

Decentring Heritage

Towards an Interdisciplinary Research and Teaching Network at Leiden University

Position Paper Summary

Leiden University has the potential to develop into a major player in the field of heritage studies. So far, this potential is hampered by disciplinary fragmentation, institutional pillarisation and invisibility of research initiatives. In this position paper we propose to overcome this by fostering and supporting an open approach to what heritage can entail, encouraging interdisciplinary collaborations that proceed from diverse and complementary understandings of how heritage is relevant, and how it can be researched. By **decentring heritage**, we advance an inclusive understanding of heritage that will strengthen Leiden's academic and societal profile. Such an approach calls for multi- and interdisciplinary perspectives, which are needed to tackle heritage related societal challenges as 'wicked problems'. By involving more than one disciplinary angle, as well as including different (societal) stakeholders, we will also increase our societal impact. To foster such synergies between disciplines, we argue for an initiative that has a strong bottom-up basis, forming **a sustainable network that bundles the involvement of and support for Leiden researchers, strengthening our outward profile**. This can result in new and impactful interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary and collaborative research initiatives, tapping into local, national and European funding and sponsorship as to attract external financial support to make heritage studies in Leiden sustainable and impactful. As such, the network proposed here aligns seamlessly with the strategic plan of Leiden University to promote interdisciplinary, interfaculty research and collaborative projects and thus build more powerful relationships across academic fields, also with partners outside the university. In this position paper we propose to the CvB a rationale for prioritizing heritage as part of the Leiden research agenda and suggest how this can be accomplished.

1. Seeking Synergy

This position paper focuses on the potential for Leiden University to create a sustainable platform for synergising the currently fragmented expertise on heritage, in a bid to create a recognizable profile for internal and external stakeholders that spotlights the highly active, versatile and interdisciplinary field that we house. Leiden University has ample knowledge, materials (e.g. collections) and expertise pertaining to heritage, spread across Departments located at distinct Faculties (e.g. Humanities, Archaeology, Social Sciences, Governance & Global Affairs, Law) and Centres of expertise (e.g. Africa Studies Centre, Leiden University Library, International Institute for Asian Studies), as also present among organisations external to the university, such as the Leiden museums. This diffusion often results in siloed definitions and decreased visibility, narrowing the scope of what heritage can mean and how we can showcase it as a university. By actively seeking synergies in our research community and capitalising on the potential to collaborate and go beyond borders and paradigms, we can build a future profile that is more than the sum of these parts.

2. Decentring Heritage

We as authors - coming to heritage from different backgrounds, roles, disciplines and Faculties - have noticed that scholars and students at Leiden University are increasingly adopting a more open stance to what constitutes heritage. Making, defining but also rejecting heritage, creates diverse contexts for and approaches to the assessment of the past. Such critical assessments of heritage also inevitably prompt questions about the societal groups involved in, or excluded

from, 'making' heritage and the challenges this creates. This multifaceted understanding of heritage-oriented research resonates with a growing need identified in society and among researchers, as also recognised by funding bodies such as NWO, in the Dutch Research Agenda (NWA) and the EU. To build on this increasingly open approach to heritage and unleash Leiden's potential in heritage research and teaching, we need an infrastructure that facilitates the replacement of siloed and dispersed approaches to heritage by one that is radically interdisciplinary, decentred and networked. This necessarily includes both academics as well as other stakeholders (e.g. museums, NGOs, local communities), widening the scope of what heritage can mean in different contexts. Leiden University is exceptionally well positioned to adopt this approach, given the great diversity and large number of academics, collections and archives among which synergy can be sought, both in research and teaching. Doing so can further strengthen an interdisciplinary and collaborative research culture at our university, capitalizing and building on the existing research capacity and expertise, helping to put Leiden on the European and global map as a leading university when it comes to state-of-the-art decentred approaches to heritage.

