MARKET RESEARCH QUALITY STANDARDS ADVISORY BOARD
BRIEFING NOTE

ISO 20252:2012 *Market, opinion and social research – vocabulary and requirements*: Revision Changes

November 2012

In 2006 the international standard *ISO 20252: Market, opinion and social research – vocabulary and service requirements* was published. As with all ISO standards, drafting of ISO 20252 was the responsibility of an ISO technical committee, in this case TC 225 the members of which were predominantly market and social research professionals; the UK has been represented at all meetings.

The 2006 version of ISO 20252 has been – in 2012 – replaced by a revised and amended version which is also the responsibility of TC 225. This document highlights the changes between the two versions and will be useful to organisations which have already implemented ISO 20252 and need to consider the changes needed to ensure continuing compliance with the Standard, as well as organisations involved in assessing and certifying it.

In revising ISO 20252, TC 225 specifically considered:

- the experience of organisations which had implemented the Standard.
- developments in the methodology and technology used in market, opinion and social research.
- the requirements of ISO 26362: 2009 - *Access panels in market, opinion and social research — Vocabulary and service requirements*, which was developed separately after ISO 20252:2006

The changes between the 2006 and 2012 versions of ISO 20252 include small drafting changes made for clarity or to reduce ambiguity, including in the explanatory notes in the Standard, as well as new, additional requirements and changes to, or removal of, requirements of the 2006 version. In this document all changes to requirements are covered but not all minor changes in wording or formatting. This document has been prepared to highlight and assist understanding of the changes and is not a substitute for referring to the 2012 version of ISO 20252; all organisations implementing the Standard need to have access to it.

Conventions used in this document are as follows:

- Clause references of the Standard are to the new 2012 version of ISO 20252 except for the few in square brackets and italics – e.g. *[4.5.1.4]* which refer to the 2006 version.
- Quotes or headings from the text of the Standard are in italics.
- The aim has been to factually summarise changes. However, texts in boxes are interpretations of some requirements and these comments express opinions which are open to debate; they are not privileged.

Finally important conventions of the Standard itself, which should be borne in mind, are; requirements – things which have to be done to comply – are in sentences using *"shall"*, recommended good practices but which are not mandatory requirements are in sentences using *"should"*, *notes* in the standard are to assist the use of the standard but do not include any requirements. Where there is any doubt about the

meaning of a term, any definition of it, if given in section 2 – *terms and definitions,* should be regarded as definitive.

Overview of changes

Although there are numerous changes in requirements between the two versions of the Standard, many of these are of a detail requiring only minor or possibly no changes to organisations' own quality systems. More substantial changes include greater prescription in relation to subcontracting, additional requirements for sampling and for self completion data collection, a significant change in reporting requirements and new clauses relating to various types of observational research including via social media and on-line.

Foreword, Introduction
Section 1: Scope
Section 2: Terms and Definitions
Bibliography

These sections of ISO 20252 do not include any requirements. The foreword and introduction have been appropriately revised for the new version. The scope of the standard is as before although it is now made clear that non-market research activities, such as direct marketing, are excluded. Some terms and definitions have been amended and others added and the bibliography (at the end) has been updated.

Section 3: Research process management system requirements

There is a change of wording throughout this section: instead of referring to a quality management system the term now used is a *research process management system*. This change of terminology has no impact whatever on the requirements and has been made purely to comply with ISO rules.[1] Other changes in this section are relatively minor apart from in subcontracting though even here the changes are probably in line with existing UK practice.

Clause 3.1 – *organisation and responsibilities* - is now split into three sub-clauses but there are no changes in requirements. It is made clear that there is considerable flexibility in the form that a documented system can take to meet the needs of different types of organisations. Also, a note states that the role of quality manager can be part-time or shared. In both cases these only make explicit what can be assumed to have been implied in the 2006 standard.

The confidentiality of respondents' data and identity is now an additional requirement of clause 3.2. This though is unlikely to be an issue to most implementing organisations as it is also a requirement of such as the MRS Code of Conduct.

The new version of the standard differentiates in clause 3.3 between records and documents – see definitions 2.24 and 2.52. - although the requirements for control etc. are not significantly different. Security of records now explicitly includes "*from unauthorized access"*.

[1] It is ISO policy to avoid the creation of numerous industry specific quality management standards; the ISO 9001 series is considered to meet nearly all needs. The price of retaining section 3 of ISO 20252 was to agree to rename it and avoid the use of *quality system.*

Clause 3.4 now includes a need to "*review the effectiveness of company training and competence standards"*. Organisations which have implemented ISO 20252 are very likely to do this already.

