

The European Social Survey (ESS) project

1. Short description of the project and main characteristics

Already a considerable European investment, the ESS is a multi-nation project funded jointly by the Commission, the European Science Foundation and academic funding agencies in 24 nations. Initiated by the European Science Foundation, the EC is now its biggest single funder. As the project completes its second round, central funding for a third round is already secured.

The ESS has three primary objectives: (1) to monitor and interpret changing social values in Europe in relation to changing behaviour patterns and institutional structures; (2) to improve the rigour of quantitative social measurement for comparative studies throughout and beyond Europe; and (3) to develop standard social indicators to stand alongside economic indicators as measures of the quality of life in different countries and regions.

To achieve these aims a meticulously-designed biennial social survey takes place among equivalent probability samples in all participating nations. The project is designed and co-ordinated by a multi-nation team headed by Professor Roger Jowell at City University London, and steered by a Scientific Advisory Board headed by Professor Max Kaase at International University Bremen.

Although explicitly set up as a Europe-wide infrastructure, the ESS is still funded from round to round – an unstable basis for a time series with over 4000 registered data users in its first year.

2. Science case (scientific justification, including new areas to be opened)

In line with its three main objectives, the ESS contributes substantively, methodologically and functionally both to European governance and to scientific development. Its primary substantive aim is to understand the structure of changing attitudes, values and behaviour within and between European nations. Its main methodological aim is to keep Europe at the leading edge of the quest for equivalence in quantitative cross national social comparisons. And its primary functional aim is to enable Europe to understand itself better via robust comparative indicators of improvements or otherwise in the quality of life both within and across countries.

3. Impact to society and to new technologies for industry

With 21 of the 25 EU member states and a number of applicant countries already involved in the ESS, the project's design, organisation and methods are already having an impact on governmental, academic and commercial institutions. Europe's thriving market research industry, for instance, has long been grappling with the difficulties of measuring the potential of a widening European market. Now the unique rigour of the ESS – long thought to be unattainable in cross-national social surveys of this type – is widely acknowledged to be the new gold standard.

4. Strategic importance to ERA

The ESS is an operational manifestation of the ERA, not simply a hitherto untested idea. Conceived in response to a widespread academic imperative, this highly ambitious project has since been taken up and sustained by the Commission in productive partnership with Europe-wide academic funding sources. Its data and methods are transparent and accessible and are in remarkably high demand, contributing both to better science and more informed governance.

5. Maturity of proposal (including possible timetable)

The ESS is a thriving concern, about to enter its third round. But, although already widely regarded as an infrastructure in its own right, it is in fact no more than a set of separately funded biennial projects. Stable long-term funding is required to ensure optimal utilisation of the ESS.

6. Budgetary information (preparation, construction and operation costs)

The ESS currently costs between €8 and €10 million per round, shared between around 27 funding agencies in 24 countries. Two new grants are being sought within FP6, one for a further round of the project and the other for infrastructure development, access and networking.