

## NEWS

## UCL Qatar and the Institute of Archaeology

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**What is UCL doing in Qatar?**

This question still comes up quite often, three years after we were first established as an academic department of UCL. And it is important to remind ourselves occasionally why we chose to establish this campus in the first place. There are many reasons one can mention, depending on one's perspective and priorities. Here I would like to highlight a few which are of particular importance and validity, and are at the core of our daily operations.

***Providing educational opportunities.***

This is something that UCL has stood for since its very beginning, and which is still just as relevant even in this day and age. Participation rates in Higher Education are very high across Europe and other developed countries, but drop off steeply as soon as one looks beyond this limited circle of nations – not for lack of talent, but for lack of opportunity. Through Qatar Foundation and a wide range of initiatives, Qatar is supporting education both through top-down initiatives (for instance through the annual World Innovation Summit for Education, or its Education City in Doha, of which UCL Qatar is a part), as well as at the grass roots level through its overseas development arm, Reach Out to Asia, or global initiatives such as Educate a Child and Education Above All. UCL Qatar plays its own unique role within

this operation, promoting research-led and critical education of the highest quality across the Cultural Heritage sector. Yes – our largest group of students by nationality are Qatari – and they are not known for being particularly disadvantaged economically. However, access to HE at the level offered by UCL is open only to those Qatari students whose families allow their children to study abroad, and these are still predominantly the sons (according to recent statistics, three-quarters of all Qatari students abroad are male, while more than three-quarters of Qatari students at UCL Qatar are female). In addition, the majority of our students are non-Qatari, with the best being in receipt of stipends or tuition fee support from Qatar Foundation, through UCL Qatar. This support is highly competitive, and the academic quality of our students is accordingly very high. Many come to UCL only with their *potential* for outstanding performance, a potential which we often first need to unlock through programmes such as the Diploma in Academic Research and Methods. Seeing their minds develop and their *potential* transforming into *actual performance* is one of the most satisfying experiences I have as part of my own UCL Qatar experience, and I am tremendously grateful to our teaching fellows and lecturers for making this happen. This is where UCL's education becomes truly transformational for people's lives, without exaggeration and hype.

**Research.** For many years, the Institute had identified Islamic Archaeology as a major

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*lacuna* in its global coverage, and despite a strong tradition in Middle Eastern archaeology, the Institute was limited by many factors in its ability to conduct fieldwork and other research in the wider region. And of course, being at the forefront of research is top priority for UCL as one of the World's leading universities. I am proud therefore to say that in its very brief history, UCL Qatar has already established itself as a top-flight research department in the region, demonstrating intellectual excellence; and that much of that research is done in close cooperation with the Institute of Archaeology. This is visible both in terms of metrics such as publications (including 2 books, 15 book chapters, and 9 peer-reviewed journal articles in 2013 alone), research grants (currently 3 major grants worth about US\$3M, with three further large grants starting this autumn), and research students; and the vibrancy of our department and the frequency with which we are being approached with invitations for co-operations, requests for advice, or applications for mini-sabbaticals in Doha. Our research is academically exciting and internationally leading – of course.

But as importantly, we take **community outreach** very seriously as part of our research, not only creating knowledge, but making it relevant for, and sharing it with, our partners outside the academy. This is probably best illustrated by the recent award of a Beacon Bursary to Dr Jane Humphris for her exemplary work in Sudan. Research cannot be an end in itself, but needs to serve all of society. For us, this means beginning with those people who live right next to the archaeology there, and whose lives are affected by it in all sorts of ways: more often seen as a hindrance for their ways to gain a livelihood than as an abstract good called 'cultural heritage'. In this sense UCL Qatar is establishing new approaches to working with the communities in Sudan, as our current focus overseas, as well as reaching out to marginalised communities in Doha. Our

community outreach programme in Doha will be a topic of next year's report; suffice it to say here that we have a dedicated outreach officer whose work is fully integrated into our other activities, and who includes our staff and students in relevant activities.

