



Arts & Humanities  
Research Council

## Future Directions for Arts and Humanities Research:

### A Consultation

## **Future Directions for Arts and Humanities Research: A Consultation**

### ***Preface***

We are publishing 'Future Directions' to facilitate consultation with the arts and humanities research community. The AHRC's document, 'Arts and Humanities Research Landscape' (<http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/About/Policy/Pages/CorporateDocuments.aspx>) provides a history of the Council's achievements to date and outlines in detail the rapidly changing context in which it is currently operating. During the summer of 2008 AHRC senior staff consulted colleagues in the academic community, through institutional and subject association visits as well as one-off events, to elicit views on the Council's evolving strategy and future directions. At two away days, the AHRC Council considered these priorities and proposed 'directions of travel'. In the light of the input from these sources, this document outlines the future directions for the AHRC and seeks the assistance of the UK arts and humanities research community and other stakeholders in charting the way forward.

You will see that our approach is both simpler and more flexible. We have sought to move away from unhelpful debates about 'responsive vs directed' or 'individual vs collaborative'. We have already announced one example of this: to consolidate different kinds of fellowship into one category (that also embraces research leave). We would like the notion of 'strategic' to embrace priorities in core arts and humanities research as seen by the community as well as themes that emerge as national priorities, and we need your help, through this consultation, on both counts.

I trust that you will find the questions for this consultation to be well formulated and I do urge you to respond – as individuals or as representatives of organisations with an interest in arts and humanities research. Our future programme will provide the foundations of much of our social and cultural evolution and nothing can be more important than that.

Sir Alan Wilson  
Chair, Arts and Humanities Research Council

### **Why 'Future Directions'?**

As the AHRC approaches its fourth anniversary on 1<sup>st</sup> April 2009, our rapidly changing context and the prospect of a Government Spending Review impel us to take stock of where we are and what we must do to maintain our distinctive and valued role among the Research Councils, while securing continued real growth in funding for arts and humanities research. Over the last four years the AHRC has benefited from a 35% uplift in funding, from £80.5 million in 2005/06 to £109 million announced for 2010/11, significantly increasing the funds available for arts and humanities research, in consequence of our successful outcomes in SR 2004 and CSR 2007.

Our most distinctive contribution to arts and humanities research in the UK builds on the work of our predecessor body, the AHRB, and lies in our unique support for large-scale, collaborative research in the arts and humanities. At any one time the AHRC is supporting some 2000 researchers working on such projects (from networks and workshops to large grants) and devoting approximately 85% of its research budget to them. Such collaborative research allows large and complex problems, often of pressing national importance, to be addressed and generates valuable managerial, financial and personal skills among those involved in it. The AHRC is thus distinctively responsible for supporting 'big arts and humanities' in the UK research landscape.

In addition, we have developed our support for arts and humanities researchers in numerous ways and radically overhauled how we operate. While retaining the majority of our research funding for curiosity-driven areas, we have commenced new strategic programmes, like 'Religion and Society', 'Beyond Text' and 'Science and Heritage'. We have been active in cross-Research Council programmes, such as 'Global Uncertainties', 'Ageing', 'Digital Economy' and 'Living with Environmental Change', which demonstrate the important role of arts and humanities research in the UK's integrated research landscape where our contribution is needed to address the big problems of our age. We have opened up new opportunities for international research collaboration, such as in the Humanities in European Research Area ERA-NET and the AHRC/Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft agreement. We have pioneered novel methods of knowledge transfer that produce exciting evidence for the impact of our research. We have introduced Collaborative Doctoral Awards and encouraged greater use of doctoral scholarships in research grants. This year we are transforming our postgraduate support by the introduction of Block Grant Partnerships that

for the first time will mean that the HEIs we support in this way will have integrated their postgraduate training with their institutional research and knowledge transfer strategies. We are replacing our Research Leave scheme with a much more flexible and effective Fellowships programme. We are introducing new and improved structures for making decisions about grant applications and have re-organised our Programmes division so that our staff are more outward facing and meshed with our research communities.

Throughout all this, the AHRC's core mission, in line with its Royal Charter and in the formulation accepted by all Research Councils, has been to support research that delivers 'excellence with impact'. The AHRC supports research in the arts and humanities that has world-class quality, which is driven by research questions or problems of strategic significance and academic urgency that result in outputs that exhibit both academic excellence and impact. The quality and outcomes of the research are therefore of greater significance than the disciplinary origins of the research, or whether the research is conducted by individuals or groups. The AHRC also has a responsibility to sustain future research capability through postgraduate and early career training and support, and in this regard has a strategic role to play in supporting both endangered and emerging disciplines and mitigating any negative effects of demographics on the future capacity of higher education. Finally, the AHRC undertakes to encourage and initiate partnerships between academic researchers and other public and private sector organisations, and enables networks of researchers to exchange ideas across disciplinary and sector boundaries, thus further enhancing the impact of research.

