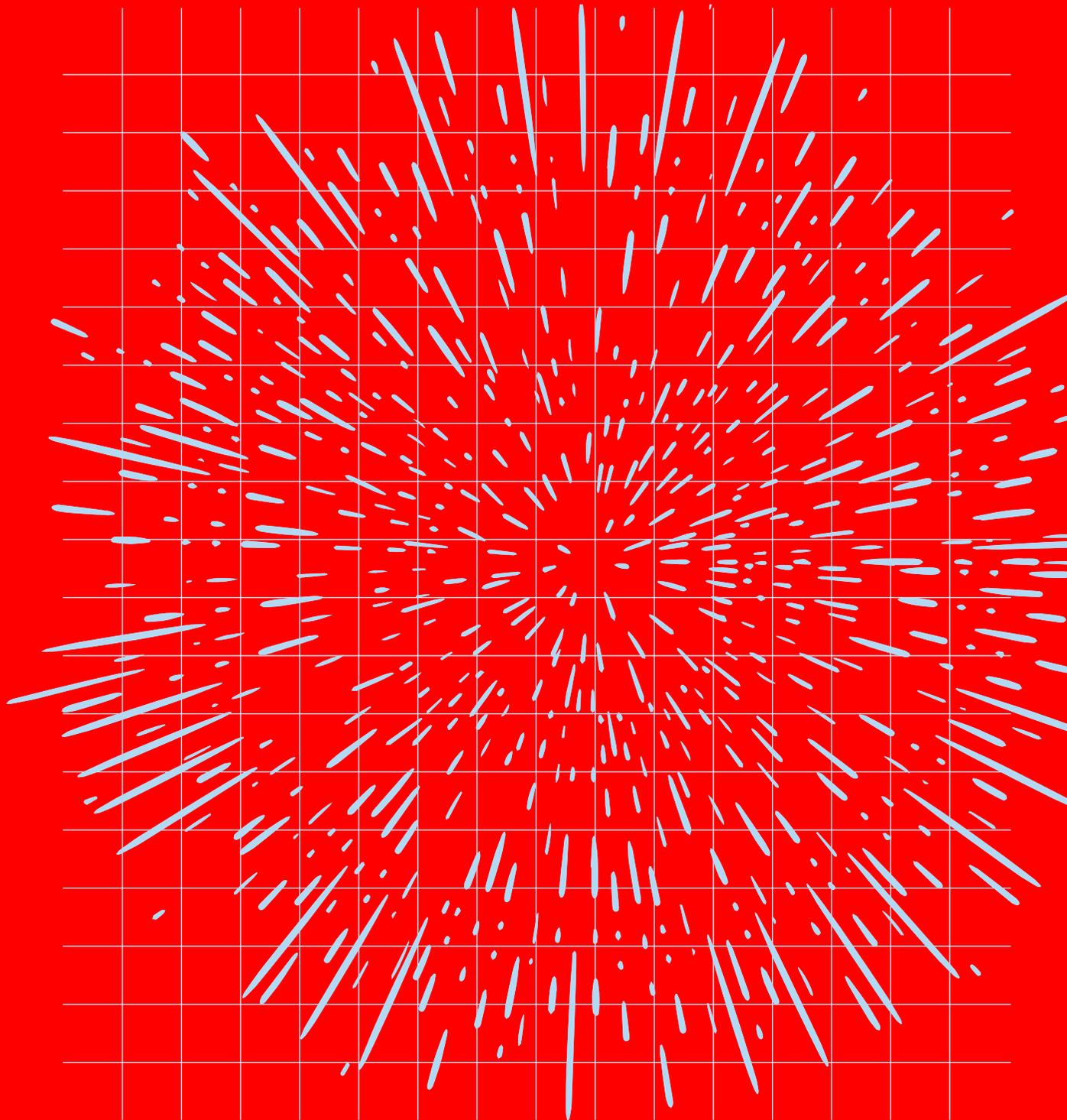


UK/Poland Cultural Season 2025: Imagining Future Collaborations

Executive summary from a study regarding potential cooperation between Polish organisations from the arts and culture sector and their UK counterparts under the UK/Poland Season 2025. New models of cooperation and recommendations for the British Council

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Since the pandemic, our international relations have died down.

