

# Towards a national research agenda for cultural heritage (NRACH)

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## **Introduction**

The purpose of a National Research Agenda for Cultural Heritage (NRACH) is to advance knowledge, improve the mapping cultural heritage assets and their conservation and protection requirements, and to support the creation of innovative experiences and heritage services. Such an agenda should outline priority areas of research, new directions of thought and practice, and the enhancement of knowledge-based philosophy of heritage management. It should serve as a factor of capacity-building of a sector whose contribution to the national economy and to society is central.

A National Research Agenda for Cultural Heritage should contribute to the sustainable use of Malta's unique non-renewable cultural heritage resources which for centuries have shaped our identity and our cultural environment. Cultural heritage resources are for Malta singular assets: they give substance to the country's appearance, aesthetics and viability of place. The fact that Malta's cultural heritage has for decades experienced extensive changes, loss and deterioration as a result of development and use makes a national research agenda more important.

Equally important is the prospect of research aimed at expanding knowledge and awareness of the cultural heritage in all its aspects. It is through research that cultural heritage

resources are valorised, identified and made accessible to the public. It is through research and publication that knowledge of cultural heritage assets is transmitted to future generations.

An NRACH will contribute to a broader appreciation of the multi-value nature of heritage resources and the inherent tension that this often creates in the use of heritage resources. Economically, cultural heritage has become one of the pillars of tourism marketing: the islands' heritage is unique and of international renown, and, due to its geographic concentration, is easily accessible to visitors. Equally, Malta's cultural heritage possess several non-economic values that have shaped the country's way of life: religious cultural heritage is present in parishes; cultural and natural landscapes provide environments for social development and life-styles; local councils seek cultural landmarks as identifiers; national monuments and collections, historic architecture and fortifications provide a cultural backdrop that gives Malta and Gozo their charm, uniqueness and a certain quality of life.

An NRACH contribute to understand how change affects cultural heritage. Because of their nature and geographic circumstances, and because of their attractiveness, Malta's cultural heritage resources experience several changes, pressures and threats. Some of these factors are more rapid than others. Conservation and preservation have become issues of paramount importance. The potential economic use of cultural heritage has attracted investment and a growing tendency towards heritage development schemes. Building and construction development across the island continues to put pressure on many valuable heritage resources in both rural and urban environments.

Whether benign or destructive, factors of change are the most critical for cultural heritage assets. It is change through use, over-restoration, loss to destruction, or a lack of awareness that is most harmful to cultural heritage assets. Unlike several elements of natural resources, cultural heritage assets are non-renewable. Their value and authenticity are inherent in their existence. Their use, exploitation and even restoration are therefore matters of utmost priority along with their protection.

### **NRACH as public policy**

The need for a NRACH was included in the National Strategy for Cultural Heritage (2006). It follows from a pressing need for there to be a standing dialogue on national research interests, among specialists and institutions. The aim of a NRACH is not to streamline or narrow the scope of research: there is ample space for private and individual pursuits. However there is a need for indentifying issues that would benefit from a concerted

approach and from a pooling of resources. The NRACH should therefore act as a factor of cooperation in knowledge creation. A National Research Agenda for Cultural Heritage should both transcend and include individual research goals, and create a special framework of commonly accepted priorities as matters of public policy.

A NRACH should therefore be viewed as an instrument of public policy in a very broad sense. As an instrument of public policy a NRACH should attract and guide government and private research funding, provide and support avenues of research for individuals, specialists and institutions, and establish long-term objectives of a national concern and of public interest. Public policy guides the use and care of public resources. In this, issues of protection and conservation are paramount, but require guiding strategies which can only be built on knowledge and continual research.

At the same time, a well-designed NRACH should also have an inbuilt mechanism to sustain and generate a diversity of research initiatives in the field of cultural heritage without becoming limited in its scope and vitality.

It is as an instrument of public policy that a NRACH can form part of state and other funding programmes.

### **Research potential**

Malta's cultural heritage sector lacks a national approach to research. Traditionally, researchers in the field have been individuals, students or foreign institutions missions. Such research has therefore leaned towards more personal goals, thus subjecting national needs to the availability of individual researchers. It is taking Maltese institutions far too long to establish strong research programmes in the field of cultural heritage, an area that is so vital to our economy and our cultural identity. In matters of national concern, research in the field of cultural heritage lacks a sense of sustainability and the necessary operational frameworks.

The benefits of a NRACH are several. Certain issues of national concern require solutions whose scale are well beyond the research means of an individual scholar. In addition, a number of heritage research concerns also require a multi-disciplinary approaches, for which resources are found in different institutions. In addition, there are a number of operational sectors, such as monitoring of resources, the establishment of inventories, developing heritage management capacity at Local Council level, which depend on knowledge-based solutions which can only be devised as a result of medium to long-term research.

Like any other sector, Malta's cultural heritage sector is greatly influenced by external factors, as well as by economic realities and public perceptions. Responses to such factors require new directions in terms of operations and policies, and in terms of new management solutions.

### **Focus Areas**

The NRACH should address a number of agreed focus areas established through peer review and stakeholder recommendations. The focus areas and their effectiveness depend on policy and scientific debates, and review. The selection of focus areas will be stakeholder based and cover critical areas of Malta's cultural heritage sector. Focus areas will be placed in an agreed framework (grouped, ranked in terms of importance and priorities, as well as in terms of research project duration and expected results, inter-relations, other attributes).

Focus areas should address the special needs of Malta's cultural heritage sector, some requiring urgent attention, others addressing a consistent long-term framework. The success and research viability of each focus area will depend on contribution to knowledge, improving the existing state of knowledge, mapping of existing resources, filling of knowledge gaps, etc,

Once identified, focus areas will provide frameworks within which research can be assessed and measured. Focus areas can be linked and integrated into other strategic interests of the cultural heritage sector, in addition to being reflected in the State of the Heritage reporting.

### **Institutional participation**

The NRACH will provide an opportunity for government bodies, the University of Malta and other teaching institutions, as well as NGOs and private researchers to participate in a unified research framework. In this regard the objective of the NRACH is to make qualitative progress in intra-institutional cooperation across the humanities, sciences and public governance.

In combining certain research efforts, Malta will benefit from a rationalisation of resources. Being a small island state with limited resources, it becomes even more imperative for the country to seek common research platforms. Such frameworks based on team / collaborative research can in turn benefit from large-scale funding programmes.

## **Scientific committee**

Though initiated by the Superintendence of Cultural Heritage as indicated in the Cultural Heritage Strategy (2006), it is envisaged that the NARCH would be administered and directed by a scientific committee established for the purpose.

The scientific committee will:

Create a research strategy of national priorities;

Evaluate research needs;

Establish focus areas;

Establish an academic and scientific framework to oversee research needs, focus areas, research proposals, and related matters;

Establish funding and resource framework with auditing;

Establish a review process to assess the NARCH, focus areas and their currency, research proposals.

## **Reporting**

The Scientific Committee (NRACH) will publish an annual report. The Committee will also refer the NRACH strategy and business to the Minister and other relevant authorities, especially research partners.

## **Envisaged preliminary business of Scientific Committee**

Committee appointment;

Secretary appointment;

Scientific committee to establish and regulate business;

Scientific Committee to draw up strategy and priority research focus areas through public consultation process;

Establishment of business plan;