

UK YOUTH

Youth Conversations:

How to increase access to
international experiences at home
and abroad

In partnership with:



Supported by:



Contents

Foreword	3
Introduction	4
Methodology	5
Findings.....	8
Recommendations.....	19
Learning for future youth engagement	21
Acknowledgements.....	25
About the partners	26



Foreword

The British Council's Internationalism ambition is founded on the belief that international connections and skills are essential for children and young people to succeed and flourish. Unfortunately, opportunities to connect and learn with people of other countries and cultures are diminishing, particularly in disadvantaged or isolated communities that need them most. In 2019, we established the Internationalism Alliance in partnership with The Prince's Trust, an open forum for organisations sharing our commitment to supporting children and young people in the UK with international and intercultural experiences. Together, we have authored and signed up to the Internationalism Pledge.

Since its foundation, we have included young people as active members that help to shape the research, collaboration and engagement we need to collectively make the case for a globally engaged and interculturally aware generation of citizens, empowered to shape the UK's future role in the world.

This is why, since 2019, we have also worked with UK Youth to build our awareness and capacity to listen to the views and ideas of children and young people themselves: to engage with them not only as beneficiaries of our programmes and activities, but as partners who can help us to create the programmes and services they need. It is also why we wanted to proactively reach beyond our existing beneficiaries to those who may not even know that we, or the programmes we provide, exist. This report is the second phase of that work, in which we partnered with My Life My Say to pilot a series of youth conversations, focusing on our future strategy and approach to Internationalism in the UK.

In doing so, we were challenged to let go of preconceived ideas of what international opportunities 'should' look like, or to reach for solutions from existing programmes, but to simply listen. We have taken a values-based approach, in particular our commitment to being *expert and inclusive*: adopting an open mind to include voices from the whole of the UK, and in doing so building our expertise and confidence for our Internationalism work.

The views shared in these conversations will support the British Council and members of the Internationalism Alliance to widen access to international opportunities, and to understand why and how international connections and skills are important to children and young people in the UK. At the same time, the thoughts expressed have created a compelling snapshot of young peoples' attitudes and perceptions to internationalism that we hope will raise the aspirations of their peers across the UK.

Julia Handelman-Smith, Head of Internationalism, British Council

Introduction

Following recommendations from the British Council Youth Participation Review, UK Youth and My Life My Say took on the next stage of youth engagement work to develop a programme of Youth Conversations. The aim for these Conversations was to gather young people's perspectives to influence a national strategy and pledge for international opportunities and connections for young people in the UK as part of the British Council's Internationalism Strategy.

Young people are a key audience for the British Council, and they have made a commitment to increase and prioritise the involvement of young people in the development of their work.

The Youth Conversations also served as a pilot activity for increased youth participation in British Council strategy and policy, as recommended in a Youth Participation Options Paper commissioned by the British Council from UK Youth in 2019. Learning from this report will help to inform future youth consultation and engagement with British Council policy and initiatives and form the basis for internal guidance and sharing of best practice for wider teams at the British Council.

The views of young people from the Youth Conversations project are being used to support the British Council in developing their work to meet the aims of their Internationalism Strategy.

The British Council Internationalism ambition is based on the belief that every child and young person needs diverse connections and skills, both within their communities and internationally, to build a better future for themselves. Current British Council work is about widening opportunities and participation in internationalism for children and young people across the UK, with a particular focus on more disadvantaged young people, to ensure every young person has international and intercultural experiences.

International and intercultural experience refers to sustained and cumulative encounters with people of other countries and cultures, at home and through periods of time spent overseas. This develops intercultural competence and intelligence: a combination of attitudes, knowledge, behaviours and skills that support mutually beneficial collaboration and understanding between people of different countries and cultures

The strategy also involves research and collaboration with partners to influence policy and practice. To achieve this, the British Council partnered with The Prince's Trust to establish the Internationalism Alliance: a group of mandated organisations working with young people committed to advancing international opportunities for their communities.¹

¹ <https://www.britishcouncil.org/work/partner/internationalism-alliance>

Methodology

The Youth Conversations were delivered by My Life My Say, using their Democracy Café methodology, in partnership with UK Youth, using their network of young people through the UK Youth Movement to access a wide range of young people who have varied experience of international opportunities.

COVID 19 Adaptations

As the COVID19 pandemic developed, it became clear that we could not travel across the UK to meet young people in their communities and youth centres to run the Democracy Cafés and so the method of delivery changed significantly, and all workshops were held online

Democracy Café

My Life My Say use a unique Democracy Café approach to gain youth insights. The Democracy Café approach is a reinvigoration of the 17th century coffee house tradition where members of society would gather and discuss local issues. This model brings a social buzz back to coffee shops and makes them a place where communities can come together and engage in meaningful discussions. My Life My Say's trained facilitators host sessions and guide the discussions by posing questions to participants.

