

La Trobe University Human Research Ethics

Student Survey Guidelines

The University Human Ethics Committee (UHEC) has considered the question of whether certain surveys of student opinion require approval by the UHEC or a Faculty Human Ethics Committee (FHEC).

The following examples were presented:

- i. Focus groups or anonymous surveys to determine interest in certain kinds of proposed courses;
- ii. Focus groups or anonymous surveys to determine student responses to variations in course presentation;
- iii. Focus groups or anonymous surveys seeking student advice on ways in which to improve teaching or course or subject offerings;
- iv. Requests of successful students to supply information about themselves or their opinions of subjects and courses for promotional purposes.
- v. In some cases former students were to be approached as well as, or instead of, present students.

These examples, and others like them, fall in a region which is only barely research if research at all, and they clearly shade into the kind of informal inquiries that teachers routinely make about student responses to various changes or proposed changes to teaching practice or subject offerings. However, many of the ethical issues that arise when using students as research subjects can arise in these cases as well.

The UHEC therefore recommends the following approach to cases of this sort.

1. Where there is genuine uncertainty about the need for ethics approval, the UHEC or appropriate FHEC secretary should be consulted about the necessity to obtain human ethics approval.
2. Where a conscientious decision is made that a student survey does not require ethics approval, the following guidelines should still be observed:
 - 2.1. The survey instrument (including focus groups) should be accompanied by a clear written statement detailing the purpose of the inquiry and the use to which the information obtained will be put, including potential advertising/promotion;
 - 2.2. The written statement should make it plain that participation in the project is voluntary and that participation or failure to participate will have no effect on the student's relationship with the university in any other respect;

2.3. The written statement should make it plain that no information will be recorded in a way which links it to an identifiable individual.