

THE PEER REVIEW AS A MAIN DRIVER FOR STATISTICS AUSTRIA'S STRATEGY 2020

Thomas Burg, Statistics Austria
thomas.burg@statistik.gv.at

Abstract

With regard to the second round of Peer Reviews the exercise for Statistics Austria took place in October 2014. Since the edition of the Peer Review report containing the recommendations for the Austrian statistical system was close to the start for the development of the new strategic concept of Statistics Austria – the so called Strategy 2020 – it seemed evident that the improvement actions based on the findings of the peers became a most relevant input for the forthcoming strategic concept.

Starting by describing the Peer Review process at Statistics Austria, its main findings and the most relevant improvement actions the paper gives subsequently an insight in the process of developing the Strategy 2020. It is shown how the recommendations of the peers were translated into important strategic measures aiming to improve the current situation and to enhance the compliance to the European Statistics Code of Practice. A second aspect worth to be considered is that not only the measures but also the structure of the process of developing the strategy did gain from the Peer Review by integrating various organizational layers into the process.

Finally taking into account the actions of the Strategy 2020 not triggered by the Peer Review recommendations the paper proposes possible issues or a revision of the Code of Practice and enhancements for the Quality Assurance Framework.

Keywords: 2nd Round of Peer Reviews, European Statistics Code of Practice, strategic development of an NSI

1. The Peer Review at Statistics Austria

The Peer Review for Statistics Austria took place from October 13th to 17th 2014. Austria's national statistical system is highly centralised. Its NSI, Statistics Austria, is responsible for the vast majority of European and Federal Statistics produced within Austria. Statistics Austria is an independent and non-profit-making federal institution under public law having no regional offices. It is the principal provider of scientific services in the area of federal statistics. Its professional independence is derived from a strong legal basis laid down in the Federal Statistics Act 2000. The Federal Statistics Act of 2000 defines Federal Statistics as a non-personal information system of the government providing data on the economic, demographic, social, ecological and cultural situation in Austria. There are seven other national authorities (ONAs) contributing to the development production and dissemination of European statistics. Two of them – the Environment Agency Austria and the Energie-Control Austria - where invited to take part in the Peer Review exercise. It is worth to be mentioned that the legal position of the NSI in Austria is not very strong with respect to the ONAs and

the adherence to the principles of the Code of Practice (CoP) can be secured only in a more or less persuasive form. Having this background in mind it was decided to provide the two selected ONAs with the so called light self-assessment questionnaire (LSAQ). Of course Statistics Austria herself was obliged to compile the full self-assessment questionnaire (SAQ). The filling in of the questionnaire was in so far a new and experience gaining procedure that caused by the necessity of providing evidence a discussion involving various units on a broad basis took place. The actual Peer Review visit resulted in a report containing 28 recommendations. Statistics Austria decided to bring in a diverging view to three recommendations and to formulate improvement actions along the others.

2. Recommendations and Improvement Actions

Before describing the situation of some of the improvement actions in detail it should be mentioned that the recommendations out of the Peer Review could be basically classified into two categories. A first set is suggesting changes in legal acts mainly addressing the Austrian federal statistics act. For this kind of recommendations Statistics Austria is not in the situation to decide since the revision of legal acts is obviously bound on certain procedures laid down in the Austrian constitution. Therefore the relevant improvement actions linked to this kind of recommendations are mainly some kind of effort to trigger a process involving relevant authorities into a discussion process in order to suggest the content of the recommendation as an input for a possible legal revision.

On the other hand the second group of recommendations directly addresses some processes, practices or possible improvement potentials related to the development, production and dissemination of official statistics. With respect to this set of recommendations improvement actions in a more concrete way could be formulated where deliverables and certain milestones can be expected and the dependency on authorities outside of Statistics Austria is not persistent.

