

The Nahrein Network: Annual Report

Year 2: 1 October 2022 – 30 September 2023

December 2023 • Oana Borlea-Stancioi, Paul Collins, Mehiyar Kathem, Zainab Mahdi, Rozhen Mohammed-Amin, and Eleanor Robson

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Figure 1 In February the Nahrein Network welcomed a delegation of the Iraqi Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Antiquities.

1. Introduction and overview

The Nahrein Network conducts and supports interdisciplinary research, capacity building and policy work on sustainable development of Iraqi history, heritage and related fields. Working with well-established partnerships and creating new ones, we foster:

- an integrated approach to natural and cultural heritage;
- youth-focused solutions, both within and outside the state;
- reparative approaches to the past

to create long-term benefits to Iraqi culture, economy, environment and society.

We were funded by AHRC–GCRF in 2017-21 and are now continuing our mission until 2031, thanks to this generous philanthropic gift. We are based in the History Department of University College London and, since early in this reporting period, at the British Museum and Kurdistan Institution for Strategic Studies and Scientific Research (KISSR) in the Kurdish Region of Iraq.

1.1. Governance and administration

This year was a frustrating one for governance and administration. Internally, the new, clearer terms of reference for the Management Committee worked well, but we were beset by hold-ups, both within UCL and beyond, that held us back considerably.

Our Co-Is Paul and Rozhen both moved to new employers in late October/early November 2022 but it took until the following spring to put in place a new core collaboration contract, and concomitant payments. The work of Rozhen's team in particular was badly affected by these delays.

Meanwhile new overarching MoUs requested by the Iraqi Ministries of Culture and of Higher Education and Scientific Research, also in November 2022, had yet to be finalised at the end of this reporting period. This has been more an annoyance than a major inconvenience for now, as the main delays have been internal to UCL. We began setting up the payment mechanism and contracting for the reformulated devolved research grants scheme in May 2022 and at the time of writing, in November 2023, it has only just been resolved, having been escalated right to the top of UCL's Office for Research, Innovation and Global Engagement (RIGE). As a result, no devolved research projects have yet been launched, two years into the funding period. We consider this a significant failure to deliver on our remit and a major reputational risk to the Network and UCL.

1.2. Developing partnerships and relationships

Since the creation of the new Iraqi government in November 2022, we have been working towards new MoUs with the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research in Baghdad. While these are not yet signed, we have developed closer connections with both ministries, facilitated by reciprocal visits in November, February and May and enabled by good relationships with the Iraqi Embassy in London, the University of Mosul, British Council Iraq, and the Iraq Initiative at Chatham House.

We also signed an MoU with the Directorate of Antiquities in Erbil — responsible for the whole of KRI — in November 2022. At that point the Ministry of Higher Education in Erbil did not consider an MoU to be necessary for us to continue our work in KRI.

1.3. Devolved projects: the Research Grants Scheme

In 2021–22 we paused the Research Grants Scheme in order to completely redesign the application process. Now applicants submit an initial Expression of Interest in the autumn, and all eligible applications are peer reviewed. We took forward ten projects for further development over the winter, expecting about half to prove viable. Two were ready to go to contract at the end of this reporting period and four more are due to launch over the winter of 2023–24. The scheme needed only minor modifications before re-opening for a second call in autumn 2023.

1.4. Capacity building

1.4.1. Joint Nahrein Network-BISI Visiting Scholars Scheme

The VS programme continues to be a highly successful element of our work. We funded four new scholars this year and hosted three, plus three originally funded on our old AHRC grant in 2018–21, who returned for follow-up visits paid for by returned funds from that pot. The new BISI Visiting Scholars Co-ordinator, Anne-Marie Misconi, appointed in winter 2022–23, is excellent, and it is a joy to see the different generations of Visiting Scholars supporting and networking with each other.

1.4.2. UCL Graduate Studentships Scheme

The Graduate Studentship Scheme, in which we offer one Masters + PhD place a year at UCL, has been a mixed success. On the plus side, our first awardee, Ms Niyan Hussein Ibrahim, arrived in London in September 2022 with her family to start the MA in Sustainable Cultural Heritage. She thrived on the programme and was admitted to the PhD for academic year 2023 onwards.

However, she is the only awardee so far — of five — who has been able to meet UCL’s stringent (but necessary) English language requirements. We have paid for tests, and offered places on UCL’s pre-session English courses if grades were met, but so far this has just led to raised expectations and disappointments. For the 2023–24 application round we will be requiring proof of English language proficiency before interview. If this new approach does not work, we should accept that this expensive scheme is not the best use of NN funds and consider how to redeploy the rest of this budget line, which is still very underspent.

1.4.3. AcademIQ Research Skills Programme

This year saw the launch of two strands of Mehiyar’s programme, building on the highly successful Iraq Publishing Workshops (IPW) funded by the British Academy in 2019–20. At entry-level, we ran the Academic Research Course (ARC) for 55 participants on UCL’s public-facing VLE platform UCLExtend (based on Moodle), while at the upper end, former IPW trainer Dr Ersun Kurtulus ran an intensive mentoring programme for 10 senior academics, resulting in the completion of seven research papers, ready for submission to academic journals. Over the summer and autumn, we ran evaluations of both programmes. ARC will now be more tightly focused with a significant element of live interaction with trainers, and both will be more selective in their recruitment of participants.

1.5. Core team’s research projects

1.5.1. Cultural Heritage Organisation

Following Rozhen’s move to KISSR, CHO has gone from strength to strength. It now has a very high public profile and reputation in KRI for innovative use of AR to engage publics emotionally in ‘difficult’ heritage — in both senses of ‘traumatic’ and ‘hard to grasp by non-experts’. The much-anticipated internship programme to develop interdisciplinary team-based projects to apply tech to heritage is now getting underway.

1.5.2. The forgotten city of Kish: reparative history and knowledge repatriation

This project has made slower progress than hoped for, given Paul's new commitments at the British Museum and Eleanor's need to focus on the overall management of the Network. However, in December she gave a well-received invited lecture about the project in Leiden, while Parsa made progress on editing the cuneiform corpus from Kish. Parsa's appointment to a Junior Research Fellowship in Assyriology at Wolfson College, Oxford, from 1 October 2023, is also a successful outcome of this phase of work. However, we now need to assess how best to take this project forward.

1.5.3. New work at the British Museum

Paul has started work on the history of the British Museum's work in Iraq, and is beginning to set up a knowledge-exchange network for museums in the country.

1.5.4. Policy, politics and heritage

In November, Mehiyar organised a session on heritage for Chatham House's annual Iraq Initiative conference, and a closed round-table there for the new Iraqi Minister of Culture in February. He continues to publish and teach on the subject too.



Figure 2 Logos of the Nahrein Network and its partners

2. Governance and administration

2.1. Staffing

There have been no changes to the membership of the core team during this reporting period.

Co-Directors Professor Paul Collins and Dr Rozhen Kamal Mohammed-Amin both moved to new jobs with different employers in October–November 2022. This had several consequences for the Network, both positive and negative.

Most immediately, the contract between UCL, the University of Oxford and Sulaimani Polytechnic University had to be replaced by one between UCL, The British Museum, and the Kurdistan Institution for Strategic Studies and Scientific Research (KISSR). This took longer than it should have,

in part because UCL understandably wanted written agreement from the Donor and in part due to slow response times on all sides. The new contract was finally signed on 15 June 2023.

For Paul, the move from the Ashmolean to the British Museum meant putting aside his work on the Kish Project and developing new lines of work for the Nahrein Network (see §5.3 below). Rozhen, meanwhile, is now working in a much more supportive and enabling environment but the long delay in re-contracting slowed the launch of her planned internship scheme (see §5.1 below).

This year was also Network Director Professor Eleanor Robson's final year as Head of UCL's large History Department. As universities emerged from pandemic conditions, she had expected to have more time and energy to devote to the Network, but in fact it turned out to be her most stressful and exhausting period in this role. In the face of mounting administrative support challenges for the Network — detailed section by section below — she only had the capacity to address the most urgent and acute, while overseeing its day-to-day activities. She stepped down as Head of Department on 31 August 2023, just before the end of the reporting period, and set about a thorough investigation of where the failures lay.

Similarly, much of Project Administrator Mrs Oana Borlea-Stancioi's time this year has been consumed by chasing up and compensating for inadequacies and miscommunications in UCL's service departments. In §7.1 below we summarise how we intend to address these challenges in 2023–24.

2.2. Management Committee

The Network's Management Committee meets every three months to ensure that the Nahrein Network delivers work that is of high academic quality; is appropriately governed, ethically and financially; and meets the research remit agreed with the funder. The committee includes representatives from the Network's main partners in Iraq, and academics in the field from Iraq, the UK and elsewhere.

We are very grateful to the following people who served on the Management Committee during the reporting period:

- Dr Ahmed Al-Mallak, Coventry University
- Dr Dhirgham Alobaydi, University of Baghdad (to June 2023)
- Dr Fanar Hadad, University of Copenhagen (to June 2023)
- Dr Ula Merie, University of Babylon (to June 2023)
- Dr Bijan Rouhani, representing the EAMENA project, University of Oxford
- Dr Shireen Younis, University of Duhok
- Dr Maja Kominko, representing the ALIPH Foundation (to June 2023)
- Dr Lanah Haddad, representing TARI, The Academic Research Institute in Iraq

We also wish to express our deep gratitude to Professor Bill Finlayson, who stepped down from the Management Committee in October 2022, having served on it since the start of the AHRC-funded project in October 2017. He was a consistently wise and supportive advisor through thick and thin.

