



THE LONDON SCHOOL
OF ECONOMICS AND
POLITICAL SCIENCE ■



The Big Conversation Research Pilot

Final Report

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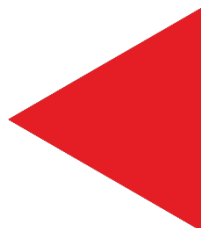
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Introduction

The British Council builds connections, understanding and trust between people in the United Kingdom and other countries through arts and culture, education, and the English language. It aims to foster cross-national dialogue, understanding and cooperation, through creating opportunities for intercultural exchange. Last year marked the start of a 5-year strategy for the British Council to strengthen its position as a leader in the fields of Arts and Culture, Education, and English. An integral aspect of this strategy is to engage in research and shape its work around evidence-based solutions.

In this context, the British Council commissioned the LSE research team to conduct a Pilot to launch the Big Conversation project, using cutting-edge research to gain a better understanding of values and meta-values within and across countries and populations.

Building on the foundations outlined in the Scoping Study, we identified that there was scope for advancing the research on values to promote cooperative relationships across nationalities and cultures, with a focus on interactions between language, inclusiveness and cross-culturalism.

Our approach aims to maximise the comparative advantages of the British Council vis a vis other stakeholders. These include, on the one hand, its worldwide presence and manpower, and on the other hand, its previous corporate values, the intercultural dialogue values of mutuality, respect, tolerance, equality, diversity and inclusion. These are in themselves examples of meta-values that, if promoted through facilitated spaces for deliberation, are expected to enable cross-cultural engagement. This is precisely one of the goals of our proposed approach: test whether the meta-values promoted by the British Council improve deliberation and cooperation among different groups and, if so, how and under what conditions.

Furthermore, the study coincided with the unique eruption of the COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic, and we have aimed to adapt both the practicalities of our fieldwork and the analytical core of our research plan to this new global threat and disruption facing the world.

Finally, it needs to be emphasised that this is a pilot, intending to test various iterations of research in view of inferring the best route for future upscaling of the work across worldwide countries and contexts. In that sense, we used a flexible analytical framework in order to allow for both elements of comparison but also leave space for the possible expression of alternative conceptions of values or value prioritisation. This also meant maintaining a rather broad model of how values might cluster together around such conception as business values, multicultural values, humanist moral values, and utilitarian values.

The British Council's internal values, mission and external perceptions will constrain what can be a coherent and effective set of values that can be articulated and championed by the British Council, maximising their positive impact according to specific contexts. Thus, our research design maintains a multiple focus on a) citizens values, b) British Council's values and mission, c) perceptions of the British Council's mission and moral image, and d) strategic capacity, soft power, and cultural diplomacy.

Executive Summary

- One of the most important values across the survey is the emphasis placed on respect, which features as one of the most prominent values for nations, cultural and diplomatic institutions as well as the British Council. Whilst respect remains by far the main value respondents want the British Council to identify with, and peace is important, very unique to the British Council is the primary importance of equality as a core value. It is cited by 21% of respondents in Malaysia, 20% in South Africa and 18% in the United Kingdom.
- Among values which are generally not associated with what respondents want to see the British Council embody, we note the weakness of religion, gender equality, tradition, and even prosperity and sustainability, among others. Those values may, in some cases, be seen as important by respondents in general, but they are not the values that citizens wish the British Council to put at the heart of its identity.
- The survey identified key conditions important for international cooperation across the three countries. These included: the need for more tolerance (the top answer everywhere, cited by 45% of respondents in South Africa, 61% in the UK and 71% in Malaysia), more focus on what countries have in common (notably highlighted by 50% of Malaysian respondents and 53% of British ones), more equality, and more experience of other cultures.
- When it comes to areas of priority for international cooperation, there is more diversity across the three countries which seems to reflect areas of cooperation that link to country vulnerabilities; In South Africa and Malaysia, the most important area for international cooperation is seen by far to be the economy, followed by education. By contrast, in the UK, the two most important areas are the environment and the fight against terrorism.
- In the context of the qualitative findings, we see an emphasis on valuing difference through respect, open-mindedness, sensitivity and understanding of cultural contexts as well as a willingness to learn and adapt to the practices of others. This was seen as not only important in 'normal' times, but also enabling successful international cooperation in times of crisis. In particular, by being open-minded, agile and flexible, the British Council was seen as in a unique position to take the current pandemic and use it as a moment of reflection and rejuvenation. When considering the role of shared values in fostering positive international cooperation, whether in times of crisis or not, it is crucial to be open, respectful and agile in order to enable both the work of the organisation to remain relevant but also meaningful.
- Comparing the three countries for the focus groups that used the same framing (values in contexts of threat) we find that Malaysia deviates somewhat from the UK and South Africa in deliberative quality. While the UK and South Africa show more similar patterns, the lower numbers in Malaysia (on expressions of opinions and presence of agreement) seem to indicate less need to expand or explain opinions of what values are needed and why in contexts of threat, which might indicate a broader shared (or assumed) consensus within the culture itself, and thus less of a need to elaborate on opinions to justify them.
- The COVID-19 pandemic has posed challenges but has also opened opportunities for international cooperation and cultural relations. There were concerns in the sector on how to embed values in organisational practice at a time of financial difficulty. Building trust and meaningful relationships and guaranteeing equal access, key for cultural relations, in an era of digitalisation of person-to-person interactions was also perceived as highly challenging. However, the pandemic was also seen as an opportunity to take ownership of values, such as sustainability, that could help people come together in times of shared global threats.

1. Theoretical Framework and Scope

1.1 Purpose of the project

The Big Conversation Research Pilot project aims to understand how the British Council can use values to optimise their link to existing and potentially expanding groups of users and optimise the quality of its dialogue and communication with users and populations, its global influence and soft power across its network and types of activities (including cultural, scientific, linguistic, etc.).

The British Council will use the pilot to convene research and dialogue on shared values, advance wider understanding of the role of values in international cooperation, as well as develop new evidence-based approaches which can enhance trust and understanding between different people, leading to more effective cooperation on shared global challenges.

The Pilot's core activities include the design, implementation and evaluation of the methodological approach for research activities that can be deployed more widely across our global network, establishing a framework and tools for values engagement in cultural relations activities that can make the work of the British Council more effective, and organising and contributing to roundtable events that can then be replicated in more countries.

1.2 Research Approach

The LSE Team, formed by Professor Michael Bruter, Dr Sarah Harrison, Dr Mathias Koenig-Archibugi, Dr Sandra Obradovic and Ms Elisabet Vives, has developed a model of "value ownership" which matches 1) self-perceptions of values that the British Council cares about and wishes to champion and support; 2) values shared by users and/or populations that are positively connoted and tend to be unifying and integrative (rather than polarising) amongst specific cultural contexts and types of populations and users; and 3) mirror perceptions of positive values that users and populations believe the British Council does, could, and/or should embody.

The Pilot, which has been conducted in the United Kingdom, Malaysia and South Africa, is divided into three components and three constituencies:

- The general population's views gathered via a representative **online survey** conducted by Opinium (subcontractor).
- The internal (British Council Staff) and stakeholder perspectives compiled via **online interviews**, conducted by the LSE Team, to capture their perceptions of the mission of the British Council, and their understanding of personal and organisational values.
- Users of the British Council recruited to participate in **experimental deliberative focus groups**, conducted by the LSE Team, to understand their sense of value priorities and their perception of British Council values, as well as the dynamics of engagement.

All components of the research (survey, focus group, interviews) are fully anonymous.

The outputs of the project will include:

- 1) The design, trialling, and evaluation of a values survey tool
- 2) The design and evaluation of a Framework for engaging values in cultural relations, which will include:
 - A toolkit for strategic decision-makers in the British Council.
 - A toolkit for programme staff.

- The analysis and presentation of results and recommendations through a written report for each pilot country, a final report, a roundtable event in each pilot country and international plenary in the United Kingdom.

1.3 Research Framework Note

1.3.1 Preliminary thoughts

The Big Conversation Research Pilot is conducted on behalf of the British Council with a triple objective: 1) to generate research data useable by multiple internal and external actors, 2) to help the British Council in their strategy to use values to optimise their action, 3) to test a pilot due to be rolled out in other countries in due time.

In many ways, these objectives are very different from those of a traditional research project. This project aims to generate insight from data to support institutional action, not to test a theory and evaluate whether it is upheld by the findings. Our chosen fieldwork approach combines quantitative and qualitative methodologies and integrates action research into the framework.

All of this has significant implications. The first is that if this was a piece of purely academic research, our team would have one research question (strictly conceived – see for example King, Keohane and Verba, 1994¹, Przeworski and Teune, 1970²). In our research, we would always stick to a single research question to ensure project unity, and it being strictly conceived means that all research answers the whole of the research question, and no research addresses anything beyond the research question. In this case, this would be problematic on multiple levels. First, the project has several ambitions which makes it impossible to find a single research question. And secondly, we are thinking in terms of research objectives (i.e. things that we need to achieve) and operational questions guiding them rather than research question (which would be purely “truth finding” rather than focused on use).

Second, the very logic of data production and applicable research go well beyond deductive model testing because it involves an element of inductiveness and, in the context of action research, adaptability. In many ways, hypothesis testing would be even more limiting and we do not tend to use it in our qualitative research because strictly conceived hypotheses (i.e. “simple, positive, falsifiable statements”) effectively under-use the potential of qualitative research, which includes collecting narratives, deriving typologies, or validating concepts (see for instance Bruter and Harrison, 2020³).

In that sense, in this project, we are more likely to be guided by a looser “model” than by hypotheses which would effectively miss the mark in terms of what we aim to generate. Much of that model is also derived from our prior research (for instance, on tectonic movements in public opinion, the extension of ownership models beyond issues, or the interface between model and methodology, for instance in the context of inherent tension, implicit conceptions, overlap modelling, conceptualisation and ascription).

With those preliminary reflections in mind, we do, however, have several guiding operational questions and a broadly defined values model which defines our theoretical approach and which will give a clear sense of our research direction.

¹ King, G., Keohane, R., Verba, S. 1994. *Designing Social Inquiry*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

² Przeworski, A., Teune, H. 1970. *The Logic of Scientific Social Inquiry*. New York: Wiley.

³ Bruter, M. Harrison, S. 2020. *Inside the Mind of a Voter*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

1.3.2 Guiding questions

We use six operational questions in the project. Those guiding questions include the three questions identified by the British Council in the original ITT (building on the Scoping Study, as specified in section 7.6.3 of the ITT), alongside the three subsidiary questions that we identified in our response. The six operational questions guiding our research are thus as follows:

- 1) How can internal values systems (such as cohesion, fragmentation and/or polarisation) be identified and understood in countries where the British Council is active in? How can this understanding impact on and/or shape the British Council's cultural relations activities?
- 2) Can the British Council's meta-values (inclusion, diversity, equality, mutuality, respect and tolerance) be embedded in its programmes in order to foster deliberative quality and cooperative orientations among its participants? If so, how?
- 3) What role does the British Council staff's understanding of values play in their practices and day-to-day cultural relations activities?
- 4) How are the meta-values that shape the British Council's identity as well as sub-values that constitute them perceived across countries and cultures?
- 5) What should be the British Council's ethos, image, and mission according to the populations in the countries in which the British Council operates?
- 6) Which of the meta-values that shape the British Council's identity as well as sub-values that constitute them are perceived as best fitting with the British Council's ethos, image and mission, thereby constituting the basis of the British Council's value ownership?

1.3.3 Theoretical framework underlying the research

The theoretical framework we use is complex and pertains to many different elements, notably a theory of the nature of values, and a theory of value articulation, mobilisation and change. Below are a number of defining elements of our theoretical framework:

- We understand values to be deeply held and grounded in individual beliefs and personality, as well as culture and societal organisation.
- We understand values to be prisoners of language. That means that individuals may mean significantly different things by referring to the same value, or sometimes mean the same thing by referring to apparently distinct or even opposite values.
- We understand values to be subconscious. That means that the values that guide people's beliefs and life are not necessarily the ones which they believe to be most important to them.
- We understand values to be in tension in differentiated ways. That means that whilst many people may share the same values in principle, the way individuals reconcile or prioritise values when they are in direct contradiction with one another will vary significantly.
- We understand values to be contextualised. That means that different contexts and situations will trigger reliance on some values and impede reliance on others. For example, one may strongly value freedom and independence but those values may be muted when an individual experiences a context of severe threat. Conversely, underlying safety values may be heightened in the same context.

- We understand that values are ascribed. We may be defined by certain values, but it does not mean that we want the action of every possible actor to be defined by those same values. Instead, we have different expectations about which values institutions should embody and enact.
- This leads to our concept of value ownership, i.e., the idea that some actors naturally embody some values and are bad at embodying others. This leads to a priming framework whereby we might look at a given actor supporting values which we feel are “wrong” for them with suspicion or even criticism even if we favour those values in principle. The “right” values supported by the “wrong” people will be as unwelcome as the “wrong” values supported by the “right” people.

Derived from this framework, we have several theoretical expectations, notably:

- We aim to identify both areas of overlap and areas of contradiction between the value priorities of general populations, British Council users, British Council staff, and stakeholders.
- We expect values to be resistant to change. This is because values are deeply held and slowly formed so that any short- or medium-term intervention is more likely to affect attitudinal expressions than underlying values.
- However, we expect values to be subject to mobilisation effects – thus, we expect deliberation to facilitate the identification of value sets that can be agreed upon, even if it does not necessarily modify individual differences in value preferences and if “muted” values can be re-mobilised outside of a deliberative or priming context.
- We also expect deliberation to highlight value tensions, i.e. make individuals more conscious of the “cost” of the values that they prioritise over other similarly important values that they might potentially compete with.
- We expect deliberative consensus to be affected by acquiescence and social desirability biases, that is, we expect convergence effects to be asymmetric with individuals more prone to acquiescence and social desirability more likely to report value change.
- We expect value preferences to be affected by contextualisation – for instance, by references to threats and moderating narrative.
- We expect value preferences to be affected by ascription – for instance, by references to cultural or diplomatic actors or based on the nature of fellow participants in a discussion group.
- We expect value preferences to be affected by functions and interests – we thus expect different value sets to be prioritised by British Council staff, stakeholders, users, and the general population.
- We expect different values to be unanimous or polarising in the three societies targeted in this pilot.

In summary, these abovementioned expectations will shape our ambitious comparative fieldwork and our analysis of the findings will enable us to empirically test their strength and their conditions across systems.

1.4 Adaptation of the Research Pilot to the COVID-19 pandemic

Since the time we conceived our research proposal, the COVID-19 pandemic has affected our entire world. With a commitment to operating the most successful, effective, and informative project possible, we adapted our research strategy accordingly.

This current global pandemic is a source of uncertainty and it is impossible to know when it will be fully resolved, nor which countries and regions will be most affected. It poses a logistical complication particularly when it comes to in-person interaction, but substantively, it also provides a natural experiment that forces us to embrace this unique and difficult context if we are to provide a better understanding of how values are constrained and affected by major external threats, be they sanitary or otherwise (e.g., terrorism, natural disasters, etc.).

As a result, we have adapted our research strategy to ensure that we conduct the best possible project sticking as close to the original proposed timeline as possible, but also substantively confronting the unique context the world is facing to ask immensely important questions. These are directly related to the challenge raised by the Big Conversation when it comes to how the British Council can respond to the value priorities of its users around the world in a context which realistically does and will continue to present concerns and risks to citizens globally.

1.4.1 Logistical response

It is impossible to know how long the myriad of disruption related to the COVID-19 pandemic will last and how different countries and regions will be affected and react. To mitigate this complicated risk, we made the following adaptations:

- Experimental focus groups: we proposed to conduct all experimental focus groups online. As previously discussed with the British Council team, we conducted these in-house with participants recruited by the participating local British Council offices. We identified Zoom as the best platform to use and had piloted it already to confirm its functionality and effectiveness. Using an LSE account, the platform seemed ideal regardless of whether we decided to organise the experimental focus groups using a chat function or using a video conference. We believed the former to be the best solution as it is the most versatile, allowing participants to take part even with limited bandwidth, and optimises the function of the focus group. We also considered a video-based focus group, but this would be constrained by potential technical issues (bandwidth, communication issues etc) which we believed outweigh the limited potential advantages. After 2 chat-based focus groups in Malaysia, however, we encountered a very low level of interaction between participants, and it was decided that all focus groups should be conducted using audio + video functions. This improved the discussion engagement substantially and the technical problems had a much lower impact than expected. The experimental focus group remained synchronous (as recommended by the literature) and their duration was unchanged (1 hour).
- Still with regards to the experimental focus groups, whilst both the options 1 and 2 (users only or one general population group in total) remained available, we now strongly encouraged focusing on users. In the context of the current sanitary crisis, of the proposed new timing of the research, and of the introduction of the substantive threat-focused moderation component (see section 2.4.2), we believed that the comparison between users and general population would be a lot more fragile in the context of qualitative methodologies specifically. Retaining the greatest possible parallelism in methodology was far preferable if we were to derive robust conclusions from the experimental focus group design across three countries. The general population yardstick will still be provided by the survey component which is now nearly synchronous and far more robust in terms of sampling.
- Stakeholders' interviews: we also recommended Zoom to conduct all British Council stakeholders and member interviews remotely.
- Conduct fieldwork in phases by country: instead of conducting each component of the fieldwork (survey, interviews, experimental focus groups) at a specific time across countries, the plan was to conduct the three components in waves in quick succession. This was to ensure that we minimised the risk of a significant change in the situation within a country between components of the fieldwork.

In practice, the recruitment challenges encountered and the complex design and approval process of the survey meant that components were run in parallel across countries, with some weeks where more than one fieldwork phase (i.e. focus groups and survey) were happening at the same time in the three countries.

- The rapidly changing situation required utmost flexibility and could result in changes to case selection at any time should the health situation require it. Our team was ready to conduct the work directly in any country where we would use English or Spanish (French might also be an option though a more complex one) as the communication language, or in any other country if the British Council staff could conduct the moderation of the experimental focus groups under our supervision.
- Finally, we will include threat contingency guidelines in the final material so that the next phase of upscaling by the British Council can be done as effectively as possible regardless of future contexts.

1.4.2 Substantive adaptation

There is no doubt that across the world, the COVID-19 pandemic is at the forefront of the minds of many citizens, affecting their lives, and their sense of safety or vulnerability, as well as conceptions of solidarity, collaboration, and self-sacrifice. Whilst this health crisis is almost unprecedented, it also follows from other – more localised but deadly – epidemics, as well as other types of threats, such as terrorism.

To take this context into account, the survey component of the study tested value preferences under different threat conditions presented in the question phrasings (notably health, terror, and natural disaster crises).

Additionally, we used the crisis context as one of the test conditions for the experimental focus groups, contrasting one group with the health threat context in the moderation with that of threat-less moderation references. The revised focus group experimental design was thus as follows:

- United Kingdom: value-neutral, threat-focused, cultural values
- South Africa: threat-focused, cultural values, political/diplomatic values
- Malaysia*: threat-focused, integrative setting, polarising setting

Overall, this adapted and revised research strategy embraced the current context both organisationally and substantively but also enabled us to optimise the project implementation and delivery. Despite the additional complexity, we intend to deliver the project within the proposed timeframe, within the same budget, milestones and deliverables, and delivered by the same team.

2. Methodology

2.1 Survey

The survey was conducted online using samples of approximately 1000 respondents (see Table 1 for samples and fieldwork dates). The questions included both explicit and implicit questions; differentiating values associated with politics, culture, science, and language; unifying or polarising values, arbitrations between opposed values, and how values interact with perceptions. The questions aimed to understand citizens' values in each country, notably which values are more central to people's ethos, which are most unanimous and divisive, which of them the British Council would have high value ownership of, and which would be most useful to support mutual understanding and collaboration.

We wanted to highlight one "signature" question based on our existing research, but which could be used throughout British Council measures and operations, alongside a subset of questions that were replicated in the debrief questionnaires that followed the focus groups and interviews (administered online using Qualtrics). The questions we designed capture a range of different conceptions, expressions, and contextualisation of values, which would enable us to measure both individual-level and comparative differences. Below, we provide further detail of the structure of the survey:

- 1) A hierarchical "signature" value question (three variables, hierarchical) based on our pre-existing research that included the British Council meta values in the list of responses amongst other relevant and important values.
- 2) A second module comprised of questions from the World Value Survey allowing the articulation between our results and WVS data.
- 3) A third module based on the concept of value ownership to assess how respondents ascribe value priorities to cultural and other institutions, and also specifically what values they would like to see the British Council focus on in priority.
- 4) A fourth module on which values are perceived as unifying and divisive within each society to assess the risk of value polarisation and controversy in external action.
- 5) A fifth module based on tension scale value measures. This is critical because open answers can often make it hard for respondents to hierarchise value as they may just support everything – tolerance, respect, freedom, etc. – but putting values in tension with one another forces hierarchisation based on clear and specific scenarios and offer a more reliable way to compare value sets across countries.
- 6) A sixth module based on values in the context of major (health, environmental, and terrorist) threats as discussed in our adapted research proposal.
- 7) A seventh module which uses implicit value measures based on comparisons of pairs of photographs.
- 8) An eighth module based on what citizens believe is needed to improve cultural understanding and collaboration across nations in line with one of the goals of the survey component of the research project.
- 9) Several control variables enabling us to compare value sets across categories of citizens, including across religions, ethnicity, social groups, age groups, gender, etc in each of the country.

We used split samples to keep within the time limit of the questionnaire (instead of sacrificing some questions) and to optimise the response rate.

Table 1. Survey samples and fieldwork dates

COUNTRY	SURVEY SAMPLE*	FIELDWORK DATES
United Kingdom	1000	31 July to 7 August 2020
Malaysia	1000	17 to 24 July 2020
South Africa	1028	31 July to 7 August 2020

*Notes: All samples weighted to a nationally representative criteria and include adults aged 18+

2.2 Interviews

Our team also conducted semi-structured interviews with British Council staff and stakeholders to capture both internal and external perceptions. This qualitative component will seek to echo the voices of those involved in the British Council's activities, assess the understanding of the British Council's meta-values and how they perceive themselves as agents of cultural relations and international cooperation.

2.3 Experimental Focus Groups

A series of experimental deliberative online focus groups were conducted with varying conditions by type of moderation and stimulation:

- Value-focused vs value-neutral moderation
- Cultural value association vs political/diplomatic value association
- Integrative vs polarising settings

Due to the restrictions imposed on face-to-face interaction, the revised research strategy implemented an exclusively online mode for the focus groups. An online approach allowed us to recruit people from a wide geographical spread and include participants from rural/urban locations.

2.4 Case Selection

The Research Pilot was conducted in the **United Kingdom** (as suggested in the ITT, section 7.5.2), **Malaysia** and **South Africa**. In addition to the United Kingdom, **Malaysia** was selected because of its geopolitical significance and is perceived to be a good example of a South-eastern-Asian middle-income country and is a perfect example of the remarkable transformations that the region has undergone in the past decades. The British Council has been present in the South Asia region since 1948, when it opened an office in Kuala Lumpur. **South Africa** is also a particularly interesting case: despite being classified as a middle-income country by the World Bank, it presents the highest levels of inequality in the world, with a Gini coefficient of 63.0 in 2014 (source: World Bank). Moreover, South Africa has undertaken a complex process of racial reconciliation at the legal and institutional level, which makes it a very relevant case for matters related to cooperation in diverse settings. The presence of the British Council in the country is also well-established and the South Africa office is part of the British Council's Southern Africa Arts cluster, which also includes Botswana, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

3. Analysis

3.1 Quantitative Findings

The survey was designed to capture some of the key value preferences and ascriptions of general populations and understand how this may differ from the values prioritised by British Council's staff, stakeholders, and users.

In this preliminary analysis, we are only focusing on a sub-sample of the questions which we have included as part of the study. We will start by looking at decontextualised societal value preferences (what people would want to be the founding values of an ideal nation), before considering how those value priorities translate in terms of implicit values tested through images. In a second section, we will look at questions of value ascription and value ownership, looking at how citizens differentiate between the values they want to see championed by cultural institutions vs diplomatic ones. We will then analyse which values citizens in the three pilot countries want to see embodied by the British Council itself and in its action. Finally, in the third section, we will look at what citizens believe to be the conditions for better and stronger international cooperation.

3.1.1 Explicit and implicit value prioritisation

In this first section, we look at elements of value prioritisation in South Africa, Malaysia, and the United Kingdom comparing the results of decontextualised explicit questions and implicit questions based on images.

The first question that we raised with regards to values hierarchy asked respondents to imagine the values that should found a new ideal nation (our basic questions on values alternate values attached to personal qualities and to societal environments, as those can be quite different).

The results are presented in Table 2 and Figure 1. Everywhere, respect and peace are consistently highlighted as the two most fundamental values to base a new nation on (respect being the top choice in South Africa and the United Kingdom, and peace in Malaysia). As we will find out later, respect appears as the single most important value to most respondents across countries, and contexts. Peace is a little different. It appears as a critical value commitment for a nation but is sometimes less prominent when it comes to what citizens expect various institutions to champion. Safety (South Africa and Malaysia), equality (South Africa and United Kingdom), freedom (same) religion (South Africa and Malaysia) and tolerance (Malaysia and United Kingdom) are also important to many. By contrast, values including gender equality, mutuality, solidarity, tradition, strength, and inclusion receive little support across all three contexts. Values like sustainability, open-mindedness, and prosperity are somewhere in between.

Among the most significant contrasts across countries, we note that religion is generally seen as an important and positive value in Malaysia, significantly less so in South Africa and openly rejected in the United Kingdom. Similarly, care is seen as a fairly important value in Malaysia and the United Kingdom but is seen as far less fundamental in South Africa.

