



شبكة النهرين

The Nahrein Network, 2017–2025: Impact and Evaluation Report

August 2025

This Impact and Evaluation Report aims to encapsulate and reflect on the Nahrein Network's achievements over the past eight years, highlighting its commitment to fostering sustainable cultural heritage development in Iraq through academic collaboration, community engagement, and policy advocacy.

The report outlines key accomplishments, evaluates the reasons for our relative successes and failures, showcases impactful case studies, and provides recommendations for future funders and partners interested in supporting similar initiatives.

For further detail of activities, outcomes and outputs, please read our website www.nahreinnetwork.org. All eight Annual Reports to our funders, lightly edited to remove confidential information, are also available there.

I hope future generations learn from the Nahrein Network that heritage is more than preserving the past. It's about empowering communities, respecting diverse voices, and building a shared, inclusive future. Let them see that protecting culture helps heal and unite us and inspires hope for generations to come.

Dr Marwan Kadhim Mohammed, University of Anbar

I would like to express my deep gratitude and thanks to all the members of the Nahrain Network team for their constant support, both on a personal level and for their significant backing of the heritage and archaeological sector in Iraq. Personally, this network has greatly enriched my cultural understanding, it was the gateway through which the cultural knowledge of my country, specifically my city, has been opened to me. This city is considered a cultural and social treasure with a rich historical heritage. However, this cultural treasure would be in vain if not focused on and if this heritage is not showcased globally, as done by the Nahrain Network.

Anonymous, Nahrein Network Knowledge Sharing Webinar, July 2025

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Introduction

The Nahrein Network ran for eight years, from October 2017 to August 2025. Funded originally by the UK government's AHRC-GCRF Network+ scheme, and from 2021 by a generous gift to University College London, its mission was to support and champion Iraqi-led, interdisciplinary research into the sustainable development of history, heritage and the humanities in Iraq. For three years under the AHRC-GCRF scheme, its remit also extended to Iran, Lebanon and Turkey. Throughout, an Iraqi-majority Management Committee, who generously provided their time and expertise to steer us through significant challenges.

We had six research aims, each aligned to a United Nations Sustainable Development Goal:

1. **To better understand the current situation:** 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 aimed to develop a fuller historical and political understanding of this problem. (See [UN SDG 10](#): Reduce inequalities between and within countries.)
2. **To raise the profile of local expertise:** We aimed to support Iraqi humanities academics and heritage professionals to engage with regional and global academic communities, as producers of research for international consumption. (See [UN SDG 17](#): Strengthen partnerships for sustainable development.)
3. **To improve the job prospects of the region's youth:** We aimed to improve employability and leadership potential for humanities graduates from Iraqi universities. (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 aimed 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 aimed 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** (from 2021 onwards): We aimed 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.)

Impact Evaluation

Shaped by the requirements of the Network+ scheme, the Nahrein Network has delivered three interconnected strands of work: research development; research through devolved funding; and legacy development. With some modifications, this division continued into the philanthropically funded years. In this section we discuss each of these three strands in turn.

Strand 1: Research Development

Visiting Scholarships Scheme

With partners The British Institute for the Study of Iraq (BISI) and, in 2019-21, the British Institute in Ankara, the Council for British Research in the Levant and the Iran Heritage Foundation, the Network has run a very successful Visiting Scholarship scheme, modelled on BISI's precursor. Between 2018-25 we funded 2-month research placements in UK universities and heritage institutions for **33** Iraqi, one Lebanese academic, and 3 Turkish academics, research students, and heritage professionals.

My Visiting Scholarship experience in the UK was truly transformative, both academically and personally. This opportunity allowed me to engage with outstanding researchers, and explore extensive library collections. Equally important were the cultural experiences exploring London's communities, visiting monuments and landmarks, and building friendships with people from around the world. These moments broadened my perspective and strengthened my belief in the importance of international collaboration in cultural heritage protection. The knowledge, skills, and inspiration I gained during this scholarship are already influencing my work in Iraq. I am grateful to the British Institute for the Study of Iraq (BISI) and Nahrain Network for making this journey possible, and I look forward to building on this experience in future heritage projects.

Mustafa Yahya Faraj, Iraqi State Board of Antiquities and Heritage, June 2025

We learned that:

- It was relatively cheap to run and had a disproportionately positive impact on our Scholars.
- Many forged lasting academic and professional relationships, both interpersonal and inter-institutional, with their hosts; or were able to sustain prior relationships from previous time as graduate students.
- UK hosts were very generous with their time, and the best relationships led to joint publications, or other collaborations which also benefited the host

- Most Visiting Scholars report a variety of tangible and intangible benefits to their subsequent lives or careers.
- The scheme required significant outlay of time in supporting awardees to apply for visas, make travel and accommodation arrangements, and enculturate themselves in the UK if they had not been here before.
- It is necessary to set cultural and legal expectations very clearly, on all sides, both through formal contracts and informal conversations. There should also be 24-hour help available for awardees while on placement in case of emergencies.
- Awardees were overwhelmingly male. It proved very difficult to make the scheme attractive for women with dependants, who find it very hard to travel.
- We strongly encourage the adoption of similar, short-term sabbatical-like placement schemes, both to and from Iraq if possible.

You can read more about the impact of this scheme in Case Studies 5–8 in Section 2 below. Each Visiting Scholar also has a dedicated page on our website at <https://nahreinnetwork.org/visiting-scholars>, featuring blog posts, podcasts, academic articles, and other reflections and resources.

British Academy Writing Workshops (2019) and AcademiQ (2022-25)

With funding from the British Academy’s Writing Workshop scheme, in 2019 the Network ran three intensive two-day workshops at three Iraqi universities, which aimed to increase Iraqi academics’ capacity to research, write and publish in internationally recognised social sciences and humanities journals. This highly interactive programme, led by experts in higher education research pedagogy, reached 80 participants from across the country.

Encouraged by universally positive feedback, and the trainers’ ambitions to scale up the offering, the Network built up the AcademiQ programme as a core component of its philanthropically funded work in 2021-25. In partnership with the Iraqi Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research, AcademiQ delivered an entry-level, online Academic Research Course. Over three iterations, comprising 10-16 units of independent learning, live lectures and interactive webinars, it reached over 300 participants, 180 of whom successfully completed final portfolios. It has now been migrated from a UCL platform to Google Classroom and will be ‘owned’ by a small group of senior Iraqi academic stakeholders for further use in Iraqi university settings.