Another way to classify the recommendations is to look if they address issues where the NSI is already on the way to implement something or if there is something closely connected to it where the recommendation aims to a continuation of the way or to complete, enhance or improve something. An example is recommendation 9:

Statistics Austria should facilitate written agreements with Other National Authorities on the production of European statistics with the support of the Statistics Council. Agreements with Other National Authorities should address, as much as possible, the production of quality reports, as well as statements about deviations from the European statistics Code of Practice. (Coordination)

Secondly sometimes something rather new which has to be developed more or less from the scratch might be recommended such as.:

Statistics Austria should create a public, searchable repository of its statistical concepts, definitions and methods. Statistics Austria should provide English translations of standard documentation or its executive summaries on its website. (European statistics Code of Practice, indicators 6.4, 7.1, 7.2, 15.1 and 15.6.)

Having these two dimensions of analysis table 1 below shows how the situation emerges when looking at the recommendations for Statistics Austria.

	Internal responsibility	Depending on other authorities	Diverging view	Total
Already connected to an action	8	7	1	16
New issue	5	5	2	12
Total	13	12	3	28

Table 1: Recommendations out of Statistics Austria's Peer Review broken down by internal/external dependency and if linkable to an action already existing

3. Improvement Actions and Strategy 2020

The Peer Review in general creates an opportunity for an NSI to look a little closer to the various fields of interest (production, dissemination etc.) and to detect certain areas where room for improvement, innovation and harmonization could be detected. This holds even more for the case of Statistics Austria because the time when we received the report and formulated our improvement actions was very close to the start for developing our new five year strategy valid for the years 2016 to 2020 the so called Strategy 2020. According to the Austrian Statistics Act Statistics Austria is obliged to elaborate a strategic concept on a five year basis. Therefore the year 2015 right after the Peer review took place was the one to do the work for the period 2016 to 2020. Having in mind the vision of a modern NSI of the year 2020 the goal of this process is to take all actions on board to improve the production processes, the governance and the accessibility in way to realize the vision. To achieve this it is necessary to receive sufficient input. Statistics Austria as the main player in the Austrian Statistical system fosters contacts to various bodies on international and national level. By doing that it receives input and recommendations in formal and informal way. So the first task when compiling the strategy 2020 was to structure the input channels and subsequently collect all the recommendations and formulate concrete strategic actions out of the input.



Picture 1: The Inputs channels for Statistics Austria's Strategy 2020

As picture 1 show there are several input channels for the strategy and you might argue that the Peer Review is only one among others. But what makes the input more valuable is the fact that due to the procedure of formulating actual improvement actions based on the recommendation there are already actions defined which are able to being overtaken into the strategy 2020. Another issue in this context is that by having the Peer Review in the back you have a very profound argumentation basis when it comes to internal discussions if an action is integrated into the strategy. Coming back to the classification provided in table 1 the improvement actions realized within the frame of the strategy 2020 relate to those which are not dependent on other authorities because the responsibility for the actions of the strategy with respect to planning, milestones and deliverables completely in the hands of Statistics Austria. Before describing the way how the actions of the strategy related to the improvement actions of the Peer Review have been integrated into the Strategy 2020 concretely a general remark concerning the nature of the relation of the Improvement Actions to the Peer Review recommendations should be stated. Sometimes a recommendation addresses more than one aspect and therefore more improvement actions had to be defined in order to comply with the recommendation. On the other hand sometimes recommendations were combined to one