Table 2. Most desired values for the foundation of a new country

South Africa		Malaysia		United Kingdom	
VALUE	%	VALUE	%	VALUE	%
Respect	26	Peace	42%	Respect	27
Peace	25	Respect	39%	Peace	23
Safety	21	Safety	30%	Equality	18
Equality	20	Religion	25%	Freedom	17
Freedom	16	Tolerance	22%	Safety	16
Religion	14	Freedom	21%	Tolerance	15
Sustainability	13	Equality	20%	Sustainability	12
Prosperity	13	Open-mindedness	16%	Care	11
Gender equality	10	Care	16%	Open-mindedness	10
Open-mindedness	9	Prosperity	15%	Prosperity	10
Diversity	8	Sustainability	12%	Inclusion	7
Care	6	Strength	10%	Strength	6
Strength	5	Solidarity	8%	Tradition	6
Tolerance	5	Diversity	8%	Diversity	6
Solidarity	4	Gender equality	6%	Solidarity	5
Tradition	2	Tradition	4%	Gender equality	5
Inclusion	2	Inclusion	3%	Religion	4
Mutuality	1	Mutuality	3%	Mutuality	2

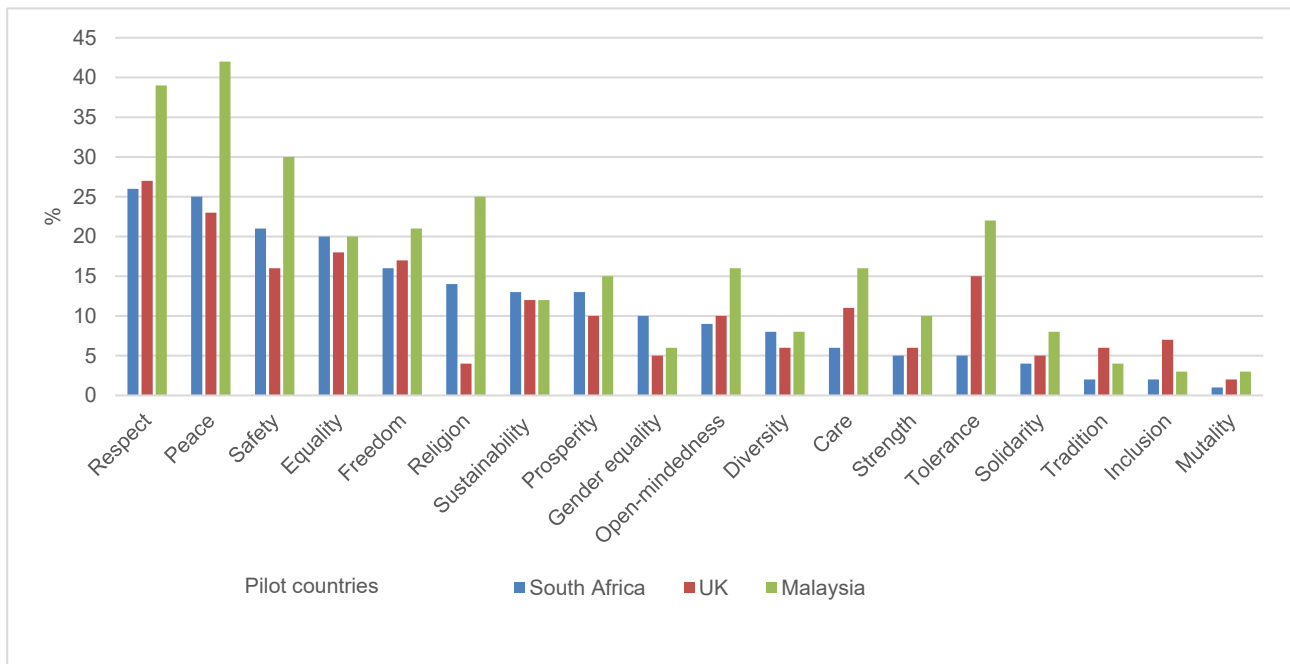
**Notes for Table 2: respondents were asked the following question (V1): Imagine that you were to create a new country founded on the values which are most important to you, and you were asked to pick the three most important values to become the new country motto. The respondents were presented with the full list of values. The first choice was therefore indicative of the most important value. Totals add to more than 100% as respondents were asked to select three values. See toolkit appendix for description of all survey items.*

Throughout the tables, colours are used to capture magnitude using the following colour codes: Above 50, 30-49, 20-29, 15-19, 10-14, 0-9.

In a way, this first question gives us one of the most decontextualised measures of value prioritisation in the three countries that we have in the survey, but as explained in our theoretical framework, it suffers from being “prisoner of language”, which means that it is quite conceivable that similarities across countries may hide some major differences in terms of what is meant by, say, respect or tolerance. Conversely, noted cross-national differences may be artefacts of contrasting linguistic connotations even within the same language.

Moreover, we emphasised that values are largely subconscious, and verbalisation can often hide those subconscious realities. In order to better capture them, we therefore used some implicit questions, including asking respondents to choose between images representing alternative values. We used the same images everywhere, portraying choices between order and chaos, love and science, solidarity and personal treat, diversity and family homogeneity, and finally discussion and mindfulness.

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



In Table 3, we look at how citizens chose between those five pairs of images across the three countries. The distributions reveal two important findings.

The first set of findings is about prioritisation. We find that when reacting to implicit prompts and having to choose one of two competing values, overwhelmingly over 4 in 5 choose order over chaos, and over two-thirds prioritise love above science. In significantly more balanced ways, a majority of respondents prioritise diversity over family homogeneity, mindfulness over interaction, and a small majority tend to prioritise solidarity over personal treat (roughly 55% of respondents vs 45%).

The second important finding is that unlike what we observed with regards to the explicit question interpreted above, there is virtually no difference between the three countries (apart from diversity being preferred by an even slightly larger proportion of respondents in the United Kingdom as opposed to the other two countries). This is interesting because, in many ways, pictorial representations of value alternatives can be more culturally loaded (in the sense that, for instance, order or chaos might mean different things in different countries). Yet, the instinctive preferences of citizens of those three different nations between the implicit representation of contrasting values are virtually undifferentiated.

Table 3. Implicit value preferences

TENSION	VALUE	South Africa	Malaysia	United Kingdom
Order vs Chaos	Order	83	85	79
	Chaos	17	15	21
Love vs Science	Love	71	69	67
	Science	29	31	33
Diversity vs Family	Diversity	57	57	63
	Family	43	43	37
	Mindfulness	58	58	58

Mindfulness vs Interaction	Discussion	42	42	42
Solidarity vs Personal treat	Solidarity	54	57	55
	Personal treat	46	43	45

3.1.2 Value ownership, and what value priorities for the British Council

Whilst we looked at values in general in the first section, the second set of results aims to better understand the reality of value ownership, i.e. to what extent respondents' value prioritisation can apply to the actions of any institution or, on the contrary, be differentiated with respondents preferring certain types of institutions to embody different values than others. In this section, we first contrast the values people would like to see embodied by cultural vs diplomatic institutions and then look at what values they specifically want to see at the heart of the identity and action of the British Council itself.

Let us first compare value prioritisation for cultural institutions in general. Those are reported in Table 4. As with the generic values variable, respect is by far and everywhere the most important value citizens want to see at the heart of the identity and action of cultural institutions. However, a number of values become a lot more important when it comes to cultural institutions than was the case generally. This is notably the case for open-mindedness, equality, and tolerance (except in South Africa, where it is rated lower). At a lower level, diversity is also seen as a more important value for cultural institutions in all three countries. By contrast, values such as safety and even peace, whilst not disappearing altogether, are far less emphasised than was the case in the question on general values.

In terms of cross-national difference, we note that respect and peace are rated much higher yet in Malaysia than in other countries, that inclusion is seen as important for cultural institutions amongst British respondents, and gender equality among South African ones, even though those two values are not prominent elsewhere.

In terms of value ownership, however, what we mostly wanted to ascertain was the extent to which respondents would differentiate between the values which they wish to see championed by cultural institutions and those they believe should be at the core of the action of diplomatic institutions. The results for the latter are presented in Table 5. Once again, the primacy of respect is unchallenged; indeed, it is seen as even more crucial for diplomatic institutions than for cultural ones (up to 55% of mentions in Malaysia). More importantly, however, respondents are far keener for diplomatic institutions to focus on peace (22-34% of depending on the country) and safety (17-27%). 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.

Table 4. Most important values for cultural institutions

South Africa		Malaysia		United Kingdom	
VALUE	%	VALUE	%	VALUE	%
Respect	29	Respect	48	Respect	30
Open-mindedness	17	Peace	31	Open-mindedness	19
Peace	17	Tolerance	30	Tolerance	18
Equality	15	Open-mindedness	24	Peace	15
Diversity	15	Religion	22	Equality	15
Freedom	13	Safety	20	Inclusion	13

Religion	11	Equality	17	Freedom	12
Gender equality	11	Freedom	15	Safety	11
Safety	11	Care	15	Diversity	10
Sustainability	11	Diversity	14	Sustainability	9
Tolerance	9	Tradition	12	Tradition	8
Tradition	8	Strength	10	Care	8
Prosperity	7	Solidarity	9	Solidarity	7
Care	6	Mutuality	8	Strength	7
Inclusion	6	Prosperity	8	Mutuality	6
Strength	6	Sustainability	8	Prosperity	4
Solidarity	6	Gender equality	6	Gender equality	4
Mutuality	5	Inclusion	3	Religion	4

Table 5. Most important values for diplomatic institutions

South Africa		Malaysia		United Kingdom	
VALUE	%	VALUE	%	VALUE	%
Respect	30	Respect	55	Respect	34
Peace	22	Peace	34	Peace	23
Safety	22	Tolerance	28	Safety	17
Equality	16	Safety	27	Tolerance	17
Tolerance	13	Open-mindedness	25	Open-mindedness	14
Freedom	13	Care	19	Equality	14
Open-mindedness	13	Freedom	15	Freedom	12
Care	9	Religion	14	Care	11
Diversity	9	Equality	13	Inclusion	9
Solidarity	9	Mutuality	13	Solidarity	8
Gender equality	8	Solidarity	10	Strength	7
Strength	7	Strength	9	Tradition	6
Sustainability	6	Diversity	7	Diversity	6
Religion	6	Prosperity	7	Mutuality	6
Prosperity	5	Tradition	6	Sustainability	5
Inclusion	5	Sustainability	6	Gender equality	4
Mutuality	4	Inclusion	5	Prosperity	4
Tradition	4	Gender equality	5	Religion	2

Where, however, does this leave us with regards to the values that respondents would like to see at the heart of what the British Council represents and embraces? Interestingly enough, the results, presented in Table 6 and Figure 2, about the institution in terms of value ownership, differ a little from respondents' general perceptions of cultural institutions.

Whilst respect remains by far the main value respondents want the British Council to identify with, and peace is important, very unique to the British Council is the primary importance of equality as a core value. It is cited by 21% of respondents in Malaysia, 20% in South Africa and 18% in the United Kingdom. This time in line with cultural institutions, freedom is also seen as an important value everywhere (13-17% depending on the country), whilst by contrast, tolerance is interestingly seen as less critical than for both cultural and diplomatic institutions.

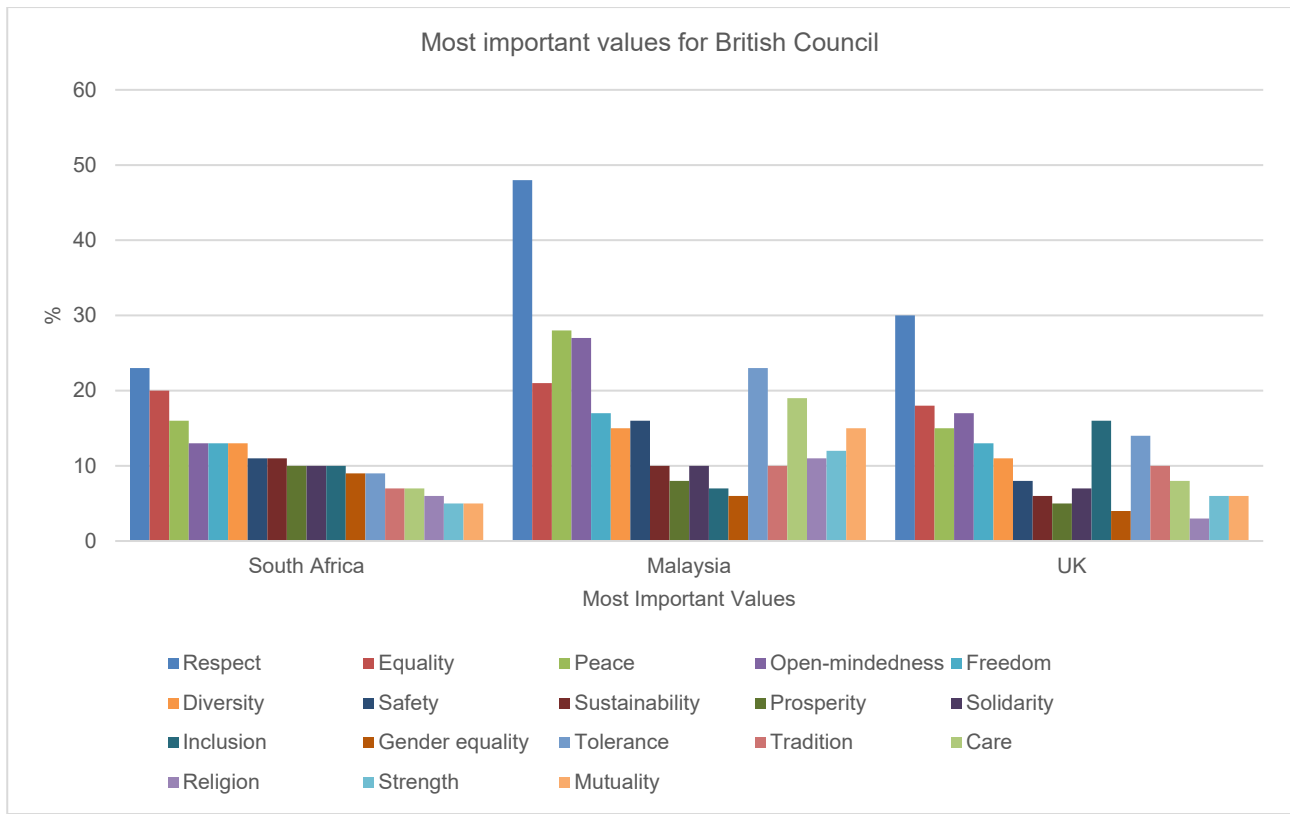
We also note many values which are seen as important in some countries only. In Malaysia, we note the importance of care (19%, 6th most cited value) as well as mutuality (15%, 9th most cited value), whilst in the United Kingdom, it is interesting to underline that inclusion is seen as important by many (16%, 4th most cited value).

Among values which are generally not associated with what respondents want to see the British Council embody, we note the weakness of religion, gender equality, tradition, and even prosperity and sustainability, among others. Those values may, in some cases, be seen as important by respondents in general, but they are not the values that citizens wish the British Council to put at the heart of its identity.

Table 6. Most important values for the British Council

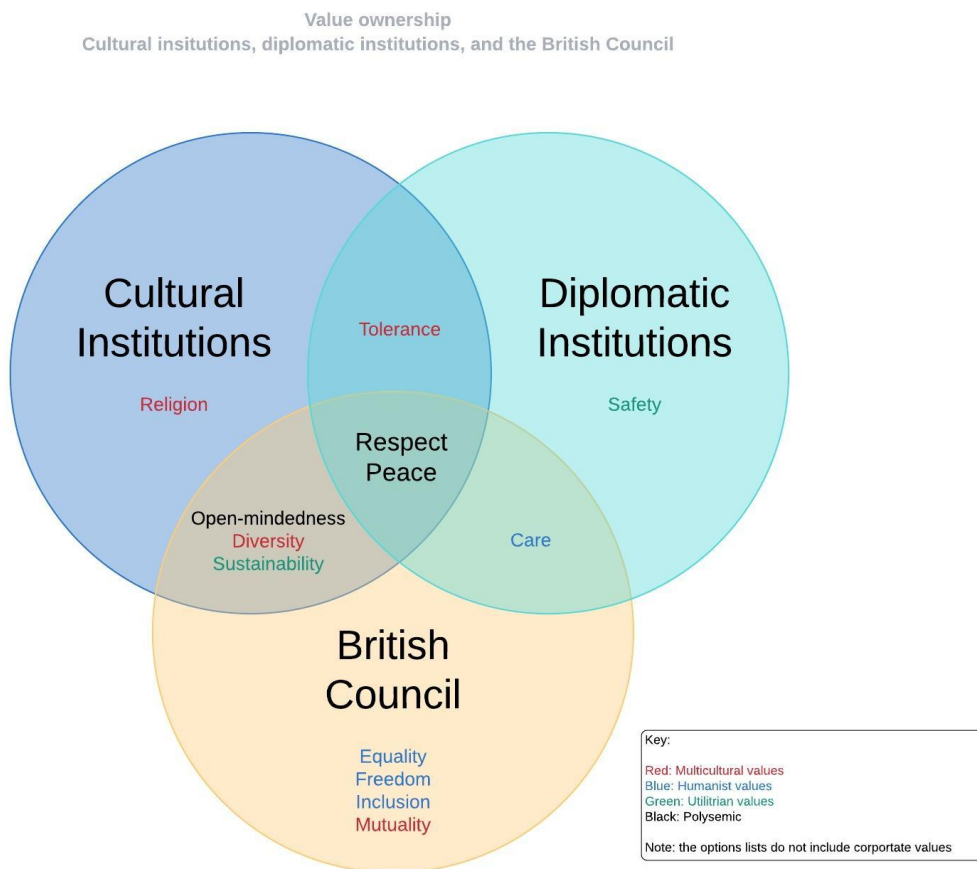
South Africa		Malaysia		United Kingdom	
VALUE	%	VALUE	%	VALUE	%
Respect	23	Respect	48	Respect	30
Equality	20	Peace	28	Equality	18
Peace	16	Open-mindedness	27	Open-mindedness	17
Open-mindedness	13	Tolerance	23	Inclusion	16
Freedom	13	Equality	21	Peace	15
Diversity	13	Care	19	Tolerance	14
Safety	11	Freedom	17	Freedom	13
Sustainability	11	Safety	16	Diversity	11
Prosperity	10	Mutuality	15	Tradition	10
Solidarity	10	Diversity	15	Safety	8
Inclusion	10	Strength	12	Care	8
Gender equality	9	Religion	11	Solidarity	7
Tolerance	9	Solidarity	10	Strength	6
Tradition	7	Sustainability	10	Mutuality	6
Care	7	Tradition	10	Sustainability	6
Religion	6	Prosperity	8	Prosperity	5
Strength	5	Inclusion	7	Gender equality	4
Mutuality	5	Gender equality	6	Religion	3

Figure 2. Most important values for the British Council



In other words, beyond respect and to a lesser extent peace, which respondents wish for all types of institutions, British Council included, to abide by, citizens tend to have a fairly distinct sense of value ownership and of how they wish different types of institutions – cultural and diplomatic ones, but also the British Council specifically – to be defined by different core values (see Figure 3). In particular, this highlights a specific “value niche” for the British Council, which could represent values of equality and freedom better than others. In other words, whilst those values may be cited by as many people as respect, peace, and open-mindedness which remain very important values, equality and freedom are essential because they are *unique* and can thus represent a particularly distinctive and likeable value profile for the British Council. Inclusion and mutuality may also be championed by the British Council better than by anyone, but they are only emphasised in some countries and not in others, so further research in additional countries may be necessary to confirm how strong a value opportunity mutuality and inclusion may indeed represent.

Figure 3. Value ownership model and the British Council value niche



3.1.3 Improving international cooperation

Finally, we wanted to understand what citizens of Malaysia, South Africa, and the United Kingdom want to see emphasised in the context of international cooperation and what they believe could further facilitate it.

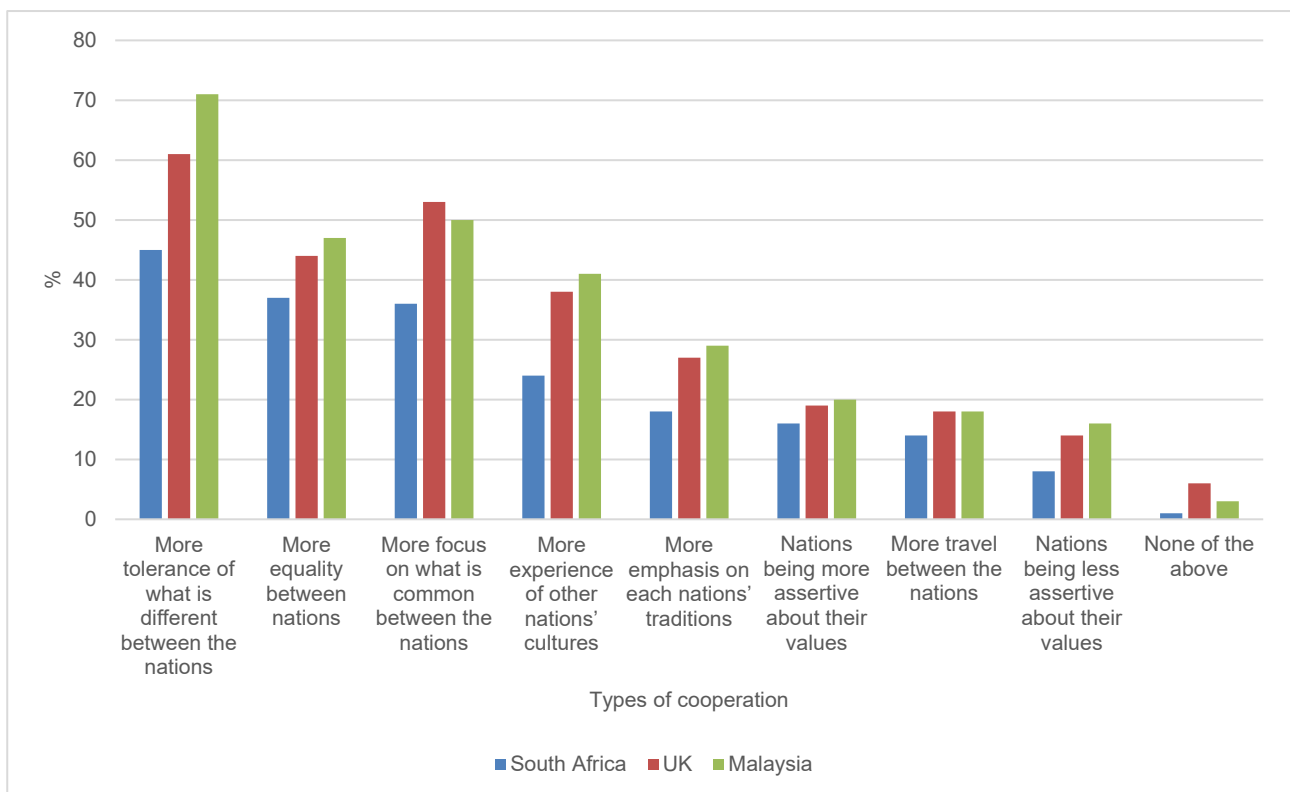
In this section, we analyse two different questions. The first one pertained to the conditions that are most important for international cooperation. The results are reported in table 7 and Figure 4. Four elements tend to be particularly highlighted by respondents in all three countries: the need for more tolerance (the top answer everywhere, cited by 45% of respondents in South Africa, 61% in the United Kingdom and 71% in Malaysia), more focus on what countries have in common (notably highlighted by 50% of Malaysian respondents and 53% of British ones), more equality, and more experience of other cultures. Other elements – such as being either more or less assertive on national values, focusing on traditions, or travel are seen as far less relevant. Everywhere, we note the very low proportion choosing the “none of the above” answer (1-6%), which suggests that the options at hand are generally relevant.

There are a few comparative differences to note. For instance, experiencing other cultures is seen as less relevant in South Africa than elsewhere; in South Africa and Malaysia more people believe in asserting values more, whilst in the United Kingdom more feel that values should actually be asserted less in order to improve international cooperation.

Table 7. Most important conditions for international cooperation

	Malaysia (%)	S. Africa (%)	United Kingdom (%)
More tolerance of what is different between the nations	71	45	61
More focus on what is common between the nations	50	36	53
More equality between nations	47	37	44
More experience of other nations' cultures	41	24	38
More emphasis on each nations' traditions	29	18	27
Nations being more assertive about their values	20	16	14
More travel between the nations	18	14	18
Nations being less assertive about their values	16	8	19
None of the above	3	1	6

Figure 4. Most important criteria for better cooperation between nations



Secondly, we also looked at what areas should be prioritised for international cooperation, a crucial question for the British Council to understand the space available to the institution and its core missions to participate in better and stronger international cooperation. The results are presented in Table 8 and Figure 5.

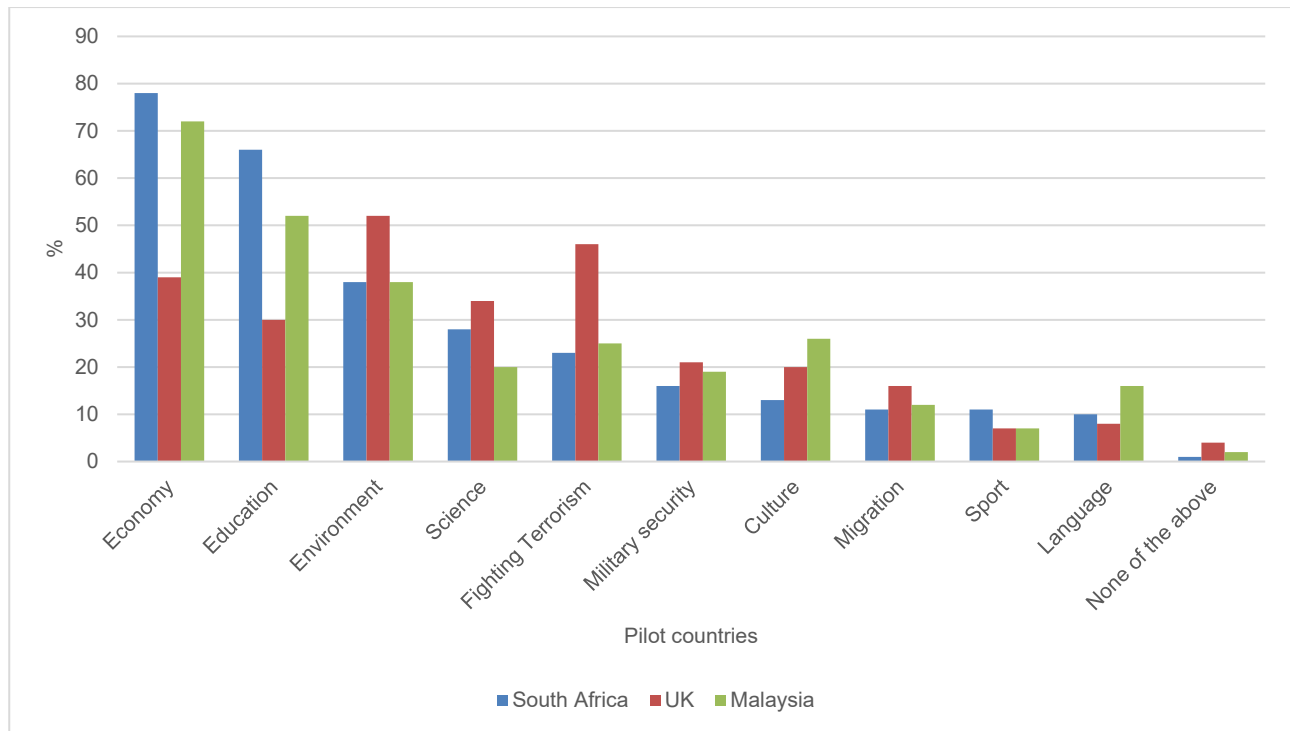
This time, the most striking findings are the differences in priorities across countries. In South African and Malaysia, the most important area for international cooperation is seen by far to be the economy, followed by education. By contrast, in the United Kingdom, the two most important areas are the environment and the fight

against terrorism. In the United Kingdom and Malaysia in particular, science is also seen as a key priority area, whilst in Malaysia and to a lesser extent the United Kingdom, culture is seen as important. Military security is a secondary but relevant priority everywhere, migration is low on respondents' priority order except to an extent in the United Kingdom (16% cite it), language and sport are weak everywhere.

