



**through
other
eyes2**

*How the world sees
the United Kingdom*



Section 1 key messages from the 1999 and 2000 data

How the world sees the United Kingdom

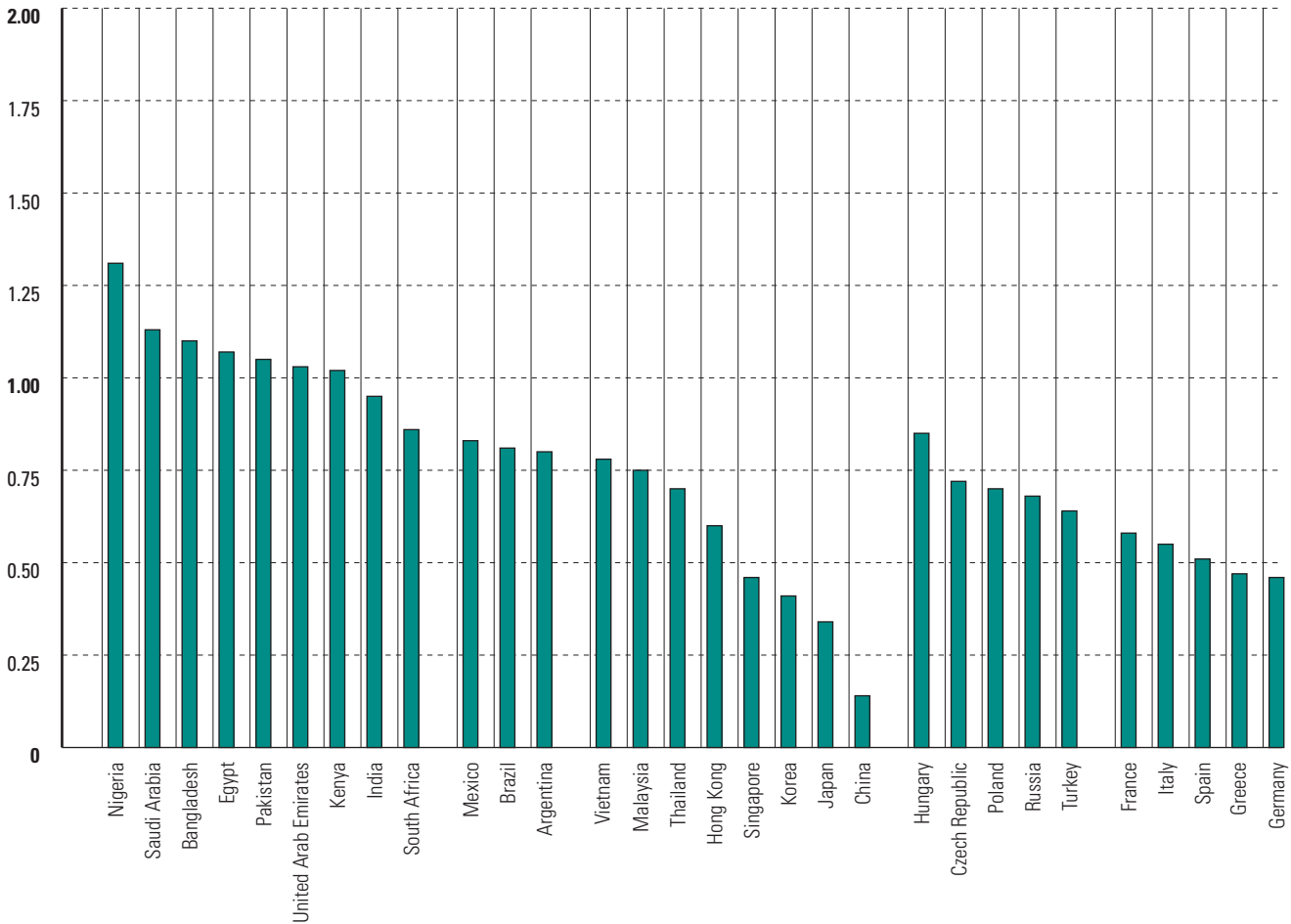
While the real value of the research we carried out in 1999 and 2000 is at the country level, we can use the results to build a general picture of how the UK is perceived around the world.

