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THE EU LABOUR FORCE SURVEY ON THE WAY TO CONVERGENCE AND QUALITY

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ABSTRACT

The EU labour forces survey is based on national surveys who were, originally, very different. For the past decade, under pressure from increasingly demanding users (particularly with respect to timeliness, comparability and flexibility), the LFS has been subjected to a constant process of quality improvement.
The following topics will be presented in this paper:

a. The quality improvement process: screening national survey methods, target structure, legal foundations, quality reports, more accurate and more explicit definitions of components, etc.

b. Expected or achieved results: an ongoing survey producing quarterly results within reasonable time frames, comparable employment and unemployment rates over time and space in more than 25 countries, specific information on current political topics, etc,

c. Continuing shortcomings: implementation delays in certain countries, possibilities of longitudinal analysis, public access to microdata, etc.

d. Future tasks envisioned: adaptation of the list of ISCO and ISCED variables and nomenclatures (to take into account evolution in employment and teaching methods), differential treatment of structural variables and increased recourse to administrative files (to limit respondent burden), harmonization of questionnaires, etc

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 What is the European Union Labour force survey?

The EU Labour force survey is formed by putting together the 15 national LFS conducted by the Member States. Perfect comparability among 15 countries is difficult to achieve, even were it to be by means of a single direct survey, i.e. a survey carried out at the same time, using the same questionnaire and a single method of recording.

Nevertheless, the degree of comparability of the EU Labour Force Survey results is considerably higher than that of any other existing set of statistics on employment or unemployment available for Member States. This is due to:
(a) the recording of the same set of characteristics in each country;
(b) a close correspondence between the EU list of questions and the national questionnaires;
(c) the use of the same definitions for all countries;
(d) the use of common classifications (e.g. NACE for economic activity);
(e) Eurostat is centrally processing the data.

The EU Labour Force Survey, although subject to the constraints of the EU's statistical requirements, is a joint effort by Member States to co-ordinate their national employment surveys, which must serve their own national requirements. Therefore, in spite of the close co-ordination between the national statistical institutes and Eurostat, there inevitably remain some differences in the survey from country to country.

The national statistical institutes are responsible for selecting the sample, preparing the questionnaires, conducting the direct interviews among households, and forwarding the results to Eurostat in accordance with the common coding scheme. Eurostat checks the results and is responsible for processing and

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disseminating the information sent by the national statistical institutes as well as the calculation of EU totals.

Each Member State in the national language or languages, taking into account the stipulations made in the Regulation draws up the questionnaires. For every survey characteristic listed in the Regulation, a question or series of questions exists in each questionnaire to permit this information to be supplied to Eurostat. Otherwise the information is imputed from other sources such as population registers. The questionnaires may also contain other questions that do not relate to the list of characteristics in the Regulation, but rather reflect an interest in the topic concerned at national level. Based on the sample design the figures obtained from the sample survey are expanded to population levels, usually on the basis of grossing-up factors derived from the most recent census of population, suitably adjusted to take account of recent changes which may have occurred since that census or from the population registers when they are available.

The design of the sample is subject to certain constraints imposed in the Regulation concerning the required level of statistical reliability and representativity both at NUTS II regional level and regarding changes between two consecutive quarters. Within these constraints each Member State draws up its own sample design and carries out the interviews.

1.2 The story so far

1960-1973 - The first attempt to carry out a labour force survey covering the then European Community was made in 1960 with the six original Member States (Belgium, Germany, France, Italy, Luxembourg and the Netherlands). This was regarded largely as an experiment and was not repeated until 1968, when the first of a series of annual surveys took place.

1973-1981 - With the first enlargement of the European Community in 1973, a series of biennial surveys was initiated.

1983-1991 - The definitions used in these early surveys were necessarily somewhat imprecise, due to the lack of an internationally accepted terminology. This gap was filled in 1982 when the Thirteenth International Conference of Labour Statisticians, convened at Geneva by the International Labour Organisation, passed a Resolution concerning statistics of the economically active population, employment, unemployment and underemployment, containing exact definitions of the various categories of the population which labour force surveys were designed to measure. The Member States of the then European Community agreed to apply these recommendations in a new series of Community Labour Force Surveys that would be conducted annually.

