Cultural Heritage and the Creative Industries in the Making of the Current UK-India Research Landscape:

From Development to Equitable Partnerships

AHRC India Fellowship 2026

Report by the AHRC India Fellowship based across University of the Arts London (UAL) and SOAS University of London.

The UAL Decolonising Arts Institute seeks to challenge colonial and imperial legacies, disrupting ways of seeing, listening, thinking and making in order to drive cultural, social and institutional change.

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Executive Summary

UK-India research has a long and rich history, producing projects and networks that have significantly contributed to addressing today's global challenges in the UK, India and beyond. In recent years, AHRC-funded work in India has demonstrated the vital role that collaborative, Global South/Global North-based arts and humanities-based work can play in tackling contemporary global challenges. There is much to be learned and further nurtured from this work in terms of making equity central to global research, both between UK and India and more widely.

At the same time, the UK-India relationship has changed significantly in recent years and continues to evolve. In the last decade, the balance and dynamics of economic power between the UK and India have shifted considerably. Since the signing of the UK-India trade deal in 2025, the parameters of the UK-India relationship have become more closely defined in accordance with the agreed bilateral directives of foreign policy, diplomacy and trade. This has considerably reoriented and reshaped the UK-India research landscape. Having earlier focused on community relations, and particularly the condition of those in marginalised communities, conversations about equitability are being increasingly reframed to take in questions of national economy and security.

Situated at this present juncture of UK-India research, this report provides an outline and contextual understanding of some of the structural and geopolitical challenges that impact UK-India research work, while identifying practical ways in which the AHRC can navigate this terrain, consolidate its reputation in India for funding research on global challenges and enable more equitable research environments. It illustrates how the AHRC's sustained investment in heritage, creative practice, and humanities-based research in India provides a strong platform for shaping critically attuned collaborative projects, enabling use of the CCI (cultural and creative industries)/CH (cultural heritage) framework in ways that respond to broader social issues rather than solely to economic and security directives.

In doing so, there are several key recommendations for how the AHRC might support equitable research in practice:

- Strengthen multilateral research partnerships in order to better address power imbalances, new regulatory frameworks, and structural complexities across the Global South and North

- Embed contextual awareness into programme design by building guidance that recognises the sector's move from development- to growth-oriented funding, helping applicants design partnerships that address structural inequalities.

- A commitment to enabling and protecting academic and artistic freedom through funding design, embedding freedom-to-operate principles in calls, peer-review criteria, and partnership agreements, signalling institutional commitment and giving researchers concrete tools to protect intellectual independence.

- Provide practical equalities support for global research teams through targeted training, model frameworks, and onboarding resources that help institutions integrate equity, inclusion, and diversity into international projects—especially where capacity differs across partners. Despite an explicit turn towards growth, principles of equality, inclusion, and diversity must remain central to ethical research, supported through better training and guidance for research institutions to enable the AHRC to maintain and build on its existing reputation and relationships in the region.

- Expand access to creative research by diversifying the funding ecosystem through flexible schemes (micro-grants, mobility funds, community partnership grants) that reach beyond elite or metro-centric institutions and enable meaningful participation from regional and community-based partners in both countries.

- Enable collaboration by developing guidance, co-created templates, and information-sharing platforms to help research teams navigate UK and Indian regulatory frameworks, reducing administrative burden and enhancing international understanding.

Introduction

This report comes at a particular moment of UK-India trade relations within an agenda explicitly framed by growth with a significant emphasis on mutual interests and equitability between the two countries. The last decade has seen a shift in the balance of relations between India and the UK. The Indian economy which officially overtook the British economy at the end of 2021 currently stands as the fourth largest economy in the world following the United States, China and Germany, with projections for it to soon rise to third position.

Following the adoption in 2021 of the 2030 Roadmap for UK-India Future Relations, the UK Government committed itself to a set of approaches to build new international trade markets after the UK's departure from the European Union culminating in the signing of the UK-India Trade Deal in May 2025. Culture and the Creative Economy have been signalled as a particular area of interest for UK-India collaboration.

The turn to a growth-oriented framing of UK–India relations has had a substantial effect on UK research funding, redirecting a system which, in the decade prior to this, had prioritised issues of development and inequality. Since the mid-2010s, opportunities for UK researchers to work internationally, and particularly with the Global South, have been expanded through the Newton and Global Challenges Research Fund. Researchers in the Arts and Humanities have played a prominent role in this research context, with support from the AHRC, showing how essential creativity is for tackling today's global challenges. These projects have also drawn important attention to the damaging effects of unequal power dynamics for research work and have contributed to putting the question of building more equitable research practices at the top of the research funding agenda.

The AHRC continues to stand by the importance of this work, as is reflected in Objective Three of the AHRC's 2022-2025 strategy which has prioritised developing world class ideas with a particular emphasis on equitable approaches. This includes 'being open to ideas and inclusive perspectives from around the world and encouraging research and innovation that is of the highest standard, fair and inclusive, and has reach and impact across and beyond borders' (UKRI, 2022).

Within this wider context, the AHRC commissioned two scoping reports on UK-India research.

The first (Sutton et al, 2023) analysed recently funded projects with a particular interest in understanding how digital technology was impacting research and equitable research approaches.

The second (Hitchen et al, 2022) provided a mapping of Creative Industries in India with a view to identifying future areas of research and UK-India collaboration.

Set up at the same time as these scoping exercises, the AHRC India Fellowship has explored the following questions:
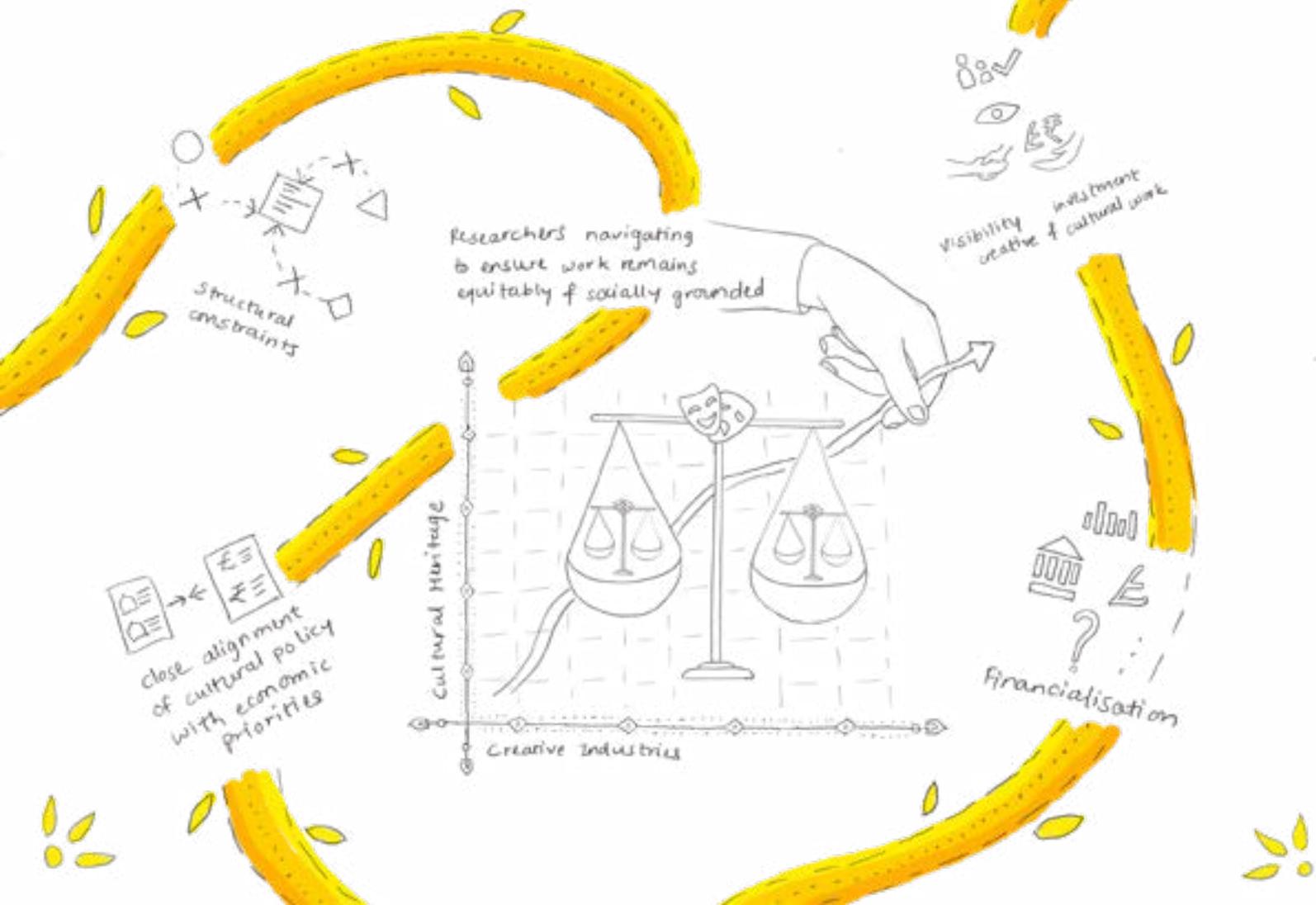
- **What are the main areas of activity, synergies, and thematic areas which can be fostered through the AHRC's 2023-2028 strategy plan in relation to India?** How can the key reflections and findings from the current scoping studies and follow-on funding be incorporated into the shaping of the strategy plan?

