BRITISH COUNCIL

Research

Oral histories

The British Council in action

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The British Council is the UK's international organisation for cultural relations and educational opportunities. We support peace and prosperity by building connections, understanding and trust between people in the UK and countries worldwide.

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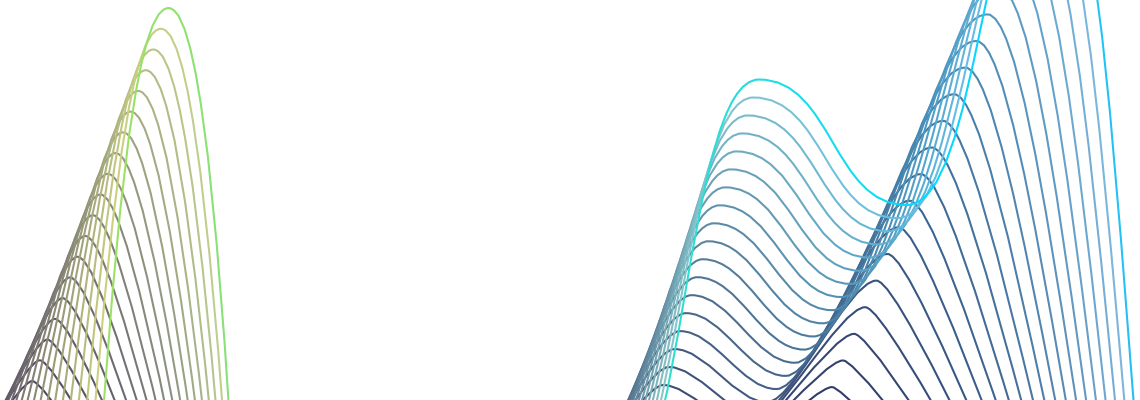
Contents



Oral histories

The British Council in action

I can't believe the sort of life that I've actually led at that time, a combination of constantly stimulating work, of constantly meeting a whole series of interesting people from the Prime Minister downwards ...

John Burgh, former Director General (75th anniversary collection)

Scott McDonald

Foreword

What does the British Council mean to you?

This was a question asked of all those we interviewed last year for our 90th anniversary oral history project, one of two British Council oral history collections this report draws upon. The interviews were with current and former colleagues, as well as those who have worked with us as partners, collaborators and advisors around the world. The British Council is, according to our interviewees, a 'conversation with the world', 'an invitation to the world', 'a link in the great global chain', a 'vital broker' for international connections, and a 'conduit' for the opening of opportunities.

I am proud to lead an organisation that invokes such warm sentiments, and where the responses speak to real impact over time. But our oral history work is not simply a moment to reflect on our storied past. It is motivated by a desire to analyse and learn, to consider our place within the wider, ever-evolving landscape of foreign policy, soft power, international development and cultural and educational exchange. As we celebrated our 90th anniversary last year, one of our aims was to raise understanding of the British Council. This report, like the oral history collections on which it is based, certainly does that.

To return to the interview responses, there is one theme central to both this report and the British Council's very purpose: the importance of international relationships and the positive impact these can have on people's lives. As the following chapters explore, there is much that has changed at the British Council, both in terms of corporate structures and organisational culture and in terms of *how* we work. But one thing that has remained constant is our commitment to building relationships, connections and trust to support peace and prosperity. As our former Chair Neil Kinnock noted in his interview for the 90th anniversary project, despite the ease in which we can now communicate across borders, the world is arguably more fragile and fragmented today than it was in 1934 when the British Council was founded. Yet as he said, while this is 'both depressing and distressing,' it should also be 'a spur to greater efforts' going forward.

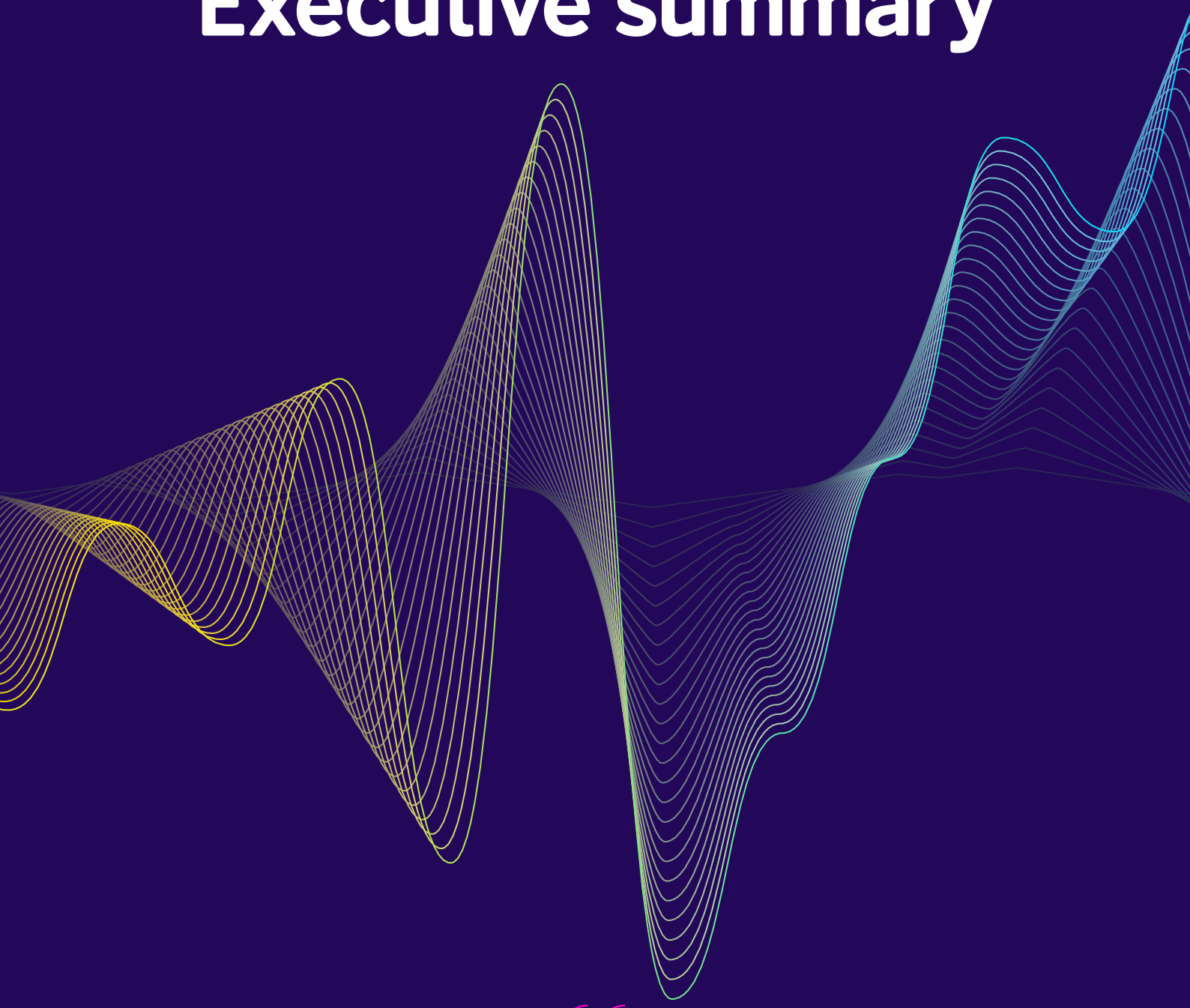
With this in mind, the recent initiative by the Foreign Secretary and Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport to launch the UK Soft Power Council – on which I look forward to playing an active role – is hugely welcome. And it makes the analysis that follows in this report, about the role of the British Council as a convener of international cultural relations and an instrument of the UK's soft power, particularly timely. It complements some of the more theoretical and abstract studies of soft power by offering a more 'personal' way into the subject; we get an insight into what soft power means in practice, and in different global contexts. Through the lens of the interviewees, we can see the impact it has both at the level of relationships between countries and communities, and on the lives of individuals.

My thanks go to the authors of this important report, and to the British Council's Research & Insight team for their coordination of the 90th anniversary oral history project. I must also thank everyone who contributed to the project, both as interviewers and interviewees. I am delighted these interviews will be joining an existing interview collection, completed around our 75th anniversary, in being archived at the British Library. They will be available online as a public resource and can contribute a valuable body of insight for future scholarship on international affairs.

I hope the report you are about to read becomes one of many more studies over the years to come that draw on these collections and unlock their potential for new knowledge and understanding about the world.

Scott McDonald
Chief Executive, British Council

Executive summary



“There is this very strong sense of trust that the way that the [British] Council does things is genuine belief in others and what they have to offer. There is trust in the relationships.”

Janet Ilieva, former Education Research Officer (90th anniversary collection)

Executive summary

Introduction and methodology

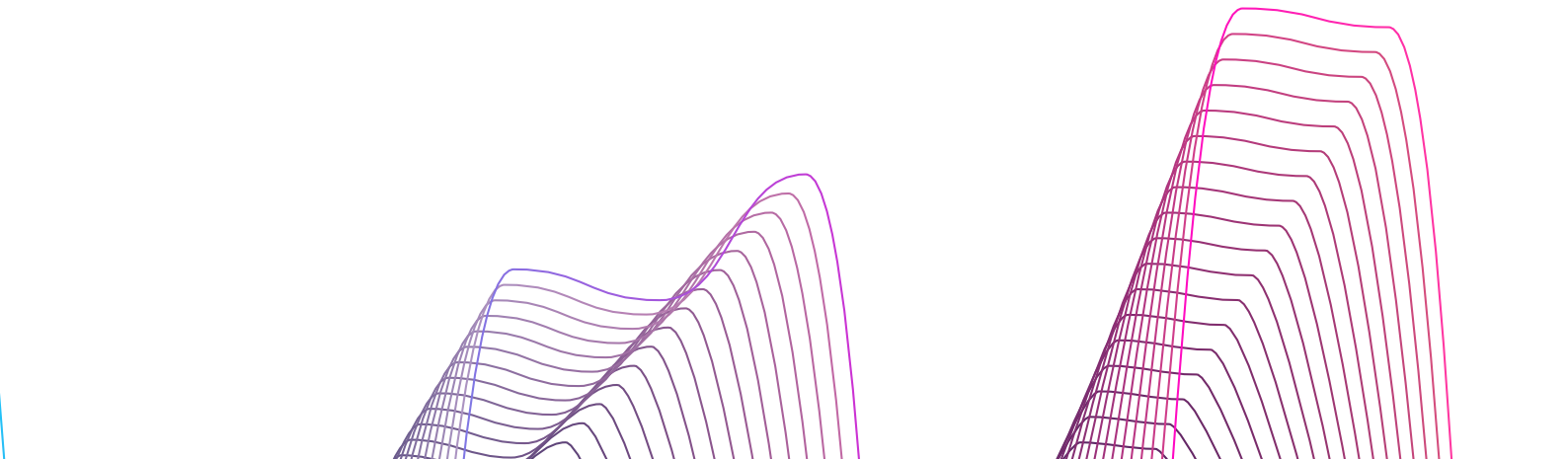
The British Council is the UK's international organisation for cultural relations and educational opportunities. In 2025, ERS was commissioned by the British Council to explore its 75th anniversary and 90th anniversary oral history collections. The aims were to gain insight into the history, approach and impact of the British Council, as well as its role, remit and reception within the wider landscape of the UK's international relationships.

This report is not intended to be a 'dry' and purely factual institutional retelling of the British Council's operation. Rather, it is about bringing out the personal stories, emotions, experiences and subjective reflections of the interviewees. Via a sample of fifteen 90th anniversary collection interviews and eleven 75th anniversary collection interviews, thematic analysis was undertaken, which surfaced a number of high-level themes. A summary of key points across each of these core chapter themes is provided below.

Life with the British Council

This collection of oral histories tells the stories of people's lives as shaped by and lived through their relationship with the British Council, i.e. their life as it has been shaped by interaction with the institution, and the formative experiences it offered. The scope of the deeply personal stories related ranged from early childhood experiences to late-life reflections.

- Motivations for joining the British Council included: prior international experiences, often via parents; a desire to work internationally; the draw of the arts; individual passion; and personal adversity having instilled a desire to make a positive difference for others.
- Specific academic qualifications were a common route into the organisation, however personal attributes and the ability to build positive relationships were considered more crucial.
- A career with the British Council offered a diversity of experience and opportunity to colleagues and partners. This access to a range of countries, cultures and perspectives was often described as a 'privilege'.
- An 'international' life often provided challenges, particularly for the families and spouses of colleagues, and when working in insecure environments.
- A number of interviewees attributed the British Council to creating a clearer perception of self, with testimonies of profound personal impacts.
- The British Council was perceived to have a unique organisational culture. Two aspects that stood out were the prioritisation of learning and emphasis on building personal relationships.
- Interviewees' perceptions of the British Council's role consolidated over time. Across the collections, the perceived function of the British Council was described both implicitly and explicitly as based on a principle of mutuality, which guides the mission of cultural relations.
- Interviewees across the collections recognised the repositioning of the British Council as it has moved to acknowledge



its colonial legacy, alongside its concerted push towards an authentic Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) programme. This transition has aided the organisation in maintaining credibility and retaining cultural appeal.

Change and continuity: the work of the British Council

This chapter broadly covers change (and continuity) in relation to the geographical remit of the British Council and development of its delivery approach(es) over its lifetime, as considered by interviewees from the oral history collections. The narrative within this chapter provides a high-level overview of external shifts affecting operations, including financial pressures prompting organisational evolution, external geo-political factors and individual personalities.

The British Council operates in, and is subject to, a dynamic and changing world. Indeed, working in place, across continuously evolving contexts, countries and regions has required that the organisation becomes equally adaptable in response. The story of the British Council, alongside that of the world it operates within, is therefore a story of change. That said, it is also a story of continuity, with evidence of the British Council *remaining* in place, delivering *long-standing* commitments, and *maintaining* links and connections, even where and when geopolitical contexts have made this challenging.

Geographical remit:

- The British Council has demonstrated longevity of involvement in particular countries, showing its strong commitment to places and people. This length of commitment enables depth of outcomes, such as development of established trust and relationships. This is also reflected via greater continuity in staff postings as the organisation has developed.
- Over time, there have been both expansions and contractions of the British Council's operation and geographic remit, and at times withdrawal from particular locations. These drivers of change have largely included financial pressures that prompted organisational evolution; external geo-political drivers; and individual personalities.

Financial pressures:

- There has been a trend of increased financial accountability over time. When reflecting on the early days of operations, there are fantastical and often humorous accounts of British Council colleagues living a thrilling and often exclusive life, largely recognised as unsustainable and unsuitable.
- Over time, governmental and public pressure increased accountability, and material cuts have also led to overseas office closures or staff contractions. However, the trend in external pressures and internal processes towards greater accountability supported the British Council to act more intentionally and with greater focus.
- Today, grant-in-aid from the UK government accounts for a far smaller percentage of the British Council's overall budget, with the organisation having gone through a process of commercialisation, developing strands of income-generating activity. Owing to operating across a global context, external shifts and drivers have held a great influence on the British Council's desire and/or ability to operate within particular settings – both strategically and operationally.

External geo-political drivers:

- Regarding withdrawal from certain countries, owing to geopolitical factors, the British Council has always sought to maintain links and connections in a remote capacity, as well as to reinstate an on-the-ground presence at the soonest, politically expedient opportunity.
- Interviewees also noted the significant emotional upset of withdrawal from places of operation.

Individual personalities:

- Individual personalities, via their motivation and passion, have been able to influence change in relation to the British Council's foci and areas of operations (strategically and geographically).
- In general, there has been a push-pull between centralised power at the organisation versus distributed power, i.e. awarded to overseas directors or representatives.

Change and continuity: delivery of programmes and activities

- Change and continuity with regard to the British Council's approach to delivery, broadly landed within the themes of technological developments and its expanding cultural sensitivities.
- It is clear that digital technology (and absence of, initially) has significantly impacted the British Council's operations and influenced its organisational culture, particularly in terms of communications as a global organisation. There are plentiful anecdotes of life before digital technology and a welcoming of the opportunities it could offer to a globalised organisation as well as towards delivery of the British Council's programmes – in terms of both efficacy and accessibility.
- Cultural sensitivities broadly relate to the British Council's interaction and relationship with colonial histories and recognising the UK's role in colonialism/neo-colonialism.
- Interviewees shared accounts of in-country populations pushing back or being sceptical about British involvement, particularly in post-colonial nations, and there was discussion about how resources had tended, in the past, to be inadequately sensitive to local contexts.
- The collections reveal how it was recognised that, to move forward, the British Council would need to reassess how it interacted with countries that had formerly been part of the British Empire, stripping themselves of this assumed label of superiority and paternalistic operating. Clear statements, speaking to the British Council's work decades later, highlight an apparent shift – one that prioritises local involvement and partnership.
- Some positive changes have included a shift in attitudes around employing non-native English speakers and adjusting teaching resources to better suit local contexts and local accents.

Socio-cultural shifts at the British Council

This chapter explores issues around Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) and, additionally, the chapter discusses gendered experiences in the British Council. One of the intrinsic benefits of this collection of oral histories is the temporal scope it provides, which allows us to look back at practices and specifically to intersectional experiences (albeit that the collections largely focus on the protected characteristic of gender).

- Earlier in the British Council's life, there was a perceived dogmatism. Interviewees referenced 'all-white' employees and spoke of a clear divide between British colleagues and local, in-country colleagues.

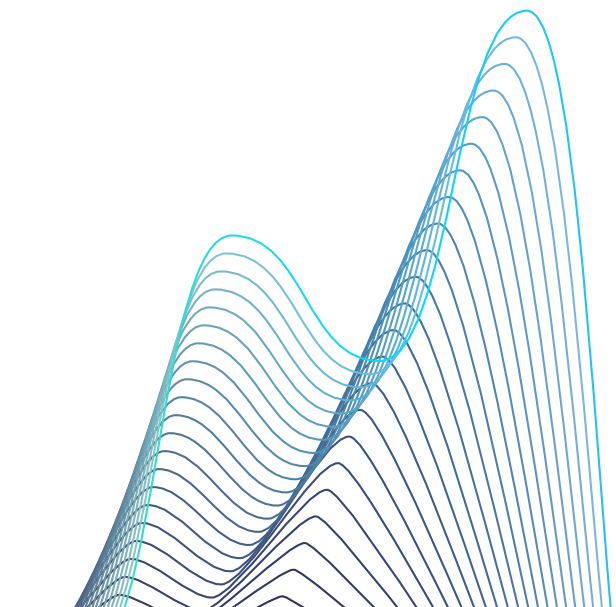
- A recurring theme is the notion of what a British Council employee should be. Often, this archetype is a white, male, Oxbridge graduate. Whilst this elitism is certainly present, by accounts, in earlier years of the British Council, across the two collections in sum we see how that perception unfolds, unravels and is ultimately dismantled.
- Broadly, the British Council has developed its approach to EDI, particularly with regards to gender, but also in taking account of a wider array of difference and protected characteristics.
- However, it is recognised in the 90th anniversary collection that there is more to do by way of EDI, including tackling unconscious bias, prioritising actions over words, going beyond compliance, and avoidance of espousal and virtue signalling, i.e. moving towards a more intentional approach. In this sense, the British Council can be seen to be sharing the UK's journey, in having made progress but still having clear areas for development. However, this intentionally is what appears to have marked a new era for the British Council and EDI.
- Most discussed in the collection in terms of individual experience was the impact of gender, and the gendered experience in the earlier days of the organisation. This included accounts of discrimination and/or differential treatment experienced by both female British Council colleagues and the wives of male colleagues. For example, the presence of an 'old boys' network' and having to work harder as a woman to progress. Whilst anecdotal, these do point to a reflection of the British Council's institutional attitudes towards women at that time.
- The experiences detailed by interviewees can be attributed, in part, to mechanisms of exclusion at both an institutional and societal level, recognising this interplay.
- Much like other protected characteristics, gender appears to shape individual and collective journeys within and through the British Council.

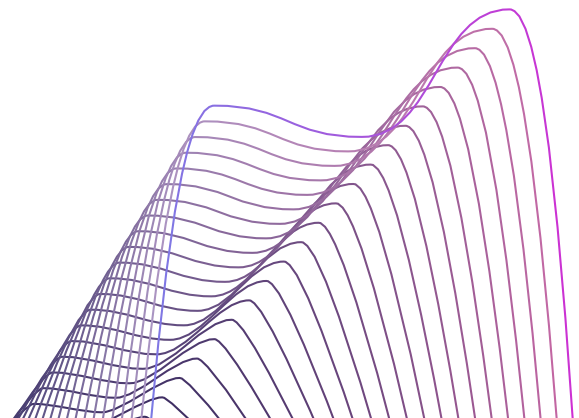
The British Council and the concept of soft power

'Soft power' – a term coined by Joseph Nye – is power attained via non-coercive influence. The British Council primarily engages in cultural relations to enhance the UK's global influence, and to foster meaningful intercultural relationships and exchange. As a cultural relations organisation, therefore, soft power is of relevance, as soft power outcomes are one potential effect of cultural relations activity. Soft power, in this report and within the analysis methodology, is explored via a series of proxies, broadly relating to three defined 'pillars' of soft power: cultural appeal, political values and foreign policy. Key points within each of these three pillars follow below.

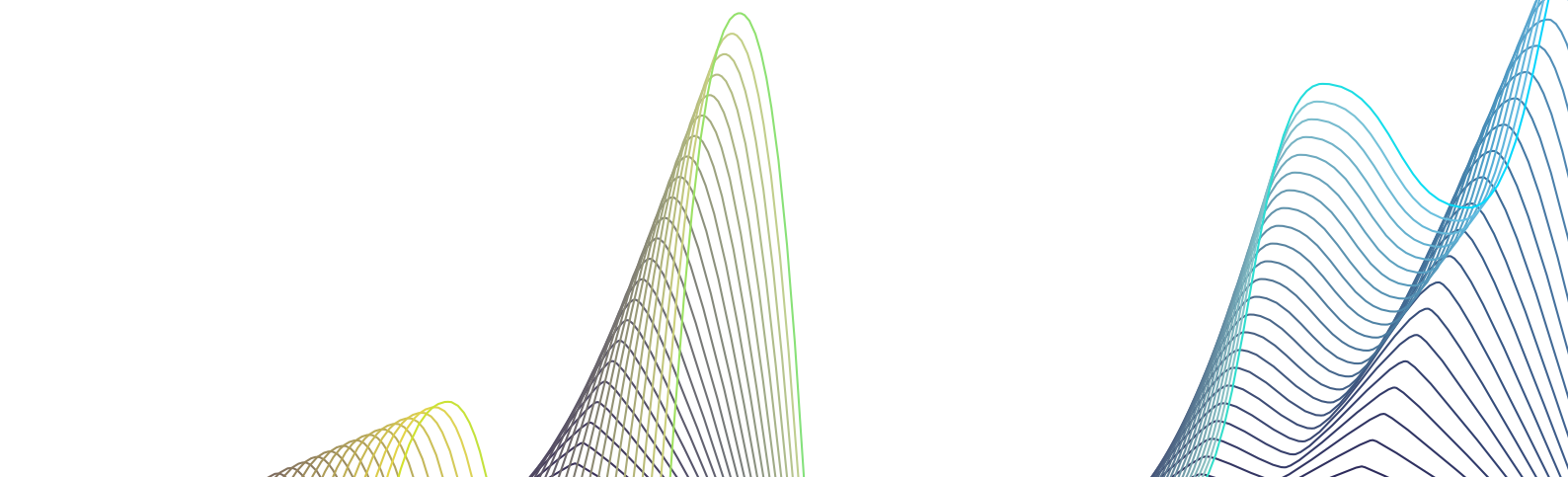
Pillar one: perceptions of the UK's cultural appeal

This pillar involves exploring appreciation of, or attraction to, the UK, perceptions around the country's reputation and proxies such as consumption of cultural exports, for example.





- Broadly, interviewees related how the UK has generally enjoyed positive associations internationally, particularly in terms of its language, culture (arts), education system, scientific credibility and as a result of respected British institutions.
- Perceptions were shown to vary over the lifetime of the British Council and across differing geographies.
- Negative perceptions, where observed, most commonly related to the UK's past role in colonialism and conflicts. These sentiments were expressed within both collections, from British and non-British citizens. Highly nuanced and diverse perceptions were evident within British Council host countries, including post-colonial nations, demonstrating views were not homogenous.
- Further, across the timeline of the British Council, it is clear that different aspects of British culture and institutions have exerted more/less influence or appeal at different times, with an increasing role played and recognised in relation to cultural power.
- A common assumption about the British Council that affected its reception both at home and abroad stemmed from a scepticism over its mission which, to some, was felt to be colonialist/neo-colonialist. It is apparent, however, that perceptions are not often wholly binary, and that both positive and negative regard can often co-exist, owing to different facets of the UK, its actors, its institutions, its values and its culture.
- The interviews reveal a general trajectory of the British Council attempting to establish more positive and more proactively decolonial relationships, as well as an evident shift towards co-operation and local sensitivity, as opposed to either coercion or charity.
- Where soft power was noted explicitly, this was felt to offer both potential pitfalls and promise. For example, it was recognised that soft power activity (or cultural relations activity, noting these are not synonyms) could sometimes be viewed negatively, including with scepticism or suspicion.
- This suspicion has also been evident when in-country actors have conflated the British Council with the UK government. This suggests that the independence of the British Council is fundamental to its efficacy as an institution.
- This demonstrates, perhaps, the unpredictable nature of cultural relations, owing to the multitude of interpretations that can arise.
- Despite this, positive associations and perceptions have often provided the British Council both greater access and credibility within host nations.
- What is clear, including from the examples above, is that perceptions are never static, but liable to shift or evolve. This can be considered a positive in terms of the British Council's mission, given that perceptions appear to be responsive to *influences upon them*, revealing they can be changed for the better.
- Largely, it is considered that the British Council is primed to play an important and ongoing role in the context of soft power.
- In terms of how *British values* were perceived to have shifted over time, the 90th anniversary collection interviews point to perceived positive shifts, including



a perspective that the UK became more 'accepting' and 'outward looking' and developed into a country that 'has decent values and that tries to embrace diversity'.

- Of course, the UK itself possesses a varied landscape of culture and identities, and there is not necessarily one definitive set of 'British values' that could be pinned down, rather a plurality of perspectives, which are at times aligned and at times in opposition.

Pillar two: collaborations and intercultural relationships

Whilst, in general, the interviews reviewed did not expressly reveal shared 'political values', many of the proxies identified were, in fact, present. This involved themes such as increased collaboration and intercultural relations, and proactive behaviours such as a desire to learn or operate in the English language.

- Interviewees reveal a demand for English language teaching across various countries and continents and over time.
- Moreover, this English language teaching, as well as generating impacts for students, has also evidently had a lasting effect on those responsible for delivery. At times, this has included a strong emotional component, perhaps demonstrating the authenticity and depth of relationships forged, in both directions, via the vehicle of English language education.
- The benefits of transnational education were related and it is clear that, strategically, the UK has had a clear offer that aligns with countries' needs. Having said this, alignment has not always been possible to achieve, owing to varied multi-country agendas.
- Overwhelmingly, the interviews reviewed most often contained sentiments around cultural *exchange*, *connection*, and *collaboration*, as opposed to one-way sharing or rather than an explicit acknowledgment of soft power goals or outcomes.
- The theme of *co-operation* runs strongly through accounts of arts-based initiatives, delivered in various locations. Moreover, impacts of arts interventions have ranged from enjoyment, to providing platforms for artists' self-expression, generating pride in one's own language and culture and achieving greater representation for disabled artists.

Pillar three: foreign policy

The British Council, as understood by interviewees' accounts, appears to occupy a unique space within the international political landscape, owing to its non-governmental and operationally independent nature and status as an arms-length body. This feature was broadly regarded as a key component of its success.

As the British Council does not form a component of official governmental diplomatic missions, it appears the institution has been awarded, at times, greater access within host countries, whether this has been to particular geographic locations, particular in-country institutions, or to particular political officials – such as foreign ambassadors – and political processes. Some interviewees would also attribute this privileged access to the trust earned through longevity of operations, and the forging and maintenance of personal relations.

It is clear that, whilst largely a cultural and educational institution, the British Council has variously played a geopolitical role, in addition to itself being directly influenced by geopolitical events. There are accounts, within the interviews reviewed, of the work of the British Council playing a positive role in post-conflict relations, such as following the Cold War or the Falklands War (la Guerra de las Malvinas), in strengthening relationships with post-colonial nations and also similarly restoring trust and productive international collaboration following geopolitical events such as Brexit.

One theme within interviews was that, over time, the British Council appears to have become more responsive to local delivery

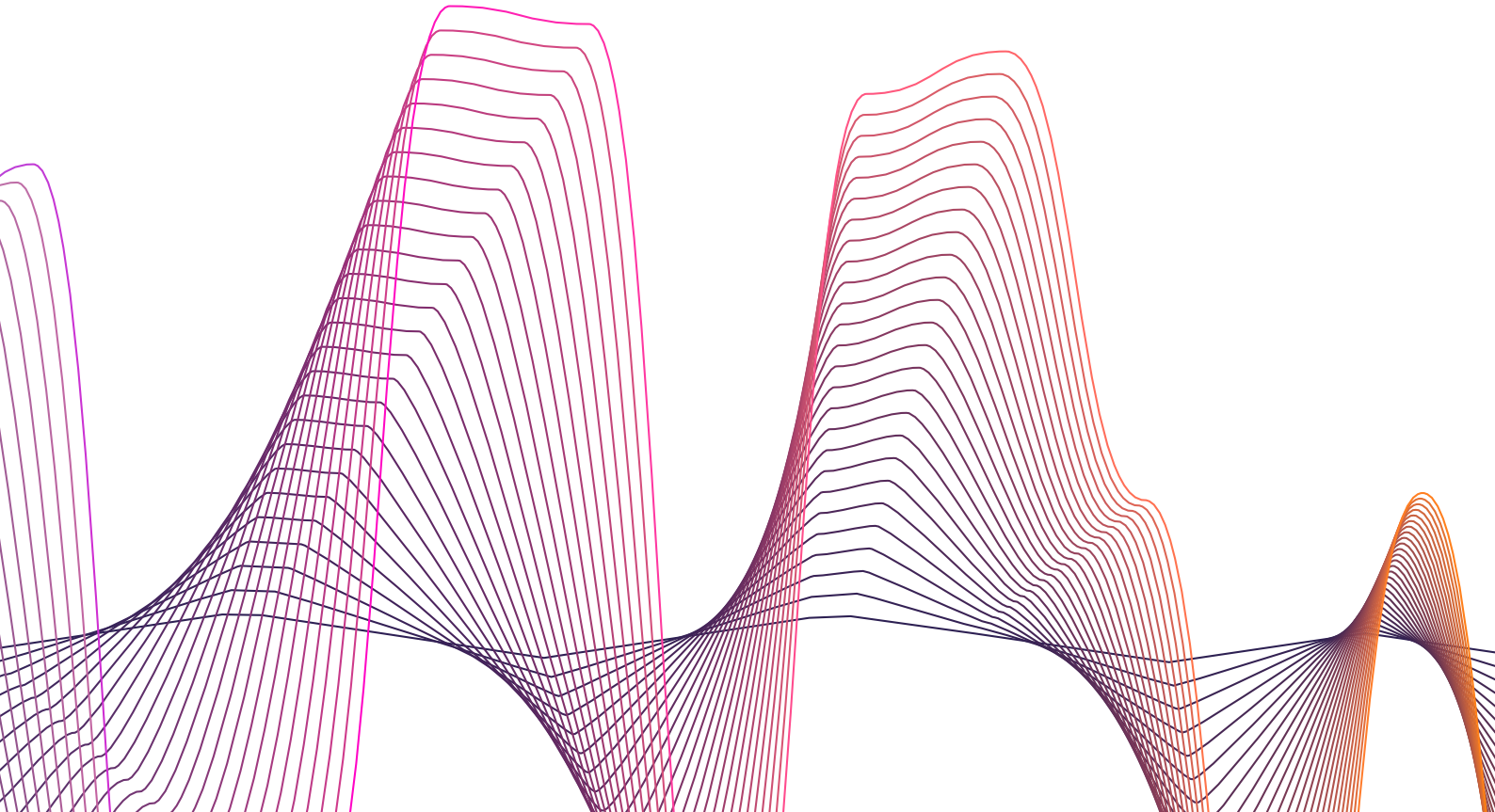
contexts, embedding this approach to a greater extent within its delivery. This way of working, within cultural relations, relates to soft power as it represents the *absence* of identified proxies, which imply the *inverse* of soft power, i.e. force or coercion, power imbalances or lack of meaningful and long-lasting relationships.

There was, within some interviews reviewed, open acknowledgement of a *continued* level of 'colonial' feeling within some British Council activity, as acknowledged. For example, by Patsy Zeppel (former British Council employee in the Sydney office) within the 75th anniversary collection. However, overall, the collections relate the ways in which the British Council has progressed, through the decades of its operation, to placing a greater emphasis on *mutuality*. Ultimately, it is the *intentionality* of the British Council's mode of operation in more recent years, demonstrated in the 90th anniversary collection, which signals this change.

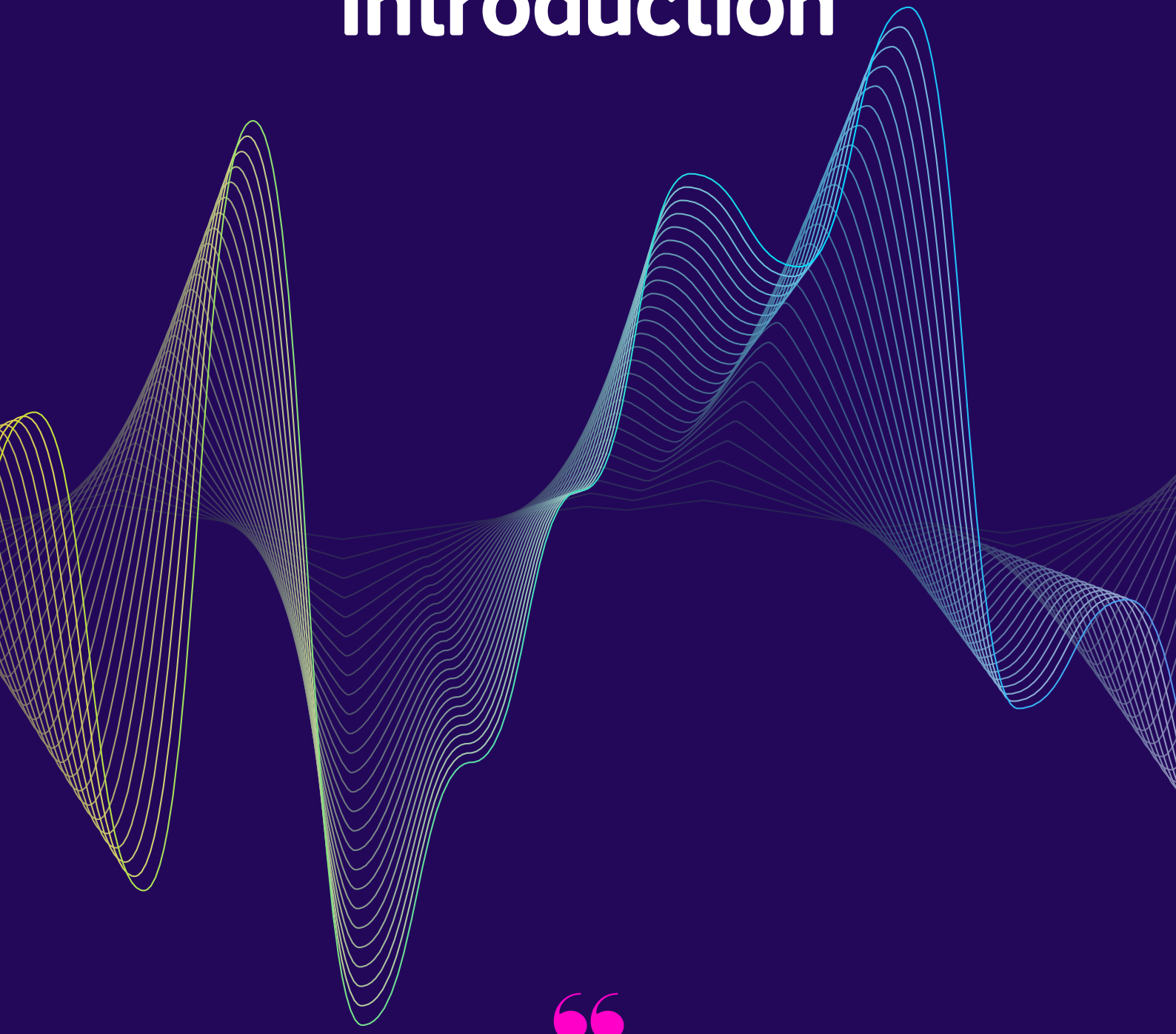
Recurring themes

There are several themes that can be woven together from the sum of the analysis presented across this report. These high-level themes draw together key findings, which may prove of interest to the British Council and others in continuing to explore the wealth of insight contained within these oral history collections:

- relationship building
- commitment and longevity
- intentionality
- independence
- impact
- change
- future
- iterative learning.