The chart below shows how the UK is rated overall by consolidating mean scores in five key areas:

- higher education
- business
- institutions
- society and people
- creativity and innovation.

The scale used is -2 to +2, where +2 represents 100% of people strongly agreeing with, or strongly positive in answer to, a statement or question posed, and -2 is 100% strongly disagreeing or strongly negative. (Neither/nor counts as 0.)

For purposes of comparison these overall mean scores are represented on subsequent charts by a ▷ symbol.



The chart shows clearly the range of views expressed and the way they group into broad categories: from a 'very positive' block of countries in Africa, the Middle East and South Asia to the underimpressed or critical groups of Western Europe and East Asia, though this last group has a more favourable subdivision within it. China, so resolutely unimpressed by just about everything about the UK, almost deserves to sit alone in its own highly critical category.

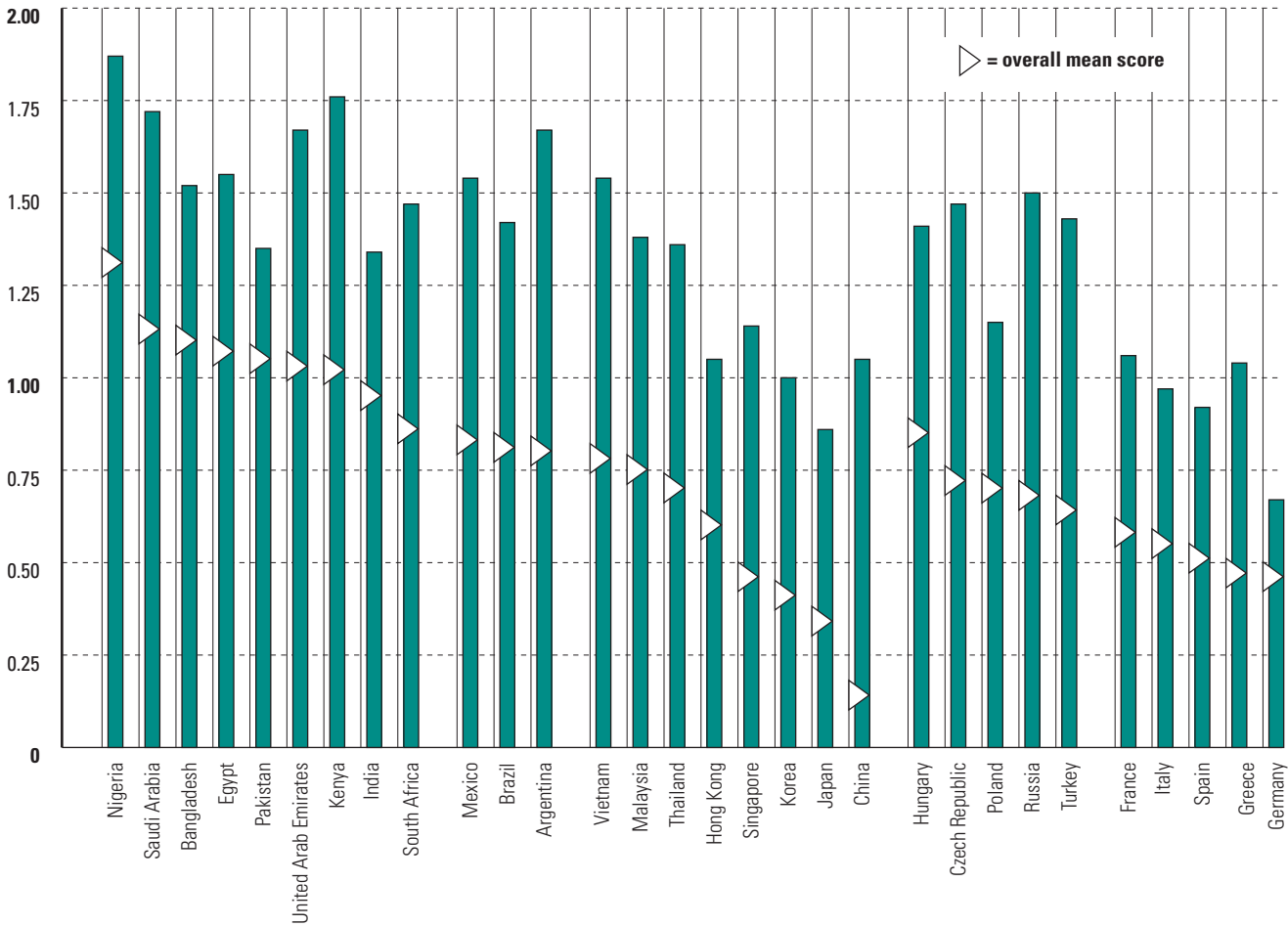
We can see then that the UK's reputation is highest in developing countries that are former British colonies or were under informal UK influence. However, the survey found that in all of these countries young people hold even more favourable views of the USA. This suggests that a UK model has been replaced in these countries by a UK-US, or more precisely US-UK, model. If true, this raises the question: How do we differentiate ourselves from the United States and ensure that what the UK has to offer isn't overshadowed by the American colossus?

