

Cultural Relations in Action

A research study on
the British Council's
International Collaboration
Grants programme
Executive summary

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This is the executive summary of the cultural relations in action report.

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.

We work directly with individuals to help them gain the skills, confidence and connections to transform their lives and shape a better world in partnership with the UK. We support them to build networks and explore creative ideas, to learn English, to get a high-quality education and to gain internationally recognised qualifications.

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The interpretations offered in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the British Council, its officers, or those individuals who contributed to the research.

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Illustrated by Eileen Lemoine



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This report was commissioned by the British Council.

Executive summary

This is a study on how and what kind of cultural relations develop among partner organisations collaborating internationally in different art forms with funding from a cultural relations organisation, the British Council, and what constitutes an ‘international cultural relations approach’ in giving grants for this kind of collaboration.



The study is based on the British Council's International Collaboration Grants Programme (ICP) during its first round of grants for projects which were active in 2022-23. This programme provided grants to organisations based in the UK and in 42 eligible countries to collaborate internationally on joint projects to produce art work together.

It first explores the quality of relationships that were formed between international partners funded by the programme and the factors that contributed to developing such relationships. It identifies evidence of cultural relations outcomes, defined as:

“greater connectivity, better mutual understanding, more and deeper relationships, mutually beneficial transactions and enhanced sustainable dialogue.”¹

The study then identifies the distinct features of an ‘international cultural relations approach’ to giving grants for international artistic collaboration by contrasting and comparing the ICP, on the one hand, with similar funds of two other international cultural relations organisations – EUNIC's European Spaces of Culture and the Goethe-Institut's Co-Production Fund – and, on the other, with funds of the four UK arts councils.

The research was conducted in 2022 and 2023 and it involved a desk review of published material on different collaboration funds and interviews with staff of the British Council, the four UK arts councils, EUNIC, the Goethe-Institut, and 20 grantee organisations of the ICP.

¹ This definition comes from British Council & Goethe-Institut, Cultural Value: Cultural Relation in Societies in Transition, 2018, 7

Benefiting from international cultural relations

The benefits that were cited the most by the 20 ICP partners interviewed were new contacts, joining new international networks and establishing new professional relationships at home or outside their own countries.

Many partners learnt new things not only about the subject matter of their collaboration but also about international collaboration. They also learnt about how other organisations work by seeing from close up how they operate within their own contexts, stimulating some partners to think of new ways of working or to develop their own approaches. The collaborations also helped staff in some partner organisations acquire new skills by working alongside more experienced professionals. Many ICP partners learnt something new about the art form or theme of their project in their partners' countries. The experience of this collaboration has influenced how most of these partners would approach other international collaborations in the future.

For some ICP partner organisations collaborating internationally and becoming associated with an institution like the British Council boosted their reputation at home and gave them international visibility and access to new audiences. In the aftermath of the pandemic, the ICP also provided an opportunity to reconnect with the world or a necessary injection of funding.

Apart from the benefits for their organisations, many of the individuals who managed the ICP projects also felt personal benefits: acquiring professional experience or feeling more confident in certain inter-cultural skills – such as building networks and having professional conversations with people from different cultural backgrounds. This experience also increased the desire for another international collaboration for most of the interviewees.

Experiencing international cultural relations

The vast majority of relationships in this study were characterised in positive terms by partners despite – or perhaps because of – some of them having faced (and overcome) difficulties together.