The Management Committee's Terms of Reference were given their annual review at the September meeting and potential new members were identified. We are happy to report that all accepted:

- Dr Maja Kominko, expert on heritage in crisis contexts
- Mr Ben Lawton, representing British Council Iraq

- Dr Zeinab Shuker, Sam Houston State University, expert on the social impacts of the climate emergency in Iraq
- Ms Fran Sutherland, University of Bradford, expert on Iraqi higher education
- Ms Jananne Al-Ani, artist and academic, University of the Arts London (from March 2024)
- Dr Hannah Fluck, expert on climate heritage (from March 2024)

2.3. Formal relationships with state institutions

Led by Mehiyar and Rozhen, we expended a significant amount of time to build trust with Iraqi state institutions this year.

2.3.1. Government of Federal Iraq

After general elections in Iraq in spring 2022, a new government was finally formed, and ministers appointed, in early November. Mehiyar and Eleanor were fortunate to be visiting Baghdad at that time and were able to secure a meeting with the new Minister of Culture, Dr Ahmed Fakkak Al-Badrani, together with his advisor (and former NN Co-Director) Dr Saad Eskander and the Deputy Minister and Head of the State Board of Antiquities and Heritage (SBAH), Dr Laith Hussein. We also met with senior officials at the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research (MoHESR). While previous Iraqi governments have been content for us to work without formal ministerial approvals, at both meetings, it was agreed that MoUs would henceforth be helpful to ensure the smooth delivery of our work in Iraq.

UCL's Global Engagement Office prepared draft agreements, which unfortunately were not ready until late March 2023, after Ramadan had begun. They then began their slow way through the approval process at both ministries, and at the time of writing neither had been signed yet, though we are told that they are making good progress.

In February 2023 the Network sponsored an official visit to the UK by the Minister of Culture and Director of SBAH (Figure 1). They visited Newcastle University, Oxford University, and the British Museum as well as University College London. We also organised closed round-table meetings at Chatham House and at the Iraqi Embassy for the Minister (Figure 3).

In May 2023, we attended a closed round-table at Chatham House for the Minister of Higher Education and were able to meet him briefly. In the summer, MoHESR overturned an earlier decision disallowing Iraqi universities from applying for the Nahrein Network's research grants scheme, which had arisen through a misunderstanding of our name and function. (In Iraq, the term 'Network' apparently has a technical meaning applying to a group of NGOs.) This was an important turning point, as it enables Iraqi universities to engage fully with us once more, even in the absence of the pending MoU.

We are very grateful to the Iraqi Embassy in London, especially the Cultural Attaché, Dr Mohammed al-Hashimi and his staff; Dr Yasamin al-Asaedi, Dean of the College of Archaeology at Mosul University; and Dr Renad Mansour, Director of the Iraq Initiative at Chatham House; and the British Council Iraq team at the British Embassy in Baghdad for facilitating this work.



Figure 3 The Nahrein Network team with the Iraqi Minister of Culture and colleagues at Chatham House

2.3.2. Government of Kurdish Region of Iraq

In November 2022, facilitated by Rozhen, we signed an MoU with the Directorate of Antiquities for the Kurdish Region of Iraq. We also met with the Head of the Prime Minister's Youth Office and the Governor of Sulaimani Province (Figure 4).

In June 2023, again facilitated by Rozhen, Eleanor began conversations with Dr Karzan Karim, Special Advisor on Higher Education to the Kurdish Prime Minister's Office. As a result, the Network has been asked to advise on the creation of a research funding scheme for universities in KRI and invited to initiate an MoU with the Ministry of Higher Education in Erbil. (Until now, the Ministry has been content for us to work in KRI without a formal agreement.) This work will take place in the coming academic year.

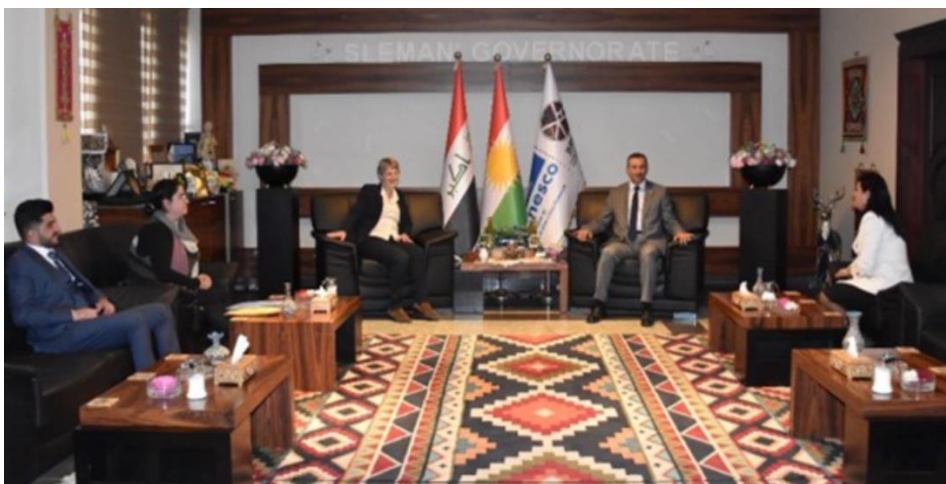


Figure 4 Prof Eleanor Robson and Dr Rozhen Mohammed-Amin meet the Governor of Sulaimani, Dr Haval Abubaker

2.3.3. Iraqi universities and heritage organisations

In November 2022, Eleanor and Mehiyar travelled to Baghdad, with Eleanor also visiting Rozhen in Sulaimani and Erbil. Apart from the ministerial meetings mentioned above, in Baghdad we also had time to visit the Iraq Museum, the Museum of Modern Art, the shrine of Abdul-Qadir Al-Gailani and the old railway station. In Sulaimani we met the president of the newly established President Jalal Talabani foundation, the Director of KISSR, Dr Polla, and toured the CHO office at Culture Factory, meeting Rozhen's team. In Erbil we spent time with Dr Lanah Haddad of TARII and member of the Network's Management Committee, visited the Institut Francais du Proche Orient and the Interpretation Centre on Erbil citadel, and met with CHO collaborators 51Lab.

During Eleanor and Mehiyar's visit to Iraq in May 2023, we visited Dr Rawa Qasha (University of Mosul) in her hometown of al Qosh and then met Management Committee Member Dr Shireen Ismael (University of Dohuk) in Dohuk. We then spent a few days in Mosul as guests of the University of Mosul. Eleanor gave the opening remarks for an event to mark World Heritage Day and fifth anniversary of Mosul's from DAESH, organized by Dr Yasmeen al-Asaedy, the Dean of the College of Archaeology. The event was attended by Dr Haider al Abadi, former Prime Minister of Iraq, and it was also a pleasure to meet the university's President, Dr Qusay al-Ahmedy, once more (Figure 5). Dr Yasameen also led us on a tour of Old City, to see the Nouri Mosque, the Museum of Mosul and other sites being rehabilitated. She also showed the progressed being made on a new community museum in one of Saddam's former palaces on the campus grounds, related to an AHRC-Nahrein Network-funded project that is still ongoing. Finally, Dr Mustafa Muhsin and Dr Khalil al Jaboori (respectively University of Kirkuk and the University of Tikrit) took us to visit the archaeological sites of Ashur and Kar-Tukulti-Ninurta near the city of Sherqat, the subjects of their previously funded AHRC-Nahrein Network project to document the impact of Da'esh occupation on heritage sites.

We are grateful to all colleagues in Iraq and the Iraqi Embassy in London who facilitated these visits.



Figure 5 Prof Eleanor Robson at University of Mosul's Heritage Festival with Dr Yasamin Al-Asaedy, former Prime Minister Dr Haider Abadi and President of Mosul University, Dr Qusay Al-Ahmedy

2.4. The Climate Heritage Network

We are delighted to report that this year we affiliated with the Climate Heritage Network, a voluntary, mutual support network of government agencies, NGOs, universities, businesses, and other organizations committed to tackling climate change and achieving the ambitions of the Paris Agreement. Mobilized in 2018 during the Global Climate Action Summit and launched in 2019, the Climate Heritage Network works to re-orient climate policy, planning, and action at all levels to account for dimensions of culture, from arts to heritage.

We hope this will strengthen our sixth research aim, namely to tackle the climate emergency–heritage emergency nexus in Iraq, and add our voices to the high profile campaigning and advocacy work of CHN (Figure 6).


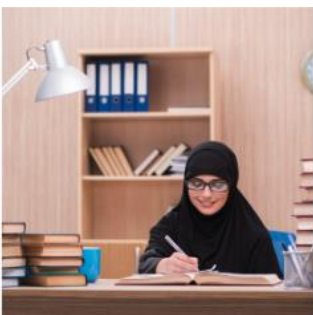



Figure 6 Nahrein Network is now a member of the Climate Heritage Network

3. Devolved Research

3.1. Research Aims

In order to foster the sustainable development of history, heritage and the humanities in post-conflict Iraq, the Network has six clearly defined research aims, each linked to one of the United Nations' [Sustainable Development Goals](#). All the work we conduct and fund must address at least one of these aims:

		
1 To better understand the current situation	2 To raise the profile of local expertise	3 To improve the job prospects of the region's youth
Why, and how, have local experts and audiences been excluded from the production and consumption of knowledge about the past of Iraq and its neighbours? We aim to develop a fuller historical and political understanding of this problem.	We aim to support Iraq humanities academics and heritage professionals to engage with regional and global academic communities, as producers of research for international consumption.	We aim to improve employability and leadership potential for humanities graduates from Iraqi universities.
See UN SDG 10 : Reduce inequalities between and within countries	See UN SDG 17 : Strengthen partnerships for sustainable development	See UN SDG 4 : Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all



4

To help heritage organisations better serve local needs

We aim to enable Iraqi museums, archives, cultural heritage sites, and registered NGOs to contribute to, and diversify, local tourism and knowledge economies.