The countries at the other end of the range, with the exception of China, are the highly developed nations of Western Europe and East Asia. The more critical views expressed here may be a matter of young people comparing like with like, though there may also be an issue of access to information.

For instance, young Japanese and Koreans admit to being less familiar with the UK than their counterparts in other countries and are distinctive in the extent to which they rely on local media as a primary source of information and views about our country. This suggests that the way forward here is to increase the supply of information about the modern UK and use the local media as a main channel for it. The issue in Western Europe is different and more difficult. Relatively speaking, young western Europeans have considerable first-hand experience of the UK from having visited here and read and hear about us regularly in their media, often in the context of the European Union. This familiarity may affect the strength of their views. A positive image in these partner countries is clearly a critical UK interest, but their young people's easy access to news and information about our country presents a considerable challenge to the UK in managing it.

The survey did not uncover any special reasons why the UK's image in China should be so poor. It may be a consequence of a more than usually critical line about the UK taken by the state-owned media in the run-up to the transfer of power in Hong Kong. It is also probable that the bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade by NATO jets, which took place while the 1999 survey was being conducted, influenced attitudes.

Higher education

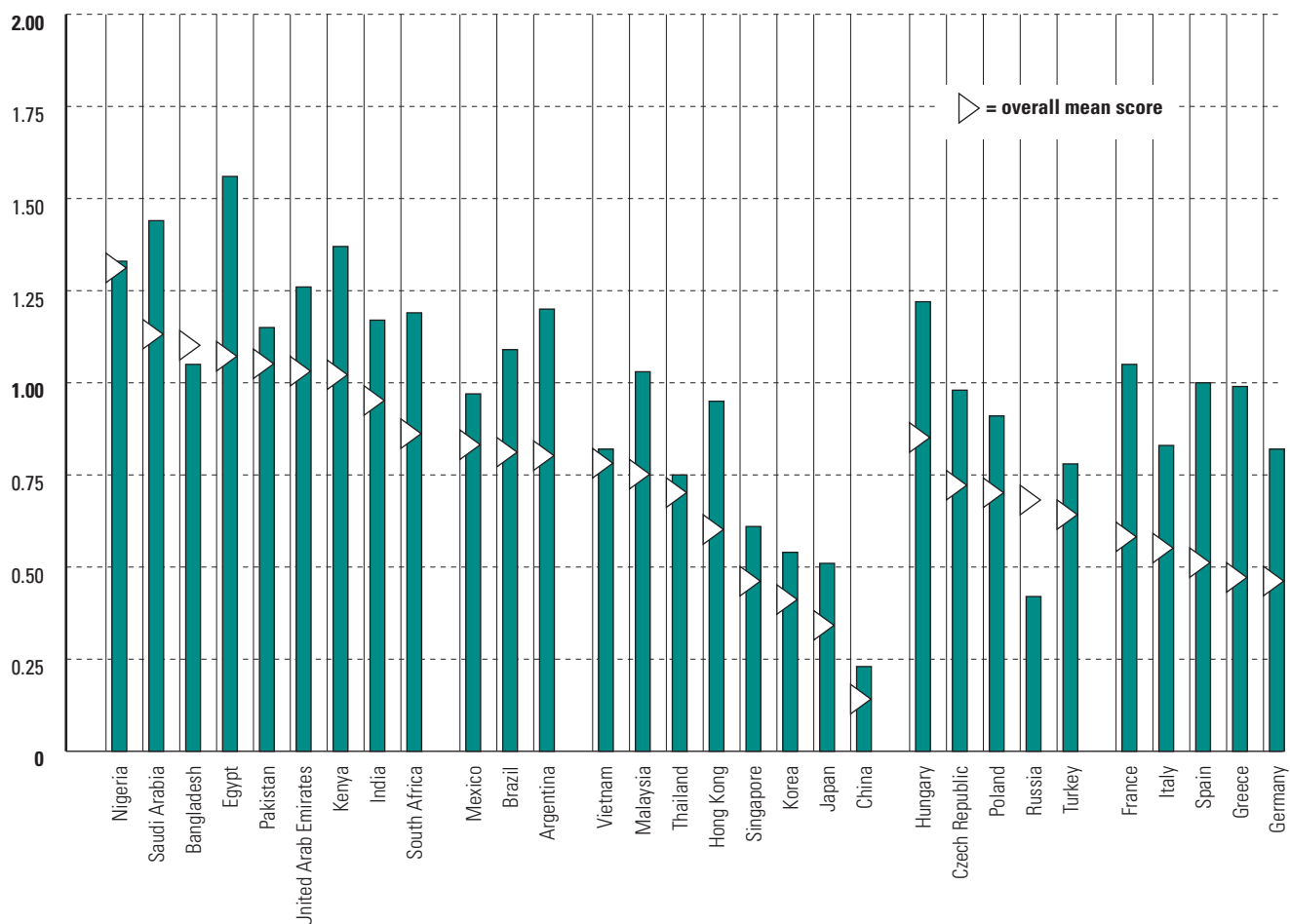


The UK gets more positive ratings for higher education than for any other area. The reputation overseas of our universities and colleges is clearly a major national asset, but there are warnings in the data that UK higher education would do well to pay attention to. Young people overseas see UK institutions as more attractive places to study the arts, humanities and social sciences than science, engineering and business, and better at theory than ‘real world’ applications. They imagine too that US universities – which is the model against which UK higher education is judged – do a better job in looking after their students and, all in all, are more lively places to be. A visualisation by postgraduate students in Singapore sums it up: the US university teacher wears Bermuda shorts, drives a convertible and spends time with students after a lecture. The UK teacher wears a suit, smokes a pipe, carries a black briefcase and leaves the lecture room as soon as he [sic] has finished. This is the *Shadowlands* image of UK higher education, which appears to be quite strong around the world.

The message about UK higher education is:

We have a very well-respected product, but we need to counteract the impression that we are slightly old fashioned and out-of-touch. The challenge is to show that the UK offers the high-quality, practically oriented courses that young people are looking for, that they can expect a high level of customer care while they are here and that it can be fun being a student in the UK.