- **How can AHRC activity in India be extended in ways which build capacity for arts and humanities research while mitigating any foreseeable risks?** In particular, how can the AHRC and UKRI India navigate the complex terrain of UK-India relations with respect to strategic partnerships and research funding?

Seven projects received funding at the start of 2025 under the **India-UK Research into Cultural Heritage and Creative Industries programme.** Bringing together the focus of the AHRC strategic plan and the 2021 UK-India Roadmap, the programme has sought to build India-UK research and innovation collaborations within the fields of Creative Industries and cultural heritage by funding projects that could demonstrate the value of the creative, cultural and heritage sectors to both countries. Between 2022-2025, the Fellowship Team has worked with the AHRC to consider how best to foster the cohort's ability to undertake equitable and collaborative work

through their projects and in ways that contribute to wider community understanding and good practice. In February 2025 the Fellowship Team with support from the UKRI India office convened a two-day participatory workshop in Mumbai for all project researchers and project partners. Reflections and insights from those two days have informed and contributed to this report.

This report is divided into three parts. The first looks back to understand the policies and changes that have shaped the rise of the cultural and Creative Industries as a policy agenda as well as the global and specific UK-India research landscape at this present moment. The second focuses on the current AHRC UK-India Cultural Heritage and Creative Industries cohort, examining how their projects respond to some of the research challenges and inequalities identified earlier while still struggling to navigate others. It considers how the current focus on research in the Creative Industries and Cultural Heritage brings together teams of researchers and practitioners from a diverse range of organisations and institutions directly engaging with the challenges and questions of working across the UK and India at this current moment. The final part of the report uses these discussions to reflect on how current and future UK-India research can be enabled in programmatic ways. It argues that scaling up activity may not necessarily be the best way of approaching the challenges identified here and that much more is to be gained through continuing to support bottom-up conversations and initiatives.

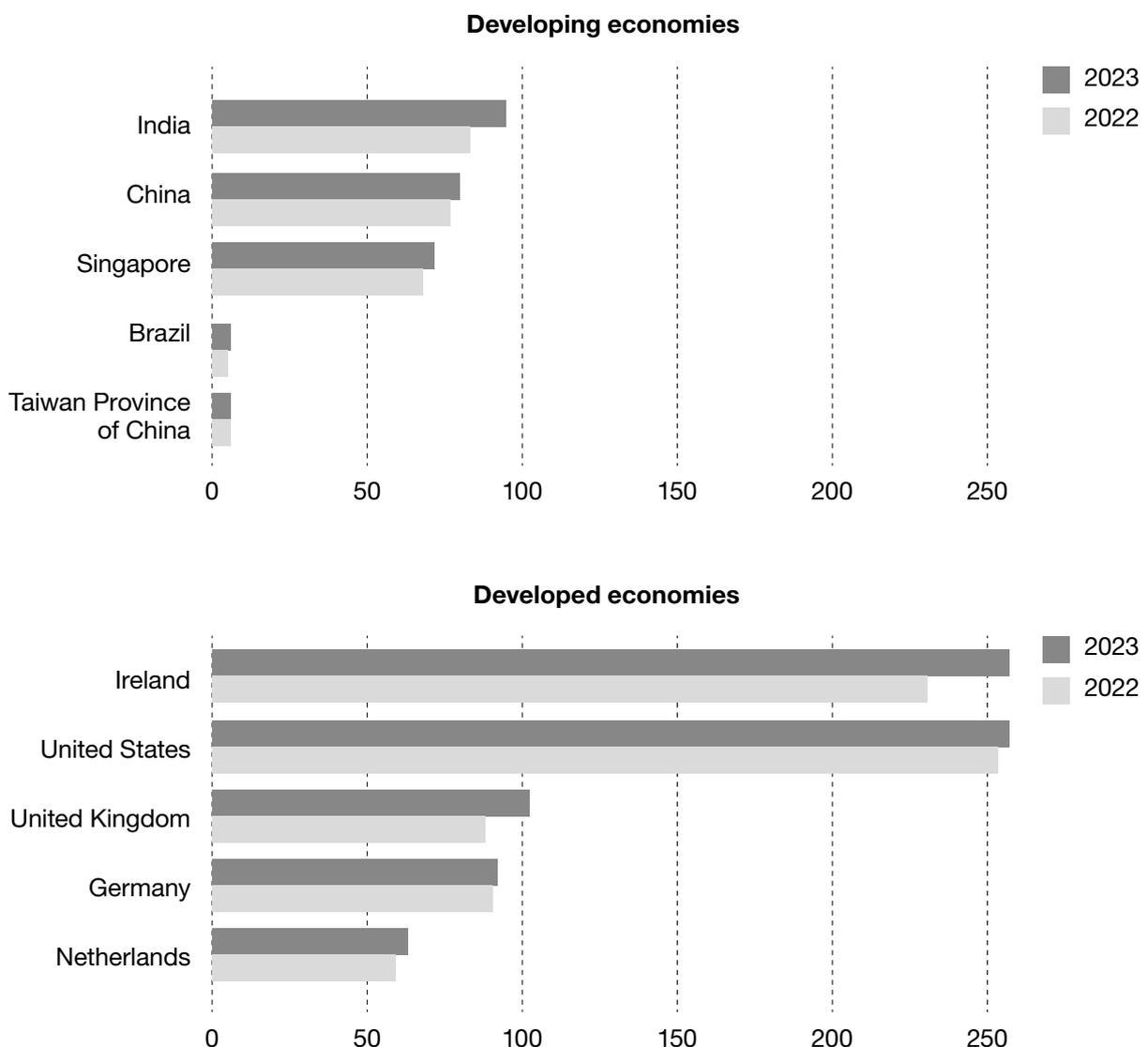# The evolving creative policy framework: from Cultural Heritage and Creative Industries to Cultural and Creative Industries

structural constraints

Researchers navigating to ensure work remains equitably & socially grounded

visibility investment creative & cultural work

close alignment of cultural policy with economic priorities

Cultural Heritage

Creative Industries

Financialisation

The hitherto distinctive areas of Creative Industries and Cultural Heritage have now been firmly established in policy terms as a compositive: Cultural and Creative Industries (CCIs). While this merging of terminology into a policy concept comes out of Global North governments attempting 'to harness the political advantages of these different understandings of culture and creativity against the backdrop of expanding digital capacity' (Purewal, Newbigin and Sagoo, 2025), the term's resonance in cultural and

trade policy in India is bound up with India's growth agenda and its strategy to highlight the knowledge economy and technology in its profile of economic growth. For UK-India relations, this is significant for the ways in which the CCIs are being positioned as a pathway to extend, expand and even transform creative work into economic growth through services for trade and export.

Figure 1. Creative services exports by country and (development) status

Developing economies

Legend: 2023, 2022

Countries (top to bottom): India, China, Singapore, Brazil, Taiwan Province of China

X-axis: 0, 50, 100, 150, 200, 250

Developed economies

Legend: 2023, 2022

Countries (top to bottom): Ireland, United States, United Kingdom, Germany, Netherlands

X-axis: 0, 50, 100, 150, 200, 250

Source: UN Trade and Development, **UNCTADstat. https://unctadstat.unctad.org/insights/theme/97**

Once considered unquantifiable and immeasurable, creative goods and services have become an established feature of policies aligned with the growth agenda. UNCTAD's (2024) measurement framework has made an explicit connection between international trade statistics and seven identified areas or groups of the Creative Industries (audiovisual; multimedia and photography; crafts and design goods; books and publishing; music, performing and visual arts; architecture; software, video games and recorded media; cultural and natural heritage) (See Figure 2).

The list is extensive, and in many ways arguably still immeasurable; it encompasses areas of creative and economic activity across different regulatory, financial, and sectoral frameworks in order to bring more standardisation to the understanding of the Creative Economy and potentially new ways of working in order access funding to reach new audiences.

As well as providing countries with a tool to estimate and evidence their creative economies, the UNCTAD framework speaks directly to the growth agenda through financialisation. The Cultural and Creative Industries sit directly within this by extending and deepening financial motives across a range of different actors and interests, ranging from tech companies with net assets seeking profits to artists and artisans seeking livelihoods. Grassroots-based arts practitioners and artisan communities are at risk of becoming even more vulnerable particularly when social protection measures are not in place.