Requirements for subcontracting and/or outsourcing – clause 3.5 – are now more explicit and prescriptive. In particular, subcontractors have to not only be briefed on the requirements of the standard, relevant to the work undertaken, but positive steps need to be taken to ensure these requirements are understood and set out in a specification, the detail of which may vary depending, for example, on whether or not the subcontractor is assessed to ISO 20252. In addition, evidence of conformity by the subcontractor is required and appropriate types of evidence are specified (to include at least one from; contractual agreements, third party assessment, documentary evidence of checking/validation and checking/validation by the main research service provider). These explicit, additional requirements have been previously recommended practice in the UK.

The requirements for reviewing the effectiveness of the system (3.6) are now set out in three sub-clauses. An additional requirement is reviewing research projects and their outcomes against client specifications (i.e. was what was promised actually delivered?). More detail is now also set out on internal audits including requirements for training auditors and ensuring their objectivity (3.6.3). Management of complaints is now widened to include internally identified problems and complaints are not restricted to those of clients (may include subcontractors for example). Regular client satisfaction monitoring is now specified to be required at least annually although it is unlikely that organisations would do this any less frequently.

Section 4: Managing the executive elements of research

The requirements for sampling have been increased but otherwise changes are minor. The need to provide clients with full details of the research has, however, been usefully modified.

There are only minor changes in clause 4.1: responding to research requests. If data is planned to be collected through an omnibus survey, the proposal or quotation is now required to make this explicit (4.1.1). A note in 4.1.2 makes clear that specification of work covered in price quotations (as opposed to proposals) may be by a reference to another document (e.g. a previous project report or a client's written specification). Another note (4.1.3.1) gives guidance on the meaning of "appropriate" for the components of research proposals. There is less prescription of the description of deliverables in proposals (e.g. there is no longer a need to state numbers of hard copies of reports) but a reminder on respondent confidentiality is added in the context of when making available interview records (4.1.3.7). Subcontracting is now required to be covered in proposals not only "*if planned*" but "*if it might be required*". Also the identity of specific subcontractors is required to be given if the client has requested this to be included in the proposal (4.1.3.8).

That a subcontractor "might be required" is presumed at the time of drafting the proposal and is a rather vague requirement that would probably be impossible to audit retrospectively. The specific sub-contractor to be used may often be undecided at the proposal stage

Ethical codes now not only have to be referred to in proposals but are now explicitly required to be met, as are legal requirements (4.1.3.9); these additions are unlikely to

affect any organisation's actual practice. The note to 4.1.3.10 can be taken to imply that the inclusion of an ISO 20252 certification mark or logo meets the requirement to state that the proposed research will comply with the Standard.

There are three substantive changes in clause 4.3*: assistance and co-operation with clients*. In the 2006 version there was a requirement to inform clients of which (if any) subcontractors are to be used regardless of whether or not this is requested, now this is required only on request although as a note indicates, local ethical codes may require this regardless of any request. The need to document anything agreed with the client relating to the protection of respondent identity is now an explicit requirement and also in 4.3.5 is the requirement to take *all reasonable precautions* to ensure respondents are not harmed through research.

What "all reasonable precautions" might be is not elucidated and auditing compliance with this, particularly of "all" may be difficult or impossible.

Minor additions in requirements for developing questionnaires and discussion guides (clause 4.4) are the need to regard completion instructions as part of a self completion questionnaire and the need to communicate (e.g. within the organisation or perhaps to subcontractors) any implications for other processes (e.g. data processing) of changes in questionnaires used between waves of continuous surveys (4.4.1). Sub-clause 4.4.5 covers electronic questionnaires and was not included in the corresponding clause of the 2006 version but it has simply been moved from section 6.

As in the 2006 version there is some ambiguity in the requirements for checking translations of questionnaires – 4.4.2:
Checking and revision shall be performed by a person or persons, other than the translator, with the appropriate competence……
There are explicit requirements relating to who does the checking but is there any requirement to check the translation at all?

Possibly the intention was to make checking a requirement but it could be argued that since this is not stated it is not required. However, most are likely to consider such checking is essential. A competent client representative (i.e. in language fluency) could act as a checker.

Requirements for project briefing of interviewers and moderators (4.4.4) state:
Any briefing shall be documented (and included as electronic records)…
Possibly, the intention was for the part in parenthesis to read *"including as electronic records"* but a strict reading of the text implies the briefing records have to be in electronic format. However, since nearly all records are now in some electronic format there may be no practical issue here.

Requirements relating to sampling (4.5.1) have been expanded and partly to include requirements of ISO 26362. Checking of bought-in or other third party supplied samples is now an explicit requirement. A new sub-clause (4.5.1.4) replaces two sub-clauses of the 2006 standard [*4.5.1.4 & 4.5.1.5*] but it should be noted covers all types of non-probability samples (including access panels) and specifies in more detail what is to be documented and available to the client.

As part of *monitoring the execution of research* (4.6) there is now an explicit requirement for records to be kept of any action taken to address problems identified in a research project; arguably this was implicit in the previous version of the Standard. A note has been added to assist implementation of the clause.

