

The revised European Statistics Code of Practice – Challenges and Opportunities

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Abstract

The recent revision of the European Statistics Code of Practice presented a challenge insofar that a good balance of two objectives had to be found: the objective to keep it as stable as possible over time, so that comparison is possible for measuring its implementation, on the one hand and to adjust it to new realities and challenges in developing, producing and disseminating European statistics, on the other hand.

The paper will describe the main elements of the revision process, such as the analysis of shortcomings of the Code of Practice adopted in 2011, basic considerations behind the changes, the consultation rounds and adoption.

The main reasons for changing the Code will be described, including the need to emphasise a principle of and ways of coordinating the national statistical system, move away from a survey-based statistics production to a production based on multiple data sources and to reflect innovation in the Code.

After the adoption of the revised Code of Practice, the way of measuring its implementation should be considered as well as the changes and opportunities that the revised Code of Practice may bring for other elements of the quality framework.

Keywords: quality in statistics, quality framework, generalisation, multiple data sources, coordination and cooperation

1. Introduction

The European Statistics Code of Practice is the cornerstone of the common quality framework of the European Statistical System (ESS). It sets the standards for developing, producing and disseminating European statistics through its 16 Principles and 84 Indicators.

It was established in 2005 and was first revised in 2011 by the European Statistical System Committee (ESSC) based on the proposal of the Sponsorship on Quality, a high-level Task Force of the ESS which worked on 3 main areas of quality from 2009 to 2011: the revision of the Code, the set-up of the Quality Assurance Framework of the ESS, and the streamlining of quality reporting in the ESS.

The first revision of the Code of Practice focussed on reinforcing the mandate of National Statistical Institutes (NSIs) to collect data from administrative data sources as well as on the strengthening of professional independence, in accordance with Regulation 223 on European statistics that entered into force in 2009.

Times very much evolved since then and following a 1-day ESSC strategic *'Workshop on Quality in the ESS'* in February 2016, the ESSC decided in May 2016 to set up a High-level Group on Quality (the Group) with the participation of 10 Heads of NSIs to provide strategic guidance on various quality issues. In line with the Mandate, one of the main tasks of the Group was to come up with a proposal for the second revision of the European Statistics Code of Practice. Following several rounds and types of consultation, the text of the revised Code of Practice was finally adopted at the November 2017 meeting of the ESSC.

The present paper describes the approach that was taken for this important exercise as well as the main milestones of the process of this second revision and the resulting changes; in addition, it also looks ahead by analysing what these changes mean for the future of quality in statistics in the ESS.

2. The approach taken

Following the drafting of the Quality Declaration of the ESS that can be considered as the formal quality commitment of the ESSC members, the High-level Group on Quality started the discussions on the second revision of the Code of Practice in its meeting of November 2016.

As requested by the Group members, Eurostat prepared a large Excel table with a detailed inventory of all issues and sources that might have an impact on the various aspects of the Code of Practice. In summary, they were identified as follows.

1. The ESS Vision Implementation Projects (VIPs), i.e. the modernisation programme of the ESS and their possible impacts on the quality of statistics –

- in particular, the access to and the use of new, multiple data sources and the issues related to micro-data exchange;
2. The revised Regulation 223 on European statistics and its aspects on quality, which entered into force in 2015;
 3. The experiences and lessons learned during the second round of ESS peer reviews (from 2103 to 2015);
 4. The related aspects of the Annual reports of the European Statistical Governance Advisory Body (ESGAB);
 5. Results and conclusions of related discussions on the subject such as the Closing session of the Q2016 conference: "High-quality statistics in a changing landscape – challenges ahead".

With the help of the QUAL Steering Committee, that is a sub-group of the Working Group on Quality in Statistics for the implementation of the QUAL@ESS Vision 2020 supporting framework of the ESS Vision 2020 Portfolio, the Group members reviewed all issues and sources identified, as well as their possible impact on the (then) current version of the Code of Practice, and agreed on the exact wording of the changes.

Considering that the cornerstone of the quality framework should be as stable as possible over time and that the exact impact of the ESS VIPs are expected to be clearly delineated in a few years' time only, the Group members decided to make the revised Code of Practice sufficiently generic, i.e. applicable to all statistics, source-independently, so that it can embrace all new developments that happen in statistics these days and over the coming years. It was also felt that all the details that need to be mentioned in the quality framework would have their place at the 3rd level of quality assurance, and below, i.e. at the level of the Quality Assurance Framework of the ESS, and the quality reporting rules, standards (such as the Single Integrated Metadata Structure and the ESS Handbook for Quality Reports) and sector-specific quality assurance, as appropriate.

In addition, considering the revision of Regulation 223 on European statistics in 2015 and its on-going implementation, Group members also received the clear instruction from the ESSC members to keep the changes to be introduced to the Code of Practice to the strictest minimum.

3. Main milestones

It is in this context and in these requirements that the Group members started the related discussions in November 2016 by reviewing and commenting on the inventory table as proposed by the QUAL Steering Committee members.

The first suggestions on how to change (and/or add to) the Principles and Indicators of the Code of Practice, based on the various issues and sources identified, were discussed in the February and May 2017 physical meetings of the Group. The results of the discussions were reported to the QUAL Steering Committee members who took due note of the guidance received and, with the help of Eurostat, prepared a 'mirror document' to demonstrate clearly the changes proposed to the 2011 version of the Code of Practice.

In accordance with the Group's transparent communication strategy on the subject, a special videoconference meeting was organised with some of the members of the European Statistical Governance Advisory Body (ESGAB) in July 2017 to receive feedback on the then actual version on the text.