1992-1997 - The survey continued to be conducted annually, but for the first time a criterion of statistical reliability at regional level was introduced. The list of variables covered was revised, so as to include topics relevant to the Single Market (such as labour mobility across national boundaries), innovative working patterns (working at home, second jobs or other economic activity outside the traditional forty-hour week) and recent developments in the area of education and vocational training. The questions relating to job-search were revised so as to underpin the commitment to the ILO recommendations, particularly by implementing the distinction between active and non-active methods of seeking work. The continued commitment to the ILO recommendations ensured a high degree of comparability between the results obtained from this series and those from the surveys between 1983 and 1991. A single permanent regulation replaced the previous annual regulations.

1.3 New requirements and a new legal basis

In the mid-1990s, the data needs were re-examined and the following requirements were identified:
- Recent data on employment growth for evaluating policy measures and for determining labour market policies;
- An annual average estimate of employed persons taking into account the seasonal pattern in employment (holiday jobs, jobs in the agriculture, etc).

- Measurement of the annual volume of employment taking into account changes in the patterns of part-time working;
- A better understanding of the relationships between wages and specific types of employment and the intermediate situations between full-time employment and unemployment (in particular visible underemployment);
- Information about labour participation within a household based upon better data on the composition of the household;
- Comparable monthly unemployment rates depending less on the auxiliary data from unemployment registers and more on the quarterly results of the labour force survey.

To some extent, the national demands for statistical information from the labour force survey had resulted in the adaptation of the labour force survey design. Some Member States were planning to implement more frequent surveys (a quarterly survey with repeated interviews was already conducted in several countries). Unfortunately, these national initiatives were not always taken in the same direction, which resulted in a divergent set of national survey designs.

To assure a convergence of the designs, it was necessary to agree upon a common framework of reference, to form the basis for the future progress. So after four years of discussions with the Member States a new Regulation was adopted which defines a target continuous survey while allowing the Member States the possibility of conducting only an annual survey in the spring if they are not in a position to implement a continuous survey.
This new Regulation was adopted by the Council and was published in the Official Journal with the number 577/98. Another council regulation that will be adopted soon stipulates that the transition period for the passage to a continuous survey should take place before 2003.

1.4 LFS becomes an indispensable tool for policy monitoring

The issue of employment took an increasing important political profile within the European Union in the last years and employment statistics are now in the heart of the European Union policies.
An employment chapter was introduced in the Amsterdam Treaty in 1997 and in the extraordinary European Council of Luxembourg in November 1997, the heads of state of the 15 EU Member States endorsed an ambitious European employment strategy. This strategy is centred on four broad pillars:
- improving employability,
- developing entrepreneurship,
- encouraging adaptability and
- strengthening the policies on equal opportunities.

For each of these pillars some indicators, both qualitative and quantitative, were defined as being key to monitoring the achievement of a set of political objectives, the so-called employment guidelines.
Member States have committed themselves to pursue this European Employment Strategy by implementing yearly Employment Policy Guidelines and the process of employment policy co-ordination as laid down in Article 128 of the Amsterdam Treaty. The cornerstones of this process are the National Action plans, where the European Employment Policy Guidelines, adopted by the Council, are translated into national policies, the Joint Employment Report, where progress in implementing the strategy is annually assessed, and the recommendations providing guidance for Member States' policies and structural reforms. Most of the performance indicators used come from the LFS.

Furthermore, at the Lisbon Special European Council, the Union set itself the *"strategic goal for the next decade: to become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion"*
The Council acknowledged the need to regularly discuss and assess progress made in achieving this goal on the basis of commonly agreed structural indicators.
The Structural Indicators are 35 indicators which are nearly exclusively compiled on an annual base and from these 35 indicators, 8 come from the LFS ("Total employment rate", "female employment rate", "employment rate of workers aged 55 to 64 years old", "unemployment rate", "life-long learning", "jobless households", "early school-leavers not in further education or training" and "long term unemployment")

In this context, the role of the EU Labour Force Survey has gained steadily in importance, and is now universally recognised as an indispensable tool for observing labour market developments and for taking the appropriate policy measures. The LFS is the only source of information in these areas to provide data, which is truly comparable in the sense of being independent of the national administrative and legislative framework. Among the statistical instruments available in the European Union, the LFS is unique for the sample-size it covers, for the length of the time-series that it offers, and for the unrivalled picture it can provide of economic and social developments.

2. THE EUROSTAT QUALITY APPROACH (QUALISTAT) AND HOW LFS IS INSERTED IN THE PROCESS

Eurostat's quality concept is built on the ISO 8402 norm. This norm states that: *"Quality is the totality of features and characteristics of a product or service that bear on its ability to satisfy stated or implied needs".* Many statistical offices have used this approach for their quality concepts; quality concepts that focus on users' needs, how to describe all aspects of a product and how to measure the user satisfaction.