See [UN SDG 8](#): Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all

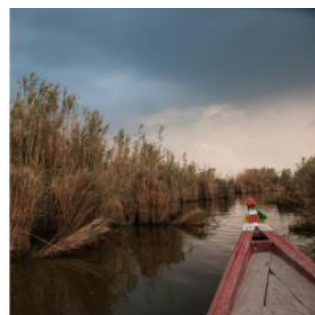


5

To help post-conflict healing and reconciliation

We aim to develop the role of Iraqi history and heritage in repairing past injustices, and in building inclusive communities and a fairer, more cohesive society.

See [UN SDG 16](#): Promote peace, justice and strong institutions



6

To address Iraq's climate emergency

We aim to foster an integrated, holistic approach to heritage and the environment, in order to mitigate against the effects of impending natural disaster.

See [UN SDG 13](#): Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts

3.2. Research Grant Awards Scheme

3.2.1. Background

The new format of the Research Grant Awards Scheme, approved by the Management Committee in June 2022, has the following features:

- It is supported by formal agreements (under development) with the Ministry of Culture (including SBAH) and MoHESR in Baghdad, and by the General Directorate of Antiquities and Heritage (GDAH) in Erbil. The Ministry of Higher Education in Erbil initially confirmed that it did not need formal approvals for the scheme to operate with universities in KRI.
- All payments to Iraq are now made through Stars Orbit, a reputable Jordanian services company that works closely with many international agencies across the Middle East.
- There is an annual, two-stage application process, with Expressions of Interest (EoIs) submitted each October. Eligible EoIs are reviewed and scored by an independent, international peer review college and members of the Core Team, and the best ten are shortlisted for further development.
- To avoid conflicts of interest, Management Committee members are no longer eligible to apply for grants (as they were under AHRC rules) and nor do they peer review EoIs. However, at the December meeting they scrutinize the shortlist for geographical and thematic spread, and are invited to give constructive feedback on EoIs in their areas of expertise.
- The Core Team then supports shortlisted applicants to develop full project documentation, budgeting and permissions over the following months, with deadlines in February and May. Projects that can meet these deadlines start as soon as all necessary paperwork is in place.

- We expect to fund 5–6 projects a year, of up to 48 months' duration

3.2.2. The 2022 scheme: applications and awards

The scheme relaunched in autumn 2022, inviting Eols — submitted via a simple online form — by 30 October. We held a Q&A webinar in September 2022 to promote the scheme and answer questions from potential applicants.

We received 55 applications, of which 22 were considered eligible and sent for Peer Review (Table 1). We shortlisted the best ten of these and invited them to develop full applications, taking into account feedback from the Peer Review College. This stage comprised three phases over winter–spring 2023:

1. Project teams developed a more detailed research plan, with a list of team responsibilities, CVs of team members, a month-by-month timeline and a planned list of outputs.
2. Project teams submitted budgets, risk reviews, ethics approvals and participant consent forms, data management plans, and letters of institutional approval.
3. Project teams were guided through the UCL due diligence process, asked to identify an authorised signatory in their university or organisation, and finally presented with the contract and award letter.

<i>EOI status</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>F %</i>	<i>Iraqi</i>	<i>UK</i>	<i>Inter-national</i>	<i>IQ %</i>	<i>Total</i>
<i>Shortlisted</i>	7	3	30%	6	4	-	60%	10
<i>Longlisted R&R</i>	2	-		2	-	-	100%	2
<i>Rejected</i>	6	4	40%	7	1	2	70%	10
<i>Total longlisted</i>	15	7	32%	15	5	2	68%	
<i>Ineligible</i>	31	3	9%	29	3	2	85%	34
TOTAL	46	10	18%	44	8	4	76%	56

Table 1 Demographic overview of applicants

After Phase 1, three projects had not made sufficient progress and a further project withdrew, leaving seven in development (**Error! Reference source not found.**). By the end of the reporting period, two were ready to go to contract.

3.2.3. Review and next steps

While we initially planned to have projects ready for contracting (Phase 3) by summer 2023, there were numerous delays, some of which originated in the projects themselves, and some at UCL:

- The most significant delay was caused by a belated request from UCL's Research Contracts team for a service level agreement (SLA) with Stars Orbit, the Jordanian services company we have used since 2021 to pay Rozhen's team. The UCL Procurement department was very slow to respond, as a result of which the SLA had still not been implemented by the end of September 2023. This meant that no contracts could be issued. In addition, staff turnover in the Research Contracts team itself has led to delays as we have had to induct new team members in our prior work and future needs.

- The second most significant delay on the UCL side is the due diligence process, which checks the financial and ethical probity of all international collaborators across the university. While one of the more efficient central processes, it remains difficult for our Iraqi awardees to comply with. The due diligence questionnaire is long and difficult to understand, even with significant support from us. Lots of requirements cannot be met, as Iraqi organisations, especially universities and state institutions, are prevented from sharing financial details with third parties, require extensive approvals (sometimes as high up as a government ministry). Furthermore, Iraqi partners are flagged as high risk every time, prompting the same explanations and the same supplementary approval from the Dean, which adds to delays.
- A third source of delay was the need to put in place overarching MoUs with the Iraqi Ministries of Culture and Higher Education, respectively. UCL's Global Engagement Office missed the agreed deadline to supply a draft by more than a month, running into Ramadan, while the Ministries in turn have been very slow to respond. In the absence of finalised MoUs, we are having to seek ministerial approvals on a case-by-case basis for every project involving SBAH or a public university, respectively. The Iraqi Cultural Attaché's office in London has been extraordinarily helpful here. Nevertheless, this is a very time consuming and bureaucratic process, with long waiting times for PIs to receive permission to sign due diligence forms or obtain letters of permission from their home institutions.
- In addition, we in NN invested significant time in creating suitable documentation, review processes and guidance to support the development of the shortlisted projects. In future rounds, now that we have a good system in place, we will be able to move more swiftly between developmental phases.

3.3. New mini-grants scheme

In order to lower barriers to participation in research in Iraq, in June 2023, the Network's Management Committee agreed to explore the options for introducing a clearly demarcated mini-grants scheme in the next funding year, ideally with a separate deadline to the research grants.

The Committee felt that we could better support capacity building in Iraq if we could offer micro-grants of up to £5,000 for small pilot projects or mid/post-project top-up support. Applying for such a grant should require less time and effort than currently needed in identifying partners and going through the long application and development process we have for larger grants. In offering smaller awards and reducing the application requirements we could support grassroots initiatives that would otherwise not have the capacity to transform into a comprehensive project.

The UCL due diligence process for devolved makes no allowance for very small, low risk, awards. As we found when we offered £10,000 grants under our old AHRC funding, the advantages of such a micro-grant scheme are greatly reduced if applicants still need to go through nine pages of due diligence questions — and which almost inevitably end up needing Dean's approval, given that UCL classes Iraq as a high-risk country.

We therefore sought, and have been granted, in-principle approval from the Dean for making project-level due diligence and funding decisions for all microgrants awards of up to £5,000 and in total, no more than 10% of our annual devolved grants allocation, representing a minimal level of financial risk. All awards under this scheme would still be subject to the Nahrein Network's grant eligibility criteria and will pass through the UCL initial risk assessment, as recommended by the UCL Global Partnerships office. We hope to launch the scheme in spring 2024.

4. Capacity building

4.1. Visiting Scholars Scheme

4.1.1. Background

The Visiting Scholarship Scheme supports Iraqi academics, cultural heritage professionals, NGO workers, and research students to visit the UK for 1–2 months for training and research, and/or to take up an online placement.

4.1.2. Applicants and awardees in 2022–23

During 2022–23, we held two calls, with deadlines in February and August (Tables 3 and 4). Applications were assessed by a joint committee of Core Team members, representatives of BISI and a former VS award-holder, and approved by the Management Committee in the respective June and September meetings. As per the agreement between the Network and BISI, BISI organised the placements.

We received a surprisingly low number of applications this year, and awarded just four scholarships in total in 2023, instead of the planned six, only one of which went to a female applicant (Table). After completing their placements, awardees wrote reports which were published on the Network's blog. Where such a report is available, it is linked below (Table 6).

<i>Applications</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Academic</i>	<i>Non-Academic</i>
Received	6	5	1	6	0
Eligible	3	3	0	3	0
Awarded	1	1	0	1	0

Table 2: Applications for Visiting Scholarships in February 2023

<i>Applications</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Academic</i>	<i>Non-Academic</i>
Received	13	12	1	9	5
Eligible	11	10	1	7	5
Awarded	3	2	1	1	2

Table 3: Applications for Visiting Scholarships in August 2023

<i>Name</i>	<i>Home institution</i>	<i>Host institution</i>	<i>Title of research project</i>	<i>Scholarship dates</i>
Salah Fulayfel Ayyed	University of Baghdad	UCL	Difficult heritage	July–October 2023 (2 visits)
Nawar Ihsan Abdulazeez	SBAH	British Museum	Marketing the Iraq Museum through the implementation of Sustainable Development Goals	March–May 2024
Alaa Abdul Hussain Ali Alkaabi	Iraq National Library and Archive (INLA)	Newcastle University	Technological change in libraries, a survey study in the INLA	July–August 2024

Ammar Hashim Saleh Merza	University of Mosul	University of Glasgow	Arab Heritage of Comics	March 2024
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Table 4: Visiting Scholars awarded placements in 2023

Name	Home institution	Host institution	Title of research project	Scholarship dates
Shazad Jaseem Tofiq	Directorate of Antiquities, Sulaimani	The British Museum	Contemporary approaches to museum design and interpretation	March–April 2023
Hamed Hyab Samir	University of Basrah	University of Loughborough	Reviving the cultural heritage of Basrah	June–July 2023
Abdulkareem Yaseen Ahmed	Al Yarmok University	University of Leicester	Rising from the rubble: toward safeguarding Christian cultural heritage in Mosul	July–August 2023
Zaid Isam Khudair al-Kawaz	Independent consultant	UCL	The heritage infrastructure of the British administration of Iraq (1916-1921)	November 2023 – April 2024 (online)
Mabast Ali	University of Garmian	University of Liverpool	Preserving prehistoric sites in Iraqi Kurdistan	January–April 2023 (2 visits)

Table 5 Visiting Scholars taking up placements in 2022–23

4.1.3. Review and next steps

During our review of the August 2023 round, BISI's Visiting Scholarship Co-ordinator highlighted the difficulties of covering visa, travel, and accommodation costs for scholars, given the rising costs of short-term rentals and lack of appropriate homestays in UK major cities while keeping to the current budget per scholar. Following approval by the Management Committee, Nahrein and BISI have agreed that the budget per scholar should be raised, while reducing the maximum number of scholars awarded per year from six to five. They will be awarded during a single round each year, instead of two with the next deadline set for 15 February 2024. Potential applicants will be informed that they need to take up the placement in one go, rather than split it up into two visits, and that the lead time for organising their visit is six months.

