

Research and Policy Insight

Values And Cooperation – A Cultural Relations Perspective

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Executive summary

The Covid-19 pandemic is the latest in a series of global issues that have highlighted the importance of international cooperation. Our ability to cooperate successfully isn't something which just happens automatically. Values and attitudes play a fundamental role in creating the right conditions for cooperation on shared global challenges. In a complex, globally connected world, effective action rests on relationships and networks that have been built over time on strong foundations of mutual trust, respect and understanding. Drawing on the experience of the international cultural relations sector, new research conducted by LSE Consulting and British Council teams in Malaysia, South Africa and the UK provides useful new insights into the values that are important to people and their priorities for international cooperation at a time of crisis.

Respect and peace emerged as the two most fundamental values across all three populations. When asked to choose between different values, Malaysian respondents were more conservative, multicultural, and respectful of religion. In South Africa, there was a preference for more universalist values over diverse ones, while the UK responses were more favourable to liberal and secular values. The environment and the economy were identified as top priorities for international cooperation in all three countries. Asked about the conditions required for effective international cooperation, the need for more tolerance of what is different was the most popular response.

The research provided evidence to show that values do enable cultural relations to build trust-based relationships and improve dialogue and cooperation between nations in an effective way. Using the work of the British Council as a case study, the research showed that cultural institutions are uniquely associated with the values of open societies - open-mindedness, equality, tolerance and diversity - in all three countries, and that people expect them to demonstrate, uphold and lead on these values in their actions and behaviours. The research also pointed to a strong alignment between the values of the British Council's staff, stakeholders and programme users relative to the rest of the population. This suggests that shared values play a significant role in the attractiveness and trust that cultural institutions enjoy within different societies.

Context sensitivity is vital for cultural relations organisations and international cooperation more broadly. The research showed that these organisations gained trust when they were seen as being respectful, open-minded and valuing difference in their engagement with local cultures, communities and organisations. Initiatives had greater reach if they made clear that they are not about creating 'the same world everywhere' but about uniting difference around a shared goal.

The British Council was seen as well-placed to act as a broker of dialogue and exchange among diverse groups, especially on complex and sensitive topics such as colonial history, climate change, gender rights and racism. The research suggested that cultural relations institutions like the British Council needed to project a clear external image about their purpose,

scope of work and relationship with government in order to truly fulfil their values leadership potential. There is also potential to broadening the reach of these organisation's work to wider segments of the population by aligning more closely with their values priorities.

The British Council has identified a number of implications for itself and other cultural institutions:

- New insights on values can help cultural relations institutions to strengthen evidence-based approaches to building connections, understanding and trust internationally.
- Cultural institutions are uniquely positioned to support cooperation on shared global challenges by convening dialogue among their diverse networks.
- Research organisations can form effective partnerships with cultural institutions to generate innovative new research on global values and soft power.
- Cultural institutions represent the values of open societies and should embed these systematically at the heart of their purpose, strategy and programming.

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic is the latest in a series of global issues that have highlighted the importance of international cooperation. In today's interconnected world, every big issue, from climate change to development and technology, requires international collaboration bringing together a wide range of actors, from government and business to the education and research sector and civil society. Our modern world is built on technology and solutions that we have developed based on our ability to communicate with others, and to learn from them and work with them – or, in other words, our culture.

Our ability to cooperate successfully isn't something which just happens automatically. It's based on relationships and networks that have been built over time on strong foundations of mutual trust, respect and understanding. Values and attitudes play a fundamental role in creating the right conditions for cooperation, especially when taking place between people with diverse backgrounds and perspectives. People will be more favourably disposed towards working with another country, organisation or person when they feel that they have values (rather than just interests) in common. And, in situations where values differ, an understanding and appreciation of those differences can help enable collaboration.