3. Redefining and Repositioning Heritage

As an angle of enquiry Heritage is inherently interdisciplinary. Some strong interdisciplinary initiatives have been developed over the last years to develop heritage as a research theme for Leiden (Leiden oriented: Stimuleringsgebied Museums, Collections & Society; the Heritage Hub; LDE-based: the LDE Centre for Global Heritage and Development; Nationally oriented: Sectorplan SSH label 'Heritage'). A number of these initiatives now lie dormant, some have ceased to exist, others are still ongoing and may materialize in the near future. All serving different organisational bodies and having different objectives (and lifespans due to temporal funding), they have taught us a lot about our strengths, but also about what could be improved. They have brought us newly forged connections between researchers and have at times been the catalyst for interfaculty collaborations, publications and events. But resonating with the observation made above about the fragmentation of heritage research at the university, they tend to largely adapt to old structures (e.g. mainly focussing on collections or museums or on internal funding for specific research groups), excluding other faculties and disciplines from the conversation and at times forming parallel worlds instead of being in dialogue with each other. In other words: out of necessity and lack of possibilities they were and are not part of an overarching, synergizing structure that could bring them together and let them benefit from their differences and similarities in topics and needs as to become more sustainable and transparent.

Also, and related to this, since these initiatives were mostly formulated by management and top-down implemented, researchers, students and support staff did and do not experience ownership. Lacking the involvement of a broad range of stakeholders within the university, these initiatives could often not be kept afloat. Lessons learned for any new initiatives to be more sustainable include

- (a) actively incentivising the academic community and a broader group of internal stakeholders to participate, take ownership and shape our heritage profile together;**
- (b) ensure the buy-in of all relevant faculties, accommodating the by and large decentralised governance structure of Leiden University;**
- (c) actively seeking alignment with related strategic agendas, such as the Leiden 'profielingsgebieden', The Leiden University Strategic Plan, LDE, Una Europa;**
- (d) identifying short-term and long-term pathways aimed at financial sustainability involving research, outreach and teaching.**

4. Decentring Heritage at Leiden: A Network

Leiden researchers do not operate in isolation, but are all embedded in local, national and global contexts. Yet within the university, our knowledge and expertise are still too dispersed, lack visibility and many of us tend to operate in relative isolation. We propose **the establishment of a bottom-up heritage initiative, which can function as a breeding ground and knowledge base for all researchers.**

We see this network as a flexible overarching structure for all involved in heritage research that can forge more lasting or more short-term connections (e.g. combining forces of UNA and LDE for a workshop, sharing dates of heritage events in different faculties) and that is there to facilitate, broker and support heritage research that can shift and grow according to the needs and objectives of internal and external partners. At the same time, such a network cannot be successful without **firm (top-down)** support from the CvB, as well as the Faculty boards. The network can thus become an interdisciplinary ecosystem for heritage studies and teaching that stems from, is grounded in, and carried by our Leiden academic community and can foster meaningful connections with external academic and societal partners. Such a cultural heritage network needs to stem from within our community of researchers, students and support staff and will create leverage for the diverse interdisciplinary research capacities and knowledge that already exist as well as grow new initiatives.

The aim of the proposed **Network for Decentred Heritage at Leiden** is to create a collaborative interdisciplinary framework and (hybrid) space to facilitate knowledge exchange and foster partnerships, both with reference to research and education. **The proposed network can (a) make a substantial contribution to consolidate and bring together the diverse knowledge and expertise of researchers working on heritage in Leiden University, connect this to external parties (e.g. museums, university partners, NGOs, funding bodies), and make it visible and findable for external stakeholders. We also hope that (b) the network can contribute to the development of a consolidated heritage profile for Leiden University, which creates connections between its academic community, and cooperative engagements such as LDE and Una Europa which Leiden is involved in. And (c) the network can be a best practice and pilot-study for other Leiden strategic areas or profiles.**

5. What We Can Achieve in the Short-Term

(a) Our primary short-term goal is to create and grow a coalition of the willing, of which this paper is already a first manifestation. We see this as a bottom-up process, with a low threshold to start with, aiming at connecting researchers and making them aware that they work on cultural heritage or related themes (e.g. through Open Mic events that some of us are already organizing). (b) We will actively seek the buy-in from the CvB, and from relevant Leiden Faculty and Institute boards, actively looking for integration of existing strategic agendas at varying levels of governance.¹ (c) Shaping a network, we intend to create bespoke Leiden U. webpages, linked to existing and currently being redeveloped theme pages, which connect relevant scholars and allows for the sharing and showcasing of projects and opportunities. Some of the authors (Lammes, de Maaker, Rodrigues) have already done some preliminary scoping and design thinking on this proposed web-based platform. This web-based platform is on the one hand aimed at enabling and building the network internally and is on the other hand aimed at