Introduction



> “... it’s one of the links in the great global chain. It’s one of the ways of strengthening those links that we have with other nations ... And for me, it was an organisation that spoke to the great values that are shared by peoples of the world.”

Helena Kennedy, former Chair of the British Council (90th anniversary collection)

1 Introduction

1.1 The British Council

The British Council is the UK's international organisation for cultural relations and educational opportunities. It was founded in 1934, with the year 2024 marking its 90th anniversary of operation. As a global organisation, the British Council aims to support peace and prosperity through building connections, understanding and trust between people in the UK and in countries worldwide.

This mission is delivered via the British Council's work in the fields of arts and culture, the English language, education and civil society. The British Council has an on-the-ground presence in over 100 countries and works with individuals to help them gain skills, confidence and connections, aiming to transform their lives and to shape a better world in partnership with the UK.

1.2 The oral history collections

In 2024, the British Council celebrated its 90th anniversary. As part of this milestone celebration, the British Council undertook a series of 26 oral history interviews. These involved people from the UK and around the world who have had a particularly inspiring, insightful or influential experience with the British Council, including current and former employees.

This collection adds to the 75th anniversary oral history collection. The 75th anniversary British Council Oral History Project ran from 2002–13 and was overseen by the British Council Association. It comprised 63 interviews – mainly (though not exclusively) with former British Council members of staff.

The 75th anniversary collection is already archived at the British Library as part of the UK's national sound archive. The 90th anniversary collection will be added to this archive and made publicly available as a resource for future research and scholarship. The 90th anniversary project website, Oral histories: The British Council in action, includes written summaries and selected audio clips for each of the 26 interviews in that collection.

The collections preserve unique accounts and perspectives of the British Council throughout its operation, covering themes such as the organisation's evolution over time; attitudes and perceptions of the UK and the British Council's role; and the impact of the organisation, whether on individuals, countries or socio-cultural and geopolitical themes.

1.3 This oral history analysis project

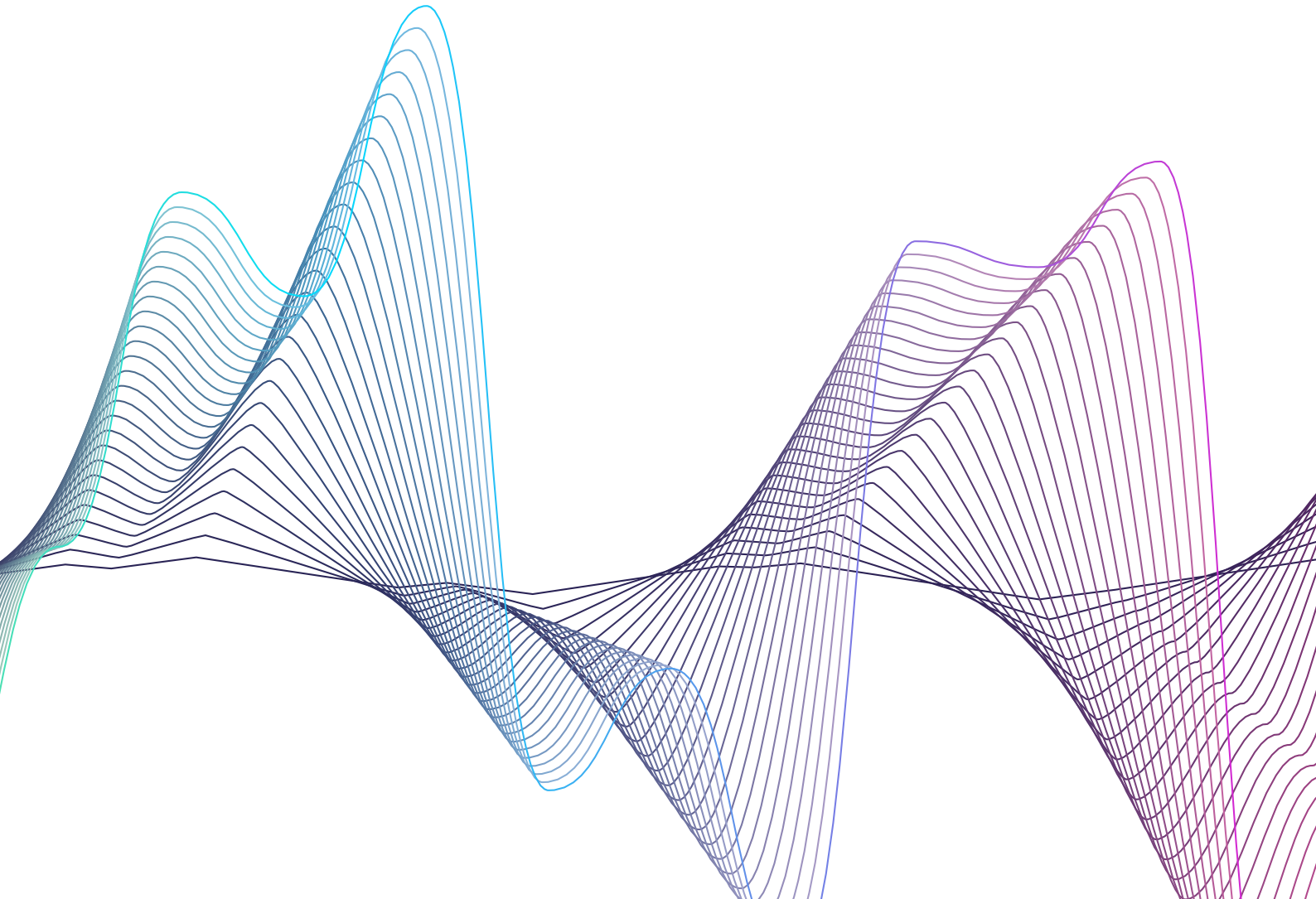
In 2024, ERS was commissioned by the British Council to research and analyse the two oral history collections. By delving into a selection of recordings and transcripts from the 75th and 90th anniversary collections, respectively, the study has aimed to provide insight into the history, approach and impact of the British Council, as well as its role, remit and reception within the wider landscape of the UK's international relationships.

This report is not intended to be a 'dry' institutional retelling of the British Council's operation. Rather, it is about bringing out the personal stories, emotions, experiences and subjective reflections of the interviewees, and analysing what these can tell us about

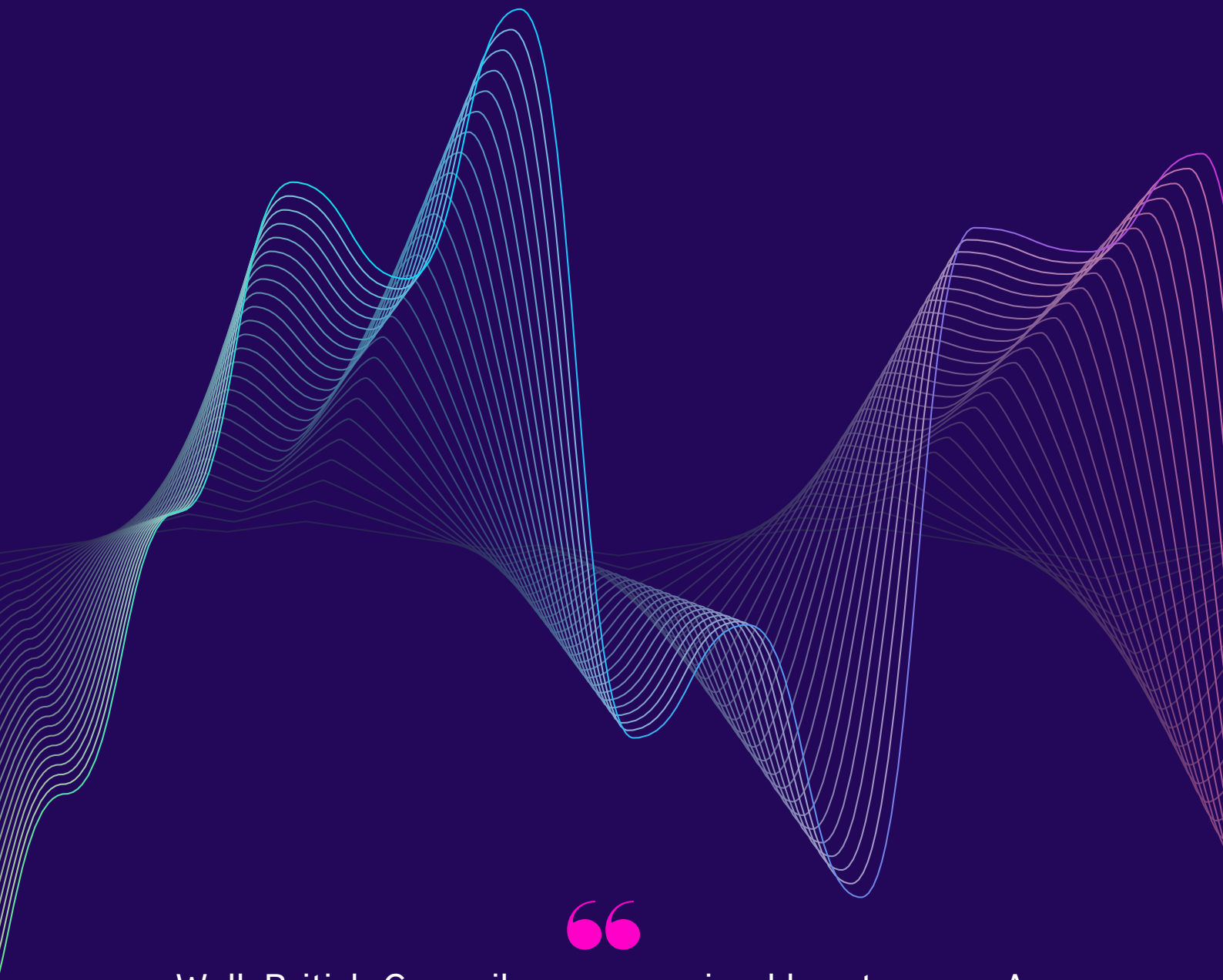
the history, approach and impact of the British Council – and what this, in turn, can tell us about the 'bigger picture' in which the British Council operates, including subjects such as international cultural relations, international development and soft power. This report therefore provides thematic insight (common threads woven into both anniversary collections) as well as powerful and lively first-hand accounts of interviewees. Taken together, this report has aimed to present where the British Council has been and where it may be going – from diverse perspectives, at differing points in history, and across varied global contexts. It is hoped this report will serve as a useful tool for audiences, scholars, practitioners and the organisation itself, aiding in reflecting on decades of international working in an ever-changing world.

This report proceeds as follows:

- **Chapter 2**: Methodology
- **Chapter 3**: Life with the British Council
- **Chapter 4**: Change and continuity: the work of the British Council
- **Chapter 5**: Socio-cultural shifts at the British Council
- **Chapter 6**: The British Council and the concept of soft power
- **Chapter 7**: Conclusions



Methodology



> Well, British Council means a mixed bag to me ... An organisation which has got a very interesting cultural mix because it has a cultural shade of the country where it is located but also a UK cultural shade and on the top of that an overarching global cultural shade.

Amol Padwad, academic and education consultant (90th anniversary collection)

2 Methodology

2.1 Introduction to oral history theory

‘As historians we are interested in the personal anecdote, the individual version of past events, but ultimately we are aware that all personal narratives are embedded within something much bigger – what we might call culture, or wider social forces or the public-political world or the discursive field.’[1]

Oral histories of the British Council are a useful tool in telling the story of the organisation, owing to their qualitative and experiential focus. This allows the story to be told from multiple angles, recognising that there is no single ‘objective’ view or experience of the organisation, rather a multitude of perspectives, attitudes and memories. Exploring the British Council and its place in international affairs via these anniversary collections therefore allows a ‘human’ retelling, spanning decades and bringing nuance to broader themes that may otherwise be flattened. In essence, it retains the more intangible ‘cultural’ component when considering the British Council’s own cultural role.

Oral history accounts differ from other types of qualitative data. Specifically, oral history aims to capture the *lived experience* of individuals. As such, oral history is deeply rooted in *memory*. As a means to analyse memory, oral history scholarship has transitioned through many analytical debates and has connected with a range of academic disciplines. Broadly, what is widely considered to be important in examining oral histories, as opposed to other forms of qualitative data, is exploring not only *content*, but also the *meaning(s)* of the spoken word – as contained in multiple forms, first within both the interview transcripts and recordings, and then via its interpretation.

The approach taken to reviewing the interview transcripts and recordings, and producing this report, therefore combines both an ‘evidential’ approach – treating the transcripts as data to inform suggested common themes and findings – and an ‘interpretative’ approach, where we seek to uncover the explicit and implicit meaning(s) within each individual’s interview, understanding the unique personal accounts and perspectives.

2.2 Oral history analysis methodology

Various methodological steps were undertaken towards completion of this study. These can broadly be considered in three phases, namely: scoping; analysis; and reporting.

As part of the scoping phase, a systematic Literature Review was conducted to familiarise with aspects of the British Council’s work, strategy, and its various operational and geopolitical contexts. This aided in contextualisation of the oral history collections, as well as broader evidence to supplement interview materials. Further, this review solidified emerging lines of enquiry.

1 Lynn Abrams (2016) Oral History Theory (Second Edition), Routledge.

As a next step, meta data connected with the interviews was reviewed in order to familiarise with the characteristics of respondents (such as nationality, role or connection to the British Council, and geographic regions in which individuals had lived or worked). This step also surfaced the broad topical themes covered in each of the interviews.

An Analysis Plan was then developed, which set out the Sampling Framework. As it would not be possible, within the timeframe or resource available, to review in detail all of the transcripts and audio recordings contained within the oral history collections, a sample was agreed on the basis of ensuring a spread across the meta data categories mentioned above, as well as considering the thematic content and quality of the interviews in relation to the research objectives. This selected sample comprised fifteen 90th anniversary collection interviews and eleven 75th anniversary collection interviews.

The analysis plan also outlined the coding structure and coding definitions applied in the qualitative thematic analysis. This analysis was carried out manually and collaboratively by the study team researchers using qualitative analysis software.

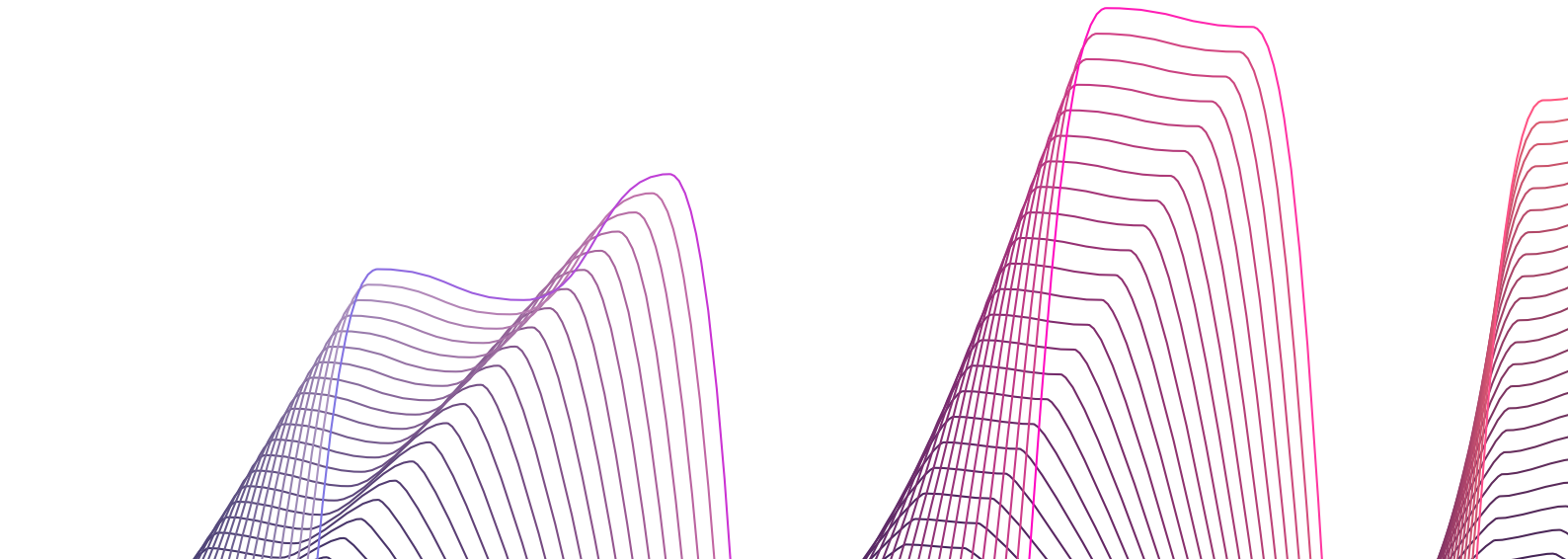
A thematic analysis approach was used, combining both inductive (themes emerging from the data, i.e. bottom-up) and deductive (themes applied from the research framework, i.e. top-down) coding. This approach allowed for exploration of the core research themes of interest, as well as for emergent themes that developed alongside the analysis process.

The coded content was then analysed, undergoing further synthesis to develop and structure report content.

2.3 Research limitations

There are certain research limitations and explanatory notes that need to be expressed, namely:

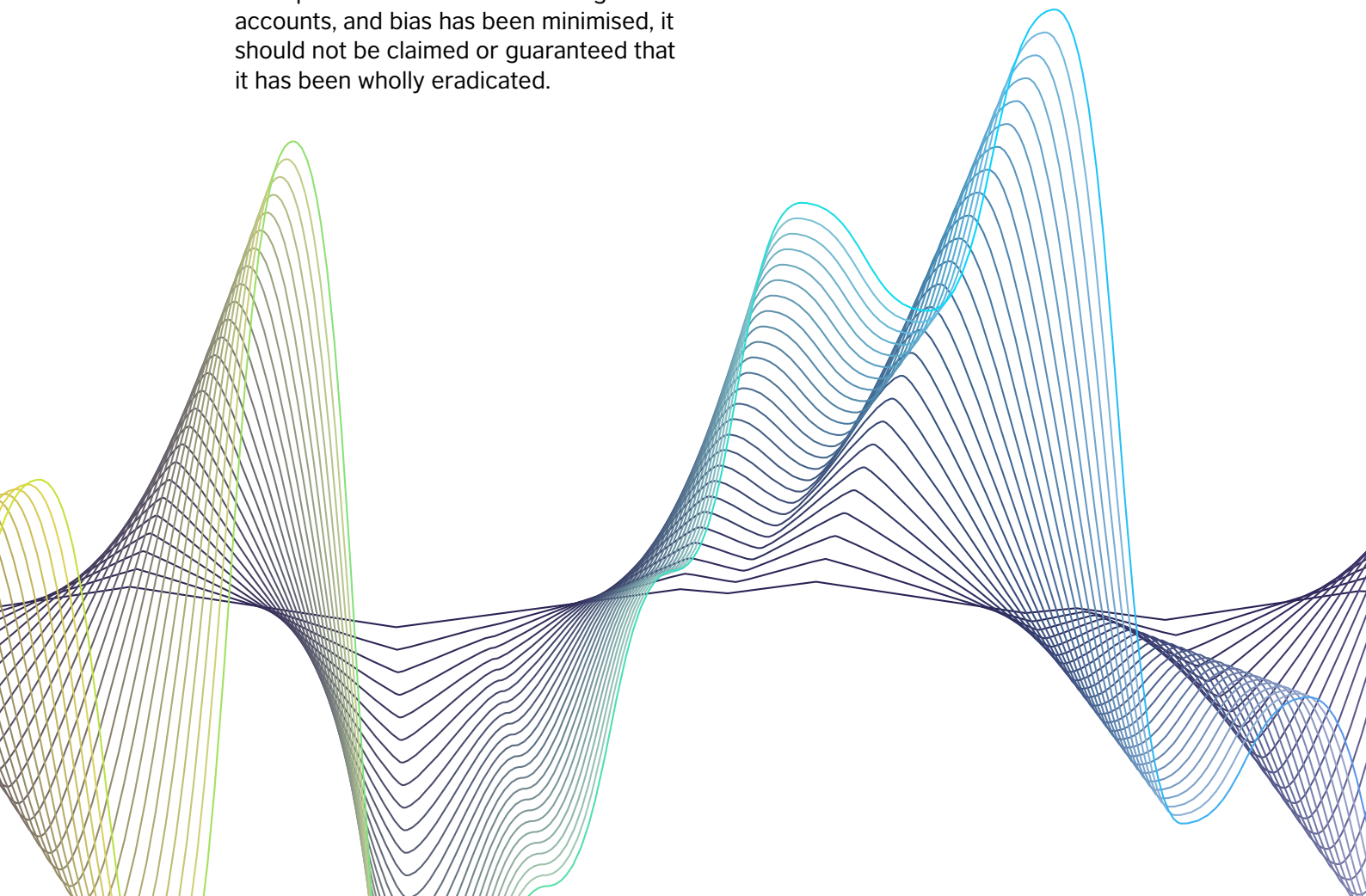
- Given the size of the collections, it was necessary to be selective regarding the interviews to be reviewed in-depth and which have contributed most directly to the findings contained here. That is to say, looking at a different sub-set of the collections may well have surfaced different themes, perspectives or insights. This report, therefore, does not attempt to be the 'definitive' account or summary of the oral history collections as a whole – nor is it a definitive or exhaustive account of the British Council.
- The 75th and 90th anniversary collections, although conducted 15 years apart, do not represent a longitudinal study, nor are they equivalent. Each collection drew from different parameters for interviewee selection and explored different themes. The 75th anniversary collection interviewees, for example, were mainly British-national former British Council colleagues, whereas the 90th anniversary collection interviewees were of a more diverse pool, i.e., individuals from both the UK and other countries around the world, former and current



British Council staff, as well as external partners and collaborators. Therefore, whilst the collections do offer opportunity for reflection on change and continuity over time, they do not provide direct comparators.

- Relatedly, whilst the report does, to an extent, supplement the interviews with wider evidence and historiography, it is primarily focused on relating subjective accounts and perspectives. It should be noted that the report delivers an overview of these key experiences and recollections, rather than sourced fact, or representative or generalisable views. Moreover, as accounts are memory-based, they may be subject to bias or fallible recollections. Here, we have sought to interpret and understand, rather than verify.
- Despite attempts and a methodological design aimed at minimising researcher bias, it must be highlighted that there has been a necessary level of interpretation that has been applied in assessing the collections. Whilst the study team has attempted to remain faithful to original accounts, and bias has been minimised, it should not be claimed or guaranteed that it has been wholly eradicated.
- As is the nature of writing interpretative accounts of oral history materials, the quotes presented throughout have necessarily been decontextualised from their wider narrative. This may therefore alter the reader's own interpretation of meaning. As well, at times, quotes have been minimally altered to support sense-making or to redact personal information.

Positively, as mentioned above, the oral history collections as a whole are being made available through the British Library, as a public resource. The hope is that the collections will be drawn on in various ways by other researchers or interested parties going forward, supporting future scholarship and insight. Therefore, in many ways, this analysis represents a starting point and an invitation to the research community to further explore the collections through their own lens(es), in order to build on, challenge or reframe the ongoing discussion. See the Appendix for the full list of interviewees for both the 75th and the 90th anniversary collections.



Life with the British Council

I think that's a very important thing about how the British Council functions. It doesn't function just on an organisational level. It also functions at a personal level.

Deb Avery, education consultant (90th anniversary collection)

3 Life with the British Council

This collection of oral histories tells the stories of people's lives as shaped by, and lived through, their relationship with the British Council. The deeply personal nature of these stories is powerful and, in this chapter, we start to explore who these people are and their personal connections to the British Council, as both internal and external to the organisation.

The first section will explore the various life experiences that led individuals to engage with the British Council. The second section explores the diversity of experience offered by a relationship with the organisation, followed by testimonies of personal impact and finally an introduction to both the perceived culture and the perceived function of the British Council.

3.1 Life experiences that led to engagement with the British Council

Through both anniversary collections, numerous motivations can be observed for joining the organisation.

Family and early life were commonly discussed in the interviews. Indeed, a few individuals found their path to the British Council through the recommendation of friends and family. Pilar Aramayo-Prudencio (Head of English in Education at the British Council) recounted how her mother's own role in the British Council was fundamental to how her childhood was shaped. There appears to be some correlation across interviewees that having parents working in international roles planted a seed in their mind that not only might they be equipped for a life overseas, but that they would enjoy it themselves. A 90th anniversary collection interviewee, Janet Ilieva (former Education Research Officer at the British Council, currently an education consultant) cited a 'childhood aspiration to experience the world' as a motivation to join the British Council. Interestingly, despite coming from families who 'appreciated the arts', in some cases, interviewees' desires to pursue a career in arts and culture were often discouraged or minimised by their families (e.g. Amr Gamal, theatre and film director, 90th anniversary collection).

Passion as a motivation for joining or working alongside the British Council was omnipresent across both anniversary collections. Where this passion stemmed from varied, be it experience of other cultures at a young age, a desire to travel, a love for the arts or, in some cases, borne out of adversity and a desire to help others. Adversity for the interviewees took many forms. For several of those interviewed in the 75th anniversary collection, it was the legacy of growing up during the Second World War, losing loved ones, or being forced to flee their homes. Across the 90th anniversary collection, Jo Verrent (Director of the arts commissioning body Unlimited) described losing her hearing at a young age, whilst Fiona Bartels-Ellis (former Head of Equality and Diversity and Inclusion at the British Council) and Lemn Sissay (poet and broadcaster) detailed their experiences of exclusion and discrimination growing up in the UK. Fiona Bartels-Ellis went on to cite the adversity she faced as a child as a contributing factor in her desire to help others through Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI):

‘I’m somebody who’s personally experienced, you know, discrimination. And I particularly know and understand what it’s like to feel powerless as a child. And that was a huge motivation for my work in this sector, a huge motivation.’

Fiona Bartels-Ellis, former Head of Equality and Diversity and Inclusion at the British Council (90th anniversary collection)

As interviewees told the stories of their lives, education was commonly mentioned. Across both anniversary collections, interviewees detailed with pride their academic achievements with several 75th anniversary interviewees citing their degree qualifications from Oxford University and Cambridge University. Further exploration of these prestigious qualifications will be explored in 5.1 Manifestations of EDI in practice, specifically how they relate to stereotypes of a particular *‘type’* of British Council employee in the early years of the organisation’s operation. Despite the very obvious levels of academic credentials and intellectual aptitude demonstrated across both collections sampled, however, it was interesting to see that what appeared to take precedence over academic qualifications was being ‘the right sort of person’ (in this sense, meaning someone who possessed an ability to develop relationships and engage others). Trevor Rutter, former British Council Assistant Director General, noted this explicitly, saying:

‘I think personal qualities are more at a premium in the Council, the sort of qualities which can readily establish relations of trust and congeniality on a broad basis in another country, those rather than purely intellectual qualities, the ability to develop and nurture fruitful relationships.’

Trevor Rutter, former British Council Assistant Director General (75th anniversary collection)

The above points around narrower educational backgrounds are more specific to the 75th anniversary collection. Despite a wide variety of cited motivations for joining the British Council, and a wide variety of nationalities, childhoods and experiences across the two collections, those internal to the British Council in particular recognised a common attribute in colleagues, namely a passion and dedication to their work. This is best illustrated by the quotes below.

‘I think we were frightfully lucky to have the people we did as colleagues, and this may be a tribute to the selection process, may be a tribute to the motivation which people felt to join the Council, and to the general ethos of idealism and enthusiasm which I think imbued the organisation during the years in which I served in it.’

Trevor Rutter, former British Council Assistant Director General (75th anniversary collection)

‘… going to the British Council I was able to identify with objectives in which as a human being I very strongly believed and which touched my heart as well as my head, so working for the British Council and working for people who felt committed to what they were doing – and this is one of the great things about the British Council, one felt that one’s colleagues really believed in what they were doing.’

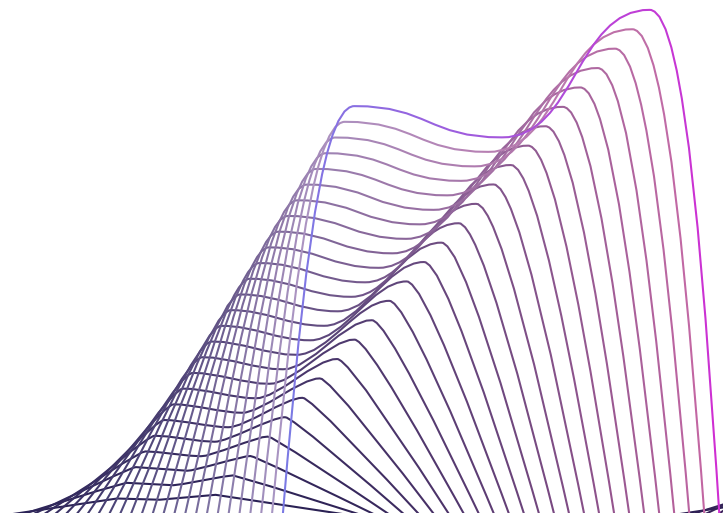
John Burgh, former British Council Director General (75th anniversary collection)

3.2 The impact of diverse career experiences

‘… and I must admit you become a rolling stone …’

Brian Lavercombe, former Head of Science Department, British Council (75th anniversary collection)

When initially approaching the collections, what became apparent very early on was the diversity of a life with the British Council. Not only did interviewees move across departments and work across numerous projects, but they were also always on the move. In a 75th anniversary collection interview, Marion Oakeshott, former Private Secretary at the British Council, describes an unspoken rule of moving between departments approximately every two years. In Chapter Four, we explore the organisational implications and debates around international roles. In this chapter, in considering a life with the British Council, what we observed – which was often described as a ‘privilege’ – was a remarkable opportunity to experience a variety of cultures, countries and perspectives.



‘I have been looking back at my diary as I have told you and I can’t believe the sort of life that I’ve actually led at that time, a combination of constantly stimulating work, of constantly meeting a whole series of interesting people from the Prime Minister downwards, ministers of every description, people of distinction in academia and the arts, whatever, and then travelling abroad and meeting the most interesting people, any number of heads of states, ministers and so on.’

John Burgh, former Director General (75th anniversary collection)

The quote above is from the former Director General (1980–87), but this experience of exposure is also described by another senior member, Fiona Bartels-Ellis, a decade later. An external partner, Francesca Beard, a spoken-word artist, also describes how her life with the British Council enabled her to grow as a spoken word artist through this exposure.

Interestingly, it appears that no matter the position held by staff, this opportunity for exposure to such a range of people was always present. This ability to interact with such a variety of cultures, one 90th anniversary collection interviewee, Paul Smith (former British Council Country Director) suggests, is even greater in the British Council than in the diplomatic core: ‘I mean, I’ve been so privileged to have engaged with so many cultures, so many people, some of the, you know, sometimes in the job of a Country Director, you meet a wider variety and get to know well, a wider variety of professionals and creative people in a country than the ambassador does.’

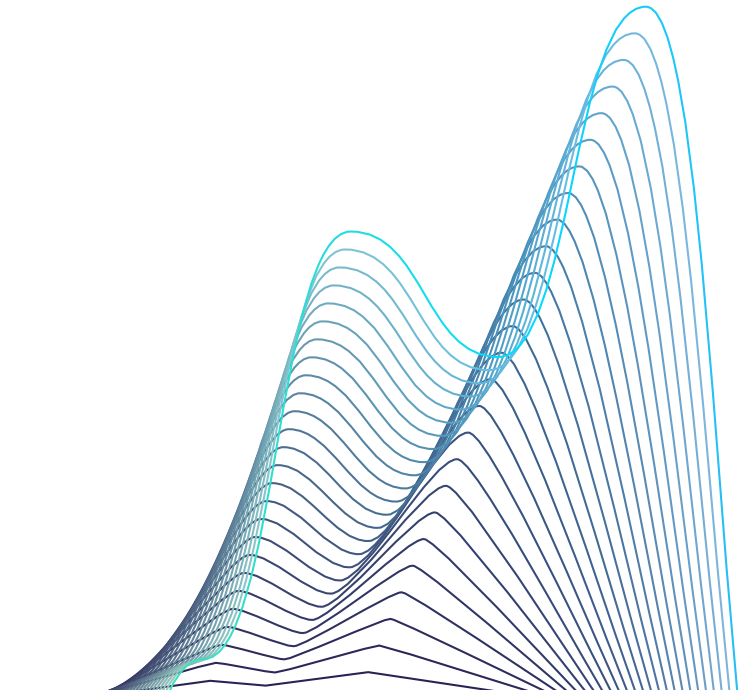
Whilst interviewees see this experience as a privilege, a proportion of the collection also acknowledges the impact this international life has on family and friends.