The quality concept at Eurostat is structured according to the following seven main components: relevance, accuracy, timeliness and regularity of results, accessibility and clarity, comparability, coherence, completeness.
Taking these 7 criteria we will describe in this document the progress achieved by the Labour force survey in the last years as well as the remaining weaknesses and points for further improvement.

2.1 Relevance of statistical concepts

A survey is relevant if it meets users' needs. The identification of users and their expectations is therefore necessary.

The "Rolling review" is one of the Eurostat "quality improvement" actions. This is the systematic review of statistical work done within the Community, looked at in conjunction with the national statistical offices, the Directorates-General of the Commission, ministries, national banks and international organisations.
The review is in the form of a questionnaire which covers the following points:

- are the requirements of the statistical programme met?
- does the user get adequate and satisfactory service?
- how much does the work cost Eurostat and the Member States?
- could the work be done more efficiently through more appropriate use of funds?
- could certain jobs be eliminated or modified in order to allocate resources to other, higher priority jobs?

LFS has participated as a pilot in this action and the results are being under analyses.

The main users of the LFS data are:
The General directions "Employment and social affairs", "Economic and financial affairs", "Regional policy" and the European Central Bank. Twice year meetings with these users take place to decide on the present use and future improvements of the Labour market statistical tools.
The continuous quarterly survey as defined in the 1998 regulation answered largely to most of the users' expectations:
- More recent and more frequent data is now available on the employment trends to allow the choice of employment policies.
- Annual estimates of average employment will progressively be calculated. The Spring figures published until now do not take into account the seasonal trends in employment.
- Comparable monthly unemployment rates were until now calculated using the Spring results of LFS as a departure point and the evolution of registered unemployment as an auxiliary variable to evaluate the monthly evolution. Quarterly series of LFS data will provide a more accurate estimation of unemployment.
- New variables were introduced to answer to new policy requirements

- Ad hoc modules on Labour market related issues and with a reasonable size (maximum 11 variables) can be added in an agreed quarter. This is a very flexible way of answering to new policy requests.

Some negative aspects should be noted:
- The definition of a target structure for gradual convergence of the national surveys was the only way of insuring that the national initiatives were taken in the same direction. Nevertheless, this convergence is slow: in 1998, 6 of the 15 MS had quarterly continuous surveys, in 2002 this figure will be 14 and Germany will be the last to do the transition, hopefully in 2004. For this reason, only in 2004 we will be able to fully profit of the investment made in 1998.
- Ad-hoc modules are a very flexible solution to get information on particular labour market related issues but, in order to be able to implement them properly, the final list of variables should be approved one year before the data collection and need at least another year of discussions with the Member States and the main users. For, this reason data will be only available 2,5-3 years after the choice of the subject, which obliges Eurostat to anticipate the needs of its users.
- The LFS is a victim of its own success. The completeness and timeliness of its results make their users think that it is the perfect source to collect all kind of information. Nevertheless, the efficiency of this tool is directly linked with the size of the questionnaire and the objectiveness of their questions and it is very difficult to balance the users' wishes with the effectiveness of the tool.

2.2 Accuracy of estimates

Accuracy is defined as the closeness between the estimated value and the (unknown) true population value. Assessing the accuracy of an estimate involves analysing the total error associated with the estimate.

The accuracy of the results was an issue of almost complete responsibility of the national statistical institutes. Recently, Eurostat started some work on the harmonisation of definitions of indicators of accuracy like the variance of the main aggregates. In the case of complex surveys like the LFS with a big diversity of sample designs, it is extremely complex to find common definitions and methods of calculation for these indicators.

From another point of view, we can have a general overview of the more or less accuracy of the results due to specific characteristics of the national surveys:

- Frame errors - Countries with population registers use them as sample frame. This is the case for Belgium, Denmark, Italy, Luxembourg, Sweden and Finland. Germany, Greece, Spain, France, Ireland, Austria and Portugal use last census as sample frame. In the Netherlands and in United Kingdom the sample frame is a file of addresses provided by the Post Office. It is difficult to evaluate the impact of these different sample frames on the accuracy of the results but one could expect that the Scandinavian population registers, updated continuously could provide a more accurate sample frame than Census that have in general a periodicity of 10 years. Nevertheless, for legal and cultural reasons, population registers cannot be implemented in all countries.

