

RGS-IBG consultation response

● RCUK Large Facilities Roadmap 2007

The Royal Geographical Society (with The Institute of British Geographers) welcomes this opportunity to comment on the Large Facilities Roadmap 2007 published by Research Councils UK. The Society is the learned society and professional body representing geography and geographers. It was founded in 1830 for the advancement of geographical science and has approximately 14,000 members.

In preparing our response to this consultation, we requested comments from all Heads of Departments of Geography, the RGS-IBG research groups, members of the Society's Research Committee, and key members of the community actively engaged in research that draws on such infrastructure. Reflecting the breadth of geographical research, we submit comments on the facilities for the social sciences and humanities, and environmental sciences.

Overall, we support the existing and new facilities relevant to the geographical sciences listed in the Roadmap. We welcome the recognition of the need for funding of long-term and often high-cost programmes which under-pin multi-centre and multi-disciplinary programmes. We want to stress the importance of continued investment in data collection, its management and analysis. Good quality longitudinal data collected over sustained periods of time are vital to understanding the processes of social, economic, demographic and environmental change.

We do note some inconsistencies in the facilities listed and whether they are described as existing or new. For example the Centre for Longitudinal Studies already exists (but is in the future facilities), while others that exist but require continual renewal (for example the ESRC census programme) are listed as current. More importantly, there are initiatives of comparable standing that do not seem to be included. For example, the new Scottish and Northern Irish Longitudinal studies, which offers the prospect to develop a future UK Longitudinal Study, is one of the most important demographic initiatives of the last couple of decades.

In terms of the environmental sciences, we note a strong emphasis on oceanography and polar science, with a secondary emphasis on atmospheric science. This is appropriate given the leadership of UK scientists in the environmental sciences. The commitment to terrestrial environmental science, through LIFEWATCH, is significant but less clear in terms of exactly what will be supported. We note the absence of remote sensing infrastructure. Atmospheric remote sensing, in particular, is an area where there is considerable UK strength and which should be supported, not least because it affects the ability of the community to influence ESA. Others in the geographical community have drawn attention to the need for facilities to support palaeoenvironmental research, specifically laboratories for high precision dating and correlation (luminescence; cosmogenic radionuclides) and for paleoclimatic determinations (stable isotope facilities).

Research in the social sciences is distinctive in its extensive use of datasets collected and released by government agencies. In many cases datasets that are important for academic research are also important for generating the evidence base for developing and monitoring public policies at national and sub-national scales. Many of the dataset developments proposed in the Roadmap will be greatly strengthened if they are supported by innovative improvements in the range and quality of data that the government collects and releases through the Office of National Statistics. It is important that the necessary development of administrative databases for statistical purposes be clearly identified as part of the social science research infrastructure, requiring strong research council engagement. In particular we would identify: the need for a definitive national address register; the development of new data sources on internal and international

migrant streams; integration of post-census sources of small area population data; improvement of the quality of small area economic statistics.



In addition to supporting the existing and new initiatives for social science datasets contained in the Roadmap consultation document, the Society would strongly encourage RCUK to use every opportunity to emphasise to the government the central importance of developing the quality and range of the data that it collects to support research of high quality both within higher education institutions and within the other companies and agencies that contribute to improving our understanding of social, demographic and economic development within the country. Such data are key to addressing the key challenges set out in this document - demographic change, migration, ageing.

RGS-IBG
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