

Cultural Relations Collection

Edited by J.P. Singh



English Language Assessment as Cultural Relations

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and Mina Patel



English

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The British Council

The British Council is the UK’s international organisation for cultural relations and educational opportunities. We create friendly knowledge and understanding between the people of the UK and other countries. We do this by making a positive contribution to the UK and the countries we work with – changing lives by creating opportunities, building connections and engendering trust.

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Foreword

I am delighted at the release and publication of the first contributions to what I hope will be an important collection on cultural relations and the mission of the British Council. Not always easy to describe and at times even more difficult to measure, when you see cultural relations in action you know what it is about: working over the long term with individuals, communities and institutions in a spirit of mutuality.

Our mission is not only about what we do but also how we engage. This is what distinguishes a cultural relations approach from other forms of public or cultural diplomacy. It is about activities and opportunities, but it is also about how relationships are formed and nourished. And in our case as the British Council it happens in over one hundred countries, working with the English language and through cultural engagement in the arts, education and skills.

This collection provides an overview and analysis of diverse examples of this distinctive cultural relations approach and how it is used to further the British Council's charitable objects, and how the approach benefits both the UK and the people with whom we work. The ways of working apply whether convening the global leaders of international higher education, or building partnerships with civil society organisations or artists within a single country. The cultural relations thread also applies across the British Council's largest programmes, including those such as English Language teaching which deliver income.

Over the past decade the British Council has been consolidating its activities in order to increase the commonality across different countries and regions. Yet a cultural relations approach will always necessitate some variety, because mutuality involves degrees of exchange, co-production and adaptation to local needs. An example in this collection shows how in 2016 within Shakespeare Lives, a global programme celebrating the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's death, and operating to consistent global production values, a small, country-based arts investment in Nigeria saw the production and touring of a locally relevant Shakespeare play performed in Nigerian Pidgin.

The collection also reflects on the long view and includes two contributions which draw on historical investigation to understand the British Council's role over many decades in Burma/Myanmar and the Soviet Union/Russia, drawing on deep scholarship of post-colonialism and the Cold War respectively. It is to be applauded that the editors and authors allow such critical reflection, avoiding the risk of self-congratulation and enabling organisational learning and growth.

Reading these contributions together as a collection reminds me that while all these different areas constitute cultural relations in their own right, together they add up to more than the sum of their parts. Hard work in one area leads to networks and builds the trust that enables the British Council to undertake activities in different areas and with diverse kinds of partners.

It is not always easy to quantify cultural relations or the impact of an individual institution like the British Council over the arc of time and geography. Today, great effort is put into evaluating both the programmatic and organisational impact of our work. Yet the methodologies to assess the effects of multiple decades of engagement are still developing. Friends made, understanding gained and trust increased are things we know to be important. Proving their worth is harder.

Historical investigation helps, but in the end, as Martin Rose says of cultural relations in his essay in this collection: "It has been said of diplomacy that its success can be measured by wars not fought.... The same might be said of the British Council, though it operates at a more human level with individuals and communities rather than nations." Seen in this way, cultural relations is as much about the absence of negatives as the presence of positives. Cultural relations delivers the calm, reflective response as well as the bustling, creative one. This collection, authored by both well-known scholars and authoritative practitioners shows both. And it does so in a way that I hope you find to be accessible, enlightening and compelling. I commend it to you with enthusiasm.

Sir Ciarán Devane,
Chief Executive, *British Council*

Preface to the Cultural Relations Collection

The British Council is often viewed as an organisation that ‘does’, and it does a great deal, but it is also a ‘thinking’ and learning organisation and in recent years has begun to increase its investment in commissioning, using and sometimes undertaking research. It does so for three key reasons.

As an organisation that provides thought leadership in cultural relations it is important that the British Council contributes to, demonstrates and shares a thorough understanding of cultural relations, and of how this approach contributes to the United Kingdom’s attraction and trusted connections in international relations. It does this, for example, through regular studies on the influence and measurement of soft power that track perceptions of the UK, particularly among young people across the world.

Second, we commission and undertake research as trusted expert practitioners in the thematic areas in which we work: in the arts, international education, English language teaching and assessment, and activities undertaken largely with young people in communities and civil society organisations, such as through the Active Citizens Programme. In each of these areas we convene informed debates based on the provision, sharing or curating of new knowledge, in many cases disseminated in well regarded publications and series.

A third reason is to increase the evidence and understanding for ourselves and others of what works to generate cultural relations impact and why. We seek to demonstrate engagement of the highest standard to supporters and partners, while also building our capacity as an organisation to benefit from using research and evidence, both our own and work by others’, in order to make strategic decisions, engage global stakeholders, and exchange knowledge. Together, each of these research areas contributes useful new knowledge to further our charitable purpose through generating new insights and understanding in areas relevant to our work, in turn enhancing our ability to influence policy or to impact debates.