A gap connected with financial and organisational changes has emerged. And Brexit has added a new level of complexity.

We have ceased to think [of the UK] as a potential partner.

I could use a nudge from the outside showing that it's possible to do things differently.

Introduction

The present report outlines the plans, needs, potential, and perceptions that arts and culture organisations have reported with regard to cooperation under the British Council's **UK/Poland Season 2025**. The study was conducted in **7 Polish cities** (Katowice, Krakow, Lublin, Poznan, the Tri-City, Warsaw, and Wroclaw) and involved **70 institutions and organisations**. Its objective was to identify plans related to cooperation between Polish and British partners as well as their **experience of various crises** and the **ideas on how to deal with them**. It presents an attempt at creating **new models of international cooperation**, including **adaptation** and **resilience mechanisms** so as to cope with our **fragile, anxious, non-linear and contradictory** reality.

The majority of respondents stressed that the **old formulas for international cooperation were no longer adequate in the face of the current reality**. In their view, crises have become the new normal. The **COVID-19 pandemic, Brexit, the war in Ukraine, the energy crisis, and inflation** have radically changed and continue to impact the way people work, feel, create art and culture, and approach collaborative initiatives. Many people surveyed indicated that they are willing to develop **new cooperation formats and models** based on a new set of values and principles, adapting them to the new reality. Our report is an attempt to articulate and conceptualise these needs through an **imaginary journey into the future** – the future not as a determinate, linear series of events, but as a variety of alternative, hypothetical ramifications – many different futures that could be influenced or shaped.

70

organisations accepted the invitation to take part in our study

69%

organisations had previously implemented collaborative projects with UK partners

100%

organisations were willing to start new collaborations or to continue initiatives, building on already established contacts

59

people took part in online in-depth interviews

63

respondents representing 51 organisations participated in workshops

7

workshops were conducted across the country

93

persons were involved in the study process

organisations

type

foundations and associations

local, national and co-managed public institutions

private business entities

working field

performing arts

film

literature

music

design and applied arts

contemporary and ancient art

architecture

photography

ethnography

social history

tangible and intangible heritage

implementing inter- and transdisciplinary projects

research and research-artistic activities

running educational programs

creating computer games

***The world is what
I dream it to be.***

Gaston Bachelard

From past experiences to new models of future cooperation

The study focused on three temporal perspectives, namely:

- (1) insights into **past experiences** and the meaning respondents assigned to them several years later,
- (2) **present plans and needs**, both in the form of official institutional plans as well as formulated in less formalised internal strategic and program-related communication,
- (3) the **potential for future cooperation**; here the study focused on cooperation “prototypes” developed during workshops, new cooperation models, speculative visions, institutional imagination and its limits, new formats and practices.



Everything boils down to knowledge and curiosity, and relationships that are marked by trust and understanding. It takes time and space to engage in a conversation.

To go somewhere, to get to know each other [...] Then usually [cooperation happens] very quickly. The most interesting things come out when people meet in less formal circumstances and can hang out with each other.

That is precisely when “non-obvious discoveries” occur and meetings become “less air-tight.”

Desired models and areas of cooperation: Practices, relationships, values, themes

Locality and beyond

What resonated strongly during the workshops and conversations was the theme of **linking localities together**, building relationships not based on national identities i.e. *Britishness* and *Polishness*, but by understanding how various local phenomena or processes – cultural, social, ecological, economic or political – resemble and differ from one another. The theme of looking at one’s own locality in order to see it in a new light or from a new perspective was also stressed.

Process, not products

The importance of focusing on and prioritising the collaborative process recurred time and again. A processual approach to a project implies **great attentiveness to what arises at specific meetings, out of unpredictable situations, in a spontaneous atmosphere.**

Furthermore, the processual nature of collaboration requires “**experiencing daily routines**” and “**working every day.**” “In the international environment, we rely on events,” one participant noted, before adding, “and not on daily work.” The vernacularity of practices was contrasted with “event-ness, spectacularity, [and] highlights.”

