

# Guidelines for the measurement of educational attainment in the European Social Survey

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## 1 Theoretical background of the target concept

Educational attainment is defined as the highest level of education an individual has successfully completed. This is typically indicated by the highest educational certificate obtained by the individual.<sup>1</sup> Education comprises both general or academic as well as vocational education *and* training. This definition is in line with the current Eurostat specifications for the EU LFS.

Educational attainment frequently serves as an important substantive or control variable in statistical analyses for the following reasons: First, educational attainment is used to proxy ‘human capital’, i.e. the individuals’ level of *knowledge, skills and competences*. Since examinations validate the successful acquisition of knowledge, skills and competences, educational certificates and qualifications are used as proxies for ‘human capital’ in surveys that cannot administer complex achievement tests of e.g. reading literacy. Second, examinations and certificates are important *selection devices* within the educational system. Subsequently, they serve as *signals* of the individuals’ success in education, which is an important piece of information in e.g. the marriage and labour markets. Because of their relationship with human capital and their signalling character, educational certificates are critical elements in the process of social stratification. Finally, educational institutions are considered as crucial agents of *socialisation*. Formal education has the objective of deliberate enculturation, i.e. introducing children to a society’s norms, customs, values, traditions, social roles and symbols. Educational certificates are proxies for socialisation because they are closely linked with the educational institutions an individual was exposed to, and because passing an exam is a sign of adaptation itself.

## 2 Educational attainment variables in the ESS from round 5 onwards

The ESS contains the following educational attainment variables since ESS round 5 (2010):

- Country-specific educational attainment variables (EDLVnXX, where XX stands for the country abbreviation; n stands for a letter indicating the version of the variable).
- Detailed cross-national educational attainment variable (EDULVLB)
- A simplified analytical cross-national educational attainment variable (EISCED)

All these variables exist for the respondent, as well as respondents’ partner, father and mother (for the latter, this is indicated by the extra letters p, f and m respectively in the variable name). For the respondent alone, there is a further variable on the (actual) number of years the respondent has been in education, which is directly asked (EDUYRS).

In the following section, the detailed cross-national variable and the analytical variable are described as the target variables for the ESS. Then, the construction of the country-specific variables that will allow the production of EDULVLB and thereby EISCED is presented (section 3).

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<sup>1</sup> Educational certificates (qualifications, diplomas, degrees) are official documents confirming that someone has reached a certain level of achievement in a course of study or training. Only those achieved in the formal education system (i.e. recognised by the competent authorities such as the education ministry or organisations of employers in a country) are to be considered. Certificates of attendance (rather than achievement) do not count.

## 2.1 Detailed cross-national coding scheme: EDULVLB

EDULVLB has a 3-digit hierarchical coding scheme which is closely linked to ISCED 2011. The ISCED 2011 document is available [here](#).

### *EDULVLB digit 1:*

The first digit of EDULVLB indicates the highest ISCED 2011 level successfully completed, as displayed in the first column of Table 1. It is measured at the ordinal level.

**Table 1: ISCED 2011 first digit and correspondence with ISCED 1997**

First digit ISCED 2011 code	Label in ISCED 2011	Corresponds to ISCED 1997...	Label in ISCED 1997
0	Less than primary	0	Pre-primary
1	Primary	1	Primary
2	Lower secondary	2	Lower secondary
3	Upper secondary	3	Upper secondary
4	Post-secondary non-tertiary	4	Post-secondary non-tertiary
5	Short-cycle tertiary	5	First stage of tertiary
6	Bachelor or equivalent	5	First stage of tertiary
7	Master or equivalent	5	First stage of tertiary
8	Doctoral or equivalent	6	Second stage of tertiary

### *EDULVLB digit 2:*

The second (categorical) digit reflects programme orientation at ISCED 2011 levels 2 to 5 (below the degree level).

1. *General education* represents educational programmes that are designed to develop learners' general knowledge, capabilities and literacy and numeracy skills, often to prepare participants for further education at the same or a higher level. These programmes are typically school based.
2. *Vocational programmes* are designed for learners to acquire the practical skills, know-how and understanding necessary for employment in a particular occupation or trade or class of occupations or trades. Vocational educational programmes may be school and/or work based. Successful completion of such programmes leads to a labour-market relevant vocational qualification. Vocational programmes may involve substantial amounts of content also taught in general programmes. Therefore, programmes that combine general and vocational education would be considered vocational if they conclude with a labour-market relevant qualification.