At the same time, the Academic Mentorship Programme gave intensive support to Iraqi humanities and social sciences researchers as they designed, researched and wrote a research paper over the course of an academic year. Offered as monthly webinars and six-monthly weekend workshops in Iraqi universities, the AMP supported over 30 participants in three cohorts to successful completion of advanced drafts or even journal submissions.

While this course taught me essential academic writing skills, the real value came from learning how to incorporate critical analysis into my research. I particularly appreciated the focus on not just summarizing literature but evaluating it through a critical lens.

Anonymous feedback from Academic Research Course participant

[The] programme has significantly enhanced both my confidence and capacity as a university instructor and researcher. I now feel much more equipped to supervise final research projects, and this has been recognized by my peers, who frequently consult with me when facing challenges in supervising their own students.

Anonymous feedback from Academic Mentorship Programme

We learned that:

- The enduring legacy of isolation and underfunding in the Iraqi university system, combined with narrow, publication focused promotion criteria, has created huge demand amongst Iraq academics for professional development programmes in humanities and social sciences research. The Ministry of Higher Education is also very keen to develop nationwide training schemes in this area.
- Such courses are best created through co-production between specialists in the pedagogy of higher education and senior Iraqi academics, so that international best practice can be pitched to the level and needs of the target participant group. This process should be iterative, learning from the successes and failures of each phase of delivery. It must also have Ministry buy-in from the outset.
- However, there is no one-size-fits-all solution: While Iraqi academics, like their counterparts the world over, particularly aspire to English-language research outputs in internationally recognised journals, in reality there is a wide variety of language capability, academic competencies, and research experiences in the Iraqi academy. This difference was especially (but not only) felt between those who have studied abroad and those who have remained within the Iraqi university system.
- An entry-level humanities and social sciences research methods course should be as accessible as possible across Iraqi academia. This likely means putting more resource into such a course than we were able to do, e.g., through provision of bilingual English-Arabic teaching resources, and interactive small-group teaching even in large cohorts.

- While online delivery has great benefits of affordability and ease of access (e.g., participants can attend wherever they are, with no travel times), it also has drawbacks (e.g., lack of internet connectivity, distraction and disengagement, retention struggles).
- Ideally, one would create a local, in-person component to the entry-level course, e.g., by facilitating clusters of participants in the same university or city meeting regularly for peer-to-peer discussion and support.
- There also needs to be Training of Trainers (ToT) version of the entry-level programme, so that it can be adapted and delivered locally for individual universities or university consortia. The Network's Academic Research Course, now on Google Classroom and managed by a group of Iraqi academic stakeholders, could form a useful starting point for such a ToT programme.
- The hybrid Academic Mentorship Programme worked incredibly well for 'graduates' of the Academic Research Course and academics who had studied abroad. Such a programme can and should be run in an internationally recognised language such as English, grouping participants by subject area.
- Our experience has been that this small-group mentoring creates strong peer-group relationships, models constructive supervisory techniques, and strongly lessens the sense of isolation amongst senior academics. It also created space and time for personal research for people whose working lives are often consumed by university administration and management.
- All training programmes, whether short, intensive courses or delivered over several weeks or months, should include both formative and summative assessment so that participants can self-assess their learning and demonstrate their achievements to others.
- Whatever the level of programme, much depends on the calibre and temperament of the trainers, who need to be able to listen and learn from the participants, enjoy their company, and adapt their own expectations and experience to suit the learners' needs. In this we were extremely fortunate.

For more detailed recommendations on the delivery of academic research training programmes, please see the final reports on AcademiQ that are available at <https://nahreinnetwork.org/academiq>

Graduate Studentships

With the advent of philanthropic funding in 2021, the Network hoped to fund three MA+PhD studentships to UCL for Iraqi nationals, in the fields of history, heritage and archaeology. However, the scheme proved extremely expensive and time-consuming to run and attracted few strong applicants. There was then a high attrition rate between provisional award of a studentship and arrival to start the programme. We had many disappointments and one great success, with the awardee about to enter her third PhD year at UCL.

My PhD is about exploring the relationship between sustainable heritage management and public transportation. There is a gap in this research area, and it has not been explored extensively. So as a researcher, it naturally gives me the opportunity to contribute to a novel research field that has yet to be explored. And in the context of a developing country with a rich heritage like Iraq, this kind of research is needed to inform policymakers and direct the country towards the sustainable development agenda through managing its heritage. So as an urban planner and a heritage professional, I will develop my career in many different aspects and levels.

Mrs Niyah Hussein Ibrahim, recipient of a Nahrein Network graduate studentship at UCL

We learned that:

- It is necessary for such a scheme to cover all relevant costs for successful applicants, from the university application fee onwards, through to research expenses while in the UK, as well as a liveable stipend and full fees.
- The Iraqi higher educational system does not support discipline-switching, nor taking two qualifications at the same level, while UCL's entrance requirements demanded that graduate applicants already had a Masters-level qualification if they had only studied in Iraq; many applicants were put off or ruled out by this incompatibility.
- The UK government's prohibition, since January 2024, on international Masters students bringing their dependants with them to the UK also deterred good applicants.
- UCL's stringent English-language requirements for admission to graduate programmes were often impossible to meet without dedicated pre-sessional English courses.
- There was not enough time between passing UCL's pre-sessional course and the start of the academic year to apply for a visa, arrange affordable accommodation, etc.
- Although London is wonderfully cosmopolitan, it is also very expensive to live in, even for students awarded generous stipends.
- Overall we would not recommend trying to run such a scheme outside of a national/governmental programme, as it there are too many structural barriers which cannot be overcome at institutional level and it does not provide good value for money compared to shorter-term interventions, such as a Visiting Scholarships scheme or a research training programme.
- On the other hand, we strongly encourage Iraqi government graduate studentship schemes to invest in history, heritage and related humanities disciplines, as key components of a national academic portfolio and long-term development strategy.

