



Arts & Humanities  
Research Council

# Working at the Intersections

*Arts and Humanities Research Council  
Strategic Themes*

*2010-2019*

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The cover image shows members of the Noyam Dance Institute (Dodowa, Ghana) performing *Broken World, Broken Word* at Solas Festival in 2018. The performance was co-curated with researchers from Translating Cultures Large Grant, ‘Researching Multilingually at the Borders of Language: the Body, Law and the State’.

*Photo credit: Karen Gordon*

## The AHRC Strategic Themes

In 2009, the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) undertook a 'Future Directions' consultation with its researchers, clients and users from across the sector. Among the resulting initiatives was the creation of four strategic research themes to receive funding in the planning cycle to 2018.

The subjects of the themes were identified from responses to the consultation:

- **Translating Cultures**
- **Science in Culture**
- **Digital Transformations**
- **Care for the Future**

The AHRC strategic themes represent a compromise between the highly directed research characteristic of a formal programme and a responsive mode. Themes encourage researchers to develop proposals in broad interdisciplinary areas, but the structure of the funding offers researchers intellectual and methodological flexibility within the remit of the theme.

The funding patterns of each theme followed a broadly common pattern. Each theme included three large grants (of around £2 million pounds each) which offered researchers opportunities to develop projects on a more expansive scale than had previously been possible through the AHRC. Each of these large grant projects demonstrated the potential of large-scale collaborative and interdisciplinary projects to transform the scale and impact of arts and humanities research.

Theme Advisory Groups containing researchers and stakeholders from across the sector were

established at an early stage in 2010 and were vital in defining the initial scope of the themes and advising on the development of funding opportunities.

In 2012, Theme Leadership Fellows were appointed for each of the themes. Each Theme Leadership Fellow was supported by teams including project managers and research assistants. These were:

- **Translating Cultures:** Professor Charles Forsdick, University of Liverpool. Liverpool team: Dr Will Amos, Hannah Dutton, Dr Leila Kamali, Dr Eva Špisiakova.
- **Science in Culture:** Professor Barry Smith, School of Advanced Study, University of London. London team: Nisha Patel, Mahi Parvin
- **Digital Transformations:** Professor Andrew Prescott, University of Glasgow. Glasgow team: Sonia Ali, Dr Luca Guariento, Dr Diane Scott.
- **Care for the Future:** Professor Andrew Thompson, University of Exeter (to 2020); Exeter team, (phase 1, 2013-17) Christine Boyle; (phase 2, 2018-20) Professor Henry French; Dr Susan Leedham; Dr Catherine Cummings, Dr Poppy Cullen.

As well as undertaking their own research, Theme Leadership Fellows worked closely with projects to enhance the connectivity and collective impact of research funded under their respective themes. Theme Leadership

Fellows were able to draw wider intellectual and strategic lessons from the work of the themes. They advised the AHRC on matters relating to the development of the themes and worked with AHRC on specific projects to promote them, feeding into events such as the Digital Transformations Moot in 2012, the Cheltenham Festivals and AHRC Common Ground event in 2016.

The Theme Leadership Fellows held regular meetings together, which identified common findings across the themes and generated joint activities. The involvement in these meetings of the two Leadership Fellows from the Research Councils UK (RCUK) Connected Communities programme, Professor Keri Facer of the University of Bristol and Professor George McKay of the University of East Anglia, led to significant joint work, such as the Common Cause project to promote diversity in arts and humanities research.

The AHRC themes funded over 500 projects that promoted interdisciplinary research, forged new national and international partnerships and collaborations outside the university sector and generated many further new research partners. The theme portfolio provides a snapshot of many of the current research preoccupations in the arts and humanities.

In the latter stages of the AHRC themes, there was a strong intersection with the emergence of more challenge-oriented funding programmes in the run-up to the launch of UK Research and Innovation (UKRI). These included the RCUK Digital Economy programme, Global Challenge Research Fund (GCRF), the Tackling Antimicrobial Resistance programmes, and various initiatives relating to the environment and sustainability, the creative economy and

Artificial Intelligence. Drawing on the experience of the strategic themes, the Theme Leadership Fellows provided wide-ranging strategic and intellectual input to the development of these activities.