A similar kind of differentiation is more difficult to achieve within higher education (ISCED 5A in ISCED 1997 and ISCED levels 6 and 7 in ISCED 2011) and thus not reflected in ISCED 2011.<sup>2</sup> From a social science research perspective, it is however important to reflect differentiation in higher education (see e.g. Arum et al. 2007). The cross-national variable to be coded for the ESS, EDULVLB, thus contains this additional distinction:

1. In those countries that have a binary or diversified system of higher education with different tertiary education institutions providing more selective academic or research oriented programmes on the one hand and less selective vocational or application oriented programmes on the other,

<sup>2</sup> The available distinction in ISCED 1997 between 5A and 5B has not been well implemented by OECD countries (which largely overlap with ESS countries) since 5B is only used for post-secondary 2-3-year vocational programmes, but not for longer applied university/polytechnic programmes. These latter were equalised with research-oriented university programmes despite the fact that they often prepare for specific occupations and usually do not give access to ISCED 1997 level 6.

code 1 on the second digit is used to denote vocationally oriented or applied programmes and degrees/qualifications ('lower tier'),

2. Code 2 to denote academically oriented degrees/qualifications ('upper tier'). In countries with a unified system of higher education, i.e. where all tertiary education is provided by the same kind of institution, all programmes are coded 2 on the second digit ('single tier'); code 1 is irrelevant in those countries.

### ***EDULVLB digit 3:***

The third (again ordinal) digit reflects combinations of the complementary dimensions 'programme destination' and 'programme duration' at ISCED levels 2 to 4.

1. Qualifications from educational programmes that do not give access to a higher ISCED level, but are sufficiently long to be considered as completion of this level (terminal programmes).
2. Qualifications from educational programmes that give access to vocational (technical/applied/lower tier<sup>3</sup>) programmes at a higher ISCED level, but not to general (academic/upper tier) programmes (e.g. pre-vocational programmes).
3. Qualifications from educational programmes that give access to general (academic/upper tier) *or all*, i.e. vocational *and* general or single tier programmes at a higher ISCED level (academically oriented or comprehensive programmes).
9. Qualifications from short educational programmes classified at the next higher level that are however too short for the resulting qualification to be considered as completion of that level. For example, a qualification from a vocational one-year programme following completion of ISCED level 2 is not advanced enough to be considered as completion of ISCED level 3 and thus classified at ISCED level 2, even though it requires completion of ISCED level 2 for entry.

At ISCED 1997 levels 1, 5 and 6 (levels 1 and 5 to 8 in ISCED 2011 and EDULVLB), the third digit is not used. Trailing zeroes are added to complete the three-digit code. The official ISCED 2011 uses code 2 here to denote 'partial completion of the level' – i.e. defining a sub-level to the main level – instead of differentiating types of access to higher level programmes, code 3 instead of code 1 for terminal programmes, and code 4 instead of 2 and 3 for qualifications giving access to higher level programmes. Code 9 qualifications in the ESS are included in code 4 qualifications in data coded in ISCED 2011.

