Access to official data and researcher accreditation

State of the art and future perspectives in Europe

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Data without Boundaries (DwB)

- Recent, widespread improvements in research access to official data in Europe;
- New issues are being addressed today:
  - Enhancing access to Eurostat data;
  - Trans-national access to national data;
  - Access to highly detailed datasets.

⇒ DwB contributes by exploring and piloting solutions;
⇒ Focus is on transnational access and highly detailed data.
Our task in DwB

- Map researcher accreditation rules, practices and procedures in Europe;
- Use the results to set up a database;
- Develop it into a web-based searchable tool and make it available to users;
- Based on observed similarities, support design of shared solutions for transnational access.
What is accreditation?

- Accreditation contributes to enabling safe research access to official data;

- It is part of risk management:
  - A “fit and proper” person;
  - Comparable to official statistics staff;
  - Safe data =
    - safe person;
    - safe project;
    - safe setting.
Accreditation is the process of

- Defining **eligibility** criteria (who is a researcher, what is research);
- Establishing **application** procedures (how to request access);
- Designing rules for decision-making (who decides, on what basis), **managing** and monitoring the process.
Sources of cross-country variation

- Differences in national **legal** frameworks;
- Within the same country, different **internal policies** in different institutions;
- Within the same institution, different rules for different levels of **data anonymisation**;
- Differences for national vs. **trans-national** access.
Issues for trans-national access

- Variability of rules and procedures creates inequalities among researchers in Europe;

- What’s more, it hinders transnational access:
  - directly: legal impediments to crossing borders;
  - indirectly: information, costs, practical aspects;

- Our work aims to identify obstacles and explore ways to overcome them.
Our overview of accreditation

- We have collected information on data from NSIs in European countries;
- We use a common terminology to reveal similarities beyond apparent differences;
- Yet there is some variation in word choice, and nuances in meaning across countries;
- We consider official statistical data at all levels of anonymisation.
Figure: Who is a safe researcher? NSIs' criteria, absolute frequency.
Figure: Can non-national (European) researchers qualify as safe researchers? NSIs’ criteria, absolute frequency.
Figure: What is a safe project? Required content of applications, absolute frequency.
Results

Highlights from our findings

Figure: Contracts: most common conditions, absolute frequency.
Encouraging signs

- All European NSIs provide **some form of access** to their official microdata;
- All European NSIs allow **non-national** (European) researchers to use (some of) their data, though under varying conditions;
- Open data movement, pressure on NSIs to maximise value of data collections, and progress in IT have enabled major steps forward;
- In particular, spread of **secure solutions** for detailed data **(remote access)** and production of **PUFs and tables for Web dissemination**.

⇒ Moving toward a more researcher-friendly dissemination model?
Subtle differences remain

- Cross-country differences remain, though mostly in *practices and processes* rather than underlying principles;
- Differences in *terminology*, despite similarities in key criteria and application contents;
- *Trans-national accreditation* is often ill-defined, unclear or burdensome;
- *Gaps in availability of information* about existing data, criteria and procedures for access; English translations are frequently incomplete.
A twofold set of solutions

- Simple improvements (mainly in communication / information) may make a difference in the short run;
  ⇒ Our searchable online database will be a step in this direction.

Toward a transnational accreditation and access system (TAAS)

- DwB is considering the design of a “European Service Centre for Official Statistics” (ESC-OS);
- The ESC-OS may include a shared accreditation system to facilitate transnational access to NSI data;
- Key features are now being discussed;
- Potential benefits to NSIs and researchers.
Next steps

- Consultation with NSIs regarding the TAAS;
- Revision of TAAS design and fine-tuning of accreditation system features;
- Legal assessment.
Thank you!

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