The power of example is crucial, too. How far a person, institution or country appears to behave in line with their professed values will affect the level of others' trust in them. Values are an important component of the concept of 'soft power' – the ability to influence and persuade through your power of attraction rather than coercion – developed by international relations scholar Joseph S Nye¹. International engagement provides a window on the culture and values of other societies. The UK's recent Integrated Review has underlined the central role of values in guiding a nation's foreign policy, and in the increased importance of upholding the values of open societies in a more contested and complex world.

The field of international cultural relations is grounded in the fundamental values of open societies, notably equality, mutuality, openness and tolerance. International polling has shown the universal appeal of these values². This is also evident in the British Council's own work. As an international organisation working in arts and culture, education and the English language in over 100 countries for the past 70 years, it has long experience of how engaging with values effectively can build the trust, understanding and connections upon which effective cooperation rests. As cultural relations practitioners, the ability to identify shared values and appreciate difference is part of the organisation's everyday work building relationships with its staff, stakeholders and programme users. It enables it to fulfil its mission of building connections, understanding and trust between people in the UK and other countries.

Its new research programme, The Big Conversation, aims to capture that knowledge to help all those working in international engagement foster the dialogue and cooperation necessary

¹ Joseph S Nye Jr, outlined values as a key component of a country's soft power in an [article](#) for *Foreign Policy* in 1990.

² [Article](#) on international soft power survey carried out by IpsosMORI for the British Council, June 2020.

for addressing today's global challenges. It also aims to generate insight which can be used to develop new evidence-based approaches to building trust-based relationships and partnerships – a task that lies at the heart of international cultural relations.

As the world emerges slowly from the pandemic, cooperation both within and between countries will be essential to a successful recovery. While cultural relations and soft power do not provide solutions in and of themselves, this research hopes to shed light on how we can build those relationships that are critical to international collaboration and to the many other opportunities and challenges that face our world.

Context

In March 2020, the British Council commissioned LSE Consulting to develop and pilot a new research model to help generate rigorous new insight into how cultural relations organisations engage with values and the role this plays in their ability to foster dialogue and cooperation between and within countries. It focused on case studies from the work of the British Council in three countries: Malaysia, South Africa and the UK. Working together with staff through an 'action research' approach, the LSE Consulting team carried out online research comprising representative surveys of the national population, interviews with staff and stakeholders and focus groups of programme participants.

The research looked at a range of questions to help understand the role that values play in the building of trust-based relationships. This included how cultural relations organisations can better understand social/cultural values; which values these organisations share with different parts of the societies they work in; how the values of cultural relations organisations are perceived by the societies they operate in; which values are seen as being best placed to uphold; and how staff understand and apply values in their day-to-day work.

The findings provide valuable insight into how cultural relations institutions build and sustain networks in the countries they work in. The rigorous approach of the LSE Consulting team provides an important contribution to the development of more scientific, evidence-based approaches to the theory, practice and evaluation of international cultural relations. The research also provides important insights into the values and attitudes of people in Malaysia, South Africa and the UK.

The fieldwork coincided with the first few months of the global pandemic (June-August), when many countries were in the early stages of the crisis, with rising hospitalisations, lockdowns and border closures, and national governments competing for PPE, ventilators and other scarce medical resources. The research therefore provides a unique snapshot of the impact of a global emergency on people's values and priorities, and on their attitudes towards international cooperation.

