Gender equality in higher education: maximising impacts

Executive summary
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Foreword

There is global consensus on the importance of addressing gender inequalities, expressed in the inclusion of a standalone goal on gender equality in the Sustainable Development Goals. It is important to note that these goals are universal and relevant to every country, community, sector and area of the economy and, likewise, all areas of the work of the British Council and our partners globally.

Gender equality issues impact and are reflected in higher education systems worldwide – with unequal access to higher education in many countries, fewer resources and opportunities available to women, the existence of violence against women affecting students and staff, and sustained under-representation of women in leadership positions in higher education institutions. Despite women succeeding academically, it is more challenging for women to succeed in their future careers both within and outside academia following their studies.

There is a critical need to address gender inequalities in higher education – requiring concerted efforts from a range of different institutions and partners, including governments, oversight and funding bodies, academics and civil society organisations as well as higher education institutions themselves. As reflected in this report, progress has been made towards gender equality in many countries and there are some excellent examples of policy and practice to draw on. However, much more still needs to be done and the British Council is committed to supporting this process.

The British Council has put an increasing emphasis on gender equality over the past five years and this is further reflected in Strategy 2025. In our higher education work, we develop partnerships and connections between governments, institutions, policymakers, academics, researchers and students around the world. This creates many opportunities to enable dialogue and learning between the UK and the rest of the world on how values of equality can be put into practice.

This Executive Summary provides an overview of the findings and recommendations of a comprehensive report which acts as a resource to help us make the most of these opportunities. It provides extensive evidence and analysis of the issues in the sector and a rich collection of case studies from both within and outside the British Council, as well as resources that set out practical ways in which we can strengthen our work.

As well as improving our own understanding of gender equality issues, how they are manifested in the higher education sector and how we can integrate gender equality considerations systematically into our work, we would like to call on our partners globally to work with us on this agenda. By sharing expertise, experience, models and successes and by developing innovative approaches, we can together make an important contribution to addressing challenges of gender inequality both in the UK and around the world.

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Executive summary and recommendations

Gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls is central to the work of the British Council as a cultural relations organisation that promotes equality, diversity and inclusion as core values. The British Council shares with others – in the higher education (HE) sector and in the development and women's sectors – the desire to bring an intentional focus to how HE systems and practices can be improved through attention to gender equality outcomes. This can equally well be expressed as the desire to address gender inequalities and advance the equality and empowerment of women and girls through the vehicle of HE systems, programmes and practices.

This report provides an in-depth analysis of how gender inequality is reflected, reinforced and challenged in HE worldwide. It examines relevant legal and policy frameworks and statistical data, as well as summarising academic research on the extent and consequences of gender inequalities in HE and the evidence for effective practice from research and programme implementation.

For the first time, research and best practice from around the world that addresses the multiple manifestations of gender inequality in HE, together with tools and practices to promote equality and empowerment, are collated into one reference document. The report then examines the challenges and opportunities for gender equality in HE framed by the five core outcome areas of the British Council's global theory of change for women and girls' empowerment. A compendium of global resources and data sources, illustrated by 17 in-depth case studies and with suggestions for evaluating and monitoring progress, is provided. Recommendations are grouped into 12 thematic areas.

Analysis of gender equality and inequalities in HE

Higher education benefits women as individuals and in society

Individuals benefit directly and significantly through investment in tertiary education where the rates of return (profitability for individuals) are generally higher for women than for men, globally across low-income and high-income countries. Engagement in HE is a route to economic independence for women, which is a marker and facilitator of gender equality, disrupting cycles of gender disadvantage. HE also brings a range of social benefits, including indirect and non-financial benefits, to women and is associated with better individual and family health.

Higher education institutions are important for gender equality

Higher education institutions (HEIs) are the incubators for the thought leaders and social leaders of the future. The creation of HEIs and systems where norms for gender equality are practised and modelled, and where the voices and ideas of women are valued and raised up, are some of the most powerful tools available to society for accelerating progress towards the equality and empowerment of women and girls everywhere. When harmful, rigid social gender norms are challenged, and gender equality is promoted, the full realisation of equal rights for people of all genders and gender identities becomes achievable.

