

Beshara Development Office

Progress Report and Strategy
November 2012

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Background

The Beshara Development Office¹ was set up between January and March 2012. It came about as one result of a period of conversation and consultation which took place in the last three months of 2011, at Chisholme House in Scotland.

In December 2011 a report was written by Rayanti Binawan and Kartika Putri, they identified:

For the Beshara School, this is a time to contemplate and to revisit the whole concept of its existence and manifestation and it is an opportunity to listen more closely to the requirements of the era. In this spirit, the entire School has been scrutinized from top to bottom and radical and far-reaching changes have been proposed in every aspect of the School's operation.

As part of the consultation a **Vision Statement** was developed to help orientate and focus activities:

The Beshara School is the exemplary provider of contemporary, culturally relevant and engaging education in self knowledge.

The Beshara Development Office aims to be of service to the education and all the ways and places in which it is manifested and to work towards the realisation of this vision. Initially this was for a pilot period of six months. Its activities were initially based upon the proposals developed during the consultation period. These are outlined in a report entitled "Action Plan for the Beshara School, January 2012"². They are organised according to the area of activity they fall under, for which the following teams were created:

Organisation: Jonathan Davey, Peter Yiangou, Kai Peacock

Finance and Development: Paul Finegan, Lynn Cullum, Julia Dry, Irene Young

Product Development: Alison Yiangou, Maria Young, Aliya Ryan

Communications: Julie Witford, Frances Ryan, Martha Rafferty, Aaron Cass

Two new staff positions were also created within the Beshara Development Office: *Beshara School Administrator* and *Beshara Outreach and Development Director*. Their role is to help coordinate, focus and prioritise the work of the teams and to serve as focal points for communication for Beshara alumni, supporting organisations and outreach activities.

Many of the jobs now given to teams and individuals were previously carried out by staff at Chisholme or by volunteers connected to Beshara: the consultation process by no means reinvented the wheel. The aim was rather to streamline the structure and put in place a sturdy and efficient mechanism, that builds on lessons from the last forty years of quite organic internal growth and allows for improved communication and clearer flow of people, ideas and energy.

The Beshara Development Office is presently based at Chisholme. Its remit is wide and serves the whole of the Beshara constituency, including the educational programme at Chisholme and elsewhere, acting as a hub and a resource. It is essential that it builds networks, and draws on expertise and experience from further afield. This aspect needs developing.

The Development office and the teams have now been working for six months and the time allocated for the pilot period is up. In early October the Directors of the Chisholme Institute agreed to support the development and growth of the office.

¹ Previously called the Beshara School Office

² <http://www.beshara.org/about/chisholmeinstitute/action-plan-2012.pdf>

The first section of this report outlines the main activities and focus of the teams to date and an appraisal of how this new system is working. The second section puts forward a proposal of how they could continue working in the future, identifying the current buds in development and their associated needs.

The Last Six Months

When the teams started work in early 2012 they were given a long list of initiatives to act upon. Their first task was to prioritise these initiatives and work out a strategy for dealing with each one, whether it be a short term measure or a long term project. In all cases the teams served both a strategic / consultative function in putting proposals to the School Administrator, Principal, Executive Director, Chisholme General Manager, Institute Directors or alumni, and an executive function in carrying out plans that were agreed upon.

All the team members were working voluntarily. They have all approached this work with enthusiasm, dedication, patience, time and energy and whilst there is still much to be done, progress has been made in many areas.

Each team has compiled a detailed report on its progress to date, available on the minutes website³. The main achievements of each team, in most cases demonstrating where energy has been focused, are outlined below, as is a summary of the role taken by the Beshara Development Office.

Product Development

The overarching aims given to the Product Development team, in line with the vision statement, were:

1. To develop a Beshara School Educational Programme fit for the contemporary context.
2. To increase the educational influence and availability of the Beshara School.

