

# People Exchange: A British Council's Post-Colonial Distinguished Cultural Investment

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## Abstract

Since the beginning of the post-colonial era, preserving already acquired links and pioneered cultural ties cultivated during the colonial era with overseas people, has remained a priority for the British Council. The latter did not mince efforts to protect British interests, particularly when strong competition from more powerful countries could threaten British position on the international scene. Thus, the Council's People Exchange activity was considered as one of the most important cultural investment on which the British Council could rely to back Britain in times of turbulences.

**Keywords:** Post-Colonial, British Council, Cultural Investment, People Exchange

## Introduction

The work of the British Council during the post-colonial era has become diverse and multifaceted. The Council ran libraries and information centres which were used by thousands of people in different countries in the world. It also managed development and aid projects and was the most active technical assistance agency in Europe.<sup>(1)</sup> It organised cultural events such as music tours and visual art exhibitions overseas, showing to the world British talents in an influential way. At the centre of its main activities, the teaching of English remained the most important and requested service. This task was partly done through a network of language centres, mainly operating, in countries where people could afford to pay their tuition and partly by training teachers of English in foreign countries by signing contracts with their governments. This educational enterprise allowed the British Council to expand other crucial activities like education and training, libraries and books, arts work and people exchange. The latter has remained one of its post-colonial priorities, particularly during the 1980s when Britain had to face turbulences both at the domestic and foreign levels.

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<sup>(1)</sup> L. Martin and J. Garnett, *British Foreign Policy, Challenges and Choices for the 21st century*, Great Britain, The Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1997, p. 48.

The present paper attempts to consider the Council's important devotion to make of this cultural activity, namely "People Exchange", a fruitful investment to maintain influence, preserve and further British interests in different parts of the world. To what extent could the British Council make of the development of this cultural activity, namely People Exchange, its most lucrative operation?

## **I- The Cultural Dimension of People Exchange**

The fact of focusing among other things on 'people exchange' in particular is practiced by cultural agencies world-wide. This activity is considered as the most fruitful in the field of cultural relations since it brings together – in one way or another – people from different cultures into contact. Therefore, the British Council, like other international cultural agencies, spent a significant portion of its budget on teachers, lecturers, experts and advisers who were sent overseas to offer their expertise in more than eighty countries, and on bringing foreign people to Britain for professional visits, training and studies. The Council pointed out: "We invest two thirds of our budgets in [the movement of people between Britain and other countries]". For instance," during 1985/1986, the British Council brought 24,000 overseas people to Britain and sent 5,000 British people abroad".<sup>(2)</sup>

The importance given to such an activity by the British Council resulted from a conviction about the long-term gains this operation would provide Britain with as Sir David Orr McLLD, the 1988/1989 British Council Chairman, revealed in his Introduction to the British Council Annual Report :

*The flow of these [overseas] young people to Britain is of considerable long-term importance to us. From them will come new leaders, driving the administration, the policies, and the economy, the creative and academic life of their countries.*<sup>(3)</sup>

## **II- The British Council and People Exchange: A Source of Political and Economic Advantages**

The British Council devoted remarkable energy to the promotion of British education in general, university and higher education in particular. It concentrated more on 'people exchange', even more importantly on overseas students because the latter could rise to positions of power and influence within their own countries, a fact that

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<sup>(2)</sup> The British Council, "The British Council Annual Report 1985/86", London, the British Council, 1986, p. 24 (The Overseas people were brought to Britain for professional and educational reasons, The British people were sent on a teaching consultancy basis).

