

ifa ECP Monitor Country Report

United Kingdom

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1. External cultural policy objectives in geopolitical context

The British government stated in the *Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015* that it would strengthen Britain's position in the world as a leading soft power and promote British values and interests worldwide through institutions such as the BBC World Service and the British Council (British Council, 2016a, p. 24). This emphasis has continued, with the 2018 National Security Capability Review stating that the UK “will create a cross-government soft power strategy, while respecting the independence of the BBC World Service, British Council and the many British institutions and brands that contribute to our soft power” in order to project UK power and influence worldwide (HM Government, 2018).

The UK has important economic, diplomatic, and military strengths to support its power projection worldwide. It is the world's 6th largest economy, with a 2019 nominal GDP of €2.5 trillion (£2.2 trillion). Its total GDP is roughly similar to that of its large European neighbours, placing below Germany but just ahead of France.

Table 1: Economy of the United Kingdom

	2019	% change since 2015
Population (millions) / ranking	66.64 / 22 nd	64.85 / 3%
GDP ranking	6 th	5 th
GDP per capita	37,770	- 7
Cultural economy (%GDP)	0.20 ⁽²⁰¹⁸⁾	- 0.1
Education economy (%GDP)	4.80 ⁽²⁰¹⁸⁾	- 0.4
R&D economy (%GDP)	1.73 ⁽²⁰¹⁸⁾	0.1
Media economy (%GDP)	0.20 ⁽²⁰¹⁸⁾	0

Sources: Eurostat, World Bank

The UK's diplomacy and hard power slightly trail its aggregate output, however. Its 2019 diplomacy ranking was 11th and its hard power ranking was 8th worldwide. Compared to 2015, this represents a decline of 2 and 3 places, respectively. On soft power, however, the UK excels. It places second in the world, a decline from its previous first place ranking. Indeed, experts describe the United Kingdom as a “superstar” of foreign cultural and educational policy (Portland, 2019).

Table 2: UK's geopolitical and geo-economic position

	2019	2015	
Hard power rank	8 th	5 th	↑
World trade rank (\$ million)	4 th / 1,704,004	4 th / 1,660,134	-
Soft power rank	2 nd / 79.47	1 st / 75.61	↓
Diplomacy rank	11 th	9 th (2016)	↓

The UK has a worldwide ECP presence, with activities in 169 countries. In the wake of the UK's departure from the European Union, cultural policy is consciously used as a tool to boost the geopolitical and geo-economic aims of "Global Britain." While the government has emphasized world-spanning foreign policy goals, UK ECP has exhibited a strong orientation toward North America and Europe, both of which have become more important in the aftermath of Brexit.

Table 3: Government spending on ECP fields as a % of total outlays

	2019	% change since 2015
Culture	0.60 ⁽²⁰¹⁸⁾	-0.1
Education	11.80 ⁽²⁰¹⁸⁾	- 0.6
R & D	1.04	- 0.2
Media	0.50 ⁽²⁰¹⁸⁾	-0.1

Source: Eurostat

As a share government outlays, the UK spends significantly less on culture (0.6%) than Germany (0.9%) or France (1.1%). However, it allocates much more to education (11.8%) than either (both of which are under 10%). This is broadly in line with conceptions of UK ECP: a decentralized approach to cultural policy, but a strong system of education, including world-beating public universities.

Despite British cultural diplomacy's many strengths and long tradition, over the past fifteen years it has been subject to multiple review and reform processes. The main focuses have been on financial savings, increased accountability of the institutions involved and closer integration of these institutions into an overarching strategy of the Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office (FCDO)¹. The UK's domestic affairs will also affect its international standing, as the lingering consequences of austerity and the uncertainty of Brexit could negatively affect the UK's image abroad in years to come.

¹ The FCDO was created as a merger of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Department for International Development in 2020. This move was criticized by several career diplomats and former Prime Ministers as threatening the UK's role in the world.

