

Research and Policy Insight

**Force for good:
leading nations' pursuit
of soft power**

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Soft power in a changing world

In an increasingly complex, multipolar world with rising powers seeking to increase their regional and global influence, the UK's soft power grows ever more important to its security and prosperity. Whether it is negotiating a trade deal or building the alliances needed to address international challenges like climate change or COVID-19, it is crucial to be recognised as a partner willing and capable of working with others for the common good - to be seen as a force for good in the world.

Governments actively seek to grow their international influence through a range of interventions including public diplomacy, strategic communications and an array of cultural and educational exchange and outreach programmes, what academics refer to as "international cultural relations". There is no silver bullet solution or single optimal approach to achieving soft power success. However, governments and the different institutions through which they work overseas, will have a better chance of success if they are informed about the most impactful approaches other leading nations have taken and understand the quite different mechanisms and strategies they use.

Research undertaken by [International Cultural Relations](#) on behalf of the British Council explored these questions and considered in particular the role of international cultural relations. This paper draws out key findings and considers their implications for the UK.

International comparisons and the UK's position

The UK is in a strong position relative to its rivals. It is currently the most attractive and the second most trusted country in the G20, according to the British Council's most [recent soft power perceptions survey](#). However, its lead is a fragile one.

74 per cent of respondents rated the UK six out of ten - or higher - for overall attractiveness. Yet, the UK's score is near identical to that of second place Canada's, while the gap between first and sixth place has narrowed to just 3 percentage points, half that of 2016.

The UK is a world leader in soft power, but it is very much first amongst equals with the competition closer than ever. If it fails to continue to prioritise soft power, there are others all too ready to seize the advantages it currently enjoys.

Other countries are investing in soft power. Liberal democracies like Germany and Japan that are well placed to overtake the UK in terms of trust and attractiveness have been investing heavily in programmes and networks to grow their soft power advantage. They are not alone.

China has been dramatically expanding its global network of Confucius Institutes as part of a full spectrum strategy to increase its international influence. The network of the Confucius Institute is now three times larger than that of the British Council with offices present everywhere the government has invested through the Belt and Road Initiative. The expansion has been driven by a desire to tell China's story internationally, increase its influence, grow its economy and challenge the international order that the UK was instrumental in building.

Why invest in soft power?

A state's international credibility and capacity to effect change depends as much on diplomacy and the social and human capital of international networks as it does on its gross domestic product (GDP), or military might. For a state to enjoy international success in the 21st century, it needs to focus on both hard and soft power. By ensuring these are strategically aligned – what some commentators refer to as “smart power” – a state maximises its global reach and impact.

Being recognised as a global force for good has substantial benefits. The trust and attractiveness that come from a country's soft power increases interest in engaging with it through business and trade, drives up foreign direct investment (FDI) and increases inward flows of international students. Perceptions of trust have a measurable economic impact - a one standard deviation increase in an importer's trust toward an exporter raises exports by 10 per cent and the level of FDI by 27 per cent¹.

Soft power has multiple positive impacts on the UK's prosperity. International students and researchers for example not only make a vital contribution to the success and diversity of the UK's higher education sector, they also support local economies across the country and are core to the success of the UK as a “science superpower”, especially in areas key to UK productivity like the life sciences, engineering and artificial intelligence.

People who have enjoyed the UK's arts and culture are on average **+14% more positive** [about the UK than those who have not across 20 perceptions metrics associated with trust and attraction. These factors range from the country 'is a strong example of a democratic government' to 'has world-leading science and technology'. The impact of engagement rises to +16% for those that have studied in the UK and to +17% for those who have done business/trade with the UK.

It is notable that at +26% the impact of studying in the UK is especially impactful on perceptions of the UK's contribution to international development, **the strongest driver of trust in government**. Attracting future political and business leaders to the UK to have the immersive experience of living and studying in the country is vital to the future success of the UK. It is through familiarity with the people, culture and values of the UK that perceptions of the country as a force for good are strengthened.

The benefits of increased levels of trust stretch far beyond the inward flows of FDI and international students that so enrich the economy of the UK. Professor Joseph S. Nye, the originator of the term soft power, recently highlighted the increasing importance of social and human capital in international relations:

In this new world, networks and connectedness become an important source of power and security. In a world of growing complexity, the most connected states are the most powerful.

Through soft power a country also builds “reputational resilience”. It gains international credibility and can come to be viewed as desirable, reliable partner. This resilience offers vital protection from both the propaganda of rival states and insulation against the damage to perceptions that can be caused by a state's own missteps on the global stage.