Since its formation as a Council, the AHRC has been positioning itself to realise this mission and to support researchers to achieve these aims. The recent changes mentioned above have all been undertaken to ensure that the AHRC can continue to take a leadership role in fostering research of strategic importance; training and sustaining the careers of researchers; and promoting relationships and networks that can maximise the impact of research. 'Future Directions' indicates the ways in which the AHRC intends to consolidate and focus its priorities as it takes an increasingly strategic approach to research.

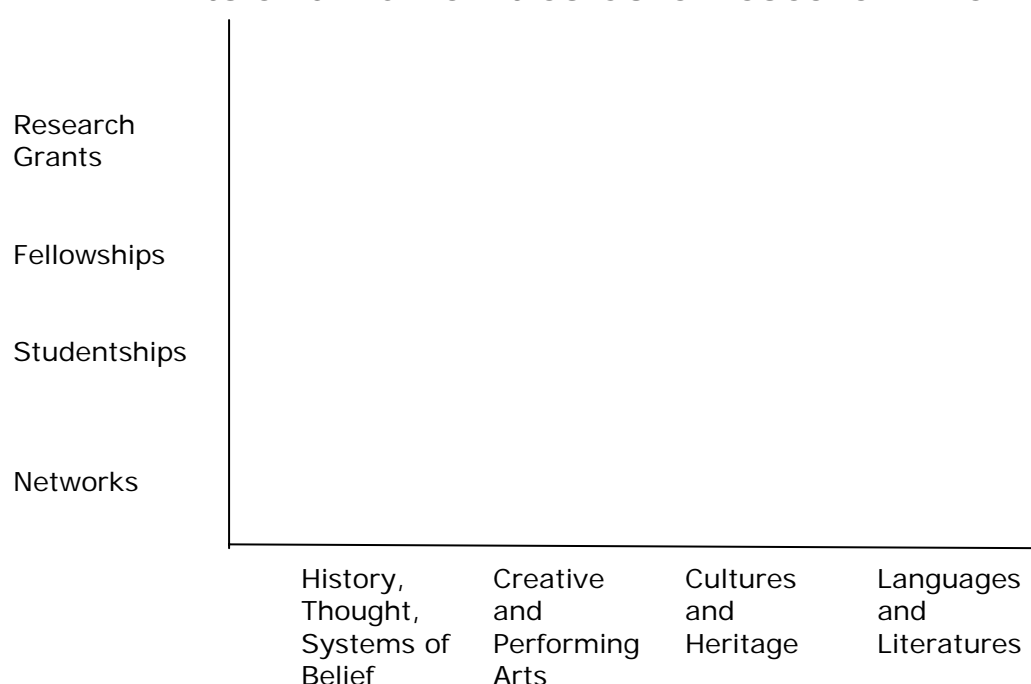
## Taking a more Strategic Approach to Research

### ***Arts and Humanities Core Themes***

The AHRC believes that distinctions between ‘responsive’ and ‘strategic/directed’ mode funding have in the past created an unhelpful and misleading dichotomy, in that attitudes have developed within the academic community that see ‘directed’ funding as instrumental, or as antithetical to blue skies research. Evidence from both responsive and strategic programmes funded by the AHRC has demonstrated that the best research comes from the initiatives and insights of the researchers themselves, but that impact can be extended if the research can be matched to areas of strategic importance and if researchers work in partnership with other stakeholders in the public, private or third sectors. As it develops its new funding priorities over the next few years, the AHRC wishes to consider a spectrum of funding modes, from research themes that reflect the overall priorities of arts and humanities research and are therefore highly responsive to the research community, to cross-Council programmes which are often focused on major societal challenges and therefore may be strongly ‘directed’.

