# Guidance for questionnaire-based surveys (including online surveys) and template for providing ethics information to survey respondents

## Introduction

This document provides guidance for researchers on ethical issues that may arise when conducting questionnaire surveys. The latter pages of this guidance provide a template that you can adapt, for use in informing participants about the ethical dimensions of your survey and ensuring that their consent to participate is recorded.

Surveys conducted for the purposes of research (including as part of data gathering by taught students on dissertation-type modules) require ethics review; typically, researchers seek new knowledge arising from the results of the survey. However, not all types of surveys necessarily require ethics review; a simple customer satisfaction or feedback survey is normally seen as evaluation, rather than research, so would not normally be reviewed by a research ethics committee (REC). The essential issue is concerned with underlying intention: if the intention is evaluation of a service or product and there is no experimentation, such as conducting a trial with two or more research arms, each receiving different products or services, then no review is necessary. Some researchers will still seek ethics review in the aforementioned circumstances usually because they intend to publish results in a peer reviewed journal which demands ethics review. Even if the survey you are conducting would not be classified as research, you should still act ethically in designing the survey, informing participants about the purposes of the survey and what the data will be used for, and in gathering, storing and reporting the data. The most recent version of the Market Research Society’s Code of Conduct (available online) provides a useful set of principles to follow for all surveys, whether ‘research’ surveys or not.

## Survey Media

Surveys are usually administered to participants by post or, increasingly, online. Online surveys can be created using a variety of software platforms and delivered in numerous formats, e.g. via email, social media sites, etc. Decisions about anonymity, confidentiality and how participants’ informed consent can be demonstrated need to be made with all survey designs, but the issues are not always obvious or straightforward.

The University subscribes to Online Surveys (OS). This software is secure and uses password access for all accounts. The Department for Curriculum and Quality Enhancement can grant access (email: [studentsurveys@port.ac.uk](mailto:studentsurveys@port.ac.uk) ). The software website contains basic templates and guidance: [Guidelines for Online Survey](http://www.onlinesurveys.ac.uk/)

Other software varies in its capacity to ensure an anonymous response with appropriate confidentiality. For instance, Survey Monkey records the computer IP addresses of responses by default, and this option needs to be turned off if your survey is intended to be anonymous. Before applying to a REC, you must check the policies and protocols of any platform you intend to use to ensure a sufficient levels of data security and participant anonymity for the needs of your research, and to comply with the University research data management policy.

A researcher could, in theory, make a concerted effort to find the identity of participants using information such as IP address. IP addresses are considered as personal data. Therefore, it might not be strictly true to state that the survey is completely anonymous. It is wise to add a statement such as:

Whilst it might be technically possible to attempt to establish the identity of any individual participant, please be assured that the researcher has no intention of doing so.

Please note, in addition, there is a University Policy regarding departments administering anything that might be considered to be a ‘survey’. This policy, agreed by Academic Council, states that any request to carry out a survey involving University of Portsmouth students where >250 students are involved or the survey spans more than one department must seek approval from the Student Survey Request Group. This is intended to ensure that students are not overloaded with requests that might impinge on their involvement in mandatory internal and external student surveys.

## Consent

The 2018 General Data Protection Regulation (and Data Protection Act 2018) requires consent to be given freely, unambiguous, specific and informed when gathering “personal data” ( for a definition see [Guidelines for GDPR and Data Protection Act 2018](https://ico.org.uk/for-organisations/guide-to-data-protection/guide-to-the-general-data-protection-regulation-gdpr/key-definitions/what-is-personal-data/) ). This means that if you do intend to gather personal data you will need to include recommended GDPR/DPA2018 wording in the participant information along with explicit consent statements in the same way as you would for other types of research (see advice on the University’s ethics webpage).

However, GDPR/DPA2018 does not apply to research collecting anonymous data. For these types of studies, the traditional position has been that a positive response from a respondent is, in itself, evidence of consent to participate. If someone doesn’t wish to complete your survey, they simply won’t respond. However, best practice is, at the very least, to inform potential participants that the act of completing and returning the survey constitutes evidence of their consent. For online surveys, we recommend that you design a consent statement as the first question, with progression to the survey questions themselves not being possible unless a positive response has first been given. If a survey is particularly sensitive it is best practice to send potential participants an invitation letter securing their consent to receive the survey instrument; this might entail provision of a written [information sheet](http://www.port.ac.uk/research/ethics/downloads/filetodownload,171755,en.doc) and [consent form](http://www.port.ac.uk/research/ethics/downloads/filetodownload,171748,en.doc). In most cases, it is not normal to seek formal written consent with a name or signature. Indeed, given that most surveys are completed anonymously, written consent will have the paradoxical effect of compromising anonymity.

## Information

Participation should always be on the basis of potential respondents being adequately informed about the intended research, including the basis on which they are being asked to participate, any risks, and any right to withdraw from the research. You should give an indication to participants of the amount of time completion of the survey will take. To work this out it is advised to ask a friend to time a pilot version of the questionnaire. When collecting anonymous data, a formal information sheet is not normally necessary as information can be included in a simple invitation at the beginning of the survey instrument. However, this information can be based on the main components of a formal information sheet. With online surveys, necessary participant information can be given on the ‘front page’ of the survey, in the email in which the link to the survey is contained, or similar.

## Confidentiality and anonymity

Most surveys are completed anonymously with the researcher not present, thus ensuring confidentiality – though researchers should be aware of the risk of demographic data and substantial qualitative data identifying the respondent. While anonymisation is standard practice, some researchers choose to code questionnaires so that a nil response can be chased. Chasing is usually acceptable but limited to a single attempt; if the survey is fully anonymous as opposed to being link-anonymised (coded in some way) then chasing will have to be in the form of a ‘blind’ second posting acknowledging that some addressees will have completed the survey.

