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Report on quality check 1

EUROSTUDENT V

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1 Introduction

This report sums up the results of the first quality check for Eurostudent V, which follows the first project phase “preparation of national surveys”. The quality check has been implemented by the Swiss Federal Statistical Office (FSO) as part of work package 6.

The quality check of the first 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 first project phase “preparation of national surveys”.¹

2 Relevance

Relevance as a quality dimension for Eurostudent V means collecting relevant data that can be used to formulate evidence-based policy. The informational needs of the political stakeholders have to be identified and taken into account.

In order to measure the fulfilment of the quality goals regarding the quality dimension relevance, the following quality goals need to be evaluated: The number of participating countries and the definition of an information mandate and the necessary indicators.

Number of participating countries

25 countries delivered comparable data for the fourth round of Eurostudent. At the outset of the fifth round the partners of the Consortium agreed, that it would be difficult to have as many countries participate in Eurostudent V, because of the instruction of participation fees.

60 participants from 25 countries showed an interest in Eurostudent V at the Kick off conference in Berlin. However, some countries had to abstain from participation due to the difficult situation following the economic crisis. It should not be forgotten that participating countries finance the execution of the own national surveys as well as the participation fee for Eurostudent. The costs are substantial and therefore also an indicator for the great commitment of the participating countries to the project.

27 countries have since joined the Eurostudent network for the fifth round of the project. 5 more countries may join the project building a NIS-cluster. The number of countries participating in Eurostudent V equals about two thirds of the 47 countries who have joined the Bologna process. This is a major achievement considering the situation at the projects outset.

It should be noted that the whole process to set up the participation contracts and fees took up a lot of time and the project schedule had to be adjusted accordingly. For a possible future round of the project the schedule should allow more time for the setup of the project structure. At least if the model of financing will remain roughly the same.

Information mandate and necessary indicators

Participants of the kick off conference in Berlin were asked to fill out a short survey. It included questions on current problems within the country's higher education, potential hot issues in 2015, potential changes to the target group of Eurostudent. The answers of the countries were discussed in small groups at the conference. Due to those discussions several conceptual changes were implemented for Eurostudent V. It became clear, that a majority of countries wanted to include foreign students in the target group of Eurostudent in order to learn more about the social and economic study conditions of this particular group. Also it was decided to include all higher education institutions whether they have an academic or a vocational orientation.

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

Discussions during the revision of the core questionnaire always took place with one eye on the relevance of data surveyed for policy debates. The handbook accompanying the core questionnaire references the relevance of question by including a section on the purpose of each question. When discussing the relevance of certain questions in the questionnaire, the difficulty is of course in the different points of view. One particular question may be of high relevance to some countries but not to others. Or the resulting data may be of interest to certain stakeholders in higher education but not to others.

At the moment there doesn't exist a formal document that settles the information mandate of Eurostudent V. For a possible future round of the project it could be useful to discuss first about topics and indicators and use the resulting document as a guideline for the revision of the questionnaire.

3 Accuracy

The data gathered has to be accurate. In order to ensure accurate data, country teams need the core questionnaire and its accompanying handbook. Additionally they may need advice on sampling methods, data cleaning and weighting.

In order to evaluate the fulfilment of the quality goal regarding the dimension of accuracy, the question must be answered, whether central conventions and adaptations to national context have been defined and communicated to the country teams.

Handbook on core questionnaire

Until the end of the first project phase all country teams have received the handbook. On the 5th of December 2012 HIS informed country teams that the core questionnaire as well as the accompanying handbook are available on the wiki pages of the project. The handbook contains information on the Eurostudent target group, on methodical concepts used and on technical issues which are important for implementing the core questionnaire. Apart from this more general information the handbook documents for each question of the core questionnaire the question's purpose, the necessary explanation and definition, the usage and history of the question and optional changes. All this information allows country teams to implement the core questionnaire accurately in their national surveys.

An innovation of the current project round lies in the use of hash tags (#) in the handbook. These hash tags should lead to an improvement of accuracy of data, as they mark sections of the questionnaire that need to be adapted to the national context by the country teams. This allows for a general question e.g. using the ISCED classification that will be "translated" by country teams to the national mapping of ISCED. Students will know the national names of different branches of the educational system. Country teams can then map the national information back to the hash tag expressions. This should facilitate filling out of the questionnaire for students while still providing comparable data. As this method is new to the project, it will need to be evaluated at the end of the project round. Ideally it will increase accuracy of data while at the same time comparability between countries rests assured. Slight changes in the handbook were made after the discussion with the participants of the regional seminars.