The diagram below represents a new way of conceiving AHRC’s strategic approach to research:

### **Arts and Humanities Core Research Themes**



**Axis X** represents four areas of arts and humanities research which encompass a range of disciplines and approaches. These areas correspond to the core values of arts and humanities research. In broad terms, arts and humanities research enhances the deepest understanding of: individual and communal identities; ideas and beliefs; creativity; cultures (including their institutions and their artefacts); and human communication in both the past and the present. Arts and humanities research achieves this depth through methods of questioning, challenging, probing, debating and unearthing the complexity of what it means to be human. While these core values are expansive and fundamental to the research landscape, the AHRC considers that they can be conceptualised into four principal areas:

*History, Thought and Systems of Belief.* Research in these areas discloses how people have lived in the past in different environments; how they have expressed themselves in legal, political and popular documents, legislation and texts; and what this tells us about the values they share and where divergence lies. Research in these areas also identifies the spiritual, moral, ethical and legal bases of human thought and behaviour.

*Creative and Performing Arts.* Research in these areas enriches the originality, quality and significance of creative outputs in visual art, music, design, architecture, music, dance, drama, exhibition and creative writing for contemporary audiences and probes the significance of creative practices in the past. It also offers innovative practice-led methods of tackling research problems across a range of disciplines.

*Cultures and Heritage.* Research in these areas interprets material artefacts, ancient civilisations and non-traditional textual sources (such as digital media), to determine how and why artefacts were made and used; how they were and are classified and displayed; why they have been valued; how we preserve, conserve and cultivate cultural and intellectual heritage; and how people access and engage with this heritage. Research in these areas also considers how

human beings understand and interpret the natural and physical places and spaces in which they live.

*Languages and Literatures.* Research in these areas evaluates how people have expressed themselves in all forms of prose, poetry and fiction across the globe, what this expression reveals about societies, priorities and beliefs, and how human beings have used language to make sense of their world and to engage with each other.

There are, of course, numerous overlaps among these core areas, and researchers working within specific disciplines, as well as those working in interdisciplinary fields, may feel their work touches upon all of them. Nevertheless, by classifying our research in this way, we are opening up opportunities for researchers to consider their work within perspectives less driven by distinctions between arts and humanities disciplines and to apply for grants across a wider range of areas than in the past.

**Axis Y** represents the mechanisms by which we will fund research. These mechanisms will vary according to the needs of the programme or project: research grants enable large collaborative projects, Fellowships enable individuals to undertake focused work in a variety of ways, studentships (including project studentships and collaborative doctoral awards) enhance the training and capacity of future generations of researchers, and networks enable the development of new relationships and exchanges of ideas.

The AHRC contends that during the life of a research project a variety of methods will be used by the researcher(s) in charge of the project. There will be occasions when collaborations with colleagues—whether co-organising conferences, co-authoring papers, working with Ph.D. students, etc.—will enable a project to flourish, and other times when a buy-out from core duties will allow a researcher to visit unexplored sources, work closely with researchers in another organisation in the UK or abroad, or write up the research. The mechanisms listed here have been developed with this full range of research activity in mind.

## ***Cross-Cutting Strategic Themes***

While these four areas represent the intellectual core of arts and humanities research, the AHRC will also develop strategic themes that cut across these areas. These themes can be either those that address vital questions in arts and humanities research, be developed with international and/or other partners, or be cross-Council programmes to which the arts and humanities can make a major contribution. The AHRC believes that the areas of research it supports are of indispensable value to most cross-Council programmes, and as part of our 'Future Directions' we want to ensure greater visibility within RCUK. We intend to undertake this by continuing to use our 'place at the table' on cross-Council working groups to reinforce the significant contribution the AHRC can make to such major research challenges as digital economy, environmental change, lifelong health and wellbeing, and global security; developing new challenges, such as 'connected communities'; and ensuring a successful move from Bristol to join the other Research Councils in Swindon, where our physical presence will allow greater interaction with our other Council colleagues.