Content development

My Life My Say created a workshop based on four key questions provided by the British Council. They wanted to hear about participants' understanding of the word 'internationalism', whether this resonated or had importance in their lives, their own international experiences, some of the barriers to accessing international experiences and finally, any solutions to help increase young people's access to international experiences.

It was important that the methodology itself was developed with young people from the beginning. The workshop was piloted with young people who are part of UK Youth Voice. Feedback from the pilot was used to change the questions and spend more time on discussing the word 'Internationalism', and establishing an agreed definition, before participants moved on to discuss their own experiences of international opportunities.

These were the final questions used in the workshops:

- 1: What is internationalism?
- 2: Are there benefits to having international experiences or connections?
- 3: What are the barriers/enabling factors to young people exploring international experiences?
- 4: How can we create international experiences or connections?

Participants

It was important to the British Council to hear a diverse range of views and experiences from young people, including – and especially – those who may not have connected internationally before. Participants for the workshops came through UK Youth's network of local youth organisations.

Across the five workshops, there was a wide range of different international experiences, both at home and abroad, represented. This included young people who have had international experiences before, and also those who rarely left their local area to visit the main city due to socio-economic barriers or rural isolation. There were also participants at the workshops who had travelled to the UK from abroad to study.

This mix of backgrounds and experiences at the workshops meant we heard about a wide range of enabling factors and barriers that influenced young people's thoughts on their access to international opportunities. During the workshops, young people quickly created their own peer support and advisory spaces to enable everyone to take part, including adapting to people's special needs, and recognising that not everyone comes from the same background or has had equal access to experiences.

Delivery

All five workshops were delivered over Zoom. Some members of UK Youth Voice were trained as facilitators and a mixed model of peer and adult-led facilitation was used throughout.

Taking a peer-led approach can help participants, especially those who are less confident with the topic of discussion, to overcome apprehensions they might feel in speaking to an 'authority' on the topic. Since engaging with young people who had not had lots of international experiences was key to this project, creating a more equal and balanced space to promote an open conversation was very important, and peer facilitators were a crucial part of that.

Locations

The British Council represents the whole of the UK and it was very important that participants were drawn from diverse geographies across the UK. The workshops were originally planned to take place face to face in local youth clubs, and five specific locations were chosen to ensure representation from across the four UK Nations and to have geographic diversity, including rural, coastal, and urban places. As the workshops moved online, the locations of participants became more diffused. This allowed for more young people to take part and for us to hear from a more diverse group. Five workshops were run in total: in Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland, and two in England. This does, however, mean that we cannot draw conclusions on attendee's experiences based on the places they live in.

The Pilot

The Democracy Café was piloted with five young people from UK Youth Voice, some of whom went on to be peer facilitators. Their feedback was used to make changes to the four main questions and structure of the session. It was important to test the plan out with young people who would be comfortable telling us if something could be improved, especially as the topic wasn't a familiar one.

The most important piece of feedback from the pilot was that none of the young people had come across the word 'internationalism' before. Their feedback showed that we couldn't assume participants would have come across it either, or have an understanding of it that was similar to the British Council's.

This led to the first question being changed and more time being spent unpacking the term. While acknowledging all of the different ideas young people would bring to the sessions was important, a common understanding of 'internationalism' on which to build the rest of the session was needed. The British Council definition referenced later in this report was used to help with this process.



Findings

At each of the five Youth Conversations Democracy Cafés, four guiding questions were asked:

1: What is internationalism?

2: Are there benefits to having international experiences or connections?

3: What are the barriers/enabling factors to young people having international experiences?

4: How can we create international experiences or connections?

These questions brought forward a wide range of reflections, experiences, and opinions from the participants. The key findings at the end are based on the conversations had with young people. Quotes from the Democracy Cafés are used throughout the report to represent the young people's input most accurately.

Question 1: What is internationalism?

The feedback from the pilot turned out to be crucial as during each Democracy Café participants confirmed that it wasn't a word they had come across before, or if they had, they didn't have a definition for it. Participants offered a range of guesses for what the term might mean.

- The opposite of "nationalism"
- Political principle about global cooperation
- What we have in common with people across the world
- Connections to people across the world
- Cooperation between countries

- International heritage and having relatives in different parts of the world
- Mix of cultures in some countries
- International trade
- Diverse communities
- Globalisation
- People coming from other countries

Participants were more familiar with the term 'intercultural experience'. It was broadly understood as people displaying or sharing a part of their identity with others. Lots of examples of this were shared and experienced in everyday life, including eating foods, seeing people wearing certain clothing, and participating in cultural or religious celebrations. For those who did not consider themselves to live in a diverse community, there was a recognition that they "missed out" on these things.