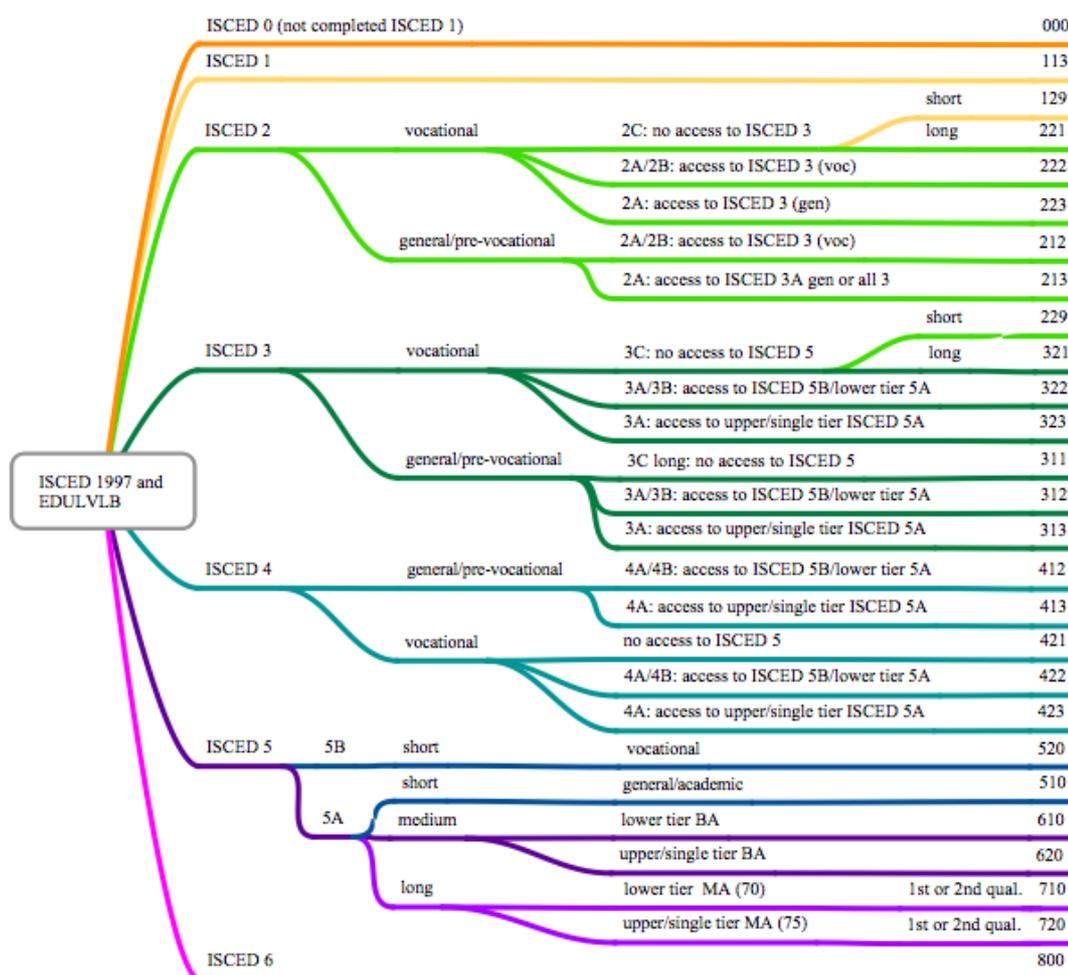
Although this looks like a large number of possible codes, many of them are implausible and do in fact not exist at all. The scheme only uses 31 different codes for educational certificates. Also, not all types of programmes exist in all countries.

To illustrate, Figure 1 shows the 'classification tree' and associated codes for coding educational certificates into the amended ISCED for the ESS - EDULVLB.

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<sup>3</sup> Because the upper secondary level is sometimes differentiated by access to the different tiers of higher education (but both classified as ISCED 3A in ISCED 97), this additional distinction needs to be reflected in the destination criteria of upper secondary education, too. Countries with a unified system of higher education use the respective 'upper/single tier' category (code 3 on the third digit) in secondary education; code 2 is irrelevant in those countries. This is why in some categories in the coding template (312 and 313; 322 and 323, 412 and 413; 422 and 423; 610 and 620; 710 and 720) the ISCED level and sub-dimensions indicated are identical. In this case the description in column 4 contains the difference between the two categories in italics.

