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Overview of the ESPAD Project

Background, Methodology and Organisation

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Section 2

Overview of the ESPAD Project

1. Background of the ESPAD Project

A need for comparable data on adolescent substance use

In the spring of 1995, the first large-scale European school survey of students' substance use, known as the European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs (ESPAD), was conducted in 26 countries. The main reason for initiating the ESPAD Project was the need for comparable data on substance use among young people throughout Europe.

At the beginning of the 1990s only a few European countries regularly carried out national school surveys on substance use. Others had performed single studies at different times, for instance on geographically limited samples, while many other countries had hardly any data at all. Even though the number of studies was growing, it was still difficult to obtain a comprehensive picture and to compare prevalence levels between countries. The main reason for this was that the studies had been performed on different age groups using different questionnaires and at different times. In other words, too many factors influenced the results and made comparisons difficult or impossible.

In the 1980s a subgroup of collaborating investigators was formed within the group of experts on the epidemiology of drug problems at the Pompidou Group (Council of Europe). The aim of this subgroup was to produce, by means of the standardisation of definitions, prevalence measures, etc, a survey instrument which would allow countries to compare substance use in student populations. A questionnaire was tested by eight countries in a pilot study in 1986–1988. Owing to differences in sample sizes, sociocultural background, target age groups and the timing of data collection, the data were still not directly comparable between participating countries. However, the pilot study demonstrated that the questionnaire was reliable and valid for use in Europe. The methodological findings from six of these surveys have been published by the Pompidou Secretariat, Council of Europe (Johnston et al 1994).

ESPAD – a Swedish initiative supported by the Pompidou Group and the EMCDDA

Annual school surveys have been conducted among Swedish grade 9 students (15–16 years old) since the early seventies. During the mid-1980s the Swedish Council for Information on Alcohol and Other Drugs (CAN) became responsible for the surveys. It was then noted that it was hard to find comparable data from other countries, not least owing to methodological differences.

In the light of these experiences, Björn Hibell and Barbro Andersson at CAN initiated a collaborative project in the early 1990s by contacting researchers in a number of European countries to explore interest in simultaneous school surveys of substance use. After receiving positive responses, they made contact with the Pompidou Group secretariat to find out if it was possible to obtain some support for the project.

The proposal was submitted to the Permanent Correspondents of the Pompidou Group in December 1993. The Pompidou Group gave its support to the project at an early stage, not only by hosting and

financing meetings but also by suggesting contact persons in a number of countries. The first ESPAD Project Meeting was hosted by the Pompidou Group in Strasbourg in 1994. Support was also given for travel expenses for a small working group (Steering Committee) appointed by the first Project Meeting, as well as for an Editorial Committee for the first International Report. After a thorough planning process, the first data-collection wave took place in March–May 1995, resulting in the first ESPAD International Report (Hibell et al. 1997). The cooperation with the Pompidou Group has continued in many ways also after the initial phase of ESPAD.

Another important collaborating body since it was established in the mid 1990s is the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA). The cooperation has included support for data quality development, data analysis and reporting as well as contribution to ESPAD reports and dissemination of ESPAD results.

2. Purpose

The main aim of the ESPAD Project is to collect comparable data on substance use among students of the same age group in as many European countries as possible. The most important objectives in the long run are to monitor trends in substance use among students in European countries and to compare trends between countries and between groups of countries. In order to do so, the surveys are repeated every four years, with 1995 as the starting point.

Since the 2007 data collection, all national datasets are merged into common ESPAD Databases. This allows research teams to go beyond the mere process of monitoring prevalence rates but also to carry out deeper and more statistically advanced analysis in order to increase the knowledge of mechanisms related to substance use among adolescents.

This kind of knowledge is important in the context of the design of new prevention strategies. ESPAD data may also be valuable in the evaluation of policy documents such as the EU Drugs Action Plan, the EU Alcohol Strategy and WHO/Europe's Declaration on Young People and Alcohol.

3. A standardised methodology

To obtain comparable data, it is important to standardise the data-collection process as much as possible. This means that those collecting the data must follow the methodological protocol that has been decided. Information about the protocol is presented in the ESPAD Handbook, which is a necessary tool for conducting ESPAD surveys. Some of the methodological issues are also briefly mentioned below.

Target population

It is important to compare students of the same age since experience of substance use changes considerably with age among adolescents. The (main) target population of the ESPAD Project is students turning sixteen during the year of data collection. This means that students born in 1999 will be surveyed in the 2015 study. Since data collection normally takes place during March–April, the students are on average about 15.8 years old.