"I went to London last year for the first time and I was surprised, I didn't realise how multicultural it is. There was a street market with food from different countries and we have none of that here"

Ohren - Newry, Northern Ireland

After the discussions about the meaning of internationalism, participants were shown the British Council's internationalism pledge. This became the basis for Question 2 and the rest of the workshop.

The Internationalism Pledge

We want to offer every child and young person in the United Kingdom, whatever their background or interests, the opportunity to learn from – and connect with – other people in the UK and around the world.

The UK's future will be shaped by our international links and the way we work with partners to tackle the challenges facing us all.

We pledge to do what we can to give our young people the understanding, skills and confidence to make those connections for themselves – to enrich their lives and the lives of everyone in the UK.

Question 2: Are there benefits to having international experiences or connections?

This question immediately split those who had previous international experiences and those who did not. The split was not in opinion, as to whether there were benefits or not, as regardless of their own experiences most participants thought there were clear benefits. The split was evident in that some could speak from their own personal experiences and others spoke about what they hoped to get from potential international experiences in the future, or what they thought the benefits for society at large were.

Although international experiences include those both at home and abroad, a lot of the reflections to this question were about travelling abroad. However, those who considered themselves to be living in a diverse area shared that encountering people from different countries and cultures on a daily basis, impacts positively on their own and their peers' interest in pursuing international experiences.

"I was privileged to go to a school that was very multicultural" Sarah, Wigan - England

"Where I live is not culturally diverse at all, a lot of my friends who go to school in the centre of Cardiff have a completely different experience than I do even though it's not that far away." Elin - North Wales

Those who'd had their own international experiences abroad reflected on the impact on them as individuals.

"I've loved every experience I had overseas where I got to interact and actually understand how people lived in different countries and cultures and sub-cultures"

Swetha – Newcastle, England

"From my personal experience of doing international experiences it helps to create and build relationships with those you are going with, gaining the experience of a new culture, language, food etc. It also makes you want to experience it more" Prasanna – Newcastle, England

"It's helped me to recognise my privileges, especially around the health care we have in this country." Rachael – Cardiff, Wales

“International experiences also allow greater opportunities, and allow people the chance to develop their experiences outside of their normal realm - so this can be with business, friends, and life experience in general” Ganesh – Newcastle, England

Regardless of whether they had personally had international experiences, participants picked up on a host of personal benefits that also impact wider society:

- Build character
- Self-understanding
- Independence
- Meet new people
- Communicate with others
- Broaden your horizons

- Exposure to different ways of life
- See more options for life choices
- Less prejudice
- Build empathy

“It’s actually seeing that things are much wider than the four walls we live in and the close communities we live in”
Gabby – Bristol, England

“I think it broadens horizons and especially gives people opportunities to see that they are part of this global world and are a global citizen - being better at communicating with people around you and others!”
Zoe – Newcastle, England

The themes of developing tolerance, independence and compassion came through strongly in participants’ answers to this question, as well as lots of personal enjoyment from their experiences.

Lots of the participants could speak another language because of their family heritage or the country they live in. They were proud to share this during the Democracy Cafés but said that sadly, their mother tongue or native languages were often not appreciated in their places of education.

Languages spoken by some participants:

- | | |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Bengali• Tamil ! :)• English Welsh Bengali• Irish• I speak Arabic and English and Turkish• I speak Welsh• Bangla• Irish• I can read Arabic• English Welsh and learning Spanish | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Some Welsh• Learning Welsh• Welsh, English, a little Swedish and French• English and a bit of Welsh :)• I can read Arabic but not understand it• Irish• I'm learning to speak Welsh and am interested in the Welsh language revival and the fight for its survival. |
|---|---|

This idea of international experiences giving young people multiple lenses or perspectives to understand things was a common reflection and seen as an advantage. Some participants also shared how being someone with multiple cultural identities has shaped their view of internationalism.

"I'm Tamil but live in North Wales so my lens has always been multinational, and I think it's advantageous. It never been a disadvantage, in my opinion, it can only be an advantage to have these different lenses to view the world through. But I can understand how other people would say it's a disadvantage if they've faced racism."

Nizanka – Wrexham, Wales

Participants shared that they thought an introduction to international experiences was best built from a very young age by living in diverse local communities and supported through formal learning experiences at school. This could then be later built upon through individual international experiences abroad as they got older.

For participants who said they do not live in diverse communities, it was suggested that there is an additional mental barrier in becoming interested, open to, and understanding of, the values of having international experiences. Participants shared that as they are less likely to have had positive experiences with internationalism growing up, they are less likely to seek it as they grow up.



