Deliverable Number: 4.2

Deliverable Title: Report on populating a Question Variable Database (QVDB) with questions and variables from the European Social Survey (plus further feasibility testing by other survey infrastructures)

Work Package: 4 – Interactive tools for cross-national surveys

Deliverable type: Other
Dissemination status: Public

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Date Submitted: March 2019

This project has received funding from the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 654221.
SERISS (Synergies for Europe’s Research Infrastructures in the Social Sciences) aims to exploit synergies, foster collaboration and develop shared standards between Europe’s social science infrastructures in order to better equip these infrastructures to play a major role in addressing Europe’s grand societal challenges and ensure that European policymaking is built on a solid base of the highest-quality socio-economic evidence.

The four year project (2015-19) is a collaboration between the three leading European Research Infrastructures in the social sciences – the European Social Survey (ESS ERIC), the Survey of Health Ageing and Retirement in Europe (SHARE ERIC) and the Consortium of European Social Science Data Archives (CESSDA AS) – and organizations representing the Generations and Gender Programme (GGP), European Values Study (EVS) and the WageIndicator Survey.

Work focuses on three key areas: Addressing key challenges for cross-national data collection, breaking down barriers between social science infrastructures and embracing the future of the social sciences.

Please cite this deliverable as: Beuster, B. & Agasøster et al. (2019) Report on populating a Question Variable Data base (QVDB) with ESS questions and variables, as well as having other SERISS survey partners /third parties test the feasibility of such a tool. Deliverable 4.2 of the SERISS project funded under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme GA No: 654221. Available at: www.seriss.eu/resources/deliverables
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Summary

1. Introduction

The Question Variable Data base (QVDB) is a system for storage and retrieval of survey questions and variables, facilitating reuse of their metadata and metadata components. The overall aim of the QVDB is to serve the European Social Survey (ESS) and other survey programmes in their work with specifying, documenting, versioning and disseminating survey data. The tool also aims to make the survey questions and variables findable, available, searchable and re-usable for the wider research community.¹

The question variable database (NSDSurvey) developed by NSD prior to the first ESS round in 2001 is one of several databases serving the ESS Data Archive in their business processes, first and foremost for the purposes of documenting datasets resulting from the survey. The data base stores metadata components related to questions and variables used in the ESS, and is also used by some other surveys.

However, this data base is a legacy system that is not generic and difficult to change. In order to achieve the goals and purposes of the QVDB as defined in the DASISH project², the old system needed to be replaced by a new tool.

The QVDB is part of the TMT (Translation Management Tool), QDDT (Questionnaire Design and Development Tool) and QVDB family of tools that were conceptually developed in the EU-funded Data Service Infrastructure for the Social Sciences and Humanities (DASISH) project (Grant Agreement 283646) and realised as part of the SERISS project. Like the TMT and the QDDT, the QVDB is based on the metadata documentation standard DDI³. In the SERISS project, following the submission of a business case, a license to the DDI-based Colectica software was purchased as the technical platform for the QVDB.

NSD has populated the QVDB with the first 8 rounds of ESS data, by migrating data from the previous database (NSDSurvey) to QVDB. The metadata of the 2018 Cumulative ESS1-8 data released on 14 December 2018 is based on the QVDB as a storage system.

Codebooks and metadata for new editions of ESS1 to 8 integrated data files released on 1 December 2018 were prepared in the QVDB. In 2019, the variables in the QVDB will be linked with associated questions in the QDDT.

Starting from the existing database, NSDSurvey (version 1.09), an SQL database with a Java based user interface application, the QVDB enhances the functionalities and extends its functionalities and purpose in line with:

- increasing demands from the user community,
- increased complexity in ESS data and metadata holdings, and
- new technology and emerging tools.

¹ https://www.go-fair.org/fair-principles/
² For more on the QVDB developed under DASISH, see Requirement document
1.1 Colectica as replacement for the ESS question variable database

To ensure efficient and timely implementation, NSD bought access to the commercial DDI-based software platform Colectica to serve as technical backbone for the QVDB. Colectica is a centralized storage system for managing data resources such as official statistics and statistical surveys, enabling collaborative workflows, and providing automatic version control.