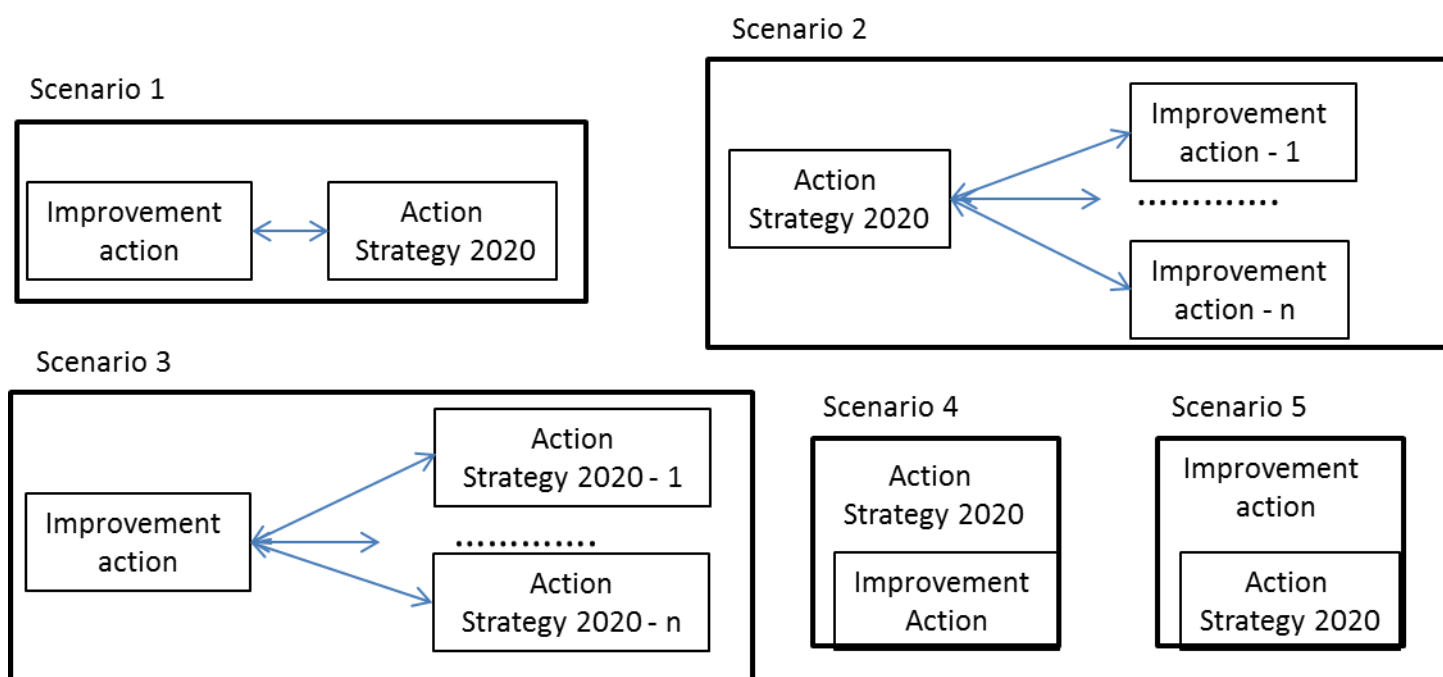
improvement action (although this is the case first of all by the recommendations depending to outlying responsibilities it should be mentioned here for the sake of completeness). Coming now to the Strategy 2020 the actions formulated in it are assigned to one of the five pillars:

- Modern, efficient and integrated data production
- Transforming data to information
- Social relevance by covering new topics and permanent development
- Cooperation and interaction on national and international level
- Attractive employer, cost efficient leadership

Under the umbrella of these headlines there are altogether 95 so called strategic actions. In the table which is for the sake of saving space placed in the annex of this paper you can see how the relevant Peer Review recommendations and the resulting improvement actions are mapped to the concerned actions of the Strategy 2020.

If you look at the table you can see that there are different scenarios with respect to the realization of improvement actions in the Strategy 2020. Sometimes an improvement action is taken over as a whole and there exists a 1 to 1 relation to an action of the strategy 2020 (Shown as scenario 1 in picture 2). As an example the implementation of internal quality audits which is closing a gap for the commitment to principle 4 of the Code of Practice (Commitment to Quality). Looking for instance at coordination which was a topic at the Peer Review leading to different recommendations and improvement actions the situation is different. There is one action in the Strategy 2020 taking on board all necessary sub-actions to handle the corresponding improvement actions (scenario 2). On the contrary you might have the situation quite the other way round when there is a set of actions in the Strategy 2020 which can be related to a certain improvement action (scenario 3). Obviously this holds for recommendation 21 demanding an improvement in visualizing of statistical figures and a modernization of dissemination channels. This recommendation is splitting up into two improvement actions which are realized by nine different actions of the strategy 2020. Sometimes the entity of an action either the improvement action or an action of the Strategy 2020 is not assignable to the other set in a complete way. So we have the case that an improvement action is embedded as a sub-action belonging to a package aiming to realize a broad visionary goal (scenario 4). For instance the implementation of a searchable repository of statistical terms as well as the provision of metadata in English is part of the action “Implementation of a centralized metadata management” which as an ambitious project