**Figure 1: Coding educational certificate into ISCED (amended) for the ESS, using ISCED 97 terminology**



## 2.2 The European Survey Version of ISCED (ES-ISCED)

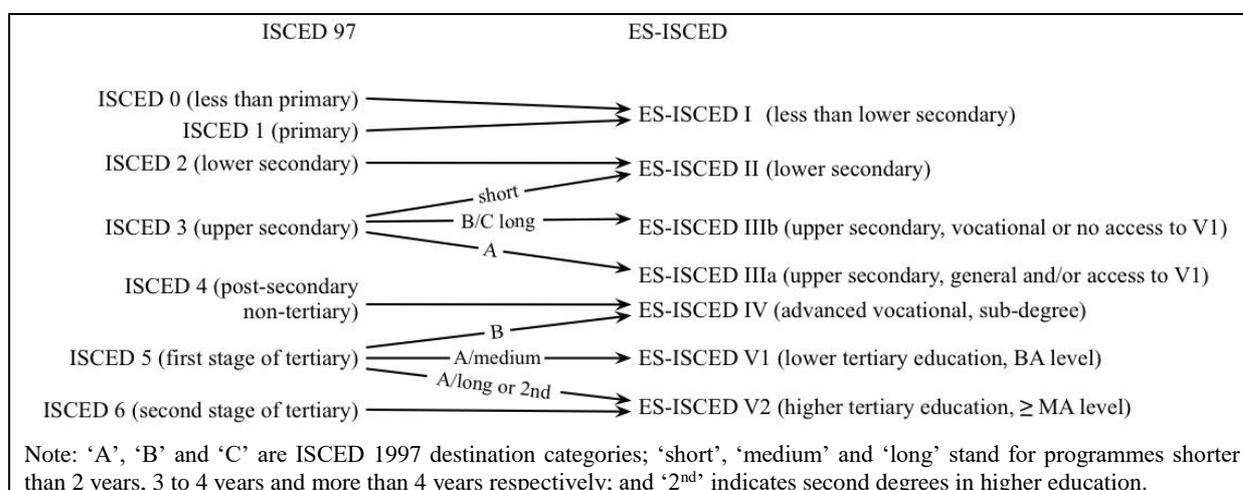
ES-ISCED (variable name 'EISCED' in the ESS datasets) builds on the concepts and mappings of country-specific to international categories provided by ISCED but incorporates a crucial idea underlying the CASMIN scheme (see e.g. Brauns, Scherer and Steinmann 2003), an education scheme that has been used extensively for cross-national stratification research: the differentiation of types of educational programmes or certificates within levels of education. In order to derive this information, ES-ISCED uses the complementary dimensions provided by ISCED, namely 'programme orientation', 'programme destination', 'programme duration' and 'order in the national degree and qualification structure'. In turn, ES-ISCED suppresses distinctions that are less relevant for European countries today, e.g. the levels 'less than primary education' and 'primary completed, but less than secondary education' are merged since both are very small in European countries today where compulsory education usually lasts until ISCED level 2 (lower secondary education) inclusive.<sup>4</sup> Figure 2 shows how ES-ISCED is derived from the detailed ISCED 1997.

ES-ISCED has the same number of categories as ISCED 1997 has main levels. It can be extended according to researchers' requirements by including additional distinctions including those not offered

<sup>4</sup> Country-specific variables should however still make this distinction so it can be used if necessary (e.g. for PT, ES-ISCED category I contains more than 50% of cases). Several European countries experienced educational attainment rather late and thus this differentiation is still important there especially for older people.

by ISCED, e.g. type of tertiary education institution (academic/research-oriented vs. vocational/application oriented) or tracking in lower secondary education. As a comparison between Table 2 and Table 3 shows, ES-ISCED is distributed much more evenly than EDULVL, which is the 7 category ISCED 1997 levels based variable used in the first four ESS rounds.<sup>5</sup>

**Figure 2: Relationship between ISCED 1997 and ES-ISCED**



**Table 2: Distribution of EDULVL (corrected for misclassifications) for selected countries in earlier ESS rounds**

Country	ESS Round	ISCED main levels					
		0	1	2	3	4	5 & 6
CZ	2	0.2	0.2	9.3	78.1	0	12.3
DK	3	0.4	0.9	12.9	35.4	0	50.4
FR	3	1.6	11.1	9.3	47.4	0	30.7

**Table 3: Distribution of ES-ISCED for selected countries in ESS round 5**

Country	ES-ISCED categories						
	I	II	IIIb	IIIa	IV	V1	V2
CZ	0.88	12.58	37.84	25.55	12.75	2.43	7.97
DK	10.24	19.26	23.52	8.90	9.03	20.60	8.46
FR	20.01	8.96	24.96	18.73	12.04	3.72	11.58

### 3 Country-specific variables for the measurement of educational attainment in the ESS

Given cross-national educational attainment categories are incomprehensible for respondents, cross-national surveys use country-specific questionnaire items to collect information on respondents’ level of education.<sup>6</sup> The resulting country-specific education variables are then recoded into a cross-national variable after data collection. Given countries differ substantially in their educational institutions and their populations’ levels of attainment, it is important to anticipate the cross-national target variables when designing the country-specific data collection instruments for educational attainment.

Country-specific education categories are mapped to a detailed ISCED-based cross-national scheme before data collection (ex-ante output harmonization). This higher degree of harmonisation is meant to standardise information content as well as improving cross-national comparability and coding consistency over time. The detailed cross-national codes provided by EDULVLB allow the deriving of

<sup>5</sup> EDULVL was replaced by a 5 category ISCED 1997 based variable, EDULVLA, in the ESS Round 1 – 4 datasets.