The AHRC has recently extended the Leadership Fellow model into other priority areas such as conflict, heritage, design and modern languages. Although these fellows are not intended to be successors to the Theme Leadership Fellows, this fellowship system has provided a valuable focus for sharing research and ensuring continuity between findings in the themes and emerging priorities for the AHRC.

## Working at Intersections

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The themes were formulated in such a way as to invite researchers to think outside traditional disciplinary frameworks and propose projects that work in more participative and crosscutting ways. The interdisciplinary nature of the Theme Advisory Groups promoted such approaches and ensured that the themes were not dominated by narrow disciplinary concerns.

The themes were exceptionally successful in encouraging all those involved in the research funding process (applicants, referees, panels, advisory groups) to collaborate in developing research at the intersection of different disciplines, methodologies and practice. Many projects were funded which produced outstanding interdisciplinary research whose quality may not have been so evident to traditionally constituted panels.

The themes hosted an extraordinary spread of events from art exhibitions and orchestral concerts to live performances, art and science encounters, and film showings that generated powerful interdisciplinary and cross-cultural dialogues. Whether exploring our perceptions of criminality, considering the effects of space travel on our senses or sharing in African storytelling, the themes constantly offered challenging perspectives and insights. Such events provided a stimulus to further research collaboration and applications.

The activity conducted within the themes fused together all the various types of research within the broader AHRC portfolio and beyond: traditional humanities research; scientific research; performance; practice-based research;

digital research ranging from imaging to work with big data. Innovative methodologies were deployed such as the use of serious games, experimental tastings, crowdsourcing, experiments in a gallery setting, co-creation and exploration of the potential of new materials such as conductive ink.

The themes were major drivers in promoting the dissemination of research in innovative formats, including storytelling, performance, immersive experiences, apps, digital tools, film and art installations. The themes demonstrated the possibilities of developing new audiences and engagement with arts and humanities research through using different methods, such as co-creation and experimental formats to make research more widely available and accessible.

There was significant work in areas of social policy that has not hitherto been a significant priority of AHRC but is now, in the context of UKRI, assuming greater prominence. By developing projects in such areas as education studies, development studies, migration, humanitarianism, judicial policy and political science, the AHRC themes helped prepare for the greater prominence of policy interventions with the increasing focus on challenge-driven research.

Above all, the themes generated energetic and wide-ranging collaborations with other subject areas, including many 'long distance' connections with subjects such as space research, cosmology, biology and neuroscience, medicine, surgery and health studies, ecology and engineering. These collaborations were

generated by the nature of the themes and the way in which their formulation promoted cross-disciplinary dialogue. They also reflected the way in which the agile and fluid structure of the themes, with the Theme Leadership Fellow as a focus of contact, provided a robust framework for developing interdisciplinary dialogues, knowledge-broking and knowledge-exchange.

The synergies between the different forms of interdisciplinary work in the AHRC themes raises questions about the current structures of disciplinary research. It appears that generic themes of this kind are very effective vehicles for generating interdisciplinary research, but there is still a need to promote benchmarks to measure the quality and strength of interdisciplinary research. Greater attention is being paid to this issue as evidenced by the new forms of assessment announced for main panels and subpanels in REF 2021. The way in which different disciplines were so readily accommodated within overarching themes suggests that we may need to give greater consideration to post-disciplinary trends within the arts and humanities, ways of working in teams, and cross-council collaboration. The implications of this for future structures of research funding and evaluation of funding applications have not been widely discussed.

## Collaboration and Partnership

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A distinctive feature of the strategic themes was their close working with the RCUK Connected Communities programme, with shared projects as well as jointly organised events on themes such as community archives and utopias, leading to the development of collaborative initiatives such as the AHRC Common Cause project. The work of the Connected Communities programme in identifying best practice in thinking about the role of communities and universities in the co-creation of research profoundly affected the conception and scope of research within themes as they developed. Together the AHRC themes and the Connected Communities programme played a leading role in promoting the participative turn in arts and humanities research, and the lessons of this shared experience were embodied in the report by Keri Facer and Bryony Enright, *Creating Living Knowledge* (2016).

