

The Use of Recruitment Agencies in Human Research

How recruitment agencies can help research

Researchers often use participant recruitment agencies to assist in the recruitment of voluntary participants for RMIT research. Such agencies are often web-based and are established for the purpose of providing access to research volunteers to private industry market researchers and university researchers who wish to access participant groups directly.

Potential participants will have registered with such agencies for the purpose of participating in research. In registering people will typically provide demographic information. Often participants are rewarded with a nominal payment and the researcher may have to pay either the participant directly or the agency.

Use of such agencies is helpful for researchers as it can provide convenient access to potential participants who have expressed an interest in being involved in research. These recruitment agencies can select certain demographics that meet a project's selection criteria. This allows researchers to tailor their invitations to potential participants to those who have professed an interest in research. For certain sorts of research projects (e.g. low risk projects involving online surveys) this form of recruitment may be convenient for all involved.

What are some important considerations?

a) Representative samples

In deciding whether a recruitment agency is appropriate for a research project, researchers should consider whether the sample of participants is likely to be representative of the community, and/or meet the inclusion criteria for the project. Use of such agencies has a potential to skew outcomes of research as it may lead to use of non-representative samples, as it is a 'closed' sample.

Researchers are advised to apply screening mechanisms in their survey tools to confirm that the participants meet the inclusion criteria for their project.

Potential participants have registered with an agency because they are interested in research, but this may not mean they are appropriate for a particular research project. If the participants' motivation in registering with an agency is financial or material, this may impact the validity of the results. Participants recruited from such agencies may be participating in numerous research projects and their 'over-participation' may skew research results.

b) Participant remuneration

When applying for human research ethics review and approval researchers should also explain what financial incentive or other reward participants will receive. Rewards should be proportionate to the level of risk in a project. Excessive levels of remuneration or rewards should be avoided as these can reduce the level of voluntariness in the consent process.

c) Choosing an agency

Before choosing an agency to facilitate recruitment, researchers should consider whether the agency is appropriate for academic research, and also whether they are, in fact, a bona fide recruitment agency. There have been examples of bogus recruitment scams that have the purpose of harvesting people's personal information for illegitimate purposes.

Most genuine agencies are affiliated with relevant industry bodies such as the Australian Market and Social Research Society (AMSRS or 'Research Society'). Professional association membership is one indicator of their authenticity. Does the organisation have a code of ethics?

Recruitment agencies like these are collecting data from people, they should have a privacy policy that is compliant with state and national laws. Do they have data protection policies? This provides evidence that the company is reputable and will ensure the merit of the research project.

Researchers should also consider the processes used by the company to facilitate recruitment. For example, does the agency attempt to verify those who register with the company and to cross-check the bona fides of the people who register with them?

Agencies that host or collect data on behalf of researchers must be avoided.

If a potential agency sounds too good to be true, then it probably is.

d) Recruitment

In the recruitment process it is preferable that agencies will send an email or other form of communication to their participant panels or groups on behalf of the research team, rather than providing an email list or database direct to the researcher (which is probably illegal!).

A communication to the potential participants via the agency should make clear that the request to participate is from RMIT. A draft of such a message must be prepared by the researcher and included with the application to the RMIT human research ethics review body for consideration and approval.

Researchers need to clearly indicate when participants will be provided with the Participant Information Sheet (PIS). Where appropriate consider including it with the message/ email to participants. The application must be clear on how the recruitment process is organised and the extent of the involvement of the agency.

e) Consent

Although participants registered with an agency have probably consented to being contacted for research purposes, they still need to provide voluntary informed consent to the RMIT researcher.

If the research project involves an online survey and is assessed as low risk, then it is likely that an implied consent model will be appropriate. It is essential that researchers have a consent process for the research project that is separate from any consent provided to the recruitment agency.

Key things to remember when completing the application

- Provide the recruitment agency information within your application and include its bona fides if it is not a verified RMIT provider along with your rationale for choosing the agency.
- Make sure you include your recruitment communicate to the participants is included with your original application for review and that it clearly outlines your relationship with the recruitment agency.
- Make sure your consent form clearly identifies your project as an RMIT University research project. Participant Information and Consent Form and Participant Information Sheet templates are available with the [Research Ethics Platform Help](#) section.
- When considering privacy, be sure and include your recruitment agency's policy on privacy and data protection.
- Include how your data will be collected and stored and detail any link between the recruitment agency and your data. Remember you should avoid agencies that host or collect data on your behalf.

Clearly outlining details of the use of recruitment agencies throughout your application will assist the RMIT ethics reviewers to better understand your rationale and methodology and more efficiently review your submission.

Additional resources:

[Payment of participants in research: information for researchers, HRECs and other ethics review bodies](#) (NHMRC, 2019)

Further information:

For further advice on this topic or other human research ethics matters, please email humanethics@rmit.edu.au. Feedback or suggestions on these guidance notes are welcomed. 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.