Participant Payments and Reimbursement

Guidance on Paying Research Participants in Human Research

Purpose and Scope

This guideline provides advice to researchers on payments and reimbursements for participants in human research. It is aligned with the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2025)*, particularly sections 2.2.2, 2.2.6(j), and 2.2.10–2.2.11.

It applies to all forms of participant payments, including reimbursements, compensation for time, incentives, and prize draws.

La Trobe University's remuneration policy does not apply to consumer or lived-experience involvement in research. For these contexts, researchers should instead refer to La Trobe's specific payment guidelines for consumer and lived-experience participation, which outline appropriate recognition, reimbursement, and compensation. Researchers should refer to La Trobe's payment guidelines available here. La Trobe University Payment Guidance

Core Ethical Principals

Offering reimbursements, payments, incentives, or entry into prize draws as part of research participation may affect the voluntary nature of consent and risk unduly influencing participation. While the National Statement does not explicitly address gifts or prize draws, it emphasises the principles of inducement, coercion, and respect for participants.

The *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2025)* (sections 2.2.2, 2.2.6(j), and 2.2.10–2.2.11) indicates that reimbursing participants for reasonable expenses—such as travel, accommodation, and parking—is generally appropriate. Participants may also be compensated for their time. However, payments that exceed what is reasonable for the time involved, or inducements that may encourage participants to accept risks, are considered ethically unacceptable.

Payments to participants must be consistent with the core ethical principles of **respect**, **justice**, and **beneficence** (National Statement, Section 1).

Respect

Participation in research must be based on informed consent. Payments should not impair a participant's ability to make a voluntary and informed decision about participation, nor should they encourage individuals to take risks they would otherwise avoid.

Justice

Participants should not incur out-of-pocket expenses as a result of participating in research, where this can be reasonably avoided. It is noted that reimbursing participants is not always feasible, depending on funding availability.

Where possible, reimbursement of direct costs (e.g. travel, parking, meals) is considered good practice. Payment for participants' time may also be appropriate, provided it is reasonable, proportionate, and not excessive.

Failure to adequately reimburse participants, or providing only minimal compensation where participation places a substantial burden, may be considered unfair or potentially exploitative (NS

1.4(e)). Researchers should therefore consider the time, commitment, and involvement required, and where possible ensure appropriate compensation when these are significant. Payments should also be distributed fairly among participants (NS 1.4(d)).

Beneficence

Payments should not be set at a level that encourages participants to take risks they would otherwise avoid. The National Statement states that "payment that is disproportionate to the time involved, or any other inducement likely to encourage participants to take risks, is ethically unacceptable" (NS 2.2.10, 2025).

What constitutes disproportionate payment will depend on the context. An amount that may seem minor to some individuals may be unduly influential for others, particularly those experiencing financial hardship. Payments should therefore be appropriate and justified in relation to the participant's time, effort, and any expenses incurred, and should not be presented as a "reward" for taking part.

Additionally, when determining payment structures in a human ethics application researchers should consider transparency and special populations.

Transparency

All payments and reimbursements must be clearly explained to participants during the consent process. The level of payment may also depend on participants' contribution to the project.

Participants should be informed of:
- how much they will receive
- when and how they will be paid
- whether they will still be paid if they withdraw from the study

This information must also be included in the Participant Information and Consent Form (PICF) using clear and simple language (e.g. "reimbursement for travel" or "small payment for your time").

- Researchers should also consider cultural and community expectations, as in some cases group benefits or culturally appropriate gifts may be more suitable than individual payments.

Special Populations

Additional care is required when working with certain participant groups:

Children and young people: Typically, small tokens of appreciation (often provided via a parent or guardian) are preferred over direct monetary payments.

Students, employees, or dependent relationships: Participation must be entirely voluntary. Where incentives such as course credit are offered, equivalent alternatives must be available (e.g. completing a comparable non-research learning activity, attending an equivalent seminar or workshop, writing a reflective summary on a set topic, or undertaking an alternative assessment task of similar time and value).

