CULTURE, TOURISM, EUROPE AND EXTERNAL AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

EXTERNAL AFFAIRS INQUIRY

SUBMISSION FROM INTERNATIONAL CULTURAL RELATIONS LTD

1. This evidence paper responds to the Committee’s Inquiry into Scotland’s engagement with the European Union and the rest of the world. It also addresses the Committee’s general questions relating to evaluation and the role of the Scottish Government’s International Offices.

2. We offer our thoughts on what a strategy should contain based on our extensive experience as policy-makers, academics and practitioners of international cultural relations. The authors are currently London-based but have also worked in international cultural relations in Scotland, India, the USA, Brussels and Germany.

3. Our suggestions are based on theory that explains why specific approaches are likely to succeed as well as on our extensive engagements with sectors that are crucial to Scotland’s international influence: business; science; higher education; technology and culture. We do not attempt to answer every question, but to suggest a framework within which more specific questions, such as those on the Hubs, can be addressed.

Introduction

4. This inquiry is well-timed. There are important short to medium term challenges for Scotland’s external affairs, not all of which are in Scotland’s control, but all of which potentially have major implications for Scotland, eg: Brexit or not; no-deal or not; the review of devolution to be announced by the Prime Minister. There is a long list.

5. The external environment is changing fast. There are geo-political and economic shifts, challenges to globalisation and the post-war rules-based international order. In the EU there is a new Parliament, a new set of leaders of the European Institutions, and an upsurge in populism and aggressive nationalism.

6. At the same time, there is an urgent need to collaborate to tackle global crises and challenges, recognised in Scotland’s commitment to implementing the SDGs.

7. The so-called Fourth Industrial Revolution poses very significant opportunities and challenges for Scotland and the world.

8. All this requires an effective strategic approach to managing Scotland’s external affairs. This strategy needs to be multi-dimensional and multi-level, and it needs to be (and to be seen to be) legitimate domestically as well as influential internationally.
A strategy for Scotland

9. Scotland is well-placed to develop its strategy, having the necessary building blocks for successful public diplomacy (PD) and flourishing international cultural relations.\(^1\) Research confirms that the principles and main components of any such strategy are the same:

- **Narratives**: the world is so complex, chaotic and contradictory that it cannot be contained in a single narrative. As a ‘new’ actor in international relations, albeit one with a recognised ‘brand’ and an exceptionally strong knowledge and science base, Scotland has the potential to develop disruptive narratives for strategic communications which engage with global challenges, attract international attention, and form the basis for engagement. Small countries can develop eye-catching innovative initiatives that enhance narratives and give them legitimacy, especially when they shift perceptions positively in relation to specific topics. A good example is Denmark’s ‘Tech Ambassador’;\(^2\)

- **A forum** within which strategy can be developed, stakeholder engagement secured, and decisions made. This is particularly important in PD/cultural relations given the large number of stakeholders involved, including in Scottish civil society. Recent research highlights that public diplomacy’s international and domestic dimensions can be seen as stepping stones on a continuum of public participation that is central to international policymaking and conduct;\(^3\)

- **Research**: Scotland needs to be up to date with the most recent tools and approaches around the world. It also needs to understand the environments, networks and contexts it operates in internationally;

- **Evaluation**: it is essential to understand ‘what works’ in terms of international influence. This is a problem that countries across the world grapple with. In the USA, Bill H.R.2159\(^4\) was introduced into Congress in April this year with the aim “To modernize and streamline the public diplomacy capabilities of the Department of State, increase evaluation of public diplomacy programming, enhance strategic planning for the Department’s public diplomacy physical presence abroad, and for other purposes.” Evaluation is essential for effective decision making, accountability and making the best use of resources – the Committee’s role would be very important here;

- **Learning**: Scotland needs to continue to enhance its capacity and capability in international engagement, but specifically in PD and cultural relations. As they

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1 Terminology in this policy area can be confusing. This submission uses the term PD to describe public policy which aims to exercise influence on other countries, including their publics and civil societies with a view to changing their behaviour or preferences. We include diplomacy, cultural diplomacy and other forms of ‘diplomacy’ within PD. The other term we use, ‘cultural relations’ refers to the broad spectrum of relationships, exchanges and engagements that take place across borders. These can be facilitated by public policy, but do not serve an explicit short-term policy goal, though they do enhance international standing in the longer term. In other words, PD broadly refers to ends and cultural relations to means.

