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# AGS Survey Incentives

*Protocols for institutions regarding the offering of response incentives for the AGS*

# Background

The Graduate Careers Australia (GCA) guidelines for the interpretation of the AGS survey data state that a total institutional response rate of 70% is desirable and achievable for the GDS and the CEQ. Any GDS and CEQ survey data with an overall institutional response rate below 50% should not be disclosed publically. The national average for the GDS is 55.9% and the CEQ is 44.8%, with several institutions not achieving a 50% response rate. Research on response rates of national surveys in the United States and Europe shows a decrease in response rate from 60% in the 60’s to 21% in the 80’s (Atrostic, Bates, Burt, and Silberstein, 2001). The need for higher response rates to the AGS across institutions in Australia led to the deployment of a variety of different methods, of which incentives is one.

The use of incentives to increase survey response cannot be separated from an overall holistic approach to achieving “good” response rates as described by Dillman (2000). However, concerns were raised within the sector and at the SRG meeting in April 2008 regarding the range of different methods of incentives used across the sector to increase response rates. Quoting from the minutes of the SRG April 08 meeting:

*“The issue of incentives was discussed by the meeting, with the general feeling that the process should be made as standardised as possible. It was felt that, if incentives were to be offered, GCA should provide parameters about the level and type of incentives”*

The SRG requested that GCA develop parameters regarding the use of incentives for incorporation into the new survey model as part the ongoing management of quality of the AGS dataset.

# Purpose

This paper intends to inform the SRG on the use of survey incentives and provide draft protocols for institutions regarding the offering of incentives with the intention to further standardise sector implementation of the AGS and improve the quality of survey data.

# Literature Review

**Overview**

A variety of different forms of incentives are currently used with the intention to increase survey responses. The most commonly used in several Australian Universities is the offering of monetary or non-monetary lottery prizes for “early return”. The value ranges between $100 and $3000. Many institutions offer a larger numbers of cash prizes (e.g. 10 prizes of $500) which is believed to be a useful strategy for improving response rates. Others use small post-paid survey rewards in the form of vouchers or “points” which can be used to purchase books or as a donation to a charity of their choice.

Studies on the effectiveness of these methods have been conducted and the literature on each will be reviewed in the section below. These are summarised in **Table 1** in the following section.

**Pre-Paid vs Post-paid Rewards (including Lottery Incentives)**

Incentives can be divided into two groups i.e. pre-payment and post-payment. This is based on when the survey recipient receives the incentive (Porter and Whitcomb, 2004).

According to Porter and Whitcomb (2004) empirical research on incentives indicates a conclusive positive impact on response rates; however, this impact depends greatly on the type of incentive used.

The research on the effects of postpaid and lottery incentives on response rates is not overly supportive of this practice, in fact; research shows that these incentives have little to no impact on survey response (Church, 1993; James and Bolstein, 1992; Singer, van Hoewyk, and Maher, 2000; Warriner and others, 1996). However, the paper by Porter and Whitcomb (2004) points out that previous studies have been conducted on members of the general population and it may be possible that college students are more price-sensitive than the average person. If so, lottery incentives may have an impact on rates of response to student surveys while not having any impact on rates of response to surveys of the general population (Porter and Whitcomb 2004). Church (1993) estimated the effects on response rate of a monetary prize contingent on return, and a non-monetary prize contingent on return, as 4.5% and 1.2%respectively.

Research by Singer (2002) has shown that incentives have the largest effect when there are few reasons to participate. An experiment with lottery incentives used in a college survey conducted by Porter and Whitcomb (2004) showed a small difference between the response rates of the control group (14%) and incentive groups (15.6%). The experiment included 5 groups - a control group and four incentive groups with prize draws of $50, $100, $150 and $200. According to Porter and Whitcomb (2004) the offer of a $100 gift certificate in a drawing increased the response rate by 2 percentage points, but there were no other significant differences between the control and incentive groups. Given the very large sample size and p value (only .047), this is a weak finding, especially in terms of the substantive effect. In addition, it does not appear that offering incentives of a higher value has a positive impact on response rates (Porter and Whitcomb, 2004).

ANOVA tests on the number of questions completed showed lower item non-response for respondents in the incentive groups. Further findings of this study by Porter and Whitcomb, 2004 suggest that the use of incentive may have caused respondents to complete a greater number of items specific to the institution offering the reward, while more general survey questions were completed at a rate that was identical to that of respondents not offered an incentive. The substantive difference is quite small, however: about 0.5 items (Porter and Whitcomb, 2004).

In the discussion on the results of post survey lottery incentives Porter and Whitcomb (2004) argues that a larger number of lottery awards available to participants could have a positive effect on survey response rate, however, this has not been tested.

