SCIENCE AT THE BRITISH COUNCIL

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Science, technology and innovation are cornerstones of the UK's creative and knowledge economy. As a country we rightly take pride in the achievements of our scientific community and for the last 75 years the British Council has promoted the UK's excellence and contribution as a respected global partner and leader in the field.

The British Council's purpose is to build engagement and trust for the UK through the exchange of knowledge and ideas between people worldwide and we call this cultural relations.

Cultural relations provides a platform and a space for people to find common ground and, like Education, science has the capacity to reach across divides, nurture innovation and foster understanding. That is not to suggest that cultural relations blindly assumes agreement at each stage or that people will shelve their own beliefs, but our starting point – as an organisation, and as, I believe, a country and society – is a broad acceptance of scientific proof whether discussing climate change, pandemic illness or evolution.

Take 'Darwin Now' as an example. This is our global cultural relations contribution to the celebration of the 200th Anniversary of Charles Darwin's birth and, of course, the 150th Anniversary of the publication of 'On the Origin of Species'.

Our objective with Darwin Now is to look at the impact of Darwin's theory of evolution on contemporary biology, medicine and society. We are inviting people to ask the question, "What is the relevance of evolution to me, to my life and my society?" Our belief in the power of exchange of knowledge and ideas requires us to consider what kind of conversation we need to have with people from cultures who hold other perspectives and beliefs. We do not presume that our truths are more truthful, but any dialogue of this nature cannot be values-free if it is to be meaningful, and progress will not happen without it.

What Darwin Now does demonstrate is the power of science as a co-operative force for good not only amongst expert practitioners, but also wider publics. We have seen more than 6 million people in 44 countries take part in Darwin Now over the last year which manifestly underpins the relevance of science to the international and cultural relations conversation.

In promoting international scientific co-operation, the British Council's vision is for a widespread recognition of the role that science, engineering and technology can play in helping to extend our understanding of the world and develop imaginative solutions to shared problems.

In the current economic environment, each of us recognises the vital role that science and innovation has to play in securing long-term prosperity. Like higher education, science and innovation must continue its drive towards systemic internationalisation if the UK is to consolidate and build on its position as a world leader and a global partner.

Key to this is the engagement of the scientists themselves and wider publics, particularly young people. In order to reach both of these audiences, we work in partnership with policymakers and scientific administrators both in the UK and in-country, on common objectives. For the scientists, the exchange of knowledge and ideas is through instruments that promote mobility of researchers and contact-making such as workshops, seminars and laboratory exchanges. For the public, exchange is through instruments that promote science communication such as public talks and debates, events and exhibitions.

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For example, 'Mediterranean Innovation and Research Co-ordination Action (MIRA)' is a project that aims to create a platform for dialogue using state-of-the-art ICT, enabling discussion between researchers and innovators from both sides of the Mediterranean. It will connect and improve the dispersed, existing scientific initiatives for co-operation supported by the Member States, the European Commission and other political bodies, and provide training to raise the quality of participation by Mediterranean partners in European research programmes. A series of workshops and meetings will identify thematic priorities of common interests, and the project will create a Euro-Mediterranean 'observatory', to agree indicators for the monitoring of research co-operation. Finally, it will create a network of research and development actors from both sides of the Mediterranean. All these activities are aimed at providing a strong inter-institutional basis for collaboration.

Our 'Women in Science' project produced a brochure and website featuring twenty-two leading women scientists in the UK. We used a young fashion photographer from Manchester to take portraits of the women in settings other than the laboratory and commissioned a journalist to write short pen portraits for each woman. There were three specific messages, for three different target audiences: firstly, to highlight the valuable contribution that UK women are making to pushing forward the frontiers of science, engineering and technology; secondly, to encourage more UK women scientists to be invited overseas as ambassadors for UK science; and thirdly encourage policymakers overseas to become more interested in the issue of women in science and the UK's work in this area. The fourth, less explicit, though important message was to inspire young women to consider a career in science, engineering and technology.

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Supporting actions taken by our science team in London include building relationships and partnerships with other national stakeholders in order to assist in-country delivery, and setting the strategic direction for the global network. The annual expenditure by the British Council on science programmes worldwide is £9 million, with activity in around 70 countries, delivered by 250 staff. A previous major thematic project, ZeroCarbonCity, which looked at the global climate change debate, reached some 10 million people worldwide over a two year period.

Recognising the two distinct recipient communities, scientific and public, and the need to address both, we are building science communication in as a central part of our work and encouraging people to develop science communication skills and create an 'open research' which is transparent and accountable to citizens.

This is, in part, behind the thinking of the expansion to a regional project, 'Beautiful Science', which is a highly successful exercise in helping young scientists in South East Europe to communicate with the public in novel and engaging ways. The successful partnership we have developed with the Cheltenham Science Festival and Visualise, who bring their very distinctive track records and strengths to Beautiful Science, is also an example of how we want to work in the future. We want to move to a position where such communication is an innate (and enjoyable) element of research work, rather than being seen as a distinct, separate area of activity.

The British Council's Royal Charter, states that the objects for which the Council is established include the encouragement of 'cultural, scientific, technological and other educational co-operation between Our United Kingdom and other countries'.

Our future effort will be concentrated on promoting symmetrical scientific and technological co-operation; building mutually-beneficial relationships with like-minded policymakers and organisations and working in partnership with them in order to provide products that will support the exchange of knowledge, ideas and information and the building of long-lasting contacts and collaborations. We will favour initiatives directed at mobile early-stage postdoctoral scientists in academia, research institutes and industry, recognising the relative paucity of mechanisms to help this younger section of the UK scientific community get established on the international scene, and we will work with the UK research councils to ensure their continued career progression.

Today this agenda is more relevant and important than ever if we are to show to other peoples our values and achievements as well as our vision of a safer, more harmonious world.

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