

Research involving RMIT students

What are surveys in research?

Surveys can be a simple and effective method of collecting research data. They can be delivered online via a platform such as Qualtrics, distributed in hard copy, or conducted in person. The format that is used to collect data will be informed by the research design and practical considerations such as whether participants have access to reliable internet or whether surveys will be part of field work. Surveys can be anonymous or can collect personal information that identifies participants.

What are some important considerations with surveys?

Survey research, like other forms of data collection, have ethical considerations that need to be considered in the research design. These could include:

a) Risk Level

While survey data may be anonymous, ie. not collecting any personal information, the data collected could still be sensitive, involve a vulnerable participant group or include health related data as defined by the [National Statement on ethical conduct in human research \(NS\)](#). As such, the risk may be deemed to be 'more than low risk' even if the data is not identifiable.

Researchers are responsible for assessing the risk level of their proposed research activity and to determine whether the anticipated benefits of the research outweigh the risks associated with it. For survey research, additional considerations may include:

- The sensitivity of the research data being collected and the ability of the researcher to link data that may be potentially harmful.
- The potential participants and whether the targeted participants are a vulnerable group as outlined in the National Statement and how this will be determined in an online environment.

- The potential for psychological risk with the questions being asked and how this will be managed if surveys are completed without researcher oversight.

b) Confidentiality and Privacy

Survey data can be completely anonymous where not identifying information about the participant is collected or can be identifiable, if this information is requested. Survey data is anonymous when participants cannot be reasonably identified, even by the researcher. If the survey collects identifying personal information from participants, which is then removed by the researcher, then the data is de-identified and not considered anonymous. Further information on data types and identifiability can be found in the Guidance Note: Data and Identifiability.

c) Recruitment

The recruitment of survey participants can be online by sending a survey link to potential participants, by approaching participants in person during field work, by mailing hard copies of surveys to be returned by post, or a combination of all three. Recruitment protocols may consider the following:

- How the researchers will determine the age and selection criteria of participants if the survey link is distributed online either via email or via social media.
- Will participants feel any pressure or coercion to participate, real or perceived, if recruitment posts are circulated within a specific online community group, in personal messages of individuals within an online community, or even approached in person on the street.
- If using a combination of online, in person and hard copy surveys, how researchers will collate the data for analysis.
- How participants will withdraw their participation, and hence their data, from the research if they no longer wish to participate.

d) **Voluntary and informed consent**

Voluntary and informed consent flows from the principle of respect for human beings includes respect for their capacity to make their own decisions, such as **not to participate**.

Participants must be appropriately informed of the research before consenting to participate. Information can be provided to participants either with a Participant Information Sheet (PIS) or a Participant Information and Consent Form (PICF). Some considerations include:

- Whether the format of the survey requires a PIS or a PICF. If the survey is conducted online, the PIS must appear at the beginning of the survey and completing the survey implies consent.
- If surveys are completed in person, will participants sign a PICF or be provided a PIS and completing the survey will imply consent.
- How will participants be informed whether withdrawing their participation is possible and how this will be managed.

e) **Data Management**

The [RMIT Research Data Management Procedure](#) outlines the responsibilities of researchers with respect to research data management in accordance with [Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research \(2018\)](#).

Researchers have a responsibility to retain clear, accurate and complete records of all research including research data and primary materials to a sufficient standard that allows for verification and/or reproduction of research by others. Considerations include:

- Where will data be stored if data collection is within a platform such as Qualtrics and how will hard copies be stored.
- What will happen to hard copies of surveys after they are collated with online survey data.
- What will happen to data collected from incomplete surveys.

- What data will be collected to ensure that clear, accurate and complete records are retained that will enable research to be verified or replicated
- How will data be shared amongst the research team.

Key things to remember when completing the application:

- While surveys may be anonymous and not collect any personal, identifying information, they are not necessarily 'negligible or low risk'.
- Surveys can be administered online, face to face, or in hard copy but research design should consider how data will be consolidated if a combination of methods is used.

Further information

Further information can be found in the [RMIT Research Policy: Human Research Ethics Procedure](#) and the [Research Data Management Procedure](#).

For further advice on this topic or other human research ethics matters, please email humanethics@rmit.edu.au.

A Research Governance and Ethics Coordinator will assist you and may connect you to one of the CHEAN or HREC members in your discipline who can offer expert ethics advice.