This cultural relations collection arose out of an early initiative when the British Council first established the small research team that would become part of the new global function led from the Research and Policy Insight Directorate. In commissioning a series of in-house and external studies it had three key aims. The first was to clarify our understanding of cultural relations as an encompassing venture that permeated all our work, whether specific to a sector or not and whether income generating or not. Here the contributions on English language and on assessment are particularly illustrative. The second aim was to provide an opportunity to country offices and regional teams, through a competitive bidding process, to commission research on initiatives that were able to illustrate a cultural relations approach in action at a local level. The fascinating contribution on Shakespeare in Nigerian Pidgin stems from this call. A third aim was to grapple with the challenges of understanding and demonstrating impact when reviewing the British Council’s work in an area of activity or in a country over a long period of time. The contributions on science diplomacy and on Myanmar fit here and demonstrate the richness of reviewing cultural relations over time, alongside the challenges of making assessments across the long arc of history.

This cultural relations collection has provided an opportunity to show the work of the British Council in its rich diversity, linked by this common thread and demonstrating that as with the best partnerships, mutuality in approach often produces things that are not what were originally designed, which are often better as a result and that sometimes grow in ways over which no individual or organisation has control.

Dan Shah
Director Research and Policy Insight
British Council

Editor's Note

In very few other areas of work or life is trust more crucial than in the area of examinations. Individual careers depend on it. Organisations hire and pay on the basis of what examinations say about employees. And, as this piece shows, the credibility of institutions and systems such as national civil services is built on the proven talent and application of the people that run them. Building cultural relations is premised on trust (British Council, 2012) and as such, trust in the quality, delivery and impact of the British Council's examinations and testing arm is both a contribution to and an outcome of cultural relations. In this contribution, two British Council thought leaders and professionals in the Examinations Division draw on the academic literature and recent evaluations to reflect on assessment as a cultural relations activity. They trace the organisation's role since 1941 in both its transactional and charitable work in assessment. They argue cogently that in both cases, a cultural relations approach pertains, with trust and respect being built through engaging with individual examination candidates, whose opportunities are enhanced, as well as with education ministries through the strengthening and development of their language assessment systems. Cultural relations on behalf of the UK are fostered by the expertise, professionalism, innovation and dedication of British Council examinations staff and the UK experts with whom they work, as well as through the co-production of knowledge and understanding with their counterparts in countries where the British Council works. Indeed, the distributors, invigilators and managers of British Council-run examinations and the organisation's own English language tests, are often the first and most important face of the UK for many young people across all corners of the globe, and it is a face that builds trust and reputation alongside opportunity.

Historical View of Assessment as Cultural Relations

The Chinese Imperial Examination system (科举: Kējū) was a series of examinations designed to identify talented individuals across the empire for selection to the Imperial Civil Service. The Kējū was introduced in 605 and was finally abandoned 1,300 years later in 1905. The four-tiered system first saw the candidate sit for a three-stage Apprentice examination, progressing if successful to a local Municipal examination. From here the successful candidate progressed to a Regional examination, and finally to the Palace examination. Progression through the levels meant greater and greater opportunity, and even failure to progress past a level still meant an appropriate local or regional appointment or opportunity to teach at or even open a preparatory academy. Passing at the highest level meant a significant imperial appointment and major social and financial rewards.

The Kējū was seen across East Asia as being a fair and sensible selection procedure as it ensured that the most talented individuals were promoted to high-level administrative positions. For this reason, the system was adapted for use in places such as Japan (7th–8th centuries), Korea (958–1894), and Vietnam (1075–1913).

In later centuries, the concept of competitive examination was introduced to Europe by the Jesuits when they introduced written examinations to their schools in the 16th century – the rules governing their education system (*the Ratio Studiorum*) were set down in 1599 and not revised until 1932. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the inspiration for the introduction of examinations came from their knowledge of the Kējū and its impact on society (Spolsky, 2017). The concept of competitive examinations later spread to the civil services of France (18th century), the United Kingdom (19th century) and the USA (19th century), and to the broader general education systems of these and other countries. Indeed, it is widely recognised that the systems of educational examinations used globally can be traced back to imperial China.

This is important as, in terms of cultural relations, the Kējū offers a perfect example of how a government built a system purely for its own purposes and later gladly helped spread the application of the system to other jurisdictions with no ulterior motive but to demonstrate its part as a positive role model. While this may seem overly simplistic, the fact is that all modern education systems rely on an initiative developed over many centuries in China.

After the political upheavals of the early and mid-20th century, in which China first divested itself of the imperial system and later embraced communism, the Kējū fell out of favour. Its study and (particularly) praise was shunned and its impact rejected, at least in China itself. However, over time the importance of the system has come to be recognised and it is now recognised by many in China (including the government) as being the fifth of China's significant contributions to human civilisation (the other four being papermaking, the compass, gunpowder, and printing).