Question 3: What are the barriers and enabling factors to young people having international experiences?

Question 4: How can we create international experiences or connections?

The diversity of participants attending workshops meant that lots of barriers, both general and those specific to individuals, were shared. The key themes of barriers that emerged through the conversations were: family, accessibility, money, and lack of confidence. How these barriers can be overcome can be inferred from young peoples' contributions, and in some cases, they have made direct suggestions. The enabling factors have come from participant reflections on how they have previously had international experiences and tries to take the learning of how they can be harnessed or improved even more.

The influence of families

Some participants whose families had not been encouraging of international experiences as they were growing up said that this attitude comes from a place of concern, wanting to protect their children, or not understanding how international experiences can be beneficial.

“It can be difficult to break the family tradition and convince parents that this experience can impact the rest of my life” Yasser – Newcastle, England

Occasionally, participants referenced friends or people they knew who had no interest in international or intercultural experiences as a result of *“being brought up with unreasonable mindsets, like racism or that sort of thing.”* Matthew – Newcastle, England

Participants reflected that if someone had international experiences when they were younger, like family holidays, living in a diverse community, or having family in different countries, this sparked an interest that evolved into pursuing international opportunities independently from family later on.

“I have some family who live in other countries, I’ve been to visit them once. They tell me lots of cool things that they can do where they live, and now that I’m older, I’d like to go back and stay with them again.” Ohren – Newrey, Northern Ireland

Accessibility and safety

Lots of participants shared wide ranging concerns about accessibility and safety. Some participants with additional learning needs suggested structured and supported environments would help them to take the first step and could be pivotal in the development of their own independence and further engagement with international opportunities.

Participants said that some international programmes are too long and can be too daunting, particularly for people who don’t have role models to inspire them. Shorter, stepping-stone opportunities are needed to help build the confidence and aspiration for longer or more ambitious international opportunities.

“If you’re a young carer, you can’t be away from home. That’s where you need to be and unless you get lots of help to cover things, you can’t go.”

Liam – Newcastle, England

Other participants shared concerns about safety based on their own identity.

“Internationalism can be a privilege in terms of race, Cardiff is a very multicultural place, so I have friends from lots of different places but not everywhere you go is going to be tolerant of people from different races.” Lucie – Cardiff, Wales

“When you think about going abroad, I don’t know about you guys but, as a female and Chinese Brit I think about my own safety. Even if you have the money but don’t think you would be safe, you probably wouldn’t go anyway.” Racheal – Cardiff, Wales

“We spoke about some countries that have laws that aren’t welcoming to people because of their sexuality or religion, that can be a really big barrier.” Jonathon – Edinburgh, Scotland

Finances

Finances were brought up as an issue universally. Participants shared that they wanted to go on school trips or volunteer abroad, but the cost stopped them. They commented on the importance of having international experiences at a younger age and in supported environments. Those aware of opportunities through school or youth groups spoke of a financial requirement that is not always possible for them. Not being able to access these experiences due to financial barriers means young people are missing important opportunities at a formative age and long past their time at school.

Finances were also a barrier to having international experiences at home. Young people from rural areas said that costs were prohibitive to travelling to their nearest city or their country's capital city where there are more diverse communities and greater opportunity for international and intercultural experiences.

"When I was younger, I didn't always have money to go to the nearest city, let alone abroad."

Miriam – Bristol, England

"Our area isn't particularly diverse... If you want to see proper diversity in Ireland, you need to go to Belfast or Dublin." Gabby – Newry, Northern Ireland

"If you don't have an airport near you, it might cost you a lot more to go abroad" Samantha – Newcastle, England

"Some people say we're doing free internships or volunteering so it can be open to everyone but there can be other costs like food, accommodation and even the clothes you need"
Aaysha - North Wales

Internationalism as something to aspire to

Lack of confidence, or feeling like internationalism isn't something some young people can aspire to came across very clearly in the Democracy Cafés. This feeling went beyond financial constraints or specific accessibility barriers. Some young people expressed that they felt like these opportunities are not suitable for them and they can't even conceive of themselves taking part.

These quotes from the sessions open up this issue:

"If you don't have access to people who encourage you to aspire for more, you won't have the need or want to explore anything further than your surroundings." Sarah – Wigan, England

"For lots of experiences, you need to be in education. If someone doesn't go to university, can they access an international opportunity?" Kaidey – Glasgow, Scotland

"Are there similar projects to the Paramus [Erasmus] funding that young people can access who are not at university? Young people round here do not generally attend university."
Youth worker – Bristol, England

Both youth workers and participants said they associated international experiences with going to university. During the workshops the Erasmus scheme was mentioned and the quote above from the Youth worker, that incorrectly refers to the Erasmus scheme as Paramus, shows that they clearly hadn't heard of it before. Youth workers that joined the workshops were unable to tell us about any dedicated funding for youth groups to go abroad on exchanges or trips. Funding for exchanges

between the four UK nations were mentioned, but these opportunities were highlighted as very structured, only administered by national organisations rather and mostly one-off opportunities for small groups.

