

## Stakeholder Summary

### Monetary incentives effective in boosting student participation in research studies

When it comes to persuading postsecondary students to participate in voluntary research studies, monetary incentives work best, according to a new study commissioned and published by the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HECQO).

Encouraging participation in research is an ongoing challenge across sectors, but obtaining high response rates from students can be particularly challenging because they are frequently asked to participate in surveys and studies. Incentives are commonly used to boost participation rates.

HECQO commissioned Academica Group to examine the effects of different incentives, communication strategies and task demands on student participation in online research to better inform its ongoing work with the [Essential Adult Skills Initiative](#) (EASI). This project uses an online test to measure changes in literacy, numeracy and problem-solving skills in college and university students from the time they begin their programs to the time they graduate. The findings of the study, like many others involving postsecondary students, will depend heavily on participation rates and the quality of student responses. Having a better understanding of how task demand, incentives and communication strategies impact these factors can help ensure the success of the project.

### Project Description

*The Impact of Incentives, Communications and Task Demand on Postsecondary Student Participation in Online Research* presents the findings of an experiment that included two types of incentives (monetary and non-monetary), two types of communication strategies (regular and enhanced) and two types of tasks (low- and high-demand). The low-demand task consisted of a short, online survey that required approximately 15 minutes to complete and the high-demand task took upwards of 90 minutes. The latter consisted of the Education and Skills Online (ESO), an assessment of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, and the same one used in EASI. The monetary incentive was a \$10 Amazon gift card and the non-monetary incentive consisted of premium access to Paddle, an online motivation and career exploration tool. The regular communication emails were similar to those Academica typically sends to potential survey respondents. The enhanced communication emails employed, among other things, a more conversational tone as well as icons and images to convey key messages. The frequency of the email messages was the same for both types.

A sample of 8,000 postsecondary students in Ontario were selected to take part in the study and participants were randomly assigned to one of eight possible study conditions. Response rates, email invitation open rates, quality of participant responses and sample composition were then analyzed.

## **Findings**

Task demand and incentive type had the largest impact on response rates. Participants who were offered a monetary incentive were four times more likely to complete the task than those who were offered the non-monetary incentive, and those invited to take the low-demand task were almost six times more likely to complete it than those taking the high-demand task. Students who were sent the regular — as opposed to the enhanced — email communication opened the invitation at a higher rate, although the effect size was small and translated into a small increase in the response rate. In terms of response quality, low proportions of respondents for both tasks completed them faster than expected, indicating that the majority of respondents were taking the time to read the survey questions and provide thoughtful answers. An analysis of the demographic and academic characteristics of the students found few significant differences.

The results suggest that monetary incentives yield a higher response rate than non-monetary incentives, regardless of the type of messaging used and the task demand, the authors conclude. The findings also suggest that email invitations with a clear and concise subject line will have a better chance of being opened than one with a more conversational or informal tone. Although monetary incentives were effective in increasing participation in both types of tasks, response rates were significantly lower for the high-demand task. This suggests that lengthy and demanding tasks are likely to require more innovative ways of encouraging student participation.

The authors of *The Impact of Incentives, Communications and Task Demand on Postsecondary Student Participation in Online Research* are Julie Peters, Chris Hall and Rod Skinkle.