Proposal for Ruskin Centre for Culture, Landscape and Environment

Summary

This paper proposes the creation of a new University Research Centre, the Ruskin Centre for Culture, Landscape and Environment (RCCLE). The creation of this new University Research Centre will mark a considerable expansion of the current research focus of the Ruskin Library and Research Centre (RLRC), providing a home and support platform for a number of areas of FASS research expertise while also making links across other Faculties and beyond the University. RCCLE will aim to maximise our reputation for Arts and Humanities led research, facilitate cross-disciplinary funding bids and contribute to the University’s Engagement strategy. The Centre will be led by a full-time Director.

This proposal was discussed and unanimously supported by FASS PRC on 25 January 2017 and by University Research Committee on 3 February 2017.

Context

This proposal draws on recommendations made by a working group established by Professor Simon Guy, Dean of FASS, to explore links between the academic activity of the Ruskin Library and Research Centre and that undertaken within Departments, Research Centres and Institutes at Lancaster University. Chaired by Professor Simon Bainbridge, ADR for FASS, the working group was asked to develop a proposal that would connect, integrate and develop cognate research. The working group was constituted to include members from across the University, with representation from LUMS and FST as well as FASS (for Membership, see appendix). The working group’s report, out of which the current proposal springs, has been discussed and supported by the Ruskin Foundation and the Ruskin Library Board.

Currently, the Ruskin Library and Research Centre undertakes a number of academic activities, in addition to the fulfilment of the Ruskin Library’s curatorial responsibilities. These activities include:

- research projects (past projects include: ‘John Ruskin, Cultural Travel and Popular Access’, an electronic version of the Venice Notebooks, Ruskinian Theatre)
- arrangement of Ruskin Seminars, lectures (including the Mikimoto Memorial Ruskin Lecture) and other occasional events
- publication of Ruskin Review and Bulletin (twice yearly)
- liaison with scholars and readers (e.g. students under the Stones of Venice bursaries)
- academic support for Departments (Art, ECW, History, LUMS)

This proposal addresses the academic research centre elements of the current RLRC, rather than the curatorial responsibilities of the Ruskin Library, which are expressed in the bailment of the Whitehouse Collection and expected of an Accredited Museum. The presence and continued use of the collection would remain a distinctive feature of the Centre, providing differentiation from, and an advantage over, many other Research Centres which have a more virtual identity.

**Ruskin Centre for Culture, Landscape and Environment**

As an interdisciplinary and socially-committed critic and thinker, John Ruskin offers an inspiration model for connecting and developing much of the research undertaken at Lancaster University. A Victorian polymath and visionary, Ruskin was an art critic, social reformer and educator; George Eliot wrote that ‘I venerate him as one of the great teachers of the day’. A wide-ranging thinker, engaged with science as well as art, Ruskin stressed the importance of aesthetics and the careful study of the natural world, emphasising their links to political, economic and social concerns.

The creation of the Ruskin Centre for Culture, Landscape and Environment would significantly expand the current research strategy of the Ruskin Centre, widening the focus from the writer’s own work to also consider key Ruskinian areas of interest in which Lancaster already has significant expertise (outlined in more detail below). The Centre would provide a focus for critical, reflective and cultural studies on the nature of human existence within environment, and the place of the landscape in artistic and cultural traditions. It would create a means of bringing together a range of interconnected research interests across FASS (and the wider university) in areas where there is also significant potential for funded, interdisciplinary research and impact. It would engage the research interest of many FASS Departments, while also creating links with LEC, LUMS, FST and FHM. While the identified research topics can be addressed in global terms, linking to the designated funding for ‘Global Challenges’, they also play to Lancaster’s location in the
North West and to the agendas of Lancaster Regional Heritage Centre, the Lake District World Heritage Bid, the N8 and the ‘Northern Powerhouse’.

