

UEC Guidance on the use of Financial Incentives in Research

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The ethical appropriateness of using incentives / payment / offers of services in research with human subjects is the subject of much debate. Compensation in the form of wages and reimbursement for costs incurred in research participation or appreciation payments when the research participants are not made aware of them from the outset are not the same as incentives and therefore do not pose the same ethical concerns. Incentives interconnect with power in research relations because they can be used as a tool to persuade or coerce. Researchers use incentives to enhance recruitment and retention of research participants but authoritative data on the effectiveness of this is lacking (Bernstein & Feldman, 2015). While there are reasons for using incentives, there are also reasons for not using incentives. For instance, incentivising research participation may have the overall unintended effect of creating a universal expectation of payment for research participation and discouraging participants to behave altruistically by becoming research participants. This may have implications for the kinds of research that can be undertaken (Zutlevics, 2016). Incentivising participation may distort sampling, potentially skewing study findings. Incentives are particularly ethically problematic if there exists one or more of the following factors:

- (1) The research participant is considered vulnerable or is in a **significant dependency relationship** with the researcher
- (2) The **risks** of participating are particularly significant
- (3) The incentive is given **at the stage of recruitment**
- (4) The research is **degrading**
- (5) The research participant will only consent because **the incentive is relatively significant**
- (6) **The research participant has an aversion to participating** and the aversion is a principled one.

Researchers thinking of using a financial incentive and Ethics Committee Members reviewing research projects where incentives are being used should give consideration to the following questions:

1. Why is the incentive being used?
2. Does the incentive constitute undue influence or a coercive inducement to participate?
3. Does the incentive / payment compromise the dignity of the research participant?
4. Is the incentive tantamount to coercion because it is difficult for 'vulnerable' persons/ persons in financial need to refuse to participate in the research?
5. Is the incentive attractive enough to tempt persons to participate in the research study against their better judgement?
6. Are incentivised research participants asked after their participation in the study, if they regret their participation?
7. Has there been consultation with the relevant research population / stakeholders in deciding the amount and the form of the incentive?
8. If the reason for using the incentive is that it is difficult to recruit research participants, are there factors that may be impeding recruitment and what efforts have been made to address them? Are there ethical problems in the research, which could be making recruitment difficult?
9. Are the risks of research participation such that the incentive is being used to account for the increased risk associated with participation? Incentives should not be used to compensate for risks.

Researchers applying for ethical approval need to

- Make clear in their applications the form of the incentive to be used in the study and its worth.
- Provide a full justification for the incentive including an ethical justification for its use.
- Ensure that the use of an incentive does not contravene any laws / regulations / obligations governing the conduct of research in their particular field.
- Show what steps have been taken to ensure that the incentive offered is not undermining the principle of freely given informed consent.
- Evaluate the impact of the incentive on a person's judgment to participate.
- Ensure that the right of withdrawal from the research is available to research participants without them losing the incentive for participation.

- Show evidence of having a procedure in place to track monies / vouchers etc. paid to research participants and to ensure that research participants receive the incentive / compensation they have been promised by the researcher etc.

This guidance is provided to supplement general university ethics requirements and should be read in conjunction with information provided by the university ethics committees and other relevant university policies. It should be noted that while UCC does not permit the issuing of vouchers to people, as an exception vouchers can be issued to persons, who partake in human research studies and they should be sufficient to reimburse the participants for reasonable out of pocket expenses incurred by the them as a result of participating (See University College Cork Finance Office, 2017). Any out of pocket expenses have to be reimbursed in a way which is in line with UCC's Travel and Expenses Policy (See University College Cork Finance Office, 2018).

References:

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