

Canadian Federation of Medical Students Survey Policy

Raechelle Gibson, CFMS National Officer of Research Sr., McMaster University

Rishi Sharma, CFMS Ontario Regional Director, McMaster University

Maylynn Ding, CFMS Director of Education, McMaster University

Stephanie Smith, CFMS President, University of Calgary

Type of Paper: Position Paper

Background

The CFMS Research Committee was tasked by the CFMS Board to develop a policy to guide surveys of CFMS members for internal purposes. The CFMS board has found that over the past few years, the general membership has been subject to numerous surveys which has led to survey burnout and a decrease in responses to important CFMS surveys. The CFMS board has also found that numerous surveys sent in the past have elicited information quite similar to data that has previously been collected. The CFMS Board would like to see the implementation of a policy and recommendations for more effective surveying of the CFMS general membership.

To that end, this document provides a review of the available literature concerning best practices in survey conduct for internal organizational purposes and recommendations for surveys conducted by the CFMS for internal purposes. Thus, this paper is separated into two components – a section outlining best practices for survey design based on the literature and a section outlining the policy/procedure by which surveys being distributed to the CFMS general assembly must adhere to.

Survey Design

1. Survey Platform

- The designated platform for all research conducted by the CFMS will be one that houses its servers in Canada.

2. Survey Fatigue

- Respondent fatigue, also known as survey fatigue, refers to the phenomenon in which respondents give less thoughtful answers to questions in the later parts of a survey, or prematurely terminate participation in a survey (Whelan, 2008; Ben-Nun, 2008; Hochheimer et al., 2016). Factors that influence respondent fatigue include survey length, survey topic, question complexity, and question type. Surveys that are too long or feature complex questions may discourage participants, and open-ended questions tend to induce more fatigue (Ben-Nun, 2008).

3. Survey Frequency

- It has been previously demonstrated that surveying students too often in one year can suppress response rates in subsequent academic years (Porter, 2004). Furthermore, low response rates to surveys are common among organizations representing physicians in Canada; for example, the response rate to the CMA National Physician Health Survey in 2018 was 8.5%. Similarly, the 2015 National Resident Survey administered by Resident Doctors of Canada had a response rate of 15.8%. Similar response rates have been observed among Canadian medical students, for example, 7.8% in a recent study of responses to a clinical teaching elective (Hughes et al., 2017).

- Unfortunately, the optimal number of times to offer surveys is not known. In one study of university students, students indicated that they should be surveyed only three or four times a year (Asiu, 1998). The CMA e-Panel promises to send survey invitations to members no more than 6 times per year, but members register and identify themselves as willing to be contacted about these surveys. The OMA Thought Lounge (also an opt-in service) does not stipulate a maximum number of surveys per year but stores personal information and pledges to limit survey offers as those relevant to a member's profile and interests. There is no evidence-based recommendation regarding how often to survey a group to minimize survey fatigue.

Ethical Considerations

The Tri-Council Policy Statement (TCPS2) applies to the review of the ethical conduct of research involving humans in Canada. The scope of Research Ethics Boards (REB) review is limited to those activities meeting the TCPS2 definitions of research involving human participants. Research is further defined as “an undertaking intended to extend knowledge through a disciplined inquiry or systematic investigation”, and human participants are defined as “those individuals whose data, or responses to interventions, stimuli or questions by the researcher, are relevant to answering the research question” (Canadian Institutes of Health Research, Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada, & Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, 2014, p. 5).

1. **Research involving humans as participants that do not require REB review.** There are a few scenarios that share elements of the definition of research involving humans that do not require REB review, as described in Article 2.5 of the TCPS2 (Canadian Institutes of Health Research et al., 2014):

Article 2.5 Quality assurance and quality improvement studies, program evaluation activities, and performance reviews, or testing within normal educational requirements when used exclusively for assessment, management or improvement purposes, do not constitute research for the purposes of this Policy, and do not fall within the scope of REB review.

Application Article 2.5 refers to assessments of the performance of an organization or its employees or students, within the mandate of the organization, or according to the terms and conditions of employment or training. Those activities are normally administered in the ordinary course of the operation of an organization where participation is required, for example, as a condition of employment in the case of staff performance reviews, or an evaluation in the course of academic or professional training. Other examples include student course evaluations, or ***data collection for internal or external organizational reports***. Such activities do not normally follow the consent procedures outlined in this Policy. [emphasis added]

If data are collected for the purposes of such activities but later proposed for research purposes, it would be considered secondary use of information not

originally intended for research, and at that time may require REB review in accordance with this Policy. (p. 18).