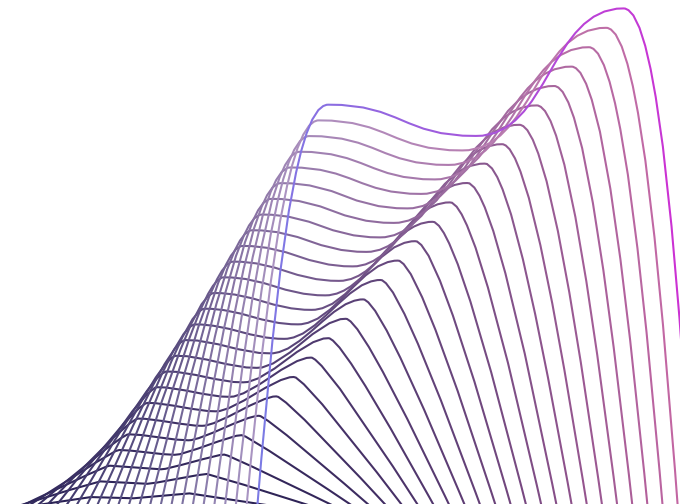
‘On a personal basis, I suppose the itinerant life for me at any rate meant a loosening of early friendships, there were many friendships which I wasn’t able to sustain because I kept going away, and friendships I suppose need nurture on a regular basis otherwise they taper, so I think that was a loss. I think sometimes there’s a risk that one loses touch with one’s own society if one’s so preoccupied with tuning into other people’s.’

Trevor Rutter, former British Council Assistant Director General (75th anniversary collection)

Another impact noted by several male British Council employees was the implications of their early work for their wives. Numerous 75th anniversary collection interviewees detail the obligations and expectations of British Council wives at that time in history. Commonly, their wives were not able to work in the countries they were sent to, be it through lack of opportunity or custom. Additionally, they were also expected to fulfil a number of duties including entertaining, charity work and looking after the family. As Brian Lavercombe noted in 2003: 'It wasn't easy to be a British Council wife in those days'. These expectations, he acknowledges at that time, would 'be considered completely politically incorrect', but are indicative of gendered stereotypes of this time. These themes will be explored in greater detail in Chapter Five, as we assess socio-cultural shifts within the organisation.

A final theme that is illustrative of life in, and inextricably linked to the operating remit of, the British Council is securitisation of life. One 75th anniversary collection interviewee, Monica Smith (a former British Council employee whose international posts included roles in Bangkok, Thailand, Santiago, Chile and Kumasi, Ghana) described in Chile living under curfew, tear gas in the streets during protests, and a bullet coming through her window. Monica was in Chile for the two penultimate years of Salvador Allende's presidency. She noted that she was in London during the 1973 coup d'état, where the Chilean military, led by General Augusto Pinochet, overthrew Allende. She returned to Chile for the first two years of Pinochet's rule, which was marred by human rights abuses and significant social and economic upheaval (1974–76). Another 75th anniversary collection interviewee and former British Council Regional Officer, Bridget Thompson, described working in Czechoslovakia (Czechia) following the Prague Spring in 1968, a brief period of political liberalisation and reform. The Soviet Union supressed the reforms and ultimately took back control of Czechoslovakia until 1989. Bridget describes how 'the academics were having a really horrid time, being interviewed and assessed for what they'd done in sixty-eight and so on'. She described tensions between Soviet troops and Czechoslovaks at the time and accepting that her office was invariably bugged. She recounted the story of having to have regular discreet conversations with colleagues during walks in the woods. Francesca Beard additionally noted that when performing in Columbia in the early 2000s, despite being in a 'war-torn region', she felt confident that she would not be sent into danger.

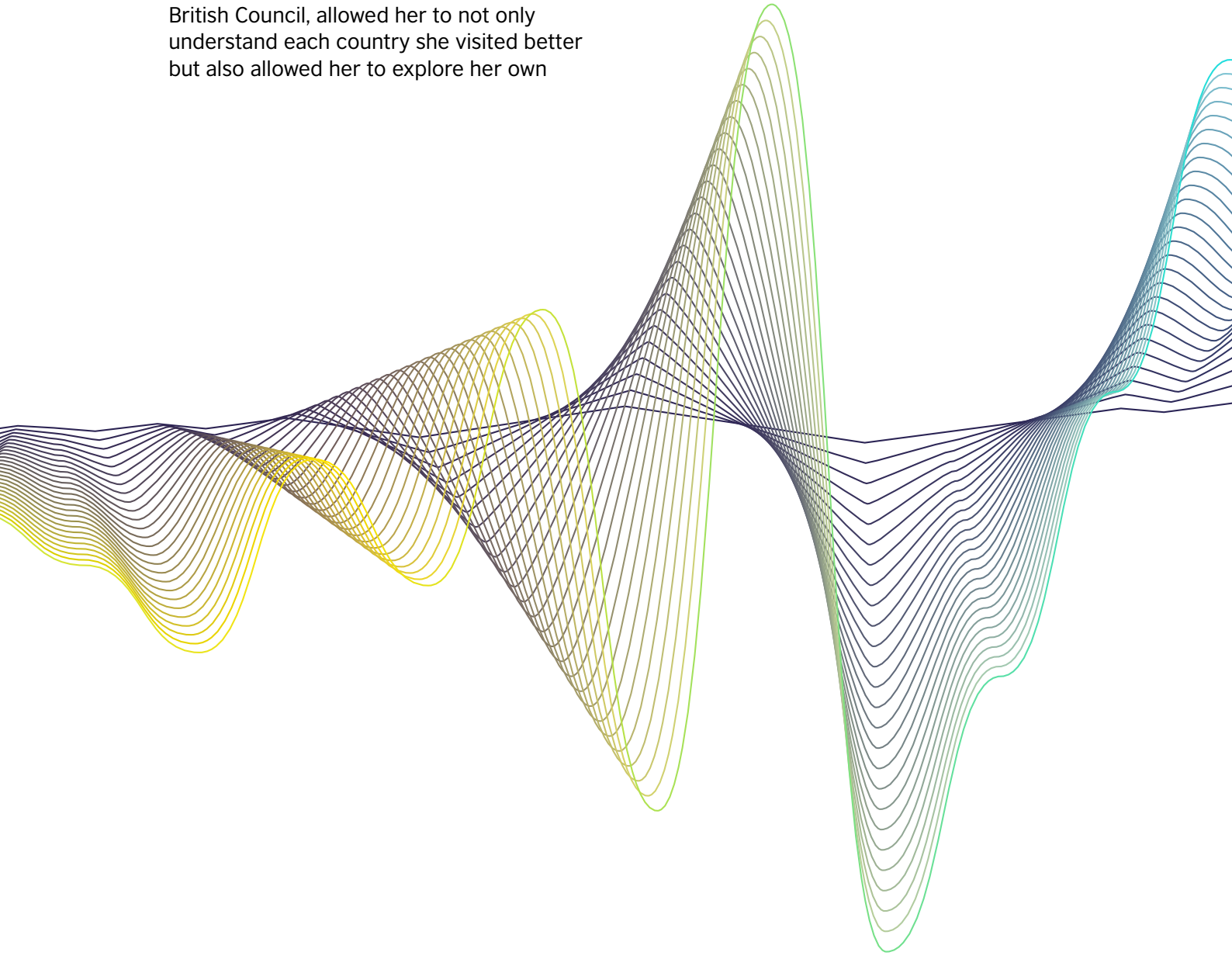




3.3. Shaped by the institution

As noted at the start of this chapter, what is so compelling about these interviews – due perhaps, in part, to the medium of oral histories – is the representation of a person's life story as shaped by the institution of the British Council. This is explicitly acknowledged in numerous interviews.

A number of interviewees attribute the British Council to creating a clearer perception of self. One 90th anniversary collection interviewee, the Indian academic and education consultant Amol Padwad, suggested that, through his partnership with the British Council, he was able to 'understand certain things about myself, question and confront myself with certain beliefs, preconceptions and so on'. Another external partner, Jo Verrent (Director of Unlimited), described how international opportunities, facilitated in part by the British Council, allowed her to not only understand each country she visited better but also allowed her to explore her own needs and wants. She said: 'I particularly like going to countries that are quite politically nuanced and trying to work out where my boundaries are and where, and who I align with' (90th anniversary collection). Another external partner, the Yemeni theatre and film director, Amr Gamal, movingly testifies how, through the British Council facilitating and recognising the importance of their own art and culture, their confidence was restored (90th anniversary collection).



‘It built more trust in myself. It raised my self-esteem and made me like … even if the last years with war after war after war break … Actually, we are products of wars also because since we were children, we went through many wars so all the time it breaks something inside you and makes you feel less and you cannot achieve something big and to be content with small things because you don’t have an opportunity to make a bigger thing … And I always had this low self-esteem, but now I think this is the most important thing I took from this experience. It rebuilt the missing blocks in my trust.’

Amr Gamal, theatre and film director (90th anniversary collection)

These testimonies not only demonstrate the value of the British Council’s work in facilitating and supporting external partners but also demonstrate the dedication and passion of British Council partners themselves.

This work of facilitation also links to a separate category of impact, which is the opportunities the British Council provided both internally and externally.

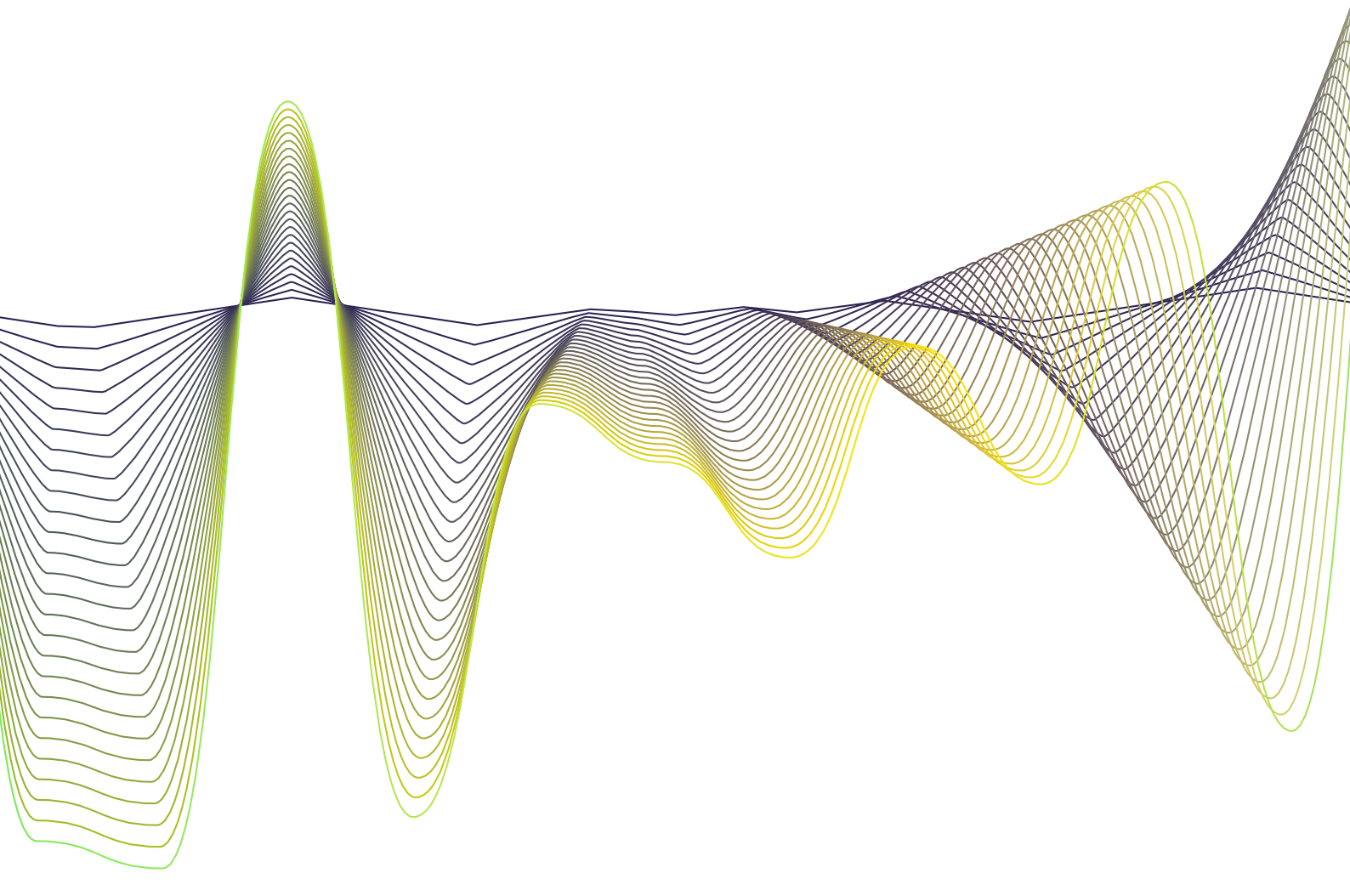
Poet and broadcaster Lemn Sissay recalled how the ‘British Council put me on my first plane outside of this country’ and another external interviewee, the South African education consultant Deb Avery, suggested it had allowed her to work on more projects that she may not have been able to experience otherwise (both 90th anniversary collection). Internally, Mike Solly, Head of English Research and Insight at the British Council, acknowledges the nuance of opportunity provided by the British Council: ‘I’m not saying it would have been impossible for me to have had the kind of experiences of other cultures that I’ve had without the British Council. But it has been my way in’ (90th anniversary collection). This nuance is important to these stories because those interviewed already constitute a group of individuals so dedicated to their field that they would likely have pursued their work in the absence of the British Council. However, what was equally observable is that the British Council has had an invaluable role in supporting and facilitating these experiences.

3.4 Perceived culture of the British Council

When considering a life with the British Council, one of the themes that comes organically from the interviewees is a sense of a unique organisational culture. Not a culture derived from a mission statement or brand perspective, but a more subtle reflection on what being with the British Council entails. The two aspects that stand out in this regard are an encouragement and desire to learn, and an emphasis on building personal relationships.

John Burgh, former Director General of the British Council, saw his two essential duties as 'finance and staff', and in the ensuing discussion of his approach, he detailed an initiative he launched whereby he made themself regularly available to junior colleagues during lunch. He noted this initiative allowed him to gain 'information and knowledge about what people thought that otherwise a Director General inevitably doesn't come across' (75th anniversary collection). This demonstrates a willingness to learn from the very top of management. As detailed above, the opportunity to learn from and experience different cultures appeared highly valued by interviewees. But what was also demonstrated was a willingness to question one's own perspectives, in a continual process of learning and growth.

Building relationships and these 'personal qualities' also seem fundamental to a life with the British Council. Often, the interviews were filled with extraordinary and often very detailed anecdotes about relationships built within and outside the British Council.



Anecdotes of the personal relationships facilitated by the British Council

‘So being young as we were, being very young, as we were, at the time, we struck up excellent personal relationships with young Pakistanis of the same age, students for example at the civil service academy in Lahore, young army officers. This meant of course in later years that one had some very, very good and influential contacts because of those early days when we met socially and did so many things together. One of them was Javed Burki, who later became captain of the Pakistan cricket team. This was a great advantage to us, whenever there were visiting cricket teams (as) we, Anne and I, were always invited into the pavilion and sat with the Pakistan cricket team. Because of our interest in drama, we had very strong friendships with local actors and writers and film makers, and particularly women at that stage, women had come very much to the fore and were leading in so many of these.’

Malcolm Dalziel, former British Council Regional and Country Director (75th anniversary collection)

‘You become close to people, and you start to think, well, you know, these people are almost like my family. And I think that’s a very important thing about how the British Council functions. It doesn’t function just on an organisational level, it also functions at a personal level.’

Deb Avery, education consultant (90th anniversary collection)

Deb Avery

Audio clip

Anecdotes of the personal relationships facilitated by the British Council

‘And I remember I went to the British Council Christmas party. I used to do an amazing Christmas party at Spring Gardens … but also just all of the people in a room that you really want to talk to because they’re incredible. And everyone was really open and there wasn’t, you know … sometimes you go to – I very rarely go to these, but I know that they exist – literary parties and everyone’s like eyeing each other and competitive and weird. And it was not that – everyone was … it was full of camaraderie and was super friendly. You could just talk, go up and talk to someone and they would be really just friendly and, you know, and it was all under this … I think it was because everyone who had worked for the British Council literature department and had gone on a tour had had such a transformational, wonderful experience that they felt kind of grateful and humble in the best way. So everyone was just very chill.’

Francesca Beard, spoken word artist (90th anniversary collection)

Francesca Beard

3.5 Perceived function of the British Council

Alongside this discussion of what the culture of the British Council represents at an individual level, there is an additional theme of consensus that emerges from both collections, namely its perceived function as an institution.

3.5.1 Prior to joining the British Council

A 90th anniversary collection interviewee, Paul Smith (former British Council Country Director), detailed his perception of the British Council's function before joining as an extension of the Diplomatic Service, promoting Britain not through politics and economics but through art and education. One interviewee, Harold Oxbury (former Deputy Controller of Home Division, British Council, 75th anniversary collection), expressed his disbelief at its reach and remit, and perhaps a common scepticism about the efficacy of soft power as a mechanism of diplomacy.

One external partner and collaborator, the Argentinian musician and playwright and war veteran, Rubén Otero (90th anniversary collection), saw its function both as a 'factory of forming endless interpersonal and inter-community relationships', citing the good done for others, whereas another external partner had a more nuanced and complicated understanding of its function:

'Well, British Council means a mixed bag to me. I often see it as a corporate charity as well as an educational organisation, a learning organisation, a collection of good and bad individuals. An organisation which has got a very interesting cultural mix because it has a cultural shade of the country where it is located but also a UK cultural shade and on the top of that an overarching global cultural shade.'

Amol Padwad, academic and education consultant (90th anniversary collection)

Amol Padwad

Connecting threads across the collections, it is recognised that the British Council as an institution is made up of individuals with the power to do both good and harm, situated within a diverse geographic ecosystem that lends influence to its activities and processes. This is an important point that will be discussed further in the discussion around change and continuity in delivery, and within Chapter Five, which discusses socio-political shifts at the British Council. The repositioning of the British Council, as it moves to acknowledge its colonial legacy alongside a concerted push towards an authentic EDI programme, is one important foundation upon which the British Council continues to maintain credibility in its

operations. This is inextricably linked to its efficacy in soft power as well, because soft power exists only so long as the British Council and Britain itself are capable of retaining cultural appeal. These factors are also a driving force behind the evolution of the institution.

3.5.2 In retrospect

As aforementioned, the benefit of this collection and its format, oral histories, is that there is ample opportunity for interviewees' reflections. Looking retrospectively, back across the decades of operation, former British Council colleagues were able to conceptualise its function with great clarity. Therefore, what emerges from the interviewees is a confidence in stating this perceived function. John Burgh speaks about the process of evolution: 'I suppose looking back, one always knows of course that every discovery of the British Council is in fact a rediscovery and the wheels turn full circle. There is nothing very new I think about this, but the actual process of reaching this certainly helped to clarify our minds.' Other interviewees, also internal to the British Council, had an unwavering confidence in the British Council's value and function. Trevor Rutter, detailing the defence of the British Council in the 1980s said: 'We're having to defend and expound what seemed to us self-evident and obvious, what we were doing was totally worthwhile, entirely in the British interest, and indispensable we argued, and we were arguing this to sceptical think-tank people and sceptical politicians.'

Across the collection, the perceived function of the British Council was described both implicitly and explicitly as based on a principle of mutuality, which guides the mission of cultural relations. As former British Council Chair Neil Kinnock put it, 'The [British] Council existed to inform the world about Britain and in return to get Britain to comprehend something about the world.' (Neil Kinnock, former Chair of the British Council, 90th anniversary collection.)

This theme was apparent in both anniversary collections. The evidence of commitment to this principle is illustrated by Mike Solly:

> 'And but that said, one of the things that I remain really positive about what the British Council does is that it has these long-standing relationships with countries, sees them through the turmoil that they might go through where they can.'
>
> **Mike Solly, Head of English Research and Insight at the British Council (90th anniversary collection)**

Across numerous interviews, what emerged is a real confidence in the mission of cultural relations, speaking to the passion driving British Council employees (discussed in Chapter Three).

> 'And here we were. I mean, you couldn't have asked for a more committed, knowledgeable, supportive group of people. I think because we had the joint purpose and we were all there for the right reasons.'
>
> **Neil Kinnock, former Chair of the British Council (90th anniversary collection)**

Neil Kinnock

The joint purpose of cultural relations – meaning sharing culture, building relationships and bringing people together – seemed to form a consensus on the perceived function of the British Council:

Consensus on the cultural relations function of the British Council:

‘For me, means it’s one of the links in the great global chain. It’s one of the ways of strengthening those links that we have with other nations. And you do that by taking pride in your own culture, by seeing the things that we share with others. And it’s our common humanity. And for me, it was an organisation that spoke to the great values that are shared by peoples of the world.’

Helena Kennedy, former Chair of the British Council (90th anniversary collection)

Helena Kennedy

‘My experience with the British Council was a dream come true because it was a direct experience of the world. But not just that, it’s being actively involved in building the bridge between the UK and other countries … It’s the people that make up the British Council, their dedication, their commitment, their genuine interest in others and bringing people together from all across the world. It’s quite a unique chance to be able to be involved in that, to be part of that.’

Janet Ilieva, former Education Research Officer at the British Council, current Education consultant (90th anniversary collection)

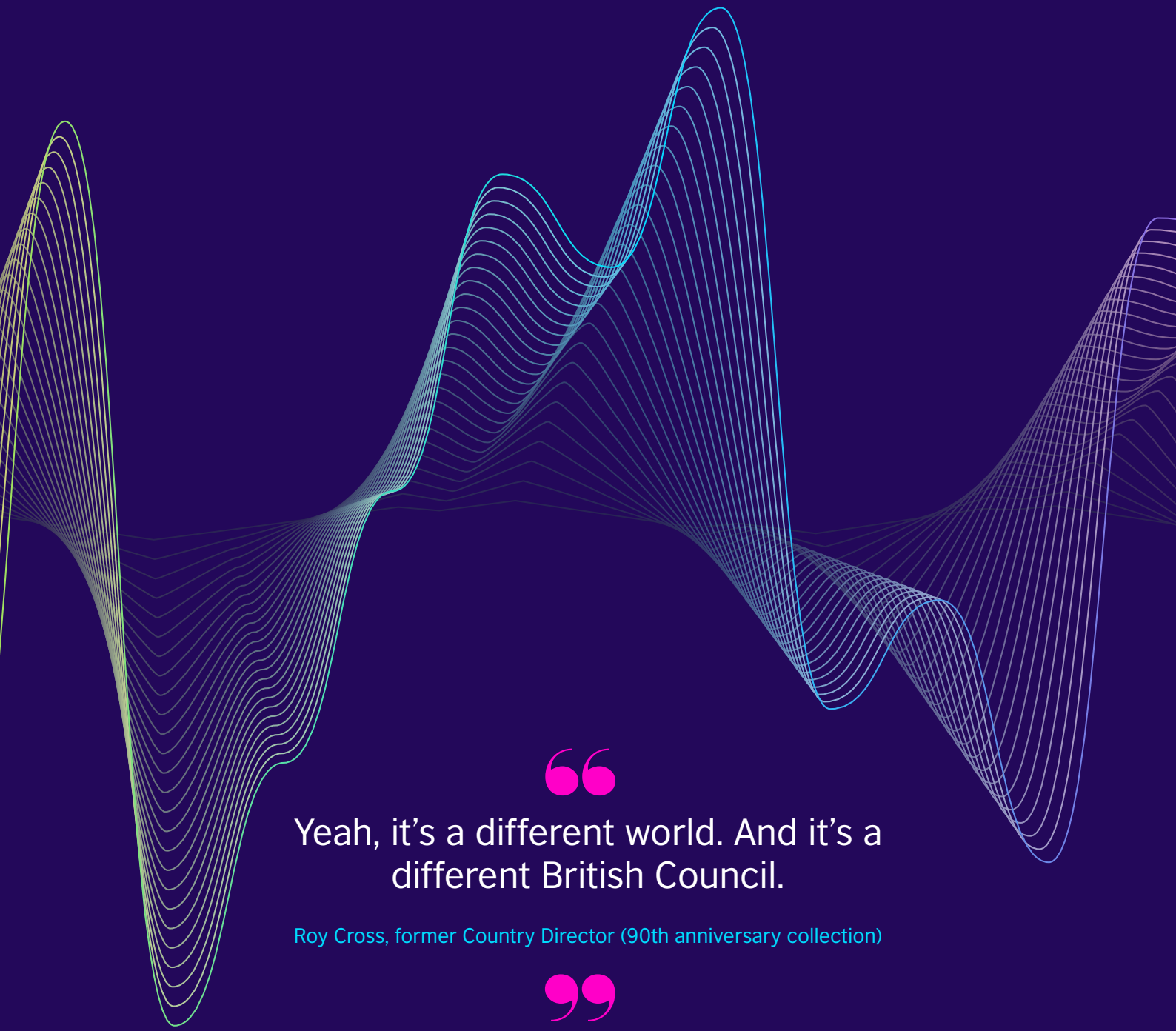
Janet Ilieva

‘I just read that the aim of the British Council is to support peace and prosperity by building connections, by understanding and building trust between people in the UK and countries worldwide. And I’ve seen that happen. That I’ve seen that actually happening, building peace, building connections, building that trust. And that is to me what the key thing is about the British Council is: the relationships, not just money, it’s relationships.’

Deb Avery, education consultant (90th anniversary collection)

Having discussed life with the British Council and the consensus around the mission, the next chapter will go on to identify both change and continuity in relation to the geographical remit and the approach to delivery taken by the British Council over its history.

Change and continuity: the work of the British Council



> Yeah, it's a different world. And it's a different British Council.
>
> Roy Cross, former Country Director (90th anniversary collection)

4 Change and continuity: the work of the British Council

This chapter broadly covers change (and continuity) in relation to the geographical remit of the British Council and development to its delivery approach over its lifetime, as considered by interviewees from the oral history collections. The narrative within this chapter provides a high-level overview of external shifts affecting operations, including financial pressures prompting organisational evolution, external geopolitical factors, and individual personalities.

This chapter goes on to detail how technological developments as well as how a shift in cultural sensitivities informed by a colonial legacy have affected approaches to delivery over time. Discussions around gendered experiences within the British Council, as well as the British Council's approach towards EDI, will also be explored. They too have impacted change and continuity – though more specifically discussed in relation to delivery *approach* rather than *remit* here. Finally, the chapter will also lend itself to an exploration of the foundation upon which the British Council's contribution to UK soft power is drawn: the credibility of the institution.

'Yeah, it's a different world. And it's a different British Council.'

Roy Cross, former British Council Country Director (90th anniversary collection)

Roy Cross

It is clear from interviewee accounts that the British Council operates in, and is subject to, a dynamic and changing world. Indeed, working in place across continuously evolving contexts, countries and regions globally has meant it has been necessary, in many senses, for the British Council to become equally fluid and adaptable in response. The story of the British Council, alongside that of the world it operates within, is therefore a story of change. That said, it is also a story of continuity, with evidence of the British Council *remaining* in place, delivering *long-standing* commitments, and *maintaining* links and connections, even where geopolitical contexts have made this challenging.

In observing the effects and impacts of the British Council's work, then, the narrative often stretches across decades: beyond the terms of appointed Chairs or Directors, beyond programme timelines and even beyond the span of entire political regimes or conflicts. Indeed, the full scope of effects owing to activities or actions delivered by the British Council may not be seen for years. There are accounts, for example, of British Council employees cultivating positive relationships with contacts in-country, whereby those in-country contacts have – in some cases decades later – gained positions of political influence or leadership within their countries. This has resulted in the British Council holding established connections with key decision-makers in-country, as a result of a much earlier investment in relationship-building.

The scope of the oral history collections reviewed thus provides insight into some of the seismic geopolitical and organisational shifts that have influenced the work of

the British Council but, revealingly, it also highlights that *individuals* have been influential when working in place, creating change of their own.

Some of the themes emerging from the collections, when considering change and continuity within the British Council's work around the world and over the years, are summarised below.

4.1 Change and continuity: geographical remit of the British Council

The British Council has demonstrated significant longevity of involvement in particular countries, showing its strong commitment to working with particular geographies and nations over time. For example, one 90th anniversary collection interviewee, Amol Padwad, described how the British Council had 'been in India for more than 60 years', and that, as a result, English language teaching in the country was 'changed forever'.

Another education consultant, Deb Avery, related the constancy of the British Council's commitment to education across the African continent.

> 'For me, one of the big things that I've seen is that commitment. It's commitment to improving education, but also even more important, I think, improving the life of the African child. And I think that is something that's very important about the British Council that has never changed, that there is a commitment to making the life of the child in Africa, and I'm sure in other parts of the world as well, better. And that I think is one of the hallmarks of the British Council.'
>
> **Deb Avery, education consultant (90th anniversary collection)**

Over time, these long-standing commitments have enabled greater benefits to materialise, for example, providing time to allow for relationships and trust to establish then flourish. Moreover, alongside this continuity of British Council presence, there has appeared to be a shift towards developing continuity of staff members in country postings. Specifically, it appears that whilst staff, earlier in the British Council's operation, might be given multiple overseas postings across different countries or continents in short succession, as described by section 3.2, there has subsequently been a shift to

longer-term postings. Interviewees in the 75th anniversary collection identified this shift, acknowledging that this has enabled British staff to develop a greater depth of local knowledge and cultural competency.

‘The idea in those days seemed to be to build up a breadth of experience of different types of work which has changed now – everyone is expected to stay in the same place for year after year after year and become much more expert at what they are doing. There are pros and cons I think: it’s better for one’s clients to have the same people in a job for a long time rather than just two years. You spent the first year learning the job and the second year doing it well, then you were off somewhere else, but anyway it was quite nice for the staff I think.’

Marion Oakeshott, former Private Secretary at the British Council (75th anniversary collection)

Relatedly, one interviewee observed that the British Council began to plan specifically for longevity of project outcomes and involvement:

‘I mean, I’m making a bold statement, it may not be a first time, but in my perception, it is for the first time that the British Council thought of a project, after the project life as well. It did not leave the field as soon as the project was over. And what it did was to think systematically what can be done to sustain the impact of the project.’

Deb Avery, education consultant (90th anniversary collection)

It is noted by John Burgh that the British Council’s commitment to a geography is integral to its efficacy as an institution, and he cautioned:

‘I have always believed that government action (in response to a need to demonstrate disapproval of the acts of a foreign state), that as one of its first steps requires the British Council to leave the country is profoundly mistaken, because it is precisely the task of the British Council to develop long-term relationships, and what should remain is the British Council much more than any kind of diplomatic representation.’

John Burgh, former Director General (75th anniversary collection)

Whilst the desire to maintain its geographical remit is evident, there are instances, as illustrated by the interviewees, where this was simply not feasible. The result is the expansion and contraction of the British Council's operation within particular locations or regions over time. These drivers of change include financial pressures that prompted organisational evolution; external geo-political drivers; and individual personalities, discussed below.

4.1.1 Financial pressures prompting organisational evolution

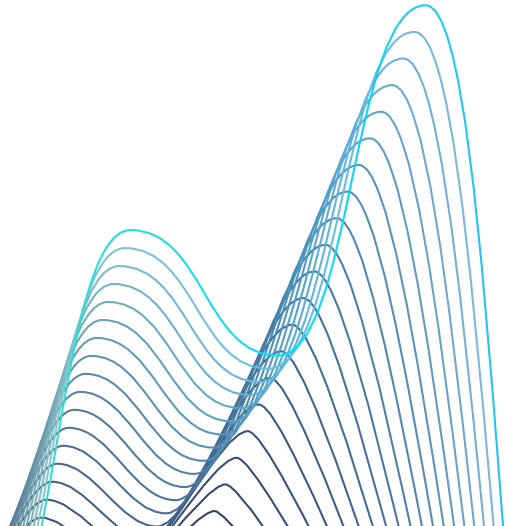
Present in the 75th anniversary collection was a description of the British Council, which is unrecognisable today.

> 'I thought: "Won't it be wonderful being Representative" – endless cocktail parties and Royal progresses through the country and so on and of course that's all sort of gone … you only had to see as you sometimes did; the sort of documentation; the sort of attitudes and so on that were in correspondence in the 50s and 60s to realise that it's sort of worlds away.'
>
> **Brian Lavercombe, former Head of Science Department, British Council (75th anniversary collection)**

When thinking about organisational evolution, the first image that comes to mind via the collections is the picture painted above. Particularly in the 75th anniversary collection, there are fantastical and often humorous stories of eccentric men and women living a thrilling and often exclusive life.

> 'You still hear these wonderful stories, don't you? I remember people telling me that – I remember our Assistant Rep in Colombia had been in Afghanistan and I remember his boss had been a great man for Central Asia and so he used to go wandering round Iran and so on, and he would go off and say "I'm leaving you in charge Harrison; any mail that comes from London there is no need to open it if you don't want to". Just imagine it, things were not like that in the 90s really and, in a sense, you were under a fairly tight rein in a way.'
>
> **Brian Lavercombe, former Head of Science Department, British Council (75th anniversary collection)**

A contextual caveat to these stories of *unsupervised offices is a recognition that* the practicalities of manging offices across the world without access to communication mechanisms beyond letters and calls, where officers moved via boat not plane, may have been in part conducive to a lack of accountability compared to that which might be expected today.



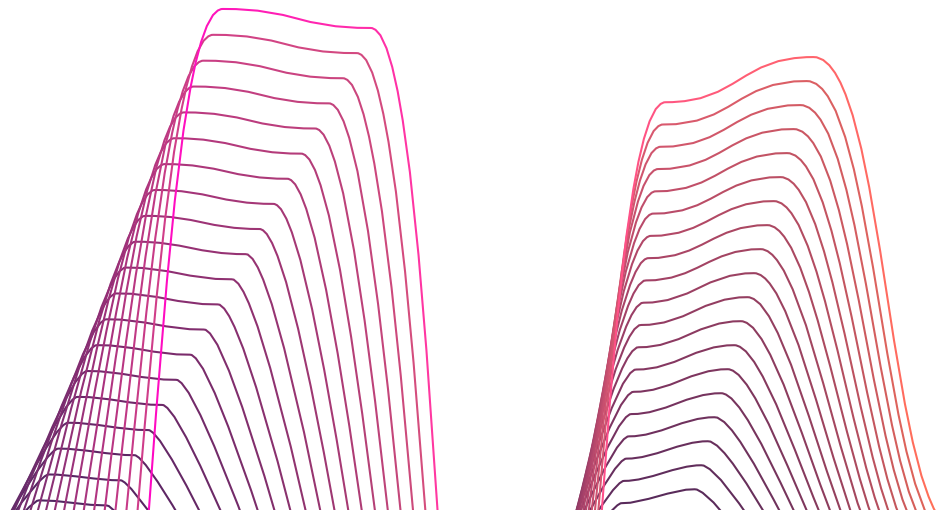
Whilst these anecdotes are retold often in a humorous and favourable light, there is an adjacent recognition, in the 75th anniversary collection, that this way of life was unsustainable and unsuitable.

Interviewees detailed the decades of reform spurred on by UK governmental pressure, predominantly described during (but not limited to) a period of Conservative government between 1979 and 1997 and marred by consequent financial strain, which necessitated greater accountability than had been seen in the days described above. This period of pressure was commonly touched upon by interviewees from the 75th anniversary collection. A particular pinch point appeared to be in the late 1980s whereby one interviewee, Monica Smith, describes having to 'cut a quarter of a million off our budget'. Evidence of expanding and contracting resources is illustrated throughout the interview collections. Whilst one 75th anniversary collection interviewee, Harold Oxbury, described a period where the British Council had to 'lose' 20 per cent of posts, a 90th anniversary collection interviewee, Pilar Aramayo-Prudencio, spoke about a rapid increase in numbers within her team, at one time expanding from one or two individuals to 25 permanent members of staff in a particular location.

