RESEARCH UPDATE

Heritage Research: The AHRC Heritage Priority Area

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Introduction

Since January 2017, the UCL Institute of Archaeology has been the institutional base of the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) Heritage Priority Area Leadership team. The team, led by AHRC Heritage Priority Area Leadership Fellow and Professor of Heritage Studies at the UCL Institute of Archaeology Rodney Harrison, are funded to undertake their work initially for a period of three years until the end of 2019. This brief research update provides an overview of the work of the priority area and AHRC's investment in world leading heritage research, with particular reference to the AHRC's Heritage Priority Area: Future Directions research strategy, which was updated in consultation with the team in March 2018.

The AHRC Heritage Priority Area

The Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) is one of seven UK research councils. In April 2018, AHRC became part of UK Research and Innovation, a new organisation that brings together the UK's seven Research Councils, Innovate UK and Research England to maximise the contribution of each Council and create an enhanced environment for research and innovation to flourish (**Figure 1**).

In *The Human World*, the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) Strategy

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(2013–2018), the AHRC committed to further 'increase its work with organisations such as the UK-wide arts funding bodies, broadcasters and the museums, galleries and libraries sector to promote public understanding and appreciation of the arts, culture and heritage' (2013: 24). The AHRC's Heritage Priority Area builds on earlier investments in substantial heritage related research funded through AHRC's responsive mode research schemes, post-graduate training, international and knowledge exchange funding. It also connects with past thematic initiatives, including the AHRC Museums and Galleries Programme (2005–10) and joint AHRC-EPSRC Science and Heritage Programme (2007–12) and with other AHRC thematic initiatives such as Care for the Future, Digital Transformations, Science in Culture, Translating Cultures, Conflict, Connected Communities and the Creative Economy. Additionally, it builds upon a range of targeted calls and collaborations both in the UK and internationally, including the European Joint Programming Initiative (JPI) on Cultural Heritage and Global Change. The priority area also seeks to further develop partnership work across the sector, including for example ten years of AHRC funding for a range of heritage organisations such as independent research organisations (IROs), as recognised in the recent report *A Decade of Success* (AHRC 2017), and through collaborative doctoral awards and partnerships.

In 2016, the AHRC invited applications for Leadership Fellows to provide intellectual leadership and strategic advice in its three
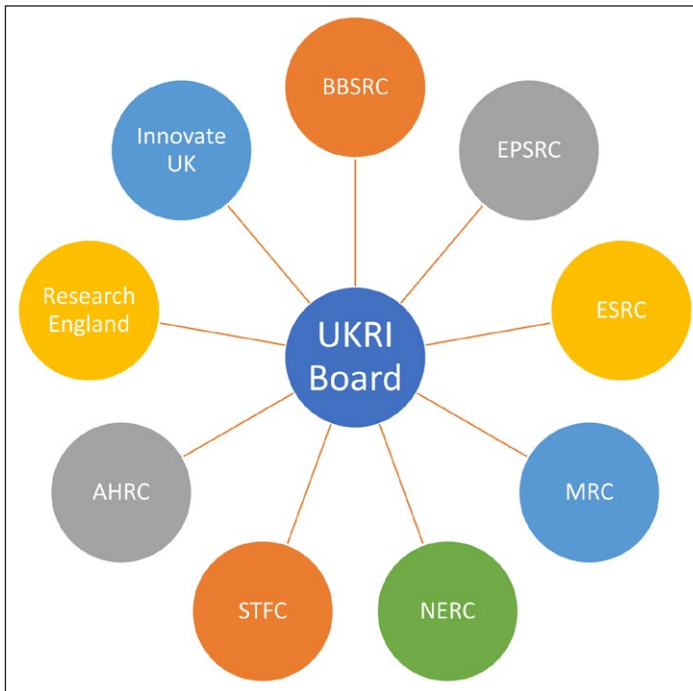
Figure 1: Under the Higher Education and Research Act 2017, the new UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) landscape is such that all seven Research Councils become committees of UKRI instead of statutory bodies in their own right. Illustration produced by Rodney Harrison.

