

Reasons for setting up a multi-disciplinary International Society for Longitudinal & Life Course Research

1. Longitudinal and life course research is a fast growing field as demand increases for information collected in long-term studies of individuals and in long-term panel studies of households. This growing requirement from scientists across the whole spectrum of social and life sciences and from policy analysts and policy makers is being generated by the development of new and multi-disciplinary models of the long-term processes of physical and mental development and ageing, and of family dynamics.
2. The demand is also seen in growing concern for information about the impact of changes in the physical, social, and economic environment on the development of individuals as well as family functioning and health and well-being. There are, consequently, new demands on the well-established longitudinal and panel studies as the requirements and possibilities for innovative research become clear. New research ideas are enhanced by the addition of DNA resources and by sources of new data on the environment and on individual development and change with age across the physical and social domains of life. The growing interest in the bio-social ecology of development is reflected in the expanded use of area study, multilevel longitudinal survey designs and social, biographical and ethnographic investigations alongside national probability samples.
3. In addition, new and much larger longitudinal and panel studies are being set up in Britain and in many other countries, with particular emphasis on the health and well-being of individuals, and on the response to environmental and economic and social change. These new studies are making extensive use of innovative ideas in the biological, behavioural and social sciences, about what can be measured and how it can be done in large scale data collections. There is also considerable interest in ways of linking information about the same individuals from different data sources. Such developments present new challenges in handling the on-going problems of attrition and non response, and measurement error in longitudinal data.
4. Having a number of life course studies begun at different historical times and in different cultures raises the question of how best to exploit the potential scientific and policy value of comparing their findings within and across societies.
5. These extensive innovations and increasing data complexity are generating new thinking about and innovation in data analysis about how best to make measurements comparable across studies and across time. Difficult ethical and data protection questions are raised by collecting, storing and using such data. There are also important questions about resources, both economic and human, in this expanding field.
6. Currently there is no single forum for communications, and for forming collaborative opportunities, in the life course research to which the new data resources and methodological developments provide the foundations. The proposed multi-disciplinary Society, and its associated on-line journal (Longitudinal & Life Course Studies) offers the means for scientists and policy makers to meet this need.