Key research findings

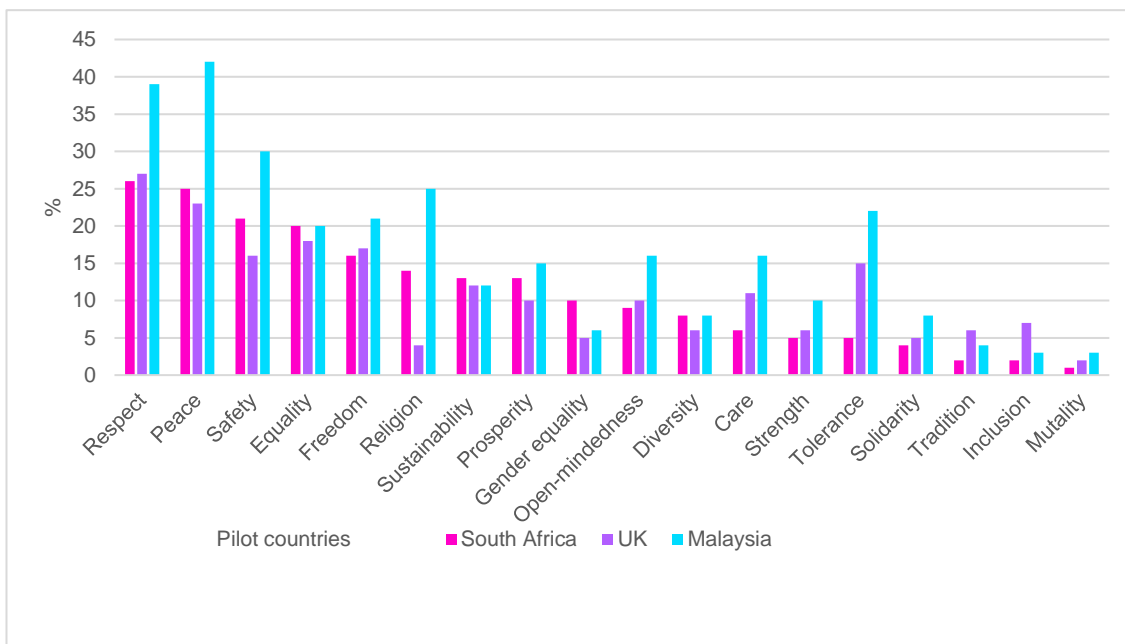
The following pages highlight some of the key findings from the research for those working to support international cooperation and cultural relations.

Respect and peace are the most important values

Respect and peace emerged as the two most fundamental values for the populations surveyed in all three countries. They were the most popular values in a question asking about the values to base a new nation on. Other values that respondents considered important included safety, equality, freedom, religion and tolerance.

There were more similarities than differences in the values choices of the three populations surveyed. Responses were particularly unified in a question which asked people to choose between pictures representing two competing values. Overwhelmingly, over 4 in 5 chose a picture of order over chaos, while over two-thirds prioritised one showing love above another showing science.

Figure 1. Most desired values for the foundation of a new country



The survey revealed more differences between the three countries when it asked people to make a choice between different competing values in real life contexts. One of the most significant differences was over religion. Out of the three countries, the values choices made by Malaysians were more conservative, multicultural, and respectful of religion than in the UK and South Africa. For example, people there appeared more favourable to limiting freedom of speech where it risks leading to religious offence (61-27) or public disorder (56-34). While

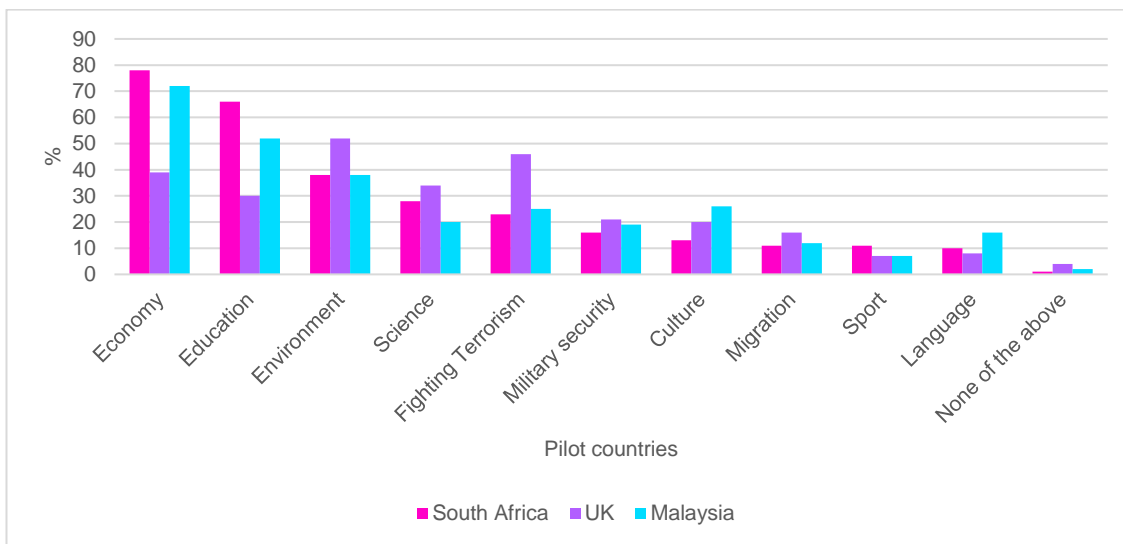
religion was generally seen as important and positive in Malaysia, it was significantly less so in South Africa and openly rejected in the UK.

