



House of Commons
Foreign Affairs Committee

Delivering Global Britain: FCO Skills

Fourteenth Report of Session 2017–19



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relating to the report*

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The Foreign Affairs Committee

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Summary

The Foreign and Commonwealth Office's reputation for diplomatic skill has historically been very strong. But a continuing lack of clarity over the FCO's purpose and role in government, including confusion over the meaning of Global Britain, threatens to have detrimental effects on the skills of its staff, and puts at risk the prestige of the FCO as an employer. We again call on the Government properly to define Global Britain and the FCO's role in delivering it. The FCO also lacks systematic data on the existing skills of its staff and the extent to which they are meeting skills-development targets, and continues to face issues with 'churn', meaning expertise is lost when staff move roles. In this report, we set out measures the FCO should take to correct this.

Pay lower than for comparable, similarly qualified staff at other departments is adding to the FCO's problems. The FCO cannot expect indefinitely to attract Premiership talent if it consistently offers Championship salaries. The FCO's future as a home for the best that the Civil Service has to offer is at stake. We urge the Government to look again at the pay offer at the FCO, and call for an external review to keep the reward package of officials doing similar jobs at the FCO and the Department for International Development closely in line. The Foreign Secretary has announced plans to open some ambassadorial appointments up to external competition. As he concedes, this is not in fact a significant change to existing FCO recruitment policy, and we call on the FCO to take a much wider look at the potential to open up appointments across the organisation to external competition.

This comes at a time when the broader environment in which the FCO operates continues to change rapidly, and the FCO needs to ensure it has the skills required to deliver Global Britain. We believe it probable that the Diplomatic Academy will miss the target it has set for training experts from across government in trade policy and negotiations. We also continue to believe that the FCO faces a considerable challenge to ensure it has the skills it will need for European diplomacy after Brexit, both with the EU and bilaterally with member states. We call on the FCO to clarify its plans in both these crucial areas.

The FCO's language skills are improving, but there is still a long way to go, and even the FCO's existing targets for language attainment will be challenging to reach. The Foreign Secretary has now announced plans to expand the FCO's language capacity; we welcome these plans, but call urgently on the FCO to identify the additional resources required to deliver them. The challenge to the UK from Russia has only increased in recent months, and the geopolitical role of China is becoming ever more important. Developing and maintaining expertise on both countries will need to be a key focus for the FCO. Lastly, the FCO has recognised that digital communication is now a core aspect of diplomacy, but it will need to encourage calculated risk-taking and promote creativity and innovation on the part of its diplomats in order to succeed in this field.

1 Introduction

1. Diplomacy requires a broad range of skills. The FCO needs to be able to draw on these to succeed in promoting the UK's strategic interests. In addition to knowledge of regional politics, economics and culture, and proficiency in languages, these skills include: knowledge of multilateral bodies and international organisations; general diplomatic skills such as negotiating, political reporting, communicating and networking; experience of working in challenging local environments; specialist knowledge in policy areas such as economics, trade, sanctions and security; and digital and data proficiency.

2. The FCO also has a range of non-diplomatic responsibilities which can require different skills, such as programme management. In addition, the broader environment in which the FCO operates continues to change rapidly. This involves shifts in the international system, such as the evolving roles of China and Russia, as well as the impact of new technology on the practice of diplomacy. It also includes the implications of the UK's exit from the European Union and the requirement to deliver on the Global Britain agenda. These developments could mean that the mixture of skills the FCO relies on in the future will need to change.

3. Diplomacy 20:20, the FCO's current four-year programme of organisational reform, includes strands of work on "expertise" and "agility" which relate to skills. This has included the production of a Priority Skills Statement and a Skills Framework, the development of a Languages Strategy, and changes to how skills and expertise are considered in the promotion process. The FCO says that Diplomacy 20:20 was re-oriented to take into account the implications of the UK's exit from the EU.¹ Much of the FCO's work on skills development is concentrated in the Diplomatic Academy, which was established in February 2015. The Academy has a range of faculties covering the main elements of the FCO's work. A Trade Policy and Negotiations faculty was jointly established in 2016 with the Department for International Trade to support the Government in future trade negotiations after the UK exits the EU.