Business

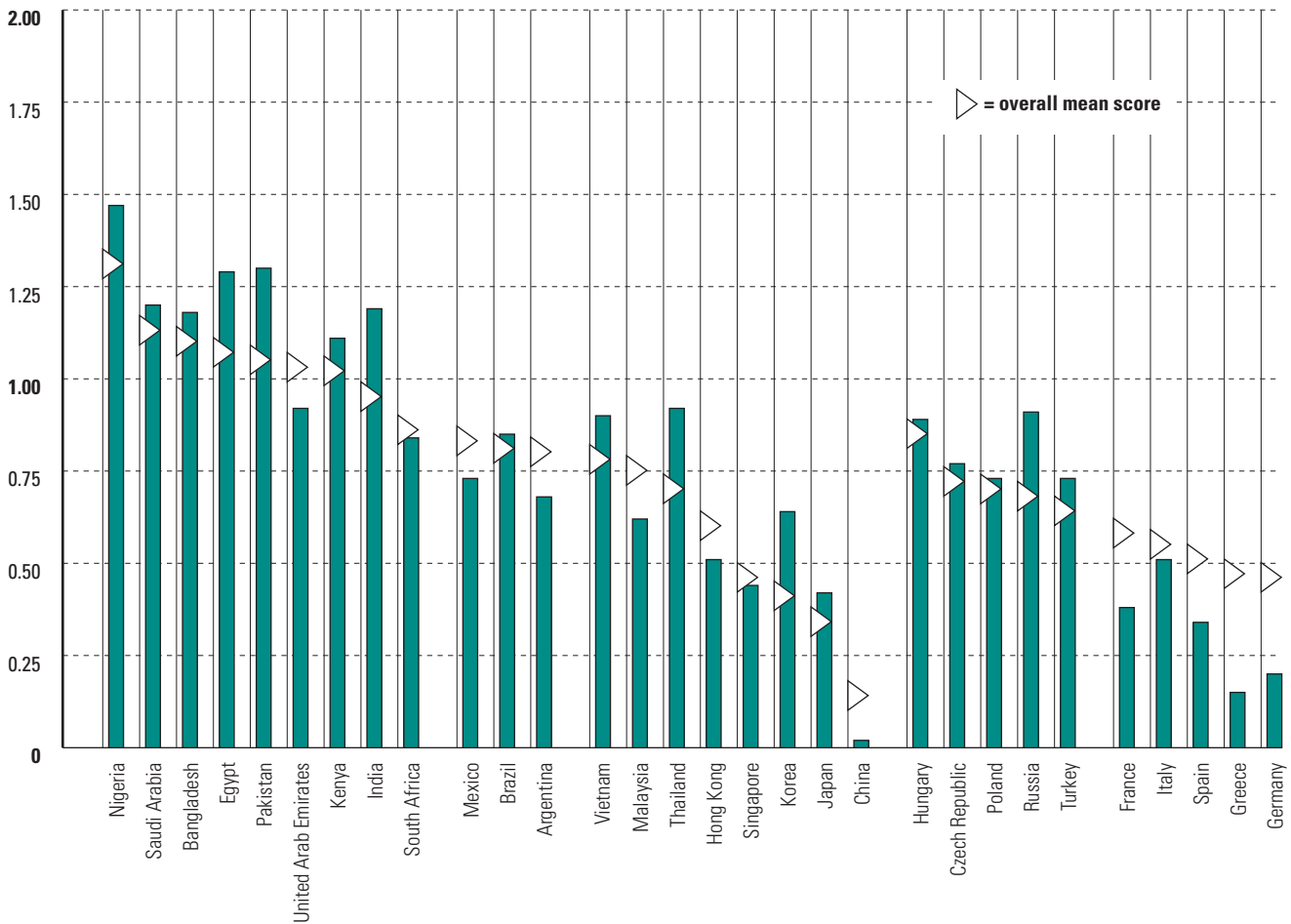


Business is another area where there is clear recognition of UK strength. The UK is especially well rated for its prowess in financial services and the 2000 survey shows that a 'Made in the UK' label acts as a positive influencer on consumer attitudes. Young people see UK business as having effective managers and respect our companies for their organisation, reliability and probity; however, many also see them as cautious or complacent, at any rate slow to react and to take advantage of opportunities. There is, too, an association of UK companies with top-end traditional products, usually involving a high degree of craftsmanship, and an absence of strong modern business icons. This explains why, for all their positive qualities, UK companies can't quite match the reputation of their US, Japanese and German counterparts as world beaters.

