

Written evidence from the British Council (CAU0010)

# The Caucasus

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## **Executive Summary**

- The British Council plays a key role in building relationships for the UK in the Caucasus. By delivering cultural and educational programmes we have access to a diverse section of the population, and our work has reached over 90% of the population either directly or through the media and online.
- The expertise of the British Council makes us the partner of choice for governments and organisations across the region, as we have a proven record of delivery based on trust and success.
- This enables us to connect people in the UK and across the Caucasus, and align with HMG core objectives in the region while remaining a trusted independent partner for stakeholders across the region, delivering benefits to both the people of the Caucasus and the UK.

### **1. British Council**

1.1 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, by making a positive contribution to the UK and the countries we work with: changing lives by creating opportunities, building connections and engendering trust. This enhances the security, prosperity and influence of the UK and, in so doing, helps make the world a better, safer place.

1.2 The British Council builds the UK's soft power through a cultural relations approach, which develops long term relationships and trust for the UK with people and organisations around the world.

1.3 We have a 26-year history in the Caucasus with permanent offices in Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia, collectively forming our South Caucasus cluster. We work closely with the British Embassies in each country to achieve a holistic approach to UK engagement within the region. We have an extensive and successful track record via our grant-in-aid activity and donor-funded programmes, including those funded by UK Government, EU and local partnerships.

1.4 Our presence and people are a source of permanence in the region which has earned us a reputation for being committed to long-term outcomes and strengthening regional ties with the UK. We are valued in the region for a unique platform for collaboration where it is possible to bring UK and Caucasus stakeholders from different backgrounds and sectors together around education, English language teaching, creative industries, and inclusivity in Arts agendas. This brings about meaningful and mutual benefits for the UK and Caucasus, for example, our work on English language skills for employability has been central in the Georgian Government's ongoing educational reform initiatives, and our work to create a network for disabled artists has resulted in changes to the Georgian state grant aid application and distribution process so ensure the inclusion of disabled persons in the arts.

1.5 In 2018-19 our programmes reached 242,000 people through face-to-face engagement at our events, reaching 13 million people across the Caucasus (out of a total population of just under 17 million people) including through national broadcast and social media.

## 2. Demand for UK expertise developing institutional capacity

### 2.1 *Developing resilience:*

Developing citizens resilience is vital to building societies in which people can thrive, and international expertise plays a key role in fostering this. All governments in the region have national reform agendas aimed at building long-term resilience, and in different ways, each country continues to assert its national identity and cultural independence, looking westwards to Europe and the UK for partnership and expertise.

2.2 Through our English, education and the creative industries expertise, the British Council forms collaborations between governments, arts and cultural organisations, civil society and UK partners to support stability and prosperity through: educational policy and systems reform, increasing skills and employment prospects for individuals, capacity building, exams qualifications and building opportunities for inclusive growth. UK skills and qualifications are in high demand and UK experience in economic diversification and skills training have much to contribute to the region.

### 2.3 *Institutional Education Reform:*

Ensuring quality, accessible education is a priority for the Caucasus, and is an area where the UK and British Council can play a key role. National governments have made significant progress in educational reform in recent years, transforming post-Soviet education systems into reformed, globally competitive systems.

2.4 However, challenges persist. Improvements are still needed to address the quality of teaching and training services provided, and equal access to education for those with disabilities or learning difficulties, and from less economically privileged backgrounds, remains an obstacle. There is a gap between education curricula in preparing students for work and labour market needs. Sustainable development in the Caucasus will be reliant on building a generation of highly skilled graduates, particularly in the areas of science and innovation, and this is where the support of the British Council is of tremendous value.

2.5 The governments of all three countries acknowledge the importance of continued education reforms to address these shortfalls and respond to growing market demand for qualified and skilled graduates. The UK is one of the leading countries that the three governments refer to for knowledge and expertise in this sector, with the British Council core to this response. For example, the British Council was the first organisation approached by the Georgian Government to join the Education Reform Advisory Board, and the National Teacher Development Scheme was developed with British Council assistance and was based on the British Council development scheme for teachers. The EU, World Bank and Asian Development Bank are also playing significant roles in this area, and were recognised, alongside the British Council, at the September 2019 Education Reform Presentation as being *the* leading international organisations concerned with educational reform in Georgia.