One reason for choosing students in this particular age group is that they are still enrolled in the compulsory school system in most countries, yet are old enough to have gained some experience of alcohol, tobacco and drug use. The target population is limited to students who are present in class on the day of data collection. This means that data from follow-up studies that may be carried out on

absent students are not included in the ESPAD International Reports. Students who are unable to understand the questionnaire or who for other reasons cannot answer it without assistance, for example students with various disabilities, are also not included in the study.

Nationally representative samples

Even though some exceptions have been made over the years, it is highly recommended and expected that participating countries draw random samples that are representative of the whole country and not only of regions, cities or the like. These nationally representative samples should be drawn as cluster samples where the sample units are classes, and the net sample (returned questionnaires) must include answers from at least 2,400 students.

Standardised questionnaires and fieldwork

Data collection takes place in a classroom during one classroom hour with group-administered questionnaires, under more or less the same circumstances as a written test. It is made clear that the survey is anonymous, that participation is voluntary and that each student should seal his or her questionnaire in a blank envelope before returning it. A number of countries prefer to use research assistants rather than teachers as survey leaders. A methodological study of different modes of administration suggests that there, at least in some countries, is no difference in the results obtained between teacher-administered and research-assistant-administered questionnaires, provided that anonymity envelopes are used (Bjarnason, 1995).

For reasons of comparability, most questions in the questionnaire are identical in subsequent data-collection waves. It is a well-established fact that survey questionnaires may be sensitive to changes. Even small changes to the order or wording of questions may affect the results and destroy comparability. However, minor changes are sometimes necessary and the ESPAD questionnaire has in fact been slightly amended before each data-collection wave. A major revision of the ESPAD questionnaire in 2007 resulted in a loss of comparability for certain items, as demonstrated by a split-half study carried out in 2006 (Hibell and Bjarnason, in progress). However, key measures have remained unchanged since the first ESPAD survey in 1995, enabling changes in substance use over time to be tracked.

Databank

Since 2007 it is mandatory for all participating countries to deliver their national datasets centrally, so that they can be merged into joint ESPAD databases. This process was started on a voluntary basis after the 2003 data collection, and most countries delivered data for the first ESPAD database. The 2007 Database, however, covers all participating countries. The databases are stored in the ESPAD Databank.

The databases are used to generate results to be included in the International Reports. Once a report has been published, ESPAD researchers may apply for access to the database in order to conduct further research, leading to the publication of books, reports and research articles. Applications to use ESPAD databases are sent to the Application Committee for review (see below). Rules for the use of the databases and information about their application are available in a document entitled “Rules for the use of ESPAD databases”.

4. Data-collection waves and International Reports

Data-collection waves are organised every four years. Since the first one was in 1995, the subsequent survey waves took place in 1999, 2003, 2007 and 2011 and the sixth data-collection exercise will be conducted in the spring of 2015.

Table A lists participating countries in the various years. As can be seen from the table, a growing number of countries have become involved in the ESPAD Project. In addition, after the 2007 data collection five more countries took part in a supplementary data-collection exercise during the subsequent year. The table also includes information about exceptions made from the requirement for samples to be nationally representative.

Results from all data-collection waves have been published in International Reports (Hibell et al. 1997, Hibell et al. 2000, Hibell et al. 2004, Hibell et al. 2009 and Hibell et al 2012). These reports are compiled by the Coordinators and focus primarily on trends in the prevalence of substance use. However, the common descriptive report is by no means intended to be the only international report. On the contrary, the databases enable the ESPAD researchers to perform a large number of different analyses (for a list of publications, see www.espad.org). Such further work has been conducted at various levels: schools within countries, regional groups of countries and the European level of all participating countries.

Apart from surveying the main target age group (15–16-year-olds), seven countries also surveyed 17–18-year-old students during the 2003 data collection (i.e. students born in 1985). Results concerning these older students are available in a separate report (Andersson et al. 2007).

Most countries produce national reports in order to disseminate their national results. To obtain copies of such national reports, it is advisable to contact the Principal Investigators in each country, who are listed on www.espad.org.

5. Project organisation and governance

The ESPAD Project

ESPAD is an independent research project owned by the ESPAD researchers. This section describes the structure of the project, the decision-making process and the different bodies involved as well as what is expected of the participating countries.

The ESPAD constitution

ESPAD used to be governed by a set of rules that were decided at several Project Meetings. However, at the Project Meeting in Budapest in 2013 a formal constitution was adopted and some minor adjustments were done at the Assembly in Zagreb 2014. The constitution is attached as Appendix 5 and includes goals and objectives as well as information about decision making and responsibilities.