<sup>6</sup> The response categories shown in the source questionnaire in appendix 2 are thus not intended to be used in the country questionnaire. They serve merely to illustrate the range of target ISCED categories that the country-specific instrument needs to cover.

purpose-built education variables by researchers. As a result, the cross-national scheme becomes much more useful than the simple 7-level variable in ESS rounds 1 to 4 used to be.

All ESS countries revised their data collection instruments in order to capture the level of detail needed in ESS Round 5 (or the first ESS round after in which they participated). Countries taking part in the ESS who have not participated since round 5 will have to go through this process in good time before fieldwork is scheduled.

In countries where large numbers of respondent's are likely to have achieved qualification from other ESS countries, interviewer instructions should be provided showing how these qualifications map onto the answer codes of the country of interview. Countries should consult APPENDIX A1

### **3.1 Developing the country-specific question stem**

For the question wording, it is important that it reflects the definition provided in section 1: The question should ask for the highest level of formal education successfully completed or the highest formal educational qualification obtained by the respondent (or his/her partner, father, mother).

- It should NOT ask for the last educational institution a respondent was enrolled in, or the highest educational programme ever attended.
- By 'formal' we mean education that is generally recognised by state education providers and/or employers.
- If an individual attends an educational programme but does not achieve the final certificate, the respective level of education is not regarded as successfully completed. However, for educational programmes not concluding with any certificate or only with a certificate of attendance (e.g. ISCED level 1 – primary education – programmes in many countries), successful completion refers to full attendance in the programme, i.e. having followed the programme from its beginning right to the end (allowing temporary periods of absence due to illness etc.).

### **3.2 Developing the country-specific response categories: Filling in the coding template**

In order to start the process of developing the country-specific education response categories and measurement instruments, please refer to the document 'CSEV\_ISCED Template.xls' that is provided together with these guidance notes (and ensure the "coding template" tab is selected). The process of completing the excel template file will allow National Coordinators to map out the level of detail required which will, in turn, drive the development of the questionnaire instrument(s) and showcard(s).

The rows of the table refer to country-specific educational attainment (response) categories and the columns contain various pieces of information relating to these categories:

- 1) the standard cross-national codes closely linked to ISCED 2011 (the correspondence between EDULVLB, ISCED 1997 and ISCED 2011 – for those who are interested – is provided in the sheet "EDULVLB-ISCED");
- 2) *empty*: the codes for the country-specific education categories (have to be added by each country; most countries use codes counting from 0 upwards);
- 3) *empty*: the labels for the national educational attainment categories (have to be added by each country; these categories will be used on the showcard);
- 4) a brief description of the content of the detailed categories, largely using ISCED 1997 terminology as set out in the [ISCED document](#) (UNESCO 2006) since ISCED 2011 was still in the making when this work was performed for the ESS;
- 5) the corresponding ISCED 2011 codes to help you find the specific category in the mappings according to the official ISCED mappings (from [Eurostat](#) – open link twice to see the list of ISCED mappings for years 2013 to most recent – or [UIS](#))

- 6) the assignment to ISCED 1997 levels and sub-dimensions according to the official ISCED mappings (from [Eurostat](#) or [UIS](#)) to help you find the specific category in the mappings if using older mappings (not recommended);
- 7) *empty*: space for documenting intended deviations in the assignment of country-specific categories to ISCED from the official ISCED mappings in columns 5 and 6; and
- 8) *empty*: space for comments you may have on the classification of country-specific categories in EDULVLB or ISCED.

Please take some time to familiarize yourself with the ISCED terminology and the ISCED mapping for your country to support you in this task. The task to be achieved by country teams (with support from the country experts you were asked to identify, and Silke Schneider) is to fill in columns 2 and 3 with the country-specific education categories that match the ISCED classification criteria for the respective detailed category. The description in column 4 and the ISCED 1997 levels and sub-dimensions provided in column 5 are there to help you identify the relevant ISCED criteria for each category in the UNESCO 2006 manual. Thereby in one step, the required country-specific categories are *identified and mapped* to the detailed ISCED. Ensure that defunct/outdated qualifications that are held in the population covered by the ESS are included as appropriate.

These categories will form the response categories in the questionnaire item and on the showcard (see appendix).<sup>7</sup> Please provide the education categories in the original language(s) just as this information will be used in the questionnaire item.<sup>8</sup> You do not need to literally use the certificate or programme names provided in the ISCED mappings since they use the official terminology rather than what respondents in a survey might understand best.

