**Harmonisation across the UK: Comparability of survey and administrative data in conjunction with European influences**

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**Abstract**
*The Harmonisation Team work across the UK Government Statistical Service (GSS) by harmonising definitions, questions and outputs to ensure that the quality of official statistics meets user requirements and supports comparability both within the UK and internationally. The GSS harmonisation vision is that all definitions, questions and outputs for the census and surveys and all data from administrative records will be harmonised, so that users can compare data from different sources with confidence and can merge and match data more easily. The harmonisation of administrative data is a new and challenging area of work and forms a large part of this harmonisation work programme. Understanding the conceptual differences between survey data and administrative data is key to this. The harmonisation team plan to develop a set of harmonised definitions, questions and outputs for administrative data for use across the GSS. This will be in addition to the harmonised definitions, questions and outputs already in place for surveys. A further new area of work is the harmonisation of business statistics to comply with EUROSTATs Framework Regulation Integrating Business Statistics (FRIBS). The regulation requires the GSS to move to a harmonised set of variables by 2019. Alongside this, and in collaboration, ONS are harmonising business survey questions where possible on the Electronic Data Collection programme over the next few years. The paper sets out what the GSS has achieved to date with harmonisation, including the development of a harmonised question library, harmonised definitions, questions and outputs for surveys, administrative data and what remains to be done. It also outlines the benefits of harmonising and details the issues and challenges faced when attempting to harmonise.*

**Keywords:** Harmonisation, administrative data, survey data, business, social

1. **Harmonisation by Default**

Harmonisation is key in maximising the usefulness of data collected and statistics produced. Harmonisation is about ensuring commonality in the use of definitions, survey questions, administrative data and the presentation of outputs across the Government Statistical Service (GSS).

The Harmonisation Team have been working across the GSS engaging with the devolved administrations, government departments and European bodies such as EUROSTAT to develop and maintain a set of harmonised definitions, survey questions, standards for administrative data and standards to be used for outputs. These variables are organised by topic and published as Harmonised Principle’s which are used to ensure statistics are comparable and coherent.

1.1 *The Harmonisation Vision*

The GSS harmonisation vision is to ensure all definitions, survey questions, administrative data and outputs are harmonised, meeting the needs of users whilst improving statistics by making them more robust and comparable. This will enable users to compare data from different sources with confidence and also merge and match data more easily.

The Harmonisation Team have over 50 harmonisation champions and support the GSS community of over 7000 statistical producers. Our work is not limited to the GSS, we frequently offer advice and guidance to the private sector, charities and European organisations. We want to create an inclusive culture whereby we can work collaboratively in a consultancy based way with government departments and organisations across the world.

1.2 *Harmonisation not Standardisation*

Adopting a harmonised, rather than standardised, approach allows users to compare related statistics without creating a ‘one-size-fits-all’ model. Standardisation involves implementing uniform definitions, questions and outputs, however, this approach isn’t always possible and can be very difficult to achieve in practice. Therefore, adopting a harmonised method ensures data from different sources can be compared without compromising differences in user needs across statistics.

1. **Current Focus**

In addition to maintaining the current Harmonised Principles which involves reviewing them regularly and liaising with topic experts to discuss developments in a topic area, the Harmonisation team also consider new topics and assesses the user need for the information.

Incoming work is often influenced by a range of factors, including; societal changes, changes to policy, research and systemic reports from the Office for Statistics Regulation (OSR).

One topic the harmonisation team are currently working on is homelessness. In contribution to the Homeless Reduction Act 2017 and the OSR systemic report; Statistics on Planning and Housing in the UK 2017, the harmonisation team are helping to increase the comparability of homelessness statistics by assessing the feasibility of producing a UK harmonised definition for homelessness. We have also been working with the ‘European Federation of National Organisations working with the homeless’ who have a European definition of homelessness called ‘ETHOS’.

Administrative data sources are the main mode of collection for homelessness statistics with many homeless charities and local authorities collecting information on housing status. There is currently lots of variability in defining homelessness, so by creating a harmonised definition, the GSS will benefit as they will be able to compare different data sources giving greater power to homelessness data and analyses without compromising quality.

1. **Benefits**

There are many advantages harmonisation can bring both for the statistical producers and users of the data. By providing clarity and comparability in statistics, users will be able to match data and make inferences at a UK level rather than country level. Additionally, by integrating data across different modes, people will get a better overall picture of what statistics mean. The better statistics can be, the more informed decisions are made which can have a positive impact on policies which are formed.

Furthermore, by adopting relevant harmonised principles, compliance with the code of practice is achieved.

1. **Challenges**

The Harmonisation Team consists of experienced researchers and advisors all of whom have expertise in overcoming barriers which can impact harmonisation. We work closely with members across the GSS which is vital when developing new tools to implement harmonisation.

A challenge we often face is when additional policies or guidance needs to be adhered to which prevents harmonisation from occurring. An example of this is devolved policy whereby the devolved administrations have individual legislature which isn’t comparable across the UK. A way the harmonisation team try to overcome this is to research ways in which the devolved policy can be aggregated up so that across the UK all the policy can sit under a category that can be comparable.

In addition to differences in devolved policy, another common issue surrounds the systems that the collected data relies on. There can be substantial financial burden to update systems, whether this be updating survey questions or updating an administrative system such as the NHS. This financial burden can have an impact on harmonisation as data sets may not align with the agreed Harmonised Principles as the system acts as a barrier. Not only is the financial cost an issue, but also the resource required to modernise a data system can also be considerable. The harmonisation team work with the statistical producers to understand the limits within a system and try and provide a practical solution to ensure harmonisation occurs.

1. **References**

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