2.6 There is further scope for the UK to play a role, particularly in higher education where reforms are underway to improve learning outcomes and prepare graduates for the labour market, contribute to the development of R&D in universities and promote the internationalisation of universities. Revision of STEM education is also a key priority. In all of these areas UK expertise and support is in high demand.

2.7 There is also a significant region-wide need for English language skills, and the UK is seen as the best source of quality support to teaching and learning. Fluency levels are low, with 52% of the Armenian population and 59% of the Georgian population claiming no basic knowledge of English<sup>1</sup> and widespread and increasing popular support for mandatory English in schools<sup>2</sup>. English language learning is widely supported by the national

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<sup>1</sup> Caucasus Research Resource Center (2017) *KNOWENG: Knowledge of English (%)*. Available at: <https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb2017/KNOWENG/> (Accessed: 30 August 2019)

<sup>2</sup> Caucasus Research Resource Center (2017) *FLMANDSC: Any foreign language mandatory at schools? (%)*. Available at: <https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb2017/FLMANDSC/> (Accessed: 30 August 2019)

governments and international organisations, and the expertise of the British Council is particularly prized and sought after as both a source of teaching and a resource with respect to curriculum reform.

2.8 All the Caucasus countries aim to bring the national curricula in line with Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) and are seeking to integrate innovative IT technologies within the learning process. In Georgia, the EU and NATO integration process has intensified the importance and the demand for higher standards, and closer international cooperation in English is on the agenda of every state institution. Across all three countries in the Caucasus, major educational reforms are underway, primarily (but not exclusively) aimed at improving teacher professional development, reforming curriculums, supporting international student mobility and research and innovation, and the formal accreditation of awards and qualifications. In all of these areas the UK and British Council play a role by sharing best practice from the UK and around the world with policy makers.

#### *2.9 Supporting a framework for the creative industries:*

The creative industries in the Caucasus remain an underdeveloped sector, which nonetheless holds great potential for economic growth and diversification, provided it is supported to form a sustainable pillar of the national economy. A lack of opportunities within the sector perpetuates disillusionment among young people about the sector's ability to support career prospects, thereby losing talent to other industries, a failure to harness the sector's potential economic benefits, and limiting opportunities for international creative enterprises to invest.

2.10 The UK arts sector is highly regarded for its creativity and innovation. Cultural institutions, professionals, artists and practitioners in the Caucasus are keen to engage with UK arts programmes and activities and develop their skills, knowledge, artistic practice and international networks. This desire for UK engagement is bolstered by high levels of regional trust in the UK. This provides the UK with opportunities to engage with the region, but also means that the UK has a responsibility to refresh, maintain and develop this capital of goodwill: and the arts are an essential means of doing this.

2.11 A concurrent priority within the creative industries is to move the profile of our arts work from one of showcasing to that of demonstrating social value and impact. To this end, the British Council have a focus on supporting inclusive arts. Disabled artists and arts professionals from underrepresented communities lack access to wider audiences, skills and opportunities to realise their potential through arts. The UK is a world-leader in this area, and as such has been a natural partner in establishing new and supporting existing networks for inclusivity, thereby broadening the base of talent working, encouraging diversity within the creative sector and building links to and goodwill towards the UK .

#### *2.12 Developing skills:*

The UK also provides expertise in entrepreneurship, giving young people the skills to create opportunities for themselves, develop the creative sector and drive economic growth. Developing the capacities of hubs, start-ups and small to medium enterprises working in the creative industries, technology and education in the Caucasus, along with the sharing of UK expertise in the creation of sustainable business models has the potential to have a positive impact on prosperity in the region. In addition, the UK can support youth empowerment, better education and career opportunities through the provision of core skills and supporting their access to UK/international networks. This contributes to developing active citizens, raise their confidence to engage and share their opinion on issues that matter to them and their communities.

### 3. Bilateral relations between the UK and states in the region

3.1 The UK's long-standing relationship with the region puts it at the heart of the international community supporting governments' reform priorities to ensure their success. The UK's presence in the Caucasus is particularly crucial at a time of growing external influence.

3.2 The UK is well-placed to provide support and play a role in building security in the Caucasus. We are well-respected across the region for our institutions and systems, and there is high demand for UK experience, skills and institutional models. It is well understood in the region that UK expertise and partnership will greatly assist domestic reform agendas. Opportunities to mobilise and engage UK organisations are therefore considerable, simultaneously promoting deeper UK influence and partnership in the region.