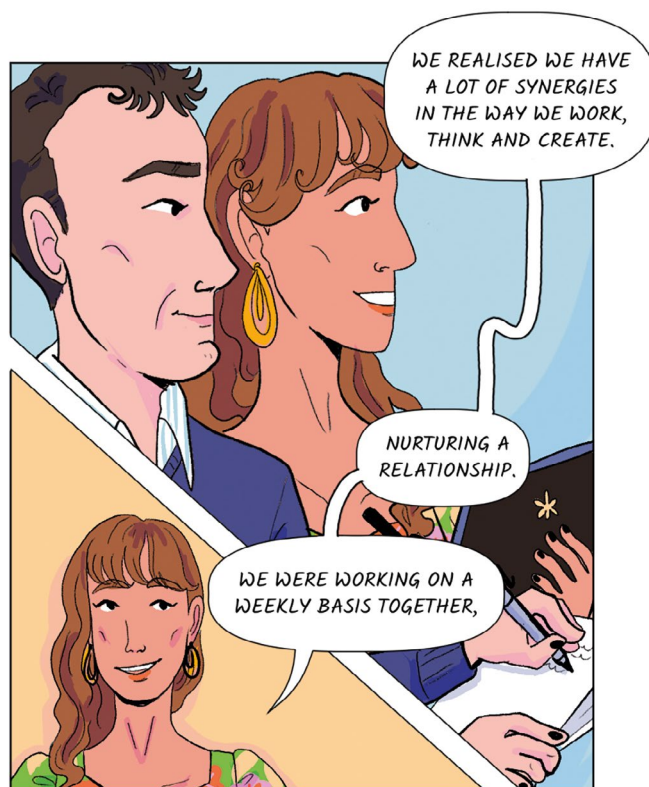
Interviewees identified a number of factors that they thought had contributed to this outcome, including:

- ◆ having worked with the other organisation or knowing each other before this collaboration
- ◆ complementarity in what each organisation brought to the project
- ◆ openness and transparency in communication
- ◆ being like-minded in their field or project theme or having common values, backgrounds or positions on core issues

In all four collaborations where partners knew each other or had worked together before, partners felt that their relationships had deepened during this collaboration. In one partnership difficulties in the relationship were not overcome.

Mutuality and reciprocity were present in most of the partnerships in this study. This mutuality was manifested as ‘mutual respect’, ‘mutual support’, mutuality in learning, sharing ideas and co-creating, joint decision-making, trying to find common ground and negotiating, ‘reciprocity of welcome and generosity’, a kind of ‘reciprocal forgiving’, or the fact that partners visited each other’s countries during the project. Some interviewees thought that their partnerships were based on a division of labour rather than mutuality.

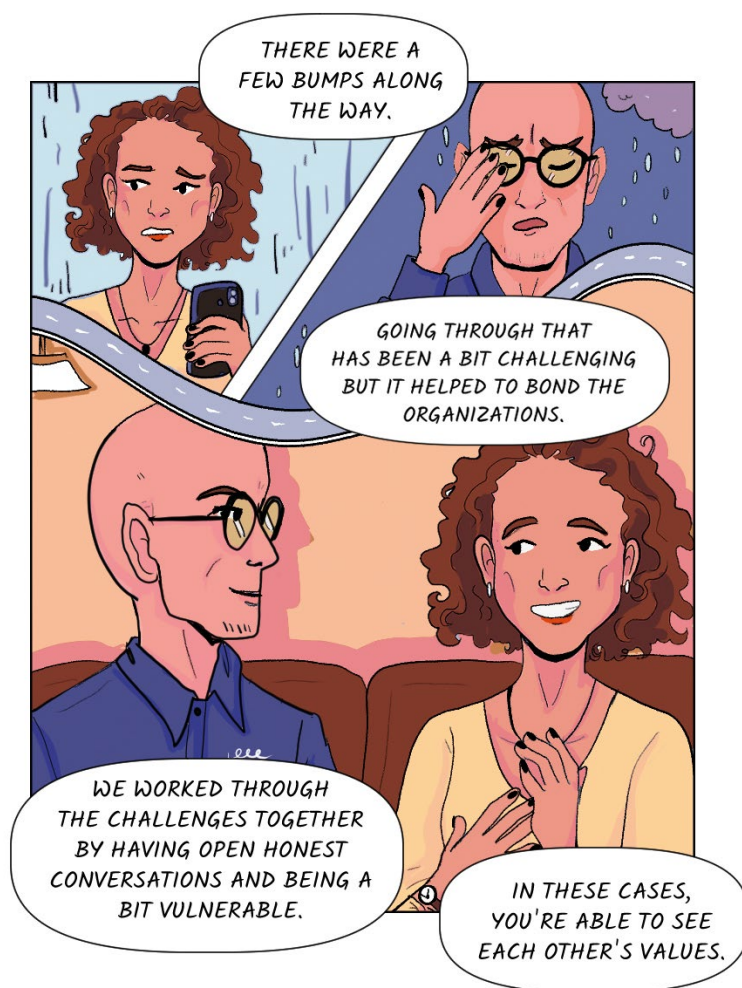
In most partnerships in this research both partners stated that **trust** had been built between them. This had happened gradually during the collaboration process or even earlier, when partners were preparing their funding application together. In two partnerships there was loss of trust either because one partner felt excluded from decision-making or because the other partner was not delivering on what had been agreed.