At the end of August 2017, via a videoconference meeting, the Group members finalised another version of the revised Code of Practice that was submitted for the discussion of the ESSC meeting of September 2017. All the comments received in this consultation (exchange of views, written comments, oral comments in the meeting) as well as in the consultation of the ESGAB members were duly analysed and the proposed text of the revised Code of Practice was updated accordingly.

This updated version was discussed by the members of the Working Group on Quality in Statistics in their meeting of October 2017 – the analysis and opinions of the Working Group members were reported back to the Group members who prepared the version to be submitted to the ESSC meeting of November 2017 via a written consultation.

The Group members discussed in their meeting of November 2017 just before the ESSC meeting all the comments and suggestions received from the ESSC members via the Exchange of Views, and agreed on the final version to be proposed to the ESSC meeting as a room document the day after.

During the ESSC meeting some final small changes were introduced to the text and at the end of the discussion the ESS Committee adopted the revised version of the European Statistics Code of Practice.

4. Main changes

The main changes that were introduced to the European Statistics Code of Practice in its second revision can be summarised as follows.

The Preamble of the Code of Practice has been fully rewritten, in order to take into account the recently adopted Quality Declaration of the ESS, to explain the reasons for the revision, as well as to introduce and describe the respective roles of the Code of Practice, ESGAB and the common quality framework of the ESS.

A new Principle has been added on Coordination and Cooperation, based on the wording and approach of the amended Regulation (EC) No 223/2009 on European statistics. Due to the importance of Professional Independence as the starting Principle of the Code of Practice, it has been proposed to place the new Principle as Principle 1bis, right after the first Principle.

In Principle 1 on Professional Independence, the text of Indicator 1.8 on the procedure for recruitment and appointment of the heads of statistical authorities in the ESS has been aligned to the wording / approach of the amended Regulation 223/2009.

The aspect of access to new data sources has been added to Principle 2 on the Mandate for Data Collection and Access to Data, by specifying the nature of the access to administrative sources in line with the provisions of the amended Regulation 223/2009 and by creating a new Indicator (2.4) on the access to other, privately held data.

Some precisions on the types of resources have been included in Principle 3 on Adequacy of Resources and Principle 4 on Commitment to Quality has been enriched with the integration of data from multiple sources.

Principle 5 on Statistical Confidentiality and Data Protection has been 'upgraded' by taking into account the current IT environment of the ESS and the importance of data protection.

Within Principle 6 on Impartiality and Objectivity, a specific reference to the documentation of data sources has been added to Indicator 6.4, and more precision was added to the provision on the pre-release access arrangements in Indicator 6.7.

Regarding Principle 7 on Sound Methodology, the aspect of innovation has been added to Indicator 7.1 and the texts of Indicators 7.2 and 7.3 have been generalised to all kinds of registers and frames used for European statistics. In Indicator 7.7, the cooperation with the scientific community has been expressed in a more active way.

Principle 8 on Appropriate Statistical Procedures has been generalised by extending the coverage to 'other data' as well and the text has been streamlined; the process approach to statistical production has been highlighted and the importance of process-related metadata has been included in Indicator 8.4.

Some aspects of Principles 9 on Non-excessive Burden and 10 on Cost Effectiveness have been generalised (to other data, other data sources) and harmonised. In Principle 9, the use of other data sources – other than surveys and administrative data – and their integration to minimise response burden has been emphasised and the aspects of monitoring of response burden has been added in Indicator 9.2. The notion of sharing standardised solutions to increase effectiveness and efficiency of statistical production has been added in Indicator 10.4.

The notions of the value for users, anticipating users' needs and innovation have been introduced in Principle 11 on Relevance – so that innovation is also reflected in the output part of the Code of Practice, in addition to the statistical process part (Indicator 7.1).

The formulation of Principle 12 on Accuracy and Reliability has been adapted in order to reflect the use of data from multiple sources and their integration in statistical production.

Some precisions have been added to Principles 13 on Timeliness and Punctuality and 14 on Coherence and Comparability, while Principle 15 on Accessibility and Clarity has been enriched with the aspects of new communication technologies and platforms, metadata management and dissemination as well as informing users also of the use and integration of other data.

In addition to these changes, a new Glossary, accompanying the revised Code and explaining its main terms used, was drafted by Eurostat and the High-level Group on

Quality – it is now being finalised with the help of the Quality Working Group members and will soon be published on the Quality web pages of Eurostat, just beneath the new, modernised brochure of the revised Code of Practice.

5. Conclusions, next steps

Following this 1 year of intense work of the revision of the Code of Practice, efforts are now invested by the ESS and the Quality function of the ESS in the revision of the underlining Quality Assurance Framework and the set-up of the new monitoring exercise, i.e. the next, third round of ESS peer reviews. The biggest challenges in the implementation of the revised Code of Practice will certainly relate to the new elements and aspects included in the revised version, such as the coordination of the National Statistical System, accessing and using multiple (new) data sources, using innovative approaches in all stages of producing and disseminating statistics and finally, raising awareness of government authorities and the public on the obligations / ambitions of the NSIs to fully implement the Code of Practice and apply its provisions in their daily work.

As a subsequent step, touching the 4th level of quality assurance in the ESS, the quality reporting rules and standards will be reviewed and streamlined, by taking duly into account the experiences and lessons learned in the first round of the implementation of the Single Integrated Metadata Structure by 2018.

In parallel, work and reflections are also on-going on how to enhance the common quality framework of the ESS by considering 'quality for the institutions as a whole', in line with the Quality key area of the ESS Vision 2020. Results of this work are expected to arrive later this year and will certainly be very useful for the set-up of the main outlines of the third round of the ESS peer reviews' exercise.

6. References

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<http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/quality/overview>

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