Application of ISO 20252

This document has been prepared by the Market Research Quality Standards Association (MRQSA) as an aid to companies implementing the international standard ISO 20252. It is recommended that it is read in connection with the published standard ISO 20252.

General comments

Note: Clauses of ISO 20252 are referred to by clause name and number shown in brackets; e.g. responding to research requests (see clause 4.1).

The scope of ISO 20252 implies that the standard can be implemented by any provider of market, opinion and social research services. It is implicit that a research service provider shall meet all requirements of the standard which are relevant to the activities and processes undertaken. Many research service providers, however, will not be involved in all such activities and processes in which case some requirements of the standard will not apply; e.g. data management and processing may not apply to a research service provider involved in only qualitative research.

Comments on clauses of ISO 20252

None of the following comments should be regarded as adding to or limiting the requirements of the standard as set out in sections 3 to 7 of ISO 20252 and are provided for guidance and advice only. Also the comments do not constitute a summary of requirements of the standard and should be read in conjunction with the wording of ISO 20252.

Organisation and responsibilities (3.1)

The need for commitment, by management, to quality of service, a quality management system and implementation of ISO 20252 is a requirement and evidence that this is the case should be apparent including by audit.

A documented quality management system is required and this covers procedures, instructions and methods. The structure of the research service provider and staff responsibilities is also required to be documented. The purpose of such documentation is to ensure that the standard is effectively implemented and the format can vary widely, including between different sizes of research service provider. Over-long and over-detailed procedure manuals are not a requirement. Whilst most requirements may be better covered as formal procedures this may not always be the case and other documentation, including research plans and instructions for specific projects, may be

more appropriate. The requirement to maintain the documented quality management system should be taken to imply such as version numbering and dating as well as procedures for revision and approval of current versions; users of the documents should be able to identify that a copy is up-to-date and the current version.

The requirements of the quality management system (and, therefore of ISO 20252) need to be actively communicated to staff and especially requirements relevant to each member of staff's own work. Similarly requirements of ethical codes and legal obligations also need active dissemination.

The standard requires that a quality manager be appointed. Except in the largest organisations this is unlikely to be a full time role and the key need should be allocation of responsibility for the system and its management regardless of the titles of those concerned.

Confidentiality of research (3.2)

Confidentiality needs to be communicated internally and externally as a key principle. It may be appropriate to specifically cover this need in specific procedures, internal instructions and in proposals and other communication with clients.

Documentation requirements (3.3)

Whilst to be auditable (a requirement of clause 3.1above) the quality management system should produce adequate records to establish each defined process step has been followed, implementation of the standard should not necessitate the creation of numerous forms purely for audit purposes. To meet most requirements, documents produced as an integral part of the research process should satisfy the requirements of this clause. None of the documentation has to be hard copy but in some cases it may be appropriate to consider how a computer file record can be authenticated e.g. electronic signature, date stamping etc. Many project records are likely to be in the form of internal emails and to or from clients. To facilitate efficient retrieval, these should be copied to project files rather than only available in personal email folders.

The standard requires unique project identification (usually, but not necessarily, project numbers) and some form of project log may be used to identify the client, what the work is about, date of commission etc. Such a log can be extended to provide other records such as the project team and progress of the work to date.

Competence and training (3.4)

Procedures specifying how a team of appropriately qualified and experienced staff is allocated to a project would cover the first paragraph of this clause. In a small organisation the method of selecting the project team is likely to be very simple.

A staff training system is required, covering assessing needs periodically (this may be part of a staff appraisal system) and delivering the training required. This should also include the needs of the quality manager and internal auditors. The training of fieldworkers is covered in a later clause - 5.2.

Subcontracting/outsourcing (3.5)

The terms subcontracting and outsourcing are used without differentiation.