The themes, and particularly Professor Barry Smith, played a leading part in the development of the successful series of Being Human festivals that have contributed significantly to presenting the arts and humanities in new ways to fresh audiences and have widened general awareness, interest in, and appreciation of the relevance of arts and humanities research in recent years. Professor Rodney Harrison (Care for the Future) was invited to programme two panels at FutureFest (2018), Europe's largest Festival of the Future. AHRC funded projects have also contributed to major science festivals, including the Cheltenham Science Festival and the Edinburgh International Science Festival.

The structure of the themes facilitated the development of a core community of researchers

through participation in theme events. This encouraged contact between projects for follow-on projects and shared presentations. There was also fruitful contact between researchers across themes that enhanced the interdisciplinary dimensions of the theme. This has already led to researchers from the themes developing new joint projects that in turn enhance the continuities of the thematic activity.

The themes were notable for the way in which they were not restricted to university researchers but engaged an enormous range of partners from many different sectors. These included commercial companies, start-ups, philanthropic foundations, not-for-profit organisations, NGOs, cultural heritage organisations, and a wide variety of community organisations. This not only enriched the nature of the research but also enhanced its reach and impact, with the potential to transform the relationship between different sectors and their publics.

In developing these external links, Theme Leadership Fellows played a key role in identifying potential partners and setting up long-term contacts and conversations with researchers. The fostering of such dialogues can require substantial effort. The theme structure is effective in supporting this, which is otherwise difficult to sustain from within a research council such as the AHRC.

The continuity provided by the theme structure facilitated the emergence of core partnerships. In some cases, these partnerships were with independent research organisations such as the British Library, British Museum, the Heritage Alliance, Tate Galleries and Victoria and Albert

Museum. They were helpful in promoting cross-sectoral activity. In other cases, the themes facilitated collaboration and partnerships with completely new sectors such as Mozilla Foundation and the Institute for Government.

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## Making Common Cause

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The structures of the themes have provided a means to identify, within awards and across the wider range of projects, underlying issues relating to diversity, equality and inclusion. The Theme Leadership Fellows have benefitted from a detailed overview of the portfolio of awards for which they have had responsibility. This has allowed them to understand the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, in terms of project teams, partnerships and the subject matter of research, as well as placement records for early career researchers. This strategic knowledge is often not available for research funded through responsive mode.

A highlight notice for research networks was launched in 2016 in the context of the UN International Decade for People of African Descent. The aim was to encourage the submission of boundary-crossing arts and humanities-led research proposals that address research issues of relevance to, or raised by, the UN Decade and with the potential to contribute broadly to its aims. In the absence of any commitment of HM Government to signing up to the Decade, this AHRC call has been one of the few formal attempts in the UK to acknowledge the importance of the initiative for the promotion of the full and equal participation of people of African descent in all aspects of society, nationally, regionally and internationally. Eleven awards were made, addressing research priorities of specific relevance to people of African descent or to the International Decade itself. Applicants were invited to explore connections with existing AHRC themes or priority areas (e.g., Translating Cultures, Care for the Future). The Translating Cultures theme convened workshops bringing together

award holders in 2019, permitting capacity building across this portfolio. The visibility of the AHRC's contribution to the UN Decade was enhanced by a public event highlighting the work of the networks.

Central to the UN Decade call was a commitment to engagement with, or the participation of, researchers and communities of African descent. Collaboration with relevant community, cultural, heritage and creative organisations was a key element of a cross-theme initiative, Common Cause Research: Building Research Collaborations between Universities and Black and Minority Ethnic Communities. The project emerged from a collaboration between Translating Cultures and Connected Communities and was committed to exploring how the quality of the knowledge base of the arts and humanities – its claim to inform and reflect the historic and contemporary world – is dependent upon its capacity to reflect the breadth and diversity of human experience. Researchers associated with Common Cause worked with a range of AHRC-funded projects, many of which were drawn from within the theme portfolios, in order to map, strengthen and extend university-Black and Minority Ethnic community research and collaborations across the arts and humanities, including the areas of heritage, community and culture. Project partners Arts Council England and the Runnymede Trust permitted engagement with new communities and networks in this debate – building new bridges between universities and Black and Minority Ethnic community partners.