In South Africa, there was a preference for more universalist values over diverse ones. Respondents showed a desire to protect gender equality when that conflicts with diverging traditions, and universal benefits over national ones. The UK responses were more favourable to liberal and secular values than in the ones in South Africa and Malaysia. A relatively clear majority emerged on many issues in favour of “humanist” values over “multicultural” solutions. However, UK respondents were much more evenly balanced between more protective and more liberal approaches when it came to issues such as unemployment and personal freedoms.

Education, the economy and the environment are top priorities for international cooperation

Education, the economy and the environment were identified as one of the top priorities for international cooperation in all the countries surveyed. However, there were some clear differences over their order and importance. The economy was the top priority issue by some distance in Malaysia and South Africa (selected by 72% and 78% of those surveyed respectively). Education came in second place in both countries (selected by 52% and 66% respectively), with environment some way behind in third place (38% in both countries). This contrasts with the UK where the environment was the top priority issue (52%) followed by terrorism (46%) and the economy (39%).

Figure 2. Most important areas of cooperation with the rest of the world



The survey showed significant desire for international cooperation in the field of cultural relations. Education, science and to a lesser extent culture were identified as important issues for cooperation. Young people in particular were more likely to prioritise education and culture in their responses. In Malaysia, for example, young people were most focused on education and language. Culture, sport, and migration were the top priorities for young citizens in South Africa, and for young British people their priorities were more focused on education and culture.

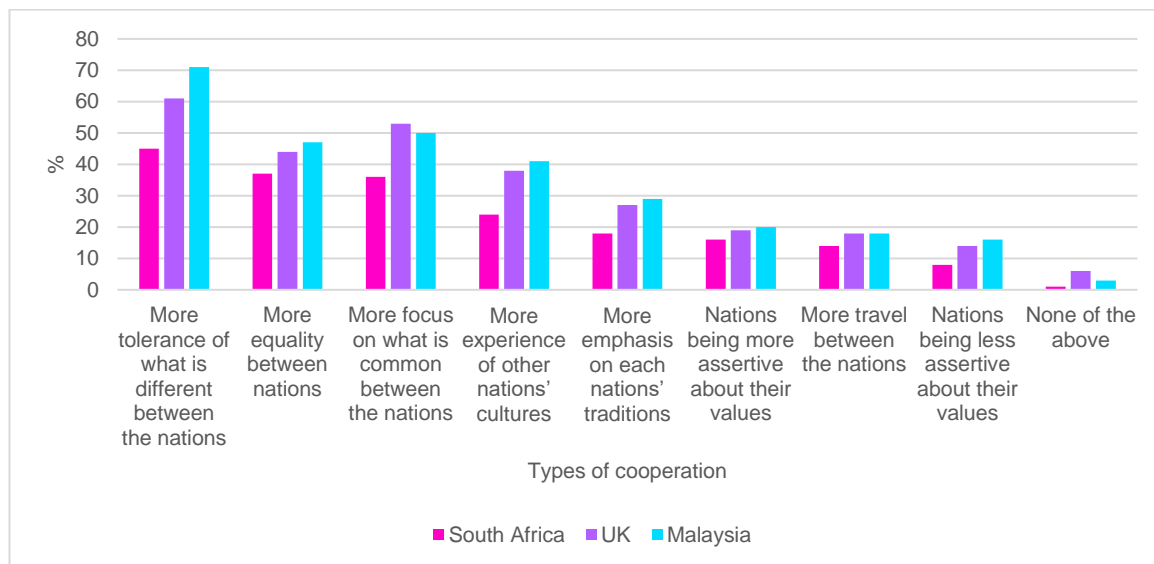
Looking at the conditions required for effective international cooperation, the need for more tolerance of what is different was the most popular response in the survey of the national populations. Other factors they identified were the need for more tolerance, more focus on what countries have in common, more equality, and more experience of other cultures. One difference that emerged was over whether values should be asserted less or more in order to improve international cooperation. In Malaysia and South Africa, a larger proportion of respondents favoured being more assertive, whereas in the UK more people preferred being less assertive about values.