2 [http://techamb.um.dk/](http://techamb.um.dk/)


require multi-level collaborative action both domestically and internationally, there is a need at the policy and leadership-level for a focus on resourcing and capacity-building in terms of experience, skills, and an enhanced knowledge base. There will also be a need to consider where strategic transformation is required in specific sectors which are crucial to Scotland’s external engagement;  

- **Networks:** function horizontally and are essential for engagement and collaboration, but they need to be actively researched, developed and maintained. This requires sustained effort which can pay off. Start with understanding of existing networks – every organisation, interest, process or practice can be described in network terms. Effects (results) are obtained through relationships within networks. This is an essential shift in thinking in the digital age.

### Specific general suggestions for consideration

10. It is worth noting that there is a global rise in subnational diplomacy or ‘para-diplomacy’. For example, in 2017, the then US Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson, proposed the establishment of an Office for Subnational Diplomacy within the State Department. Elsewhere, this trend involves countries as diverse as Australia, Belgium, Germany, India, Nigeria and Spain.

   *It would be valuable for Scotland to understand what can be learned about the drivers, mechanisms, successes and failures of such initiatives as well as an audit of ‘what works’ for analogous small countries and large regions in the EU.*

11. Scotland has existing globally recognised areas of expertise and high reputation. As already noted, for a small country, Scotland has an exceptionally strong higher education, scientific and knowledge base, and there are others which influence preferences for investment, tourism, etc. Scotland also has significant populations of Scots occupying positions of influence outside Scotland, and immigrant populations with connections back to their countries of origin.

   *These areas of strength should firstly be systematically documented and assessed for their strategic importance as they form Scotland’s ‘soft power assets’. A second phase would be to map their global networks and scope for influencing events and perceptions.*

12. The SDGs are already a focus for the Scottish Government. In addition to domestic implementation, there is an enormous amount of international activity where Scotland could make a high-profile impact for the global good.

   *One example: the UN estimates that implementing Sustainable Development Goals will cost $ trillions each year. Consideration could be given to Scotland taking an active role in international discussions about ethical investment and its governance.*

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8 It is worth noting that there were many Scottish voices at the recent City of London SDG roadshow, indicating the crucial role that Scots based outwith Scotland can play in crucial areas of international activity such as investment and finance.
13. Building influence and networks, and shaping the international debate, matters more than nation-branding.

The aim of any new strategic narratives for Scotland should be to connect to the interests of others, to establish Scotland as an active participant in key areas of debate, and to make common cause with others where appropriate, recognising that this process needs to start with listening, and move through engagement to collaboration. Engagement needs to be an active process – presence alone is not enough. In networks, Scotland should aim to be a mediator – connecting others and transforming the meanings of what it is involved in. That will be more productive than asserting claims to uniqueness which simply do not work in today’s world.

Scotland can start with existing networks where it can expect to have an influence and profile in the context of Brexit. Universities have links that transcend politics at the UK and global levels including the Association of Commonwealth Universities, the League of European Research Universities, The Guild, and bilateral and multilateral programmes. The same argument applies to sport and culture. Scotland’s existing network participation should be mapped.

14. Finally, Scotland needs to act externally in a way that is seen as legitimate to Scots, and to others. That legitimacy will generate trust and confidence. Trust is essential when there is uncertainty. Trust is not needed when there are perfect data on which to base decisions, but that is not the case.

This requires an effective strategy that is supported domestically and implemented wherever it needs to be put into action. While there is no nation without national symbols, there is no community without joint practices, common understandings and trust, and no meaningful action without tools...

15. The time is right to develop a strategy for action that is based on:

- **Clear aims in terms of outcomes for Scotland**;
- **Evidence (not assumptions) and analysis of the complex, multi-layered, and heterogeneous set of relations Scotland has to operate within – both domestically and externally**;
- **Understanding of organisations, interests, processes and practices, how they are linked, particularly through key networks, and how Scotland can position itself most effectively to achieve influence**;
- **Identification of opportunities based on empirical analysis**;
- **A shared understanding of risks**;
- **An approach that hedges against multiple possible outcomes ie is appropriate to both an existing sub-national actor and a new participant in international relations**;
- **Practical proposals for the short, medium and long-term with priorities, and**
Engaging with the European Union

16. Our responses to the Committee’s questions are:

Q. What principles should inform the focus of the Scottish Government’s external affairs policy with regard to the European Union?

A. The principles of any policy are as set out above, ie the policy should be evidence-based, contain sound evaluation, focus on building capacity and capability, align domestic and external policies and strategies and focus on where the greatest sustainable impact can be secured.

Q. Are there examples of best practice for ways in which nations / regions from non-EU Member States engage with and influence the EU?

A. Undoubtedly, but research would be needed to give a conclusive answer.

In relation to the questions on the Hubs, we cannot offer specific responses. We do, however, in general terms, think that the Hubs, over time, can evolve their role into a distributed network which can share its knowledge and insight widely with Scottish civil society and help to facilitate strategy development based on strong contextual knowledge. There may also be scope for temporary ‘pop-up’ hubs which for example can connect to the agenda of the country currently holding the EU Presidency, or with major events such as summits, where networks of influence come together.