<sup>(3)</sup> The British Council, "The British Council Annual Report and Accounts 1988/89", London, the British Council, 1989, p. 3.

would benefit Britain in the long-term. In fact, the British Council wished to secure for Britain the contribution of a maximum number of overseas young talented people who might otherwise go elsewhere – in order to ensure and reinforce British influence in world affairs. This approach, during the 1980s, was linked with the considerable change which affected Britain then. The latter’s relationship within and beyond Europe changed as old barriers started disappearing; normal Anglo-Chinese diplomatic relations knew perplexing development; political ramifications in South Africa slowly began to resolve. Indeed, it was in such a situation, i.e ; one of turbulences, that the significant dynamism of the British Council invested in the cultivation of long-standing human links could be seen to strengthen Britain’s influence in world affairs on the international scene. The pattern of people exchange during the 1979-1989 decade – British specialists sent on advisory visits abroad and foreigners brought to Britain, both with Council help, was as follows :

Year	People in Britain	People Overseas
1979-80	32,000	19,000
1980-81	28,700	15,700
1981-82	30,900	17,500
1982-83	28,200	15,200
1983-84	22,200	4,300
1984-85	23,391	4,952
1985-86	24,000	5,000
1986-87	26,310	5,000
1987-88	28,050	3,127
1988-89	35,000	3,500

**Table One**<sup>(4)</sup>

Thanks to long-term awards schemes such as the Technical Co-operation Training Programme (TCTP) – funded by ODA, which stood as the Council’s biggest programme,<sup>(5)</sup> overseas students were attracted to Britain. During the 1980s, thousands of people were increasingly brought to Britain under this Scheme as the table below illustrates :

Year	Number of people in Britain under TCTP
1981-82	7,968
1982-83	8,356

<sup>(4)</sup> Compiled from the British Council Annual Reports : 1979/1980, 1980/1981, 1981/1982, 1982/1983, 1983/1984, 1984/1985, 1985/1986, 1986/1987, 1987/1988, 1988/1989 Data.

<sup>(5)</sup> In its annual report for 1985/86, the British Council pointed out : “The Council manages several different schemes under which people come to Britain. The two biggest are both funded by the ODA : the Technical Co-operation Training (TCT) Programme costing £54 million, and the Commonwealth Scholars and Fellows Programme costing £9 million”. The British Council, 1986, p. 25.

<sup>(6)</sup> Compiled from the British Council Annual Reports : 1981/1982, 1982/1983, 1983/1984, 1984/1985, 1985/1986, 1986/1987, 1987/1988, 1988/1989 Data.

1983-84	8,869
1984-85	9,773
1985-86	9,965
1986-87	10,605
1987-88	11,465
1988-89	12,500

**Table Two**<sup>(6)</sup>

In fact, the British Council was like other cultural agencies, aware of the benefits such work could provide. Once in Britain, overseas people were acquainted with new facts and distance themselves from familiar experiences. They rather found themselves faced with systems, machines about which they ignored all the new technology or of which they had merely heard. So, when they returned to their countries and were in influential positions, wanting to serve their home economies, most of them looked to Britain for supplies, and therefore indirectly benefited British economy. For instance,

*Some years ago, Indian mining engineers studied British mining technology at Bates and Wearmouth Collieries in the North East. This [had] been followed by the introduction of Long Wall mining equipment into India, a training package for up to 46 trainees and contracts worth about £100 million for further equipment.*<sup>(7)</sup>

Indeed, as the British Council Board stated in an article about the importance of Higher Education in British Foreign Policy: "Every overseas student studying in Britain represents an investment [political, economic and cultural] – whether sent by the student's family, an overseas government or a British government programme. The Council works to secure this investment..."<sup>(8)</sup> The importance given to the bringing of overseas people to Britain was primarily motivated by economic consideration, as a leading objective behind British Foreign Cultural Policy was to increase sales.

Thus, the increase in the number of overseas people brought to Britain by the British Council through – for instance Technical Co-operation Training Programme (see Table Two) indicates the Council's considerable contribution to Britain's effort to attract overseas students who constitute a bridge between Britain and foreign countries and whom the British Council wants to protect from competing

<sup>(7)</sup> J. Mitchell, *International Cultural Relations*, London, Allen & Unwin, 1986, p. 20.

