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**ESSi-NA2 Quality Enhancement Meeting III:  
Qualitative and Quantitative Pretesting in the ESS**

Held in Mannheim, 03 – 04 November 2008

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## **Outcomes of the Quality Enhancement Meeting III on Qualitative and Quantitative Pretesting in the ESS**

### **Introduction**

As a part of the European Social Survey Infrastructure Programme, the networking activity NA2 convened a third Quality Enhancement Meeting on Qualitative and Quantitative Pretesting in the ESS (held in Mannheim, 3-4 November 2008). International experts in the area of quantitative and qualitative pretesting, questionnaire design, and translation met with key members of the ESS Central Coordinating Team (CCT) as well as some other members of the ESS group to look into the pretesting procedures currently in use in the ESS and to discuss possible improvements and alternatives.

The first session of the meeting set out the current pretesting procedures in the ESS: The questionnaire design process for new sections of the questionnaire (primarily the rotating modules) in the ESS consists of a) a rigorous and iterative expert review, b) use of the Survey Quality Predictor (SQP) program, c) a quantitative pilot in two countries, d) statistical assessments, e) rigorous translation protocols, and f) a pre-test in each participating ESS country. The second session reviewed the state-of-the-art portfolio of qualitative and quantitative pretesting techniques, emphasising that there is no single “best” technique but that different techniques should be selected differentially for varying aims and contexts. After a general introduction to the Michigan cross-cultural survey guidelines, with a special focus on generic pretesting, the next session examined two pretesting experiences in comparative surveys. The final session reflected on the lessons learnt from the presentations and the intensive discussion, and identified the main recommendations that the experts wished to go forward as the agreed outcome of the meeting.

### **Agenda**

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#### **DAY I (3.11.08) Chair: Anouk Zabal**

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##### **I Pretesting in the ESS**

- Questionnaire Pretesting in the European Social Survey (Eric Harrison)
- Improvement of Survey Questions in the ESS (Willem Saris)
- Assessing “Versions” in Multilingual Surveys (Janet Harkness)

##### **II State of the Art of Pretesting Techniques**

- Overview of Qualitative Methods (Theresa DeMaio)
- Quantitative Pretesting Methods (Gustav Haraldsen)
- The Three-Step Test-Interview (TSTI) (Kees van der Veer)

##### **III Cross cultural Survey Guidelines**

- Cross-Cultural Guidelines (Beth-Ellen Pennell)
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#### **DAY II (4.11.08) Chair: Eric Harrison**

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##### **V Applied Pretesting**

- ESS/Budapest Initiative - Cross-National Cognitive Interviewing Collaboration:
- Identifying Sources of Error in Cross-National Questionnaires: A New Tool and Scheme (Rory Fitzgerald)
- Cognitive Pretesting in Switzerland (Nicole Schöbi)
- Pretesting in SHARE (Hendrik Jürges)

##### **VI Recommendations**

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## MAIN RECOMMENDATIONS

The participants of the Quality Enhancement Meeting on Qualitative and Quantitative Pretesting clearly recognise the importance of rigorous questionnaire design and development in the ESS. The suggested recommendations take the existing ESS questionnaire design process as a starting point: Based on the status quo in the ESS, the experts have looked for feasible, cost-effective and constructive ways to enhance this procedure by identifying further possible elements that could relatively easily be added onto the existing structure, as well as ideas to improve on the current procedures.

### Overarching recommendation

The experts emphasized that there is no unique prescribed set of pretesting methods to be used:

1. The ESS should **adopt a mixed methods approach to pretesting**, using techniques tailored to the particular objectives and constraints of the ESS and the participating countries.

### Recommendations pertaining to the production of the draft questionnaire

2. **Improve the documentation for the Question Module Design Teams (QDT).**

In order to improve the general efficiency and quality of the work of the academic substantive experts responsible for the development of the selected rotating modules and drafting the questions, the ESS should improve the documentation for the QDT:

- 2.1. **Create high level background documentation for the QDT**, including guidelines on how to move from constructs to questions.
- 2.2. **Bring forward some elements of the process to the first step of the application phase** by providing more detailed information and specifications at an early point in time.
3. **Enhance the ESS system of expert review.**

Currently, the QDT are supported in their work by a small group of survey methodologists from the CCT. This consists of an iterative review process resulting in a series of questionnaire drafts. The role of the CCT is comparable to that of expert reviews, with their input being more focussed on methodological than substantive aspects. The feedback given by the National Coordinators (NCs) on the draft questionnaire and can be regarded as a further extension of this. The QEM III expert group stresses that expert reviews are indeed very efficient methods of finding problems and potentially correcting them, although they are not sufficient per se.

To improve the expert review process, the ESS should:

- 3.1. **Clarify the status of the CCT Questionnaire Design sub-group.**

This should work towards a more transparent and efficient questionnaire development process.

- 3.2. **Improve the use of input from the participating countries.**

Input from the countries is invaluable in the production of a questionnaire for cross-cultural use. The ESS should focus on including NCs more fully in the process of review, and to ensure that the NCs are well-informed and clear on the goal and structure of the questionnaire.

