User Satisfaction Surveys in Eurostat and in the European Statistical System

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A central principle for the work of statistical offices is their user orientation so that products and services provided satisfy stated and implied user needs. User satisfaction surveys are carried out on an increasing scale by statistical institutes with a view to both gathering information on user expectations and gaining insight in how far they have been met.

This paper reviews the 2006-07 round of user satisfaction surveys in the European Statistical System, which were conducted in the context of the implementation of the European Statistics Code of Practice1. The Code of Practice, which was adopted in 2005 by the statistical institutes of the European Statistical System, explicitly addresses users "…to show that European and national statistical authorities are impartial and that the statistics they produce and disseminate are trustworthy, objective and reliable" (European Commission, 2005). This overall user orientation is translated into a number of indicators dealing with users’ needs. Indicator 11.3 of the Code of Practice explicitly calls for “User satisfaction surveys (to be) undertaken periodically” so as to ensure that European statistics meet the needs of users (Principle 11, relevance). The role of user satisfaction surveys as “an important tool to detect user needs” was already emphasized in the European Leadership Group on Quality (Lyberg et al 2001) which resulted in the Recommendation No 7 to initiate “a development project regarding the design, implementation and analysis of customer satisfaction surveys”. In 2003 a state-of-the-art project was completed (Eurostat, 2003) providing an overview on customer/user satisfaction surveys carried out and planned by 16 NSIs. A continuation project was completed in 2006 (Eurostat 2006a) giving some methodological guidelines for carrying out customer satisfaction surveys and for analyzing the results by calculating an overall satisfaction index.

As of end 2005 only about half of the NSIs of the ESS regularly carried out user satisfaction surveys (Eurostat 2006b). Thus, when it was decided in 2006 that user satisfaction surveys should be carried out by all national statistical institutes and Eurostat prior to the European Statistical System peer reviews, they served not only the monitoring of the implementation of the Code of Practice but at the same time its implementation. The 2006-07 round of user satisfaction surveys was carried out with the main objective to prepare, focus and complement the interviews with selected key users conducted during the peer review. In addition there were expectations that they may build a basis for comparisons over time or even – cautiously interpreted – across countries.

1 Please refer to www.ec.europa.eu/eurostat/quality
This paper details the methodology used for user satisfaction surveys and possible improvements, and exposes their results.

1. User satisfaction surveys in the European Statistical System

The questionnaire and methodology for the 2006-07 round of user satisfaction surveys was agreed by the WG on Quality. It largely builds upon a corresponding survey requested by the IMF prior to a country’s Data Review of Standards and Codes (Data ROSC)\(^2\). In so far the European Statistical System not only relied on a tested and widely used set of questions but also ensured to exploit synergies with the IMF activities either where the survey had already been conducted recently or where it could serve a future IMF Data ROSC.

In line with the IMF model questionnaire, the common European Statistical System's version comprises two parts. The first part aims at identifying the users’ area of interest and the use of statistics, whether they use metadata and at specifying the sources from which they obtain the data. A second part focuses on the statistics’ quality addressing for each statistical area the following quality aspects: accuracy, timeliness and accessibility as well as an assessment of overall quality on a scale from 1-5. To allow users to consider other quality aspects as well, room is provided for comments. Both parts include aspects of how users obtain the statistics.

National Statistical Institutes and Eurostat were invited to modify the questionnaire according to their needs in terms of language, format, and data carrier. Adaptations of the IMF Questionnaire were needed with regard to the statistical areas covered so to better reflect the range of European statistics. In addition, National Statistical Institutes were encouraged to further adjust the areas where needed including the possibility of adding important national statistics.