Figure 2. World creative services exports by services categories
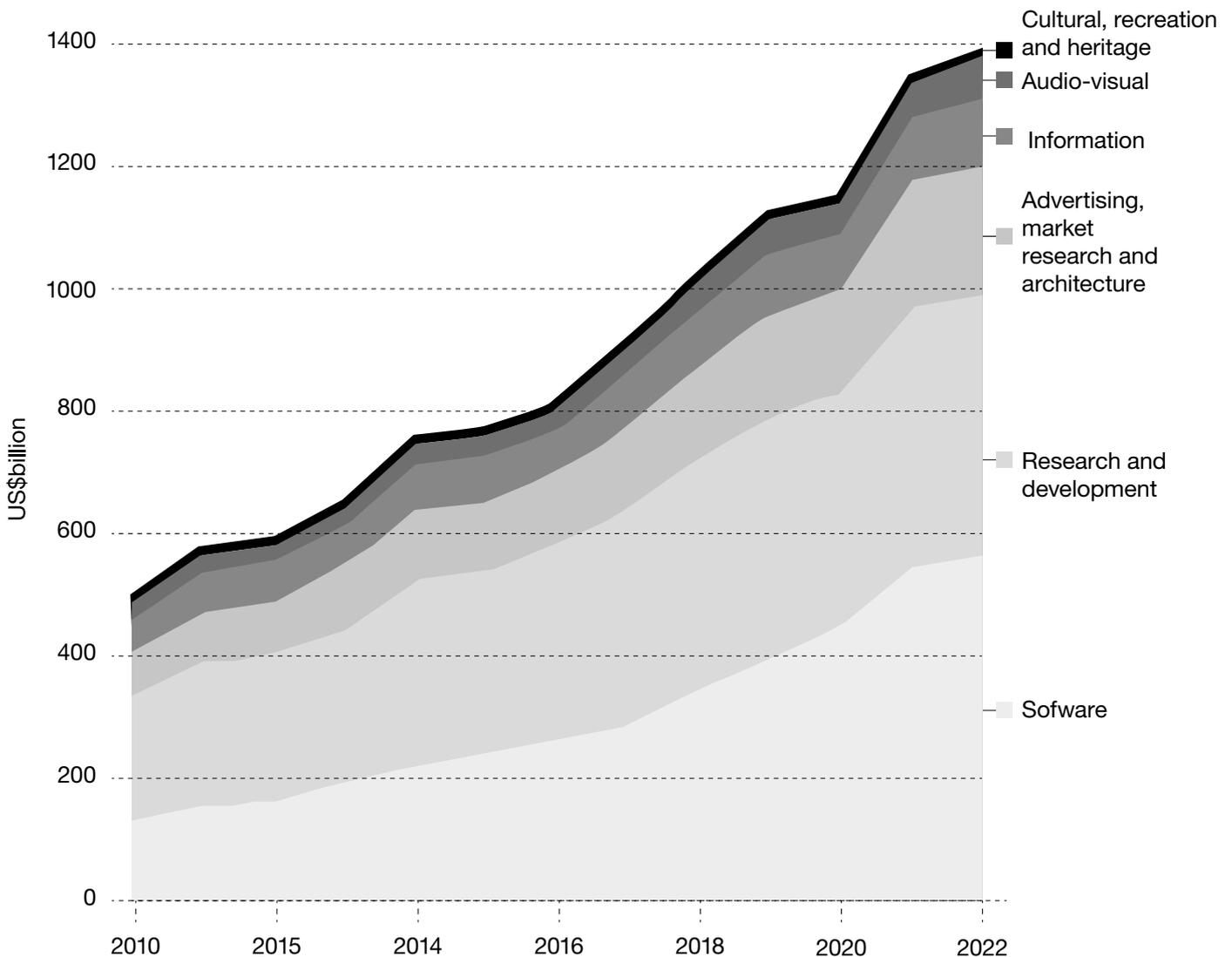
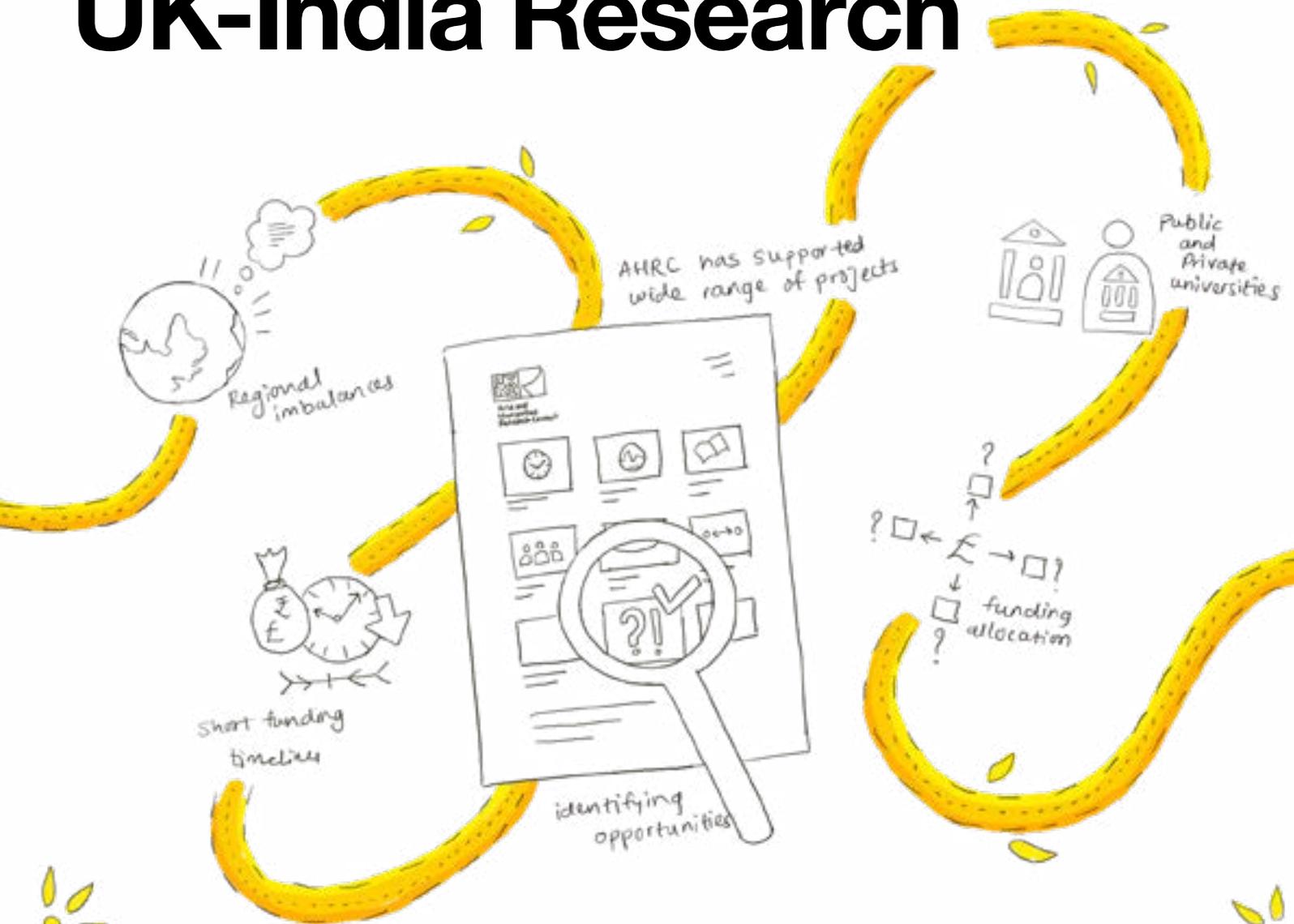Source: Creative Economy Outlook, UNCTAD 2024

AHRC-funded mapping of India's Creative Industries reveals an equally complex picture, that includes a world-leading, highly resourced, highly formalised IT, software and gaming sector alongside traditional artisanal goods production and fashion and textile work that sit largely in the informal sector (Hitchen et al, 2022). India's GLAM (Galleries, Libraries and Museums) sector is growing rapidly. Traditionally an area under the control of Central Government and the Ministry of Culture, private and philanthropic entities and initiatives now wield a significant presence in this sector. At the same time, this sector is heavily shaped by regulatory policy, including the 2020 amendment of the Foreign Contributions (Regulation) Act (FCRA) which introduced new measures and controls on organisations' eligibility for foreign funding and donation. One outcome has been that few small, community level organisations can afford, either financially or politically, to apply for FCRA status. The impact of this for building more equitable funding structures is significant and is addressed throughout the report.

Summary:

Within this shifting geopolitical scenario, the CCI/CH framework shapes the landscape of UK–India humanities and creative research. On the one hand, it brings greater visibility and investment to creative and cultural work, including the heritage, practice-based, and creative research central to the AHRC's remit. It also creates openings for new forms of collaboration, including with marginalised communities that have been a key focus of recent development-oriented UK–India partnerships. On the other hand, its strong emphasis on financialisation and the close alignment of cultural policy with economic priorities introduce structural constraints that researchers must understand and navigate carefully to ensure that collaborative work remains equitable and socially grounded.

Where have we come from?
Situating the question of equitable practice in this present juncture of UK-India Research

Regional imbalances

AHRC has supported wide range of projects

Public and Private universities

short funding timelines

identifying opportunities

funding allocation

As other AHRC reports on Global North–South collaborations note, research structures differ widely across the Global South, and equitable practice depends on recognising the specific conditions of each location. Factors shaping the UK and India's respective national research contexts and funding have also been shaped by shifts in the global economy and power structures. In light of this, we draw out the UK-India relationship in terms of several points of departure and convergence and consider how broader and more local framings have contributed to how UK-India research relations have evolved to where we are today.

Charting UKRI research from Development Challenges to 'National Interests'

The UK government's merging of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) and the Department for International Development (DFID) into one Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) in 2020 has significantly impacted the global research landscape. The Newton Fund (£735 million, 2014-2022) and the Global Challenges Research Fund (£1.5 billion, 2016-2021) made sustainable development and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) a key priority of research funding. These funds supported the development of new, fixed term projects but also helped to foster and support research networks and relationships between international academics and non-academic bodies and organisations, which often extended beyond the duration of the funded work.

The termination of both funds in 2021-22 marked a dramatic shift away from the promotion of development challenges and towards UK national interests in its review of foreign and development policy. A tightened framing of national interests through security, trade and benefit to the UK economy became central to how the new FCDO and its influence on research were subsequently shaped. The merger of the two government departments was accompanied by cuts in the UK Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) budget from 0.7% to 0.5% of the gross national income (GNI) which resulted in a 70% reduction in all UKRI ODA expenditure for 2021-22.