One reason the Chinese government has changed its position is its recognition of the fact that the Kējū has a strong, positive international reputation as the precursor to current educational examination practice around the world. In other words, they see the immense cultural capital it brings to China and the related cultural relations benefits.

As we will see in the following section, the British Council, which has had a significant impact on the spread of English language learning and teaching around the world, has also positively impacted on how language is assessed. This work has seen a significant and systematic growth in the reputation of the organisation as a trusted client and partner in assessment-related initiatives (either directly or curated through UK partner institutions).

The British Council in Assessment

The British Council formally entered the world of English language testing in 1941 when an agreement was signed between the organisation and the University of Cambridge Local Examination Syndicate (UCLES – now Cambridge Assessment English). As part of that agreement, the British Council brought its already established expertise in English Language teaching to advise UCLES on the development of its English language examinations. The Cambridge Proficiency examination in English (launched in 1913) differed significantly from language examinations that were being developed at that time (particularly in the USA) in that it was based solidly on contemporary theories and practices in language education – hence the interest in partnering with the UK’s leading English language teaching organisation at the time. Together, the two organisations formalised what was to become internationally recognised as the UK approach to language testing. This approach continues to influence thinking across the world.

From the outset, the contribution of the British Council was significant. In addition to providing guidance on test content, the British Council team brought a measure of innovation to the testing process not seen in UK tests before this time. From the 1970s on, the team led on the development of communicative language tests, on tests of English for specific purposes, on professionalisation of English language testing practice globally, and on theoretical conceptualisations of language assessment.

An historical overview of this work is provided by Weir & O’Sullivan (2017). In this contribution we provide just one example to demonstrate the influence the British Council has had over the years. The professionalisation of language assessment began with the organisation’s work with UCLES in the 1940s and continued over the decades, highlighted by the formation of the English Language Consultancies Department (ELCD) in 1976; renamed the English Language Services Department (ELSD) in 1978. It was from within this department that the ideas that led to the in-house development and launch of the original English Language Testing Service (ELTS) test came in 1980. In 1990, this went on to become the highly influential IELTS test following an extensive revision project.

In the following section we look at three of the 17 projects (there were many more) discussed by Weir & O’Sullivan in Chapter Two of their book. These were chosen to give an indication of the breadth and influence of the work carried out over a thirty-year period. As it happens, all three projects were undertaken jointly by the British Council and Lancaster University, though we should point out that the benefit to the UK went beyond this single institution. Other beneficiaries included the Universities of London, Reading, and Roehampton as well as publishers such as Macmillan and Cambridge University Press and a number of independent consultants.

¹The Lancaster team was Diane Wall, Charles Alderson and Caroline Clapham.

²Alderson et al. (1987) report on the findings of the first phase of the evaluation, while the methodology can be found in Wall et al. (1991). The findings of the second phase of the evaluation can be found in Goonetillike et al. (1988).

³Washback refers to the effect a test has on teaching and learning. The concept was first highlighted by Arthur Hughes in the late 1980s (though he used the term ‘backwash’) and has been the subject of much research into the social and educational impact of tests. This is of great importance as governments often change high-stakes tests in an effort to force through change in how subjects are taught in schools. An example of this is in Japan, where the Ministry of Education has decreed that universities must test all four skills (as opposed to the receptive skills of reading and listening only, as has been the case up to now). The reasoning behind the decision is to force schools to focus on the productive skills (speaking and writing) in order to equip the future workforce with the language skills to compete in the global marketplace (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology – MEXT, 2011).

National Examination Reform Projects

It has long been accepted that accurate language certification using appropriate accredited tests has contributed significantly to the generation of economic prosperity, while English language proficiency clearly underpins growth in wealth and helps drive economic development (British Council, 2013). Coleman (2010) offers empirical evidence of the benefits of English language proficiency, including:

- increasing employability
- enabling international collaboration and cooperation
- providing access to research and information
- facilitating international mobility.

Coleman argues that English ability can have a significant impact on individuals, on industrial sectors such as the service economy, and at a national level. The trusted certification of English proficiency through high-quality language tests is central to this process.

In this section, we briefly review a series of national level projects in which the British Council played a key role. These projects led to significant improvements in local language testing expertise and positively impacted on the lives of millions of learners in these countries.

The Sri Lanka Projects (1986-1992)

In the early 1980s the British Council set up a series of visits by Dr Cyril Weir, then of Lancaster University, to the National Institute of Education in Colombo, Sri Lanka. During these visits, possible changes to the national examination system were explored and this led to continued British Council support for the ministry during the following years. A number of Sri Lankan teachers were sponsored by the British Council to undergo training in test design and administration. The first aim of the initiative was to develop a test of proficiency for adults called the National Certificate in English. This was to be the first time listening and speaking papers were included in a high-stakes test in the country. This was planned to lead into the revision of the O-Level (school leaving) examination in English Language, aimed at students in their final year of compulsory education. The local team was supported in both projects by Ian Pearson, a British Council language testing expert.