Many partners thought of their partnerships as being among equals, but their understanding or experience of **equality** varied and, in many cases, these pointed more to **equity** than equality. In some collaborations partners felt equal in certain aspects and not equal in other aspects. Words used by partners included: ‘equally involved’, ‘creatively equal’, or equal in decision making. Others spoke of relationships having been ‘balanced’ or ‘proportionate’, ‘fair’, or about having ‘shared power’, or not pushing their own agendas.

Just as there is variety in how partners understand equality, there is also variety in how inequality is perceived or was experienced by different partners. Despite the fact that the British Council paid the grants to UK-based partners potentially creating inequality in partnerships, most interviewees thought that this did not impact on their relationships negatively even if it affected how projects were managed.

Partners faced various **challenges** in their collaborations, which tested relationships. Challenges that were sometimes couched as ‘cultural differences’ by partners were those around different ways of working, working at different speeds - for example, how quickly partners would respond to emails — different approaches to how to do things in projects; or how to deal with conflict. These caused tensions at times. When these challenges were overcome this happened through discussion, open communication, owning up to one’s own mistakes, showing understanding and keeping focused on the work. All partners except one would like these relationships to be long-term.



What is distinct about the ICP in relation to other international collaboration funds in the UK and Europe?

The ICP is the largest fund dedicated to international artistic collaboration within the UK and possibly also in Europe.

Unlike the ICP, most funds by UK arts councils are not dedicated to international collaboration, but also fund other kinds of (international) activities, such as exchanges, residencies, travel and showcasing. Another distinct characteristic of the ICP is that it gives far more grants per year than either EUNIC or the Goethe-Institut, the two other cultural relations included in this study.

When ICP grantees were asked about the distinct characteristics of the ICP as a fund, they identified a number of practices that they thought distinguish it from other experiences they have had with project funding:

- ◆ Giving freedom to partners to direct and design their projects the way they want by being 'hands off' or 'light touch'.
- ◆ There was sufficient time for project partners to develop their relationships - many of which partners wish to continue – because projects were not short term. Most of them were year-long.
- ◆ The online 'Meet Ups' bringing together ICP grantees to help them connect with organisations outside their own specific projects.
- ◆ The support given by British Council staff, including the assigned 'relationship managers', who proved helpful especially at times of need.

What is distinct about the ‘international cultural relations approach’ and how it adds value to international artistic collaboration

As stated earlier, this research tried to identify the main features of an international cultural relations approach by comparing the British Council’s ICP to other funds supporting international artistic collaborations in the UK and outside it.

It was possible to identify a number of commonalities in the funds of the three cultural relations organisations (British Council, EUNIC and Goethe-Institut) in contrast to grant giving by the four UK arts councils:

- ◆ The British Council, EUNIC and the Goethe-Institute focus on relationship building far more than the UK arts councils, which focus primarily on strengthening the UK arts sector. The three cultural relations organisations have this focus because they see their grant giving as being about building and supporting long term trust, understanding and relationships – the outcomes of cultural relations.
- ◆ For this reason, the support cultural relations organisations give to grantees and individual international collaboration projects, apart from the actual grants, is far greater than that given by the arts councils. It is here that the added value of the cultural relations approach primarily lies — in the ‘accompaniment’ of grantees during their collaborations: the cultural relations organisations, including the British Council, organise gatherings of grantees to meet and explore partnering together or to develop further relationships or a sense of community; their staff support grantees when they encounter difficulties during the implementation of their projects and they provide grantees with various additional resources.
- ◆ Pursuing fairness or equality in international partnerships is at the core of the cultural relations approach and these principles are also what make the cultural relations approach innovative.
- ◆ They are committed to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and linking the outcomes of their work to them.