The UKRI ODA Evaluation Team conducted a review in 2021 of UKRI grant holders and partners (i.e. Principal Investigators in the UK and project staff based in partner developing countries). The review provided 'a snapshot in time, capturing the perspectives and experiences of a small cohort of

UKRI's research partners in the months immediately following the ODA budget reductions' (UKRI, 2022). The findings made it clear that the ODA budget cuts would have deep and lasting impacts not only on individual projects and teams but also on partnerships, communities, Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) and inclusive communications and decision making. The report concluded that "respondents suggested that the ODA budget cuts disregarded the ODA principle of 'do no harm' and did not address core priorities such as equitable partnerships, safeguarding, risk assessment and gender equality." Despite such detrimental impacts, reductions have proceeded with the UK Government announcing in February 2025 that its aid spending would go down to 0.3% of GNI in order to fund an increase in spending on defence and security **(UK Parliament, 2025)**. This is perhaps the most pressing and grave challenge for doing cultural and creative work in equitable ways.

Since that time, the AHRC and other UKRI research councils, through carefully framed research priorities, have shaped funding calls and programmes which have retained some core themes of the earlier ODA era (sustainability, equitable access, and partnerships/collaboration), while acknowledging the new FCDO's mission. The AHRC has committed resources to further explore the challenges facing equitable research work in the present context and to identify approaches that could help to mitigate or overcome these inequalities.

Two AHRC-funded projects, *__Building Equitable Partnerships in Africa (BEAP) and South America and Southeast Asia (SASA)__*, provide crucial insights into the policies, structures and approaches that

stand in the way of building more equitable ways of working between UK researchers and those in the African Continent, South America and South East Asia.

These reports highlight structural, institutional and cultural challenges facing researchers and organisations who seek to play a more egalitarian and influential role in international research work. Building on the work of SASA with its focus on Brazil and Malaysia and BEAP through its focus on Kenya and South Africa, this India Fellowship report examines how such dynamics manifest within the specific context of UK–India research.

India in AHRC global research funding

The AHRC has long supported innovative and cutting-edge research conducted by researchers based in the UK and India, with a particular focus on heritage and creative work (IFA, 2010).

India's move to non-ODA status as a middle-income country has meant that it is no longer eligible for development assistance. The nature of research funding in India has shifted in light of the integration of research and development budgets. India's status and classificatory shift within the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) ODA list is like other 'rising' and 'emerging' economies which have gone from being donor recipients to donor contributors. Similar to other BRICS countries, India began harnessing non-ODA financing for large infrastructural, trade and investment partnerships while continuing to engage in South-South and North-South partnerships and cooperation. Coinciding with the newly elected Indian government in 2014 with its neoliberal agenda, India began projecting its weight as one of the fastest growing economies this century while also establishing itself as a country to be partnered with and not given aid to. This had a tremendous impact on the research policy landscape in India and has shaped how global research partnerships have been approached.

The GCRF-Newton framework had a transformative impact on the funding landscape in India, enabling research that is more engaged with social and community needs in India, and to a lesser extent, the UK than was the case before, but it has also reinforced models of interaction premised on deficit models and donor-recipient relationships.

India's position in the AHRC's global research portfolio shows a wide range of funding. Most significant to date are the GCRF and the Newton Bhabha fund. The AHRC was one of 17 UK delivery partners of the GCRF programme and supported several programmes involving India. In addition to the Newton-Bhabha fund, the GCRF supported programmes some of which had explicit focus on India and others which were not India-specific but had projects and partnerships involving UK-India research.

There have been four India specific programmes which the AHRC has funded.

- Cultural Heritage and Rapid Urbanisation in India I and II (2015 and 2017): This was an AHRC–Indian Council for Historical Research (ICHR) collaboration under the Newton Fund, which also aligned with GCRF goals. It explored how India's urban growth intersects with heritage preservation, with projects using digital tools and community engagement.

- Cultural Heritage, Migration and Diaspora (2019): This programme worked with the ICHR to support research networking projects encouraging the building of partnerships in exploring the relationship between cultural heritage and migration in the Indian diaspora.

- India@75 (2021): This was a programme involving projects related to India's 75th anniversary of independence, specifically focusing on the creative industries and cultural heritage.

Non-India specific programmes which have supported India research partnerships:

- GCRF Urgency Grants Pilot (2021): Though not India-specific, this scheme allowed researchers to respond rapidly to urgent development challenges in low- and middle-income countries, including India. This included the Agile Response to Covid-19 programme.

- GCRF Interdisciplinary Hubs (2019): Some of the 12 major research hubs funded under GCRF included Indian partners. These hubs addressed global challenges like sustainable cities, heritage, and social inclusion, often with a strong arts and humanities component.

- Growing Research Capability (GROW) Programme (2017-21): This initiative aimed to build long-term research partnerships between UK institutions and those in developing countries, including India. The AHRC contributed to projects that strengthened cultural and academic ties.

Projects funded under these calls have produced innovative and cutting-edge research, with a particular focus on heritage and creative work. They have helped to drive forward collaboration between UK and India-based researchers and organisations but, as noted by the authors of the Digital Thread Report (2023), this work continues to be shaped by a number of challenges in terms of addressing inequalities.

Some key areas to highlight which have emerged out of the above AHRC research programmes and scoping studies include:

- **Partnerships between UK and India academics**

India's research landscape is varied and complex. There are more than 1,100 universities operating in India, and this list is comprised of a range of different types of institutions: centrally funded, state-level and private institutions. The number of private universities is growing. According to the Ministry of Education (**GOI, 2022**), 685 are managed by the government (445 state universities and 240 central) and 483 are private institutions. In the pre-2014 era, research funding in India was either public, private or both, with the Government of India being the largest funder of research in the 2010-11 budget covering three-quarters of research expenditure (IFA, 2010). Notably,

there were separate government budgets allocated to autonomous research institutes via Indian research councils which reinforced a disconnect between government and non-government agencies. In the post-2014 era, Indian research councils have been closely aligned with corresponding central government ministries which has seen the Indian Council for Social Science Research (ICSSR), the Indian Council for Historical Research (ICHR), the Indian Council for Philosophical Research (ICPR) and other specialised discipline-based councils reshaped in terms of outlook, priorities and a tightening national agenda with respect to areas of research inquiry.

Academics in larger, usually centrally-funded, institutions have made key contributions to world leading research, funded by UKRI and other Global North funders. This work takes place, however, within an institutional model where research is not heavily rewarded and research leave is not a standard part of the institutional landscape. Private institutions, which draw their income from teaching, give little time or space to research. Academics often undertake research with little to no institutional support or remission from other duties for the time they devote to this work. Meanwhile, non-academic partners and practitioners enter into research partnerships on often unremunerated and inequitable terms.

In spite of this, the recent funding calls have produced more positive opportunities for co-creation between academic PIs and Co-Is. However, the relationship between academics and non-academics remains unequal and has not been "a generative aspect of the funding calls" (Sutton et al, 2023).

- **Shifts over time in the partner organisations researchers work with – from heritage to development and now growth**

Global Challenges-focused funding has created new opportunities for arts and humanities scholars to work with social and community organisations in India and the UK. The Digital Thread report notes that non-academic partners identify clear benefits of working with academics, particularly access to new networks, to a wider range of influences and through academic endorsement and recognition of the work they do.

For academics, however, relationships with non-academic partners can often be rather contractual in nature, with partners brought in after the project has

been conceived and designed, rather than on a co-creational basis. The Digital Thread report comments that for researchers "development is a way to undertake heritage work while for partners, 'heritage' is a way to do development work." Sometimes this approach can produce generative partnership but it can also lead to academics "piggybacking" on NGO relationships and local communities, without having a substantial stake in the work being done. This point resonates with M.N. Srinivas' observations in the 1950s about the government's emphasis on research that is directly contributing to development and planning at the cost of 'pure' or 'fundamental' research being sacrificed altogether (IFA, 2010).

The lexicon of development in earlier grants reinforced a deficit approach to research work by framing India as a site of fieldwork and data supplementation as opposed to the key fulcrum for the development of innovative academic, engagement and theoretical frameworks in cultural heritage. This current moment of UK-India research shows a marked shift from a development agenda to an economic growth agenda seeking to position the UK and India on more 'equal' footing on bilateral terms but without referencing questions around how to work equitably.

■ **Challenges in timelines of short-term funding for projects and the ongoing development work of community-facing work**

Inequalities in working patterns between academic and non-academic partners are often exacerbated by the fact that funding calls are fixed term and outcome-focused which runs counter to the longer-term timelines of community facing work. The fact that UK-India funding calls have undergone so many shifts, particularly since the turn away from international development funding, has not helped or encouraged academic partners to maintain sustainable and equitable long-term relationships with non-academic partners. Longer-term calls and continuity of funding schemes would help to promote a research environment in which partners can play a substantial and equal role in shaping research questions.

■ **Challenges of equitable funding**

It has been noted that current funding arrangements mean that only UK-based academics can apply for funding overheads. As noted above, this is highly

problematic for India-based researchers who have very few other avenues for research funding. Project partners are ineligible to apply for economic costings at all. At the same time, India's own economic regulations present challenges for UK funding organisations to cover their costs. Indian bodies and individuals can only receive foreign funding if they have been registered under the Foreign Contributions (Regulation) Act (FCRA). Few small, community level organisations can afford, either financially or politically, to apply for FCRA status. In these contexts, project partners' ability to access resources and influence financial decision making depends on the willingness and ability of academic researchers to navigate the regulatory framework with a clear focus on achieving research equity.