4. Predecessor Foreign Affairs Committees have expressed concern about a decline in specialist skills at the FCO, paying particular attention to shortfalls in knowledge of regions and languages, and concluding that past FCO reforms prioritised managerial expertise ahead of diplomatic skills, to the detriment of the FCO's core foreign-policy functions.² In this inquiry, we aimed also to consider the structures and processes by which FCO skills are developed and priorities are set, and the impact of corporate factors, including pay policy.³ The issues raised during our inquiry were wide-ranging, touching on nearly every area of the FCO's work. We have not attempted in this brief report to cover all aspects of skills development and retention. Instead, drawing on the evidence we received,⁴ we have focused on three themes, each of which forms a chapter of this report:

1 [Letter from Sir Simon McDonald to Crispin Blunt MP](#), 21 July 2016

2 See, for example, Foreign Affairs Committee, Seventh Report of Session 2010–12, [The Role of the FCO in UK Government](#), HC (2010–12) 665, and Foreign Affairs Committee, Seventh Report of Session 2016–17, [The United Kingdom's relations with Russia](#), HC (2016–17) 120

3 The [terms of reference](#) for this inquiry were launched on 14 June 2018.

4 The FCO's written submission to this inquiry, and its response to our follow-up letter, included substantial detail on the FCO's work to date in the area of skills, much of it previously unpublished, providing an extensive evidence base. We are grateful to the foreign ministries of Canada, Ireland, Japan, Mexico, Norway and Switzerland, for their answers to our survey on diplomatic skills. We would also like to thank all those who participated in this inquiry and provided valuable oral and written evidence.

- a) The link between the role and purpose of the FCO, on the one hand, and the skills it regards as most important, on the other;
- b) The ways in which the corporate structure and culture of the FCO affect the skills of its staff; and
- c) Whether the FCO has the skills it will need for Global Britain, particularly in post-Brexit trade policy and European diplomacy, foreign languages, and other specialist skills.

2 What is the FCO for? Skills and the purpose of diplomacy

The FCO's standing

5. The FCO's reputation for diplomatic skill has historically been very strong. As LSE academic Dr Heidi Maurer put it in written evidence, "the UK's Diplomatic Service, its network and its skilful diplomats have for a long time been regarded as one of the best in the world".⁵ Retired senior foreign diplomats told us the same thing. Former German Ambassador to the UK Dr Peter Ammon said:

I would say that the British foreign service as a whole has an extremely good reputation in the world. I think it is considered by us, the German foreign service, to be a role model.⁶

Alexander Downer, former Australian Foreign Minister and former High Commissioner to the UK, said:

[T]he British foreign service is extremely professional. It is one of the five or six best foreign services in the world, without any doubt.⁷

6. However, in recent years, several observers at home have been much more critical of the FCO, including the skills of its staff. In 2011, for example, our predecessor Committee argued that reforms introduced to professionalise the FCO had prioritised managerialism at the expense of core diplomatic skill; that regional expertise had declined; and that the FCO's institutional purpose had become confused and blurred.⁸ In October 2018, a magazine article aired severe criticism of the FCO, quoting named and unnamed current and former officials.⁹

7. Some of the underlying themes of these critiques have been acknowledged, at least implicitly, by the FCO. In 2015, the Permanent Under-Secretary commissioned Tom Fletcher, the former Ambassador to Lebanon, to conduct a wide-ranging review of the FCO's structure and practices, published in 2016 as the "Future FCO" report. It received input from two-thirds of the FCO's staff, and identified several areas for improvement; its author concluded his foreword with a call for the Government to "free the FCO".¹⁰

8. A principal recommendation of the 2016 Future FCO report was that "Our staff and those we work with require a clearer sense of what the FCO does and why".¹¹ Dr Ammon told us why this matters for getting the right skills:

5 Dr Heidrun ("Heidi") Maurer ([SKI0003](#))

6 [Q1](#)

7 [Q1](#)

8 Foreign Affairs Committee, Seventh Report of Session 2010–12, [The Role of the FCO in UK Government](#), HC (2010–12) 665

9 Steve Bloomfield, [An island apart: the inside story of how the Foreign Office is failing to prepare for Brexit](#), *Prospect*, 15 October 2018

10 FCO, [Future FCO Report](#), 2016, page 4

11 FCO, [Future FCO Report](#), 2016, page 5

The skills cannot be defined abstractly. The question is: what do you want to achieve? And then, when you know what kinds of skills you might need to implement these objectives, you define them.¹²

Or, as Dr Maurer put it: “Expertise and skills of diplomats can only serve a foreign policy strategy but not replace it”.¹³

