

**Written evidence submitted by Gerald Lidstone, BA, MA, ATC, Dr.h.c FRGS, Director of the
Institute for Creative and Cultural Entrepreneurship [ICCE], Goldsmiths, University of London
(ECA0006)**

Executive summary

- 1.** Regional initiatives by the British Council, including Creative Spark and Creative Central Asia, have had substantial impact on education system reforms, as well as on the positive perception of the UK. In order to capitalise on this, the UK should sustain engagement efforts in Central Asia, to ensure that competitor countries do not reap the benefits of British investment in the region.
- 2.** The UK should continue its support for institutional change in Central Asia, particularly in education, through a comprehensive, long-term soft power strategy, backed up by sufficient resourcing.
- 3.** Further investments in strategic projects to build up the region's entrepreneurial sector, through the involvement of UK businesses and cultural organisations, are likely to have substantial impact.
- 4.** The UK should ensure it is represented at the 2024 World Conference on Creative Economy in Samarkand, Uzbekistan to demonstrate its commitment to maintaining established relationships in Central Asia.

Introduction

5. As director and founder of ICCE I am responsible for a range of MA programmes, some with over 100 students, mostly joining us from overseas. They encompass Cultural and Entrepreneurship Management, including Events and Experience, Luxury brands, Retail and the soft power of Diplomacy and Tourism. This unique institute is 12 years old and is the fastest growing in the sector. We would also claim that it teaches in a radical way that has had substantial impact in the UK, globally and in particular on Education in Central Asia. For the last five years, I have been the director of two successful Creative Spark British Council projects in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, supporting international university and institutional partnerships to develop the countries' enterprise skills and creative economy. In parallel with these, I have contributed to the Creative Central Asia conferences in 2017, 2018, and 2019 and the signing of a Goldsmiths partnership MOU¹ in 2022 at the 26th session of the Uzbek British Trade and Industry Council².

6. In undertaking these activities, I would maintain that Goldsmiths' ICCE and the regional BC, as well as the other 60 UK partner universities working across 7 countries in Ukraine, Central Asia and the Caucuses, have changed the education system in the region, in particular in Uzbekistan. The Soviet system of traditional education featuring knowledge/fact delivery, has in the course of our creative industries teaching moved to embrace a much more critical approach and is in the early stages of

¹ The event was opened by Deputy Minister of Investments and Foreign Trade of Uzbekistan, Badriddin Abidov and the UK's Trade Commissioner for Eastern Europe and Central Asia, [Kenan Poleo](#).

² <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/26-session-of-uzbek-british-trade-and-industry-council-took-place>

involving practitioners and entrepreneurs directly in university teaching. In parallel, as a direct response to the second Creative Central Asia conference, the Uzbek Ministry of Education has undertaken key education reforms. A Quality Practice Framework was developed, bringing together the work and best practice shared by Creative Spark partnerships, aiming to introduce creative enterprise education to all universities in Uzbekistan and influence the development of a creative entrepreneurship ecosystem.

7. In the project's third year, Creative Spark activities reached over 1,600 young students, entrepreneurs and influencers in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, as well as over 500 government and institutional stakeholders live or via online sessions, due to regional location and the Covid pandemic. Creative Spark's fourth year saw similar levels of engagement across the two countries, with the total number of participants across all seven countries over four years amounting to over 65,000.

8. These significant educational and social changes need to be capitalised on by the UK, rather than be built on by competitor countries. We are trusted but need to sustain delivery to maintain that trust.

Q1: What are the key challenges facing the region and its people in the coming decade and what implications do these have for UK foreign policy?

9. The key challenge is cultural, but situated in a political and geographical, both historical and contemporary context. It is about countries successfully managing to balance between pro-European and nationalist drives, in efforts to reform institutions that have been established according to Soviet models, while also accounting for their historic ties to the Russian Federation.

10. In my experience of working directly with government ministries, particularly on education and culture, it is clear that they want to modernise state systems and they have demonstrated this directly at a high level. In the second Creative Central Asia conference, UK speakers advocated that universities should be allowed to be independent, through loosening central control, be able to create their own curricula and effectively be in competition with each other. In 2018 this was seen by our education partners as impossible. By the 2019 conference, it had already happened, and ministers were asking education institutes to show evidence of changing to grasp these opportunities. These advances have been possible, as leaving the Soviet education system has been encouraged sensitively by evolution, not revolution, and by joining a global approach.

11. An equally sensitive evolution has been seen in how we share teaching material. This was at the start of Creative Spark presented in English and Russian. Five years later, it is now being presented in English and Uzbek. The students we work with see English as their Global language and now Uzbek as their National language, a subtle but key change. Educated students as society influencers [particularly on social media] are beginning to see themselves as 'Global Citizens' with English as the passport to that internationalisation. Notably, improving English language skills was among the main reasons for students and recent graduates to attend CS activities.

