



University Ethics Committee

Guidance on Ethical Issues involving payments and incentives to participants

Chief Investigators and those conducting research involving human participants have a responsibility to treat participants fairly and with respect. The purpose of this guidance is to highlight the ethical issues raised by the provision of different forms of payments to research participants, and to suggest points to consider when planning the research and preparing an ethics application.

Reimbursement and compensation of research participants

Research participants may be reasonably remunerated for their time, expenses, inconvenience and for the degree of discomfort they may experience while participating in a research study. All remuneration, reimbursements or in-kind services must be approved by the University Ethics Committee or one of its subcommittees through the University's ethical review process.

Methods of recruitment must be consistent with the need to obtain informed consent. There should be no indication, express or implied, of any expectation of an agreement to participate. Generally, no inducement should be offered to a participant or proposed participant. Any payment, other than expenses or small remuneration for time spent, must be justified in the ethics application.

Researchers need to be clear about the distinctions between different kinds of payments and incentives for participation (see glossary) which broadly fall into the following categories:

- Incentives;
- Recompense (reimbursement of expenses, or compensation for non-financial losses);
- Remuneration or reward.

The use of incentives

There are strong arguments for the use of incentives in research. Offering incentives could help speed up the research process or boost response rates. Payment might also be viewed as fee for a service, in other words, for participants' time, knowledge and experience. It has been argued that it is ethical practice to pay socially and economically vulnerable participants for their time because it provides them with the dignity of employment and economic reward for their labour.

The use of incentives can, however, be incompatible with treating the participants with respect and dignity. Incentives can influence potential participants to take part in research. Participants can be at risk of exploitation from accepting an unreasonable burden of risk or agreeing to do something they would not otherwise agree to take on. They may also feel influenced to take on inconvenient or uncomfortable activities or be motivated to volunteer repeatedly for research studies offering remuneration for participation (which can be the case with research using micro working sites such as Amazon Mechanical Turk). The use of incentives to participate changes the relationship between the participants and the researcher(s). It has been argued that incentives may inappropriately commercialize the relationship between researchers and research participants, with implications for public trust. Participants from financially disadvantaged groups and those in resource-poor contexts may be particularly vulnerable in respect of this. Reimbursement of loss of earnings could encourage researchers to focus recruitment on "cheaper" participants.

It is important to ensure that such payment will not interfere with the voluntariness of participants' consent by acting as an inducement. Under no circumstances should there be any coercion or undue influence of research participants to take part in the research. It is expected that compensation should be proportionate to the burden of the research on the participant and the duration of study involvement. Any use of incentives needs to be justified in the ethics application.

Factors to take into account when considering whether incentives might prompt someone to participate when they would not otherwise do so include:

- the welfare of the volunteer and of other closely concerned individuals;
- the potential threat to the common good (i.e., will this undermine other approaches to research/ bring research into disrepute?);
- the professional responsibilities of the researchers.

Context-specific considerations

Any payments to participants should be carefully considered in the contexts where they will be applied. If the participants' cultural background differs from that of the researchers, the local culture and practice should be taken into account. It may be helpful to draw on community advisory boards or to consult people from the cultural setting. When offering compensation for participants' time, national government guidelines may be useful. Where research is using an online platform to recruit participants, researchers should check whether the platform they intend to use stipulates standard or minimum payment rates for taking part in research.

The source of the funding should also be taken into account. For research for an educational qualification, students who do not have the means to pay participants should not be put at a disadvantage. Any departmental guidance on this must also be followed.

If participants could be identifiable to others, e.g., finance staff or third parties processing payment for the research, this should be made clear to the participants beforehand, e.g., by including a sentence to this effect in the information sheet.

Research participant-specific considerations

Particular consideration should be given in situations where there might be a power imbalance or if the participants are at risk or vulnerable. If participants cannot give informed consent themselves, it is particularly important that consent is being given for the right reason and not for material benefit. If the research involves young people, consider whether payments should be made to parents/ guardians (e.g., for travel expenses) or what age-appropriate payments might be (e.g., a sticker or a certificate for young children). Reimbursing a group or institution for participating may be appropriate in some situations (e.g., book tokens for schools). Participants should be made aware of the possibility of payments affecting any benefits to which they would otherwise be entitled so that they are able to make an informed decision about whether or not to accept the payment.

Advertising reimbursement or remuneration

Consideration should be given to how and when participants are told about any recompense. Participant information sheets and recruitment materials should state that recompense will be made so that potential participants are not discouraged from participating by the associated costs. As a general rule, recruitment material should not state the value. However, if this is necessary (e.g., it is a requirement of a third-party recruiter), advertisements must not emphasize the value of the payment (for example, through the use of formatting), nor should payment information be privileged over other information, such as what participants are being asked to do.