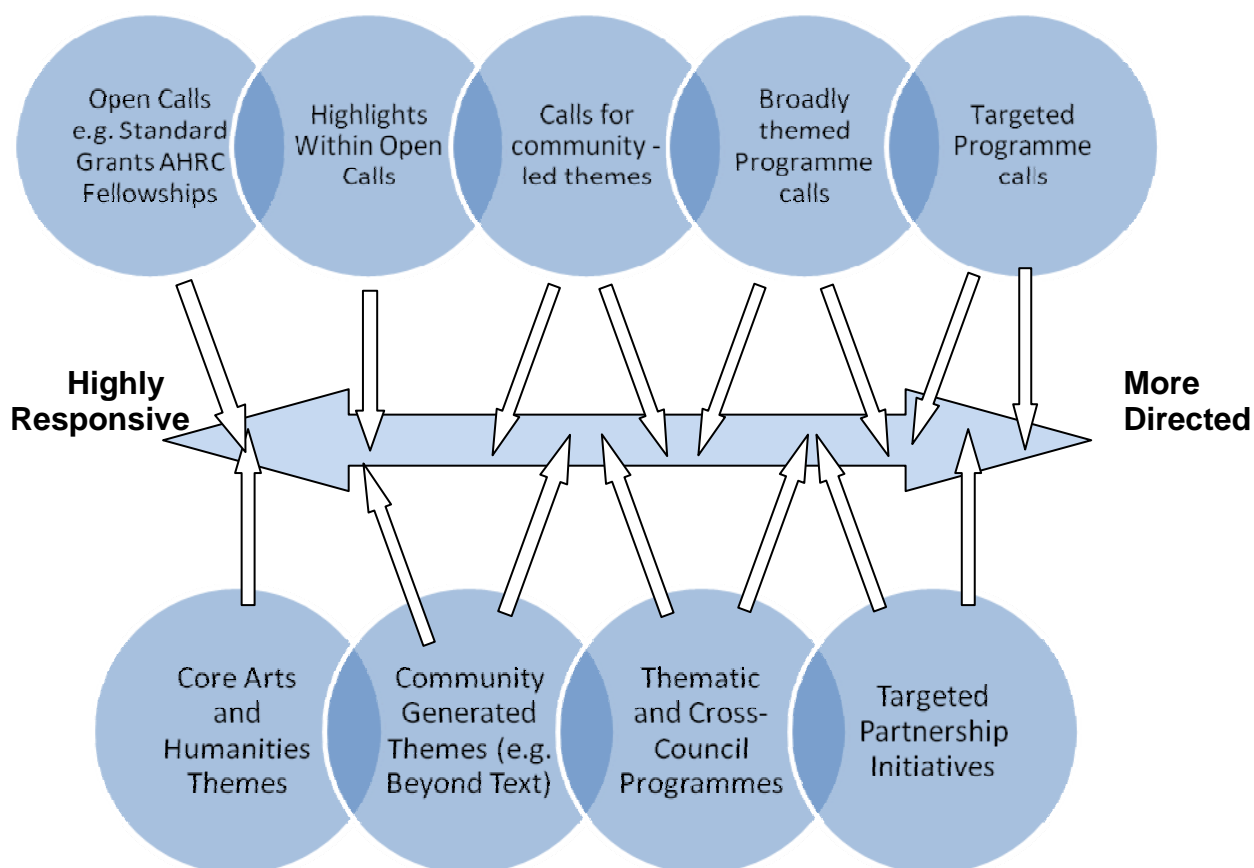
## ***Generating Themes with the Academic Community***

In the past, strategic themes supported by the AHRC have emerged through a variety of means. Some themes have emerged after an open call to the arts and humanities research community, while cross-Council themes are normally generated through dialogue among Research Councils and then are developed with working groups formed of academics and other stakeholders. As part of our strategy we will develop a full and transparent range of mechanisms to ensure that new cross-cutting themes can be identified and evolved in conjunction with the research community and other partners, as appropriate. That process will draw heavily upon the results of this consultation. In addition, we intend to use a full range of available options as appropriate, from open workshops and seminars, to 'sandpits', which are more selective in their selection of participants but which result in immediate decisions about funding. Our new Advisory Board, consisting of senior researchers covering the range of our disciplinary remit, will be responsible for overseeing the AHRC's approach to theme development. The

Advisory Board will draw together the strands of development and evaluation work previously undertaken by the AHRC's separate committees.

Both our four core areas of arts and humanities research and all of our strategic themes will be subject to periodic 'calls' for research to be undertaken. Calls will enable a more rapid response to areas of research urgency that emerge during a spending review period. These calls will, in many cases, be based on areas of strategic priority that have been identified by the research community. The AHRC will work to ensure that its communication mechanisms are improved so that researchers will be alerted to new calls promptly and with sufficient time to respond to them.

### Research Funding Continuum



## ***Internationalisation***

As part of its more strategic approach to research, the AHRC intends to capitalise on its growing international presence, its co-funding agreements with international bodies, and the international relationships forged by the researchers it funds. The AHRC anticipates that there will be an increasing international dimension to much of the research it funds. In order to facilitate and encourage internationalisation, where appropriate, the AHRC intends to:

- make more effective use of the RCUK offices in Brussels, Washington, Delhi and Beijing and prioritise our work with them
- ensure that we can encourage and fund international partnerships and collaboration where there is clear value added to the quality or impact of the research project
- undertake trend analysis to identify the key areas of the world where our researchers have their major partnerships to ensure that we develop concordats and agreements with funding bodies or other relevant organisations where this will help facilitate collaboration.