During the financial strain in the 1980s, John Burgh was Director-General of British Council (1980–87) and is cited by many as an important figure in steering the British Council through this period of financial reform.

'There was a fundamental change of gear, we had until that time been living on a rising budget … We've hit a buffer, how do we reorganise ourselves to do less because our budget is suddenly being constrained, willy-nilly, and however we squirm and argue we are on a downward budget, and we've now got to learn new managing skills, which was the case. I think you could say that we had become rather complacent because we had been on a rising budget for so long, and we had become a bit flaccid in management terms, and this was another way in which John Burgh had, as the recently arrived Director General, an important role to play to pace us through that real sort of change in tide in our affairs, and to learn how to cope with reductions.'

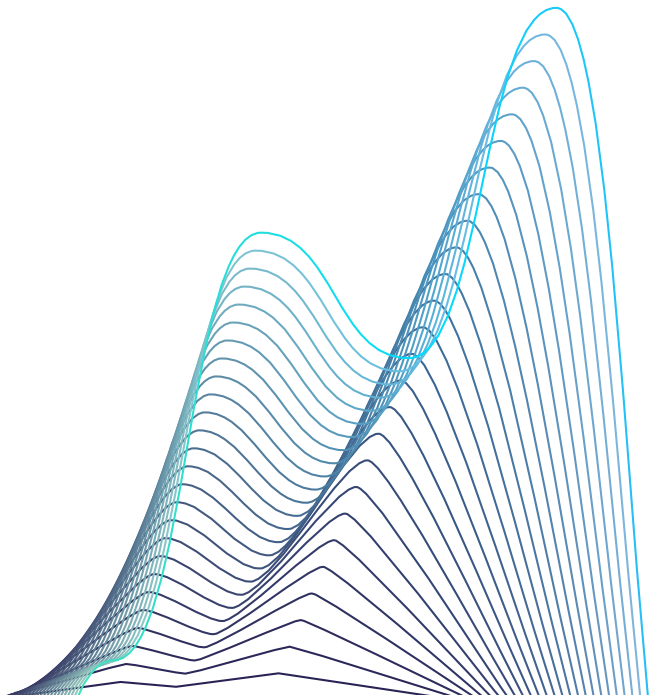
Trevor Rutter, former British Council Assistant Director General (75th anniversary collection)



As a consequence of governmental pressure and, by extension, public pressure to increase accountability, alongside material cuts in government funding to the British Council, interviewees identified a number of perhaps painful or frustrating consequences, such as having to shut overseas offices.

Under the shadow of government scrutiny and cuts in the 1980s, Trevor Rutter (75th anniversary collection) described his concerns about overseas divisions being 'overloaded with bureaucratic procedures and kind of going under'. He was tasked with 'finding £2 million in one year' and he noted, after a period of 'salami cuts', where budgets were sliced across all programmes, he felt the painful but right decision was to close an overseas division all together. This was – in Trevor's words – 'enthusiastically taken up' and he was left in the unenviable position of presenting options to the overseas departments. He explained that he had to make a last-minute trip to China and when he returned his least favoured option had been chosen. The consequence being 'closing two representations in Scandinavia' and outsourcing the work to London offices.

This specific period of financial reform in the 1980s marked a period of shrinking geographical remit. However, it was also taken as an opportunity to act with greater intentionality. This effectively ended the approach, initially described above, where both delivery and remit were at the discretion of the local office.



'There seems to be a far more intentional look at how is this going to work out? How is it going to reach the most number of people with the best use of resources? And I've definitely seen that shift in the kind of work that I've been doing in the programmes that I've been involved in. That it's not just a free for all anymore. It's definitely intentional.'

Deb Avery, education consultant (90th anniversary collection)

Serving the function of operating with greater financial efficiency and more accountability in the face of government scrutiny, one 75th anniversary collection interviewee, Monica Smith, described the impact on the ground: a more conscious approach to delivering in a specific context and with a greater desire to align with British policy.

'I think it did focus what we should be doing on key activities and the money was being better spent, certainly from my experience there had been a lot of … you know, people ask for things, and I think this certainly was true in Thailand, if certain people had said, "We want this," it had been given without really assessing whether it was in Thailand's or Britain's interest to do it.'

Monica Smith, former British Council employee (75th anniversary collection)

This is evidence of change, over the lifetime of the British Council, and it is clear that some processes have grown more formalised, particularly in relation to setting specific objectives, and to measuring the impact of interventions. This has enabled a greater understanding of project and programme outcomes over time, and likely aided working towards strategic objectives and specific shared visions, as well as planning and justifying investment.

One former British Council Country Director from the 90th anniversary collection, Paul Smith, recalled the first time that objectives were set as part of delivery of his role:

> ‘I didn’t have a job plan, didn’t have a job description, nothing, nothing, nothing. And they said, from next year we want to try something new. So from next year, in all the work of everybody, and all the work of every programme, we’re going to ask that you set a series of, and then inverted commas, ‘objectives’. And we all thought, what the hell is this? Nonsense person. Who is this business, you know, management graduate guru? Objectives? How ridiculous is this? That was it. We all had to have a couple of objectives. So that was how it all worked.’
>
> **Paul Smith, former British Council Country Director (90th anniversary collection)**

Despite the benefits, one interviewee from the 90th anniversary collection, Amol Padwad, felt that the project and management processes which have been implemented have made the projects more ‘mechanical’, and felt this has somewhat eroded the ‘spirit’ of the projects delivered.

On the whole, however, the British Council’s trajectory has generally, according to interviewees, been one of expansion and positive development. To facilitate this, it has been important that the British Council has remained in a position to finance and sustain such a wide-reaching and varied global operation.

> ‘I mean the Council today is so much bigger than it was in my time, it is incomprehensible; we got very excited when our budget reached five million. I don’t know what it is now, about five hundred million, I think.’
>
> **Harold Oxbury, former Deputy Controller of Home Division, British Council (75th anniversary collection)**

The British Council’s grant-in-aid from the UK government accounts for a far smaller percentage of its overall budget today than was the case in the past, with the organisation having gone through a process of commercialisation, developing more income-generating strands of activity. Several interviewees reflected on this commercialisation. For example, Neil Kinnock, former Chair of the British Council (2004–09), regarded the reduced reliance on grant-in-aid as ‘healthy’, Helena Kennedy, another former Chair of the British Council (1998–2004), pointed out how this had

led to the British Council being perceived as 'competition' to some other in-country providers, and she additionally expressed that the reliance on generating revenue had reduced the ability of the British Council to do 'the stuff that I think is particularly important'.

In some ways, however, the inability to rely solely on grant-in-aid funding has, in Neil Kinnock's eyes, supported the 'independence' of the British Council 'without compromising its mission'. In his view, the British Council then 'became a commercial organisation which for very sensible reasons, some people feared' (90th anniversary collection).

It is also clear that the commercial activity necessitated a culture shift and that previously – some interviewees described – there were misgivings about charging for services, as illustrated by the quote below. However, for some, this commercialisation is a departure from the 'patronising' dispensing of charitable activity.

'And we charged a fee, for example to a university if it was a rich university, this doesn't apply to poor countries but the rich universities, it's so … Saudi Arabia or somewhere, they paid us a fee to recruit on their behalf so we were making money … it was the beginning, the start of making money in the Council, I think up to that time, making money had been rather a dirty word as it were and we did start with the paying, getting people to pay for our services.'

Monica Smith, former British Council employee (75th anniversary collection)

Even so, at times, funding has been a challenge to delivering in-country interventions at scale. Moreover, as with operations, global events have too impacted upon the financial health of the organisation.

'And the other big challenge was there was no money. I mean, there was no money anyway. I mean, in COVID, there was really no money. My total budget after staff and buildings and everything in my first 12 months there for anything to do with programmes across education, English, social programmes, and arts was 1,000 pounds.'

Paul Smith, former British Council Country Director (90th anniversary collection)

Despite this, teams or individuals on the ground have, at times, found creative solutions to addressing funding gaps, achieving remarkable change on tight budgets. An example is the set-up of the Cultural Bridge programme in Germany, which aimed to support UK-German cultural relations post-Brexit, and towards which Paul Smith attracted investment via coalescing support from the various Arts Councils. This example is discussed in more detail in 6.3.2 and is the case to which the above quote refers.

4.1.2 External geo-political drivers

‘But I just hope just like the Council persevered through periods like the Cold War and system changes, it will carry on through the decades to come.’

Janet Ilieva, former Education Research Officer at the British Council, current Education consultant (90th anniversary collection)

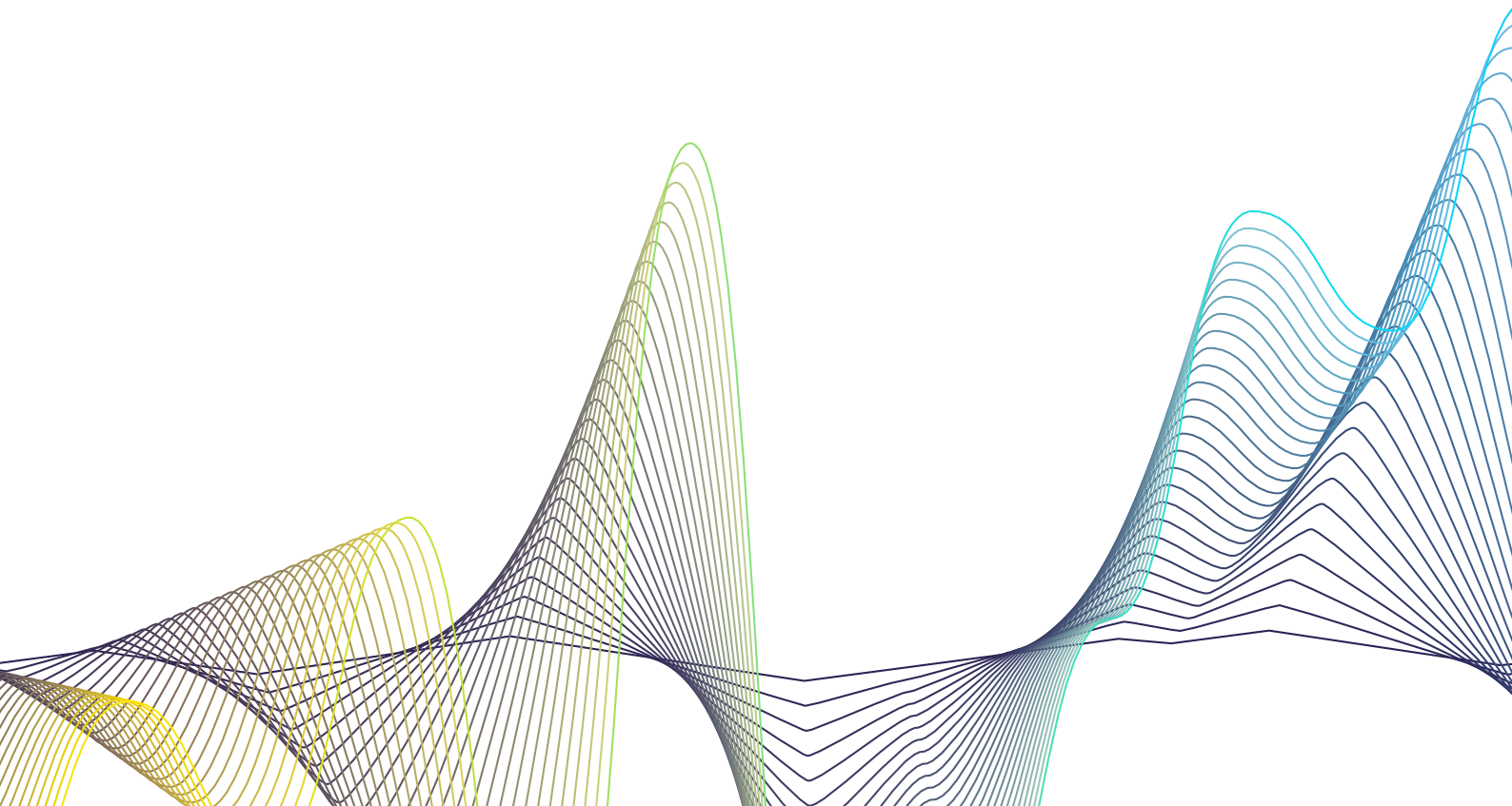
Continuity of operation, embedding within the local context, and even expansion to focused regional work has been possible in some cases for the British Council. Of course, owing to operating across a global context, external shifts and drivers have held a great influence on the British Council’s desire and/or ability to operate within particular settings – both strategically and operationally.

Strategically, it is evident that the various foci and geographical target countries of the British Council have, to an extent, been subject to change as a result of geopolitical drivers. For example, whilst English language teaching has consistently been a focus for the British Council, at times there have been concerted efforts to deliver this in specific regions, for example, expanding English language teaching provision in former Eastern Bloc communist societies in Central and Eastern Europe in the 1990s. At other times, the British Council has focused, for example, on addressing Islamophobia in the post 9-11 landscape, showing that it is strategically sensitive to broader geopolitical happenings, which in turn affect cultural relations.

On a practical and operational level, at times the British Council has needed to pull out of countries where they were operating, owing to safety concerns or conflict, which have made continuity of delivery temporarily impossible. In the quote below, Mike Solly discusses operating during the Bosnia-Herzegovina war, following the breakup of Yugoslavia:

‘They couldn’t have people like me in the city [Sarajevo] there because then it became incredibly dangerous and, as it was, nobody could get in or out except by a tunnel.’

Mike Solly, Head of English Research and Insight at the British Council (90th anniversary collection)



When so much has been invested, personally and professionally, these periods of withdrawal from particular countries or regions have proven challenging for those involved, sometimes with a sharp and sudden break in involvement. This abrupt end is also, of course, detrimental to the work undertaken in-country, and to longevity of outcomes. However, it was noted by Mike Solly that where the British Council has been forced, by extenuating circumstances, to withdraw from a country, it has always sought to maintain links and connections in a remote capacity, as well as to reinstate an on-the-ground presence at the soonest, politically expedient opportunity.

‘They might not be on the ground, but they will operate in as far as they can and as far as is politically expedient. But as soon as peace returns or the right atmosphere comes back, the British Council are back there, as they were when Yugoslavia split into its constituent countries. And they were right back.’

Mike Solly, Head of English Research and Insight at the British Council (90th anniversary collection)

There was an overarching sense that, however the geopolitical context inevitably shifts, the British Council’s connections (generally) endure, irrespective of these shifts.

The value of long-term connections and trust

‘There is this very strong sense of trust that the way that the [British] Council does things is genuine belief in others and what they have to offer. There is trust in the relationships. We have seen regimes come and go, but the connection … that the British Council promotes and builds with the people of those countries is there to stay irrespective of what happens in politics, in trade, you name it, is the connection with the people of the country the ones that will prevail over time and are there to stay. And I guess this has been one of the key motivators and drivers throughout this three decades in my work with the Council, my perception of the Council, although I’m not an employee, there is this very strong bond that they’re doing fantastic work and if I can help that, that’s my work, that’s my job done.’

Janet Ilieva, former Education Research Officer at the British Council, current Education consultant (90th anniversary collection)

Audio clip

4.1.3 Individual personalities

As alluded to earlier in this chapter, specific individuals have been greatly influential, alongside these broad geopolitical shifts, in shaping the work of the organisation, what the work looks like, and where it goes ahead. For example, this influence has been variously exerted via changes in the British Council leadership – resulting in a shift in strategic or operational priorities – and/or simply via individual employees on-the-ground, who have either followed their passions or spotted an opportunity to create change and been incredibly motivated to achieve it.

Paul Smith, former British Council Country Director, related how the British Council’s work, during the period of his involvement, included a great deal of activity in the USA, in part driven by his own passion to work in the region.

That change and momentum, when associated with an individual’s own particular momentum, enthusiasm or relationships, can be at times a powerful force though, conversely, the loss of that individual can result in activity stalling, slowing or even changing direction entirely. One interviewee described, for example:

Janet Ilieva

‘Yeah, that’s true with organisations and also within the British Council. It’s like, you know, in some places, in Mexico, for example, making a really good contact with the British Council member of staff, working for a number of years with them. And then when they go, it’s really hard to pick up those relationships sometimes because the enthusiasm has resided in an individual rather than within the whole of a department or the whole of the British Council in a particular place, because everybody has their own priorities. So, I suppose how do you make this a genuine priority for all is a question that we’re really left with rather than a faddish priority for some.’

Jo Verrent, Director of Unlimited (90th anniversary collection)

Jo Verrent

The above connects to the perceived difficulty of working under a single strategy and establishing a shared, global vision, especially when there are individual projects and visions within different countries of operation.

This is linked to one of the enduring debates in the collections around regionalities versus centralised decision making.

‘Well, the balance in those two spheres changed from time to time.’

Trevor Rutter, former British Council Assistant Director General (75th anniversary collection)

What is important to note is how the British Council’s geographical remit appeared to expand and contract over time. And as the quote above illustrates, these two spheres refer to the proponents for and against how much power should be given to overseas directors, or representatives, and how much power should be held at the centre. In a discussion with Trevor Rutter, the interviewer notes, this debate ‘seems to go on forever’. Trevor suggested that during his tenure, this debate was won not on the merit of ‘reason and measured discussion but on the basis of strong personalities who pulled in one direction and prevailed’. Specifically, during his time, he felt the centralisers prevailed. Trevor asserted that by placing power at the centre ‘that this would take away a lot of the chance for serendipity which had been inherent in the more liberal, the more broad, approach to our work, which gave greater discretion in deciding how to spend money, and what relationships to establish on what basis (75th anniversary collection).

4.2 Change and continuity: delivery of programmes and activities

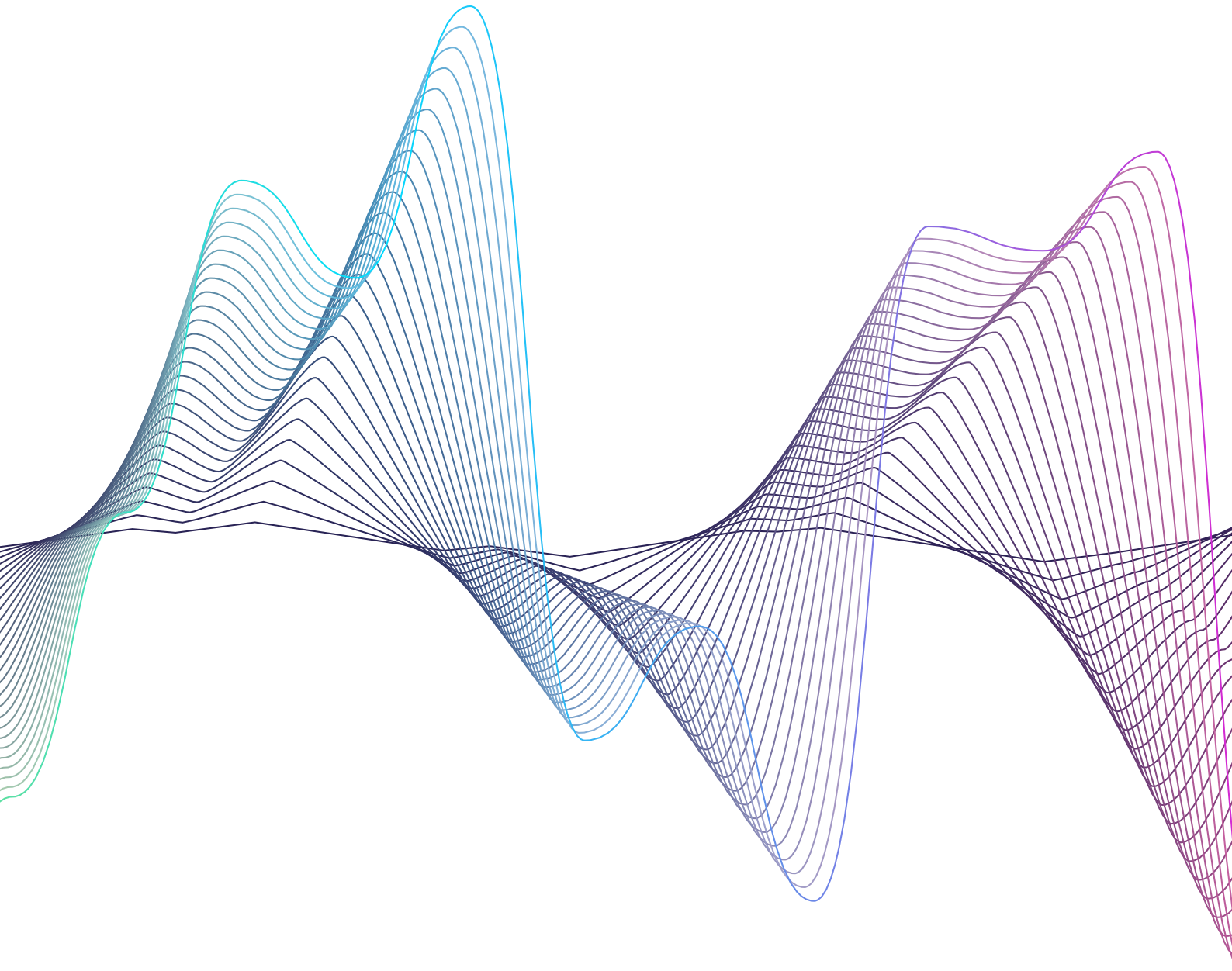
In this section, change and continuity will be discussed in relation to the British Council's approach(es) to delivery, alongside the organisation's evolution, as attributable to technological developments and expanding cultural sensitivities.

4.2.1 Technological developments

'This was 1973 or 1974 and computers were just beginning to come into the British Council and so everyone was a bit nervous about computers.'

Marion Oakeshott, former Private Secretary at the British Council (75th anniversary collection)

Within the collections, particularly the 75th anniversary collection, interviewees recall numerous anecdotes, often humorous, about the frustration they felt due to the limitations of communication methods.



Painting a picture of life before modern communications:

‘Yes, I lived in, and in those days when there was any urgency of course you got cables, and so I would very often wake in the morning to have to take down cables from London. But mostly we corresponded by air mail, and of course that from Sydney to London would take a good five days and so you wouldn’t expect an answer for about ten days if you were lucky, and life was pretty leisurely!’

Patsy Zeppel, former British Council employee in the Sydney, Australia, office (75th anniversary collection)

‘How did we communicate with the outside world even within Kano? No telephone. Not even a telex or obviously even pre-fax and so on. Once a day in the working week I could go down into the basement of the office and there was a walkie-talkie radio and at 12 o’clock I would go, you know, Lagos Lagos Lagos this is Kano, can you hear me? Lagos Lagos Lagos Kano, and if somebody happened to be passing that phone they’d pick it up and say yes and I’d say, you know, just reporting everything’s okay, did you receive this, did you receive that, there’s no idea, so that was the only way we communicated, so in my two/three years in Kano, I never had a phone call. I had nothing really.’

Paul Smith, former British Council Country Director (90th anniversary collection)

Paul Smith

Amongst these frustrations were also stories of how the British Council embraced the technology they had and how they facilitated programmes at the time. Patsy Zeppel, former British Council employee who was working in the Australian office, incidentally one of the first British Council offices to be computerised in 1988, recalls the record library they built up.

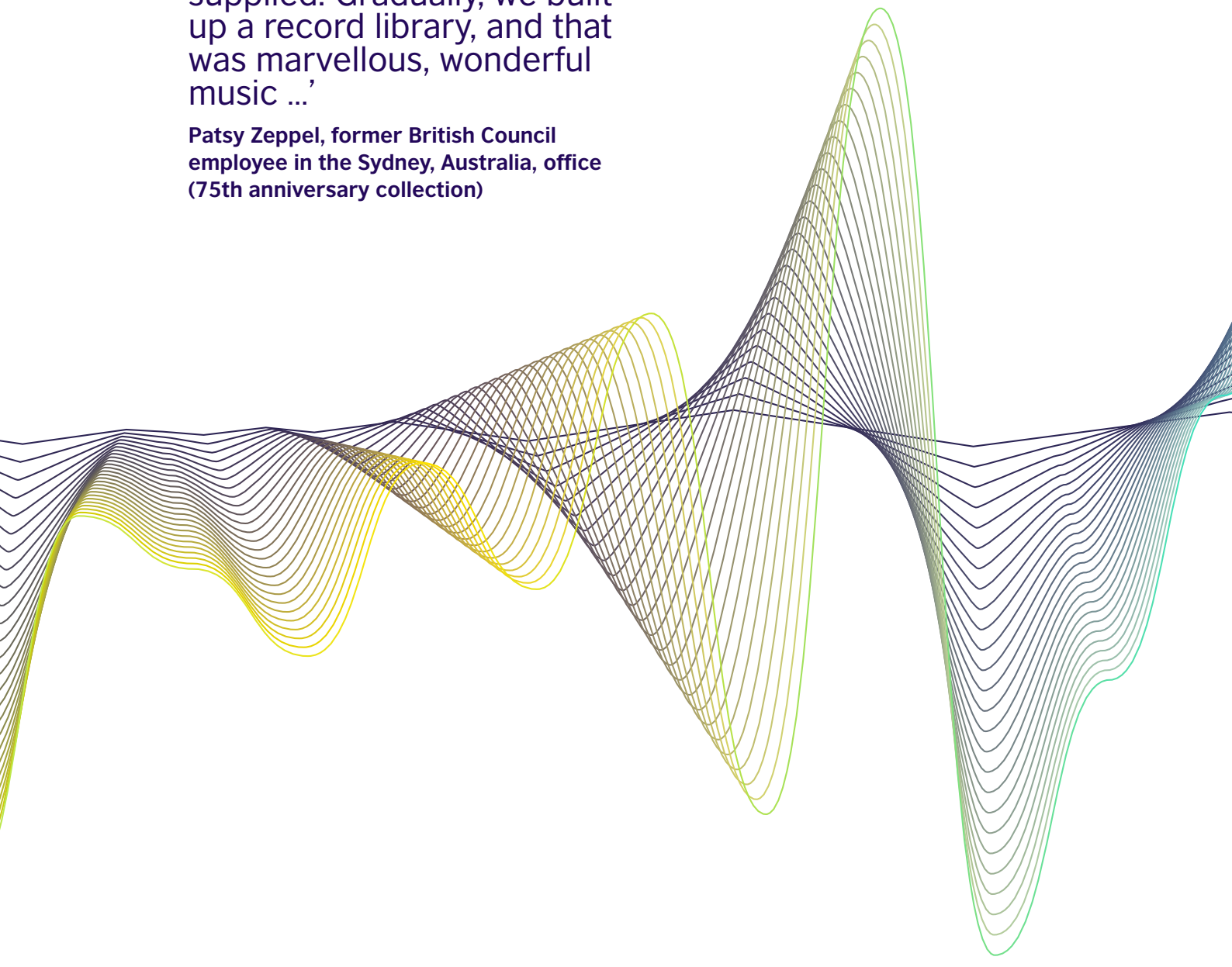
‘The Council did supply a radio for each office, Melbourne and Sydney. They provided great tape recorders, big Grundigs, about two feet by two feet, and concert-style gramophones for the records which London supplied. Gradually, we built up a record library, and that was marvellous, wonderful music …’

Patsy Zeppel, former British Council employee in the Sydney, Australia, office (75th anniversary collection)

Amongst these anecdotes, from those who experienced life at the British Council before emails and the like, there was also a recognition of the subsequent benefit technology would bring, and how heavily it would impact the efficiency of communications at the British Council.

4.2.1.1 Proactive approach: online programmes and embracing technological developments

Amongst the obvious organisational efficiencies the development of technology brought to the British Council, the wider collection also offers examples of how the organisation embraced technological innovation and how it altered programme delivery accordingly. This is explored in the case study below, as explained by an external partner and education consultant, Deb Avery, from the 90th anniversary collection.



Technological accessibility in South Africa:

In her interview, Deb Avery discussed the contextual difficulties of technological accessibility in South Africa and her involvement with the Learn English Audio Programme (LEAP). This programme was designed to support teachers, parents and caregivers in remote and under-resourced schools in African countries. The objective of the programme was to improve speaking and listening skills, which the British Council saw as the foundation for literacy. The programme aimed to create more inclusive learning by providing quality English learning resources in multiple languages, alongside songs and bilingual story books to make the learning more engaging. The content was also linked to national curricula.

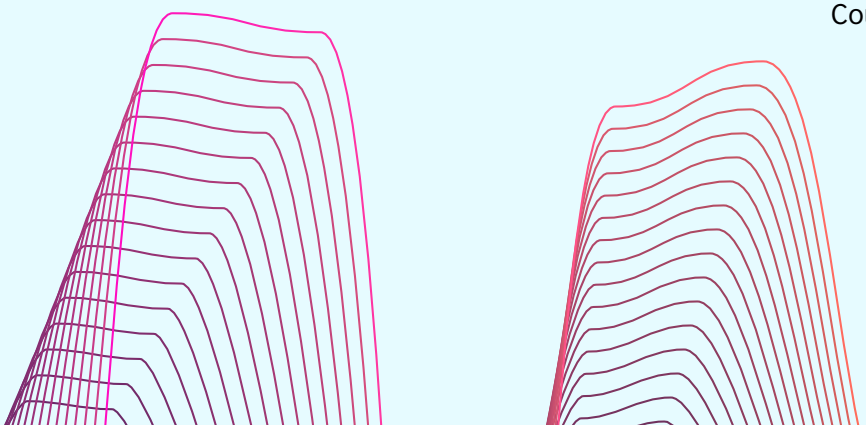
Originally, LEAP was accessed and taught using SD cards and flash drives on a laptop. However, this method was heavily reliant on having access to power and Wi-Fi and, as she notes, this was a big challenge for LEAP. Deb explained: 'Connectivity in South Africa is not great in rural areas. So sometimes you'd get there to teach and there wouldn't be any connection'. She attributes this to what she calls 'load shedding' where for hours at a time the power would go down. Deb explained that she was used to improvising and went everywhere with a 'flipchart and lots of pins'.

In collaboration with consultants and trainers, the British Council took the step to digitise material and implement RTC (real-time communications), essentially allowing access via cell phone.

'So, the LEAP training using the phone, letting them use their cell phone to access the materials has made a huge difference. And people are using it all over the place because they're so excited that they actually have resources in their hand. Instead of having to just have a bunch of books, they have something in their hand that they can use.'

Whilst this certainly made an impact, even the use of cell phones remained something to be further explored. As Deb acknowledges, data in South Africa was expensive and sadly teachers are not well paid; the next step for innovation would be to find a way to mitigate these expenses.

In her interview, she cited the greatest personal impact was learning how to use platforms such as WhatsApp for her teacher training. 'And I actually taught lessons using WhatsApp. And for me, that's been a key thing, actually teaching a live lesson using WhatsApp. And so, I think that's been one of the key excitements for me in this British Council thing. It's opened doors for me that I did not have before. I did not have them to use before. So, I now use WhatsApp in other training that I do for other organisations. I teach WhatsApp Live lessons. I teach teachers how to use WhatsApp Live and how to teach other people using WhatsApp. And it's all through working with the British Council. I didn't know how to do that before.'



4.2.2 Cultural sensitivities

Another development that impacted approach(es) to delivery, is the British Council's interaction and relationship with colonial histories and recognising Britain's role in colonialism/neo-colonialism. This relationship, as it has evolved, has necessarily impacted the approach to work in a range of ways.

4.2.2.1 A legacy of British colonialism

As identified by Mike Solly, Head of English Research and Insight at the British Council, in a discussion pertaining to English language teaching: 'I don't think we can divorce the colonial legacy of English'. It would therefore be disingenuous to discuss a broader agenda of EDI in the British Council without acknowledging how it interplays with the UK's colonial history. The oldest of the interviewees, Harold Oxbury, born in 1903, described an early career conversation with the Head of the Colonial Office about how the British Council should organise their colonial activities; he also noted that they were working at the British Council during a period of decolonisation following the Second World War. This shift is best illustrated by the below quote from Harold himself:

> 'It was all a very peculiar situation in those days and the fact that the colonies were beginning to think in terms of running their own countries, things were very difficult, the students often were very hostile to British ways of doing things.'
>
> **Harold Oxbury, former Deputy Controller of Home Division, British Council (75th anniversary collection)**

Fiona Bartels-Ellis, former Head of Equality and Diversity and Inclusion at the British Council, also detailed having difficult conversations in Jamaica, where she was questioned by locals about the British Council's right to be there, or to assert British beliefs onto Jamaicans. However, Fiona does come back to this notion of pushing or 'promoting' British culture. She clarified that she saw it as being about *sharing* culture instead, asserting that during her tenure of nearly 23 years 'I never experienced the British Council trying to shove Britain and British culture down anybody's throat' (90th anniversary collection).

In cases, the consequences of a paternalistic approach and the unchecked assumptions that this brings could clearly impact delivery, filtering through into design of materials and everyday interactions. One external partner, the Indian academic and education consultant Amol Padwad (90th anniversary collection), described one such instance where, in his specific Indian province, he found the British Council training consultants to be 'a little bit insensitive to the local context'. Amol also added that some of the materials were not context sensitive; he did caveat this, however, acknowledging the limitations of creating material for such a large number of teachers.

The collections reveal how it was recognised that, to move forward, the British Council would need to reassess how it interacted with countries that had formerly been part of the British Empire, stripping themselves of this assumed label of superiority and paternalistic operating. This repositioning is perhaps best understood as a principle of mutuality. In the context of the British Council as an institution, this means mutual benefit, removing perhaps some of the asymmetry of former relationships and power dynamics with countries that were formerly part of the British Empire.

Addressing legacies of empire

The British Council's approach to addressing colonial legacies was also praised in one of the interviews:

'The British Council has continually tried to negotiate with grace, you know, the legacy of empire and colonialism and kind of bear witness to will those relationships and those cross-cultural relationships in many, many different places in the world and also trying to keep hold of things which power can facilitate, like libraries and like art and like the funding of art and artists and like research and like open access. Like language and learning a language like open spaces and conversations and, and safety to a certain extent. And the expectation that of a kind of mutual respect. I think, I think, you know, that the intention is really strong and sometimes it's impossible or difficult and sometimes, you know, it doesn't work. But I think that that intention is really strong and important.'

Francesca Beard, spoken word artist (90th anniversary collection)

Francesca Beard

This idea of intentionality is important, and it speaks to the passion with which a number of interviewees talk about the British Council's perceived function, that is, as a mechanism of cultural relations and an institution that serves the common good – an institution and set of values that people believe in.

Audio clip

4.2.2.2 Cultural sensitivity in delivery

‘I do think that there must have been a time when it was a fairly patriarchal way of looking at things, a charitable organisation, giving money to people in countries that have less resources. But I do think that even in the 12 years that I have had some work with the British Council, I have seen that it’s far less driven by donation and far more driven by the people within the organisation and the people that are being assisted. So, it’s become much more of a co-operative relationship. It’s not a giving from the top; it’s co-operation and sharing and being able to use ideas that each group has to build something that’s really worthwhile.’