consists of a variety of sub-actions. And finally looking at recommendation 28 addressing the public availability of a pricing policy and the accessibility of “ Statistische Nachrichten” only one part is implemented by the strategy 2020. strategy action (scenario 5).



Picture 2: Different scenarios of relations between improvement actions and the actions of the Strategy 2020

As a final result of the mapping it can be seen that we have tackled 12 recommendations, 12 improvement actions and 28 actions out of the strategy 2020.

Looking at this kind of mapping exercise I would like to make two remarks which can be seen as a kind of lessons learnt out of the Peer Review exercise. First if you ask the question if the Peer Review acted as strategic driver the answer has to be a clear yes. But on the other hand as picture 2 and the annexed table show there was a kind of fit in procedure necessary to anchor the improvement actions into the strategy 2020. In other words if you look at the demand to the improvement actions to follow the SMART approach (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, and Time scaled) the necessity of a kind of transformation of the actions can be seen as way in order to implement the improvement action in a SMART -like way.

The second remark concerns the actions which are not included, that means the improvement actions not tackled by the strategy at all and on the other hand it is my mind worth to draw the attention to the actions of the strategy which are not directly triggered by the Peer Review. Regarding the first aspect I would like to come back to the fact shown in table one. At least in the Austrian case as already mentioned the number of recommendations suggesting a change

in legal acts was relatively high. For these recommendations I think it is extreme hard to formulate an improvement action satisfying the SMART approach to the full extent. I would not go that far to say that based on this argumentation the recommendation suggesting a modification of legal is useless. This would be against the spirit of the Code of Practice But it should be clear that given the status of an NSI in the most national statistical systems the magnitude of an improvement action related to such a recommendation might be limited.

The second reflects the opposite situation that there are actions in the strategy which are not triggered by the peer review. if you compare the figure of 28 actions realizing improvement actions to the total number of 95 actions (which is 29,5%) you might say that there is only a small overlap. But on the other hand looking at picture 1 you can observe that there are eight different input sources for the strategy 2020. Dividing the total number of actions by the number of input sources would lead to 12. So you can argue that the Peer Review was an over-average driver to the strategy. Nevertheless besides this number-fiddling it is evident that there are of course actions which are not triggered by the Peer Review. Not able to describe or even to enumerate them all here I only list here the activities in the area of Big Data, various actions concerning our user database STATcube, and the enhancement of competences in the area of forecasts as examples.

Finalising the chapter I would like describing shortly at least the main fields of actions of the Strategy 2020 related to the improvement actions. Firstly the issue the fostering of the coordination role was a topic defining a global action covering a significant set of improvement actions of the Peer Review. The promotion of scientific publications and the intensification of contacts to the scientific community are strategic goals in line with a corresponding recommendation of the peers. In the area of data collection a lot of actions aiming to foster the partnership to respondents as well as modernising the data collection process are planned. The data warehouse project can be seen as one of the key actions of the Strategy 2020 and will serve as a main evidence for the recommendation to proactively support the development and use of integrated, harmonised information technology solutions, especially a single framework for data processing actions. Dissemination and accessibility plays another central role in the strategy. This covers metadata but as well visualization and improved access possibilities. Last but not least the enhancement of job satisfaction, where statistics Austria received two recommendations is part of the Strategy 2020.