Often research service providers choose to subcontract one or more processes and in a large project many subcontractors may be required (e.g. international projects with data collection in several countries). The intention behind this clause is that the work of subcontractors should meet the relevant requirements of ISO 20252 to the same extent as for the primary research service provider, otherwise it cannot be claimed that work has been carried out in conformity with the standard. Selecting subcontractors which can demonstrate implementation of ISO 20252 (e.g. third party certification) would satisfy this requirement but it is very likely that other subcontractors will need to be considered. In such cases the onus is on the primary research service provider to ensure the subcontracted work is carried out in conformity with the requirements of the standard. The following steps are suggested;

- For each project, the subcontractor should be given a document specifying what is required to carry out the relevant processes in conformity with ISO 20252. In the case of data collection subcontractors this would cover, for example, appropriate elements of clause 5 including such as interviewer training and briefing, fieldworker ID, respondent reassurance and fieldworker validation to the defined levels. If the subcontractor has previously carried out the same type of processes for the primary provider, a reference to a previous briefing document may be enough. A framework agreement can also be used to specify the requirements. Only a limited documented specification may be required for a subcontractor certified to ISO 20252.
- The above briefing document may be linked to a written contract between the two parties, but, in any case, the subcontractor should give a written assurance that work will be carried out in conformity to the briefing specification.
- The contract with the subcontractor or the specification document should include a requirement for the subcontractor to provide, on demand, evidence that the relevant requirements have been met. Whether such evidence is actually requested is a matter for judgement by the research service provider. On completion of the work, the subcontractor could also (or instead of documentary evidence) be requested to give written conformation of conformity, in the particular project, to the briefing specification and the standard.

The standard also requires that the work of subcontractors is evaluated and it is suggested that this is done at least annually. Evaluation should take account of the performance of each subcontractor and this implies some form of performance record be kept for each subcontractor and project. Conclusions should be drawn from this evaluation and, where appropriate, action taken, which may include a decision to not use a particular subcontractor. In turn, this implies a need for some form of approved subcontractor list with a procedure for adding to or subtracting from the list.

The need to inform clients of subcontracting and the identity of subcontractors is covered in other clauses of the standard (sub-clauses 4.1.3.7 & 4.3.2).

Reviewing the effectiveness of the quality management system (3.6)

Methods of reviewing effectiveness are specified and include; analysis of the research process, reviewing client complaints, internal audits and client satisfaction monitoring. External audits by certification bodies also provide review feedback. This process requires the availability of records relevant to each approach. Whilst the quality manager or equivalent is likely to have a major responsibility for collating evidence, a review and decisions taken should involve other managers and staff. Reviewing should consider the need for both corrective action (i.e. correcting, as far as practical and useful, identified problems) and preventive action (drawing general conclusions from specific problems and seeking longer term solutions which reduce the chances of recurrence). Types of action may include re-doing work, staff training and revision of documented procedures. The review and decisions taken need to be documented (e.g. meeting minutes). A well as identifying issues, internal auditing may be used for establishing whether corrective or preventive action has been effective.

Internal audits should be carried out by staff with some training and preferably not involved in the processes being audited. The outcome of audits needs to be documented in audit reports.

The standard does not specify how client satisfaction is to be monitored beyond stating that it should be measured (implying some sort of quantitative approach) and analysed at regular intervals. The specific methods, therefore, are a matter for the research service provider. The client base may not be large enough to justify sampling, with all clients covered instead, although it may be considered appropriate to give greater attention to larger and more frequent clients. A research service provider should be well qualified to select appropriate measurement techniques.

Managing the executive elements of research (4)

Responding to client requests (4.1)

The requirement to check that the necessary resources and expertise for a particular project are available will, in most organisations, not require complex procedures. The judgement of a senior member of staff is likely to be enough.

The standard differentiates responses to client requests as proposals and quotations. The former involves the research provider developing a methodology to meet agreed objectives whilst the latter assumes a documented specification of the research process. Such a specification may be provided by the client, although quotations may be provided for repeat projects, with the details of the research process documented by reference to a proposal or report for previous work. At the simplest, quotations may be little more than a written price and reference to a specification. Most providers working as subcontractors to primary research service providers are likely to prepare quotations rather than proposals.

In the case of proposals, sub clauses specify what should be included in document. The items specified though are “as appropriate” i.e. relevant to the research objectives and the broad research approach such as quantitative or qualitative and it may be that some will never be applicable to the type of service offered by a specific provider. Staff preparing proposals need to be aware of what should be included; standard

checklists may be useful in this respect. Proposal templates may also be appropriate and these may cover standard practices such as retention of project data and records (see sub-clause 4.9.2). Most research service providers will also consider it desirable to include standard commercial terms even though this is not a requirement of the standard.

