Running Case Study 4

How to get respondents

In the last few weeks, Rebecca has spent hours in the library and behind the computer to get a more theoretical grip on her topic. She has almost finished her theoretical chapter and derived a couple of hypotheses. She has also developed a draft version of a questionnaire she will discuss with her supervisor in the next few days. She realized that the real research was about to start; although she was delighted that up to now she was on schedule, she was also worried.

A couple of days ago she met Alexander, a fellow student she knows from other courses they have taken together. Alexander told her that he started with his research project five months ago and now he was getting frustrated, as nobody filled in his questionnaire. His supervisor told him that some meaningful statistical analyses would require a sample of about 100, but although he has posted requests to participate in his online survey at the school's website, he still had just 46 responses. He had planned to complete his data collection two months ago and he feared that it would take months until he has 100 filled-in questionnaires. Rebecca tried to cheer Alexander up and bought a coffee and a chocolate muffin. But Alexander was desperate. He told her that he has even placed his survey on www.surveymonkey.com: just three respondents filled in the complete survey, while more than 20 respondents had either returned an incomplete questionnaire or filled in answers that were inconsistent, and most probably the people answering the questions filled it in at random or faked answers. Rebecca looked concerned. 'How do you decide whether an answered questionnaire is serious or should be deleted?' she asked.

'That is the point', Alexander replied, 'you never know whether people fill it in seriously or whether they are careless or even want to make fun of you. You know – I already thought to fill in a couple of questionnaire myself. I will simply put myself in the role of certain types of students and then answer the questionnaire on their behalf.'

'That is against the rules – it's unethical,' Rebecca interrupted him.

'There are no written rules in the study regulations. But, the point is that I can produce more reliable answers playing the role of some students than real student respondents, because I know what the research is about and it will save me time.'

'Oh, Alexander, why would you collect data at all, if you already know it? You can't do it. Although it is not mentioned in the regulation, you know it is wrong. You will feel bad, because this is cheating.' Alexander promised not to fake questionnaires and wait for another two weeks. Maybe if he obtained 70 respondents that would be sufficient.

The conversation with Alexander worried Rebecca, as she wanted to collect her data online as well. The problem was how to get the attention of other students and to convince them to fill in an online questionnaire. You could post such requests on a special school website, but Alexander's experiences were not encouraging. Rebecca could imagine why. From time to time she looked at that site because on the same site students could sell their used study books, offer and ask for lifts to other cities, sublease their rooms etc.

She had also seen requests to fill in questionnaires for students' research projects, but had never completed one. You must be completely bored if you click on such a link, she thought. But what could she do. The university did not allow you to send emails to all students of the school or university. If they discovered that you did, they would block your email account for at least a week. Not that she was using her university account; she usually used her Gmail account. But it would be embarrassing if they did block her account.

A day later she had a brilliant idea of how she could approach students. She would open another email account at a free mail provider. Then she would look up names from the university student address book. As the structure of the student email addresses was firstinitial.name@student.maastrichtuniversity.nl, she could easily create a list of student email addresses once she knew the students' names. She would not violate the university rules and she could also ask friends at other universities whether they could provide her with name lists, as she needed answers from different universities. In the evening she phoned her school class mate Brenda, who just had finished her psychology Master's at the University of Amsterdam. Rebecca asked Brenda whether it would be possible to get her a list with a lot of student names.

Brenda has always been pragmatic and said: 'You know what, I will simply send your link to the online questionnaire to the student lists from my university account. I do not know whether it is allowed or not at our university, but in case it is not allowed who cares. I do not use that account anymore since I started working in London and they will not take away my degree I suppose. Just send me the link and the text for the email and the whole University of Amsterdam will know about your research project.'

Rebecca was delighted and was sure she would get many respondents from most Dutch universities.

1 Discuss how Rebecca obtained the (email) addresses of her respondents from an ethical perspective.
2 Discuss how Rebecca could have ensured the anonymity of her respondents.
3 Take the ethical code/code of conduct of your university and investigate whether the code covers the ethical conduct of students in their research projects.