should, what are the appropriate leverage points?
- Is the ethical stance of my research transparently communicated?
- In what ways is the ethical questioning ongoing and unwavering?
- Does the approach address ethical dilemmas in practice research?

This theme introduces deliberative ethics: not only acting ethically but questioning whether intervention is warranted at all.



## Trust, authenticity, transparency, and sovereignty

- How are multiple voices heard throughout the work?
- Are my immersion and vulnerability transparently shared?
- Is there a transparent exploration of practice's multifaceted, multi-reality nature?
- Does the research deal with the messy real world that defies simple solutions?
- Are practices and findings explored, stretched, and tested by multiple dimensions (including new)?

These questions point to the importance of transparency, co-presence, and building trust through authentic voice and representation.

## Collective and communitarian ethics

- How does the research contribute to collective and communitarian ethics? Who are the participants?
- How are all participants and stakeholders valued and respected (and how do they know that)?
- Is the commitment to collective ethics and collaboration transparent?
- How does an ongoing approach to relational ethics improve research and practice? (rather than now-distributed barrier)

Ethics is not an individual virtue but a collective endeavour, particularly in participatory, situated, and post-disciplinary research.

## Te Tiriti-based ethical practice

- How does this research enact the spirit of and responsibilities set out by Te Tiriti?
- In what ways are Māori participants, perspectives, and knowledge initiating, leading, co-designing, or shaping the research?
- How does the research demonstrate partnership, protection, and participation in form and substance?
- What specific benefits and outcomes for Māori communities are being pursued—and who defines them?
- How is mātauraka Māori being treated—as data, as inspiration, or as co-intelligence? Is its authority upheld?
- How are relationships with iwi, hapū, or whānau being built, sustained, and reciprocated?
- How does the research consider the flourishing of te reo Māori, tikanga Māori, and Māori futures?
- How are non-Māori researchers critically reflecting on their power, position, and responsibilities under Te Tiriti?
- What does a Te Tiriti responsive practitioner in my field look like?

Practitioners' research in Aotearoa must honour Te Tiriti o Waitangi as a living, relational, and constitutional foundation. This requires more than cultural competence or consultation; it calls for an active commitment to relational partnership, sovereignty of mātauraka Māori, and co-determination of research purpose, process, and benefit (Sherwood & Anthony, 2020). Ethical Tiriti practice involves not only identifying the relevance of the research to Māori but enacting this research as a Tiriti relationship—one that reflects mana-enhancing engagement, shared authority, reciprocal contribution, and critical reflexivity about positionality and power.

This approach is intended as a starting point for discussion and treats Te Tiriti not as a procedural checkbox, but as an ongoing ethical stance, requiring continuous reflection, responsiveness, and accountability to Māori partners, knowledge systems, and aspirations.

### Ethics beyond procedure

- How does the research evolve to enhance its transformative potential?
- Are ethical practice standards from multiple fields considered and respected?
- Are ethical considerations coherently integrated throughout the research?
- How does a critical ethical stance inform practice?
- Does the approach address ethical dilemmas in practice research?
- How are situational and relational ethics consistently used to question, reflect upon, and critique decisions?
- How does the approach evolve in response to emergent ethical challenges?

The ethical description in NIRF (Mann et al., 2024) reads, “nuanced, ongoing ethical attention, encompassing communitarian, place, space and time ... [means] ethical research [that] transcends procedural requirements, embedding moral considerations in every decision and interaction.” Ethics shifts from rule-following to ethos—a deeply embedded, continuously reflected way of being in research.

## PROTOCOLS FOR PRACTICE

The Ethical Research Licence is not a rigid protocol, but a defined ethical space—a broad, values-based track within which the professional practice researcher operates. It offers autonomy within accountability, encouraging practitioner-researchers to engage ethically in complex, emergent, and relational contexts.

### The Licence as a defined ethical track

The Licence defines a zone of endorsed practice based on ethical maturity across eight themes. Within this track, researchers may use flexible, creative, and emergent methods (for example, professional practice autoethnography, participatory inquiry, and reflexive design). The track is not unlimited: it is defined by the maturity model, reflective protocols, and an endorsed context of practice.

### Context-specific endorsement

Each Licence is issued for a specific context, based on the practitioner’s declared scope, roles, relationships, and likely methods. The Licence does not automatically extend to all contexts. For example:

- A Licence for a reflective design project in education does not cover a public-facing health campaign involving minors.
- A Licence may be issued to enable emergent inquiry within workplace roles but would not cover formal interviews with vulnerable clients unless explicitly added.

## When standard ethics approval is required

The Ethical Licence does not replace formal OPREC Category A1 or B approval when:

- A defined ethically significant event occurs, such as: Surveys or structured interviews beyond the researcher's organisational role; collection of identifiable personal or health data, or work with vulnerable populations (for example, minors, prisoners, or persons under care).
- The research shifts into a new context not covered by the original licence.
- The risk profile escalates (for example, media exposure, conflict of interest, or reputational impact).

In such cases, researchers must:

- Pause and update their licence.
- Seek additional guidance or standard ethics review (category A1 or B) as needed.
- Document the shift through a Licence Variation Form or similar protocol.

## Breach and revocation

If a researcher operates outside the defined ethical track without review or adaptation, their licence may be:

- paused for review,
- revoked, requiring resubmission, or
- referred to standard OPREC processes.

Breaches may include acting in ethically unsafe ways, failing to respond to new risks, or disregarding collective obligations to communities or collaborators.

## Living protocols and shared responsibility

The Licence is guided by maturity, not micromanagement. Ethical judgement is expected to be relational, reflexive, and ongoing. Practitioners are encouraged to regularly revisit:

- Their ethical maturity self-assessment,
- Reflections from supervision or peer review,
- Shifts in context, relationships, or power dynamics.