Higher education can perpetuate gender inequalities

Despite HE systems being a driver for the promotion of equality and empowerment, the evidence shows that they also reproduce discrimination against women, often 'by default rather than design'. Action is required within HEIs to transform discriminatory gender norms – such as unequal domestic burdens falling upon women and bias in assessment, recruitment and promotion – as well as to address the practical barriers in the here and now that disproportionately affect women because of their place in society. Effective policies to address structural barriers (e.g. maternity, paternity, flexible working) are not in place for HEIs or research bodies in many parts of the world.

Intersectionality

Sex/gender discrimination and inequality do not affect all women in HE equally, with data showing that various characteristics – including, for example, socio-economic background, ethnicity and disability – intersect with and compound women's disadvantage. Research on gender identities, and non-binary and transgender experiences is lacking, compounded by a lack of clarity in data collection on whether sex, gender identity or both are being analysed.

Legal and policy frameworks

There is a range of binding and indicative international and national legal, regulatory and policy frameworks which set out the obligations upon nations, public bodies and HEIs for taking positive steps to promote women's equality, and to tackle discrimination and disadvantage. These are described and signposted in the report.

Approach to the evidence

The report provides summaries of numerous rigorous and up-to-date research studies that demonstrate significant bias and discrimination against women in HE – against a backdrop where narratives of scientific, scholarly or professional objectivity have clouded the willingness of individuals and institutions to acknowledge and therefore address the systemic discrimination for which they hold responsibility.

In each thematic section of Section 1 of the report, research findings are discussed together with sources for evidence-led approaches to preventing and counteracting bias. In turn, the report addresses the gendered aspects of enrolment in HE; progression to research; research and innovation; subject selection; curriculum content; teaching and learning environments; student assessment; and recruitment, promotion, pay, 'service' work and leadership among academic research and teaching staff. Examples from research and programmes in the regions and nations of the world are threaded through the text.

Enrolment and progression

Concerted global action on equity in education provision has contributed to the fact that more women than men now complete HE in most countries (52 per cent vs 48 per cent), despite one in four people globally agreeing that university education is more important for a boy than a girl. Women's higher completion rates do not translate into personal advantage for those women over comparable men, or for women in general, globally.

There is substantial variability in participation and completion rates, and their association with other markers of inequality, across different regions and countries, showing that gender norms that suppress or accelerate gender equality are not fixed and can be shifted. One global pattern – women's significant under-progression into research roles – is particularly variable by country and region as well as discipline, which can be traced to the effects of social and educational policies. Women are consistently and significantly under-represented in positions of power and leadership in HE globally, regardless of whether their national context sees more women overall filling the less prestigious roles in HE.

Research, innovation and women in STEM

The field of STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) is critical for innovation, for addressing environmental and health concerns, and for economic advancement.

It receives a significant degree of attention in the context of HE, and it is also the field with the most global and persistent issues of under-representation and marginalisation of women and where the systematic under-valuing of women's work has been demonstrated in a host of rigorous research studies.

Efforts to address this imbalance and improve the quality of STEM subjects and outputs through the engagement and retention of greater numbers of diverse women are described, including through the adoption of action plans and frameworks designed by research councils and HE advisory bodies.

Women in Science at the WOW Festival, Rio de Janeiro

Subject selection and gender as a subject

There is significant and persistent gender disparity in a range of subject fields chosen for study at HE level. Some but not all of this disparity sets in during formative years of primary and secondary education, where a combination of gender stereotypes, gendered curricula and role models, and other barriers to equal engagement are apparent. Addressing the issue requires action across the educational lifecycle.

In the meantime it is important that HE initiatives to support access to HE are not skewed to subjects where male students predominate, without targeted action to support women. As a subject in its own right, gender studies (or women's studies) is an important tool for legitimising and embedding the enhancement of social understanding of gender inequality, while also producing empowered graduates with the motivation and the skills to work towards a more gender-equal society. In-house expertise on gender (academics working in gender studies) will also assist HEIs to develop good policy and practice.

Curriculum content

There is considerable evidence that curriculum content often constructs men and boys as the default subject, and the default holder of knowledge.