In short, amongst the various areas of competence and action of the British Council, education is seen as the most critical but less so in the United Kingdom, science and culture are strong everywhere (except for culture in South Africa) and language is not seen as a critical cooperation area.

Table 8. Priority areas for international cooperation

South Africa		Malaysia		United Kingdom	
VALUE	%	VALUE	%	VALUE	%
Economy	78	Economy	72	Environment	52
Education	66	Education	52	Terrorism	46
Environment	38	Environment	38	Economy	39
Science	28	Culture	26	Science	34
Terrorism	23	Terrorism	25	Education	30
Military security	16	Science	20	Military security	21
Culture	13	Military security	19	Culture	20
Migration	11	Language	16	Migration	16
Sport	11	Migration	12	Language	8
Language	10	Sport	7	Sport	7
None	1	None	2	None	4

Figure 5. Most important areas of cooperation with the rest of the world

3.1.4 International cooperation: cross-sectional variations

In terms of preferences for international cooperation we have mostly looked at overall trends and cross-national differences. However, we have also identified a few – relatively limited – cross sectional differences. For instance, we note that men are more likely to believe that nations should be less assertive about their values, whereby women are more likely to be keen on highlighting equality between nations. In terms of the substance for key policies for international cooperation, men are also more likely to prioritise scientific collaboration, whereas women tend to emphasise education and the fight on terrorism as the main areas to facilitate cooperation on the global stage.

Citizens living with disabilities are more focused on nations being less assertive about values but are generally less keen on emphasising tolerance except in the United Kingdom where citizens living with disabilities are slightly more likely to emphasise tolerance of differences.

We also find that citizens in South Africa that report higher levels of education are more likely to emphasise travel as an important requirement for international cooperation. Similarly, British citizens with higher levels of education are more focused on experiencing other nations' cultures.

Moreover, citizens that have heard of the British Council are more likely to emphasise experience of other cultures, and in Malaysia, these citizens are more likely to stress equality between nations.

We also find that older generations in all three countries are more focused on the importance of tolerating differences than younger generations are. In general, they are more emphatic of tolerance of differences and more focused on the perceived commonalities between groups. In addition, perhaps counter-intuitively in terms of defining priority areas for international cooperation, it is older generations who focus on environmental cooperation and sustainability, whereby younger generations are more likely to prioritise education and culture. In Malaysia, for example, young people are most focused on education and language. Culture, sport, and migration are the top priorities for young citizens in South Africa, and for British young citizens their priorities are more focused on education and culture.

Cross-sectional differences: Requirements for international cooperation

	Malaysia	South Africa	United Kingdom
Gender	Men more likely to emphasise being less assertive about values	Women more likely to emphasise equality between nations and men nations being less assertive about their values	Women more likely to emphasise tolerance of differences and focus on commonalities. Men more likely to emphasise national being less assertive about their values
Age groups	Older people more likely to emphasise tolerance	Older people less focused on equality between nations and more on experience of other cultures	Older people more emphatic on tolerance of differences and focusing on commonalities. Young people focus on travel
Education	No major difference.	People with more education more likely to emphasise travel.	People with higher education more focused on experiencing other nations' cultures.
Ethnicity	Ethnic Malays less likely to emphasise equality between nations.	Black South Africans less likely to emphasise experience of other cultures. White South Africans more likely to stress nations being less assertive about values.	No clear difference.
Disabilities	Those with disabilities more focused on nations being less assertive about values but less focused on tolerance.	People reporting disabilities more likely to emphasise nations being less assertive about their values.	Those with disabilities more likely to emphasise tolerance of differences.
Heard of British Council	Those with exposure to the British Council more likely to stress equality between nations.	No major difference.	Those familiar with British Council more likely to emphasise experience of other cultures and less focused on equality between nations.

Cross-sectional differences: Priorities for international cooperation

	Malaysia	South Africa	United Kingdom
Gender	Women more likely to emphasise education and men fighting terror.	Women more likely to emphasise education and fighting terror, men more likely to emphasise science.	Women more focused on fighting terrorism and protecting the environment, men more likely to emphasise science.

Age groups	Young people least concerned about economy, environment, and fighting terror, but most focused on education and language.	Older people more likely to emphasise fighting terrorism and the environment, younger people culture, sport, and migration.	Older people more likely to emphasise environment and fighting terror. Young people more focused on education and culture.
Education	People with lower education more likely to emphasise military security.	No major differences.	Those with higher education more likely to emphasise science and culture.
Ethnicity	Malay Chinese more likely to emphasise the environment and fighting terror whilst ethnic Malay more likely to emphasise military security.	White South Africans more likely to emphasise the environment and fighting terrorism.	No clear difference.
Disabilities	Those reporting disabilities are less likely to emphasise the economy or education.	No major difference.	Those reporting disabilities less likely to focus on the economy.
Heard of British Council	Those familiar with the British Council more concerned about the environment but less about language.	Those familiar with the British Council more concerned about the environment.	Those familiar with the British Council more likely to emphasise culture and migration.

3.1.5 How do Malaysians arbitrate between conflicting values? A tension scale analysis

The tension scales analysis in Malaysia brings about some interesting findings which strongly help us understand the key arbitrations that citizens perform when having to decide between competing positive values in situations where they are incompatible – as in frequent in society and life.

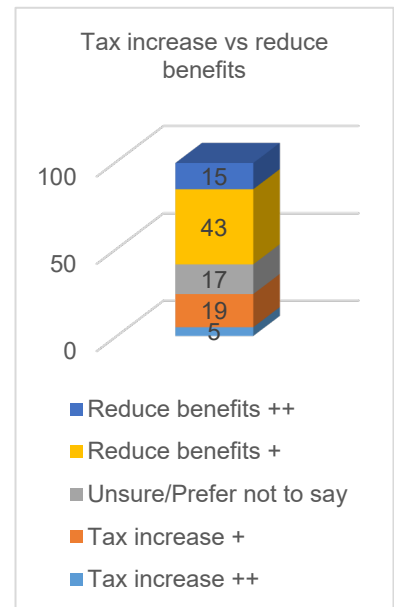
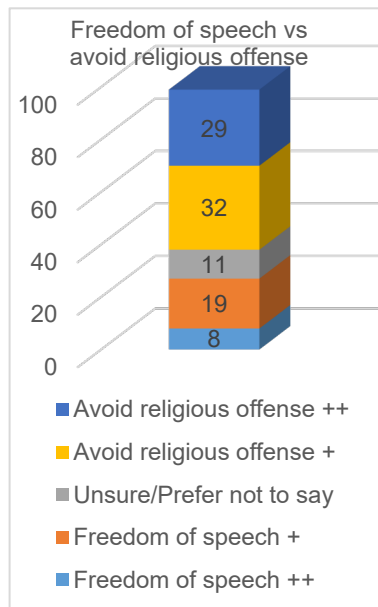
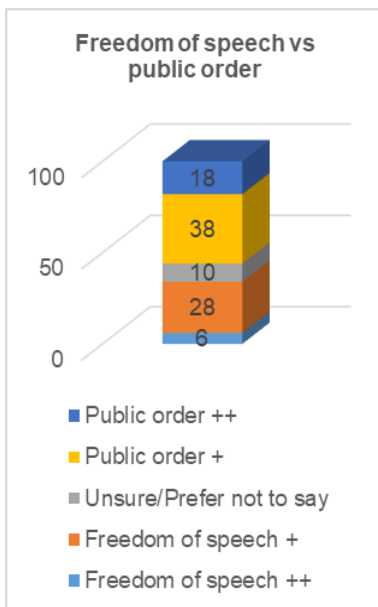
A key insight is that on balance, the Malaysian population tends to be favourable to limiting freedom of speech where it risks leading to religious offence (61-27) or public disorder (56-34). This prioritisation also goes hand in hand with support for a certain multicultural basis for society, which also leads to protecting minority concerns even if it goes against majority rule (67-23) and fostering mixity rather than avoiding cultural tensions if it requires distancing between communities (68-22).

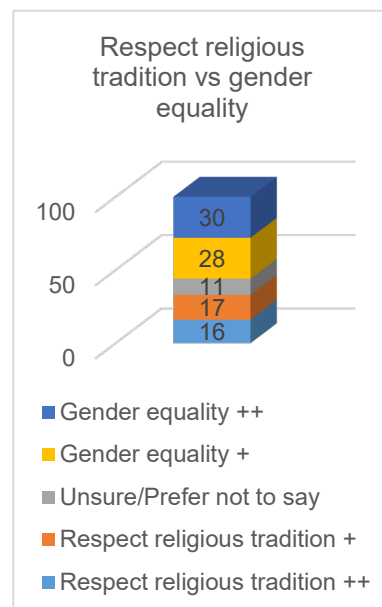
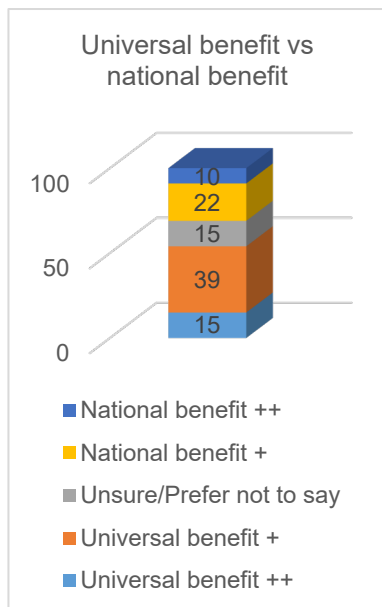
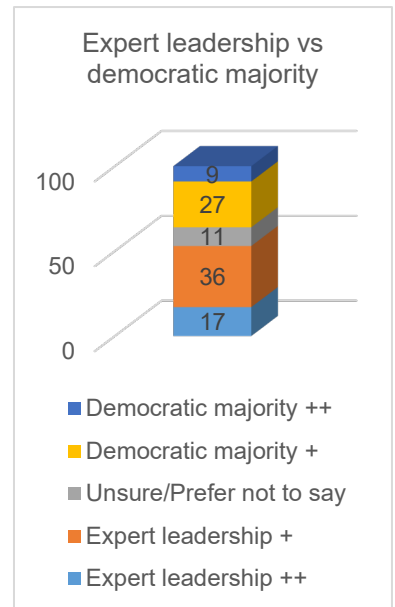
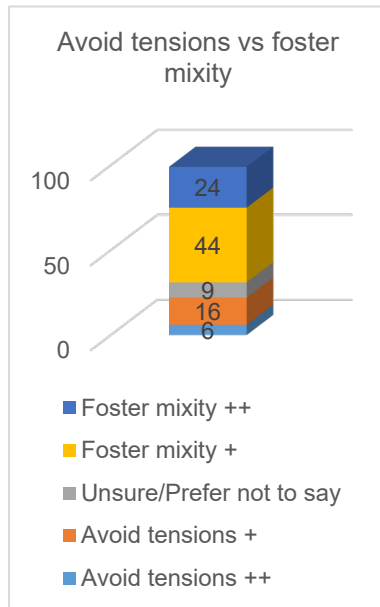
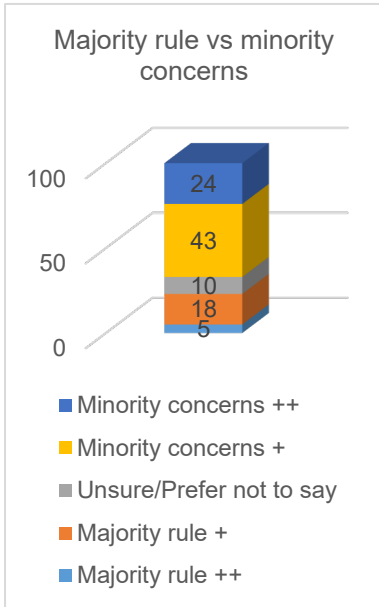
Finally, there is a general prevalence of a form of social and economic conservatism with a preference for reducing benefits over tax increases to protect the unemployed (58-24) and trusting expert advice over public preferences (53-36). However, the population remains attached to teaching critical skills over respect for authority (57-33) and enforcing gender equality regardless of religious traditions (58-33).

The Malaysian picture is surprisingly similar to other countries in a number of ways, but the sacrosanct nature of freedom of speech is clearly much weaker than in both South Africa and the United Kingdom (when in tension with public order priorities and even more notably religious offence priorities). Conversely, the

population is generally more economically and socially conservative in values than the other two countries. This is true both in its support for lower tax even if it leads to more vulnerability for the unemployed, and in terms of tolerating religious traditions if they contradict gender equality (there is more support for gender equality on balance, but significantly less so than in the United Kingdom and South Africa). Finally, the country globally has a stronger belief in enforcing cultural mixity and in considering a role for majority preference even if it contradicts expert leadership (here again, trust in expert leadership is higher, but the margin is significantly weaker than in the United Kingdom and South Africa).

In that sense, the tension scales are proving very valuable, because they suggest that whilst the value narrative is very similar across all three countries, when value tensions occur, the ultimate arbitration tends to be significantly more conservative, multicultural, and respectful of religion in Malaysia than in the other two countries studied.





3.1.6 How do South Africans arbitrate between conflicting values? A tension scale analysis

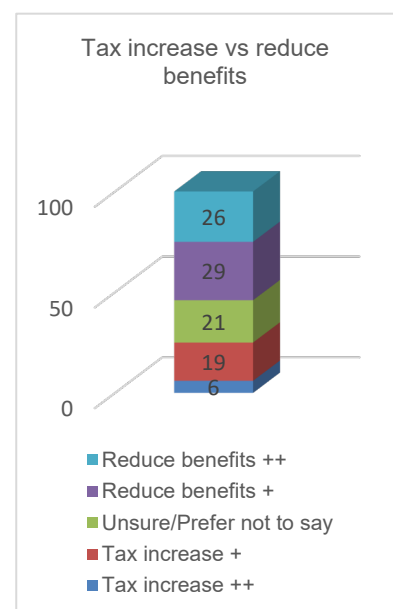
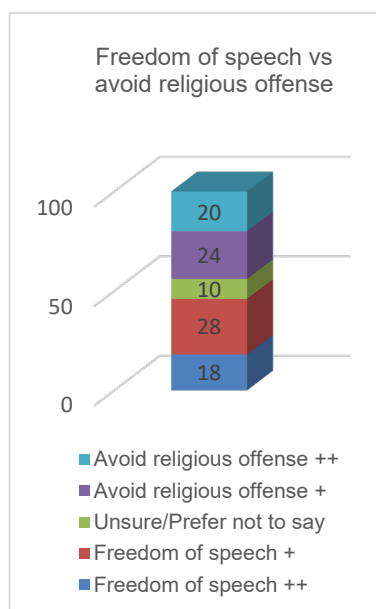
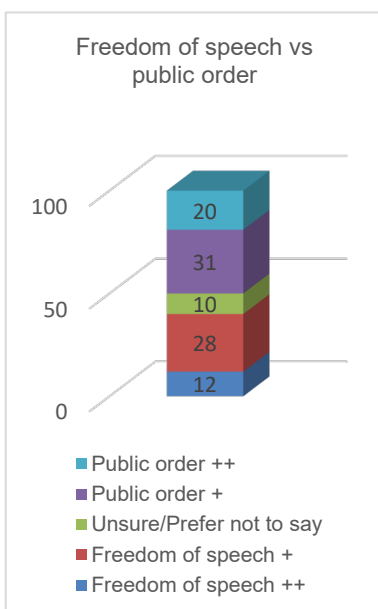
The tension scales analysis in South Africa brings about some interesting findings which strongly help us understand the key arbitrations that citizens perform when having to decide between competing positive values in situations where they are incompatible – as frequent in society and life.

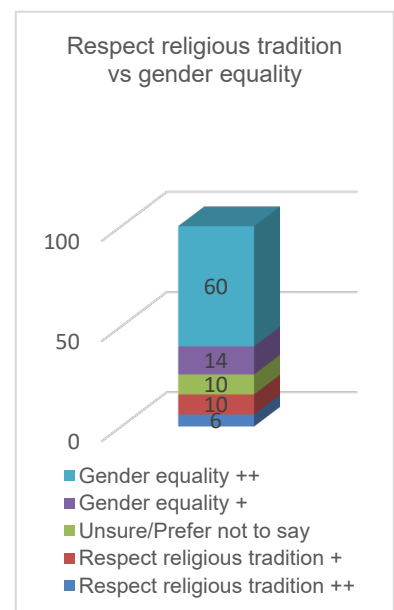
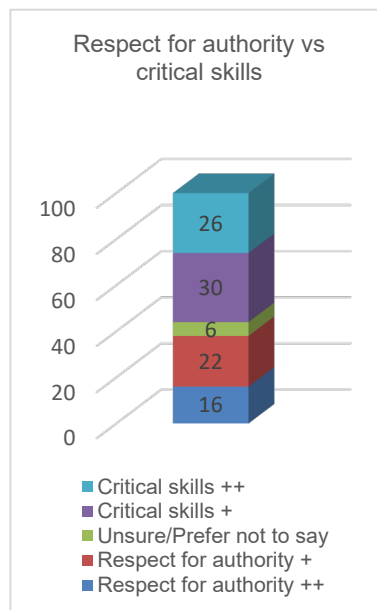
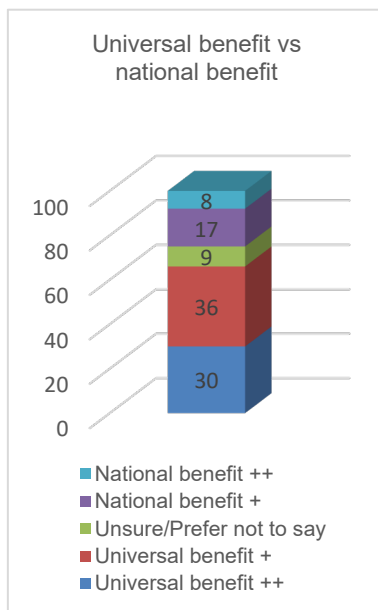
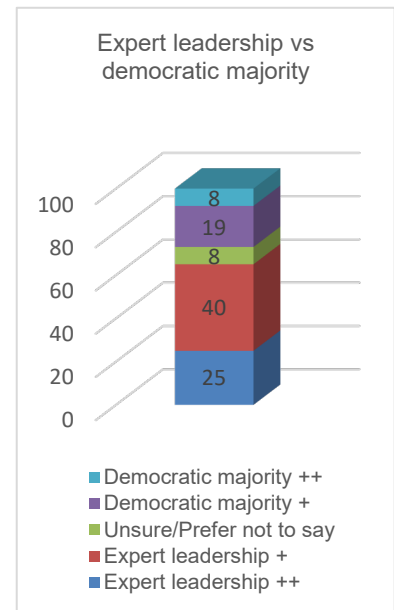
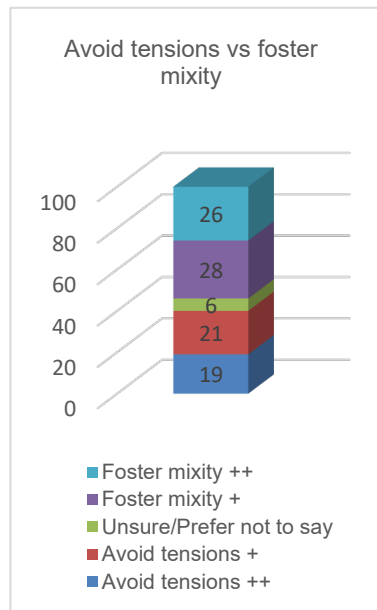
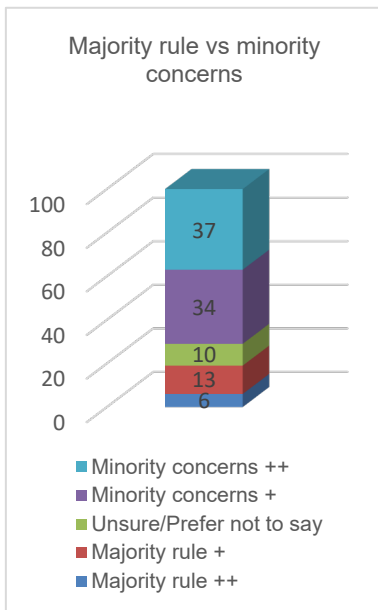
There are a number of largely unanimous areas for the South African public in terms of how to arbitrate between contradictory positive value choices. For example, 74% want to ring fence gender equality even if it conflicts with the respect of religious traditions while only 16% are willing to make the opposite choice. Similarly, 71% will privilege minority concerns over majority rule (19%), 66% will prioritise a more universal benefit over the option of a greater national benefit (25%), and the same for expert leadership (65%) over democratic preferences (27%).

Beyond those cases of overwhelming preferences, there are also relatively clear majority of South Africans who will privilege forcing mixity (54%) over avoiding tensions (40%), emphasising critical skills (56%) over respect for authority (38%), reducing unemployment benefits (55%) to avoid increasing taxes (25%), or protecting public order (51%) over freedom of speech (40%). The most balanced division is between preference for freedom of speech (46%) over avoiding religious offence (44%).

South Africa does not very significantly differ from the other two case studies, though we note in particular that South Africa is the most unanimous in its support for reducing benefits for the unemployed rather than increase taxes in a context of crisis.

In that sense, the tension scales are proving very valuable, because they suggest that not only is the value narrative very similar across all three countries, but also that South Africans are largely aligned with the other two case studies, and in fact closer to the distributions noted in Britain than in highly multicultural Malaysia.





3.1.7 How do Britons arbitrate between conflicting values? A tension scale analysis

The tension scales analysis in the United Kingdom brings about some interesting findings which strongly help us understand the key arbitrations that citizens perform when having to decide between competing positive values in situations where they are incompatible – as in frequent in society and life.

In some respects, the British value preferences are very clear. For instance, when it comes to arbitrating between gender equality and religious traditions, the British population overwhelmingly favours the gender equality side (81% vs 9). The situation is almost as clear when it comes to arbitrating between minority concerns (59%) and majority rule (27%).

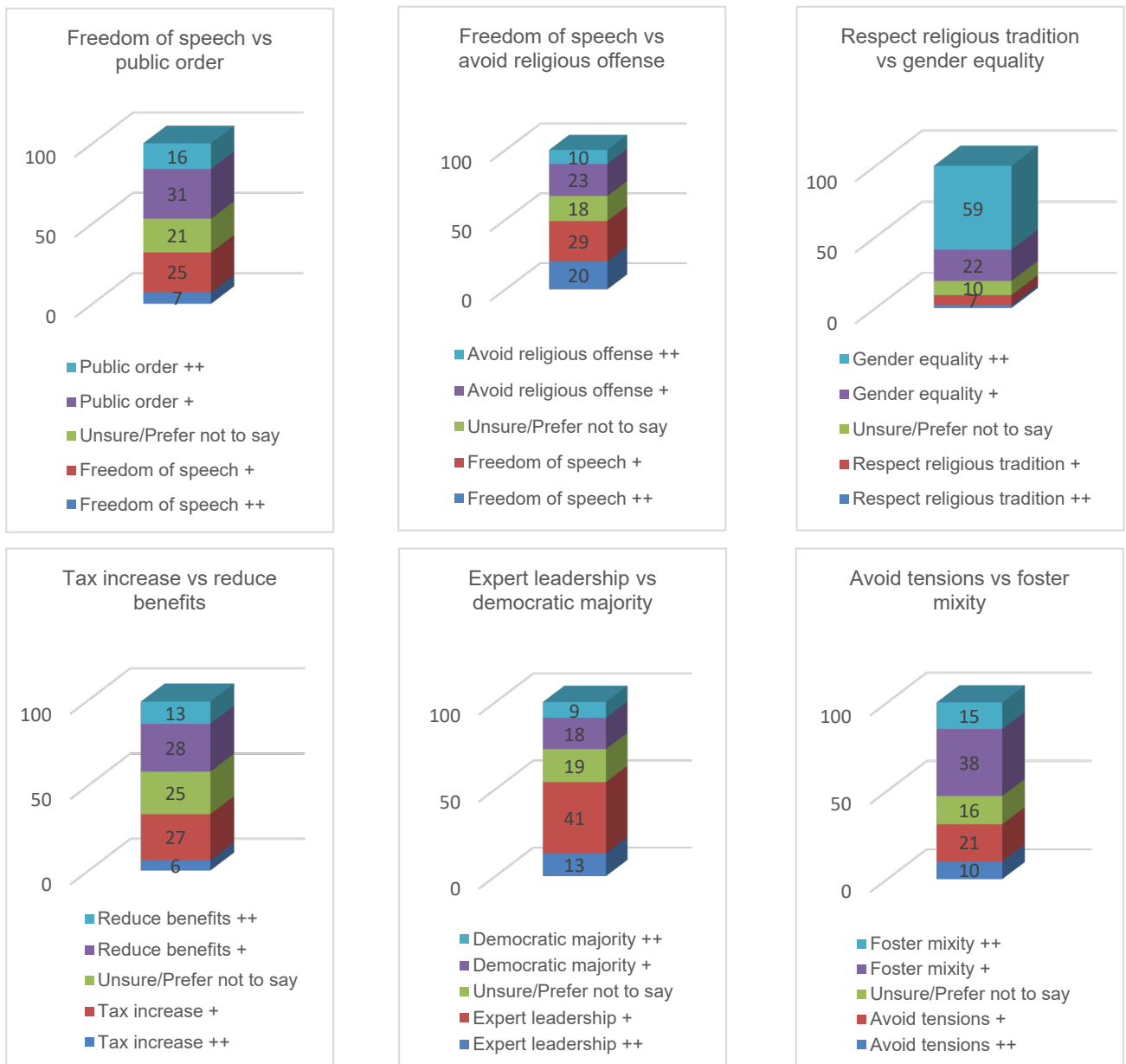
There are still relatively clear majorities in favour of expert leadership (54%) as opposed to democratic majority preferences (27%), prioritising universal benefits over national ones (2% vs 31), imposing mixity even if it risks perpetuating tensions (53% vs 31), prioritising freedom of speech even if it causes religious offence (49% vs 33) or encouraging children to cultivate critical skills (48%) over emphasising respect for authority (34%). By

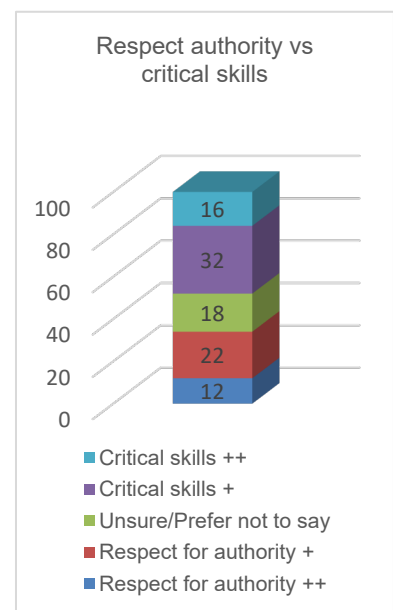
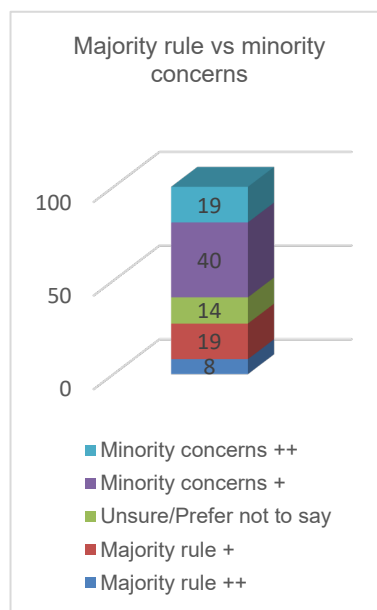
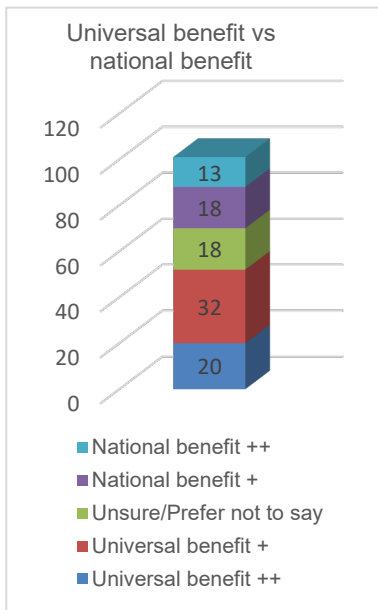
contrast, the dominant British respondents' value system puts public order ahead of freedom of speech (47% vs 32).