12. Young people are aware of their big neighbours and their potential cultural and political influence, but clearly see their future relations in the context of greater Europe and in particular the

UK. However, they are treading carefully, particularly aware of the current Ukrainian situation. Our Uzbek partners are also fully aware of the influence of the Chinese 'Belt and Road' project, but also understand it as foreign intervention, accepting it for its practical use, but resisting it culturally.

13. In simplistic terms, an older generation may be Soviet focused and cautious of change [although strongly nationalist], while the younger is open to changing institutions' direction towards Europe/UK, balanced with developing a new 'Uzbek' way. A key element of young people's exposure to UK universities has been the development of their own critical thinking, and with that now increasingly questioning what they actually want in the future.

14. Therefore, the implication for UK foreign policy is to keep up support for institutional change, in particular in education, and to work through partnerships with Uzbek organisations to provide the stimulus – both political and practical – to continue to support change: a very much hearts and minds approach to diplomacy. Students in the organisations we work with will be the future leaders and the BC has shown it fully understands this. UK government support needs to be embedded, strategic and for the long-term, otherwise competitors [as stated earlier] will capitalise on our good start.

15. One of our partners wrote the first book produced in Uzbekistan as a guide to the Creative Industries. That it credits the UK throughout as a model for developing ideas, is a good example of that soft influence as it is a textbook for young future leaders.

16. Both Uzbek academic staff and enterprise practitioners have as part of CS, both before and after the Covid pandemic, visited the UK to have teaching and seminars and to visit creative hubs, in both the commercial sector and universities. CS has contributed to increasing the interest in and demand for UK education and expertise across all partner countries, with stakeholders' feedback pointing to a number of examples where students and staff became more interested in studying and working in the UK as a result of participating in CS activities.

17. The UK needs an effective soft power strategy for Central Asia that builds on its current solid achievements, bringing together all sectors, including education, in a comprehensive plan.

Q2: What are the opportunities and risks of the UK strengthening its partnerships with Central Asian states in areas of mutual interest?

18. The opportunity is clear, as the UK has made an effective start at working with a large number of young entrepreneurs, managers and influencers and a trust has been built up for UK personnel from universities, agencies and the BC. Entrepreneurs in particular see themselves as having global opportunities and values developed through UK contact. In developing this new approach, the Soviet business approaches and networks are seen as redundant.

19. New agendas have been set particularly through webinars during the Covid pandemic, and specific events on women entrepreneurs and on sustainability. As part of Creative Spark competitions for identifying entrepreneurial universities, there were categories for areas of entrepreneurship but also green/sustainable entrepreneurship. This focus on gender and climate change was not in any way resisted but was fully embraced. Given the history of the country, these

latter aspects are clearly where a young generation wants to make an impact. They are already working digitally and developing businesses in technology, but also seeing the UK as a model to follow, given its profile in Creative Industries' contribution to GDP.

20. Two other areas of critical influence are important to note. The first one is in relation to cultural institutions such as museums, theatres and music, both traditional and contemporary. Creative Spark and some additional programmes have looked at making cultural producing organisations more independent, through seminars/projects on increasing audiences or independent funding. While hoping to sustain the organisations, this has had a political agenda of making them less state dependant, in turn promoting work that is less traditional and more contemporary. Uzbeks are proud of their culture and those helping them to de-sovietise and develop international markets/influence for their cultural products are seen as important to maintain a relationship with. This can also be seen in the way culture relates to tourism, which is perceived as an area of the economy with substantial potential. Again, there has been substantial UK input in this area, waiting to be further developed.

21. As stated before, we need to build on this impact and influence by maintaining resourcing at a level above the minimal.

Q3: Where do the relationships between Central Asian states and neighbouring countries, including the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation, pose challenges for UK Foreign Policy, and where do they provide opportunities?

22. Based on the five years of engagement in the region through Creative Spark, it appears that each country poses different challenges in the sphere of education. In relation to the Russian Federation, influence would be hard to reassert as learning and teaching has actively changed in methodology, particularly in business, entrepreneurship and cultural management. To some extent this is generational, as Soviet methodologies are seen as 'of the past', not just because they are inefficient and seen as colonial, but also because they are not seen as international and do not align with Uzbek youth's global perspective.

23. China is seen differently, as a modernising influence with considerable resources. China finds the work of Uzbek entrepreneurs of interest and sees the potential, in terms of investment in a country that has weak Intellectual Property laws. In the future, if Chinese strategies are duplicated as in other parts of the world, they will start to invest in entrepreneurial infrastructure with a mission beyond access to resources and control of that infrastructure, but for fostering Uzbek creativity, as exhibited by young entrepreneurs. China has the investment potential and through this could inevitably reduce UK influence.

24. In interaction with Uzbek colleagues in both businesses and universities, we do not publicly criticise the influence of China and Russia although it is sometimes 'the elephant in the room'. However, our Uzbek colleagues are subtle in their understanding of the diplomatic situation and are fully aware of potential friction.

25. Part of Creative Spark's objectives was developing leadership skills in students, academics, practitioners, and state employees. This activity was particularly important in developing and

opening up the potential to see a UK/western approach, which is vital in communicating democratic and ethical approaches to leadership. We found we were pushing at an open door, with a great desire for change in all sectors, within a context seeking not to imitate western methodology but to develop and invent an Uzbek version of it. This approach was strongly endorsed by UK practitioners and academics.