Model online survey and interactive handbook

In order to help country teams with the implementation of the core questionnaire as an online survey two instruments were developed: the model online survey and the interactive handbook. The model online survey was implemented by ResearchNed on SurveyMonkey and will be put at the disposal of interested country teams. It contains the entire core questionnaire and offers multilingual support, so country teams can add the text of the questions in their national language to programmed questions.

The handbook is available online and offers an explanation sheet for every question of the core questionnaire as well as the programmed question.² Questions can be selected by chapter of the questionnaire. For every question there is an instruction document that highlights the important points to remember when programming the online questionnaire (single or multiple response, scales, use of hash tags, etc.).

The interactive handbook and the model online survey should help country teams to accurately implement the core questionnaire for their national surveys. The accuracy of the data collected could improve even more, if country teams use these tools offered by the Consortium.

Seminars for country teams

The three Seminars for the country teams took place in December 2012 and January 2013. The contents of the seminars were additional information on the project schedule, the core questionnaire and the handbook and on methodical questions (e.g. sampling and weighting, contacting students). The seminar was a wonderful opportunity to discuss difficult points of organising student surveys in the various countries. The discussion of different practices in different countries will most likely have a peer learning effect. The regional seminars in Eurostudent V replaced the big conference on these issues that took place during the last round of the project. The smaller seminars are better suited to an exchange of practices between countries and allowed the Consortium to learn more about the individual situations of country teams. In some countries the appointment of the research team took place after the seminars.

Unfortunately of the content presented at the Seminar almost no documentation is available at this point for country teams. Especially for country teams participating for the first time in Eurostudent it could be very helpful to have some reference documents for methodical questions on topics like sampling, executing a pre-test of the questionnaire or how to contact students. For a possible next project round the Consortium should aim to make such documents available to country teams on the wiki pages of the project.

Some countries raised the idea of another round of regional seminars after the field phase and focused more closely on the data delivery. The project budget for the current round does not allow the Consortium to implement this suggestion in this round. This idea should be kept in mind for the next project round.

4 Punctuality

In order to measure the fulfilment of the quality goals regarding the quality dimension punctuality, the following questions need to be raised, whether country teams received core questionnaire and handbook in time to prepare their national surveys and whether the regional workshops took place as scheduled.

Punctuality of core questionnaire and handbook

The handbook “core questionnaire and project conventions” was scheduled for the end of October 2012. As mentioned above, it was sent out to country teams on the 5th of December 2012. This slight delay was due to unresolved questions that needed to be discussed during a video conference meeting of the Consortium.

Country teams participating in the first Seminar for the country teams did not have much time to study the handbook before the Seminar. However, participants agreed, that it should be possible to implement the national survey according to the central conventions outlined in the handbook. As the first

² See <http://dc2.rn.nl/mrIWeb/mrIWeb.dll?I.Project=EUROCQT1> for the interactive handbook.

Seminar brought together country teams with a comparatively early field phase, the country teams participating in the second and third Seminars should have no problems with the slightly delayed handbook and the schedule for the field phase.

However, the delay of the core questionnaire will also affect the second project phase. A modified project schedule was therefore communicated to all country teams at the seminars: a draft of the handbook on data delivery should be ready by March 2013, a draft version of the data delivery module should be available by the end of May or in early June 2013. This should allow for enough time for testing before countries start the data delivery.

In order to prevent similar problems in the future, it would be necessary to start the whole setup of contracts, funding and fees earlier, in order to start the revision of the questionnaire on time. However, the current model of financing Eurostudent does not allow for an overlap of project rounds. For the next round, overlapping funding should be aimed at to improve the punctuality in the first project phase.

Seminars for country teams according to schedule

The three Seminars for the country teams were planned for December 2012, January and February 2013. One Seminar took place in December 2012, the other two in January 2013. Consortium stressed the dimension of punctuality of the Seminars when discussing the country teams taking part in the first Seminar. With one exception, the countries participating in the first Seminar had not yet drawn their samples or contacted the students for the national survey.³ For most countries the methodical recommendations arrived therefore in time. This should also be true for the countries participating in the other two Seminars, as they generally start their field phase a bit later.