Deb Avery, education consultant (90th anniversary collection)

Taken together, the oral history interviews reviewed revealed a progression in the ‘ethos’ (whether that ethos was implicit or explicit, intentional or incidental) of the British Council. Namely, progress towards mutual benefit and co-operation, as opposed to ‘paternalistic’, colonial, or wholly Eurocentric methods of operation.

For example, Paul Smith, from the 90th anniversary collection, recounted that, when he first began working in Nigeria (1983), there was: ‘no meeting to discuss even minor matters of management or policy or strategy of what we’re going to do, which had any Nigerian person in the room’.

‘Making friends for Britain, keeping friends for Britain was more common. And the idea that, you know, but basically it was, it was a kind of colonialism. It was that we knew better and the sooner that Nigeria and India and so on got there, you know, was up to speed with the way Britain ran its schools and its colleges and its arts and its, you know, and its society, the better. This is what we had to offer, and they mustn’t be disturbed, if the end of empire meant that they were going to lose all these wonderful things.’

Paul Smith, former British Council Country Director (90th anniversary collection)

Clear statements, speaking to the British Council's work decades later, highlight an apparent shift: one which prioritises local involvement and partnership.

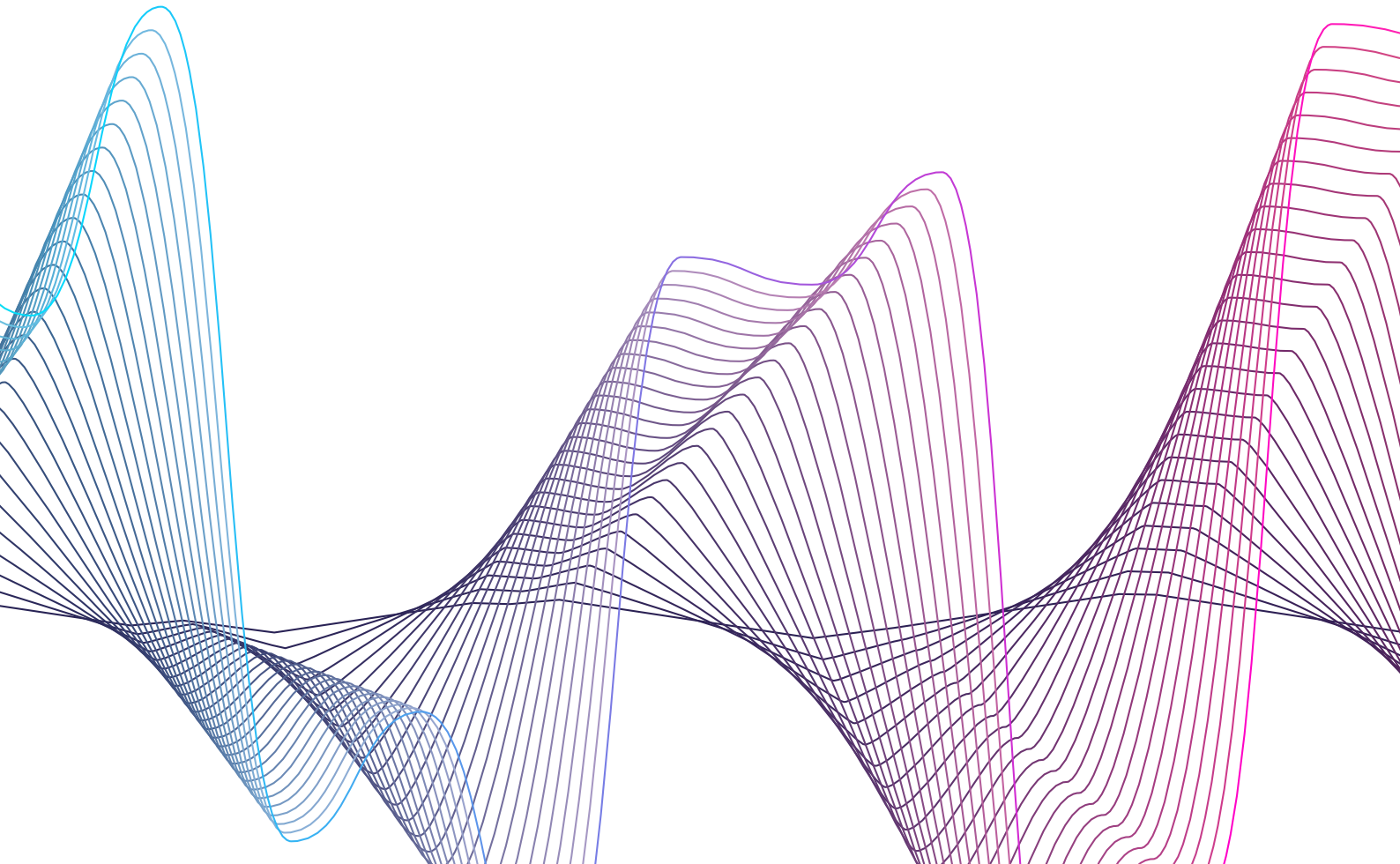
'When we do anything with the British Council, it is a collaboration with the country that we are then working with. We now refuse to do things that are only just about shining the UK's light, that don't have any involvement on the ground from our peers, for example.'

Jo Verrent, Director of Unlimited (90th anniversary collection)

This increased cultural sensitivity has also been integrated into the British Council's approach to English language teaching (ELT). ELT has both remained relatively consistent as a component of the British Council's global offering and has changed in terms of its approach over the years. Some changes have included a shift in attitudes around employing non-native English speakers or adjusting teaching resources to better suit local contexts and local accents. As well, there has been a shift towards engaging local providers, and also towards operating a train-the-trainer approach to support the pedagogy of local educators.

'So, I do see a much wider variety of teachers at British Council offices around the world now and I think this is a really good thing.'

David Crystal, author and former British Council Board member (75th anniversary collection)



Socio-cultural shifts at the British Council

> “... we’re also sharing the UK’s journey. We’re also trying to help people think about the UK, perhaps in a different way, in a more positive way, understand it, understand its nuances ...”

Fiona Bartels-Ellis, former Head of Equality and Diversity and Inclusion (90th anniversary collection)

5 Socio-cultural shifts at the British Council

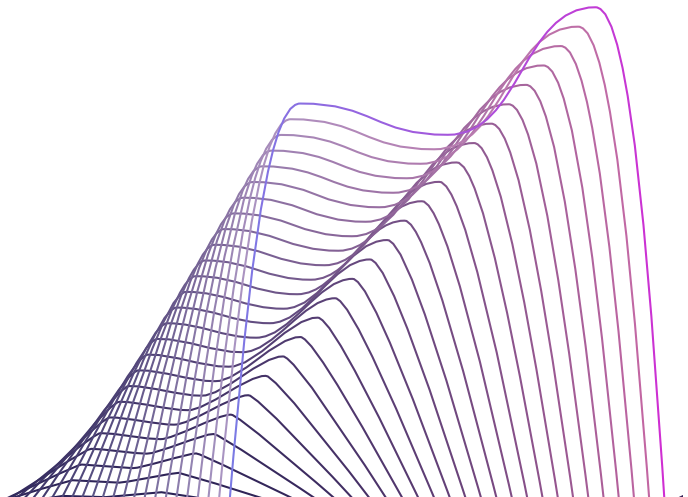
It would not be possible to discuss the evolution of the British Council without acknowledging the socio-cultural shifts, both internally and externally, that have affected not only the delivery of its programmes but its credibility as an institution. This chapter will explore issues around Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion and, additionally, the chapter will discuss gendered experiences in the British Council. Gender is included within EDI, and gender does not solely comprise EDI, but the specific focus on gendered experiences is in recognition of the frequent manifestation of this theme directly in the anniversary collections.

‘I guess the British Council has to find ways to understand itself in today’s society, just like the artist has to find ways to understand his self, herself, their self. In today’s society, you know, and the British Council will have made mistakes in its past in how it sees itself, and so will the artist. And the ability to transcend and to be confident in your journey into this new age is really important.’

Lemn Sissay, poet and broadcaster (90th anniversary collection)

5.1 Manifestations of EDI in practice

One of the intrinsic benefits of this collection of oral histories is the temporal scope it provides. To begin the discussion around EDI, it is necessary to first acknowledge the history in this space. In an excerpt from a 75th anniversary collection interviewee, Monica Smith, a certain dogmatism from London colleagues when visiting overseas offices was described. Neil Kinnock acknowledges that there had been a time when the British Council had been ‘all white’ , although he states that this had not been the case for ‘many decades’ by the time he became Chair (2004). This initial lack of diversity and dogmatic thinking perhaps resulted in experiences such as those described by one employee below:



‘For example, the fact that I was a young, very well prepared, super enthusiastic and motivated teacher of English, incredibly competent, if I can say so myself, but my training and my experience had given me that, but the British Council at the time would not hire me as a teacher because I was a non-native speaker of English … So fundamentally to me that was, you know, I don’t want to be in that organisation. So, they think I’m good enough to sell their exams essentially, but they don’t think I’m good enough to teach their students. No, thank you. I’m not going to work there.’

Pilar Aramayo-Prudencio, Head of English in Education at the British Council (90th anniversary collection)

Pilar Aramayo-Prudencio

Other such policies and traditional ways of working also included a divide between local contracted and UK-based staff at the British Council. Patsy Zeppel recalled, when asked about travelling in her role in the Australian office: ‘[supervisor] had wanted … he wanted the Brits to be the image, not you as staff.’ Fiona Bartels-Ellis suggests this way of thinking was still in place during her time at the British Council more recently:

‘I still think there is a divide between UK and locally contracted. It’s minimised significantly, but there is still that divide. When I came to the British Council, people said to me, you know, it’s not UK appointed, Fiona and it’s not locally engaged. It’s UK appointed and locally enslaved. What they were trying to say to me is that there’s this big divide between the UK contracted staff and the locally contracted staff and you could hear it in the language.’

Fiona Bartels-Ellis, former Head of Equality and Diversity and Inclusion at the British Council (90th anniversary collection)

Whilst Fiona suggests that it is improving and ‘I think a lot of people have worked very hard to dismantle that’, what comes out in the subsequent discussion is that these behaviours are often informed by unconscious bias about what a British Council employee *should* be. In her own words: ‘somebody white, somebody male, somebody with a received pronunciation accent’.

This idea of what a British Council employee *should be* appears to be corroborated in part through interviewees from the 75th anniversary collection, and descriptions of their educational backgrounds. A pattern can be observed of male British Council employees, following a traditional trajectory of public school or grammar school followed by a degree(s) at Oxford and Cambridge. One interviewee, Malcolm Dalziel, recalls that following grammar school and National Service, attending St. Catherine's College in Oxford to read modern history. He notes that during this time he 'had been president of the junior common room, president of the dramatic society, captain of college rugby, president of the Boswell Society'. Malcolm also commented that: 'this sort of seemed to link in with what the British Council was looking for'. The image depicted here is in line with what Fiona Bartels-Ellis suggested. Whilst this is not necessarily homogenous across the 75th anniversary collection, the pattern observed in the sample is notable.

As many people work diligently and passionately to dismantle this stereotype, the ensuing discussion demonstrates, through the words of interviewees, how that perception unfolds, unravels and is ultimately dismantled.

5.2 A socio-cultural shift

As EDI as a discipline, practice and ethos began to gain traction in the UK, guided by socio-cultural shifts in the way we perceive difference, equality and equity, Fiona Bartels-Ellis acknowledged that when she arrived 'I was shocked to be honest that the organisation was not where I thought it would be, particularly around issues to do with race, taking the definition of nationality, ethnicity, ethnic origins, skin colour, all of that sort of, you know, the legal definition of it' (90th anniversary collection).

She saw her role as a way to not only ensure the British Council was compliant with relevant internal EDI policies, but to push the organisation beyond compliance. A sentiment echoed by former British Council Country Director, Paul Smith, who said:

Paul Smith's old British Council passport

> 'The serious inclusion of diversity, equality and inclusion. Diversity is the big one for me in what we are. For me, it's more than even just a very, very important programme. It is what we do.'
>
> **Paul Smith, former British Council Country Director (90th anniversary collection)**

The prioritisation of action over words in this space is fundamental and it is something Fiona Bartels-Ellis mentions several times. She identifies a core issue with the approach to EDI in the UK and risk to its EDI policy as a proclivity for 'espousal'. Espousal alone is not a negative thing, but she indicates that this is more commonly used as virtue signalling.

> '… and I feel worried as well because I think we're in a world where there is so much espousal, and we are comforted by espousal. And I think that the EDI sector should really be challenging that, and it should be challenging, posturising and performative approaches to EDI and I don't know that there's enough around accountability and all that sort of stuff.'
>
> **Fiona Bartels-Ellis, former Head of Equality and Diversity and Inclusion at the British Council (90th anniversary collection)**

Fiona Bartels-Ellis also provided fascinating insight in her transcript about how EDI policy and assumptions, more broadly, had evolved over the years. This socio-cultural shift in turn was mirrored by her own vision for EDI at the British Council. In her own words:

> '... we're also **sharing the UK's journey**. We're also trying to help people think about the UK, perhaps in a different way, in a more positive way, understand it, understand its nuances, not say that we've got it all sorted because we've got the legislation and this, we've got our own problems in EDI. No doubt about it. And I never went saying, we've got it all sorted. We know what's right. Not at all.'
>
> **Fiona Bartels-Ellis, former Head of Equality and Diversity and Inclusion at the British Council (90th anniversary collection)**

This extract illustrates how EDI policy is intertwined with the British Council's modern *modus operandi*, sharing British values and culture, but with a recognition that the UK is not the moral authority. This is a common theme in the above interview – this linking of EDI inextricably to the quality of impact as a whole. Fiona identifies a number of socio-cultural shifts, manifest at both a national and an institutional level. The first is an evolution of the remit of EDI, as it was understood. At the British Council, the focus was initially predominantly on gender, disability and race. This has been expanded to include all protected characteristics. This broadened understanding of how someone's life chances can be affected by a much wider range of circumstances also allows scope for conversations around intersectionality.

Intersectionality, as coined by Crenshaw[2], means the ways in which multiple axes of discrimination interact to produce a unique experience of discrimination, such as race and gender or age and disability. Crenshaw also identifies an evolution in the way EDI covers health and wellbeing, shifting from a narrow focus on physical impairments to include mental health. There is also an acknowledgement of how politics interacts with EDI and concerns are raised over the dominance of identity politics in the space, often leading to intolerance of others.

Fiona Bartels-Ellis's insight is foundational to this section because, amongst the wider collection, conversations around EDI are often tangential. However, what is also important to note is that since she left, her work has been carried forward. In an interviewee with Jo Verrent, Director of the arts commissioning body Unlimited and who works in the space of disability activism, mentioned that 'even within the British Council, it's kind of like there's always been a brilliantly dedicated group of people who are absolutely committed to making this [EDI] happen'. This intentionality, which is distinct from simply espousal, is what marks the new era of British Council EDI.

In spite of positive developments with regard to EDI, interviewees reflected that there was still more to be done. Fiona Bartels-Ellis called for a 'radical rethink' of how the British Council approaches EDI, hoping that they might seek to embed and mainstream this across all strands of work and facets of the organisation – as opposed to focusing on this as part of specific programming. Positively, Fiona felt that 'some of the conditions are there' in order to achieve this. However, she emphasised that success in this regard would depend on 'thoughtful leaders' at the British Council translating those thoughts into appropriate corresponding actions.

2 K. Crenshaw (1991) 'Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color', Stanford Law Review.

5.3 Gendered lens

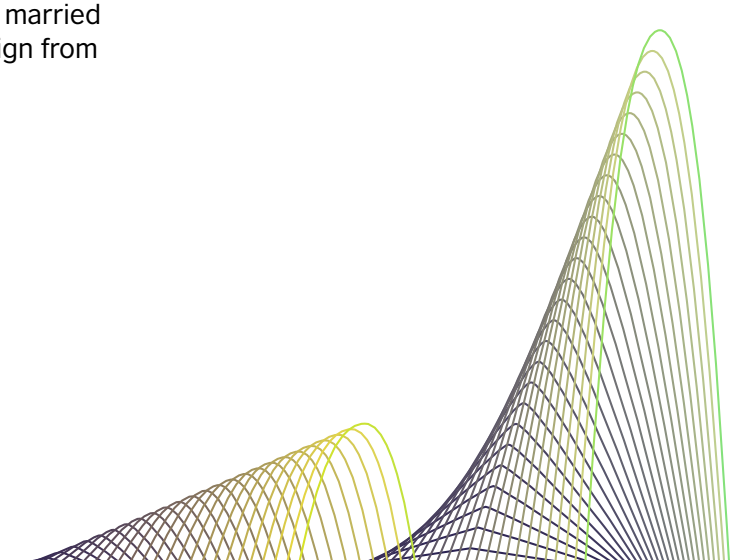
In acknowledging socio-cultural shifts, perhaps the most discussed in the collection was the experience of, and subsequent impact of, gender. Fiona Bartels-Ellis suggests this was perhaps where British Council EDI policy and progress was seen to be strongest. However, it is important to note that gender cannot be viewed in isolation, and whilst patterns of behaviour emerged through the interviews, the ways in which they were experienced as discrimination invariably related to intersectionality, individual embodied experiences, and temporal perceptions of appropriateness.

> ‘As long as we behaved ourselves and our skirts weren’t too short.’
>
> **Marion Oakeshott, former Private Secretary at the British Council (75th anniversary collection)**

In the 75th and 90th anniversary collections, numerous men and women described encounters in specific geographical contexts where women were treated differently from men. This section, however, is not an exploration of global attitudes towards women but, more specifically, of the gendered experiences of the women interviewed and their own perceptions on change over time – as this pertains to the British Council.

Helena Kennedy acknowledges that ‘sustaining a family’ in the British Council was particularly hard for women. Fiona Bartels-Ellis reiterates to the interviewer that, up until 1976, if you got married as a woman in the British Council you had to resign. This is confirmed by Monica Smith who got married in 1966 and ‘immediately had to resign from the overseas service’ (75th anniversary collection). Another former British Council Regional Officer, Leonora Collins, described a need to resign when she became pregnant, and in her story, we see the intersection of class and gender: ‘I was going to have a baby in about six weeks’ time, and you had to resign, so unless you know you were very rich and could afford proper child care, so I resigned’ (75th anniversary collection). Aside from these exclusionary practices, discrimination also manifested in the type of work given, described by Leonora Collins as ‘simple things to do’. She went on to explain that at the time there was an acute lack of female representation in senior- or even medium-level positions and where this did occur, ‘it was very unjust. Pay wasn’t equal, you were patronised, you knew perfectly well that in order to get on you had a very good degree, be very dedicated’. This lack of representation is echoed in several narratives.

The experiences detailed by interviewees can be attributed, in part, to mechanisms of exclusion at both an institutional and societal level, recognising this interplay. When putting into context a number of stories from the 75th anniversary collection about the British Council, but more broadly the Britain post-war, a picture of a rather exclusionary world is painted. This is perhaps best illustrated by the quote overleaf, from a former employee, Harold Oxbury, who left the British Council, only to later realise he had perhaps made a mistake.



Old boys' network:

'But I was lucky things were fixed on the 'old boys' network' or whatever you would call it, and I simply rang up James Livingstone one day and said more or less "I think I was better off in the Council than here, or better suited" and he literally said "Well, come around on Saturday and have tea with me and we'll discuss it", and this happened and he then did whatever was necessary within the organisation, he was the top Personnel man, the top establishments officer at the time, and he obviously made a judgement and persuaded his colleagues that it would be sound to take me back, which they duly did. It was extraordinarily easy in those days, but that's something actually which is a general reflection on my career and the careers of those of my generation, this was still a time when you left university and you could make a decision I will join British Tobacco, or I will join the British Council, or the Diplomatic Service, and assumed that as long as you were eligible and accepted you were there for life if you wished.'

Harold Oxbury, former Deputy Controller of Home Division, British Council (75th anniversary collection)

This concept of an 'old boys' network' was implicitly mentioned by Helena Kennedy (the first female chair of the British Council) in her discussion of female representation in the organisation. In her account, she suggested there was a time where job opportunities were advertised and filled by word of mouth – specifically via male employees' personal networks. She also recognised this practice was not unique to the British Council, rather, it 'was all over'.

The sentiment that emerges from the women interviewed – specifically women internal to the British Council and commonly in the 75th anniversary collection – was an expectation that, to be a successful woman in the British Council in these earlier years, you had to be beyond reproach, as well as better educated and harder working than male colleagues.

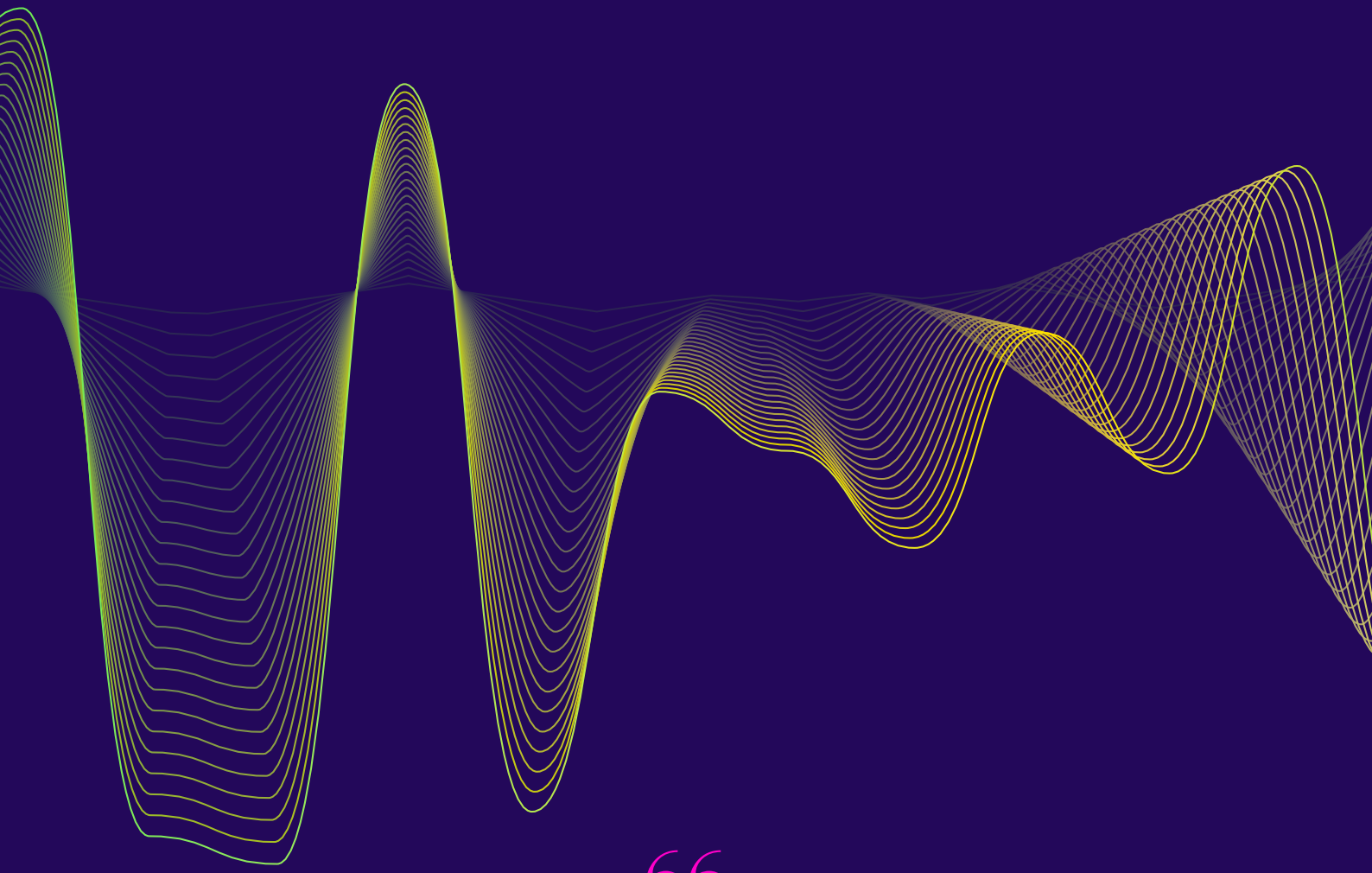
'If I may quote (no one else is going to quote this), someone once said "It's no good if you're seen in the wrong pub with the wrong man". I would amend that to I wouldn't say 'wrong', I would say 'any'. Men could get away with anything and women were rather suspect really …'

Leonora Collins, former British Council Regional Officer (75th anniversary collection)

This section is an illustration of manifestations of gendered experiences of discrimination. It is an exploration of the socio-political shifts at both a national level, but also at the institutional level of the British Council. The narrative is led by the material in the interviews, and the majority of discussion around gender at the British Council is of this nature. It is also to be considered alongside the testimonies of women in this collection on other topics. Much like other protected characteristics, gender appears to shape individual and collective journeys with and through the British Council.

As discussed in the limitations section 2.3, the collections do not represent a longitudinal study and, as such, it is not possible to directly map how individual experiences and anecdotes around gendered experience, for colleagues within the British Council, may have changed over time. Notably, the 75th anniversary collection is focused on sharing individualised and personal anecdotes of first-hand or second-hand experiences in relation to gender. In the 90th anniversary collection, the proportion of internal respondents is lower, and the discussion is more focused on EDI and intersectionality (as opposed to protected characteristics in isolation), discussion of which can broadly be considered to provide an institutional-level rather than individual-level perspective on gender.

The British Council and the concept of soft power



So here was the British Council doing really serious geopolitical stuff through the prism of culture.

Paul Smith, former Country Director (90th anniversary collection)

6 The British Council and the concept of soft power

'Soft power' – a term coined by Joseph Nye – is power attained via non-coercive influence. The pursuit of soft power aims to improve perceptions and standing of a country via attraction, rather than via force or payment. This is in contrast to 'hard power', which is typically expressed via military and economic force. In the 2024 Global Soft Power Index (Global Soft Power Index | Brandirectory), the UK ranked second in terms of soft power.

The British Council primarily engages in cultural relations to enhance the UK's global influence and to foster meaningful intercultural relationships and exchange. It achieves this via promoting education, arts and culture, and English language initiatives around the world. Soft power can be one potential outcome of this activity.

It is widely recognised that soft power outcomes are difficult to measure directly, owing to their multidimensional nature and sheer range of contributing factors. At this stage, it is useful to note that this study represents an analysis of soft power as seen through the lens of interviewees, as opposed to an 'objective' or direct measurement. Accounts include interviewees' reflecting their own experience (first person) as well as the *perceived* experience of others (third person). Given this, the analysis presents what interviewees personally observed in terms of soft power outcomes. This is sometimes stated explicitly, and at other times this was drawn out by way of implicit meaning(s).

Towards this exploration, a series of 'proxy' measures were developed, to aid in drawing out soft power themes within the analysis. Joseph Nye identifies three foundational pillars of soft power, namely, the extent to which interviewees demonstrate alignment with or express resonance with a country's: cultural appeal, political values; and foreign policy.[3] Therefore, within the coding framework used for this study, excerpts, phrases or sentiments which might demonstrate changed perceptions, in relation to one or more of those pillars, were sought.

Finally, it should be noted that soft power can apply to all countries. However, we were specifically interested in UK soft power as part of this study.

3 Nye, J. S. (2017). 'Soft power: the evolution of a concept'. Journal of Political Power

	Cultural Appeal (Pillar One)	Political Values (Pillar Two)	Foreign Policy (Pillar Three)
Indicator	Positive perception of culture, values, and practices.	Expression of shared ideals or values (both explicit and implicit).	Alignment with national strategies and ambitions.
What we might seek to identify (attitudes)	Terminology or phrases indicating admiration for or attraction to specific cultural aspects of the UK. Changed perceptions around reputation of the UK, reduction of negative perceptions. Positive perceptions around the UK's motivations and intentions (present and future) regarding the target intervention country.	Voluntary expression, i.e. interviewees freely expressing a desire to integrate with shared goals or perspectives (non-coercion, i.e. attraction) and/or link this with their personal identity and aspiration. Expressions of cohesion and strengthened intercultural relationships.	Expression of greater perceived credibility or legitimacy of the UK. Strategic alignment in relation to the interviewee's own identity and/or role and responsibilities. Language connected to 'role modelling' or seeking to 'learn from' or 'replicate' approaches.
	Emotive language or expressions, e.g. gratitude, appreciation, inspiration, loyalty, celebration, enthusiasm, etc. Identity-related language, for example, self-comparisons pre- and post-intervention which highlight influence, changes in self-narrative or cultural symbolism.		
What this might look like (behaviours)	Telling others about positive experiences, seeking to learn or experience more, or to better understand UK culture, language, etc. Adopting practices, or consuming trends or cultural exports from UK culture.	Desire/aspiration/ action taken to visit or study in the UK, desire to foster greater political collaboration. Improved international relationships, collaborations, partnerships, linkages, networks.	Changes in policies, strategies, investment, programmes, diplomatic/bilateral relationships, cultural/political alliances, partnerships, etc. Examples of influence exerted, i.e. an altered decision-making trajectory. Media coverage/ publication.
	Demonstrable changes in behaviours, habits or actions, in-line with the influencing actor.		
Identify an absence of:	Force, pressure, payment, coercion, short-term shift in perception or attitude/lack of long-lasting relationship, power imbalances.		

These proxies were used to structure our initial coding of the qualitative oral history data, however, the resulting narrative – presented below – is structured thematically, i.e. themes that emerged as most prominent following the conclusion of the analysis process.

6.1 Pillar one: perceptions of the UK's cultural appeal

This pillar involves exploring appreciation of, or attraction to, the UK, perceptions around the country's reputation and proxies such as consumption of cultural exports, for example.

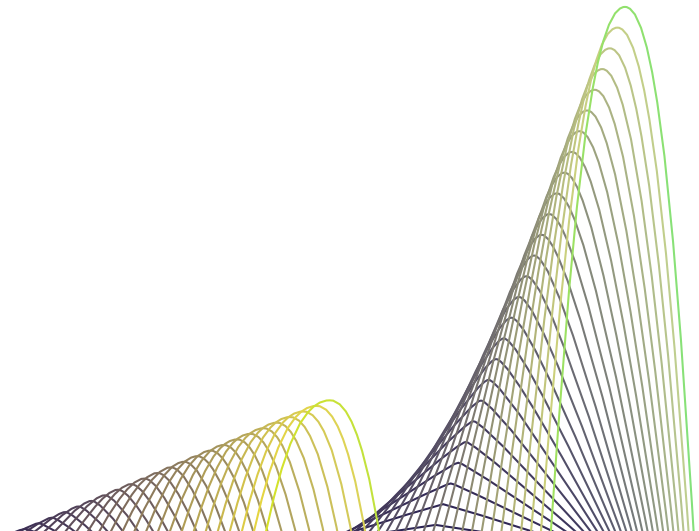
Respondents from both the 75th and 90th anniversary collections recount varying perceptions of the UK amongst host locations (as interpreted through the interviewee's own lens). These perceptions were shown to vary over the lifetime of the British Council, and across differing geographic and political contexts.

The interviews reveal that the UK has variously benefitted from positive associations due to its language, culture (arts), education system, scientific credibility and as a result of respected British institutions (including Parliament, the BBC, and the BBC World Service, for example). Undoubtedly, alongside national-level cultural appeal, certain *individuals* have been instrumental in fostering positive perceptions of the UK. This demonstrates that soft power influence is generated at multiple levels.

Negative perceptions in relation to the UK's past role in colonialism and conflict were expressed within both collections, from British and non-British citizens, though highly nuanced and diverse perceptions were evident within British Council host countries, and views were not homogenous.

A common assumption about the British Council that affected its reception both at home and abroad, stemmed from a scepticism over its *mission* which, to some, was felt to be colonialist/neo-colonialist. As Neil Kinnock described: 'Some of them would deliberately consider it to be a kind of attempted colonisation or patronising exertion of great power status' (90th anniversary collection). For two interviewees both internal and external to the British Council, their affiliation with the institution was interrogated by friends and peers. Fiona Bartels-Ellis's friends perceived the British Council to be a 'colonial entity' and an external partner, Deb Avery, working in South Africa, was prompted to clarify that 'the British Council was not coming in as a patriarchal figure trying to make people more British, that it was actually a co-working, a working together with the South African Department of Education'. Deb Avery went on to explain that, in her experience, whilst many local people were receptive, there had been instances where they were asked: 'Why are you coming here? We're sick of you British people coming and bringing stuff to us and expecting us to use it.'

It is apparent, however, that perceptions are not often wholly binary, and that both positive *and* negative regard can often co-exist, owing to different facets of the UK, its actors, its institutions, its values and its culture. Therefore, the topic should not be oversimplified, nor sweeping assumptions made. Having said this, the interviews reveal a general trajectory of the British Council attempting to establish more positive and more proactively decolonial relationships, as well as an evident shift towards co-operation and local sensitivity (as explored in Chapter Four, 4.2.2 Cultural sensitivities and Chapter Five: Socio-cultural shifts at the British Council).



Further, across the timeline of the British Council, it is clear that different aspects of British culture and institutions have exerted more/less influence or appeal at different times, with an increasing role played and recognised in relation to cultural power.

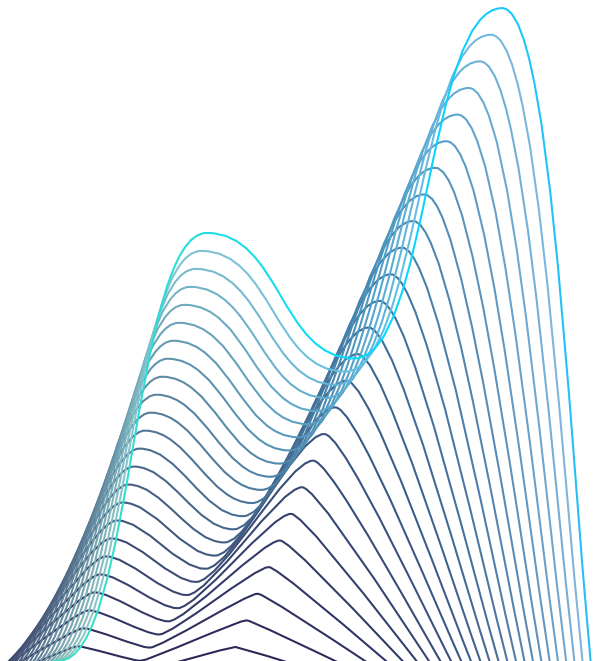
‘A language becomes a global language for one reason only and that is the power of the people who speak it, undoubtedly. And power does mean in the case of English political and military power, on the one hand, but it also means technological power, the industrial revolution, science, the language of science. It also means economic power, (as in the) 19th century, with the dollar talking and the pound talking. And it means cultural power today, in the sense of all the inventions that have been done through the medium of English.’

David Crystal, author and former British Council Board member (75th anniversary collection)

To an extent, attribution strictly to the British Council and its role in generating such perceptions is less evident, in the sense that these perceptions are and have been informed by multiple intersecting strands, across and within the context of long personal, national and regional histories and contemporalities. Therefore, perceptions can be seen to pre-exist, to run alongside, and to be interwoven with British Council interventions, in turn informing and influencing the success of said interventions. However, there are also clear examples where the British Council’s work has had a clear and attributable influence and effect at various scales – whether personally, nationally and/or regionally. Where these examples were provided in any concrete manner, selections are highlighted later in this chapter.