4. Peer Review and development process of the Strategy 2020

The Peer Review did not only influence the contents of the Strategy 2020. As well the development processes of the Strategy 2020 have been thought over after the experience of the Peer Review. Looking back at the development of the last strategic concept (Strategy 2015) it was prepared by working groups and finalized by the senior management. The Peer Review exercise first when filling in the self-assessment questionnaire and later when junior staff was involved provided evidence that there exist some input sources which might deliver significant input for the development of strategic concepts. Given this it was decided to have a broader approach when using input sources during the development process of the Strategy 2020. After all we came to the following input sources

- Working groups (like for the 2015 edition)
- Project leaders
- Junior Statisticians
- Works Council and Non-Discrimination Group

Looking at picture 1 the proposals coming from project leaders and junior statisticians can be seen under internal proposals in the green box. I would like to highlight especially the role of the Junior Statistician group which was basically the same as was interviewed as junior staff during the Peer Review visit. They contributed a lot to the actions where the pretesting of survey instruments and the promotion of scientific publications can be listed as examples.

After all proposals have been collected the draft of the Strategy 2020 was created as a result of two day closed meeting where besides senior management and working group leader as well two persons of the Junior Statisticians (elected by the group) took part. Summarizing it can be said that the Peer Review triggered the change of the format for compiling the Strategy 2020 in order to have a broader basis of input.

5. Conclusions for possible consequences for the ESS quality framework

In the previous parts of the paper it was shown how the strategy was influenced by the improvement actions of the Peer Review. Given the situation that only a part of the strategic actions are dealing with the Peer Review some might ask if there was something missing in the Peer Review. In other words: Can actions defined in a strategic concept of an NSI influence the quality framework of the European Statistical System (ESS)? I think there must be a clearly committed 'yes' to this question. Before introducing my proposals I like to clarify

that my findings are based solely on the Austrian experience. Let us look first to the reference below the indicators of the Code of Practice the so called Quality Assurance Framework (QAF). Basically this document lists methods serving as possible evidence of the implementation of a certain indicator of the Code of Practice. Having strategic concepts developed by an NSI - I suppose nearly every member state in the ESS has a process like this¹ – and realizing successful actions leading to good solutions or as it is said frequently ‘good practices’ could be overtaken to the QAF whose purpose is to be a kind of living document. So it would be worth to collect the information about strategic concepts or to be more precise the resulting solutions which can be seen as good practices. This could be a way to further enhance the goal, which was already formulated for the Peer Review exercise to achieve a repository of good practices. Some say that during the Peer Review we have missed an opportunity in order to take all the information of the SAQ but I think the opportunity is still open if we could agree to collect the information of the strategic concepts in a standardized way although I have to admit that the approaches in the different member states is by far not harmonized.

Finally to move a level higher to the question if there are any consequences CoP there is first an issue discussed already in other fora: Coordination should be mapped in a more concrete way in the CoP . Some say that even a new principle could be envisaged in this regard. But this something which is shown by both the Peer Review and the strategy 2020. A second aspect might become evident when looking in the actions of the strategy not directly driven by the Peer Review. It can be seen that some innovative necessities (for instance the integration of so called New data sources as Big Data) was not addressed by the Peer Review in Austria. This could lead to the conclusion that in the CoP the aspect of the increased velocity of technological changes should be mapped in some way. At the recent round of Peer Reviews it was tried to take into account this aspect a bit by an extra report “On Cooperation/Level of integration within the ESS”. But I think it would be more appropriate to have aspects like innovation, integration and harmonization directly in the CoP. To conclude the paper I would like to stress the issue that with respect of changing the CoP the experience of single country is for sure not enough but some of the findings here seem to be coherent with thoughts already expressed.