A round of testing and evaluation had concluded that Colectica fulfils the requirements established in the DASISH project\(^3\). The QVDB is compliant with the DDI-Lifecycle. That allows for interoperability with other tools and systems developed under the DASISH and SERISS projects. Colectica has functionalities which permit seamless transfer of metadata to other databases such as CESSDA’s Euro Question Bank (EQB).

The company behind Colectica, Algenta Technologies, cooperates closely with academically driven networks and organisations such as the DDI (Data Documentation Initiative) Alliance, which ensures developments informed by internationally recognized standards for metadata.

Use of Colectica is license-based. The present license costs 40 000 dollars for 5 years.\(^4\) For the QVDB to be used by other surveys, a cluster license for different databases or repositories would be needed.

Overall, Colectica was found to be an economically viable/good value for money platform for the tool. User guidance and support is available.

The Colectica contract establishes that Colectica is the owner of the tool with sole right to develop it. NSD is the owner of the database and the content, and could further develop the tool using the Colectica customization toolkit (SDK), and would be the owner of that.

1.2 Report overview

The report is organised as follows:

The remainder of Part 1 provides the context for the tool and its realisation. Part 2 outlines the purpose and the scope of the QVDB. Part 3 of the report describes how the QVDB was populated with 8 waves of ESS data including the transformation from DDI-Codebook (NESSTAR DDI) into DDI Lifecycle (DDI3.2) as well as an external software test with data from the EVS and the GGP. The final section considers next step’s for the QVDB’s use by ESS and other social science infrastructures.

Additional materials provided alongside the main report can be found in annex 1-3:
Annex 1: Technical Documentation and User Guide
Annex 2: Test scenarios from GGP and EVS
Annex 3: Use Case Table

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\(^3\) For more on the QVDB developed under DASISH, see Requirement document

\(^4\) License bought in February 2018.
1.3 Further information

The QVDB Portal is available to view open access on the web: 
https://colectica.nsd.no
username: qvdb@test.org
password: password

To learn more about the European Social Survey: www.europeansocialsurvey.org


Compatibility with other tools:
Other tools compatible with the QVDB:
- the SERISS Questionnaire Design and Development Tool (QDDT) to document and retrieve information on the design process of developing a cross-national survey questionnaire
- the CESSDA Euro Question Bank (EQB) which provides a central search facility across all CESSDA's survey questions in different languages. Questions from the QVDB can be exported to the EQB. The EQB uses a similar DDI model. A mapping system between QVDB and EQB has been developed in the EQB project.

1.4 Definitions, Acronyms and Abbreviations

CESSDA Council of European Social Science Data Archives
DASISH Data Service Infrastructure for the Social Sciences and Humanities
DDI Data documentation Initiative
ESS European Social Survey
EQB CESSDA Euro Question Bank
EVS European Values Study
GGP Generations & Gender Programme
QDDT Questionnaire Design and Development Tool
QVDB Question Variable Data Base
RDF Resource Description Framework
TMT Translation Management Tool
1.5 Acknowledgements

Input to the QVDB Colectica platform has been provided by Benjamin Beuster, Kirstine Kolsrud and Knut Kalgraff Skjåk, all at NSD – Norwegian Centre for Research Data, home of the ESS Data Archive, based on specifications developed in DASISH/SERISS and own ideas.

2. Purpose and Scope of the tool

The overall aim of the QVDB is to serve the ESS, and potentially other survey programmes, in their work of specifying, documenting, versioning and disseminating survey data.

Another aim is to make the survey questions and variables available, searchable and re-usable for different user groups, for example for staff from the ESS archive or for the research community in general.

2.1 Previous ESS question variable database

One of the pillars in the ESS Archive work of specifying, documenting and distributing ESS survey data, has always been the question variable database developed by NSD prior to the first wave of the ESS in 2001. This database (NSDSurvey version 1.09) was a SQL database with a Java based user interface application.

The motivation and replacing this database has thus partly been to learn from the shortcomings of the existing database and partly to extend its functionalities and purpose in line with increasing demands from the user community, increased complexity in ESS data and metadata holdings and new technology and emerging tools.