Strand 2: Devolved Research Projects

Another central feature of the AHRC-GCRF Network+ model was the competitive award of devolved funding to in-country research projects, which the Network continued, with some adaptations, into our philanthropically funded phase. This programme was very challenging to deliver well, and we had to rethink it several times. It has seen some spectacular successes, but also a significant failure rate, both from provisional offer to award of funding, and then from award to completion of the research. In total this scheme has supported 30 research projects in Iraq, all with Iraqis in their leadership teams.

We learned that:

- There is a huge thirst for academic research funding in Iraq, as there are no national research funding councils. Both Ministries of Higher Education and Scientific Research — in Baghdad and Erbil respectively — now understand the need for and benefits of funded research and international research collaborations, even if the necessary infrastructure is not always in place yet to fully support them.
- All such schemes MUST be approved at ministerial level in Federal Iraq: university-to-university collaborations cannot operate without this.
- However, ministerial approvals and agreements take such a long time to negotiate and secure — in our case two and a half years — that very long lead times must be factored into the planning process.
- There are extreme challenges in funding such schemes, as Iraqi universities have no mechanisms for accepting external research funding, and it is virtually impossible to transfer money into Iraq through the usual international mechanisms such as IBAN or even Western Union. A third-party transfer agent, such as Stars Orbit, must be used instead, and their fees factored into the costs.
- Many potential recipients of research funding are extremely wary of taking financial responsibility for a grant, and many do not have the basic accounting skills needed to plan a budget or to manage it effectively. We lost many potential awardees on these grounds.
- Conversely, UCL's extremely stringent financial due diligence procedures were often disproportionate to the small amounts of money we wished to award, and unrealistic expectations over the levels of detailed documentation required often postponed projects' start dates by several months. These paper exercises were not effective in capturing potentially corrupt practices in day-to-day grant management, however.
- Equally, UCL's research contracts' team's insistence that UCL retain intellectual property rights on devolved projects' research also caused friction — and ran exactly counter to what we were trying to achieve.
- If an appropriate legal, logistical and ethical framework can be put in place, devolved schemes are extremely rewarding.
- Projects with UK and/or international members of the leadership team proved

disproportionately expensive, because of the institutional overheads required, and no simpler to support. Devolving the challenges of payments to Iraq, due diligence, etc., to other British universities who had not acquired our team's level of expertise in managing them only created further delays.

- We soon learned that local expertise identified viable and urgent research topics that we in London would never have considered, and brought together wonderful teams who might not have worked together otherwise.
- We eventually settled on a three-stage application process, in which we first invited expressions of interest that described the intellectual aspects and desired real-world impacts of the research. We then worked with up to ten shortlisted applicants to design fully costed and planned project proposals; typically half fell by the wayside during this process. Alongside, a UCL-led due diligence and contracting process whittled down the fundable projects further.
- It therefore took a minimum of six months between receipt of Expression of Interest and project launch, more typically 12-18 months given the institutional approvals needed. In the UCL context it proved impossible to deliver a low-resource, quick turnaround scheme for smaller research projects, even with institutional lip-service paid to the idea.
- The best projects led to real-world tangible impacts, such as engagement with local communities or policymakers with evidence-led recommendations for support of heritage in often fragile contexts. There were also often real career benefits for project members.
- If we had had more resources, we would have liked to provide the following for fundees: regular in-person meetings to share work in progress and present their findings; a secure data repository; and an open access journal and/or monograph series as an optional venue for fundees to publish their research.

You can read more about the impact of this scheme in Case Studies 1–4 in Section 2 below. Each devolved Research Project also has a dedicated page on our website at <https://nahreinnetwork.org/research-projects>, featuring blog posts, podcasts, academic articles, and other reflections and resources.

Strand 3: Core Team Research, Policy, Advocacy and Legacy Building

In addition to designing and running the schemes described above, the Network's Directors and Co-Directors also conducted their own research projects to further the Network's research aims and to consolidate and promulgate our overall findings. They also offered formal consultancy and informal advocacy based on Network members' experiences and findings. Mindful that the need for the Network's offerings would continue after its closure, there was work to secure its legacy.

Here we evaluate expectations, process and delivery. Outcomes and outputs are described

on our website at <https://nahreinnetwork.org/core-team-research>

My Nahrein Network Co-Investigator fund empowered me and my team to try transformative teaching and interdisciplinary learning approaches through our new Digital Heritage Internship Program (DHIP). The program brought together local youth from different disciplines to conceptualize, design, develop, promote, and fundraise for innovative digital heritage projects using state-of-the-art technologies like Augmented Reality and Virtual Reality. DHIP aimed to connect heritage protection and promotion with local and global needs and challenges for the sustainable development of the Kurdistan Region and Iraq's heritage. The program also equipped local youth with 21st-century digital knowledge, skills, and networks for expanding the creative industry in the Kurdistan Region and the rest of Iraq for making cultural, social, environmental, or economic impacts. Through this program, we strove to practically embody "think globally, act locally" in our digital heritage research and development.

Dr Rozhen Mohammed-Amin, Co-Director of the Nahrein Network, 2020–24

We learned:

- The original design of the Network in 2017 included an Iraqi-run Research Centre for Culture, History and Humanities for Sustainable Development at the University of Kurdistan Hewler (UKH), focusing on the politics and economics of cultural heritage in Iraq. It was led by an Iraqi Co-Director and staffed by a part-time administrator and a full-time postdoctoral researcher. Professor Charles Tripp also very kindly donated a large collection of books to the library. However, top-level management challenges at UKH in the pre-pandemic period, beyond the Network's control, impaired our ability to operate within the university and the relationship was terminated in early 2020.
- In the following years made several further attempts to set up Co-Directors in Iraqi universities, both in KRI and in Federal Iraq. It proved almost impossible for a variety of reasons. On the one hand, UCL does not permit directly employed staff to reside and pay tax outside the UK, so we could not set up an independent Network office in Iraq. On the other hand, Iraqi institutions that we approached to host a research centre understandably wanted control of appointments to it, with interests that were not necessarily aligned with the Network's. Frequent changes of leadership at Iraqi universities also precluded stable inter-institutional relationships, while the structural barriers to setting up international research collaborations and payment mechanisms, discussed above, also pertained.
- Our one long-term Iraqi Co-Director set up her own NGO in order to circumvent these

challenges, though this came with its own burdens (see Case Study 9 in Section 2 below). The Network also very explicitly excluded her—and other Iraqi members of the Management Committee—from involvement in funding decisions, to avoid accusations of conflict of interest. Instead, her team focused exclusively on research, professional development, and public engagement in her specialist areas of digital humanities and dark heritage. Overall, this was the best model we could come up with, given the constraints we were working to, though it was not entirely satisfactory.