The consequences of leaving sex/gender and women/girls out of the curriculum are many. They include inappropriate and sometimes literally dangerous over-generalisation from men's experience and/or physiology to women, and the misrepresentation of women's experiences and needs as being deviant from what has been constructed as 'normal' based on men's lives. Gender stereotypes based on sexism can be employed to account for sex and gender differences, where education about discrimination and disadvantage would have provided a more accurate picture.

Without practical engagement with sex/gender issues within the curriculum, issues of particular concern to women are unacknowledged. A number of toolkits and resources are available to assist with ensuring gender-sensitive curriculum content.

Teaching and learning environments

NGOs and others working to improve girls' access to education have paid considerable attention to teaching and learning environments that are physically appropriate for, and welcoming to, girls in primary and secondary education. There is far less evidence of action to improve the teaching and learning environment for girls and women in HE settings, despite strong evidence for the benefits of

Graduating from the PADILEIA project which focuses on reducing barriers to completion for women participating in Higher Education.

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gender-responsive pedagogy and for the detriments suffered by female students due to unequal treatment and to their heightened risk of experiencing violence.

While there is little evidence that gender bias towards students is prevalent at tertiary level in student assessments, the evidence is considerable that bias and inequality are commonplace in the classroom and in the curriculum. Selection processes for educational opportunities such as scholarships need to be gender-responsive.

In addition to the need to create gender-responsive pedagogy for the benefit of their own students, HEIs are also responsible for programmes that provide training and accreditation for teachers at primary and secondary level, and the British Council supports a number of such courses. Ensuring that gender sensitivity is embedded in teachers' future practice will have impact at scale. The report reflects upon the considerable short-term and medium-term benefits of single-sex (women's) universities for both students and women academics, noting that of the *Times Higher Education (THE)* top 100 universities for gender equality, two are women's universities.

There is a scarcity of data about gender differences in the uptake or effectiveness of online learning, although the merits of online learning for increasing access for disadvantaged groups, including women, are significant. Generally, there is little evidence of any universal or stable gender differences in the effectiveness of online learning environments. Rather, social and educational interactions taking place online are likely to reflect the existing gender norms that are present in more traditional learning environments and in society.

Online abuse of women is a significant problem in HE as in wider society. However, if adequate policy, safeguarding and monitoring provisions are put in place by the responsible institutions, then the 'fingerprint' left by those who use online platforms to abuse or harass may give their victims better evidence with which to take forward complaints or demands for accountability.

Academic careers

Men as a group remain advantaged at every stage of their academic careers. While women tend to outnumber men at entry into HE, as they progress through the ranks of academia the senior positions are very disproportionately held by men. Men receive more opportunities and higher discretionary payments, and are consistently rated by students more highly than women who teach – which holds true in experiments where the gender of the instructor is artificially manipulated. There is a 'presumption of incompetence' held by students towards academic teachers who are women or members of other minority groups.

Concerningly, research on leadership in HE not only finds discriminatory and exclusionary practices in recruitment, selection and promotion practices, but also that many women report finding the idea of leadership unattractive and difficult to navigate culturally. Leadership and mentoring programmes for women in HE are important for women who are breaking the mould and helping to change social norms. Women in academia can be subjected to higher expectations that they provide nurture and service to others as a part of their academic role than their male colleagues. Men are also more inclined to cite other men in journal articles and they have been found to cite their own research 70 per cent more often than women. Men are awarded prizes, especially prestigious prizes, at considerably higher rates than would be expected. Research identifies a number of ways in which gender bias operates when it comes to determining scientific excellence. There is good evidence that interventions to address bias in the recruitment and promotion processes can be successful.

Compounded disadvantage and discrimination

While to be Black and female is to represent the global majority, in many nations these characteristics incur significant social disadvantage, together as well as separately. Putting effort into expanding social or cultural ideas about academic excellence to include privileged white women without representing women in all their diversity is likely to create disadvantage for marginalised women.

Research in HE has revealed profound intersectional disadvantage for Black and Latinx women as well as disabled women. Research candidates presumed to be men have been rated as less likeable, but more competent and hireable, than those presumed to be women. This is compounded by ethnicity. South Africa is one of the few countries to set targets by gender and ethnicity for research fellowships.

There are specific challenges for transgender men and women in HE, with transphobia and ignorance affecting career prospects as well as personal well-being. There is far too little data on gender identity and expression as well as on sexuality in HE, but what there is points towards trans students feeling more unsafe, experiencing more bullying and harassment, and feeling more excluded from the curriculum than other students.