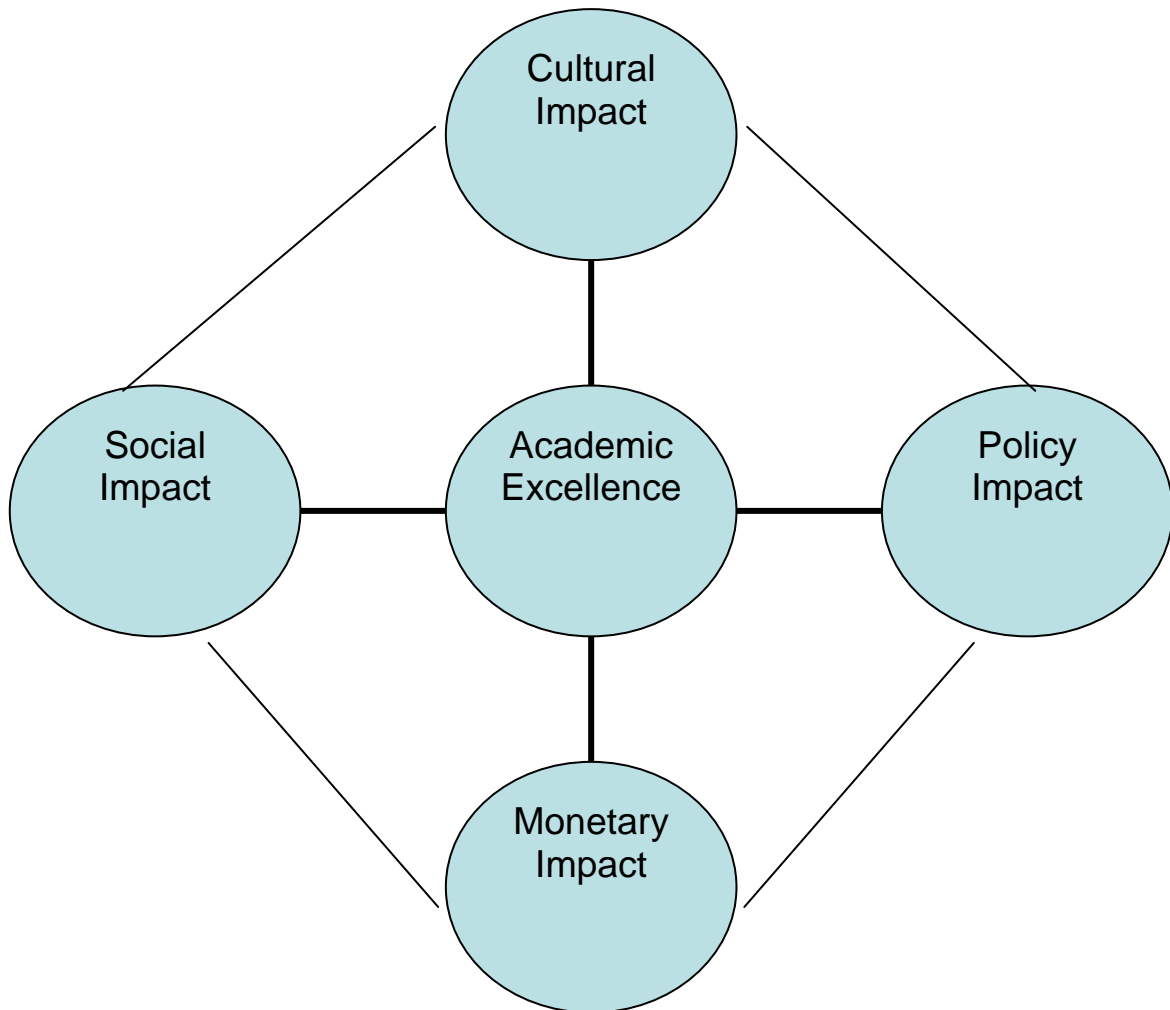
## ***Large Facilities***

The AHRC is currently undertaking a feasibility study to consider whether there is an argument for new national facilities to be included in the RCUK Large Facilities Roadmap and for consideration as possible bids under the DIUS Large Facilities Capital Fund that would be of use to researchers across arts and humanities disciplinary areas and subject domains. As the AHRC remains concerned about the proportion of funds required to maintain the running costs and long-term sustainability of such an investment, no major new commitments on large facilities are likely to be considered until and unless need and value for money can be demonstrated and if co-funding is available. The potential benefit will need to be considered alongside other priorities.