Features in previous question variable database and QVDB:

- Input: Manually registration of new questions with accompanying instruction text etc. and assigning variable(s) name(s) and categories from finalised ESS source questionnaires (every 2nd year)
- Content: Question information (question text, instructions, answer categories, routing, etc.) from the ESS main source questionnaire, basic information on variable names, labels, formats and answer categories.
- Usage: Documentation of questions and variables in documentation reports for each survey round, checks for uniqueness of variable names, document deviations at variable level, generate overviews of variables and relationships of variables across ESS rounds (for use in production of cumulative ESS1-x data files).
- Output. Reports in rtf, XML and HTML

The following list describes the enhanced and additional functionalities of the QVDB as compared to the previous database.

Enhanced functionalities in QVDB:
- Increased flexibility in editing items;
- Increased granularity and grouping of elements. Need to break down a “question unit” in smaller and more harmonized elements (need to define units same way as common practice in collaborative institutions);
- Improved handling of question batteries/grids e.g. internal sequence in output;
- Enhanced track changes, versions of questions and variables over time.

Additional functionalities and content in QVDB:
- Extending documentation of variables;
- Possibility to add variables not linked to questions (e.g. administrative variables, sample data, contact form data);
- Documentation of derived variables (e.g. syntax for mapping from country specific variable to harmonized variable (education, religion, construction of age groups, etc.) ;
- Produce data file definition tables (Data Protocol) (additional output compared to current database);
- Produce set up files (e.g. SPSS);
- Flexible search and retrieval of questions, variables and versions;
- Import from QDDT and migration from current question variable database;
- Publish parts of database for external search functions.

Note that the QVDB is currently set up for use internally within the survey infrastructures only. It would be possible to make the QVDB available to secondary data users as well but this is not a current priority. Rather the intention is that information from the QVDB will be exported to other public facing tools such as the Euro Question Bank.

2.2 Overview of QVDB: The Colectica suite of programmes

Colectica is a commercial software platform for creating, documenting, managing, distributing, and discovering data and metadata. It is built on open standards including DDI3, several ISO standards (which?), and RDF. The Platform consists of different components including Colectica Designer, Colectica Repository and Colectica Portal that are shortly described below.

2.2.1 Designer

Colectica Designer is a visual DDI metadata editor for documenting datasets, data collection processes, and research lifecycles. It supports a variety of metadata item types such as concepts, questions, variables, code lists and classifications. Most of the text fields allow entering text in multiple languages. It interacts with Colectica Repository to provide advanced data management functionality like collaborative workflows and automatic version control. The Designer complements existing systems by importing and generating various forms of data (e.g. NESSTAR, SPSS), documentation (codebook), and source code (SPSS/STATA set up files).

A core feature of the system is its ability to refer to other items. This means re-using items, such as questions or concepts, without the need to copy and paste. It can also be used as a question and variable bank where questions and variables can be managed independently of the surveys in which they may be used. This allows using the same questions and variables over rounds in

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5 Chapter 2.2 is based on the documentation and product site for Colectica: [https://www.colectica.com/](https://www.colectica.com/) and [https://docs.colectica.com/](https://docs.colectica.com/)
longitudinal studies and creating question and variable banks that can be shared within an organisation or publicly.

### 2.2.2 Repository

Colectica Repository is a centralized storage system for managing data resources, enabling collaborative workflows, and providing automatic version control. Client applications such as Colectica Designer and Colectica Portal interact with Colectica Repository using standard communications protocols. Although Colectica Repository is not accessed directly by end-users, it is the backbone of the Colectica platform.

Another core feature is automatic version control. Every version of an item committed to the repository is saved, allowing clients to retrieve a full version history of any item in the repository. Each version includes additional information such as, for instance, information about the user who committed the version, the date and time the version was committed and an optional message describing the reason for the change.

### 2.2.3 Portal

Colectica Portal is a web application which enables data and metadata publication and discovery. The portal can be populated with metadata by using the publish feature in the Designer. Once a study (ESS round) is uploaded from the Designer and published on the Repository, it is instantly available on the portal's home page. The home page of the portal can contain links to one or more studies contained in the Colectica Repository. When visiting a study’s main page the user can browse all the information in the study, including general information, the questionnaires, the data files, and all metadata items included in the study like variables, questions, concepts and coding schemes.

