Frequently Asked Questions on the 3rd round of ESS peer reviews

(Last update: 3.6.2021)

Looking for information on:

Expert Team

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SAQ.Q6. What information should be provided in Annex I *(Information and core documents)* under point *A3.2.Governance, chairmanship, composition and working arrangements. Decision making process. Coordinating body, its composition, functioning and main tasks*?

SAQ.Q7. What information should be provided in *Annex I (Information and core documents) under point A3.3. Description of legislative process for regulating statistical tasks*?

SAQ.Q8. What about the involvement of National Central Banks (NCBs) in the peer review process? Should they be considered as ONAs and requested to complete the SAQ?

SAQ.Q9. Can the self-assessment questionnaires (SAQs) of the previous rounds be shared?

SAQ.Q10. How to evaluate professional independence if a National Statistical Institute (NSI) is sub-ordinated to a ministry and how should this be indicated in the SAQ?

Visit in the NSI

V.Q1. For countries with more than 3 ONAs in the peer review visit, the template for the agenda offers the possibility to hold ONA sessions simultaneously by splitting the peer review team: each of the ONA sessions would then be run by two peer review team members instead of four. Could other solutions, such as grouping similar ONAs in a same meeting, be considered, so that the entire peer review can be present in the sessions with all the ONAs?

V.Q2. Could the organisation of the meetings with external participants, such as data providers, perhaps be organised in a way that one session would not immediately follow after the other? It would be easier to accommodate delays in case one of the sessions with external participants would take longer or any other unforeseen event would occur.

V.Q3. Can the meeting with main data providers and the meeting with providers of new data sources be merged?

V.Q4. Are there any guidelines if the peer review visit has to be carried out virtually due to Covid-19 related restrictions?

V.Q5. What is the point of the briefing of the peer review team with National Coordinator in the morning and evening during the visit , i.e. before the beginning of the sessions and at the end of the sessions?

Questions on the Expert Team

EXP.Q1. When should the Chair of the Peer Review Team first contact the National Coordinator and what should be the topic discussed? The Chair could contact the National Coordinator as soon as he/she receives the completed SAQs and other supporting documents. Information on the contact in the reviewed NSI will be provided by the contractor together with the completed SAQs and the supporting documents. The chair could use the first contacts to find out how the NSI filled in the SAQ (what was the internal process), how it applied the assessment scale and agree on the next steps.
EXP.Q2. Is there a best way to organise the work of the peer review team? The amount of documentation to be reviewed and assessed can be overwhelming. Each team will find its own way of dealing with this. However, the team could, for example, request each member to take a first look at the completed SAQ and accompanying core documents, and then divide the work between the team members according to Principle or according to their own skill set/professional experience. Another approach could be to ask the expert with the least experience on a given principle/issue to take care of it so as to get a fresh view and to provide input to the other experts in the team. It may also be useful that two experts take care of the same principles so as to have two pairs of eyes. However, in the end, it is the responsibility of the chair to discuss with the team members and define the most suitable way of organising their work.
EXP.Q3. What platform(s) should be used for the exchange of documents between the members of the peer review team? It should be remembered that all documents are to be treated confidentially and access is to be limited to the responsible stakeholders. A platform for the exchange of documents will be available on Circabc. Outside of Circabc, documents can only be shared between the members of the peer review team via email with the draft being either password protected or encrypted with a tool such as 7-zip, Zed!, WinZip.
EXP.Q4. What aspects of security should be respected when exchanging information among members of the peer review teams in order to ensure the confidentiality of the documents? To ensure that there are no potential reputational risks for the National Statistical Institutes, the draft peer review reports should be handled by the expert teams following some of the standards applicable for Sensitive non-classified (SNC) information at the European Commission. In practice this means that all draft versions of the peer review reports should only be edited locally, outside of cloud solutions such as MS Team, M365, Google Docs, etc. Furthermore, all draft

versions of the peer review reports should be exchanged among the peer reviews teams and with other stakeholders, explicitly mentioned in the peer review methodology, by either the designated folders on CIRCABC or by email with the draft document being either password protected or encrypted with a tool such as with a tool such as 7-zip, Zed!, WinZip.
It should be noted that derogations from this information security policy could only be granted by the reviewed NSI, after a specific request from the Chair of the peer review team to the national peer review coordinator, with the Eurostat TF on Peer Reviews and Quality in copy.

EXP.Q5. What technical solutions are recommended for the virtual meetings of the peer review teams?

The peer review teams can use various tools for organising their virtual meetings and groups. The recommended software solutions for virtual meetings are MS Teams or Cisco Webex; the recommended instant messaging and video calls mobile app is Signal.