New Courses: The main focus of the Product Development team to date has been working on a couple of new courses, which aim to fulfill both the objectives above. These courses are:

Intensive Summer School: A modular course run over three years, with one two-week residential module per year. The aim is to provide a way for people who can not currently do the intensive six month course to deepen their understanding and experience of the unity of being with intensive study-rich modules, periods of home study in between and a restricted access online forum. A pilot of this course was held at Chisholme in July, with 8 students. The module followed the basic study/ work/ meditation/ devotional practice structure of a six month course with slight modifications, and added sessions for conversation. After the pilot it now seems that such a course is both wanted and viable and Module 1 of the 3 year course will be held next summer at Chisholme. This course, once the syllabus and structure is developed further, could be held in international locations if suitable venues were found and sufficient students were interested.

Discovering Unity: A seven week course exploring human consciousness and meaning. An evening course run over seven weeks that combines theory and practice, group investigation and private contemplation to examine and uncover some of the essential elements of our humanity. This course aims to be something that alumni could run wherever they are in the world, with the school providing the materials needed, basic training and support. Each week takes a different theme for conversation during the session, and students then have reading, meditation and contemplation to do in their own time. A pilot of this course was held at Chisholme in July and August and it has now

3 <http://besharaschoolminutes.wordpress.com/>

been launched in Edinburgh, with 11 students, with more courses planned for Oxford and Chisholme. Alumni interested in holding this course were invited to a training weekend in September which was attended by 22 people. There are currently plans for further training courses in the South of England, at Chisholme and in other countries.

Course Programming: The Product Development team has also been involved in programming courses at Chisholme, making a proposal form for people who want to suggest new courses and looking at the possibility of holding courses outside of Chisholme. None of this is new work as such – the difference is that these proposals now come through a centralised office which over time should improve quality and coordination, and improve the transferability of knowledge and information as people in these roles change.

Communications

The aims given to the Communications team were:

1. To promote the Beshara School at Chisholme, in the UK and worldwide.
2. To improve and maintain internal/alumni communications and participation in the work of the Beshara School.

Website: the communications team have been working on the development of a new, content managed website. It aims to cater in the first instance for the new visitor, clarifying the links and relationships between Beshara, the education, Chisholme, courses etc. with simple straightforward introductory pages leading into deeper information. It will also have a clear searchable calendar for all events and courses, wherever in the world they are run, and sections for alumni and news. The design and internal structure of the website is now mainly in place, the team is now working on revising the content.

Graphic style: a new logo and graphic style for Beshara has been developed and gradually incorporated into all the materials and graphic templates. It is offered as a graphic that could be used internationally by any group connecting to Beshara.

Publicity materials: work is ongoing to produce suitable materials for publicising courses and events at Chisholme and elsewhere, and to ensure news of them reaches suitable audiences through advertising and networking. A lot of work has gone into the production of materials, and some strategies for publicity are developing, particularly in the area local to Chisholme and in Edinburgh. This area needs more systematic attention and expertise in the area of graphic design, publicity strategy and distribution.

Video: the Beshara youtube channel currently has 47 different videos on it, including interviews with students on the last day of their six-month course, how to make sour-dough bread, a portrait of the forestry fortnight and an examination of the meaning of work and service at the Beshara School. The Beshara youtube channel has had nearly 250,000 views since videos first went up in July 2009 and currently attracts a thousand visitors a day. These videos have been building up over the last three years and now, with three skilled and experienced film makers involved there is the potential to take it to another level, with the possibility of reaching wide and varied audiences through facebook and other links.

Finance and Development

The aims of the Finance and Development Team are:

1. To work closely with the Chisholme finance department to ensure the day-to-day and institutional costs of the Beshara School at Chisholme and worldwide are met on a short and long term basis.
2. Develop a proposal for a permanent Fundraising Office for the school to transform the financial and funding culture of the Beshara School at Chisholme and worldwide.

Reviewing the accounting system: The current accounting system and reporting methods have been reviewed. There is a requirement for more comprehensive analysis, monitoring and reporting and steps are being taken to implement this. These include making some changes to the accounts recording methods; establishing clear budgets and forecasts for short and long term plans; assessing and accounting for 'invisible' costs such as timber, estate produce, bed & board for staff etc; finding a means to directly relate income and expenditure for courses, events and projects.