We also discussed the low number and quality of applications this year. We have not been reaching enough well-qualified applicants. In part this is due to lack of Ministry support while the new MoUs are pending, and in part due to the rather ad hoc nature of our own promotional efforts. Zainab has now put in place a clearer promotional calendar for future years.

4.2. Graduate Studentships Scheme

4.2.1. Background

In collaboration with UCL's History Department, Institute of Archaeology, and Bartlett Institute for Sustainable Heritage, we offer one fully funded place each academic year on one of eighteen MA/MSc programmes. Subject to satisfactory progress, the scholarship may be extended for a further three years to support full-time PhD research at UCL on a project related to the Nahrein Network's research aims.

There are two sets of eligibility criteria: we require applicants to be citizens and residents of Iraq/KRI, who have not lived or studied in the UK; while UCL's Graduate Admissions Office sets minimum academic qualifications and English language standards for acceptance onto each programme.

Applicants complete a short online form ahead of an annual deadline, several months before UCL admissions close. Eligible applications are considered by the relevant programme tutors and shortlisted candidates are interviewed online. The Network then supports the successful candidate(s) to make and pay for a formal application to their UCL Masters programme, including any necessary English language tests.

4.2.2. Applicants and awardees in 2022-23

We opened applications as soon as the UCL Graduate Prospectus came online in October 2022, and set a closing date of 30 November.

We received 28 applications, shortlisted seven and interviewed three (Table). The strongest candidate wishes to pursue an MSc in Sustainable Heritage.

<i>Applications</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>
Received	28	12	3
Eligible	7	6	1
Shortlisted	7	6	1
Interviewed	3	3	0

Table 6 Applicants to the UCL Graduate Studentship Scheme, 2022–23

4.2.3. Our 2022 awardee

In better news, **Mrs Niyan Ibrahim Hussein**, awarded in 2022, successfully completed her MA year and has secured a PhD place, which Nahrein Network will continue to fund (Figure 7). Niyan will be funded through the full postgraduate research programme, subject to successful progression as required by the degree. This is her report:

When I applied for the Nahrein Network studentship, I had a plan and a proposal for my future studies based on my academic background and work experience. Following my undergrad study, I worked as an urban planner within KRI, in different departments such as Urban Planning and Municipalities. As a part of my work, I worked with the Heritage Neighbourhoods within Sulaimani city. Subsequently I pursued an MSc degree in Urban Planning, where the focus of my thesis was on Public Transportation. However, my passion for studying cultural heritage led me to work in the field of Cultural Heritage after completing my studies.

At that time, I helped Dr Rozhen establish the Nahrein Network-funded NGO, 'Cultural Heritage Organization for Developing Cultural Heritage', which is registered in both KRI and Iraq. Additionally, I changed my workplace from the Directorate of Municipalities to the directorate of Antiquities in Sulaimani City, Iraq.

On receiving the Nahrein Network Graduate Studentship, I started an MSc programme in UCL's Institute for Sustainable Heritage. It enabled me to cover various aspects of heritage studies and conduct practical work on projects, which gave me better insight in shaping my research interests. An important module for me was 'Heritage Management and Sustainable Development'. In this module, I studied methods for introducing sustainable solutions to urban development and achieving sustainable heritage management. This helped me to establish my PhD proposal, whose title is 'Exploring the Dynamic Relationships Between Sustainable Heritage Management and Public Transportation'.

This research area seems to be less focused on within the current literature. In my research I will try to determine the dynamics between public transportation and Sustainable Heritage Management from the perspective of Urban Dynamics and Heritage Dynamics within the context of a developing country such as Iraq, which is known for its rich heritage. However, the country lacks proper management to safeguard its heritage and its management in accordance with the sustainable development agenda.

Since admission to my PhD program, and after discussion with my research supervisors, I am currently auditing some additional Master's modules in Sustainable Urban Development: Key Themes, and Transport Planning and the City. These modules will help me to build better understandings of concepts of transportation and urban sustainability, which will feed into my future research. Besides that, currently I am taking various training courses and workshops to increase and develop my research skills and personal developments skills. These are mostly provided by the UCL Doctoral School or my Department. Meanwhile I am conducting an initial literature review with guidance from my supervisors, trying to establish the theoretical background for my research.

In summary I want to highlight the fact that having the opportunity to complete my MSc at UCL before starting my PhD was an important step for my doctoral studies. It equipped me with a solid background in the field, enhanced my research skills, and deepened my knowledge of heritage literature and methods.

4.2.4. Review and next steps

Over the past two years, we have attempted to award a studentship to five different applicants, with only one success to date. We believe that the following factors are hindering the process:

- First and foremost are UCL's entirely reasonable English language requirements. While most interviewed candidates have a relatively good level of spoken and written English, this does not translate well under test conditions. Iraqi candidates do not generally have access to, or lack the resources to undertake, language courses geared to passing the IELTS or TOEFL tests. Finding resources for self-study can also be difficult. Candidates still find it difficult to meet even the lowest test scores acceptable for UCL's pre-sessional English courses. There is very little we can do about this, except to require applicants to demonstrate they have the



Figure 7 Niyam in UCL's Japanese Garden

required level of English before applying for our studentship.

- The slow and sometimes haphazard way in which admissions applications are processed by UCL. To address this, we have brought forward our application deadline and we encourage candidates to prepare as early and as thoroughly as possible for the UCL admissions application once awarded, but this still does not guarantee timely processing by Admissions or that the awardee will get a place on the pre-session English course if needed.
- Systemic and procedural shortcomings at both UCL and UKVI. These have had serious and harmful consequences for our offer holders. In multiple cases, delays or failures in communication, decision-making, and support processes – particularly around visa processing, English language requirements, and stipend or fee payments – have left offer holders in highly precarious situations. This includes applicants facing indefinite visa decisions, months-long delays in stipend disbursement and admissions outcomes, and a lack of appropriate support for students with precarious or otherwise vulnerable immigration statuses. The lack of responsiveness on the part of UCL and UKVI, and the absence of clear institutional pathways for handling more complex and/or vulnerable cases, has meant that in some instances offer holders had to defer their enrolment for a full year. While we continue to offer as much support and advocacy as possible to our offer holders, our ability to mitigate these institutional issues is limited.

4.3. [AcademiQ Research Skills Programme](#)

AcademiQ is a multi-year programme, led by Dr Mehiyar Kathem, designed to support Iraqi researchers in the arts, humanities and social sciences with academic skills development (Figure 8). It builds on a British Academy funded [Iraq Publishing Workshop project](#) which ran in 2019, and is the first such nationwide initiative in Iraq. AcademiQ consists of online research courses, provision of academic writing workshops and 1:1 academic mentoring. AcademiQ's courses and activities are not UCL credit-bearing.

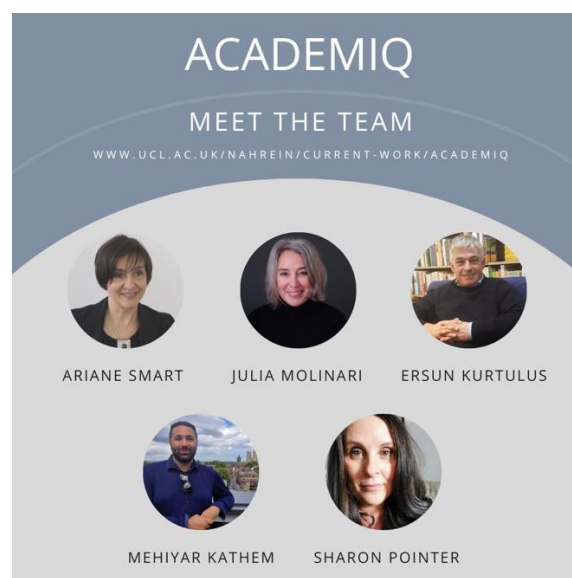


Figure 8 AcademiQ Team Members

4.3.1. Academic Research Course

This free online course is hosted on the platform UCL Extend. It consists of sixteen thematic units of 2–3 hours of independent study, released over the course of the year, offering conceptual insights, videos, readings, quizzes, and other activities designed to develop core skills in academic research. The programme had been designed over the course of 2021–22 by three expert consultants working with Mehiyar: Dr Julia Molinari, a Lecturer in Professional Academic Communication in English at the Open University in the UK and the author of *What Makes Writing Academic: Rethinking Theory for Practice* (Bloomsbury 2022); Ms. Sharon Pointer, a specialist in teaching language teaching to adults; and Dr Ariane Smart, an Associate Professor at UCL's Academic Communication Centre.

The first iteration of the programme attracted over 200 eligible applicants in summer and autumn 2022, 55 of whom were accepted to start in November 2022. However, participation rates dropped off after the first two weeks, with only 25 students making effective use of the course. A total of 12 students completed the course. We therefore ran an evaluation in the spring of 2023, including two focus-group meetings with Iraqi researchers, prior to a redesign in the summer.