Although the majority of interviewees did not refer to soft power directly, and the majority of examples suggest indirect or more intangible effects, at times this concept in and of itself is openly acknowledged. One interviewee, Neil Kinnock, when asked how people around the world viewed the UK, noted that, in his general experience, the in-country populations he had tended to encounter had associated the UK with themes of ‘liberation, or cultural fulfilment’. This reportedly afforded Neil a ‘soft landing’ when undertaking his work in countries globally. However, he also noted that ‘soft power’ activity could sometimes be viewed negatively, including with scepticism or suspicion.

This demonstrates, perhaps, the unpredictable nature of cultural relations, owing to the multitude of interpretations that can arise when dealing with the arts – in large part subjective and open to multiple readings:

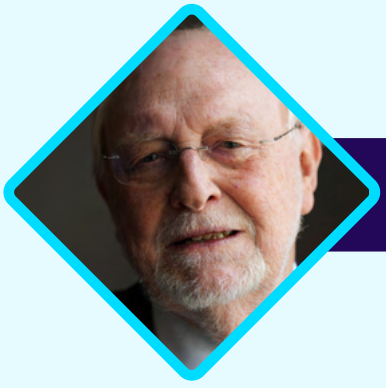


The nature of soft power

‘Occasionally, I’d bump into people who didn’t comprehend the nature of soft power and some of them would confuse, yeah, would confuse it with espionage. Some of them would deliberately consider it to be a kind of attempted colonisation or patronising exertion of great power status. There were some people, I guess in the States I bumped into one or two, who thought it was a mixture of all that, with a little bit of apple pie thrown in, you know, so (a) mixture. But for instance, you know, I’ll give you an example. National Theatre Scotland did a performance of the *Black Watch*. I saw it three times. I saw it in New York, I saw it in Dublin and I saw it in the Barbican. And it was absolutely brilliant. It was just … and it said so much about the UK, positively and devastatingly scathingly. And anybody who watched it and thought about it could, in an hour or two hours, get insights into the UK, ancient and modern. And I remember I saw it in New York in the Warehouse Theatre on the East Side. And I mean, it got rave reviews. And we went for supper afterwards with some people who’d been there because they wanted to see this play about the Scottish British military. And came away with a hell of a lot more. But they had to be talked through the idea of why the British Council was involved. Why would we be actively and financially be supporting a play that in substantial part kicked the hell out of the imperial idea of the United Kingdom and the idea of … of conformist service. And of course, the play, in order to prove its point did that. It did a hell of a lot more mind. And as I say, anybody who got the insight would understand it was a play about the nature and condition of the United Kingdom and a great means of communication about our country. As I said, the British Council exists in order to increase understanding of Britain in the world.’

Neil Kinnock, former Chair of the British Council (90th anniversary collection)

Audio clip



Neil Kinnock

David Crystal, author and former British Council Board member, reflecting on the reception to his book: *English as a Global Language*, recalls criticism he faced, with some critics implying that 'the reason for English becoming a global language was a great British Council plot to take over the world' (75th anniversary collection).

Moreover, one 90th anniversary collection interviewee, the spoken-word artist Francesca Beard, described an event they did in China where journalists, whilst not hostile, were very sceptical that a poet working for/with the British Council would not be writing propaganda. The key misunderstanding here would potentially be synonymising the British Council and the government. This suggests that the independence of the British Council is fundamental to its efficacy as an institution. However, this nuance is complicated. Another interviewee, Bridget Thompson, described the difficulties in explaining the relationship between the British Council and the UK government because, often, this structure was not present in the countries it operated in:

'It was always a problem because you could never match up the governmental structures in the two countries, and hence they didn't quite understand what our authority was and we had to accept that their authority was quite black and white and firm.'

Bridget Thompson, former British Council Regional Officer (75th anniversary collection)

Despite the potential for misunderstandings, or even negative consequences, some interviewees were clear in expressing the perceived potential of soft power. For example, Paul Smith explicitly underscored the perceived importance of soft power as opposed to political and economic forces. Pointing to the pre-cursors and effects of the significant terrorist incident at the World Trade Center on 9/11, he related that this, in their view, was largely a 'cultural happening':

'I said it's a cultural happening, it's the people of one set of cultures and the values pertaining to them and the people of another set of cultures and the values pertaining to them in conflict – (it) isn't caused by politics and economics, those are manifestations of it, this is caused by deep cultural divide, this is the stuff of the British Council.'

Paul Smith, former British Council Country Director (90th anniversary collection)

Whilst geopolitical conflicts are undoubtedly multifaceted with a range of complex drivers, this sentiment points to the potential cultural relations may offer in developing linkages and positive relationships, which in turn supports soft power. The British Council – Paul felt – was primed to play an important and ongoing role in this arena.

6.1.1 Perceptions of British institutions

‘And so many of these things are basically, the outcomes are not easily measurable, but my God, do they create relationships which benefit the United Kingdom well, long after the work has ever been done. The number of people who say that that was what drew them and attached them to the United Kingdom and who speak of the British Council with such reverence.’

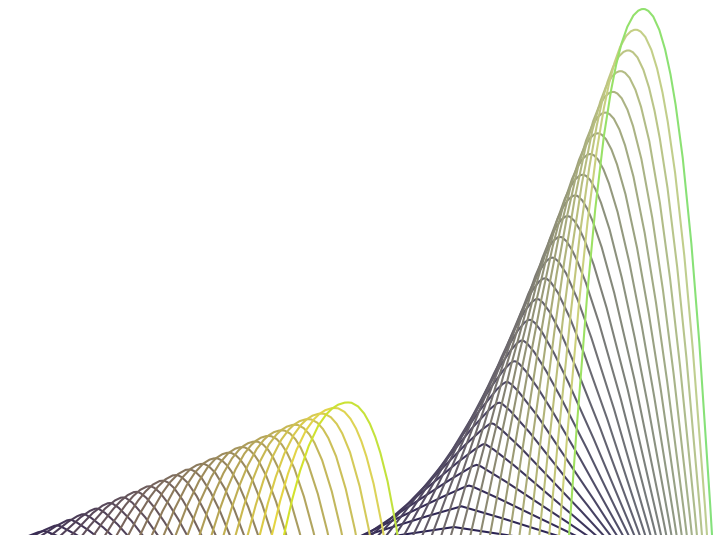
Helena Kennedy, former Chair of the British Council (90th anniversary collection)

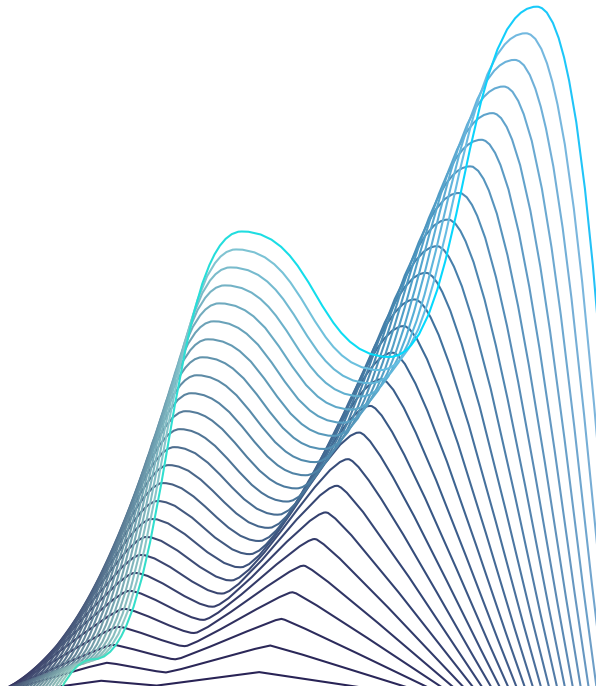
Various perceptions of British institutions were related by interviewees across the period of their involvement with the British Council. In general, these are standalone examples rather than thematic in nature. Nevertheless, they hint at the complex nature and potential wide-ranging influence of attitudes, emotions and perceptions held about the UK, and how these relate to its soft power. Interviewees gave examples suggesting that perceptions of UK institutions had variously made a contribution to decisions around where parents have chosen to send their children to study, the clothes they may have chosen to wear, the entertainment they chose to engage with, or even the legal systems that countries may have sought to adopt.

The interviews also reveal how, owing to positive associations with British institutions, the British Council has variously been involved in supporting firefighters, lawyers, doctors, educators and even football coaches – the latter reportedly at a time the sport was becoming more popular within Arab states, including Saudi Arabia.

Brian Lavercombe, former Head of Science Department, British Council, shared that the UK’s scientific establishments were highly regarded and held ‘tremendous prestige’ within the global community, including in Chile where he was based. Whilst Brian felt that the UK’s reputation in this field has since diminished globally, he described ‘a golden moment’ whereby countries in the Global South were keen to educate their populations in science, seeing this as a route to prosperity (75th anniversary collection). There was a notable demand at this time for British scientists to train local populations.

Whilst it is not clear to what extent the British Council *generated* or contributed to these positive perceptions in the first instance, there is an indication that the existence of such positive perceptions has often provided the British Council both access and credibility within host nations.





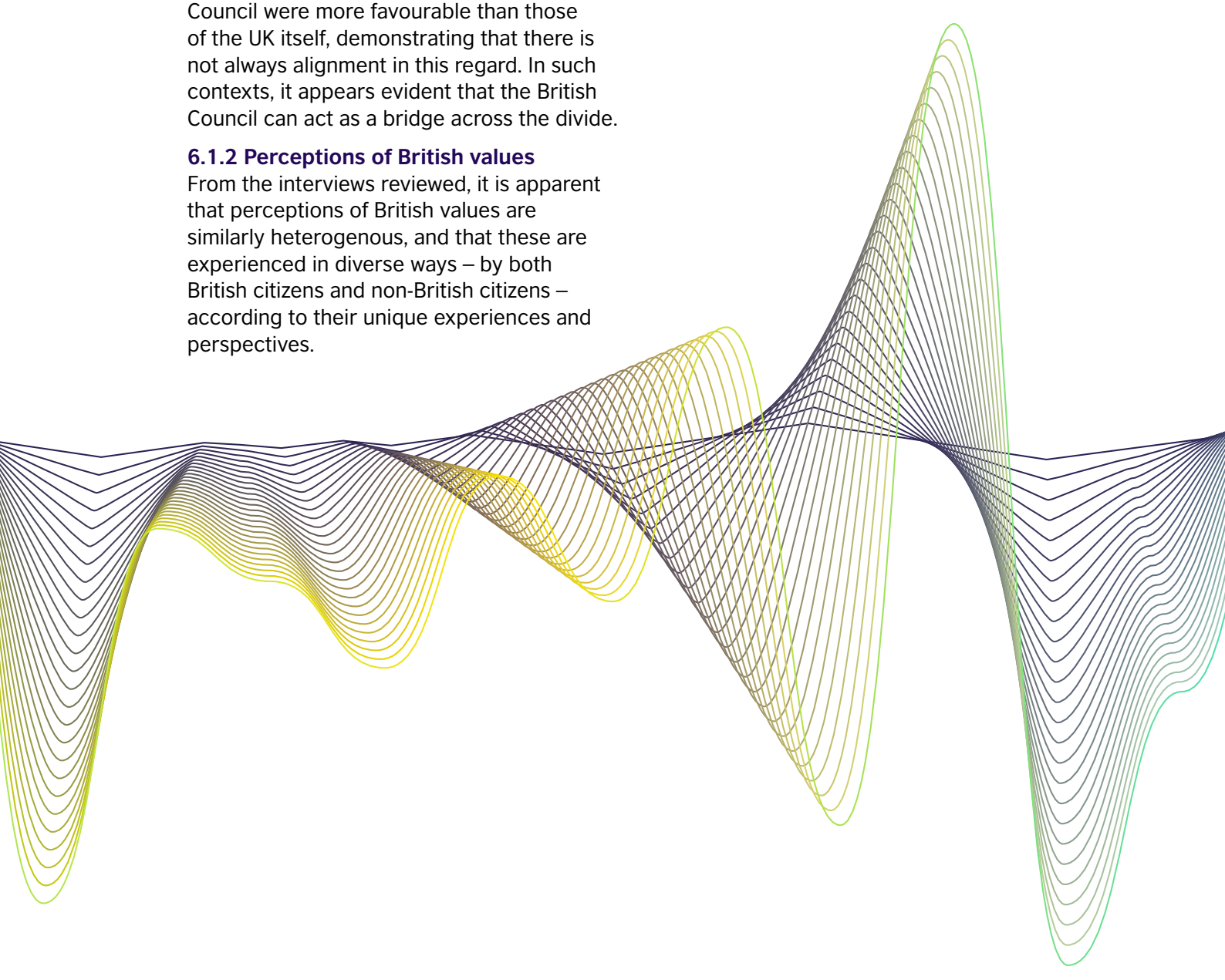
What is clear, on the other hand, including from the examples above, is that perceptions are never static, but liable to shift or evolve. This can be considered a positive in terms of the British Council's mission, given that perceptions appear to be responsive to *influences upon them*, meaning they can be changed for the better. Similarly, another interview with a former British Council employee, Patsy Zeppel, recognised shifting perceptions of the UK amongst Australians, expressing that 'attitudes to Britain' have changed. Patsy described an initial 'love/hate relationship' that had evolved positively. She foregrounded that many Australians were reading British newspapers and enjoying British TV entertainment, suggesting an important role in terms of the UK's cultural exports and institutions in evolving international relations. She also indicated that, in this case, perceptions of the British Council were more favourable than those of the UK itself, demonstrating that there is not always alignment in this regard. In such contexts, it appears evident that the British Council can act as a bridge across the divide.

6.1.2 Perceptions of British values

From the interviews reviewed, it is apparent that perceptions of British values are similarly heterogenous, and that these are experienced in diverse ways – by both British citizens and non-British citizens – according to their unique experiences and perspectives.

In terms of how British values were perceived to have shifted over time, the 90th anniversary collection interviews point to perceived positive shifts, including a perspective that the UK became more 'accepting', 'outward looking', and developed into a country that 'has decent values that tries to embrace diversity' (Fiona Bartels-Ellis, former Head of Equality and Diversity and Inclusion at the British Council, 90th anniversary collection).

Strides in terms of EDI within the UK were also acknowledged, primarily by those whose role focused on related topics and work. This socio-cultural evolution around EDI as a practice in the UK was acknowledged in 5.2 A Socio-Cultural Shift.



Shifting perceptions of the UK

‘My perceptions of the UK have changed over time. I think the UK has become a much more accepting society. I really think the UK has, and I think leadership in the UK accounts for this in many ways. I think there were some great leaders that have messaged the value of the diversity of cultures, you know, that shift from colonial superiority. I now feel that people in the UK as a generalisation are much more outward looking, much more open minded and hearted. You can see how many more, you know, how many marriages, you might call interracial marriages (there) are, as my parents’ marriage was, there are now and how common they are. Mixed people are the largest growing group, aren’t they? It’s changed enormously. We are not this isolated island. And so, I think over time, there’s been a shift from, we’ll never get rid of it, the shift from these colonial exploiters, da da da da ,da, to a country that has decent values that tries to embrace diversity, including of opinion and thought and background.’

Fiona Bartels-Ellis, former Head of Equality and Diversity and Inclusion at the British Council (90th anniversary collection)

Fiona Bartels-Ellis

Audio clip

There are also examples whereby respondents viewed particular British values positively and expressed hope that these values in the UK might 'trickle down' or influence practice within other countries. One external partner, Deb Avery, for example, referred to the 'gender agenda', pointing to the UK's stance in terms of gender equity in education. She spoke about how, in South Africa, she observed that the country had, in her view, a 'really great constitution in terms of gender equality', however, she felt that did not 'play itself out in education'. She felt the UK placed more emphasis on gender equality not only within the British Council, but also in educational establishments in general. Deb therefore hoped this ethos could be leveraged to support positive change in South African education spaces, towards greater gender parity. She expressed similar hopes in terms of LGBTQIA+ inclusion, feeling this was foregrounded to a greater extent in the UK's educational institutions, compared to those in South Africa.

Deb Avery

'What we're seeing about gender equality in the UK is just stronger than what we're seeing in South Africa. And I think it would make a big difference in this education space. We have a crazy thing that almost 70 per cent of teachers in South Africa are female, and yet almost all management is male. It would be really nice to be able to see a much better way of looking at it. Yeah, and I do think that's one of the things (...) that I think the UK space could teach South Africa so much about.'

Deb Avery, education consultant (90th anniversary collection)

There were also individual accounts of being influenced by the UK's culture and perceived values at any early age, via cultural exports. This included the account of Amol Padwad, an academic and education consultant from India, who describes having 'always had a very positive image of the UK' (90th anniversary collection). Amol recalls finding British films and literature 'fascinating', mainly as they were different, visually and culturally, from what he experienced in his own small town. There was a clear association of British culture with 'freedom', and equality within family life.

‘I think it was largely a cultural difference because I also remember watching a few movies around that time when I was in secondary school. The only cinema hall in my town used to show English movies only on Saturdays and Sundays and those would be typically Laurel and Hardy movies or movies from the olden days. And those movies showed a kind of family life where all members participated equally and there was a lot of freedom around and there was much less hierarchy. All these were different from my own experience though: my own family was much less hierarchical but the families around me, the families of my own friends, those were a bit orthodox families with strict hierarchies and more disciplined. So, those kinds of differences I noticed more readily, I would say.’

Amol Padwad, academic and education consultant (90th anniversary collection)

Of course, the point should also be made that the UK itself possesses a varied landscape of culture and identities, and there is not necessarily one definitive set of ‘British values’ that could be pinned down, rather a plurality of perspectives, which are at times aligned and at times in opposition. Nor is there one singular ‘British’ experience. Illustrating the importance of regional and cultural identities, as an example, David Crystal related a story of a series of cultural visits, whereby groups of visitors to the UK were hosted in Swansea and Cardiff during the 1980s (75th anniversary collection). This was reportedly at the moment that Welsh nationalism was garnering increasing support and the Russian visitors, understandably unaware of the regional, cultural and political nuances, would express their happiness to be visiting ‘England’, which was not well-received at the time by the Welsh communities hosting.

6.2 Pillar two: collaborations and intercultural relationships (political values)

Whilst, in general, the interviews reviewed did not expressly reveal shared ‘political values’, many of the proxies identified above were, in fact, present. This involved themes such as increased collaboration and intercultural relations, and proactive behaviours such as a desire to learn or operate in the English language.

Amol Padwad

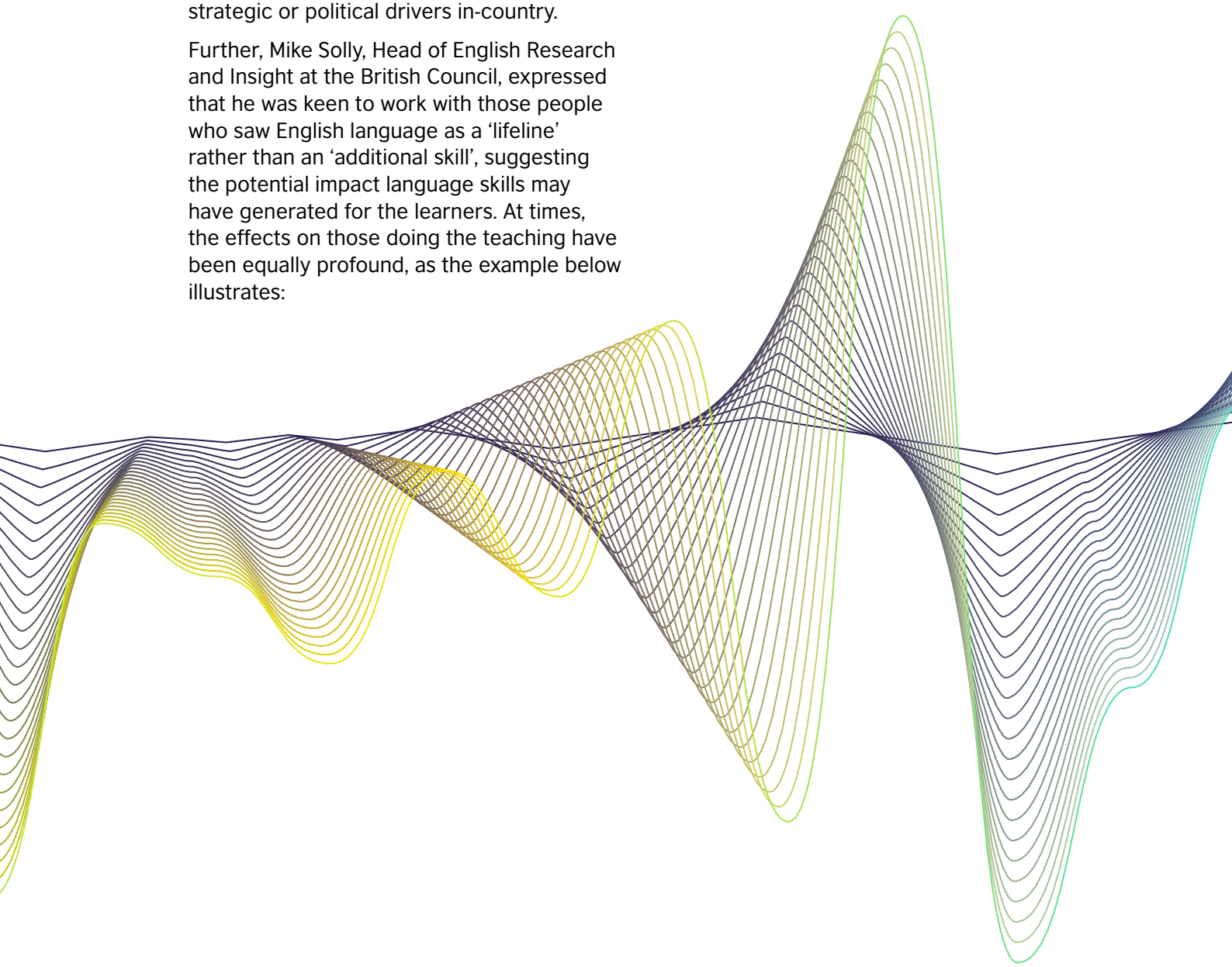
6.2.1 English language learning

‘I learnt a lot. It was, it was fascinating for me to see the way that, that, you know, English was so in demand in so many different ways from so many different people.’

Mike Solly, Head of English Research and Insight at the British Council (90th anniversary collection)

Multiple interviews, across both the 75th and 90th anniversary collections, reveal a demand for English language teaching across varying cultural contexts. It is clear that motivations for seeking to learn English language have been diverse, spanning from individuals’ personal interest to more strategic or political drivers in-country.

Further, Mike Solly, Head of English Research and Insight at the British Council, expressed that he was keen to work with those people who saw English language as a ‘lifeline’ rather than an ‘additional skill’, suggesting the potential impact language skills may have generated for the learners. At times, the effects on those doing the teaching have been equally profound, as the example below illustrates:



English language teaching and cultural exchange in Bosnia and Herzegovina

Mike Solly described that native English speakers were in demand when they were working in Bosnia. He shared a personal account of having been tasked with delivering English language education to Franciscan priests.

‘I had never had any relationship with the priesthood. I didn’t have a particularly positive or negative view of them. You know, it was just outside my range of experience. This was all before the war. I then started teaching them English. I got to know one of them really well. And in return for teaching them English, they taught me about whisky, which I didn’t know very much about before their first functional whisky. And also, one of them taught me to ski after the war.’

After a period of conflict in Bosnia, five years later, Mike wanted to seek out his now friend but had lost touch and wasn’t sure what may have happened to him. Fortunately, the interviewee managed to reconnect, and upon re-establishing a connection, Mike asked the Father if there was ‘anything’ he could do. The Father said that, yes, there was, and Mike was asked if they could sing. Upon hearing an affirmative, the Father requested that he join a choir.

Mike Solly

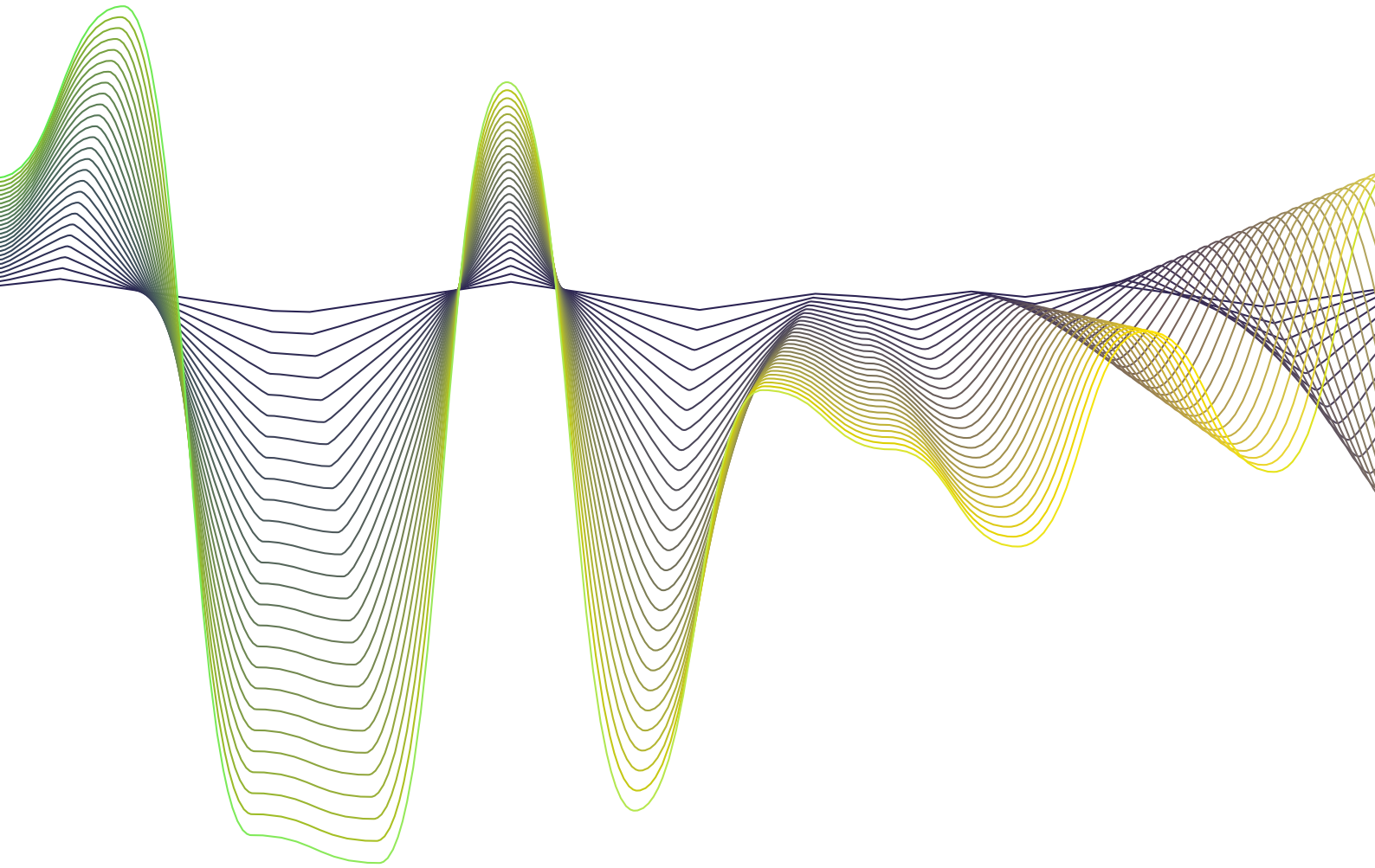
‘So, I joined this choir, which was called Pontanima, which is … kind of means building bridges. And the philosophy behind the choir was to sing songs from all the cultures of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the former Yugoslavia. So that meant Serbian songs, which have an amazing musical tradition, Croatian/ Catholic songs. You know, again, huge musical tradition, Islamic music, massive musical tradition, but quite different. And Jewish music as well as music from those that had no belief. So the folk tradition of Bosnia, that was amazing. And then I spent several years with that choir. And that in itself taught me so much about being in another country and how complex cultures are, but how beautiful when you don’t deny the difference between cultures, but you learn from each other’s company. I loved that. And that’s something that still stays with me. (…) That’s a bit of a long story that had nothing much to do with English, but as I got to know the conditions that they live under and what role English could play in their lives, it completely fascinated me.’

Mike Solly, Head of English Research and Insight at the British Council (90th anniversary collection)

To share some examples of a desire for English language education, one interviewee from the 75th anniversary collection, Monica Smith, related how young people in Thailand, during the Vietnam War, became keen to learn the English language, in part via their interest in listening to the BBC World Service, as well as owing to American influences.

There was a desire amongst young people, Monica felt, to break out of 'the very strict Thai culture'. Monica would meet with the students once a week to teach them English and describes this as a time of great demand for language teaching. This is perhaps indicative, again, of the role that cultural exports can play in generating motivation to learn language skills, and in positively influencing cultural perceptions, including during times of active regional conflict.

Similar demand was described by interviewees across multiple continents.



English language teaching in Egypt

Another example, from a 90th anniversary collection interviewee, Paul Smith, relates the broader significance of English language teaching, and situates the English language in its geopolitical and historical context(s). Paul Smith emphasised that English is a 'world language', because of 'empire', and so recognised that when engaging in English language teaching, it is also important to consider the past and the future – not only what is done in the present – when positioning how the language is presented globally.

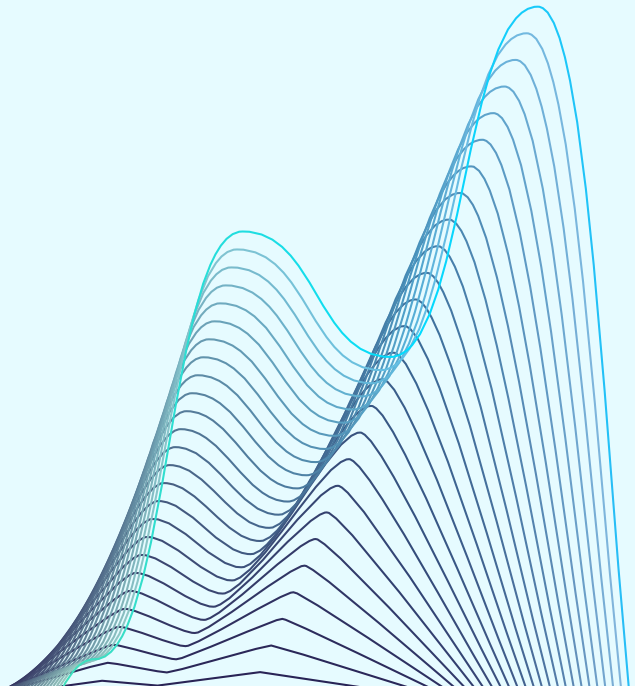
Paul related an example from his time working in Egypt, shortly after 9/11. He described it as the project he was 'most proud' to have been involved with, successfully generating links with the Al-Azhar, which the British Council at the time had not yet collaborated with. This example demonstrates a forging of strong, embedded and meaningful collaboration and relationships between the British Council and a significant and a globally important Islamic institution, demonstrating shared goals and values.

'So in Egypt, in Cairo, is a very great Sunni Islamic institution called the Al-Azhar. It's over a thousand years old. It's the oldest university in the world. Bologna needs to realise this. They have only taught Islamic studies and related things, but it's the oldest place in the world in which people of what we regard as university age came for years to learn. It's the largest producer of Imams and priests in the world. Most of the priests and Imams in the Regents Park Mosque, for instance, would have been trained at Al-Azhar. It's a massive institution. Thousands and thousands of students and people. And the Imam, the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, is the most significant leader in Sunni Islam in the world. If Islam had a Pope, it would be this person.'

After contacting the University's president by letter, Paul received a response and was invited to a meeting.

'The president stands up, puts his hands out like that, and he says, Mr Smith, British Council, where have you been? Amazing moment. He said we have a lot to talk about, come in. We sat down on that sofa. This president, by the way, three years later becomes the Grand Imam. The Grand Imam dies, and he is appointed the Grand Imam. He's still the Grand Imam of the Al-Azhar and the leader of the Sunni Islamic world. But this man sits on this sofa with me, and he says: "Look, your country and other countries do not understand our religion and you are demonising us, and we need a real conversation to sort this or we're going to have more horrors and violence and warfare." And he said: "I, we at Al-Azhar must be at the forefront of this conversation." He said, "No, you in the West are never going to learn our language. So we've got to learn your language, literally, English, and you've got to help us. So what I want … is I want to create a British Council here in the Al-Azhar teaching my faculty and our potential Imams English." And he said, "I will, if you can contribute something that's great in terms of the teachers, but we will essentially cover all the costs."

Audio clip



English language teaching in Egypt

‘And then he said, “I want one other thing. I want some of our senior faculty to have doctorates or post-doctorates from your country so that they can teach and assert even better.” So he said, “I would like you to connect us with universities in the UK that can help us with this. And again, we can go so far with the money, but … here we may need help,” – which I eventually got from the protected budgets of the British government. I said, that’s great. I will, soon as I get back to my office, I will remind myself of those universities in Britain that are leading in Islamic studies. He said, “I’m not interested in Islamic studies, we do Islamic studies. You can come and learn that from us.” He said, “I’m interested in three things. I’m interested in, I want my faculty to understand Western philosophy, Christian theology and Judaism. That’s what I want, doctorates and post-doctorates.”

‘I won’t go through all the mechanics but three months later the British Council at Al-Azhar opened and it’s still there for 15, 13 years later it’s still there. That’s the greatest thing I’ve ever been involved in. It’s been visited by every British Prime Minister; it’s been visited by Prince – now King – Charles twice. It was a beacon of new understanding. Amazing. We had some of the most hard-headed Islamic young men wanting to be priests go through that university and the quality and the generosity of conversation we all had at all times was amazing.

‘And when he became the Grand Imam and the world’s press were there, literally, two hours after being appointed, he had the world’s press, their CNN, Washington, everybody was there. And they asked him, on camera, of course, you know, what are some of the things you’re going to do? And he said, “One of the things I’m going to do is continue our wonderful British Council project.” Nobody in the room really … they didn’t even know what the British Council was. I cannot believe how in the past the British Council used to lose its soundbites and its communication. The British Council never did anything with that soundbite, which is probably the greatest soundbite the British Council has ever had.’

Paul Smith, former British Council Country Director (90th anniversary collection)

Paul Smith

The examples above, whilst also having an evident effect on the recipients of English language training, have also evidently had a lasting effect on those involved in delivery of the English language projects. At times, this has included a strong emotional component, perhaps demonstrating the authenticity and depth of relationships forged, in both directions, via the vehicle of English language education.

One interviewee from the 90th anniversary collection, former British Council Country Director Roy Cross, described having worked in Iraq and teaching during the period Saddam Hussein was in power. When the invasion of Kuwait began in August 1990, marking the beginning of the Gulf War, British Council activity had to cease, and the interviewee (and the wider team) returned to the UK. Roy spoke of the emotional impact of this sudden departure:

‘I mean, I’m a reasonably typical Anglo-Saxon male. It took me many years to come to terms with what effectively was the sort of emotional amputation of your arm or your leg or something, because we had friendships, we had work, we had plans, and it all just disappeared. Disappeared just like that.’