Funding: A picture of the overall health of operations has emerged with some existing areas identified as under-funded and new initiatives to be added.

Last autumn's fundraising campaign "Be the 200" increased monthly covenants to £3500; interest free loans were granted for some immediate costs; the volunteer fund was launched at Angela Culme Seymour's 100th Birthday Celebration.

A brief for a fund-raising office has been devised. This is pending agreement regarding implementation.

Grants: Grants were received from the Beshara Trust to support the Edinburgh evening course and website development. The Forestry Fortnight was monitored in relation to potential funding; the volunteer programme will be researched for grant applications; there is the possibility of a grant for the replanting of Meadburn after felling; European Funding may be available for specific projects working with certain groups.

Coordinating: The team has been working closely with the financial manager at Chisholme to forecast running expenses. Coordination with the teams in terms of helping draw up their budgets for the next year has also begun. More detailed plans of aims and costs of planned projects are needed before further investigations can be made and the need to develop the estate plan, for Chisholme, was highlighted.

Organisation

The aims of the organisation team are:

1. To transform the culture and working practice of the Beshara School at Chisholme and worldwide.
2. To create a lively, dynamic and transparent environment providing the best possible structure and support for the school and facilitating the fulfillment of its vision.

The organisation team's scope includes the organisation at Chisholme and that of Beshara more widely. The initiatives called for the creation of new positions and offices to carry out the initiatives in line with the above aims. These new positions and offices were: *Beshara Development Office* (Aliya Ryan, Aaron Cass), *General Manager at Chisholme* (Kai Peacock), *Human Resources Consultant* (Jonathon Davey), *Executive Director* (Peter Yiangou).

Beshara Development Office

The Beshara Development Office encompasses the *Beshara School Administrator*, the *Beshara Outreach and Development Director* and all the teams. The main role of the Beshara Development Office has been to work towards implementing the vision as expressed on page 1 of this report and to serve the education wherever it appears, which might be in particular individuals or places and change over time. In practical terms this has meant coordinating the work of the different teams, ensuring good communication between the teams and with the Principal, doing a lot of day-to-day work on communications and product development issues and producing new materials with the teams.

An important aspect has also been keeping up regular communication with all the supporters, alumni and the mailing list. This has been done through a monthly Beshara newsletter that

goes to the whole mailing list and through the Beshara School minutes site which tries to ensure all the team work is transparent and accessible.

Another important aspect has been outreach, both in terms of coordinating with supportive organisations such as the Beshara Trust and SKGR, and making links elsewhere in Scotland and the UK so as to raise awareness of the School. Examples of this include visits to Findhorn, coordinating with the Salisbury Centre, coordinating with the Edinburgh International Centre for Spirituality and Peace and initial discussions and conversations with Borders Council education and events staff.

Principal of the Beshara School

Prior to the re-organisation the Principal occupied a pivotal role in the day-to-day operation of the School. Under this arrangement there was frequently an organisational bottleneck and the Principal was effectively tied to being at Chisholme full time.

The present task is to identify roles and responsibilities which are transferable, that is, not tied in perpetuity to a particular individual. Over the past few months some functions hitherto fulfilled by the Principal have been allocated to the General Manager, the School Administrator and the Outreach and Development Director. Each of these functions has greatly benefitted from the special attention brought to it by the new appointees. The Principal now has a simple advisory role with regard to day to day matters at Chisholme, and is free to engage more in research and development and courses further afield.

Organisation and Human Resources Manager

Job descriptions are in place for the majority of positions. Any outstanding ones should be clear by the end of December 2012.

An updated contract of employment needs to be agreed by the Board of Directors and then can be used once agreement on terms has been reached.

Fire risk assessment, general policy, area risk assessments and training will be reviewed and updated by the end of December 2012.

Organisation chart will be updated when all job descriptions have stabilised.

Executive Director

A temporary post to ensure that an appropriate form of organisation emerges, that the efforts of the many teams, organisations and individuals tasked with specific roles are 'joined-up' and that they know to whom they should be reporting.