There are two significant changes to requirements *for research documents, materials and products* (4.7). Agreement with the client is required on their disposal, at the end of the project, if they were supplied by the client (this was arguably already implicit) and that the client contract needs to specify client responsibility for complying with legislation or regulations relating to products or materials the client supplies; this is clearly also sensible business practice.

There is only one significant change in requirements for reporting research results (4.8). In the 2006 version, research providers were required to provide the client with full, documented details of the research design and methods whether or not the client requested this (and, strictly speaking, even if the client expressly did not want them). The revised requirements are that the full research details are to be documented but only need to be passed to the client on request - the client has to be made aware, however, that this information is available on request e.g. a statement in other reporting documents or in the research proposal. In addition, all reports of findings to clients are required to disclose sample size and method and dates of data collection but this is generally regarded as essential practice. Finally, in reporting to clients, it is required to state that the research was conducted in compliance with ISO 20252 (this is also required in a proposal but this document is about what was promised rather than what is actually delivered).

The format of documentation of the research details is not specified; it needs to cover all relevant details and be accessible but not necessarily in a form appropriate to passing to the client. Making the client aware of its availability could be a standard clause in all an organisation's proposals. In some forms of continuous research stating that the research has met the Standard may seem to raise problems. However, it is in "reporting" rather than "reports" that this is specified and this might include any method of communicating to the client over a period rather than in each report document.

Section 5 Data collection

The major changes in this section are for self-completion data collection and observational research. Changes to data collection by fieldworkers or in qualitative research are less significant.

The new version includes a reminder (5.1) that data collection subcontractors need to comply with the relevant requirements of the Standard but this is not an additional requirement.

Fieldworker minimum training now specifies the need to include the treatment of children or other vulnerable respondents (5.2.3.2). A note (to 5.2.3.4) makes clear that when a company first implements the Standard it does not need to retrain its fieldworkers just to be able to provide records of individuals' training; this has probably always been an accepted principle.

There are two minor changes in fieldworker appraisal (5.2.5); the appraisal policy for fieldworkers used less frequently than for five projects per year, or equivalent, needs to be documented (e.g. as part of written procedures) and records of appraisals no longer have to be signed by either or both parties.

The possible need for specific guidelines or instructions for projects carried out amongst specialised samples containing significant proportions of children or other vulnerable respondents is now mentioned in the Standard (5.3.3).

In the list of topics to be covered in quantitative briefing instructions "methodology" has been deleted (5.3.4). Recommendations on appropriate respondent incentives have also been deleted (5.3.6) but the nature of any incentives given still need to be recorded as part of project records.

The requirements for fieldworker validation of quantitative research are virtually unchanged from the 2006 standard. Validation by monitoring (5.4.2.4) now explicitly includes supervisor accompaniment and allows for monitoring from remote locations. It is recommended that every fieldworker allocated to a project is validated "*where the project sample is adequate"*; it is left to the organisation to decide what is "adequate". Also this is a recommendation not a requirement ("should" rather than "shall").

There are some changes of detail in qualitative data collection (5.5). A new introductory sub clause (5.5.1) defines what is included as qualitative data collection, including on-line and similar methods, but there are no new requirements here. In 5.5.2, however, a new requirement is to record the sources used to recruit respondents (e.g. recruitment database, panels etc.) on the recruitment questionnaire or similar record, as well as how (e.g. face to face, by phone etc.) respondents were recruited.

Requirements for qualitative recruitment validation (where carried out by fieldworkers) have changed. The need to validate all respondents (i.e. the work of fieldworkers) has changed and brought in line with the validation requirements for quantitative fieldwork i.e. minimum recontact validation of 10% and minimum monitoring validation of 5%. Note 3 to 5.5.3 refers to where the only criteria for recruitment is that respondents are drawn from a source such as a customer list, in which case a check to ensure the respondent was drawn from the source (e.g. on a list) may be sufficient validation. A new requirement in 5.5.3 is validation of qualitative respondents recruited from access panels; the methods required are as generally for access panel respondent validation – covered as part of a 5.6. The need to confirm respondents' identities at a group or depth interview is unchanged but notes 4 to 5.5.3 provide some guidance on methods. A new requirement, however, is for the moderator to confirm at the group or depth, that the respondents meet recruitment criteria and this is, in principle, additional to any separate validation of the recruiters' work

The methods for respondent confirmation are not specified and could be fairly informal e.g. part of the initial questions or discussion. However, and especially if this confirmation is more formal, such as a self completion questionnaire would be a form of recontact validation of all respondents and could meet the requirements to validate the recruiters' work rather than carrying this out separately.

Requirements for moderating groups or depths and recording them are hardly changed. Some references are made to on-line groups etc. and respondents' consent to recording now needs to be recorded (but not necessarily including respondents' signature).