The financial dimension of UK ECP changed dramatically with the global financial crisis of 2007-08. State subsidies for international cultural, educational and foreign media programmes were sharply cut. Organisations such as the British Council were forced to reduce costs and expand their commercial activities. Public-private partnerships were employed more frequently to promote cultural programmes. The British see no contradiction between cultural promotion and economic interests: the creative industry enjoys a high reputation in Great Britain and culture is seen as a “link in the value chain” (Schneider, 2015, p. 366). In a globalised world, British culture is designed to contribute to the country’s competitiveness and prosperity. At the same time, intermediary organisations have become more closely involved in the United Kingdom’s overarching security strategy in recent years.

The regional focus of British cultural diplomacy reflects these economic and political interests as well as historical ties. The British Empire was the largest colonial empire in history, comprising more than a quarter of the world’s population at the time of its greatest expansion. The common past and continuing cultural, linguistic, political and economic ties between Great Britain and the former colonies are still reflected in the foreign cultural and educational policy of the Commonwealth of Nations (Abubakar, 2014, p. 32). At the same time, the UK is placing more emphasis on strengthening bonds with other Western countries, particularly North America and Europe.

2. External cultural policy: an overview

Table 4: Key ECP Statistics for the United Kingdom

	2019
Number of countries with ECP activities	169 ²
Total number of institutions abroad	about 4,400
Total number of FTE staff engaged in ECP activities	about 22,000
Freelance and local staff	about 38,000 ³
Government financial support (€ million)	1,669 ⁴
Comparative ECP group	major

The “arm’s-length principle” between the government and ECP organisations is a key factor in how external cultural policy is conducted in the UK. Officially, the government should only be on the periphery of foreign cultural relations. Although it can provide financial support, the British Council and the BBC World Service technically retain full autonomy. In order to maintain their credibility abroad, offers and programmes are designed to remain free of political influence (Rivera, 2015, p. 11). However, the “arm’s-length” between the actors has become significantly shorter in recent years. The British government is demanding greater

² Based on Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) posts abroad, as of 31 March 2019, FCDO (2019).

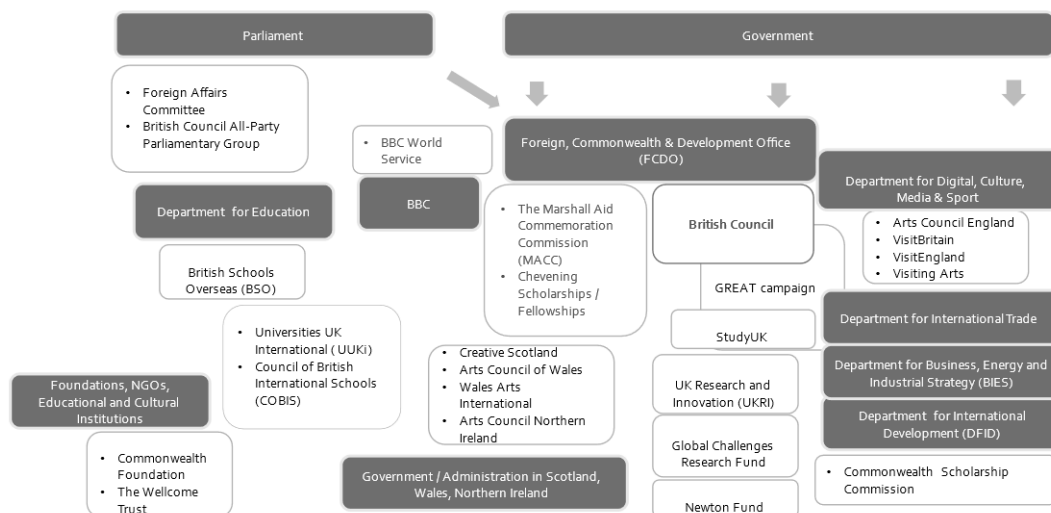
³ This should be read as approximation. It is based on the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office local workforce (8178) and estimated 30,000 local teachers and staff at British Schools Overseas.