**Pre-survey reward**

Most common in prepaid incentives is the inclusion of $1 or $2 with the initial mailing of the survey, with some researchers using $5 or $10 payments (for example, Singer, van Hoewyk, and Maher, 2000). Zusman and Duby (1987) found a substantial effect from a $1 prepayment to a post-secondary student sample of stop-outs, finding an increase in response rate of almost 19 percentage points. The relationship between size of incentive and survey response is less clear. Some scholars (Heberlein and Baumgartner, 1978; Hubbard and Little, 1988; James and Bolstein, 1990, 1992; Kropf, Scheib, and Blair, 1999) have found that increasing the value of a prepaid incentive leads to higher response rates, although the impact appears to decrease as the value of the incentive increases (Fox, Crask, and Kim, 1988; Warriner and others, 1996). Others (Jobber and Saunders, 1988, 1989) find that moving beyond a gesture amount has little or no impact on response rates.

After conducting five separate tests, Dillman (2000) indicated that the modest pre-paid incentive of $1 or $2 (whether sent by cash or check) administered in conjunction with four wave personal mail out, has proven to be markedly powerful (Porter, 2004). This method increased the response rate with an additional 19 and 31 percentage points.

**Contributions to charities**

Several scholars, however, have also studied how offers of contributions to charity affect response rates and have concluded that promised charitable contributions have no effect on respondent behavior (Furse and Stewart, 1982; Hubbard and Little, 1988; Warriner and others, 1996).

**Consistency**

A final concern is the extent that incentives may create expectation effects that will negatively affect future surveys (Dillman, 2000). The current research indicates that this is an insignificant issue (Singer, van Hoewyk, and Maher, 1998). These studies, however, tested the impact of incentives on subsequent survey response after a six-month or twelve-month period.

# Discussion

Research conducted by Porter and Whitcomb (2004) raises the question of effectiveness and resource allocation at institutions. **Table 1** shows a summary of the literature review, scientific evidence of the impact of various types of incentives and the advantages and disadvantages for each.

Pre-paid incentives show proven positive results on response rates, but are difficult or impractical to implement while post-paid incentives are more convenient to implement, but showing very little proof of any significant increase in response rates.

Given limited resources, should universities be spending time and money on awarding prizes, or on efforts that have proved to increase response rates, such as Dillman’s (2000) method of personalized, multiple contacts? (Porter and Whitcomb, 2004). Even though it has proven not effective, it might be tempting to offer large prizes in a survey, because to individuals unfamiliar with survey research methodology, it appears as if strong efforts have been made to increase response rates (Coates, 2006). A few large prizes may also be cheaper than including $1 or $2 prepayments with all surveys. Less salient efforts such as a second or third mailing or a personalized letter salutation may be less appealing to researchers but offer more certain benefits (Porter and Whitcomb, 2004).

**Table 1: Summary of Literature Review**

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| **Pre-paid Survey Rewards** |
| **Literature** | **Tested in student markets?**  | **Advantages** | **Disadvantages** |
| Zusman and Duby (1987) $1 notes | Post secondary students  | Increased responses with almost 19% | Difficult, costly and impractical to administer in large surveys like AGS |
| Church (1993) used meta-analysis using non-monetary incentives | Results from Public survey  | The overall effect of non-monetary incentives was 7.9% | Difficult, costly and impractical to administer in large surveys like AGS |
| $5-$20 pre-payments (for example, Singer, van Hoewyk, and Maher, 2000) or $10 payments (such as Warriner and others, 1996) | Results from Public survey | Increase responses with 10 percentage points (in conjunction with an advanced letter) | Difficult, costly and impractical to administer in large surveys like AGS |
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| **Post-paid Incentive Rewards**  |
| **Literature** | **Tested in student markets?**  | **Advantages** | **Disadvantages** |
| Prize draw (single)Porter and Whitcomb (2004) showed a small difference between the response rates of the control group (14%) and incentive groups (15.6%). | Porter and Whitcomb (2004) | Easy and cheaper to administer.  | Research results on this method show a difference of 2 percentage points between the control group and incentive group. It is not considered effective to improve response rates.  |
| Prize draw (multiple)The SES conducted by GCA in 2005 (Coates, 2006) – 60% of students indicated that a reward motivates them to complete the AGS.  | Not aware of available research on multiple rewards (prize draw)  | Easy and cheaper to administer.  | No scientific proof for the use of this method. Universities that are currently using this incentive method (UniSyd & ECU) are not achieving desired results other than early return.  |

Lottery incentives might be appropriate for institutions that are achieving response rates of 50 percent or higher, but not sufficient for those who require a significant improvement in their GDS and CEQ response rates. These institutions might have to review their processes and align with recommended GCA practices (GCA, 2008) or review approaches such as those documented by Dillman (2000) (**Table 2**) to get them over the 50 percent line.