The recommended target population comprises known users from the academic and research community, banks and business, government agencies, the national Parliaments, the media, the international community and other relevant user groups, specific to the selected statistical domains. It was envisaged that National Statistical Institutes and Eurostat provide information to the respondents of the survey comprising a general explanation that the results of this survey will be used to prepare a review of some features of the national statistical system by peers in the framework of the implementation of the Code of Practice, a reference (copy or link) to the European Statistics Code of Practice, information on the structure of the questionnaire, assurance that names of individuals will not appear anywhere and the deadline for reply. It was recommended to give about 2-3 weeks to reply and to send one reminder, if necessary. It was requested to present results in aggregated form so that individual respondents cannot be identified. Information on the user group/institution, however, was to be included where possible.

\(^2\) For more information please refer to: [www.imf.org](http://www.imf.org)
Eurostat and 17 other statistical institutes eventually used the proposed questionnaire, or used a questionnaire based on it. 14 NSIs used other questionnaires, sometimes remotely inspired by the common questionnaire. 3 NSIs outsourced the survey to a contractor, which interviewed users by phone. Other NSIs used mostly online questionnaires, or in some cases paper questionnaires.

The sample size varies greatly, from 61 to 8530. Two main factors seem to help explain the number of respondents: the decision to focus on known/key users or to address the questionnaire to a wider audience, and the size of the country. Still, the characteristics of each survey seem to have a sizable effect on the response rate: how was the questionnaire advertised, how long it is, etc.

2. The Eurostat user satisfaction survey

2.1. The questionnaire

As described above the Eurostat User Satisfaction Survey was carried out within the framework of the European Statistics Code of Practice. Eurostat implemented this survey in preparation of the peer review as it was done by all the other Member States.

The questionnaire and suggested methodology largely built upon the standard European Statistical System's version as described above but was adapted to the specific needs of Eurostat with a focus on the following elements:

- coverage of all the statistical areas mentioned on the Eurostat web-site;
- questions on the type of user;
- limitation of quality dimensions on those most relevant in the European context;
- comparison with statistical data from other international organisations rather than with country data.

Apart from these changes the general Eurostat survey covered – like any other user satisfaction survey implemented by Eurostat for specific statistical areas – the following three blocks of questions:

- The purpose for which the data is used, what kind of decision-making benefits from the data, what kind of other data sources is used and why;
- The quality of the data;
- The support services provided to the users.
The questionnaire was thus balanced and focused on those aspects in which Eurostat wanted to know the opinion of its users and for which some follow-up actions would be possible afterwards.

### 2.2. The survey

The Eurostat user satisfaction survey was implemented during the month of June / beginning of July 2007 in two different ways:

1) via the Internet using the Interactive Policy Making (IPM) tool developed by the Commission services for a normal stakeholder consultation targeting the approximately 3800 registered users and placed on the web-site of Eurostat

2) via e-mail targeting around 300 main users identified by Eurostat or being members of Council sub-groups, CEIES, etc. with the possibility of some follow-up and reminder e-mails in case answers were not sent in time.

In total 317 replies were received, 207 from the Internet registered users and 110 from the main users. The group of main users was comprised of international organisations (IMF, OECD, FAO, WB, UNECE, WTO), CEIES, colleagues from other Commission services, the ECB, the EFC sub-committee on statistics and two other Council sub-committees both in the area of social statistics in a wider sense. Although the total number of replies can be considered satisfactory, nevertheless a response from more users was expected and would have been appropriate.

When analysing the results of the two different groups of users it turned out that for a large part the answers from those main users were more positive than those of the Internet users. This was particularly valid for the questions on certain quality dimensions such as timeliness and completeness of the data. Thus, the way of implementing the survey may be reconsidered and at least some considerations should be given to the question on whom to target in the survey.

Finally, Eurostat also prepared a summary report on the results of the user satisfaction survey and made it public on its web-site in October 2007. Those users approached by e-mail that had specifically requested to receive the report got the report via e-mail.