⁴ £ 1,514,804,000, based on the FCDO’s expenditure on the strategic objective “SO2—Project Our Global Influence”, FCDO (2019).

accountability from Non-Departmental Public Bodies (NDPBs) such as the British Council. Their integration into the foreign ministry's political strategy is also becoming increasingly important.

Figure 1: Institutional map of UK ECP

United Kingdom



In addition to the FCDO, the Department for Culture Media & Sport (DCMS), Department for International Trade (DIT), and Department for Education (DfE) take part in public diplomacy initiatives. Due to the decentralised structure of the United Kingdom, England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland also have their own cultural institutes, the so-called Arts Councils: Creative Scotland; Arts Council of Wales – especially Wales Arts International; Arts Council Northern Ireland and Arts Council England. They are also involved in international cultural cooperation, often in close cooperation with the British Council (Schneider, 2015, p. 366). Moreover, representatives and organisations of the universities are involved in the internationalisation of the higher education sector.

3. Fields of ECP

The division of institutions into “language and culture” and “science and education” is difficult in the case of Great Britain. The British Council is the main actor responsible for promoting culture and language as well as supporting schools and colleges. Through newspaper supplements, radio broadcasts and cooperation with the BBC, it is even active in the field of foreign media.

3.1. Culture and the arts

Table 5: Key statistics on culture and the arts

	2019	2015
Number of countries present	116 ⁵	110
Number of institutes	177	196
Number of FTE staff	10,963	9,624
Number of artists in programmes	24,000 artists and 4,000 arts organisations in 87 countries (2017/18)	n/a
Budget (€ million)	1,333 ⁶	1,075 ⁷
	Culture: 115.8 ⁸	Culture: 81 ⁹
Government financial support (€ million)	201 ¹⁰	177 ¹²
	Cultural Protection Fund (CPF): 32 (2016-2020) ¹¹	

The United Kingdom Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office (formerly the Foreign and Commonwealth Office) founded the British Committee for Relations with Other Countries in 1934 to create a "friendly knowledge and understanding between the people of Britain and the world". (British Council, 2017). The British Council still fulfils this mission today by promoting programmes in the priority areas of education, culture and society. It has 177 offices in over 116 countries (British Council, 2019). In total, nearly 11,000 people worldwide work in its offices, language and information centres and libraries (Ibid.).

In 2019, the British Council had a revenue of €1.33 billion, up from 1.1 billion in 2015. Of this, €115 million is devoted to cultural activities. However, only about 15% of these funds are provided by the Foreign Office as "grant-in aid" (€ 201 million in 2019) (British Council, 2019). In order to close this gap, the British Council uses English courses and language exams, which are subject to a fee, to finance its other services and programmes. These programmes are discussed in the following section.

⁵ The British Council is active in additional 20 countries but without physical presence.

⁶ The original sum, £1,219 million, refers to the total expenditure of the British Council in 2018/19.

⁷ £982 million total expenditure in 2015/16, British Council.

⁸ Original sum: £105,887,000. It refers here to the budget item "Encouraging cultural scientific and technological co-operation", British Council.

⁹ In 2015/16, 8% of British Council budget or £74 million went to "Encouraging cultural, scientific and technological co-operation".

¹⁰ £184 million of government grant-in-aid, or 14.7% of the British Council budget.

¹¹ The £30 million Cultural Protection Fund (2016-2020) supports cultural heritage in conflict-affected countries. CPF is managed by the British Council in partnership with the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS).

¹² £162 million of government grant-in-aid, or 17% of the British Council budget.

The other programmes of the British Council are assigned to three overarching objectives in the current business plan (2016-2020): (1) security and stability, (2) prosperity and development, and (3) influence and attractiveness. The British Council is also responsible for organising bilateral cultural years (British Council, 2016b).