Working with India-based funders has, so far, not provided alternative ways of enabling financial and research equity. The AHRC has collaborated with India-based funding bodies, particularly working with the ICHR on the *Cultural Heritage and Rapid Urbanisation in India and Cultural Heritage, Migration and Diaspora* funding programmes. Recipients of these awards have reported that this partnership created additional bureaucracy and unevenness in funding experiences. It was also noted that the AHRC-ICHR partnership revealed significant differences in research cultures and expectations. Those working on projects framed around architecture, heritage, monuments and archaeology provided more positive feedback on working with the ICHR than those that were more people-centric, rather than object-based (Sutton, et al, 2023). Government directives play an influential role in shaping research activities, which can create additional considerations when academics and partners work with national-level organisations on topics outside established national priorities in society, politics, and culture.

■ **Impact of digital technology on research work and expertise**

Digital technology has become a much more substantive part of arts and humanities research work. Despite the emergence of the field of digital humanities, it is still nascent and the dominant tendency is still to use technology to communicate and disseminate findings. The Digital Thread report notes that digital technology is often used to repeat existing cannons of knowledge in a new digital

format, rather than exploring the disruptive capacity of this technology. Researchers reported that they drew on digital media because they felt that they had to, rather than because they felt confident to do so. New funding calls have brought a wider range of researchers with technological expertise, but not necessarily regional, cultural and political knowledge into research in India. At the same time, a key question to keep in mind is *which groups are served by digital-heavy projects?* While India's digital infrastructure has developed at an exponential rate, this has not been felt evenly across all areas of society. Universities often do not have the digital infrastructure to engage with digital-heavy projects, though neither do small organisations or state actors outside the main urban metropoles.
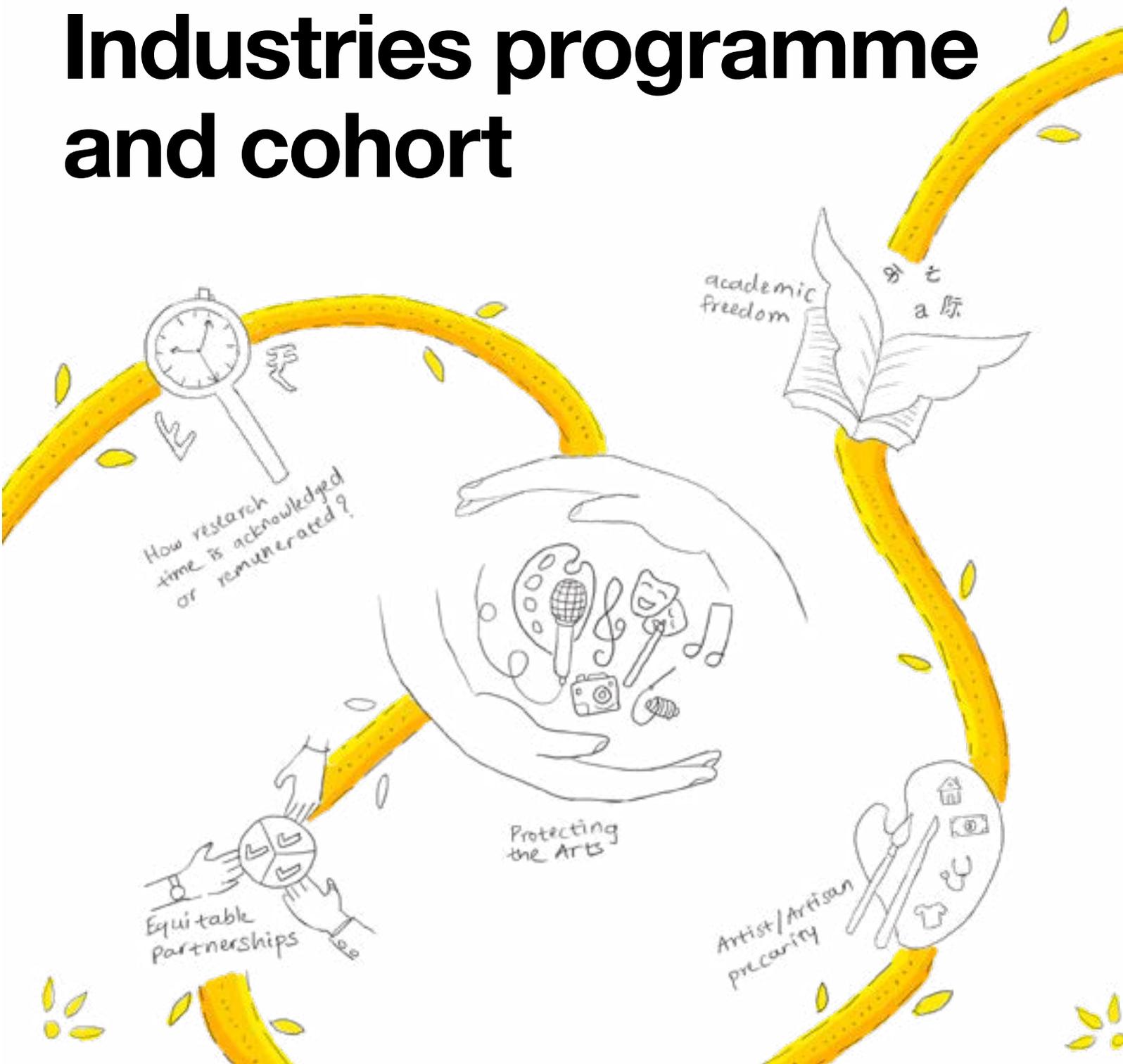
■ Regional imbalances

There are notable imbalances and inequalities in the research communities within India and the UK, as well as inequalities between UK and India-based researchers. Of the three major funding calls assessed in the Digital Thread report (*Cultural Heritage and Rapid Urbanisation in India* 2015 and 2017 and *Cultural Heritage, Migration and Diaspora* 2019) Indian partners were generally based in central (rather than state) institutions, with the majority coming from north India. It was noted that a majority of pre-call events and the India-partners themselves were based in Delhi which exacerbated this regional pull. There has been no mention in these funding calls about equality and diversity, which would in any case need to be unpacked and explained in order to engage meaningfully with the different kinds of structural inequalities that shape research work in the UK and in India.

Summary:

The AHRC has supported a wide range of important and innovative projects to build a varied and engaged research landscape. Over several decades of sustained funding, the AHRC has helped to nurture and support long-term collaborative research partnerships, as well as open opportunities for new partnerships with a wider range of groups and organisations. UK-India arts and humanities research is connected to a wider and more diverse range of social organisations than ever before. It has demonstrated its relevance and ability to contribute to global challenges in India, the UK and beyond. The AHRC has also collected important data about the issues impacting the possibility of more equitable working in these relationships from which it can help to develop better practice in UK-India partnerships and beyond this. Key areas for focus here are, disparities in institutional support and resources between UK and Indian academics; foregrounding the concerns of the highly diverse range of partner organisations with which AHRC is now working; the challenges of short funding timelines and changes in funding priorities; the ability to navigate regulatory guidelines in ways that consider and do more to safeguard the influence and financial autonomy of project partners; the wider social impact of digital heavy research; regional imbalances in funding opportunities.

The current AHRC UK-India Cultural Heritage and Creative Industries programme and cohort

academic freedom

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How research time is acknowledged or remunerated?

Protecting the Arts

Equitable Partnerships

Artist/Artisan precarity

In March 2023, the AHRC issued a UK-India research funding call that focused on India-UK research and innovation collaborations within the fields of Creative Industries and Cultural Heritage. Collaborative partnership was at the heart of the call as applicants were asked to build projects that would demonstrate the value of the creative, cultural and heritage sectors to both countries. The call built on past AHRC-funded work, particularly in terms of heritage and community-based work. The turn to Creative Industries marks a new shift in the funding landscape that aligns closely with the language and priorities of the 2021 UK-India Road map and conjoins and penetrates different areas of the economy ranging from crafts, to scaled-up production systems, to the service sector to the knowledge-based economy. This framework enables researchers to work with an even broader range of partners, particularly in the GLAM sector (Galleries, Libraries and Museums). Yet, many of the older inequalities and structural issues shaping the UK-India research landscape pertain, and even take on, new dimensions in this latest shift in funding focus.

How do the Cultural Heritage and Creative Industries cohort see their work?

The AHRC India Fellowship has engaged with the seven UK-India research project teams, through a range of interactions, feedback and discussions. The core research teams are comprised of academics based in the UK and India, with Principal Investigators (PIs) in UK universities and Co-investigators (Co-Is) in both the UK and India.

Table 1. UK-India Research into Creative Industries and Cultural Heritage: Where academic research teams of the cohort are located

Country	Organisation name
United Kingdom	London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE)
	Birmingham City University
	Queen Mary University of London
	University of Brighton
	University College London
	University of Reading
	University of East London
	University of Oxford
	University of Huddersfield
	University of Brighton

Country	Organisation name
India	National Institute of Design, Ahmedabad
	Shiv Nadar University, U.P.
	Christ University, Bengaluru
	Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi
	St Xavier's College, Mumbai
	Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai
	University of Kerala, Thiruvananthapuram
	French Institute of Pondicherry, Puducherry
	Indian Institute of Technology Madras, Chennai
	World University of Design, Haryana
	School of Environment and Architecture, Mumbai

A range of universities can be seen in the seven projects which indicates that expertise of individual academics and their existing or preexisting networks come into play when project teams are drawn together at the application stage. Discussions have reflected on the dynamics of working within and across different institutional (both administrative and academic) cultures. The cohort's experiences and contributions to understandings of UK-India research stem from their respective locations in the UK and India in relation to higher education as well as in relation to Global South/India-Global North/UK dynamics and asymmetries in the research process.