### ***Impact and Knowledge Transfer***

The AHRC works closely with the other Research Councils in furthering the impact of the world-class research it funds. Together with the other Councils it has developed a broad description of impact that draws upon our Royal Charter imperatives and HM Treasury guidance on the assessment of economic impact, which includes effectiveness of public services and quality of life. The AHRC will develop an increasingly sophisticated means of articulating and measuring the impacts of the research it funds. Its Impact Task Force will complete its final report in 2009, and this will provide a methodology for assessing impact in the arts and humanities and a template for considering the particular contributions of the AHRC subject domain. The AHRC expects the research it funds to have a range of impacts, but the nature of the impact will vary from project to project. Broadly speaking, impacts in the arts and humanities can be conceptualised as follows (all of which fall within the Treasury definition of 'economic impact'):

## Excellence with Impact



*Academic excellence* is fundamental to all research funded by the AHRC. This can be demonstrated by peer review, citations, the effect of the work on research conducted internationally, and the extent to which the research enhances Universities' ability to attract and retain world-leading researchers to the United Kingdom.

*Cultural impact* designates the effect of arts and humanities research on intellectual and cultural life both nationally and internationally. It is indicated by changes in thinking; through its visibility in and effect on various media (e.g. books, newspapers, television, radio, internet), exhibitions or performances; through its role in broadening the horizons of students who are exposed to it through research-led teaching; in fostering public debate, and understanding;

and leading to greater public participation in or engagement with cultural activities.

*Social impact* indicates how arts and humanities research directly influences and benefits local communities by enhancing social and emotional well-being, diversity and inclusion, as well as sustainability; and also how the research ensures understanding of the human perspective and cultural context of social and institutional issues.

*Policy impact* addresses the ways in which arts and humanities research influences and changes the views or improves the practices and intellectual frameworks of government departments, Parliaments and devolved administrations, local authorities and national and international non-governmental organisations and leads to more effective public services. This also encompasses impact on professional practices, such as law.

*Monetary impact* concerns the ways in which arts and humanities research contributes to the economy, including through supporting innovation, local regeneration, inward investment, job creation, and key sectors of the economy such as the creative and cultural industries and tourism. It also refers to how research develops skilled and creative people who contribute in a variety of ways to a healthy economy.

While all Research Councils can demonstrate impact across most of these areas, the AHRC has a distinct role in each of these areas of impact and a unique role in fostering cultural impact.

As enhancing the impact of research is one of the primary aims of the AHRC, the AHRC will further develop its Knowledge Transfer role. The AHRC understands Knowledge Transfer to signify the two-way flow of understanding and knowledge between researchers and wider audiences or other partners. While maintaining support for ring-fenced Knowledge Transfer schemes, the AHRC intends to position this type of activity as part of a brokerage service, helping researchers to identify a variety of possible impacts of their work and assisting them in realising those impacts through the life of a project and beyond.

Additionally, the AHRC, with all other Research Councils, will from early 2009 onwards be asking grant applicants to identify potential non-academic beneficiaries from the outset of their project. This process does not involve any spurious attempt to predict monetary return on particular projects, but rather looks to the non-academic partners and beneficiaries applicants may be able to work with in relation to their projects. The AHRC will offer support to researchers and to peer reviewers in approaching this, including providing case study examples of significant and unexpected impacts that have arisen from curiosity-driven research funded by the AHRC. The AHRC will use this opportunity to establish its broker role in order to develop the capacity of the academic community to realise the full range of research impacts. The AHRC also intends to improve the ways in which it evaluates the impact of research over time in order to track impacts, including those that are long-term and unexpected.

The effect of these changes is that Knowledge Transfer should become an increasingly prominent part of funded research projects, fully embedded in them, as the arts and humanities academic community builds its understanding and capacity in this area.

***Questions for consultation:***

1. What broad research themes do you consider should attract specific funding from the AHRC, both those lying within the arts and humanities research domain, and those that extend beyond it?