9. The FCO’s outward-looking objectives, as stated in its Annual Report, are those of the National Security Strategy set in 2015: “Protect Our People”, “Project Our Global Influence”, and “Promote Our Prosperity”.¹⁴ The FCO has an additional inward-looking objective, “Manage our Business”, stated in its Single Departmental Plan.¹⁵ These objectives are further divided into Priority Outcomes, which are themselves subdivided. For the year ahead, the FCO has eight priority outcomes in the three outward-looking objectives, subdivided into 21 items,¹⁶ and the current Single Departmental Plan lists seven items under its inward-looking objective.¹⁷ The Permanent Under-Secretary has previously insisted to us that it is “realistic” for the FCO to have such large numbers of priorities, and that the FCO is “capable of coping” with them.¹⁸

10. In the past two years, the way the FCO has described its purpose has been increasingly defined by the concept of Global Britain. For example, the Single Departmental Plan says the UK’s “vision is to build a truly Global Britain, which is outward-looking and confident on the world stage”, and that the FCO is “central” to delivering this.¹⁹ This has not added clarity to the FCO’s objectives. In a report earlier this year, we concluded that “for Global Britain to be more than a worthy aspiration, the slogan must be backed by substance”, and called on the Government to conduct a “clear-eyed assessment of the UK’s interests and position in the world”.²⁰ Indeed, when we asked the new Foreign Secretary how he differed from his predecessor, he told us that “one of the things I need to do is put some flesh on the bone” of Global Britain.²¹

11. In practice, Global Britain is just one of several strategies being applied to the FCO’s work, and is not the single overarching framework for UK foreign policy. In October, the Foreign Secretary announced the creation of 1,000 new positions in the FCO in London and overseas, and the creation of 12 new overseas posts. He later told us that just two of the ‘new’ posts and 550 of the new jobs were actually new: the rest had already been announced by his predecessor.²² When we asked what priorities had been used to determine where these new resources would be applied, we were told that “three interlinked processes” had been used—Global Britain, the Africa Strategy and EU Exit requirements—and that

12 [Q7](#)

13 Dr Heidrun (“Heidi”) Maurer ([SKI0003](#))

14 FCO, [Annual Report & Accounts: 2017–2018](#), 5 July 2018, page 6

15 FCO, [Foreign and Commonwealth Office Single Departmental Plan](#), 23 May 2018

16 FCO, [Annual Report & Accounts: 2017–2018](#), 5 July 2018, page 42

17 FCO, [Foreign and Commonwealth Office Single Departmental Plan](#), 23 May 2018

18 [Oral evidence: FCO Budget and Capacity and Annual Report 2016–17](#), 15 November 2017, Q1–7

19 FCO, [Foreign and Commonwealth Office Single Departmental Plan](#), 23 May 2018. The FCO’s second core objective, Project our Global Influence, is now also defined in reference to Global Britain. See FCO, [Annual Report & Accounts: 2017–2018](#), 5 July 2018, page 42

20 Foreign Affairs Committee, Sixth Report of Session 2017–19, [Global Britain](#), HC 780, para 28

21 [Oral Evidence from the Foreign Secretary](#), 31 October 2018, Q331

22 [Letter from the Foreign Secretary to the Chair on Policy Exchange speech](#), 12 November 2018

each process has its own criteria.²³ Adding to this complex picture is the fact that the new Foreign Secretary has produced his own slogan: the idea that the UK should become an “invisible chain” linking the world’s democracies.²⁴

12. The broader context to these questions is that, in the past two decades, the foreign-policy machinery of government has changed in ways that many observers consider detrimental to the standing of the FCO. In 2011, then-Foreign Secretary William Hague introduced a programme of reform, arguing that the FCO had been “devalued and sidelined in British government”.²⁵ Notwithstanding the reforms that he and subsequent Foreign Secretaries have pursued, such concerns have persisted. The creation of the Department for International Trade and the Department for Exiting the European Union have exacerbated these concerns by further removing aspects of the UK’s relations with foreign countries from the purview of the FCO.²⁶ As Sir Simon Fraser, former FCO Permanent Under-Secretary, told our Global Britain inquiry:

You have a large number of Ministries—Departments that are now dealing with different aspects of international affairs—including the Foreign Office, the Department for International Trade, the MoD, the Treasury, BEIS and DFID. There is to some extent a fragmentation of responsibility and different budgets applied to international affairs...[s]o there is a bit of a lack of clarity, it seems to me.²⁷

13. We are concerned that a lack of clarity over the FCO’s purpose and its role in government, and the FCO’s continuing failure to prioritise among its objectives, could have detrimental effects on the skills of its staff. A lack of clarity and sense of purpose makes it harder to set priorities for skills development. In the long term, it also threatens the prestige of the FCO as an employer, potentially making it harder to attract and retain highly skilled staff. Continued reference to the concept of Global Britain without a clear sense of what Global Britain is, and why the FCO is uniquely placed to deliver it, is likely to exacerbate these risks. The fragmentation of government responsibilities relating to international affairs compounds the problem. Without a clear sense of what the FCO exists to do, a proper assessment of the skills it needs is impossible. We again urge the Government to set out full and detailed responses to the questions we posed on the meaning and substance of the Global Britain strategy and the FCO’s role in delivering it, first set out in our report on Global Britain and inadequately answered in the Government’s response to that report.