¹ Possible interfaculty and interdisciplinary themes may include: Cultural Heritage & Social Justice (decolonization, restitution etc.); Cultural Heritage in the context of digital transition (AI, digital preservation etc.); Cultural Heritage & Resilience (contexts of migration, climate change and conflict); Cultural Heritage & Health and Wellbeing (context of mental health/community resilience and practices), Cultural Heritage & Sustainability (World Heritage creation, indigenous knowledge; landscape conservation).

brokering contacts with external parties. The platform can include interactive tools, allowing for the mapping and visualization of heritage-oriented research at Leiden, also making links visible with regional, national and international stakeholders. (d) The network will seek to map and bundle approaches to heritage, including (among others) the Leiden 'profileringsgebieden', LDE (Programme for Global Heritage and Development); Una Europa (the SSC-CH; Una-Her-Doc; the Joint Centre for Advanced Research) as well as externally funded research projects (e.g. NWO, ERC). (e) The network will facilitate the development of a support structure that actively incentivises interdisciplinary collaboration, and encourage collaborative, interdisciplinary grant applications including social partners. Opportunities for such applications include calls of the NWO NWA ORC (Living History route), calls within the Cultural Heritage destination of Horizon Europe Cluster 2 Culture, Creativity & Society; but also, other Leiden partners such as the Asian Development Bank.

6. What We Want to Achieve in the Longer Run

(a) In addition to, and expanding on the aims listed under header 5, we aim to consolidate the network in a form that is recognisable for outside stakeholders, allowing for integration with the broader heritage environment in Leiden (such as the museums). This can create space for mutual exchange of knowledge and collaboration inside and outside Leiden University, allowing for recognition at the national, European and global level.

(b) Encourage and support research driven academic education, also in collaborative national, European and international contexts.

(c) Seek the development of an interfaculty hub for Decentred Heritage Studies, who meet regularly to align and synergize work, organize events etc. with the commitment of relevant Faculties/ Departments.

(d) Ensure financial sustainability of the network in part by having earning power from (1) internal funding: through sharing premiums of promotions, taking a percentage of the overhead from related funded projects, teaching ECs (internships) and in kind buy ins from different faculties; (2) by seeking external and third party fundings through partnerships and sponsorships.

7. Recommendations

- 1) Create a taskforce with the backing and endorsement of the CvB to:
 - a) Bring heritage initiatives together and exchange information (the first 'node' in the network);
 - b) Develop a prototype for a web-based platform together with a designer/design thinker;
 - c) Develop a long term strategy for acquiring external funding: a business case encompassing different scenarios.
- 2) See this as a pilot/test-case for:
 - a) How other interfaculty research initiatives could be improved and sustained;
 - b) How our website could be updated as a whole (e.g. see the websites of the [KU Leuven](#) or of [MIT](#)) and/or how we can create an adjacent/parallel Leiden platform for external stakeholders (e.g. [OpenResearchAmsterdam](#)).
- 3) Make a SWOT analysis of how the governance structure of Leiden University has strengths, weaknesses, threats and opportunities when it comes to interfaculty initiatives for research (and teaching), learning from this and other initiatives.

- 4) Engage with different groups at the university when thinking this through further: a coalition of the willing consisting of researchers at different career stages, support staff, deans, students, etc.
- 5) Adopt a visible and attractive Leiden model and/or create more incentives (e.g. Leiden Ventures/kickstarts) helping this network and other initiatives to create their own earning power within the university (also through shared Intellectual Property) and thus become sustainable.
- 6) Stop further fragmentation to make the university more lean, efficient and transparent.

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Acknowledgement

This position paper has been written with the support of a Leiden KIEM grant, as well as the support of the Leiden Una Europa team. We would like to thank Anna Loh for her invaluable contributions to the design thinking process and the conceptualisation of the Open Mic events.



Given the large turnout of attendees from over 10 departments/institutes, our first Open Mic clearly catered to a felt need for new interdisciplinary connections among Leiden heritage researchers (February 6, 2025).