3.3 At a time when the UK's political relationship in the wider region is going through a challenging period, it is more important than ever to build cultural, educational and people-to-people bridges within the Caucasus. Research has found that the cultural and arts engagement facilitated by the British Council and others around the world is essential to the building of trust between people in the UK and other countries. Across young people surveyed in G20 countries, it was found that 50% of those who had participated in this type of activity with the UK trusted the UK, while only 32% of those who had not participated trusted the UK<sup>3</sup>.

3.4 Cultural and educational activity is most successful in building relationships and soft power if undertaken at arm's length from the UK Government. As the 2015 SDSR states, "Much of the UK's soft power is completely independent of government and this is what gives it its strength"<sup>4</sup>. The British Council therefore remains apolitical and committed to long-term relationships.

### 4. UK Government project and programming support to the region

4.1 The British Council's activity in the Caucasus dovetails with HMG's strategic objectives, complementing our support for governance and prosperity by sharing UK skills and experience in these areas and connecting regional stakeholders with a wide range of UK organisations and collaborators. Our work strengthens the UK's position in the Caucasus as an active and trusted partner in regional affairs, promoting greater institutional resilience and providing alternative economic and social pathways for young people. As a result of our work, we form long-term bilateral commitments that lead to deeper influence, trust and co-operation between the region and the UK.

4.2 Under our corporate objective for the wider region, our work in the Caucasus is founded on four strategic priorities that unite regional demand drivers, our expertise and networks, and UK sectors:

- **English for Employability and Engagement** – using UK expertise to support education sector reforms, English language and core skills thinking, working with policymakers, teachers and students
- **Higher Education** – supporting higher education reforms by improving graduate employability outcomes
- **Skills for Stronger Societies** – building the capacity of education and cultural institutions through international exchange
- **Arts and Creative Economy** – developing the creative industry sector towards economic sustainability, brokering partnerships and supporting inclusivity in the Arts

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<sup>3</sup> Campbell-Cree, A. and Lotten, M. (2018) *The Value of Trust*, British Council. Available at:

[https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/the\\_value\\_of\\_trust.pdf](https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/the_value_of_trust.pdf) (Accessed: 3 September 2019)

<sup>4</sup> HM Government (2015) 'National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015', pp. 49. Available at: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/555607/2015\\_Strategic\\_Defence\\_and\\_Security\\_Review.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/555607/2015_Strategic_Defence_and_Security_Review.pdf) (Accessed: 3 September 2019).

#### 4.3 *Education Reform:*

The British Council's work on education reform covers primary and secondary education, as well as higher and vocational education. Significant programmes include our Higher Education for Employability programme aiming to support governments' higher education reforms across the Caucasus to improving graduate employability, focus on *English as a Medium of Instruction*, quality assurance in teaching and align graduate outcomes to labour market needs.

4.4 We also seek to raise standards in English teaching through long-term reforms including support for teachers' professional development, innovative teaching methodology, creating a structure for better-skilled teachers and better-quality education for future generations. Significant programmes include Future English, which provides training, resources and support to tens of thousands of English teachers; Our English Language Skills for Employability in VET in Georgia, funded by the Good Governance Fund, supports Vocational Education and Training (VET) students to receive higher quality education in English through reform of English curriculums and teacher training.

4.5 Our own English language teaching offers core skills work with young people, encouraging career pathways using cutting-edge language resources, and encourages respect and openness to different cultures. Every year we administer 15,000 internationally recognised UK exams and qualifications, helping young people achieve their education and employment aspirations.

#### 4.6 *Creative Industries:*

The British Council uses the UK's cultural assets to position the UK as a long-term partner for the development of this emerging creative economy within the Caucasus. We've created viable career pathways for young people in the arts, supported cultural leaders, contributed to industry policymaking, and brokered new partnerships between arts organisations in the UK and the Caucasus. This exposure to the UK sector in turn develops greater understanding of the potential for creative industries in the Caucasus, and exposure to British skills, networks and policy structures help the sector grow.

#### 4.7 *Higher Education*

Our *Creative Spark: Higher Education Enterprise* Programme builds on UK creative economy expertise to support economic diversification and to develop UK university partnerships to nurture a pool of skilled local entrepreneurs. In 2018 alone 14 partnerships were created and supported from the Caucasus.