EXP.Q6. Improvement actions from the previous round of peer reviews have sometimes not yet been resolved. How should this be approached by the peer review expert team in this round of peer reviews?

The Excel table with the status of end 2019 is provided to each of the expert teams for the NSS under review and should be the starting point for experts. However, the experts should check whether such improvement actions have been completed in the meantime.

EXP.Q7. Where to find guidance on audits/evaluations and interviewing techniques?

The following sources may prove useful when looking for such guidance:
1. Boyce, C., & Neale, P. (2006). Conducting in-depth interviews: A guide for designing and conducting in-depth interviews for evaluation input.
This resource is a widely cited reference in the evaluation field. The document constitutes a concise guide that defines what in-depth interviews are. The guide also explains the advantages and disadvantages of in-depth interviews and the steps involved in their application.
You can also find the guide at:
https://www.betterevaluation.org/resource/guide/conducting_indepth_interviews

2. A four-page document on strategies for qualitative interviews from the Department of Sociology of Harvard University.
(https://sociology.fas.harvard.edu/files/sociology/files/interview_strategies.pdf)

3. A five-page document on the basics of asking questions from the University of Leicester titled Interviewing for Research - Asking the Questions
(https://www.le.ac.uk/emoha/howtointerview/wordpdf/questions.pdf)

4. This paper from the United States General Accounting Office (GAO) explains structured interview techniques for GAO evaluators and how they should be incorporated when appropriate. (Note: The Government Accountability Office (GAO) is an independent and non-partisan U.S. legislative agency that monitors and audits government spending and operations. Often called the "congressional watchdog," GAO examines how taxpayer dollars are spent and provides recommendations on how to save the government money or operate more fiscally responsibly)
https://www.ignet.gov/sites/default/files/files/17_Structured_Interviewing_Guidance_for_Interviewers.pdf

5. A short Coursera video on the basics of probing. This video corresponds to section 4.6 of a course on qualitative research methods from the University of Amsterdam.
(https://www.coursera.org/lecture/qualitative-methods/4-6-probing-tactics-wnGnr)

6. Interviewing aspects: the Guidelines on Audit Interview of the European Court of Auditors (2013). We strongly suggest having a look at the following sections:
3.2. Consider how to formulate questions
3.3. Developing an interview guide
3.4 Organizing the interview
3.5 The interview situation
(https://www.eca.europa.eu/Lists/ECADocuments/GUIDELINE_INTERVIEW/ECA-Audit-Interview-Guideline-EN-Oct2013.pdf)

7. Quantity and quality of the evidence collected: Performance Audit Manual of the European Court of Auditors (2017). We particularly suggest having a look at sections:
4.2.3 Sufficiency, relevance, and reliability of evidence
4.2.4 Sources of evidence
4.2.5 Types of evidence
Annex II: Evidence collection plan (page 53)
(https://www.eca.europa.eu/Lists/ECADocuments/PERF_AUDIT_MANUAL/PERF_AUDIT_MANUAL_EN.PDF)

Questions of a General Nature

G.Q1. When will the peer reviews be implemented in the situation created by the current Covid-19 pandemic? The 3rd round of peer reviews was launched in April 2021 and will be finalised in June 2023. All methodolgy documents were published on Eurostat's website in November 2020. The peer review of Eurostat is scheduled for 2021, while the first peer review of an EU Member State is planned to take place at the end of June 2021. The situation created by the Covid-19 pandemic is monitored on a regular basis and taken into account when discussing the schedule and mode of the peer review visit with the country to be reviewed. See also V.Q4
G.Q2. When will the peer reviewers and the national coordinator receive a detailed time schedule for all the work and deadlines linked to a peer review? The general timeline for a peer review can be found in the Guides both for Peer Review experts and for the NSIs/ONAs. However, a detailed timeline with concrete dates and deadlines for actions will be provided for all peer reviews by the contractor, after a final agreement on the exact dates of the peer review visit, which should happen around 6 to 7 months before the peer review visit. The detailed schedule will then be shared with the peer review experts and the national coordinator.

Questions on the Methodology

M.Q1. How and by whom was the methodology for the 3rd round of peer reviews developed? The methodology for the 3rd round of ESS peer reviews was developed in a very collaborative approach, through several brainstorming sessions, meetings at the level of the Directors General of the NSIs from the ESS, meetings of the - specifically created for the purpose of the peer reviews – ESS Task Force on peer reviews, meetings of the experts of the working group on quality in official statistics and sub-group meetings of this working group. The methodology documents were consulted at all levels of the ESS and finally endorsed by the ESS Committee.
M.Q2. What is the role of the ESS Quality Assurance Framework (QAF) in this round of peer reviews? In the previous round of peer reviews, the QAF was a benchmark and the SAQ was built around the QAF. This is not the case in this round of peer reviews, because countries have different practices. The QAF is a collection of good practices, but other practices are possible. Therefore, in this round the QAF should be used as a source for inspiration.