Non-academic partners consist of a wide range and type of organisations including crafts cooperatives, film festivals, film production studios, arts charities, registered not-for-profit organisations, as well as private limited companies. We signal this heterogeneity as a matter of significance for further exploration in terms of how different partners are placed in relation to more material aspects of the cultural and Creative Industries, not least in terms of how equity and the growth agenda weigh upon them.

Table 2. Non-academic partners in UK-India Creative Industries and Cultural Heritage projects

Projects	Non-academic partners
Crafting Sustainability and Equitability: Reconstructing Pasts and Futures in the Indian Creative Economy	200 Million Artisans Craft Revival Trust Lata Sita Design
Connecting Creative Industries and Cultural Heritage: India-UK Film Festival Federation, Youth Curation and Community Co-creation	UK Asian Film Festival Habitat International Film Festival Bengaluru International Film Festival KASHISH Mumbai Queer International Film Festival
Crafting a Sustainable Future: Empowering Indian Crafts in the Creative Industries	Artisans Alliance Jawaja
Women Online: The Impact of VOD on Women's Position in the Indian and British Film Industries	Visions in the Gallery, Nunnery Gallery (Bow Arts) Women in Cinema Collective Foundation Damsel Fish Productions Chitrkhana Productions
Colonial Standards: Using Scientific Instrument Collections in India to Investigate Mechanisms of Control	New Cartographers
Delivering Heritage: A Place Based Creative Scanning Approach to Investigating Post Office Cultures in India and the UK	Sangam Festival & Sangam Radio Kirklees Council Postal Museum Indian National Trust for Art and Heritage (INTACH) Rosie Daswani
Designing Spaces, Making Sustainable Homes: The Design Industry, the Data Gap and Design Innovation	Hunarshala Foundation

Conversations within the cohort have drawn out different and shared understandings of the concepts of Creative Industries and Cultural Heritage between India and the UK settings and across the different cohort teams. Asymmetries and inequities in doing academic work in India-UK teams have also been identified, through a sharing and examination of how these played out at the cohort level and in terms of previous and current project experiences.

Discussions within the cohort surfaced a number of themes, including equitable research work in other parts of the Global South and the opportunities and challenges, particularly the inequalities, around academic-non-academic engagement in the projects.

Imbalances in working across academic and non-academic partnerships

Complex research teams are working under a number of different pressures, many of which are structurally defined. Building a new community of equitable and ethical practice requires an approach which is mindful of and empathetic towards what it means to work in partnerships which involve both academic and non-academic partners across different asymmetries, institutional positionalities and scales.

Reflecting on the imbalances that exist across partnerships is a process which should continue throughout the research process and beyond. The cohort could potentially contribute to informing new

ways of working which consciously address existing asymmetries while also considering how mutually defined and agreed principles of the purpose/s of partnerships can be developed as part and parcel of partnership work.

Uneven institutional bureaucracies

The increasing pressures to demonstrate compliance to a range of research, financial and ethical protocols in the UK, combined with the rapidly changing regulatory requirements placed on research in India, present a range of institutional challenges. Burdensome paperwork in both the UK and India was raised as a concern by India-based researchers with a lack of shared understanding of different research cultures and positionalities across UK-India research teams about due diligence and ethics requirements. As has been reported in the BEAP and SASA projects, this places Global South institutions under disproportionate risk and responsibility.

Mobility for Global South scholars

Many participants expressed appreciation for holding the workshop in India for its accessibility to India-based researchers who are often unable to attend international workshops or meetings due to lack of access to funding or prohibitive requirements for leave from university duties. Like recent AHRC programmes (Cultural Heritage, Migration and Diaspora and India@75), research projects are actively working across the UK and India, as teams, in their research questions, and sites of research and impact. Many of the projects in the cohort are designed to actively challenge the directional 'gaze' of research and bring Indian-based researchers and expertise to bear on UK-based problems and research questions even as challenges to obtain visas to the UK add an extra burden to managing this work. Technology offers some way to mitigate uneven mobility within research teams but brings its own problems and inequalities, as was highlighted in the Digital Thread Report (2023). Memorandums of Understanding (MoU) between institutions can help to facilitate travel for senior university leaders and representatives but does not always help mobility of early career or more research-focused team members.

Recognising how context, culture and policy environments shape research

Culture cannot be disembodied from context and therefore terminologies and understandings of culture across national contexts differ greatly and reflect context-specific histories, politics as well as institutional aims and policies. This kind of cultural expertise is therefore vital for equitable working but not always acknowledged or supported in funding calls and research planning. The cohort discussed these differences in relation to the decolonising agenda in particular. Some participants expressed frustration at the ways in which UK institutions promoted the decolonising agenda on the one hand while at the same time are placing the institutional and bureaucratic burden of doing such work on Global South partners. Participants explained that their UK institutions were asking for proof of coverage or liability that their Indian partners were not able to provide before money or support could be released.

Regulatory requirements in the building of partnerships

As noted above, the Foreign Contributions Regulation Act (FCRA) has significantly shaped the Indian research environment since the 2020 amendment with important implications for the operation of international partnerships. Researchers expressed strong desire for more information and understanding about how to navigate FCRA regulations and remain compliant with this framework while also prioritising partner equity and interests. It is important to build more capacity and training around this regulatory framework so that academics and UK universities understand the FCRA and its implications for equitable partnership. While the FCRA is particular to India, the challenges of equitable access to and autonomy over research funds is relevant within wider Global South contexts, and particularly the African Continent.

The elusiveness of the concepts of CCI/CH in the neoliberal, growth-oriented contexts of India and post-Brexit UK

As discussed above, the focus on cultural and Creative Industries (CCI) and Cultural Heritage (CH) has emerged through a particular alignment of UK and India interests in the wake of the UK's exit from the European Union and India's distinctive national

growth agenda. The 2030 UK-India Roadmap and its surrounding political context frames culture in highly commodified, nation-centric ways that can only been navigated if they are first acknowledged. Discussion on the first day of the workshop showed that project teams found CCI/CH to be a complex and often opaque framework for operation, with few teams aligning their research specifically to the CCI agenda.

There is a looming question of what incorporation into the Cultural and Creative Industries agendas will mean for India's deep, longstanding and diverse histories of cultural production and social organisation within artisanal and craft communities and economies – including traditions of cooperatives in the handicrafts. This pertains to increasing pressures on the informal economy, where most of the cultural economy is concentrated. There are deep implications of further market forces on the livelihoods and sustainability concerns of craft and artisanal communities at the heart of this work. This threatens to eclipse past critical Cultural Heritage work with its emphasis on considering the importance of history. Protecting vulnerable and marginal communities and groups or centring concerns around social justice and equity will remain a key question for research agendas engaging with the CCI/CH policy and fields.

Dominant framings of CCI/CH are also being challenged in productive ways that enable much clearer and specific synergies to emerge. In mapping their project aims and contributions, the current India-UK cohort have used other terms to define their work, including place making, preserving tangible and intangible heritage, sustainable design, craft-based communities, creative practice, heritage practice and co-creation. Conversations flagged the importance in the Indian context of histories of cultural production and social organisation within artisanal/craft communities and economies and societies with academic and project partners questioning how the CCI agenda reframes past work and political linkages in this arena. We feel that further cultivating common reflective practices around the CCI/CH terminology within and by the cohort will ensure stronger collaboration between the different projects and the cultivation of new, evolving and responsive research cultures.

A positive contribution of the cohort is its re-engagement with the CCI/CH agenda in an ongoing and reflective manner coming from their respective project's questions and aims. This will no doubt further inform how the agenda is being interpreted and potentially redefined the field as a loose and evolving, and qualitatively contextual way.