Roy Cross, former British Council Country Director (90th anniversary collection)

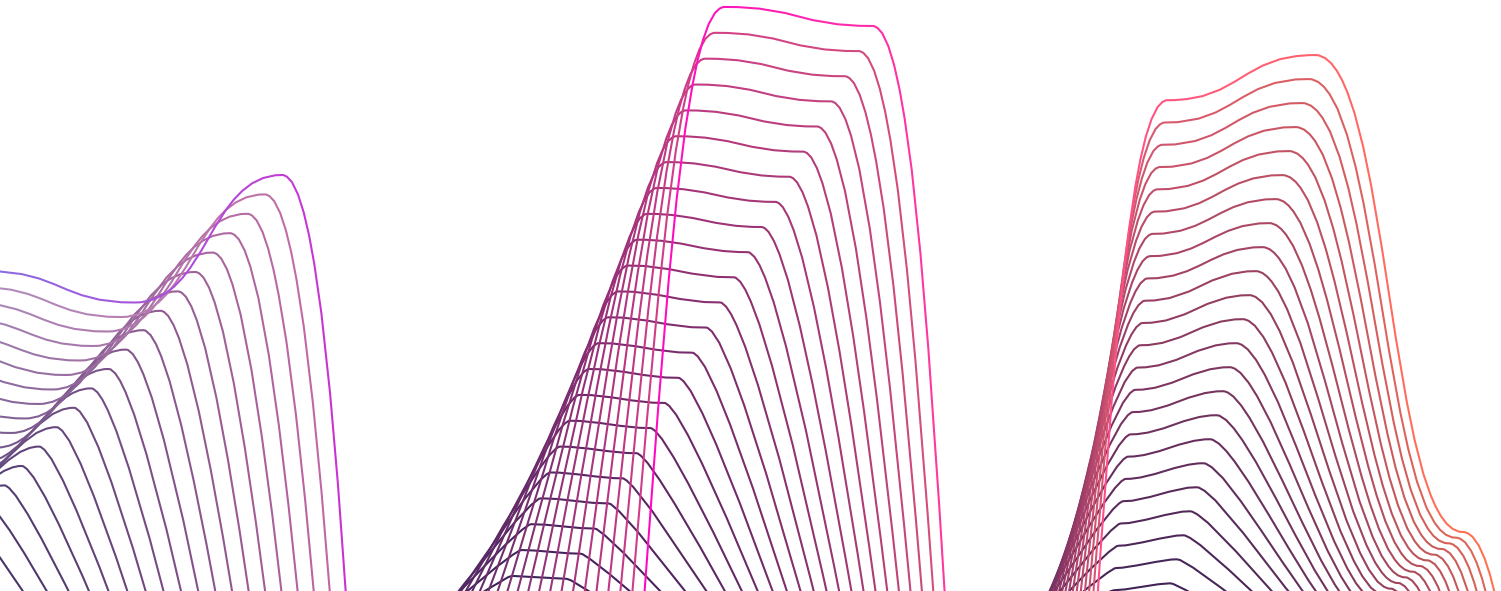
6.2.2 Education

‘They put together the idea of this large conference for teachers in Mexico where they would bring specialists from, you know, from the UK and they would gather teachers in a highly specialised forum and so on. And that’s how BBELT was born.’

Pilar Aramayo-Prudencio, Head of English in Education at the British Council (90th anniversary collection)

One 90th anniversary collection interviewee, Janet Ilieva, described that education was, in her view, being used by the British Council as a vehicle to drive connections and build relationships. Janet has done a lot of work at the regulatory level, focused on working with local stakeholders to share experiences from elsewhere around the benefits of transnational education. She related that transnational education can support learners, build capacity in a country and support the internationalisation of local educational curricula.

It has been discussed, above, how the UK has generally enjoyed positive associations in relation to its education system, and in particular disciplines.



‘I think you know peers, colleagues, friends and family definitely thought of the UK as having opportunities, having very, very good educational opportunities, making strong cultural contributions through literature and kinds of music and that sort of stuff. I think they were very aware of its colonial past, and it was an era where that was being challenged.’

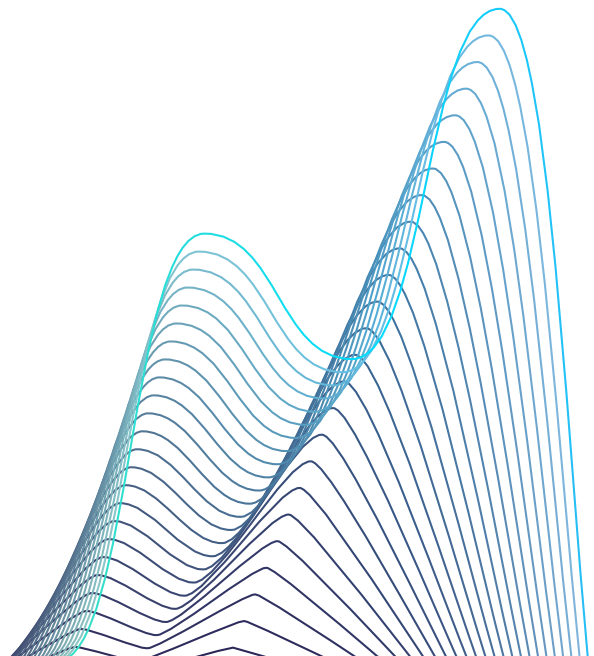
Fiona Bartels-Ellis, former Head of Equality and Diversity and Inclusion at the British Council (90th anniversary collection)

That said, there have been times whereby the British Council’s strategy has not necessarily aligned fully with those of host countries. For example, Pilar Aramayo-Prudencio, Head of English in Education at the British Council, related that it was the UK’s aim at the time to engage students in the Philippines with UK universities, without necessarily having those students travel to the UK (90th anniversary collection). Reportedly, the minister in the Philippines was keen that students travel to the UK to study. Whilst it was, at times, challenging to find a ‘middle ground’, Pilar reported great success in terms of the collaboration, citing a ‘very long and very large’ project with the Commission on Higher Education in the country, which ‘continues to this day’. The key impact of this collaboration, from her perspective, was in the subjects the British Council was able to support:

‘And it was important, I mean, significant both in numbers, in the numbers of people that we were reaching, also financially, but most importantly in the subjects that were being supported that were areas where the Philippines had very little experience or expertise, but that were critical for their development as a nation.’

Pilar Aramayo-Prudencio, Head of English in Education at the British Council (90th anniversary collection)

This case demonstrates the benefits to be gained from educational exchange, as well as the potential challenges in aligning goals and aspirations across countries. This example also appears typical of the British Council’s transnational education approach, summarised via the following quote, i.e. signifying a blend of UK experience with local need:



‘So transnational education has become kind of the main pillar of my work for the Council. And a lot of the work implies understanding better local higher education systems, seeing what are the bottlenecks in terms of higher education provision. Can UK experience remove those bottlenecks? Can then the education be widened, be made more accessible to others irrespective of their geographical location, irrespective of where they are?’

Janet Ilieva, former Education Research Officer at the British Council, current Education consultant (90th anniversary collection)

6.2.3 Cultural exchange

‘For me, any, any successful workshop or gig is going to be an exchange like I would always look to for it to transform me as well as transform whoever comes to it in some way. You know, I know that sounds like a big, like a big, transformation. It feels like a big thing. But I don’t think really you know, I don’t think it is. I think it’s like we should expect that some kind of change or some kind of shift or that you learn something new, you know, that you doing something changes you in some way.’

Francesca Beard, spoken word artist (90th anniversary collection)

Janet Ilieva

‘In other words, there is already a back and forth. I think that the conversations and the relationship change the situation. Yes, I think they help a lot, because those of us on stage are part of the people. And that’s what the people want: understanding, relationships, not war.’

Rubén Otero, musician and playwright (and war veteran) (90th anniversary collection)

Whilst one strategy towards generating soft power is dissemination of cultural products, such as literature, theatre, arts, media, and so on, the interviews reviewed most often contained sentiments around cultural exchange, connection and collaboration, as opposed to one-way sharing, or explicit acknowledgment of soft power goals or outcomes. This is evident in the often recounted profound and lasting effects that time spent within a host country – and with the people present – has engendered, spanning deep and meaningful friendships, formative experiences and learning, and powerful, vivid memories. The theme of co-operation runs strongly through accounts of arts-based initiatives, delivered in various locations.

Indeed, one interviewee, Paul Smith, suggests that arts should not be instrumentalised solely for diplomatic purposes:

‘I’m never ready to crow about Britain just for the sake of it, but I am ready to crow about where I think Britain is good, and where Britain is good is in its artists and its culture and in its intellect and its education and values as emanated through that. I don’t think there are things of British values, but our values come through. So, here I was in a position to actually make wonderful artistic exchange and education exchange happen thanks to the funding of this organisation, the British Council, and for it not to be public diplomacy, which is a phrase I’ve always hated because I think it’s just a fig leaf of propaganda. And using the arts for propaganda is appalling. If traditional diplomacy is the government of one country trying to benignly influence on its own behalf the government of another country, then public diplomacy is the government of one country trying to benignly influence the people of another country, and that is, that’s a slippery slope to propaganda.’

Paul Smith, former British Council Country Director (90th anniversary collection)

This raises an interesting point, given that the arts can be inherently provoking and influential, rather than inert. It is not always possible to depoliticise the arts, and there may always be a ‘message’ it is possible to interpret, even if this is highly subjective or even unintended.

Regardless, interviewees described various activities such as film programmes, theatre tours and spoken-word initiatives. Some experiences can be broadly described as supplying enjoyable and entertaining experiences for audiences (for example, one film screening in Nigeria was described by Paul Smith as 'a hoot' for those involved) whilst others have generated more profound effects, such as providing platforms for artists' self-expression, generating pride in one's own language and culture, and achieving greater representation for disabled artists.

One interviewee, Jo Verrent, related a significant 'sea change' in relation to accessibility in the arts, emphasising that the British Council has made an important contribution to this shift, alongside other entities such as the UK Arts Council. This aligns with the perceived values of inclusivity outlined above and provides a showcasing of what is possible.

6.2.3.1 Theatre and spoken word

Taken together, the interviews reviewed suggest that, historically, British theatre has enjoyed a positive reputation globally, in turn boosting broader perceptions of the UK. It is clear there has been ongoing 'demand' for British cultural experiences. Shakespeare, for example, seems to hold enduring appeal, however, there has been appetite for renditions of plays by contemporary playwrights also. Budget has, at times, constrained programming, but has equally led to inspired creativity by way of solutions, such as Steven Berkoff touring a 'one-man' Shakespeare play internationally on behalf of the British Council.

Returning to some points made above, the below example illustrates both how the arts can engender positive relations and perceptions, and also that effects can be both surprising and unintended.

Jo Verrent

Staging *A Passage to India* in Lahore, Pakistan:

One 75th anniversary collection interviewee, Malcolm Dalziel, former British Council Regional and Country Director, described the successful staging of a play, A Passage to India, in Lahore, Pakistan. This is an interesting example in terms of attributing soft power outcomes as part of cultural exchange. For example, because Malcolm, who at the time was employed by the British Council, played a 'sympathetic' character in the play, he received an overwhelmingly positive reception locally. American colleagues, he related, attributed this as a 'clever' public relations stunt by the British. In fact, the endeavour was led by a Pakistani woman working in the arts and was a staging of an American play written by an Indian-born American writer, Santha Rama Rau. Therefore, the extent of the positive reaction felt was at least partially incidental rather than intentional.

'The highlights in that time was the birth of our first daughter in Lahore, Anne dancing in a Punjabi dance drama, and something which obviously was incredibly important at the time – probably I've not done anything as important since, it was all downhill from there onwards, as it were – but this was decided by a woman producer, a Pakistani producer, to do A Passage to India as a play.

'Now this had just opened, I mean it had been put into a play and performed in Britain a couple of years before with Zia Mohyeddin playing, as it were, the lead part. But there was a certain amount of concern about how it would go down in Lahore and what would be the reactions. It was supposed to play for three days, but in fact it was so successful it played for ten days and could certainly have gone on.

Audio clip

'Now I played Fielding. Fielding is, in fact, the only sympathetic character in the whole of the play, the man who tries to bring everybody together and understand everybody and everything. I really sort of lived on this for months and months afterwards because I literally would be stopped in the mall and there would be a suspension of disbelief and people would shake my hand because I was Fielding. If I was meeting people at Lahore railway station, people would come up and, again, shake my hand because I was Fielding, there was a sympathy and empathy and as I say the suspension of disbelief.

'American colleagues thought it had all been carefully contrived and it was a massive PR exercise undertaken by the British and how clever we were. Well, whatever, it certainly did have a great effect but no, it wasn't contrived, it was a Pakistani initiative, and one was just delighted to go along with it. Actually, Ian McCallum, the brother of the actor David McCallum, was also in the play but he unfortunately had a rather less sympathetic part than myself and I'm not quite certain whether he suffered as a result of that or not. But it really was a great success.'

Malcolm Dalziel, former British Council Regional and Country Director (75th anniversary collection)

The interviews surfaced examples of where cultural events, supported by the British Council, have also enabled participants and audiences to generate improved perceptions of their *own* cultures and languages. This shows influence generated not only with regard to perceptions of British culture, and again, foregrounds the elements of exchange.

For example, Amr Gamal, a Yemeni theatre and film director, described how the staging of *Hamlet* in Aden, which incorporated traditional local dialect, supported the audiences to develop greater esteem for their language:

> ‘Now people in Yemen, in Aden, they replaced some very original words of ours because they feel ashamed and replaced it with another word from [the] Gulf or from Egypt or from Lebanon because they feel ashamed. But when you do good play and they come and watch and in five minutes they forgot they are watching in Arabic or in the Aden [dialect], because it became the level of Arabic. So, they start to feel my language is, my dialect is, very good … and well received by everybody outside of Yemen … That’s how real art can build trust and high self-esteem.’

Amr Gamal, theatre and film director (90th anniversary collection)

Similarly, Amr pointed to the influence the arts can have in terms of aspiration-raising, or offering alternative future pathways, particularly for younger generations. Amr described that via providing and making visible writers, philosophers, directors or sports people for young people to look up to, that ‘a difference will happen’. He felt that, in this case, young people may begin to re-evaluate their role models and be discouraged from idolising ‘someone who is playing with guns’.

Spoken word, as discussed in the interview with Francesca Beard, was regarded as simultaneously a cultural and political act, with poets holding the potential power to reform and to create a ‘different cultural landscape’ (90th anniversary collection). Francesca also described poets as ‘cultural leaders’. This is an interesting assertion in relation to soft power, as it indicates how art forms have the power to shift narratives, but also perhaps to challenge dominant narratives and/or to develop countercultures. This further supports the notion of change via cultural means but also is suggestive that the poets themselves control and exert the influence generated.

Amr Gamal’s production of *Hamlet*

Similar themes around language were related in Francesca Beard's account of her time working on spoken-word projects. She observed that performers would sometimes be reluctant to speak in their 'mother tongue', preferring to perform in and/or to incorporate English. Francesca, despite emphasising with her cohort the importance of various languages, particularly in the context of globalisation, found that English had held up as a language of 'status' and a language of 'self-expression' for those the British Council was working with.

6.3 Pillar three: foreign policy

When seeking to observe examples of foreign policy influence, as a pillar of soft power, key indicators would include: examples of the perceived credibility or legitimacy of the UK (perhaps demonstrated further by proxies such as media coverage or access to political figures or processes); strategic alignment; and examples of influence upon policies, plans or strategies, including where foreign entities may seek to replicate or learn from approaches administered by the UK.

Following this, the ways in which the British Council as an institution appears to have lent legitimacy to and improved the UK's access in terms of foreign policy and international affairs, are summarised below, insofar as this was evident in interviewees' accounts.

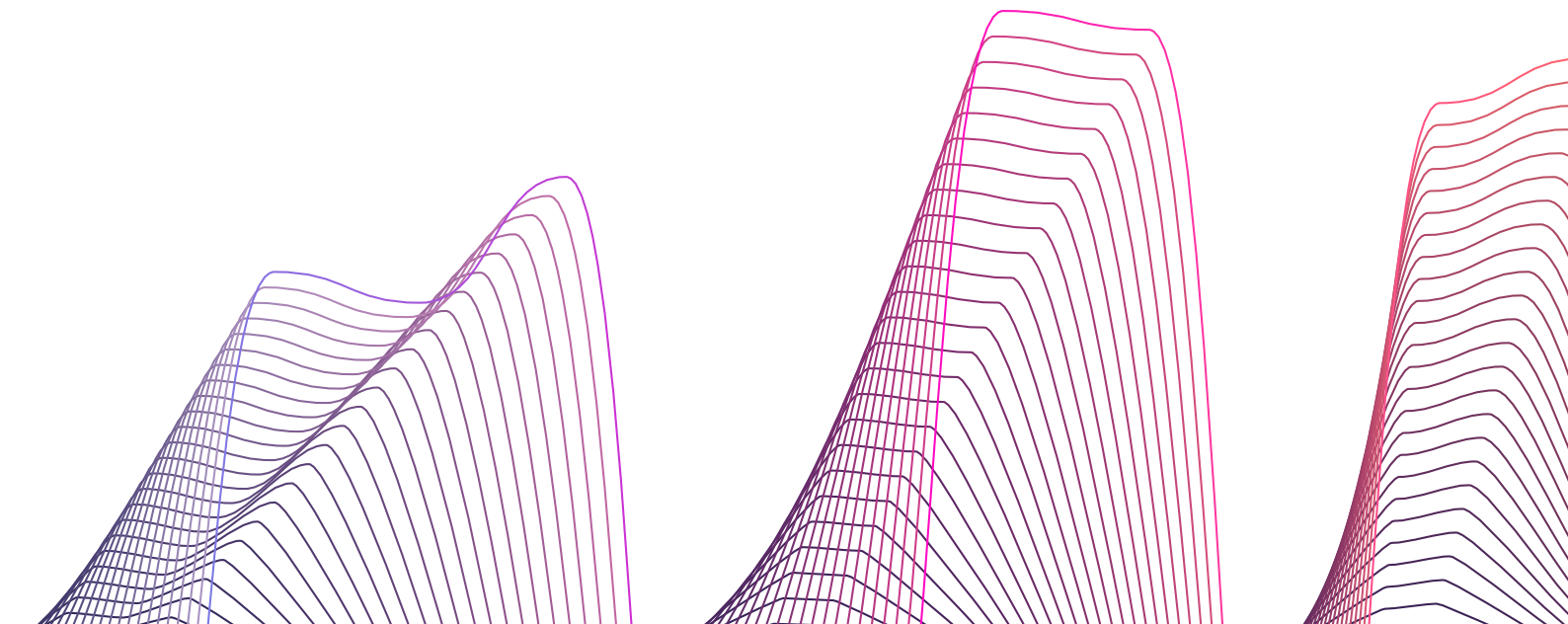
6.3.1 The institution of the British Council

'Politics was always fraught in Pakistan, but the British Council was always highly regarded, relationships with the High Commission [of the United Kingdom to Pakistan] were excellent.'

Malcolm Dalziel, former British Council Regional and Country Director (75th anniversary collection)

'I just feel that Britain was so admired. In that period, I went around and I felt proud of the fact that I was British, because people would say, you know, we look to Britain and to your parliament and to your institutions and the BBC and the World Service.'

Helena Kennedy, former Chair of the British Council (90th anniversary collection)



The British Council, as understood by interviewees' accounts, appears to occupy a unique space within the international political landscape, owing to its non-governmental and operationally independent nature, and status as an arms-length body. This feature was broadly regarded as a key component of its success. As the British Council does not form a component of official governmental diplomatic missions, it appears the institution has been awarded, at times, greater access within host countries, whether this has been to particular geographic locations; particular in-country institutions; and, to particular political officials – such as foreign Ambassadors – or political process. Some interviewees would also attribute this privileged access to the trust earned through longevity of operations, and the forging and maintenance of personal relations.

'We have the advantage of having, you know, been on the ground for so many years with built connections all over the world, with built trust that goes, you know, beyond governments or … you know, political parties. We've done that. We are very much, you know, in partnership with governments in most countries around the world. That part exists. I think everywhere in the world that's valued and respected.'

Pilar Aramayo-Prudencio, Head of English in Education at the British Council (90th anniversary collection)

'I had a particularly close relationship with the Sudanese prime minister. And because of this general good standing that we had … I was asked to go down to Juba and go by overland from Juba to Wau. This was the first official – well it wasn't really an official – visit. But a first visit by northerners going through that part of the country to show that the civil war had ended. I was the one foreigner that was asked to go, so I was obviously delighted and proud and very, very excited about this.'

Malcolm Dalziel, former British Council Regional and Country Director (75th anniversary collection)

It is also apparent that the positive reputation of the UK has at times supported this access, and vice versa.

Ana Maria Aramayo (Pilar's mother) and Pilar Aramayo-Prudencio (as a baby) in La Paz, Bolivia, 1977

‘The position of the British Council was very special. It was a time when Western-country diplomats were not allowed to travel outside Khartoum, for quite a deal of, a good proportion of those years they couldn’t travel outside. The British Council was not part of the UK mission, i.e. not diplomatic, therefore during the war times I was allowed to travel down south to Juba and Malakal and Wau, and we had offices and libraries, besides Khartoum and Omdurman, in Wad Medani, in Atbara, in El Obeid, particularly topical, Darfur, and El Fashur. I also did some TV and radio work there at the invitation of the Sudanese Broadcasting Corporation, so this was all an indication, it was a double-think as it were, that somehow we were all right. And even at a time when the Communists were taking over for a period, that also still meant that we were all right, whether it was keeping a channel open or not, I don’t know for certain.’

Malcolm Dalziel, former British Council Regional and Country Director (75th anniversary collection)

There are also cases whereby the British Council has appeared to have enjoyed greater freedom in its programming compared to if it has been operating in an official governmental capacity. For example, Paul Smith described that whilst the British Council acted as an ‘official cultural agent’ of the UK, it benefitted from being non-governmental. As Paul explains, you could demonstrate that ‘the work you were doing was really between artists and professionals and organisations and universities without government interference’ (90th anniversary collection).

Nevertheless, there were multiple examples from interviewees of the British Council enjoying very positive and long-lasting relations with UK ambassadors globally.

‘It has a permanent relationship with the embassy. Every time I went to the ambassador’s residence, there were people from the British Council organising everything.’

Rubén Otero, musician and playwright (90th anniversary collection)

This is not to suggest that all relations have been smooth sailing. For example, whilst at various times the British Council has enjoyed a positive reception locally, extending to positive mentions in the media and even media appearances, at times this had led to negative outcomes. One instance, for example, ultimately involved the resignation of a British Council Chair, owing to a negative headline that appeared out of a publication within a host country, which has subsequently gained some traction amongst commentators. This demonstrates that perceptions are not always within the British Council’s sphere of control, of course, and that unforeseen setbacks or negative outcomes can occur when operating in a complex and unpredictable international arena.

Linked to this, there is acknowledgment of the sensitivities involved in operating across cultures and ideologies. One 90th anniversary collection interviewee, Francesca Beard, described being expressly aware of this in undertaking of arts activity, making sure to take steps ahead of time to avoid offence, such as having a dialogue with collaborators ahead of performances.

‘You were just really representing much more than yourself whenever you’re performing, even if you’re not aware that you always are, you know, and we’re all part of ideologies and systems and it’s … we always have to be really diligent about continually trying to make those visible. And I think that’s part of the work is to make invisible things visible in a safe way that can then, you know, just, you know, enable conversations around things in a safe way.’

Francesca Beard, spoken word artist (90th anniversary collection)

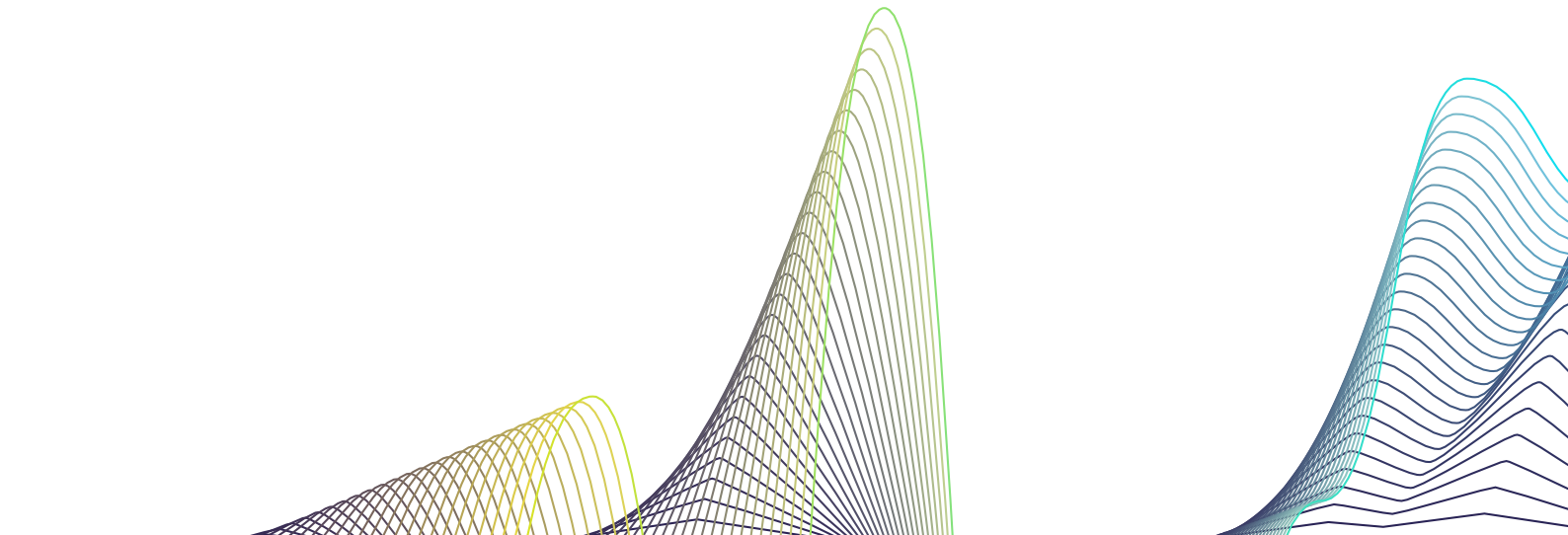
6.3.2 Global geopolitics

‘So, here was the British Council doing really serious geopolitical stuff through the prism of culture.’

Paul Smith, former British Council Country Director (90th anniversary collection)

It is clear that, whilst largely a cultural and educational institution, the British Council has played a geopolitical role, in addition to itself being directly influenced by geopolitical events. There are accounts, within the interviews reviewed, of the work of the British Council playing a positive role in post-conflict relations, such as following the Cold War or the Falklands War (la Guerra de las Malvinas), in strengthening relationships with post-colonial nations, and also similarly restoring trust and productive international collaboration following geopolitical events such as Brexit.

Rubén Otero an Argentinian war veteran who went on to contribute to the British Council theatre production *Mine Field* (*Campo Minado*) recalls how this project ultimately led to the welcoming of a British ambassador to the Argentine Embassy in London – something which, prior to that, had not happened since 1982. Rubén is a survivor of the sinking of the cruiser ARA General Belgrano, spending 41 hours adrift on a raft before being rescued. He later went on to write his own play *Stay Afloat* (*Seguir a flote*) based on his own story. In his interview, he details how this artistic process brough him catharsis and how he in turn has sought to help others process their own trauma through arts and culture.



Positive relations with the Argentine Embassy:

‘I had some beautiful experiences because we were invited many times here in Buenos Aires to the British Embassy. We went to the residence of the embassy where they had several meetings, and we were invited to be part of those meetings.

‘And one of the loveliest things that happened to me was that when we did the play Campo Minado in London, one day the Argentine ambassador at the time invited all the play’s staff to a lunch at the embassy. And when we entered the embassy, we sat at the table and everything, the ambassador was two chairs away from where I was sitting, and he grabbed me and said, “the man in front of you is the British ambassador in Argentina”.

‘Yes, yes, of course, I know him.

‘He says, “Before 1982, that is, since the war began, no ambassador had entered this embassy until today. Today, because of you, an ambassador is entering the Argentine Embassy here in London”. And it may not seem like it, but for me it was, it stuck in my mind: what do you mean that because of the work we did, a British ambassador is back in an Argentine embassy in London? I mean, what he said to me was a wonderful thing. I don’t even remember what we ate, but I always remember that message he said to me because it was very important for me that this happened because of a play.’

Rubén Otero, musician and playwright (90th anniversary collection) – Interview translated from Spanish

Rubén Otero performing *Stay Afloat*

The Link – how cultural relations supports UK bilateral relationships

Paul Smith described the British Council's success conducting a project in New Zealand (90th anniversary collection). The project was called The Link and, it was hoped, would 'reinvent the relationship between Britain and New Zealand'. New Zealand is a former colony of the UK, and is now part of the Commonwealth of Nations, maintaining a constitutional monarchy with the UK Monarch as its head of state.

'So we created a thing called The Link. The Link was the concept of the unique link between Britain and New Zealand. It was going to reinvent the relationship between Britain and New Zealand. Again, getting past colonialism, past post-colonialism, past that period in which, you know, New Zealand had, they always use this phrase, cut the apron strings with Britain, totally new, reinventing sibling co-production or relationship between modern Britain, diverse modern Britain, and diverse modern New Zealand. So we said let's do this. And we actually set up a year's programme called The Link. Lasted 12 months.

Audio clip

'We had an independent … one thing we did use the money on was an independent evaluation. Quite rare in those days, nobody had ever done this before. Which actually went out to the populace of New Zealand. And the two main questions were: have you heard of this thing The Link and 70 per cent of the nation had, and has your view of Britain changed, you know, positively in these kinds of ways? And the great majority of people said, yes,
this is a new Britain.
This is an interesting Britain.
This is a friendly Britain. This is a modest Britain.
This is a creative Britain.
So, it was a great success and somebody nominated me for an OBE.'

Paul Smith, former British Council Country Director (90th anniversary collection)

The same interviewee also shared an example of how positive relationships have been supported, over decades, between the UK and Germany as a result of the British Council's initiatives. They described that, post-Brexit, there was a need to bolster UK-Europe relations and that many European nations felt the UK's exit from the European Union as an 'insult'.

> 'They thought Brexit was just an insult. They were horrified. So, my mission was to say that, you know, we've been in the European Union for whatever it is, you know, 50 years, but we've been in Europe for 500 years. And that, you know, at the end of the day, this is a political and economic severance, Brexit. It does not have to be a cultural and educational severance.'
>
> **Paul Smith, former British Council Country Director (90th anniversary collection)**

In response, Paul established the project Cultural Bridge, to support relations and re-establish links between the UK and Germany. The project was to focus on diversity, social purpose and young people, and he was able to gain funding from other partner institutions. At the time of the interview, three years after the project established, there had been 44 activities delivered, and the project was set to continue into its fourth year. The President of Germany at the time, Frank Walter Steinmeier, when receiving a British royal visit, reportedly – in his address – spoke of Brexit being the most detrimental event to have occurred between the two countries since the end of World War Two. Paul related how the President then addressed the Royal visit. Paraphrasing the President's statement, Paul recalls that the President argued that, as a result of Cultural Bridge, in addition to the work that had preceded it in terms of culture, education, young people, common purpose and value, he (the President) felt that 'we can now put Brexit in the history book and that we have re-established the special relationship between the peoples of Germany and the peoples of the UK.' Paul described this as a 'major moment' in terms of the two countries' relations.

Another interviewee, Trevor Rutter (75th anniversary collection), spoke of a 'diplomatic gap' that had to be filled in order to restore the UK's 'credibility in Europe' and described the British Council's relationship with Germany ranging back to 1959 and the post-war years. A lot of international exchanges were facilitated during these years to restore relations and co-operation. Relatedly, another interviewee, David Crystal, spoke of the contribution of English language teaching in Russia in improving relations following the Cold War (75th anniversary collection).

6.3.3 International collaboration

‘We had a conversation with the British Council and kind of went, if we were doing this all again, what would we do? How would we make that different? And then we really started to talk, not just about the one-off spectacle moments, but actually what does an embedded programme of change that’s mutually respectful, that’s about learning as much as it’s about sharing and giving and something that, yes, focuses on UK artists because it is the British Council, but also really supports the development of disabled artists overseas. And in so many countries, disabled artists don’t have the same status.’

Jo Verrent, Director of Unlimited (90th anniversary collection)

One theme within interviews was that, over time, the British Council appears to have become more responsive to local delivery contexts, embedding this approach to a greater extent within its delivery. This again, perhaps, points to a concerted shift for the British Council, away from neo-colonial ways of operating, and towards mutually beneficial and respectful collaboration. It also suggests more of a two-way influence and learning.

This way of working, within cultural relations, relates to soft power as it represents the *absence* of identified proxies that imply the *inverse* of soft power, i.e. force or coercion, power imbalances, or lack of meaningful and long-lasting relationships. Moreover, this approach to cultural relations and examples of it in practice suggest the *presence* of positive indicators of soft power within pillar three (foreign policy). For example, this includes cultural and political alliances, shared visions, partnerships and perceived legitimacy of the UK’s activity. Therefore, whilst the testimonies that signify the British Council’s evolution towards more collaborative cultural relations do not necessarily make soft power outcomes explicit, these are useful proxies to signify the likelihood of a positive influence on foreign policy.

One account also emphasises an increasing appreciation and acknowledgement of local knowledge, and a critical interrogation of the assumptions inherent in programmes that appointed British people to deliver their ‘expertise’ to host country populations:

‘And the main thing I say is this, 1983, why was it assumed that this person from Britain, this young, inexperienced person from Britain, was the right person to do all this? And there was somehow inevitably bound to be an expert in everything that mattered, in running a library, in understanding the arts, in knowing what Nigeria needed in terms of development, in terms of water, you know, agriculture, public administration. What was it just assumed? And the answer I think was, I

regret to say, because I was British. You know, I came from the ex-empire. But this was the new imperial offer in which we would now … we pulled out in terms of political, developmental and economic advice and now, we will be showing how benevolent we were but showing them how to do education properly and how to run society properly and how to do values properly and how to do intellect properly and, you know, this was a Cambridge educated young man who obviously knew better, knew better and would do it.'

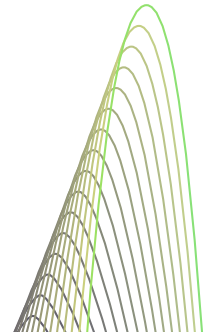
Paul Smith, former British Council Country Director (90th anniversary collection)

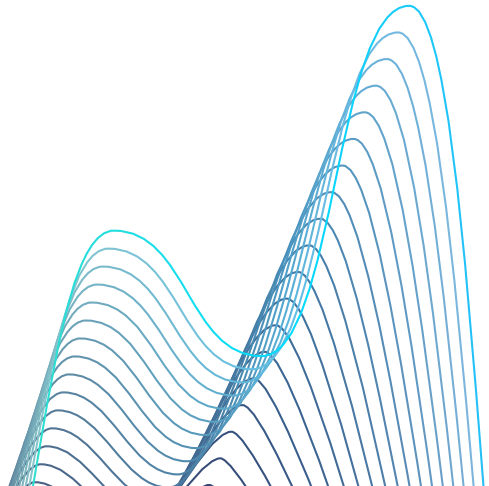
There is, within some interviews reviewed, open acknowledgement of a *continued* level of a 'paternal or colonial feeling' in terms of the nature of interventions (Patsy Zeppel, 75th anniversary collection), however, this can be observed to a lesser degree in accounts of more recent activity.