The Application section for Article 2.5 of the TCPS2 thus suggests that the CFMS can conduct surveys for internal reports without REB approval, provided that the data are not later repurposed for research. Nevertheless, the relevant statement (“data collection for internal or external organizational reports”) is qualified with tentative language (“Such activities do not normally follow the consent procedures outlined in this Policy”), and definitions are not provided for “internal or external organizational reports” in the TCPS2 (Canadian Institutes of Health Research et al., 2014, p. 18).

- 2. Research involving humans that may require multi-jurisdictional REB review.** If a survey administered by the CFMS does qualify as research under the TCPS2, and thus requires REB review, the research ethics process becomes complicated by the involvement of multiple institutions given that CFMS members are students at institutions across Canada. Regarding the potential requirement of multi-jurisdictional REB review, the TCPS2 offers the following interpretation (Canadian Institutes of Health Research, Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada, & Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, 2018):

If a researcher obtains REB approval at his/her own institution to gather data from participants who are members of other institutions, is it necessary to obtain REB approval at each of the other institutions that employ the participating members?

The issue to consider is whether the research is being conducted under the jurisdiction or auspices of the other institutions as well, which would necessitate REB review at the other institutions. The determining factors include (1) the extent and nature of the other institutions’ involvement, and (2) whether it is necessary for the researcher to collaborate with the other institutions in order to carry out the research.

If the researcher is seeking the collaboration of staff of other institutions and/or using the resources of those the institutions (e.g., bulletin boards, email lists, meeting rooms, equipment) to recruit members of the institution or for the purposes of data collection then the research would be under the auspices of these other institutions. The research would require ethics review by REBs of the other institutions in addition to the researcher’s REB (see Article 8.3). The level of REB review may be adjusted in accordance with a proportionate approach to research ethics review (see Article 6.12).

However, if recruitment and/or data collection involving an institution’s members as prospective participants is done through other means that do not involve the resources of the institution, the research would not fall under its auspices and would not be subject to review by its REB. For example, if names and emails of faculty or department heads are publicly available on websites or

through some disciplinary association and the researcher uses this information to recruit them as participants, then REB review at the researcher's institution would suffice. (p. 1)

This TCPS2 interpretation concerning multi-jurisdictional research thus implies that REB approval from the institution at which the principal investigator resides could be sufficient for a research project involving CFMS members at multiple institutions. However, REB approval may be required from every institution depending on the extent and nature of the involvement required by the other institutions. This is a complex determination, and the TCPS2 recommends that researchers consult with members of their local REB for assistance. Such a determination is beyond the scope of the CFMS.

Survey Approval Process

1. Survey Submission Content

- Surveys must be submitted using the CFMS Survey Proposal Form, which includes the survey objective and list of survey items. A copy of the form is attached in Appendix A. This form will be replicated as a google form that students can use to submit their survey proposals for consideration.

2. Survey Submission Personnel

- Surveys may only be submitted by National Officers, Committees/Task Forces/Roundtables, or CFMS Board Members. Surveys will first be submitted to the Director/VP of relevant portfolio who will bring survey to CFMS Board meeting for review.

3. Survey Submission Timeline

- Survey requests will be collected 3 times per year, at the time of each CFMS Board Meeting (Fall, Winter, and Spring). Submissions are due 6 weeks prior to CFMS Board Meetings. Exceptions can be made for urgent surveys that will be considered on an ad hoc basis

4. Survey Review by the CFMS Board

- CFMS Board members will review the survey and determine the need for the survey. Survey need should be determined based on if data currently exists in the recent past, data is relevant to capture, and/or issue is pertinent to medical students.

5. Survey Review by the CFMS Research Committee

- Following approval by the CFMS Board, members of the CFMS Research Committee will review the survey and make recommendations for best methodological practice for the survey as outlined in the Survey Design section herein.