The connection with Lancaster University was maintained through a later commission from the British Council to evaluate both tests.¹ The resulting evaluations are recognised nowadays as representing seminal works in the area of language testing. Diane Wall, in an interview for Weir & O'Sullivan (2017) remembers the first part of the two-phase evaluation as providing:

...a thorough look at both the content of the examination and its statistical properties, paying special attention to rater reliability. The immediate impact of this evaluation was to provide guidance for improving the design of the 1987 examination and associated procedures. It also established a model for evaluation that the Sri Lankan team could use as they carried out their own validation exercises in years to come.

She also remembered that the:

...1987 evaluation focused not only on investigating the qualities of the examination but also on training the Sri Lankan team in evaluative methods, data analysis and report writing. This training would enable team members to evaluate their own work not only on the NCE, but also on the 'O' Level Examination, which was to follow shortly, and on other examinations they would be involved in designing in the future.²

The second evaluation project focused on the newly devised O-Level in English Language examination. Weir & O'Sullivan (2017, p. 59) report that:

The innovative research of Dianne Wall, Charles Alderson and Caroline Clapham, together with their Sri Lankan colleagues in this British Council funded project was to result in a number of seminal publications on test washback³, which subsequently proved of great value to the language testing field ... Their work provided language testing with a deep and comprehensive understanding of the concept of test washback and perhaps more importantly, they provided a feasible and plausible methodology for its investigation.

Diane Wall, again in an interview for Weir & O'Sullivan (2017, p. 59), remembers that:

The 'O' Level evaluation project had the desired effect in the local context, through its analysis of the examination itself and its discussion of factors that were facilitating or inhibiting beneficial washback (Alderson & Wall 1992). It also had an impact on the field of language testing by exploring the notion of examination washback more fully and by emphasising the need to incorporate insights from other disciplines, principally educational innovation, into washback investigations.

The importance of this project can be seen in its contribution to national-level English language testing in Sri Lanka, where the provision of professional, high-quality examinations had an indisputable impact on millions of test-takers over the years. The project also led to significant developments in the way language testers globally approached the evaluation of test impact.

Year 12 English Examinations Project, Baltic States (1994-1997)

The British Government's Know How Fund, established in the early 1990s, provided funding to support reform agendas in those post-Soviet countries hoping to gain membership of the European Union. The British Council managed most of the education reform projects, which tended to focus on teacher training, though in the Baltic States there was a focus also on examination reform. Perhaps the most important of these was the Year 12 English Examinations Project.

According to Wall (1996, pp. 15-17), "the purpose of the Baltic States' Year 12 Examination Project has been to support national teams in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania in their attempts to design, administer and evaluate new school-leaving examinations in English as a Foreign Language". The idea being that a specially trained team in each country would work to create a new examination for students in Year 12 in their respective country over a period of three years from 1994 to 1997.

The three project teams received professional development training in language testing both at Lancaster and in their home country. This involved developing an understanding of the importance of the local context, including, in particular, the new national curriculum that had been recently introduced. In addition, the British Council team realised, through their considerable experience in delivering tests globally, that simply devising new examinations was not enough.

Therefore, the project teams were also trained in management as part of a programme delivered by John McGovern of the British Council.

Dianne Wall (Lancaster University), in an interview for the Weir & O'Sullivan (2017) volume, felt that the project had had "a dramatic effect on the professional lives of all those involved". In fact, she and many of her colleagues regarded it as "one of the highlights of their careers". Wall (1996) also felt that:

The Year 12 project represented three important innovations in testing support from the Council:

1. the idea of designing not only examination papers but also systems to support the design, administration and evaluation processes (e.g. secure printing and delivery of exam papers, efficient registration procedures, statistical analysis of results)
2. the idea of providing training in management skills as well as testing skills, and
3. the idea of a long-term relationship between national teams and the UK trainers/consultants, with nearly a dozen opportunities for working together over the three years of the project.

Wall believed that the project had a significant, long-term impact beyond the fact that the teams had worked to develop a series of innovative, multi-skill tests. The impact included the creation of training materials for all those who participated in the writing of the tests (e.g. item-writers, examiners, raters), the training of teachers across the three countries, and the formation of professional networks to disseminate their work. In achieving all this, the project changed language (not just English) education and testing across the three states.

In Weir & O'Sullivan (2017), team members report on how participation in the projects helped them professionally, and also helped them to influence language education and assessment in their respective countries in the longer term.⁴

⁴These team members were Ulle Turk (Estonia), Vita Kalnberzina (Latvia), and Zita Mazuoliene and Stase Skapiene (Lithuania).