These similarities make up what we can call an ‘international cultural relations approach’. This approach is different from the grant giving by the UK arts councils in terms of the purpose, priorities, and modalities of giving grants:

- ◆ Arts councils support new, individual artists more than the British Council, which mainly gives grants only to established organisations.
- ◆ Arts councils prioritise the strengthening of the UK arts sector and developing the art form.
- ◆ One of the motivations of arts councils is to help UK artists reach international markets.
- ◆ They also want to promote UK artists and their nations’ profiles to the outside world.
- ◆ Whereas all funds explored in this study monitor how their funding has been spent, arts councils seem to focus more on identifying the outputs of the funded collaborations, namely, their artistic products, while cultural relations organisations are more interested in the outcomes of international collaborations, namely the quality of relationships that have developed and what has changed for the grantees, as a result of their collaborations.

Admittedly, the contrast between arts councils and cultural relations organisations over the why and how of giving grants for international collaboration is not always a sharp one. It is sometimes a matter of different emphases — UK arts councils too encourage and promote international relationships and partnerships among artists, but not with the same emphasis as cultural relations organisations do.



Why are the British Council and other cultural relations organisations well placed to do this work?

There is another aspect to the British Council's added value in grant giving in the arts, which is common to the other two cultural relations organisations included in this study – EUNIC and the Goethe-Institut: the networks these organisations have in other countries.

During this research, all UK interviewees — all UK arts council and British Council staff — agreed that there is something unique that the British Council brings to this kind of grant giving in the UK: its in-depth and up to date knowledge of what is new or interesting in the arts and wider cultural sectors in the countries where the British Council has offices, coupled with government contacts in these countries. This is an asset that the British Council has built over a long period of time. It is also one that UK arts councils lack and draw from through their strategic partnerships with the British Council. Within the UK this British Council asset is unparalleled, but outside the UK, EUNIC and the Goethe-Institut also use their network of members or offices around the world to provide extra support to the grantees of international cultural collaborations. This is an important asset for doing cultural relations, because it enables international cultural connections and relationships to be formed and international cultural relations to develop.

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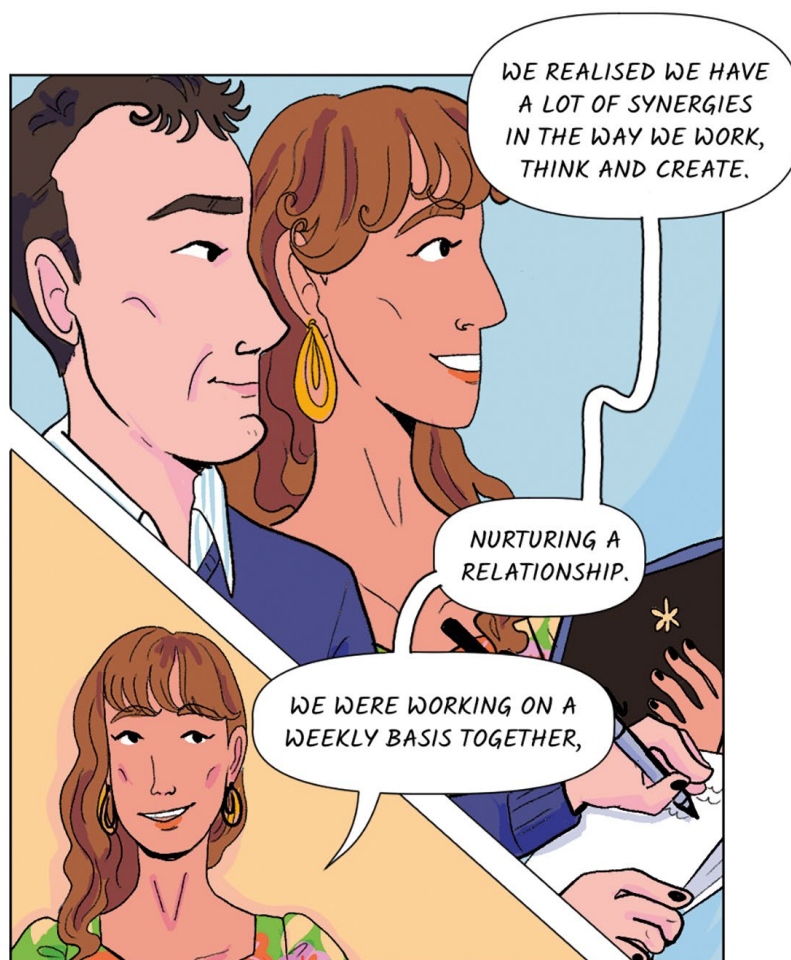
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British Council 2024

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