3.2. Language

Table 6: Key figures on language promotion

<i>British Council</i>	2019	2015
Number of countries where courses are offered	53 (teaching centres) ⁽²⁰¹⁸⁾ (Language exams in 124)	over 50 (teaching centres)
Number of students enrolled		
In-class	- 420,000 learners - 168,000 teachers trained	- 400,000 learners ⁽²⁰¹⁶⁾
Online reach	1.8 million ⁽²⁰¹⁶⁾ ¹³	1.2 million
Number of candidates for English language qualifications (IELTS)	3.9 million British Council: 4.4 million exams ^(2017/18)	2.7 million
Number of language teachers	2,548 ¹⁴	2,632
Budget (€ million)	749.70 ⁽²⁰¹⁷⁻¹⁸⁾ ¹⁵	593.44 ¹⁶
Government financial support (€ million)	n/a	n/a

In 2019, some 420,000 people studied English with the British Council, while 4 million took the IELTS and other exams (British Council, 2019). In the absence of substantial government funding, tests and language courses have become an increasingly important component of the Council's business model. Still, the British Council has managed to grow in the new environment: its FTE count has increased by roughly 1000 since 2016 (British Council, 2016a).

Despite efforts to trim costs, the reach of the British Council is impressive. In addition to in-person contacts, the British Council reaches a total of nearly 800 million people each year, with 80 million of them direct contacts, the rest through indirect means such as online and through social media (British Council, 2019). It currently employs over 2500 teachers and has trained over 168,000 (Ibid.).

¹³ This includes English language MOOCs. The overall digital reach is much larger with over 100 million language learners and teachers globally in 2018/19. British Council (2019).

¹⁴ Additionally, 2,000 young graduates from 176 UK HEIs worked overseas as English language assistants.

¹⁵ £683.3 million, 58.6% of the British Council budget was dedicated to "Developing a wider knowledge of the English language".

¹⁶ £541 million or 55% of the British Council budget for "Developing a wider knowledge of the English language".

3.3. Primary and secondary education

Table 7: Key figures on primary and secondary education

<i>British Schools Overseas (BSO)</i>	2019	2015
Number of countries	-	-
Number of schools	about 4,000 Independent Schools Council (ISC): 58 campuses overseas ¹⁷	about 3,700 ⁽²⁰¹⁷⁾
Number of students	about. 1,200,000 ^(p) ¹⁸ ISC: 39,616	n/a
Number of staff / teachers	30,000	n/a
Budget (€ million)	n/a	n/a
Government financial support (€ million)	n/a	n/a

Some 4,000 independent schools worldwide refer to themselves as “British schools” and follow a British curriculum. The Department for Education (DfE) offers voluntary inspections for these schools. If they meet the quality control standards, they are allowed to carry the official title “British Schools Overseas” (BSO). The criteria include the quality of the curriculum and teaching, the “moral, social and cultural development of the pupils”. The inspections are carried out by independent providers every three years and the reports are publicly available to parents (Council of British International Schools, 2017).

3.4. Tertiary education and science

Table 7: Key figures on tertiary education

	2019	2015
Number of countries	TNE: ~180	~180
Number of universities / colleges abroad	139 ^(2017/18)	132
Number of foreign students ¹⁹	452,079 ⁽²⁰¹⁸⁾	430,833
Number of students at transnational higher education (TNE)	693,695 ^(2017/18)	701,010

¹⁷ Furthermore, there are approximately 127 ISC affiliated schools, i.e. overseas schools in membership of ISC associations. ISC is only a small part of the BSO network. ISC (2019).

¹⁸ This is a provisional value, assuming that at least 3,000 BSO campuses have an average of 400 pupils each (the average for ISC schools in the UK). Oxford Economics (2018).

¹⁹ Data based on Global Flow of Tertiary-Level Students | UNESCO UIS. (2020). Retrieved 2 September 2020, from <http://uis.unesco.org/en/uis-student-flow>.