- Measurement errors - Some countries use paper questionnaires and face to face interviews and others use Computer assisted (personal, telephone or both) interviews. Computer assisted interviews tend to reduce errors because impossible values cannot be introduced and the consistency of the answers given by the interviewed person can be checked.

-Errors due to the reporting unit – The participation to the survey can be direct or via another member of the household. A lot of questions refer to professional experiences that only the person who has experienced them is able to answer accurately. Another member of the household can give incomplete or erroneous information. In the Scandinavian countries the sample unit is the individual. For this reason the % of proxy interviews is very low (1% in Denmark). In countries with the household as sample unit, very often one member of the household provides the information for all the members of the household and it is very difficult to have the simultaneous presence of all the members of the household. Multiple visits to the same household could solve the problem but this would raise drastically the cost of the survey.

- Errors due to the interviewer - Countries with a continuous survey have in general a professional staff of interviewers. This group is smaller but better trained and with more experience than the freelance interviewers usually recruited for non-continuous surveys.

- Unit and item and non-response – Countries where the participation to the survey is compulsory tend to have a better response rate than in the countries where the survey is facultative. The response rate varies from 98% in Germany to 55-60% in the Netherlands.
For some variables the non-response can also be quite high. Some countries do imputation for the item non-response either using auxiliary information or coping the information given by the same person in a previous interview (in the case of a re-interview).

2.3 Timeliness and punctuality in disseminating results

Most users want up-to-date figures, which are published frequently and on time at pre-established dates.

The 1998 new regulation stipulates that for countries with a continuous quarterly survey, data should be forward to Eurostat within 12 weeks after the end of the reference period. This constitutes an important progress in terms of timeliness compared with previous surveys where the delay for the data transmission was 9 months.
Nevertheless, all the Member States do not always respect this delay, though progress has been observed in the successive data transmissions during the last 3 years. It should also be noted that the introduction of a quarterly survey causes some extra delays in the first data transmissions. After a period of adaptation the delays tend to be reduced. The following table shows the respect of the delays for the 4 quarters of 2000 (only countries having continuous surveys, providing quarterly results, are showed). This corresponds to the situation in July 2001 and the figures correspond to the difference between the date of reception of the data and expected date of arrival in months.

	1st quarter	2nd quarter	3rd quarter	4th quarter
B	+3	+2	0	-1
DK	+2	+4	+2	+1
GR	+9	+6	+7	Not received
E	-1	-1	0	-1
IRL	Not received	+8	+9	Not received
I	+4	+1	+3	+1
NL	+13	+7	+7	+4
A	+6	+6	Not received	Not received
P	0	-1	0	Not received
S	-1	-1	0	-2
FIN	+2	+1	0	0
UK	+4	+6	0	-1
BG	+6	+7	+6	+4
CZ	0	-1	0	-1
EE	+5	+2	+4	+1
HU	0	0	-2	-1
PL	+6	+1	0	Not received
SI	+5	+3	+3	+1
SK	+6	+3	0	0

2.4 Accessibility and clarity of the information

Statistical data have most value when they are easily accessible by users, are available in the forms users desire and are adequately documented. Assistance in using and interpreting the statistics should also be forthcoming from the providers.

The access to the LFS data is provided in 3 levels:
- Paper publications:
  - a short bulletin with the main features and indicators
  - a more detailed publication composed by 66 tables and illustrated by some graphs (last edition: European social statistics – Labour force survey 2000 results).
  - a joint publication Eurostat/DG Employment and social affairs (Employment in Europe) which describes in a more analytical way the main employment/unemployment trends.
  - a plethora of other horizontal publications which use LFS data due to the large coverage of social and economic issues of this survey
- Database - an LFS domain in the Eurostat database New Cronos (Theme 3/lfs) presents approximately the same indicators as the paper publications in form of time series in multiple dimensional tables.
- Ad hoc requests – Users with specific requirements, which are not met by the existing publications and databases, may also ask for customised tables to be produced for a fee. Several hundred of such requests are received each year from public and private bodies, research institutes, universities, etc.

Many researchers and other users have also expressed strong interest in having direct access to micro-data. In view of this increasing demand and interest, it is considered essential that Eurostat, together with Member States, develops a set of rules allowing an easier access to LFS data, without jeopardising the necessary conditions of data confidentiality.
In most of the Member States the LFS micro data are only disseminated to researchers under strict contract procedures and they have until now been reluctant in generalizing micro data dissemination. The main concerns were linked with public opinion and possible impact in non-response as well as problems with quality aspects like the use of non-reliable data.