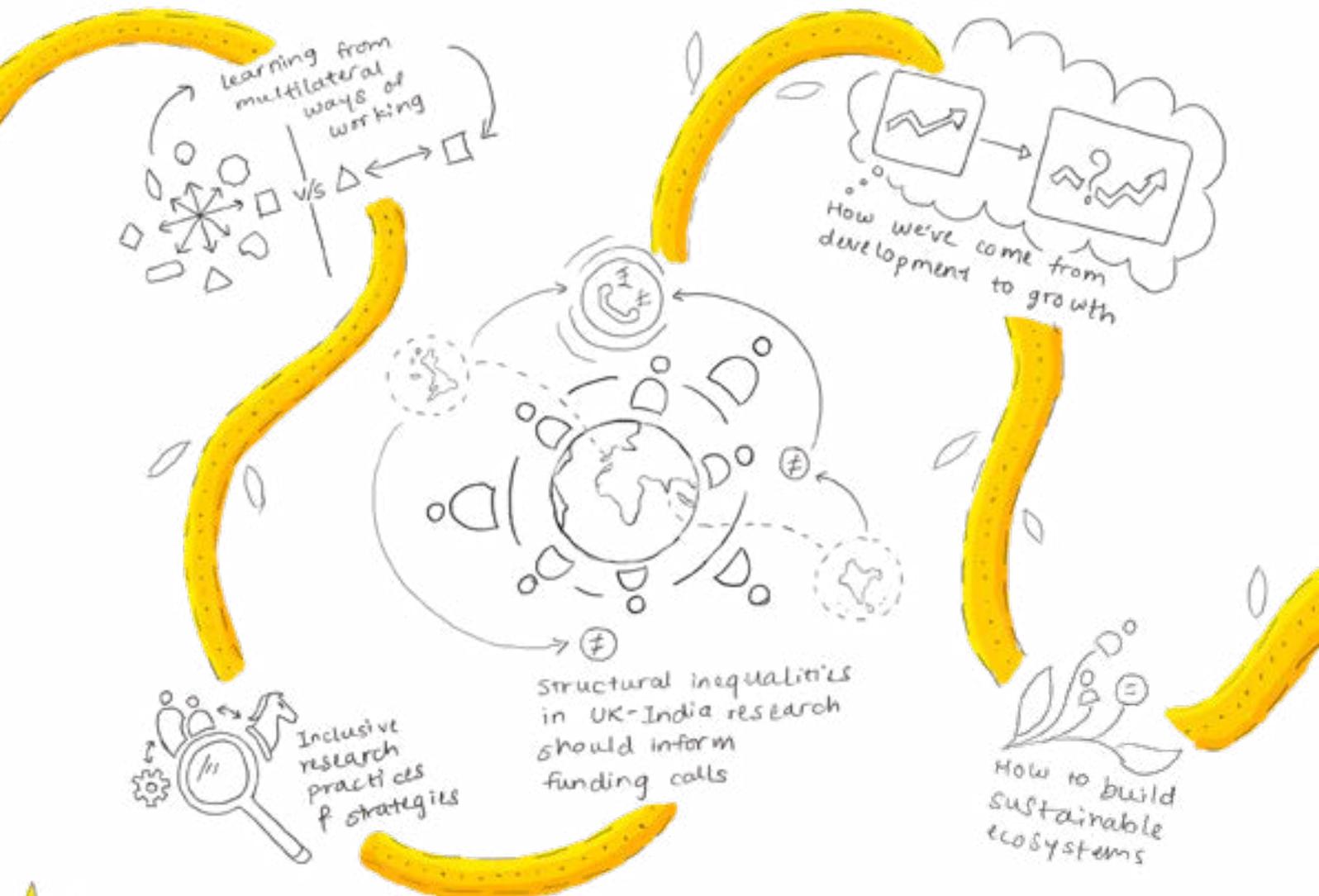**Academics and art/heritage practitioners at risk**

Meaningful notions of ethics and practice need to home in on questions of vulnerability, risk, safety, and protection from violence. Academic and creative freedom is under threat more globally and these concerns play out in specific ways in the UK-India context, often around restrictive bureaucratic approvals as well as complicated financial reporting and payments systems. Naming or speaking about risk is in itself a risk. While academics are increasingly finding themselves wary of academic freedoms being curtailed, they still occupy positions of relative power and privilege in comparison to Indian art/heritage practitioners and the precarities that surround their work, though academics who voice concerns or identify issues which are considered contentious may also be at risk. Where privilege can be leveraged to enable a more pluralistic understanding of communities of practice, it could enable critical and essential questions to be voiced and shared.

Managing risk and safeguarding is a collective responsibility in which academics, institutions and funders play a joint role. The current cohort offers opportunities for collaborative work around this issue, providing a space for continued discussions about developing practices (modes and forms of engagement) which can work towards addressing concerns which frame identified risks for both academic and non-academic partners. The AHRC can play a key facilitative role in developing and disseminating best practice and experience-based guidance or points to consider around this issue.

Summary:

Discussions with researchers working in Creative Industries and cultural heritage shed light on how researchers are experiencing the rapidly changing UK-India research space. The experiences and reflections of the India-UK Creative Industries and Cultural Heritage programme project teams highlight some of the challenges of establishing and working in equitable partnerships, even when the desire and intent to do so exists. While partnership and ways of thinking and working equitably are a distinct feature and ambition for research teams wanting to work within the UK-India research space, careful navigation is required at every step of the research funding process in an increasingly complex regulatory research terrain. Funding councils, academic institutions and researchers now need to work together to build awareness, share evidence and best practice, and collectively ensure diversity and inclusion in order to drive more equitable global research and sustainable research ecosystems.

Where to next?
How to build equitable partnerships and ways of working across the UK, India and beyond

learning from multilateral ways of working

v/s

How we've come from development to growth

Structural inequalities in UK-India research should inform funding calls

Inclusive research practices & strategies

How to build sustainable ecosystems

Building on existing mapping and scoping reports, reporting on two partner-led participatory meetings (BEAP and SASA) on global research partnerships, and facilitated consultative explorations with the current AHRC UK-India research cohort, a number of challenges and insights have been identified:

Table 3. A table setting out research challenges alongside guiding principles that could help address these issues in ways that move towards more equitable research

Challenge	Insights from Fellowship research and cohort engagement	Guiding principles for the research community
Asymmetries in academic-non academic partnerships	■ Non-academic partners often feel that they are brought in too late to make an impact on the project; ■ Collaborative work improves when partners are involved early and meaningfully; ■ Academic and non-academic partners often hold different understandings of heritage, development and creative practice	Equitable partnerships require early and meaningful co-design, with non-academic partners involved in shaping research questions, methods, and goals. Funders, institutions and individuals should devote resources to building, maintaining and developing partnerships in the long term, rather than focusing on current funding terms/buzz words. Differences in understandings of heritage, development, and creative practice should be openly recognised and negotiated through transparent decision-making processes. Resources need to be provided to enable the development of ethical, culturally informed approaches to collaboration, including sensitivity to regional, institutional, and sectoral contexts – at individual and institutional levels.
Uneven administrative and regulatory burdens	■ Lack of prior knowledge of UK-India research context, including regulatory frameworks, can impact logistical and administrative aspects of partnership building. ■ India-based partners face disproportionate administrative burdens; ■ UK researchers, and institutions, do not always understand India due diligence and ethics contexts; ■ Misalignment between UK and Indian bureaucratic process slows work, creates uncertainty and heightens UK-centric approaches.	UK–India research collaborations should be planned with an explicit awareness of uneven regulatory and administrative burdens, with a focus on developing guidance and information sharing about India's FCRA and other country-specific regulation. Likewise, care should be taken to ensure that Indian institutions, organisations and individual researchers understand and are able to navigate UK regulatory frameworks. Clear communication and administrative alignment are needed to enable institutions, funders, and researchers to work together and share responsibility for developing realistic timelines, budgets, and support structures that reflect differing bureaucratic contexts

Challenge	Insights from Fellowship research and cohort engagement	Guiding principles for the research community
Uneven mobility for Global South researchers	- India-based researchers often cannot attend UK meetings due to leave barriers, cost, visa delays; - Holding events in India improved accessibility dramatically; - Digital participation offers some opportunities but also reinforces inequalities due to infrastructure gaps and different quality of interaction.	Maximising active participation of Global South partners should inform research planning and funding allocation. A priority should be given to enabling face-to-face interaction where possible while using digital participation in ways that do not reinforce existing inequalities.
Digital expectations create new inequalities	- Digital infrastructure varies across India and UK partners; - Digital-heavy expectations can put smaller organisations and partners under strain.	Equitable research recognises the value of appropriate forms of knowledge production, including analogue and low-tech, alongside digital innovation. More community-level conversation is needed to consider the ends and interests served by different kinds of digital data and technology, with an emphasis on exploring how this can be used to disrupt, rather than maintain existing inequalities. Funders and applicants must acknowledge that digital outputs and methods should be proportionate to partners' infrastructure and capacities.
Different interpretations and understandings of CCI/CH framework	- Teams interpret CCI/CH differently and flexibly, often in ways that build on past work and research networks; - CCI/CH labels are seen as important for accessing funding but are not always guide research practice; - Cohort members value space to reinterpret or critique CCI/CH frameworks.	Conceptual frameworks such as CCI/CH should be treated as flexible and evolving rather than prescriptive, with an openness to a variety of terms and vocabularies, (e.g. intangible heritage, creative practice, place-making). Funders, researchers and institutions should create space for context-specific interpretations and critical reflection on the usefulness and limits of these terms.