Examination Reform Teacher Support Project, Hungary (1998-2002)

The situation with the current system of school-leaving examinations in Hungary is well documented by Pizorn & Nagy (2009, pp. 193-202). The lack of a centralised system of examination development meant that clear differences were found across the country. There was also a significant issue with assessment training for teachers and with the stability of the scoring system as a whole.

Yet again, Lancaster University took on the role as project lead, through Charles Alderson who was seconded to the project from 1988 to 2000 as the British Council Adviser, Budapest. The project outputs are contained in a series of publications, which are still available through the Lancaster University webpages – an indication of how that institution values the project to this day (see Fekete et al., 1999; Alderson et al., 2000; Györgyi et al., 2001).

Despite its apparent success in developing a broad range of project materials and achieving its technical objectives, the work was never implemented by those managing the education system according to Pizorn & Nagy (2009, pp. 195-202). Weir & O'Sullivan (2017) record the positive reaction to the technical achievements of the project group by Ildikó Csépes, a member of the Hungarian Examinations Reform Teacher Support Project of the British Council. In her interview for Weir & O'Sullivan (2017, pp. 73), Csépes recalls that:

the British Council provided ample opportunity for them both to develop practical skills in test development and to gain insights into the principles and the theoretical background to language testing. The expertise they were offered at that time was highly appreciated and cutting edge.

As was the case with the Baltic projects, the local participants in this project went on to develop long-lasting personal and professional friendships. Some also went on to do PhDs in language testing and rise to important positions both within Hungary and internationally.

Weir & O'Sullivan (2017, pp. 74) summarise the critical importance of the project and of the whole British Council approach:

As with many other British Council sponsored testing projects, a clear commitment to the training of indigenous cadres to become specialists in the field meant the legacies of such projects were often just as important, if not more important than any achievements

during the lifetime of the project itself. The series of handbooks produced by the project were also a valuable legacy in Hungary and beyond.

The projects described here offer an excellent example of how the British Council was directly involved across a range of countries in the professionalisation of local language testing cadres while at the same time creating opportunities for UK universities to build skills and reputations, which were to form the foundations for a growing UK language testing community, including academics and developers. Weir & O'Sullivan (2017, pp. 63) argue that:

Alderson, Clapham and Wall at Lancaster University were leading lights in the movement to establish language testing as a more professional, scientific endeavour in contrast to the more cottage industry type approach that had hitherto been the norm in the pre-scientific days of British language testing in the first half of the 20th century.⁵

Two things are important here. One relates to the professionalism mentioned above, while the other refers to the importance of the cultural relations aspect of the entire endeavour. With regards to professionalism, the opportunities to build the knowledge and skills required to shape the (deserved) reputations for groups such as we see at Lancaster University, were recognised, negotiated and made available by the British Council. The role of the organisation in helping to establish and consolidate a clearly identifiable UK position on language testing theory and practice and offering numerous opportunities for UK higher education institutions is unquestionable.

In terms of cultural relations, we would argue that the focus of the British Council in offering support to local language test developers by insisting on projects with sustainability at the core (a position clearly supported by the UK academics who worked on the projects) was well understood and appreciated by these local developers. Those individuals contributing to Weir & O'Sullivan's (2017) history of the British Council in language testing consistently recognised the positive impact of the projects in which they had participated. This positive impact saw individuals rise to positions in which they were able to positively influence language testing practice in their country, and also saw the UK recognised as a leading, positive influence on the world of language testing.

⁵See Weir (2013) for a detailed discussion of this shift to professionalism.

Assessment, Cultural Relations and the British Council

In the British Council context, testing is sometimes perceived as an unlikely contributor to the cultural relations agenda. This may be due to the complex nature of cultural relations and the lack of a shared understanding of what assessment entails for the British Council as an organisation. It may also be due to the fact that, until very recently, the activities of the Examinations division have been largely measured through reach and income rather than impact. However, the recent British Council Periodic Review (Foreign & Commonwealth Office, 2019) has been a welcome catalyst of change in this respect. An important focus of the Tailored Review was the impact and more specifically the cultural relations impact of the work of the British Council. This meant changing the way we look at our work in Examinations; changing the focus from reach and income to seeing our work through the eyes of our stakeholders, so rather than looking through a single lens, seeing our work through a prism offering different perspectives.

A single test is usually seen as an isolated, transactional activity. A test-taker pays for a test, takes the test, receives the result and that is the end of the transaction. However, to see a test like this is to diminish its value and contribution to a variety of impact agendas, including that of cultural relations. The way the test is constructed, the types of questions it contains, the choice of language within those questions, and the marking system all represent the educational philosophy of an organisation or a country in which the test is developed. A test, though important in itself, is one part of a much bigger assessment and educational system or process that exists to support individuals, institutions and countries achieve their goals and ambitions.