By entering a search query, a user is presented with a list of matching items. Each search result is linked to the item’s page, where detailed information is available. Every item maintained by the Colectica Repository has a dedicated page. The page displays all information about the item, along with a version history.

In cases where an item is documented in more than one language, the user may choose which language or languages are displayed. The Portal can be configured as a public web site, or restricted only to users who have authorized accounts. Users can also be assigned one or more roles which provide different authorization levels for searching, viewing, and annotating items.

### 2.2.4 Licenses and costs

Colectica offers a wide range of license options, both for the Designer and the Repository, which enable customers to select solutions tailored to their capacity and requirements. The Designer licenses vary from a personal “Pay as you go per month” license to a site license for multiple users.

The Repository is offered in different editions depending on number of instances (separate agency work spaces) and concurrent sessions. The simplest edition, as chosen for the QVDB, is a single server repository (one workspace) with 10 concurrent sessions. Purchase price for this version is $15.000. A more extensive cluster edition supporting multiple work spaces with 100 concurrent sessions costs $65.000. There is also an even larger edition with 250 concurrent
sessions which is less likely to be within the scope of a QVDB. However, such an edition is worth noting if Colectica is considered as a shared resource across survey programmes, for example made available with CESSDA as a host.

A cost estimate for purchase and licenses over five years is presented in the table below. A five year time period can be a useful period to compare costs, as it normally will include the need for a major technical upgrade of an inhouse developed software. From the licensed software perspective, five years may be a suitable time to re-assess whether there are new or improved solutions available elsewhere.

In the initial phase of using Colectica, a “Price per month, pay as you go” license was preferred. This license costs around $60 per month per user. For the ESS archive activity at NSD we estimate that this Designer license will cost $2,600 per year on average. In 2018, we ordered additional licenses for four months for remote testing by other survey programs in SERISS. The Colectica Repository includes the Colectica Portal and APIs/Web services. The purchase price of the version the ESS needs is $15,000, including the first year license. The annual licensing cost from year two is $3,000, and includes access to Knowledge Base, patches, upgrades and support.

### Table 1. Colectica license costs for the QVDB for a 5 years period

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Costs, Designer</th>
<th>Costs, Repository</th>
<th>Sum</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Year 1</td>
<td>$2,600</td>
<td>$15,000</td>
<td>$17,600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 2-5</td>
<td>$10,400</td>
<td>$12,000</td>
<td>$22,400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sum year 1-5</td>
<td>$13,240</td>
<td>$27,000</td>
<td>$40,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 3. Testing the QVDB with ESS data

In February 2018, an agreement for the licensing and maintenance of the Colectica application between the NSD and Algenta Technologies (d.b.a. Colectica) was signed. The Colectica Repository and the Colectica Portal was deployed on an NSD server in March and April 2018, and in May 2018 the first example elements were uploaded to the Colectica Portal using the Colectica Designer as the upload tool. In June 2018 the QVDB was considered to have reached a sufficient state of readiness, meaning that the system was able to receive real life metadata from the ESS structured in DDI-Lifecycle compliant XML.

According to the agreed testing plan, the QVDB was to be populated with questions and variables from the first 8 waves of the ESS, structured in DDI-lifecycle compliant XML-format. Furthermore, it was agreed to test the system with other surveys beyond the ESS in order to assess the feasibility of the tool for other cross-national survey programmes.

Thus, the testing phase of the QVDB can roughly be divided into 3 parts. Firstly, data migration from Nesstar files to the QVDB. Secondly, application of a DDI-lifecycle compliant structure for main metadata components like variables, questions and concepts. And thirdly, an external software test conducted by data managers from other studies including data entry and data import of limited amounts of metadata elements.
3.1 Testing phase 1: Migration of ESS metadata into the QVDB

Data migration for the QVDB describes the process of selecting, preparing, extracting and transforming ESS metadata and permanently transferring it from Nester to the QVDB. Due to principal differences in complexity and granularity of the two metadata systems (DDI-Codebook vs. DDI-Lifecycle) a strategy for reducing the risk of data loss needed to be developed. Firstly, the data suitable for data migration needed to be identified, and also the data that was no longer required. Secondly, the data needed to be checked and cleaned before data migration could be started.