Requirements for self-completion data collection – clause 5.6 - have been substantially increased including to cover requirements for access panels as per ISO 26362. However, the clause covers all types of self-completion and not just on-line or via access panels; sub-clause 5.6.1 indicates the data collection methodologies included. In general the requirements relate to transparency to clients and respondents, safeguards for respondents and validation. The first bullet point of 5.6.1 may confuse; mail surveys and postal research are usually regarded as synonymous and a comma is probably in the wrong place.

Sub-clause 5.6.2 covers invitations to respondents to participate in a project and there are some additional requirements for information to be given to respondents; prior to their agreement to participate. Similarly, 5.6.3 includes additional requirements for transparency about incentives offered to respondents. In 5.6.5.1 the requirements to document validation methods are as the previous version of the Standard but the specific requirements to validate respondent identity (5.6.5.2) and of response data (5.6.5.3) are new and additional.

Validation of respondent identity is qualified by "where feasible" which could be criticised in terms of standard drafting. Where an organisation decides that validation of respondent identity is not feasible a recorded explanation is probably required and it is open to question whether costs alone are an adequate reason for not validating. Also, some self-completion data collection may, by design, not record respondent identity (e.g. some postal surveys and other paper based methods) and in this case the requirement to validate identity cannot apply. Similarly the requirements to validate response data from self-completion (5.6.5.3) is also qualified by "if feasible" and for some specifics "where applicable" with the decision on this lying with the organisation implementing the Standard.

Clause 5.7 covering observational data collection is wholly new and additional and organisations using such techniques need to check and implement the specific requirements. Observational data research is defined widely and includes on-line methods including from social media such as "scraping".

The limited requirements for data collection from secondary sources (5.8) and the requirements for the records to be kept of the data collection process (5.9) are unchanged from the 2006 version.

Section 6: Data Management and Processing

There are only a few minor changes in this section.

In the 2006 version of ISO 20252, section 6 included a clause on electronic data entry *[6.2]*. This is no longer included in the section but, as mentioned previously, has been moved to 4.5.5. A new note to 6.2.1 makes clear that often the data analysis program itself provides an adequate record of logic data entry checks or other processes.

Instructions to coders are now required to provide an adequate overview of any material shown to respondents (6.4.2); implicitly it is a matter for data processing management to decide what is an "adequate" overview. Treatment of "don't know" and "no answer responses" is included in this sub-clause but this is simply a transfer from another sub-clause in the 2006 version.

A note to 6.5.2 makes clear that revisions of spelling, punctuation etc of open-ended responses do not need to be recorded but more substantive edit records are required.

The use of "as appropriate" in 6.7.1 – specifications for data analysis – can be reasonably assumed to exclude such situations as where the project manager also carries out the data analysis. The note to 6.7.2 explains that some programs may provide an adequate record of the analysis process to allow for later replications (as mentioned above in relation to logic data entry). A new requirement in data analysis verification (6.7.3) is for records to be made of the verification checks; this was arguably implicit in the previous version. In 6.7.4 – *data tables* – it is now made clear that the requirements for tables apply regardless of whether the tables are delivered without other reporting or as part of a fuller report.

Finally, clause 6.9 specifies that requirements for back-up, retention and security of data applies to data held by subcontractors. This, however, is implicit in general requirements for subcontractors as per 3.5.

Section 7: Report on Research Projects

Section 7 defines the minimum requirements for full documentation of research projects. As discussed previously, this record is required to be made available to the client on request (and the client has to be made aware of its availability) but does not otherwise have to be given to clients. Clauses of this section cover the different types of research project; quantitative (7.2), qualitative (7.3) and observational research (7.4), which was not covered in the 2006 version.

Compared to the previous version, additional coverage for quantitative research includes; details of any parts of the research process that were subcontracted, details of the sample frame used and how the sample was selected from it and an assessment of how well the sample represents the target population. For qualitative research the only addition is details of any subcontracting. The new clause relating to observational research defines the details to be covered for physical observation (e.g. traffic counts), social media, online behaviour, as well as, for all observational methods, how sampling issues have been addressed and how the processes have been monitored. Organisations using observational methods will need to check clause 7.4 in detail.

Implementation of ISO 20252: 2012

Organisations that have already implemented and been certified to ISO 20252: 2006 will need to review their existing documented quality systems, processes and working methods against the changes in requirements for processes carried out. Where self-completion data collection or observational research is undertaken, to any significant degree, changes in documentation, processes and working methods will be needed. In other situations the need for revision may be less. The timetable for implementing any changes should be discussed with the organisation's own certification body but a minimum of twelve months notice of a need to make changes will be given.

Organisations considering implementing ISO 20252 for the first time should work to the 2012 Standard and the details of changes between the two versions is unlikely to be of interest.