Course credits for research participation

Within the University of Strathclyde, a few departments offer undergraduate course credits for participation in research. The British Psychological Society (BPS) code of Human Research Ethics outlines the ethical rationale for student participation in research:

“Participation by students in psychological research provides them with valuable experience, not just with methodology but also with the ethics problems that can arise when carrying out experiments and other forms of research. Indeed, it can be argued that it is unethical for psychology students or graduates to carry out research with others unless they have been willing to participate and have had experience of participation in such research themselves.”

There must be valid informed consent and no coercion in the recruitment of student participants. As such, any departments that intend to offer course credits must:

- Offer a wide range of studies, such that students are not obliged to participate in a particular study if they do not wish to do so.
- Offer an alternative (such as a practical course and exam of equivalent duration) aimed at helping the student make up their knowledge deficit regarding research and research ethics.
- Allow all students to participate in any study offered in that department, whether or not they would normally meet exclusion criteria, provided this does not put the participant at risk. For example, a left-handed participant may take part in research intended only for those who are right-handed, but a pregnant student may not take part in a study where pregnancy is one of the exclusion criteria. This is to ensure that they are not denied the educational experience allowed to other students who meet the criteria for inclusion.
- Make allowances for students who are unable to complete the specified number of hours on medical grounds.

Any decision to adopt the offer of course credits must be made by the Department/ faculty concerned, not by individual researchers.

Summary

Given the ethical concerns surrounding payment for research participation, the following points should be considered where reimbursement, compensation or remuneration is provided (in cash, vouchers, goods or access to support services):

- Project-specific guidelines should be developed for when and how payment is made, including for what should happen if a participant withdraws.
- For some types of research, compensation rates/ types may already be standardized in the local setting.
- A clear and explicit justification for paying participants should be provided, including for how much will be paid, for any differences in the amounts paid to participants, and for how this is appropriate to the cultural context.
- The form of recompense. Cash payments can have implications in terms of, for example, participants' benefit payments or identifiability (if a record of the payment is needed). Concerns about what any cash paid may then be used for should be weighed against the need to respect participants' autonomy and avoid paternalism. Vouchers may be preferable in many situations. An alternative option is offering entry into a prize draw⁷ or a non-financial benefit, particularly one that is appropriate to the nature of the research.
- How and when to tell participants about the payments.
- How to record the reimbursements made.
- Careful consideration should be given to any cases where there is concern that people are primarily consenting because of the payment offered and not because they wish to take part.

It is important that any payments used in research are suited to context of the research project. Participants should be treated fairly and with dignity. Any payment must not override the principles of freely given and fully informed consent.

Examples

Below are some examples of acceptable and unacceptable payments and incentives.

The following would normally be **appropriate**:

- Providing young children with a pack of stickers or a certificate for participation in an observational study.
- Providing young people aged 13-18 years (who have been recruited outside the school environment) with a £15 cinema/ shopping voucher for participation in a 4-hour focus group (or, outside the UK, financial and cultural equivalent).
- Providing schools/ colleges with a reward in kind (e.g., books/ equipment) for recruiting students into your study.
- Providing pregnant women and young mothers with a £20 voucher for a baby shop for attending a focus group to discuss their experiences of antenatal services (or, outside the UK, financial and cultural equivalent).
- Providing refreshments to focus group members while they are taking part in a focus group.

The following are examples of the sorts of payment that would normally be **inappropriate**:

- Providing young people 13-18 years old (who have been recruited outside the school environment) with a £5 book voucher (UK example) for participation in a four-hour focus group. This is a poor recompense for time spent and also constrains their purchasing choices.
- Providing cigarettes to participants taking part in smoking research. Even if participants request this, there are no circumstances under which this would be considered acceptable.
- Providing alcohol. There are no cases where alcohol should be used as reimbursement or recompense.
- Providing potential participants with access to professional advice/ services in return for participation, e.g., offering prisoners free legal advice in return for participation. If you are in the position to be able to give a vulnerable group access to a desired commodity for free, then you should offer this to all members of the group from which you are recruiting. In this case it would be permissible to give participants and non-participants the contact details of free services, but not to act as a broker for access.

Resources

[University of Strathclyde Code of Practice on Investigations Involving Human Beings](#)

[University of Strathclyde Anti-Bribery and Corruption Code of Conduct](#)

ESRC Framework for research ethics: [guidance on voluntary participation and coercion](#)

Health Research Authority [guidance on payments and incentives in research](#)

Nuffield Council on Bioethics: [Human bodies: donation for medicine and research](#)

Market Research Society [Regulations for Administering Incentives and Free Prize Draws](#)

American Anthropological Association's (draft) [Ethics Committee Briefing Paper on Remuneration to Subject Populations and Individuals](#)

University of Toronto [Compensation & Reimbursement of Research Participants](#)

British Psychological Society [Code of Human Research Ethics](#) (2nd edition, 2014)

BMJ (2009) [Should healthy volunteers in clinical trials be paid according to risk? Yes](#)