Clarifying rather than changing, clearing blockages and helping to evolve an organisational tree.

Ensuring that those engaged on projects speak to relevant Directors etc on financial and legal matters.

Keeping the Principal abreast of developments.

Chisholme

Chisholme is a prototype for the Beshara School education. It is, in one sense, only one place amongst possibly innumerable contexts where courses can run or students be informed according to the highest principles of self knowledge and the unity of being. Yet at the same time it serves as an exemplar for the Beshara education in its most complete and immersive formulation.

It is of no surprise then that Chisholme should evolve and grow as a facility so that its capacity to provide a fully functioning immersive context can be developed in keeping with the demands and opportunities of the times.

A new conversation is beginning at Chisholme, involving staff, alumni and anyone interested in the specific vision and future of the place, how it is to be developed, how building programmes can be integrated into educational contexts and how participation of staff students and volunteers can be made most fruitful and rewarding. This process has been kick-started with the appointment of the new post of General Manager.

General Manager at Chisholme

In addition to the specific areas outlined below, the General Manager serves to facilitate the emergence of the vision for Chisholme, and its implementation.

Developing the opportunities for volunteering at Chisholme. This includes clarifying their role at Chisholme, projects they might be involved in, related finances and communication of the volunteering opportunities.

Overseeing current and proposed works, projects and events at Chisholme, of which there have been many over the last six months including: the dinner held in memory of Angela Culme Seymour (80 people seated dinner); the organisation of an Open Day in August; the Andrew Harvey talk on Rumi and accompanying buffet (100 people). Major works that have occurred at Chisholme over the last few months include: the installation of a new kitchen fan extraction system; work on the Gate Lodge extension; connection to the National Grid; clearfelling of Meadburn plantation; putting up a new polytunnel for salads and vegetables in the garden; ongoing work rebuilding the garden wall. There has also been ongoing set-up for courses such as the FNI course.

Overseeing, supporting and assisting staff.

Development of the *Common Ground* with Principal. The *Common Ground* is a document outlining the basic principles aspired to by students of the Beshara School, which will be given to all students and guests staying at Chisholme.

Challenges

Everyone involved in any of the initiatives or conversations, whether at Chisholme or on the other side of the world, has had many opportunities for education during the process that began a year ago. In so far as the teams are concerned, any areas needing particular attention or where difficulties have been found are mentioned in the individual reports. Some of the common areas of difficulty are highlighted below. These need to be acknowledged in order to make realistic appraisals and also to plan for the future.

Skills: Despite the huge pool of talent, wealth of experience and willingness to help amongst the students, alumni and supporters, there seem to be certain areas where skills are lacking, or not yet identified and tapped into. Further work needs to be done to make the best use of peoples abilities, including better planning and reviewing.

Two such areas that stand out are: **Advertising/Publicity** and **Fundraising:** If you have specific skills or knowledge of these areas that could be of assistance please get in touch.

Operations vs Research and Development: In all areas there is a conflict between the day to day work and admin (eg. ongoing publicity, daily accounting, course planning) and the longer term strategic research necessary to really set down deep and strong roots. This is compounded by the teams having to do both aspects, team members have a lot on their plate and are few in number; most of them are doing this on a voluntary and part time basis, and all these factors can result in stress as well as longer term research suffering.

Decision making processes: The processes through which decisions are taken are unclear. Better pre-planning is needed so that teams can work within agreed budgets, with some process in place for immediate responsive decision making where necessary.

The next six months, and beyond

The Beshara Development Office, despite the progress made over the last six months, is still very much in a nascent stage. If it is to continue it needs proper continued support and attention in order to become more strongly established and serve more fully the wider constituency. Some areas identified in the original initiatives have been wholeheartedly and fully responded to, others have as yet had very little attention. The main projects for the next year are listed below. In order to be carried out they depend upon the teams being further developed, some new positions at Chisholme and new, more specialised teams to develop some of the aspects.