The message about UK business from the data is therefore:

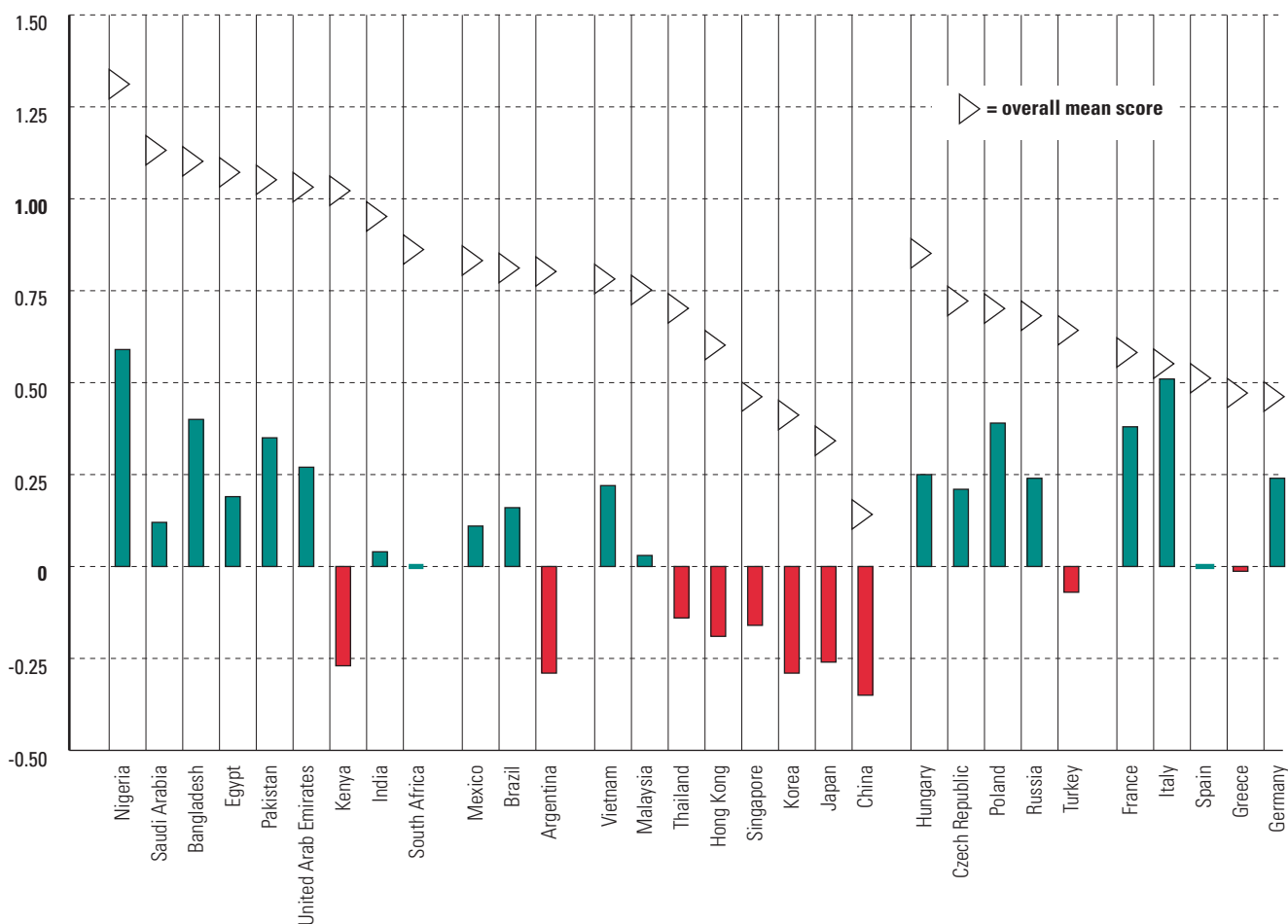
Our reputation rests on a very solid base but we are not always communicating our successes to the world's young people. In particular we need to build up an association of UK business with the cutting edge, high technology and pioneering entrepreneurialism.

Institutions



The institutions chart combines opinions about our democracy, legal systems and health service. In general young people have a more favourable opinion of the last than the two former, a result supported by the high regard in which UK doctors are held, especially in the Middle East and South Asia. The qualitative data show that, while generally positive, young people in other countries often have a confused and uncertain view of our democracy. They respect the fact that it has a long tradition, but other strong images of the UK state – the monarchy, judges in wigs and lords in ermine – get in the way of what they think a truly modern picture of democracy ought to look like. In some ways Tony Blair typifies the confused way young people look at UK democracy. They see him as a different type of UK leader, but they can't decide if he is an exception to the rule or the first of a new generation.