In an increasingly complex, contested, multi-polar world, the UK will be reliant on alliances and networks to prosper. Whether it's persuading other countries to take multilateral action

¹ Guiso, L., Sapienza, P., Zingales, L. (2009) Cultural Biases in Economic Exchange?, The Quarterly Journal of Economics, 124(3):1095–1131.

in a humanitarian crisis, agreeing to collective targets for reducing carbon emissions, signing a trade deal or deterring rivals from hostile acts, networks, trust and attraction are integral to success. The UK's security, international influence and capacity to address global challenges all depend on being connected and trusted.

The UK's soft power success relies upon its reputation as an open and tolerant society that acts as a global force for good. To maintain its lead it needs to build on its international relationships and continue to actively champion the values it is seen as representing, through support for the rules-based international system and multilateral institutions like the World Health Organisation, and taking a leading role in promoting collective action on global issues such as climate change, COVID-19, women's rights and education, and technology governance.

The gap between soft power leaders is narrowing. China, France, Germany, Japan, the Republic of Korea, Russia, and others have all been investing more in soft power as a proportion of GDP than the UK. They place soft power at the core of their international strategies, recognising that it is absolutely vital to their security, prosperity and international influence.

In 2018/19 the German state invested £550 million in its principal soft power agencies, three times the UK government's £184 million grant in aid to the British Council. In the same year France spent £478 million. The Council for Foreign Relations² has estimated that China spends US\$10 billion per year on soft power.

The UK's comparative advantage in soft power is not guaranteed. Complacency is the enemy. Without an increase in investment the UK will lose ground to competitor nations who are all eager to increase their influence, grow their economies and secure any advantage they can.

The role and relevance of international cultural relations institutions

The research undertaken by International Cultural Relations on behalf of the British Council explores the different approaches of leading states in the soft power space. The report highlights the differences between short- and medium-term interventions like government communications and marketing that seek to promote and explain policies and meet immediate priorities, and the long-term network and trust building work of cultural relations. These different state interventions all have a vital role in mobilising a country's soft power to advance the national interest, much of which comes from the activities of institutions, civil society groups and individuals wholly outside the ambit of the state.

A key finding of the ICR research is that a growing number of states around the world are investing heavily in arms-length bodies - international cultural relations institutions - that work to build trust and understanding through mutual exchange programmes, cultural seasons and other activities.

This model, pioneered by European states in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, has been widely adopted and adapted by other countries. The Confucius Institute, the Korea Foundation, the Russkiy Mir Foundation and the Yunus Emre Enstitüsü all draw upon the models of the Alliance française, the British Council, the Goethe-Institut, the Instituto Camões, and other venerable European institutions.

² The Council on Foreign Relations (2018) China's Big Bet on Soft Power. Available online at: <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/chinas-big-bet-soft-power> [Accessed 31 May 2018].

The curated experience of cultural and educational engagement is far more impactful than ad hoc experiences, whether it is targeted at “high worth individuals” or mass market digital engagement drawing on popular cultural assets like Mr Bean or Aardman Studios. By understanding local markets and then making a tailored offer to targeted international audiences, cultural relations institutions magnify the impact of a state’s soft power assets - like its universities and performing arts scene - on attractiveness and trust.

The precise delivery model varies between states. Some institutions operate directly out of Embassies while others are deliberately located both physically and institutionally apart from the sponsor government’s international network, in recognition that close association with government can undermine efforts to build trust. This is the reason both China and Russia have recently announced moves to make respectively the Confucius Institute and Russkiy Mir Foundation independent bodies. However, the delivery model can also vary according to local legal requirements and other factors in host countries, in some places for example the British Council operates out of the UK Embassy as part of the UK’s diplomatic mission.

Some countries, notably France and Germany, work through a range of discrete bodies with each institution having its own unique mission in higher education, language promotion, schools, the arts or the curation of intercultural dialogues. Governance and financial arrangements also vary considerably but commonly each organisation is sponsored by the Ministry for Foreign Affairs.

While most countries take an arms-length, mixed economy approach, the US State Department’s Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA) is managed in-house and is 100 per cent state funded. Financial data on China and Russia is limited but the publicly available financial information for the Russkiy Mir Foundation and the Confucius Institute has allowed academics to estimate a 50/50 ratio of state to private income. France is similarly 50/50. Germany is closer to 60/40 with the UK the real outlier – in 2019/20 just 15 per cent of the British Council’s income came from government.