Finally, a small number of issues are really cases for clear divisions, for instance between reducing benefits for the unemployed (41%) or accepting tax increases (33).

Comparing the United Kingdom to Malaysia and South Africa does not reveal very large differences, but on balance, the United Kingdom is by far the most socially protective of the three (33% would favour tax increase over a reduction of unemployment benefits vs 25% in South Africa and 24% in Malaysia), and the most secular, i.e. the country which most clearly emphasises both gender equality (81% vs 74% in South Africa and 58% in Malaysia) and freedom of speech (49% vs 44% in South Africa and 27% in Malaysia) over religious tradition in the first case and risk of religious offence in the latter.

Overall, the tension scales are suggesting that in when citizens are forced to choose, there are relatively clear majority emerging on many issues, in particular in favour of "humanist" values over "multicultural" solutions (e.g., gender equality, mixity, etc) but much more balanced divides along ideological value lines, for instance between more protective and more liberal approaches to both unemployment and personal freedoms.





3.2 Qualitative Findings

3.2.1 Overview of Data

Staff Interviews: A total of 25 staff interviews were conducted across the three countries, beginning on the 2nd of June and completed on the 2nd of July 2020. Staff interviews included a topic guide that covered 16 questions (including sub-questions or follow-ups) on average. The interviews had an average duration of 49 minutes, ranging from 30 to 68 minutes long. The gender composition of the staff samples was overwhelmingly female, with 64% women and 36% of men participating in the pilot. The age range was more inclusive (24 to 65 years of age), with a median age of 34 years old and an average of 37. Staff were also quite diverse in terms of their length of employment with the British Council, with the shortest employed member having worked only 3 months at the time of data collection, and the most senior staff member having worked at the British Council for 33 years. The staff interviewed came from different programmes and departments and all levels of seniority were represented.

Stakeholder Interviews: A total number of 9 stakeholder interviews were conducted across the three countries, beginning on the 9th of June and completed on the 17th of July. Stakeholder interviews included a topic guide that covered 14 questions (including sub-questions or follow-ups) on average. The interviews had an average duration of 48 minutes, ranging from 30 to 63 minutes long. The gender composition of the stakeholder sample was overwhelmingly female, with 67% women and 33% men participating in the pilot. The stakeholder sample was considerably older than the staff's, with an age range of 36 to 59 years old, and a median and average age of 46. The stakeholders interviewed came from different sectors including the national governments of the pilot countries – more specifically, the Department of Education –, development NGOs, arts organisations, other European cultural organisations, local legal institutions, international British organisations and diplomatic British institutions. An interesting point to note, and potentially reflect on its impact, is the use of 'you' when discussing the British Council and addressing the interviewer. This tends to reflect an identification of the researcher as a member of the organisation itself, which in turn could have impacted how Stakeholders chose to answer questions.

Focus groups: A total of 10 focus groups was conducted across the three pilot countries. The total number of participants was 94, with an average participation per country as follows: 10 participants per focus group in Malaysia (where 4 focus groups were conducted), 9 participants per focus group in South Africa (where 3

focus groups were conducted) and 9 participants in the United Kingdom (where 3 focus groups were conducted).

The Findings section for the qualitative fieldwork is divided into two segments; 1) the thematic content analysis of the data, focusing on how meaning is constructed around core concepts and values; and 2) an analysis of the deliberative processes of the focus groups, in particular examining the different formats (chat/chat and audio/audio-video only) and frames (values under threat; cultural values etc.) and their impact on the quality of the discussion.

3.2.2 The role of shared values in International Cooperation

“Do we want to have the same world everywhere? I’m not sure.” – interviewee, Malaysia

Values play a crucial role in creating positive perceptions of organisations such as the British Council, and for enabling cooperation between the British Council and other organisations, local communities and partners. In particular, one way that values play a crucial role is the extent to which they align the mission of an organisation with its actions and behaviours.

Across the qualitative datasets, certain values 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. When discussing what values were important for international cooperation in particular, the following values were mentioned frequently across the datasets; tolerance of difference and open-mindedness, sensitivity to local cultures, issues and differences, creativity in aligning organisational goals with diverse contextual environments and needs, listening to learn rather than to fix, sharing best practice for mutual learning and mindfulness of how ‘sameness’ might be expressed in different ways. What unifies this list of values is their emphasis on difference, rather than sameness. Crucially, within the qualitative datasets, international cooperation is premised on valuing difference in order to allow for both parties to give, and take, from the relationship.

Valuing difference and learning from & through differences

In contrast to the quantitative findings, the qualitative data also emphasised that an overarching priority for successful international cooperation is not necessarily what countries have in common, but rather a perspective and approach that values difference. Through valuing difference, international cooperation was perceived as both possible and genuine, because it allows for the consideration of what makes countries different, and thereby what things they can learn from each other. As one focus group participant remarked, cultural relations is a “two-way learning” process, and so valuing difference as something to learn from, and through, was considered crucial for international cooperation to be perceived as such, and not as a top-down imposition of changes from a more powerful British organisation.

In contrast to valuing difference, an emphasis on ‘sameness’ or commonality draws in concerns about power dynamics, where the question of how sameness is agreed upon, and whose version of ‘sameness’ is used to determine which shared characteristics before important to emphasize. The tendency to want to emphasise sameness comes from an assumption that, finding what makes us all similar, i.e., what ultimately defines us as one human race, will allow for harmony by bringing to light that we are more similar than different. However, existing research within cultural psychology finds that this harmony is rarely achieved, as higher-order categories such as ‘human’ often become tools for in-group favouritism and discrimination⁴. Translated in the following context; by valuing sameness over difference, less powerful organisations or communities might

⁴ Bilewicz, M., & Bilewicz, A. (2012). Who defines humanity? Psychological and cultural obstacles to omniculturalism. *Culture & Psychology, 18*(3), 331-344.

perceive a pressure to conform to a ‘sameness’ defined in terms of what the British (of the British Council) might perceive as important to emphasize as similar, which in turn allows for less adaptation and agility on the part of the organisation, and in turn requiring more so from others (organisations, communities, citizens) to ‘fit’. In contrast, due to the wealth or resources and networks of the British Council, it was perceived as being precisely in a powerful position to engage with and value difference, both locally and abroad, and should do so in a way that allowed the organisation to grow and develop. This is further something that was seen as setting the British Council apart from other international organisations, with which it was compared favourably. One of the ways that valuing difference was possible was by engaging more with local partners and working through partners rather than being an actor on the ground. As one partner remarked in a focus group:

“There's also a desire to be included and represented in certain decision-making and things like that. Because it's always like the brand is used but then you're never consulted. So you're never asked like what actually do we want, it's like all them give you that, but we didn't need that. So yeah, just to be part of the process would help.”

A move towards greater collaboration and consultation was also seen as positive for countering suspicions around what the aim of the British Council was when it worked with local communities, as participants mentioned it being perceived by some as an ‘outsider’. Similarly, a crucial point emphasised throughout the qualitative data was the British Council's wealth of intelligence and knowledge of the diverse contexts within which it operated, with some participants emphasising that more international cooperation could be fostered simply by focusing on interlinking the British Council's offices with each other, rather than mainly with the United Kingdom.

Valuing difference is also linked to two other key values emphasised throughout the research in all countries, namely the value of respect and open-mindedness. Respect features prominently across the three countries as the core value which the British Council should be championing, with open-mindedness coming 3rd or 4th in terms of priorities. Cultural organisations such as the British Council were perceived more favourable if they were both knowledgeable about, and respectful towards, local cultures, communities and practices. Respect entailed not only respecting differences, but also respecting the limitations of what can and cannot be achieved through international cooperation. As one staff member explained:

“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. Yeah, absolutely. And if the values do not align, I don't think it is our place to push our values. We can explain our values, we can create awareness about them. But we have to respect where we are.”

This idea of respecting differences in order to successfully achieve international cooperation is also linked to showing an open-mindedness allowed for agility and adaptability, which, with the uncertainties of COVID-19 were seen as particularly necessary traits to have as an international organisation (see section 4.2.3 below). Being open-minded was discussed not only as valuable for learning from other cultures but also for learning how to adapt organisational practices to make them meaningful across diverse contexts. Successful international cooperation hinges not only on learning about the environment that you want to work within, but also making yourself, and your resources, relevant to the people within that environment. As the section on COVID-19 makes clear below, sustainability (as an organization) becomes increasingly important for international cooperation and the work of cultural relations organisation to be seen as meaningful and, particularly in times of crisis, useful.

The importance of respect and open-mindedness brings us back again to the ways in which the link between values, behaviour and attitudes manifest in contexts of international cooperation. If a cultural organization is perceived as respectful, open-minded and valuing difference, then its approach towards engaging with other cultures, communities and organisations will be seen as flexible and adaptable, rather than one that is seen as imposing, exploiting and potentially extracting resources from a local context.

Ultimately, valuing difference can function to build trust by emphasising how international cooperation is a two-way process of mutual dialogue and learning, where the starting-point is defining what makes us different and how we can build on these differences to improve, share and build innovative networks, partnerships and initiatives in diverse national contexts. However, as cultural organisations come from a culture themselves, there is the issue that the political agenda or goals of a nation come to overshadow or define the cultural goals pursued. In particular, the Brexit vote and the United Kingdom leaving the EU has had important implications for the image of the British Council, and what the true nature of 'British' values are. As one staff interviewee said about Brexit: *"I think Brexit was quite a big deal for the British Council because ultimately, we're premised on cooperation and openness to nationalising people's experiences. And I think, yeah, that vote was seen as kind of a move in the opposite direction. And so I think it's quite a difficult thing to square in a lot of people's mind"*.

Through emphasising an agenda that is defined by international cooperation aimed at achieving particular goals, the potential threat or suspicion leveraged at the British Council as purely interested in exporting Britishness and extracting resources and talent from countries can be circumvented through a focus on achieving goals within local contexts themselves. This framing emphasises that international cooperation is not about creating 'the same world everywhere' but about uniting difference around a shared goal, rather than shared cultural characteristics.

3.2.3 International Cooperation in light of the COVID-19 pandemic

Our qualitative research (interviews and focus group) has shown that the emphasis on values changes when coronavirus is brought into the conversation. While people explicitly say that their core values do not change, specific behaviours and principles come to the fore and are emphasised over others as especially important in times of a crisis.

Before going into the values people believe become crucial in crises like the one we are facing, it is worth outlining the psychological background in which these emerge. Uncertainty is the new defining factor of our lives, and it can quickly trigger distressing feelings. One participant described it as a *"fear of not knowing"* and believed it was a widespread feeling across the globe - *"It's everywhere around the world"*. The overwhelming spread of the virus has also fostered self-reflection at the individual and community level. Many participants expressed that the pandemic had been and had to be a moment of reckoning, of profound questioning of the future direction that societies should take: *"We really have to ask ourselves, what is important? What does really matter?"*. The sentiment of being at a crossroads that will define the future of humanity, the feeling of living through a transition to something new, was also emphasised by many, although this certainty was again fogged by the complete ignorance of the direction of such change: *"Things are going to change. I don't know if they're going to change for the best, but change is coming anyway. Yeah. Whether you want it or not"*.

In this context of uncertainty, deep reflection and change, the values that were more generally highlighted in the context of the pandemic are primarily compliance and adaptability. Compliance was understood as a combination of integrity, that is, knowing right from wrong and following the rules, and self-responsibility, that is, recognising that one's actions have consequences not only for oneself but also for others, especially in a context where no one knows how dangerous one's actions are. In this regard, the conversations emphasised that *"We need to step out of being focused on me and being focused on society and community and how my actions impact on the lives of others"*. Adaptability was also identified as being fundamental to overcome the challenging situation in which people, organisations and countries found themselves in. The capacity to adapt was associated with flexibility and the values of innovativeness and creativity.

Trust was also a very important value in the conversations but in different ways. On the one hand, some people expressed a lack of trust in others triggered by the pandemic. Some participants reported knowing of relatives, friends and acquaintances that were not following lockdown rules. A sense of frustration could be noticed in some of the contributions: *"We are saying 'Take all these precautions' and in spite of it, people (...) are still breaking the rules. They're still not following it"*. On the other hand, everyone recognised that in some areas of

life, trust has become essential, for instance, when working from home or following government guidance. Managers need to trust that their employees are actually working, employees need to trust that employers will protect workers' rights, citizens need to trust that the restrictions imposed by governments are for the greater good.

The pandemic was seen as offering both challenges and opportunities for the British Council, international cooperation and cultural relations.

Challenges for international cooperation and cultural relations caused by COVID-19

Regarding challenges, first, the financial implications of COVID were discussed with British Council staff concerning the non-profit programmes suffering the most, with more focus and energy moving towards profit-generating work. Beyond the British Council, there is the question whether the financial models of international cooperation and cultural relations initiatives will be deemed unsustainable by governments facing increased public spending and unprecedented economic crises in their countries. As one stakeholder said: *"I think this is definitely something where not only values are tested, but also systems are tested"*.

Secondly, fears about staff redundancies triggered questions about how big international organisations sustain relationships with local partners. Some staff showed confidence that, as an organisation, the British Council would find ways to maintain partnerships and projects with the local community. However, testimonials by partners, beneficiaries and even staff, highlighted the importance of individual staff members in developing and sustaining the key networks needed for the British Council to sustain its brokering role in society. Continuity of engagement was emphasised by partners and users as one of the key values for international cooperation, understood as the importance of maintaining regular contact with and presence in communities, especially in disadvantaged contexts. The pandemic and its impact on staff may put this value at risk.

Third, the reduction of international travel and the move to an online world was said to pose a threat to one of the core aims of the British Council and pillars of cultural relations, which is connecting people internationally and fostering trusting relations with local communities. There was a caution warned against the potential appeal of moving everything online. Face-to-face interaction, putting oneself in a completely different environment, meeting people in their countries of origin, was reported as having a transformative power that can't be mirrored by online tools.

Fourth, the digitalisation of cultural and international cooperation activities was seen as potentially preventing certain groups from accessing them: *"People who we try – who we want to reach, might not have the infrastructure network infrastructure to be able to connect to us digitally"*. Several participants warned that communities with limited access to internet and technology could be excluded from programmes they used to benefit from if face-to-face engagement is not resumed.

Finally, some participants were concerned that narratives around the origin of the pandemic coming from specific parts of the world could exacerbate a resistance to engage in face-to-face interaction with foreigners. This would have an impact on international collaborations, as was expressed by one participant:

"I don't know if that will change how people perceive, you know, partnering with overseas organisations (...). I don't know if that will change in the future. If we say, "Oh, we have a group of researchers coming from the United Kingdom to deliver a training", I don't know, people might think "Oh my words!" you know - not the United Kingdom specifically I'm just giving you an example".

Hence, international cooperation and cultural relations institutions face the challenge of reproducing in a pandemic world the type of interactions and relationships that built trust and true collaboration in the past.

Opportunities for engaging with values in international cooperation brought by COVID

The main opportunity presented by the COVID pandemic relates back to the psychological effects it has had on people. The attitude of deep reflection and reevaluation of assumptions is, for many, the perfect background against which conversations for more meaningful and value-driven cooperation can emerge:

“Actually, what the COVID has done is made us all rethink how we what what what are the things that we have to value, like time and family and culture and work and food. I think it's actually made everyone rethink re-evaluate who we are and how we function and how we how do we survive during this crisis? Yeah.”

Many interviewees (British Council staff and stakeholders) saw moments of crises as an opportunity to strengthen commitment with their organisations' mission: *“Coronavirus has just shown us even more what the levels of inequality and poverty are like, so, it means that we [are] even more committed to social justice”*. In the specific case of the British Council, the potential retreat inward that COVID might cause, potentially exacerbating rejection towards foreign people and ideas, was to be fought with an even greater commitment to international exchange, brokering and opportunity creating in the future.

The capacity to adapt and the opportunity to flexibilise approaches was also widely explored. As pointed above, international cooperation and cultural organisations have relied heavily on face-to-face interaction, pushing it to limits that are perhaps unsustainable (environmentally, financially, etc.). As one interviewee said *“I'm not sure I should be traveling to Malaysia to deliver a two hour presentation. I think a lot of people are wondering about (...) the impact we have on the environment and the funding that goes into that that might go elsewhere”*. As a result, COVID may bring to the fore new issues that the international cooperation organisations should take ownership of.

In fact, as shown in tables 9, 10 and 11 (see section 4.2.2), Sustainability is a value that the British Council community (staff, stakeholders and users) believes the organisation should be championing, and the pandemic offers a great opportunity to reflect on how this value can be placed at the core of its operations and cultural relations mission. A way of doing so could be introducing this value in the conversation in the context of shared, global threats, which may foster dialogue at the international level and strengthen bonds between people from diverse backgrounds. For instance, our focus group participants showed great interest in including the consequences of the climate emergency in the conversation. It was perceived as a threat to present and future humanity that triggered emphasis on values that refer to social accountability, community cohesion and *“respect for all living things”*.

Finally, while acknowledging concerns around access, some participants saw the digitalisation of communications as an opportunity to bring more diverse people together, in the same (digital) room, which in a pre-pandemic world would have been time and resource consuming. They believed this change opened up opportunities for hearing more voices, and more diverse, and for enhancing cooperation between communities that are geographically apart.

3.2.4 Staff Interviews

3.2.4.1. Cross-country analysis

Key values echoed across Staff interviews: Emphasis on inclusion and openness to diversity, on mutuality (although with specific criticisms of its practice) and brokering cultural relations, connecting people internationally and fostering the personal development and sustainability of young people through professionalism.

While there were differences in country-specific issues and local values that arose in the interviews, there were also common themes that cut across. Below we summarize the key themes that overlapped:

Theme 1: Values in and across the organisation

Across the three countries, there was an awareness of a 'value-split' between the organisations for-profit and non-profit sectors, and that this split was embodied in the staff that worked in the different sectors. This was also mirrored in tensions around the broader agenda of the British Council, with some interpreting it as a soft power tool for the United Kingdom and others seeing it as a genuine cultural relations organisation. The two groups appear to hold different values, which has an impact on the practice of the organisation. For example, staff working within the non-profit sectors were perceived as promoting the British Council's cultural values more fully, including EDI values and creativity and mutuality. As a result, some staff feel the British Council lacks a common thread, which creates a sense of disjointedness.

Theme 2: The external image of the British Council

The data collected echoed similar reflections on the external image of the British Council, which echoed either a positive image among those who already worked with the British Council or a confused/unclear image among those who did not work with the British Council. Staff are aware that the understanding of the scope of the work that the British Council does by the local population is very limited and, sometimes, inaccurate. Key similarities around the external image included a lack of awareness of the British Council (and particularly its more non-profit work), the British Council being misconstrued as another United Kingdom-based organisation (Embassy, High Commission, Immigration-related Office, British Consulate) or a suspicion that the British Council was working on behalf of the United Kingdom government as a neo-colonial soft power organisation.

Theme 3: Managing the political landscape

The relationship between the British Council and the local government was discussed in all interviews. In Malaysia and South Africa, it was believed that alignment with local government was crucial for the organization's ability to operate and building trust with the government was seen as important. It seems that among the staff of local origin (compared to staff in Malaysia/South Africa who were non-locally appointed) a close relationship with the local national government was seen favourably, while the non-locally appointed staff (and United Kingdom-based staff) perceived it to be important to demonstrate independence from government.

Within this theme, interviewees also addressed concerns regarding the British Council's relationship to the United Kingdom government, which often raised suspicions regarding the intent and mission of the organisation abroad, something that in turn limited the extent to which genuine mutuality was seen as possible. Lastly, the impact of Brexit was discussed, including the potential role played by the British Council in doing 'damage control' to the negative and isolationist image that Brexit was communicating abroad.

Theme 4: Values in 'theory' v. values in 'practice'

Across all countries, interviewees reflected on the differences between values in theory (and statement) and values in practice. By discussing a model where the British Council works 'through' partners and is limited by government relations, it was perceived as difficult to control the follow-through of values in practice. While most staff discussed the fact that the British Council tends to partner with like-minded partners and organisations, it was nevertheless seen as difficult to enforce British Council values blindly, emphasizing both the need to work with the goodwill of local partners but also to contextualize and localize how values are translated in practice, where structural barriers made it difficult to implement a 'one-size-fits-all' approach. It was also mentioned (in non-United Kingdom interviews) that non-locally appointed British Council staff sometimes did not live by the values of the organisation, showing lack of interest in integrating and learning from the local culture that they worked in.

Theme 5: Impact of COVID & British Council's future

The pandemic was seen as offering both challenges and opportunities.

Challenges: First, the financial implications of COVID were discussed concerning the non-profit programmes suffering the most, with more focus and energy moving towards profit-generating work. Secondly, fears about

staff redundancies entailing loss in partnerships with local and community-rooted organisations highlighted the importance of individual staff members in developing and sustaining the key networks needed for the British Council to sustain its brokering role in society. Third, the reduction of international travel and the move to an online world was said to pose a threat to one of the core aims of the British Council, which is connecting people internationally and fostering trusting relations with local communities. There was a caution warned against the potential appeal of moving everything online, which would not only threaten this but also exclude communities with limited access to internet and technology. In addition, the need to reflect an open-minded image of Britain, in light of Brexit and other potentially negative United Kingdom government decisions, and to separate the British Council from the United Kingdom government was seen as a potential challenge given the uncertainty around funding of the British Council moving forward, and the potential renewed reliance on government funding.

Opportunities: Staff reflected on the adaptability of the British Council in light of the pandemic and some perceived it as an opportunity to re-evaluate the organization's commitment to certain key values and practices. For example, interviewees reflected on the potential retreat inward that COVID might cause and argued that this made the British Council's commitment to international exchange, brokering and opportunity creating even more important to emphasize in the future. Some staff reflected on the continued need to engage in face-to-face relation-building, but that travel should focus more on exchange rather than sending British Council senior management staff to various locations and countries on short trips.

3.2.4.2. *Malaysia*

Malaysian staff interviews were predominantly focused around acknowledging and respecting differences in values, how shared values are contextualized and limited by top-down powers and the need to engage in genuine mutuality and exchange.

Theme 1: The challenges of managing value alignment

With such a unique multicultural and multireligious context as Malaysia, the staff interviewees focused on discussing how to align the values of the organisation with those of the diversity of values of the local community. It was argued to be important to maintain a position of neutrality in relation to values, to not be seen as favouring one segment of society over another. In particular, discussions centred around how valuing inclusion and diversity was something that was seen as overlapping between the organisation and the Malaysia context, but that these values might be interpreted or contextualized differently. This was most clearly illustrated in discussions around LGBTQ+ inclusion:

“These values are programs that probably we could do it in Australia or the United Kingdom, for instance, but we don't really do it consciously in Malaysia because of that, because we're still trying to build that strong relationship with, with the ministries and we don't want to be seen as having values which they might not be very connected with.”

As an organization, the British Council was seen as open and providing a safe and inclusive environment for LGBTQ+ staff. One of the key values that staff attribute to the organization was 'inclusive', which was echoed by all staff members, and this was linked to the organization's emphasis on valuing people, both their own and those they worked with. However, there was also awareness among staff that while this discourse of openness and inclusion was possible within the boundaries of the internal dynamics of the organisation, it was not necessarily something that could be publicly signalled. Staff discussed different strategies through which these sensitivities were managed, illustrating that staff tried in various ways to allow for LGBTQ+ rights to be valued, while at the same time being mindful of local restrictions and authorities.

This example was reflective of the bigger challenge of contextualizing the implementation of values in order to align them with community values, but also in ensuring that the procedures and agendas implemented were meaningful within the local community (rather than blindly adapted from the United Kingdom model). Respect

for local cultures was seen as crucial for building trust with the community and a good relationship with the government was in turn seen as beneficial to be able to do work and to approach communities and partners. As one participant remarked, this meant that value alignment and implementation was a times selective:

“I guess we'll all work on a project, you know, just to give you sort of, like, you know, a hypothetical sort of, you know, way of answering is that all of us will work on a project, but on very selected agendas, I would say, you know, very safe, you know, things like environment or, you know, things like that, and even the arts, it will be very selected in terms of like, you know, what would benefit both parties sort of situation?”

Theme 2: Learning from the British Council v. mutuality

Another key theme in the Malaysian context was the tension between positioning the British Council as an ‘older and wiser’ organisation from which Malaysia could learn and emphasizing the need and opportunity for genuine mutuality, where the British Council could also learn from Malaysia.