Engagement with the rest of the world

17. Our responses to the Committee’s questions are:

Q. What principles should inform the Scottish Government’s international engagement? For example, should economic priorities be the key priority or cultural / ‘soft power’ priorities?

A. As with the EU, the principles of any policy are as set out above, ie the policy should be evidence-based, contain sound evaluation, focus on building capacity and capability, align domestic and external policies and strategies and focus on where the greatest sustainable impact can be secured. It should not be based on a priori decisions as to the merits of economy vs culture.

It would be helpful to stop using the term ‘soft power’ as that simply refers to the influence which, it is claimed, that can be gained through the attractiveness of a country’s policies, institutions and culture. Unfortunately, no-one has yet come up with a reliable way to measure soft power and its impact although some people and organisations still talk about it.

This problem has led to some major new initiatives to develop new approaches to the measurement of influence which embraces both the ‘traditional’ and the digital worlds and their complex interactions. Scotland has the potential to lead on this area of global
interest, building on pioneering work done at the University of Edinburgh. We strongly recommend that this work is developed in Scotland as a key element of any strategy.

Q. How should the Scottish Government prioritise its international engagement – for example, should the locations prioritised be based on a geography or policy focus?

A. This question would be a matter of political and economic judgement, based on evidence as to how Scotland’s interests would best be served and on an agreed set of criteria. Priorities should be evidence-led.

In our view, in the short term, priorities will need to focus on mitigating the impact of Brexit, particularly a no-deal Brexit, whose consequences would be severe for Scotland. That would suggest a focus on Scotland’s top export markets, i.e., mainly the USA, the EU, other European countries, and a few other countries such as Australia, Brazil, China and Japan.

In the short to medium term, Scotland could also consider its priorities in relation to where key decisions that affect Scotland are made – these do not necessarily map onto geographies in the traditional way. We have already referred to Denmark’s ‘Tech Ambassador’ – an initiative followed by some other countries who see the need to take the debate about the ethics of technology to the global corporates who produce it. For the medium to longer term, Scotland has an opportunity to develop an innovative strategy for international engagement that takes full advantage of technology and potentially could offer services to Scots abroad. That would be based on a cool assessment of how best to match priorities to Scotland’s circumstances at the time.

In relation to the Hubs, in the short term, we believe that the key aims of all these offices should be to manage the risks of Brexit to the Scottish economy. That has to take priority in the immediate future over other considerations. We believe, however, that the offices should also continue to engage in other ways, particularly to secure vital links in higher education.

Q. Currently, the Scottish Government has international engagement strategies with Canada, China, India, Pakistan and the USA. Do these strategies and their geographic focus remain appropriate post-Brexit?

A. We believe that there should definitely be country plans for each country where Scotland has an international office, so, broadly, yes. Post-Brexit, we also believe that these strategies should be refreshed more regularly and focus harder on the principles we suggest above.

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10 https://scotland.shinyapps.io/sg-exports-performance-monitor/
Final questions

18. Our responses to the Committee’s final questions are:

Q. How can the Scottish Government’s international engagement be evaluated effectively?

A. We have noted above that evaluation needs to be a key component of an overall strategy which is as clear as it can be about what the Scottish Government aims to achieve. If appropriate evaluation is built in to the strategy design from the start, drawing on best practice then an assessment can be made as to how well these aims have been achieved. Any evaluation in today’s world needs to include both the digital and traditional worlds and their interactions.

Q. How should the Scottish Government’s international offices most effectively engage with other Scottish organisations such as Scottish Development International and Visit Scotland?

A. Engagement should be consistent with the principles and overall aims of Scotland’s strategy for external affairs. The national-level forum proposed above would allow for high-level coordination and alignment of agencies’ priorities with those of Scotland as a whole. At the level of operations in target countries, there needs to be effective co-development of country strategies, alignment of effort where appropriate, and efficient sharing of knowledge and resources, to allow maximum benefit to be achieved through strategic action. International Offices should support SDIO and VisitScotland to maximise their sectoral insight and knowledge, and their participation and influence in relevant networks.

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We contributed to the report, “Optimizing Engagement, Research, Evaluation and Learning in Public Diplomacy, prepared for the US State Department by M&C Saatchi: https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/ACPD-Optimizing-Engagement.pdf. We have also participated in studies of digital influence and how to measure it, and in the development, with the Informatics School, and the School of Social and Political Science of the University of Edinburgh, of innovative approaches to the development of data-driven evaluation of flows of influence.