2.5 Comparability of statistics

Statistics for a given characteristic have the greatest usefulness when they enable reliable comparisons of values taken by the characteristic across space and over time. The comparability component stresses the comparison of same statistics between countries in order to evaluate the meaning of aggregated statistics at the European level.

The main role of Eurostat is to ensure the comparability of the published results and a lot of efforts have been deployed in this domain.

The concept and definitions used follow closely the ILO recommendations. The definitions proposed by this organisation are somehow general to allow an application by a large number of countries. Eurostat endeavours to make these definitions as precise as possible taking into account the specificity of the EU member states.
A set of methodological notes is provided together with the list of the EU variables and it is continuously completed and improved. These notes help the National statistical offices to prepare their questionnaires and notes to the interviewers.
In 2000, the definition of unemployment, due to its political importance, becomes the subject of a Commission regulation. All the EU Member States have engaged themselves to revue their national questionnaires in order to entirely respect the definition of unemployment. Finland and Ireland fully respect it already; Belgium, Denmark, Luxembourg, Portugal and United Kingdom will do it this year, Spain in 2002 and France, Germany, Italy, Austria and Sweden in 2003. Member states provisionally not fully applying the definition stipulated in the regulation shall accompany the transmission to Eurostat of the LFS results, with a clear identification of the deviations from the definition.

Annexed to the unemployment definition there is a set of principles for the formulation of the questions on the labour status. These principles cover issues like the order and wording of the questions, the existence of cues for the identification of specific groups, information on time references (being without employment during **the week of reference**, searching for a job during **the last 4 weeks,** being available to start a job in **the next 2 weeks**), among others.

The 2001 national questionnaires as well as the coding according to the EU format will be analysed in detail by the end of this year. This analyse will be conducted in order to detect eventual deviations to the EU definitions and recommendations. The same kind of work has been conducted in 1995 exclusively for the part of the questionnaires concerning the labour status (employment, unemployment and inactivity) classification. One of the outputs of this work were the above mentioned principles for the formulation of the questions on the labour status.

The use of the same classifications ensures the comparability of the results. In the LFS, NACE (Rev.1) is used for the Economic activities, the ISCO-88 (COM) for the occupations, the ISCED 1997 for the levels of education and training and the NUTS (nomenclature of territorial statistical units) for the regional codes.
The main remaining problems of comparability concern the ISCO and ISCED. In the case of the occupations, most of the countries collect the information according to national classifications. These national classifications are not always compatible with ISCO and in certain cases they are only compatible at a more aggregated level. For many years Eurostat had tried to analyse these national classifications and have proposed recommendations to improve the comparability but, definitively, the ideal solution would be the use ISCO directly at the data collection level. The main arguments used by the countries for not doing it is that other national surveys (ex: Census) use these national classifications and for reasons of internal consistency they have to use the same classifications in all the surveys.
In the case of ISCED the difficulties are more linked with the diversity of educational systems in the different MS. The diplomas that don't exist any more (aged persons that have got certificates difficult to classify in the present ISCED) and foreign diplomas are another source of difficulties. Eurostat, UNESCO and OECD work in close collaboration to solve these problems.

As employment and unemployment have a very important seasonal component, a synchronisation is essential for the comparability of the results. With the 1998 regulation, the introduction of a continuous survey will solve progressively this problem. The quarters are defined as blocks of 13 weeks starting in 29th December 1997. Seasonal quarters (blocks of 13 weeks corresponding to the 4 seasons) are used in Ireland and United Kingdom but the impact on the comparability of the results should be negligible.

Although all the efforts made to improve the comparability of the LFS results, some aspects still hind it:
- National questionnaires cover the list of EU variables but the wording and the order of the questions is decided at national level. A common questionnaire would be a considerable improvement.
- Methods of data collection are different according to the countries. Some countries still use face to face interviews others use computer assisted data collection either by personal interviews or by telephone interviews or even by a mixture of both.
- To reduce variance between the results of 2 consecutive surveys almost all the countries re-interview a part of the sample. The rotation patterns of the sample are quite different according to the countries and seven different rotation schemes exist at the moment. The impact of these differences in the comparability of the results is not completely identified.

2.6 Coherence

When originating from a single source, statistics are coherent in that elementary concepts can be combined reliably in more complex ways. When originating from different sources, and in particular from statistical surveys of different frequencies, statistics are coherent insofar as they are based on common definitions, classifications and methodological standards. The messages that statistics convey to users will then clearly relate to each other, or at least will not contradict each other. The coherence between statistics is orientated towards the comparison of different statistics, which are generally produced in different way and for different primary uses.