Valuing difference is seen as a key condition for international cooperation

The need to appreciate difference in order to cooperate effectively was echoed in the interviews and focus groups with British Council staff, stakeholders and programme participants. Values such as diversity, open-mindedness, and sensitivity to local cultures and issues were highlighted.

The overarching priority for successful international cooperation was seen as being not necessarily what countries have in common, but instead adopting an approach which is both open to and values differences. Those interviewed saw this as key to both enabling international cooperation and to improving its quality by leading to more genuine and mutually beneficial relationships. This emphasis on respecting difference appeared to be linked to the value of respect which emerged so strongly in the surveys of the national populations.

Figure 3. Most important criteria for better cooperation between nations



Mutuality and open-mindedness, both core values of the cultural relations approach to cooperation, were strong themes in this section of the research. Adopting an approach which places more emphasis on mutual, two-way exchange was regarded as an important route to building trust. Taking differences rather than commonalities as a starting point, interviewees said, would enable a genuine two-way learning process to occur and avoid perceptions of top-

down changes or instrumentalist agendas being imposed by more powerful countries or organisations. It was also seen as helping understand how to build and strengthen networks and partnerships across diverse national contexts.

Context sensitivity was also stressed as a key condition for cooperation. International organisations were most effective at enabling cooperation when they focused on learning about the environment they were operating in and sought to make their activities relevant and meaningful to local priorities. Participants spoke of 'listening to learn rather than to fix', sharing best practice for mutual learning, and being aware of how 'sameness' might be expressed in different ways in different contexts.

The Covid-19 pandemic and attitudes towards international cooperation

The Covid-19 pandemic has reinforced the need for international cooperation, but also placed many new barriers in the way of it. The impact of the global emergency on people's values and attitudes to international cooperation was a strong theme throughout the research.

In a context of uncertainty, distress and fear in face of the public health crisis, values of compliance, self-responsibility and adaptability were prominent. The crisis also seems to have heightened a sense of community both locally and globally as people simultaneously experienced a shared threat and challenge. In the research, adaptability, creativity and sustainability were identified as key values for overcoming the challenges and enabling cooperation on the recovery from Covid-19.

Key challenges to international cooperation in the aftermath of the crisis were highlighted by cultural relations professionals. The impact of travel restrictions on face-to-face engagement and the shift to more digital interaction was a particular theme, with participants considering how the type of interactions and collaboration that international cooperation rests on could be reproduced in a future where digital models are more prevalent.

However, the pandemic was also seen as an opportunity for organisations to re-evaluate their missions and increase their relevance to the post-pandemic world. Increased use of digital platforms was seen as a way of bringing together a more diverse range of voices as well as increasing sustainability in both financial and environmental terms.