In sub-clause 4.1.3.6 "coverage" can be taken to refer to the type of output to be delivered (e.g. report, verbatims, recordings etc.), whilst "scope" refers to whether all objectives or the full or only part of the sample are to be included in reporting. If it is intended to provide transcriptions or recordings this should be mentioned in the proposal but if it is not intended to do so then this need not be covered unless the client has asked for this but is not to be provided.

In sub-clause 4.1.4 it is required that "key factors which can lead to a change in price should clearly be identified". Clearly only factors which can reasonably be anticipated at the time of drafting the proposal can be included.

Whilst sub-clause 4.1.5 requires a documented contract, it is made clear that this may often consist of the research service provider's proposal or quotation and the clients written confirmation of a go-ahead (which may be in email form).

Project schedule (4.2)

Timings and responsibilities of the client and the research service provider may be adequately covered in the proposal. Where required, a schedule may be just set out in a letter or email. The schedule may need updating, during a project, including with revised timings.

Assistance and co-operation with clients (4.3)

This clause is concerned with transparency to clients (including of changes in the project) and providing opportunity for clients to review key process steps if they wish to do so. Records are required but these need be no more than copies of correspondence or meeting notes.

Clients may not wish to be involved in reviewing questionnaires but should be offered the opportunity to request this. This may be covered in the proposal. Where clients do review questionnaires, their agreement to the draft should be recorded (e.g. on the questionnaire itself).

Observing data collection can be assumed to include seeing, hearing or reading. The need to protect respondent identity only applies where identity is likely to be apparent to the client.

Consultation with clients on the way research results are presented may have taken place at the proposal stage.

Questionnaires and discussion guides (4.4)

Requirements for the translation of questionnaires and similar documents are specific in terms of qualification of the translator, checking procedures and appropriate records. Evidence should be available to confirm the competence of translators. The last paragraph of sub-clause 4.4.2 is not clear in meaning but can be assumed to refer to the need to take action arising from problems found on checking translations. Where translation is carried out by subcontractors the requirement of the clause should also be met (see comments above on sub-clause 3.5).

All self-completion questionnaires are required to be pre-tested. For other questionnaires, pre-testing is carried out where this is agreed between research service provider and client and the types of pre-test are likely to be covered in the proposal (usually there will be cost implications). The types of testing to be used are not specified and can be selected as considered appropriate.

Briefing of interviewers is a requirement covered in sub-clause 5.3.4 and should be covered in general procedures. Where special project training is considered to be needed this will be agreed with the client and likely to be covered in the proposal (again there will generally be cost implications).

Managing sampling and data processing (4.5)

The key auditable requirements of this clause are the need to document sampling methods to a level where they can be replicated. Reporting requirements (see clause 4.8) also require adequate records of sampling methods to be available. The appropriate methods of sampling will generally need to be selected on a project by project basis rather than covered by general procedures.

Monitoring the execution of research (4.6)

This requirement is for project control and management and will be met through general procedures and project specific instructions for each project stage. Project records should include actions taken to address any problems arising.

Research documents, materials and products (4.7)

This clause mainly concerns documents etc. provided by the client. Apart from research involving physical products, the main issue is likely to be security of data which may be sensitive. There may also be data protection issues to take account of. General procedures may be sufficient but where physical products are concerned a documented product handling plan may be required. Disposal of client-supplied products or data should be covered. The implications of having client-supplied contact databases saved to the research service provider's file server or back-up media may need to be considered.

Reporting of research results (4.8)

Research may be reported in one or more documents (e.g. a separate technical appendix may cover methodology in detail). Other clauses (7) specify what needs to be disclosed in client reports but the requirement to provide the necessary

information, so that the work can be replicated (sub-clause 4.8.1), largely pre-empts the contents of these later clauses.

Some clients may state that they do not require to be given full methodological details; possibly they may not have the skills or experience to make sense of this information. In such cases, the requirement of the standard is arguably met if the details are documented and on file, available to the client on request and that the client is made aware of this availability (e.g. stated in the proposal or in other reports).

