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Leading UK institutions: new ‘culture’ and revised approach to funding required for more effective collaborative research

A working culture and longer-term approach to funding that reflects the changing landscape of heritage science is essential for delivering impactful research, a team, representing several of the UK’s foremost cultural and academic institutions, has found.

The AHRC/EPSRC* Science and Heritage Programme funded project, **Mind the Gap: Rigour and Relevance in Heritage Science Research** examined the perceived gap between researchers and users of research*, thought to be hindering effective collaboration and limiting the impact of research. The [report](#) by representatives from The National Archives, Tate, the UCL Centre for Sustainable Heritage and University of Exeter found the sharp distinction between researchers and practitioners* was inaccurate, with a growing group of professionals identifying themselves as spanning both roles. The report emphasises the need for heritage science to respond to this reality and recommends that funding extends over longer periods to grow and sustain partnerships between organisations committed to promoting collaborative heritage science research.

“Our research reveals that achieving successful collaboration in the field of heritage science is a complex and dynamic process,” said **Nancy Bell of The National Archives and principal investigator for the project**. She continued, *“As funders are increasingly championing interdisciplinary research projects to address some of society’s biggest challenges, the quality of collaboration will be even more important in the delivery of effective research with meaningful outcomes”*. She added: *“While technology is making collaboration easier, people remain central to its success”*.

Recommendations

The [report](#) is based on a study, led by UCL Centre for Sustainable Heritage, of 210 participants involved in collaborative heritage science projects. The research highlights the distinct features of the culture necessary to support effective collaborative research and makes a series of recommendations for researchers, research organisations and funders.

Specifically, universities and cultural organisations are advised to publicise their research strategies and provide suitable support to research teams. In turn researchers should make clear how their proposals meet the goals of their research organisations and build in enough time to develop a common language among project partners. Secondments between academic and cultural organisations to cultivate professionals whose roles span both researcher and practitioner are also advised.

The importance of the approach taken by funding bodies was also addressed, suggesting that prior to funding complex collaborative projects, that networking groups or projects be initiated as a valuable way for trust to develop naturally over a longer time

frame. Additionally, funders should consider developing training packages for prospective collaborative researchers.

The report suggests that some* of the recommendations could be achieved by promoting best practice collaboration in the field of heritage science and through pre-project partnership funding for organisations to establish stronger foundations for collaborative research.

Responding to the report on behalf AHRC, a funder of collaborative research, **Professor Mark Llewellyn, Director of Research at AHRC**, commented: *“The perceived division between researchers and practitioners in the field of heritage science stimulated the Mind the Gap project. But what the report evidences is the much more fluid and fruitful interactions that are taking-place in this field. Increasingly, high-quality research is conceived and delivered through cross-sectoral and cross-organisational partnerships, and building on the Science and Heritage Programme and the kinds of new dialogues it has facilitated is important.”*

He continued: *“To achieve the full potential of these exchanges we must capitalise on the capabilities of an array of institutions, researchers, and professionals. The Mind the Gap report provides a context to see where work remains to be done, including for the AHRC as a funder, in embedding best practice and enabling a full range of opportunities to support innovative collaborations for the future”.*

Project origins

The need to understand the working culture of researchers and users of research working collaboratively emerged as an issue from AHRC/EPSRC Science and Heritage Programme Research Clusters (2008). Differences in language, research methodologies, expectations and priorities were cited as hindering the success of collaborative research projects, which in turn could potentially limit the effectiveness and impact of publicly funded research.

Using an online questionnaire the Mind the Gap project surveyed academic researchers and practitioners across the heritage science field engaged in collaborative research in the last five years. The study found that while on the whole respondents had a positive experience of collaboration, fewer than half* (49%) believed the impact of their research would be realised. Those engaged in the research from a practitioner perspective were typically less satisfied with project outcomes and achievements than researcher academics. And surprisingly approximately one third of respondents reported holding dual roles of both researcher and practitioner.

The responses suggested several features of effective research collaboration including opportunities to meet other professionals for knowledge exchange, developing common or complementary goals among partners and limiting the number of disciplines engaged in collaborative research to fewer than six. Importantly, respondents felt collaborative research promoted shared goals that helped bridge the gap between researchers and users of research.

Concluding on the research, **Professor Andrew Thompson of The University of Exeter and co-investigator for the project** said: *“One of the many reasons why this study is so welcome and timely is that it provides new insights into the shifting dynamics of collaborative research in heritage science - the blurring of boundaries between heritage researchers and heritage professionals, the critical contributions made by early*

career researchers to the forging of partnerships between universities and heritage organisations, and the importance of such partnerships as a source of innovation as well as impact in heritage research. As such the project's findings have implications that stretch beyond the realm of heritage science and speak to the heritage sector as a whole.”

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For more information or interviews please contact
frances.mcdarby@nationalarchives.gsi.gov.uk, 07961 983 240.

Notes to editors

Definitions

* The AHRC/EPSRC Science and Heritage Programme is sponsored by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) and Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC).