In considering the different models, the team at ICR found the optimal formula for success in terms of reputation, resilience and sustainability is a focused, agile, flexible, mixed economy model where public funds form the core support, but activities are supported through partnerships and income generation where that is seen as a means to an end, and not an end in itself. Stability, clear lines of governance and a commitment to working long-term are vital to the successful building of trust and robust, influential international networks. The research team found that across all the different agencies they considered there is certainly room for greater investment in digital engagement and for data gathering and analysis to inform states’ soft power strategies. The knowledge economy is the battle ground of the future.

Digital technologies offer cultural relations institutions new opportunities for engaging very large audiences but they also bring new challenges. The ICR report highlights that there is a real risk that the emphasis – and indeed dependence – upon language teaching for cultural relations institutions is a hostage to technological advances that allow for instantaneous translation.

Governments recognise that cultural relations play a vital role in creating the conditions for cooperation. By engaging within the “safe spaces” of culture, science and education states build the trust, confidence, familiarity and mutual understanding that make it far easier to positively engage in more challenging and sensitive areas of international relations like security, trade and global issues like climate change. Cultural relations cannot guarantee a

good outcome from negotiations, but they do help create an environment conducive for constructive dialogue.

By working on long term relationship building at arms-length through established networks, cultural relations organisations like the British Council have a significant, positive impact on perceptions of their sponsoring state. Analysis by Ipsos MORI has found that 75% of people who had been involved in a British Council programme said they trust the UK, compared with 64% who had been involved in a non-British Council cultural relations activity, and 49% who had never been involved in a UK cultural relations activity.

The overall attractiveness of the UK for people who have participated in cultural relations is +16% higher than those who have not. When we compare those that are aware of the British Council and those that are not, our research finds that the number of respondents saying they intend to study and do business/trade in the UK is more than doubled (from 8% to 20%, and from 10% to 24%, respectively).

The global presence of international cultural relations institutions

Against the backdrop of global power shifts, growing competition between nations and challenges to the international rules-based system, major changes are taking place in the soft power landscape globally. One of the clearest indicators of this is the expanding presence and impact of states' official bodies for cultural and educational exchange.

The ICR research reveals that China now has 641 of its **Confucius Institutes** in operation, a 100 per cent increase from the 320 that were operational in 2013. However, this figure is dwarfed by the total number of French operations internationally. The combined global footprint of the **Institut français**, **Campus France**, **AEFE** (Agence pour l'enseignement français à l'étranger) and the **Alliance française** totals 1622 operations globally, giving France many more individual centres around the world than China. However, China has the greater geographic reach covering 196 countries and territories to France's 164, giving it the broadest coverage of all the countries surveyed.

The **ECA** fosters mutual understanding between the people of the United States and the people of other countries around the world. It is responsible for the United States cultural exchange programs, including the Fulbright Programme and International Visitor Leadership Programme. In terms of networks it has 394 offices operating in 167 countries.

The networks of Germany and the UK are similar in both size and geographical coverage, though quite different in structure. Like France, the Federal Government of Germany operates several discrete international cultural institutes. Through the **Goethe-Institut** and the **Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst** (DAAD), Germany has 229 offices in 110 countries. A third body, the **Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen** (ifa), runs exhibitions and other projects around the world but does not maintain a permanent on the ground presence outside of the Federal Republic.

With a total of 214 the British Council has a somewhat smaller number of international operations than Germany but is slightly ahead on the number of countries in which it is based with a total of 114. The UK is notable among leading European states in having a

single, portmanteau organisation covering culture, language promotion, scholarships and education.

Other G20 states have significantly smaller networks. For example, the [Japan Foundation](#) has 30 offices globally, there are 24 [Brazilian Cultural Centres](#) and 57 [Indian Cultural Centres](#).

It is worth considering that while the raw data on the number of offices and geographic coverage of any individual cultural relations institution can be impressive, they can also be deceptive. Some of these operations are modest in size with only very few staff and limited scope for public engagement while others can have tens or even hundreds of staff in country with extensive networks capable of reaching thousands of people. Nevertheless, the data does serve as a useful proxy for the priorities and intent of different countries.

The greatest concentration of cultural institutes is in the Americas with a total of 601 offices – 91 of which are Confucius Institutes in the United States. Europe comes in second with 560 cultural institutes. Significantly, there are 33 Confucius Institutes in the UK, more than double the 13 recorded in 2013 and higher than any other European state. There's a total of 400 cultural relations institutes across Asia and Oceania. Africa hosts 122.