The relationship of poverty and economic exclusion to opportunities in HE is a main focus for governments and institutions. Data shows strong gendered patterns with the poorest female students less likely to access HE than the poorest male students. Initiatives to widen participation of the poorest should always have a gender focus.

Lifecycle approach

A holistic understanding of every individual's journey towards and through HE from childhood to adulthood is required. The success of programmes that seek to empower girls to remain in secondary education is amplified by considering their entry into HE, and the pipeline of different genders into non-traditional subject areas in HE is strengthened by early intervention to address the norms, stereotypes and family cultures that constrain their engagement. HE programmes that stand alone are likely to have less impact than those that are developed and executed in dialogue with programmes in the same locations which are focused on culture, society and primary or secondary education.

Gendered violence and harm

Sexual and gender-based violence persist in all societies, both causing and resulting from gender inequality. The occurrence of violence against women (VAW) in HEIs reflects and supports gender inequality in the immediate HE context but also more widely in society. Sexual harassment and violence are prevalent in HE and form a core concern for many women managing their decisions to enter, remain or progress in HE environments as teachers, researchers or learners. HEIs are high-risk environments for VAW, with HE students being more at risk than those in the general population, and international students being an even more vulnerable group within the student population, subject as they are to a host of both specific and universal risks. The heightened risks for victimisation are accompanied by heightened risks of severe subsequent distress and trauma.

The level of data collection, analysis and prevention undertaken by HEIs and those responsible for supporting internationalisation in HE is not commensurate with the prevalence and harm caused by gendered violence in HEIs. This is despite the fact that HEIs are well placed to conduct research and are also ideal hubs for transformative prevention work which would considerably further progress towards gender equality and empowerment.

Cairo University lit up in orange as part of the 'Orange the World' activities during the 16 Days of Activism against Gender-based Violence, culminating each year in the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women (#IDEVAW) on 25 November
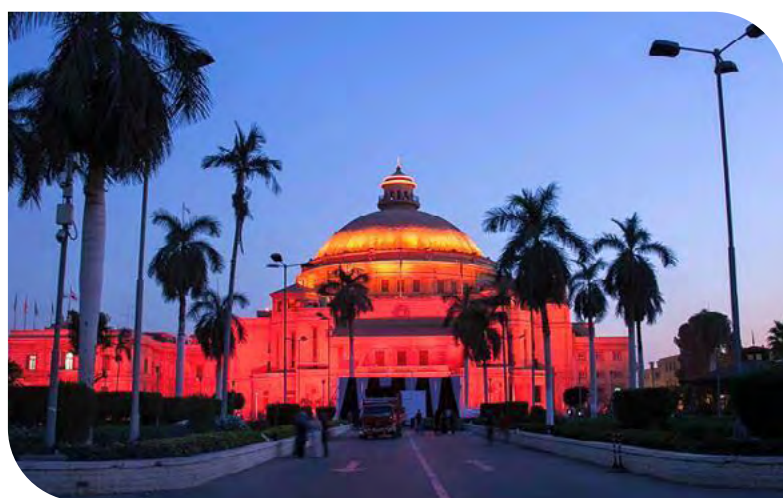
Analysis of programmes and theory of change

In the second part of the report, the British Council's theory of change for women and girls' empowerment is used to examine the challenges and possibilities for working in HE towards the five core outcome areas of:

1. increased awareness and agency
2. fairer access to resources and opportunities
3. dialogue, collaboration and collective action
4. supporting legal and policy environment
5. changes in attitudes, beliefs, practices and discriminatory social norms.

The importance of collecting and analysing gender-related data at every stage of the project cycle is emphasised.

'Fairer access to resources and opportunities' is the gender equality outcome area that receives by far the most attention in HE programmes and projects. While creating additional and specific opportunities for women's participation is important and laudable, it is also important to focus on addressing and removing the barriers that are standing in the way and which otherwise remain at the conclusion of activities that only raise participation temporarily.

