

Case study 7. Can money solve this problem?

A hypothetical case about undue inducement for research participants

Leanne started preparing for her thesis project earlier than many of her peers did. The first part of her project went well and she has successfully obtained ethics approval for it. She was thrilled when her supervisor rated her performance very satisfactory in the bi-annual progress report.

When it came to the phase of collecting data, however, Leanne found herself in unexpected trouble. Only a handful of people agreed to participate in her experiment, which was entirely out of her expectation. Three months have passed and she was able to recruit only one-third of her target sample size. Other students in her study group have been catching up and a few of them have already finished data collection. In desperation, Leanne decided to advertise her project on Facebook and increased the compensation for each participant to \$1,000. Leanne's new strategy has worked and her experiment could finally proceed. Half year later, her supervisor received a complaint from a parent about Leanne's undue inducement to his daughter for participating in her experiment.

Reflection corner

1. What do you think of Leanne's compensation strategy in this case?
2. What should Leanne do in this situation?
3. What are your strategies to recruit research participants?

Analysis: How to determine the right level of research incentives for participants?

The Operational Guidelines and Procedures of the Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) stipulate: "Prospective participants should not be adversely induced by financial reward or be pressured to participate in research. All reimbursement of expenses, such as traveling expenses, should be commensurate with standard practice and be reasonable." As principal investigator (PI) of research projects, students should familiarise themselves with the basic ethical principles set out in the University's Policy on Research Integrity. One of the principles emphasises that researchers should make sure there is "no undue influence and inducement to participate". By paying incentives beyond the reasonable range to induce participation, Leanne's action was against this basic principle. It also raises questions to the project concerned such as the credibility of the study and fairness in research participation. Furthermore, PIs should submit an amendment application to the HREC through the Faculty Research Ethics Committee (FREC) if there is any deviation from the approved research protocol of a project.

See more:

1. Operational Guidelines and Procedures of HREC:
<http://www.rss.hku.hk/HREC/guidelines.pdf>

2. Summary of the Belmont Report:
<http://www.rss.hku.hk/HREC/BelmontReport.rtf>
3. Procedures for application for ethics approval in the Faculty of Education:
<https://web.edu.hku.hk/research/ethics-application>