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Building Bridges, Shaping Futures:

Scott McDonald on UK–Bangladesh Relations



Scott McDonald, Chief Executive
British Council

Q1. This is your first visit to Bangladesh. To begin with, if you could share your reflection from this trip- who have you met and what has struck you the most?

Answer: It has been invaluable to witness a seven-decade long relationship. I've met government and education leaders, school teachers, children and leaders, young entrepreneurs, cultural partners and our own British Council team.

One of the highlights of my trip was an evening in Dhaka where we met alumni of British Council programmes and grant recipients. The results of their work were incredible, including a new genetic counselling organization focused on cancer treatment, sustainable architectural designs, several entrepreneurial businesses focused on the craft sector and new apps designed to help with employment.

Q2. How do you see the UK-Bangladesh relationship evolving, and where does the British Council fit in?

Answer: Our focus is building a modern, mutually beneficial partnership. Bangladesh is increasingly looking outward academically, and the UK has strong institutions, expertise, and networks to offer. We aim to bridge that connection, moving towards sustained partnerships across education, English, and the arts.

Designing programmes that work at scale for Bangladesh's population might be our greatest challenge. I want the British Council to leverage all our experience to tackle it.

Q3. As you have already seen, Bangladesh is pursuing a significant reform in education. How, in your opinion, can the UK and the British Council support this?

Answer: Rather than prescribing solutions, our role is to listen and identify where UK expertise and partnerships can add value, like quality assurance, teacher and institutional development.

Our work already ranges from the 'Teacher Needs Analysis' to higher education leadership programmes with Advance Higher Education, supporting faculty and university leadership.

Visiting a school in Rajshahi gave me a firsthand look at this impact. The students spoke impressive English, and even playfully teased me about my broken Bangla!

Q4. How can access to English be widened, and what role will digital learning and AI play?

Answer: We need to think beyond reaching individuals and empower teachers, institutions and partners that can reach many more, including outside major cities. Digital learning can help extend that reach, and AI creates further possibilities for personalised practice, feedback and support. But we should be thoughtful about it. AI should support good teaching, not replace teachers, and questions around quality, bias, privacy and unequal access need to be taken seriously.

Q5. Higher education partnerships are often equated with student mobility. What does a deeper relationship look like in this context?

Answer: While student mobility remains vital, international education extends far beyond studying abroad. A deeper UK-Bangladesh relationship involves universities collaborating on teaching, research, faculty development, and knowledge exchange, including transnational education models that deliver global benefits without requiring travel. Crucially, this is a two-way relationship: UK institutions gain equally from Bangladeshi talent and perspectives. Our leadership and faculty work with Advance Higher Education illustrates how such collaboration strengthens institutions far beyond the individuals directly involved.

Q6. How is the British Council working with young people on digital citizenship and resilience to misinformation?

Answer: Digital citizenship is an essential life skill, especially as AI reshapes how information is created and shared. Our role is to build critical thinking, verification skills, and safe online habits. Through our Youth Connect: Digital Citizenship and Misinformation Resilience project at Rajshahi University, students are not only gaining these skills but passing them on to their families and communities. However, parents, teachers, schools, and institutions must work together to guide the young learners.



Q7. What role do arts, culture and heritage play in strengthening UK-Bangladesh connections?

Answer: Culture creates integral connections, giving people space to tell their stories, understand each other and build trust. Bangladesh has an extraordinarily rich cultural heritage and a dynamic creative community.

In Rajshahi, I witnessed this dynamic culture at the historic Varendra Research Museum and during a performance at the Rajshahi Shilpakala Academy, supported by the 'Women of the World' grants programme.

Varendra Research Museum's partnership with Durham University through the British Council's Cultural Protection Fund shows how cultural exchange can also strengthen professional expertise and institutions. During my visit, we also signed an MoU with the Bangladesh National Museum to boost cultural cooperation.

Q8. What does the future of the British Council's relationship with Bangladesh look like, and what one message would you leave the readers with?

Answer: I would like to see a Bangladesh-UK relationship that becomes deeper, broader and mutually beneficial. That means stronger connections between institutions; English and higher education collaborations; opportunities for young people; and continued exchange via arts and culture.

My message after this first visit is one of thanks and optimism. I was welcomed with open arms and am grateful to everyone who has shared their work, ideas and time with me.