Individual themes have identified major intellectual issues that will help promote a greater

knowledge of and respect for the diverse heritage and culture of the UK whilst contributing to the creation of a more equal society. Projects have engaged with questions of antislavery, 'difficult' or contested heritage and dark tourism; they have foregrounded issues of multilingualism, translation and translanguaging; they have underlined the importance into digital inclusion and exclusion, and ensured their visibility on research agendas.

## International Profile

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Projects across the themes have contributed significantly to the internationalisation of AHRC-funded research. This has had an impact on a range of aspects including partnerships, methods, content, audiences and dissemination. This is particularly true of the portfolio of large theme grants, all of which included a significant international dimension. Translating Cultures has underlined in particular the need for UK research in international contexts to be language sensitive, paying attention to the multilingual contexts in which it is conducted as well as the multiple forms into which and media through which findings are translated, interpreted and understood. The focus permitted by themes has also served to raise the institutional profile of the AHRC internationally as a unique funder of arts and humanities research.

The scope, scale, visibility and coherence of the themes has enhanced the international profile of research by supporting and showcasing work in a variety of major venues and in collaborations with a range of significant partners. These include the Library of Congress, the Harry Ransom Centre, the Folger Shakespeare Library, the Getty Foundation, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Volkswagen Foundation, the International Committee of the Red Cross, the Nunalleq Culture and Archaeological Centre, Alaska and the Danish Research Foundation.

Care for the Future demonstrates the potential for research themes in the arts and humanities to broker major new bilateral agreements leading to funded programmes. The theme worked with the LABEX (Laboratoire d'Excellence), Pasts in the Present: History, Heritage, Memory, a cluster of excellence supported by the CNRS and

based at Paris Nanterre University, to develop a call focused on areas including understanding the relationship between history, heritage and memory, and representations and uses of the past in the present. This activity fostered collaborative transnational research concentrated in eight projects involving UK and French scholars as well as non-academic partners.

The themes have coordinated a series of joint transnational workshops that have encouraged the development of new collaborative links in focused strategic areas. These have included a bioscience workshop with National Endowment for the Humanities and the National Library of Medicine, big data workshops at IEEE, and a joint AHRC-Wellcome workshop on the Mental Health of Refugees.

The existence of the themes permitted an agile and rapid engagement with the Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) agenda when the UK Government announced this initiative in late 2015 in order to support cutting-edge research that addresses the challenges faced by developing countries. The themes mobilised existing projects and contacts, which led to cross-theme activity including a joint call led by Care for the Future and Translating Cultures for innovation awards in the area of international development. The possibility of follow-on funding for the theme large grants encouraged the diversification of existing work in new situations and contexts and the amplification of knowledge transfer.

GCRF activity was instrumental in enabling thematic work to be scaled up and transformed at an important stage in their development.

However, the themes also played a key role in defining the work and orientation of the fund as it evolved, an aspect apparent in the contribution of Translating Cultures to discussions of language and equal partnerships as well as consideration of the role of indigenous languages and methods. The different and diverse cross-cultural global perspectives resulted in a re-thinking of western concepts of heritage and a challenge to western perspectives, highlighting that heritage is plural, diverse and polysemic. Science in Culture projects have, for instance, contributed to developing better knowledge of animal husbandry in order to address food safety concerns in Ethiopia.

Finally, the themes provided intellectual and strategic support rooted in their portfolios of projects as well as the wider overview they permit for the development of other international initiatives relating to the Transatlantic-Platform (in particular its Digging into Data programme), the Newton Fund, the JPI on Cultural Heritage and Global Change and the joint AHRC and Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG) initiatives.

## Aggregation and Agility

Through digital and conventional publications of many different types, the themes have made the connections between the hundreds of funded projects more evident. The result has been a critical mass of new thinking and innovation that has effectively underlined the impact and effectiveness of AHRC investment in such urgent areas of public concern as migration, multilingualism, privacy, bioscience and the health of the internet.