The methods described by Dillman (2000) to improve survey response in conjunction with small post-survey incentives seem to be the most effective in achieving a good outcome (see **Table 1**). However, the emphasis is on a holistic approach and not incentives. These procedures could impose demands on resources (financial, human and technical) which could be problematic for some universities.

**Table 2: Dillman Methods to Improve Survey Response (Dillman, 2000)**

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| Steps to Improve Survey Response  | References and Results (percentage points)  |
| **Pre-notify** | Pre-notification: 10% (meta-analysis; Hutchinson, 1996) |
| **Second contact & Incentive** (Dillman, 2000)**.** | Personalisation: 4-6% (meta-analysis; Green & Hutchinson, 1996) pen/small monetary incentive as token of appreciation: 8% (single experiment; Boynton, 1995). 8% multiple prize lottery incentive (six Ipods) Ginns, 2006Teaser on envelope: 11% (single experiment; Dommeyer, Elganayan, & Umans, 1991)Stamped return envelope: 6% (meta-analysis; Green & Hutchinson, 1996) · Warning of reminder: 10% (single experiment; Green, 1996)  |
| **Third contact: Postcard Thank You/Reminder.** | postcard reminder with pre-notification letter: 13% (Dillman, Clark, & Sinclair, 1995). |
| **Fourth contact: first replacement questionnaire** | Personalisation: 4% (meta-analysis; Green & Hutchinson, 1996) stamped return envelope: 6% (meta-analysis; Green Hutchinson, 1996)  |
| **Fifth contact: phone surveys.** | Additional contacts: number of contacts correlates strongly with the response rate in mail surveys (meta-analysis; Heberlein & Baumgartner, 1978) |

Based on the 2005 student engagement surveys (SES) (Coates, 2006) 16 percent of survey managers indicated that they have no access to additional resources (other than standard office resources) to administer the AGS. However, as shown in **Figure 1**, 49 percent (CEQ) and 9 percent (GDS) of institutions respectively, fall below a 50 percent response rate. Only 13 percent (GDS) and 4 percent (CEQ) of institutions achieve a desirable rate of 70 percent or higher.

**Figure 1: AGS Response Rates (2007)**

(GCA, 2007)

Further, all students surveyed as part of the 2005 student engagement assessment believed that institutions should seek feedback from students, however, only 60 percent of the sampled students felt that institutions make good use of the feedback they receive from students (Coates, 2006). Over 60 percent of graduates reported that an incentive would motivate them to respond to the survey, although the size of incentive does not seem to matter. Other factors rated as important by more than 50 percent of graduates included repeated mail-outs of the questionnaire, postcard reminders and follow-up telephone calls. Particularly notable is the low emphasis placed on both the size of receiving incentives and prizes, or the likelihood or winning a prize (Coates, 2006).

Despite the importance of pre-notification, figures from the GCA 2004 methodology review survey suggest that only 20.4% of institutions give any preliminary notice to students about the GCA surveys. Post and personal email are the only two means of contact favoured by more than 50% of respondents (Coates, 2006).

Many of the issues and trends exposed in this research are active in the national surveys of Australian university graduates. A 2004 survey methodology review conducted by the Graduate Careers Australia (GCA, 2004) found that at least three-quarters of institutions make three follow-up contacts, use multiple modalities to conduct the survey, and use reply-paid envelopes. Just over half use multiple modalities for initial form distribution and make moderately targeted use of response incentives, although very few believe that they are an effective means of raising response rates (Coates, 2006).

Yet, comparatively few institutions give pre-notification to graduates about upcoming surveys, or endeavour to reduce survey fatigue. While discussions about survey fatigue are common, much less emphasis appears to have been given to developing potential respondents’ perceptions of the salience and significance of survey (Coates, 2006).

# Recommendations

GCA can, with the SRG, develop a set of protocols for the way incentives are offered but these cannot stand in place of solid survey research practices aimed at maximising response. The issues discussed in this document will be developed into an advisory paper to be referred to in the AGS Manual and placed on the START web site.

While pre-survey promotion may enhance general awareness and receptivity, one real challenge for enhancing response levels and quality is to identify effective ways to transform non-response into response behaviour. It seems that enhancing intrinsic motivation rather than using extrinsic rewards may be a key means of doing this, although this is itself a challenge given the essentially low stakes nature of many survey outcomes for participants (Coates, 2006).