<sup>(8)</sup> The British Council, *op. cit.* p. 25.

international influences that might not coincide with British interests. From Malaysia, for example, a plantation executive pointed out :

*The enormous good will which the U.K enjoys (in Malaysia) derives from the fact that the great majority of the ruling class has received some form of education in the U.K or in local schools run on U.K lines.<sup>(9)</sup>*

Such a positive attitude developed towards Britain becomes beneficial once the former overseas student becomes directly involved in the economic life of his country as, for instance, a businessman or as a decision-maker in government, because these two particular types of trainees play an essential role in the shaping of their nation's way of thinking. For example, even though the Chinese and the Muslim cultures are still very important in Malaysia, the British culture still holds. In the same context, the head of an industrial company with wide interests in the Far East stated :

*Many of my acquaintances at the highest level of Government and business told me that they [...] want British-educated people to maintain the old links, to maintain the British attitude to work and play and not something else. Many of the Malaysian hierarchy and Senior businessmen are U.K educated: they send their children to the U.K and arrange for private tutoring in the East on a U.K syllabus.<sup>(10)</sup>*

By wanting to preserve old links, these highly – ranked overseas people (who were educated in Britain) are likely to maintain British political and economic advantages; and by wanting to keep the British attitude to work and play, they are preserving British culture and providing the cultural ties with overseas ruling-classes on which Britain could base its foreign policy.

### **III- The British Council and Britain Shaken Educational Prestige**

For British political, economic, and cultural reasons, it was essential that more overseas students should come to the U.K for studies.<sup>(11)</sup> However, a decrease in the number of foreign students in Britain was noticed during the 1980s as a consequence of the “full-cost fees” policy introduced by the conservative government at the end of the 1970s. For instance, the number dropped from nearly 87,000 to 56,000 in 1987.<sup>(12)</sup>

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<sup>(9)</sup> P. Williams, *The Overseas Student Question*, London, Heinemann, 1981, p. 100.

<sup>(10)</sup> *Ibid*, p. 101.

<sup>(11)</sup> The British Council, *op. cit*, 1986, p. 11.

<sup>(12)</sup> House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, *Fourth Report, Cultural Diplomacy*, London, HMSO, 1987, p. 73.

In 1989, the number of overseas students Britain received was only half that of ten years earlier.<sup>(13)</sup> Thus, Britain prestige in education and training was strongly shaken. In such a situation, the British Council was expected to come forward so as to help Britain face these turbulences. Indeed, the Council was given the opportunity to show its efficiency in backing the current British interests. As stated by its Board during the 1980s :

*For political, financial and cultural reasons it is important for Britain that more overseas students should study in Britain. In the face of strong Western and Eastern competition and the increased costs of British higher education, an intensive marketing operation is essential. The British Council is pioneering this....<sup>(14)</sup>*

Being, indeed, aware and concerned with the political, financial and cultural interests Britain could draw from having overseas people studying in British universities or polytechnics, the British Council – whose work as a cultural body was expected to be restricted to the cultural field as its organisational structure suggested – started marketing British education. Indeed, it dispatched services which advertised and marketed British education abroad.<sup>(15)</sup> Moreover, to attract bright overseas scholars, the Council administrated several schemes such as the Technical Co-operation and Training Programme, The Foreign and Commonwealth Office Scholarships and Awards Scheme, Commonwealth Scholarship and Fellowship Plan, British Council Fellowships Programmes, and Country/ Territory Support Schemes.<sup>(16)</sup> These schemes balanced out the negative effects of fee increase. Yet, as regards countries which were not politically and economically as important as Commonwealth and Western European countries, for example, they were no longer taken in charge by Britain. In fact, what the British Council did was to help Britain overcome the difficulty and to support and allow Thatcher's policy of economic recession to flourish at the international as well as at the domestic level.

In addition, the Council multiplied its efforts and improved its services abroad – by introducing computers and additional audio and video materials in its centres – and promoted British books in order to cultivate a lasting contact between Britain and those who studied there in general, those from Commonwealth countries in particular. This contact which the British Council tried to establish positively remained of significant political, economic and cultural benefits for Britain. British

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<sup>(13)</sup> The British Council, op. cit, 1989, p.23.

<sup>(14)</sup> The British Council, op. cit, 1986, p. 11.

<sup>(15)</sup> The British Council, "The British Council Annual Report 1984/85", London, The British Council, 1985. p. 55.