- Our UK-based Director and Co-Director also struggled with institutional expectations, particularly regarding competing demands on their time. Both regularly found themselves unable to ring-fence allocated research time when university/museum management prioritised their other leadership duties, especially during times of emergency. Equally, the day-to-day running of the Network, and constant emergency trouble-shooting, was unexpectedly time-consuming. Nevertheless, by the end of the Network's funding period, both achieved significant impact in their closely related research areas: rethinking the production of ancient history in colonial contexts; and increasing the accessibility of museums and online heritage resources for Iraqi stakeholders.
- In retrospect, the Directorship of the Network should have been allocated a 40–50% buyout, rather than 20%, and the Co-Director at least 20%, even though this would have been a significantly more expensive option.
- The most successful working arrangement has been the 50%-50% split between research and project leadership for the Network's full-time Research Associate (later Deputy Director) in London. However, given the time constraints of the other members of the leadership team, described above, he was exposed to a great deal of stress and responsibility, especially in relation to support for the Network's funding applicants and fundees. This needed much more resource, even at the scale we were working on, and stronger safeguards against perceived conflicts of interest. Nevertheless, close day-to-day engagement with Iraqi Network members' concerns and needs fed very effectively into his policy and advocacy work with international agencies and academic audiences.
- All members of the Network's leadership team took the idea of networking to heart. Through the Network's core programmes, communications and social media, as well as the Co-Directors' initiatives CHN/CHO and MEKEN, we fostered long-term professional relationships not only with these centres but also, and most enduringly, peer-to-peer connections at institutional and individual level.
- Through our own formal writings and informal advocacy with iNGOs, government ministries, and funding agencies, we have also succeeded in promoting and normalising all six of our core research aims far beyond the Network itself, recentring and empowering Iraqi expertise, experience and needs in conversations and decisions about the country's heritage and its future.
- The short-term nature of many political and diplomatic appointments meant that we

continually needed to renew institutional relationship and re-acquaint new appointees with our work, ethos and results. It is hoped that the 2025 Academic Bridge agreement between the UK and Iraqi governments, which makes specific reference to cultural heritage, will help to foster long-term legacy for the Network's goals and ideals.

Case Studies of Impact

Funded Research Projects

Case Study 1: Thesiger's Tarada, led by Rashad Salim (2018–2019)

Institutional Partners: Basrah Museum

Project Overview

Thesiger's Tarada aimed to revive and document Iraq's vanishing maritime cultural heritage, particularly the Mashhuf and Tarada canoe traditions once central to life in the southern marshes. At the time of the project's inception, maritime cultural heritage was virtually absent from Iraqi heritage discourse. Through practical boatmaking, community engagement, and museum collaborations, the project laid the groundwork for a new research and preservation field in Iraq.

Key Outcomes

The Nahrein Network grant was pivotal in transforming a one-off 2018 initiative into a sustained, multi-year heritage program. It enabled:

- The construction of multiple traditional boats using historically accurate methods.
- In-depth documentation, including film, oral histories, and model-making, now housed in the Basra Museum.
- Field expeditions using the boats on the Tigris River and Shatt al-Arab.
- Establishment of a database of technical, ethnographic and visual material.
- Direct publishing of research findings in *Turath al-Shaby*, Iraq's national anthropology journal.

These efforts not only revived a nearly extinct craft but reintroduced these boats into the cultural landscape and thus bridged academic research with cultural heritage. The success of the project positioned the team as leaders in maritime heritage. It led to:

- Collaboration invitations from Basra governorate and the Ministry of Culture and international stakeholders.
- New funding from CPF and ALIPH to develop modernised boat clubs and establish Iraq's first Water Scouts, an initiative now accredited by the Ministries of Youth, Education and Culture.
- Participation in national policy-making committees focused on cultural heritage and intangible heritage.

Long-term Impact

Building boats with and for communities, not merely studying them, was a cornerstone of the project. This hands-on approach:

- Continued exploration of boatmaking traditions across southern, western and

northern Iraq and the integration of boatmaking into broader cultural and environmental education programs.

- Cultivated trust with local boatbuilders and communities.
- Affirmed the role of cultural heritage in Iraq's environmental and social recovery.

Challenges Faced

Despite successes, the project operated amid instability:

- Iraq's 2019 Tishreen (October) demonstrations created logistical disruptions.
- Co-researcher Dr Abdulameer Hamdani was appointed Minister of Culture mid-project, limiting his ability to stay engaged.

Case Study 2: Intangible Cultural Heritage of Iraqi Bedouins, led by Dr Salah Hatem (2019–2021)

Institutional Partners: University of Al-Qadisiyah

Project Overview

Dr Salah Hatem's project focused on documenting the intangible cultural heritage of Iraq's Bedouin communities in western and southern Iraq. Historically marginalised and often excluded from heritage policies and institutions, these communities face growing threats to their traditions due to climate change, forced migration and increasing urbanisation. Their oral histories, poetry, music, tribal customs and nomadic knowledge systems are at risk of disappearing without formal recognition or documentation.

Key Outcomes

With support from the Nahrein Network, the research team worked closely with Bedouin communities to conduct extensive fieldwork with camel and sheep herders, Bedouin sheikhs, women, youth and other community members across remote areas of western and southern Iraq. Through this work, they recorded oral testimonies, songs, and stories, and generated original, field-rooted anthropological data on the largely understudied Iraqi Nomadic Bedouins, including transcribed questionnaires, ethnographic notes, pictures, and sounds. The funding enabled the financial and human resources needed to be deployed to undertake this work.