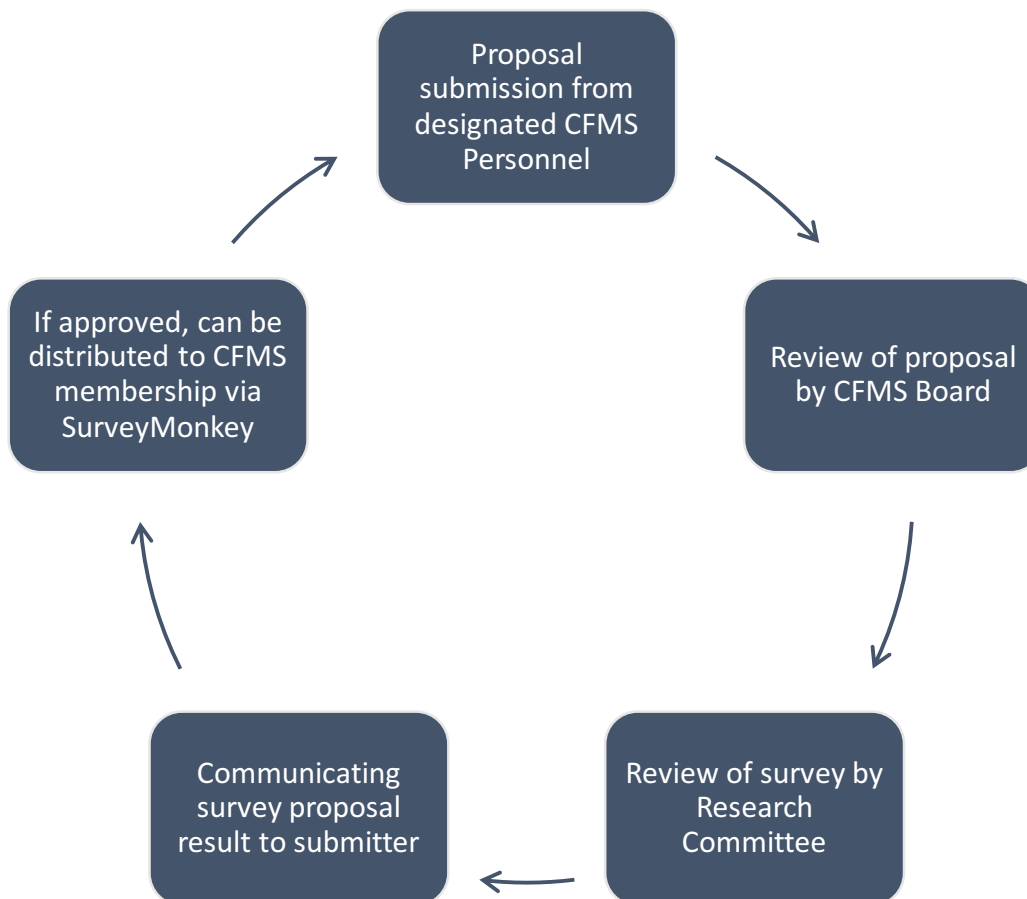


Figure 1. Overview diagram of survey submission process/steps carried out for each proposal submitted.

Recommendations

1. The CFMS will consider requests for surveys of the general membership from CFMS National Officers, Committees/Task Forces/Roundtables, or CFMS Board Members three times per year, at each CFMS Board meeting (Fall, Winter, and Spring). The CFMS board will review the survey request to determine the survey need based on whether data currently exists in the recent past, data is relevant to capture, and/or issue is pertinent to medical students. Following approval by the CFMS board, the CFMS research committee will review the survey to make recommendations in accordance with Recommendations 2 to 7.
2. The CFMS should use a survey platform that houses its servers domestically.
3. To mitigate survey fatigue, CFMS internal surveys should be brief and preferentially rely upon simple, closed-ended questions.
4. While there is no evidence-based recommendation for the optimal number of times to survey a group to minimize survey fatigue, efforts should be made to survey the CFMS membership as infrequently as possible.

5. Any CFMS member who wishes to conduct a survey of the membership through the CFMS must adhere to the TCPS2 regarding the ethical conduct of research involving human participants.
6. Assessments of the performance of an organization within the mandate of the organization, such as data collection for internal or external organizational reports as defined in Article 2.5 of the TCPS2, do not normally constitute research for the purposes of the TCPS2 and therefore do not normally require REB review. The determination of whether a given survey intended for the CFMS membership meets the criteria of Article 2.5 of the TCPS2 must be made on a case-by-case basis to identify whether REB approval is required. This determination is generally beyond the scope of the CFMS and may require the survey creators to consult their local, institutional REB for guidance.
7. Surveys of the CFMS membership may qualify as multi-jurisdictional research under the TCPS2 and may therefore require REB approval from every involved institution, depending on the extent and nature of the involvement required by the other institutions. This is a complex determination, and the TCPS2 recommends that researchers consult with members of their local REB for assistance. Such a determination is similarly beyond the scope of the CFMS, and the CFMS recommends that members consult with their local REB for guidance regarding multi-jurisdictional research.