This is achieved through policy actions at the country and institutional level, as well as through developing curricular and extra-curricular programming that helps learners to understand and challenge harmful gender-related social norms and practices. It is important to work with both women and men on social norms, and to create learning conditions in which the prospect of backlash is minimised. Introducing a commitment to include gender awareness and sensitivity in pedagogy and curricula as a matter of policy for quality assurance, including in teacher training curricula, has the potential to enhance the reach of gender equality work in HE exponentially.

The increasing marketisation of HE in some regions and nations has increased the number of stakeholders involved in HE activity and policy, and means that priorities between stakeholders are not always aligned towards gender equality and inclusion, reducing the potential for collective action. This needs to be addressed through bringing in specific requirements on policy and practice for gender equality as standard, across the full range of activities related to HE.

Resources and examples to assist with gender mainstreaming

There are many sources of guidance and support that have been produced by a range of contributors to assist with different aspects of gender mainstreaming in HE. This report creates, for the first time, a compendium of such resources and toolkits, for use by practitioners, programme designers and policymakers in HE. The resources are presented thematically to correspond with gender-focused activities across the five portfolio intervention areas in the British Council's HE and science strategy:

1. policy and systems development
2. institutional partnerships
3. professional development
4. student mobility
5. insight, analysis and advocacy.

To aid reflection, relevant international case study examples are highlighted, and suggestions are included for what monitoring and evaluation practices could look like in each of the intervention areas.

Case studies

An analysis of 17 case studies of British Council and wider HE projects and programmes brings to life some of the main challenges discussed throughout the report. The case studies range from policy approaches to partnership projects and actions undertaken by a range of institutions and agencies operating in the HE sector globally. Examples of good practice as well as reflections on what could have been done differently for improved gender equality impact are included.

Recommendations

The report concludes by making a set of recommendations in 12 core thematic areas, for the reduction of gender inequalities and the improvement of outcomes for women and girls worldwide through HE.

1. Prioritise gender mainstreaming

Progress towards gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls is a core ambition, but it is not achieved without intentional focus. Gender audits of current and planned projects should be conducted systematically and standard documentation should invite discussion of the ways in which sex and gender analysis is (or is not) relevant to, and reflected in, the work at hand. Sufficient resource allocation for the work of gender specialists should be factored into planning. Parties should take up, and build on, training in gender equality. Management reviews should include competence and operational success in gender mainstreaming. Externally commissioned work must include gendered analysis conducted by demonstrably competent analysts. Gender equality objectives and outcomes need to be explicit and not assumed, at every stage of project cycles and their associated documentation. The default indicators in monitoring and evaluation plans should be refined

and replaced as necessary, to enable analysis of the gender inequalities and progress towards equality that cannot be captured by simply 'counting' participation, access or completion rates by sex/gender. Layers of disadvantage, including intersecting inequalities, should be identified. Materials demonstrating institutional commitment to gender equality should be developed and promoted in communications.

2. Develop gender expertise

Gender equality is currently not comprehensively mainstreamed (as discussed above) and neither is expertise on gender inequality regularly sought out where it is needed. International NGOs focusing on gender and education tend not to work in HE spaces. Leaders in HE and in Research and Innovation organisations worldwide have come to state the importance of integrating gender equality considerations into their work, creating a demand for country, regional and global gender specialists who have a specific focus on HE.

3. Ensure an intersectional approach

Good practice is not currently widespread, with the majority of initiatives taking 'women' as the only category of analysis. Ensure that interventions are inclusive of minoritised women, disabled women and other disadvantaged groups, and consider whether

programmes could produce more impact by being targeted at specific groups of women and girls. The different experiences of women and girls with different intersecting identities need to be theorised, monitored and evaluated.

4. Put a greater focus on violence against women

VAW in HE has been identified as an urgent global predicament. It is a risk, concern and critical challenge for all those involved in HE who need to take a step up for accountability and safeguarding. Urgent action is required to work with specialists to develop evidence-based policy and assurance frameworks, particularly in transnational HE contexts where students appear to be at even greater risk than home students. Guidance should be provided to students and staff. Data collection on VAW prevalence and institutional response should be mandated. Prevention of VAW in HEIs should be a priority area for investment in best practice.