5 Comparability

The collected data needs to be comparable between countries. The results of the fifth project round should also be comparable with the results of the last round; therefore revisions of the questionnaire should be kept to a minimum.

In order to evaluate the fulfilment of the quality goals the scope of the revision of core questionnaire and its implementation in the national surveys need to be analysed.

Revision of the core questionnaire

To revise a questionnaire means to have several quality dimension at odds with each other: If you change a question in order to make it more accurate you lose the comparability at the same time. Also the relevance of different questions for policy debate changes over time, making it necessary to add questions or to adjust questions from the last project round. The process of the revision of the core questionnaire tried to take into account these different tradeoffs.

Table 1 shows a brief quantitative summary of effect the revision of the core questionnaire had on the comparability of results. A number of revisions were made to existing questions. For 13 questions the changes will lead to results that will be of limited comparability with the data from Eurostudent IV.

The number of questions in the whole questionnaire increased from 47 to 59 questions. The time students need to fill in the questionnaire will increase also by approximately 25%. This will leave less room for country teams to add questions of interest on the national level. On the other hand the relevance of the Eurostudent data will hopefully increase as the 15 new questions were judged to be of enough relevance to add them to the questionnaire.

³ One country started the field phase already in the autumn semester. Two more countries have already completed their national surveys before 2013.

Table 1 – Scope of the revision of the core questionnaire for Eurostudent V

| Chapter | Number of questions in E-IV | Limited Comparability due to changes | Share of question with limited comparability | Number of questions in E-V | New questions | Share of new questions |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------------------|--|----------------------------|---------------|------------------------|
| 1 - Current Study Situation | 8 | 1 | 13% | 13 | 3 | 23% |
| 2 - Study Background | 7 | 3 | 43% | 9 | 3 | 33% |
| 3 - Living Conditions | 12 | 3 | 25% | 15 | 3 | 20% |
| 4 - International Mobility | 6 | 1 | 17% | 10 | 5 | 50% |
| 5 - Personal Details | 10 | 4 | 40% | 9 | 1 | 11% |
| 6 - Family Background | 4 | 1 | 25% | 3 | 0 | 0% |
| Total | 47 | 13 | 28% | 59 | 15 | 25% |

The biggest change occurred in the questionnaire's chapter on international mobility. This is due to the need for additional data on this topic expressed by stakeholders during the revision process. The gain in relevance due to the added and changed questions was considered to outweigh the loss of comparability. The chapter concerning the study background of students was also changed and extended. In order to better survey and compare data on access to higher education, these changes were deemed necessary. While the comparability with data from Eurostudent IV may be limited, the accuracy and comparability between countries should improve with these modifications.

All in all it must be noted that while we set out to do a small revision of the questionnaire the changes have nevertheless been substantial. While we believe that these changes will increase the relevance and accuracy of Eurostudent data, the effects will only be visible after the field phase and the delivery of data. The scope of the revision was also by the involvement of additional stakeholders in the revision process. As more points of view were integrated, more changes were inspired. Methodical aspects as well as the relevance to policy aspects (inclusion of EC) were improved by this approach.

Implementation of the core questionnaire in national surveys

The implementation of the core questionnaire in national surveys cannot be conclusively evaluated before the field phase of national surveys. Even after the field phase the consortium cannot control the translation of the core questionnaire into all the different languages of the national surveys. However, some conclusions can be drawn from the feedback of country teams on the last questionnaire. Therefore, country teams were asked to send in their comments on the core questionnaire for Eurostudent IV at the outset of the revision of the questionnaire. Many countries took this opportunity to comment on questionnaire of the last project round. All remarks were collected and discussed at the questionnaire workshop in June 2012 in Austria. Many changes to the questionnaire were decided on because of this feedback from participants of the last round. This process ensures that existing difficulties of countries with the questionnaire as well as with the target group can be eliminated.

The regional seminars and information from country teams shows that there will be more online surveys in Eurostudent V. Also, the majority of countries is surveying in spring 2013. The common survey method and the same timeframe for the field phase will further improve the comparability of national survey data.