Challenge	Insights from Fellowship research and cohort engagement	Guiding principles for the research community
Risk, vulnerability and safety concerns differ across partners	▪ Risk is unevenly distributed not only between UK-India team members but also amongst partners; artisans, practitioners, small NGOs are more vulnerable; ▪ UK academics are often aware of ethical considerations and vulnerabilies but unsure how to operate safely; ▪ Research teams value honest but careful conversations around risk.	Risk, and its uneven distribution across research partnerships, needs to be addressed collectively and transparently. Ethical collaboration is much more than a bureaucratic process and requires ongoing, context-sensitive discussions of safety, visibility, and vulnerability for all partners – at the micro (team) level and in more macro contexts. Funders, researchers and institutions can work together to create wider space and recognition of the importance of these conversations as well as share experiences and best practice.
Regional imbalances within UK and India tend to be entrenched within research opportunities	▪ Funding calls cluster around the Indian metros, Delhi, Mumbai and to some extent Bangalore; ▪ South Indian, Northeastern and rural partners are underrepresented in current, and past, funding cohorts. ▪ Small institutions struggle to access AHRC funding opportunities.	Research ecosystems should widen access to partnerships beyond major metropolitcan centres by actively deflecting or countering regional concentration. Recognising and supporting, including through financial resources, the participation of smaller institutions, regional universities, and local organisations can help to redress current imbalances.
Trust-building and ongoing communication matter more than scale for equitability	▪ Small scale engagements tend to produce more equitable collaboration, with partners playing a more engaged role than large, centralised programmes; ▪ Recurring and regular cohort meetings support deep partnership-building and reduce misunderstandings.	Sustained communication and trust-building are central to equitable collaboration and often more important than scale. Smaller, repeated, and well-supported engagements enable deeper partnership and shared learning; these can be supported by funders and research institutions. Opportunities for UK–India research teams to engage with peers outside their immediate projects can support the development of shared norms, relationships, and trust across collaborations.
Local cultural knowledge is essential but undervalued	▪ Partners succeed best when local expertise leads research design. ▪ Partners feel sidelined and burdened when UK institutions apply disembedded 'decolonisation' agendas.	Local cultural knowledge should be recognised as central to research design and leadership, not supplementary expertise – and appropriately resourced. Equitable collaboration requires valuing local authority and notions of leadership and avoiding the imposition of externally defined agendas.

The importance of building a shared language about equitable partnerships	■ Teams would welcome more clarity around shared expectations and ways to articulate partnership principles.	Equitable collaboration benefits from shared principles and vocabularies that clarify expectations while remaining adaptable. Funders, institutions, and researchers should work towards common frameworks that guide ethical and reflective partnership practice – at both the level of institutional practice as well as individual research teams.

In light of live and rapidly evolving UK-India strategic relations, there is need to reflect on how the AHRC might approach current and future UK-India research in programmatic ways. To address the above challenges, this report recommends a focus on the following areas and actions so as to prioritise, enable and support equitable research practices in current and future work in India.

■ Consider the efficacy of doing multilateral rather than bilateral work towards equitable partnership by learning from other contexts where equitable partnerships work is critically engaging with questions around power relations and situated structures across Global South and Global North contexts in the actual practice of research. Bilateral research can generate and potentially magnify tensions for researchers due to national frameworks which impose different kinds of restrictions which multilateral research could mitigate. Approaches here include developing more complex, intersectional models of the global research context which clearly acknowledge the complex role that middle-income countries such as India play as a place of partnership with UK-researchers but also a region interested in extending its own influence in regions of the Global South, particularly the African Continent.

■ Remember how we have come to 'growth' from 'development challenges'. As institutional leadership and policies evolve, focus remains on future planning and agenda. However, as we have highlighted in this report, retaining strong institutional awareness of how we have come to the present moment is also important. The historical shift in UK research funding over the twenty-first century, from development to growth, informs the current challenges and inequalities in research culture, but also helps to see opportunities to build sustainable and effective research partnerships in the long term. Funding councils should consider how to acknowledge this in their narrative and planning of international research work moving forward.

■ Support spaces and activities which foster academic freedom, especially in relation to culture and arts. This necessitates attentiveness to creating environments which are accessible and open to a diversity of researchers, practitioners, cultural workers, creatives, and curators. Enabling future talent through inclusive research practices and strategies is necessary for the creation of responsive and thriving research ecosystems that can address the global challenges of our times.

■ Maintain a strong focus on principles of equality, inclusion and diversity for ethical research which is vital for fostering world-leading creative work that addresses global and local contemporary needs. A strong understanding of structural inequalities in UK–India research should inform funding calls and outreach, helping to foster a research ecosystem that is open to and nurtures creativity across the full spectrum of fields, not only highly financialised, technology-focused industries. Suggestions from the BEAP and SASA reports to provide stronger training and administrative guidance to research offices in the UK and Global South-based institutions offer a clear way forward on this point.

■ Enable networks and spaces for creative work beyond large cultural and educational institutions, and beyond the north-Indian and metropolitan focus of funding so far, potentially through mobility schemes and small or non-funding calls aimed to gauge interest, connection and interest. This

could include building a network of potential non-academic partners in India and the UK, with

opportunities for them to share their research interests and needs in order to develop more community and society-led research agendas.

- Develop supportive administrative structures and strategies to assist research teams in relation to regulatory processes. A primary focus of this should be on supporting teams to build equitable partnerships within existing legal and regulatory frameworks through shared guidance and templates, as well as fora for information and experience sharing amongst researchers and partners in India and the UK. Gathering information about how teams manage the FCRA through reporting processes could inform the development of new strategies and draft funding documents (e.g. consultancy arrangements) that support projects to navigate the FCRA in as equitable a way as possible.

This report has offered some points for reflection on this current moment of UK-India, in which there are implications and complexities which can be identified in the UK-India research funding landscape due to geopolitical and economic forces as well as national policies which have reset the terms and principles of research funding integrity. This evolving context of UK-India research relations requires a strategic approach for the AHRC to continue its longstanding commitment to support the funding high quality research in India while addressing the very real challenges being faced by researchers who are engaging in research across the two countries and in teams which are seeking to work in partnership.

The AHRC has a crucial role to play in the UK-India research space through a continuation of its record of supporting high quality arts and humanities research while informing and influencing this space carefully and meaningfully. Drawing on the experiences of researchers across both countries and outlining practical actions the AHRC can take to support resilient, ethical, and collaborative UK–India research in the years ahead, the report offers suggestions for how to move towards the goal of enabling and supporting ethical and equitable research.

Scaling activity alone is unlikely to resolve the complexities identified by the cohort. Instead, meaningful progress will come from carefully designed, context-sensitive interventions that prioritise equity, distributed leadership, and sustained relationship-building.

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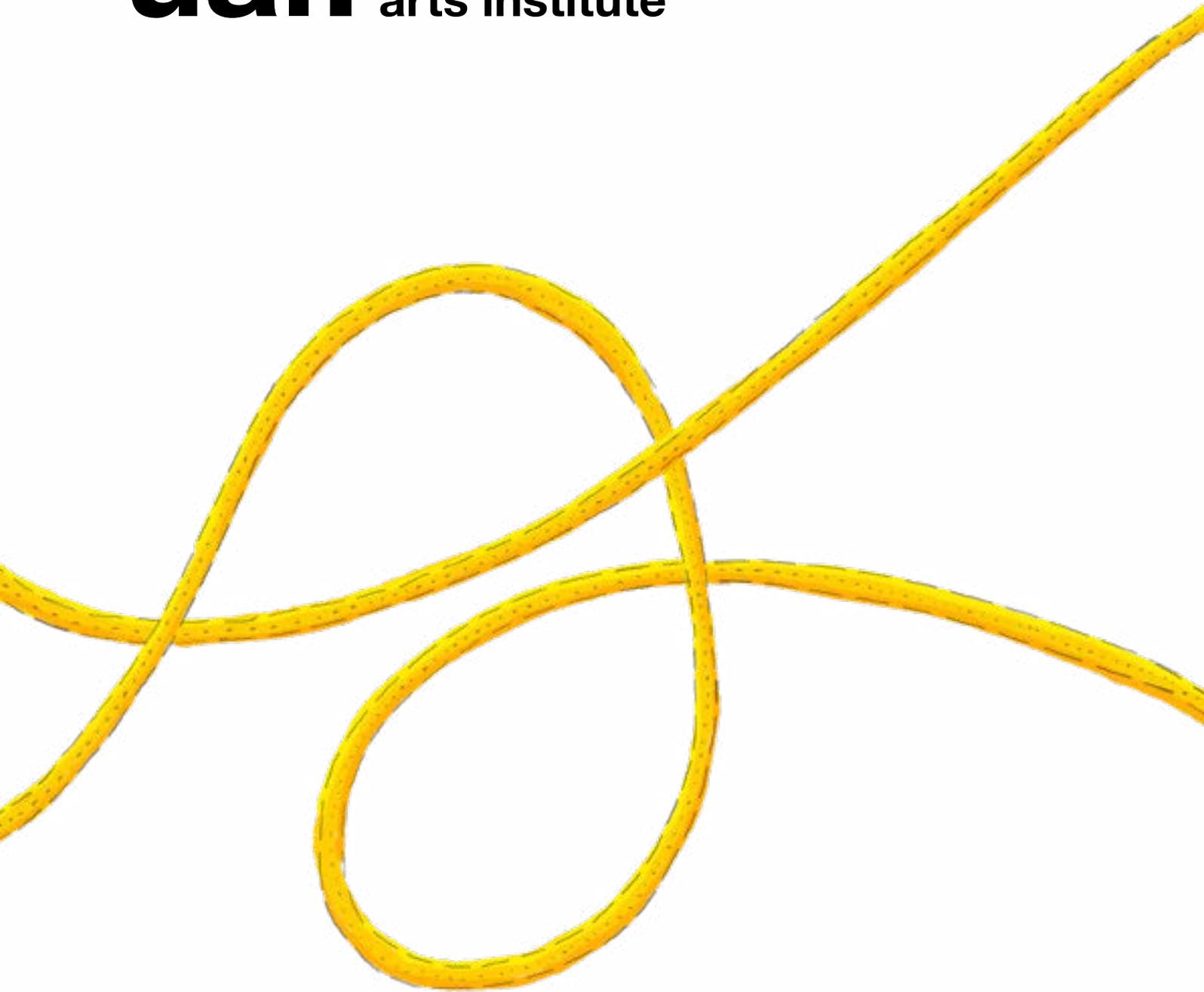
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