<sup>(16)</sup> House of Commons, Foreign Affairs Committee, op. cit, 1987, pp. 151-152.

awareness of this fact was neatly expressed by Sir Patrick Wright, KCMG, and Permanent under Secretary of State, in 1986 :

*We are very conscious of the importance of cultivating the future leaders of other countries. That is only part of the promotion and protection of British interests in the longer term. This is why the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and Heads of mission overseas take a particularly strong interest in Government awards for overseas students.<sup>(17)</sup>*

It is therefore obvious that the British Council was not alone on the British cultural scene to promote and protect British interests abroad, political bodies were also involved as suggested here.

Indeed, if Britain succeeded in imposing her educational programme – and perhaps to some extent her ideology – during the colonial and early post-colonial period on overseas countries, during the 1980s, she lost this advantage. First, because of the “Full-cost fees”. Second, because the programmes she applied during the colonial and early post-colonial period could no longer meet the requirements of the 1980’s new generation. The latter could have political, economic and cultural relations with other more developed powerful or “generous” countries than Britain; a fact which led overseas governments and individuals to consider Britain like any other developed country providing education and training against payment. Thus, guided by perceptions of value for money, they were attracted by countries whose fees policy was more generous than the British one.

France and Federal Germany, for example, had to face more expenses than Britain from the dramatic rise the world had known in the number of overseas people studying abroad during the 1980’s. For example, in 1985, the total number of overseas students in Higher or Further education, in Germany was 125,000<sup>(18)</sup>; France received 128,000<sup>(19)</sup>; comparable figures for Britain, in 1985-86, were 56,120<sup>(20)</sup> and 15,780.<sup>(21)</sup> As far as Germany is concerned, 48,000<sup>(22)</sup> students had obtained an indirect financial assistance from German public funds even though no tuition fees were charged in that country. Moreover, during the same year, 1985, Federal Länder funds provided direct financial assistance for 27,000 foreign students and trainees.<sup>(23)</sup>

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<sup>(17)</sup> Ibid, p. 62 : “Although the FCO’s own scholarships and award scheme represent only a small proportion of the total Government efforts

in this context, FCO ministers and officials take a close interest in all matters affecting policy on overseas students”.

<sup>(18)</sup> Ibid, p. 12.

<sup>(19)</sup> Idem.

<sup>(20)</sup> Idem.

<sup>(21)</sup> Idem.

<sup>(22)</sup> Idem.

<sup>(23)</sup> Idem.

The most important difference in Europe as regards overseas student's policy is that between France and Britain. The French government indirectly assisted 106,000 students in 1985.<sup>(24)</sup> The latter mainly benefited from the subsidized level of academic fees – the “bourses indirectes” of the French Ministry of National Education, whereas Britain limited this kind of subsidy to students from the European Community. Indeed, while £293 million was the sum the French government in 1985/86 allocated to the support of overseas students, Britain spent only £96 million.<sup>(25)</sup> The British figures raised by £2.5 million in 1987 as a result of new agreements for undergraduates from European Community countries.<sup>(26)</sup>

## Conclusion

In fact, Britain has been aware that knowing about the cultural and social life of a foreign country is a very helpful matter if one wants to undertake consciously and successfully different affairs – political or commercial and other – with foreign countries. In this, the British Council has always been present where Britain has to do business and activated where British political and commercial interests were to flourish, for where cultural links are developed, political and other strategic relations could follow. Thus, much of the Council's work during the 1980s was concerned with bringing people to Britain to study and learn, and sending British people overseas to advise and teach. Some of this exchange of people was designed to stimulate an appreciation of Britain among future generations of leaders and decision makers. A large proportion of British Council activities arose out of Britain's bilateral and multilateral aid programmes, to which the Overseas Development Administration (ODA) contributed Britain's share, and was directly intended to create trained manpower requisite to national progress and economic development in the Third World. Such technical cooperation was supported by the development of local teaching and by the British Council's programmes for the cultivation of ties between British universities, polytechnics and technical Colleges, and those in overseas countries.

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<sup>(24)</sup> Ibid, p.10.

<sup>(25)</sup> Idem.

<sup>(26)</sup> Idem.

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