In some staff interviews, the British Council was positioned as an organisation that could teach local organisations better practices, and as a key English learning provider that heightened opportunities for employment and international experiences. The service side of the British Council was more well known, and oftentimes the creative arts or science programmes were seen as less relevant or important in terms of the mission of the British Council. In a lot of ways, this framing of the British Council’s mission often led to it being confused with other United Kingdom organisations including the High Commission. The positioning of the British Council as an organisation that Malaysia could learn from, was discussed positively but was also seen as a delicate balancing act to manage; *“But then even for me and those working for British Council we are very careful in, in managing the relationship because we also don't want to be seen like I'm biased by United Kingdom if you read the history, Malaysia used to be colonized by the British.”*

This, in turn, was linked to the British Council potentially being seen as a neo-colonial organisation, something heightened by the message of Brexit, seen as counter to the one being promoted by the British Council. Thus, staff interviewees reflected on the tensions of balancing a “soft power approach”, as one interviewee remarked:

“We need to ensure that we don't force ourselves and force our expertise or what our objectives are to the community, but we do it in a way that, we call it soft power where we share and we try to find a middle ground to ensure that we're not just pushing ourselves through whatever we want to be doing with the community because there's a bit of sensitivity, when, you know, you come in and although we've been here for 70 years, but there are some people who think oh, you know, what are the British trying to, you know, are expecting out of Malaysia and you know, you know, it's quite still a bit sensitive in that sense”.

In contrast, there was also a lot of discussion around the importance of genuine engagement and dialogue within the local context, both on the side of staff and in relation to how partnerships were built and how genuine mutuality was achieved.

It was argued that recruiting local staff (i.e., Malay) was a useful strategy for the British Council to foster these relationships and to show recognition of mutuality. One interviewee also commented on the, at times, lack of integration or interest in the local community within the British Council staff body, arguing that there were two kinds of staff members, those interested in the local culture and in sharing and learning from it, and those who worked in Malaysia but tended to live by their home country values and culture, which was seen as slightly problematic in terms of embodying the values of the organisation.

Malaysia is proud of its culture and customs, and the lack of interest shown by some was seen as offensive and damaging to trust-building with local partners. This was discussed by one local staff member in relation to previous incidents where Malay professionals had highlighted and praised the work of the British Council but seen as neglecting the role of the Malaysian community or institutions. Therefore, mutuality meant not only

learning from each other, but equal recognition and respect afforded to both parties. As one interviewee mentioned, this was largely down to how partnerships were approached and through the organization's communication: *"The leaders, they will feel a bit more, you know, defensive, when if you only talk about the United Kingdom and not mentioning what Malaysia has done, what they have achieved, so it is the way how we approach it and communicate."*

Theme 3: Human values rather than British values and the value of difference

When discussing the values of the British Council, similarly to staff in the United Kingdom, Malaysia staff did not necessarily perceive the core values of the organisation as unique to 'Britain'. When discussing the values that should be timeless, shared across organisations and across nations, these were seen as values that were human, not British. Where 'unique' British values were discussed, these were mainly within the domain of professionalism, ethics and work integrity, rather than in the domain of cultural values and values around social and human relations. As such, the British Council was not necessarily seen as an organisation that was pioneering cultural values, but rather as embodying key human values that were seen as shared by many, but potentially contextualized differently. Related to this was an emphasis on valuing difference, where shared values were crucial, but so was diversity and difference; *"I think potentially some of the values can be shared. But I think that for the sake of diversity, I would not push it too hard. I would not want to, do we want to have the same world everywhere?"*

British Council values were seen as overlapping with the values of partners, but there was some nuance in how these were implemented or conceptualized. For example, a discussion around valuing inclusion and diversity was seen as important. However, this did not necessarily mean inclusion in relation to sexualities, as this was seen as restricted by the official government position in Malaysia (see Theme 1). The ability to be flexible in relation to the interpretation of largely shared values was important, and it also allowed for synergies to be built while respecting differences that might be seen from a Western perspective as less progressive. Values were argued to be useful as guiding principles but not as mechanisms of control.

3.2.4.3. South Africa

In South Africa, 8 staff members were interviewed (62.5% men, 37.5% women). Their ages ranged from 27 to 39 years old. 62.5% of the interviewees were South African nationals, while the remaining 37.5% were nationals from neighbouring countries. The length of employment at the British Council ranged from 16 months to 15 years. The staff came from different teams and programmes and different levels of seniority were represented.

In addition to the key common themes identified for the three pilot countries (see section 2.2 below), South Africa presents very specific characteristics that are acknowledged by the staff interviewed for this research project. These specificities, very closely linked to the history shared between the United Kingdom and South Africa, are crucial to understanding the role of values in the British Council's work, as well as the challenges it faces in the country and could be summarised in the three following themes.

Theme 1: Different value-engagement across the British Council South Africa

As mentioned in cross-country analysis (Theme 1), the British Council has difficulties in implementing a consistent and coherent value practice. The South African office is not an exception as these difficulties are felt across programmes and units.

Apart from the internal value-split between for-profit and non-profit units within the British Council, which is translated into people with different worldviews being hired by different sections of the organisation, in South Africa, there is a feeling that some programmes are value-based, while others aren't. An interviewee reported that conversations about how values inform the work of the British Council in South Africa are only happening in a few teams, but not across the organisation. Despite recent exercises to discuss what values should guide the work of the British Council in South Africa, there is a feeling that these are not put in practice and result

into words “*framed and put on the wall*”, with no real consequences. One of the causes of such difference is, according to another interviewee, due to different procurement processes and different types of contracts. It was reported that while values are embedded in the procurement process and contracts for social and cultural programmes, this is not the case for exams.

Mutuality, which is deemed to be a core value for the work of the British Council in South Africa, was repeatedly brought up as an example of the difficulties to realise the aspiration to be a value-driven organisation. On the one hand, the role of the British Council in the past may alter the meaning of mutuality in South Africa, something that is explored further in Theme 2. On the other hand, an interviewee felt that mutuality was a contentious value because the British Council often struggles to communicate its mission transparently and gain trust from its stakeholders. Finally, this trust is even harder to build due to the systems and bureaucracy with which the British Council operates, which limit the South African office’s capacity to bring as much benefit to South African programme beneficiaries as to British ones.

It is worth noting that part of the difficulty of putting values into practice in South Africa has to do with the country’s history. Several members of the staff implied that history must be considered when addressing how values should be understood and, most importantly, put in practice. They gave the example of equality and inclusion. They argued that these two values, which are core values of the British Council, may have to be realised in a very specific way in South Africa – probably different from other countries – due to the still very tangible consequences of apartheid and colonialism.

“If we take inclusion as a value in South Africa, we can then link inclusion to the fact that in the apartheid era, black minorities (*sic*) were excluded from you know, opportunities, from education, from getting a good education, they couldn’t attend any university that wanted to attend. So we can now say for example, in higher education, inclusion now means facilitating access to higher education for the previously marginalised groups of students. That’s something that’s basic to our context, but the value is though generic.”

Therefore, British Council staff in South Africa believe that a key aspect of their job is repackaging the values and messages they receive from the United Kingdom-based British Council for a South African audience.

Finally, the staff in South Africa felt that their office can have difficult conversations about race, colonialism and the impact and role these have at the British Council. Several staff members said that these conversations had been framed around, and on some occasions, prompted by the Black Lives Matter movement and protests in the USA. The willingness in the South African office to have these conversations was considered something unique and valuable since other country offices seem very reluctant or unable to address these issues openly. In this sense, staff saw the South African office as a pioneer that can inspire others to start complex conversations.

Theme 2: History: “a wound that never really heals”

The recent history of South Africa has important consequences for the current state of the country and the conditions of the British Council’s work there, especially due to the role of the United Kingdom in the colonial past of the African country and the white rule during apartheid. The impact on the British Council is felt at different levels and in different ways.

The most-reported consequence of the history between Britain and South Africa for the British Council is a constant aura of suspicion around the work of the British Council. Staff said that they are frequently inquired about the true intentions of the British Council when engaging with stakeholders and participants, in line with a widespread feeling in South Africa that European, and more specifically, British influence should be reduced.

Interestingly, this sense of suspicion and anti-British intervention is most strongly felt by very different ethnic groups, which an interviewee placed “*very far on different sides of the political spectrum*”. On the one hand,

Afrikaans people have expressed their opposition to the British Council labelling it as an agent of the British Empire to impose their language and culture on South Africans and linking it to conspiracy theories. On the other hand, black African groups pushing for decolonization and linked to the “Rhodes must fall” movement have responded very negatively to the association of the British Council South Africa with Britain.

Apart from ethnicity, age was also identified as a characteristic that shapes the population’s perceptions of the British Council. While the older generation is considered to be less aware and supportive of the British Council, the youth was consistently identified as the demographic group that is the most supportive of the British Council. British Council staff are confident that young South Africans (18-35 years old) see the British Council as an enabler, a generator of opportunities: *“I think it depends also on generations. (...) With the younger generation, things are changing, things are evolving. For me, I can understand... Right? The opportunities that are there, the positivity that comes with the British Council.”*

At the same time, an interviewee reflected on the lack of a clear historical role of the British Council in South Africa, unlike in other African countries, where the British Council is strongly associated with promoting literacy during the 20th century. This lack of a historical authoritative voice raises questions about the role of the British Council during apartheid which, in turn, has an impact on the credibility of some of the values that the British Council is currently trying to promote. Staff concurred that mutuality is the most affected value by this lack of credibility.

Finally, staff identified another source of suspicion towards and lack of credibility of the British Council. The work of British organisations in ex-colonies is often perceived by the general population as a mere facelift, a bogus operation to make the United Kingdom feel better about its colonial past and clear its conscience:

“I think to an extent some people, and maybe I would also, agree that the United Kingdom and the British... whatever British projects are in South Africa are... they like try to redeem... it's like trying to redeem themselves for what has happened while we were colonised, you know, trying to give back to the countries that were colonised by the British and trying to do good because of the bad that was done those years or things that were not done, according to the way it was supposed to.”

To add a layer of complexity, some staff view the shared history of the United Kingdom and South Africa as a positive background for British Council’s work. They believe that the fact that many people in South Africa are fluent in English is what allows the British Council to run most of its social programmes and bring benefit to the local population. Moreover, some South Africans see the United Kingdom as an ally because it stands for liberal values, with which they also identify the British Council.

An interviewee reported that these complexities, which could even amount to contradicting realities, create psychological tensions for the staff, who are constantly questioned by their fellow citizens and themselves about their work and their organisation: *“If I tell people I work for the British Council, some people will be like ‘You’re a puppet for the British’”*. Other interviewees also reported having difficulties to make even their families and friends understand and believe the mission of the British Council in South Africa, even after many years of being employed, or directly questioning the staff’s historical consciousness:

“It’s a matter of them... they may perceive that we forget where we come from. We are going over the other side of the fence and forgetting the other side of the fence. Yeah, right. Yeah. It’s a matter of ‘You’re forgetting your heritage and you are forgetting what we went through’.”

In conclusion, as an interviewee said, South Africa’s history of apartheid and colonialism is *“a wound that never really heals”* and will continue to have an impact on how the British Council’s work and mission are perceived by the local population. It remains to be seen whether this may affect the role of the British Council as convener of diverse, big conversations on values in the British ex-colonies.

Theme 3: Low public awareness and misconceptions of the British Council in South Africa

All the interviewees agreed that the British Council has an abnormally low public awareness in South Africa and, consequently, there is a great deal of confusion and ignorance around what the British Council does and represents.

They identified various reasons that could explain this phenomenon. First, the abovementioned lack of a clear role of the British Council in South Africa contrasts with the situation in other countries. For instance, in other African countries, but also South Asia, the British Council's social image is constructed around its library, or in Europe, around its English language courses, according to one interviewee. There is no such clear identification in South Africa. Second, the audiences targeted by the British Council seem limited and not aimed at the average South African. Third, the marketing strategy is not successful at telling the story of the work of the British Council – an interviewee labelled it as “old-fashioned”. And fourth, the low numbers of programme beneficiaries in South Africa (10,000-20,000 people in total according to an interviewee) means that there are very few people who have a good understanding of what the British Council does.

Regarding the last point, another interviewee reflected on the trade-off between quantity and quality when it comes to increasing the British Council's reach. She challenged that the focus had to be on reaching out to more people. She felt that, instead, engaging more deeply with the same group of people may be more in line with the values the British Council wants to promote.

In terms of misconceptions, apart from the usual confusion with the British High Commission or the British Government, another frequent assumption that the general population makes about the British Council is that it is a white institution, with exclusively white – and, more specifically, British – staff. Many (black) interviewees have had to deal with this assumption:

“The head of business development yesterday, she said she will go to a meeting and then they will look at her, and she will say: ‘I know what you thought. You thought British Council = white. No, that's me.’ Yeah. So the British is associated to the white. Yeah. British people.”

As proved by the anecdote above, and corroborated by many interviewees, what disrupts and changes these perceptions is the strong presence of Black staff in the South African office. In addition, all the staff members interviewed agreed that another successful way of improving the perception of the British Council in South Africa is to continue to do good work. They all reported personal experiences of conversations with customers, participants and partners praising the work of the British Council and emphasising how their perceptions had changed after working and engaging with them. Finally, an employee reflected on the weight that the name “British Council” carries in ex-colonies like South Africa, as well as the lack of meaning of the word “Council” for many, and she suggested that the organisation explore a change of name.

3.2.4.4. *United Kingdom*

The United Kingdom staff interviews focused predominantly on themes related to the political context (both domestic and abroad) within which the British Council operated, the impact political relations had on the work and image of the British Council, and on themes that focused on the brokering role of the organization as a way to realize its aim of mutuality. Criticism was leveraged at the organization's adherence to values both internally and in practice, how it missed opportunities to engage with difference instead of focusing on sameness, and how the ‘British’ in British Council was interpreted both internally and externally.

Theme 1: Value split in the British Council and the lack of an identity

United Kingdom staff members discussed a number of different values which they associated with the work of the organization, including the values in the official value statement, as well as personal values which they brought to their work which were not necessarily recognized as important by the organization itself. The many values discussed were narrowed down when discussing specifics of the British Council, including different programs, different sectors of the staff as well as different points in time. As is discussed below in the ‘cross-

country summary', perceptions of a value split within the organization were a dominant theme within the United Kingdom dataset. Participants spoke of how different values were embodied in the commercial and creative programmes;

I think that's determined by the nature of the program. So is it an income generation generating program where you have customers and where you want to keep your customers happy? You want repeat business or not? Or are you running a program working through other people, so you're just a kind of convener or administrator of a program because you're a consultant on it, you know, we bid for money. And I think both those things lend themselves to different values, different ways of doing things or ways of thinking about things, different ways of thinking about program participants.

This value split was not always perceived as problematic, but it did reflect negatively on the ability to sustain a coherent image of the British Council as a whole, and this was particularly evident in the United Kingdom, where the British Council was in general perceived to be less well known in its work; *"the totality of what we do is not always recognized. The value the value of what we do for the United Kingdom is not very often recognized or appreciated. Yeah, I don't think I don't think we resonate in the hearts and minds of British citizens, to be honest."* However, the perceived value split was for some participants an outcome of a business model that allowed for 'good work' to be done in the non-profit programmes through the income generated in the for-profit programmes. This trade-off was evident, but it was emphasized that transparency was needed in order to allow the public to understand how the values of the organization were translated into practice and embedded within the work on the ground:

There's always a bit of a conflict of interest between commercial business and then teaching English and exams, representing they say the English language sector in the United Kingdom. So I think transparency is something that's really crucial in what we do and how we communicate, what we do sort of, being quite upfront, define what our purpose is internationally and what we're doing and how our business model does require us to, you know, make money and some countries which needs to work in other countries to develop good work."

Despite this value split, throughout the interviews when reflecting on what defined the British Council's niche specifically, two key values emerged: mutuality and internationalism (through international exchange, connections and presence). It was argued by all staff that these needed to be nurtured and safeguarded, particularly in the current crisis, and that they reflected what was unique about the British Council in terms of its role as a broker. This discussion of nurturing the niche of the organization was also linked to its ability to remain relevant as an entity in a changing society by having a clear identity. Many participants remarked on external criticisms of the British Council as being a *'poor use of money'* and as *'having an unfair advantage in certain markets due to [our] closeness with government'*. Adapting and harnessing what makes the organization unique, in term of its values and work, was seen as more pressing than ever. As one participant remarked; *the classic British Council offer of, you know, we will give you access to the world and we will give you these platforms where you meet senior leaders and many of the youth organizations I work with, they have all of that already. And, you know, and, and the idea of youth voice and agency, they connect directly to governments. And they don't necessarily need us to do that."* Continuing saying that there is *"still a sense that if we're not funding things, what are we bringing that's additional stuff?"* This theme clearly illustrates how values, as guiding principles for behaviour and practice, impact and shape the identity of an organization, and in the case of the British Council, as one participant remarked, the British Council is not a wonderful organization, but *"it's an organization that does wonderful things."* This distinction hints at a lack of organizational identity, embodied in practices defined by key values.

Theme 2: The political overshadowing the cultural

British Council staff in the United Kingdom spent a disproportionate amount of their interviews referring to (or back to) the impact of politics on the work of the organisation. This was either in relation to the relationship the British Council has (or is seen to have) with the United Kingdom government, and the impact political events have on the organisation, or concerning how bilateral relations impacted its work abroad.

Focusing firstly on the domestic context, staff in the United Kingdom had mixed perspectives on the British Council's relationship to the United Kingdom government. While many reflected on the British Council's position as one that is *"at arm's length from government"* and therefore being able to be trusted more as an organisation, it was discussed that the nature of this relationship was not always clear to those outside of the organisation (or inside it) and that there was a need for "explaining" and being "transparent" in relation to the identity of the organisation and its relationship to power.

Importantly, staff felt that suspicion aimed at the British Council oftentimes occurred because it was believed that they worked 'for' the government, and in turn, United Kingdom politics tended to reflect negatively onto the organisation. The British Council was however argued to be in a unique position to compensate for some of the government's failings concerning the lack of cohesion and lack of global outlook; *"with the current political climate in the United Kingdom, I think particularly around Brexit, I think, and kind of the United Kingdom's wider global reputation, I think the work of the British Council has only become more important in trying to kind of create that – Well - mutual understanding but also kind of the friendly, a kind of a friendly arena for exchange and kind of setting up relationships and convening conversations in a way that I don't think our government here in the United Kingdom can."* As such, the future value of British Council as brokering international networks and collaborations was seen as even more pressing in light of COVID and the negatively perceived political changes taking place in the United Kingdom.

Staff felt that more could be done to promote the positive, non-politicized work that the British Council's does, as a way to communicate a public image of the organisation that counters suspicions of it working for the government. As one interviewee mentioned, *"because we're not actually a government body, the work that we can do and the trust and the transparency that we can provide, I think is really important in our current political climate."* This was seen as particularly pressing in diaspora communities in the United Kingdom, which were seen as targets of many negative government interventions and discourses, and by extension held generally heightened levels of suspicions against the British Council.

Focusing secondly on the international context, staff reflected on the impact of bilateral relations in either enabling or hindering the work of the British Council abroad. Successful examples of overcoming political tensions were mentioned, with Russia being the primary example. However, other countries such as Iran and India were also discussed as examples where the British Council was in a much trickier position as an organisation. Interestingly, while staff felt a need to differentiate between the British Council and the United Kingdom government, they were aware of the power that this coupling had for their ability to work with governments abroad. The 'arm's length from government' discourse was thus seen as mainly positive in affording the organisation legitimacy when approaching governments abroad. However, this proximity to the government could come with its own criticisms, as one interviewee remarked: *"I think Brexit was quite a big deal for the British Council because ultimately, we're premised on cooperation and openness to nationalizing people's experiences. And I think, yeah, that vote was seen as kind of a move in the opposite direction. And so I think it's quite a difficult thing to square in a lot of people's mind"*.

Theme 3: The British Council as a broker, not an implementor

A key image of the British Council held by United Kingdom-based staff was that it was an organisation that served a 'brokering role', where its main impact was through providing support, funding and resources to partners who in turn had first-hand contact with users and participants, and who implemented shared values and goals through their work on the ground. As such, one way in which staff discussed how to overcome the political image of the organisation and enable it to do good work locally was through partners. All staff reflected on the key role played by partnerships in enabling the British Council to have a meaningful and positive impact within local communities, particularly as the British Council often came with key resources needed to implement projects, while local partners came with an existing presence and trust with local citizens, artists and communities. Staff members perceived the value of their organisation through its supportive function, not necessarily leading on change and progress, but providing the resources and networks that would support community programmes to facilitate change. As one staff member said, *"our strength as an organisation is*

partnership". As with Malaysia, building trust with local partners was seen as crucial for achieving this. What is interesting in the context of the theme of partners is that many staff members reflected on how the British Council tended to work with likeminded partners, and discussed the missed opportunities that arose from this at times 'safe' approach to work, which impacted the ability to actually 'practice' key values, such as diversity and inclusion; *"We do a lot of very good work to try and ensure that programs are accessible, but I don't think we talk to the right people to make that happen."* This was linked to public perceptions of the BS as an 'elitist' and exclusive organization, and the need to adapt to maintain the organizations relevance;

Because of this, when asked how to expand the work of the British Council in the United Kingdom, staff emphasized partnerships, and a need to *"become more collaborative and agile as an organization"*. However, they also feared that these partnerships might be in danger due to COVID. With potential cuts in funding and staffing, existing staff members felt there was a potential threat to these partnerships as they very much hinged on the individuals themselves rather than the organisation. COVID was seen as leading to a "reduced workforce" and by implication *"changes to [British Council's] physical presence on the ground"* which were seen as troubling for an organization that has *"always drawn value for our work in the face-to-face, in the connections and always advocating that nothing beats person to person connection."*

This was interesting, as it seemed to indicate that the work of the British Council was largely due to the individual staff members themselves, with the bigger organisation being seen as a resource rather than as an actor. This also links to the findings in Theme 1, where the organizational identity as a whole was unclear, but the positive work stemming from it (and its staff) was perceived a 'wonderful.'

Theme 4: Engaging with difference

An interesting theme emerged around engaging with difference, with staff remarking on the organisation's tendency to avoid engaging with difference, yet its unique ability to be able to do so in a productive manner if it chose to.

Specifically, interviewees emphasized that the organisation tends *"to interact with institutions that share our values, and we struggle to bridge any sort of gap between those that don't."* Staff felt that partnerships were developed and maintained with like-minded organisations and 'friends' rather than branching out to engage with new or potentially diverging perspectives or communities. This was discussed as potentially problematic in a United Kingdom climate that was becoming increasingly polarized.

Despite this, staff felt the British Council was in a unique position to engage with difference, both locally and abroad, and should do so in a way that allowed the organisation to grow and develop. Many staff members mentioned the recent BLM (Black Lives Matter) movement and the British Council's issuing of a statement on it, which, in light of broader racial inequalities permeating the United Kingdom, was seen as necessary. When it came to differences in values, one staff member remarked that difference can be used for mutual growth, rather than enforcing an image of uniformity, which would, in turn, be seen as counter to the British Council's goal of 'mutuality'. Mutuality entailed engaging with difference as well as growing from it.

Staff members spoke positively about the unique position of the British Council in enabling dialogue across difference, in brokering exchange and opportunities, and that it would be a shame for this to be lost, either as a consequence of COVID or as a consequence of changes to the political landscape in the United Kingdom.

Theme 5: 'British' as a concept is neither inclusive domestically nor internationally

United Kingdom based staff were critical and mindful of what the 'British' in British Council stands for. Domestically it was seen as often leading to a London-centric approach, and internationally it was perceived as serving elites and at times being an exclusive and hard-to-reach organization. Both of these lines of discussion led to the conclusion that an emphasis on 'British' value was a very narrow approach to take and that the values the organisation was seen as championing were not exclusive to Britain, but rather key human or global values. As one participant remarked; *"I think if we are exporting the United Kingdom. Not British values, but values like inclusion which are important."*

The criticism leveraged at 'British' values as coming "with negative connotations" was because the category 'British' was often seen as being equated with 'English' and in turn with 'White' values. This was evident in concerns that the organisation was not always inclusive of all the 4 devolved nations, with some non-London based staff reflecting on how their offices worked hard to ensure that the communication and image of the British Council were mindful of this inclusive framing. As one staff member remarked, a common yet subtle expression of 'lazy journalism' was the tendency to assume British meant United Kingdom; *"it's not about Britishness, it's about the United Kingdom, and all its diversity and part of that diversity is, is Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland and cities in the north of England"*. Furthermore, one staff member reflected on this in relation to programmes or initiatives aimed at "showcasing the best of Britain" that were seen as "narrow" in their scope and inclusivity.

The exclusivity of 'British' was also echoed in concerns that the organisation should not be too 'London-centric' or elitist, which was a criticism many United Kingdom staff expressed. This was seen as different across the organisation, with the creative arts programmes seen as more genuinely engaged with concerns around EDI than the organisation as a whole was. As such, staff emphasized the importance to "practice what we preach", where values around EDI were not only embedded in rhetoric but also embodied within the institution through staff and structures. Overall, the British Council was seen as 'white' organisation, which was also reflected in the lack of racial diversity of the pool of participants recruited for the interviews themselves.

The sense that this also translated internationally was discussed in terms of who uses, or can use, the British Council services and programmes; *"I think we are seen at an organizational level to be quite elitist. And from my perspective internally I, I see merit in that accusation, I think much of our program is about working with those, you know, who have the money to be able to, you know, develops English skills and can study at universities."* It was argued that the British Council "should have a more open-door policy" and be "more approachable" as an organization, especially in order to do meaningful and good work with underrepresented communities and groups.

3.2.5 Stakeholder Interviews

3.2.5.1 Cross-country analysis

Key values echoed across Stakeholder interviews: Stakeholders emphasised that the British Council is perceived to value people and creating opportunities, playing a brokering and facilitating role through their partnership and as an organisation that valued integrity.

In general, stakeholders were very positive about the work that the British Council does and their partnerships with it and emphasized that there was an overlap between the values they held and those they perceived to drive the work of the British Council. While there were differences in country-specific issues and local values that arose in the interviews, there were also common themes that cut across. Below we summarize the key themes that overlapped:

Theme 1: Positive perceptions of British Council partnerships

Across stakeholder interviews, there was a general positivity towards the British Council, its partnerships in the three countries and the values that the organisation was seen to champion. The British Council was perceived as an organisation that was professional and held credibility and prestige within the minds of other organisations. This was also seen as positive for partners, as the 'weight' of the British Council brand afforded them opportunities within their local environments (or abroad) that they would have limited access to without the British Council. The positive outlook in the British Council was also reflected in a sense of shared values that enabled partnerships to work for a mutual benefit.

Theme 2: Stakeholder knowledge of the British Council limited to shared sector of interest

It was clear from interviews with stakeholders that they did not feel familiar enough with the British Council as a *whole* but instead continuously referred to the shared sector of interest as their anchor point for their perspectives or opinions. Oftentimes, this was coupled with a lack of awareness of the diversity of the British Council's work and programmes. This seems to hint at the idea that the British Council services and sectors were siloed, which limited the ability to develop a coherent image of the British Council as a whole, rather than its specific subdimensions. The 'grandeur' of the British Council was discussed, and interviewees reflected on the potential slowing-down of the British Council's efficacy as an organisation due to its adherence to rigid bureaucratic processes. The organisation's ability to be seen as relevant, reactive and context-aware was seen to suffer as a consequence.

