Harmonised Concepts and Questions for Social Data Sources

Introduction to Harmonised Standards
About This Document and Update History

Introduction to Harmonised Standards

About this document
This document along with other related harmonisation information available on the Office for National Statistics (ONS) website has been produced with the aim of making topics easier to find by using clearer informed guidance and consistent layouts. The standards have been published using PDF documents, as they provide a simpler and faster option for releasing updates and incorporating new topics.

This document provides background about the use of harmonisation, and as an introduction to specific conventions used in the harmonisation documents such as primary and secondary harmonised standards. All of the associated harmonisation documents are available from the ONS website.

Please check the ONS website to ensure that up-to-date versions of harmonised questions and outputs are always used. The document version number will be incremented when changes are made.

Version 4.0 published in November 2011
This document was revised to incorporate the latest details and issues concerning the GSS Harmonisation programme that is co-ordinated by the ONS Harmonisation team.

Previous Versions

Version 3.0 published in April 2008
This document was updated to reflect the changes in the Survey of English Housing and changes in contact details for the Harmonisation team.

Version 2.0 published in November 2004
This document is part of a series that replaced the Harmonised Concepts and Questions document. Formatting and layout changes were used to help improve the document navigation and provide greater clarity of information.
Contents
Introduction to Harmonised Standards

Harmonisation Team Contact Details................................................................. 4
Harmonisation Background.................................................................................. 5
Why are Harmonised Standards Needed............................................................ 7
Ongoing Harmonisation Issues........................................................................... 8
Conventions and Terminology:
Primary and Secondary Harmonised Standards.............................................. 9
Inputs and Outputs............................................................................................. 10
Interviewer Instructions..................................................................................... 11
Edit Checks......................................................................................................... 12
Harmonisation Team Contact Details

Introduction to Harmonised Standards

This document provides background for harmonisation and its underlying principles. We welcome your questions, so please contact us if you would like to know more about our work, any questions concerning published harmonised standards or if you would like to join the Government Statistical Service (GSS) harmonisation mailing list.

Contact us
For more information about Harmonisation or to join our mailing list, please visit our website at Click Here

If you would like further information or have any questions, please contact via:

Email: harmonisation@ons.gov.uk

Follow us on Twitter: @statisticsons

Telephone: 01329 444017

Mail: Harmonisation Team
Office for National Statistics
Room 1400
Segensworth Road
Titchfield
Fareham
PO15 5RR
Harmonisation Background

Introduction to Harmonised Standards

The United Kingdom has a wide range of Government surveys of persons and households which provide sources of social and economic statistics. The decennial Census of Population is the largest and best known but Government Departments also commission continuous household surveys on a range of topics and these include:

- economic activity
- income
- expenditure
- food purchase and consumption
- health
- housing

These surveys were designed at different times, to meet different needs, and were commissioned by a range of Departments. Consequently, they were developed to a significant degree in isolation from each other. This lack of cohesion leads to differences in:

- concepts and definitions
- design
- fieldwork and processing practices
- outputs (content and format)

A major factor behind the creation of National Statistics was the desire to provide a better service to users of statistics, by improving the availability and accessibility of those statistics. Producing datasets based on common classifications, definitions and standards will lead to improved comparability of statistics. The agreed harmonised concepts are a step towards this goal by making the interpretation and analysis of data easier. This will allow users of published data to see a more coherent picture of British society and trends within it, and to help users plan surveys (at a local level, for example) that can provide data comparable with national surveys.

Account has also been taken of concepts and definitions developed for the 2011 Census of Population, although the different data collection modes and statistical methods and uses of the data mean there are inevitably differences in some cases.

Harmonisation can relate to inputs (for example, interview questions and answer categories) and outputs (for example, analysis variables derived from inputs).

In 1995, ONS began working on the harmonisation of questions in major Government social surveys. An ONS Harmonisation Working Group was first established in 1996 and was responsible for the co-ordination of social survey harmonisation activities across the GSS. It focused on harmonising concepts, definitions, classifications, questions and outputs through regular meetings of representatives from across Government. One of the aims of the work was to make it easier for users to draw clearer and more robust comparisons between data sources.

In 2003, the Social Statistics Harmonisation Group was responsible for helping to shape the overall programme of harmonisation work in line with corporate and National Statistics-wide priorities.