Cultural institutions are seen as representing the values of open societies

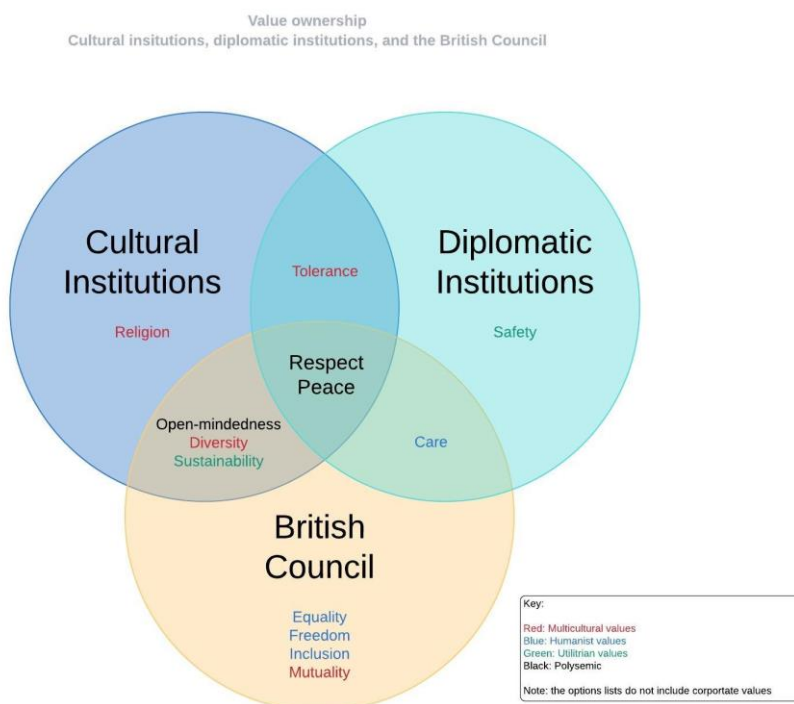
Understanding how to build relationships that enable cooperation in international cultural relations was a particular focus of the research. The theory and practice of intercultural dialogue is grounded in specific values connected to open societies, notably equality, mutuality, openness and tolerance. The research provided evidence to show that these values do enable cultural relations to build trust-based relationships and improve dialogue and cooperation between nations in an effective way. They were continuously emphasised as important for fostering international cooperation and exchange, and for allowing for cultural organisations, such as the British Council, to operate successfully across a wide range of countries. In the

qualitative data, values were discussed as ‘guiding principles for behaviour’ and as derived from the agenda/mission of an organisation.

The research also revealed which values people want different types of institutions to champion in their work. The concept of ‘values ownership’ - developed by the LSE Consulting team for this project - tests the alignment between the values that particular institutions want to support and the values of the people and societies that they work with. It also explores the values which people think these institutions could or should embody. This model helps identify values which would be most helpful for institutions to emphasise in their work in order to improve dialogue and collaboration with the societies they work in.

The values ownership model compared the values associated with three sets of institutions: diplomatic institutions, cultural institutions in general and the British Council. Respect emerged again in the survey as the value identified as most important for all these institutions to uphold. However, there were some values which were associated specifically with one institution and not the others, representing a ‘values niche’ or values which those institutions are seen as having a distinctive voice on.

Figure 4. Values ownership model and cultural institutions’ value niche:



- **Cultural institutions.** Open-mindedness, equality, tolerance and, to a lesser degree, diversity were seen as more important values for cultural institutions in all three countries. Respondents in Malaysia placed more emphasis on respect and peace for cultural institutions than the other countries, while those in the UK stressed inclusion

and those in South Africa stressed gender equality as a more prominent value for cultural institutions to champion.

- **Diplomatic institutions.** Respect, peace and safety are the values which survey respondents see as more important values for diplomatic institutions than for cultural ones. This comes at the expense of values such as diversity, which are not seen as crucial by respondents in this context. It should be noted that several values, such as strength, prosperity, tradition, and solidarity, are not prominently mentioned in the context of either institution.
- **British Council.** The values uniquely associated with the British Council and not with other institutions by survey respondents were humanist values of equality, freedom and inclusion. Equality in particular emerged as a core value, cited by 21% of respondents in Malaysia, 20% in South Africa, and 18% in the UK.

Cultural institutions work with people with similar values

When asking participants about the values which they thought the British Council should prioritise, the research highlighted some alignment between the British Council's staff, stakeholders and programme users. There were more significant differences between these groups and the national populations surveyed in each country.