There are many different sources for employment statistics apart from the Labour force survey (National accounts, business surveys, structure of agricultural holdings surveys, census…) using different coverage, periods of reference and concepts and definitions.

In general the results of employment by economic activity obtained from the business surveys are quite different from the LFS's. Apart from eventual differences in the reference periods, the business surveys give more reliable and detailed information on the economic activities distribution because the enterprises know better their economic activity than the individuals. Nevertheless, the information on the composition and the characteristics of the labour force is rather poor and not all the economy is covered (information is restricted to certain sectors, only enterprises over a certain size are sampled, self-employed are excluded).

Because the LFS and National Accounts (NA) use the same definition of employment ("… furnish the supply of labour for the production of economic goods and services as defined by SNA…" 13th ICLS), employment levels should be the same apart from some adjustments for coverage. These adjustments are related to

(a.) the coverage of the economic territory in NA but the geographic territory in the LFS,
(b.) unreported employment which corresponds with undeclared production (for example, immigrant workers),
(c.) practical survey limitations in the LFS (age limits, non-institutional households) and
(d.) the different treatment of persons on leave for a short duration (SNA 17.9 e).

National accounts in EL, IRL, I, P and UK use the LFS as the primary source for information on the overall level of employment. Elsewhere, register data (B, DK, D, E, LUX, A and FIN) or data from business surveys (F, NL, S) are the primary source and the LFS data on specific categories of employed persons are incorporated when they are not covered by the primary source (for example, the self-employed). In this case, the register data or data from business surveys are considered more reliable than the LFS, in particular on annual employment growth.

2.7 Completeness

Domains for which statistics are available should reflect the needs and priorities expressed by the users of the European Statistical System.

The possibility of adding ad hoc modules was a considerable improvement in terms of covering the needs of the users in a relatively short delay. The subjects covered until now and foreseen for the next years are:

1999 Accidents at work and occupational diseases
2000 Transition from school to work
2001 Length and patterns of working time
2002 Employment of disabled persons
2003 Lifelong learning
2004 Transition from school to work

Another issue with an increasing important political profile within the European Union, is its enlargement to Central and Eastern European countries. Most of these countries have already continuous quarterly labour force surveys following the Eurostat definitions and recommendations and are regularly transmitting the data to Eurostat. From the 13 candidate countries only Turkey and Malta have not yet started a regular data transmission but it is expected to change this situation still this year.

3. FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS

3.1 A more flexible LFS

As it was mentioned previously, the LFS is considered a privileged source for data collection on social issues. Nevertheless, the number of variables collected should remain reasonable to insure a good response rate and an acceptable quality of the answers. To try to respond to the political demand of data keeping the

interview in an acceptable duration, the Swedish Statistical Office has proposed a rational approach for the problem:
The list of variables should be analysed in terms of distinguish the variables necessary for the short-term statistics from the structural characteristics. The core set of variables would be asked the entire sample (to provide reliable quarterly estimates) and the structural characteristics would be asked to a sub-sample. This sub-sample can be a certain(s) wave(s) or quarter(s). The main advantage of a wave specific set of items is the calculation of annual averages and the elimination of seasonal effects. However, there may be problems of data collection and estimation. For the data collection, a choice must be made which wave will be asked the entire questionnaire. The interview mode is an important factor to be considered. Interviews of later waves by telephone may put some limits on the length of the interview and the number of variables. Furthermore, estimates on the basis of a sub-sample of waves require a separate set of weights. These weights on itself are not a problem, but the resulting distribution for example, by the labour status (employed, unemployed, inactive) may be inconsistent with the distribution on the basis of the entire sample - adjustment procedures may solve some inconsistencies but not all.
An alternative link would be the quarter. In the case of quarter specific data, it is assumed that the seasonal effect can be ignored.
Both proposals are under discussion and this new approach is expected to be implemented from 2003 onwards.

3.2 Towards a common questionnaire?

The differences in the national LFS questionnaires are still one of the main sources for the lack of comparability in the results. The introduction of changes on the questionnaire raises 2 problems:
- any change in the questions is a source of breaks in the time series and
- countries have national specific needs and changes not always fit with the national layouts. Nevertheless, a convergence in this field is essential. As a starting point, the ad hoc modules, as they cover specific subjects most of the time not covered by the core national questionnaires, will have a recommended questionnaire. The analyses of the national questionnaires will be also a good starting point for the formulation of recommendations for the construction of particular modules of the questionnaire and examples of questions.

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