A further challenge was to find a tool that professionalises and automates the data migration process, thus further reducing the risk of error and data loss. Finally it was decided to use the Colectica Designer as data migration tool. The designer is able to import information from DDI-Codebook and it stores questions and variables in a DDI-compliant way.

Although this is a straightforward task, and within a few hours work eight rounds of ESS data could be imported into the QVDB, the testing also uncovered a few disadvantages stemming from the data import. Variables that measure the same information across waves appeared to have equal pairs of values and categories (codelist), but the codelist IDs were actually different (_duplicates). Duplicate items do not only affect the maintenance possibilities of the elements negatively, they also increase the size of the database unnecessarily. This issue was able to be resolved before phase 2 of the testing by attaching a master codelist to all variables with the same variable name. A side effect of this measure was reduction in the size of the database of about 30%.

Screenshot of variable 'impenv' with replaced master codelist (duplicate codelists removed)
3.2 Testing phase 2: Harmonising of variables over ESS rounds

The current configuration of the Colectica Portal allows the user to find items by browsing concepts or topics. The left bar of the Explore page shows a hierarchical list of concepts, or topics. By selecting a concept the user can browse the portal for variables, questions, and other metadata about that topic.

Screenshot of topic 'Party voted for in last general election'

To enable item-search by browsing concepts, the data structure in the database must meet the needs of the system. This is not given by the data import due to structural differences of the metadata standards in the old and new database. Other required metadata elements are missing and must be generated manually by the user in the Colectica Designer. The system also requires that the user establish relationships among these elements (DDI variable harmonisation).

Variable harmonisation describes how variables from different points in time correspond to each other. In the ESS, the variable relation is expressed by the variable name. Variables that measure the same information across rounds have equal variables names while variables that have changed over time but still are related to each other are given a slightly different name.

The tool permits the user to use three levels of items to describe how variables from different points in time or different datasets correspond to each other.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item Type</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Variable</td>
<td>A column in a dataset</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Represented Variable</td>
<td>Describes how a variable is measured; the data type. This may be consistent across rounds, or may change.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conceptual Variable</td>
<td>Describes a measurement of a person, firm, or other thing, without specifying the data type. The most generic way to describe something that is measured.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The following diagram visualizes these items and their relationships[^6].

[^6]: Diagram is copied from documentation for Colectica: [https://docs.colectica.com/](https://docs.colectica.com/)
As part of the software test, the structure of Conceptual Variable, Represented Variable and Variable should be applied to all variables present in the publicly available ESS integrated data files. Even if this is a straightforward task it turned out to be a time consuming task when applying this structure manually to a certain amount of variables in the Colectica Designer. The issue was finally resolved by a python-script that established correct relationships among the metadata elements in the XML-file according to a predefined harmonization sheet.
### 3.3 Testing phase 3: Entering content of other surveys (GGP, EVS)

In the third phase of testing, a functional software test was to be carried out with data from two other SERISS partners, the European Values Study (EVS) and the Generations & Gender Programme (GGP). The test was to be conducted by external data managers or researchers with experience in data documentation and data preparation and it should at least cover data import of Nester files for selected studies and manual data entry of limited amounts of metadata elements.

The purpose of this phase was to test the tool using 'real and external' content which encompasses the variety, complexity and volume of data to be documented during a typical data documentation process. The testing was designed to evaluate:

- Whether the QVDB can import all elements that are present in the current metadata of the study;
- Whether the QVDB can be used to document all elements required for the study specific variable documentation;
- Whether the workflow within the tool meets the needs of other studies and
- Whether the tool’s user interface is fit for purpose.

The first step was to develop a testing scenario that is suitable to evaluate the testing topics. The second step involved providing the partners with the software (Colectica Designer) and the
licensure key and to arrange an online meeting in order to give a short introduction to the system and the planned test scenario.