Evaluations showed that:

- The fact it was a free course (with the possibility of securing a certificate of completion from the Nahrein Network) was one of the reasons why students had registered.
- Interviews would have helped to select applicants committed to completion of the course.
- Those that did complete the course found it to be an important source of information and knowledge on academic writing and publishing.
- However, continued, regular guidance (rather than a self-paced and self-learning approach) would have better served the target audience.
- Some learners found the course material difficult to use and would have benefited from live support sessions.
- A self-learning approach weakens or reduces the possibility for inter-student collaboration and communication. Learning cultures in Iraq do not lend themselves to self-learning and regular student-to-student engagement in the absence of direct and co-ordinated facilitation by the instructor(s).

Over the summer and autumn of 2023, Mehiyar therefore worked with two UCL student interns, the focus groups, and the trainers to rework the delivery of the programme, though much of the content stays the same. For the next iteration of the course, to run in Academic Year 2023–24:

- The course will remain free and a certificate of completion will be available at the end.
- All viable applicants will be interviewed.
- The content has been condensed into a smaller number of units, and there will be regular live online sessions with a tutor.
- Participants will be assigned to groups of maximum 20 in size, so that they can build community and learn to work with each other and their tutor.

Over the course of 2023, the team gained significant knowledge about Iraqi higher education, and we now have much deeper understanding of the needs of Iraqi academics. The programme will be evaluated again after this second iteration.

4.3.2. Academic Writing Workshops and Research Mentorship

This free training programme is designed and led by Dr Ersun Kurtulus, Associate Professor at the Department of International Relations, Social Sciences University of Ankara. It offers in-depth training and group-work support for up to ten Iraqi academics in the arts, humanities and social sciences, in research and academic writing. Participants develop and complete a research project starting with formulation of a research question (or a paradox or hypothesis), exploring the available literature in relation to the research topic, choosing a suitable research design, choosing appropriate research techniques dictated by the research design and collecting necessary data, and finally reporting their research results in the form of a publishable research article.



Figure 9 The workshop held in Baghdad with Dr Ersun Kurtulus

Ten senior university academics from Iraq, including KRI, were selected for the first set of workshops, which ran over academic year 2022–23. The group met with the trainer eight times, six times online and twice in two-day, in-person workshops in Iraq (Table 7). The first was held in Baghdad and the second in Erbil. Each day included six hours of training and group collaboration (Figure 9).

<i>Session</i>	<i>Format</i>	<i>Number of attendees</i>	<i>Number of submissions</i>
1	Online	10	n/a
2	In-person, Baghdad	9	10
3	Online	7	10
4	In-person, Erbil	5	5
5	Online	7	7
6	Online, discussion of papers	8	7
7	Online, discussion of papers	5	7
8	Online, discussion of papers	7	7

Table 7 Academic Writing Workshop Sessions

A total of seven participants completed a research paper as an outcome of this programme, listed below. They were discussed in the final three online sessions above and critical, group reflection was centred as a way of engagement.

- Dr Muayyad Omran Jaeed, "Gender Representation in EFL Secondary School Textbooks - A Critical Discourse Analysis Perspective" University of Karbala.
- Dr Zhwan Dalshad Abdullah, Department of Physiotherapy, Erbil Polytechnic University, "Exploring Online Design Thinking Approaches and Assessment Models for Learning Outcomes in Higher Education - A Scoping Review"
- Dr Haydar Jabr Koban, English Department, Dijlah University College: "Representations of Science: Questions of Postcolonial Biotechnology and Dehumanization in Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*"
- Dr Diyari Salih, Geography Department, Mustansiriyah University, Baghdad: "Baghdad's Urban Space - Militarization and Popular Geopolitics"
- Dr Islam Abdulsahib, English Department, Al-Bayan University: "The Pragmatic Portrayal and the Pathetic Plight of the Individual - A Postcolonial Study in Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* and *A Handful of Rice*"
- Dr Thamir Az-Zubaidy, English Department, Wasit University: "Empowering Iraqi Woman's Voice and Revolt in Muhsin Al-Ramli's 'I Killed her because I Loved Her'".
- Dr Eman Adil Jaafar, English Department, College of Education for Women, University of Baghdad: "Investigating Roles, Views and Attitudes in Social Media Communication Addressing Climate Change: A Corpus-Based Study".

Several participants spoke passionately about how the programme as a whole, and Dr Ersun's mentorship in particular, had helped them to reinvigorate their research activity, and kept them motivated during a busy, education and administration-focused academic year.

As with the Academic Research Course, conversations and evaluations have shown that the relaunch of the Academic Mentorship Programme will benefit from interviews as a process of selecting participants, in order to identify commitment to completing the course and for negotiating expectations from applicants.

Dr Ersun, the course convenor, also delivered two additional in-person workshops in Baghdad, one of the Ministry of Higher Education (26 attendees) and one for the State Board of Antiquities and Heritage (SBAH) that saw 23 attendees in total.

We are currently thinking and planning together, with this group, about how to ensure greater continuity and further development of the overall goals of the programme. This may include the development of new programmes involving the current group of participants and communication with the Ministry of Higher Education to rollout similar capacity-building activities for Iraqi universities.

5. Core team research projects and related activities

5.1. Cultural Heritage Organisation — Rozhen Kamal Mohammed-Amin

5.1.1. Aims

Dr Rozhen Mohammed-Amin is Nahrein Network co-director and president of the non-profit, Network-funded Cultural Heritage Organisation (CHO). CHO aims to address the gap in and need for digital cultural heritage research and practice in Iraq through three Work Packages. The first creates and conducts impact assessments of mobile Augmented and Virtual Reality apps to deliver immersive, emotive and empathetic responses to aspects of Iraq's 'difficult' heritage, from the Mandate-era Serai Building in Sulaimani to the Yazidi genocide of 2017. Second, the "Reconstruct Mesopotamia" annual internship program trains interdisciplinary teams across Iraq in digital cultural heritage reconstruction, preservation and interpretation of their cultural heritage. The third delivers monthly professional development workshops and webinars to cultural heritage professionals and scholars from local museums, libraries, NGOs, and universities. CHO's achievements this year are described below.



Figure 10 Launch ceremony for the "Feel like me" project.

5.1.2. Augmented and virtual reality for engagement with difficult heritage (WP1)

We launched and continued online and in-person campaigns for CHO, NN, and Minority Rights Group's joint "Feel like me" project that combines difficult heritage, technology, and advocacy to encounter Yazidi hate speech and promote empathy towards the Yazidi minority (Figure 10). Through the project's mobile Augmented Reality app and social media platforms, we are collecting quantitative and qualitative data related to the users' reactions to the content of the app.

CHO received/will receive funding for an amount of £30,000 + £9,500 from the University of Reading to develop an AR and a VR experience for Slemani Museum's Pre-History Gallery similar to the *Talk to Sarai* and *Feel Like Me* projects as part of the Central Zagros Archaeological Project's HESDIK (Heritage and Ecotourism for Sustainable Development in Iraqi Kurdistan) Project (University of Reading, AHRC Grant no. AH/W006790/1). The project also includes a capacity-building session on

developing 360 tours and some other activities at two archaeological sites and Slemani Museum. Work on the projects is stalled now, waiting for feedback from the University of Reading team.

The CHO-NN team is also becoming a go-to team for participating in key local cultural and technological events and festivals such as Sulaimani Day Festivals, TECHEST, and HITEXT in Sulaimani and Erbil. Our organization has witnessed a surge in the number of requests from individuals, organizations, and educational institutions for collaboration, delivering training workshops, and showcasing our projects, far more than what we can handle and respond to. For example, we were invited to participate in a high-profile tech event in Sulaimani called Bit Technology Festival, co-organized and funded by Potan company and GIZ. We were also invited to participate in the festival's roundtable on technology start-up challenges and opportunities with the KRG Deputy Prime Minister (Mr. Qubad Talabani). Also, over the summer, an AUIS faculty member invited our team to display our projects to her students as examples of locally produced innovative projects. The local recognition of our projects as innovative has led to the nomination of our projects to participate in a closed funding call the Enterprise Development Fund for Innovation Businesses (EDFi) from UN IOM, in which participation was only through a referral by an incubator. Although we could not apply to the fund (due to the not-for-profit nature of CHO), the referral demonstrates interest in scaling our projects. Our team continues to receive a growing number of requests from individuals, organizations, and educational institutions for collaboration, delivering training workshops, and showcasing our projects, far more than what we can handle and respond to.

Our team's developer, Karo Kameran, and his colleague were awarded the top prize in the Artificial Intelligence category during the HakaSuli 2023 competition at the Bit Technology Festival in the Culture Factory.

5.1.3. Digital heritage internship programme (WP2)

Over the summer and in early fall 2023, we completed the planning for our Digital Heritage Internship Program (DHIP), announced and promoted the program, reviewed and shortlisted the application forms, selected the targeted 16 interns after a panel interview by three CHO-KISSR-NN team members, and started the program. The interns' keen interest in their group projects (proposed by our team based on the needs of local heritage organizations and the program's objectives) has already led to an early start of the projects and the expansion of the projects' scope and amount of work (Figure 11).



Figure 11 The Digital Heritage Internship Program in action

5.1.4. Webinars and community engagement (WP3)

During this reporting period, our CHO office based at Culture Factory in Sulaimani welcomed nearly **240** local and international visitors (including academics, journalists, students, government officials, NGOs, companies, and high-profile advisors and diplomats from Iraq, the US, UK, Germany, and South Korea). Their feedback on the quality and novelty our digital heritage projects has been highly positive and encouraging. Aside from publicising our projects, these visits led to invitations to new projects, events, media coverage, project display opportunities, and even becoming a case study for students' assignments at the American University of Sulaimani-Iraq (AUIS).

