

Research Strategy

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The landscape

The last few years have seen fundamental challenge and change to the academic and research landscape. Cuts to university funding and student grants have led to a much sharper focus on finance. The Research Excellence Framework (REF) has introduced the need for non-academic ‘impact’, which has led to a spike of applications to cultural heritage institutions for partnership, an increase sharpened by growing pressure on universities to be collaborative and cross-disciplinary. In the meantime, the new Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), introduced in 2016, has added further scrutiny and an additional layer of assessment. The impending exit of Britain from the EU is causing further uncertainty, particularly in relation to funding while the creation of a new body, UK Research and Innovation (UKRI), aiming to bring together the seven UK research councils, promises yet more change. Further reviews of the Higher Education sector are ongoing. Finally, the digital universe is causing paradigm shifts in how academics access and interrogate information, with unknown implications.

Why research?

We know that the academic and research climate will continue to be both turbulent and tough. We also know that nothing is gained or achieved without ambition, and we are ambitious about research. Research is pivotal to the functions of The National Archives. We must innovate in order to preserve, maintain and unlock access to our collections and maximise opportunities for ambitious new initiatives. To innovate well, we need research.

We also know that academics would like us to increase our work and visibility in this space, specifically around our areas of expertise, such as knowledge of and innovative access to our collections. In the archival research field, we are leaders nationally and internationally, particularly in the digital sphere. Other archives want us to lead for the future. If we are to deliver on the ambitions of our business plan for 2015-19, [Archives Inspire](#), we need to undertake research.

The Nurse Review answered the question, ‘Why do we do research?’ by stating that research ‘is aimed at generating knowledge..., and also at developing that knowledge

into useful applications, including...better public services.’¹ Nurse stated that ‘research should be at the heart of government,’ and that ‘the best research should be funded wherever it is found.’² Whether it is digital sensitivity review or appraisal, new forms of presentation to the public, guidance on preservation and conservation for the wider archives sector, or subject-based expertise to support access, our research challenges and The National Archives’ corporate challenges are one. If we are serious about our digital and archival leadership, we need to step up and own the archival research space. Specifically, if we are going to see the research we need undertaken, we need to lead research because university priorities may not match our own.

New ways of thinking

Our vision is to be recognised as a hub of outstanding interdisciplinary academic engagement and collections-based research. By leading, partnering, and supporting research internally and externally, we will contribute to the solution of some of the key research challenges facing the organisation. Research into the interpretation, preservation of, and access to the collections will sit at the heart of what we do at The National Archives, reflecting and supporting our overarching mission for 2015-19 and beyond, to ‘change the way you think about archives’ (*Archives Inspire*). Research will be future-facing, and transform the perception of archives from the old to the new and the innovative.

Research at The National Archives

The ability of The National Archives to partner, lead, and support pioneering, interdisciplinary collection-based research projects stems from our unique collections, and our expertise and networks. Our staff are engaged in collaborative projects on the cutting edge of physical and digital record preservation, historical research and data science. The National Archives’ research activities include leading and partnering research projects, building research networks, and contracting external expertise. The

¹ Paul Nurse, 'Ensuring a Successful UK Research Endeavour: A Review of the UK Research Councils', <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/nurse-review-of-research-councils-recommendations-november-2015>, p.2

² Nurse Review, p.9

National Archives has Independent Research Organisation status with the Arts and Humanities Research Council, recognising our standing as a research hub.

Our research activities enhance knowledge and understanding of our collections, and have led to the development of innovative tools for accessing or preserving collections. For example, our Digital Record Object Identification (DROID) software enables archive services all over the world to analyse their digital data in order to facilitate preservation, while our Traces through Time project enhances results for those searching our catalogue for individuals.

The National Archives also has a unique position as leader of the archives sector in England, acting as a gateway into a network of over 2,500 archives. This means we can support research access into these collections, lead on the development of joint research networks, and act as a conduit into and out of the sector for key research trends and opportunities. No other Independent Research Organisation holds a comparable position.