	2019	2015
Number of government scholarships awarded (<i>Chevening, Marshall and Commonwealth Scholarships</i>)	- Chevening: 1,750 ⁽²⁰¹⁸⁾ - Commonwealth: 1,620 ^(2018/19) - Marshall: 83	-
Number of staff / teachers	-	-
Budget (€ million)	-	-
Government financial support (€ million)	GREAT/British Council education campaigns: about 25 million ²⁰	Scholarship schemes: 80.32 ²¹

The UK higher education is extremely prominent internationally, both in terms of drawing foreign students to the UK and offering transnational education (TNE) abroad. 139 UK universities have a TNE presence and there are a full 43 UK overseas campuses, a figure that trails only the US (Universities UK, 2019).

The UK government is also active in promoting mobility to the UK, particularly from developing countries. More than 450,000 international students study in the UK each year. To increase mobility, the British government supports three major scholarship programmes: Chevening, Marshall (US only) and Commonwealth Scholarships. In 2019, these programmes awarded 1,750, 83, and 1,620 scholarships, respectively (Chevening, 2019; MAAC, 2020; CSC, 2019). While more recent information is not available, in the academic year 2015-2016, the three fellowship programmes had almost 90 million pounds (approx. 124.2 million euros) at their disposal, including about 73 million from public funds (approx. 100.7 million euros) (HM Government, 2015, p. 3.)

Table 8: Science and research

<i>UK Research and Innovation (UKRI)</i>	2019	2015
Number of countries	130 ²²	n/a
Number of institutes	4 offices ²³ GCRF: 12 research hubs	-
Number of researchers/staff	7,800	-
Number of projects	1,750	-
Number scientists in exchange programmes	3,829 research grants 441 fellowships	-

²⁰ Original sum £22.5 million, FCDO (2019).

²¹ £73 million for 2015/16. The total budgeted spend (including partnership income) was £89m.

²² The number of countries involved across the projects of UK Research and Innovation (UKRI). The UK Science and Innovation Network (SIN) is present in over 40 countries.

²³ UK Research and Innovation is a non-departmental public body sponsored by the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. It is comprised of 7 UK Research Councils, Innovate UK, and Research England. UKRI (2020).

	2019	2015
Budget (€ million)	390 ²⁴	-
Government financial support (€ million)	n/a	-

The United Kingdom is also a hub for science and research. UK Research and Innovation, which falls under the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, is active in projects in over 130 countries with roughly 8000 staff and offices in Washington, Brussels, New Delhi, and Beijing. It has a budget of 190 million euros and cooperates with over 2,000 other organizations across 1,750 projects (UKRI, 2020). The Newton Fund (active in 17 countries) and Global Challenges Research Fund (active in 17 countries with 550 researchers) also significant players in the UK's foreign scientific policy (BEIS, 2020).

3.5. Foreign Media

Table 9: Key figures on foreign broadcasting

<i>BBC World Service</i>		2019	2015
TV	Audience / weekly (million)	138	91
Radio	Audience / weekly (million)	173	144
Total	Number of countries broadcasted to	more than 200 countries and territories worldwide	-
	Number of languages	more than 40	29
	Number of channels	-	more than 30
	Audience / weekly (million)	319 ²⁵	246.3
	Global reach (including BBC News and BBC Studios)	426	320
	Budget (€ million)	-	340 ²⁶

²⁴ £356m in international collaborations with the developed world through the new Fund for International Collaboration (FIC), and with developing countries through the Global Challenges Research Fund and the Newton Fund. UKRI's total investment across GCRF and Newton is £1 billion. UKRI (2020).

²⁵ Includes TV, radio, online and social media in English and other languages.

²⁶ £260 million, BBC World Service expenditure in 2015-16, BBC (2016).