Right to withdraw: Participants must not be disadvantaged for declining or withdrawing from research.

Indigenous and culturally specific communities: Researchers should consult with community leaders to determine appropriate forms of recognition, such as community benefits or culturally relevant gifts rather than individual payments.

Types of Payments

Reimbursements for costs

Participation in research may involve out-of-pocket expenses for participants, such as travel, accommodation, or parking. It is appropriate to reimburse or contribute toward these costs.

Reimbursements for time

Where participation involves a significant time commitment, researchers may reimburse participants for their time.

Whether this is considered a reimbursement or inducement depends on whether the researcher can reasonably determine the cost of the time participants spend in the research.

Researchers intending to reimburse participants for time must:

- Provide a justification in the ethics application
- Explain how the "cost" has been determined

Compensation

Payment for time, effort, or inconvenience associated with participation.

Inducements

Payments that are disproportionate or likely to unduly influence participation. These are not ethically acceptable.

Incentives

Incentives are payments or rewards used to encourage participation in research (e.g. gift cards or prize draws). They must be used with caution, as they may unduly influence participation decisions or create perceived pressure to take part.

When an incentive may be coercive

An incentive may be coercive if it leads a person to take part in research they would otherwise choose not to join.

Guidelines for offering incentives

Incentives should be used in a way that is consistent with the National Statement and the ethical principle of voluntary consent.

In high-risk research, incentives should generally be avoided or only used where there is strong justification. The National Statement (NS 3.1.21) notes that payments or incentives must be managed with particular care in higher-risk studies to ensure they do not exert undue pressure on participants. Any incentive in a high-risk project must therefore be clearly justified to the HREC, as they may affect voluntary consent.

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In low-risk studies involving vulnerable participants, incentives should be used cautiously. The focus should be on ensuring consent remains voluntary and free from pressure. The National Statement (NS 2.2.9, 2.2.10) requires researchers to consider participant vulnerability and whether any payment could influence decision-making. Even small incentives may affect choices in some contexts, so their appropriateness should be carefully assessed.

- Incentives should not be offered in high-risk research unless strongly justified.
- Incentives may not be suitable in some low-risk studies, particularly where participants are vulnerable.
- Where shopping vouchers are used, researchers should consider whether they could unintentionally reinforce existing vulnerability or disadvantage.

Practical advice on payments to participants

Determining Payment Levels

Payments should:

- Reflect time, effort, and inconvenience
- Include reimbursement of all reasonable expenses at minimum
- Not be so high that they influence participation decisions

A general guide is the national minimum wage (approximately A$25/hour in 2025). For example, a one-hour interview may attract $25–$50.

Payment Structure

- Prefer per session or per visit payments
- Avoid lump-sum payments at study completion
- Ensure participants who withdraw are still paid for completed participation
- Clearly document arrangements in ethics applications and PICFs

Communication

In the ethics application and PICF, describe the payment plan clearly and transparently using neutral, straightforward language. Avoid exaggerated or overstated wording. Specify what participants will receive, the amount, and when and how it will be provided. It should be made clear that there are no penalties for withdrawing from the study. Participants will receive reimbursement proportionate to their level of participation

Payment arrangements must be described clearly and neutrally in:

- Ethics applications
- Participant Information and Consent Form(s)/ Plain Language Statement

Include:

- What participants will receive
- Amount and timing: The level of payment may also depend on participants' contribution to the project.
- Method of payment

- Statement that withdrawal has no penalty (e.g. "you will still receive the gift card even if you stop participating")

Recruitment Materials

If a reimbursement or incentive is offered, recruitment materials must not place pressure on people or unduly influence their decision to take part. Recruitment materials should not include any reference to payments, so that participation is not seen as being encouraged by financial inducement.