People and society



Despite their occasionally confused view of our institutions, a comparison of the above two charts shows that young people rate them considerably better than they do our social relationships. This is in line with other findings that show that, generally speaking, young people overseas have a positive image of the UK *as a country* but are less admiring of us Britons *as a people*. Negative personal qualities in fact received the second and third² largest number of mentions when we asked young people to name the UK's main weakness.

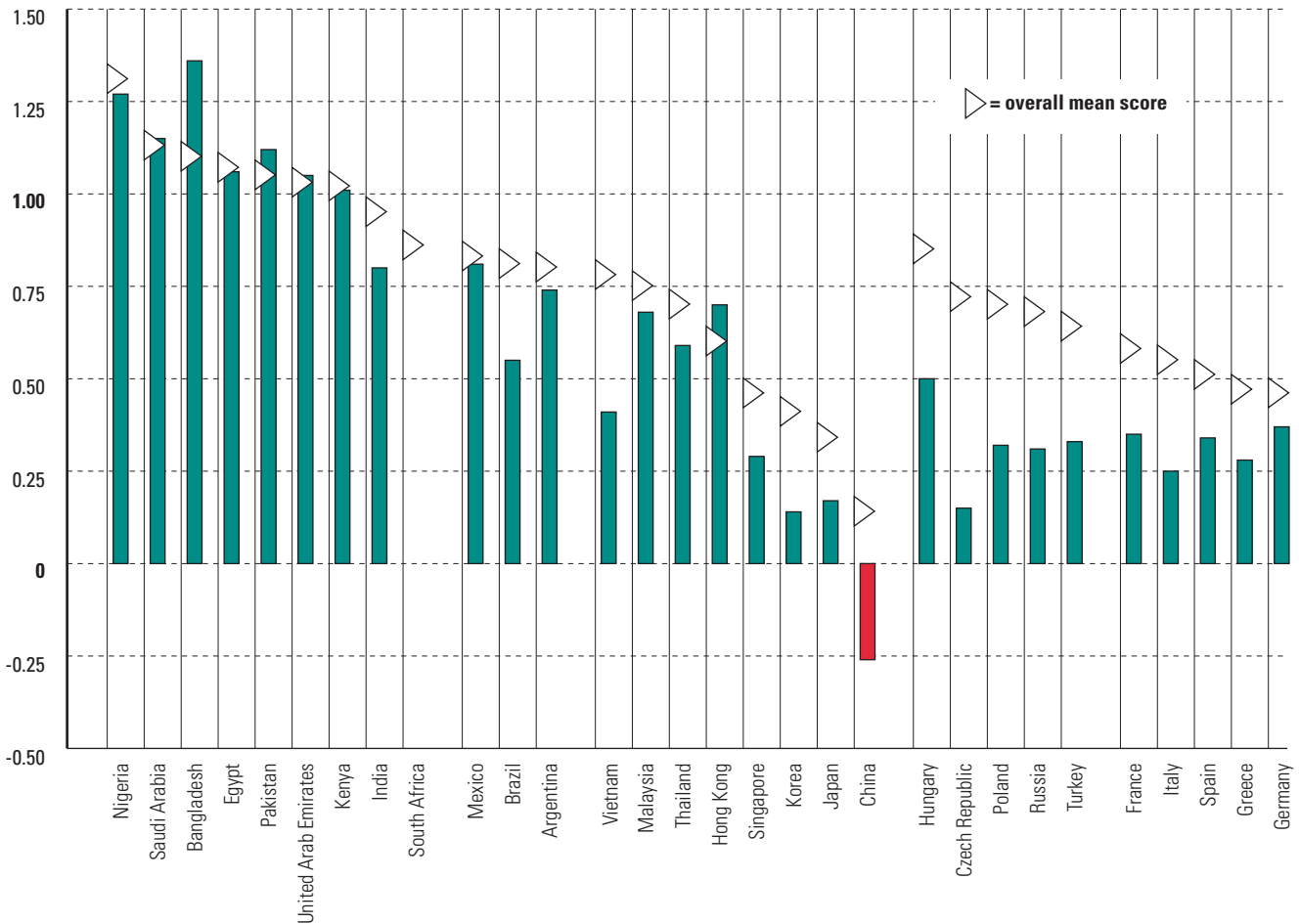
In the area of social relationships there is fairly widespread agreement that UK society does not discriminate against women and that it is multicultural, though opinion is divided as to whether or not it is also racially tolerant. The data show, however, that – with the significant exception of the Arab world and India – the countries that are least willing to believe that UK society is racially tolerant are those that are also least aware of its multicultural make-up. This suggests that, if the UK can do a better job of demonstrating its multiculturalism, perceptions of British people as intolerant of outsiders will diminish. A much harder problem for the UK to tackle is the image that we are divided by class. The proposition that the UK has become a classless society is simply unconvincing: rejected by two-out-of-three young people whom we interviewed.