- In Malaysia, there was a much stronger emphasis on diversity and utilitarian values such as sustainability among staff, stakeholders and programme participants, than the general population.
- In South Africa, there is a significant gap between the values choices of each of the groups. In particular, there was no overlap between the population's top choices of respect, equality and peace and that of British Council staff (mutuality, diversity and inclusion).
- In the UK, the groups agreed on open-mindedness as one of the top values for the British Council, but otherwise favoured different values. The population emphasised respect and equality, while staff and stakeholders favoured diversity and mutuality.

This may suggest that the British Council and other cultural institutions work with like-minded people with similar educational and social backgrounds and international outlooks, and that this broader alignment in values contributes to the effectiveness of their partnerships and collaboration. It also signals that there is potential for broadening the reach of these organisation's work to wider segments of the population.

Cultural institutions are well placed to facilitate dialogue and exchange

The findings also suggest that national populations expect the British Council and other cultural institutions to represent the values of their country's own cultural tradition. There was a perception among stakeholders that the British Council was well-placed to act as a broker of dialogue and exchange among diverse groups, thanks to its rich networks and trusted position

around the world. This was also reflected among staff who felt that the organisation could and should use this position to convene dialogue on colonial history and other sensitive topics, such as climate change, gender rights and racism. Yet, the research suggested that any values-led activities should be grounded in mutuality, open-mindedness and respect the local context. As one participant put it,

“It’s about walking the talk and if we talk about trust and diversity and we have to listen, before we talk, and we have to hear what their values are before we talk about ours, so that would be my main thing.”

Greater clarity of image will help build trust with local communities

The research also suggested that aspects of the British Council’s external image could hold it back when it comes to fulfilling its values leadership potential. In the stakeholder and staff interviews and focus group discussion, participants noted that while those who work directly with the organisation had a positive image of it, there was a lack of awareness and confusion over the organisation’s work among local communities. The wide scope of its work – from commercially driven-English and exams business to non-profit development activities – was seen as creating a ‘split’ between business and cultural/moral values in the different sections of the organisation.

Perceptions of the organisation’s relationship with the UK government were seen as sometimes overshadowing its work. Staff in particular attributed suspicions sometimes directed at the organisation to a misperception that the British Council worked directly for the government. In South Africa, the legacy of British colonialism and the Apartheid era was seen as an issue that the British Council needed to address. One interviewee described this history as “a wound that never really heals” and which would continue to have a negative impact on how the British Council and its work is perceived among the local population. In the UK, staff were concerned that UK politics tended to reflect badly on the organisation, pointing to Brexit which they perceived as a development which had damaged the country’s reputation for openness to international cooperation and exchange.

British Council view on research implications

The research demonstrates the importance that values play in the work of cultural institutions and how this work, in turn, supports the development of the trust-based relationships and networks required to enable effective international cooperation in the fields of culture and education. The British Council has identified a number of implications for itself and other cultural institutions.

New insights on values can help cultural relations institutions to strengthen evidence-based approaches to building connections, understanding and trust internationally

The research findings help advance thinking about how an international cultural relation achieves its core mission of building connections, understanding and trust between countries.

The field has long lacked a unified empirical approach to the theory, practice and evaluation of cultural relations – the rigorous research carried out by the LSE Consulting team makes a significant contribution to filling that gap.

There are a number of specific implications for the British Council and other international cultural relations institutions:

- The values, attitudes and behaviours that cultural organisations seek to emphasise in their strategy, communications and programming are important for motivating staff and building trust and attraction among stakeholders and local populations.
- Context sensitivity is vital for cultural relations organisations. Their success depends upon being seen as respectful, open-minded and valuing difference in their engagement with local cultures, communities and organisations.
- Mutuality in practice involves a readiness to listen, learn from and adapt to local contexts, and avoiding top-down, one-sided interventions.
- Ambiguity over the purpose and role of an organisation can be a barrier to building trust-based relationships. Cultural relations organisations can improve their effectiveness by promoting a more unified external image and providing greater clarity on the relationship with home governments.
- In some post-colonial contexts, directly addressing colonial history and focusing on supporting local goals rather than those of the institution's country could help improve trust and understanding.
- Cultural institutions have the potential to reach out to new sectors of society by emphasising their values priorities; however, this may reduce its appeal to staff and existing users.
- Academics and practitioners should draw on the findings and methodology to inform the development of systematic approaches to the practice of international cultural relations, specifically on context sensitivity, intercultural dialogue and the measurement of social capital.