All ESPAD PIs have voting rights and can hold office, which is the case also with the EMCDDA Coordinator, who is appointed by EMCDDA.

Coordination

CAN in Stockholm has functioned as the ESPAD coordinating institution since the project was initiated in the 1990s. However, from 2013 the Coordinator has had his desk at EMCDDA in Lisbon. The Coordinator is responsible for planning and initiating Assemblies and Steering Committee meetings, for communicating with the Principal Investigators and other researchers involved, and for producing

and publishing the international ESPAD Reports. The Coordinator also communicates with outside partners and stakeholders (such as the Pompidou Group, the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA), the Swedish Ministry of Health and Social Affairs etc.) and raises funds for the management of the ESPAD Project.

Principal Investigators and Contact Persons

Each participating country is responsible both for the project as a whole and for the national part of the ESPAD Project. In each ESPAD member country a Principal Investigator (PI) is therefore appointed to ensure that the country meets its obligations.

PIs are appointed by the ESPAD Steering Committee on the Coordinator's recommendation. It should be stressed that they cannot be appointed by any national bodies such as governments, research institutes or funding agencies. An appointed representative of a candidate country is first referred to as a Contact Person, becoming a full ESPAD PI only once he or she has led a data-collection wave.

The PI has a number of responsibilities: to raise funds for the national data collection, to produce a National Project Plan, to submit the data collected and a Country Report, to communicate with the Coordinator in a timely fashion and to participate in Regional Seminars and Assemblies. The PI also has an important role in increasing national awareness of the ESPAD Project. The Steering Committee may suspend a PI who fails to fulfill his or her defined responsibilities in a satisfactory manner. The obligations of a PI are listed and more thoroughly explained in Appendix 1.

Assemblies and Project Meetings

The regular meetings with all ESPAD researchers are an important part of the ESPAD working process. The very first Project Meeting was conducted in March 1994 at the Council of Europe in Strasbourg, gathering 26 representatives from 21 countries and 5 representatives of the Pompidou Group. During the period 1994–2002, six meetings were held. Since 2004 Project Meetings have been conducted annually as the increased availability and use of ESPAD data have led to a need for more frequent sharing of experiences and results as well as formal decision-making.

From 2014 the annual meetings are called Assemblies. A list of all Project Meetings and Assemblies up to 2014 is provided in Appendix 2.

All major decisions concerning the ESPAD Project are made at the Assemblies. Only the Principal Investigator of each country has voting rights at the meetings, but they are also attended by other national researchers from ESPAD member countries. Representatives of other organisations such as the Pompidou Group and the EMCDDA are also invited to the Project Meetings, as are Contact Persons from new ESPAD countries or countries planning to join the ESPAD Project.

The Assembly has final authority over all aspects of the ESPAD Project, including the Annual Work Plan. The meeting elects the Steering Committee and other Committees and also decides the time and place of the next Project Meeting.

Steering Committee

Between Assemblies the ESPAD Project is governed by a Steering Committee. The Committee meets at least twice a year. A list of its previous meetings may be found in Appendix 2. The Steering Committee is responsible for preparing documents, proposals, etc., and for drawing up the agenda for the Assembly. The Committee is also responsible for summing up the proceedings of Assembly and for allocating different tasks stemming from Assemblies. In between Assemblies, the Steering Committee also functions as a decision-making body. The present composition of the Steering Committee is presented in Appendix 3.

Coordination Committee

The Coordination Committee shall assist the Coordinator in following up and preparing agendas, documents etc. for the Steering Committee meetings. The Committee shall also follow the activities and management of ESPAD and coordinate the relations between ESPAD and EMCDDA. The composition can be found in Appendix 3.

During 2015 and 2016 the Committee has extended rights, including the responsibility for the 2015 data collection and reporting as well as for taking necessary decisions between Steering Committee Meetings.

The governing in 2015 and 2016

During 2016 and until the Assembly in 2016 there will be no Coordinator. His responsibilities will be shared between the Deputy Coordinator Ludwig Kraus, the EMCDDA Coordinator Julian Vicente and Håkan Leifman, CAN.

Regional Seminars

In order to achieve the necessary standardisation in terms of sampling, the survey instrument and data-capture procedures, Regional Seminars are organised before each data-collection wave. They are attended by representatives of geographically closely situated countries, who will discuss their National Project Plans. Experience shows that meetings with neighboring countries have various benefits as such countries have many obstacles and solutions in common. In order to stay up to date and to serve as a link between the different groups, one of the Coordinators attends each of these seminars (meeting history is available in Appendix 2).

