



HOW DO WE UP-DATE THE INTERNATIONAL STANDARD CLASSIFICATIONS OF OCCUPATIONS: ISSUES AND POSSIBILITIES¹

by Eivind Hoffmann

Introduction

There is a sad contradiction between strong emphasis made by ILO as custodian of ISCO-88 on the need to have a continuous programme of up-dating the international as well as national standard classifications of occupations, and the actual practices of the ILO and its Bureau of Statistics in this respect. The objective of this note is to present for discussion some ideas on how the ILO and its Bureau of Statistics (STAT) can finally rectify this situation, within the limited resources that will be available for such work.²

Background

When the proposal for the conceptual framework for ISCO-88 was prepared one hoped that stability in the classification's basic structure and principles over a long period would be one of the benefits, and that it would be possible to ensure that occupational consequences of the continuous changes in technology and work organisation could be accommodated through a process of up-dating within and extension of the established structure. Unfortunately, systematic work to up-date and extend ISCO-88 has been modest, even though the *World Health Organization* has provided new descriptive definitions for the following groups of *nursing* occupations: 223, 2230, 323, 3231, 3232 and 5133. In the future these and other updated descriptions will be found on the ILO website as they are being developed.

There are two main reasons for the lack of progress in up-dating ISCO-88 so far: (i) The limited resources devoted to ISCO-related work. About one work-year per year, divided between two persons, have been allocated to this work in the ILO and most of the efforts have had to be devoted to providing guidance on understanding of ISCO-88, as well as on the development of national standard classifications of occupations (NSCO) and on the effective use of the NSCO to obtain

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² *Hoffmann, 1999* represents the most recent presentation of ISCO-88 and ILO's work.

reliable occupational statistics. (ii) As custodian of ISCO-88 ILO is even further removed from the realities of the world of work which the classification is supposed to reflect than are the custodians of NSCOs³. On a worldwide basis these realities are also much more varied than those of a national labour market. Thus, even if ILO had allocated ample human and financial resources for this work one would be faced with difficult methodological issues: Where do we find relevant information, given that few national custodians have established systematic procedures for updating their NSCOs, and that those who have do not necessarily inform ILO about their activities and findings?⁴ What are the criteria by which we can judge whether a reported development is (sufficiently) significant and widespread to be reflected in ISCO-88?. Do we need to make such judgements?

Current plans

In the face of these problems the ILO's medium term strategy will continue to be one of "muddling" through on the basis of the following activities:

Collecting information

We expect that an ISCO-dedicated web-site, which we hope to establish before the end of 2001 (already delayed by more than one year), will be our main channel of communication with those who are closer than we are to the world of work. The web-site will be used to display answers to queries on ISCO-88 and its use, as well as proposals for up-dates and extensions. We hope to establish hyper-links to similar web-sites for NSCOs.

However, the experience since the adoption of ISCO-88 by the 14th ICLS seems to demonstrate quite clearly that we at the ILO cannot expect much information to come our way spontaneously. In this respect it will not help much to be able to receive and disseminate information electronically more cheaply from/to a much wider audience than in the past. Most of our correspondents will have to be reminded about our existence and our needs. In connection with the establishment of the

3 The custodians of NSCOs have many possible sources of information about the appearance of possible new occupations' and changes in relevant aspects of existing ones: responses to statistical surveys and advertisements for vacant jobs placed in newspapers, professional journals or web-sites being the most prominent ones. In particular the last source seems to have the potential to dramatically improve a custodian's capacity to follow and organize information on new occupations, because accompanying descriptive text will already exist in electronic form (i.e. very little data entry will be needed) and because employers using new forms of employment and new occupations may be more likely than others to use this medium when searching for employees. Unfortunately, we in the ILO have neither world-wide surveys nor relevant web-sites to support the up-dating of ISCO, thus we'll depend upon the possibilities for synthesizing the outcome of national efforts. (It may be possible to benefit from the vacancy announcements being made through the European Union's *Eures* system, but so far it has not been possible to establish the necessary contacts with the secretariat for this system.