"Most of the time, people don't see themselves going beyond their surroundings, so that can discourage them from doing something different."

Jack – Bristol, England

"Having the confidence to break out of your comfort zone I think is sometimes a barrier to internationalism, it's like is a personal journey." Dana – Cardiff, Wales

"You need to be brave and break your fear and just go for it." Josh – Wigan, England

"I'd also add that lack of confidence might be a barrier - a lot of opportunities require applications, and some people might not think they have enough experience to apply" Marya, - Bristol, England

Some young people reflected on their journey through that mindset and into having an international experience. The common thread for those young people was having someone they know personally to role model these experiences and encourage them to have a go as well. The role of a trusted adult to encourage young people, particularly those who haven't had many international opportunities previously, and face multiple barriers to access, is crucial to support them to take that next step on their journey.

"Generally speaking, if the people around you are from a similar socio-economic background, and if you're middle class or the upper class you're exposed to a lot more." Mandi – Edinburgh, Scotland

"I was fortunate, I have been on an Erasmus programme, but a lot of my friends were like what the heck is that and who's paying for it?" Ali – Bristol, England

"Even if a teacher came up to me directly rather than just handing out sheets of paper and said like - Hey, I think you'd be really good at this! - it would help."

Maya – Wigan, England



School

Participants consistently said exposure to international opportunities throughout life in everyday scenarios can pique their interest. The other biggest influencer was their experiences at school. Positive experiences at school were seen to be able to overcome the lack of everyday exposure to international and intercultural experiences resulting from living in a homogenous community.

Participants referenced different types of international experiences during primary and secondary school. Having these opportunities throughout their school life was seen to be key.

Primary school experiences seemed to be more meaningful learning experiences for the participants. They reflected that a holistic approach was taken to learning about a place, religion or culture. There was more of a focus on the experiences of the people and understanding the similarities and differences between communities locally and abroad. This type of learning

experience, and the outcomes participants got, fit closely with the benefits of having international experiences shared in answers to the previous question.

“In primary school, we had a charity come in that was based in Uganda. We raised some money for the charity, and I remember we wove a giant Ugandan flag and learnt about the languages they speak and the food they eat. It was an additional international experience that I still remember now. I probably wouldn’t have even heard about the country without that.” Nizanka - North Wales

“My village is twinned with somewhere in France and it would have been so nice when I was younger to go and visit there with my school. It would have been interesting to see how my life could have been different if I’d lived in France” Elin - South Wales

Secondary school reflections were mostly about learning languages and the pressure to do well in exams. Participants expressed that this end goal of passing an exam took the fun out of learning and limited participants’ curiosity simply to what they might be tested on.

Language exchanges were seen as the main opportunity to go abroad and these usually had a financial cost that prevented some people from being able to join. Language exchanges were usually only available once someone had chosen a language subject at GCSE. Therefore, the opportunity to go abroad in a supported and structured way was a onetime opportunity for a select group of students towards the end of compulsory education, rather than a universal offer with multiple opportunities to take part.

History, Geography and Religious Studies were expressed as gateways for some participants to a wider interest in Internationalism. However, participants also said that the curriculum is often too rigid to reflect a student’s individual interests.

With every reflection about secondary school, the need to get good grades and complete exams was said to reduce the enjoyment of learning. Those who had finished school said that at the time, their focus on exams and grades limited their understanding of the potential usefulness of the subjects they were learning outside of the formal education system.

“Being from an area of Wales that isn’t very diverse, school was one way for people to start learning. I know a lot of people weren’t very interested in RE, but I was interested in the different cultures we were learning about.” Alys - North Wales

Most of the things that took away from them enjoying international experiences are inherent to the school environment. This suggests that other non-formal learning spaces, like youth work, could help to strike the balance for young people to have self-led, non-pressurised, but guided and supported international experiences as they are growing up.

“The first time I went away by myself was on a course about Youth Work in Strasburg that UK Youth helped me to go on. It was the first time I has been away by myself so I was forced to make new friends and I learnt so much more because of that. We came from all over Europe but had a shared interest in youth work” Maya – Wigan, England

Social Media

Social media has a big role in international consciousness raising. Examples of learning about and connecting to Black Lives Matter, End SARS in Nigeria, various women's rights movements and climate change movements through social media were shared throughout the workshops.

