

# Whence and whither: Strengths and future challenges of ESPAD

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THE EUROPEAN SCHOOL SURVEY PROJECT on Alcohol and Other Drugs (ESPAD) collects comparable data on substance use among 15–16-year-old students since 1995. The purpose of the study is to monitor substance use behavior in adolescents in as many European countries as possible; i.e. including many states that are not members of the European Union (Hibell et al., 2012). With next year's data collection the observation period in those countries that have participated in ESPAD since the project's start will encompass 20 years, and analyses of temporal changes can then be based on six measurement points. Although the comparison of cross-sectional data on substance use across similar populations in countries of various social, economic and cultural origins is important, the possibility of investigating temporal changes over a 20 year period across the majority of European countries is quite unique. The distinctive possibilities for within- and between-country comparisons within ESPAD are the common methodology that has been applied since the beginning. The common approach to data collection goes far beyond just the use of the same questionnaire; it encompasses strict rules on sample selection, mode of administration and data cleaning. The strictness in study design and data collection procedures has undoubtedly contributed to the inestimable value of the survey.

Single countries, particularly of the “old Europe” such as the United Kingdom, Germany and Sweden, have a long tradition in substance survey research in the adult population that reaches back to the 1970s and 1980s (Ahacic, Kennison, & Kåreholt, 2012; Meng, Holmes, Hill-McManus, Brennan & Meier, 2014; Piontek, Kraus, Müller, & Pabst, 2010) and time trends can only be observed within these countries. However, cross-country comparisons are difficult due to the lack of standardized procedures. Moreover, most of these surveys have not been designed for cross-sectional repetition and have undergone major changes in study design or data collection methodology, limiting comparability of substance use behavior over time. Due to its common methodology, analyses based on ESPAD data have substantially contributed to the field; for instance, regarding validity issues (Gmel, Kuntsche, Wicki & Labhart, 2010; Molinaro, Siciliano, Curzio, Denoth & Mariani, 2012; Steppan, Kraus, Piontek & Siciliano, 2013), policy evaluation (Müller, Piontek, Pabst, Baumeister & Kraus, 2010), risk factors (Kraus, Metzner & Piontek, 2010), attitudes (Beck, Legleye, Chomynova & Miller, 2014) or trends (Molinaro, Siciliano, Curzio, Denoth, Salvadori & Mariani, 2011), to name only a few.

Besides standardization of questions and data collection procedures, a number of measures are foreseen to ensure comparability and data quality in ESPAD. Prior to data collection every country produces a standardized project plan describing all steps from sampling to data delivery. These plans are discussed at regional meetings with about 7-8 participants, providing opportunities to discuss problems with colleagues and to find ways to solve them. In order to detect possible problems in national data collection, all countries produce a standardized country report, which is critically summarized in the larger ESPAD report. Also from 2007 on, ESPAD data have been subjected to a common data cleaning procedure.

The validity of the collected data is an important issue and two studies have been conducted within the ESPAD project in order to learn more about validity in general, as well as variability between countries. The latest was carried out in four countries (Iceland, Italy, Montenegro and Ukraine) in 2013. The results are similar to the findings of the 1998 study among students in seven countries, indicating that a large majority of students (on average 92%) found it easy to answer the questions, 98% said that they had answered honestly and 84% stated that they believed that all or most of their classmates had answered the questions honestly (Hibell et al., in preparation).

One goal of ESPAD is to stimulate prevention policy measures for young people and in order to do this it is important that the ESPAD reports are well received. To learn more about how the 2011 ESPAD report was received an impact survey was conducted in 2012 among ESPAD researchers, the permanent correspondents

of the Pompidou Group and the heads of the Focal Points of the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA). The results are in line with the findings of a similar study in 2003 which indicated a high interest among media and responsible politicians and that ESPAD data had been used in the public debate and in policy documents (Hibell, 2014).

The high standard that has been set and maintained in ESPAD has been achieved due to grants from the Swedish Ministry of Health and Social affairs, which has supported the coordination of ESPAD since its beginning. This grant will soon come to an end and ESPAD faces several challenges in the future that may or may not be solved. The most important one is the permanent funding of the ESPAD coordination. There will be support available for the coordination of the data collection in 2015 and the reporting of the results, but after that funding is uncertain. A deepened cooperation with the EMCDDA, which began some years ago and recently has become more comprehensive, is seen as a step towards stabilization. Even if the formal structure of ESPAD has become more solid in recent years, keeping ESPAD as an independent research project has been discussed as the most important issue. Among others, the founding of an ESPAD research society may be the next step.

However, economic aspects are not only challenging the coordination. Each country is responsible for funding its own data collection and in times of strained economies in all European countries there is a risk that it might become difficult for some countries to raise the necessary money for participating in future ESPAD data collec-

tions. Lobbying for the usefulness of ESPAD might be one way to convince politicians to provide the necessary support.

Challenges are not only related to economic aspects, but also to more research oriented issues. One of these is school response rates, which so far has only been a problem in a few ESPAD countries (all of them in the Western part of Europe). Some of these countries experienced a dramatic drop in school participation in 2011. Increasing rates of school non-response may thus become a major problem for future data collections.

New techniques in collecting school survey data are another issue. Computers have already been used in many school surveys and have been proven advantageous, including reduced costs and faster ways of preparing data. In principle, data will be ready for analysis once the last student has answered the questionnaire. However, in a project such as ESPAD, where the goal is to collect data that are comparable not only between countries but also over time, it is essential that a change in mode of administration is done in ways that insure comparability. It is not expected that many ESPAD countries will use computers in the 2015 data collection, but it is of course only a question of time until electronic data collection will be utilized. Hence, online surveying is not seen as a threat but may offer possibilities to collect data in simpler and cheaper ways. The challenge is to retain comparability when such changes are introduced. Methodological studies on mode effects will be necessary.

The world is in a continuous change and issues that were important in 1995 are less important today. On the other hand, aspects that were not relevant or did not ex-

ist 20 years ago are important today. New psychoactive substances and e-cigarettes, excessive Internet use, gaming and gambling as well as major revisions of diagnostic instruments are some examples. Quite naturally, the research agenda is changing. One way forward is a balanced approach: keeping important tools, introducing new instruments when necessary and use more optional modules.

We are happy with the first 20 years of ESPAD. The long standing Swedish economic grant has made it possible to establish, stabilize and coordinate ESPAD with an increasing number of countries joining the project. In 2011 data were collected in 39 countries with more than 110 000 students answering the questionnaire, making ESPAD the world's largest school survey on substance use (Hibell and Gutormsson, 2013). The future presents several challenges, the most important being the long term survival of ESPAD, which requires support for its coordination and leadership. Let us hope that, when the time comes to review the next 20 years, we will find ESPAD as an even more firmly established European survey.

With its four-year data collection intervals ESPAD serves politicians and other decision-makers in their efforts to follow substance use trends and to identify preventive measures among young Europeans. However, ESPAD is not only an important source of information for policy makers, but also for the international research community. ESPAD databases are available to non-ESPAD researchers, and with information collected quadrennially on more than 100 00 students from a large majority of European countries, ESPAD data should continue to be a unique and irreplaceable

source for increasing the knowledge about young people's use of different substances.

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