From 2004, the work has been coordinated by the National Statistics Harmonisation Group (NSHG), a cross governmental group, with the remit to provide strategic direction for the design, development and maintenance of common statistical frames, definitions and classifications. Where appropriate, the work has also incorporated the need to provide options which recognises the differing requirements of the individual countries of the UK, the requirements of different modes of data collection, different statistical systems and general data needs. The group is responsible for encouraging compliance with the ‘Statistics and Registration Services Act 2007’ (SRS) and the ‘UK Statistics Authority Code of Practice for Official Statistics’ (CoP).

The ONS Harmonisation team was initially formed in 2003 and the ensuing years have been used to work with survey subject specialists to develop a suite of harmonised standards (including questions and definitions). In 2006, a review of the harmonisation program led to the scope of the work being revised and a reduction in the level of available resources.
Harmonisation Background

Introduction to Harmonised Standards

Currently thirteen harmonisation groups with specialist topic knowledge are responsible for developing new/revised harmonised standards and the list of topic areas is as follows:

- Benefits and Tax Credits
- Classifications
- Consumer Durables
- Country of Birth, Migration and Citizenship
- Crime, Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB) and Social Capital
- Demographic Info, Household Relationship and Civil Partnership
- Disability Health and Carers
- Economic Activity
- Education
- Ethnic Group, National Identity and Religion
- Housing and Tenure, Accommodation Type, Length of Residence and Motor Vehicles
- Income
- Pension

A governance structure involving the NSHG and other senior Government Statistical Service (GSS) management boards are used to formally ratify all new and revised harmonised standards. Once agreed, all finalised harmonised standards are then published via the ONS website.
Why are Harmonised Standards Needed?

Introduction to Harmonised Standards

With the aim of ensuring comparability when collecting data on population characteristics, organisations should strive to have the same basic meaning for key concepts no matter when or how they are collected. It is important for a dataset to be comparable both within itself over time and with other survey datasets covering related population characteristics. Harmonisation is used to establish a common knowledge base of standard definitions and methods and is very important in supporting comparability within the UK and internationally. The focus is typically on the adoption of the following key data elements and processes: concepts, sampling frames, questions, definitions, statistical / measurement units and classifications (including common geographic referencing and coding standards).

When viewing harmonisation across the UK Nations and internationally, the context of economic, social, legislative, institutional, cultural and other differences within the separate countries should always be considered.

When thinking about the typical statistical business process model, harmonisation can be applied at three key stages: inputs; outputs; and processes. Different approaches within each stage are utilised to help achieve the harmonisation objectives.

The use of harmonised standards can provide a range of benefits including:

- Cost savings and efficiencies by avoiding duplication and providing more outputs from less investment.
- Comparability and coherence within time series and between separate datasets.
- Help to support a wider reuse of survey structural information.
- The use of common standards reduces the risk and vulnerability associated with staff turnover, by sharing knowledge within an organization, encouraging dissemination of best practice and improving communication with internal and external users.
- Help to support a common understanding of outcomes and issues.
- Help to increase survey response rates and make questions more efficient by the use of more up-to-date and appropriate language and question formats along with reducing respondent burden.
- Increase the efficiency of disseminating findings by supporting better user navigation of internet based outputs.
- Help comply with the requirements of the Statistics and Registration Services Act 2007 (SRS).
- Help comply with the requirements of the UK Statistics Authority Code of Practice for Official Statistics (CoP).
- Help departments in their preparations for National Statistics dataset designation assessments.
- Encourages closer collaboration across the GSS.
- Increase options for data sharing and linkage of official statistics datasets.
- Help in the assessment of data quality via the comparison of outputs from relevant surveys and administrative data.
- Help to improve the reputation of official statistics.
Ongoing Harmonisation Considerations
Introduction to Harmonised Standards

Factors influencing harmonisation activities may be summarised as follows:

- updates to ensure harmonised standards reflect associated changes to issues such as user requirements, survey structure, changes in terminology, etc;
- differing requirements of the individual countries of the UK;
- different modes of data collection;
- different statistical systems;
- development of new standards to cover changing/emerging social issues;
- encouraging compliance with both the SRS 2007 and UK Statistics Authority CoP;
- different approaches required to encourage the uptake of standards including: the implementation of a Harmonisation Strategy for use across all Government data producers, a range of internet publications, roadshows and a range of promotional material;
- working to meet Eurostat’s data requirements, for example the European Core Social Variables Task Force; and
- ONS is increasingly positioning itself to make greater use of administrative data. In order to exploit such data, it is important to extend the principles of harmonisation beyond surveys and the Census, and this is one of the key harmonisation goals.
Primary and Secondary Harmonised Standards

Introduction to Harmonised Standards

With the aim of helping users find specific harmonisation details more easily and quickly, two separate categories of harmonised standards are used, and these are known as Primary and Secondary standards.