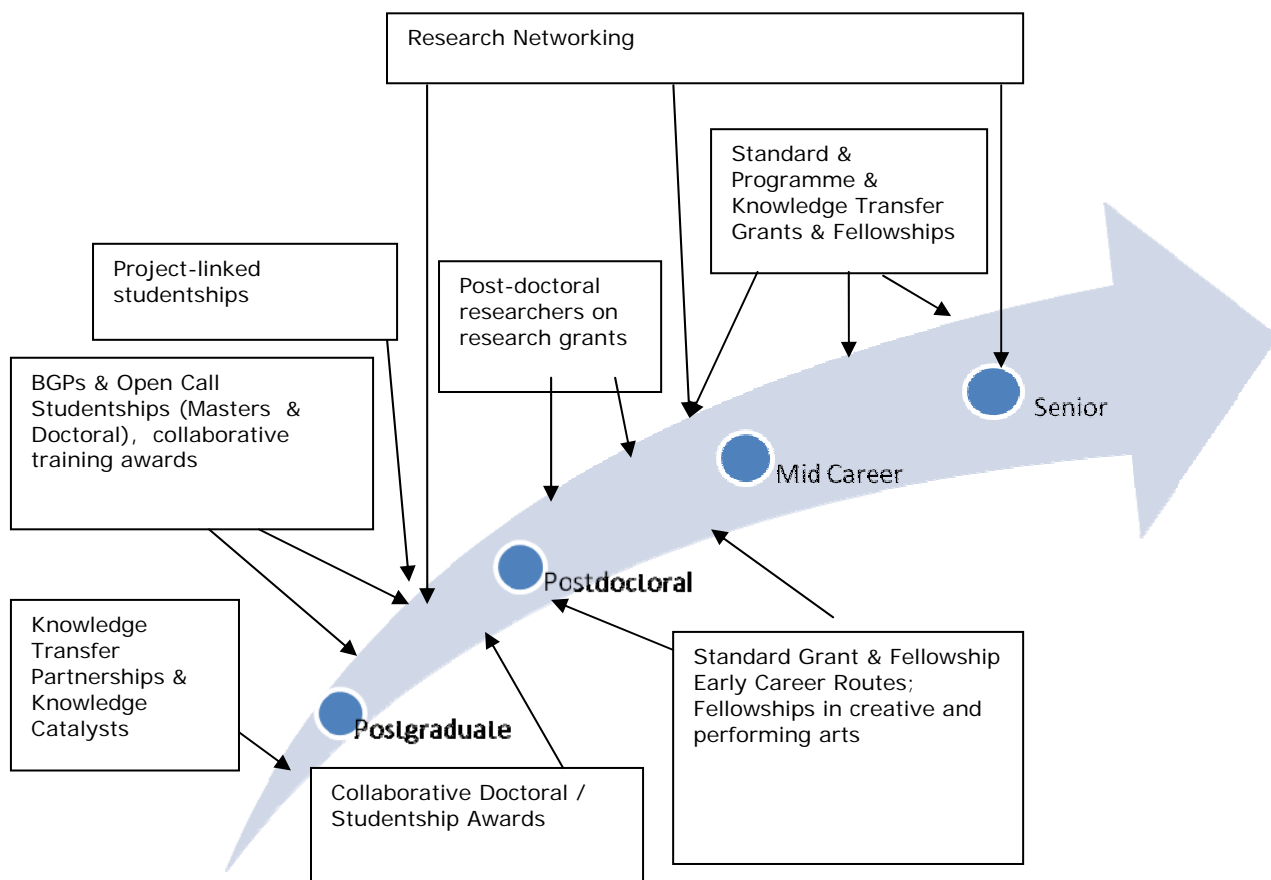
Examples from recent consultations include: the power of the past; values in the contemporary world; communities; communication in a digital age; imagining unintended consequences; ideology; understanding emotional life; networks, collaboration and gangs; and the contribution of humanities to society, including well being and aesthetics.

2. What more could the AHRC do to ensure arts and humanities research and researchers are more central and influential in cross-Council programmes?
3. What types of national capital facilities do you consider the AHRC should support?
4. How should the AHRC develop its brokerage role to support academics in realising the full range of the impact of their research?
5. Do you have specific proposals for how Knowledge Transfer could be embedded more fully in AHRC-funded research?

## Sustaining People

The AHRC affirms its role to offer researchers appropriate support opportunities throughout their careers, and it recognises that different training and development needs arise in the course of an academic career, as well as in the course of a research project. The AHRC also appreciates that the research landscape is constantly changing, and that outcomes from the 2008 RAE may lead institutions to alter their approach to support of specific disciplinary areas. Furthermore, the demographic profile of higher education reveals the danger that the large number of retiring researchers may not be fully replaced by upcoming generations of Ph.D. students fully qualified to take on their roles. In the light of this shifting landscape, the AHRC will need to take an increasingly strategic approach to postgraduate funding by being flexible enough to adjust its approach when necessary.