Much previous research has concentrated on identifying correlation of increased response rates. Such research has associated increased response rates with high quality contact information, multiple contacts, such as pre-notification, repeat mail-outs, telephone follow-up and reminder notes. The use of various monetary and other incentives has also received much attention (Coates, 2006).

According to the research, incentives have, in general, only been found to have modest positive results on response rates. Further, incentives have been found to have diminishing returns, and to be even less useful, unless they are carefully targeted at particular respondent groups. To a lesser but occasionally still significant extent, appeals for ‘help’, inclusion of return envelopes, assurances of confidentiality, questionnaire design and length, personalisation, institutional endorsement, and type of postage have been correlated with increased response rates (Coates, 2006).

Guidelines for incentives can therefore not be separated from an overall holistic approach to achieve good response rates. Strategies provided by Coates (2006) as part of the national AGS enhancement project are therefore imperative. These strategies include:

* Institutions should develop a survey policy to manage their student and graduate surveys. The policy should be institution-wide, in that it should embrace activities and stakeholders from across an institution.
* Such policies should include frameworks for planning, managing and reviewing survey practices and associated activities.
* Key stakeholders include: people in survey, planning and quality offices; teaching and teaching support staff; people working in careers and student advisory and support roles; people in management and leadership positions; and students and recent graduates.
* Such policies should take into account end users of data in addition to those people with direct involvement in managing and conducting surveys.
* Feedback from the GCA surveys should be disseminated widely to all possible stakeholders within university communities. Reports should be tailored to the interests and needs of different stakeholders.
* Institutions should assume that students very much want to provide feedback on their education and experience via surveys. They should work to endorse students as valuable stakeholders in these important aspects of university life.
* Institutions should work to develop a range of ways for providing information about and feedback from surveys. The use of a range of means to promote the GCA surveys to students and graduates, keeping in mind those methods which are most likely to reach people, including posters around campus, emails from senior staff, announcements in lectures, articles in campus newspapers.
* Institutions should adapt their marketing and dissemination of survey outcomes in ways that best communicate with different stakeholder groups.
* Institutions should promote the GCA national surveys to people before the surveys are distributed. There is considerable room for greater levels of promotion both before graduation, and between graduation and survey distribution
* Institutions should contact graduates using methods which are most likely to secure a response, rather than methods which may be simply ready-to-hand such as university email. Institutions may need to develop systems to enhance their capacity to keep contact with graduates.
* Institutions should take steps to confirm that people in the GCA national survey population have in fact received a form. This might involve follow-up calls, using multiple methods for distributing forms, or validating contact lists prior to survey distribution.
* Institutions may need to develop systems to enhance their capacity to keep contact with graduates.
* Institutions should enhance the appearance and content and impact of survey materials to better capture potential respondents’ attention.
* Institutions should focus on enhancing the significance and authority of the GCA national surveys for graduates. Even after the initial distribution, institutions need to actively develop the significance and authority of the survey forms in ways which inspire graduates to complete the forms. They should offer potential respondents clear and compelling reasons why their input into the surveys makes a valuable contribution to their university and to them as individuals.
* Institutions should inform graduates about the value and treatment of survey data. This might involve informing them of privacy, confidentiality, or other human-ethics related issues.

GCA would encourage institutions to re-evaluate their survey protocols and, where possible incorporate those strategies that are not already part of the survey process. Should institutions wish to use incentives to encourage responses, GCA recommends modest rewards, but larger in number. It is recommended that survey resources be focused on implementing a holistic approach (as described above), rather than single high value lottery incentives.

However, it is recognised that some institutions might see value in offering incentives, particularly those which encourage quick response, for example, by a certain date. Speeding response can assist Survey Managers in managing their AGS administration.

***Recommendation to SRG***

1. *That GCA develops this information to form an advisory document on incentives for Survey Managers*
2. *In terms of the way in which incentives are offered, we recommend that the SRG considers additions to the communications protocols (developed by the SRG in 2008, see the October 2008 AGS Manual) to ensure that institutions are communicating appropriately with AGS subjects, using best practice and avoiding usage which might be seen as influencing the graduate’s response. These additional protocols could include:*
* *The incentive should only be an encouragement to the subject to respond to the AGS.*
* *The incentive could be a monetary or non-monetary reward presented as a token of appreciation for completing the survey.*
* *The incentive should not be capable of being construed as encouraging more positive responses to (for example) the CEQ and PREQ.*
* *The incentive should be offered via the covering letter (or email) and not on the survey instrument itself.*
* *Survey Managers should be aware that there is differing legislation across States and Territories regarding the offering of prizes.*

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