Here are some steps you may wish to follow to support you in this process:

1. It is probably best to start out with the questionnaire item for the last ESS round your country participated in (or some other high-quality survey if this is your first ESS round) and find out where in the template to put the education response categories used in the past.
  - Please refer to the ISCED mappings (from [Eurostat](#) – open link twice to see the list of ISCED mappings for years 2013 to most recent – or [UIS](#)) to find the ISCED level as well as other required information (such as programme orientation, destination or duration) for mapping the country-specific response categories to the detailed ISCED. Note: Some previously used categories may have to be split up, for example if vocational and general education certificates were mixed in one response category at the secondary or tertiary level, or if bachelor and master level degrees were reported in the same category.
  - The ISCED mappings by UIS unfortunately do not cover educational programmes and qualifications not in force any more today. The Eurostat mappings sometimes have some of this information in a separate sheet. If this is not available for your country, please apply the ISCED classification criteria to the outdated programme/qualification (with support from expert colleagues, other experts available in the country, and in collaboration with Silke Schneider), using the ‘decision tree’ in Figure 1. It is not recommended to refer to nationally perceived equivalence between outdated and current qualifications by default since this reflects functional equivalence within the country rather than equivalence in terms of criteria used in ISCED.
2. The ISCED mappings provide a complete list of educational programmes currently in force in all countries. Their granularity may sometimes differ though. Check if all educational qualifications contained in the ISCED mapping for your country are covered by the education categories in the Excel template. If anything is missing, please add the qualification in the appropriate line in the table, unless it is a very rare educational qualification, or it can be subsumed under an existing

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<sup>7</sup> For countries using data collection instruments consisting of more than one item, the information from all items needs to be combined accordingly (see example for Germany in the coding template, sheet 4).

<sup>8</sup> If the questionnaire is administered in more than one language in your country, please add the appropriate number of columns between columns 3 and 4 in the Excel template.

category that is classified in the same way.

3. Check whether the result is plausible, and makes sense for measuring educational attainment in your country. If you think a qualification is not well classified in the official ISCED mapping, move it to the more appropriate EDULVLB-category and document the deviation from the official mapping in column 7. Schneider (2008) contains a detailed discussion of the application of ISCED 1997 to the measurement of educational attainment in the EU LFS for 15 European countries, which may help you in this task. It also includes discussions of how to code difficult cases, outdated qualifications and where the official mapping may not be very good.
4. If there are several qualifications with a sizeable proportion of respondents in one of the detailed cross-national categories in your country, you may split the line into two or more so that the country-specific variable makes more distinctions than the cross-national one. Keep in mind that cross-national classifications always simplify, and some fine-grained differentiations may be important in your country that may not be important internationally.
5. Make sure to include a “bottom” category for respondents who have not successfully completed any level of education, i.e. those who have not achieved any educational qualification and have not fully attended ISCED level 1 (primary education).
6. Finally, please insert “n.a.” for “not applicable” in those lines in the Excel template representing education categories that do not exist in your country.

### 3.3 Developing the showcard

When developing the showcards for the ESS education questions, F15 (card 52), F44 (card 60), F52 (card 62) and F56 (card 64), all categories agreed with the national team, Silke Schneider, NSD and City must be included. The corresponding numerical codes must NOT appear on the showcards and there should be no annotations. Be aware that respondents are likely to be drawn to the showcard(s) and will want to place themselves on the card(s). This will often be more directive for the respondent than the question stem or any additional interviewer notes.

The order of the categories should be ordinal. Countries will need to consider carefully whether it is best to put the highest, or alternatively, the lowest qualifications at the top of the showcard. Please add interviewer notes accordingly, to ensure it is clear to the respondents whether the highest level of education successfully completed will be the first, or alternatively, the last qualification they hold when reading from the top of the list to the bottom.