Each country circulates its National Project Plan prior to the Regional Seminar. Those plans form the basis of the discussions at the seminar. Guidelines on how to prepare a National Project Plan are available in Section 3 of the ESPAD Handbook. Depending on the outcome of the meeting, adjustments to the National Project Plan may be necessary before fieldwork begins. When the fieldwork is completed, each country submits its national dataset and a Country Report describing the process. This report is structured in a similar way as the National Project Plan.

Thematic groups

Thematic groups were first formed at the 2004 Project Meeting in order to use the rich collection of ESPAD data more efficiently for research purposes. The objective of each group is to have one or more articles published in peer-reviewed scientific journals. All PIs are welcome to form and participate in such groups. A list of active and terminated groups may be found in Appendix 4.

Temporary groups

From time to time various temporary working groups have been established to deal with specific technical issues. Examples include groups that prepared revisions to the questionnaire prior to some of the data collections and the group that suggested a general routine data-cleaning syntax to be applied to the 2007 Database. Members of former temporary working groups are listed in Appendix 4.

Database Application Committee

When an ESPAD researcher, or a non-ESPAD researcher, wish to analyse a research question, a form is submitted to the Coordinator for further distribution to the Application Committee. This Committee, which is appointed by the Assembly consists of the Coordinators and PIs from three countries. The application form and a document describing the rules for the databases and the application pro-

cess are available on the ESPAD website. The present composition of the Application Committee is listed in Appendix 3.

Table A. Countries participating in ESPAD, 1995–2011.

Country	ESPAD Researcher	1995	1999	2003	2007	2011
Albania	Ervin Toci	.	.	.	.	Yes
Armenia	Artak Musheghyan	.	.	.	Yes	.
Austria	Karl Bohrn; Alfred Uhl	.	.	Yes	Yes	.
Belgium (Flanders)	Patrick Lambrecht	.	.	Yes	Yes	Yes ^{a)}
Belgium (Wallonia)	Danielle Piette	.	.	Yes	.	.
Bosnia and Herzegovina (FBiH)	Aida Pilav	.	.	.	Yes ^{b)}	Fall ^{c)}
Bosnia and Herzegovina (RS)	Sladjana Siljak	.	.	.	Yes ^{b)}	Yes
Bulgaria	Anina Chileva	.	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Croatia	Marina Kuzman	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Cyprus	Kyriakos Veresies	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Czech Republic	Ladislav Csèmy	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Denmark	Svend Sabroe	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Estonia	Airi-Alina Allaste	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Faroe Islands	Pál Weihe	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Finland	Salme Ahlström	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
France	Stéphane Legleye	.	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Germany	Ludwig Kraus	.	.	6 Bundesl.	7 Bundesl.	5 Bundesl.
Greece	Anna Kokkevi	.	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Greenland	Vacant	.	Yes	Yes	.	.
Hungary	Zsuzsanna Elekes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Iceland	Thoroddur Bjarnason	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Ireland	Mark Morgan	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Isle of Man	Andreea Steriu	.	.	Yes	Yes	Yes ^{d)}
Italy	Sabrina Molinaro	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Kosovo (under UNSCR 1244)	Mytaher Haskuka	.	.	.	.	Fall ^{c)}
Latvia	Marcis Trapencieris	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Liechtenstein	Esther Kocsis	.	.	.	.	Yes
Lithuania	Tadas Tamosiunas	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Macedonia, FYR of	Silvana Onceva	.	Yes	.	Yes ^{b)}	.
Malta	Sharon Arpa	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Moldova, Republic of	Otilia Scutelnicuic	.	.	.	Yes ^{b)}	Yes
Monaco	Stanislas Spilka	.	.	.	Yes	Yes
Montenegro	Boban Mugosa	.	.	.	Yes ^{b)}	Yes
Netherlands	Karin Monshouwer	.	Yes	Yes	Yes	Fall ^{c)}
Norway	Astrid Skretting	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Poland	Janusz Sieroslawski	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Portugal	Fernanda Feijão	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Romania	Silvia Florescu	.	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Russian Federation	Eugenia Koshkina	.	Moscow	Moscow	Yes	Moscow
Serbia	Spomenka Ciric-Jankovic	.	.	.	Yes ^{b)}	Yes
Slovak Republic	Alojz Nociar	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Slovenia	Eva Stergar	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Sweden	Björn Hibell	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Switzerland	Gerhard Gmel	.	.	Yes	Yes	.
Turkey	Nesrin Dilbaz	Istanbul	.	6 cities	.	.
Ukraine	Olga Balakireva	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
United Kingdom	Mark Bellis	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

a) Carried out the 2011 data collection in 2010.

b) Participated in the supplementary data collection in 2008.

c) Carried out the 2011 data collection in the fall and is therefore not included in the printed international report.

d) Data collected but not delivered.