## OTAGO POLYTECHNIC CATEGORY A1 AND LICENCE A2 COMPARED

In Table 3, we use these themes to consider how well the Licence approach maps to the existing Category A1 questions. Our aim here is an enhanced level of scrutiny on the areas covered by the current Category A1 process, but through asking different questions.

Otago Polytechnic Category A1 Section (2025)	Relevant Ethical Licence A2 Commitments (as themes) and Endorsement Conditions	Notes on Licence Extension or Enrichment
Lay Summary of Project	Trust, Authenticity, Transparency, and Sovereignty	A place to begin showing researcher presence, clarity of voice, and the relational commitment to transparency.
Research Aim and Question(s)	Moral Courage and Unintended Consequences	Ethical Licence encourages asking: Should this research be done? and What are its ripple effects?—not just stating the academic rationale.
Research Design	Critical Ethical Self-Awareness Moral Courage and Unintended Consequences Ethics Beyond Procedure Te Tiriti-based Ethical Practice	Licence requires not just methodological description, but reflexivity, ethical positioning, and evolving values embedded in research choices. Requires Kaupapa Māori or Tiriti Responsive-aligned methods.
Participants and Recruitment	Relational Ethics and Ethics of Care Collective and Communitarian Ethics Te Tiriti-based Ethical Practice	Ethical Licence expands participant engagement into mana enhancing, mutual care, shared ownership, and collective benefit, not just recruitment.
Vulnerability	Relational Ethics and Ethics of Care Critical Ethical Self-Awareness Complex contexts	Ethical Licence sees both participants and researchers as vulnerable. Power, identity, and risk are fluid and must be managed relationally.
Socio-cultural Considerations	Relational Ethics Trust, Authenticity, Transparency, and Sovereignty Collective and Communitarian Ethics Te Tiriti-based Ethical Practice	OP focuses on cultural safety; Ethical Licence adds co-authorship, authentic presence, community-defined relevance, and adds sovereignty of knowledge systems, not just cultural sensitivity.
Use of Personal Information	Complex Contexts	The Ethical Licence questions assumptions about anonymity, representation, and participant visibility, especially in insider or participatory work.

Data Storage	Trust, Authenticity, Transparency, and Sovereignty	The Ethical Licence encourages researchers to reflect ethical intent in access control, co-ownership, or return of data to communities.
Participant Incentives / Remuneration / Koha	Collective and Communitarian Ethics	Ethical Licence helps researchers to consider koha as cultural obligation.
Potential Harm	Moral Courage and Unintended Consequences  Ethics Beyond Procedure	Ethical Licence expands “harm” to include epistemic violence, representational harm, or silencing of others through unintended consequences.
Treaty Considerations	Critical Ethical Self-Awareness  Trust, Authenticity, Transparency, and Sovereignty  Collective Ethics  Te Tiriti-based Ethical Practice	Reframes awareness of Te Tiriti to an embedded ethical stance and relational commitment, guiding the whole research process. The Ethical Licence strengthens attention to reflexivity, relationality, and Te Tiriti responsive practices.
Relations with Other Ethics Committees or Institutions	Moral Courage and Unintended Consequences	Relevant when ethical standards or power dynamics differ across institutions; approach invites deliberation and sovereignty.
Use of Artificial Intelligence Tools	Critical Ethical Self-Awareness  Ethics Beyond Procedure	Ethical Licence prompts deeper reflection on algorithmic bias, data ethics, and the limits of AI epistemologies.
(Not on current Category A1) How are ethics continuously negotiated during the project?	Ethics Beyond Procedure	OP form assumes ethics is set at the beginning and deviation requires re-approval. Ethical Licence views ethics as relational and evolving, especially in emergent or participatory research.
(Not on current Category A1)	Critical Ethical Self-Awareness	Reflexivity is implied but not required. The Licence makes researcher identity, bias, and positional influence explicit, which is particularly important in insider research.

Table 3. Existing Category A1 and Ethical Licence A2 compared.

## CONCLUSION


Ethical becoming is vital for Professional Practice research. This is emergent, relational, and entwined with practice itself, rather than separate from it. As a contribution for discussion, we have proposed an alternative ethical process, tailored to Professional Practice Research.

In the context of a research practice where current ethics protocols do not serve the needs of Professional Practice researchers (Mann et al., 2025) it is easy to see how the current A1 process gives rise to a perception of a one-off gatekeeping hurdle, despite the best intentions of those individuals genuinely committed to risk management and harm prevention. We reframe the conversation and raise the possibility of an ongoing, situated, and relational practice. This extends Forsyth's (2022) ethical self and researcher consideration into the formal process rather than as a precursor to institutional ethics.

This ethics approach recognises that Professional Practice research is often messy, relational, and emergent, with blurry boundaries between researcher and participant, context and intervention. As such, transactional models (based on fixed protocols and pre-defined risks) are often inadequate or inappropriate. Instead, we follow a developmental, reflective, and principled framework rooted in ethics of care, relational accountability, and co-evolution with context.

We look forward to the ongoing discussion.

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**Glenys Forsyth** has over 20 years' experience in higher education in Aotearoa New Zealand, specialising in work-integrated and practice-based learning. She is dedicated to supporting adult learners, many already in the workforce, to gain qualifications through reflective, workplace-based pathways. As Capable NZ's Ethics Lead since 2016 and a member of the Otago Polytechnic Ethics Committee, Glenys is a strong advocate for ethical practice in real-world research. Her Master's research developed a practical model for ethical decision-making, particularly suited to work-integrated learning contexts. With a background in health, well-being, and leadership across business and education, Glenys brings a holistic, grounded perspective to her work.

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