* In the study we define the term **researchers** as academic researchers, and **users/practitioners** as those who use research evidence in practice.

The report

*For a comprehensive list of **study findings** and **recommendations** see the full report on the Mind the Gap web page <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/about/mind-the-gap.htm>

****Is there a rigour and relevance gap?***

Most respondents reported a positive experience of collaborative research and aspired to both academic rigour and relevance in their projects. However, while most respondents (84%) were satisfied that the aims of their project were achieved, fewer than half (49%) were satisfied that the impact of the project would be realised. Practice-focused goals were particularly associated with lower levels of achievement. Practitioners were typically less satisfied with project outcomes, achievements than researchers

About the project

[*Mind the Gap: Rigour and Relevance in Heritage Science Research*](#) is investigating the experiences of participants in Science and Heritage Research who felt there were hindrances to effective research collaborations. Commonly reported issues included absence of shared language, different working cultures, expectations and research methodologies. These experiences are not unique to the science and heritage sector. Other practice-led disciplines engaged in interdisciplinary work have reported anecdotally that there is a 'gap' in expectations between achieving academic rigour in research, and end-users or practitioners wanting research relevant to their area of practice.

Using an online questionnaire, an empirical study exploring what helps and hinders collaborative research was completed with 210 respondents representing a return rate of 40%. Further insights were provided by the project partners, representing a broad base of experienced collections-based researchers and scientists and academics in the fields of linguistics, anthropology, education, organisational theory, information management, conservation science and archaeology.

About AHRC/EPSRC Science and Heritage Programme

The AHRC/EPSRC Science and Heritage Programme was established to provide the intellectual framework and to fund research activities to deepen understanding and widen participation in the field of heritage science research. The Programme aims to strengthen and develop the hybrid discipline of heritage science through interdisciplinary research of its different facets, increase the number of researchers in the field and communicate new knowledge to policy, practice and public domains. Since its launch in 2007, the Programme has supported 39 projects, totaling over £7 million of investment in heritage science research. The Programme is jointly funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) and Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC).

About The National Archives

For the record, for good...The National Archives is a government department and an executive agency of the Ministry of Justice (MoJ). As the official archive of the UK government and England and Wales, we

look after and make available to the public a collection of historical records dating back over 1,000 years, including records as diverse as Domesday Book and MI5 files.

Our 21st-century role is to collect and secure the future of the record, both digital and physical, to preserve it for generations to come, and to make it as accessible as possible. We do this by devising technological solutions to ensure the long-term survival of public records and working to widen access to our collection. The National Archives also advises on information management across government, publishes all UK legislation, manages Crown copyright and leads the archive sector. We work to promote and improve access to public sector information and its re-use.

About the UCL Centre for Sustainable Heritage

Established in March 2001 at University College London (UCL), the Centre for Sustainable Heritage is an interdisciplinary team focused on research and teaching in sustainable heritage and heritage science. The Centre engages in evidence-based research and through its teaching activities challenges the traditional divide between preservation and use. It is the Centre's belief that scientific and technological research helps to create an understanding of the contribution that heritage preservation makes to society by elaborating on issues such as heritage value, cultural tourism, cultural identity, quality of life, urban planning, maintenance and whole life costs, economic competitiveness and wealth creation. Currently, the Centre is leading an emerging cross-disciplinary research network on cultural heritage across UCL.

About the University of Exeter

The University of Exeter is a Russell Group university and in the top one percent of institutions globally. It combines world-class research with very high levels of student satisfaction. Exeter has over 18,000 students and is ranked 8th in *The Times and The Sunday Times Good University Guide* league table, 10th in *The Complete University Guide* and 12th in the *Guardian University Guide 2014*. In the 2008 Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) 90% of the University's research was rated as being at internationally recognised levels and 16 of its 31 subjects are ranked in the top 10, with 27 subjects ranked in the top 20. Exeter was *The Sunday Times* University of the Year 2012-13.

The University has invested strategically to deliver more than £350 million worth of new facilities across its campuses in the last few years; including landmark new student services centres - the Forum in Exeter and The Exchange on the Penryn Campus in Cornwall, together with world-class new facilities for Biosciences, the Business School and the Environment and Sustainability Institute. There are plans for another £330 million of investment between now and 2016.

www.exeter.ac.uk

About Tate

Tate is a family of four galleries, Tate Britain, Tate Modern, Tate Liverpool and Tate St. Ives. Founded in 1897, Tate holds the United Kingdom's national collection of British art since 1500 and of international and modern art since 1900, comprising a total of 67,663 works. Tate's mission is to promote public knowledge, understanding and enjoyment of British, modern and contemporary art. Exhibition, learning and interpretation programmes enable visitors of all ages and backgrounds to experience and appreciate the national collection of art. In 2012/13, 7,746,953 people visited the Tate galleries. Tate also leads the museum sector in exploiting new media technology, actively engaging large audiences through innovative online and multimedia programmes. Tate is a leading centre for research in visual art, collection care, learning and museum studies.