Themes have demonstrated their ability to create much larger scale impact by showcasing research by different projects in curated events such as the Cheltenham Festivals, V&A Digital Design weekend, Tate Exchange, the Being Human and SOLAS festivals, together with relevant publications and web activity.

Because themes promote cross-connections and dialogue between projects in a way that is not possible in responsive mode, thematic structures generate further research ideas and foster new research collaborations, thereby acting as an effective seedbed for new research, networking, capacity building, dissemination and implementation.

Theme Leadership Fellows have provided extensive advice and support in the development of research applications. This both improves the quality of applications and enables research groups to refine their research ideas progressively over the period of the theme, leading to research that is more successful and of higher quality. In this way, the Theme Leadership Fellows have played an important research promotion and facilitation role for the arts and humanities in the UK.

Above all, the thematic structure has promoted greater agility and sharing of ideas among researchers, enabling them to develop responses quickly to new strategic funding priorities in areas such as the GCRF and Creative Economy.

## Convening Power and Policy Interface

A key strength of the themes was their convening power, permitting a nimble reaction to emerging opportunities and the rapid identification of relevant researchers and research teams from a range of disciplines capable of drawing on their work in these contexts. Whilst retaining their own independence and autonomy, projects associated with the themes were all designed and delivered in the context of wider societal challenges and identified themselves with a cohort of related awards, and this meant that those involved in them were highly responsive to additional proposals for collaboration and engagement.

The Theme Leadership Fellows were able to draw on the portfolios of projects of which they had oversight in order to address new policy issues and opportunities. A key role of the fellows was to ensure the cultivation of relationships between projects and to identify a wide range of contacts in each thematic area. The communities of scholars and practitioners built around the themes across their lifetime created active networks which could be mobilised rapidly when required to provide evidence, attend policy workshops or offer an arts and humanities perspective on cross-council challenges. Detailed knowledge of the content of projects from across broad thematic portfolios allowed diverse responses tailored to the needs of the research councils as well as of external partners. The knowledge-broking role of the Theme Leadership Fellows has enabled researchers in different disciplines and sectors to form collaborative links with one another that strengthen the arts and the humanities' ties with science, industry and practice-based research.

The diversity of theme portfolios has permitted the identification of clusters of key projects focused on specific areas of concern. A range of research on big data conducted as part of the Digital Transformations theme was showcased by the Parliamentary IT Group at the Houses of Parliament.

One of the advantages of the close collaboration between Theme Leadership Fellows was the possibility this afforded to convene groups of experts operating at the intersection of thematic areas. A striking example of this was the collaboration of researchers relating to Care for the Future and Translating Cultures with the Institute of Government in the production of a report on the role of history and intercultural knowledge in public policy.

Researchers representing all four themes spoke at the GCRF event on Mobilising Global Voices held at the British Library in 2017. Sessions at this AHRC international development summit reflected work conducted under the themes, with Theme Leadership Fellows convening panels on 'Mobilising NGOs and Partner Voices' (Translating Cultures) and 'Mobilising Virtual Voices' (Digital Transformations). Care for the Future collaborated with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) on two joint conferences resulting in two policy documents shared with government and NGOs.

Work from across all four themes was deployed in response to the cross-council call for work on Antimicrobial Resistance, ensuring that there was an arts and humanities dimension to this initiative.



## Intellectual Agendas

The convergence of diverse portfolios of projects and related activities around shared areas of thematic focus proved a highly effective means of identifying and nurturing new intellectual agendas and ways of working. Through processes of dialogue, collaboration and self-reflection, the themes have permitted the discernment of broadly-based intellectual agendas and methodologies for a range of disciplinary areas relevant to the themes. In demonstrating and articulating these emerging areas and new research methods, the Theme Leadership Fellows have been in a strong position to deploy evidence from the portfolios they oversee to propose priorities for research, identifying gaps in current activity and suggesting urgent areas for future investment.