Defining priority skills

14. A common theme in submissions to this inquiry was that the range of skills diplomats need has grown considerably, and that foreign ministries worldwide are facing a challenge

23 [Letter from the Foreign Secretary to the Chair on Policy Exchange speech](#), 12 November 2018

24 [An Invisible Chain: speech by the Foreign Secretary](#), Policy Exchange, 31 October 2018

25 William Hague, [The Best Diplomatic Service in the World: Strengthening the Foreign and Commonwealth Office as an Institution](#), 8 September 2011

26 See, for example, Foreign Affairs Committee, Second Report of Session 2016–17, [Equipping the Government for Brexit](#), HC (2016–17) 431, paragraphs 9–13, and Financial Times, [Task of delivering Brexit causes turf wars in Whitehall](#), 18 July 2018

27 [Oral evidence: Global Britain](#), 6 February 2018, Q84

to adapt.²⁸ In response to a recommendation made in the Future FCO report, the FCO produced a Priority Skills Statement, which it made public as part of its submission to this inquiry and which we have reproduced here. It is accompanied by a Skills Framework, which aims to set out the full range of skills the FCO needs at Foundation, Practitioner and Expert level. The priority skills are those on which FCO HR and the Diplomatic Academy will focus effort for building capability. The FCO says that the statement “is not exhaustive and not everyone in the organisation needs the skills in this list”. We sent a survey on diplomatic skills to several other foreign ministries, including a request to list their priority skills. The answers we received did not suggest that the FCO’s priority skills statement contains any serious omissions.²⁹

Priority Skills Statement 2020

Diplomatic Skills and Tradecraft

- Diplomatic Academy Faculties of Diplomatic Practice; International Policy; Trade Policy and Negotiations; Security, Defence and Intelligence; Consular and Crisis Management; Economics and Prosperity
- Overseas leadership
- Priority 1 languages of Arabic, French, Mandarin, Russian and Spanish. Priority 2 languages of Farsi, German, Japanese, Korean, Portuguese, Turkish.

Geographical Knowledge and the International System

- Europe and its extended neighbourhood: Russia, the Middle East and North Africa
- Major strategic relationships: US, India, China, Japan
- Major multilateral institutions: UN, NATO, EU and WTO

Other Professional Skills and Knowledge

- Project and programme management and delivery
- Digital Data & Technology
- Commercial and Financial awareness, including in managing the FCO Estate

Source: Foreign and Commonwealth Office ([SKI0004](#)), Annex 4

15. The Priority Skills Statement identifies nine general categories of skills, but this treats seven different Diplomatic Academy faculties as essentially falling under one category, and groups together expertise on several countries and regions. Counting such items

28 As Dr Maurer put it: “Diplomatic tasks include nowadays not only representation, reporting and negotiating, but also management of budgets, engaging in outreach activities and public diplomacy, creating a community spirit with own nationals living in the third country, supporting trade investments and business opportunities”. Dr Heidrun (“Heidi”) Maurer ([SKI0003](#)) See also European Institute of Public Administration ([SKI0001](#))

29 See Embassy of Ireland, London ([SKI0015](#)), Embassy of Japan in the United Kingdom ([SKI0016](#)), Embassy of Mexico, United Kingdom ([SKI0018](#)), High Commission of Canada ([SKI0019](#)), Embassy of Switzerland in the United Kingdom ([SKI0020](#)), and Norwegian Foreign Ministry ([SKI0021](#)).

separately produces a list of more than 20 priorities—and this does not include the further subdivision of individual skills such as the core skills covered by the Diplomatic Practice faculty.³⁰

