

Ethics guidance on the use of research incentives

1. Context

The use of incentives for research participants in medical and psychological studies and in quantitative social research is relatively commonplace. In qualitative studies the use of incentives is less common but on the rise. There are advantages and disadvantages to using incentives in research and payments to research participants warrants reflection.

Reasons for use of incentives:

- Boost in participant numbers: without incentives the number of participants may be insufficient to achieve statistically robust results (Dunn and Gordon 2005);
- Time constraints of research projects/faster recruitment;
- Payment can be seen as a recognition of an individual's contribution to the research outcome (Phillips 2011);
- Paying people from disadvantaged socio-economic background for their effort and participation can be seen as ethical. Additionally, the researcher is not the only one who benefits directly from the research (Head 2009).

Reasons against the use of incentives:

- Fully informed consent may be compromised: Incentives may represent inducement to participants, diminishing their perception of risk of partaking in the research, putting the validity of fully informed consent in doubt (Halpern et al. 2021). This is particularly the risk for participants on low income, who might feel coerced if the reward is too high to refuse.
- The demographics of research participants: The use of incentives encourages enrolment among people with lower income levels who then disproportionately bear the burden of research (Denny and Grady 2007). Incentives can undermine autonomous decision-making and compromise scientific integrity of research.
- Authenticity of information: Incentives may prompt people to give false information to be eligible for the given study which would place accuracy of the project into question (for instance people pretending they had an ADHD if that was one of the inclusion criteria) (Russell et al. 2000). Please see related UWE guidance on non-genuine participants in research.
- Culture of expectations: By establishing the practice of paying research participants, a culture of expectation may be created, affecting people's willingness to participate when no incentive is offered (Head 2009). This reduces intrinsic motivation to behave altruistically (Zultevics, 2016) and also puts those

researchers who do not have the budget for incentives (for example PhD students) in a disadvantaged position.

- Payment to participants may degrade the idea that research is done for a common good and transform it into a marketized exchange (Head 2009).
- Change in the relationship: The use of incentives can commercialise the relationship between researchers and research participants, with implications for public trust.

UWE has produced this guidance to highlight ethical and practical issues to consider when designing a research project and ethics application that proposes to offer incentives to research participants. It should be noted that this is general guidance only. The use of incentives needs to be considered on a case-by-case basis, considering among others the sample demographics, participant's specialism, research topic and participation time and activity required.

2. Scope

This guidance is for all UWE staff and students undertaking a research activity.

3. Definitions

Incentives – something that motivates or encourages someone to do something. Similarly to honorarium as defined in the [Standard Operating Procedure for paying Public Contributors](#) incentives are a “goodwill” gesture offered for participation as a volunteer. This gesture is not payment as such in recognition of time spent, or skills brought to the project. It is a form of payment (in whatever form) offered to the public contributor (this wording is per NIHR policy and is consistent within HMRC requirement).

Reimbursement - payment to a person to cover out of pocket expenses (e.g. travel expenses, meals, child-care provision, parking costs). Payment to participants to cover expenses may be offered depending on the research project (e.g. funding). Participant information sheet and recruitment material should state if reimbursement is available so that potential participants are not discouraged from taking part due to the cost.

4. Guidance

4.1. Principles

Incentives should be reasonable and proportionate to the research project. Incentives should not cause participants to consent to risks they might otherwise not find acceptable, or set at levels that would unduly influence the participants to take part or

remain in a study (avoiding coercion). However, incentives should also not be set at a level that could be considered disrespectful of the participants' value to the research, study length and complexity of tasks, or of their expertise. For example, a provision of a £12 book voucher to youth who participated in a 3-hour focus group is appropriate; a £5 book voucher for the same activity would not be (poor recompense for their input and time; very limited purchasing choice).

Incentives should be suitable for the intended participants. For example, if participants are children, stickers or certificates are more appropriate than monetary incentives. If a class of children participates, book/toy/stationery donation to the class/school may be appropriate.

In international research, the incentives should be culturally sensitive; researchers should take into account standard wage (for monetary incentives) and learn about country/culture appropriate gifts. It is advised that researchers consult the use of incentives with community leaders/experts at the planning stage whenever possible.

