

Payments and benefits to research participants

This document provides guidance for researchers on the differences between and issues arising in the payment of incentives, reimbursement, compensation, remuneration and communication of benefits to research participants¹

It is imperative that participants ('human subjects') in research are treated with respect and fairness. This guidance note highlights the ethical issues involved in offering payments to research participants in social science, and highlights the differences between longer-term benefits to participants from the research, versus compensation of their time, individual incentives and incentivisation and reimbursement of travel/earnings lost.²

Incentives, compensation and payment for participation

The use of **incentives** is common in research and offering incentives such as a standard cash payment, entrance into a prize draw, a voucher or other practical artefact has previously proved effective in recruiting participants, especially for larger studies.

Incentives are usually applied across the board or not at all, as it is difficult to judge in advance what the demographic group of the participants will be. They are also advertised in advance, often both in individual letters of invitation and in open calls for participation on a variety of platforms. These incentives are also sometimes advertised as 'payment for participation', thus blurring the line between incentives and remuneration (see below).

When offering incentives in low-income communities and/or in close-knit neighbourhoods, it is vitally important to bear in mind that participants/informants who benefit are chosen fairly from across the community so that a sense of injustice or 'being left out' does not pervade the community during or after the research. Clear parameters for the selection of informants/participants are crucial.

Compensation for working time lost, difficulty of task and/or reimbursement of travel are likewise usually signalled to participants in advance via Informed Consent sheets and should be appropriate to the effort and risks of participation. These payments to participants are sometimes dependent on participants' showing receipts for travel or loss of income, but usually no such evidence is required.³ All of these issues need to be considered in advance and included in the ethics application and clearly signalled in consent sheets.

Compensation for time lost needs to be instituted in a sensitive manner, taking into account the countries, regions and roles of the participants so that they are not being exploited or inadvertently insulted by the payment. On the other hand, *not remunerating* participants from sociodemographic groups which rely on daily wages or are in other ways low income might also not be compatible with fairness and dignity of human subjects. And not reimbursing participants' expenses/loss of income incurred in the course of the research is another form of exploitation which might well lead to lower trust, anger and distress, particularly amongst low-income

¹ The guidance does not cover every situation. For example, it does not cover experimental research where participants sometimes receive incentives as part of the research itself rather than as compensation. Payments and compensation should always be considered as appropriate for the context.

² Note that other organisations may use slightly different terminology and definitions of these terms. In particular, for funded research, researchers should check any guidance, terms and conditions set out by the funding body.

³ However it is important to check any funding conditions.

participants. Researchers who simply cannot offer either compensation for working time/income lost to participants due to their own financial constraints should consider in-kind remuneration (see below).

Reimbursing participants for minor incidental expenses should be standard and does not raise ethical implications. Likewise providing participants with a certificate of participation for project-based research for which they gave up a significant amount of time (half a day or a day) is not usually controversial, but their consent for this should still always be sought in case they do not wish to have a record of their participation.

If participants are public office holders in the UK it may contravene the UK Principles of Public Life for them to accept any payment, even in voucher form. In these cases incentives/compensation should not be offered. Researchers will have to find out how these principles apply in other national settings.

In-kind remuneration

In some circumstances it may be more appropriate to provide remuneration *in kind* for the time and effort participants put into our research. These are usually more common in qualitative fieldwork than in quantitative studies. These include the donation of equipment or time – for example, the researcher volunteering their own time to a cause of the participants' choosing (this can vary from housework for individuals, assistance with literacy or language learning, to donating time and expertise to large non-profits).

Expectations, undue influence and risk

Issues that arise pertain to expectations, risk of exploitation, risk of undue influence and inducement. These apply to both qualitative and quantitative research, and to the possibility that researchers with limited budgets might try to recruit participants willing to work for free or who will accept extremely low payment.

Please see the guidance from the University of Oxford⁴ for a longer discussion of the ethical issues and ways forward.

The benefits of research

Entirely separate from the issue of payments, is the issue of research benefit. Research benefit can be defined as some positive impact or changes for participants and their loved ones/associates as well as the demonstrable contribution of the research to wider society. Individual and collective benefits need to be disaggregated and clearly signalled in all communications with human subjects of research. Will the benefit or potential benefit be for the world at large? For a particular sociodemographic section of society? For the industry, sector, country, or other group from which the individual hails?

It is advisable to give participants a clear sense of whether the benefits of your research are definite or whether they are speculative: "our hope is that this will happen/will be shown/will contribute to x" versus "The research will help/support/ensure x". In the rare cases where absolutely no benefit to the participants or their group can be foreseen from the research in question, it is advisable to state this clearly.

⁴ <https://researchsupport.admin.ox.ac.uk/files/bpg05paymentsandincentivesinresearchv10pdf>

Informing participants about benefits, incentives, reimbursement or remuneration

It is imperative that your research subjects as individuals and/or as groups are fully and clearly informed about the different benefits, incentives, compensations, reimbursements and/or remunerations that they can expect on participation in your research. This should usually be done in writing as best practice but can also be done orally if in settings where written consent is not appropriate.⁵ Researchers should check that their research subjects have understood what payments and benefits their participation will bring and what their expectations are.

Circumstances where benefits or true purpose are not conveyed to participants

There are, of course, circumstances in which the research participants are in a group whose actions/behaviours researchers wish to understand in order to curtail/change those actions or behaviours for the betterment of society but who would not consent to the research if this was made explicit. This might be the case if the researcher is doing sensitive research with those who have committed crimes, are abusing the rights of others within families, communities and organisations, or who are in far right organisations with anti-democratic and/or violent mandates. In these cases, the wider ethics of the case must dictate any statements about benefits, and will be dependent on other ethical issues such as the non-disclosure of the true purpose of the research and/or deception.

⁵ Please refer to the LSE guidance on Informed Consent: <https://info.lse.ac.uk/staff/services/Policies-and-procedures/Assets/Documents/infCon.pdf>