A central advantage of the themes has been the possibility of disseminating and testing these agendas in a range of different fora, encouraging wider discussion of them via an active programme of lectures and presentations by the Theme Leadership Fellows. Engagement with institutions, subject associations and learned societies has foregrounded the importance of AHRC-funded research, across a wide range of disciplines and with a variety of external partners, not only in informing but also in setting new intellectual agendas. The themes have been a particularly effective means of achieving such visibility and impact at both national and international levels, as is demonstrated by the work of Science in Culture with the Volkswagen Foundation and the Getty Foundation, Translating Cultures with the Salzburg Global Seminar, and Care for the Future with the Global Humanitarianism Research Academy

(GHRA) in collaboration with the International Committee of the Red Cross.

These intellectual agendas have been shaped through numerous theme-based events that have brought together award holders, research partners, stakeholders and wider audiences to synthesise findings across a range of projects while soliciting feedback on future directions. The flexibility of the themes and the range of projects associated with them have permitted the staging of large events representing a broad variety of research. These include the major Digital Transformations Moot, as well as more focused workshops, such as the Science in Culture event on the Mental Health of Refugees and the Translating Cultures symposium co-organised with the Wellcome Trust.

It is clear that the new intellectual agendas set by the themes have already influenced a number of wider initiatives. Translating Cultures played a key role, for instance, in the establishment of the AHRC's Open World Research Initiative, a £16-million investment in four major projects devoted to the renewal of modern languages as a discipline. Care for the Future has challenged the idea of heritage as being too strictly defined. It explored the processes and practices by which heritage is 'assembled' within a broad range of fields in which the alternative practices and processes of future-making involved in each might inform more conventional aspects of cultural heritage designation, care and management.

## Support and Advocacy for ECR Communities

Central to all four themes has been the development of early career researchers. There have been diverse opportunities created for postdoctoral researchers both at theme level and within individual awards. A number of institutions have also contributed doctoral studentships to projects, meaning that ECR communities associated with the themes have also included PhD students.

The themes have demonstrated that ECRs involved in high profile and well-funded projects enjoy enhancement of their subsequent career profile and are greatly assisted in their development. Participation on wider thematic activity also provides ECRs with a unique overview of the research landscape. The success of such an approach is reflected in the number of ECRs contributing to the themes who have moved into permanent positions in academia and other fields related to their research.

Involvement in the themes and in thematic research projects has made ECRs more aware of the wider research context in which they are operating. Notably, it has provided them with an opportunity to play an important role in strategic conversations, the identification of priorities and the enhancement of current research practice.

The core community of researchers created around the twelve large theme grants has had the potential to assist with career progression for ECRs. This has been particularly striking in the case of Translating Cultures, where the ECRs involved have created strong connections across the three large grants, leading to involvement

in each other's events and to collaborative publication, as well as with Care for the Future's Global Humanitarianism Research Academy international workshops for ECRs and other post-doctoral researchers. Such links reduce isolation, encourage autonomy and innovation, and allow ECRs to feel part of a wider community of scholars.

The themes have allowed the development of specific calls and highlight notices for ECRs seeking to establish a track record for funded research, most notably via the sandpits and dedicated funding calls related to Science and Culture and Care for Future.

All themes have given high priority to advocacy and support for ECRs. Postdoctoral researchers associated with the themes have made a significant input to ECR-specific events organised by the AHRC. Within the context of the themes, ECRs have been encouraged to make grant applications and supported in this process. Postdoctoral researchers on the large theme grants have, for example, been able to lead successful bids for follow-on funding, gaining experience as PIs at an early stage in their career. Many are moving into leadership roles, as in the case of one ECR on the interdisciplinary Science in Culture large grant, Re-thinking the Senses, who now holds a chair in Philosophy and Neuroscience at LMU in Munich.

## Leverage of Funding Opportunities

By creating a community of researchers working in a common area and assisted by the facilitation of Theme Leadership Fellows, the themes enabled the arts and humanities community to respond more effectively to new funding opportunities as they became available. This is illustrated by the success of the Digital Transformations theme and Connected Communities programme in supporting AHRC to secure capital funding for research into big data, the first funding of this type secured by the arts and humanities.