Questions on the Report

REP.Q1. What is the deadline for filing the peer review report if holidays (i.e. Christmas or Easter) fall within the given deadline? When the deadline for filing a report falls within a holiday period as specified above, the deadline will be extended by 10 working days.
REP.Q2. Beyond format and language checks, what will be the role of the contractor at the level of “content check”? In case the contractor would introduce changes, wouldn't it be appropriate to get back to the responsible of the report before transmitting the draft report to the NSO/country? The “Content check” to be carried out by the contractor refers to a methodological check: conformity of the structure of the report with the requirements; consistency of the analysis and of the chain of findings, conclusions and recommendations; existence of "evidence" - audit like approach. The contractor is not involved in the substance of the analysis (this role belongs to the peer review experts), but ensures that the analysis is articulated, grounded, evidence-based and in line with the requirements. The language and formatting check will be done by the contractor within 2 days after having received the report and the content check within another 3 days. The contractor will send all the comments to Eurostat’s Task Force on Peer Reviews and Quality (not to the expert team). Eurostat’s Task Force on Peer Reviews and Quality will then decide to integrate them or not into their comments on the report that will subsequently go back to the Contractor and the experts’ team.
REP.Q3. How can harmonisation of the reports be achieved when there is flexibility in the choice of principles/indicators to review? The aim of harmonisation is about the outcome/the final results of the peer review meaning the scope, magnitude and number of recommendations.
REP.Q4. In the executive summary of the report, will it be necessary to include the reason for all the recommendations? The Annex III: *Structure of the peer review report* indeed states that the executive summary should contain all recommendations and a brief description of the reasons for issuing the recommendations. This is necessary because the executive summary may reach a wider public than the full report.

REP.Q5. How to translate a principle-based SAQ into an issues-based report?

Advice can be found in the Guide for Peer Review Experts, Chapter 9.5: Drafting of the report and consultation procedure and in Annex VI to the Guides: Formulation of issues and recommendations.

Furthermore, during the analysis of the SAQ and other documents provided by the NSI, experts can start reflecting on what will be the issues to raise and discuss during the peer review visit, so that the discussions during the peer review visit already focus on issues/problems/challenges rather than on the principles themselves. This is also reflected in the template for the agenda of the peer review visit, grouping a number of principles into issues for meetings.

Questions on the Self-Assessment Questionnaire

SAQ.Q1. When should the NSI/ONA start working on the SAQ?

It is advised to read through the SAQ as early as possible with a view to identifying possible problematic areas. Countries may then have the opportunity to mitigate such problems before the peer review and to thus avoid a potential recommendation.

SAQ.Q2. What is the reference period for the information to be included in the peer review of a given country?

In general, the information to be mentioned should be within the timeframe of 5 years, but information on one country's progress from more than 5 years ago could also be mentioned as long as it considered important.

SAQ.Q3. Do the peer reviewers need to trace documents/findings like in an audit?

The statements made in the SAQ need to be collaborated by documentary evidence. Evidence should be sufficient, relevant and reliable. If there are questions, the findings should be cleared with the NSI in a constructive process of interaction and mutual understanding before and/or during the peer review visit.

SAQ.Q4. Can information be used from ISO certification?

If the information from the ISO certification is relevant and substantiated, it can be used in the peer review.

SAQ.Q5. In Annex I: *Information and core documents*, what information should be provided under the budget and running costs for the ONAs?

The following information should be provided:

- Budget for staff: salaries (including social contributions etc.) for the staff working in the ONA on the production of European statistics. This may be a statistics department/unit/group in a ministry or agency.
- Budget for running costs: costs for heating, electricity, paper, etc. used for the production of European statistics in the ONA. This may be a statistics department/unit/group in a the ministry or agency,

Moreover, it is understandable that the ONA being part of a bigger organisation may not have its own accounting and hence not been able to provide exact figures. In these cases, the ONA could provide an estimate based on a best effort, together with a comment in the corresponding field.