Cultural institutions are well-positioned to support cooperation on shared global challenges by convening dialogue among the diverse groups in their networks.

The Big Conversation pilot has provided useful new insights into the role that values, attitudes and behaviours play in enabling effective dialogue and understanding on how to address shared global challenges. In a context where NGOs and civil society are an increasingly important component of multilateral action on a range of global initiatives, international cultural institutions with a global presence like the British Council have a particular contribution to make through the established networks of leaders and young people that they connect with across different levels of society.

There are a number of specific implications for the British Council and other international cultural relations institutions:

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- Strengthen cooperation on global issues such as education, the economy and climate change by bringing together diverse stakeholders from a range of countries, with a focus on exploring the different values-led and cultural perspectives on the issue.
 - Develop deliberative dialogue programmes grounded in intercultural dialogue principles and evidence-led approaches, to strengthen civic education and enable more inclusive and effective discussions on complex and difficult issues.
 - Cultural institutions have an opportunity to take on a values leadership role on issues that align with their core values. However, this needs to be done in a way that is sensitive to the local context and rooted in values of mutuality, equality and open-mindedness.
 - Cultural institutions and other organisations seeking to improve the conditions for cooperation should adopt an approach which is both open to and values difference, rather than one which focuses solely on what partners have in common.
 - International cooperation initiatives can have greater reach if they make clear that they are not about creating ‘the same world everywhere’ but about uniting difference around a shared goal.

Research organisations can form effective partnerships with cultural institutions to generate innovative new research on global values and soft power

The Big Conversation pilot was intended to explore the potential for an ongoing research programme on global values and attitudes. By combining a rigorous academic research method with the large global networks and cultural insight of the British Council, The Big Conversation sought to generate innovative new knowledge that would be useful for the wider research community looking to understand global social trends.

There are a number of specific implications for the British Council and other international cultural relations institutions:

- Cultural institutions can act as useful research partners for social researchers; their cultural insight and access to local networks can help highlight underreported trends, strengthen cross-country comparison work, and deepen academic knowledge of non-Western societies.
- Specific areas worthy of further research include understanding more about intergenerational values differences, metropolitan vs regional differences and the values and attitudes of young people and the middle classes, particularly in emerging economies.
- Longitudinal, global comparative research which explores sub-national differences would add the most value to the world of social research – however, this would require significant financial investment and long-term commitment that is beyond the scope of one single cultural relations institution.

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- Cultural relations institutions should consider partnering with each other to produce an ongoing research programme of this nature.
 - Insight into values preferences can strengthen existing research into the literature on soft power and the contribution of values to a country's international influence and attraction.

Conclusion

Greater theoretical and empirical knowledge of values presents a significant opportunity to improve the theory and practice of international cultural relations as well as advance understanding of the process of creating the conditions for cooperation. The research suggests that international engagement can be strengthened when organisations recognise the differences as well as similarities between different countries, and when they emphasise the values which are associated uniquely with their organisation and cultural tradition.

Rigorous values research provides a vital resource for strategy, programming and evaluation for cultural relations bodies, particularly for an organisation such as the British Council that champions values of equality, diversity, inclusion and tolerance in countries with varied and complex sets of values. The British Council will now consider the learning from the pilot and examine how it can embed the learning from this pilot into its future strategy, programming and practice, and use its new knowledge to strengthen its values leadership role and convene discussions on improving the conditions for cooperation on shared global challenges.

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