Summary and Conclusions

As part of on-going quality assurance and quality improvement, the CFMS must conduct periodic internal surveys of the CFMS membership. This document provides guiding principles for best practice in internal survey conduct. By adhering to the principles outlined in the document, it is hoped that CFMS internal surveys will avoid respondent survey fatigue and comply with Canadian standards of ethical research conduct involving human participants.

References

- Asiu, B. W., Antons, C. M., and Fultz, M. L. (1998). "Undergraduate Perceptions of Survey Participation: Improving Response Rates and Validity." Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Association of Institutional Research, Minneapolis, Minn.
- Ben-Nun, P. (2008). Respondent fatigue. *Encyclopedia of Survey Research Methods*, 2:742–743.
- Canadian Institutes of Health Research, Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada, and Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans*, December 2014. Retrieved from http://www.pre.ethics.gc.ca/pdf/eng/tcps2-2014/TCPS_2_FINAL_Web.pdf
- Canadian Institutes of Health Research, Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada, and Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans Interpretations*, August 2018. Retrieved from http://www.pre.ethics.gc.ca/eng/policy-politique/interpretations/multijurisdictional-plusieurs_autorites/
- Hart, T., Rennison, C., & Gibson, C. (2005). Revisiting Respondent "Fatigue Bias" in the National Crime Victimization Survey. *Journal of Quantitative Criminology*, 21(3), 345-363.
- Hochheimer CJ, Sabo RT, Krist AH, Day T, Cyrus J, Woolf SH. (2016). Methods for evaluating respondent attrition in web-based surveys. *Journal of Medical Internet Research*, 18:e301
- Hughes, J.D., Azzi, E., Rose, G., Ramnanan, C. & Khamisa, K. (2017). A survey of senior medical students' attitudes and awareness toward teaching and participation in a formal clinical teaching elective: a Canadian perspective, *Medical Education Online*, 22:1.
- Porter, S. R., Whitcomb, M. E., & Weitzer, W. H. (2004). Multiple surveys of students and survey fatigue. *New Directions for Institutional Research*, 2004(121), 63-73.
- Whelan, T. J. (2008, April). Antecedents of anonymity perceptions in Web-based surveys. Paper presented at the 23rd annual meeting of the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology, San Francisco, CA.

Appendix A: CFMS Survey Proposal Form

This document will be converted to an online form that CFMS members can complete online to facilitate a more efficient process of survey proposal submission.

1. The CFMS will consider requests for surveys from National Officers, Committees, Task Forces, Roundtables, and CFMS Board Members. Please indicate your CFMS affiliation:
 - National Officer (specify, *e.g.*, of Education): _____
 - Committee (specify, *e.g.*, Education) : _____
 - Task Force (specify): _____
 - Roundtable (specify): _____
 - Board Member (specify): _____

2. Submit this request form to the Director/VP of your portfolio, who will bring the proposal to CFMS Board meeting for review. Please indicate the name and affiliation of your Director/VP: _____

3. Survey requests are considered three times per year at the CFMS Board Meetings (Fall, Winter, and Spring). In special circumstances, an expedited review can be requested. Please indicate when you would like your survey to be reviewed:
 - Fall
 - Winter
 - Spring
 - Expedited review (explanation for request):

4. The CFMS board will review the survey request to determine the survey need based on whether data currently exists in the recent past, the data is relevant to capture, and/or the issue is pertinent to medical students. Please state the objective of your proposed survey, with a consideration of the need for the survey:

5. Any CFMS member who wishes to conduct a survey of the membership must adhere to the Tri-Council Policy Statement 2 (TCPS2) regarding the ethical conduct of research involving human participants. Assessments of the performance of an organization within the mandate of the organization, such as data collection for internal or external organizational reports as defined in Article 2.5 of the TCPS2, do not normally constitute

research for the purposes of the TCPS2 and therefore do not normally require Research Ethics Board (REB) review. Does your survey involve data collection for internal or external organizational reports only as defined in Article 2.5 of the TCPS2? If not, have you requested local REB approval for your proposed research?

- Yes, my proposed survey only involves data collection for internal or external CFMS reports.
- No, my proposed survey does not qualify under Article 2.5 of the TCPS2 and requires REB approval. I am in the process of obtaining REB approval or have already obtained REB approval.
- I'm not sure/Other (please explain):

6. Please list or attach your survey items, including all questions.