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Sarah Gerhard Ortega, 31 October 2013

Report on quality check 2

EUROSTUDENT V

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1 Introduction

This report sums up the results of the second quality check for EUROSTUDENT V, which follows the second project phase „data collection“. The quality check has been implemented by the Swiss Federal Statistical Office (FSO) as part of work package 6. The report includes quality measures implemented until the end of October 2013, which in the adjusted time schedule of the projects is the end of the second project phase.

The quality check of the second project phase is based on the Quality assurance action plan, which the Consortium agreed upon in October 2012. It discusses the fulfilment of the quality goals defined for the five quality dimensions in the second project phase „data collection“.¹

In the second stage of the project the field phase of the majority of the national surveys have taken place. The Coordinator as well as the Consortium support national research teams during this stage of the project. The Data Delivery Module (DDM) has been programmed and made accessible to all countries until the end of the project phase.

A number of additional quality assurance measures were implemented during this project stage:

- Regular contacts of the responsible Consortium partners with their assigned country teams (“Buddy system”)
- Handbook on data cleaning and preparation of data delivery
- SPSS model syntax to facilitate data cleaning and delivery
- Extension of DDM based on standard tables including all focus groups for almost all subtopics
- Early-birds-workshop on data cleaning and delivery in Vienna, June 2013
- Intensive Seminar on preparation for data delivery, September 2013

It should be noted that these additional measures have also increased staff costs for this project phase, which may limit available staff time of Consortium members in future project phases.

2 Relevance

Relevance as a quality dimension for EUROSTUDENT V means collecting data that can be used to formulate evidence-based policy.

At the beginning of the second project stage, the Consortium decided (after discussion with the Steering Board) to extend the DDM for EUROSTUDENT V to include data on all focus groups. Even though countries need to invest slightly more resources into data delivery, it has the following advantages: Due to the standardization of the tables a model syntax can be placed at the disposal of the research teams, simplifying the calculation and delivery of data in the research teams. Also, this measure improves comparability of data. In terms of the quality dimension of relevance it allows the possibility of analyses for additional questions, raised only after the programming of the DDM has been finished. While not all data can be reported in the comparative synopsis report, the data reporting module will be much more comprehensive. Additionally, new data necessary for topic-specific Intelligence Briefs (e.g. type of students who pay tuition fees) can be set up without the need to ask research teams for additional data.

While the consultation process during the revision of the questionnaire in the first project stage assured that EUROSTUDENT is collecting the relevant data, the extension of the DDM assures the full use of the collected data. If political stakeholders raise new questions during the third and fourth project stage, the probability that they can be addressed with the extended data reporting module is significantly larger.

Additionally, the extended DDM shifts the focus of EUROSTUDENT dissemination. While the synop-

¹ See document on wiki pages: https://eurostudent.his.de/wiki/images/9/93/QA_action_plan.pdf.

sis, the data reporting and the Intelligence Briefs will still be considered the main output of the network, the data of the extended DDM allows for further initiatives like regional comparative reports or in-depth analysis of a particular topic. The EUROSTUDENT network actively encourages further research projects. At the Intensive Seminar in September several country research teams showed great interest in the possibilities the extended DDM offers for additional analysis. These initiatives add to the relevance of EUROSTUDENT, as they increase the impact of the data collected by the network.

3 Accuracy

The data gathered has to be accurate. In order to ensure accurate data, country teams received a comprehensive and explicit handbook for the data delivery module on the 5th of August 2013. A 'Manual for Data Cleaning and Data Processing' and an additional model syntax to produce the tables were provided to further ease the work of the national research teams.

With the new handbook on data cleaning and preparation, national research teams have received an additional tool, which was not available in previous rounds. This handbook includes information on calculation of the focus groups and weighting guidelines. The Early Birds Workshop (June 2013) and the Intensive Seminar (September 2013) provided additional help with cleaning, preparing and delivering data.

In sum, these initiatives will help to improve the accuracy of the delivered data as they provide clear guidelines on how to calculate the data to be delivered in the third project stage. The feedback loop following data delivery will show, whether these additional measures have brought forth improvements in data accuracy in the participating countries.

To note is the fact that those countries, which did not attend the Regional Seminars in the first project phase because they are executing their surveys in 2014, were invited to attend an additional Regional Seminar taking place in Belgrade in November 2013. This is evidence of systematic efforts of the Consortium to guide and supervise all national teams to the aim of improving the quality and accuracy of delivered data.

4 Punctuality

In order to measure the fulfilment of the quality goals regarding the quality dimension punctuality, it is evaluated, whether the countries have finished their field phase according to general project plans and whether the DDM was ready for data delivery on time.

Punctuality has been a big issue during the second project stage, as the delay acquired during the first project stage was already substantial. Early on during the second stage the Consortium had to decide whether additional measures could be implemented to improve data quality without additional delay to the project. It was decided to include additional measures as they would facilitate data delivery for the countries in the third stage. The DDM and the handbook on data delivery arrived with substantial delay as the modifications on programming routines had to be implemented first. However, the DDM was available as a beta version from 16 September 2013 and is now ready for data delivery. According to information from the Intensive Seminar in September 2013 this delay has not significantly inconvenienced country research teams, as they had not finished the data cleaning and were therefore not yet ready to deliver data.