priority areas—Design, Heritage, and Modern Languages. Fellowships would be three years in duration. The successful applicants would work closely with the AHRC's Director of Research, Associate Directors of Programmes and other senior Research Council staff to:

· enrich the intellectual agenda for the priority area: building upon and harnessing the potential within the activities funded by the AHRC and the broader Research Council portfolio of relevant activities; gathering intelligence on existing areas of strength and innovation; identifying opportunities to add distinctive value to the existing research landscape; identifying potentially challenging areas or issues with the potential to bring research disciplines into dialogue and stimulate cross-disciplinary debate; generating new opportunities for research creativity, innovation,

critical reflection and cross-disciplinary collaboration or contestation and for broadening engagement with research from across the remits of the participating Research Councils.

· take a lead in engaging with broader research communities (UK and overseas) with the outcomes from the priority area and its potential contribution to the development of related research fields (e.g. identifying and synthesising key emerging research areas, approaches and outcomes, convening thematic sessions at conferences, editing/co-ordinating collaborative publications such as edited collections, special editions of journals, etc.).

· promote collaboration and the development of synergies and debate between activities funded by AHRC and across disciplinary, institutional and other boundaries (e.g. leading networking

meetings/events, identifying potential collaborative opportunities between projects/across subject areas etc.) and also encouraging links with relevant research funded within and outside the Research Councils and other funders.

· act as an advocate for the priority area through engaging with a broad range of researchers, stakeholders and publics.

· advise on potential opportunities for collaboration with AHRC's other Strategic Themes and programmes, other RCUK strategic programmes (e.g. Connected Communities) and on linkages to other individual Research Council priorities and investments and with other major relevant research initiatives (e.g. internationally).

· identify potential benefits and impacts from activities within the priority area and build a narrative about its development and achievements.

· provide advice to AHRC and other senior Research Council staff and to the relevant advisory groups on the overall strategic direction and development of the priority area and on future calls and activities, including—where appropriate—providing strategic advice to relevant commissioning panels for calls on issues such as the overall fit and contribution to the priority area.

Rodney Harrison was appointed Heritage Priority Area Leadership Fellow in late 2016 and began his term of three years in the role at the beginning of 2017. Colin Sterling was a named postdoctoral research associate on the application. Hana Morel was appointed to the other postdoctoral research associate role in 2017. Subsequently, Hannah Williams was appointed to the role of executive assistant to the priority area leadership fellow.

Our approach and activities

Central to the priority area is the idea that heritage should not be understood as something which is 'stuck in the past', but rather as a series of highly variable practical and discursive fields which employ diverse and

contingent strategies for building resilient and sustainable *futures* (Harrison et al. 2016). Equally important is a commitment to inter-disciplinarity, and an acknowledgement of the need to develop and expand existing and emergent networks which connect scholars, practitioners and civil society organisations or interested members of the public. It is clear that it is not possible to study heritage from a single disciplinary vantage point. In the context of the Anthropocene, in which humans have become the primary geological and climatological force of change on Earth, it is similarly no longer possible to argue that the divisions between 'nature' and 'culture' are meaningful (see Chakrabarty 2009; Lewis and Maslin 2018). The priority area thus aims to develop an expanded understanding of heritage which works across traditional boundaries, bringing 'natural' and 'cultural' heritage research and practice into closer conversation with one another, whilst simultaneously troubling and seeking to explore the connections between other conventional dichotomies; 'tangible' and 'intangible' heritage, and 'western' and 'non-western' approaches, for example. It is strongly comparative in approach and aims to connect heritage with the most important global challenges of our time.

These approaches are developed through a portfolio of leadership and research activities which have been designed to align with, and extend, the AHRC's Heritage Strategic Priority Area Future Strategy. Accordingly, the priority area has three broad aims: to further develop heritage research as an innovative and broad cross-disciplinary field; to extend collaborations, partnerships, knowledge exchange and pathways to impact in cultural heritage research; and to enhance research capability for heritage research as a cross-disciplinary and collaborative field of enquiry. Acknowledging the significant changes in the research environment which have been instigated by the announcement of the Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF)—a £1.5 billion fund created by the UK Government in late 2015 to support cutting-edge research that addresses the

challenges faced by developing countries—it also aims to explore opportunities for the Arts, Humanities and Social and Historical Sciences to engage with Sustainable Development Goals and to address the aims of the GCRF through their research.