When analysing the results it also turned out that some of the concerns and problems mentioned by the users require a follow-up in the form of improvement actions. The implementation of these improvement actions needs still to be addressed by Eurostat.
3. Possible improvements of the methodology of surveys

The user satisfaction surveys conducted in the ESS have yielded very good results: in all NSIs, the results were interesting and useful to inform decision makers. But the analysis of the results of the 32 surveys is also a unique opportunity to reflect on methodological aspects. Of course, every survey has its strengths and its weaknesses, reflecting the choices that had to be made when designing it. Still, building on the experience acquired, some shortcomings can be avoided and good ideas can be picked in existing surveys.

The most widely shared issues are:

- A small number of respondents (sample size, response rate).
- The uncertainty on the representativity of the sample.
- The difficulty to interpret the answers given by respondents on some questions. This is especially the case when it can reasonably be assumed that most respondents have little information on the subject (i.e. when asked to assess in absolute terms the quality of the statistics produced).
- The difficulty to compare the results across countries, due to the diversity of questionnaires and methodologies.

In order to tackle these issues – among others – and to take good practices into account, improvements can involve both the questionnaires themselves, and the methodology of the collection of data. They can also take the form of a harmonization of user satisfaction surveys in the ESS.

3.1. Questionnaire design

The ideal user satisfaction survey question should be easy to answer and easy to interpret. This is the case when it is phrased in a way that ensures that:

- it is clear and unambiguous;
- it does not make unreasonable assumptions about the respondent (asking to summarize a lot of complex information or implying an unrealistically extended knowledge on the respondent's part).

To achieve this goal, questions should be factual and taking the experience of the respondent as a stallion, rather than general and asking for an absolute assessment. Use of statistical jargon should be avoided as much as possible.

Drafted questions need to undergo some cognitive testing in order to ensure that users comprehend them. A more extensive involvement of data collection experts in statistical institutes would be necessary to achieve questionnaires of the highest quality possible.
Customized questionnaires for user categories can be useful to reduce the time needed to complete the survey, and to avoid asking respondents questions about areas in which they have little insight. It is also made necessary by the fact that the expectations and needs of different types of users can be widely diverse. Questionnaires can be customized according to the environment in which statistics are being used (research, decision making, etc.), according to the type of statistics used (national accounts, employment, environment, etc.), or according to the importance of official statistics-related work for the respondent (from casual users to full-time econometricians).

3.2. Data collection methodology

There have been two main data collection methodology related issues in ESS user satisfaction surveys:

- Constituting a sample that would be representative of the users that statistical offices target.

- Ensuring a sufficiently high response rate.

Two main approaches have been used in the user satisfaction surveys, as far as constituting the sample. The first approach is to include all the visitors to the office’s website or all users registered on the website into the sampling frame. The advantage is that all kind of users can take part in the survey, including occasional and/or unknown users. The main drawback is that some users, especially key institutional users, may be underrepresented in the sample, as they constitute a small share of website visitors. The second approach is to send the questionnaire to known users. This ensures that the survey targets some of the most important users. However, it does not take enough into account other users, leading to an underrepresentation, for instance, of the research community. In the surveys where both approaches were used, the results generally showed significant differences between the assessments of the two types of respondents, i.e. known users and internet users.

Another widely shared issue is relatively low response rates, although some surveys were more successful than others in this respect. Web-based surveys are inclined to have the lowest response rates. This is an important problem not only because low response rates might imply bias in results, but also because a too small sample size makes it very difficult to interpret the results. While there is no straightforward solution to this issue that would not involve excessive costs, there are several ways to alleviate it.

- Non financial incentives could persuade users to participate in the surveys. A small publication of the statistical office could be sent to each participant.
Alternatively, it would also be possible to send the office’s statistical yearbook to some randomly selected respondents.

- Some attention could be directed towards making the questionnaire more attractive looking, and shorter. Simpler questions could also lead to a higher response rate. More difficult/long questions should be preferably placed at the end of the questionnaire and/or could be made optional.