We organized and delivered **one** in-person internal training workshop (total duration of **six** hours) for all CHO-KISSR-NN team members on "Independent Learning and Decision Making" to enhance their independent working ability and leadership skills.

In partnership with KTI and the University of Duhok, we co-organized and delivered **two** in-person training workshops, **one** panel, and **one** seminar that attracted a total of **498** faculty members, staff, students, and others in both Sulaimani and Duhok cities. These activities were followed by the display and live demo of our projects to the attendees.

We organized, co-organized, or participated in a total of **23** community engagement events/activities in the cities of Sulaimani and Erbil (with a total duration of **115 hours**) that attracted a total of nearly **4000** visitors and users.

We had a total of **19** networking and consultancy meeting with various local stakeholders in Sulaimani and Erbil before, during, and after the NN Director's (Prof. Eleanor Robson) visit to Sulaimani and Erbil.

The CHO-NN Co-I, Rozhen Kamal Mohammed-Amin, was invited to and spoke at a total of **ten** local and international events (festival, workshop, seminar, panel, and conferences). Rozhen also undertook over a dozen networking and consultation meetings with local and international

academics and experts in the heritage field both online and in person. She was also nominated to and participated in the International Visitor Leadership Program (IVLP), which is the U.S. Department of State's premier professional exchange program, along with another 10 cultural heritage professionals from the Kurdistan Region and the rest of Iraq. Their program's theme was "Protecting Cultural Heritage through Innovation" and involved a total of 27 meetings and visits to a total of 23 key cultural heritage institutions and universities across four states in the U.S.

We continue to receive invitations to take part in various activities or speak at events from well-known local institutions and stakeholders. In the 2022-2023 funding cycle, the CHO-KISSR team received a total of 17 invitations to meetings, roundtable sessions, and events related to cultural heritage and/or tech-based entrepreneurship and tech-start-up discussions.

5.1.5. Publicity and publications

In addition to outreach activities, our social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and X (formerly known as Twitter) have witnessed a large increase in the number of engagements in the 2022-2023 funding cycle. For instance, our Facebook page and profile visits have increased by 2.7K%, while our Instagram profile visits have increased by 3.5K%. The number of new likes and followers on our Facebook page has also significantly increased (866%).

We gave or were featured in an **26** interviews by local and international media/social media pages, including by Dijlah TV (one of the most-watched news channels in Iraq, based in Jordan). The number of media that we encountered or specifically approached us to feature and promote our projects and activities has **more than doubled** compared to the 2021-2022 funding cycle. In addition to promoting and raising awareness about the digital heritage field and our related projects and activities, through these interviews, we shared our ideas, plans, experiences, achievements, and impacts.

We are continuously receiving a large number of emails, messages, calls, and in-person inquiries. The feedback we get from known and unknown people and in unexpected places and times (such as at funerals and other organizations' public events) testifies to the wide and deep impacts that our projects and activities are having. We are increasingly being approached by and providing Pro-Bono consultancy (and even written proposals) to local institutions and NGOs on research capacity building, fundraising, and cultural projects.

We have already submitted a paper to the ISAW (the Institute for the Study of the Ancient World) Open Access Volume. We are also working on three other papers simultaneously.

5.1.6. Challenges faced by CHO

Managing grants in KRI and the rest of Iraq often feels like walking through a swamp from all the unpredictable difficulties and uncertainties that pop up from political and economic volatility, weak institutions, and fragile commitment to the rule of law. Aside from Iraq's unreliable banking system, a key administration challenge we faced last year was a sudden change in our previous home institution's (SPU) administration and legal commitment to our internationally funded projects (including the Nahrein Network fund). The change was caused by a change in leadership and the new leader's non-commitment to or (in one of the funds) abandonment of the legally binding international agreements signed by his predecessor. Aside from PR issues with international partners, this sudden change created a series of (now) resolved and unresolved administrative challenges for our team. These challenges interrupted and delayed various tasks, added extra workload and pressure, and also prevented financial clearance of the funds received by SPU (NN 2020-2021 and the fund from Minority Rights Group International for the Feel Like Me project). As a

result, the SPU's new Director of Finance returned all the original receipts and related financial reports to our financial coordinator. This stopping happened even though the fixed allowances (payments) for extra hours working on the financial clearance by the staff at SPU presidency have been issued and despite of SPU legal department's follow-up with the new SPU president.

None of the formal follow-ups of our team, the directors of Finance, Auditing, and Legal Affairs at SPU presidency, and the Head of the Financial Control and Monitoring Committee at SPU had resolved this issue. To mitigate administration risks, we reached out to the main Financial Control and Monitoring Department in Sulaimani (the main governmental financial monitoring body affiliated with the Ministry of Finance) to inform them about this administration challenge. As per a formal letter directed to SPU and copied to us (No. 763/5/4 on 6/6/2023), the Financial Control and Monitoring Department in Sulaimani asks SPU to comply with the regulations and complete the financial clearance of the above funds received at SPU bank and notify them in the case of any issue. Then on 18/6/2023, we sent a formal letter (No. 46) from CHO to the SPU president's office to follow up with and emphasize the content of the letter from the Financial Control and Monitoring Department and to formally document our attempts to complete outstanding financial clearances at SPU. For the last five months, we have not yet heard back anything from SPU and this matter is still outstanding.

In the past, our team has also resisted direct and indirect pressures from some decision-makers and superiors of our previous home institution to employ people for them (some form of nepotism) or pay themselves from the Nahrein Network project fund without contributing to the project. Mismanagement and misuse of another internationally funded project (not related to our team) at our previous home institution (with limited experience with obtaining and managing international funds) contributed to the false assumption of those decision-makers and superiors that international funds are money with no accountability. Aside from our continuous explanations, we asked the UCL office to provide support letters confirming our need to comply with the reporting requirements of UCL and how the reporting will go through auditing at UCL.

Our and others' experience in managing projects in Iraq makes us believe that these incidents and follow-up complications are and will not be unique and had and will likely reoccur with other teams and institutions due to weak institutions and compliance with the rule of law. Over the past few years, we have witnessed how some academics and professionals did not accept their awarded grants or did not apply for grants due to their concern about sudden or unpredictable changes in their home institution's support and compliance with the agreements they signed with local and/or international partner.

Also, in Iraq and KRI things can become highly politicized. This politicization sometimes manifests as conflicting rules and regulations. For example, most recently, the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research in Baghdad sent a confidential letter to all the public and private universities (those outside the Kurdistan Region) banning them from dealing with several local and international NGOs with legal working status in Iraq and obliging them to notify them about any projects involving the universities that are directly or indirectly funded by the US State Departments. As a registered NGO in Baghdad, we are getting concerned about the fallout of these regulations on our work and collaborations.

Our team continues to comply with high standards in managing our funds (including the funds from the Nahrein Network) by complying with all the terms and conditions of our agreements, complying with our international and local partners' reporting requirements, continuously seeking legal,

administration, and financial consultations, and transparency in providing data and statistics about our funds, spendings, and activities to all our partners, funders, past and current home institutions, and anyone related/or interested.

5.2. The Forgotten City of Kish: reparative history and knowledge repatriation — Eleanor Robson

5.2.1. Aims

The large archaeological site of Kish, 15 km northeast of Babylon, comprises the ruins of the greatest cities of ancient Babylonia. Since the mid 19th century, several international antiquarian and archaeological expeditions have worked there. Most of their finds were taken to museums in Paris, Istanbul, Oxford, and Chicago so it is now impossible to study them together, and few artefacts are in Iraq itself (Figure 12). The few archaeological and historical studies of Kish are in French and English, not Arabic. Visitors to the site today see only filled-in traces of long-ago excavation pits and the collapsing remains of mud-brick buildings, which SBAH are working hard to conserve. With this project, the Nahrein Network has begun to help SBAH to recover lost and dispersed knowledge of Kish and render it useful to Iraq.

The project comprises three work packages: Oracc tools and training (with UCL's Centre for Advanced Research Computing, ARC); website, conference and visitor engagement; theory and policy. The original team comprised Paul Collins, Parsa Daneshmand, and Eleanor Robson. In November 2022 Paul had to withdraw from active participation in the project (see §5.3 below) and Eleanor had much less time than hoped to work on it (see §2.1 above). Nevertheless, steady progress was made, and we are pleased to report that Parsa accepted a postdoctoral fellowship at Wolfson College Oxford from 1 October 2023, just a month before his UCL contract was due to end.

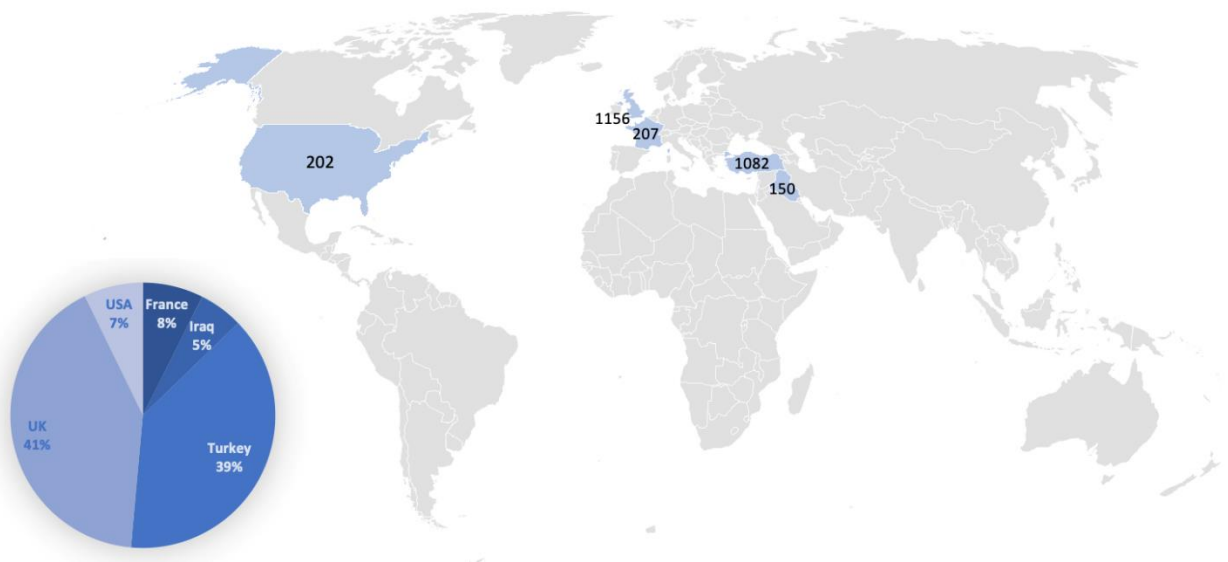


Figure 12 Worldwide distribution of cuneiform tablets from Kish

5.2.2. Delivery against objectives

In the 2021–22 Annual Report, we planned to deliver the following activities:

WP1 Oracc

- *The launch of the next version of Nisaba, the open-access cuneiform text editor, and the public release of the redesigned Oracc website, in winter 2022-23*
Nisaba version 1.4.1 was indeed released in December 2022, and [is available on GitHub](#). A test version of the new Oracc website was also released at <https://build-oracc.museum.upenn.edu/new/> But it is not yet on the public Oracc server at Penn Museum, pending that service's upgrade to secure https protocol, and ARC's completion of a new search facility. These is now expected in the winter of 2023–24.
- *The development of training activities and guidance documentation for Arabophone cuneiformists*
No progress yet, but there are concrete plans for next year.

WP2: Website and engagement

- *Near-completion of the online corpus of cuneiform tablets from Kish now housed in Oxford*
This year Parsa concentrated on the previously unedited Neo-Babylonian and Achaemenid archival documents from Kish, published as unreliable drawings by McEwan in *Late Babylonian Texts from the Ashmolean Museum* (Oxford Editions of Cuneiform Texts, 10; 1982). There are now c.400 draft editions online on the development server, but they still need much more work before they are ready for publication (Table).
- *Collaboration with the Field Museum to revive and republish the Kish finds database and field records, in an open-access online format*
With help from Paul, Eleanor initiated conversations with the Field Museum in January 2023. It turns out that they were already actively working on this and were open to collaboration. However, constraints on Eleanor's time meant that she has not yet followed up.
- *Further archival research on the history of excavation and public reception of Kish*
Following Paul's withdrawal from the project, Eleanor made some progress and also invited Laith Shakir of New York University, to contribute where the project overlaps with his PhD research on *Archaeology, Development, and Tourism in Modern Iraq, 1920-1945*.
- *The initiation of a multilingual website, modelled on <https://oracc.org/nimrud/>, that will bring together all known material on the site*
Not yet begun, beyond the draft corpus, at <https://build-oracc.museum.upenn.edu/kish>
- *A social media campaign, beginning in March 2023, to mark the centenary of the start of the OFME fieldwork*
Did not take place, in large part due to time constraints but also due to the problematic developments at Twitter/X and the lack of a viable audience on other social media platforms

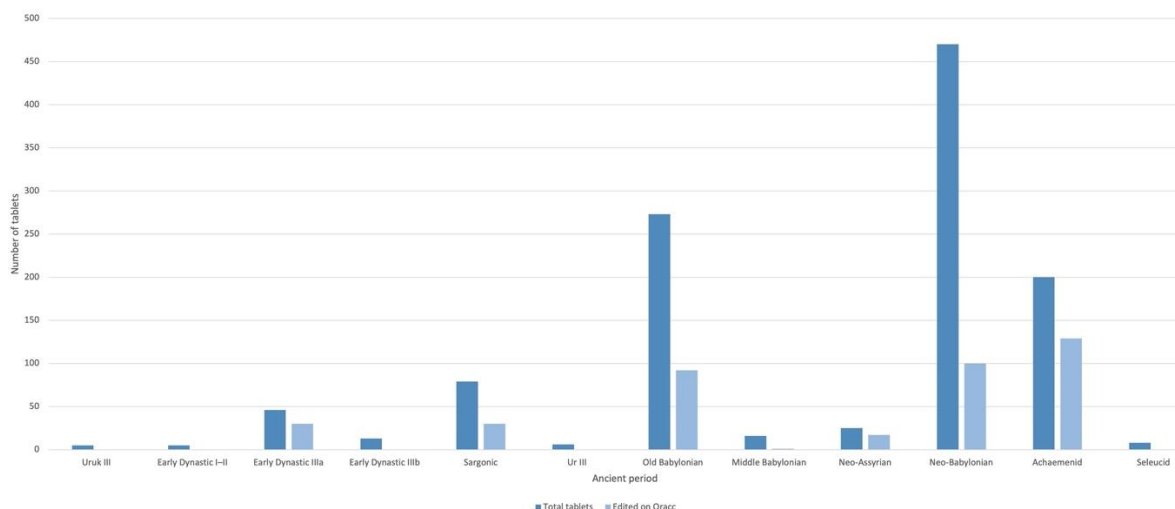


Table 8 Cuneiform tablets from Kish in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford

WP3: Theory and policy

- *Keynote lectures and the drafting of an article outlining the concept and practice of knowledge repatriation as a complement/alternative to artefact repatriation*

In December 2022, Eleanor gave the prestigious Veenhof Lecture for the Dutch National Museum of Antiquity and the National Institute for Near Eastern Studies in Leiden on this topic. A seminar she was due to give in the Cambridge Global History series in February 2023 was postponed due to the UCU strike and was rescheduled to October.

At various points throughout 2023, Eleanor gave advice to the renowned Iraqi-American artist Michael Rakowitz on the development of his new exhibition at the Baltic Gallery in Gateshead, *The Waiting Gardens of the North* (July 2023–May 2024). In September she and Michael conducted a [public conversation at the Baltic](#) on themes of Iraqi heritage, environment, food and migration which also addressed questions of reparative history and knowledge repatriation.

All this material will feed into an article, provisionally titled, ‘The forgotten city of Kish: reparative history, knowledge repatriation and heritage site management in southern Iraq’ that will form the basis of her Impact Case Study for REF 2028.

5.2.3. Review and next steps

In 2023–24, as Eleanor finally begins her research leave, she will do a thorough review of the progress and viability of all elements of the project as originally designed two years ago. Parsa Daneshmand is keen to continue collaborating. At the moment, the most likely scenario is as described below.

WP 1: Oracc tools for Arabophone edition and searching of cuneiform texts (with UCL ARC)

- Public release of the new Oracc search facility
- Translation of Cuneiform Revealed website into Arabic (WY)
- Potential collaboration with the University of Baghdad on Digital Humanities

WP2: Website and outreach (with WY and PD)

- Significant further development of the Kish corpus, including incorporation of previously edited material by Assyrological colleagues
- Development of the historical essays on the website
- More active collaboration with the Field Museum's resurrection of the artefact database
- Decision on the viability of social media campaign and/or project conference

WP3: Theory and policy

- Completion and submission of article on reparative history and knowledge repatriation
- First draft of REF impact case study
- Development of long-durée historical study of date palm cultivation and sustainability in Iraq, based in part on evidence from Kish

5.3. British Museum — Paul Collins

The past twelve months have seen a refocusing of research following my leaving the Ashmolean Museum (where I had been exploring the contemporary impact of the excavations at Kish) to take up a position at the British Museum. Work has shifted to investigating the role of the British Museum in shaping political, scholarly and public approaches to Mesopotamian/Iraqi archaeology and heritage during and in the aftermath of British Mandate control of the region. Early work has focused on the influence of Sir Frederic Kenyon, Director of the British Museum 1909-1931), Trustee of the Imperial War Museum (1920-1946) and President of the British Academy (1917-1921). A first output is:

- Paul Collins, 'The Ur excavations in context: Empire, war, museums and race', in N. Postgate, ed., *Ur 1922-2022* (BISl, forthcoming).

In addition, I have been developing plans for a **Middle East Knowledge Exchange Network** (MEKEN) as a potential partnership between the Nahrein Network, the British Institute for the Study of Iraq and the British Museum. MEKEN will build on existing networks of training and collaboration by delivering activity in Iraq itself, developing programmes around best practice in aspects of archaeology, conservation, heritage management and museology tailored to respond to specific needs and wishes identified by Iraqi university and SBAH colleagues. MEKEN will build capacity by focusing on larger numbers of participants represented by museum/office-based SBAH employees, particularly women unable to go into the field or travel abroad, as well as classroom-based university students. MEKEN will offer a mix of creative workshops, hands-on-sessions and presentations delivered by curatorial staff of the BM's Middle East Department, academic staff of UCL and Trustees of BISl in partnership with colleagues in Iraq. Participants will broaden their understanding of the museum, archaeology and heritage sectors through introductions to a wide range of topics.

5.4. The politics of heritage in Iraq — Mehiyar Kathem

In November 2022, I organised a Nahrein Network-sponsored panel at Chatham House's annual Iraq Initiative conference, on the predation of Iraq's cultural heritage (Figure 13). Chaired by Eleanor, the speakers included myself, Dr Maja Kominko, Scientific and Programmes Director of the ALIPH Foundation, and Professor Hosam Dawod, anthropologist and former adviser to Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi.

My research has focus on the heritage in Iraq. I writing for a book

Figure 13 Panel at Chatham House's Iraq Initiative conference, with Dr Mehiyar Kathem and chaired by Prof Eleanor Robson



continued to politics of have started project (for I.B.

Tauris/Bloomsbury) that explores the post-2003 politics of heritage in Iraq. I have written 30,000 words for this book so far and plan to submit a first draft in May 2024. I am continuing to conduct interviews and data collection for some of the chapters, including one on the history of the State Board of Antiquities and Heritage since 2003.