1 Research and Development of courses

In order to fulfil the vision of the education being “contemporary, culturally relevant and engaging”, research and development needs to be ongoing. The main areas identified as needing attention in the next period are:

1.1 Online Educational Tools

1) an online place where people can have discussions/conversations on particular themes/study.

2) an online element for the Intensive Summer School (for the periods between the modules).

A committee is being established to look into the possibilities and make proposals that can be piloted/tested.

1.2 Introductory Courses

There will be a review of the intention, movement, content and advertising of the introductory courses offered (eg. Weekend Course, Nine Day Course).

1.3 New Courses

Some of the courses proposed over the last few months will be researched further with the intention of developing them into courses to be included in the programme for 2013 or later. For example: Deepening Mindfulness, Children’s Outdoor Skills.

2 Outreach

Many people who find out about Beshara and get involved do so through word of mouth. Outreach, both in terms of organised events and students and alumni talking about the education is therefore crucial. It includes a number of different elements, all aimed at building the profile of Beshara nationally and internationally and consolidating its relationship with other organisations.

2.1 Coordinating with Affiliated Groups

Build on and improve coordination and collaboration with affiliated groups and associations including the Beshara Trust, SKGR, Ibn Arabi Society and international groups.

2.2 Discovering Unity Course

Further develop training for supervision of the *Discovering Unity* evening course, and support its launch in different places around the world.

2.3 Edinburgh and Beyond

Work to consolidate the profile and position of Beshara in Edinburgh and London (alongside the Beshara Trust) through an ongoing programme of

events/courses as seems relevant. Look at where else in the UK might be a possible focus for activity.

2.4 Other Educational Establishments

Make connections with other educational establishments and contribute to national and international debates on the role of education in the current context. To possibly include Chisholme hosting a meeting in 2013.

2.5 Build Student and Alumni Network

Increase communication with students and alumni, wherever they are in the world, as they are all ambassadors of Beshara and the education. Find out how to support their own initiatives at outreach.

3 Education Programme

3.1 Course Programme 2013

Make the Beshara School courses and events programme for 2013 in plenty of time, including production of a programme brochure for widespread distribution (alumni and outlets).

3.2 Publicity

Develop improved publicity strategy for courses and events, perhaps with some professional advice. Include comprehensive course and events listings and calendar on new website.

Further develop the use of video as a tool for publicity, information and outreach for the educational programme.

3.3 Develop Summer Programme at Chisholme

Complete the development of new courses included in the summer programme for 2013 at Chisholme, including Intensive Summer School Module 1, Green Timber Construction Course, Life out of the Box, Rumi Festival. Also develop the Chisholme Summer Open Programme: ongoing regular study / workshop / seminar days with visiting speakers – for staff, volunteers and open to locals.

3.4 Student Funding

Explore some kind of loan/bursary/scholarship fund for students, both for short courses and the six-month intensive course.

4 Chisholme

4.1 Team

A new team will be convened, in conjunction with all those present at Chisholme, to examine the ongoing requirements and any implications these have. This might include the area of new buildings, sustainability, estate management.

4.2 Volunteer Programme

Clarify the aims and intentions of volunteers at Chisholme and where they fall within the umbrella of the education.

Raise the profile of volunteering at Chisholme through networking, targeted publicity, etc

Build a sustainable fundraising strategy for the volunteer programme at Chisholme to ensure the programme remains open and accessible.

5 **Alumni relations**

5.1 Communication

Consolidate communication with alumni and supporters, including reviewing the database and mailing list set-up and setting up a regular newsletter.

5.2 Website

Build a suitable news pages for alumni use on the website, including photo albums and a news page with international content.