The Heritage Priority Area team have been working with the AHRC to develop a programme of events and activities which will help to address these aims. Formally launched at a 3-day "residency" at the British Academy in October 2017, these initiatives have included a workshop on heritage and data which explored challenges and opportunities for the sector (Harrison et al. 2017), workshops and conferences for Early Career Researchers, book panel discussions, round tables which have brought together practitioners, researchers and policy makers to discuss issues of shared concern, and symposia around a range of different themes. These events have been well attended and we continue to use them to understand the specific needs of the heritage research community and to refine our future plans. Our "Heritage and Global Challenges" workshop, held at the British Academy on the 6th of October 2017, aimed to explore the intersections and relevance of heritage research to the GCRF research agenda, supported by case study presentations by GCRF-funded heritage researchers and relevant RCUK representatives. The day was organised around three panels, which focused specifically on:

· Designing challenge-led and interdisciplinary heritage research;
· Strengthening capacity for challenge-led heritage research in the UK and developing countries;
· Addressing development needs: embedding official development assistance (ODA) compliance within heritage research.

The workshop provided participants with the opportunity to learn more about the GCRF strategy and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) ODA guidelines (which requires activities to demonstrate they are contributing towards economic development i.e. poverty reduction and improving welfare, or advancing sustainable development goals), and to share their research alongside other researchers to form new networks and partnerships between and across institutions and the heritage sector. The presentations did not only focus on the successes of existing projects but also addressed some of the challenges of GCRF funding. Outcomes from the workshop included discussions which have helped shape future funding calls and GCRF research agendas (**Figure 2**). We have had the opportunity to reflect discussions from this and other workshops in recent revisions to the AHRC Heritage Research Strategy (AHRC 2018).

We also have our own specific set of research themes, which we aim to engage as part of our research and leadership activities. These themes were defined at the start of the Fellowship and were highlighted as areas in which key priorities for heritage as well as global challenges overlapped. This overlap also invites us to look at the relationship between global and local—or scale and scope—and how both the cause and effect impact this scale and scope in different ways. These include the following:

· *Climate change:* if heritage has conventionally been understood as preservation practices which aim to slow or hold back processes of transformation and decay, how can we engage creatively with issues relating to environmental change?
· *Data, technology and social change:* In what ways are big data and new technologies driving change within the heritage sector? How might heritage researchers engage them productively?
· *Future heritages:* What are the emergent forms of future heritages? How do particular forms of heritage practice help to assemble and design specific future worlds?
· *The Global Challenge Research Fund (GCRF):* What is the relationship between heritage and sustainable development
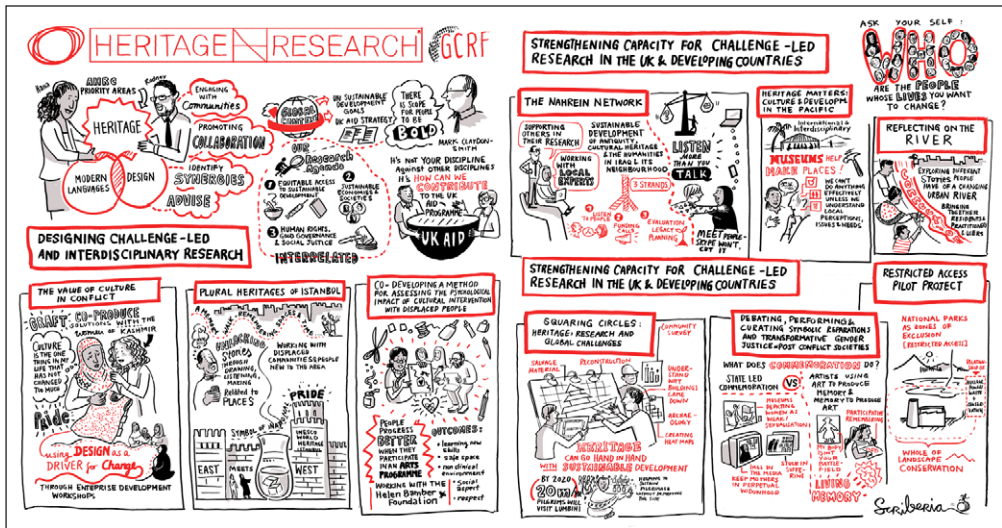
Figure 2: Visual summary of the Heritage and Global Challenges Workshop, organised by the AHRC Heritage Priority Area Team and held at the British Academy on 6ᵗʰ October 2017. Illustration produced by Somang Lee for Scriberia.