### AHRC Support Across the Research Career Life-course



Within these contexts, the AHRC will undertake to maintain its support for postgraduate training across a range of disciplines and ensure that early career researchers are properly supported and developed as they find their feet in the academic world. In terms of postgraduates, the AHRC has already developed a more strategic approach to postgraduate funding through the Block Grant Partnership Scheme and new open studentship competition, Collaborative Doctoral (CASE) awards, Knowledge Catalysts, an ever-increasing proportion of project studentships, and collaborative research training schemes. Although the BGP scheme begins from the position of stability, the AHRC will evolve its approach to the BGP, in consultation with its university partners, as universities develop their strategies in the wake of the 2008 RAE. Through CASE awards, the AHRC will help build the capacity of new generations of researchers to engage with non-HEI organisations, while project studentships also provide collaborative opportunities for the recipients of these awards. The AHRC will also review its 'open studentship' competition on an annual basis, and consider to what extent this competition will need to be ring-fenced for endangered subject areas or areas of national importance that are not supported by the BGP scheme. The AHRC will consider how to expand the opportunities for its funded students to participate in international activities, such as the Library of Congress and NIHU schemes, including the possibility of international placements. In each of these areas, the AHRC is already developing its focus from simply supporting well-qualified students in a large-scale annual, open competition to establishing a more strategic sense of its responsibility to make a difference to the quality of postgraduate research and training it invests in, working in strategic partnership with HEIs, and preparing students in a variety of ways to use arts and humanities research experience in careers both within and beyond academia.

In terms of career development, the AHRC will consider, in consultation with the new training organisation, VITAE, the most effective ways to develop its collaborative research training networks, as well as how researchers can best be supported in the transitional phases from Ph.D. student to research assistant, and from research assistant to full researcher. In addition to the early career route in the grants schemes, the AHRC will make a major contribution to early career development through its new Fellowship scheme, in which institutions will

be required to provide mentoring support for early career applicants. The Fellowship scheme will also enable us to support academic career development through the whole of a researcher's career, by providing time and other resources flexibly, as required by the researcher.

*Questions for consultation:*

6. In what ways can the AHRC use its new Fellowship scheme more effectively to support early career researchers?
7. What do you see as the key training needs of postgraduate students in your field, and by what mechanisms could the AHRC help meet these?
8. What do you see as potentially vulnerable subject areas or areas of national importance in which the AHRC should be supporting postgraduate research and training?

## **Partnerships and Networks**

One of the distinctive contributions of the AHRC has been to enable partnerships and networks to develop both among researchers themselves nationally and internationally, and between the Research Council and other public and private organisations.

The AHRC wishes to continue to support schemes that encourage new partnerships to develop from research grants and Fellowships, and through networking awards, Knowledge Transfer schemes, strategic programmes and collaborative doctoral awards. These partnerships benefit researchers by providing the opportunity to exchange ideas across disciplines and sectors, by encouraging innovative approaches to research, and by initiating longer-term relationships that continue well beyond the life of a single research project.

The AHRC itself maintains productive relationships with a wide variety of both national and international partner organisations and both within and outside the higher education sector. In addition, we have actively developed strategic partnerships based on co-production and co-funding with organisations such as the BBC, the Technology Strategy Board (TSB), and international funders such as Humanities in the European Research Area (HERA) and the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG). Collaborative Doctoral (CASE) awards also enable the next generation of arts and humanities researchers to begin their academic career already experienced in the benefits and challenges of undertaking research in conjunction with a partner body, and Knowledge Transfer schemes enable academics to work with industry and other partners for mutual benefit. The AHRC feels that it should focus the bulk of its attention on a small number of partnerships with major organisations based on co-funding and co-production for mutual benefit, with smaller scale connections and relationships maintained less intensively below this level. We would like to build further on the partnerships already developed and initiate a small number of major new partnerships, as well as working more closely in future with key stakeholder groups including world-leading cultural institutions, government departments such as the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, devolved administrations and the Home Office.

*Questions for consultation:*

9. With which organisations do you consider the AHRC should have partnerships and why?
10. What else could the AHRC be doing to facilitate international research cooperation in the arts and humanities?

## **Next Steps**

The AHRC warmly welcomes input from its stakeholders on the substance of the 'Future Directions' and responses to the questions we are asking. The processes and outcomes of this formal consultation will be reviewed by our Council and will assist us in preparing the detailed delivery plans as we develop our case for future Spending Reviews.

**Front cover picture credits**

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