16. The FCO told the Committee in September 2017 that it would complete an audit of its staff's current skills in FY2017–18³¹—something it had previously said, in the Priority Skills Statement, it would do in “early 2017”. The audit is intended to provide a “baseline” for efforts to build capability.³² When we asked the FCO about the progress of this audit, the FCO said that it had been shelved due to “concerns about the completeness and credibility of self-assessed data” on the FCO’s learning platform, and that skills would be assessed once a new enterprise resource planning system, Atlas, is introduced in 2019.³³ The FCO also said that the rollout of the new Civil Service Success Profiles alongside Atlas will “provide an opportunity to simplify how skills...are used”.³⁴

17. **The FCO’s Priority Skills Statement and Skills Framework are good first steps towards developing a system that helps ensure the FCO has the full range of skills it needs for modern diplomacy. However, a list of 20 or more separate skills is not a clear guide to where the FCO should concentrate its limited resources. We believe that in order for the FCO’s effort in defining priority skills to be truly meaningful, the FCO must have an accurate and systematic understanding of the skills its staff hold and the areas where there are shortcomings. The challenges currently facing the FCO are significant and, in many ways, unprecedented—which makes it all the more imperative that the FCO knows what skills are already available to it, and where there are gaps. *We recommend that a skills audit be carried out as soon as possible once the Atlas Enterprise Resource Planning system is introduced, and by no later than the end of 2019. This audit should be used to identify those priority skills in which it is judged the FCO particularly lacks capacity, and where resources should be concentrated.***

18. **By the time a skills audit has been carried out, the FCO will be near the end of the original lifespan, set at 2020, of the Priority Skills Statement. The effort expended in developing the original Priority Skills Statement should not be a one-off. *We recommend that by 2020 the FCO should be ready to produce a Priority Skills Statement for 2025 (or an equivalent, forward-looking, FCO-specific document under the technical element of the Civil Service Success Profile). Internal consultations to identify new skills that might need to be included in this statement, drawing on the experience of the Future FCO report, should begin now. The FCO should also consult with external stakeholders and learn from best practices adopted by other diplomatic services.***

30 The FCO said that these core skills were: “Communication, which includes use of the media, social media and digital in international settings; Diplomacy in Action, how to understand and use protocol, conferences and events to deliver foreign policy outcomes; Diplomacy Skills which are the fundamental tradecraft of our profession of diplomacy, influencing, networking, international negotiating; and Writing, a skill as fundamental to successful diplomacy in the 21st century as it always has been - how to write clearly, concisely and persuasively”. Foreign and Commonwealth Office ([SKI0004](#))

31 [Letter from Sir Simon McDonald to the Chair](#), 14 September 2017

32 Foreign and Commonwealth Office ([SKI0004](#))

33 Foreign and Commonwealth Office ([SKI0017](#))

34 Foreign and Commonwealth Office ([SKI0004](#))

3 Career paths: is the FCO an employer that values skills?

Pay

19. The FCO's submission to this inquiry was notably blunt in its assessment of the effects of low pay on securing and retaining skilled people:

Cabinet Office data shows that the FCO currently has the lowest median pay of any Government Department for policy officers and middle management officers. At policy officer level our base pay is 19% lower than the leading department, whilst the gap at middle management stands at 20%. This disparity has led to only 11% of our London based staff reporting that they feel positive about pay, ranking us 98th out of the 98 organisations featured in the annual Government 'Staff Survey'. Although the FCO is still viewed as an attractive employer, and we have attracted and retained the staff we need, the situation is becoming unsustainable:

Over 70% of those leaving cite poor pay as the main reason for doing so;

In a recent campaign for policy officers (separate to the Fast Stream), 33 out of 159 successful candidates subsequently decided not to join, citing pay as a key contributing factor; and

Applicants for specialist roles regularly compare our package negatively to Other Government Departments and external organisations.³⁵

Sir Alan Duncan MP, whose ministerial responsibilities at the FCO include human resources and finance, reaffirmed this position, saying that the FCO is "having some retention problems and I feel that that is going to grow unless this disparity is addressed".³⁶ The Permanent Under-Secretary told us that pay is a "persistent challenge" at the FCO.³⁷ The Foreign Secretary also told us that the FCO does not "have the budget to pay competitive rates for locally hired staff around the world".³⁸ The FCO submitted a pay flexibility business case to the Treasury in June 2018, to reallocate 2015 Spending Review savings to staff pay, targeting middle management diplomatic grades.³⁹ The FCO says that this case has since been approved.⁴⁰

20. Prospect, the second-largest civil service union, corroborated some of the FCO's claims,⁴¹ and we also received evidence that pay for FCO Research Analysts is particularly uncompetitive in comparison to opportunities outside government, including academia.⁴² Analysis by the Institute for Government of ONS figures appears to support the FCO's overall case. Although the FCO is above the total median earnings across all of HMG,