- In the case of web-based surveys, the call to participate could be made more prominent. The timing of the advertising of the survey could also be fine-tuned (e.g. advertise the link when the user is retrieving data from the website).

- Listing in the request for participation the improvement actions implemented since the last user satisfaction survey in response to its results can also encourage more users to participate in the survey.

- An English version of the questionnaire in national statistical institutes could improve the response rate.

3.3. Comparability across the European Statistical System

Roughly half of the statistical offices based their questionnaire on Eurostat’s proposal. This makes it possible to compare the results to a certain extent.

However, a more harmonized approach, on a voluntarily basis, would ensure better comparability of the results across the ESS. It could involve an improved questionnaire with a common core of some questions, allowing for additional questions depending on the needs of each statistical office. Data collection methodology could also be harmonized. This would most easily be achieved through a simultaneous web-based survey with similar prompts on the web pages.

Special caution would need to be exercised as far as translation is concerned, in order to keep questions clear and unambiguous.

4. Main results of the surveys

4.1. Some results of the Eurostat survey

As described above, the latest Eurostat user survey was implemented using two different channels: via the web and via e-mail. The responses differed for quite a number of assessments and are thus presented separately for each group.

4.1.1. Survey conducted via internet

- Most respondents come from the community of students, private and research users (48%).
76% of the respondents use official publications and the website of Eurostat for obtaining Community statistics while 46% use the publications and websites of the NSIs.

Respondents stated that they use Community statistics mostly for research purposes followed by use for analysis of trends for longer term policy formulation.

About half of the respondents found the access to Community statistics easy when consulting the website of Eurostat.

Out of the 115 respondents using Euro indicators almost 70% were not aware of the respective release calendar.

The statistics most used by respondents are national accounts, business statistics and employment statistics.

28% of the respondents assessed the quality of Community statistics as provided by Eurostat better than the quality of statistics provided by the NSIs of the Member States or international organisations and 10% of them assessed it as worse.

The overall quality for the presented 12 statistical areas was judged very good or good by between 33% and 53% of respondents while between 6% and 25% assessed it as bad or very bad (depending on the statistical area).

For almost all statistical area users were more satisfied with the timeliness of the data than with their completeness.

Slightly more than 60% of the respondent considered that Community statistics is presented in an easy-to-understand way but only one third of the respondents were of the opinion that there is enough information available about revisions.

4.1.2. Survey on main users

For a number of questions the enquiry among the main users (mainly public government and Commission services) confirmed the results of the Internet survey. However, there are also questions for which the differences in the results should be highlighted.

For the assessment of timeliness there are significant differences for three statistical areas: for price statistics the main users provided a more positive assessment whereas for business and environment statistics the Internet respondents expressed a more positive opinion.

The differences in the assessments of completeness of the data are even larger and the assessments of the main users are more positive in many
statistical areas but for national accounts, business and environment statistics the Internet respondents expressed a more positive opinion.

- In relation to the overall quality of Community statistics many statistical areas receive a better assessment from the main users but some areas (business and environment statistics) receive a better marking from the Internet respondents.

4.2. Some findings of the ESS surveys

It is not the right place to have an exhaustive review of the results of the 31 user satisfaction surveys conducted by NSIs: this would be beyond the scope of this paper. It would also be a very difficult thing to do, given the huge differences between the surveys.

Still, it is possible to give some stylized facts. This is especially the case for the 17 countries which have used a questionnaire based on the proposed common questionnaire:

- Users generally think that the statistics are presented in an easy-to-understand way. In all surveys, less than one user in five said they did not find the presentation of statistics easy to understand.

- To a lesser extent, users find it easy to access the statistics on the website. In all surveys, less than one third of users answered that they did not find it easy to access data on the website.

- In most countries, users consider the quality of national official statistics of the same quality as other European countries. A significant share of users did not answer this question. In two cases only, a majority of users were of the opinion that national statistics were of better quality than those of other European countries.

References