This project adopted a community-led approach, valuing the knowledge of tribal elders and cultural practitioners as primary sources of expertise. It also highlighted the gendered dimensions of intangible heritage, including the roles women play in preserving and transmitting traditions through craftwork and storytelling.

A key outcome of the project was the publication of a comprehensive book on Bedouin heritage, widely distributed to Iraqi universities, libraries and heritage professionals. According to Dr Hatem, this resource has significantly influenced the fields of anthropology, archaeology and intangible heritage studies and is now being used in graduate programs, an

important step in institutionalising this field within Iraq's academic landscape.

Alongside this, the project team organised a cascade training ('training of trainers') programme on Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH), convened a consulting multilateral symposium to discuss gathered data and research outputs, and developed collaborative multi-university teaching modules on the ICH of Iraqi Bedouins for incorporation into the teaching curricula of the five partner universities shepherded by the Ministry of Higher Education of Iraq. The project also fostered international academic cooperation, including collaboration with international educational institutions such as MIT.

Long-term Impact

Despite challenges such as difficult terrain, security issues, and administrative hurdles, including strained academic partnerships, the project successfully built long-term networks. The project strengthened collaborations across multiple Iraqi universities (Baghdad, Samarra, Mosul and Dhi-Qar) and initiated high-level policy dialogue. Meetings with MPs such as Haider Sheikhan and Mohammed Nouri have focused on preserving Bedouin lands and cultural rights. The research has also been instrumental in advocating for legal protections for intangible heritage at a national level.

Plans for sustainability include expanding the published material, establishing education and training programs, and continuing advocacy with political stakeholders.

Case Study 3: Babylon – Modern Heritage or Ancient Ruin? Led by Ammar al-Taei (2019–2021)

Institutional Partners: University of Babylon, State Board of Antiquities and Heritage

Project Overview

This project aimed to document four key archaeological cities in Iraq: Kish, Borsippa, Kutha, and Babel. These historically significant sites face environmental, social and developmental threats. The project sought to document both tangible and intangible heritage and develop innovative documentation techniques to map Babylon.

Key Outcomes

Motivation and Knowledge Building

- The funding provided motivation and inspiration to take on future documentation projects.
- The team developed crucial skills in interviewing and understanding the broader environmental issues affecting archaeological sites.
- Interviews with local communities revealed overlooked intangible heritage, such as traditional tattoo practices among elderly women, an anthropological insight that led to a subsequent research project.

Access to Technology

- One of the most transformative aspects of the funding was access to drones for site mapping. This enabled aerial surveys, map creation, and prioritisation of at-risk sites.
- Ammar developed advanced mapping skills via online tutorials and direct practice, an experience that would not have been possible without access to the technology itself.

Long-term Impact

Professional and Academic Growth

- Ammar gained experience in applying for new grants, leading to additional funding from TARII to document intangible heritage.
- He deepened his knowledge of Babylonian cities through extensive bilingual research, becoming a local expert on the four Babylonian cities, engaging with researchers and archaeologists from Germany, Italy and even media outlets such as National Geographic and Discovery Channel.

Long-term Collaborations

- The project initiated a significant collaboration between SBAH and WMF, especially on mudbrick heritage.
- This has led to the development of a new long-term initiative: “Earthen Buildings in Babel,” continuing Ammar’s work on documenting traditional architecture.

Community Engagement and Fieldwork

- Ammar conducted sensitive ethnographic fieldwork, including interviews with 350 women with traditional tattoos. His respectful approach enabled community trust and access that had often been denied to others.
- Local perspectives enriched the project, revealing how modern environmental degradation (e.g., garbage dumping) intersects with heritage preservation concerns.

Future Directions and Reflections

Ammar is now considering pursuing a PhD in documentation or restoration of archaeological sites, a direction shaped directly by the experience of this project. He continues to use the equipment and skills acquired through the project in his ongoing work at SBAH. He is currently writing a book based on this research, combining previous insights and experiences with scholarly analysis.

If given the opportunity to repeat the project, Ammar would:

- Plan for more realistic timelines and output targets and allocate additional resources to produce comprehensive 3D mapping, including drone batteries and software support.
- Strengthen local support from all site-specific staff earlier in the project to avoid misunderstandings or resentment.

The Nahrein Network’s funding played a pivotal role in enabling the project's partial success.

While time constraints limited the team's ability to fully document all four cities, significant progress was made in multiple areas of research. The funding allowed the team to begin critical work that would not have been possible otherwise and laid the groundwork for future initiatives.

Case Study 4: Dictionary of Colloquial and Marsh Arab Dialects in Southern Iraq, led by Hussein Mohammed Ridha (2021)

Institutional Partners: University of Thi-Qar

Project Overview

The Marsh Arabs are a minority group of the marshlands of southern Iraq, with Sumerian and Bedouin origins. They have their own unique culture and architecture, way of life and dialect, all rooted in and shaped by their environment: the marshes. While their way of life and their tangible heritage, such as the reed architecture and their boats, have been well documented, , their dialect has not been. As a result, it is now at risk to be lost forever, as only a very small number of elders still speak it.

The Marsh Arabs have suffered considerably over many generations, and their dialect is generally looked down upon by other Arabic speakers. They also suffered destruction and attacks during Saddam Hussein's time in power. Despite some investments in restoring it, the region has continued to suffer. Past and current threats include the 2003 US/Coalition occupation and conflict, oil industry interests and, increasingly, the climate crisis. Dams in Turkey reduce water flow and endanger the Marshes' existence, which in turn endangers the Marsh Arabs' way of life.

The project contributed to preserving the linguistic heritage of the marsh dwellers, especially since much of the vocabulary is at risk of extinction. This linguistic documentation project identified the endangerment of Marsh Arab dialects, some of which have roots in ancient Sumerian and Akkadian.

Key Outcomes

- Publication of a dictionary preserving endangered dialects.
- Participation in a UCL conference and a seminar at Thi-Qar University to raise awareness of the project.
- Strengthened local pride in intangible cultural heritage by tracing dialectal origins.
- Extensive fieldwork with Marsh Arab communities, particularly elderly speakers.
- Direct interviews and photography in natural environments contributed to rich collection.

Challenges

- The younger generation is abandoning traditional dialects, leading to difficulties in data collection.