35 Foreign and Commonwealth Office ([SKI0004](#))

36 [Q75](#)

37 [Oral evidence: FCO budget and capacity, and Annual Report 2017–18](#), 13 November 2018, Q152

38 [Oral Evidence from the Foreign Secretary](#), 31 October 2018, Q334

39 Foreign and Commonwealth Office ([SKI0004](#))

40 [Letter from Sir Simon McDonald to the Chair](#), 23 October 2018

41 Prospect ([SKI0010](#))

42 See Dr Heidrun ("Heidi") Maurer ([SKI0003](#)) and Prospect ([SKI0010](#))

the large departments below the median (the Ministry of Defence, Department for Work and Pensions and HM Revenue & Customs) have substantial delivery roles, which drag down the overall median considerably. Median pay at the FCO is lower than all other departments apart from the Home Office, and considerably lower than the Department for International Development.⁴³ It is difficult to judge the accuracy of the FCO's more specific claims without access to more detailed pay information across government broken down by grade. That said, the former foreign officials who gave oral evidence to the Committee all told us that in the foreign ministries of their countries (Australia, Germany and the United States) pay was not an issue,⁴⁴ and in our survey of other foreign ministries, none of the countries that responded (Canada, Japan, Mexico, Norway and Switzerland) told us that median pay was lower in their country's foreign ministry than for other departments.⁴⁵ This is an unscientific measure, but we consider it an indication of the merit of the FCO's overall case.

21. The FCO's evidence to this inquiry makes clear that low pay is affecting staff morale and retention, and that similarly qualified staff are offered considerably higher pay at other government departments. This is alarming. The FCO's future as a home for the best that the Civil Service has to offer is at stake. We agree with the FCO that this situation is unsustainable if we are to retain the quality of people needed to deliver effective foreign policy, and while we welcome the Treasury's decision to approve the FCO's pay flexibility case, pay at the FCO is a long-term problem with deep roots. The FCO cannot expect indefinitely to attract Premiership talent if it consistently offers Championship salaries. This is especially the case at a time when the FCO's fundamental purpose is under question. We urge the Government to look at further options for improving the pay offer at the FCO, both for centrally contracted staff and for local hires abroad. In addition, a specific exercise led by external consultants should compare the reward package of officials doing similar jobs at the FCO and DFID—and the Government should commit to keeping these closely in line in future.

Performance management, promotion and senior appointments

22. Although FCO staff, apart from designated specialists such as Research Analysts or Economists, are expected to be generalists, their careers are structured so that they accumulate at least some expertise in certain areas. These are 'career anchors': areas (thematic or regional) to which officers may return multiple times over their careers. The FCO's written submission indicated that the concept of career anchors has been tied to promotion and career progression, by expecting UK-based staff to reach Foundation level in two to four areas throughout their career, and requiring officers seeking promotion to have a learning and development plan in place and to have identified career anchors with skills relevant to the FCO.⁴⁶

23. We asked the FCO, for each of the skills listed in the Priority Skills Statement, how many people it needed with that skill and how many it currently has; and what proportion of staff currently meet the expectation of reaching Foundation level in most areas and

43 Institute for Government, [Civil Service Pay](#), 8 August 2018

44 [Qq11-14](#)

45 See Embassy of Japan in the United Kingdom ([SKI0016](#)), Embassy of Mexico in the United Kingdom ([SKI0018](#)), High Commission of Canada ([SKI0019](#)), Embassy of Switzerland in the United Kingdom ([SKI0020](#)) and Norwegian Foreign Ministry ([SKI0021](#))

46 Foreign and Commonwealth Office ([SKI0004](#))

Practitioner level in two to four areas. We also asked whether indicators of Expert-level skills had been defined for all skills and areas of knowledge in the Skills Framework, and whether there was an expectation that staff will reach Expert level in any skill during their career.