The reach of these issues on social media can help with understanding different cultures and increase visibility, but it can also mean that people only see the negative things happening somewhere. Online campaigns don't always encourage a deep understanding of a place or an issue beyond the headlines, leading to a perpetuation of negative stereotypes that can discourage people from seeking out international experiences in certain places.

"When you see different countries on TV or on social media, it can make you want to go or really not want to but what they show isn't always what it's like" Leah – Newry, Northern Ireland

Following influencers on Instagram or YouTube who are living in different countries and from different communities means it can be easy to get a view into other people's day to day lives. This enables us to get a view into different worlds and takes us past the headlines and stereotypes.

"I follow a Doctor in India on Instagram and it's so interesting seeing how the health system there works. He also just does lots of normal stuff that I like to do as well and he shows all his friends and what they do too" Daniel – Glasgow, Scotland

The rise of international streaming platforms means that TV, film and music from across the world and in many languages is readily available.

"I really like watching foreign TV shows and films. I can just use subtitles to understand what's going on" Shannon – Newry, Northern Ireland

"I can connect with my home country by watching the TV and films on the internet. I can share it with my friends too, so they get to learn and see where I am from" Dhvanil – Newcastle, England

Common interest groups

The Democracy Cafés took place in the middle of the COVID19 pandemic at a point where everything had been operating digitally for several months with no clear end date. Lots of the reflections from participants on the topic of internationalism were informed by the experience of being confined to their immediate local areas for nearly one year, and digital being the main lifeline out of that.

Some participants shared that gaming online meant they would spend hours with people across the globe, chatting and sometimes learning other languages. One participant said they had started a book club that connects online and has people from different continents joining.

Participants also said that sharing religious or cultural connections can bring people together to learn about and appreciate diversity within communities.

"I've been joining daily prayers over Zoom with people in lots of other countries. We all are doing the same thing but in different places." Yahya – Edinburgh, Scotland

However, participants noted that although digital options are good for the time being, they are not a replacement for travelling and meeting people.

“There is only so much an internet call can do, being immersed in the place, whether it’s the language or way of doing things is totally different.” Helledd, - North Wales

Recommendations

Participants were clear that there are lots of benefits, both for individuals and society, when young people have access to international and intercultural opportunities. They recognise that there is a gap in who has access to these opportunities, and can identify some barriers they and their peers face in accessing them.

Below are three recommendations based on common reflections that came across in all the workshops. These are key things that would support the participation of young people, especially those who have not previously had many international opportunities, to start to engage with international and intercultural opportunities at home, and also to support them to take steps towards independent international experiences.

1. Role models to raise aspiration

As well as material and circumstantial barriers to participation, the importance of overcoming mental barriers came across very clearly. Some young people reflected that they don’t see international experiences as something they can aspire to or believe that young people like themselves will ever get to do. Having a role model is one way to increase the confidence and raise the interest of young people.

While having representation and diversity in marketing was seen as important, participants told us clearly that personal encouragement from someone they know and trust, who ideally has had a similar international experience, can be the difference between thinking something looks interesting and taking the steps to apply.

“My youth workers experiences helped me to understand that the world is a lot bigger than I realised.”

Jack – Bristol, England

Participants shared some of the different people that had been the catalyst for their international experiences, the list included: teachers, youth workers, sports coaches, siblings, and college and university tutors.

Ali: *“My sister went to all these different countries and she said to me you can do it as well”*

Facilitator: *“So without that one person [who encouraged you and shared their journey], you wouldn’t have done it?”*

Ali: *“No way, definitely wouldn’t have done it”*

Ali – Bristol, England

Many young people who joined the Democracy Cafés said they were directly asked and encouraged by their youth worker to join, and wouldn't have otherwise. The quote above, and comments from several participants shows how crucial having a role model can be.

Recommendation: It is important for these trusted adults to know that their encouragement is key and so as well as marketing opportunities directly to a wide range of young people, can these supportive and trusted adults also be targeted by the British Council to support more young people from traditionally under-represented background to take up international opportunities?

2. Stepping-stone opportunities

"Accessibility in that disabled people might not even attempt it. They might not want to try it because it's going to be much harder for them."

Matthew – Newcastle, England

Some of the participants who joined the workshops faced barriers to access including special educational needs, physical disability, being a young carer, and having mental health conditions. They stressed that many young people don't even look into opportunities to travel abroad because of the amount of support they know they would need to successfully participate. Unfortunately, they assume the support - whether financial, practical, or individual guidance - can't be provided.