- Environmental pressures, such as drought-induced migration, disrupted fieldwork timelines.
- The COVID-19 pandemic further complicated access and slowed progress.

Future Directions and Reflections

- Expansion of the research team.
- Development of a second, expanded edition of the dictionary.
- Continued participation in academic conferences to amplify findings.

Visiting Scholarships

Case Study 5: Dr Mabast Ali Amin, “Ancient Civilisations Archaeology”

Home Institution: University of Garmian

Host Institution: University of Liverpool

Dr Mabast Ali Amin, an archaeologist from the University of Garmian, undertook his Visiting Scholarship at the University of Liverpool through the Nahrein Network. Prior to his scholarship, Dr Amin’s expertise focused primarily on field excavations and theoretical archaeology. His time in the UK marked a significant shift in his academic and professional orientation, introducing him to the vital role of cultural heritage management and preservation, especially within the context of Iraqi Kurdistan.

During his scholarship, Dr Amin engaged with emerging technologies such as Geographic Information Systems (GIS), Virtual Reality (VR) and Augmented Reality (AR). These tools enabled advanced data collection and analysis methods, which he has since integrated into his fieldwork and institutional practices. He now applies these techniques to assess the condition of heritage sites and develop sustainable conservation strategies. Exposure to the UK’s interdisciplinary and technologically integrated approaches broadened his understanding of how cultural heritage can be preserved in ways that account for both historical value and contemporary sustainability concerns.

The scholarship also led to long-term research collaborations, notably with the University of Liverpool and archaeologists across the UK. Dr Amin now serves as a senior team member on a joint archaeological project between Liverpool and Iraqi Kurdistan. These ongoing partnerships facilitate knowledge exchange and joint research initiatives, significantly enriching his professional development and the scholarly capacity of his home institution.

Upon returning to the University of Garmian, Dr Amin initiated numerous workshops and seminars, promoting awareness of advanced heritage practices and the value of international collaboration. He has actively disseminated his scholarship experience among students and faculty, fostering greater interest in cultural heritage and encouraging others to engage with global scholarship opportunities.

A notable outcome of his enhanced expertise is his leadership role in the Heritage Horizon

Project, a collaborative initiative between the University of Garmian and the University of Bologna. This project, supported by Bologna University funding, included the delivery of academic events and culminated in an international conference titled *"Revitalizing Historical and Cultural Gems for Dynamic and Sustainable Growth"* in May 2025. The initiative sought to promote cultural tourism while strengthening heritage preservation frameworks in the region.

Additionally, his research during the scholarship addressed the threats to cultural heritage in Kurdistan, including agriculture, urban development and looting. His findings have laid the groundwork for advocating stronger legal frameworks and conservation policies. Going forward, Dr Amin plans to continue focusing on policy development and sustainable tourism, using the knowledge and international networks he gained through the Nahrein Network to bridge research and practical impact.

Case Study 6: Dr Mohammed Aal-Hajiahmed, "Developing e-collections for University of Mosul's Central Library"

Home Institution: University of Mosul

Host Institution: British Library

Dr Mohammed Aal-Hajiahmed's participation in the Nahrein Network Visiting Scholarship Programme has had a profound impact on his professional development and the revitalisation of Mosul University Library. Through his placement at the British Library, he gained critical skills in digitisation, preservation and library management. These learnings directly supported his appointment as a consultant with UNESCO for the development of Mosul University Library and, more recently, his promotion to Director of Mosul University Libraries.

Application of Skills and Methodologies

During his time in the UK, Dr Aal-Hajiahmed acquired advanced knowledge in areas such as metadata management, electronic library systems and preservation workflows. He applied these methodologies to establish a digitisation unit at Mosul University Library, manage special collections and improve cataloguing and preservation processes. His training at the BL also informed staff training initiatives and sustainable resource acquisition strategies within his home institution.

New Perspectives on Cultural Heritage and Sustainability

The placement expanded Dr Aal-Hajiahmed's understanding of cultural heritage preservation, especially in post-conflict contexts. Observing the British Library's integration of digital tools and sustainable management practices provided a model for safeguarding Iraq's cultural and academic resources. He emphasised the role of partnerships in ensuring the longevity and accessibility of these resources as part of a broader sustainability agenda.

Long-Term Collaborations

The scholarship facilitated enduring collaborations with professionals at the British Library and academic institutions such as SOAS and UCL. Dr Aal-Hajiahmed also pursued an agreement with Oxford University Press to provide electronic materials to Mosul University, significantly expanding access to digital academic resources. These networks have been vital to the library's restoration efforts and continue to support its development.

Institutional Benefit in Iraq

Dr Aal-Hajiahmed's experience has had a direct institutional benefit for the University of Mosul. He has implemented digitisation techniques, revived Mosul's OCLC account and introduced international best practices in library management. These efforts have improved Mosul University Library's capacity to rebuild and serve as a vital knowledge hub.

Knowledge Dissemination

Upon returning to Iraq, Dr Aal-Hajiahmed led several training sessions and internal discussions on digitisation and preservation best practices. His capacity-building initiatives have strengthened the library's internal capabilities and encouraged a culture of innovation and learning among staff and students.

Contribution to Projects and Policy

A significant contribution stemming from the scholarship was the creation of a digitisation unit at Mosul University Library. This unit was informed by the expertise he gained in the UK and has since become a cornerstone of the library's recovery strategy. His consultation role with UNESCO has also allowed him to contribute to wider policy discussions on cultural heritage and academic restoration in Iraq.

Addressing Challenges in Cultural Heritage Preservation

The rebuilding of Mosul University Library directly addresses challenges related to cultural heritage loss in conflict-affected areas. Through digital preservation and sustainable library management, Dr Aal-Hajiahmed is helping safeguard materials for future generations and supporting Iraq's broader academic recovery.

Unexpected Opportunities

An unexpected but highly valuable outcome of the scholarship was the extensive network of institutional support mobilised through his UK placement. Discussions at the BL and with UK experts raised the profile of Mosul University's needs, leading to new partnerships, consultancy opportunities and increased international support.

Future Plans and Ongoing Impact

Looking ahead, Dr Aal-Hajiahmed aims to expand the library's digitisation efforts, deepen international collaborations and secure additional access to electronic resources. The Nahrein Network experience continues to underpin his strategic vision and leadership in rebuilding one of Iraq's most important academic libraries.