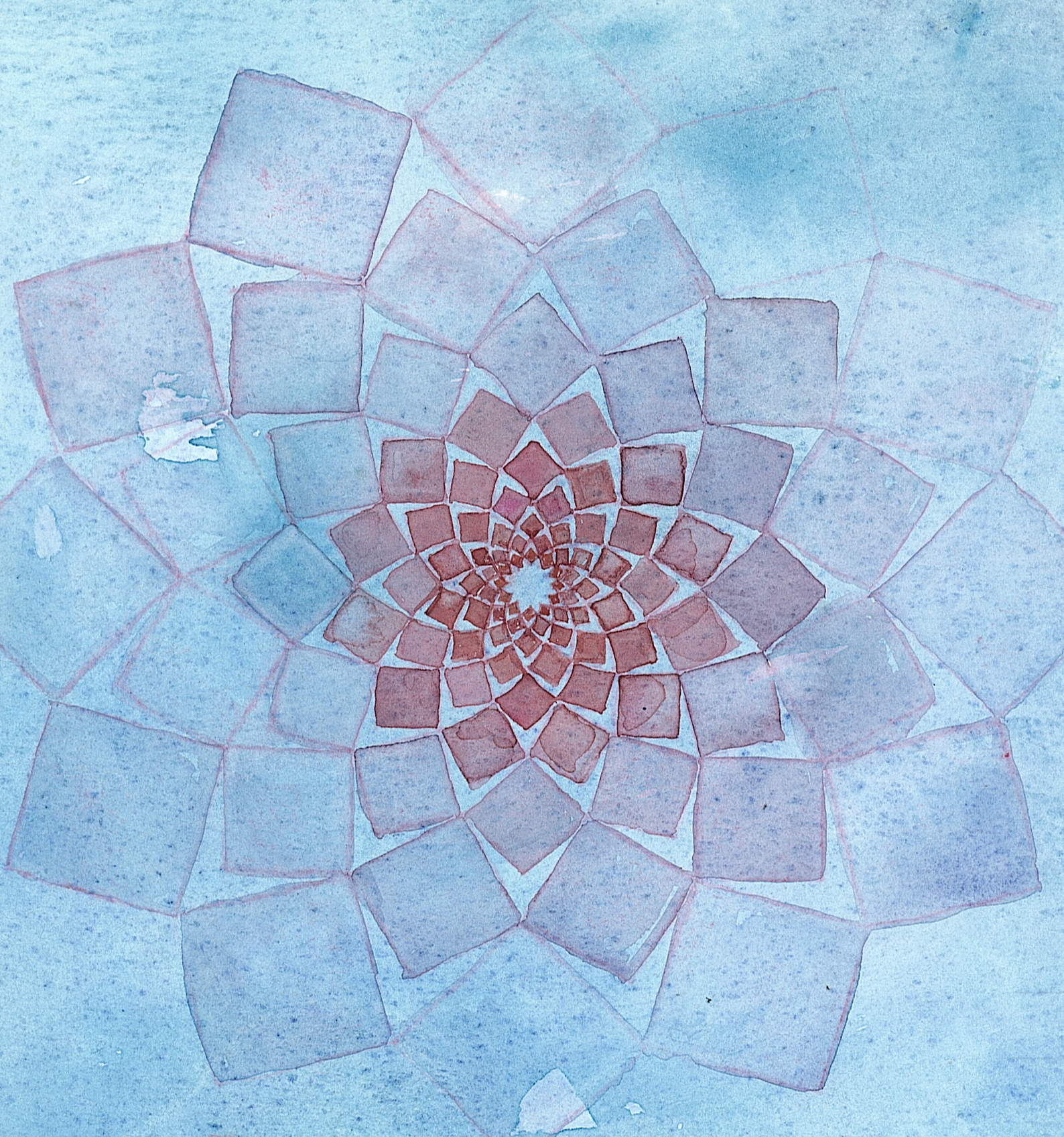
6 **Sustainability Plan**

6.1 Structure

Consolidate the role and positions within the Beshara Development office, ensure good information management, include more people where possible.

6.2 Funding

Ensure sustainable income stream for the Beshara Development Office, both through developing fundraising with alumni and researching external grants and funds.



The Beshara Development Office is located at:
The Chisholme Institute, Roberton, Hawick TD9 7PH, Scotland, UK.
+44 (0)1450 880 215 • secretary@beshara.org

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Illustration by Hiroko Nagato Apthorp