The requirement in of sub-clause 4.8.3; "results relevant to the aim of the research shall be available in full…" is not clear but may be taken to mean that "inconvenient" data should not be omitted.

The need for checking procedures for reports before delivery to the client are implied (last paragraph of sub-clause 4.8.3).

The key requirement in sub-clause 4.8.4 is of client permission, where research paid for by a client is to be published.

Research records (4.9)

Default retention times are specified for primary records (12 months) and other project records (24 months). However, these periods can be changed by documented agreement between client and research service provider and this would be satisfied by stating the retention periods in the proposal (perhaps as part of a standard template). A later clause (5.1) requires that respondent identifiers on primary records should be retained for only so long as required for administration and quality control. Where the full records are retained for only a relatively short period, separate treatment of identifiers may not be considered appropriate.

Normal office facilities and security should satisfy the requirements for storage and safe keeping of research records; off-site storage of back-up files is now generally recognised to be essential in all organisations. Procedures for the secure disposal of primary records, with respondent identifiers, are though important.

The sub-clauses on the supply of electronically stored data to the client (sub-clause 4.9.5) although detailed, probably do not in most situations require any real changes in established working methods.

Data collection (5)

General (5.1)
Management, recruitment and training of fieldworkers (5.2)

Two types of training of fieldworkers (interviewers, recruiters etc.) are specified; basic and organisational. Basic training may be provided by another research service provider, although that has been given needs to be confirmed and recorded. The six hours for basic training should be regarded as a minimum (there are exceptions allowed for observational research and simple one-off projects). Where a research

service provider implements ISO 20252, the organisation's existing fieldworkers can be regarded as already trained even though there may be no records of such training.

Organisational training needs to be provided by each research service provider to new fieldworkers, regardless of whether another organisation has given basic training, but no minimum duration of such training or method of delivery is specified.

Annual appraisal is specified for fieldworkers carrying out five or more projects per year. For less regularly used fieldworkers the requirement is to carry out appraisals at appropriate intervals. It is a matter for each organisation to decide what is appropriate; once every two years may be right for two to five projects per year and fieldworkers carrying out less than two projects per year may be regarded as not regularly used and, therefore, not needing to be appraised.

Conducting data collection by fieldwork (5.3)

Requirements in this clause are generally clear and unambiguous. Definitions of children will vary from country to country and this needs to be considered in multi-national research. Other vulnerable respondents are, however, less likely to be legally defined. Fieldworker training and general instructions need to cover how to treat apparently vulnerable respondents, as well as children, found in general population samples and, in practice, some discretion by fieldworkers will be inevitable. Where the research is carried out amongst specialised sample which are likely to contain a significant proportion of vulnerable respondents (e.g. medical patients) specific guidelines and instructions for the project may be needed.

Fieldworkers' identity can be recorded, where this is required, in code form as long as codes can be traced to full identity details.

Fieldworker validation (excluding qualitative research) (5.4)

Requirements for quantitative validation are specific and clear. The need to show follow-up action, where validation identifies issues, is a major element of the requirements. There are, however, partly contradictory requirements on the frequency of validating each fieldworker. In sub-clause 5.4.1 it is stated that the work of each fieldworker does not have to be validated for each project whilst in sub-clause 5.4.3 it is stated that "every fieldworker working on a project should be validated or monitored". However, the use of "should" means the latter is not a full requirement and the former statement has precedence.

Qualitative data collection (5.5)

Requirements in this clause cover both recruitment of qualitative respondents by fieldworkers and the work of qualified qualitative researchers, moderating groups, depth interviews etc.

Sub-clause 5.5.2 includes "at the interview/group discussion, the respondent's identity should be confirmed". The use of "should" indicates that this is less than a full requirement. However, in qualitative research, "professional" respondents attending groups etc. under aliases, to collect incentives, is not unknown and confirming

identity may be considered desirable. How identity is to be confirmed is not defined. Checking personal ID documentation is one method but this may not be thought acceptable or practical. Other methods can be considered, including such as respondents' signing of an attendance list or an incentive receipt.