Illustrative examples of this shift towards taking greater account of local context and needs are perhaps most evident in the development of English language teaching curricula and resources. For example, Deb Avery outlined how teaching materials have 'become more contextualised and more appropriate to the local situation', including developing English resources that are developed with and for a South African accent specifically, and created by local developers. She described how the British Council has also been involved in programming to elevate African language teaching:

'African languages, and we have many in this country, tend to have been … there are 11 official languages. So, they tend to have been sidelined in terms of curriculum. And this Department of African Languages has worked really, really hard to try and elevate the importance of African languages. Elevate the importance of home language and mother tongue. And the British Council bought into that, which I think is amazing because it is an English programme, and yet it has been able to reach into this other area where mother tongue is made very, very important and foregrounded.'

Deb Avery, education consultant (90th anniversary collection)





Conclusions

“I guess the British Council has to find ways to understand itself in today’s society, just like the artist has to find ways to understand his self, herself, their self.”

Lemn Sissay, poet and broadcaster (90th anniversary collection)

7 Conclusions

The 75th and 90th anniversary collections represent a valuable oral history resource, and the collections preserve wholly unique accounts and perspectives of the British Council throughout the past few decades of its operation. Via interrogation of selected interviews (transcripts and audio) from these two collections, this study has aimed to provide insight into the history, approach and impact of the British Council, as well as its role, remit and reception within the wider landscape of the UK's international relationships.

Amidst that, we have developed thematic insight but also encountered individual and personal accounts, anecdotes, and even life histories. Despite the unique nature of the accounts, and the interviewees who provided them, there are some common concluding points that can be woven together from the sum of the analysis presented across this report.

As such, rather than simply summarise back the content from within each chapter, the conclusions presented below attempt to draw together key *overarching* findings, which may prove of interest to the British Council and to the research community in continuing to explore the wealth of insight contained within these oral history collections.

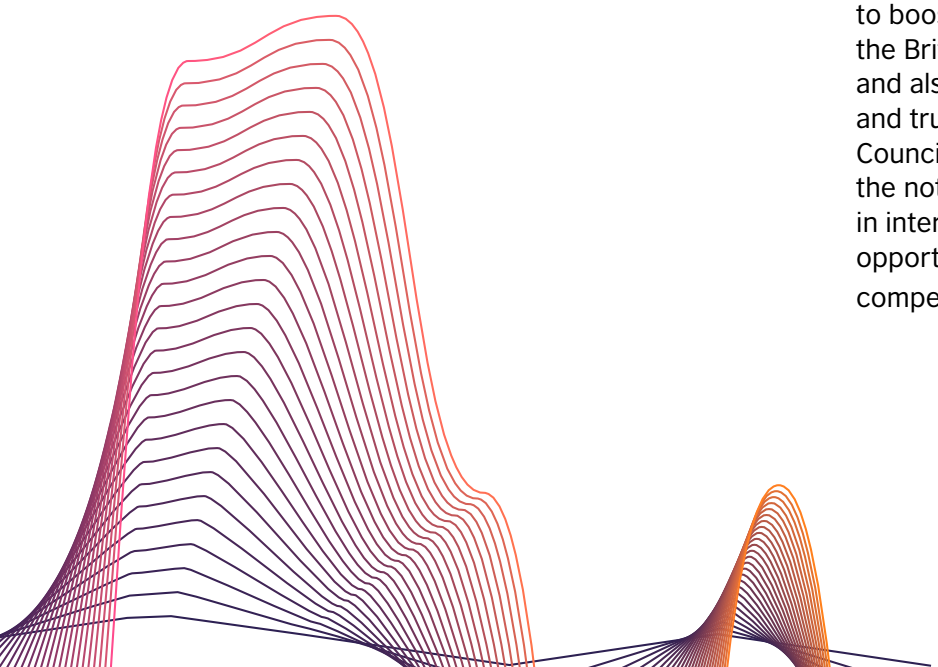
7.1 Relationship building

The importance of relationship building in relation to the British Council and its cultural relations work is apparent across both collections, at all points in time, and across all geographies. This is discussed as paramount in relation to having the 'right' people in post, capable of building such connections. It is also seen as crucial within the scope of collaborative and international cultural relations activity, as a crucial component of achieving soft power outcomes and political co-operation. Moreover, the importance of authentic relationship building is apparent in interviewees' personal accounts, which demonstrate the significant emotional depth of connections forged, and the enduring nature of these. It is apparent that trusting, authentic relationships can, at times, even endure despite less-than-optimal geopolitical contexts of operation, and that on the strength of these personal relationships, divides can be bridged.

The collections relate, variously, to the histories of nations and of institutions, but above all they relate to the lives of *people* and how they connect, and what that connection means.

7.2 Commitment and longevity

Closely entwined with the above point is the British Council's approach of committing to supporting host countries or regions over a long time period. This commitment appears to boost positive perceptions with regard to the British Council's mission and intentions, and also enables the relationship-building and trust-building aspects of the British Council's work to be embedded. Alongside the noted trend towards continuity of staff in international postings, this provides an opportunity for ever-increasing cultural competency and local knowledge.



7.3 Intentionality

Intentionality is a theme that arises again and again amidst discussion of multiple topics across the chapters above. That the British Council appears to have improved its strategic and operational focus and clarified its mission and approach over time is regarded positively by interviewees.

Further, this intentionally seems to support the organisation to operate in a culturally sensitive manner, and also in establishing a shared strategic vision and shared ways of working across the organisation. The evolution of internal processes to support and enable this intentionality are also recognised.

This intentionality is also closely connected to the repositioning of the British Council, as it has moved to acknowledge its relationship to, and place within, the context of the UK's colonial past and legacy, alongside a concerted push towards an authentic EDI programme. The report concludes that this shift is one of the core foundations upon which the British Council continues to maintain credibility in its operations. This is inextricably linked to its efficacy in soft power as well, because soft power exists only so long as the British Council and the UK itself are capable of retaining cultural appeal (and access). These factors are also a driving force behind the evolution of the institution.

Therefore, it is clear that what the British Council undertakes internally will affect what it is possible to achieve externally, and that a failure to acknowledge Britain's complex history would be to its detriment.

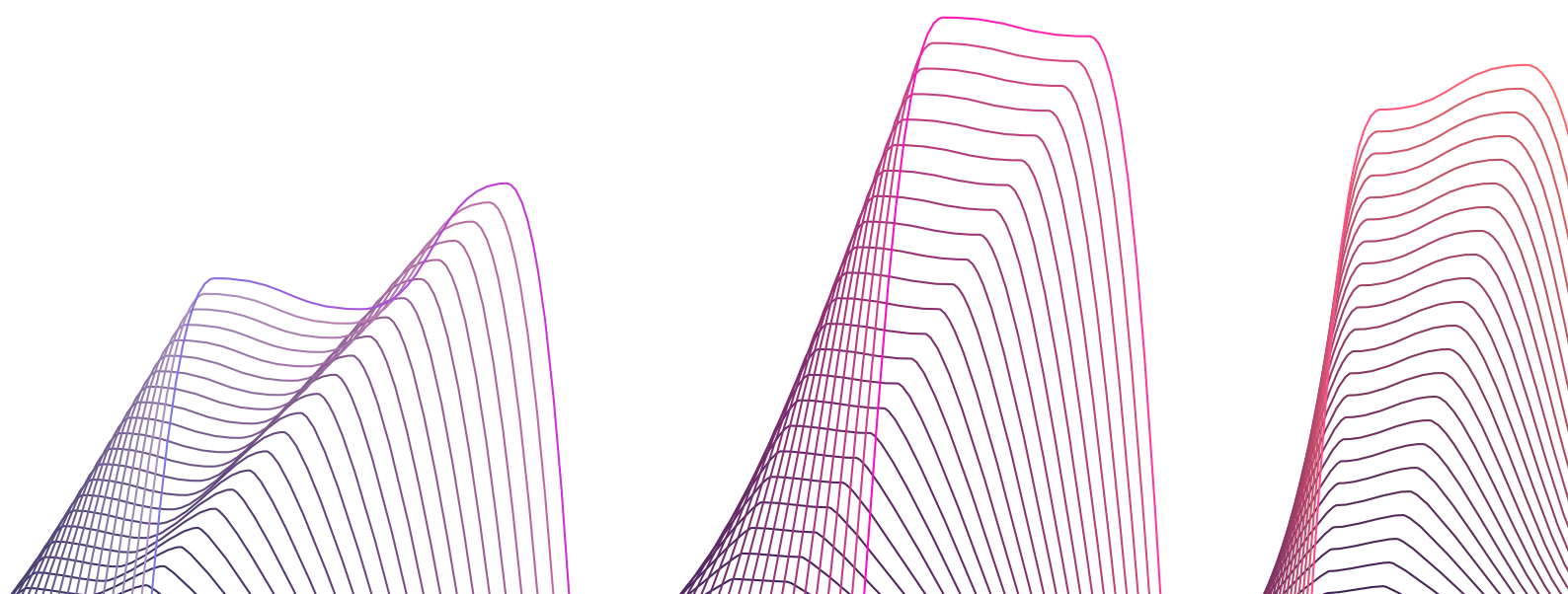
7.4 Independence

The evidence reviewed towards this report suggests that the operational independence of the British Council from the UK government is fundamental to its efficacy as an institution. As discussed, this has provided British Council colleagues with unprecedented access, in some cases to locations, officials or resources that diplomatic missions would not be able to reach.

7.5 Impact

Whilst the collections do not represent a thorough or exhaustive investigation of the British Council's impact, and this was not part of the remit of either the 75th anniversary or 90th anniversary oral history projects, there are compelling examples which demonstrate the effect the British Council can have. Whilst broader evaluation work carried out or commissioned by the British Council may make explicit the impacts of particular projects, programmes or other forms of intervention, what the oral history collections perhaps make most apparent is the transformative and formative effects the organisation has had, through its lifetime, upon the lives of individuals.

Further, the collections provide some significant examples of the 'soft' and more intangible outcomes of cultural relations work, particularly in relation to soft power. Undoubtedly, this could present a starting point for further research, whether a deeper dive across the whole collection or as part of any follow-up oral history, evaluation or research projects.



7.6 Change

Unsurprisingly, change is a prominent theme across the collections. This is in relation to change internal to the organisation, as the British Council continues to evolve, and change external to the organisation, globally and throughout the geopolitical arena. The world never stands still, but nor, it appears, does the British Council.

Whilst some elements have, it is true, remained more constant, such as the commitment and longevity of presence that has been praised above, change is the true inalienable factor. No doubt, more change will be in store, and yet, there is a sense from interviewees that despite a continuously evolving landscape, the British Council continues to hold a relevant role – one that it is considered well-placed to dispense. Indeed, that the British Council has recently celebrated its 90th anniversary points to its ability to adapt, and perhaps to that a continued rationale for its existence in many years to come.

With respect to change, it is also clear that perceptions of the UK from those within other nations are nuanced and likely never static. This holds potential in that, if perceptions are changeable, it follows they can be positively influenced via the right type of intervention. It also suggests that, conversely, they might be negatively affected by either inappropriate action or inaction. Therefore, *proactively* maintaining and further developing good relations, as the British Council does, may be considered a sensible strategy in affecting positive change.

7.7 The future

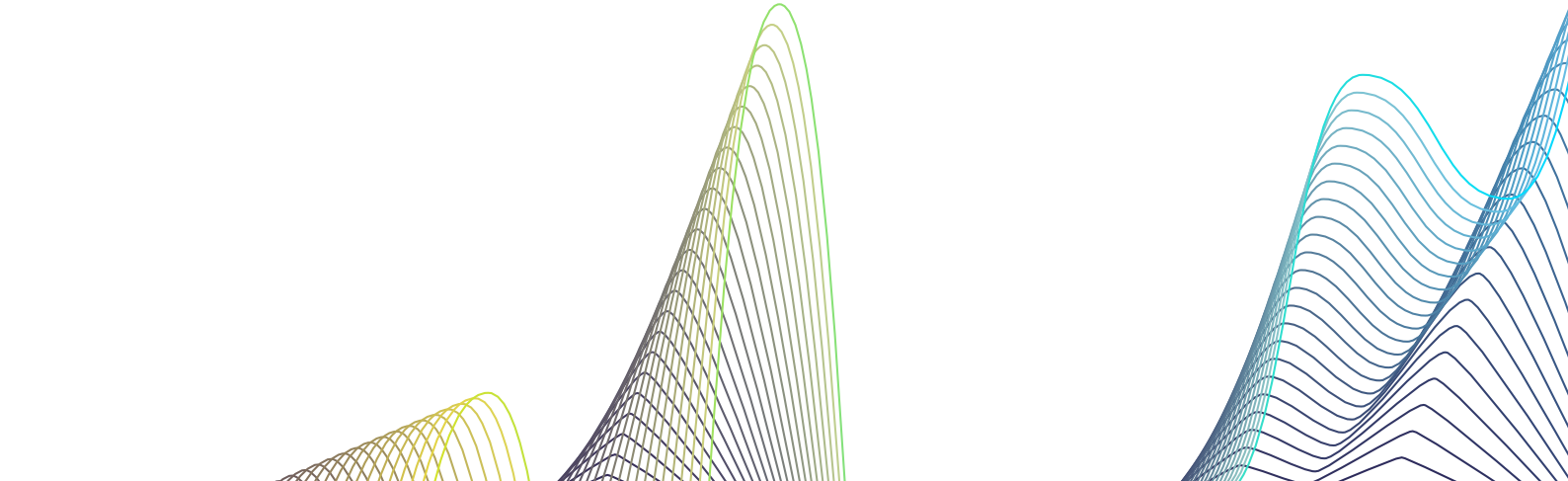
Interviewees were clear that, in some regards, there is 'more to do'. This is in the sense that the British Council's work is not considered to be 'done', but also a recognition that, as the organisation has evolved positively over recent years, there is further it can still go.

Most notably, this was reflected in terms of EDI. Specifically, there was a suggestion that the British Council can continue to progress in terms of transforming thoughts and policies into actions, tackling unconscious bias – and perhaps continuing to broaden the perception of what a British Council employee 'should' be – and working to proactively support people intersectionally, recognising the ways in which protected characteristics interact.

7.8 Iterative learning

As pointed out in the report, the collections do not provide a longitudinal study. The 90th anniversary collection is not a direct follow-up or 'revisit' with regard to how topics have progressed since they were spoken of in the 75th anniversary collection. Therefore, to an extent, there remain some unanswered questions. Some of these may be possible to answer by broadening the selection of interviewees, and some may feed into future projects or explorations.

It would be interesting, for example, to further understand how the gendered experience of colleagues within the British Council have evolved over time. However, rather than limiting this exploration to gendered experience, it would be fruitful to broaden this out to encompass multiple protected characteristics and the embodied interplay between them, insofar as they relate to the British Council as an institution.

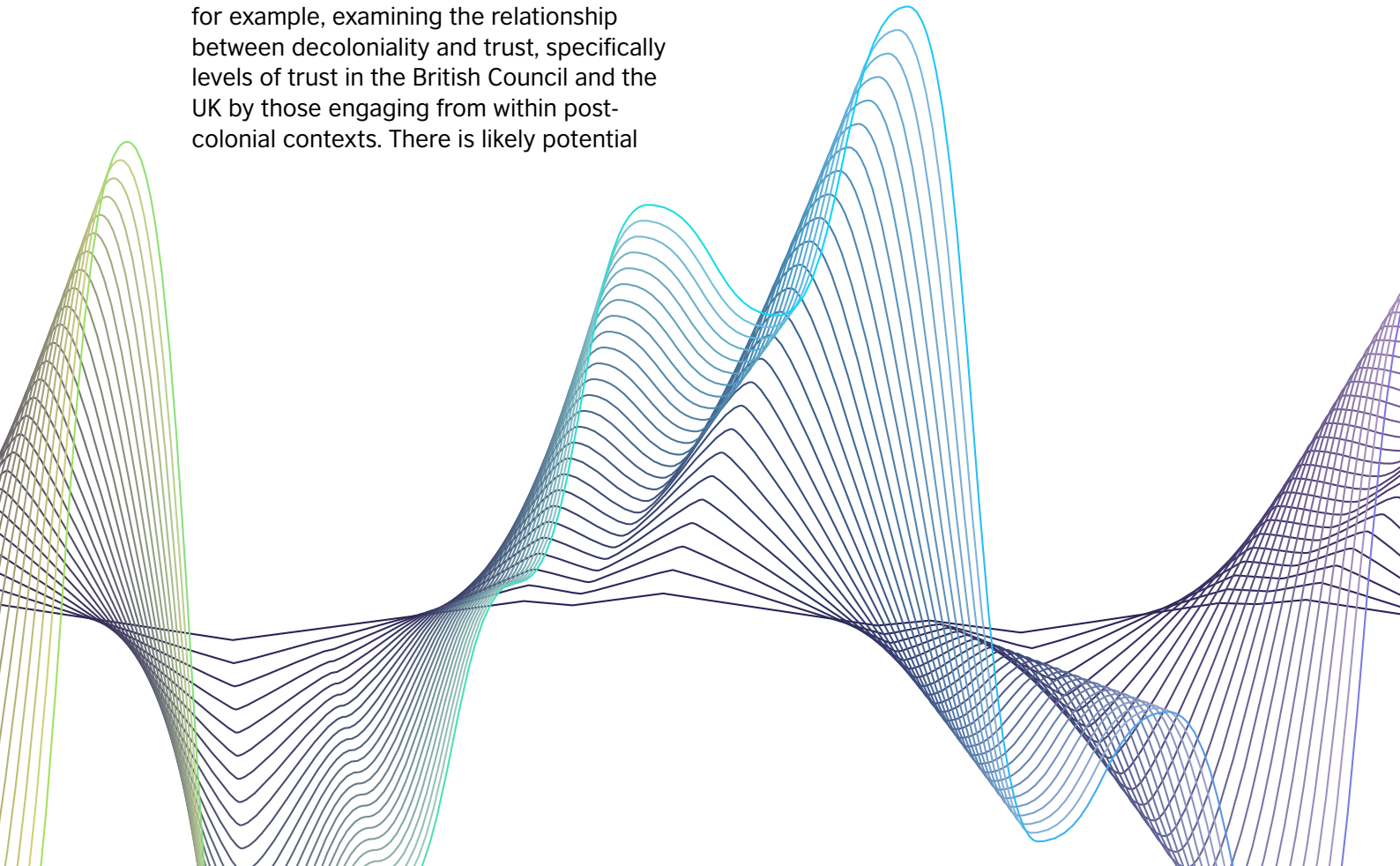


Further, it may also be of interest to capture experiences of digital technology, given its rapid evolution, and particularly how technology and digital delivery may have affected the kinds of international experiences the British Council is able to offer. This may have affected, for example, the in-country cultural exposure and opportunities that British Council colleagues have access to as part of their role, as a result of increased online interaction and the reduction in international travel and face-to-face meetings. Given the centrality of relationship-building and intercultural communication to the organisation, it may therefore be interesting to further surface how digital technologies may have altered the nature and outcomes of such experiences and exchanges. This development may have further offered differing intercultural experiences for those who engage in the British Council's offer, including potential benefits and/or disbenefits.

Another area for exploration would be to further delve into post-colonial and decolonial approaches to working within the British Council, and how this affects both operations and outcomes. This could include, for example, examining the relationship between decoloniality and trust, specifically levels of trust in the British Council and the UK by those engaging from within post-colonial contexts. There is likely potential in further exploration with regards to the lived and intersectional experiences of the British Council in such settings. As discussed, narratives and perceptions around colonialism and decoloniality are highly nuanced, and few of the accounts around this topic from the collections were 'first-hand'.

It would also be interesting to further develop the exploration of the intangible and hard-to-capture outcomes of cultural relations as they pertain to soft power, as it is recognised that these can be notoriously difficult to trace and measure.

Finally, whilst future questions may be guided by the British Council's upcoming priorities – looking ahead before looking back – it is true that the oral history collections do remain somewhat untapped. Despite a thorough analysis, which aimed to be comprehensive and insightful, there is a greater volume of material waiting to be explored. This is likely to provide yet more insights and perhaps also to furnish some more surprises, as part of the British Council's continuing and unfolding story.



Appendix

Table 1: 75th and 90th anniversary interviewees selected for detailed analysis for this report

Collection	Last Name	First Name	Occupation/Role	British Council relationship (Internal/ External)	Examples of geographical locations covered
75th	Burgh	John	Former Director-General of British Council (1980–87)	Internal	UK-based, global scope
75th	Collins	Leonora	Former British Council Regional Officer	Internal	UK, Middle East Region*
75th	Crystal	David	Author and former British Council Board member	External	Russia, Brazil
75th	Dalziel	Malcolm	Former British Council Regional and Country Director	Internal	Pakistan, Malaysia, Sudan, UK, Egypt
75th	Lavercombe	Brian	Former Head of Science Department, British Council	Internal	Chile, Spain, Israel, UK, Cambodia, Mexico
75th	Oakeshott	Marion	Former Private Secretary at the British Council	Internal	UK-based, global scope
75th	Oxbury	Harold	Former Deputy Controller of Home Division	Internal	UK-based, global scope
75th	Rutter	Trevor	Former British Council Assistant Director General	Internal	Indonesia, Germany, Singapore, UK
75th	Smith	Monica	Former British Council Employee	Internal	UK, Thailand, Chile, Ghana
75th	Thompson	Bridget	Former British Council Regional Officer	Internal	China, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, UK
75th	Zeppel	Patsy	Former British Council Employee	Internal	Australia
90th	Aramayo-Prudencio	Pilar	Head of English in Education, British Council	Internal	Mexico, Philippines, UK
90th	Avery	Deb	Former Education Consultant	External	South Africa, Namibia
90th	Bartels-Ellis	Fiona	Former Head of Equality and Diversity and Inclusion at the British Council	Internal	UK-based, global scope

Collection	Last Name	First Name	Occupation/Role	British Council relationship (Internal/ External)	Examples of geographical locations covered
90th	Beard	Francesca	Spoken-word artist	External	Azerbaijan, Thailand, Colombia, Zimbabwe, Uganda, Sudan, amongst other countries visited
90th	Cross	Roy	Former British Council Country Director	Internal	Croatia, Iraq, Germany, Romania, UK, Sweden, amongst other countries
90th	Gamal	Amr	Film and theatre director	External	Yemen
90th	Ilieva	Janet	Former Education Research Officer at the British Council, current education consultant	Internal/ External	UK, Bulgaria,
90th	Kennedy	Helena	Former Chair, British Council	Internal	UK-based, global scope
90th	Kinnock	Neil	Former Chair, British Council	Internal	UK-based, global scope
90th	Otero	Rubén	Musician and playwright	External	Argentina
90th	Padwad	Amol	Academic and education consultant	External	India
90th	Sissay	Lemn	Poet and broadcaster	External	UK, Ethiopia, South Africa, Pakistan, Germany
90th	Smith	Paul	Former British Council Country Director	Internal	India, Nigeria, Myanmar, Indonesia, Chile, Germany, New Zealand, amongst other countries
90th	Solly	Mike	Head of English Research and Insight at the British Council	Internal	UK, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Saudi Arabia
90th	Verrent	Jo	Director, Unlimited	External	UK, Singapore, Indonesia

Table 2: Comprehensive list: 75th and 90th anniversary collection interviewees

NB: Selected interviewees highlighted in **green**.

Collection	Last Name	First Name	Occupation/Role	British Council relationship (Internal/ External)	Examples of geographical locations covered
75th	Alford	Richard	Former Regional Director for Central Europe, British Council	Internal	Spain, UK, Czechia, India, Soviet Union*, China, Poland, Italy
75th	Andrews	Julian	Former Head of the Art Department, British Council	Internal	Italy, Brazil, Egypt, UK, Netherlands
75th	Arbuthnott	Robert	Former Minister for Cultural Affairs at the British High Commission in India, within the British Council Division	Internal	Pakistan, UK, Nepal, Malaysia, Saudi Arabia, Germany, India
75th	Baker	Alan	Former British Council Employee	Internal	Germany, Sudan, Japan, UK
75th	Brasnett	Clive	Former Cultural Affairs Officer, British Council	Internal	Syria, UK, Lebanon, India
75th	**Burgh**	**John**	Former Director-General of British Council (1980–87)	Internal	UK-based, global scope
75th	Butchard	Tim	Meta data not currently available*	Internal	Meta data not currently available*
75th	Cavaliero	Roderick	Former Deputy Director General, British Council	Internal	India, Brazil, UK, Italy
75th	Clark	Peter	Former British Council Country Director	Internal	Spain, UK, Jordan, Lebanon, Sudan, Yemen, Tunisia, UAE, Syria
75th	**Collins**	**Leonora**	Former British Council Regional Officer	Internal	UK, Middle East Region*
75th	**Crystal**	**David**	Author and former British Council Board member	External	Russia, Brazil
75th	Day	John	Former British Council Employee	Internal	Spain, UK, Algeria, Australia, Indonesia, Kenya, Sweden, Ghana, Ukraine, Jamaica, Barbados, Guyana, Trinidad and Tobago

Collection	Last Name	First Name	Occupation/Role	British Council relationship (Internal/ External)	Examples of geographical locations covered
75th	Dalziel	Malcolm	Former British Council Regional and Country Director	Internal	Pakistan, Malaysia, Sudan, UK, Egypt
75th	Dodd	Bill	Former British Council Employee	Internal	Tanzania, UK
75th	Elborn	Peter	Former British Council Employee	Internal	Spain, Mexico, Zimbabwe, Former Yugoslavia[4], Iraq
75th	Ferry	Brenda	Former British Council Employee	Internal	UK, Nigeria, Colombia
75th	Gotch	Paul	Former British Council Country Director	Internal	Greece, Egypt, Palestine, Italy, Spain, Iran, Colombia, Lebanon, Ghana
75th	Gunton	Dennis	Former British Council Employee	Internal	UK, Malaysia, Nigeria, Former Yugoslavia, India
75th	Harvey-Wood	Harriet	Former Head of the Literature Department, British Council	Internal	UK*
75th	Hassan	Helen	Former British Council Employee	Internal	Iraq, UK
75th	Hitchcock	Richard	Former British Council Employee	Internal	Syria, Lebanon, Sudan, Iraq, Turkey, Kuwait, Afghanistan, UK
75th	Jacomb	Martin	Former Chairman of British Council	Internal	UK-based, global scope
75th	Joscelyne	Richard	Former British Council Country Director	Internal	Japan
75th	Kazwini	Naomi	Former British Council Employee	Internal	Iraq
75th	Kemp	Neil	Director of Education UK Marketing Division, British Council	Internal	Indonesia, India
75th	Kennedy	James	Former British Council Employee	Internal	Kuwait, Malaysia, Eswatini, Malawi, Germany, Kazakhstan, Russia

4 Transcripts cite 'Yugoslavia', referred to here as 'Former Yugoslavia' following its dissolution in the 1990s. Whilst not specified in the transcripts, interviewees will have operated in what is now known as Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro, The Republic of North Macedonia and/or Kosovo.

Collection	Last Name	First Name	Occupation/Role	British Council relationship (Internal/ External)	Examples of geographical locations covered
75th	Lambert	Audrey	Former British Council Employee	Internal	UK, Norway, India, Iran, Thailand, Kenya
75th	Lavercombe	Brian	Former Head of Science Department, British Council	Internal	Chile, Spain, Israel, UK, Cambodia, Mexico
75th	Liston	Gerald	Former Regional Director for Central and South Asia, British Council	Internal	Central and South Asia*
75th	Marler	David	Former British Council Country Director	Internal	Egypt, Nigeria, India
75th	Mitchell	John	Former British Council Country Director	Internal	Morocco, Austria, Egypt, Hungary, UK, Japan, Former Yugoslavia, Bangladesh, India, Germany
75th	Montague	Arthur	Former British Council Employee	Internal	Argentina, Spain, Canada, UK
75th	Moore	James	Former British Council Employee	Internal	Poland
75th	Naylor	Peter	Former British Council Country Director	Internal	Thailand, UK, Poland, Bangladesh, Greece, Argentina, Brazil
75th	Ness	Graham	Former British Council Employee	Internal	Nigeria, Bahrain, Iraq, Bangladesh, Zambia
75th	Oakeshott	Marion	Former Private Secretary at the British Council	Internal	UK-based, global scope
75th	Oxbury	Harold	Former Deputy Controller of Home Division	Internal	UK-based, global scope
75th	Parkinson (née Peacock)	Flora	Former Assistant Director of the British Council in Glasgow and the West of Scotland	Internal	UK, Norway
75th	Peacock	Dilys	Meta data not currently available*	Meta data not currently available*	Meta data not currently available*
75th	Pendred	Piers	Former Assistant Director-General	Internal	India

*NB: The meta data provided above is not comprehensive but is an indication of what can be surmised from the transcripts. Further exploration would likely illustrate a wider variety of roles and geographic region

Collection	Last Name	First Name	Occupation/Role	British Council relationship (Internal/ External)	Examples of geographical locations covered
75th	Perchard	Colin	Former British Council Country Director	Internal	South Korea, Malawi, UK, India, Korea, Zimbabwe, Turkey
75th	Rix	Tim	Former British Council Board member	Internal	UK, global scope
75th	Roussel	Elisabeth	Potter, wife to Lyon Roussel	External	India, UK, Belgium, United States of America
75th	Roussel	Lyon	Former Head of the British Council's offices in Bombay and New Delhi (1960s)	Internal	India, UK, Belgium, United States of America
75th	Rutter	Trevor	Former British Council Assistant Director General	Internal	Indonesia, Germany, Singapore, UK
75th	Salmon	Hugh	Former British Council Employee	Internal	Nigeria, UK, Peru, Malta, Egypt, Philippines, Pakistan
75th	Smith	Monica	Former British Council Employee	Internal	UK, Thailand, Chile, Ghana
75th	Spencer	Duncan	Former British Council Employee	Internal	Portugal, Spain, Ecuador, Uruguay, Egypt, India, Pakistan, Sweden
75th	Sullivan	Michael	Former British Council Country Director, Former Head of Corporate Planning and Former East Asia and Pacific Policy Director	Internal	China
75th	Tahourdin (née Yeo)	Blue (aka Betty)	Former British Council Employee	Internal	Italy, Former Yugoslavia
75th	Tait	Frances	Meta data not currently available*	Meta data not currently available*	Meta data not currently available*
75th	Taylor	Robert	Former Assistant Director General	Internal	India, Spain, Greece, UK
75th	Thirsk	Betty	Former British Council Employee	Internal	UK, global scope

Collection	Last Name	First Name	Occupation/Role	British Council relationship (Internal/ External)	Examples of geographical locations covered
75th	Thompson	Bridget	Former British Council Regional Officer	Internal	China, Czechia, Bulgaria, UK
75th	Tod	John	Former British Council Employee	Internal	Ghana, Brazil, Nigeria, UK
75th	Tribe	Geoffrey	Former Controller of the Higher Education Division, British Council	Internal	India, Nigeria, UK
75th	Vale	Brian	Former Assistant Director-General in London, British Council	Internal	Zambia, Brazil, UK, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Spain
75th	Villiers	John	Historian, former British Council Officer	Internal	Indonesia, Poland, Greece, Romania, UK
75th	Walsh	Christine	Former British Council Employee	Internal	Venezuela, Mexico
75th	Wane	Mary	Former British Council Employee	Internal	Austria, Norway, France
75th	Waterhouse	David	Former British Council Employee	Internal	Spain, Nigeria, UK, Zambia, Nepal, Thailand, Germany
75th	Watson	Irvine	Former Secretary-General, British Council (1956–78)	Internal	UK
75th	West	Valerie	Former British Council Employee	Internal	Nigeria, Ghana
75th	Zeppel	Patsy	Former British Council Employee	Internal	Australia
90th	Aramayo-Prudencio	Pilar	Head of English in Education, British Council	Internal	Mexico, Philippines, UK
90th	Avery	Deb	Former Education Consultant	External	South Africa, Namibia
90th	Bartels-Ellis	Fiona	Former Head of Equality and Diversity and Inclusion at the British Council	Internal	UK-based, global scope
90th	Beard	Francesca	Spoken-word artist	External	Azerbaijan, Thailand, Colombia, Zimbabwe, Uganda, Sudan, amongst other countries visited
90th	Calder	Dylan	Founder-Director of Pop Up Projects	External	UK, Baltic Region, Vietnam

Collection	Last Name	First Name	Occupation/Role	British Council relationship (Internal/ External)	Examples of geographical locations covered
90th	Chodidjah	Itje	English Teacher Educator, Former Executive Chair of Indonesian National Commission for UNESCO	External	Indonesia
90th	Cross	Roy	Former British Council Country Director	Internal	Croatia, Iraq, Germany, Romania, UK, Sweden, amongst other countries
90th	D'Mello	Brian	Senior Procurement Manager, British Council	Internal	UK-based, global scope
90th	Gamal	Amr	Film and theatre director	External	Yemen
90th	Ilieva	Janet	Former Education Research Officer at the British Council, current education consultant	Internal/ External	UK, Bulgaria
90th	Kamil	Ridwan	Politician and architect	External	Indonesia
90th	Kennedy	Helena	Former Chair, British Council	Internal	UK-based, global scope
90th	Kinnock	Neil	Former Chair, British Council	Internal	UK-based, global scope
90th	Kinnock	Stephen	Former Country Director at the British Council, Member of Parliament (Aberavon)	Internal/ External	UK, Belgium, Russia
90th	Kvit	Serhiy	President of the National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy, Ukraine, Former Minister of Education and Science of Ukraine	External	Ukraine
90th	Otero	Rubén	Musician and playwright	External	Argentina
90th	Nafti	Hela	Executive Director of the Tunisian Education and Resource Network (TEARN), Country Co-ordinator for iEARN (International Education and Resource Network)	External	Tunisa

Collection	Last Name	First Name	Occupation/Role	British Council relationship (Internal/ External)	Examples of geographical locations covered
90th	Padwad	Amol	Academic and education consultant	External	India
90th	Raj Awasthi	Jai	Professor of English Education, Visiting Faculty at Kathmandu University, School of Education	External	Nepal
90th	Ramsay	Andrew	Policy Analyst/Civil Servant	External	Ireland
90th	Sheiko	Volodymyr	Director General, Ukrainian Institute	Internal/ External	Ukraine
90th	Sissay	Lemn	Poet and broadcaster	External	UK, Ethiopia, South Africa, Pakistan, Germany
90th	Smith	Paul	Former British Council Country Director	Internal	India, Nigeria, Myanmar, Indonesia, Chile, Germany, New Zealand, amongst other countries
90th	Solly	Mike	Head of English Research and Insight at the British Council	Internal	UK-based' to just 'UK
90th	Wiseman	Anne	Regional English Lead for the British Council in EU Europe	Internal	Egypt, China, Oman, UK, Iran, Sudan, Italy, Macedonia, Bulgaria, Peru, Lebanon, Ethiopia
90th	Verrent	Jo	Director, Unlimited	External	UK, Singapore, Indonesia

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