My other publications this year are:

- M. Kathem, 'Heritage predation and the pursuit of politics', in J. A. González Zarandona, E. Cunliffe, and M. Saldin (eds.) *The Routledge Handbook of Cultural Heritage Destruction* (London, 2023), 185–195.
- M. Kathem, 'Cultural heritage and symbolic power in Iraq's protest movement', in Laurajane Smith *et al.* (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of the Politics of Heritage* (London, 2024)

I also wrote the following think-tank piece for the US-based Atlantic Council, exploring the development of a new heritage model pertaining to Iraq's Shia religious institutions:

- M. Kathem, '[The rise of a Shia Vatican in Iraq](#)', Atlantic Council MENASource, 14 April 2023.

In addition, I wrote some short blog pieces and recorded podcasts for the Nahrein Network website.

From October to December 2022, I taught an optional, 15-credit module titled 'New Public Histories in Conflict Affected Contexts' that I designed for UCL's new MA in Public History. I worked closely with the students to advise them on their essay questions and conceptual framing. I also organised a series of guest speakers for the module, including Louise Haxthausen, former head of UNESCO Iraq.

6. Communications, publicity and media

6.1. Social media

The Nahrein Network's social media channels did exceptionally well during 2022–23 on all platforms except for X (formerly Twitter). The rebrand has caused X itself a substantial loss in traffic and users and this decline has been visible on our own impression and engagement levels. Nonetheless, we continue to share and post on all our platforms on a weekly basis. Facebook and Instagram have gained a lot of followers compared to last year and we can see an increase in Reach, Impression and Engagement levels overall (Table 92). We have also added Meta's Threads to our list of social media platforms. We have built a strong relationship with our audience by consistently updating our readers with the latest news and upcoming events. Across all platforms — Facebook, Instagram, X, YouTube, Threads — we gained over 1,300 followers in one year.

<i>Social Media Platform</i>	<i>October 2022</i>	<i>October 2023</i>	<i>Follower Increase</i>
X (formally Twitter)	4188	4465	277
Facebook	1758	2260	502
Instagram	850	1180	330
YouTube	85	145	60
Threads (new Meta platform)	-	135	135
Total			1304

Table 92 Increase of followers on social media platforms

6.2. Website

The Nahrein Network website is regularly edited and revised. We have continued to improve on last year's website revamp with simplified navigation and easier access to pages. A new Current Work tab has been introduced. This has links to: [Visiting Scholars](#), [Graduate Students](#), [Research Grants](#), [AcademiQ Programme](#) and [Core Team Research Projects](#), as well as a link to Nahrein Network Annual Reports ([Achievements 2021 – 2022](#)). The Research Grants page and the Visiting Scholar page remain the most visited on the Nahrein Network website (Table 3). Furthermore, users from Iraq account for nearly 60% of all site visitors (Table 4).

<i>Most Visited Pages</i>	<i>Views (Oct 22–Oct 23)</i>	<i>Country</i>	<i>Users</i>
Research Grants	1530 (19%)	Iraq	1827 (59%)
Visiting Scholarships	1209 (15%)	United Kingdom	663 (21%)
Home Page	897 (11%)	United States	147 (4.7%)
Aims	352 (4.4%)	Total	3116
Total	8074		

Table 3 Most visited Nahrein Network web pages

Table 4 Website users by country

6.3. Newsletter

The Nahrein Network Newsletter continues to do very well. This bi-monthly circular includes news, updates, and interviews with our graduate student and visiting scholars. Over the past 12 months, we have built a strong community of subscribers with a readership of over 1,300. The campaigns have been exceptionally successful, with an open rate of 55% compared to our peers' performance of 40%. The click rate of 10.5% and the unsubscribe rate of only 0.1% are also ahead of our category peers. The majority of our readers are from Iraq, UK, and USA.

6.4. Webinars

The Nahrein Network organised four hybrid (in-person and online) webinars with Visiting Scholars and other distinguished guests over the summer of 2023 (Figure 14). Although in-person attendance fell short of expectations, our online viewership was excellent and very engaged. The webinars can be rewatched via the following links:

- [Safeguarding the diversity of cultural heritage in Basrah](#) with Dr Hamed Hyab Samir from University of Basrah (5 July 2023)
- [Genocide Studies in Iraq](#) with Dr Salah al Jabari, Director of the UNESCO Chair for Genocide Prevention Studies in the Islamic World at the University of Baghdad (7 August 2023)
- [Climate Emergency and Cultural Heritage in Iraq](#) with academics and practitioners from Iraq and the UK (5 September 2023)
- [The Future and Sustainability of Najaf's Cultural Heritage](#) with Dr Ali Naji Attiyah from University of Kufa (27 September 2023)



Figure 14 Some of the in-person webinars held by visiting scholars at UCL

We also held Q&A webinars about our Research Grants and Visiting Scholarships schemes to explain the details to applicants:

- [Research Grant Awards Webinar \(in English, Arabic & Kurdish\)](#) — 7 October 2022
- [NN - BISI Visiting Scholarships Webinar \(in English & Arabic\)](#) — 12 May 2023

All our videos and webinars are recorded and uploaded on our [YouTube page](#), which received over 3,500 views in the last year.

6.5. Podcasts

Over the past year we have finished uploading all Nahrein Network podcasts to [UCL Minds](#), UCL's podcast channel. It shares the knowledge, insights, and ideas of the UCL community, with a reach of over 532,000 and accessible on several applications. During the last 12 months and with the help of our interns we uploaded a total of 17 podcasts to UCL Minds, including 12 episodes from the archive and three newly recorded interviews:

- [Preserving Cultural Heritage in a War Zone](#), a 3-part series with the late Rene Teijgeler, conservator at the National Library of the Netherlands.
- [Safeguarding Cultural Heritage of Basrah](#) with Dr Hamed Samir, Head of Architecture at the University of Basrah and Nahrein Network Visiting Scholar.
- [Early Prehistoric Sites in Iraqi Kurdistan](#) with Mabast Ali Amin, lecturer at University of Garmian and Nahrein Network Visiting Scholar.

The Nahrein Network podcast series currently includes a total of 28 episodes, majority transcribed by student volunteers from UCL (Figure 15). These episodes have over 10,000 plays, including one episode in the **Top 10** tracks played on UCL Minds: [Edward Said and Orientalism with Professor Nasser Jassem](#) and another in the **Top 25** tracks played: [Watercrafts and Heritage in Iraq with Rashad Salim](#).

We would also like to thank the the interns who helped transcribe the podcasts: Rachel Yi, Matthew Berry and Shoryu Saigo. Their hard work made this possible.



Figure 15 Podcast figures

6.6. News media

As in previous years, worldwide news agencies have reached out to the Nahrein Network for consultations and interviews on topical issues relating to Iraq. However, we still struggle to engage UCL's Faculty and central media teams in our work. Here is a list of the past year's news features:

- [In Iraq's Babylon, age-old building techniques heal climate scars](#) by Context (Thomson Reuters Foundation)
- ['We are still displaced,' 20 years after the Iraq war](#) by Hanna Duggal and AJLabs
- [Reclaiming Iraq's history](#) by Bill Law

All articles can be found on our Nahrein Network website's [News Page](#).

7. Looking ahead to Year 3 (October 2023 – September 2024)

7.1. Governance

Over two years into our funding, the lack of support and general indifference from UCL are a continued source of worry and risk. There needs to be an **urgent review** of the university's capacity to support and celebrate our work and to ensure that our funds are being spent effectively.

Separately, and more positively, we expect the **pending MoUs** with Iraqi ministries to be signed off over winter 2023–24 and are looking forward to taking up British Council Iraq’s kind offer to sponsor a signing or celebration session at the British Embassy in Baghdad in early 2024.

The current 3-year collaboration **agreement between UCL, KISSR and the British Museum** expires in September 2024. The follow-up will need to be negotiated and signed.

7.2. Devolved projects: research grant awards

Once the final bureaucratic hurdles have been leapt, both at UCL and in Erbil and Baghdad, we expect the first of our **devolved research projects**, selected in 2022–23, to start in winter 2023–24. The next awarding round should also progress more smoothly, and we hope to be able to report on up to ten active research projects in our next Annual Report.

We also hope to lower Iraqis’ barriers to participation in funded research by introducing a low-resource **mini-grants scheme** in spring 2024, offering up to seven £500 awards each year.

7.3. Capacity building

After some experimentation, the evergreen **Joint NN-BISI Visiting Scholars scheme** will move to one annual deadline, in February, and offer slightly fewer but better funded placements. Female participation is still very low, but this appears to be a structural societal problem that deters women with dependents from solo international travel.

The **AcademiQ** programme for developing research capacity continues to grow and improve, with a revamp of the entry-level online Academic Research Course and a second round of the Mentorship Programme led by Dr Ersun Kurtulus. A new Critical Research Skills course will come online in spring/summer 2024 to bridge the gap between the two. There will also be opportunities to develop more bespoke provision for the Ministries of Higher Education.

The **UCL Graduate Studentship** will be offered for a third time under tighter English-language conditions. If it again fails to attract a viable candidate for admission, the Management Committee will be asked to consider closing the programme — while continuing to support Niyan Ibrahim — and to propose alternative uses of the unspent funds.

7.4. Core research projects and related activity

CHO will at last be able to deliver its Digital Heritage internship programme in full. The **Kish Project** will be evaluated against its initial proposals and reformulated to fit current conditions. By the end of year 3 it should start to produce more visible and impactful outputs. The British Museum’s **MEKEN project** will launch, and Mehiyar’s work on the **politics of heritage** in Iraq will continue to progress.

7.5. Policy and consultancy

A piece of work on **accountability in cultural heritage projects** in Iraq is taking shape and will start in earnest in early 2024. We will also deliver planned advisory work for KRI on research grant funding.