Curiosity and trans/interculturalism

The interlocutors highlighted the need to create a systemic cooperation mechanism that would allow for the “mutual recognition of each other’s biases,” i.e. to experience

On how to speak using a more inclusive language.

how the British see us, as well as reveal how we see them, and then verify what in these “mutual projections” is correct and what is merely a prejudice.

Cultural differences, however, do not only relate to locality broadly understood, but also to **ways of working in cultural and arts organisations** and **approaches to representation in art**.

Some participants stressed the need for **transcultural experiences**, mixing elements of different cultures without having to attribute them to a particular cultural source or milieu. For them, nationality does not matter; what matters are elements from meso- and microsystems that do not necessarily relate to the state or national levels.

Accessibility and inclusiveness

The topic of **accessibility emerged among priorities**. Various collaborative **activities with those excluded, both physically and mentally**, were proposed. Some of them involved providing a venue for **people with disabilities** at renowned institutions, e.g. allowing them to showcase their works in exhibition halls as full-fledged artists. Participants were interested in co-curating exhibitions with representatives of British organisations that specialise in **Art Brut**, or recognize art collections located in psychiatric hospitals.

The emphasis was placed on an increase **of the accessibility of programmes**, as well as establishing personal relationships between staff in order to keep up to date on inclusivity issues and new solutions, such as: guided tours in sign language, introduction of SubPac devices for sound projects, subtitles in Polish/English, events using audio induction loop or sharing already existing tools like typhlographics. Polish partners were open to learn from the British existing policies on how to **protect individuals and/or groups against prejudice** on account of age, disability, gender status, marital status, pregnancy or maternal role, race, religion, sex, or sexual orientation.

Great to see that it's not so Warsaw-centric.

Relevant initiatives are those that allow to dismantle old structures and include pro-social activities.

Decentralisation

This thematic area highlights the need to **break out of elitist, inbred and inaccessible art environments** available only to a specific group. This can be achieved in a variety of ways, from using the tools of **contemporary popular culture**, making galleries available for **street testimonials** or **mixing low- and high-brow culture**, to taking chamber concerts **out of concert halls into urban spaces**. It was expressed as interesting to implement such activities modeled on **lesser-known British entities, smaller cities, young artists, and artists with disabilities, and to reach out to people experimenting with different forms of expression**.

It emerged that there is a need for projects involving establishing **relationships with institutions from cities of a similar size**, and of a **similar nature or profile**, moving away from familiar formats (exhibitions, fairs, presentations), and opting for projects that, for example, require a day trip to less accessible locations. The purpose of these activities would be to **gather and produce knowledge** on fringe topics.

Transdisciplinary and innovative solutions

Going beyond a single art field and integrating non-artistic disciplines into institutional activities was another significant area. There was a strong need to experiment with **combining new technologies with music**; include **art therapy** in the institutional program; and draw from **the social role of dance** (integration of diverse communities and generations). It was stated that it is worth looking closer at **the multiculturalism of the UK**, which has a major role in the diverse arts scene emerging there.

The participants found it important to partner with British institutions that are equally **open to change, experiments and going digital** using the latest social media and put emphasis on **linking art and science** and **exchanging inter-institutional experiences**. There were also references to **environmental topics** that form a significant

From London to Lublin.

The UK is like a Polish province.

To do something together. We bring the know-how, you bring the know-how. We don't want to be like a poor sister to the British.

part of the artistic debate in the UK. Learning from their experience, the end goal is to make a sustainable difference here in Poland. During the conversations the above values often mattered much **more than high-brow art in the broadest sense**.

Migration/inclusion of third countries/postcolonialism

When working with a country that has a long history of **colonisation** it is impossible to avoid discussing the consequences. It was suggested that the **inclusion of the post-colonial countries** in the UK/Poland Season 2025 programme was desired and could be realised thanks to the invitation of artists from Uganda, Kenya, or Tanzania.