5. Address women's under-representation in HE leadership

Across the board, women in HE who are equally as talented as men are deprived of equivalent opportunities to rise to better-rewarded positions of influence and leadership. Women leaders when in place are also notably effective champions of further actions to address other forms of gender inequalities in HE. Commit to long-term action to address the leaky pipeline, glass ceiling, sticky floor and other known patterns of impediment to women's equal leadership in HE, for which there are established good practice models that can be adapted for cultural context as required. Practices and policies for recruitment and promotion, as well as other institutional norms, can conflate good leadership with masculinity, whereas excellence in inclusive leadership should be advanced and rewarded.

6. Tackle subject segregation, particularly in STEM

STEM remains a priority focus area globally for HEIs, at the same time as being a male-dominated field. When taking action to increase the numbers of women in STEM, make use of country and regional differences to address cultural gendered assumptions, and be inclusive of women in all their diversity. Ensure that other, less male-dominated subject areas within or outside the STEM tradition (e.g. climate geography, nursing studies) are not overlooked.

7. Take a gendered approach to online learning and collaboration

Ensure that online projects are designed for equality of access and outcomes, being alert to the unintended consequences of algorithms. Account for benefits and disbenefits to women when deciding on modes of learning and collaboration. Maintain opportunities, such as for early-career researchers, by generating the means for them to collaborate online with experts around the world. The engagement of HE projects with women in local communities should be protected and enhanced through online activities which can be recorded and published to increase their visibility. E-learning projects and modules that address gender inequality in HE, including sexual harassment and violence, should be developed and widely disseminated.

8. Strengthen organisational leadership and commitment to address gender equality in strategy, policy, quality assurance and delivery

The evidence from HE initiatives and similar research on gender equality more broadly is clear that the buy-in and commitment of senior organisational leadership is critical to the advancement of gender equality. Decisive ongoing actions to address gender inequalities are needed. These actions need to be accompanied by consistent and strong messages about the importance of the agenda to promote gender equality, even and perhaps especially where other parties or partners seem uninterested. Men in managerial positions have an important role to play in taking a lead on gender equality. In place of the 'institutional betrayal' so often experienced by women when discrimination and discriminatory violence go unchecked, leaders should model 'institutional courage' in the face of gender inequality. It should be clear that overtly discriminatory acts such as restricting women's access to HE, restricting access to education about gender, and other discriminatory actions and omissions are incompatible with core institutional values. Positive action should be taken to communicate this unequivocally to partners, associates and stakeholders working in global HE. 'Leadership for gender equality' training must be considered for managers and specific gender competencies included in management training and frameworks.

9. Recognise and promote gender studies and women's HEIs

Strategically support and champion programmes and modules that involve gender studies. HEIs that are for women can be models for woman-friendly STEM learning, research and leadership, and as such should be supported and learned from.

10. Take a lifecycle approach

Recognise the linkages between primary, secondary and higher education and employment to build pathways and opportunities for women and girls, particularly underfunded and under-represented groups. HE programmes benefit from being linked with other programmes that are focused on other areas, such as primary or secondary education, active citizenship and social norms for gender equality in the community. HE programmes should seek synergy with activities in other programme areas to complement and enhance each other. The impact of gender-transformative interventions is felt over the long term, requiring a long-term approach to planning, monitoring and evaluation. Indicators should go wider than measuring individual success to include multiplier effects such as evidence of participants' ongoing influence in their communities as ambassadors for gender equality.

### 11. Assert the centrality of equality and inclusion to the definition of quality and excellence in HE

Practices that reinforce social inequalities or that only work well for one half of the population cannot be represented as high quality. Yet research shows that quality and excellence as defined and measured in HE are currently reflective of gender inequalities and often perpetuate them. Definitions of quality and excellence in curriculum content, pedagogy, programming, candidate selection and policy must be underpinned by gender equality standards. Ensure that curricula – including teacher training curricula – are gender sensitive and gender transformative.

12. Act at scale

Impressive individual programmes in HE make profound positive changes in the lives of women, while every woman empowered goes on to be a role model and empower others. Advocacy for gender-responsive pedagogy and practice in national-level HE plans and frameworks should be prioritised, to greatly enhance the multiplier effects of interventions for gender equality. Frameworks and partnership programmes that have significant or global reach should incorporate specific gender equality plans, policies and monitoring systems to enable transparency and efficacy.