- 3.3. With regard to 3.2 the proposal is to **establish a small task group (of 4-6 NCs)**. There could possibly be different groups for individual modules, each with a

different constellation of countries (depending on the country's affinity with the subject, special culturally-specific or linguistic problems related to the module etc.). This NC task group would 'shadow' the work of the QDT sub-group: By having direct sight of the draft questionnaire at an early stage, and also the possibility of including their translators in their 'deep processing' of the draft questionnaire to identify questionnaire design and wording caveats, this task group would have the opportunity to raise issues, make suggestions give more focussed and in-depth input to the QDT.

3.4. [Free up time in the process of question drafting.](#)

Experience from the first four rounds of the ESS shows that the development of the rotating modules actually requires more time than the current schedule allows. There needs to be ways of making more time in order to come to more well-informed and qualitatively sound decisions. One way of reducing the time-pressure – and thus reducing errors and increasing quality – could be to explore new ways of sharing versions of documents. This could free up time in the process of question drafting. The above-mentioned recommendations in 2/2.1/2.2 towards enhancing the work of the QDT may also work in this direction.

3.5. [Use an item checklist when reviewing the draft questionnaires.](#)

The questionnaire design sub-group could work from an item checklist when reviewing the draft questionnaires. This might involve the use of rating forms.

3.6. The ESS should [consider a strategy to attain generic insights on the basis of pretesting reviews.](#)

### **Recommendations pertaining to the pilot**

The current practice in the ESS of running only two pilots, one in the source language and one in another language, is found to be sub-optimal by the expert group. While it is good practice to pilot the questionnaire in the source language, as has been (and should continue to be) the practice in the ESS, the need for more language and cultural diversity in the piloting of the questionnaire (consisting of the "new" questionnaire sections, i.e. the rotating module, plus some questions from the core that have been identified as problematic in some way) was clearly identified.

4. [Enhance the ESS quantitative pilot:](#)

4.1. [Piloting should include more countries.](#)

It is recommended that the ESS seek for further funding to extend the number of countries in the pilot.

4.2. [Encourage countries to undertake small-scale quantitative pilots.](#)

This could be achieved by pursuing activities in-house and/or applying for independently funded research projects.

4.3. [Add other pretesting methods to the pilot](#) in order to evaluate the questionnaire.

### **Recommendations pertaining to the country pretests**

The ESS country pretests should be further extended, and the actual yield of the pretests can be increased.

5. [Extend and elaborate the implementation of the country pretests.](#)

The country pretests should go beyond a 50 case fielding of the entire ESS instrument. Countries should be required to take advantage of the opportunities offered by the pretest and make use of additional techniques to obtain more and better information.

5.1. [Country pretests should comprise more elements than they have in the past.](#)

The QEM III expert group suggests considering the following options:

- Tape recording interviews (e.g. would allow for behaviour coding)
- Respondent debriefing (the importance of obtaining input directly from respondents was stressed by the expert group)
- Structured interviewer debriefing (e.g. using rating forms, standardized debriefing questionnaires or group settings)
- Use of audit trails (to analyse response latencies)
- Using function keys to add interviewer notes

5.2. [Improve the specification of the country pretests while actively encouraging heterogeneous designs tailored to national needs.](#)

The ESS currently has a project specification that includes a requirement for all ESS countries to pre-test their translated questionnaire according to guidelines. These guidelines should be further elaborated and outline the general goals of the pretest and minimal requirements. However, countries should be encouraged to put together their own portfolio to address national issues and needs while respecting the constraints imposed by their fieldwork options. Consequently, sample size, sample specifications and pretest design should be tailored to the aims and objectives of each country. CCT can offer guidance and should sign off the proposals. This could easily be implemented by adding these aspects to the fieldwork checklist.

The suggested add-on features to the country pretests are likely not to involve major additional expense but the benefits are potentially quite considerable.

5.3. [Improve documentation and feedback to ESS network](#)

To date there is *no* systematic documentation of the pretests. Countries should be required to document the process and outcomes of the pre-testing. To facilitate this task for the countries, CCT should provide a template for the reporting. Furthermore, exchange between NCs on the pretesting experience in their respective countries will work towards increasing the European scientific capacity and survey know-how.

**Recommendations pertaining specifically to cognitive interviewing:**

6. The expert group proposes that the ESS include cognitive interviewing in its pretesting programme.

6.1. [A minimal requirement is to do cognitive interviewing of the module source questionnaire items.](#)

The recommendation is to run all 50 items in the module, but only probe on those that are expected to be problematic.

6.2. [Beyond this minimal requirement, however, the expert group proposes to select four countries for each round to carry out 15 interviews per country.](#)

These cognitive interviews should use the same sample design in each country and include a limited number of questions (maximum of 20). A common charting methodology and documentation (in English) should also

be used throughout. Country verification would be needed at the end of the process.

**Further general recommendations**

7. The proposed pretesting methods are designed to improve the design of rotating modules. They could however also be used to provide continuing evaluation of the *core* questionnaire.
8. Some of the methods suggested above could be built into main stage data collection.