One of the participants draws attention to **two waves of Polish migration to the UK**, namely Poles who stayed in the UK after World War II and those who migrated there recently (after Poland's accession to the European Union), and would like to **focus on intergenerational relations and their consequences** in future UK-Poland art projects.

The topic of migration also included critical references related to the **ongoing war in Ukraine and the resulting new map of Europe**.

Project symmetry (reciprocity)

Virtually every respondent stressed the importance of **partnership between the two countries**. Thus, once cooperation between the UK and Poland is established, there should be **no leading institution, but two (or more) equal entities**. There were also calls for Poland to be more active in shaping opinions and knowledge about our country's art and **eliminating British stereotypes** about us.

What the two countries have in common are the following, repeatedly cited experiences and trends: **radicalisation of views, people turning to tradition, right-wing or**

The world is changing; young audiences want special experiences. They prefer to go to a small concert where they can touch the artist, talk to the artist, be a participant. People expect special projects and expect to get something unusual out of them.

Certainly education [matters], but in a broader sense, including non-formal education.

nationalist allegiances. These trends were understood to be a **driver of grassroots action, stimulating creative energy and the fight against exclusion.**

Intergenerational dialogue, young people, and audience development

The need to reflect on and build cooperation and exchange with respect to connecting with **age-diverse audiences** was stressed. Currently available cultural offerings, prepared with seniors in mind, were critically discussed. The participants also stressed that the activities should be addressed to the younger generation, especially **young adults.** New activity formats that respond to the needs and expectations of young culture consumers, should be created.

Art education

Art education, both **professional** and **addressed to the general public**, is another frequently mentioned field where Polish and British counterparts could cooperate. Organisations wishing to attract young people invite **younger artists** to create projects and works, providing them with substantive support and mentoring, also in the organisational and formal-legal sphere. One of the participants thinks it is particularly valuable to establish relations with **British art schools**, as the **potential for cooperation and exchange lies in the different teaching profiles** of Poland and the UK.

Long-term cooperation, long-term echoes and outcomes, lasting relationships and networks

During in-depth online interviews, **interest in long-term and sustainable cooperation** with British partners came to the forefront. A clear distinction was drawn between one-off, temporary outcomes and long-term, permanent ones. It was emphasised that

The most valuable projects seem to me to be those that leave something behind; art projects can always leave something behind.

Great contacts remain and these things continue to happen, we develop them, this new world changes us; a change will emerge that can't be predicted because it will bring something new and surprise us. But I imagine it's cool, it's enjoyable, and we're grateful that it happened. Expanding the field makes the field itself change.

only long-term activities could guarantee stability and sustainability. The atmosphere of cooperation, lack of pressure, and the freedom to program activities were also seen as significant. Another important point is the time after the project is over, when, after taking a breather, it is worth looking back at what has been created and consider how the joint output as well as the potential for cooperation in the future could be further used. Participants also expressed **the need to leave behind something tangible**; something that could serve communities in both countries.

Social and political engagement of art

Some of the participants defined their role in the culture and the arts as **critical and engaged**. This went hand in hand with a belief in a sense of agency, influence on local audiences, and a conviction that their actions could play an important **role in building civil society and make a real difference**. **Redefining the force field**, the need to look at **postcolonial experiences in the collections of art institutions** or even at their own workplaces was a theme that resonated. The role of institutions in **socialisation processes**, support for **grassroots initiatives**, cooperation with **communities and minorities** was emphasised. Respondents saw the opening up to **cooperation with** the fourth sector, i.e. **activists**, as something new and crucial. They view the UK as a country that is very conscious when it comes to public action, which could be an inspiration and call for the exchange of experiences.

New vs. familiar project formats (but viewed in a new light)

The formats mentioned throughout the scoping included those that are well known and frequently applied by the organisations. However, relatively often these were expanded to include **new, sometimes non-obvious aspects** or became **more flexible and capacious**, including some **new contexts**, and were to function as **components of entirely new models of international cooperation**. Depending on the scale and nature of each organisation, many arts and culture institutions and third-sec-

First you need to get to know people, it's easier to work with people you know.

