DEVELOPING THE UK e-SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH PROGRAMME

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In this paper we review Phase I (2004-2008) of the National Centre for e-Social Science (NCeSS) research programme and articulate the roadmap for Phase II (2008-2012).

N CeSS is funded by the U.K. Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) with the objective of enabling social scientists to make best use of innovations in digital infrastructure (‘e-Infrastructure’) so that they are able to develop new methods and address the key challenges in their research fields in new ways. The wider goal is to ensure that the ESRC continues to develop the world-class social scientific infrastructure that is essential if the UK is to have the capacity to remain a centre of excellence in economic and social research. The key research challenges set out in the ESRC’s 2005-2010 Strategic Plan range over a diverse set of topics, disciplines and research methods, and together they collectively entail a set of requirements for the social science research infrastructure which NCeSS is working to satisfy.

The NCeSS programme has two research strands. The applications strand draws on unfolding developments in e-Infrastructure and applies them to the particular needs of the social science research community. The social shaping strand aims to understand the social, economic and other influences on how e-Infrastructure is being developed and used, and its implications for scientific practice and research outcomes.

We begin by outlining the work-in-progress across the Centre’s current research programme, and we consider how the Centre contributes to the needs of social science researchers and provides them with opportunities to address key substantive research challenges in new ways. We then turn to the continuing efforts to both consolidate and extend the Centre’s research agenda and to encourage the wider adoption of e-Social Science. We conclude by reviewing some of the challenges which NCeSS and the e-Science research community as a whole must address if the goals of e-Social Science – and indeed e-Science more broadly – are to be fully realized.

In Phase I, the NCeSS programme is laying the foundations to ensure its mission will be delivered and it is beginning to demonstrate significant impact. Social science research is being undertaken that would not have been possible without the Centre’s innovatory work on e-Infrastructure and methods. Progress is being made in creating pathways that will facilitate the transfer of these efforts by the pioneering minority (the ‘early adopters’) to the wider social science research community, raise awareness of the potential of e-Infrastructure to support domain research, and tackle the barriers which might otherwise discourage or slow down adoption. During this first phase, NCeSS has established relations with a broad range of other ESRC investments and is widely recognised as a key player in the UK e-Science community. Internationally, two independent external reviews of the Centre have demonstrated that UK e-Social Science is regarded as world-leading. To maintain its position, NCeSS is continuing to invest significant effort in collaborations with national and international partners.

In taking forward its research programme into Phase II and beyond, NCeSS faces several important challenges, including: fostering synergies across its component parts and with e-Science research more generally; widening adoption by tackling barriers to uptake and constraints on collaboration; navigating between competing technical solutions and standards; measuring impact, especially in terms of fostering advances in substantive social research; and the sustainability of e-Infrastructure from research through development to maintenance and support of mature tools and services.

This paper sets out the roadmap for tackling these challenges. In particular, it describes a change in focus for Phase II: while the programme will continue to work with the early adopters to achieve advances in leading-edge social science research, the roadmap reflects the fact that its future impact will be assessed in terms of the progress the NCeSS programme makes in disseminating these advances in methods and tools throughout the wider social science research community.