Case Study 7: Prof. Dilshad Oumar Abdul Aziz, “The BP Archive: A Source for Studying the Contemporary Economic, Social and Cultural History of Kirkuk”

Home Institution: University of Kirkuk

Host Institutions: University of Warwick (BP Archive)

Impact Summary

Professor Dilshad Oumar’s research visit to the BP Archive, supported by the Nahrein Network and BISI, allowed him to access, scan and download over 6,000 archival documents, ranging from maps and photographs to short films, on the history of oil operations in Kirkuk. This trove laid the foundation for future research and teaching at the University of Kirkuk and beyond.

Research & Career Impact

- Published a peer-reviewed article: "The Iraq Petroleum Company Archive: a source for studying the economic, social, and cultural history of Kirkuk", *Iklīl for Humanities Studies*.
- Promoted to full professorship following his scholarship achievements.
- Supervised the first MA thesis based on BP archive material: *The Kirkuk-Ceyhan Pipeline and its Economic Impact on Turkey*.

Skill Development

- Gained expertise in handling and analysing archival material and developed methodologies for publishing in global academic forums.
- Inspired to propose a digital archive in Kirkuk modelled on the BP Archive.

Collaborations

- Initiated collaboration with Professor Neil Fleming (University of Worcester).
 - Co-authored a grant proposal to the British Academy (*Oil Extraction and Urban Change in Iraq, 1927–1972*).
 - Contributing to an edited volume: *Iraq 1914–1945: Occupation, Mandate, Kingdom* (forthcoming, 2026).

Institutional Benefit

- Donated archive materials to the University of Kirkuk’s History Department Library, now used by postgraduate students.
- Hosted a Nahrein Network seminar in February 2024 at the University of Kirkuk with Prof. Eleanor Robson.

Outreach & Dissemination

- Held workshops at University of Kirkuk, Kirkuk Central Library and Garmian University.
- Featured in televised interviews discussing the scholarship's significance.

Next Steps

- Leading a Nahrein-funded Mini-Grant project on the displacement from Kirkuk Citadel (1989–1990): [Project Details](#)
- Supervising MA theses based on BP Archive material:
 - *Kirkuk–Baniyas Pipeline (1952–1982)* – Omid Eidan
 - *Workers in Oil (1961–1972): A Study of the IPC Journal* – Manar Ibrahim
- Continuing collaboration with international historians on Iraqi oil and urban history.

From Visiting Scholar to Network Co-Director

Case Study 9: Dr Rozhen Kamal Mohammed-Amin, digital cultural heritage

Home Institutions: Sulaimani Polytechnic University (to 2021); Kurdistan Institution for Scientific Studies and Strategic Research; Cultural Heritage Organisation

Host Institution: University of Glasgow (EMOTIVE project)

Impact Summary

In 2018 Dr Rozhen Mohammed-Amin, then the Head of the Digital Cultural Heritage Research Group, Research Centre Coordinator and a lecturer in the City Planning Department at Sulaimani Polytechnic University, undertook her Nahrein Network Visiting Scholarship at the University of Glasgow. Before beginning her placement, she had completed a PhD at the University of Calgary and an internship with HITLAB in New Zealand, experiences that had already furthered her interest in the newly emerging field of digital heritage.

During her eight-week placement Dr Mohammed-Amin worked with the EMOTIVE project at Glasgow's School of Humanities, led by Dr Maria Economou. Throughout the course of her placement she developed and experimentally evaluated a storytelling pilot for the SlemaniMuseum in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq using the EMOTIVE platform, and in doing so, lay the groundwork for other Iraqi museums, cultural heritage professionals and academics interested in developing similar projects.

The placement proved to be a pivotal moment in her career. Shortly afterwards, she secured funding from the Cultural Heritage Network and went on to become a Co-Investigator of the Nahrein Network, developments that were indirect outcomes of her Visiting Scholarship experience. Over the next seven years, her work expanded significantly to combine research, capacity building and community engagement on a large scale.

In under seven years, Dr Mohammed-Amin and her team have secured grants through three institutions: the Digital Cultural Heritage Research Centre at Sulaimani Polytechnic University, the Cultural Heritage Organisation, and the Kurdistan Institution for Strategic Studies and Scientific Research. With their dedicated team, past and present, and local and international partners, they have delivered:

- 22 international webinars with 3,461 attendees from 35 countries and 24 Iraqi cities

- Community projects engaging over 30,000 visitors or users
- 41 in-person workshops with nearly 2,000 participants
- Eight AR/VR research and development projects, four led by interns within one year
- Seven publications, with more in progress

A key outcome of this work has been the creation of a structured internship programme, inspired by virtual internships in New Zealand, shaped through consultations with international advisors and adapted to the needs of Iraqi students. The programme offers students and graduates training in all aspects of digital heritage and has resulted in technically accomplished projects that have been featured in media outlets and used in schools and cultural organisations.

The Nahrein Network and its Visiting Scholarship programme have not only lent Dr Mohammed-Amin and her team greater confidence, resilience and visibility. As beneficiaries of the Network, Dr Mohammed-Amin and her colleagues have actively ‘paid it forward’ by mentoring early-career researchers, offering consultations to heritage organisations and sharing resources with partners across the country. In doing so, the benefits of her Visiting Scholarship have extended well beyond her own projects by indirectly supporting digital heritage initiatives throughout Iraq.

Top Five Recommendations

These recommendations focus on the development and fostering of equitable research collaborations between countries such as the UK and Iraq. Please also see our paper [*Cultural Heritage Predation in Iraq*](#) (Chatham House, 2022), available in English and Arabic.

For ministries and government agencies in Iraq

- Develop practical solutions to enable researchers in Iraqi state universities to fully participate in internationally funded collaborative research, such as allowing the transfer of research funds to Iraqi universities and speeding up the MoU process.
- Assess all offers of international research collaboration, to ensure inclusion of Iraqi expertise, perspectives and needs in the design, leadership and execution of projects.
- Promote the inclusion of history, heritage, archaeology, and the humanities and social sciences more generally, in international graduate studentship schemes.
- Continue to develop national research capacity-building schemes in the humanities and social sciences, building on the legacy of the AcademiQ programme.
- Continue to reform and modernise university curricula in humanities and social sciences to increase graduate employability and research capacity, by taking advantage of the educational resources developed by Iraqi members of the Nahrein Network, for instance in heritage studies, museology, and oral history.