4 One exception to the first part of this statement is represented by the *Occupation Information Unit (OIU)* in the *Office for National Statistics (ONS)* in the United Kingdom, see e.g. *Elias & McKnight, 2000*. However, the OIU does not represent an exception to the second part, as there is virtually no spontaneous communication from the OIU to the ILO, nor have the ILO been placed on whatever mailing lists OIU may have.

ISCO web-site we therefore hope to send out a request for information about the current situation with respect to (a) NSCO(s) to all national statistical offices and employment services. In addition to asking for the co-ordinates of the custodian(s) of the national classifications as well as whether the NSCO represents an adoption or adaptation of a variant of ISCO, we will ask for information about procedures and tools used for implementing the classification in national data collection programmes and for ensuring that these tools and the classification itself is regularly up-dated. Based on the information received we hope to be able to establish a 'data-base on NSCOs' in connection with the ISCO web-site, and to be able to up-date this data-base regularly through the information received later, either spontaneously or through reminders, e.g. annually. **It would be highly appreciated if the participants at this workshop would agree to participate in a pilot for this request for information.**

Forms of up-dating of ISCO-88

As a result of the information received number of more detailed occupational classes may be presented as subdivisions of appropriate ISCO-88 unit groups, with a two digit extension to the unit group code: "-xy". Such extensions will be proposed where it has been made clear that international exchange of occupational information, including statistics, on these groups will warrant their separate identification within the ISCO-88 structure. This may happen e.g. (i) at the initiative of e.g. international federations of organizations of people working in particular professions who can make a case for the separate identification of these professions in ISCO-88 as important for the international recognition of such occupations⁵; (ii) because new occupations have emerged as a consequence of technological developments common to a number of countries; or (iii) because exchange of information between several countries for e.g. recruitment, job placements and the international migration of workers will be facilitated by references to detailed standard occupational classes.

Regional adaptations of ISCO-88 may introduce new unit and/or minor groups to the ISCO-88 structure, to bring together and highlight some important categories of occupations which in ISCO-88 are "hidden" in one or more unit groups, or which it is difficult to place within the ISCO-88 structure⁶.

Procedures for evaluating the relevance and significance of proposed up-dates to ISCO-88

On this very important point we have not yet been able to come up any proposals which seems satisfactory. The best option may be to try to establish a network of volunteer national 'specialists' who we can consult on specific proposals. Available experience seems to indicate, however, that many such specialists find it very difficult to evaluate proposals which do not correspond closely to their national experience and procedures. It will therefore be necessary to also make more use of regional workshops of the type represented by TACO 2000. The difficulty will be to ensure the

⁵ One example is the proposal to create a group 2111-11 *Medical Physicist*

⁶ One example is the group 247 *Public service administrative professionals* created for ISCO-88(COM).

necessary funding for such workshops around the world. Currently the series of workshops represented by TACO 2000 is unique. It is encouraging that the UN Statistics Division has managed to find funds to organize such workshops for Asia and the Pacific and for the Caribbean (in 1999) and for English-using Africa (in 2000) on classifications in general and ISIC, rev. 3 in particular, but this does not provide a precedence which can be used to argue for workshops on occupational classifications, unfortunately.

Concluding remarks

The results of the activities described above will be presented to the *17th International Conference of Labour Statisticians (ICLS)*, tentatively scheduled for 2003-04, with an invitation for the delegates to ICLS to consider whether proposals for a comprehensive revision of ISCO-88 should be prepared for discussion at the 18th ICLS in 2008-09. Obviously, all this will depend on whether a minimum of qualified staff and other resources will be allocated to the relevant activities. One way the custodians of NOCs can influence whether ILO will make funds available for such activities is to encourage those representing the governments in the ILO Governing Body or at the International Labour Conference to mention the importance of this work.

References

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