



## Prioritising the User Perspective on Statistical Quality

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It is a much quoted tenet of management theory that you can only control those things you can measure. But it is also stated that the issues that are most important, in the long term, often cannot be measured in advance. Statistical offices worldwide, but notably in Europe, are under pressure to establish formal systems to document and monitor quality. This tends to be translated into practice in terms of ‘process quality’; and that sometimes means little more than conformity to a preordained process specification. So when a regular process is followed step by step according to the documentation, the quality management system records a positive outcome. That in turn promotes a culture of process control. This is not a bad thing in itself but it risks creating an inward focus and an impediment to innovation. And those things constitute a major risk for any modern public service. Ultimately, the quality of any statistical product or process must be contextualised by whether it serves a meaningful purpose – whether it does any good. The ‘shelf life’ of many official statistics is very long, possibly 100 years or more. During that period they will be used countless times in diverse ways, not all of them of benefit to society. This points to the issue that cannot easily be measured in advance, and it really is the most important issue. Statistical offices must find ways to build the actual and potential use of their outputs into their quality frameworks. And to do this effectively, they must have a framework within which to judge what constitutes a use that offers value to society. This will never be an exact science but a less than perfect approach may still serve to push organisational development in the right direction. There are of course already some instances where a formal business case for collecting statistical data is required, and such business cases can be expected to set out the expectations of future use. Monitoring the outturn against expectation in this regard is potentially one important part of the quality process. Extending the concept to other areas where there is no formal business case should be considered.

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