A range of methods of validating qualitative respondents against recruitment criteria are allowed. These include validation before or at the group or interview ("may be carried"). Post group or interview validation is not mentioned but, arguably, is not excluded as a valid method. The use of self completion or administered validation questionnaires, at groups or interviews, is mentioned but only as a possible approach ("may be used"). Another approach may be the judgement of the moderator and this is probably always at least an element of validation whether or not more formal methods are used as well. Validation by moderator judgement alone may meet the letter of the requirements but its subjective nature should be considered before it is adopted as a standard procedure. If this is the only form of validation there should be some traceable record, from the moderator, that validation has been done, even if very brief (e.g. an email to the fieldwork manager stating the group met requirements). Sub-clause 5.5.3 also requires documented reports from moderators on problems or issues found at groups and interviews, regardless of the method of validation.

If the only criteria for recruitment of qualitative respondents is that they are included on a list or database used as a recruitment source (e.g. a customer list), adequate validation may be no more than checking that the recruited respondents are indeed on the list or database.

Self-completion data collection (5.6)

The major requirement of this clause is transparency to the client including in relation to sampling methods and validation. The issue of validation needs to be covered even if it is considered that the methods practically available are very limited. Questionnaires are required to be pre-tested and various forms of respondent safeguards are specified.

Data collection from secondary sources (5.7)

The requirement to record sources of data only reflects well established practice.

Data collection records (5.8)

The requirements of this clause are only making explicit general requirements for project records. As is made clear, data collection records may be filed and stored with other project records. The ability to easily access relevant records by both fieldworkers and projects is desirable.

Data management and processing (6)

General (6.1)

The requirement to have procedures in place equally applies to all clauses of the standard. Where data processing and analysis is carried out by a separate department it may be useful, but is not essential, to have a separate set of procedures.

Electronic data entry (6.2)

Electronic data entry from CATI/CACI and internet research is likely to grow in importance. Requirements include the need for testing of electronic questionnaires.

Hard copy data entry (6.3)

This clause is concerned with long established data "punching". Testing of data entry programmes is required, but the programme itself may be an adequate record of the in-built checks. The level of frequent (i.e. unacceptable) error needs to be decided by each provider and documented in procedures. Minimum verification levels are specified in the standard.

Accuracy of databases not requiring data entry (6.4)

This may be considered a rather misleading title since scanning is normally regarded as a form of data entry. Testing and documentation of the results is required.

Coding (6.5)

Although this clause is after those covering data entry, the coding process may of course come first. The detail of requirements indicates that coding is regarded as an important part of the research process and, by implication, a potential source of error. As for data entry, what constitutes frequent errors needs to be decided and covered in procedures. Again, minimum verification levels are specified in the standard.

The requirement to differentiate "don't know" and "no answer" can clearly only apply where this is recorded on the questionnaire being processed.

Data editing (6.6)
Data file management (6.7)

The key element in this clause is that any changes made to data and the logic of the changes needs to be traceable. Editing programs may facilitate this, at least in part.

Data analysis (6.8)

Again the analysis program may provide adequate records for subsequent replication.

It may be considered useful to have checklists to ensure that the relevant validation checks are carried out and that data tables are supported by the details covered in sub-clause 6.8.4. Strictly speaking, the requirements of this sub clause only apply where data tables are passed to the client (as opposed to internal use in preparing summary or narrative reports).

Electronic data delivery (6.9)
Back-up, retention and security of data (6.10)

These clauses restate requirements covered earlier (clause 4.9) in a more general context and just make them specific to data and records involved in the data processing.

Report on research projects (7)

This clause covers project information "which allows the reader to understand the way (the research) was conducted and the way it may be replicated etc." (sub-clause 4.8.1). The clauses cover separately the details for quantitative and qualitative research and a requirement to state that the research was carried out in compliance with ISO 20252. Some of the details may not apply to particular projects. Checklists to ensure all relevant details are included may be useful. See also comments above; reporting of research results (clause 4.8).

Reference to non-sampling errors in sub-clause 7.2 can be taken to include particular or unexpected situations e.g. interviewing in hot weather/holiday time.