Depending on the study, context and research participants, consider if participants are in control of their personal finances (e.g. people in abusive relationship may not be) and look for the most appropriate incentive.

Be mindful how incentives are advertised and discussed. If the incentive is used to attract the participants, this should not be the focus of recruitment materials. The main focus of recruitment material should be the information about the research project; i.e. description of the project, what it entails, an invitation to participate should come first. Any reference to the incentive should come after project description and should be as discreet as possible (e.g. not in bold, in different font or different colour).

Incentives need to be discussed throughout the informed consent process; however, it is inappropriate to use the incentive as the main reason for participants to consider participation. Additionally, incentives should be advertised as a thank you for participation and not a payment of a service provided.

Transparency. Participants need to be informed that accepting the incentive does not affect their right to withdraw from the project or to decline to answer certain questions.

If participants could be identifiable to others (e.g. finance staff or others processing payment for research), participants should know this and this information should be included in the Participant Information Sheet.

Participants must be made aware of the possibility that a monetary incentive may affect any benefits they are receiving if applicable.

Personalised acknowledgement. Whenever possible prepare a personalised thank-you message acknowledging the invaluable role participants play in research to foster a

positive relationship. Researchers could do this at the point when the funding is put up onto the Finance BmX system.

4.2. Types of incentives

Bank payments

UWE is a cashless organisation, therefore cash payments are not possible. However, we recognise that research might take place in a location (abroad) where bank transfer isn't possible. In such cases, the researcher should raise this at the project set-up stage so that REE and Finance can explore what the possibilities are.

Vouchers

Vouchers from large on-line shopping platforms may be the most convenient, but they may not be the most ethical or suitable. Consider the quality of internet access participants have, availability of delivery in the area where participants live, and the potential additional delivery costs purchase of on-line goods entails. A more ethical approach would be offering a voucher for establishments that participants would typically frequent and that are not controversial (e.g. a local shop). Consider also the appropriateness of the voucher for the demographic and location of participants. If the project allows, the most suitable voucher can be discussed with the participant(s).

Physical vouchers should be stored securely (locked cabinet).

With e-mail vouchers consider information protection and data security, particularly on the transfer of the voucher to the participant.

Vouchers from Amazon can be processed through Finance. If researchers wish to use a different voucher, they will need to acquire them and claim expenses back through staff expenses. Receiving an advance payment for the vouchers is possible when the amount of money used for the vouchers is substantial. As with any vouchers, researchers will need to provide a proof that the vouchers have been given to participants. Please seek advice from Finance if needed.

Prize draws

Prize draws may be ethically acceptable provided that the prize is not significant enough to unduly influence participation in the study. Prize draws are sometimes used when research is unfunded or underfunded or when research participation is not substantial enough for an individual incentive.

Researchers should be transparent and in the Participant Information Sheet provide participants with the information on the prize and its value, expected number of participants, expected timeframe, how the prize will be transferred. A winner should be chosen at random and contacted by the researcher. When personal data is collected for the prize draw purposes, researchers should give consideration to GDPR compliance and maintain security of this information. Any information should be securely destroyed once the prize has been awarded.

Please note that draws may not be appropriate for anonymous research, since they would present an unfair disadvantage to those willing to identify themselves versus those who don't.

In-kind incentives

In-kind incentives are more common for qualitative studies than quantitative studies and are not seen as coercive (Paradis 2000). Researchers can for instance offer their time through different volunteering activities (with literacy or language training, assistance with housework, volunteering in food-bank distribution points or in a local school, offer of expertise to a non-profit organisation). Such incentives 'give something back' and depending on the context bring additional benefit of access to further research participants and/or an insight in the community life/research location.

4.3. Ethics review

College Research Ethics Committees (CRECs) will consider the justification and precedents presented to them when evaluating the suitability of the incentive. They may determine the incentive is not appropriate and provide guidance and support for resubmission of ethics application. CRECs will also consider all clarifications and responses received and if needed consult with the Research Integrity, Governance and Ethics Office, UEIC and other CRECs Chairs.

Ownership and Oversight

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