¹ It is not called strategic concept of strategy. Sometimes it is done during planning a kind of long term work program

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The European Code of Practice

<http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/3859598/5921861/KS-32-11-955-EN.PDF/5fa1ebc6-90bb-43fa-888f-dde032471e15>

Quality Assurance Framework of the European Statistical System (ESS QAF)

<http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/64157/4392716/ESS-QAF-V1-2final.pdf/bbf5970c-1adf-46c8-afc3-58ce177a0646>

Annex: Table off recommendations and improvement actions mapped to actions of the Strategy 2020

Peer Review		Strategy 2020
Recommendation	Improvement Action	
Coordination and cooperation		
<p>9 -Statistics Austria should facilitate written agreements with Other National Authorities on the production of European statistics with the support of the Statistics Council. Agreements with Other National Authorities should address, as much as possible, the production of quality reports, as well as statements about deviations from the European statistics Code of Practice.</p> <p>24- Statistics Austria should facilitate the compliance of Other National Authorities producing statistics with the European statistics Code of Practice, especially by requiring regular quality reports on their data production, examining their dissemination guidelines and mandating a release calendar.</p> <p>25- Statistics Austria should facilitate a reasonable presentation on the statistics activities of Other National Authorities in order to provide a full overview of European statistics for the public, for example a single web portal for European statistics</p>	<p><u>9 - Completing the set of written agreements with ONAs</u> Statistics Austria will continue to invite all remaining ONAs relevant for the production of European Statistics to sign the agreement. Statistics Austria will assist ONAs in producing regular quality reports and provide feedback on potential non-compliances with the Code of Practice.</p> <p><u>24 - Enhancing contacts to Other National Authorities</u> Statistics Austria will launch a series of bilateral meetings with ONAs in order to detect possible deviations from the Code of Practice and develop proposals for improvement actions. One related aim will be the signing of written agreements taking into account the principles and indicators of the Code of Practice especially the documentation of quality of the data as well as dissemination guidelines and a release calendar.</p> <p><u>25 – Web section linking to other national producers</u> Statistics Austria will implement a section on its webpage linking to European Statistics produced by Other National Authorities. To facilitate this process Statistics Austria will in its planned bilateral meetings emphasize the need of a release calendar.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National coordination function of Statistics Austria

Peer Review		Strategy 2020
Recommendation	Improvement Action	
10- Statistics Austria should consider facilitating the establishment of a research committee to initiate a formal consultation process with researchers and to enhance cooperation with the scientific community.	<p><u>10 - Investigation on enhancement of cooperation with research community</u> Statistics Austria will start an initiative to enhance the cooperation with the research community. After seeking support by the Statistics Council Statistics Austria will contact relevant persons within academics aiming at the establishment of a possible research committee.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enhancing the contact to the scientific community • Promotion of publication activities in scientific journals
Data collection and data processing and data quality		
18-Statistics Austria and Other National Authorities, in close cooperation with the Federal Economic Chamber and other relevant institutions, should consider further motivating data providers to respond to surveys by maximising their benefits in the system, while minimising their response burden.	<p><u>18 - Further enhancement of respondents motivation</u> In cooperation with relevant stakeholders Statistics Austria will keep up initiatives to increase respondents' motivation to participate in statistical surveys. The measures taken will include feedback processes to respondents as well as providing more detailed information material to respondents (for instance leaflets). As a result of the currently ongoing action of profiling of statistical units in the business sector the possibility of a more streamlined approach to respondents could be expected.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enhancing partnership to respondents • Profiling • Implementation of revised 223 with respect of administrative data use • Using balance sheet information (XBRL) • Mobile survey devices • Pretesting of survey instruments
22 - Statistics Austria should further promote (both in-house and	<p><u>22 - Standardization of data collection and internal data management</u></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Finalisation of development of modern survey infrastructure • Development of data warehouse