For international funding agencies

- Check and, if necessary, redesign funding schemes to centre local expertise, perspectives, needs and benefits in the design, leadership and execution of projects and minimise exploitation of ‘subaltern labour’. Value local priorities and support projects on topics that might be low priority from an international point of view.
- Be mindful that research support infrastructure is minimal in Iraqi universities and research organisations, as in many other parts of the world. Design multi-stage application processes that minimise workload for applicants, for instance by using Expression of Interest calls for initial screening, and accept relatively low conversion rates from shortlisting to contracting. Secure institutional and/or ministerial permissions, if necessary through face-to-face visits, for any projects you wish to fund.
- Build a team of peer reviewers who are both academic experts and familiar with conditions and constraints in the areas you are funding. Reward them appropriately.
- Provide sufficient and appropriate resource to enable your support team to work constructively with applicants and awardees on research design and ethics, financial planning and probity, project management and reporting, throughout the process. Ideally, this will include regular face-to-face visits to see the project in action and to demonstrate support to institutional leadership.
- Develop Follow-On schemes for successful fundees, to support the further development of their careers and research relationships. Use their feedback, expertise

and goodwill to improve the delivery and impact of your funding schemes.

For international universities, museums, and heritage organisations

- Seek opportunities for genuine knowledge exchange, which will benefit both partners. Design long-term collaborations based on the resources, constraints and priorities of your local partners, not just your own. ‘Training programmes’ which expose professionals to your best-in-class facilities, and/or lecture at them, for a few weeks before they return to work in unchanged conditions with no follow-up, do little more than demoralise.
- Offer collaboration agreements that are truly equitable, for instance in the ownership of data and IP, and offer access to relevant research facilities such as secure data storage and online library access.
- Develop due diligence processes that are sensitive to local context, minimally burdensome to institutions without research support, and proportionate to the financial risk involved.
- While much work can be done together online, understand that face-to-face meetings, especially at the beginning of a collaboration, build trust, understanding and visibility for the collaboration. Fund your employees to travel to meet research colleagues, especially at the project planning stage. FCDO advice on travel should not be the only advice you seek: local knowledge is just as important for sensible risk management.
- Develop a public communications and social media strategy about your collaborations that appropriately address both local and international target audiences, e.g., by choice of language, platform, imagery.

For individual researchers and experts

- There are many ways to initiate a new working relationship with a colleague from another country: attend their conference paper and invite them for coffee; email to say you enjoyed an article they wrote; ask closer colleagues for an introduction. Equally, if you have many contacts, offer to act as match-maker for potential collaborators.
- Seek funding schemes that will enable you to apply together: show how you have co-designed and will co-lead the project even if one of you (usually the person in the better-resourced context) ends up writing most of the application itself.
- Understand and factor in local career needs to the research design (e.g., Iraqi academics’ need to publish in SCOPUS-listed journals vs the UK need for open-access), as well as inequalities in resource availability and institutional expectations.
- Listen carefully to your research partner, to the silences as well as the words. Be mindful always of privilege and power. Accept risk and failure, be opportunistic.
- Always remember that collectively we academics are ‘the field’ we’re in. Within the constraints of our work environments, we can all make positive choices about who we support, mentor and partner with, our research topics and their impacts. We can each change ‘the field’ for the better, in myriad large and small ways.

Thanks and Acknowledgements

The introduction, impact evaluation and recommendations were drafted by Eleanor Robson, with input from Mehiyar Kathem, Misha Enayat, and many members of the Network. Drafts of the sections on Strand 1 (Research Development) and Strand 2 (Devolved Funding) were shared and discussed at two public Knowledge Sharing Webinars in July 2025, both of which are available to watch on the Nahrein Network's YouTube channel. The case studies were written by Zainab Mahdi and Misha Enayat with the collaboration of all nine awardees featured. They were shared with and discussed by the Nahrein Network's Management Committee in June 2025. We are grateful to everyone who participated in this helpful process and, in the interests of keeping this document as short as possible, we regret that we have not been able to take every contribution into account.

Over the years, many hundreds of people have been active and influential members of the Nahrein Network. Back in 2016–17, Professor Paul Collins, Dr Saad Eskander, Ms Louise Haxthausen, and Dr Moudhy Al-Rashid worked with Professor Eleanor Robson on the original project design and grant applications, with significant support from Dr Steve Morrison at UCL. Co-directors since then included Dr Anwar Anaid, Professor Paul Collins, Dr Saad Eskander, Dr Jaafar Jotheri, and Dr Rozhen Mohammed-Amin. Staff members in London and Iraq included Dr Nadia Ait-Saïd Ghanem, Mrs Oana Borlea-Stancioi, Dr Parsa Daneshmand, Dr Misha Enayat, Ms Rahma Ismail, Dr Mehiyar Kathem, Mrs Zainab Mahdi, and Dr Amani Suleiman. We relied on many wise Management Committee members, a brilliant team of trainers for AcademiQ, and the time and enthusiasm of several student interns. We benefitted from strong partnerships with ministries and embassies, NGOs and cultural organisations, and many, many universities across the UK, Iraq and beyond. And behind the scenes, multiple people in research support departments across UCL facilitated programming, payments, contracts, and travel for us. There are far too many people to list here, individually, but if you recognise yourself in this description, we hope you know how grateful we are for your unfailing support and enthusiasm.

Although the Network has now closed, individual team members may still be available for discussion and consultancy regarding the topics covered in this paper. You can reach us via hello@nahreinnetwork.org but be aware that this email address is not monitored every day.

It isn't easy to write a few words here to describe the Nahrein Network's great role in bringing interest to Iraqi Heritage. Thanks to all who participated in this project. And I am sure it will not be the end of the route to achieve our goal: enhancement of our cultural identity to build a peaceful future in Iraq.

Professor Ali Naji Diebil, University of Kufa, February 2025
