



**Wilton  
Park**

# **Report: Education and the UK's International Impact – Policy Development Workshop**

Wednesday 26 – Friday 28 February 2025

**In association with**  
Department for  
Education, Foreign,  
Commonwealth &  
Development Office,  
and Department for  
Business and Trade



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Wilton Park convened UK international education sector representatives and representative body leaders, policymakers and experts to examine the role of education in extending and consolidating the UK's global impact. It offered a short, medium and long-term lens on the Government's strategic approach to education in achieving international development and opportunity, global influence and soft power, and UK growth and prosperity goals. Aligned strategy will be a key part of the step change in cross-departmental collaboration that real mission delivery will require.

With multiple Government reviews and refreshes underway, it was an opportune moment to bring key stakeholders from the sector, experts and policy makers together to consider the specific role of education in all of these. These include the five new Government Missions, three major reviews on Global Impact, Growth, and Development, the establishment of the new Soft Power Council, the Industrial Strategy, the Trade Strategy, and the International Education Strategy and Climate Education Strategy refreshes. Conversations took stock, and simplified and focused on key strategic tools that can optimise the contribution that education makes to each.

The dialogue helped to formulate and feed directly into UK government policy development and thinking through focused plenary sessions and breakout groups looking at specific questions, co-designed and co-created with His Majesty's Government partners and Wilton Park. This summary presents the key themes that emerged from discussions.

## **Excellence and quality of UK education from early years to skills and higher education**

The UK has long been a powerhouse in education with the greatest universities attracting top talent from across the world. The UK Government and the sector need to protect and build on this reputation by being clear about their commitment to specific aspects of quality across the education ecosystem. In early years, this means a recognition of the importance of literacy, numeracy and oracy and preparing children for the world and sharing UK values at the earliest stages of development. British schools, teachers, curriculum and assessment approaches provide a future-facing, knowledge-rich, and values-based education accessible to all, with a commitment to safeguarding. In EdTech, this means access to high quality, safety enabled digital support. In Higher Education (HE), this means an inclusive environment leading to positive experiences for international students including those with diverse needs; high retention and completion rates and strong outcomes into work or further study including in Transnational Education (TNE); and that research is internationalised and world leading.

### **International perceptions of the UK**

Participants discussed structural barriers such as rising fees, visa complexities, including for the caregivers of disabled students, and health insurance requirements. Negative media narratives on immigration, financial sustainability of HE institutions including the role of international students' fees financing UK education institutions, low English language tariffs, and an overall sense of instability all have the potential to damage perceptions.

Changes to domestic policy in skills, Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET), or curriculum can fuel concerns about the value of qualifications overseas. Complexities around the UK's compliance with international and European regulations and qualification standards risk negatively impacting international perceptions and subsequently reduces the UK's international standing. A sense that the UK might be less open to partnership and engagement, especially in Europe since the UK left the EU, damages perceptions of quality.

### **Reciprocity and mutual benefits**

Participants noted that emphasis should be on promoting equitable, reciprocal relationships and mutual benefits between countries, students, and institutions while

avoiding extractive models of education. With emerging economies, engagement at an early stage through co-design of education policies and regulations lays strong foundations for future relationships.

Deep-rooted relationships and networks are formed through education, leading to invaluable trusted partnerships for the long term. Improving access to UK education while promoting diversity, equality, and inclusion is critical. The social value of international students to the UK should be conveyed more effectively to local communities.

## **Soft power**

The UK's ability to project leadership and influence and build trusted and reliable relationships is achieved through its soft power. Soft power is reflected in culture, values, and foreign policy, and education sits across all of them. The UK remains a top three global soft power, but this must be supported and cultivated purposefully. The UK has strengths of thought leadership and expertise that transcend ideology.

Education is a cornerstone of citizenship. In turbulent geopolitical times the UK is a source of stability, tolerance, and flexibility which is a rare and precious feature to be harnessed. Finding ways for education, as a key pillar of soft power, to further enhance the UK's global reputation grows more urgent and should start with the youngest children. Young people in the UK should be supported to engage through outbound study abroad options, language learning and internationalisation at home. UK soft power can be harnessed further through its global convening power, including the Education World Forum as a major asset, the largest annual gathering of education and skills ministers in the world held in London.

## **Building the narrative and communicating effectively**

Strategic communication on the UK's education ecosystem to a wide range of internal and external audiences is critical. The UK requires a coherent and compelling narrative about its education strategy and offer to the world, telling the story of the entire education pipeline from early years onwards and including research. This requires coordination and collaboration across government departments and with external stakeholders.

The UK needs to enhance self-promotion and broadcast its education offer loudly with one voice, celebrating successes, telling stories, empowering ambassadors and champions to communicate, and ensuring a much larger presence in global convening

spaces. We need to make better use of research and science diplomacy and promote our excellence in this space alongside the wider education offer.

The UK's international alumni networks along with education experts and HMG staff working overseas could be better utilised to advocate for and support the UK's international education. Domestically, a simple, evidenced-based narrative could be used to help push back on misconceptions.

## **Taking strategic action that has high impact**

Opportunities exist, particularly in embassies and postings overseas, to gain quick wins at low cost to amplify the UK's education offer. For example, the British Embassy in Iceland implemented a low-cost project in primary schools nationwide that made front-page news and boosted diplomatic relationships. Mechanisms for sharing these ideas and innovations across Government can be improved.

Data can be used more effectively to make the case for the UK's education impact globally and to make strong policy decisions, while also taking risks in areas of innovation.

There is a case for providing frameworks for system-to-system strategic partnership development in international education including based around neutral/non-geopolitical lines to support mutuality and reciprocal benefit, which should include education-industry collaboration. Strategic approaches should support the whole education ecosystem and for transition between stages, including the full transnational and complementary EdTech offer.

## **Building a cohesive, collaborative approach**

Consolidating a cohesive approach to international education involving the sector, His Majesty's Government, the British Council and other partners has strong value. Opportunities exist for the UK as a convener to support this cohesion and collaboration. Cross-government join up is particularly important and noting the value of the partners in the room at Wilton Park, it is vital to continue to engage the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology and the Home Office, as well as the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government of the United Kingdom on housing and rentals and also the devolved governments and regions with responsibility for education.

Alison Dunn

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