	2019	2015
New Media		
Social networks following ²⁷	British Council: Facebook: 2,275,295 Twitter: 283,400 Instagram: 75,400	n/a
Audience / unique monthly visitors (million)	British Council: 180 ^(2017/18) BBC World Service: 55	BBC World Service: 41.6

The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) is the UK's main public broadcaster and is one of the world's best-known and oldest of its kind. It is financed primarily through the collection of TV licence fees and is supposed to be separate from government interference. BBC World is the main foreign arm of the BBC and was originally founded in 1932 as the BBC Empire Service. As of 2019, the station's radio, television and online services were available in a total of 40 languages (CPF, 2019). According to the station's own figures, its weekly audience has risen from 320 million (2015) to 426 million (2019). Around 65 percent of the more than 1,514 BBC World Services employees work in the London Headquarters, while around 35 percent support the station in its field offices. The channel's expenditure for 2015-2016 was 268 million pounds (BBC, 2018). The government is investing £291 million between 2016 and 2020 to support the BBC World Service through the World 2020 Programme (FCDO, 2019).

As part of the post-financial crisis austerity programmes the UK government reduced funding for the BBC. In April 2014 it was determined that the channel would be financed by licence fees from the BBC (BBC, 2016, p. 5). As a result, the BBC was forced to make dramatic cuts. Hundreds of offices and five language services were completely closed, including Macedonian and Albanian. The number of languages offered by the BBC World Services had already declined significantly; the total language offer fell from 44 (1998) to 29 (2016) (BBC, 2016, p. 28). However, a renewed, massive expansion of available languages to 40 commenced in 2017 and major investments were approved.

The UK Foreign Office is trying to act as a “global authority in the theory and practice” of digital diplomacy. In recent years, the Foreign Office has developed the “digital by default” strategy, which aims to provide as much information and services as possible online. The British Council has an extensive online reach, with nearly 3 million followers spread across the main social media platforms and 180 million monthly visitors to its website.

²⁷ Last data update on 17 September 2020.

4. Challenges and future outlook

One of the biggest challenges is the relationship between the FCDO and intermediary organisations. The "arm's-length principle" is seen as the basis of British foreign culture and education policy, as largely independent organisations are often more trusted than the government. However, the "arm" between government and intermediary organisations seems to be getting shorter. The British Council is a particularly notable example of this development, but the FCDO has also expanded its oversight on the work of the BBC, forcing the broadcaster to delicately navigate the tense political atmosphere in the UK.

Consequently, the British Council is fighting for the preservation of the "arm's length principle". For example, the GREAT campaign to show off the strength of Great Britain (which is run jointly by Government, DIT, FCDO, DCMS and the British Council) (GREAT, 2021) is often praised as a public diplomacy initiative *par excellence*. However, it was met with some criticism from British Council staff. Experts feared that the "brand" of the British Council, which has been appreciated abroad for decades, could lose influence through the competition of a second, competing brand. A long-time employee explained: "Great Britain is relatively good at showing its weaknesses and strengths. People appreciate that. GREAT puts this at risk. If we were to adopt the GREAT approach, we would concentrate only on the positive" (Rivera, 2015: 18-19).

Although Brexit has finally been concluded, many questions remain about the UK's place in the world. The British Council is increasingly trying to fill the political gap and maintain positive relations with EU countries. At the same time, the UK is striving to fortify a "global" brand. Still, it is unclear how this will manifest itself concretely. Portland argues that ongoing Brexit uncertainty is a major weakness of the UK's ECP and predicts that the UK's departure will leave lasting damage to its reputation (Soft Power 30, 2018).

Indeed, other English-speaking nations such as Australia and Canada are already benefiting from declining international student numbers in the UK, which may be caused by in part by rising tuition fees for EU students. In this sense, the contradictions between the UK's dual focus on commercialized ECP and increased national sovereignty may become clearer. The cultural sector relies on close international interdependence to boost economic ties, yet currently, the political leadership seeks to distance itself from pre-existing partnerships. While the UK has a strong basis of ECP that it can fall back upon, this conundrum may prove more and more intractable in the coming years.

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