Theme 3: The British Council should engage in more positive self-promotion

An interesting theme that cut across the three countries was the sense that the British Council was being very modest or restrictive in the extent to which it publicly promoted the positive work that it does. This positive work was not necessarily related to the for-profit sector, but rather in showcasing the work that they do in the more creative and development sectors, which was in some cases seen as a way to challenge the suspicion that the British Council's primary aim was to promote the United Kingdom governments agenda, but also to make more prominent how the organisation was actually a 'cultural relations organization' as this component of the British Council image was not necessarily self-evident in the eyes of stakeholders. It was also discussed how this would allow the British Council to become more well known, as stakeholders argued that a positive image of the British Council often came from engagement with it, rather than it being a household name (although in Malaysia it was argued to be quite well known). Lastly, stakeholders mentioned their awareness of the local restrictions on the British Council, and the challenges it faces when trying to promote certain values while respecting local diversity and difference as well as potentially being a pioneer of innovative and progressive values without losing the ability to 'do good work' because they are on the wrong side of 'official government values'. In this sense, some stakeholders reflected on the British Council's tendency to be risk averse.

3.2.5.2. Malaysia

Three stakeholder interviews were conducted in Malaysia.

Theme 1: British Council as a service provider – and the limitations of what it can do

Overall the image of the British Council in Malaysia is positive; the British Council is seen as prestigious, as transparent and an organisation with integrity, as a legitimate and well-known source of English language across generations and as an organisation that, while attempting to branch out beyond the for-profit work it is doing, is seen as less known for its creative work, and as potentially too progressive for the local context in certain regards. The stakeholders interviewed mentioned that the general image of British Council was one as an educational institution, and when discussing future work, emphasis on developing deeper partnerships with educational institutions was mentioned. The 'cultural relations' dimension of the British Council was less clear, and how this was part of its mission was less evident or something that individuals had to proactively seek out themselves. This might be because the stakeholders share more common ground with the British Council's for-profit sector and are thus familiar with and supportive of this work. As one stakeholder remarked *"For me, the British Council is where it seemed more of an education organisation especially maybe it's something that they need to build on. How is it cultural? I cannot see I cannot get it. You know, I'm sure everyone ... I when I think British Council, I think about learning English."* When contemplating the role of the British Council as a cultural relations organisation, this stakeholder reflected that this muddled the perception of the British Council, that it was potentially 'doing too much' and that there was a question around 'what its main priority is'. This hinted at a limitation to what the British Council could (and should) do in its mission abroad. This was also directly linked to the ability to cultivate a clearer identity as a cultural relations organization, as one stakeholder reflected *"if they are talking that they are a cultural organization, create some awareness on that some products*

that they are offering based on what is cultural.” Another stakeholder, when asked what the British Council could do to extend its public reach, also emphasized culture, stating that *“the one thing I think the British Council here could do more of is cultural events.”*, acknowledging that this might be difficult given a lower *“cultural appetite”* in Malaysia.

Theme 2: British Council as a professional and reputable organization

Another important positive element that the stakeholder shared in relation to the British Council was that being affiliated with the ‘British’ brand, it was perceived as working with the highest levels of professionalism, integrity and ethics. One stakeholder explained that this was due to the longevity of the relationship;

“United Kingdom products and United Kingdom values are thought very highly because of the long relationship, there’s more familiarity. Only in recent years, you know, Australia came into the picture in terms of education. But if you look at, you know, in the 70s, and a lot of people have much more affinity to the United Kingdom and it is looked at as strong it is continue to be seen as a strong brand.”

A United Kingdom linked education was seen as having a *“very, very high value”* and the British Council made this *“reachable”* to local population (albeit restricted segments of the population, as issues around affordability were discussed).

The conversation around the British Council were heavily framed around the British Council as a company working within a ‘market’ and providing a valuable ‘service’, as reflected in Theme 1. The British Council and other United Kingdom organisations, such as the High Commissioner or the Chamber of Commerce were seen as part of ‘the same family’ working towards representing British interests. There was little to no mention of other values, such as mutuality or creativity, but rather emphasis on values of integrity, transparency, professionalism and ethical conduct and political neutrality were highlighted, hinting further at the divide between the different British Council sectors in relation to partner knowledge and value frameworks.

Theme 3: Importance of awareness and respect for cultural sensitivities

The stakeholder in Malaysia emphasized that local values of respect and fostering trustworthy relationships were key to the ability of any international organisation to operate in Malaysia. As one stakeholder explained:

So here we, we need to understand different types of culture. When you deal with different organizations understanding the culture and diversity will be very important. how you deal with people how you speak to people, you know? So once you understand that relationship management, you can do very well in Malaysia.

It was predominantly when discussing local values that any mention or reference to culture emerged, and where tensions around the British Council championing particularly ‘progressive’ values might be problematic. As with staff interviews, the particular example of LGBTQ+ rights was used to anchor this point. As one Malaysia stakeholder explained when discussing differences in values around tolerance (particularly LGBTQ+ rights) *“It has to be done with sensitivity and care. Doing that they’re certainly very, very aware of the pitfalls of being too preachy and trying to push these values too hard.”* ‘Clashes’ around how and to what extent to emphasize inclusion and diversity were touched on, and the stakeholder reflected that *“the level of British Council, the level is very high. And it’s, it’s not their fault, but it’s the market may not be ready because of various sensitivities”*. There was tension here between being part of a market controlled by the government, and championing values that were incompatible with the ability to deliver a service. As one stakeholder explained, there was a limit to what the British Council (and other United Kingdom-rooted organizations) could do in Malaysia, but that this was better than nothing; *All we can do is kind of show them the benefits of tolerance and openness. But you can only you can only push it so far. If you’re working against the grain in the local culture. I don’t think we should ever abandon each other.”*

3.2.5.3. *South Africa*

In South Africa, four (4) stakeholders were interviewed. All of them were women who represented different types of institutions: an NGO, a social start-up, the South African government, and a European international cultural organisation homologous to the British Council. In addition to the key themes identified across the three pilot countries, the following additional themes emerged in South Africa:

Theme 1: The British Council: a respected, valued, admired partner

As mentioned in the cross-country analysis section, the most prominent feelings that the interviewees showed towards the British Council were ones of respect and admiration of the British Council, which resulted in the consensus that the British Council is a valuable partner.

Those feelings are grounded on different experiences. First, the British Council is perceived to contribute to the empowerment of South African communities, especially the youth, through education and upskilling. One stakeholder felt that the British Council actively listens to them and the communities and adapts its programmes accordingly, which creates a sense of genuine collaboration. This was compared to other organisations, who are less willing – or not willing at all – to adapt and take the local community and stakeholders into account. In sum, both the local communities and partner organisations value the work that the British Council does very positively. Second, the British Council is seen as an innovative leader in the cultural relations sector, always introducing an element of originality that differentiates the British Council from similar organisations:

“It's kind of quite edgy what they're doing. It's not... It's not... It's not mainstream, exploring boring things, but exploring things on the edges, I think, in some ways really very interesting. I mean, not always, I mean, sometimes it's very mainstream, but then it's... they might be supporting a mainstream artist or a mainstream designer, but in a kind of new way.”

And third, one of the main sources of such a positive outlook of the work of the British Council in South Africa appeared to be the strong synergies between the British Council and its partners, according to all interviewees. The synergies referred to multiple aspects of the British Council's work, but common values were recognised as a crucial underpinning. All stakeholders confirmed that their organisations and the British Council share core values. The common core values identified were in some cases business-related, such as professionalism, being output focused, and understanding the timings of bureaucracy (something that is very important and valuable for the South African government). And in other cases, culturally-related, such as valuing people, which is put in practice by listening actively and embracing participatory approaches and co-design, being innovative, or striving to overcome Eurocentrism. Both elements, in turn, are key for South African in general. This alignment seems key for successful collaborations and positive impacts.

In light of the above, one stakeholder struggled to understand why the British Council does not promote its work more widely in the country. She expressed her surprise for the lack of branding in programme materials, which is eventually translated into a total lack of knowledge by the programme beneficiaries that the British Council is behind it.

Theme 2: Lack of context awareness

All stakeholders coincided in flagging that the British Council seems to lack context-awareness in different aspects of its work in South Africa. One interviewee reported excessive rigidity regarding the way projects should be implemented. She implied that the British Council uses British standards when demanding certain commitments to their partner organisations, without realising that the South African context makes them very hard to fulfil sometimes (something echoed by some staff members and focus group participants). She believed that the British Council lacked flexibility in accommodating the specific working conditions of her organisation and hinted towards the British Council's British origin and urban-oriented operations as the causes of this lack of awareness of the local context:

“I think, sometimes, the tension or the clash might be the British Council not being fully aware of the South African day to day. For example, a bad weather, not having access to the internet or a riot happening, and so you don't have access to certain towns. (...) The foundation is two hours out of Cape Town, so we're not in a city environment, but basically a small little village, so access to certain things is limited. (...) You know, and so, things that (...) in the United Kingdom might be easy, accessible, and quick and fast... South Africa is completely different”.

These views were fully (and almost literally) seconded by another stakeholder, who believed that *“the full realisation of how many South Africans live is not there”*.

If the above impressions were confirmed, they could have serious implications for some of the values that the British Council aims to promote, namely EDI (equality, diversity and inclusion), and would require conversations within the organisation as well as with external stakeholders to address them. For now, stakeholders had some recommendations to offer. First, they suggested that the British Council expand its understanding of South Africa by being more sensitive to the country's internal diversity. Second, they believed that the British Council should focus on working more with rural communities. And third, reach beyond elite groups and engage more meaningfully with under-resourced communities.

Theme 3: Mixed perceptions on the impact of history on the British Council in South Africa – familiarity, suspicion, and bad conscience

The stakeholders interviewed gave mixed accounts of the impact that the shared history between the United Kingdom and South Africa has on the British Council.

On the one hand, some of the interviewees believed that there were no obvious downsides of the shared history between the two countries. In fact, one of them noted that these historical links currently enable British organisations to have a better, more nuanced knowledge of South Africa, compared to other international organisations:

“I think it's that.. because of that link, and because of the strength, I think, is what makes the relationship also so valuable – is that that history kind of plays into what we're doing. So there's kind of an idea of what they [the British Council] are stepping into. So it makes it a little bit more familiar territory, if I could say so, so I think it's got a big influence.”

This stakeholder thought that the shared historical background allows both countries to influence each other through their long-established relationship and links. Another stakeholder expressed similar opinions and believed that the reason why colonial history hasn't negatively affected the British Council in South Africa was *“because of its values and because it kind of sticks to those values”*.

A third one expressed that the British Council manages to be neutral and detach itself from the idea of “Britishness”, which contributes to the absence of negativity around it: *“I've never heard anyone saying ‘Ah! The British Council is so British’. (...) In a way the British Council manages somehow to be more neutral”*. This was seconded by another stakeholder, who said that *“the British Council is obviously an old institution, (...) the British colonies is an old idea, and Great Britain is an old idea. But the work that the British Council doesn't feel like that at all”*.

On the other hand, some stakeholders believed that the colonial legacy has a negative impact on the British Council in South Africa. For instance, they reflected on the role of the English language, one of the British Council's flagships, which is regarded with less and less sympathy by younger South African generations who believe that *“we [South Africans] need to nurture our own languages, we need to value them and our own literature”*. Suspicion was again part of the conversation, emerging precisely from the fact that the British Council represents a colonial power in a former British colony. The question comes up constantly: *“What is a colonial power still doing here?”*.

Despite the opposite views on how history has impacted the British Council in South Africa so far, all stakeholders converged considering that the work of the British Council in Britain's former colonies is guided (at least in part) by bad conscience and a desire to compensate for the harm done in the past:

"I think the British Council... I might be wrong, but I do think the British Council prioritises its social responsibility programmes in its former colonies. I don't know, I could be wrong, but... but I get the sense that that is the... if I look just at Africa, you know, it [the British Council] does perhaps a little more work in the former colonies because probably there is the issue of conscience. Which is not a bad thing, you know? To give back at a time when it can, and to do it with a clear conscience."

As this interviewee said, this is not necessarily bad, but this could be another source of credibility erosion for the British Council in former British Colonies.

Finally, even those stakeholders who believed that the British Council is not negatively perceived because of Britain's colonial past, gave a warning. The British Council "*might be the next Confederate statue*", in reference to the movement to remove Confederate statues and memorials in the US because they are seen as a symbol of white supremacy. To avoid this, stakeholders believed that it is now time for the British Council to reflect and engage more deeply, explicitly, and publicly on the implications of Britain's colonial rule in South Africa.

Theme 4: Big conversations with other international cultural organisations

It is worth noting that other cultural relations organisations may be very interested in engaging with homologous organisations to discuss the role of values in their work. As explained by one of the interviewees, international cultural organisations, and more specifically, European ones, need to provide clarity around their values and intentions, and this is only achieved through self-reflection and dialogue. Due to the admiration and respect that the British Council inspires in partner organisations, but also due to its leadership in the field of cultural relations through its innovative approaches and diversity, the British Council is in a perfect position to be the convenor of such conversations.

Brexit, however, may have an impact on the British Council's relationship with similar EU institutions, as well as the competitiveness between them:

"It's always this strange situation that on the one hand, you really want to work together, you really want to cooperate. But on the other hand, there's always a sense of competition and it would be not honest to say that it's not there".

In turn, this "*sense of competition*" unveils an uncomfortable reality for many – the fact that soft power and influence narratives still play a key role in the work of the organisations like the British Council: "*This is really the basis of our work and it would also, again, not be honest if we would deny that*".

3.2.5.4. United Kingdom

Two stakeholders were interviewed in the United Kingdom, both coming from the culture and arts sector. The key value that was seen as more reflective of the British Council was the idea of the British Council as brokering opportunities with a focus on internationalism and connectivity. The British Council was seen as holding a wealth of cultural intelligence and networks which benefitted smaller (to medium) cultural, creative and artistic organizations and individuals in developing new programmes, learning from other cultures and building partnerships.

Theme 1: The British Council as an international 'broker'

United Kingdom stakeholders both emphasized the image of the British Council as one that was an 'honest broker' of positive relations and networks between people in the United Kingdom and abroad (based on a preliminary reading of the second interview as well). This brokering role was seen mainly positively, and as positioning the British Council in a unique space where they had a wealth of insight and knowledge about other

countries that smaller organisations and community groups could benefit immensely from. Echoing United Kingdom staff interviews, the stakeholder emphasized the ability of the British Council to foster collaborations and develop networks, both because of its extensive international presence, but also because it had a wealth of intelligence and insight from other United Kingdom organisations; *“Putting together ideas and projects, I can say, brokering of relationships and bringing enough people together can be quite. I think they do it, they do it, they do it, sometimes well, sometimes not so well, but they do it, which is important.”* In order to be able to be this ‘honest’ broker, it was seen as important to be transparent about the organization and its mission, its history with colonialism and what its soft power approach actually entailed. Without this transparency and clarity, the work of the organization could at times be wrongfully understood, as one stakeholder remarked; *I think the ‘British’ and the ‘council’ make it really, really tricky to advocate for particular things because people can then end up, or people will hold up a mirror and say, yeah, you know, here’s the issue is what you’re saying here.”*

As both stakeholders came from the Arts sector, their perceptions and experiences focused mainly on this area’s events and collaborations, but both emphasized that the work the British Council does within the Arts is perceived very positively, the partnerships are valued and the work that is done is important but oftentimes not promoted or made public in ways that they felt could benefit the British Council’s image; *“I think that’s a really kind of an underappreciated aspect of the work that’s done, you know, you , so often people talk about the kind of the, the elitism of the arts, but actually, it’s a very democratic engagement through the British Council.”*

This again was seen in contrast to the perceptions of the British Council ‘at large’, echoing previous themes in the dataset on a sense of ‘split’ identity and value-frame of the British Council but also mentioning the general unawareness of the general public as to what the British Council actually does. This, in turn, has implications for the ability of the British Council to position and promote itself as a coherent and unified cultural relations organisation, as it seems from the United Kingdom stakeholders that this image does not come across and that the value of the organisation comes from its individual staff members and the work they do.

Theme 2: The ‘British’ in British Council

The stakeholders interviewed both reflected on similar concerns to those voiced by United Kingdom staff in relation to what the ‘British’ in ‘British Council’ stands for. For one stakeholder, this related mainly to the tensions around acknowledging the potential problematic nature of exporting, and profiting from exporting English, while pursuing a mission of mutuality, while for the other stakeholder this was more deeply discussed in relation to colonial legacies, the potential lack of internal diversity within the British Council and how this impacted the organizations ability to practice what it preaches;

“ I think there is definitely room for it to review and renew its set of values and think about how it then upholds them within itself before it can then do it for others and go to other places and do it with others. So there’s a really interesting question, which is about the British Council’s and its DNA and whether it wants to start to kind of really embed this thinking into its DNA and these values into its DNA. And I think that’s when we’ll see a real shift.”

Here, the discussion centred around making sense of how the British Council worked and what its primary purpose actually is. In order to have a clearer sense of the British Council’s identity, it was argued to be necessary to engage with the British colonial legacy and how the current political climate, particularly around Brexit, challenged the extent to which the ‘British’ of the British Council could be seen as different to the ‘British’ promoted by Brexit. Furthermore, a concern about the lack of diversity within the organisation meant the staff demographics themselves might reflect an exclusive version of British society rather than all of it. The stakeholder discussed how the mission of the British Council is restricted by the government, and that although it might aim for mutuality, its primary purpose is still to promote Britain. This meant that the organisation sometimes shied away from engaging with ‘off-brand’ ideas or groups, which were seen as missed opportunities for growth and learning. This, however, was seen at times as at odds with the work of individual staff members who were more concerned about EDI and mutuality than the organisation as a whole was seen

to be. The stakeholder remarked on how partners had felt devalued in the past when they were not chosen to participate in events but instead the British Council had favoured big-profile partnerships, which it was not necessarily seen as needed, due to being a big-profile organisation itself.

Theme 3: The British Council in a position to foster dialogue and exchange across difference

What was interesting in these two interviews was the emphasis that both stakeholders placed on the richness of the British Council's resources for supporting partners in developing international networks and collaborations, but also how this richness, alongside a global operation, positioned the British Council in a niche place where it was seen as able to tackle a difficult but necessary task; to engage and foster dialogue across difference and around issue of a sensitive nature in local contexts;

I suppose the beauty of, of being the kind of free thinker, or the honest broker, is that in a sense, they can create the town square that has that conversation and that, that, by extension will naturally lead to some uncomfortable conversations happening in different places. But I think it's the ability to facilitate that conversation or those conversations. That is probably one of the greatest strengths that the British Council has.

The British Council was seen as doing a good job, so far, of balancing adherence to values and the ability to do good work in diverse cultural contexts, and the need to continue to do so was evident. The links, and potential limitations, of being tied to government were discussed by stakeholders as well, and one stakeholder remarked that this could have an impact on the ability of the British Council to foster that dialogue; *“you won't be able to have those kinds of conversations if you don't maintain that, that sense of independence and, and, and, and at least arm's length from government, but I think that that they've been in political environments where they are forced to co locate. I think they still manage the kind of the independent space enough to feel comfortable.”* The second stakeholder was less optimistic about this for the future, wonder about how sustainable this 'independence' was; *“can it keep government at arm's length if it is being funded by the government and therefore, there's always the threat of being cut and therefore it has to kind of also respond and do what government says to some degree.”* What was evident from both respondents was that, despite a disagreement around how much government relations limited the British Council's ability to do meaningful work, the organization was in a position where it had the resources, the goodwill of the staff and the opportunity to foster dialogue across difference and this was seen as a unique feature of the work the British Council can, and should, do; *“the value of the British Council's operation in each of those countries is its ability to understand the margins of grey area, the margins of compromise that they can work within, the conversations that can exist within that space.”*

3.2.6 Focus Groups

3.2.6.1. Cross-country thematic analysis

Theme 1: Perception of value-split within the British Council

As is expanded in the country-specific analyses, there was a clear theme that emerged within the focus groups that reflected perceptions of a value-split within the British Council. This split was framed in different ways but pertained mainly to the differences between the for-profit and non-profit sectors of the organisation and their purpose as well as how certain values drive these purposes. In particular, values around professionalism, integrity and corporate culture (which we call 'business values') were often spoken of by participants who had experience with, or had partnered with, the for-profit sectors of the organisation, or among those who predominantly perceived the British Council as a 'service provider' where 'British' values became synonymous with progressive organizational and corporate values. In contrast, values around inclusion, equality, diversity, care and mutuality (which we call 'cultural values', acknowledging that they may not form a single group, as explained in the survey analysis) were seen as more embodied within and reflected through the non-profit work. This was also discussed in relation to the value-split seen in staff, with senior management perceived to embody more the 'business values' and lower-level staff, particularly those working within the arts, seen as

embodying the 'cultural values'. This often led to a sense of incoherence about the identity of the British Council.

Theme 2: Lack of clarity on British Council as an organisation

The second theme follows closely from the first, where an inability to create a coherent image of the British Council's identity was in turn linked to a lack of clarity around what the organisation's purpose was. While for most it was argued that it was about exporting Britishness, particularly through English learning, for others this was muddled by the rhetoric of individual staff and the different initiatives developed by the non-profit sector. The consequences of this lack of clarity was a general sense of suspicion around the British Council's role abroad, where partners or users were often questioning, or were questioned by others, about what the British Council wanted to do and why it was working with particular partners in a particular way. At times, discussions centred around what a 'soft power approach' entailed, and how this could not be disconnected from the British colonial past.

Theme 3: British Council fosters opportunity but with limitations

The final theme reflected discussions around the work of the British Council and the opportunities it offered. Focus group participants were very positive about the fact that the British Council, as an organisation, offered opportunities to develop partnerships and networks abroad and get to travel internationally. This was probably more reflective of those focus group participants who were partners, such as those who co-organized events with the British Council, but also those who had received grants or funding for exchange and collaboration. These opportunities were seen as uniquely reflective of the capabilities of the British Council as an international organisation with extensive networks and cross-cultural intel, which enabled engagement and development of non-mainstream initiatives and artists. Participants were particularly enthusiastic about initiatives that go beyond bilateral programmes with the United Kingdom and foster multi-country collaborations and exchanges.

However, these opportunities were also seen as limitations to what individuals or groups could do with these them and in particular, this was seen as hampering the possibility of genuine mutuality as an outcome of the opportunity. The limitations discussed were the following: 1) bureaucratic procedures that were incompatible with local specificities, so that certain opportunities were not able to be realized as a result of incompatible regulations (e.g. immigration visas for South Africans); 2) some participants discussed how the remit of the work set out in a grant or partnership was ultimately defined and limited by the British Council, where individuals had to go out of their way, and use their own resources, if they wanted to engage more with the programmes or the communities they worked in; 3) the former point was linked to the third limitation, which was the perception that aims of mutuality were secondary to the promotion of Britain and British values (this was particularly echoed in the discourse of United Kingdom focus group participants); 4) opportunities were seen as at times limited in terms of partner engagement, where they were recipients, rather than collaborators or co-creators of shared projects, with a desire to be included more, and at an earlier stage, in the shared work.

3.2.6.2. Malaysia

The focus groups took place via Zoom, and we began the first two focus groups as chat-based only. However, given the low level of interaction (instead most participants treated the sessions as online Question and Answer sessions, we conducted focus group 3 and 4 using audio/video to facilitate better engagement. Given the change in format (from chat-based only to audio/video) because of low interaction using the chat, we conducted 4 focus groups in Malaysia to compensate for, and examine more thoroughly, interaction and dialogue.

Theme 1: Societal values of respect, care and mutuality crucial today and in future

Within Malaysia, all focus groups discussed which values make for a good society, and there was a dominant emphasis on respect, altruism and community care, open-mindedness, integrity, empathy, mutual

understanding and tolerance. These values were considered important to maintain a sense of harmony in a society with a lot of diversity, as Malaysia. In particular, respect was the most prevalent, and this was linked both to respect towards authority and elderly population, respect towards the environment and ensuring sustainable practices and respect towards each other, particularly in times of crisis. These values were seen as becoming even more prevalent in the present, with one focus group participant reflecting that the *“the values we hold should not be constrained by unfavourable conditions”*, with another participant adding that *“Good values can be a good guide in making difficult decisions during this pandemic.”*

Theme 2: The British Council as a facilitator but not reciprocator

The image of the British Council that came across most strongly within the focus groups was its role in providing opportunities, support and advice, as well as facilitating international exchange and network building. Participants mentioned the British Council creating “sharing platforms” across the commonwealth and Asia, as promoting the development of new “community engagement activities” and providing “support” and “funding for international collaborations”. In the discussion, the British Council, especially among more senior participants, was seen as an organisation with a positive history in Malaysia, that had been doing great work through creating opportunities and providing support, for both individuals and smaller institutions, but it was seen as having become more profit-focused and less community oriented recently.

Participants reflected on the work of the British Council as enabling non-mainstream artists to develop their skills and knowledge, and that this would have been impossible without the British Council’s networks and support. However, among all this positivity there was also a desire for more, in terms of being treated as an equal collaborator, rather than a mere receiver of British Council services. As one participant remarked:

“There’s also a desire to be included and represented in certain decision-making and things like that. Because it’s always like the brand is used but then you’re never consulted. So you’re never asked like what actually do we want, it’s like all them give you that, but we didn’t need that. So yeah, just to be part of the process would help.”

A move towards greater collaboration and consultation was also seen as positive for countering suspicions around what the aim of the British Council was when it worked with local communities, as participants mentioned it being perceived by some as an ‘outsider’. As one participant remarked, cultural relations is a “two-way learning” process, and while Malaysia was able and willing to recognize the value of the British Council within their country, they did not necessarily see that the value of their cultures, insights and ideas were given equal standing, something that was further linked to a core local value – respect and openness towards diversity of people, ideas and practices.

Theme 3: The importance of the global community and sharing in the present and future

A lot of the focus group discussions around values centred around which values become more or less important in the present and the future. Here, the discussion highlighted the need for solidarity, open-mindedness to new ideas and innovative solutions, need for altruism and supporting local communities and authorities as well as the importance of a global community in tackling a threat that faces all of humanity.

The British Council was seen as being in a unique position to achieve the latter, given its existence in a multitude of countries around the world. It was seen as able to gather insights and share useful tips and support across countries, but also as an organisation that would maintain and emphasize a global outlook at a time when people might be afraid of what the future holds. The British Council was also seen as in a unique position to tackle another growing societal challenge, which was the rise of decolonization and engagement with colonial pasts. As one participant remarked, the British Council should take on this challenge and develop a space for an open, trusting and transparent dialogue around history and its impact, in a way that would allow both the positive and more critical aspects of history to be acknowledged.