It still remains open whether the project delay can be compensated during the third stage of the project. Possibly data delivery will need less time than in EUROSTUDENT IV due to different additional tools that were provided to the research teams (handbook, model syntax, Intensive Seminar). While the delivery of data will still need a lot of resources of national research teams as the DDM has to be filled in cell by cell, the model syntax helps them to produce about 60% of those tables in an efficient manner.

While the delay compared to the original project schedule is now substantial, Consortium partners agree that this delay was acquired for very good reasons. The additional measures implemented will increase accuracy and comparability of data not only for the current project round but also offers an improved starting point for future rounds of EUROSTUDENT.

5 Comparability

The collected data needs to be comparable between countries. One indicator for comparability of data between countries is the timing of the field phase. For EUROSTUDENT V the field phases of the national surveys were planned for spring 2013. While three countries collected their data earlier than 2013, a few countries have planned their field phase in spring 2014. However, the majority of countries have finished the field phase as planned according to information from the buddy contacts. This is a significant improvement to EUROSTUDENT IV, where the field phases were less harmonized. At the same time there is still room for further improvements in the next round of EUROSTUDENT.

Another indicator for comparability is the harmonization of data calculation by research teams. The additional tools provided to the research teams (the handbook on data cleaning and the SPSS model syntax mentioned above) will provide further improvements to the quality dimension of comparability. It should be stressed once again that the additional efforts to harmonize data cleaning and delivery with the new handbook, model syntax and the intensive seminar are substantial. Again, the impact of these efforts can only be reviewed without reservation once the data delivery has been concluded.

6 Communication

All through the lifetime of the project the communication among the Consortium partners as well as with participating countries must be evaluated. In order to achieve a transparent communication structures, processes and responsibilities must be defined and respected.

As before, the Consortium regularly met for video conferences to discuss progress and possible initiatives. Additionally, some members of the Consortium met at the early-birds-workshop in Vienna. A mandate for the Steering Board was formulated and approved together with the financial report of 2012 during a video conference of the Steering Board on the 5th of September 2013. During the discussion of the Mandate it became clear that for country representatives on the Steering Board no clear replacement procedure has been defined. For the next round of EUROSTUDENT a standard replacement process for members of the Steering Board should be set up. This is especially important for country representatives as the kick off meeting offered the only possibility for elections with most countries present to vote.

The above mentioned regular contacts between the research teams and the Consortium were ensured through the “buddy system”. Most Consortium partners also met at the early bird workshop and the intensive seminar. The buddy system constitutes a real improvement, as the Consortium is now better informed on the project progress in most countries (and of possible problems). Moreover, given the flexibility of the project budget, the organisation of seminars was made possible to address issues of accuracy, punctuality and comparability of data at the earliest opportunity and strengthen the contact of the Consortium with the national research teams. For the next project phase initiatives to keep national teams actively engaged should be continued. For the next project round additional strategies in reactivating lost contacts could be envisaged.

Plans to schedule countries' data delivery during the third project stage have been made and implemented. With this coordination of the data delivery timetable research teams can be better addressed and supported, because only a handful of countries are delivering data at the same time. The support available to the individual research teams will therefore be more extensive than in the last project round. The scheduling of data delivery will need to be evaluated at the end of the third project stage.

Last but not least two project Newsletters were sent during the second project stage (in April and August 2013) to keep all interested parties informed of the progress of EUROSTUDENT V.

7 Conclusion and recommendations

To sum up the evaluations concerning the different dimensions of quality for the second project phase of EUROSTUDENT V the following conclusions can be drawn:

- Due to information and guidelines provided to national research teams by means of the two handbooks, data delivery should be made easier, more accurate and better comparable.
- There will be further harmonization of data delivery due to the intensive seminar and common syntax provided to the countries.
- The course towards higher comparability due to improved synchronization of field phases has been continued.
- The introduction of a buddy system to assure better flow of information from the countries has shown positive results.
- Strong integration and constant exchange within the Consortium
- The delay in project planning from the first project phase is ongoing, but no additional delays have occurred.
- Preparation of different aides to speed up the third project phase may be necessary.

The following recommendations can be drawn from the experiences in the second project phase of EUROSTUDENT V for a possible future round of the project:

- Additional efforts to harmonize the timing of field phases of national surveys would further improve comparability of data collected.
- Staff costs should be increased and more flexible to allow for the investment of additional staff time to make data delivery easier, more accurate and better comparable.
- The buddy system to manage contacts with research teams has been successful and should become a regular component of the projects communication strategy.
- Finances should be earmarked for site visits of Consortium members to national research teams with whom contact has been lost or limited or for other efforts of re-establishing contact with these research teams.
- Possible changes of Steering Board members should be scheduled in advance. A replacement process for country representatives in the board should be implemented.