

Methodological improvements of the Labour Force Survey (LFS) 2017

The Labour Force Survey was organised in Belgium for the first time in 1983 and has significantly evolved over these 34 years. A first substantial reform took place in 1999: we switched from an interview during one quarter to an interview all year-round. At the same time, many more people were interviewed, which led to more detailed results.

The survey methodology remained quite stable between 1999 and 2016, except for the switch from a data collection on paper to a data collection with tablets and laptops. These interviews were still conducted in person by interviewers from Statbel. Thanks to the stability of the survey methodology, we have comparable data over a very long period of time.

2017 is a new milestone for the survey. While the methodology was kept as stable as possible during the period 1999-2016, many adjustments were made simultaneously in 2017. With such a substantial reform and modernisation of the survey, we want not only to be able to meet the users' needs, but also to better take into account the respondents who participate to the survey.

The key elements of the reform are summarised here below.

1. Panel interview

The Labour Force Survey is organised all year round and collects data over each of the 52 weeks of the year. This way, we get an overview that is as representative as possible of the labour force over a whole year, but also by quarter and even by month. Until 2016, respondents from the survey were interviewed only once on their status on the labour market, their educational level, etc. This meant that a brand new sample was selected every quarter. Even though the sample was quite large, when comparing an evolution from one quarter to another, an uncertainty margin due to random sampling fluctuations still had to be taken into account. This problem arose in particular with quarterly figures and less with annual figures, given that the sample was four times larger.

With the growing importance of the follow-up of short-term evolutions of the labour market, it is increasingly important to measure quarterly evolutions more precisely. That is why a panel survey was introduced in 2017. This type of survey implies that the same persons are now interviewed several times. This way, the samples remain more stable and the results are less subject to random sampling fluctuations. This allows us to report short-term evolutions with greater precision.

2. Introduction of mixed mode data collection

As from 2017 respondents are surveyed four times in total. In order to limit as much as possible the response burden, various data collection methods are used and the respondent can also choose how he or she wants to provide the information.

The first survey is comparable to the kind of survey that was conducted before 2017, i.e. the respondent is invited by an interviewer for a personal interview during which they go through the questionnaire together and the answers are registered on a tablet. This survey is the most detailed one and is therefore conducted by an interviewer who also discusses the further participation in the survey.

The follow-up surveys are much shorter and concentrate on those aspects of the labour market position that have changed in comparison to the previous survey. Respondents also have the choice between providing their answers on internet (web survey) or through a telephone call with the interviewer with whom they previously had contact.

3. Various methodological improvements

Finally, a number of other methodological aspects of the survey were adapted on the occasion of this major reform. These aspects include measures to raise quality that we had decided to postpone because preference was given to the stability of the results. The most important one here is the reform of the *way the results are weighted*.