It has been noticed for a long time that arts and humanities researchers are not always able to respond to funding opportunities as quickly as STEM researchers. Thematic work, through its nurturing of a core community of researchers, enables those in the arts and humanities to be primed with research ideas and possibilities so that they can make successful proposals in short time frames. Through cross-disciplinary and cross-theme initiatives, notably in the Science in Culture and Digital Transformation themes, it has been possible for arts and humanities researchers to help shape research proposals from the fields of science and technology.

Theme Leadership Fellows and Theme Advisory Groups are closely involved in discussions about current research funding priorities. The theme structure allows information about these priorities to be rapidly shared among the research community and enables research proposals to be developed in advance. Theme Leadership Fellows also provide a point of contact for advice and preliminary discussion in the development of proposals.

The themes played an important role in the early development of activities relating to AHRC involvement in such major challenge-oriented research funding initiatives as the GCRF. As has already been noted, Theme Leadership Fellows played a prominent role in helping to curate the AHRC International Development Summit, Mobilising Global Voices, in 2017. The themes provided a major intellectual and networking resource as the AHRC sought to develop the scale and focus of its funding priorities.

The move to more challenge-led funding has been a major development in the research funding landscape since 2010. Challenge-led funding schemes like GCRF, Tackling Antimicrobial Resistance and the Creative Economy programme are now prominent. The theme work, by encouraging researchers to shape their research to address thematic priorities and challenges, has played an important part in preparing arts and humanities researchers to successfully engage with more challenge-led funding.

The experience of developing research proposals for themes has also assisted arts and humanities researchers in more successfully securing funding in cross-disciplinary programmes such as the RCUK Digital Economy, the conflict strand of the ESRC's Partnership for Conflict Crime and Security Research theme, or the recent UKRI call for doctoral centres in AI.

The themes have also supported new international collaborations and funding opportunities such as the Trans-Atlantic Platform and the EQUIP EU-India Platform.

## Enabling Innovation

The thematic framework for research provided a space for innovative work in areas that might not naturally seem to work together. Examples during the themes ranged from research on the experience of tasting food in space through to the use of conductive ink in medieval studies.

Traditional responsive-mode panels in appraising research proposals often opt for the safe and sound proposals and are frequently risk-averse. Panels in a thematic context are more open to innovative and speculative proposals, because they see themselves as taking forward work around a theme rather than representing disciplinary interests.

The AHRC themes consequently provided space and support for more adventurous curiosity-driven research proposals and sponsored a large number of projects with a strongly innovative and exploratory flavour: nuclear waste disposal, built heritage conservation, endangered language preservation, seed banks and museum collecting, sensory testing in major galleries or the creation of working labs in a humanities setting.

Because the themes emphasised particular issues such as the role of big data in the arts and humanities, the future of the archive or alternative futures for heritage, they directly encouraged creative and original thinking by researchers around particular subjects. This allowed late and even middle career researchers to go in new directions in their research and has had a catalytic effect in taking their research along innovative avenues, including learning how to design and run experiments in the case of several Science in Culture projects.

The themes have strongly promoted the use of public engagement as a research tool, developing new and innovative ways to engage an interested public in the consumption, shaping and development of research. Working with the museum and gallery sector it has been possible to craft experiments that are also experiences for visitors who contribute to research in the museum. Visitors not only participate and learn but can develop their own expertise, transforming their involvement from crowdsourcing to citizen science.

These benefits were summed up by one researcher as follows: 'The scheme pushed us to be experimental and to take risks that made the work vital and exciting for all partners and helped us build relationships that are still developing and bearing new fruit. It allowed us to develop cross-disciplinary methods and to plug into unfamiliar networks that are helping us deliver the social consequences of our collective research. Life-affirming!'

## Legacies

The themes produced legacies in many different forms: theoretical, conceptual, practical, tangible and intangible, online and off line, ephemeral and permanent; and in one case, the creation of working labs in a humanities setting. The research outputs of the large number of projects funded within the themes represent a huge legacy. The way in which the themes allowed projects to be funded on a larger scale than hitherto possible facilitated the creation of cohorts of researchers who have used their funding under the AHRC themes as a springboard to secure further large-scale funding to pursue their research vision.