4.8 Since 2015 the British Council have supported inclusivity in the arts through the *Unlimited: Making the Right Moves* initiative, which supports disabled in the Caucasus (and Ukraine) by creating a sustainable network of disability arts practitioners, venues and producers, and developing their skills to create and present work. The project has seen all countries establish their first professional research into and scoping of their domestic disability arts sectors, which has gone on to inform overall Government policy around inclusion in the arts; the commissioning, development and support of artistic performances in all countries; opportunities for placement, tours and studies for artists in the UK; and it has seen UK artists tour the region with performances having been seen by 6,000 people.

#### 4.9 *Developing skills:*

We encourage closer links between education, employers and policy makers in the UK and the countries in which we work to enhance the skills and employability of young people globally. Our work creates opportunities for individuals to broaden their horizons and equips them with the skills needed to face today's global world of work. In Azerbaijan, we support skills development in the vocation education sector and disabled people in particular through our *Access to Hospitality and Apprenticeship* Programme and *Employability for People with Disability* Programme.

4.10 We run the CSSF funded *English for Isolated Communities* programme supporting vulnerable young people in underprivileged communities to improve their English language skills, future prospects and contribute to peacebuilding. *English Clubs* have been established across the region since 2018, with 3,111 students and 1,468 teachers taking part. These English Clubs have been established in many hard to reach communities<sup>5</sup>. Our new *Learning Hubs* programme, also funded by CSSF, builds on the British Council's *English Clubs* initiative. This three-year educational programme develops young people's skills for better career prospects, resilience and more stable and prosperous communities in the Eastern Partnership countries, with a total of 16,200 students and 5,815 teachers benefiting. 80% of students surveyed indicated that they believed these language courses improved their employment prospects and that the English Clubs improved their ability access resources and networks in English. All teachers surveyed stated that the programme led to a positive change in their teaching skills, and noted the time and resources devoted to their development by the programme. Parents surveyed also reported a notable improvement in the language skills and general enthusiasm of their children, and national policy makers have been positive about the programme and its effectiveness; they also felt that there was a strong likelihood of ongoing government support for this initiative.

#### 4.11 *Building bilateral relationships:*

Our approach in the Caucasus, as with elsewhere, is focused on establishing institution-to-institution links, Government-level commitments and long-lasting relationships with young people that connect them with the UK. These connections with the next generation build long-term relationships that underpin future diplomatic and trading relationships. The Caucasus and wider region is a core element of the British Council's strategy, with a corporate objective that emphasises our role and ambition: "strengthening long-term connections and relationships with the next generation in Russia and neighbouring countries".

4.12 Our UK/Georgia Season, running from September to December 2019 and jointly delivered by the British Council and the British Embassy in Georgia, is a special programme of events and activities to celebrate the one-hundredth anniversary of British-Georgian diplomatic relations and the twenty-fifth anniversary of the British Embassy's establishment in Georgia following its 1991 independence. The Season will be delivered in partnership with UK cultural organisations and festivals in Georgia, reaching 100,000 participants at events across Georgia, 200,000 through digital channels, and a further 700,000 through broadcast.

## 5. Conclusion

5.1 The British Council plays a key role in building relationships between the UK in the Caucasus. Our reputation is built on our long-term presence and a cultural and educational approach that is distinctive from the work of HMG. We work closely with the FCO and ensure that our work aligns with long-term UK foreign policy priorities.

5.2 Governments in the Caucasus value UK expertise in English, education, culture and skills in particular, and British Council works with them to ensure the UK remains the partner of choice in relevant reform agendas. Our work is successful because we work with governments and sectors to ensure that there is mutual benefit for both the UK and the countries in which we work. We design our programmes with these stakeholders, and this approach is valued.

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<sup>5</sup> In Armenia, English Clubs were established in two high schools of Jermuk and Vayk towns in Vayots Dzor region and one in Berd town of Tavush region <https://bit.ly/2VL0M51>; In Azerbaijan, two new English Clubs were established at Fuzuli School no. 50 and Gushchu School named after A.G. Isakhanov. Both are IDP community schools <https://bit.ly/2QkoZ0D>; In Georgia, two new English Clubs were established next to the Administrative Boarder Lines (ABLs) in Rukhi and Tkviavi Community Centres of the Public Service Development Agency of Georgia <https://bit.ly/2EFRQZ1>

5.3 The Caucasus form part of our key corporate objectives and will remain of vital importance to the British Council. We are ready and willing to continue discussing how British Council can support HMG priorities in this area, while also working with governments and sector stakeholders in the Caucasus to ensure that the UK remains relevant in the years to come.

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