We are generally process-oriented; when we invite people for residencies it is supposed to be creative work, not the production of something material.

Working groups involve exchange, cooperation, being together for a long time, eliminating window dressing.

tor entities apply presentational formats such as **live theatre, dance, opera, circus performances, film screenings, exhibition projects in all areas of visual arts, concerts.**

The interviews indicate that the organisers would like such presentations to include some **side activities** such as **meetings with artists, debates, workshops, publications, or social and inclusive activities.** It is worth noting that for most interviewees, the **public presentation of art is only an element of a longer and much more crucial process.** This process can be preceded by **research and studies**, and involve **additional activities** that give people a chance to get to know each other better, **exchange knowledge**, or build more lasting relationships with the audience.

The interviewees focused chiefly on **the formats which require robust, long-term relationships.**

- **Study visits** that do not have an export-import nature, but provide actual opportunities **to spend time together.**
- **Residencies, short- and long-term**, where the **process**, not the outcome, is at the centre. There is also a lot of interest in residencies for artists in smaller, local, and specialised centres.
- Building partnerships through **networks and cooperation platforms** (including interdisciplinary and international working groups).
- **Educational activities, workshops, masterclasses, debates, lectures.**
- **Scientific and curatorial research** as well as academic internships.
- **Bilateral and multilateral staff exchanges** based on reciprocity that enable employees and staff at different levels to meet and learn other institutional practices (including job shadowing and artist placement), to exchange knowledge and get a chance to test non-obvious solutions together.

This is the role for the British Council: to fill this gap (after Brexit), because now we cannot invite artists from the UK within the European platform.

Lack of funding results in lack of cooperation.

Forms of funding

The study revealed that it would be beneficial if the the funding programmes of the UK/Poland Season 2025 had the following characteristics:

- **Multi-year;**
- **Open to modification** in the course of implementation;
- **Separate small and large grants, differentiated in terms of timing and frequency of calls** (current call for small grants, call 2-3 years in advance for large grants) and maximum cap of funding requested;
- **Allowing for processual and experimental activities;**
- **Enabling the development of soft competencies for people working in the field of culture** in various areas and roles (study visits, queries and research, residencies, job shadowing).

The participants also called for a **systemic solution to obtain feedback from the British Council if funding is declined**. During the UK/Poland Season 2025, they considered it important to implement a **coherent communication strategy in Poland and the UK**, and to perform an **evaluation after the Season ends**.

Filling the gap after Brexit

An important context when planning the collaboration between Polish and British organisations is the **disappearance of UK entities from the EU subsidy programmes** and, consequently, **from the maps of European cooperation**. Under these circumstances, the **British Council's financial support becomes critical to sustaining cooperation**.

Summary

We encouraged the participants to **exercise agency, take responsibility, find inspiration for their actions in a wide range of possibilities and unlimited ideas, to**

The world we live in right now is someone else's imagination. [...] When we deconstruct [existing] concepts in our lives, in how we love, in how we interact with other people, we are already imagining other futures into existence with every choice we make that is about being our whole unbridled, unfettered, and post-oppressed selves.

Adrienne Maree Brown

stay true to their values and be proud of their skills and potential. Our aim was to explore perceptions, needs, fantasies, visions, and practices that do not belong in an institution's official narrative or self-definition, but often determine actual directions of cooperation, success, atmosphere, and the experiential layer.

The majority of participants agreed that preparations for the UK/Poland Season 2025 are a great opportunity to build new connections and create long-lasting collaborations. The significance of joint projects lies in gaining mutual knowledge and sharing experience between the two countries in order to bring about change. The idea behind the UK/Poland Season 2025 is to imagine and create it in accordance with the areas of interest and new formats identified above, rather than as a reactive action to what is already around us. **We believe that the conclusions and recommendations will be, on the one hand, a source of inspiration for the organiser of the UK/Poland Season 2025 and, on the other, contribute to the creation of new strategies and the implementation of new solutions in the area of international cooperation.**

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