Databank management

At the present moment there are four ESPAD databases available in the ESPAD Databank. The 2003 Database covers most of the ESPAD countries, namely those that voluntarily submitted their 2003 ESPAD datasets. The 2007 and 2011 Databases cover all of the ESPAD countries, as data submission had by then become mandatory. In addition, the 2007 Database includes data from six countries using the 2007 ESPAD questionnaire in 2008.

So far databases were compiled, maintained and stored by the Databank Manager. This position has been held by Thoroddur Bjarnason (Iceland). However, CAN will be responsible for the production of the 2015 database.

6. The ESPAD Project work cycle

Year 1: Preparations

- Steering Committee Meeting
- Assembly (and Steering Committee Meeting)
- National Project Plans prepared and distributed
- Regional Seminars
- Revision of National Project Plans
- Fieldwork preparations, sampling, etc.

Year 2: Data collection

- Steering Committee Meeting
- Fieldwork and data collection
- Data capture
- Submission of datasets and Country Reports
- Communication process between PIs and Databank Manager/Coordinators
- Assembly (and Steering Committee Meeting)

Year 3: Reporting

- Steering Committee Meeting
- Release of the International Report, release of the national reports, press conferences
- Database ready for applicants
- Assembly (and Steering Committee Meeting)

Year 4: Analyses and methodological development

- Steering Committee Meeting
- Assembly, including paper presentations (and Steering Committee Meeting)

7. Communication

Much of the routine communication within the ESPAD Project is of course conducted via e-mail or phone. The most important formal channel for disseminating information, however, is the ESPAD website:

www.espad.org

A wide range of information is available on the ESPAD website. Much of it is accessible to the public, such as uploaded references and national reports, country contact information, the International Reports, questionnaires and a description of the background to the ESPAD project.

However, some of the information on the website is restricted to those actually involved in the ESPAD Project, i.e. Principal Investigators, other national researchers and collaborating partners. A personal password is required to access the restricted parts of the website, which contain documents more closely related to the work process, such as the ESPAD Handbook, project plans, guidelines, rules, approved applications to use the databases, etc.

Each member is encouraged to upload documents of relevance to ESPAD, references to published articles, etc. All researchers are also expected to keep their contact information on the website up to date. This is the primary source used by the Coordinator to compile updated contact information for the group, and it is also the most natural source for journalists, politicians, school staff and other people with an interest in finding out more about the project on the national level.

Newsletter

To communicate in between Assemblies and to have a channel for summing up information of major importance, a newsletter is produced by the Coordinator. This is distributed by e-mail and also posted on the website, where a newsletter archive is available.

8. Financial conditions of ESPAD

The ESPAD Project does not have a full budget of its own. Each Principal Investigator is expected to raise funds for national data collection and for participation in the annual Assemblies.

Apart from costs related to national data collection, there are also general overhead costs for the maintenance of the ESPAD Project. Such costs relate to coordination, databank handling, production of International Reports and travel expenses for meetings of the Steering Committee and the various thematic groups as well as Regional Seminars. Over the years, such expenses have to a large extent been covered by the Swedish Ministry of Health and Social Affairs.

The Pompidou Group hosted the first Project Meeting and has ever since made funds available for participation in Project Meetings by researchers from countries in the eastern parts of Europe. In some years the Pompidou Group also supported participation by researchers in Regional Seminars and covered travel expenses for the Steering Committee.

The European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addictions (EMCDDA) has also supported ESPAD in many ways. This has included data analysis, the work of thematic groups, a questionnaire test multilingual dissemination of ESPAD results and hosting the ESPAD Coordinator.

Other organisations that have contributed at some point during the project are the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA), the Social Research Unit for Alcohol Studies (STAKES) in Finland and the Alcohol Research Council of the Swedish Alcohol Retailing Monopoly (SRA).

And last but not least: several countries have hosted Project Meetings/Assemblies, which means that they have made financial efforts regarding meeting facilities, meals, excursions, etc.

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