The overall message about UK society is:

Young people have an ambivalent view. On the whole they see it as fair, caring and democratic, but also as divided by class and, in the eyes of some, racially intolerant. Promoting an image of the UK as a multicultural society will demonstrate a new and more attractive face of the UK to the world, and this may also help dispel other negative and outdated images.

² 'Cold, arrogant, snobbish, aloof people' and 'Racism, xenophobia, intolerance, unfriendliness', respectively.

Creativity and innovation



The survey found that, while the world’s young people have a broadly positive view of the UK, they are more likely to respect our country for its reliability, orderliness and stability than to be excited by it as an exemplar of modernity and innovation. This is the view given in direct answer to a question about modernity and tradition³ and is supported by answers given to other questions about the UK’s reputation for creativity in the areas of science, engineering and technology (SET) and the arts.

The UK is rated well for innovation in SET, but behind the USA, Japan and Germany. What is holding our reputation back is not so much the quality of our research, but our perceived lack of interest in translating it into commercial applications. Cloning is a case in point. It’s a very visible British achievement, tremendous science, but it also seems rather removed from everyday life. What do you do with a cloned sheep? The way forward for UK SET appears to be showing how the excellence of our fundamental research converts into everyday uses and means better products and a higher quality of life for the world’s young people.

³ In eighteen countries the majority view is that UK society is traditional; in the other twelve it is seen as modern. The first group includes all the high-income countries we surveyed apart from Singapore, while the ‘modern’ group is a mix of middle- and low-income countries.

The UK scores less well for creativity and innovation in the arts. The data show that young people essentially conceive 'the arts' as popular music and film. (For instance, Elton John and Hugh Grant topped the list of spontaneous mentions of UK contemporary artists in 1999.) They are less aware of the 'high' arts, and, in forming an opinion about them, it appears that they rely on what else they think they know about the UK – that it is a cautious, conservative and traditional country – and assume that its arts must be traditional too. Some, especially in Europe, show an awareness of how artistically creative and innovative the UK can be, but the image of the UK as traditional and conservative is so strong that they tend to dismiss these flashes of innovation as departures from the norm rather than the norm itself. The way forward is clearly to show that the UK has a culture of creativity and innovation that co-exists and interacts with the heritage of a rich history, but this is a sophisticated image and one where each aspect has the potential to undermine the other.

The message about creative UK is therefore:

The general image of the UK around the world is reliable but dull and this image is often quite deeply rooted. To contradict it, we need to identify what young people already know or what they already want and work with that. Shocking them into something they 'ought' to know or want will not work. Then we need to state the message and restate it consistently, and make sure that every other message that we are giving out supports it.

To sum up, the surveys undertaken in 1999 and 2000 show that the UK's reputation is best in the developing world in countries that were formerly under UK control or influence. The UK has a more difficult job projecting a positive image in East Asia, where young people know relatively little about us, and in Western Europe, where, relatively, they know a lot.

The overall message of the data is:

Young people believe that the UK has an excellent higher education system and is good at business. With one or two reservations they also accept that we have a democratic society and efficient institutions. But they are critical of our social relationships and do not regard us as especially creative or innovative. In general young people around the world respect us more than they like us – and they find America more attractive.

Reinforcing the positives and combating the negatives in these perceptions will require considerable and sustained effort.