

INCENTIVES TO RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

Introduction

In most cases it is best if research participants are genuine volunteers. People who are in any way "coerced" into taking part by incentives (of any kind) may be less representative of the population or may be more keen than normal to give answers which they think will please the researcher.

Nevertheless there are clearly many cases where the inconvenience of taking part is such that an incentive is appropriate. This paper provides guidance in such cases.¹

Guidelines on Incentives

1. Where a researcher (or team) proposes to give incentives to research participants this must be clearly disclosed on the research ethics form (SHUREC2A/2B). The Research Ethics Committee considers that *any* use of incentives will require a SHUREC2 and individual approval by the relevant FREC (because the risks noted above mean the researcher would need to accept a possible "yes" to the SHUREC1 question "Will anyone be taking part without giving their informed consent?").
2. An "incentive" is anything which is likely to give a benefit to a research participant which would not generally be available to others. Incentives can include:
 - cash payments
 - gifts
 - vouchers to spend with particular retailers or suppliers
 - access to treatments, educational opportunities or anything similar
 - possible prizes drawn at random.
3. For the avoidance of doubt the following are not regarded as "incentives"
 - provision of items necessary for the research itself (e.g. foods which must be consumed for the study, literature which the participant must read, attending a performance on which the participant is asked to comment)
 - direct reimbursement of *actual* travel expenses which participants had to incur to take part (receipts or mileage claims must always be requested to support claims).
4. Incentives should only be offered where it is likely to be difficult to recruit a suitable pool of participants without an incentive - e.g. where participants have to give up a considerable amount of time, or subject themselves to demanding dietary or exercise requirements. Researchers are encouraged to consider the INVOLVE guidelines regarding public involvement in NHS, public health and social care research (www.invo.org.uk).
5. Where incentives are used those must not be offers of goods or services which could be seen as trying to influence participants' behaviour. Unless a study is clearly advertised from the outset as one being conducted on behalf of a particular retailer or manufacturer, vouchers and products linked to particular suppliers are best avoided. Cash incentives are only permissible if explicitly approved by Finance. Vouchers which can be spent at a wide range of outlets may be appropriate – these can be ordered through SHU Finance, but specific procedures must be followed – see <https://portal.shu.ac.uk/departments/finance/Purchasing/GiftVouchers/pages/home.aspx>
Note that vouchers cannot be offered to SHU staff for anything linked to their employment.

¹ However, where researchers feel that these guidelines do not adequately address the requirements of their proposed research, they are free to propose other arrangements for individual consideration, as part of a SHUREC2 submission to the relevant FREC.

6. Receipts must be obtained when incentives are provided to satisfy University accounting requirements (see the Finance guidelines above regarding vouchers). This also reduces the risk of someone trying to claim the incentive more than once.
7. Prizes are sometimes used where the effort of participation is not substantial where respondents have a chance to win something. They may be appropriate in some cases. However, they still raise the same risks, as prize draws will almost certainly encourage higher response rates from those who like the idea of winning the prize. Also, if participants have no idea how many people are taking part they have no idea of their chance of winning which makes it hard to assess the value of the incentive - so it is more difficult for participants to make an informed decision on whether or not to take part.
8. A promise of a donation to charity may sometimes be more appropriate than a direct gift to the participant (e.g. "Sheffield Hallam University will make a donation of £1 to xxx charity for each completed survey response") but this raises complex accounting issues and the payment arrangements must be agreed with Finance. If a specific charity is named, this must be cleared in advance with the charity concerned - otherwise the University could be considered to be acting as a "commercial participator" under the Charities Act 1992 without the charity's consent. A charity donation has less risk of skewing participants' behaviour, but there is still a small risk that some people may still be motivated to take part in order to help a particular charity when they were not otherwise keen to be a participant.
9. Even where an incentive is appropriate, it should be clearly advertised in a way that makes clear it is a nominal token of thanks for taking part, not a formal payment for services provided (the latter has many contractual complications - not least the payment could be taxable, or could even create a contract of employment). As a general rule, the value of any incentives should not exceed £15 for any day of involvement.
10. Incentives must never be so large that people may be induced to take part against their better judgement.
11. In advertisements seeking participants, the incentive should *never* be the main headline. Any reference to the incentive should make clear that it is just a small compensation for the inconvenience and/or expenses of taking part. However, people should know at the start of the recruitment process what the incentive will be so they can make an informed judgement of whether they wish to take part. It should also be clear who is paying the incentive (normally this will be the University - even if the research was externally funded, the actual incentive will normally be provided by the SHU research team, not the funder.) A statement on the following lines may be appropriate:

"In thanks for your co-operation in this study, Sheffield Hallam University will be pleased to offer you a £15 voucher which can be spent at a wide range of high street stores as some compensation for your time and travel expenses."
12. However, where participants may have incurred significant travel expenses it is best to separate reimbursement of travel from a formal incentive.
13. If an extended timescale is involved, it should be make clear when the incentive will be provided.
14. Incentives should not be presented in a way that will detract from other important information such as warnings to participants on any risks or discomfort from taking part.
15. An incentive must not be used in a way that makes it difficult for participants to exercise their right to withdraw from a study, and this should be made clear in participant information sheets. If a participant has to attend a number of sessions, someone who withdraws early should not be left out of pocket - e.g. having incurred extensive travel expenses which are cannot then be reclaimed. However, may be acceptable to end-weight the incentive to encourage completion of the study - e.g. "You will receive a £10 voucher for each of the first two sessions, and a £20 voucher for the final session".