SAQ.Q6. What information should be provided in Annex I (*Information and core documents*) under point *A3.2.Governance, chairmanship, composition and working arrangements. Decision making process. Coordinating body, its composition, functioning and main tasks*? The NSI should provide a description of how it manages/coordinates the national statistical system, e.g. what kind of arrangements are in place (governance), if there is a coordination body (a committee, council, working group, etc.) with the ONAs. Also, what is the legal basis for such a body, who is the chair, who is a member, how often it meets, how the body takes decisions, what are the tasks etc.
SAQ.Q7. What information should be provided in Annex I (*Information and core documents*) under point *A3.3. Description of legislative process for regulating statistical tasks*? This question relates to the national legislative process, e.g. the statistical law or other statistics-related issues. In fact, the NSI should describe the process it follows whenever it needs to enter something related to its activities into a law or decree.
SAQ.Q8. What about the involvement of National Central Banks (NCBs) in the peer review process? Should they be considered as ONAs and requested to complete the SAQ? In principle, the ESCB has its own reviewing system. If an NSI selects a NCB as an ONA, it will have to be treated as any other ONA. In other cases, the NCBs may be involved as users.
SAQ.Q9. Can the self-assessment questionnaires (SAQs) of the previous rounds be shared? The SAQs are confidential documents. If a peer review team would like to analyse SAQs from previous rounds, the experts should ask the national coordinator for these additional documents.
SAQ.Q10. How to evaluate professional independence if a National Statistical Institute (NSI) is sub-ordinated to a ministry and how should this be indicated in the SAQ? The CoP Principle 1 includes a number of rather descriptive indicators, which can be used as a benchmark. The ESS QAF provides further guidance on possible practices to implement the indicators and, consequently, the principle.

Questions on the Visit

V.Q1. For countries with more than 3 ONAs in the peer review visit, the template for the agenda offers the possibility to hold ONA sessions simultaneously by splitting the peer review team: each of the ONA sessions would then be run by two peer review team members instead of four. Could other solutions, such as grouping similar ONAs in a same meeting, be considered, so that the entire peer review can be present in the sessions with all the ONAs? Ideally, the peer review expert team should not be split, but for timing reasons it may be difficult to find another viable alternative for a peer review visit in countries with more than 3 selected ONAs, apart from dropping the opening and closing sessions and allocating less time to each of the individual sessions. The expert team meets at the end of each day and would of course provide each other with extensive feedback and discuss their respective meetings in detail at the end of day 3. In this way each expert will have similar information available on the ONAs role and situation. The alternative of grouping similar ONAs in a same meeting would fall short in providing a more prominent role to ONAs. This solution is therefore not suggested in the template for the agenda and not recommended. However, if this alternative better suits the needs of a country and is also suitable for the experts, it can arrange the meetings with the ONAs by splitting the expert team.
V.Q2. Could the organisation of the meetings with external participants, such as data providers, perhaps be organised in a way that one session would not immediately follow after the other? It would be easier to accommodate delays in case one of the sessions with external participants would take longer or any other unforeseen event would occur. The agenda is flexible and this could be agreed between the national coordinator and the peer review expert team.
V.Q3. Can the meeting with main data providers and the meeting with providers of new data sources be merged? Merging the session with main administrative data providers and the session with new data providers is not recommended, because the sources are differently structured and the data providers of publicly and privately owned data require a different approach. Hence, the questions to be discussed are not sufficiently linked.
V.Q4. Are there any guidelines if the peer review visit has to be carried out virtually due to Covid-19 related restrictions? The methodology was screened and no issues requiring adjustments for virtual visits were identified. In fact, all issues that need to be handled in a different way for a virtual peer review are of an operational nature.

While it is still considered that the peer review visits would be most efficient and productive if they were held onsite, for those cases, in which this is not possible because of the Covid-19 related restrictions, the following will be done.
Firstly a decision needs to be taken on whether a physical visit is feasible. This will be decided in a meeting between Eurostat together with the country under review, the peer review expert team and the contractor and will take place approximately six-eight weeks before the scheduled visit. The following issues should form the basis of discussions:

- Travel restrictions for the experts from their country of residence;
- Availability of rooms big enough to host meetings with a certain number of participants still respecting the rules of social distancing;
- Restrictions of meetings in terms of number of participants;
- Risks for further restrictions than in place at the time of the discussion;
- Any other possible issues.

