# **Ethical Guidelines for using ’Crowdsourcing’ – participant recruitment services**

**Introduction**

Crowdsourcing or online participant recruitment services (such as Prolific or Amazon Mechanical Turk) are becoming popular ways to recruit potential research participants, typically used to recruit for online questionnaires and surveys, but also for other types of research.

[Amazon Mechanical Turk](https://www.mturk.com/) commonly known as MTurk is a website run by Amazon that provides a readily available workplace to match “workers” with available work from “requesters”. The MTurk service provides access to a diverse, on-demand, scalable workforce and gives workers a selection of tasks to complete whenever convenient. MTurk was not established for human participant research but it is commonly used by some researchers.

[Prolific](https://www.prolific.co/) is an alternative crowdsourcing platform that was specifically designed for academic research. Prolific has established a minimum amount that participants can be awarded per hour and has standards in place for the fair treatment of participants. Prolific stores information about participants, including demographic information.

These guidelines have been created to assist University of Stirling researchers that are recruiting participants through online participant recruitment services. The guidance was initially developed with MTurk in mind however elements are applicable to other crowdsourcing websites.

Advantages to online participant recruitment services:

* Large pool of potential participants
* Participants have often been pre-screened, so it is easier to identify those that meet the inclusion criteria.
* It is a quick and accessible.
* Participants are compensated for participating and compensation can be granted without gathering personal information about participants.

Disadvantages

* The motivation to participate may be financial vs other traditional research recruitment methods.

**Guidelines**

Researchers (Staff or Postgraduate Researchers[[1]](#footnote-2)) wishing to use online participant recruitment services must gain ethical approval from the relevant University Research Ethics Panel. All ethics application must consider the ethical implications of their chosen recruitment method, noting which service in the application form. Applications must include, in the application form and participant information (known as Human Intelligence Task (HIT) for MTurk):

* Details about compensation
  + Rate of compensation
  + Time frame for payment
* Estimate as accurately as possible the time required to read and understand participant information sheets, consent forms and to complete the task (overestimating is better than underestimating)[[2]](#footnote-3).
* Clearly identify and describe any extra system/software requirements for completing the research (e.g., JavaScript).
* Identify and fully describe the type of task investigators are inviting participants to complete.
* Applicants should consider adding a ‘concentration’ task or attention filter to their survey to ensure more valuable responses.

**Before using online participant recruitment services researchers must**

* Establish a knowledge and understanding of the platforms terms and conditions, participation agreements and privacy policies.
* Only reject or return[[3]](#footnote-4) submissions that are not genuine, for example where attention questions have been missed. Or where participants have taken part in a study where they don’t fit the study criteria.
* Carry out checks on the proposed platform to minimise the risk of reputational damage to the University.
* Consider how participants’ data will be treated – how will the data be retained by the platform and how will it be used.

## **For further advice or assistance**

Please contact:

Research Integrity and Ethics

[ethics@stir.ac.uk](mailto:ethics@stir.ac.uk)

1. MTurk is not recommended for use by undergraduate or postgraduate taught students. Prolific is considered more appropriate. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Prolific will adjust the compensation provided to the actual amount of time taken to complete the task. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. MTurk is a place of employment for a large community of people. Being rejected damages their reputation and impact on their future employment opportunities. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)