Theme 4: The role of values in institutions and cultural relations

A lot of focus groups discussed the role of values in public institutions, and differences in roles and responsibilities emerged. While some participants argued that institutions “should be neutral”, “they should never take sides” and “should enforce laws and not values”, others argued that the core values driving institutions should be those shared by all society, while yet others agreed with this but pushed for government and educational institutions not limiting themselves to these values but also “strive towards new values that Malaysians can learn from”. Here concerns around favouring different religious or ethnic groups over others were discussed, and participants emphasized the need for the valuing of difference and for mutual understanding and dialogue in order to be able to address any clashes that emerge when differences are not accepted or tolerated. The British Council was seen as in a good position to tackle some of these cultural relations concerns, in particular by promoting cooperation, exchange and sharing. The organization was praised for being respectful and diplomatic and as one participant mentioned, due to the British Council’s presence in so many countries, it “can promote unity and also reduce conflict, also I think they encourage open communication” through their many activities that have a global focus. As another participant remarked about having attended such an event; “we met all sorts of people so that that’s why I think when, when we think British Council, I think about unity.” This hints at the potential value niche that Malaysia participants attribute to the British Council, as an organization that can promote respectful and open dialogue, devoid of politicization. It is crucial to emphasize here that this potential was anchored in events that were focused on the non-profit work (arts, creative community hubs, exchanges and workshops) rather than in the for-profit English learning work.

3.2.6.3. South Africa

The focus groups analysed took place via Zoom. The total number of participants was 27, divided into 3 focus groups (7 participants in the first one, 8 in the second one and 12 in the third one). The number of participants who had their camera on progressively increased from the first to the third focus group and, contrarily, the use of the chat function decreased from the first to the third focus group.

The framing of the discussions was the following: focus group 1 was threat-focused, focus group 2 was framed around cultural values and the role of cultural organizations and focus group around political and diplomatic values. These framings determined the main topics of discussion.

It should be noted that while focus group 1 and 2 were mostly formed by end-users or beneficiaries of the British Council, while focus group 3 was mainly formed by suppliers and partner organisations of the British Council. This difference may be due to the recruitment difficulties in South Africa, which may have forced the British Council office to reach out to a sample that did not fully meet the initial criteria.

Apart from the common themes identified across the three pilot countries, in South Africa the following additional themes emerged from the focus group discussions:

Theme 1: Real listening to local needs and innovativeness as key cultural relations values

All three focus groups reflected on and discussed the values that cultural organisations like the British Council should champion, especially in their mission to foster cultural dialogue between different communities. The values and practices that were consistently emphasised, regardless of the specific framing of the conversation, were the following. First, all participants agreed that international cultural organisations should first and foremost listen to the needs of the local people. It was felt that international organisations tend to land in South Africa “*come with their own interests (...) without understanding what the priorities are*”, It was emphasised that to promote real cultural dialogue it is essential to “*be open to listening to experiences without trying to fix anything, holding the space for the other*”. Participants felt this was closely related to respecting cultural difference, which was understood as a combination of tolerance, open-mindedness, and flexibility to accommodate and adapt to cultural differences and cultural change.

Second, innovativeness was identified as an essential value for cultural relations organisations. This value emerged against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has and continues to impact the cultural sector with special hardship. Both in the present and the future, innovativeness and creativity were considered crucial for the survival of cultural organisations, but also for the survival of inter-cultural dialogue in a time when physical interaction and global travel are very difficult. These two values should underpin a greater capacity to adapt to changing and uncertain circumstances, because as one participant said: “*It’s ‘adapt or die’ for everyone*”. Again, flexibility, dynamism and adaptation were emphasised, while at the same time participants were conscious of how challenging embracing these values and practices it would be for an organisation like the British Council “*playing within their spectrum of rules and regulations*”.

However, as another participant said, innovation does not necessarily mean “*reinventing the wheel*”:

“There are many beautiful things that are happening in different countries. So we need to just identify areas where we have common interest and begin to share best practices from there and learn from one another. And we grow. We grow as different countries, and we can impact our communities in areas where we live”.

Several participants believed that the British Council (South Africa) was already acting as a bridge between countries and communities, as a vehicle for sharing best practices and as a supporting partner to implement them in local communities.

Theme 2: Accountability as a catch-all value in South Africa

Theme 1 has summarised the values and practices that refer to the mission of the British Council as a cultural organisation. Theme 2, on the other hand, will look at the other face of the British Council, as a governmental and diplomatic institution.

South African participants identified accountability as the most essential value that any organisation with governing responsibilities and, as such, with power over others, should uphold. Interestingly, accountability also featured highly as a value that a good person, a good citizen and a good society should have. This value was never mentioned alone, and it was often paired with honesty, personal and social responsibility and integrity.

The conversations that framed this group of values were very influenced by two factors. First, by a generalised feeling of disappointment and frustration with the political situation in South Africa, where corruption and dishonesty were felt to be widespread and even predominant among political actors. And second, by coronavirus and the perceived attitudes of others during the pandemic. Many participants shared a feeling of distrust towards their fellow citizens, as they assumed that “*they’re still breaking the rules. They’re still not following it. And, and in spite of that, (...) it is always (...) it will happen to another person and not to me*”. It is in this context that accountability, integrity and honesty were recurrently emphasised by all the focus groups.

Looking at the British Council in particular, participants unanimously qualified it as an accountable institution. As one person said: “*So for me, my experience from a value perspective was literally the accountability, responsibility, the honesty, integrity, and all of those things for the British Council*”. This experience was shared across the focus groups.

One participant referred to the concept of RARE (relevant, accountable, reliable and ethical) leadership to reflect on the British Council’s values and actions. These values were discussed in detail by the focus group with the ‘political and diplomatic values’ framing. Again, there was unanimity in the group that the British Council is an accountable organisation, but there was less clarity when analysing its relevancy and reliability. Ethical standards of the British Council were not addressed.

Finally, the links between the British Council and the United Kingdom government were also discussed by the ‘political and diplomatic values’ focus group. In this occasion, the group, while not openly disagreeing, did not come to a unanimous vision of the issue. On the one hand, a subset of the participants shared that in their experiences working with the British Council, they were happily surprised about how “*non-British*” the interactions felt, in consonance with what was reported by one of the stakeholders. By this, they meant that British Council staff was “*very high spirited, very positive, [with] high energy*” and there was a “*wonderful local feeling*” when working with them. This group reported that they had never perceived any politicism or any kind of political connection (between the British Council and the United Kingdom government) when working with the British Council. On the other hand, the other subset of participants believed that the connections between the British Council and the United Kingdom exist. They referred to a specific working ethic and a value system that emphasises justice and professionalism, shared by all British institutions, maybe rooted in tradition or the government system of the United Kingdom. Interestingly, both groups praised the British Council for not having or having (respectively) connections to the United Kingdom.

This contradictory perception of the “Britishness” of the British Council, as well as its links with the United Kingdom government, may be another reason behind the suspicion that some participants expressed towards the true intentions of the British Council in South Africa:

“There’s always the question around – ‘Why are they doing this? What is the bigger agenda?’ And for me that question always lingers. This idea of soft power is... ‘Is it a way of kind of British Council engaging in this way for the benefit and, and progressing kind of British kind of imperative?’ So that... there’s also those kinds of questions that I certainly have (...) given the history of kind of the United Kingdom to Africa relations”.

It is telling that even people who have worked with the British Council for years and praise its work still raise questions about the role of soft power and influence guiding its work in South Africa.

Theme 3: A value-split, mixed experiences and a shift noticeable externally

Staff interviews already showed a clear value-split between the for-profit and non-profit units of the British Council, as explained above. The existence of such a clear split was confirmed by the focus group participants, who provided an external perspective on the nature of the divide.

The group identified two main sets of values with which the British Council operates. On the one hand, they listed several values that fall under the previously defined category of ‘business values’, which include accountability (very important in South Africa, as seen above), professionalism, communication, preparedness, high standards, quality assurance, responsiveness and integrity. The participants who made this list had a very positive outlook of the British Council and considered it a model in the sector for following and realising the mentioned values.

On the other hand, participants recognised that different types of cultural values, such as equality, diversity, inclusion and mutuality, were harder to identify in their interactions with the British Council, even though these were deemed crucial by the participants for any diplomatic institution: “*What we interface with is exactly what everyone referred to interface with. We interface with professionalism. We don’t immediately interface with equality*”.

In line with this, some participants shared negative experiences with the British Council that undermine its commitment to certain values that it allegedly champions. For instance, one participant reported having lost connection with the British Council when the person she was usually in touch with left the organisation, which impacted greatly on the continuity of the relationship between the British Council and this participant. Another participant explained that the strict rules that the British Council have around some grants are highly inadequate for the South African context:

“For all the travel, everything, accommodation, money whatsoever, was sent to the course supervisors in the United Kingdom. And for them [the students] to travel, you know, they need to prepare this side. I'm not given the money. I'm asked to spend money so that I can claim for... So, I find it so difficult because it's like, okay, there's a grant that is supposed to support people in South Africa going to the United Kingdom. The money is in the United Kingdom. But then I have to find money to give to the students to travel in order to... And then I have to claim the money, where are they going to get the money from to support this? So, but those are the rules that they follow. You have to (...) spend and then claim. Yeah, so that's why I'm saying sometimes they don't accommodate, and they are not flexible. And it makes life difficult”.

Since focus group participants identified context-awareness, flexibility and continuity of action and contact with the local population as key practices and values for international organisations, these kinds of experiences are concerning, because they show clear failings of the British Council in these areas.

As a consequence, some participants concluded that the British Council's values, in practice, are still very much business-oriented, although they recognised a shift in the past few years. They acknowledged and commended efforts in recent years by the British Council South Africa to be more collaborative and relevant, promote equity and mutuality, and abandon soft power approaches:

“And I think their strategy when the first engagement was pretty much around showcasing British culture, British... what they're doing in the United Kingdom and bring those kind of creators into South Africa. But, over the past couple of years or past few years, there has been a change in that we're seeing more of this idea of collaboration, which I absolutely agree on. And this understanding that in the local context of... there are expertise, and I've seen a lot of work that is... certainly in the past would have been done by a British organisation coming to South Africa to do that work. We're seeing much more of South African organisations taking charge of our own stories and own kind of narratives. I think also importantly, I think the shift of kind of the work that (...) they're doing from a cluster perspective, rather than from a kind of countries perspective, a really kind of... started to assist in connecting particularly Southern Africa to one another. (...) So, I must say, that's, that's commendable. And I think it makes it much more of an equitable, I think, engagement with them”.

The idea that the British Council acts as a knowledge and networking platform, connecting people from different backgrounds, nationalities, and fields, was shared across the focus groups. As a result, some participants felt that their engagement with the British Council had transformed their lives for good:

“I think British Council is one of the organisations that is meant to transform others. You know, it just transforms and (...) changes the person that you are. (...) So, I think that is the platform that I really felt change, you know, and it really had an impact on how I view and perceive things. So, I think it's just another platform that I always share with all those within my circle. That is one of the places that you need to acquaint yourself with because it just transforms you. It just transforms you. Yes”.

3.2.6.4. *United Kingdom*

The focus groups analysed took place via Zoom. Three different framings of the focus group moderation and topic guide were used in the United Kingdom; value focused and value neutral moderation as well as cultural value associations.

It should be noted that from the types of comments and experiences shared, the United Kingdom focus groups were predominantly composed of partners, rather than users, which might be a reflection of the different nature of the work of the British Council in the United Kingdom, compared to other countries.

Theme 1: Lacking a coherent and transparent organizational identity

The first theme from the focus groups touched on the lack of a coherent identity and core mission of the British Council, which often led to a sense of ‘confusion’, ‘suspicion’ and not ‘having a clue’ as to the totality of the organization's work and its aims.

On the one hand, from their personal experiences many participants reflected on how the British Council was a supportive organization, that held a wealth of knowledge and insights of communities across the world, which they used to support and connect United Kingdom organizations and foster collaborations and exchange. This side of the British Council (particularly as it pertained to the non-profit sector) was praised; *“they are connected with what’s going on in those cities. And it makes that the ability to connect and collaborate so much more, I don’t know, just a stronger opportunity and means we can do so much more.”* Keywords such as ‘opportunities’, ‘connectivity’ and ‘support’ highlighted the facilitating and brokering role that was seen as uniquely positive about the British Council and they occupied a space where they catered to a niche segment of that sector that was not supported elsewhere; *“I find the British Council to support a lot of projects and creative projects that take risks, and are seemed to be on the edges of cultural society and things that aren’t necessarily aren’t supported [by other organizations].”* These elements of the organizations work were often linked to the contributions and the work of individual staff members, and praise of local British Council staff was common.

On the other hand; many participants admitted being ‘conflicted’ towards the organisation and perceiving it as having a ‘split personality’ where the positive values of connectivity, internationalism and inclusion of diversity and promotion of collaboration was seen as contrasted with the idea that the British Council is a soft power organization. ‘Soft power’ was something that most participants associated with the British Council, and many had an uncomfortable relationship to this concept. As one participant remarked; *“the thing I’ve always been fascinated by this idea of soft power, which actually sort of has the potential to wipe away everything we’ve just been talking about, because power is, in a way, not a very nice thing”*, with others adding that soft power was ‘distasteful’ and ‘problematic’.

This sense of split or incoherence was further reflected in how one participant, who had moved to the United Kingdom from an African country, perceived the British Council in his experience outside of the United Kingdom and his experience of it working with it in the United Kingdom. It was also mentioned that the British Council’s website, which one participant looked up during the focus group, gave no clarity about its identity, mission or values.

Several participants challenged the group on the notion of soft power and asked them to reflect on where this dichotomy or sense of incoherence came from, arguing firstly that it was due to the mismatch between the organization’s mission and the kind of staff it recruited, saying that the British Council gets funding to promote Britain, but despite this *“it actually manages to populate itself with staff who have the sort of liberal values that we’re all espousing”*, which creates an incoherent image of its values and priorities. Secondly, one participant argued that in turn, the mismatch arose from what the British Council actually is, and what people like the participants in the group “want it to be”. In clarifying, she explained: *“It’s actually that we, the suspicion is that it’s not behaving as we want it to, well, it’s not funded to behave like we wanted to”*. Here, the ‘other side’ of the British Council identity was discussed – where its links to government, its bureaucratic nature and corporate culture as well as its focus on exporting English and aligning itself with government, were seen as contrary to values of mutuality, dialogue and cultural relations; *“Institutions like British Council are likely to reflect the vested interests of the government and those that fund them.”* As will be discussed in theme 2 below, values are perceived as guiding principles for behaviour, shaped by the aims or missions of an organization, and the question was whether the British Council could ever fully realize their ‘independent’ values when the aims and missions of the organization were seen as in the best case restricted by government goals and in the worst case, fully driven by them.

Theme 2: What features a cultural relations organization requires

A key theme within the United Kingdom data was a discussion around how the British Council, and cultural organizations in general, could foster and promote cultural relations and international cooperation. Key topics were discussed, ranging from being a good listener and understanding and working with the community value framework and the needs of the community, being open to diversity and new ideas and cultures; being transparent about the organizations goals and commitments (whether short term or long term) within a particular context and co-creating rather than imposing projects and goals. What was of equal importance, and

interesting to reflect on in relation to the British Council's perceived lack of identity was the importance of alignment with one's audience.

But when you come to cultural institutions, you then have the intersection with audience. And, you know, you could read these [previously discussed values] from one way as sort of, you know, high minded liberal values, that if your audience are not coming from the same direction, you have to at the very least, my words may be clumsy here, translate, because what you're interested in is your connection with your audience. And, you know, this, if I can generalize was part of the issue around the Brexit debate and how the arts found it incredibly difficult to connect with leave vote voters broadly. Because we weren't coming from there. And I think a lot of cultural institutions and artists struggled with how to open up a debate, debate on things that were for many of them sort of profoundly upsetting or quite hard to understand. You know, on one level, it was a black and white argument another level it was an enormously nuanced level and, and another level absolutely not what it was apparently about, you know, so I think I think this is the crux of it for me when, when the values of an organization must intersect with their audiences, and as our previous colleague said, those audiences within those institutions who may fund us and run us and those audiences that we directly seek to reach.

The bigger point made here was that these features were driven by values. As one participant remarked, values *"create a sort of bedrock of behaviours and how we choose to work"* and another explained; *"So It is an important part of any institution that it does identify what its values are, and they will vary from institution to institution, depending on you know, what their particular, I suppose mission is, if I can use that word."* As such, a genuine cultural relations approach requires features that are defined by the values of the organization, which in turn help to build its identity by embodying those values within the behaviour, projects and goals of the organization. The British Council was in many ways seen as having some of these key features, but because there was concern about the bigger inability to link these features to a coherent core; *"the British Council needs to kind of do a bit of soul searching of what it actually is, who it's for and what it wants to do."*

Theme 3: Power imbalance, a challenge to genuine mutuality

Another key theme that emerged in this focus group discussion, linked to the discussion around the mission and agenda of the British Council, was how it could serve as a facilitator of cultural relations and dialogue. There was a sense that mutuality was unachievable when the British Council's core mission is to promote and export Britishness, and when there is an inherent power imbalance on multiple levels. Power imbalance was discussed in the extent to which the British Council's work was a two-way learning process; power imbalances between the United Kingdom and countries it operated in, and finally power imbalance as it was expressed in relation to the 'high' threshold needed to begin engaging with the British Council.

When discussing that the primary purpose of the British Council was to export Britishness, this was linked to its for-profit work in exporting English, but also the constraints it faced being funded by the government. However, the participants were also reflecting positively on how this could, in more subtle ways, be challenged through partnerships. The work that the British Council was seen as doing through partners was favourably looked upon and was seen as (most of the time) allowing for collaborations and networks to be developed. However, the British Council's involvement was seen as restricted to the one-way exchange of Britishness, while partners were seen to have to engage with their own creativities and resources to go beyond that. In particular, this was linked to the work done within the arts sector, which was seen as embodying more the positive values of the British Council and as something that should be publicly promoted more.

In discussing the power imbalance on multiple levels, this included between the British Council and the countries and communities that they operate in and partner with, as well as the oftentimes middle/elite class which was seen as benefitting from, and knowledgeable about, the British Council abroad. Examples of the British Council office being in-gated and secluded communities meant that "if you were just a normal person" you wouldn't necessarily get access to it. This was discussed as potentially changing, with participants acknowledging changes to staff composition abroad, including the recruitment of more staff of local origin,

which was seen as one positive way to challenge the power imbalance and potentially control the work of the British Council in their communities.

Lastly, participants discussed the high threshold of beginning engagement and partnerships with the British Council; *“at first you know, it was difficult to get involved. It was difficult to get the attention of somebody up British Council but once we did, which was just the right sort of time for our organization, when we started working with British Council [...] it was so obvious that you know, our kind of like a, you know, the activity that we were doing aligned with this kind of things British Council wanted to be doing.”* This seemed to indicate another way in which the British Council was seen as inaccessible and exclusive, where engagement and benefits were often seen as things given out by the British Council rather than something organizations could themselves actively pursue.

3.2.7 Cross-country deliberative analysis

To examine the deliberative quality of the focus groups, we draw on a micro-level analysis. “Micro analysis involves assessing the deliberative quality of discussion discourse through closely analysing the content of people’s comments during the deliberation”.⁵ The aim of this analysis (coupled with the insights from the more content-focused analysis) was to examine how meta-values (inclusion, diversity, equality, mutuality, respect and tolerance) can be embedded in programmes in order to foster deliberative quality and cooperative orientations among participants. And how this could potentially be more or less successful if different framings of values are drawn on.

In the following analysis, we examined several indicators of deliberation using a simplified version of Stromer-Galley’s coding scheme.⁶ In particular, our unit of analysis was a ‘turn’, rather than a ‘thought’. Total words in the dataset are 47,361. Total turns in the dataset equal 860. We examine if discussions stayed on topic; how prevalent the expression of opinion was, and to what extent this was elaborated; whether and what sources were drawn on to support arguments; what conditions allowed for more or less equal participation on behalf of participants, the quality of engagement with the question v. the group. Prior to coding, all social talk (i.e. introductions and goodbyes) and or process-talk (talk referring to muting/unmuting, connectivity issues etc.) was removed in order to ensure that the coding was focused solely on the data of interest.

As a reminder, the following value-frames were used per country, with each pair highlighted in a distinct colour:

- United Kingdom: value-neutral, threat-focused, cultural values
- South Africa: threat-focused, cultural values, political/diplomatic values
- Malaysia*: threat-focused, integrative setting, polarising setting

Our analysis proceeds by giving general results on the data as a whole, before addressing within-condition comparisons and, where relevant, a comparison across the three countries (using the shared condition of ‘threat-focused’).

Topic: We coded for whether a turn addressed the topic posed (structuring topic) or topics that emerged through the interaction (interactional topic). Given the breadth of the topic guide in terms of its focus on values in different comparative contexts (i.e., in contexts of threat v. not; in contexts of political institutions v. cultural institutions) we found that participants predominantly stayed in course and focused on the structured topic at hand throughout the sessions. More specifically, only 3% of the talk in the sessions was on interactional topics, specifically in the United Kingdom, moving to discuss Brexit and polarization, and in Malaysia to discuss anti-

⁵ Black, L.W., Burkhalter, S., Gastil, J. and Stromer-Galley, J., 2011. Methods for analyzing and measuring group deliberation. In Bucy, E.P. and Holbert, R.L. eds., 2014. *Sourcebook for political communication research: Methods, measures, and analytical techniques*. Routledge.

⁶ Stromer-Galley, J., 2007. Measuring Deliberation’s Content: A Coding Scheme. *Journal of Deliberative Democracy*, 3(1).

mask movements on Facebook. There was no difference between moderation formats regarding the presence of interactional talk.

Reasoned opinion expression: Reasoned opinion expression is a combined measure that includes the codes for statements of opinion, agreement, or disagreement and whether there is elaboration on that opinion expression. As Stromer-Galley explains, “Opinion expression was defined as an expression of the speaker’s belief about how the world is. Opinions are expressed judgments the speaker has made on a person, an event, a social problem, a state of affairs, a crisis, values, and the like.” (p. 10).

We did not code instances of one-word or two-word answers listing values as expressions of opinion, instead, these required at least some formulation of thought. With regards to reasoned opinion expression, overall, 51.8% (N = 466) of all turns included an expression of opinion (this included expressions of agreement as well). Of those 466 turns, 36.7% had an elaboration (N = 159). The rest, 64.3%, did not.

Looking more specifically at the presence of agreement and disagreement, we see that disagreement was quite rare. While agreement occurred in 21.7% of the turns that included an opinion, only 3.6% of disagreements occurred. Using existing literature (i.e., Stromer-Galley, 2007) as a benchmark, we find that the presence of disagreements is slightly lower but still a value to be expected from this kind of data. Probing further into when disagreements occur, to consider what points of tension can be identified, we see that these happened in a context where participants were discussing the practical application of values (i.e., when the discussion moved from translating a value from theory to practice) or when the discussion turned to the politicisation of values (i.e., which values governments should hold, which values political institutions should support and the role of organisations in championing more niche and less accepted values).

In examining the two datasets (chat and audio) separately, we see another trend, which shows better deliberation in the audio-based conditions. In the audio-condition, we find that 80.8% of turns express an opinion, compared to 38.1% in the chat. Of turns that expressed an opinion, again there was a range in how much these were elaborated by participants. In the audio-based data, elaborations occurred 66.1% of the time and in the chat-based, this was less than 5% of the time.

Comparison at country pair level:

Looking at reasoned opinion expressions across each country gives us a sense of which value-frame elicited more, or less, thoughtful responses from participants.

Malaysia: Integrative v. Polarising Setting

Because the first focus group in Malaysia was chat-based only while the second session was audio and chat-based, our comparison of this condition is slightly incomplete. Nevertheless, comparing the chat conditions only, we see that the integrative condition elicited 39% opinions, compared to the polarising condition, which elicited only 30% of opinion-related expressions. Of these, 0% of the polarising were elaborated on, while 15% of the integrative opinions were elaborated on. As might be expected, the integrative condition generated more agreement (18.2%) than the polarising condition (2%) but neither condition generated disagreement

South Africa: Cultural values v. Political/Diplomatic values

We compared the audio conditions only for both groups (given the finding that the chat-based conditions tended to elicit very low numbers of opinions and particularly opinions that were elaborated on).

We find that there is a similar pattern of opinion expression in both the cultural (82%) and the political (85%) conditions, with a slightly higher presence of opinions in the politically framed discussion. However, we find a slightly different pattern when it comes to the extent to which opinions were followed by elaborations, with the political condition eliciting more elaborations (62%) than the cultural condition (55%). Overall, across the total

number of turns, there was a higher number of turns dedicated to opinion expression and elaboration for the political framing of the value discussion (53% of the total session) than the cultural framing (45% of the total discussion). This seems to indicate a slightly higher thoughtfulness in the condition where values become politicised. A look at the presence of agreement and disagreement across the two conditions further helps to support this idea. For example, the political condition had a higher presence of agreements (35%) and disagreements (12.5%) than the cultural condition (with 23.7% agreements and 0% disagreements). This political frame condition was, overall, the condition with the highest presence of disagreements, indicating it was a condition that elicited more deliberation than others (but specifically in comparison to a cultural framing).

United Kingdom: Value-neutral v. Threat-focused values

We find that there is a similar pattern of opinion expression in both the neutral (78%) and the threat (81%) conditions. However, we find a slightly different pattern when it comes to the extent to which opinions were followed by elaborations, with the threat condition eliciting more elaborations (76%) than the cultural condition (72%). This seems to indicate that participants spent more time expressing and justifying their opinions when discussing values under threat, compared to when the prompt was not present. Examining the presence of agreements or disagreements highlighted a higher frequency of these in the neutral condition (31.3% agreements; 9.4% disagreements) compared to the threat condition (22.2% agreements; 2.8% disagreements). The qualitative inspection of the data explains these patterns by allowing us to see how the neutral condition stimulated a deeper discussion of the tensions between values in theory and values in practice, while the threat condition was more focused on the importance of 'good' values in contexts of threat, which was more unanimously agreed upon by participants.

Cross-country comparison of the same condition: Threat-focused values

One framing was used across the three countries to be able to compare the data internationally. For the condition of threat, we see that opinions were expressed 87% of the time in South Africa, 81% of the time in the United Kingdom and 57% of the time in Malaysia. Of these expressions, elaborations were offered 74% of the time in South Africa, 76% of the time in the United Kingdom and 57% of the time in Malaysia. Lastly, the presence of agreements was 22.6% for South Africa, 22.2% for the United Kingdom and 8.1% for Malaysia (neither Malaysia nor South Africa had any disagreements in the threat condition while the United Kingdom only had 2.8%). While the United Kingdom and South Africa show more similar patterns, the lower numbers in Malaysia seem to indicate less need to expand or explain opinions of what values are needed and why in contexts of threat, which might indicate a broader shared (or assumed) consensus within the culture itself, and thus less of a need to elaborate on opinions to justify them.