Seen through the eyes of an individual test-taker, the process begins when deciding which test to take. Some factors that impact this are the reputation of the test, recognition by receiving organisations, customer service, the mode and standards of delivery. All of these reflect a certain set of standards and values that are embedded in the culture of an organisation and/or country.

At an institutional level, we need only to look at the examples of Sri Lanka, Hungary and the Baltic states to see cultural relations at work on two main levels:

- The assessment expertise, understanding and collaboration shared between two or more institutions. This includes knowledge about testing, experience and reputation in the field.
- Legacy through sustainability. This includes the development and professionalisation of teams to continue and grow after initial interventions, and can be evidenced by continued relationships, study visits, future collaboration etc.

On a national level, cultural relations are most likely to prosper in response to long-term, mutually beneficial relationships and trust building. The examples cited here are excellent examples of how the British Council working directly with a local ministry of education and UK experts can build locally appropriate assessment systems that are sustainable both in that context and within the broader relationships developed with UK institutions.

If we think about assessment as a process or system, of which an individual test forms one part, and if we conceptualise cultural relations as being “a concept embedded in practices” (British Council & Goethe Institute 2018, p. 8) then a cumulative positive impact can result from a series of interactions and activities. Seen in this way, we can begin to understand how assessment can be a very strong and powerful contributor to the cultural relations agenda.

The British Council and Cultural Relations through Assessment

The articulation of cultural relations is not something the British Council has been confident in advancing over the decades. Perhaps as a consequence, the organisation has never fully come to grips with producing an effective narrative of the work it does in the assessment area and why. However, the process of responding to the 2018 Tailored Review provided the impetus for a thorough review of our role and contribution and in doing so has provided an opportunity for us to look at our work in Examinations in a different way. The Examinations portfolio is diverse, ranging from individual transactional relationships to national transformational engagement. The British Council supports and collaborates with both UK and international partners as well as having the expertise to develop and deliver its own products.

This section provides some examples of how the British Council's work in Examinations supports the cultural relations agenda in a substantial way. These examples clearly sit within the British Council Examinations Cultural Relations Mission to:

Build trust: the nature of UK qualifications and assessments and the way that we administer them enhances trust between the UK and other countries

Create opportunities: the UK qualifications and assessment we provide, because of their integrity and wide recognition, have the power to change people's lives, enabling them to access life, study or work opportunities overseas or in their own countries

Drive change: qualifications and assessments are one of the most powerful drivers of improvements in teaching, learning and professional practice. They are essential to the learning process. As well as providing the exams, we often provide support for schools, organisations and individuals.

Build Trust

Assessment Research Group

The Assessment Research Group (ARG) was formed by the British Council in response to the need to remain competitive and relevant in fast-changing markets. The ARG is a team of assessment professionals with expertise in language testing theory and practice. The main objective of the ARG is to strengthen the position of the British Council and the UK as global leaders and product innovators in the field of English language assessment. The group has done this by:

- helping to diversify the British Council's portfolio of activities from test delivery to test development
- providing academic expertise to existing and new interventions, for example, in the localisation agenda that supports the use of the British Council's Aptis test of English proficiency in a range of countries and for a range of purposes
- increasing the presence of the British Council and the UK in general on the global assessment stage
- building relationships with the UK and international assessment sectors through conference presentations, publications, contributions to the international academic community and advisory work with local ministries and institutions

China

For many years, the British Council has delivered the Association of Chartered Certified Accountants (ACCA) qualifications internationally. The ACCA has been operating for 30 years in China and has a firm foothold in the professional and higher educational sectors there. Many ACCA alumni hold influential positions in Chinese industry, and the quality and reputation of the qualifications encourages study in the UK for Chinese students.

In China, the British Council also delivers IELTS with its governmental partner the National Education and Examinations Authority (NEEA). Since 2013, the engagement between British Council China, the ARG and NEEA has built a strong level of trust, which, in turn, has resulted in a strong and influential partnership. In 2016, a government-to-government memorandum of understanding for the education sector was signed between Britain and China. As a result of this, NEEA invited the British Council to work with them to develop the theoretical and practical procedures required to demonstrate a meaningful link between national and international examinations and the newly created China's Standards of English (CSE). As part of its mission to foster relationships between the UK and international institutions, the British Council invited Cambridge Assessment English to participate in the research and development work that formed part of the project. The entire CSE/ linking initiative was very much a collaborative effort between the British Council and NEEA, bringing UK research and methodology expertise to the CSE project.