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# Appendix 1

## 1. Rationale for changing the measurement of educational attainment in ESS round 5

The cross-national educational attainment variable provided in the ESS data sets for rounds 1 to 4, *edulvl*, has shown a number of weaknesses:

- *edulvl* was derived from country-specific educational attainment variables that do not refer to the same underlying construct in all countries;
- *edulvl* was derived from country-specific educational attainment variables in different ways across countries and ESS rounds, often with inconsistent application of ISCED criteria and mappings and thus containing a substantial amount of misclassifications (although this has improved over ESS rounds);
- *edulvl* was too crude as a cross-national coding frame for educational attainment:
  - o The distribution of *edulvl* (after correcting for misclassifications) was highly inefficient: ISCED levels 0, 1, 4 and 6 are usually rare, and levels 2, 3 and 5 very common (see Table 2).
  - o Some of the broad ISCED levels contained very different types of educational certificates (e.g. level 3 mixes general and vocational; 5 mixes vocational tertiary, bachelor's and masters' levels). However, not only levels of education, but also types of education are important for assessing an individual's educational attainment. Types of education differ substantially with respect to selectivity, the kinds of knowledge, competences and skills conveyed, and dominant norms and values (see below).
  - o Consequently, *edulvl* shows a much lower level of dispersion than the country-specific variables. As a result, *edulvl* has a very low degree of construct validity compared to the country-specific variables in many countries. The fact that additionally the degree of construct validity of *edulvl* differs across countries decreases cross-national comparability even further.

*Edulvl* thus showed low levels of validity and cross-national comparability. The same is probably true for the respective variables for partner, father and mother (and some countries still use the ISCED main levels rather than country specific instruments for these variables, leading to very poor measurement quality). To solve these problems, the following actions were proposed and realised with ESS round 5:

1. Improve country-specific measurement instruments in order to a) standardise and improve the information content of the resulting country-specific variables (see section 1 and Appendix) and b) ensure that the data can be harmonised into a detailed ISCED-based scheme (see section 3).
2. Code the resulting country-specific variables into a detailed cross-national scheme that is closely linked to ISCED. This variable is then used as an operational variable (just like ISCO 88 for occupation) that serves as an intermediary tool and allows researchers to derive specific analytic variables (like social class schemes or status scores derived from ISCO 88) depending on their requirements and research questions. A sufficient level of detail also improves continuity over time and adequacy for a wide range of countries. In contrast to ISCO 88, this variable will however only have around 25 categories and does not require office coding of verbatim information.
3. Derive an analytical variable from the detailed ISCED scheme that has a higher degree of information content and construct validity than *edulvl*, while having a reasonably low number of categories. One possible scheme that was proposed and tested (Schneider 2009 and forthcoming) is the European Survey Version of ISCED (ES-ISCED). The CST has decided this variable will be derived and made available to data users from ESS round 5 onwards. However the detailed ISCED data provided will be versatile enough to allow data users to derive other analytical education variables.
4. Use the same country specific codes frame for all educational attainment questions (respondent, partner, father and mother).

## 2. Relationship between EDULVLB and ISCED 2011

EDULVLB is based on ISCED 2011, but extends this version of ISCED in two respects:

- Additional distinction at ISCED level 2 depending on which ISCED level 3 programmes a level 2 qualification gives access to.
  - “Limited access”: access to vocational ISCED 3 programmes only;
  - “Full access”: access to general/all ISCED 3 programmes.
- Additional distinction between lower and upper tier tertiary at ISCED levels 6 and 7 (610 and 620 are 660 in ISCED 2011; 710 and 720 are 760 in ISCED 2011) and the relevant access-categories at levels 3 and 4.<sup>9</sup>
  - “Limited access”: access to level 5 and lower tier tertiary programmes only;
  - “Full access”: access to upper tier/all tertiary programmes.

Given the ISCED 2011 coding system was not yet finalised in May 2010, the differences between the EDULVLB and ISCED coding systems are as follows:

- The 2<sup>nd</sup> digit at ISCED levels 2, 3 and 4 in EDULVLB are 1 for “general” and 2 for “vocational”; in ISCED 2011 these are codes 4 and 5 respectively.
- The 3<sup>rd</sup> digit at ISCED levels 2, 3 and 4 in EDULVLB are 1 for “no access”, 2 for “limited access” and 3 for “full access”; in ISCED 2011 these are code 3 for “no access” and code 4 for “access” (both “limited” and “full”).<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> The distinction between “academic” and “professional” in ISCED 2011 was made after May 2010 and is still lacking core definitions. It is related to but not identical with the “upper tier” and “lower tier” distinction (e.g. medical degrees are occupation specific and thus professional, but taught at upper tier institutions).

<sup>10</sup> A notion of “partial level completion” was introduced in ISCED 2011 after May 2010. In EDULVLB, “partial level completion” is not considered as “level completion”. All qualifications are classified at the ISCED level that has been “(completely) completed”.