24. The FCO told us that it does not in general define how many officers with specific skills it needs, because individual hiring managers and their departments or posts determine the skills that are required. It said that it has two specific targets, in language attainment and trade policy (discussed below). The FCO provided some figures on the number of staff that have passed Foundation-level qualifications, although not a general percentage, and said that all Fast Stream new entrants to the FCO are now required to complete Foundation level during their first two years.⁴⁷ The FCO said it does not hold data centrally on the number of staff who have been certified at Practitioner level, and said that this is something that it will address when Atlas is introduced. The FCO did provide further detail on how Practitioner-level skills have been made a condition of promotion to middle-ranking and senior roles. The FCO told us that Expert-level indicators have only been defined for Professional skills—i.e., not for the majority of the skills listed in the Priority Skills Statement, including those taught by the Diplomatic Academy’s various faculties—and that “there is no requirement for staff, outside of the professions or specialist cadres and functions, to reach Expert level in one or more priority areas”.⁴⁸

25. We welcome the efforts the FCO has made to emphasise skills in performance measurement and promotion. However, the FCO does not yet appear to have the ability to track accurately the progress that its staff are making against the targets set out for skills development, which increases the risk that priorities will be established but not enforced. We are also concerned that the FCO is yet to define what an expert looks like in the majority of its priority skills. We recommend that the FCO measure the proportion of its staff reaching the expected attainment in Foundation- and Practitioner-level skills as soon as is practical once the Atlas system is in place, and that it set out a plan for ensuring that staff not yet at the expected level reach it promptly. We call on the FCO to set a specific time scale for this work, and to commit to reporting the figures to us once they are available. The FCO should also produce a definition of expert-level attainment in core diplomatic skills, and should add this to the criteria used by the Senior Appointments Board.

26. In October, the Foreign Secretary announced that in order to “broaden the pool of talent we tap into for our Ambassadors”, the FCO would open up applications to external candidates, especially those with a commercial background.⁴⁹ When asked for further details, he told us that these appointments would be conducted using existing recruitment processes, that they would not be political appointments (and so he would not commit to candidates receiving pre-appointment scrutiny by the Committee), and that his announcement “does not represent a significant change in recruitment policy”.⁵⁰ The Permanent Under-Secretary told us that there would be three competitions for head

47 Foreign and Commonwealth Office ([SKI0017](#))

48 Foreign and Commonwealth Office ([SKI0017](#))

49 [An Invisible Chain: speech by the Foreign Secretary](#), Policy Exchange, 31 October 2018

50 [Letter from the Foreign Secretary to the Chair on Policy Exchange speech](#), 12 November 2018

of mission posts per year, entirely open both to Civil Service and external candidates, and that the reward package for successful appointees would be the same no matter who wins.⁵¹

27. **Although the announcement of external appointments to Ambassadorial positions gained considerable media attention, we agree with the Foreign Secretary that it does not represent a significant change in FCO recruitment policy. If the FCO is serious about opening itself up to external talent, reforms will have to go much further—and there is no obvious reason why this should be limited to heads of mission. We are concerned that too few posts are to be subjected to open competition. Further, in sticking rigidly to a recruitment procedure which values traditional public-sector skills, and with which existing FCO staff are familiar, we fear that external candidates will face a formidably high barrier to appointment.**

28. *The FCO needs to be more ambitious in seeking to recruit high-quality external candidates to complement its undoubtedly high-calibre existing workforce. To that end, we recommend that it produces plans to extend open recruitment to a wider tranche of roles, including those at deputy head of mission level, and that it reports those plans to us within six months. Further, it should require external, expert headhunters to review its plans for the three open competitions to be held next year, with a view to making them as accessible as possible to external candidates. Finally, a full review of those competitions should be conducted after they are completed, looking at the number and quality of external candidates; that review should seek the feedback of external candidates to identify any challenges and barriers encountered in the recruitment process. We will expect to receive a full copy of that review. The FCO has made a tentative step in a positive direction but it needs to go further faster if it is to have the fullest range of talent at its disposal.*

Avoiding churn and maximising expertise

29. Evidence to this inquiry has made reference to the problem of ‘churn’, where turnover in personnel leads to an interruption in the expertise and skills the FCO is able to apply to a particular issue.⁵² Sir Alan Duncan accepted that this was “a problem: whether the institutional memory of wisdom in people through their experience gets lost because staff turnover is too rapid and goes from one part of the world to another.”⁵³ Sir Alan also referred to the FCO’s Research Analysts as an “underappreciated and perhaps underused resource” with “a lot of institutional memory and an amazing skillset”,⁵⁴ and the FCO has already accepted that Research Analysts should be involved more systematically in policymaking.⁵⁵

30. We asked the FCO whether a recommendation in the Future FCO report—to introduce a formal two-week training margin for all staff entering new roles, focused on improving expertise—had been adopted.⁵⁶ The FCO said that no such formal margin had been introduced. New staff joining the FCO in the UK participate in induction courses

51 [Oral evidence: FCO budget and capacity, and Annual Report 2017–18](#), 13 November 2018, Q96