New Directions

New Directions is a series of high-quality conferences bringing together key officials in Ministries of Education in East Asia, representatives of local and regional testing associations, and leading academics. The ARG, working with local and regional teams, shape the conferences to meet relevant needs, while at the same time showcasing UK expertise in the field. The first conference in Beijing in 2013 was instrumental in enhancing the relationship between the British Council and NEEA, while subsequent conferences have been in Tokyo, Seoul, Hanoi, Shanghai (organised in partnership with NEEA) and Malaysia. In all of these cases a very positive impact has been reported as a result of the conference (Saunders & McGovern, 2019). The engagement during these conferences and the continuity of the series has:

- strengthened relationships between the British Council and local respective Education Ministries
- provided a forum for stakeholders in East Asia to interact and engage with language assessment experts from the UK
- created an opportunity for stakeholders in East Asia to share best practice and lessons learned from within the region and elsewhere
- provided opportunities to showcase UK universities, exam boards and consultants throughout the East Asia region
- created opportunities for new collaboration between East Asia and the UK

The British Council is now seen by ministries of education in East Asia as the convening authority for language assessment in the region. As a result of the success of New Directions East Asia, there are plans for New Directions in South America and possibly even South Asia. Saunders & McGovern (2019) detailed evaluation of the impact of the New Directions conference series for a fuller argument in support of these claims.

Create Opportunities

The case studies below are examples of how the British Council's work in Examinations has supported test-takers all over the world. The British Council prides itself on the excellent standard of care and accommodation provided to every individual throughout their journey. Equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) are at the heart of the work in Examinations. With the support of Cambridge Assessment English, for IELTS, and Global Assessments for Aptis and other tests, British Council test centres worldwide accommodate test-takers with a variety of challenges on a regular basis.

Case study 1: Universidad Católica de Chile: English testing for students with special educational needs

In 2017, with the aim of being more inclusive, the English department of the Universidad Católica de Chile approached the British Council to assist with an English test for their Special Educational Needs (SEN) students. Before this, SEN students were not tested in English because the university did not have the expertise to test them. Using Aptis, the British Council delivered a test session for 24 test-takers with different degrees of visual, hearing and motor impairment. The opportunity to be tested in English has opened what was a closed door until now. With this test, the students now have the opportunity to be placed on a more equal footing with other students at the university. The university now plans to have two sessions a year for SEN students. The university also benefits by offering SEN students this opportunity, as it becomes a more attractive educational destination both through its values and actions.

Case study 2: Abdalaziz Mohamed Ali AwadElkarim': Sudan: A surgical career to practice in Sudan and train future generations

Abdalaziz, a teaching assistant with the University of Khartoum achieved the highest possible score in Sudan's postgraduate diploma for surgeons, and stood the chance of improving his qualifications further with Membership of the UK's Royal College of Surgeons (MRCS). Taking the MRCS could have been problematic for him. Flying to the UK to take the exam would have been prohibitively expensive. The British Council played a pivotal role in Abdalaziz's career by ensuring that he could take this examination in Khartoum. He has also taken IELTS to further his surgical training in the UK. Abdalaziz intends to give back to Sudan on his return by practising medicine, training future generations and, no doubt, inspiring them to follow in his own footsteps.

Case study 3: Jianwei Zheng, China

"A model of fortitude for Chinese disabled people." Jianwei Zheng is blind. He took the IELTS test in 2012 and scored 6.5. He applied to study at the University of Essex to do a masters level degree specialising in teaching English as a second language, and graduated in 2014. On his return to China, the Chongqing government named Mr Zheng in the 'Top 10 Chongqing Moving Figures'. In the same year, the China Disabled Persons Federation nominated him for the 'Fortitude and Perseverance Model of Chinese Disabled People', and he received the award from President Xi Jinping.

In 2017, Mr Zheng participated in the English is GREAT campaign launch event, and met the British prime minister as a representative of Chinese students who have benefitted from IELTS and UK higher education. Mr Zheng now teaches English in his hometown near western Hunan in China and has set up the Zhengjianwei Workstation, which aims to help prepare students for IELTS in Chongqing.

Case study 4: Multiple sclerosis study, Innsbruck: Investigating the ability of persons with MS to learn a foreign language

At least half of the patients diagnosed with multiple sclerosis (MS) are affected by cognitive deficits, which may hinder learning. Current approaches to cognitive rehabilitation interventions tend to have no real-life relevance in terms of learning new skills. Often, these programmes are not very motivating. The purpose of this project was to investigate whether persons with MS are as able as their healthy counterparts to learn a language. If that were found to be the case, new cognitive rehabilitation programmes involving foreign language learning could be developed and evaluated.

The Language Testing Research Group Innsbruck (LTRGI) was approached by a group of neurologists from the Clinic for Rehabilitation (Münster) and the Department of Neurology (Innsbruck Medical University) to conduct pre- and post-measurements of foreign language ability and develop an intervention in the form of an eight-week language course. In cooperation with the British Council, the LTRGI opted to use bespoke versions of the Aptis Speaking and Listening tests to measure the participants' language competences before and after an intervention.