**Shaping a new profession.** This is probably the most ambitious and most long-term of our aims. For the last few hundred years, the way museums are run has been dominated by a European tradition of collecting, conserving, categorising and explaining things. How most museums work therefore is directly rooted in this history, which served first a curious (often aristocratic) elite, and later a developing upper middle class. Only over the last half century or so has there been a conscious drive to make museums more inclusive and relevant for all of society. UCL, as the UK university with the most nationally recognised museums, plays a significant role in this. For the last decade or two, however, the focus of new museum developments has shifted away from Europe and North America to Asia and the Gulf. The needs of society in these areas for museums are very different from the traditional roles museums play in the West. We cannot simply take the handbook of the National Trust, or the best practice of the Victoria and Albert Museum, and apply it to museums in China or Qatar. Instead, we aim to work with the current and future cultural heritage professionals in the wider Gulf region to develop a mind-set and professional practices that are relevant and meaningful for the complex and rapidly changing social context here. We do not have a blue print as to how this new profession will look – but we can help the people of the region to develop it for themselves, rooted in their own diverse cultural backgrounds and visions of their pasts, and building their dreams for the future. We know we can do it – UCL has been leading in establishing new professions throughout its history. We give the leaders of tomorrow our best support to develop their critical capacities, free of the constraints of narrow disciplinary thinking



**Fig. 1:** HH, Sheikhha Mozah bint Nasser Al Missned, Chairperson of Qatar Foundation (centre), Prince Andrew, Duke of York and Professor Sir Malcolm Grant, then Provost of UCL, were amongst the dignitaries in attendance at the formal inauguration of UCL Qatar.

and cultural stereotypes, to build open and inclusive minds based on academic excellence, mutual respect and shared values, and prepare them for taking responsibility for their own life-long learning, being engaged with the wider world and committed to changing it for the better. In short, we are giving our students a true UCL education; the rest is for them to do.

### **UCL Qatar's formal Opening Ceremony**

The first highlight of the academic year was the formal inauguration of UCL Qatar on 10 September 2013, attended by HH Sheikhha Mozah bint Nasser Al Missned, the Chairperson of Qatar Foundation, HH Sheikhha Mayassa bint Hamad Al Thani, Chairperson of Qatar Museums, HH Prince Andrew, the Duke of York and HE Michael O'Neill, the British Ambassador to the State of Qatar, Professor Sir Malcolm Grant, President and Provost of UCL, HE Dr Abdulla al Thani, President of Hamad bin Khalifa University, and more than one hundred invited guests (**Fig. 1**). The event took place at the Qatar National Convention Centre and featured a series of speeches and announcements. UCL Communications aired an

inspiring film featuring a wide range of our students and partners, and our staff provided guided tours for visitors showcasing our labs, exhibition and teaching spaces. It was a bold public statement that UCL has arrived at Doha, fully operational and committed to working in partnership with our Qatari sponsors to serve as a bridge between the Arab and Islamic worlds and the West, promoting discussions about cultural heritage and the relationship between the past and the present, and about national and individual identities. Less glamorous, but academically much more significant for us was the first meeting of the **UCL Qatar Board of Examiners** shortly after the opening event. The board recommended that the students in the MSc in Conservation Studies and the MA in the Archaeology of the Arab and Islamic World should progress into their second year of studies, and recommended award of degrees to the first cohort of students in the MA in Museum Studies. Having examined the work of our students and considered the various handbooks, feedback given to students, and other relevant literature the three external examiners then provided valuable feedback to the department about how we can further improve the delivery of our teaching and the examination of our students. For us, this marked the completion of the first full circle of student achievement, marking the coming of age of UCL Qatar as an academic department. It was most satisfying then to see, half a year later in early May 2014, the first group of our former students participate in Hamad bin Khalifa University's Convocation Ceremony (**Fig. 2**); nearly all of them by that time were already in relevant employment either at Qatar Museums or elsewhere in the country, changing from students to colleagues and fulfilling our mission to stimulate understanding and knowledge about cultural heritage among the people of Qatar and the wider region.

UCL Qatar completed the academic year 2013/14 with 75 students across five



**Fig. 2:** UCL Qatar participating in Hamad bin Khalifa University's Convocation Ceremony.

different postgraduate programmes, nearly 40 staff including several externally-funded

research fellows, confident in its desire to establish itself as a world-class research-led higher education institution at the centre of the Arab and Islamic worlds, promoting learning and research, and ready to take on the challenges of the future.

#### Further information

Film of the UCLQ opening ceremony: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ghnoGKip5e0>

UCL Museums: <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/museums>

UCLQ Postgraduate programmes: <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/qatar/study>

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