With 217 institutes on its soil, the USA hosts the most of any single state. Brazil is second with 109, though fully 37 of these are branches of the Alliance française which has a significant presence throughout Latin America. Perhaps surprisingly while maintaining the largest international network measured by geography, China itself hosts only 47 foreign institutes, 21 of which are French (14 branches of the Alliance française, six offices of Campus France and the Institut français in Beijing).

The significant presence of the Confucius Institutes in the UK and USA is not only a reflection of the relative importance of these two Permanent Members of the Security Council to China. Confucius Institutes are predominantly campus-based and so can engage not only domestic students but also the very large numbers of international students – including those from China itself - that attend US and UK universities.

The distribution of the different networks of international cultural relations institutions is a useful guide to where states are trying to grow their influence. Or more accurately where they have sought to grow their influence. The global distribution of the institutes of European countries for examples owe much to history with the distribution of the operations of the French and British in Africa very much a reflection of a colonial past.

Where China has rolled out a massive global operation in a very short period of time that serves as a very useful guide to the current priorities of the Chinese state, there have been very few new additions to the networks of the British Council and the other European institutes in the twenty first century. Instead it is necessary to look at patterns of investment in specific programmes like cultural seasons to understand sponsor states current geopolitical priorities, for example [France's Africa 2020 season](#) that...

... is dedicated to the 54 states of the African continent. This off-the-beaten-track cultural season has been viewed from the perspective of the great challenges of the 21st century. It... is a multidisciplinary project focusing on innovation in the arts,

science, technology, entrepreneurship and the economy. It will address education in a cross-cutting way and aims to highlight women in all sectors of activity and to target youth as a priority.

The programmes and networks of the international cultural relations institutes of China, France, the UK and other leading powers in the soft power space are a helpful proxy for identifying their geopolitical priorities. The fact that so many states are investing significantly in developing their global platforms demonstrates how vital they are seen to be to the success of their sponsoring states in the twenty first century.

If it is to avoid being overtaken, the UK will need to match its ambitious plans for Naval expansion and cyber defence with investment in the international networks and institutions that build trust to levels similar to its international competitors.

Competition and collaboration

The ICR research highlights the importance of collaboration in the fostering of trust and building of networks. International competition is the key driver of government investment in soft power and cultural relations institutions. These are state sponsored interventions designed to advance the national interest. However, the research team found that in many areas of their work there is very little direct competition between different international cultural relations institutions, instead cooperation between the agencies of different states is the norm.

These are institutions that have a common interest in building networks, knowledge and shared understanding. Partnerships between bodies to facilitate bilateral exchanges or to maximise impact in other international contexts are common. For example, the **German American Partnership Programme** (GAPP) between the Goethe-Institut and the US Department of State or the partnership between the Swedish Institute and the British Council in the **Western Balkans**.

The exception to this collaborative approach is in the highly contested market in international higher education where different states seek to maximise inward flows of students, researchers and scientists to their universities through their cultural relations institutions.

In summarising their findings the research team at ICR note that states commonly operate...

... a range of public policy-driven soft power and cultural relations activities that seek to influence and attract populations in other countries as well as activities that are truly based on supporting engagement and mutuality. This is not a zero-sum game... Countries all say that they wish to promote understanding, share knowledge, and encourage cooperation because they recognise the reputational benefits of doing so. It is important for states to be seen to be cooperating for the common good.

By promoting cultural and educational exchanges, international cultural relations institutions play a key role in demonstrating that their sponsor state is outward looking,

engaged, trustworthy and committed to working constructively with other international actors for the common good.

A force for good

A country's security, prosperity and influence all come from a combination of hard power capability - a strong, modern military, a robust and open economy and a significant aid programme - and the attraction, trust, familiarity and the resulting willingness to collaborate that comes from a state's soft power. Together they underpin the UK's international credibility and capacity to affect change.

In an increasingly complex, multipolar world with rising powers seeking to increase their regional and global influence, the UK's soft power grows ever more important to its security and prosperity, whether that's persuading other countries to take multilateral action in a humanitarian crisis, agreeing to collective targets for reducing carbon emissions, or deterring rivals from hostile acts.

The UK is a world-leader in soft power, a soft power superpower, but it is very much first amongst equals. To retain its comparative advantage, and the economic and geostrategic benefits that flow from that status, the UK will need to reinforce perceptions that it is a responsible global actor and a force for good in the world. That means investing in its global networks, taking an active role in defending the rules based international system, a continued commitment to international development and promoting multilateral action on free trade, climate change, corruption and other global issues.