Sourcing: Overwhelmingly, when sources were used to support a claim (N = 145), these focused on personal anecdotes, experiences or stories (76.4%). Other sources included referring back to the reasons offered by other participants (8.6% of the time) which were explicitly taken up, rather than simply agreed with, referring to facts (5% of the time) and references to current events (5%; i.e., Black Lives Matter movement). The use of sources was more common in audio discussions (95.2%) compared to chat (4.8%). There was no difference across moderation conditions.

Equality: There was a variety and range in terms of contributions and engagement across the sample. The number of speakers within a group ranged from 7 to 17 (M = 9, SD = 3). The number of words that one participant contributed in total per session ranged from 11 to 1815 (M = 526 words, SD = 487). The number of words per turn were counted to assess the level of engagement and time spent unpacking a point. The number of words in a turn ranged from 1 to 602 (N = 47 361, M = 55 words, SD = 94.3). The total number of turns by a speaker in a given group ranged from 2 to 28 (M = 10 turns per participant, SD = 6.3).

If we separate the audio-based data from the chat-based data and we only consider the former, we see that the average number of words per turn increases to 155, indicating that in the audio-based discussions participants spent more time developing their thoughts and ideas.

When we took the data set as a whole, there was no correlation between the number of speakers and spoken words overall. However, when controlling for the format, there was a positive correlation between the number of speakers and spoken words in both Audio ($r = .46$, $p = .24$) and Chat ($r = .89$, $p < 0.01$). However, this relationship was only significant for chat, with audio showing a moderate to weak correlation.

As gender differences have been previously found in terms of dominating group dialogue, we examine the role of gender in our data. We find that in the chat-based only conditions (MY1 and MY2), we see almost equal participation between men and women, while controlling for the presence of more/less women in each group. However, in conditions where there was both audio and chat, women tended to use chat more and men audio more. For example, in MY3 where women composed 55% of the group, they only took up 39% of the audio-discussion while they contributed 77.6% to the chat-based data. Similarly, in UK1, where there were only two men in a group of 11 participants (composing 18% of the group) they made up 38.9% of the audio and 11% of the chat. Lastly, in ZA1, where there was only one male participant in a group of 7, this participant accounted for 33.6% of the words spoken in that session but only 3% in the chat. This tended to be the case because men on average spoke more words per turn than women (818 words per turn for men; 564 words per turn for women). Thus, while our sample was slightly overrepresented by women in the focus groups overall, gender dynamics in terms of who dominates a discussion needs to be considered in detail.

There was no difference in equality on the basis of moderation prompt, but rather this was a reflection on the gender composition and form of data (chat/chat and audio/audio only).

Engagement: Analysis of turn-type indicates that participants in the focus groups primarily responded to the moderator (by offering their opinion or direct answer to the question posed). 86.7% of all turns initiated responses to the question or addressed at the moderator.

Overwhelmingly, participants' responses would begin with 'I think' or 'I feel' or 'I find it important...'. The focus on responding to the moderator is also evident in the turn-taking patterns found in the audio-transcripts of the focus groups, where participants very rarely 'jumped in' to respond to each other's points, but instead waited for the moderator to facilitate. This might be a consequence of the online format, where multiple participants within one online session made it important to use functions such as 'hand raising' to elicit response order. However, this might have led to participants waiting to be called upon to speak instead. In comparison, 11.3% of response picked up on other participants' responses directly.

The coding also captured whether a participant continued a thought from a prior turn. For example, a participant who takes multiple turns to continue their thought—regardless of what other participants might have said in the intervening turns. This was a relatively rare phenomenon. Only 1.2% of the turns were continuations of a speaker's thoughts from a prior turn ($N=10$, $M=.63$, $SD=.90$).

Meta-talk was even rarer. Across the focus groups, meta-talk occurred 7 times in total (0.8%), with 6 instances identifying consensus across the group ('We all agree that...') and only one instance of meta-talk that clarified what another speaker said.

Questioning of the thoughts expressed by other participants occurred in only one instance within the whole dataset and occurred when a participant in South Africa asked another to clarify "What does honesty mean and look like?". Therefore, probing another participant's thought or asking them to explain or justify their thinking further was rare. Instead, there was a general tendency to engage with the opinions of others through explicit agreement or picking up on the points made by others (i.e., 'Picking up on what X said'; 'Just to add to what X has said'; 'Going along with what X said' and 'For me it's the same as X, I think...').

If we look at the data across data type (audio or chat) we find some interesting differences. All in all, 97.5% of all turns in the chats were responses to the prompt or the moderator, in comparison with 63.9% of the audio-based data set. Response to others in audio composed 30% of all turns while responses to others in the chat-based groups composed only 2.2% of all turns. If we compare MY1 (which was chat-based only) with UK2 and ZA3 (where participants did not use the chat) we see this pattern further evidenced; response to question/moderator composed 99.6% of the MY1 data, while in UK2 and ZA3 this was 50% and 65% respectively. As such, we see that, when data is collected online, audio-based data collection methods are better at eliciting engagement with other participants.

Moving on to consider the role of moderation types for eliciting more or less engagement, we again examine this across country pairs:

Malaysia: Integrative v. Polarising Setting

The Malaysia focus groups were compared across the chat-based conditions which reflect different overall patterns to the audio-based data, as is evident in the general results indicated for each section. The integrative condition elicited slightly more engagement than the polarising condition, with 9.1% of turns being responses rather than initiations of new messages (or aimed at moderator). This is in comparison with 0% of the turns being aimed at other participants.

South Africa: Cultural values v. Political/Diplomatic values

Across the two conditions, we find similar patterns, with 25% of the politically framed dialogue and 29% of the culturally framed dialogue eliciting responses to other participants. Interestingly, we only see meta-talk occur in the political condition (10% of the time). Closer inspection shows that this meta-talk focused primarily on clarifying another participant's point (on half of the instances) and identifying consensus (on half of the instances). As there was a strong presence of disagreement within this framing, it is interesting to also see the presence of meta-talk which tries to bring the group together around shared points.

United Kingdom: Value-neutral v. Threat-focused values

In the United Kingdom we again see similar patterns in the two conditions, with the neutral condition eliciting responses to other participants in 40.6% of the dataset, while the threat condition was only slightly higher (41.7%).

As with the South Africa data, we only see meta-talk emerge in one condition, which is the threat condition. Here, the instances of meta-talk (5.6%) were all focused on addressing points of consensus within the group, which, while a small number, indicates an effort to unite the group.

3.2.8 Summary and Conclusion

Several summary points can be made from this analysis:

Firstly, the quality of the data varied markedly by type of data collection method, with audio/video-based focus groups eliciting more expressions of opinion and elaboration, more engagement with other participants and overall longer responses. However, the audio-based format also led to unequal participating, with men tending to dominate discussions more. Thus, we suggest audio or face-to-face focus group formats be used in the future. If online discussions are preferred, using documents or more problem-oriented/issue-oriented topic guides might help to foster more interaction between participants.

Secondly, while we did not find much (or very strong) evidence to suggest that framing the discussions differently had a significant impact on the deliberative quality of the focus groups, we did find interesting trends and patterns which offer a starting point for interpreting the Pilot research. Different frames were engaged with

in different ways by participants. We see that in South Africa, the cultural-institution frame elicited more engagement with other participants; however, the political-institution frame elicited more meta-talk, which aimed to clarify other participants points and highlight group consensus. In the United Kingdom context, the condition that elicited more engagement was the values-under-threat condition; however, the difference was small. Lastly, in Malaysia, due to the groups being chat-based, there was a very small presence of response-oriented data, but this was nevertheless more common in the integrative condition.

Third, we find that tensions (disagreements) arise predominantly around discussions which politicise values or which discuss values in practice. This finding is crucial as it allows us to consider which framing of value-based discussions might be most fruitful for eliciting deliberation and in-depth engagement by participants. Given that disagreement is an important marker of deliberation, a key takeaway from the pilot is that the potential framing of the moderation might be less significant than the inclusion of direct examples (or tangible framings) of discussion points.

Fourth, more diversity in the sample of participants might be useful for eliciting more deliberation. As all focus groups were conducted with national in-group members, values were oftentimes discussed on the level of the nation, within which all participants were members. Some evidence of differences emerged when participants spoke of different ethnic, class or racial groups (reported in the content-focused analysis) and this might be worthwhile pursuing through a more strategic sampling.

As this component of the Pilot suggests, varying frames are useful for eliciting different types of data and engagement with a topic, and to elicit more debate among participants it seems useful to consider values in their politicised or practical/applied nature, either by anchoring them around an explicit social problem or current issue or by focusing on the role of values in politicised contexts or contexts of intergroup tension.

Finally, to address the question of the role of meta-values in fostering deliberative quality and cooperation among participants, it is clear from the thematic analysis that the meta-values of the British Council are key values that participants consider crucial for genuine cultural exchange and cooperation (with the caveat of the values of tolerance and mutuality being questioned most frequently by participants, see below). It is important to note that the focus group findings, despite showing little difference between moderation conditions, do not mean that cultural relations organisations are unable to effectively promote dialogue and cooperation. Positioning these findings more broadly within the bigger qualitative fieldwork analysis, our findings seem to point to the opposite in fact. Namely, participants were open to having value-based conversations facilitated by the British Council, they were supportive of the organisations agenda to promote values and interconnecting of people, cultures and practices, and differences mainly occurred in regard to which values cultural relations organisations should be promoting and how to do so in practice.

As such, there is evidence to support that cultural relations organisations are suitably positioned for value leadership, and that they should own this space more. Stakeholders emphasising more positive self-promotion is a key example of this. While the qualitative fieldwork was not designed to assess the quality of existing practices, the findings indicate that there is, across the different perspectives reflected in the fieldwork (staff, stakeholders and a combination of partners and users), high regard for the work of cultural relations organisation and a desire for their continued engagement and boldness in pioneering conversations and agendas that other, more politicized organisations, are unable to push.

A key to achieving this is through building trust with local communities, partners and stakeholders. There is work needed on the processes through which trust is built and value leadership claimed. Specifically, work is needed on how the processes of cultural relations work are framed both with staff, stakeholders and users as well as how the organisational identity is represented. As the qualitative data indicates, this is built by having a clear organisational identity and agenda, which is transparently communicated (alongside a transparency about the organisations relationship with both domestic and local governments). This was seen as missing within the British Council. A sense of misalignment and unclarity about what a cultural relations organisation

'is' and 'does' can function to hinder its appeal to new partners, its credibility among users as a body (at least partially) independent from political institutions and its ability to foster trust. As the quantitative analysis shows, there are different values that we expect of cultural and political institutions, and so a clear identity is important here.

The importance of valuing difference is crucial and is reflected in the thematic analysis of the data and was seen as more important than claims to 'mutuality' which were oftentimes questioned on the extent to which they were possible to realize, when there would always be a power asymmetry and a profit gained from exporting English as part of the British Council's work. Furthermore, the value of tolerance was seen as problematic, as it communicated a general sense that more powerful organisations (or indeed countries) "put up with" the diversity they encounter in other places in order to profit from it, rather than genuinely engage with it. These are two values which might require some reframing, or re-articulation in the identity of the British Council. More detailed discussion of values in cultural relations can be found in Section 4.2.2 above.

4. Conclusions

Throughout this report, we have mapped and explored the positions of the populations of three countries – South Africa, Malaysia, and the United Kingdom – as well as the people using British Council services and working with and for it in those three nations – when it comes to value preferences, international cooperation, and the ideal value profile of different types of institutions including the British Council itself.

Because of the nature of the four types of groups that we have been interested in, we use three different types of methodologies to conduct our research: surveys, semi-structured interviews, and focus groups with variations in moderation and a deliberative component.

To conclude our analysis, however, we would now like to consider how those findings can be brought together and what their superimposition tells us. In our analysis, we have mostly done that in two ways. First, by understanding how the qualitative components could shed some light on the possible nature of some of the quantitative findings and, notably, on the possible meanings of some of the values which general populations often refer to in the survey. Second, we have asked the participants in our qualitative fieldwork to also answer some of the questions that general populations responded to as part of the survey. Whilst the qualitative samples are not intended to be representative of the groups they were drawn from (users, stakeholders, and staff of the British Council), so we cannot analyse their responses in the same way, it is legitimate to consider their answers to highlight any major discrepancy and try and understand its implications when it comes to both the British Council work and the foundations and future priorities of international cooperation and action.

Let us consider some of the pictures that this comparison reveals in each of the three countries.

4.1 Unifying the findings: Comparing value preferences across groups

4.1.1 Malaysia

In stark contrast to the preferences expressed by the general population, diversity is seen to be the dominant value for staff, stakeholders and users of the British Council's actions and programmes in Malaysia. For these groups that have more contact with the British Council, there is more focus on utilitarian values, notably sustainability, which is placed second in the value hierarchisation for focus group participants and third for staff members, whilst it does not appear within the top seven of the values for the general population. A surprising contrast is that peace, a polysemic value, is placed second by the general population is not referenced by any of the groups that have most contact with the British Council. Members of British Council staff refer to mutuality which sets this group apart from the rest as it is not mentioned by the other groups, whilst focus group participants include tradition in the top seven values that represent the British Council. As we noted earlier, whilst respect, peace, and open-mindedness are amongst the most cited for the general population, it was multicultural values such as equality and inclusion that were seen to be integral to the "value niche" that the British Council could represent better than other cultural and diplomatic institutions. This ownership of values also seems to be highly relevant for groups that are most connected with the British Council whether they be staff, stakeholders, or users of its programmes and actions.

Altogether, those differences have critical implications for the action of the British Council, because an arbitration will need to be made between the value priorities that motivate staff internally (and their own perceptions of the contexts in which they operate), those of the people already using their services, and ultimately, the population of the countries in which their action takes place. Focusing on staff and users' preferences could reinforce existing bonds but conversely prevent the British Council from effectively use values discourse to broaden its appeal and local legitimacy. By contrast, using insights from the general population analysis could open the door to the British Council addressing new public but may also make current

staff and users feel that the British Council is partly losing what they have considered to be the institution’s value mission and identity.

Table 9. Comparison of Most important values for the British Council

General Population		Staff Interviews	Stakeholders	Focus Groups
Value	%	Value	Value	Value
Respect	48%	Diversity	Diversity	Diversity
Peace	28%	Inclusion	Respect	Sustainability
Open-mindedness	27%	Mutuality	Inclusion	Open-mindedness
Tolerance	23%	Sustainability	Equality	Inclusion
Equality	21%	Equality	Open-mindedness	Equality
Care	19%	Open-mindedness	Sustainability	Tradition
Freedom	17%	Freedom	Gender Equality	Tolerance

Note: Whilst the survey of the general population used a representative sample, the samples for the questionnaires at the end of the staff and stakeholder interviews and the focus groups are non-representative. Red represents multicultural values, blue represents humanist values, green utilitarian values, and black represents polysemic values.

4.1.2 South Africa

Table 10. Comparison of “Most important values for the British Council”

General Population		Staff Interviews	Stakeholders	Focus Groups
Value	%	Value	Value	Value
Respect	23%	Mutuality	Inclusion	Inclusion
Equality	20%	Diversity	Respect	Sustainability
Peace	16%	Inclusion	Tolerance	Equality
Open-mindedness	13%	Sustainability	Open-mindedness	Open-mindedness
Freedom	13%	Equality	Sustainability	Mutuality
Diversity	13%	Care	Care	Diversity
Safety	11%	Respect	-	Respect

Note: Whilst the survey of the general population used a representative sample, the samples for the questionnaires at the end of the staff and stakeholder interviews and the focus groups are non-representative. Red represents multicultural values, blue represents humanist values, green utilitarian values, and black represents polysemic values.

In South Africa, there is a significant gap between each of the three target groups that we surveyed (British Council staff, stakeholders, and users) and the general population. Notably, of the three main values prioritised by the general population (respect, equality, and peace, in that order), only respect comes in second place amongst stakeholders’ responses, and equality in third place amongst British Council users. This is a striking division because it seems that the priorities of the broader South African population are not really mirrored by the groups already invested in the current British Council action.

Paradoxically, the greatest gap comes with the value preferences of staff which do not overlap at all with the top three choices of the general population. Additionally, of all three top values privileged by the British Council staff whom we interviewed, only one – inclusion – is shared with stakeholders and users (amongst whom it is

ranked top). Note that the main value priority of British Council staff (mutuality) only appears low down the line of users and not at all in the top list of value priorities of stakeholders and the general population, whilst the second most important value for staff – diversity – only comes low down the line for the general population and users and was not mentioned by stakeholders.

In effect, there is relatively little overlap between value priorities for the four categories of populations, and the British Council will need to decide how to reconcile those diverging value propositions. There are four main options that could be followed.

- 1) The first is to stay true to what the British Council’s staff believe is the value mission of the organisation – mutuality and diversity – but this will likely create a major expectation-delivery gap with both current users and partners and the general population.
- 2) The second option would be to focus on inclusion which is not a major priority for the general population but is key amongst the British Council’s current stakeholders and users.
- 3) The third is to try and realign value priorities with the general population preferences, focusing on respect, equality, and peace, but this could be demotivating for staff or conflict with their intuitive sense of the values of the organisation.
- 4) The fourth and final option would be to try and highlight areas of overlap between at least some constituencies. This could mean focusing on inclusion, respect, open-mindedness, and equality. This may be a useful compromise balancing some values that come relatively high in the preferences of staff whilst not their highest, but which resonate outside the organisation.

4.1.3 United Kingdom

The United Kingdom represents a key case study for the Big Conversation research pilot. It is the “home country” of the British Council, and as such we expect that values, actions, preferences, and perceptions will reflect this unique position compared to other countries where the British Council is present and active. The United Kingdom case study will enable us to assess some of the critical theoretical and methodological bases of our model and help us to reveal the “layers” of value preferences between British Council staff, stakeholders, users, and the general population.

Table 11. Comparison of Most important values for the British Council

General Population		Staff Interviews	Stakeholders	Focus Groups
Value	%	Value	Value	Value
Respect	48%	Open-mindedness	Equality	Inclusion
Equality	18%	Diversity	Open-mindedness	Respect
Open-mindedness	17%	Mutuality	Diversity	Sustainability
Inclusion	16%	Sustainability	Sustainability	Open-mindedness
Peace	15%	Inclusion	Respect	Mutuality
Tolerance	23%	Equality		Solidarity
Freedom	17%	Respect		Equality

Note: Whilst the survey of the general population used a representative sample, the samples for the questionnaires at the end of the staff and stakeholder interviews and the focus groups are non-representative. Red represents multicultural values, blue represents humanist values, green utilitarian values, and black represents polysemic values.

Respect, equality, freedom, and tolerance are highlighted as the most fundamental values for a new nation. One of the most significant contrasts across countries was that religion is generally seen as an important and positive value in Malaysia but is openly rejected in the United Kingdom. Respect is by far the most universal and important value that citizens want to see at the heart of the identity and action of cultural institutions. Open-mindedness, equality, and tolerance are also cited frequently by citizens.

In contrast to the Malaysian and South African populations, inclusion is seen as important for cultural institutions amongst British respondents. For diplomatic institutions, respondents choose to focus on peace and safety. Whilst respect remains by far the main value respondents want the British Council to identify with, very unique to the British Council is the primary importance of equality as a core value. In the United Kingdom, inclusion is also important and represents the fourth most cited value.

In terms of international cooperation, respondents highlight the need for more tolerance, more focus on what countries have in common, more equality, and more experience of other cultures. In contrast to Malaysia and South Africa, respondents in the United Kingdom feel that values should be asserted less in order to improve international cooperation.

British respondents claim that the two most important areas for international cooperation are the environment and the fight against terrorism, in contrast to the economy and education in South Africa and Malaysia. Science is also seen as a key priority area alongside military security and migration.

In terms of arbitrating between competing positive values in situations where they are incompatible, on balance, the United Kingdom is the most socially protective and secular of the three case studies. There is a relatively clear majority emerging on many issues, in favour of “humanist” values over “multicultural” solutions but much more balanced divides along ideological value lines, for instance between more protective and more liberal approaches to both unemployment and personal freedoms.

Whilst gender differences were minimal, contrasts in value preferences across age groups are slightly more pronounced. We note that voters aged 55 and over are far more likely to emphasise tolerance and respect, whilst younger respondents are more likely to emphasise diversity and care. Other social and demographic characteristics reveal relatively few significant differences and endorse the broader tendencies uncovered by the public opinion analysis.

United Kingdom staff reflected on the political image and implications of the work of the British Council and engaging with difference, as well as reflecting critically on how the ‘British’ in British Council was perceived. Staff also commented positively on the unique position of the British Council in enabling dialogue across difference and using key partnerships with stakeholders to broker exchange and opportunities across countries. This key role enabled the British Council to have a meaningful and positive impact within local communities. Echoing staff interviews, stakeholders emphasised the ability of the British Council to foster collaborations and develop networks. At the same time, references to the ‘split’ identity and value-frame of the British Council was perceived to impact upon its ability to position and promote itself as a coherent and unified cultural relations organisation.

Reflecting the different nature of the work of the British Council in the United Kingdom, focus groups were predominantly composed of partners, rather than users, and should be noted when comparing findings with the other countries. Participants believed that the organisation seemed to be ‘confused’ about its core mission, referencing a ‘split personality’ that betrayed a dichotomy between what the organization’s mission was perceived to be (embodied in the board and directorate) and what individual staff members promoted, valued and sought to achieve.

4.2 General Conclusions

- In terms of value preferences and ascription, there is more that is shared between the three countries studied rather than separates them. This is notably the case of the critical importance of respect as the central value that populations in all three countries want to see at the heart of the identity and action of all institutions. The similarities across countries seem even stronger when we focus on implicit – rather than explicit – measures.
- Citizens highlight a fairly clear path for better international cooperation but disagree on what should be its main components – with South African and Malaysian respondents focusing on the economy and education, and British respondents on the environment and the fight on terrorism. Despite those differences, the British Council can find an indispensable niche in the context of what citizens want international cooperation to be about, notably in the context of education, science, and culture, despite language being seen as less prominent a priority.
- The phenomenon of value ownership is real. Respondents make clear distinctions about the types of values which they wish to see championed by different types of institutions – cultural, diplomatic, and the British Council itself. From that point of view, there are different types of moral and cultural values which cluster together. Values from the “humanist” tradition aim to focus on common moral priorities (e.g. freedom, equality, inclusion, gender equality, etc), whilst values from the multicultural tradition emphasise the importance of tolerance, diversity, and acknowledging different traditions and religions. Finally, some respondents emphasise utilitarian values, i.e. values defined by their goal rather than their nature (e.g. prosperity, safety, sustainability). Different types of institutions see humanist or tolerant values more or less emphasised.
- The British Council notably sees a high emphasis on some humanist values (freedom, equality, and inclusion) and perhaps surprisingly less so on multicultural values – with respondents being less keen on tolerance being a central value for the action of the British Council than for both cultural and diplomatic institutions. These highlight an interesting “value niche” for the British Council, which many want to see as the champion of advocating freedom and inclusion compared to other institutions, with a possible focus on mutuality in some countries to complete the uniqueness of its mission.
- When value tensions occur, the ultimate arbitration tends to be significantly more conservative, multicultural, and respectful of religion in Malaysia than in the other two countries studied. In comparison to the United Kingdom and South Africa, the Malaysian population is generally more economically and socially conservative in values. The findings suggest that respondents tend to be favourable to limiting freedom of speech where it risks leading to religious offence (61-27) or public disorder (56-34).
- When value tensions occur, the ultimate arbitration of the South African public is largely in line with that of other countries (closer to Britain than to Malaysia). On balance, it favours integrative values over diverse ones, emphasising a desire to ring-fence gender equality over diverging traditions, and universal benefits over national ones which has a strong impact on prospects of international cooperation.
- When value tensions occur, the ultimate arbitration of the British public is largely in line with that of other countries, but explicitly more favourable liberal and secular values than is the case in South Africa and even more so in Malaysia.
- In Malaysia, one of the most important elements in the cross-sectional analysis is that gender and age make remarkably little difference to how people prioritise the values that the British Council should be prioritising. Yet, there were two interesting exceptions with regards to age groups. First, those aged

65 and over and 55-64 favour open-mindedness far more than other age groups, and secondly, mutuality is placed higher with older generations but is seen as largely irrelevant by young age groups. Whilst numbers are too small to infer regional differences, we do note that tolerance is ranked much higher by those living in Kuala Lumpur than any other region (32% and second place). In terms of experience, we note that those who travel abroad regularly are far more likely to emphasise open-mindedness and tolerance as two of the key values which they wish the British Council to emphasise.

- In South Africa, cross-sectional differences are few and far between. Women tend to further emphasise respect where men prioritise open-mindedness, older populations are keener on care and tolerance whereby the young focus far more on solidarity, and white South Africans put a stronger emphasis on respect, peace, and tolerance, and a lower one on diversity whilst those self-identifying as mixed ethnicity particularly wish the British Council to emphasise open-mindedness and freedom as core values. Crucially however, no social, demographic, or ethnic line decidedly divides the South African population which emerges as largely unified in its preferred value principles for the British Council.
- Similarly, in the United Kingdom cross-sectional differences are few and far between. Women tend to further emphasise respect where men prioritise freedom a lot more, older citizens care more about tolerance and respect, whereas the young are keen to ensure that the British Council champions diversity and care, and the more educated the respondents, the more important it is to them that the British Council will represent values of open-mindedness in its action.
- In the context of the interviews and focus groups, a lot of participants use those differences to point out to certain perceived ambiguities or tensions with regards to what the British Council does and should emphasise. This involves both tension between business values and more substantive cultural and moral values, and a sense of ambiguity between the latter two, as well as utilitarian values (defined by their goal rather than their nature), with many participants suspecting a divergence between the intended core mission of the British Council and those embraced by local teams on the ground. This is not necessarily a bad thing, but it creates a sense of confusion amongst participants.
- Conversely, in the survey, we find that the “niche” respondents ascribe to the British Council particularly emphasises some humanist moral values such as equality, freedom, and inclusion, suggesting an expectation that the British Council should indeed be providing value leadership around certain conceptions of moral values that correspond to its own cultural tradition.
- Finally, in terms of international cooperation, we find that some of the British Council’s missions, notably education, science, and, to a lesser extent, culture, correspond to a priority demand by an important part of local populations, even if it comes after some other priorities such as economic collaboration in Malaysia and South Africa, or the environment and fight on terror in the United Kingdom.
- The pandemic was seen as causing uncertainty and fears about what the future might hold, triggering the need for deep reflection on existing practices, values and societal needs. The need to be agile, flexible and creative to adapt to current and future threats was highlighted, emphasize it as a way to ensure the sustainability of the organisation’s relevance for international cooperation. Future challenges included concerns around financial implications and loss of staff who act as gatekeepers to local community networks, and the digitalisation of cultural relations activities which can limit their inclusiveness and ability to foster deeper bonds. Future opportunities included a timeliness of re-evaluating and strengthening the organisation’s mission and ensuring a renewed commitment towards sustainability.