

AHRC doctoral focal awards in art history, visual arts and creative practice

Q&A from 21/02/26 webinar

This document covers aspects of the funding opportunity but does not duplicate content from the funding opportunity. Please see the full [funding opportunity](#) and the FAQs before you approach the AHRC for advice.

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1. Timelines, start dates and recruitment

1.1. Is there any flexibility with the October 2026 start date?

AHRC may be able to allow for January starts for the first cohort to allow more time for recruitment. Subsequent cohorts should, however, start in October. AHRC will work with the successful award holders to explore this further.

1.2. Given late outcomes, how will institutions recruit inclusively by October 2026?

AHRC acknowledges the extremely tight timeline and recognises the pressure this will place on institutions. However, it was important for us to offer this opportunity for students to commence in October 2026. We commit to:

- issuing results as quickly as possible (mid- to late May, with official offer letters by June)

- minimising internal processing time
- providing flexibility on start dates where possible
- encouraging use of existing applicant pools for recruitment of the first cohort where appropriate

1.3. When will outcomes be confirmed?

The assessment panel meets in May 2026 and AHRC will notify applicants as soon as possible afterwards, with formal TFS offer letters expected around June.

1.4. Can you confirm that the 8:8:9 ratio for studentship allocation over the 3 cohorts is broadly indicative of an expectation that more studentships will be offered in the final intake, rather than a strict formula?

Correct, AHRC's profile allows for slightly more studentships in the final year, however, the minimum for cohort 1 is 8 studentships. If you were applying for 30 studentships over the whole award, you could use the ratio 9:9:12. Please note that AHRC reserve the right to amend studentship numbers at the award stage.

2. Student eligibility, recruitment models and funding rules

2.1. Should studentships be allocated or competed for?

AHRC prefers studentships to be student-driven, so you may have open competition around a theme or broad priority area. There is the flexibility to be more prescriptive, but there must be the option for the student to have some autonomy over their research. If you are offering Collaborative Doctoral Awards, they are like to be challenge-driven and already well developed with the non-HEI partner. Even so, there should be scope for the student to bring their own ideas to the project.

2.2. Do studentships need to be open to international applicants?

Yes, but international students are capped at 30% per cohort. Please see UKRI's guidance on [EU and international eligibility for UKRI studentships from 2021](#). More detailed guidance will be provided when the awards are made, as there are a range of ways in which the 30% may be achieved. At this stage, please ensure that you are factoring in that the studentships will be open to international students.

2.3. Will AHRC cover leave of absence (maternity/ill health)?

Award holders are expected to manage payments for leaves of absence within the training grant but, UKRI will cover eligible costs if funding isn't available within the award. Please see UKRI [terms and conditions](#) for information on how to manage different types of leave.

2.4. How are shortfalls between the fee UKRI pays and the fees charged by universities handled?

Please see [TGC4.7](#) and [TGC4.7.1](#) which state that students should not be asked to bear these costs. The university could choose to cover these costs from external funds, or the costs could be drawn from the training grant, but you would need to consider the impact that would have on the overall offer for students.

2.5. What are AHRC's Master's requirements?

Those applying for a doctoral studentship should have sufficient experience to enable them to undertake doctoral study. If a student does not have experience of formal postgraduate study, they may be eligible for a studentship if they can demonstrate evidence of sustained experience beyond their undergraduate degree level that is specifically relevant to their proposed research topic and could be considered equivalent to master's. Please see AHRC's [Training Grant Funding Guide](#) for more information.

AHRC no longer supports Master's studentships. However, it is permissible for award holders to build master's elements into doctoral provision, for example, to enable doctoral students to gain knowledge or skills necessary for their doctoral research.

2.6. Can the cohort size be increased via additional studentships, funded through partners or HEI match funding?

Yes, this is permitted. AHRC do not require match funding, and it will not be part of the assessment process.

3. Collaborative Doctoral Awards (CDAs)

3.1. Can a CDA hosting partner count as a project partner?

Yes, project partners can host CDAs, but CDA hosts do not have to be formal project partners in the original application.

3.2. What are the requirements for a CDA host?

CDAs must be co-supervised by the HEI and non-HEI partner, which is the CDA host, so there must be the capacity for the CDA host to provide this. Additionally, the CDA host must be committed to provide access to training, facilities and expertise not available in an academic setting alone. There must be the opportunity for the student to spend time working at the CDA host organisation, this needs to be a minimum of three months and a maximum of half the studentship period.

3.3. How many CDAs can be included?

You can apply for up to six CDAs in total, these should be counted within the number of studentships you are applying for.