If it is decided to hold the peer review visit in virtual mode, the following arrangements need to be taken into account for a successful conduct of the peer review visit:
Concerning the experts:

- An onsite peer review visit is scheduled for 4-5 full days. A virtual peer review visit should have the same duration as ensuring that experts and staff, including the senior management of the NSI, are available for a longer period than 4-5 days, may not be possible. However, the total duration of meetings in the mornings and in the afternoons should preferably not exceed 3h each and breaks need to be planned in between, as is the case in an onsite peer review visit;
- While in an onsite peer review visit, it is a common understanding and practice that all experts are available for all meetings, for a virtual peer review visit, this may turn out differently, due to sudden urgent other commitments. Therefore, all peer review experts should commit to actively attend all meetings, without occasional drop-outs (which will be easier to materialise due to the virtual nature of the meetings). Possibly experts could consider a kind of self-isolation or clear out-of-office messages to assure full availability;
- A higher number of virtual meetings have to take place among the expert team members before the peer review "visit" so that team members are at ease with one another and know the roles they will play;
- Good communication between peer review team members and the Chair and the national coordinator is even more essential in a virtual environment. More virtual meetings than foreseen in the guide should be held in order to create a good working relationship;
- De-briefing meetings after each day of the peer review visit need to be held in a way to encourage open exchange of opinions, and the team may need to think about creating some similar atmosphere as would exist over common dinner in an onsite peer review visit;

- The role of the Chair is of particular importance. He/she needs to recognise any possible limitations imposed by a virtual peer review visit (e.g. less open exchange of opinions, virtual tiredness, less active participation in meetings, etc.) and find mitigating measures;
- Confidentiality of the peer review expert meetings, especially the de-briefing meetings each day, has to be ensured.

Concerning the meetings/general organisation:

- Special attention must be paid to the agenda, including very clear and time-limited presentations;
- Preparations for the meetings will require more time to clearly structure the discussions and manage within a more limited time than during an online peer review visit;
- Questions should be concise and to the point – also to respect English comprehension as far as possible;
- The number of participants should be closely scrutinised and limited so as not to add confusion to the meeting for the peer review experts;
- Lists of participants in all meetings, with some information on the participants (name, institution, position, responsibilities, possibly a photo) should be sent in advance of the meetings, so as to save time for introductions;
- All participants, especially stakeholders from outside the NSI, should be committed to actively participate in the meeting, also when not talking themselves/not being concerned directly;
- The confidentiality of certain sessions such as the one with junior staff has to be ensured. It must be agreed beforehand between the Chair and the national coordinator how this will be ensured and for which of the sessions;
- No recording of sessions should take place, except in specifically agreed circumstances (agreed between the Chair and the national coordinator) and only upon agreement of all participants. Special attention must be paid to confidential sessions to ensure that they are not recorded;
- When interpretation is necessary, technical conditions need to be created and more time may need to be planned for the session;

Concerning technical issues:

- Stable and proper technical connections need to be ensured by all experts and by the NSI for all sessions, including also for the meetings with the stakeholders;
- Agreement on the platforms to be used, should be found between the Chair and the national coordinator sufficiently in advance of the peer review to make sure that all experts and stakeholders have access and can work on that platform;
- Technical conditions need to be discussed sufficiently in advance, to provide for back-up solutions;
- A technical expert should be present/available in case of technical issues with connection;

• A test session with the different stakeholders (internal NSI, media, researchers, ONAs, ministry users, etc.) should be organised one or two days before the beginning of the peer review "visit" to deal with any possible connection problems. If these conditions are ensured, the comparability of the peer reviews, independently of how they are conducted, should not be compromised.
V.Q5. What is the point of the briefing of the peer review team with National Coordinator in the morning and evening during the visit , i.e. before the beginning of the sessions and at the end of the sessions? It is important that there is a good channel of communication between the National Coordinator and the peer review team in order to avoid any misunderstandings, clarify any questions as quickly as possible, request additional information/documentation if necessary and also agree on possible adjustments of the agenda. It is therefore recommended that a short meeting takes place between the National Coordinator and the peer review expert team both before the sessions begin and, again, at the end of the day.
V.Q6. What language should be used for the peer review visit if the peer review team knows the local language? English should always be used during the peer revisit visit, even if the members of the team know the local language. This is to avoid any misunderstandings that could ensue through translation when the findings are written up in English in the final report.
V.Q7. Is there a minimum/maximum of other principles/indicators to be explored during the peer review visit, in addition to the fixed principles/indicators. There is no maximum/minimum number of other principles/indicators to be explored during the peer review visit. It depends on the situation in a country.
V.Q8. What to do if the National Statistical Institute (NSI) cannot find any providers of private data sources that are interested to participate in the modernisation session? It would be very interesting for the peer review experts to meet and interview such data providers, but if it would be really impossible, the session should be used for discussing modernisation activities with NSI representatives.
V.Q9. What to do if more than one provider of privately held data accepts to meet the expert team? In such a case, several sessions should be organised, one with each of the providers. The standard agenda provides for sufficient flexibility on this.
V.Q10. How to decide what is an innovative practice? There are practices that are new for some countries but long used in other countries.

For defining an innovative practice in a country it is important to assess whether the practice is new/innovative for this country and whether this is a new development in the national context of this country.