"Is there a way for young people who aren't at university to do this? Most young people around here don't go to university"

Youth Worker – Bristol, England

Recommendation: That the British Council shares the positive experiences of young people who face similar barriers, or are from traditionally under-represented groups, engaging in international opportunities and travelling abroad. This will hopefully inspire young people to take part.

Some young people and youth workers attending the workshops thought that university exchange programmes are the only way that young people can have supported and structured experiences abroad. This reinforces the perception that international experiences are only for those who access higher education.

By the time someone has gone to university, they have very often moved cities and are living relatively independently within a structured and supported environment already. Participants told us that for someone that has not gone to university, doing those same things for the first time but abroad might be too big for a first step.

Recommendation: With more young people taking up education, employment, and training routes outside of university, it is important that the British Council ensures that those who choose not to go to university know about, and can access, steppingstone international opportunities.

3. Young people's interests to lead their exploring and learnings

This recommendation has come largely from participants' reflections on their experiences at school. While primary school experiences of internationalism held lots of fond memories, the more focused curriculum and prioritisation of grades at secondary school turned a lot of participants off the international experiences and learning available. The things that reduced engagement with international experiences are ingrained into formal educational settings.

Unfortunately, not many participants had examples of international projects or trips they had experienced in non-formal educational settings. Some youth workers who joined the Democracy Cafés commented that accessing funding for trips abroad has become increasingly difficult over the last few years.

Participants had a lot to say about the different ways they have international experiences online. One of the reasons for this is that they get to choose what they engage with and the medium. Young people are, in some cases, spending hours each week engaging with international content online in the form of TV, films and social media that appeals to them. This supports the recommendation that when young people are allowed to lead and develop their own interests, they are more invested in and committed to having continued international experiences because they enjoy it.

Recommendation: It would be good for organisations like the British Council to partner with non-formal educational bodies, such as youth and community organisations, to offer a wider range of opportunities, including youth-led initiatives in supported settings.

Learning for future youth engagement

The learning points highlighted in this part of the report will use the Youth Conversations project as a case study to highlight some of the ongoing barriers that pertain to digital engagement and working with those who are not already benefitting from the Internationalism ambition, to support the British Council to overcome them in future youth engagement work.

In setting up a series of youth conversations to engage young voices in its Internationalism ambition, the British Council was piloting the preferred 'task and finish' option proposed in the Youth Voice and Engagement Options Paper prepared by UK Youth and People, Dialogue Change in 2019. While the Youth Conversations were one-off consultations, learning from the activities can be applied to many different types of engagement. The two key areas of focus are digital accessibility and engagement with new voices.

In the context of the Youth Conversations, the original plan was to travel across the UK to meet with young people in their communities and youth centres. As the COVID19 pandemic developed it became clear that that would not be an option for some time, and we therefore decided to hold the Democracy Cafés online. While adapting to digital delivery came with lots of challenges, there has also been a lot to learn that can be carried forward, even beyond the lockdowns of the COVID 19 pandemic.

Digital accessibility

Three key areas of learning related to digital accessibility and inclusion came through.

1. The digital divide

As everything, including schooling, went online, it became apparent that many young people didn't have the equipment needed to transition to digital platforms and fully participate in online activities. Issues with the digital divide include:

- Sharing devices throughout the day
- Only having a phone available
- Not having stable internet connection or enough data

By this point during the pandemic, lots of hardware had been given out to young people through places of education or by youth clubs. These donations, while valuable, won't have reached all who needed them and still might not mean that every person in a household now has their own device with stable internet access. This issue will continue past the pandemic as many continue to embrace digital ways of working.

During the Youth Conversations, in some instances (when COVID 19 guidance allowed), groups took part all together from inside their youth club using community assets like laptops and projectors, enabling more young people to take part. Being aware of this and encouraging alternative ways of participating can stop people feeling excluding.

2. Digital confidence

Young people are often described as digital natives, having grown up in a digital age. While this is often true, it can help when preparing workshops to remember that professionals and young people use digital platforms very differently, and we shouldn't assume that they are always the best way to engage young people. Issues with digital confidence include:

- Literacy levels
- Not using the same programmes/apps that people in office jobs use everyday
- Different digital etiquette, like texting over talking or not using video

Experience taught us to expect lots of cameras to be turned off and for there to be some awkward silences in the beginning of the workshops. While having your camera off in a work meeting can sometimes seem rude, or like you're distracted, facilitators were prepared for this and didn't interpret it as a sign of disengagement.

Many of us are now used to working from home, and have probably created a suitable workspace, but many young people don't have the control over their home space to do that. For young people joining a focus group with people they don't know, allowing them all to see into their home can seem invasive, especially if their home is not a place they want to share with the world.

Facilitators were understanding of the different ways that young people chose to engage, including using the chat function.

