

Background to the BER's other services survey

Of the various sub-sectors making up the services sector of the economy, the BER's surveys have covered the domestic trade sectors (i.e. the retail, wholesale and motor trade) since their inception in the 1950s. In 2005, the BER expanded the surveys' sector coverage to select other services sectors, namely catering (restaurants and take-away outlets), accommodation (hotels and guest houses), transport, real estate and business services.

The heightened COVID-19-induced uncertainty, delays with the release of some of the official data, and recent financial support to cover the cost of conducting the survey created the ideal opportunity and means for the BER to make the results of this long-running survey public for the first time in the second quarter of 2020. The long time series also allowed the BER time to first validate the survey's reliability before making it public.

In deciding which of the remaining services sector to cover, the BER followed its international counterparts. While the government provides the bulk of services, the selected sectors are those in which private firms dominate. For reasons of focus and feasibility, the BER does not cover personal services and sectors dominated by a few large firms (e.g. telecommunication and air transport).

Firms in the other services sector differ from those that the BER has been reporting on traditionally (i.e. building contractors, manufacturers, retailers, wholesalers and vehicle dealers) in several important aspects.

1. The most obvious difference is that other services providers do not carry stocks to balance unexpected changes in demand. In contrast to stocks of raw material inputs and finished goods in manufacturing, as well as retail, wholesale and new vehicle inventories, other services cannot be stored temporarily. Instead, other service providers have to take care of short-term fluctuations in demand via adjustments in the utilisation of their workforce and/or space.
2. Another difference is that the cyclical peaks and troughs in other services sector's activity are not symmetrical and do not move in synch with those of the sectors reported on traditionally. While the five sectors included in the RMB/BER business confidence index (BCI) reach upper and lower cyclical turning points at more or less the same time, other services lag the recovery at the bottom, as it takes time before capital and other business spending increase and starts to lift accommodation, transport and business services. To safeguard the cyclical and advanced signalling (predictive) properties of the RMB/BER BCI, the other service sector is not included in the BCI. Whereas quantitative estimates benefit from an expanded sector coverage, this is not necessarily the case for cyclical measures.
3. A final major difference is that there is no readily available equivalent official monthly reference measure of other services activity. Stats SA has been producing high-frequency data on the performance of hotels, restaurants and transport for a couple of years, but nothing on real estate and business services. The latter two are only covered together with financial intermediation in the quarterly GDP production numbers.

	% of GDP	BCI	Other services
Primary sector	10.9		
Agriculture, forestry & fishing	2.6		
Mining and quarrying	8.2		
Secondary sector	21.1		
Manufacturing	13.4	√	
Electricity, gas and water	3.8		
Construction	3.9	√	
Tertiary (services) sector	68.0		
Trade, catering and accommodation	15.0		
Wholesale trade	4.9	√	
Retail trade; repair of household goods	7.2	√	
Motor trade; repair of motor vehicles	2.0	√	
Catering and accommodation	0.9		√
Transport, storage & communication	9.8		
Transport	8.0		√
Communication	1.8		
Finance, real estate & business services	19.8		
Finance and insurance	9.0		
Real estate	5.7		√
Business services *	5.1		√
General government services	17.6		
Personal services **	5.8		
All sectors	100.0		
<p>GDP = Gross Domestic Product (National Accounts) from the production side; sector division according to the Standard Industrial Classification (SIC) of All Economic Activities, at current prices, 2017, Source: Stats SA and author's own calculations</p> <p>BCI = RMB/BER business confidence index</p> <p>* Business services consist of the renting of machinery and equipment (8%), computer services (16%), legal, accounting, market research & management consultancy (27%), consulting engineering (21%), advertising (3%) and other (e.g. labour recruitment, security activities, building and plant cleaning, and miscellaneous such as debt collection, interior design and exhibitions) (25%).</p> <p>** Personal services consists of education (20%), health & social work (45%), other community services (e.g. refuse removal) (2%), activities of membership organisations (e.g. those of trade unions) (2%), recreation (e.g. cinemas, TV production), cultural (arts, news agencies, libraries, museums, nature reserves) & sport activities (26%) and other (washing & dry-cleaning of clothes, hair dressing & beauty treatments, funeral services & miscellaneous) (4%).</p>			

For a short video about the BER's other services survey, click [here](#). A short video on how this survey compares to the RMB/BER BCI can be found [here](#).

George Kershoff
14 September 2020