

In brief

Quality is the key to measuring public service productivity

On 3 July 2007, the Office for National Statistics UK Centre for the Measurement of Government Activity (ONS UKCeMGA) published a strategy for measuring quality as part of public service output.

This follows up the Atkinson Report (ONS, 2005) on measurement of public service output for the National Accounts, and ONS consultation on principles and techniques for including quality in output measures.

Measuring Quality as Part of Public Service Output – Strategy Following Consultation proposes a conceptual framework for measuring quality of public services, based on the extent to which the service:

- succeeds in delivering intended outcomes
- responds to user needs – the human factor in service delivery

The balance between these two should depend on evidence or assumptions that are clear to all.

The strategy for measuring quality-adjusted education output is to:

- refine the use of GCSE results
- work on approaches using Key Stage results to measure progress within school years
- work to take account of diplomas and A levels
- use research to measure quality of pre-school education
- measure how far education delivers outcomes in the Government programme ‘Every Child Matters’

The strategy for measuring quality-adjusted healthcare output is:

- more weight on health gain than patient experience
- more work on measurement of health prevention as part of healthcare output
- need for systematic information on health gain from treatment

- more work to estimate the relative benefit to health from different treatments, although productivity articles will be based on the cost of treatments, not a mixture of costs and benefits, in line with the consultation

The strategy also proposes new work to measure welfare gained from public spending, including benefits for the market sector. This replaces the ‘rise in earnings’ adjustments in previously published education and healthcare productivity articles.

More information

www.statistics.gov.uk/ci/article.asp?id=1831

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Labour Force Survey methodology workshop in Vienna

The second Labour Force Survey (LFS) methodology workshop was held on 10–11 May 2007 and hosted by Statistics Austria in Vienna. The focus of the workshop was on data collection in the LFS, following the focus on survey design at the first LFS methodology workshop which was hosted by Statistics Netherlands in Heerlen in 2006. The workshops follow the statistical value chain in terms of their content, and the third workshop to be held in 2008 is to focus on LFS processing and associated issues. The workshops provide an opportunity for researchers, statisticians and methodologists working on the LFS to meet to discuss common problems, share best practice, and develop links, enabling dialogue to continue on LFS methodology issues between workshops.

Statistics Austria proved to be excellent hosts, providing a well-organised workshop in their impressive new building in Vienna, which was attended by 60 delegates from 30 countries and by Eurostat. The workshop contained plenary and parallel sessions, which covered topics such as strategies to improve response rates, best practice

in questionnaire design, cognitive testing and piloting, the use of mixed modes, proxy response effects and interviewer training. ONS, which is represented on the organising committee for the workshop series, sent three delegates, who delivered well-received presentations based on developments, evidence and experience from the LFS.

There was considerable interest in the cognitive testing and piloting which is carried out in the UK LFS, including the objectives of these processes, their strengths and limitations, and the way they complement each other to provide, together with post-implementation evaluation of new variables, an effective question-testing strategy. Also of considerable interest were the strategies used to improve or maintain response rates, which in some countries include up to 12 attempts at contact by interviewers, letters from the head of the national statistical institution to refusals to encourage refusal conversion, the use of weekly indicators of interviewer performance, and short postal surveys to non-responders to collect key labour market data. In summary, the workshop provided a valuable learning experience and work is already underway to organise the third workshop in the series which is to take place in spring 2008.

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Third international conference on Establishment Surveys

This major, international conference took place in Montreal, Canada on 18–21 June 2007. It followed on from the success of its predecessors in 1993 and 2000 and provided a rare opportunity for government statisticians from around the world to share experiences on the collection and analysis of data from businesses, farms, educational institutions, local and regional governments and other ‘establishments’. Although the location of the conference meant that most of the 400 or so delegates

came from Canada and the US, participants also included delegates from many other countries worldwide, including the UK, with 11 delegates from ONS.

Main themes of the conference were:

- handling non-response
- data collection
- use of administrative data
- estimation methods
- integration of surveys and systems

The most dominant themes were the problems of non-response and data collection. Presentations on non-response addressed the questions of how this affects the results of surveys, how to improve response rates and how best to chase up non-respondents, which is an expensive process, to obtain effective responses. Presentations on data collection addressed problems of good questionnaire design and of electronic data collection, including collection over the internet.

The conference also included software demonstrations and a variety of introductory overview lectures, in which renowned experts presented best practice and recent developments in their respective fields of expertise. Prior to the conference, delegates also had the opportunity to attend short courses on various aspects of survey methods.

A common, cross-cutting theme raised in many sessions was the pressure, felt worldwide, to reduce costs, including the burden on respondents. This pressure had an important influence on the nature and content of the presentations. Indeed, the main themes of the conference were largely driven by the need to reduce survey costs and respondent burden. A particular example of this was the large number of presentations discussing the strengths and limitations of using administrative data, such as from taxation authorities, as a means of reducing the need for separate surveys. The use of administrative data for statistical purposes is a growing trend in many countries.

Participants agreed that the conference was very worthwhile, providing a valuable opportunity to learn from other countries' experiences, to disseminate their own findings and, most importantly, to discuss current challenges face to face with colleagues from statistical offices around the world. A feeling generally expressed was that seven years is too long to wait for the next conference. ONS statisticians have already

produced a long list of ideas and methods worth investigating for use in the UK.

More information

www.amstat.org/meetings/ices/2007

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Royal Statistical Society conference 2007

The annual conference of the Royal Statistical Society (RSS) took place from 16–20 July 2007 at the University of York. The title of the conference was Statistics and Public Policy-Making, and it was attended by about 350 delegates from around the world, representing statistical institutions, government departments and academia.

Denise Liesley, president-elect of the International Statistical Institute, gave the opening address of the conference. In her presentation she talked about values in official statistics and the need to build trust. In his plenary session address to the conference, Jack Straw MP, Secretary of State for Justice, talked of his hopes for the new statistical system. This was particularly relevant as, in the week of the conference, the new statistics bill was in the final stages before receiving royal assent. The implications of independence for official statistics were also discussed in parallel sessions by representatives from ONS, other public bodies, users of official data and the media.

Many of the sessions at the conference covered the themes of health, education, and crime. Other aspects of official statistics were also explored in presentations and posters prepared by representatives of the Government Statistical Service. Two short courses were run prior to the conference covering disease modelling and randomised trials.

The organised social events were to the usual high standard of RSS conferences, and provided a great opportunity to network, meet others and discuss the latest hot topics. The final evening saw the traditional conference dinner held at York racecourse, with a short after-dinner address by Tim Holt, the current president of the RSS, and prizes given for the poster presentations.

The conference closed with an address by Professor Adrian Smith of Queen Mary College, who had recently chaired a

group leading an independent review of crime statistics. He talked about the role of statistical evidence in public policy, and suggested that a shift in emphasis from national to local statistics would be beneficial, together with overhauling the scope of National Statistics. Once again, the conference had been very successful and a thoroughly enjoyable to attend. Next year's conference is a general one, and will take place at the University of Nottingham from 1–5 September.

Enquiries about RSS conferences should be directed to conference@rss.org.uk

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