The following provides a list of Ruskinian research areas that are already strong at Lancaster University and that could be developed through the creation of the RCCLE. It identifies individuals within the University whose work could contribute to the RCCLE and external organisations with which there are already established links. The aim of bringing these areas together would be to create an interdisciplinary Research Centre with critical mass that is greater than the sum of its parts and has significant potential for undertaking research projects of different sizes.:

Landscape: There is considerable work in History, ECW, LICA and existing Research Centres (such as the Wordsworth Centre) on ‘Landscape’, a category in which we include textual and visual representations. The focus plays to our location in the North West and our research in the area as well as to the work of the Regional Heritage Centre. Research could address the global as well as the local. The Whitehouse Collection has significant holdings of Ruskin’s own landscape art.

Environment: The Ruskin Centre has an established history here, going back to its first major publication, Michael Wheeler’s book *Ruskin and the Environment* (1995). Current scholarship, including that of Andrew Tate in ECW, continues to use Ruskin to address environmental issues. However we are conceiving research in this area to address a much wider remit, covering work on both the natural and the built environment, the rural and the urban (an area in which the University has recently invested through its anniversary posts). Lancaster University has a number of leading researchers in the area of the built environment, including Rachel Cooper and Nick Dunn in LICA and Simon Guy in the Faculty. There is also considerable ongoing research into the natural environment and its representation, particularly in ECW, History and LICA. The University already has well established partnerships with many external organisations in this area. The possibility of interdisciplinary projects with LEC is very exciting and might include areas such as landscape use, planning and flooding prevention. Professor Phil Haygarth, a soil scientist from LEC, was a member of the working party. Ruskin’s work can also be connected to the question of the Anthropocene (the subject of a recent series of seminars in Sociology), and the role that art and culture might play in helping us mitigate or come to terms with it. This would link Ruskin’s work on
storm-clouds to questions of man-made climate change, and would be of interest to many parts of the university, such as Sociology and LEC. Connections could be made fruitfully between Ruskin’s ideas and those of Bruno Latour, and others concerned with the relation between science and culture.

**Heritage:** The focus on ‘Landscape and Environment’ links to the issue of Heritage and the work of the Regional Heritage Centre. This is an area of significant funding opportunity (e.g. the subject of a recent N8 bid in which Lancaster was a partner). Lancaster has extremely strong links to major Heritage sites in the NW, most obviously Brantwood but also Dove Cottage. The link between RCCLE and RHC could become very strong, with the latter involved in much of the knowledge exchange and impact work. As an Accredited Museum, the Ruskin Library is strongly connected to other museums.

**Art:** ‘Landscape and Environment’ offers a strong link to LICA’s work in the area of Art which again brings with it some very strong external partnership, such as Grizedale Arts, Coniston Institute and the Ruskin Museum. LICA’s Charlie Gere is Chair of the Trustees of Grizedale Arts in the Lake District, who are attempting to put Ruskinian ideals about the usefulness of art into practice in conjunction with the Coniston Institute and the Ruskin Museum in Coniston. The vision statement for The Coniston Partnership is as follows: ‘The Coniston Partnership between Grizedale Arts, the Coniston Institute and the Ruskin Museum offers a radical vision of how the arts, culture and education can become a vital part of a community’s life. Inspired by the ideas of John Ruskin and others involved in the Arts and Crafts movement, the Partnership aims to rethink the relation between culture and community, and to revitalise the almost forgotten notion that the arts should be an organic part of everyday life, that everyone can enjoy, and in which all can participate. Above all the Partnership returns to the Ruskinian idea that the arts should be useful. The recent triumph of the architectural group Assemble’s work with a local community in winning the Turner Prize, suggests that this is a timely idea. Grizedale Arts has been a pioneer in developing this notion of useful art, and the Partnership is already a flourishing example of how it can work. Though it may be inspired by figures from the past, the work of the Partnership can be seen as a template for how art can remain relevant, especially in rural communities, in the future.’