Peer Review		Strategy 2020
Recommendation	Improvement Action	
within the European Statistical System) the development and use of integrated, harmonised information technology solutions, especially a single framework for data processing actions. (Statistics Austria will assess rolling out the recently developed survey infrastructure technology to all business areas as well as developing a data warehouse to become the central tool for internal data management.	(5 Actions)
19 - Statistics Austria should introduce internal, systematic quality audits of statistics.	<u>19 - Implementation of internal quality audits</u> Statistics Austria will start to implement a series of internal quality audits. Quality Management, Risk Management and Internal Audit will closely cooperate when designing the relevant process for the audits. Basis for the quality audits will be the quality guidelines which are currently under revision. A pilot test for a quality audit is currently ongoing. After the pilot phase it is planned to have one product audited quarterly.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implementation of internal quality Audits
Accessibility and Clarity		
20- Statistics Austria should create a public, searchable repository of its statistical concepts, definitions and methods. Statistics Austria should provide English translations of standard documentation or its executive summaries on its website.	<u>20.1 - Development of a repository of statistical concepts, definitions and methods</u> Statistics Austria will develop a repository of statistical concepts, definitions and methods. This repository will serve as a reference document for standard documentations and also be accessible through the internet. <u>20.2 - Providing metadata in English</u> For all statistical products covered by a standard documentation Statistics Austria will provide the	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implementation of a centralised metadata management

Peer Review		Strategy 2020
Recommendation	Improvement Action	
	Executive Summaries and the table of important figures in English	
21- Statistics Austria should explore new visualisation techniques (e.g. infographics) and further modernise its dissemination techniques (e.g. consider developing an app and optimising the website format for mobile devices; make advances in communication techniques via Twitter	<p><u>21.1 – Improving accessibility and working on visualisation</u> Statistics Austria will make its webpage accessible in a user friendly way also on mobile devices. Statistics Austria will participate in Eurostat's Task Force on Data Visualisation in order to share other NSIs' experiences and best practises related to different types of data visualisation, infographics, widgets, mobile phone applications, etc. Statistics Austria will take the following initiatives with respect to visualisation: Development of new ideas and concepts for data visualisations and infographics, definition of internal standards on visualisation, investigation of possible tools for visualising figures, clarification of organisational aspects, assessment of impact on the strategy 2016-2020. The skill level of staff regarding visualisation will be raised.</p> <p><u>21.2 – Modernizing dissemination strategy</u> Based on the experiences with its twitter presence, Statistics Austria will consider further Social Media activities, e.g. intensifying twitter activities including the use of shareable input (tables, graphs, infographics, pictures etc.) creating a complementary "statistical blog" Further improvements suggested:</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Action plan visualization • Internal competence centre on graphics • Producing of infographics • Usability study of webpage • Enforcing social media activities • Development of statistics apps • Marketing campaign on Open Data • Geo based Statistics (2 actions)

Peer Review		Strategy 2020
Recommendation	Improvement Action	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> strengthening the relationship with the open data community in order to encourage the development of mobile apps based on open data developing statistical Apps (e.g. on the personal inflation calculator) 	
<p>28 - Statistics Austria should make its pricing policy publicly available (tariffs document). Statistics Austria should re-examine its pricing policy to ensure that prices are not</p>	<p><u>28.2 - Providing articles published in Statistics Austria's periodic journal "Statistische Nachrichten" free of charge</u> Statistics Austria will develop a strategy to make articles of "Statistische Nachrichten" available free of charge</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> "Statistische Nachrichten", Enhancing the scope and improving accessibility
Staff satisfaction		
<p>16 -Statistics Austria should more actively enable and encourage staff participation in training programmes, including the elaboration and implementation of personalised, individual training schemes throughout the office. (European statistics Code of Practice, indicator 7.6.)</p> <p>17 -Statistics Austria should explore the further usability of additional human resource development tools during the elaboration of individual development plans (e.g. increased internal rotation, international staff exchange, internships). (European statistics Code of Practice, indicators 3.1 and 7.6.)</p>	<p><u>16/17 - Enhancing job satisfaction at Statistics Austria</u> Statistics Austria will develop standardized outputs of yearly staff appraisals including a personalized training plan. Measures promoting internal rotation and international staff exchange, including a broad communication to all staff members, will be taken.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mobility of staff ; Development of mobility models, exchange with other national and international institutions