References and bibliography

Over 300 research documents were reviewed for this study. Throughout the document, hyperlinks in the text direct readers to online sources and resources for further information. A searchable comprehensive bibliography, including hyperlinks and other identifying information about resources, has been published online by the British Council and is available to download from: https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/sources_database.xlsx
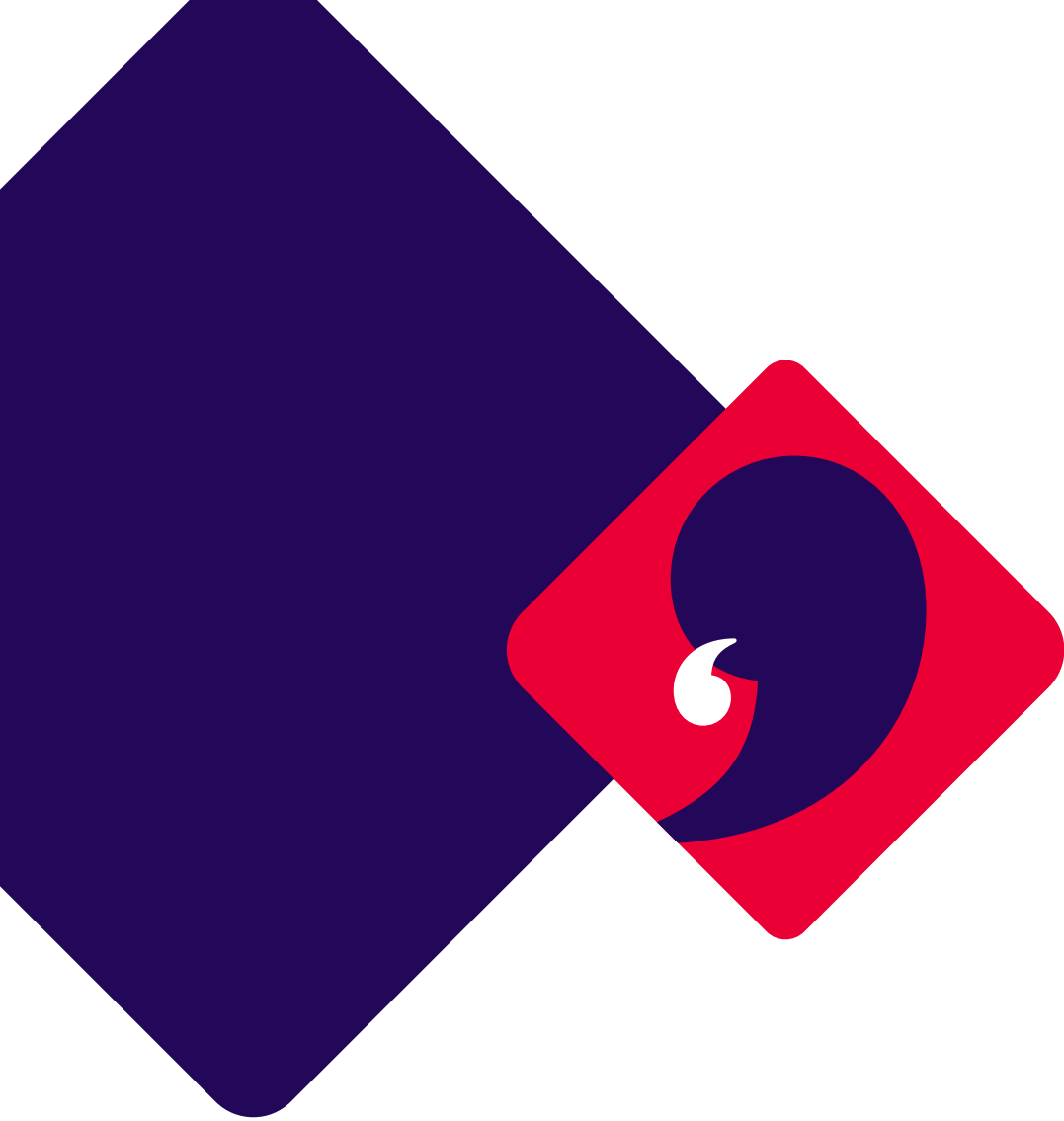
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