Brantwood has a programme of regular exhibitions. Individuals with relevant research expertise in this area include Gerry Davies, Sarah Casey, Beth Harland, Charlie Gere, Emma Rose. The RCCLE could link more fully to the new ‘Lancaster Arts’.
**Design:** Design is a key component of the lived environment and Ruskin’s interest in design is reflected in much work undertaken in LICA, such as that of Stuart Walker, a Trustee of the Ruskin Foundation who staged an exhibition ‘Design for Life’ at Brantwood. The broader conception of design in LICA, such as of Leon Cruikshank, shares an agenda with Ruskin in terms of reconceiving the role of the intellectual/academic as someone engaged with the rest of society.

**Wellbeing and Work:** there are potential links with FHM, LUMS and the Work Foundation through examination of the wellbeing elements of the environment, both natural and built. Ruskin’s interest in the role of work and the working environment provides a potential starting point for projects with LUMS. A constant stream running through Ruskin’s thinking concerns the nature of work and the working environment, which he often connects to the question of the production of ‘true’ works of art. Ruskin’s preoccupation with work and its relationship to the production (for which we can read ‘creation’) of cultural values is perhaps one of the most interesting avenues for accessing his broader critique of modernity as an epoch. His commentaries touch upon themes that have remained central to the thematic of work ever since: the relationship between work and freedom, between work and social hierarchies, between work and the worth of human life in the context of the industrial division of labour, between work and the modern politics and economics of value.

Connections between scholars of Ruskin, social scientists, academics in LUMS (Bogdan Costea, Laurence Hemming, Martin Brigham), scholars in politics and philosophy, as well as in arts, are possible at Lancaster because Ruskin himself makes them explicit throughout his oeuvre. Collaboration with The Work Foundation may also be possible.

**Digital Humanities and Corpus Linguistics:** Lancaster University has an excellent reputation for pioneering innovative approaches to issues of ‘Landscape and Environment’, most obviously in the work led by Ian Gregory focused on the Lake District that draws on GIS and Corpus Linguistics. This has gained significant funding and is clearly an area of potential for further major projects. Other relevant ongoing plans include Sally Bushell’s Lakescraft project and ‘Virtual Ruskin’, a Ruskin Foundation project.

**Interdisciplinarity and the value of the arts, humanities and social sciences:** Ruskin provides an excellent figurehead for interdisciplinary work as well as exemplifying the values of the arts humanities and social sciences for the wider world. There are strong potential synergies
with other interdisciplinary groups such as the AHRC funded ‘The Author and the World’ project and the Institute for Social Futures.

The above list gives an indication of Ruskinian areas of interest in which Lancaster University already has considerable expertise and which would be strengthened by the creation of the RCCLE. There are, of course, many other areas of research at Lancaster that address a Ruskinian agenda, such as the work of Chris May and Gavin Hyman in PPR on political economy and theology, respectively.

**Staffing**

The RCCLE will be led by an academic Director, supported by an administrator or clearly defined administrative resource. These posts will be in addition to those required to fulfil the curatorial responsibilities of the Ruskin Library. The Director, who may be an external appointment, will be appointed to an academic Department and will serve a five year term as Director (with the possibility of renewal), during which time they will be seconded from their Department on a full-time basis. Administrative support could be provided on a part-time basis (cf. the Regional Heritage Centre Administrator), but would need the capacity to act in a coordinating role for the various strands of activity and support for making bids for funding. A start-up budget, including funding for launch, research seminars and a conference, could make a major contribution to the centre’s success.

The Director would be supported by an external Ruskin Centre Advisory Group.

Simon Bainbridge
26 January 2017

Appendix: Members of the Working Group

Simon Bainbridge (ADR FASS) – Chair
Bogdan Costea – LUMS
Charlie Gere - LICA
Phil Haygarth – LEC
Michael Hughes – History
Andrew Tate – English and Creative Writing
Jacqueline Whiteside – Chair of the Ruskin Foundation

Stephen Wildman – Ruskin Library and Research Centre