Comparability could benefit from an additional day at regional seminars to treat the topics of cleaning

and weighting data more extensively, as there are no project resources available for another round of regional seminars in later project phases. This should also be kept in mind for future rounds of the project.

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.

Definition of responsibilities of Consortium, Steering Board and participating countries

The responsibilities within the Consortium are defined by the work packages and have been respected by all partners during the first project phase. For most of the first stage the Consortium used the platform Wiggio for communication and exchange of project documents. At the end of 2013 it was decided to switch to Asana for this purpose, as several members of the Consortium were having technical difficulties with Wiggio. Additionally the Consortium met once in person at the kick off conference in Berlin and five times for video conferences to discuss the progress of the project and upcoming business. The Consortium will meet again in person in February 2013 to discuss and prepare the second project phase.

The members of the Steering Board were elected at the kick off conference in Berlin. There was a first brief informal meeting at the end of the conference. According to the discussion that took place during that meeting, a brief document was drawn up, that describes the procedures and functioning of the Steering Board. It was accepted by all members during an email consultation in October 2012.⁴ The first regular meeting of the Steering Board will take place on 13 February 2013 in Berlin.

Communication with the participating countries took place mainly by email and via the project's wiki pages (especially for the questionnaire and handbook). The regional seminars enabled for face-to-face communication with the research teams from the participating countries. As mentioned above, several countries would like an additional project event for research teams during the data delivery phase of the project. Also an additional day on cleaning and weighting data could be added to the regional seminars in the next project round. This could further standardize the methodical approaches to sampling and weighting in all participating countries.

Newsletters of the project were sent out in July and in October 2012 in order to keep participating countries and stakeholders informed about the progress of the project.

Members of the Consortium gave several presentations at project external events and conferences. In order to inform additional interested countries about the network and the current project round they also attended a meeting of Education Ministers from CIS Countries on Educational Reform in Yerevan and an international Conference of the Russian University Association "Revival of Universities" in Moscow.

The working seminars held in Hainburg and Vienna as well as the regional seminars for country teams provided important opportunities for face-to-face discussions within the Consortium. During the first project phase the communication was judged by Consortium members as more extensive than in the previous project round.

Definition of contact persons

The definition of different contact persons for different project tasks seems to be working quite well. For instance, IHS was the point of contact concerning the revision of the questionnaire, Praaxis for the

^{4 4} See document on wiki pages: https://eurostudent.his.de/wiki/images/2/29/Working_Procedures_of_SB.pdf.

seminars and ResearchNed for online surveys. At the meeting of the Consortium in Berlin in February 2013 it was decided to appoint a specific contact person from the consortium to each participating country, in order to give all country teams the best possible support. Country teams were contacted by the assigned contact person after the meeting.

7 Conclusion and recommendations

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

- The *relevance* of the data produced by the project is guaranteed due to the participation of stakeholders on the European as well as on the national level.
- Steps have been taken to further improve the *accuracy* of data with an improved core questionnaire and its accompanying handbook as well as with the model online survey and the interactive handbook.
- When it comes to *punctuality*, there is still some room for improvement in a possible next project round. Especially as it is difficult to compensate for delays in the second project stage. However, with the modified project schedule, the handbook on data delivery should still be available in time for the country teams to deliver their data on time.
- Although the core questionnaire has once again undergone substantial changes, *comparability* between countries has been further improved by the evolvement of target group and questionnaire.
- The *communication* within the project is working fine so far on all levels (Consortium, Steering Board, participating countries).

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

- Continue the discussion with stakeholders of higher education on the European and the national level in order to keep the relevance of the project assured.
- Making short methodical guidelines (e.g. on sampling and weighting, on contacting students) available to the country teams for reference when developing their national survey, may improve the accuracy as well as the comparability of the data provided by participating countries even further. Adhering even closer to the project schedule especially concerning the project documents for the participating countries will provide country teams with more time for the preparation of the national survey.
- Planning more time at the beginning of the project round for the setup of contracts will evade a general delay of the project if unforeseen difficulties arise.
- Plan time in the project schedule to test the core questionnaire before countries start their field phase.
- An additional event during the data delivery phase should be added and funds in the project budget should be set aside for such an event.
- It is highly recommended to find a way to fund overlapping project rounds. Discussions on the funding of a possible next round should therefore start already in 2013 and continue in 2014.