Primary Harmonised Standards
Harmonisation which extends to all or nearly all major Government household surveys is said to be covering a primary set of concepts and questions. The related standards are known as Primary Harmonised Standards.

Secondary Harmonised Standards
Concepts and questions which apply only for a selected group of surveys are said to belong to a secondary set. The associated standards are known as Secondary Harmonised Standards.
Inputs and Outputs

Conventions and Terminology

Inputs
Separate surveys are used for a diverse range of purposes and so cover topics in differing levels of detail. Harmonised questions are designed to efficiently incorporate the use of common classifications and assist with data analysis from different surveys. Not all surveys will include questions on all topics or in every year, but the recommendation is that where a topic is covered; harmonised questions should be included wherever possible.

Some surveys will require more detail on topics than can be obtained from the harmonised questions alone. It will normally be the case that such surveys already ask for that detail. The harmonised questions have been designed so the surveys which ask for more detail can either derive them without asking them directly, or combine them with the extra detail, without adding to the length of interview.

The harmonised questions are intended to fit flexibly into the designs of different surveys. There is no intention that they should form a unified sequence within a questionnaire. Questions and groups of questions are intended to be placed in existing questionnaires in the most appropriate places. This will often mean replacing an existing individual question with a harmonised version covering the same topic area.

Avoiding an increase in respondent burden has been a major consideration in designing harmonised questions. It’s possible that harmonised questions could have more detailed sets of answer categories than some surveys use for these topics. However, classifying respondents’ answers to a more detailed set does not necessarily increase the time needed to answer a question. More detailed categories have been included only where they will not add to interview length. There is no intention to probe for detail which is not volunteered, unless a question specifically demands it. The aim has been to save time by providing clear categories for the less typical answers, where these are of interest for analysis. Finding the right balance of content has an important bearing on survey quality.

Outputs
The production of harmonised outputs from different surveys presents a number of challenges, however it is hoped that unless there are strong reasons for doing otherwise, Government surveys will as far as possible adopt harmonised standards. This will allow users to interpret and compare outputs across datasets more easily. However, it will be for individual survey teams to decide how outputs should be presented, bearing in mind the requirements of the survey users.

Harmonised outputs are not intended to restrict published outputs. Where more detail is currently published from a particular survey, it is expected that this will continue, but where appropriate include summary data based on harmonised standards.
Interviewer Instructions

Conventions and Terminology

The questions shown in the harmonisation standards documents apply to the whole sample of persons or households (as appropriate), and only one answer is expected at each question, unless otherwise specified.

Instructions to interviewers which appear with the questions are shown in *italics*.

Interviewers must ask the question as worded, reading as far as the question mark. The only exceptions to this rule are:

- if a question carries the instruction “ASK OR RECORD”, the interviewer can record the answer if it has already been clearly volunteered by the respondent. If in any doubt, the interviewer must ask the question.  
  The layout of some questions means that the answer categories are included in the wording, and the question mark is found at the end of the final answer category to be read out;

- if a phrase is in brackets, the interviewer may decide if it is appropriate to read it out; the interviewer also chooses which words or phrases to read when they are separated by a forward slash (‘/’).

Questions refer to ‘you’, as is appropriate when talking with the person whose information is being collected or asking about the collective ‘you’ which refers to the household as a whole. Interviewers will substitute the appropriate name when asking the respondent about someone other than themselves.

Questions which ask for monetary amounts expect answers to be given in pounds and pence, unless specified as to the nearest pound.
Edit Checks
Conventions and Terminology

In this document, the term edits refers to quality checks carried out on respondents’ answers.

Harmonised consistency checks have been agreed as a minimum set associated with particular harmonised questions. For their own purposes, different survey teams may add further consistency checks.

Computer assisted interviewing (CAI) allows checks to be applied during the interview, so that apparent inconsistencies can be resolved or corrected by the respondent. Typically Government surveys use CAI, so the edits are shown in the form of the message which an interviewer sees on screen when a check is triggered by an apparent inconsistency.

**Hard checks**
These are written into edit programs to look for inconsistencies which clearly require at least one of the answers involved in the check to be corrected before the data can be accepted.

**Soft checks**
These are used to warn of possible inconsistencies needing further inspection. Once an issue has been highlighted, it is possible it could then be proven to be accurate and as a consequence accepted. An example of this validation could be in the case of where a respondent was said to be a parent and was also said to be aged less than 15. Soft checks are particularly useful in checking numeric variables, like the cost of a house, where the valid range must cover all possibilities but is worth checking that answers with very high or very low values are valid and not miss-recorded.