3. Digital accessibility

When working with young people, offering digital accessibility options like closed captioning, translation, and different ways to input to the conversation is important. Asking young people directly if they have any access needs by including a question in the sign-up form can help them attend the session and participate fully.

The discussions were guided by facilitators, nothing was shared on the screen, and participants were not asked to open any other links or use any other platforms during the sessions. This helped people joining on phones to fully engage and focus on the conversations.

If we wanted to use interactive platforms, attendees could have been asked what type of device they would be using on the sign-up form. Interactive platforms are great for helping people process information, giving multiple ways to input, and keeping input anonymous. However, for anyone joining on a phone doing multiple things on a small screen can distract from the conversation.



Engaging with different young people

A key part of the Youth Conversations project was to engage young people who did not have lots of international experiences. To do this, we needed to work with people and organisations, such as youth workers and teachers, who could bridge the gap between the young people we wanted to speak to and the Democracy Cafés.

Advertising opportunities through social media works when you are trying to engage young people who already know about your organisation or have an active interest in the topic. Reaching young people who tick neither of those boxes is much harder.

Engaging the right audience for this project meant reaching out to those who weren't going to join the session because of brand awareness, or to share their wealth of international experiences. We wanted young people who desired those experiences but hadn't had the chance and didn't know what was available to them, or felt they faced too many barriers to take part. We were asking young people to speak from a place of deficit, about what they had not done.

During the Democracy Cafés, when young people reflected on why they had taken up a new or international opportunity, they often pinpointed a trusted adult or someone they looked up to who knew them well and encouraged them to do it. This is no different for a young person taking part in a focus group or online workshop with lots of people they don't know for the first time.

A youth worker from Bristol got in touch after the workshop to share this message: *"Thank you for the invitation and the young people enjoyed doing it. That was their first event outside of the organisation so any more would be great. As well as the discussions within the zoom chat, it also opened up discussions afterwards which was really good."*

This group joined all together, with six young people and two youth workers, from inside their youth club. This wasn't the ideal set up for the Democracy Café as the group would often discuss amongst themselves before sharing thoughts with the breakout room. However, this supported group setting was what the young people needed to join and begin to feel confident in a new situation discussing a new topic.

For this group, taking part in the Democracy Café was an introduction to international experiences and they got some of the amazing benefits that international experiences hold.

Ensuring that policy and plans are informed by a diverse group of people is key if they are going to be effective. Gatekeepers can also support with ensuring representation from young people with specific lived experiences or those who are part of a traditionally underrepresented communities.

Facilitators don't even need to know the circumstances of the young people, but gatekeepers can make sure their voices are at the table, without the young person feeling like a walking case study or the representative for a whole group of people.

Acknowledgements 🌍

At the end of the Democracy Cafés, participants were excited about the potential for this research and grateful to have been asked to contribute their experiences and suggestions about how to increase access to international experiences.

It's been an insightful experience :)

Thank you everyone

It was really great to hear your thoughts and ideas!

It has been lovely meeting you all. All the best everyone :)

Thank you for this! It was a great experience!

Great to meet you all!

Thank you for the opportunity

Great focus group to be involved in, thanks guys! :)

Thank you very much

Thank you 😊

About the partners

British Council

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

We work with over 100 countries across the world in the fields of arts and culture, English language, education and civil society. Each year we reach over 20 million people face-to-face and more than 500 million people online, via broadcasts and publications. Founded in 1934, we are a UK charity governed by Royal Charter and a UK public body

The British Council employs over 10,500 staff worldwide. It has its headquarters in the UK, with offices in London, Manchester, Belfast, Cardiff and Edinburgh. Further information can be viewed at www.britishcouncil.org.

UK Youth:

Founded in 1911, UK Youth is a leading national youth charity committed to ensuring all young people are empowered to build bright futures, regardless of their background or circumstances. Our mission is to provide all young people with access to appropriate, high quality services in their local community or online. We sit at the heart of a national movement for change of 5,500 youth organisations to offer support, advice and training to equip young people with the vital life skills needed to engage in education, volunteering and employment.

My Life My Say:

My Life My Say is an award winning, youth-led charity who are on a mission to empower young people to participate in democracy. They achieve this through creating spaces for dialogue across communities and generations, and by providing young and socially excluded citizens with the tools to lead change within society.

UK YOUTH

UK Youth London Office, Kings Building,
16 Smith Square, London, SW1P 3HQ

Avon Tyrrell Outdoor Activity Centre, Bransgore,
Christchurch BH23 8EE

Website: www.ukyouth.org

Telephone: 0203 1373 810

Company Number: 05402004

UK Youth Registered Charity Number:
1110590