Preliminary results show a considerable improvement in test scores from pre- to post-intervention for both groups. A follow-up study that expands on this exploratory pilot study is being planned. If learning a language can be confirmed as a viable avenue for cognitive rehabilitation for persons with MS, this will have major implications for the quality of life of persons with MS. Instead of training cognitive functions on tasks without real-life relevance, learning a new language will contribute to improving their employability and income prospects.

If "empowerment of citizens, which arguably, is the ultimate goal of cultural relations" (British Council & Goethe Institute 2018, p. 13) holds true, then assessment is undoubtedly an agent of cultural relations.

Drive Change

Research

In language assessment research, the British Council has taken the initiative to explore significantly new avenues and methodologies. The CSE linking project discussed above, is one example. Another is English Impact. English Impact is the British Council's global research initiative that aims to provide credible evidence on national capability in English language proficiency to inform education system development and to diagnose the impact policy decisions can have on the development of national learning systems. Over time, data collection at frequent intervals will allow us to establish trends and help us to understand the impact of English language capability on national development.

The project cuts across many areas, including English language learning, teaching and assessment, as well as language education policy, evaluation and planning. Thus far the project has been implemented in Spain, Colombia, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. In most cases, the project has led to significant changes to, or support for, language policy practices in the target country. For example, the local government in Bogota, Colombia, reinforced its English as a medium of instruction agenda, based on the findings of the study there. The government of Madrid found concrete evidence of the success of their bilingual programme, which in turn enabled them to rebuff criticism (often based on hearsay or on anecdotal evidence) and strengthen their policy. The fact that the British Council was chosen by the governments of these countries and regions to undertake extremely sensitive research in which their education systems risked significant criticism is clear evidence of the trust placed in the British Council.

Examinations delivery

Another example of how the British Council is driving change in the area of Examinations delivery is our work with institutions and examining bodies. The British Council has computer-based testing (CBT) operations in over 60 countries with the ambition to deliver six million computer-based tests by 2020. The British Council successfully supports institutions and examining bodies in delivering tests using technology. We provide consultancy throughout the process, from initial discussions about the choice of platform and model of delivery, to helping partners understand and implement the changes required around test-day delivery.

Assessment, Cultural Relations and the British Council

The British Council was founded in 1934 and granted a Royal Charter in 1940, in which its mission was defined as “promoting a wider knowledge of [the UK] and the English language abroad and developing closer cultural relations between [the UK] and other countries”. When the Royal Charter was updated in 1993 (British Council, 1993), this was amended to read:

to advance, for the public benefit, any purpose which is exclusively charitable and which shall:

- a. promote cultural relationships and the understanding of different cultures between people and peoples of the United Kingdom and other countries;
- b. promote a wider knowledge of the United Kingdom;
- c. develop a wider knowledge of the English language;
- d. encourage cultural, scientific, technological and other educational cooperation between the United Kingdom and other countries; or
- e. otherwise promote the advancement of education.

In this contribution, we have argued that there is a long history of assessment contributing to the cultural capital of a nation. The examples we focused on were the Chinese Imperial Examination (Kéjǔ) and the British Council’s work in English language assessment over almost eight decades. Looking at the 1993 Royal Charter, it is clear that it is perhaps only in Examinations that all five objectives shown above are reflected.

The examples presented provide evidence of cultural relations in action, while at the same time attesting to the variety and depth of impact generated through the British Council’s work in Examinations. As we mentioned above, the organisation has not been good at systematically evidencing its cultural relations impact over the years. It remains the case that there is a lack of strong documented evidence that the Examinations business division of the organisation can be seen to engage with the cultural relations ambitions of the broader organisation. We have shown here that the basis for such an argument exists in the work currently and previously undertaken by this division and call for more systematic documentation in the future.

There is ample evidence that the organisation has been involved in activities that have had a significant positive impact on individuals, institutions and nations. The way in which the organisation has approached this work has been both transactional (e.g. in terms of the IELTS, Aptis and other examinations) and charitable (in that the work has been conceived to be beneficial to the receiving institution/country with no strings attached). While it can be argued that the hard evidence is lacking to demonstrate any causal link between our assessment work and cultural relations outcomes for the UK, we can legitimately argue that this is not because the hard evidence does not exist. It is clear that when we actually look for evidence of impact we tend to find it. See for example the evaluation of the New Directions conference series (Saunders & McGovern, 2019) by the same authors who wrote the contribution on the higher education conference, Going Global, in this collection. In the New Directions evaluation, in which the same methodology as the Going Global evaluation was used, the authors found strong evidence of a positive impact from a whole series of high-level respondents across East Asia, South America and the UK. It is clear to us, that by developing a systematic method of gathering, interpreting and reporting evidence, which has been specifically collected to answer key cultural relations questions, we will continue to find that such impact exists for British Council Examinations.

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