

Survey Governance Framework

1. Background

Surveys are an important tool for students to provide feedback on their studies, for conducting research and for the University to collect information for quality assurance and strategic management purposes. As Australian Catholic University (ACU) has grown, and digital technology has improved, surveys have become increasingly prevalent as means of gathering data from large cohorts of students. Unstructured and unorganised student surveys pose a number of risks for the University, which include:

- students becoming disengaged due to survey fatigue;
- disrupting communications channels with survey invitations and reminders;
- lowered response rates which compromise data quality due to over-surveying students;
- duplication of effort through redundant surveys; and
- unclear policies around contacting students and how the data may be disseminated.

The Survey Governance Framework aims to minimise the risks of over-surveying students and to promote a clear and transparent methodology for the governance of student surveys.

2. Objectives

The primary objectives of the Survey Governance Framework are to:

- Clarify the process for approval and execution of surveys of ACU students;
- Minimise over-communication and survey fatigue in the student body;
- Improve the validity and response rates of surveys; and
- Develop consistency and transparency for the management of surveys conducted within the University.

3. Scope

The Survey Governance Framework is applicable to any survey that has *currently enrolled students* as participants. In general, these surveys can be categorised as:

- Internal quality assurance surveys (service and feedback related)
- Institutional surveys (government endorsed surveys, national benchmarking surveys)
- Internal research surveys (initiated by ACU staff and students)
- External research surveys (other external surveys)

In this context, a survey is a formal set of structured questions that require recorded responses from an individual. For example, a telephone interview with a prescribed set of questions would be in scope, but a focus group would be out of scope.

Surveys conducted as part of laboratory studies, classroom activities and student assessments are exempt from the approval process, but must comply with all other procedures of the Survey Governance Framework.

Surveys of prospective students, graduates or alumni are outside the scope of this framework.

4. Glossary of Terms

The following terms are defined:

Ad-hoc Survey

A survey without a clearly defined fieldwork period. For example, a survey that is administered to students after they meet with the University Counsellor.

Fieldwork

The period of time that respondents have to respond to a survey.

Response Rate

A survey response rate (also known as completion rate or return rate) is the number of people who responded to the survey over the number of people who were invited to complete the survey, expressed as a percentage.

Survey

A formal set of structured questions that require recorded responses from an individual.

Survey Fatigue

A feeling of exhaustion or annoyance from the experience of repeatedly completing surveys.

Survey Register

The formal record cataloguing approved student surveys and their metadata.

5. Framework Principles

5.1 Block out periods

The 'block out' periods are times during the Academic Calendar which the University has identified when students are at risk of experiencing over-communication and survey fatigue. These periods include student breaks and exam times, and the fieldwork dates of institutional surveys. During block out periods no communications or promotion from non-institutional surveys should take place.

When planning a survey, care should be taken to make sure that the fieldwork dates do not overlap with block out periods, and to minimise communications around the block out periods.

The block out periods for the current Academic Calendar can be viewed on the [Survey Register calendar](#).

5.2 Institutional Surveys

Institutional surveys are surveys within the University which have the largest impact on students; they are surveys that require a large number of responses, and are conducted to satisfy compliance and national benchmarking needs.

Surveys that have been identified and approved as institutional surveys by the DVC (SLT)¹ will have a period of the academic calendar blocked off and assigned to them, and do not need to seek further approval for recurrences of the survey during that block off period.

Institutional surveys will be reviewed every three years to ensure that they are still necessary and fit-for-purpose.

¹ Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Students, Learning and Teaching)

5.3 Research Surveys and Ethics Approval

Research projects that require ACU students to participate in a survey require both the permission to survey students through the Survey Governance Framework and ethics approval through the Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC).

For internal researchers:

Permission to survey students should be sought prior to ethics approval, and attached to the HREC application. This will minimise the potential that research participants might be affected by survey fatigue or over-communication during the research project, which may compromise the quality of research.

Research projects can seek approval to survey ACU students as an individual project, or submitted as part of a block by the appropriate faculty/research representative. Once a research project has received both the permission to survey students and ethics approval, it will be formalised in the Survey Register.

For external researchers:

External researchers are not required to seek ACU HREC approval but should instead provide evidence of approval from the other HREC. Ethics approval evidence should be attached when applying for permission to survey ACU students.

6. Criteria for Survey Approval

Applications for permission to survey students must be submitted at least one month prior to the commencement of a survey's fieldwork. Applications will be processed within ten (10) working days of being received and are approved in the order they are received. They will be approved based on:

- the quality and completeness of the application;
- the potential conflicts with other surveys during the proposed fieldwork period; and
- the potential impact of proposed communications.

Ad-hoc surveys that do not have clearly defined fieldwork dates, or rely on other factors to determine when they must be run, such as program-based evaluations, can apply to run the survey for the duration of the academic calendar year. Approval must be sought in following calendar years to continue running the survey, and must also withhold communications during block out periods.

7. Application of Framework

Refer to the [Survey Governance Workflow Chart](#) for a visual representation.

Before applying to run a student survey, consult the Survey Register to check if similar data is already available from another survey. For internal staff or student survey applicants, if data is not available then commence an application by filling in [Student Survey Approval Form on SharePoint](#).

For external survey applicants, please fill in the **Student Survey Approval Form** and email the completed form to ACU.Surveys@acu.edu.au.

The key information requirements for approval to survey students are:

- the purpose and objectives of the survey;
- the fieldwork dates;
- the population of student respondents;
- the collection method;
- the planned communications that will be received by students;
- the survey contact(s) responsible for running the survey and storing the data; and
- any other supporting material.

8. Data and Reporting

All surveys must comply with University's [Student Privacy Policy](#).

Where the survey is conducted anonymously, data must be aggregated and can only be published if the survey has at least five (5) respondents to maintain students' privacy. If a survey cannot achieve at least five responses, an alternate method of data collection should be considered.

Survey Contacts are responsible for the storage and distribution of survey data and reports. Storage and distribution of survey data must comply with the University's [Information Management Policy](#).

9. Roles and Responsibilities

Activity	Responsible role or body
Submitting application to survey students	Survey Applicant
Submitting application for ethics approval	Survey Applicant (<i>for research surveys only</i>)
Authority for Ethics approval	HREC (<i>for research surveys only</i>)
Assessing survey applications	Office of Planning and Strategic Management
Authority for approval to survey students	Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Students, Learning and Teaching)
Data entry for the Survey Register	Office of Planning and Strategic Management
Conducting the survey	Survey Contacts (or Delegates)
Storage and distribution of survey data	Survey Contacts
Review of Institutional Surveys	Office of Planning and Strategic Management
Maintenance of the Survey Register & Calendar	Office of Planning and Strategic Management
Maintenance of the Survey Governance Framework	Survey Governance Working Group

10. Review

The Survey Governance Framework will be reviewed and updated at least every five (5) years from the approval date, or more frequently if appropriate.

Date	Description of Revision (s)
31/08/2016	Framework finalised and approved by Academic Board (AB 2016/89)

Appendix 1 - Survey Governance Workflow Chart