goals and how might heritage researchers more effectively engage with the new global challenges research fund agenda?

- *Inclusion, exclusion and diversity:* If heritage is fundamentally concerned with collecting "diversity-at-risk", why has it also emerged as one of the primary means by which human difference is articulated in contemporary identity politics? How does heritage work to include and exclude?

- *Nature, culture and the posthumanities:* How might heritage engage with developments in the posthumanities and acknowledge more-than-human publics? What is the relationship between natural and cultural heritages?

- *Sustainable and unsustainable development:* What is the role of heritage in sustainable and international development? How might an acknowledgement of the limits of preserving, conserving and collecting allow us to reimagine the role of heritage in society?

- *The UK in Europe:* How is heritage implicated in issues such as Brexit, the European Migrant Crisis, the rise of neo-nationalisms and post-truth?

We pursue these themes both through empirical research funded as part of the project, as well as through our planned events and activities. Each of the themes have emerging research questions which are being refined in relation to our own work and the work of other AHRC funded researchers engaging these topics. These can be found on our website, which we will continue to develop along with each of the areas as we come into the final years of the project.

Discussion and Conclusion

One of our initial findings from speaking with members of the heritage research community and reviewing the data related to funded projects on heritage in the UK is that it is relatively dispersed across a range of different disciplines and in that sense does not have a single clear disciplinary "home". This finding has been reinforced by looking at the range of disciplines represented at our conferences (participants and audiences), workshops, online showcasing of heritage case studies (see see #heritagecasestudies on Twitter), as well as collaborative activities. We will continue to work with the AHRC and UKRI to ensure that heritage is recognised as

a distinctive area of interdisciplinary research with connections to some of the UK's most important parts of the cultural and environmental sectors, and a key driver for innovation and the creative economy.

Amongst our plans in this regard are:

– a book publication, edited volume and linked series of events on the posthumanities and Anthropocene heritages;
– a conference on 'Engaging with Policy' which invites government officials, civil servants, academic researchers, professional body representatives, civil society organisations and other arts/heritage organisations to discuss contributing towards calls for evidence and government consultations;
– Ongoing collaboration with the ICOMOS Heritage and Climate Change working group identifying the role of heritage in adaptations to climate change, which has already led to the passing of a significant resolution at the 19th General Assembly in December 2017 in Delhi, Resolution 19GA 2017/21 "Mobilising ICOMOS and the Cultural Heritage Community to Help Meet the Challenge of Climate Change" (ICOMOS 2017);
– Further work on data and heritage.

We believe our activities will be helpful in drawing together and galvanising researchers in the field of heritage studies and helping them to engage relevant international and heritage sector partners in their research. We also aim to help them communicate the value of their research to policy makers, both at home and abroad. It is clear that there is significant potential for critical heritage studies researchers not only to demonstrate how their work can shine a light on the function of natural and cultural heritage conservation processes and practices in contemporary society, but also harness the possibility for their research to contribute to social, political, economic and ecological change. We look forward to continuing to work with heritage researchers across a range

of different disciplines to explore these issues, both in the UK and internationally.

Acknowledgements

Competing Interests
The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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