Before the actual software test could start, we came across a technical problem while trying to connect the Colectica Designer installed on the local machine of the test person with the remote repository installed on the server of NSD. It appeared that the firewall at NSD, that monitors incoming and outgoing network traffic and decides whether to allow or block specific traffic based on a defined set of security rules, blocked the data upload. A way to allow the programs through our firewall was, however, identified, and the system was ready for the software test.

The testing was then completed over the course of two weeks. After completion, we scheduled a second online meeting in order to receive feedback on the system from the test persons. Additionally the test persons were asked to fill out the test scenario.

The overall feedback on the system was quite positive, and most of the steps from the testing scenario could successfully be completed by the test persons. The tool was considered to be very intuitive and to meet the requirements for data documentation, but it was also proposed improvements with respect to layout and navigation in the Colectica Designer.

The returned test scenarios for each partner can be found in Annex 2.

4. Next steps

The Colectica-based QVDB is currently in use in the production of ESS9 data and documentation\(^7\). NSD would also like to continue using the tool as a (real time) metadata repository for the upcoming ESS rounds.

Algenta Technologies is currently preparing for the release of Colectica version 5.5 containing many new features and usability updates. After that, Colectica version 6.0 will be released with DDI 3.3 support (later in 2019) and we need to check how the additional features and the upgrade to DDI3.3 will affect and improve the current implementation of the QVDB.

As discussed in chapter 2.2.4, the Colectica Repository is offered in different editions depending on number of instances (separate agency work spaces) and concurrent sessions. A more extensive cluster edition of Colectica Repository supporting multiple work spaces could be purchased if the system is considered as a shared resource across survey programmes. A business model where various users who further specify needs of the Colectica-based QVDB to their use, share new developments and expenses, would be preferable.

If there is interest from further parties to use the Colectica-based QVDB, there is first a need to identify a longer term host for the tool, e.g. at one of the ERICs in the social Sciences field (NSD’s role is time-limited as it is based on project funding). The tool could be made available from the website of such an institution. Presently, no user support service is planned.

CESSDA’s planned Euro Question Bank (EOB), currently under development, will harvest questions and other metadata components from the databases of their member organisations (archives) and other institutions, and is foreseen to serve as a question portal for European survey programmes. The EOB data model is compliant with DDI-lifecycle and it can harvest

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\(^7\) Please see Annex 3’ QVDB Use Case Table for more Use Cases
metadata from the QVDB and other DDI based tools via XML import. Easy access to EQB could therefore offer an incentive for other surveys to use the QVDB.

There are currently no confirmed intentions to use the QVDB for other surveys. More testing will be needed to ensure take up. The tool will be promoted to showcase the state of art.
5. Screenshots of ESS content in the QVDB

Screenshot of the main page

Screenshot of the topics and concepts
Screenshot of Statistics and Code Comparison

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conceptual Variable</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Label</th>
<th>Percentage (ESS3)</th>
<th>Percentage (ESS6)</th>
<th>Percentage (ESS7)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>cdgng</td>
<td>Could not get going, how often past week</td>
<td>50.77%</td>
<td>50.46%</td>
<td>55.39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statistics</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ESS3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None or almost none of the time</td>
<td>50.77%</td>
<td>50.46%</td>
<td>55.39%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some of the time</td>
<td>38.53%</td>
<td>38.57%</td>
<td>36.19%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most of the time</td>
<td>7.97%</td>
<td>8.35%</td>
<td>6.03%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All or almost all of the time</td>
<td>2.63%</td>
<td>2.62%</td>
<td>2.39%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Refusal</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don't know</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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<th>Percentage (ESS3)</th>
<th>Percentage (ESS6)</th>
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<tr>
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Annex 1  Technical Documentation and User Guide

Please see the Colectica docs at https://docs.colectica.com/
https://docs.colectica.com/introduction/
https://docs.colectica.com/designer/
https://docs.colectica.com/repository/
https://docs.colectica.com/portal/

Annex 2  Test scenarios from GGP and EVS

QVDB_event_testing_template_EVS.pdf
QVDB_event_testing_template_GGP.pdf

Annex 3  Use Case Table

QVDB_Use_case_table.pdf