3.4. Can CDAs start in any cohort?

Yes, they can start in any cohort.

4. Partnerships and consortia structure

4.1. Do all HEI and non-HEI partners need to be in the same region?

No, they may be co-located or spread across the UK. Both models have pros and cons, but the key requirement is demonstrating that risks and their mitigation have been considered, and applicants have addressed the practical feasibility.

4.2. How will AHRC consider geographic balance?

Portfolio balancing happens after quality ranking. AHRC aims to avoid concentration of both awards in a single region but does not require each consortium to be multi-regional, so applicants should not feel compelled to “force” regional spread.

4.3. What evidence is needed to show coordination with partners?

This is demonstrated through:

- the Partnerships and Governance section of the application
- the project partner statements, outlining mutual contributions
- a clear description of co-design and co-delivery arrangements

4.4. Can partnerships be developed post-award?

Yes, AHRC recognises that not all partnerships will be in place by March and expects partnerships to grow over time.

4.5. Can institutions partner with their own museum or collection?

Yes, it would be permissible to partner with a museum/collection within your own institution, however, we would be looking for a wider range of partners, ideally. We specify in the ‘what we’re looking for’ section:

“Applications will need to demonstrate strong partnerships with stakeholders across the cultural economy (for example, museums, galleries, heritage organisations, creative businesses, and other professional practitioners), and the proposals will need to be co-designed and co-delivered with non-academic partners. This will ensure that the opportunity will speak directly to sector needs and deliver sector benefit. In addition, there must be at least two universities involved but, greater engagement is expected as the programmes need to be inclusive and diverse.”

4.6. Are smaller non-IRO museums treated less favourably than large IRO museums?

No, the panel will assess fitness for purpose, alignment with vision, and ability to deliver, not institutional size or status.

4.7. Can partners be international?

Yes, while those listed in the core team section must be from [eligible](#) HEIs based in the UK, international project partners are permitted.

5. Training and funding architecture

5.1. Is RTSG for individuals and CDF for the whole cohort?

RTSG funding can be used to support individual research costs, such as:

- study visits
- conference attendance
- other training and development opportunities necessary for the student’s primary research
- research costs which are necessary for the student’s primary research (for example, consumables, artist materials, exhibition costs)

The purpose of the CDF is to support innovative training and development activities for cohorts of students.

Both are pooled funds and should not be allocated on a per student basis.

5.2. Can CDF be used for travel between HEIs for training?

Yes, it can be. If CDF has been used to develop and support, for example, an in-person training course or networking events for students, it is reasonable to contribute to the students’ costs to attend,

6. Creative practice and disciplinary scope

6.1. What disciplines are included in creative practice?

Disciplines that AHRC recognises as practice based or practice led research might be around Fine art, Photography, Film, Design, Digital arts, etc.

AHRC typically considers work to be creative practice research when the creative process itself generates new knowledge, the output includes creative work (for example, film, performance, artefact, composition), the research is practice-led or practice-based, not purely theoretical.

6.2. Should applicants address gaps left by previous focal awards?

Previous focal award themes ('creative economy' and 'arts and humanities for a healthy planet, people and place') do not map directly to this theme. Applicants should focus on the aims and objectives of this theme, to strengthen art history, visual arts and creative practice excellence.

7. Expectations for Project Leads and Professional Staff

7.1. What are you looking for in a Project Lead?

Please refer to the 'who can apply' section of the [Funding Finder](#).

7.2. Can professional enabling staff be co-leads?

Yes, professional staff can take co-lead roles where appropriate within the scheme's role categories.

7.3. How might technicians, librarians, archivists or specialists be meaningfully integrated?

Specialists and professional enabling staff can be named contributors to these grants. They could be involved in a number of ways, including:

- delivering training
- participating in cohort activities
- contributing to supervision

In some cases, it may be open to them to apply for studentships, through open competition, if they meet the eligibility criteria. Please refer to the [technician commitment](#) and its application to arts/heritage roles, including librarians and archivists, as outlined by [Research Libraries UK](#).

7.4. Is a change in Project Lead allowed during the grant?

Yes, a formal process exists to request a Project Lead change.

8. Relationship to Hubs and other investments

8.1. What is the expected relationship between Landscape Hubs and Focal Awards?

AHRC encourages but does not require collaborations with other AHRC doctoral investments, if such collaboration would be beneficial. Focal Awards already include cohort development funding to support internal training structures.

8.2. What is the relationship to Future Observatory, CoStar, etc.?

Applicants are encouraged to consider building on existing investments and infrastructure, but it is not obligatory to involve them.