26. There is considerable opportunity for continuing and increasing the impact for UK Foreign Policy. The infrastructure has been created by the British Council and Creative Spark. Further investment here could have substantial impact. The challenge is to create that investment over a long-term strategy such as that for Creative Spark and continue to develop high level interventions, with a view to having similar impact to that of the Creative Central Asia and the Trade and Industry Forums.

27. Both the public and visible approach, such as CCA, and the sector impact approach of Creative Spark, are needed. I am not suggesting more of the same in terms of projects but investment in successor initiatives that can carry forward and develop the impact already made.

Q4: What is the government doing to maximise UK soft power influence in Central Asian states?

28. I have mainly concentrated above on the Creative Spark British Council project in Uzbekistan and the Creative Central Asia events. CS, as indicated above, has been highly influential in the education and entrepreneurship sector. Creative Central Asia [CCA] is further covered in a parallel submission by Dr Martin Smith, a Visiting Fellow in Creative Industries in ICCE at Goldsmiths.

29. We also ran a parallel Creative Spark project in Kazakhstan for five years, as with Uzbekistan, budgeted for four years, with its fifth year continuing unfunded on the momentum of the previous four. The pattern has been very much the same although the lead in-country partner was a newly formed creative hub partnered with a university. We worked with the hub developing entrepreneurial skills and new modules in entrepreneurship with the university. As with Uzbekistan, the budget over four years was in the region of £90,000. Again, the Covid pandemic restrictions lasting for two of those years made all partners develop resourcefulness in delivering the programme of essentially knowledge transfer.

30. Both countries are situated in a similar political, cultural and economic context. We have developed meaningful and impactful relationships that have delivered knowledge and a change in ways of operating in education and entrepreneurship for practitioners. But with the end of CS, the achievements are left hanging. The context is too novel and not appropriate yet to gain major in-country funding to replace CS funding. We see the potential in the future for Central Asia governments and the private sector, but this will take a little more time to develop [there is some but not enough].

31. The funding from the UK for CS was seen as part of a new method of engagement. It was not seen as 'aid', but rather as an investment into a partnership, as both sides had to cocreate the outcomes. These partnerships, as accounted for above, certainly maximised the investment in soft power influence.

32. Currently, the UK government is not seen to be investing, as it has in the past, in productive partnerships. We are at a watershed in soft power relationships that needs kick starting again. We would welcome a future creative engagement that also brings together universities and industry partners and government in both partner countries. We would also welcome cross-regional partnerships. ICCE Goldsmiths was unusual in working across two³ countries but we see potential for a regional approach to enhance UK soft power, understanding that this might cost more to support. However, given the geopolitical situation, this might now be the effective moment to invest.

Q5: What opportunities exist for the UK to work more closely with Central Asian states in multilateral institutions and to foster respect for the rules-based international order?

33. There are two clear opportunities presenting themselves. The first is to create funded strategic projects, potentially across countries and through consultation with UK and regional partners, to build on developing the entrepreneurial sector. Creating bilateral relationships with successful UK businesses should be focused not only on developing trade, but also knowledge transfer. In addition to building trade relationships, partnerships with cultural organisations should be developed. With world leading museums and galleries, the UK is in an ideal position to help those in Central Asia realise their potential, i.e., through the Art and Culture Development Foundation, under the Ministry of Culture of Uzbekistan⁴, which could act as a Hub for the region. To create a sense of post-aid intervention, the UK should engage in new relationships with in-country organisations that might also receive independent sponsorship. The British Council is a trusted operator in this field and could easily broker advantageous relationships combining trade, knowledge exchange and diplomacy.

34. The second opportunity is for the UK to have a substantial presence at the next World Conference on Creative Economy which will be held in Samarkand in 2024. The UK has not been represented in the last two annual conferences and this has been noticed. The fact that Uzbekistan bid for and won the opportunity to host this conference clearly resonates with the recent Russia-China summit in Tashkent, with symbolic capital being expressed in both cases. As the UK has one of the most successful creative economies globally, to be not represented would be remis, particularly given the relationships already established with the sector. The UK would swiftly be replaced by competitors, including China, the USA and Turkey, whereas with targeted minimal expenditure its position could be maintained. The British Council with the FCDO are in a good position to broker that.

35. While the traditional trade relationships, built around oil and gas, will still remain, a new ideas-based creative economy has considerable potential for bilateral development. This should be the basis of informal sessions around the conference.

36. I would hope that this Committee can move forward on these two very timely opportunities, with a view to capitalise on the groundwork that has been laid through the above-mentioned initiatives.

14/03/2023

³ And with Martin Smith from ICCE work in Kyrgyzstan, three countries, please see his submission.

⁴ <https://artsandculture.google.com/partner/art-culture-development-foundation-under-the-ministry-of-culture-of-the-republic-of-uzbekistan>