The cross-connections between projects in the themes created new networks between researchers and helped generate new communities of research that have continued to work together. These communities of research are not restricted to the academy but also include many community and other groups who played an active role in the themes.

The themes have generated a powerful social legacy from the way in which they contributed to public-facing events such as the Cheltenham Festivals, Tate Exchange and the V&A Digital Design Weekend. Many of these activities continue to develop, enshrining the legacy of the theme.

The interdisciplinary dialogue generated by the themes has created a powerful critical legacy, with many of the insights created by thematic research in such areas as translation, the senses, heritage and big data continuing to exercise a strong intellectual influence.

Many of the projects funded under the themes created important digital resources and these represent a substantial digital legacy.

Innovative projects that included themes usually considered ‘marginal’ have challenged the ‘authorised discourse on heritage’ thus opening up new avenues for future research and research funding and have enhanced the transformational potential of research and its broader influence and importance.

The inclusion of researchers from the arts and humanities in projects led by the natural and life sciences has created an expectation among scientists that their projects will benefit from the wider perspective offered by the inclusion of these researchers in future research bids.

The themes helped acclimatise arts and humanities researchers to work in a funding environment in which research funding is increasingly hypothecated. The ability of arts and humanities researchers to support a wider range of hypothecated funding opportunities under UKRI in the context of the current AHRC delivery plan is itself a legacy of the lessons learnt from the thematic research programme between 2010 and 2019.

## Recommendations

1. In order to build on the success of the strategic themes in supporting interdisciplinary research in emerging areas, the AHRC should continue to undertake further and ongoing broadly-based consultations beyond its established advisory structures to identify emerging common research themes and opportunities at disciplinary intersections.
2. The AHRC should explore the feasibility of creating and leading further thematic research portfolios, perhaps across UKRI, which
  - a. foster community collaboration and co-creation;
  - b. incubate and generate ‘long-distance’ interdisciplinarity with scientific, technical and other disciplines;
  - c. support horizon scanning for emerging research themes;
  - d. enhance equality, diversity and inclusion in the UK arts and humanities research community
  - e. inculcate different methods of research.
3. The AHRC should explore further funding schemes to build on the success of the themes, and in particular consider:
  - a. a Network Plus scheme to support interdisciplinary dialogue at the intersections of research undertaken by the themes;
  - b. a further highlight notice in the Follow-On funding scheme to enhance the continuing impact of research undertaken within the themes.
4. Noting the success of the Theme Leadership Fellowships in providing a focus for theme-based research and in supporting the development of the themes, the AHRC should explore options for investing in senior research leadership, developing structures by which research leaders can draw together and raise the profile of thematically focused research undertaken across the AHRC portfolio. The AHRC should also propose a mechanism to draw upon the collective experience, contacts, wider networks and partners of the Theme Leadership Fellows.
5. The AHRC should develop national frameworks and activities to ensure that early career researchers working on AHRC-funded projects have a strong sense of community and contact with other researchers beyond those involved in their immediate projects, including specific ECR events, specific calls and highlights aimed at ECRs and advocacy for ECRs. Efforts should be made to promote the depth of experience of theme-funded ECRs to institutions in the UK and beyond who are seeking to establish innovative cross-disciplinary posts or looking for young research leaders.
6. The AHRC and UKRI should recognise the ways in which the themes have proved transformational for established scholars in terms of cross-disciplinary engagement and the establishment of new approaches to research, innovative and experimental methodologies, and should seek ways to identify how thematic research might continue to provide such a stimulus.

7. The AHRC and UKRI should explore ways in which thematic strengths and the structures underpinning them can be used to engage a wider range of external partners and bodies in arts and humanities research.
  8. The AHRC should continue to identify areas of existing and emerging thematic strength that will serve as effective vehicles for bilateral and multilateral discussions relating to transnational research initiatives.
  9. Noting the success of the themes in presenting AHRC research to a wide audience in a variety of different venues, the AHRC should continue to work with UKRI more widely to develop means of showcasing a variety of its research clustered around core themes and demonstrating its impact.
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