Payment Structure and Withdrawal

Structure payments to avoid creating pressure to complete the study. Consider payments on a per visit (assessment) or session basis rather than as a single lump sum at the end of the study. By doing this participant who withdraw early still receive payment for their contribution to the study and are not incentivized to stay just to receive payment. This need to be clear in both the ethics application and participant information documentation.

Guidance for specific types of research:

For online surveys or other similar low-risk research, payment is generally not required unless the study is designed with an incentive-based approach. Where payment is offered to improve response rates, it should be modest and proportionate.
Sometimes online research platforms may also act as payment providers or facilitate participant reimbursement. For example, this may include a $10 gift card or entry into a small prize draw for a small prize. Any payment should be considered a token of appreciation rather than an inducement to participate.
Participants must be clearly informed that choosing not to participate, or not entering the prize draw, will have no negative consequences for them. If a prize draw is used, it is important to ensure that confidentiality is maintained—for instance, by collecting draw entries through a separate form so that survey responses remain anonymous and cannot be linked to identifying information.

Interviews and focus groups involve more participant time, it is reasonable to offer a payment in addition to reimbursement of expenses. Consider using an approximate hourly rate (around $25–$50 per hour) as a guide to determine the level of payments. For example, you might offer a $30–$40 gift card for a one-hour interview or focus group. The amount should reflect the participants' time and any inconvenience but remain modest enough that it doesn't become an undue inducement.

If students are offered course credit or extra credit for participation, ensure it is truly voluntary and that those who opt out have an alternative way to earn the same credit (e.g. an equivalent assignment). Clearly state that choosing not to participate will not affect a student's grades or standing. If a student begins a study but later withdraws, they should still receive partial credit for the portion completed (so there is no penalty for withdrawing early).

Prize draws (lotteries/raffles)

Prize draws should be used cautiously and are generally limited to low-risk research. While some ethics committees may consider them where prizes are small and appropriate, the LTU HREC does not normally approve lotteries or raffles and does not encourage their use. They may only be considered where other recruitment strategies are unlikely to achieve sufficient participation and where there is no risk to participants (for example, studies not involving gambling or addictive behaviours).

Where a prize draw is used, it must comply with relevant state legislation and any applicable permit requirements. Participants should be provided with clear information about the number and value of prizes, the date of the draw, and how winners will be notified. Entry must be voluntary, and participants who choose not to enter must not be disadvantaged in any way.

Non-cash prizes (e.g., gift cards or goods) may be used; however, cash prizes or cash-equivalent payments are not permitted and will not be approved by the HREC. The total value of the prize pool should be kept modest to minimise the risk of undue influence

Guidance on inauthentic participation in online research

In online studies that offer payments or incentives, there is a risk that some people may take part dishonestly. This is sometimes called “fake” or “imposter” participation. It can include:

- Completing the survey more than once
- Giving false information to qualify
- Using bots or automated responses

Even small payments can sometimes encourage this behaviour.

This can reduce the quality and reliability of the research, especially in fully online studies or remote interviews.

Researchers should manage this risk using simple and fair methods, such as:

- CAPTCHA checks
- Unique survey links
- Basic eligibility questions
- Checking for unusual or suspicious responses

Payments should be modest and not designed to strongly attract participants.

Using trusted community groups or partners to recruit participants can also help reduce this risk.

Any safeguards should:

- Respect privacy
- Not be intrusive
- Not unfairly exclude genuine participants
- Still allow easy participation for eligible people

Where relevant, researchers should explain these steps in their ethics application.

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Paying research participants is generally ethically acceptable. Payments need to be fair, proportional, and not so high as to unduly influence potential participant decision making. Researchers should justify any proposed payments in their ethics applications and communicate them clearly to participants. By following the principles and practices outlined above - reimbursing costs, offering reasonable but not excessive compensation, providing payments pro-rata, and being transparent - researchers can acknowledge participant contributions.