If anonymity (and confidentiality) is promised, you should be explicit with participants about how much anonymity in practice that your survey can grant them. Researchers should also be aware of the following potential risks:

In some surveys, demographic data can serve to identify the respondent, e.g. imagine surveying senior judges and asking them to declare gender. Demographic data should be limited to that required for research purposes; if you do not need age, gender, socio-economic data etc, don’t seek it.

Respondents have a right to know the outcome of a survey. You could direct them to a public source e.g. a website or you could provide personal feedback. In the case of the latter, you should provide a tear off slip (or a separate section in an online form) at the end of the survey, allowing the respondent to give contact details and the researcher an opportunity to separate the personal data from the research data. A similar consideration applies in the case of minor inducements to participate, such as offering free entry into a prize draw, requiring access to respondents’ contact details (i.e. their personal data).

Survey data should normally be analysed in block form rather than individually – this again helps to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. Do not disaggregate the analysis so far that it becomes possible to identify individuals within it.

Increasingly, it is common practice in staff and doctoral research to make anonymised survey data ‘open access’ so that it can be shared with other researchers. In many contexts this is good practice, and now an expectation in much funded research. If you intend to share data you should include a statement such as:

Please note; this survey does not require you to include your name or any other information that will identify you.  We will ask you for some biographical details [e.g. gender, grade, subject area] to help us produce summary statistics but these will not be used in any attempt to reveal your identity.  Data Management principles encourage researchers to share information they collect in the course of research and that information can be held for 10 years or more, but we will never share anything with any other person that names you or identifies you in any way, without your explicit consent.

Recruitment

Researchers should make it clear how they came to know the identity of a potential respondent. No researcher should use privileged information to access a sample e.g. a researcher who has a friend who works at ..............and provides a list of names and addresses – this will inevitably breach data protection legislation. If the researcher does not have legitimate access to potential respondents, a third party (gatekeeper) is often used. The survey instrument should make it clear that a third party, who normally has no role in the research beyond recruitment, has been used. This is particularly important in cases where the third party has a professional relationship with potential participants.

Support and further information

Some surveys raise concerns amongst respondents, or raises desires for further information. In these cases appropriate contact information should be provided e.g. a survey related to recreational drug use might include contact details of relevant support organisations. Researchers should note that anonymisation has the inevitable consequence of a missed opportunity to benefit; this should be compensated. Imagine the anxiety of knowing that a respondent is in some significant danger whilst not having any opportunity to provide help.

A template that you may find helpful when collecting anonymous survey data is given below:

Full departmental headed paper including contact details for researcher / supervisor / director of studies

**Survey Questionnaire**

Study Title: ....................................................................................................................................

Faculty Ethics Committee Ref No (if applicable): .........................................................................

Name of researcher and supervisor (if applicable): ......................................................................

Contact details: (You might refer to the letter head if it includes necessary information. It is unwise to use personal addresses, landline or mobile phone numbers, or email addresses. It will raise suspicions that you may not be a genuine University researcher and you do not necessarily know who may end up having access to your personal contact details.)

Invitation

Thank you for reading this. I would like to invite you to take part in my research study by completing this questionnaire. It is entirely up to you whether you participate but your responses would be valued. You have been identified as a potential respondent by ..............(you might have personal knowledge, or the questionnaire might be being forwarded by a third party – give brief details). My study is ............................(give a brief overview and explain how the survey fits in). I do not need your name or any identifying details; the questionnaire can be completed anonymously and all reasonable steps will be taken to ensure confidentiality. Responses from completed questionnaires will be collated for analysis; once this is complete the original questionnaires will be .....(you might want to retain hard copies of the raw data until, for example, successful completion of a PhD or other qualification otherwise there is no reason why they should not be destroyed once the data have been processed, but please note the requirements of the [University Research Data Management Policy](http://www.port.ac.uk/library/help/research/researchdata/), which currently requires storage of research data – not necessarily the raw hard copies of any data – for a minimum of ten years). Up to this stage, completed questionnaires will be stored (give details – it’s normal to use a locked filing cabinet). If you wish to learn more about the results of the research please ...(you could direct to a website or ask for completion of a slip(or separate section in an online form) at the end of the survey which will be detached from the questionnaire) If you intend to retain the anonymised data set for future research or to make it open access for future researchers, then you should make this clear. If there any significant risks or benefits associated with participation, they should be identified – you might also refer to sources of help identified at the end of the questionnaire.

## Questionnaire instructions

You should make it clear whether you would prefer all questions to be completed or whether the respondent should see themselves as entirely free to complete the survey selectively. With online surveys, remember that you will have to design the questionnaire architecture in such a way that questions (except for any confirmation of consent) can be skipped.

Insert the questionnaire here. Ensure that any requirement for participants to confirm consent is placed before the questions proper. With online questionnaires, respondents should be forewarned when they have reached the end of the questionnaire and should be required to confirm manually that they wish to submit their responses.

Thanks, conclusions and further advice / support

Thank you for completing the questionnaire please return it ... provide necessary instructions, including the deadline.

If you have any concerns regarding this research please contact me (or my supervisor) in the first instance. If you are not entirely happy with a response please contact ............. provide a list of contacts which might include a Head of Department and /or the University Complaints Officer. In the case of sensitive research, you might also provide contact details for support organisations or other sources of advice and guidance.