Strategic aims

1 Expand our national and international reputation for pioneering research and collections management in line with our status as an Independent Research Organisation

Nationally and internationally, The National Archives has an acknowledged leadership position in archive research, particularly in relation to digital.³ The National Archives will continue to play a core role in archival research, responding to key issues facing the sector in order to inform thinking and practice; sharing this through guidance, training and development programmes.

We also intend to extend that reputation more widely to our target academic audience. We will therefore increase our visibility and disseminate our research effectively,

³ Elizabeth Oxborrow-Cowan, Interviews with International Archives for The National Archives' Academic Scoping Study, March 2016

sharing our research outcomes and publicising our ongoing work creatively and engagingly. Intelligent planning of our communications will maximise our reach and impact, raising our reputation.

2 Enhance our current research reputation to develop funding success

In the last few years, we have transformed grants funding success, winning funding in our own right and leading major grants with the Arts and Humanities Research Council, Wellcome, and the Heritage Lottery Fund. We will continue to grow funding, developing strong partnerships and strategic relationships with a wide range of funding bodies in order to achieve significant and sustainable success. Our research support staff will be professional and experienced, proactive in identifying and developing new opportunities. Researchers will be supported with training and advice to improve capacity and capability. We will introduce a refreshed approvals process to ensure that we are targeting grant applications towards a coherent and clear research programme.

3 Shape a programme of world class digital research

Digital research is pivotal to our future. It is not an optional extra if we are to continue to fulfil our role and remit in a digital world. Working in conjunction with our Digital Directorate and in support of The National Archives' [Digital Strategy](#), we will retain and grow our reputation for innovation and leadership in digital archives. We will establish a new digital research function, and take forward findings from the report, Digital Research Challenges at The National Archives⁴, using it to drive our agenda through a [Digital Research Roadmap](#).

4 Establish a renowned research centre to coordinate and galvanise our long-term research programme

⁴ Darryl Mead, Michael Moss and Norman Gray, Digital Research Challenges at The National Archives, February 2016

The new Research and Collections Directorate will form the heart of research at The National Archives, leading and coordinating our research programme, which will be tailored to clear priorities, and centred on knowledge of and research into our own collections, and that of collections across the archive sector. We will focus on defined areas where we can most add value and raise our reputation.

The National Archives' research culture will foster a collaborative, open, and creative environment in which varied and high-quality research activities can flourish. Activities that nourish a research culture will be facilitated and supported. The National Archives' research culture will be inclusive, involving researchers of all career stages, experience levels, and specialisms.

5 Respond to the changing needs of the academic and research sector

We will ensure that our academic programmes, initiatives, and events support The National Archives' ambition to become a respected centre of interdisciplinary research and a hub of research excellence. We will work with established stakeholders such as the Royal Historical Society and the Institute of Historical Research, as well as emerging bodies such as the Alan Turing Institute. We will grow existing successes such as joint conferences and collaborative doctoral studentships, and explore new initiatives such as fellowship schemes. Results from our academic scoping study will underpin our strategic goals.

Measuring success

Responsibility for delivery of the research strategy lies with the Research and Collections Directorate. The strategy will form part of the action plan emerging from the [Academic Engagement and Research Roadmap](#), which will ensure delivery as part of a coherent suite of strategies.

Annual review of our research activities will ensure that they remain achievable, relevant, and delivering maximum impact. This annual review will form part of a longer-term strategic plan which will encapsulate our ambitions and aspirations. A new

Research and Academic Advisory Board will monitor success.

Over the life of *Archives Inspire*, we will reposition The National Archives as a research-based organisation with a reputation for innovation. We will not simply grow our research reputation – we will radically shift its ground: not looking back into the past, instead looking forward to the future. Success will see solutions to digital challenges; the diffusion of cutting-edge solutions as best practice for the archives sector; the deployment of innovative tools and technologies for research access; and a reputation as a leader in both applied and collections-based research, a creative forward-looking key player in the cultural heritage of the nation.