52 See, for example, Bar Human Rights Committee ([SKI0006](#))

53 [Q89](#)

54 [Q91](#)

55 Foreign and Commonwealth Office ([SKI0004](#))

56 FCO, [Future FCO Report](#), 2016, page 21

prior to joining a Directorate, ranging in length from two days (for interns, civil servants on interchange or returning FCO staff) to two weeks for Fast Stream new entrants.⁵⁷ The FCO said that “it is customary practice for all staff entering new roles to receive a handover, an introduction to colleagues and key contacts, and access to any mandatory or role-specific L&D within an agreed timeframe”.⁵⁸ The FCO has also recently increased tour lengths in some overseas posts and in London in order to “deepen expertise, reduce churn, and deliver better value for money”.⁵⁹

31. We welcome the steps that the FCO has taken to reduce the impact of churn, including increasing some tour lengths. However, it is important that a systematic effort is made to ensure that expertise, once acquired, is not wasted, and that as far as possible there is continuity in the expertise the FCO can apply to a subject, and the networks that its staff have built up. *The FCO should now act on the recommendation that a formal two-week training margin for all staff entering new roles be introduced, and commit to do so within the next year. The FCO should also assess whether the handover procedures it describes as “customary practice” adequately transfer the expertise that outgoing staff have built up, and should issue formal guidance on handover practices incorporating any changes deemed necessary following this assessment.*

57 Foreign and Commonwealth Office ([SKI0017](#))

58 Foreign and Commonwealth Office ([SKI0017](#))

59 Foreign and Commonwealth Office ([SKI0004](#))

4 Skills for Global Britain

Leaving the EU: implications for skills

Trade policy and negotiations

32. As the FCO acknowledges in its written submission:

The UK has not had to operate on the frontline of trade policy and negotiations since it joined the EEC. The scale of the UK's challenge in building trade capability from a very modest base is unparalleled amongst developed economies.⁶⁰

The Diplomatic Academy's Trade Policy and Negotiations Faculty, jointly established by the FCO and DIT, and funded by the FCO, is designed to support the Government's needs for future trade expertise. In its first year of operation the Trade Policy and Negotiations faculty had a budget of £987,000 and "just over five staff"; the FCO says the Faculty now has increased resourcing, with 11.5 full-time-equivalent staff and a budget of £1.9million.⁶¹

33. We asked the FCO how many people it assessed the Diplomatic Academy will need to train to Expert level in trade policy and negotiations in order to support the Government in future trade negotiations. The FCO said it "aims to have trained at least 240 people to expert level by March 2019", and that "90 have already been trained to this level."⁶² In its original submission it said that "over 2,000 staff from across HMG, in the UK and overseas, have accessed Trade Faculty learning in its various formats, including 450 in the UK who have completed an intensive Practitioner level programme".⁶³

34. We asked the head of the Diplomatic Academy, Jon Benjamin, what an "expert" meant in this context. He said it "means people who are ready to negotiate the immense detail that goes into free trade agreements", and noted that they "will be dealing with counterpart officials in other countries who may have been doing this for many years, perhaps exclusively so."⁶⁴ He acknowledged that the training targets in this field were "challenging", but told us that "the throughput of people will, we hope, get us to that target figure [of 240 trained to Expert level] even if the date has to slip a little".⁶⁵ Mr Benjamin told us that the training was focused on acquiring expertise in technical chapters of free trade agreements (such as customs issues or standards), but that participants were also eligible to participate in training courses on negotiation skills.⁶⁶ When asked to follow up with details of how many participants had taken part in specific training on negotiations, the FCO told us that "over 30" participants had attended "a session specifically on negotiation skills".⁶⁷

60 Foreign and Commonwealth Office ([SKI0004](#))

61 Foreign and Commonwealth Office ([SKI0004](#))

62 Foreign and Commonwealth Office ([SKI0017](#))

63 Foreign and Commonwealth Office ([SKI0004](#))

64 [Q66](#)

65 [Q63](#)

66 [Q68](#)

67 The FCO also said that the Trade Faculty's expert training is aimed at those who will participate in negotiations; that many sessions had been led by people with extensive experience of negotiating trade deals; that people have access to other negotiating training; and that the FCO is working with DIT to develop negotiation simulations. Foreign and Commonwealth Office ([SKI0022](#))

35. We note that the Diplomatic Academy’s target for training 240 cross-government staff to expert level in trade policy and negotiations by March 2019 is a challenging one, and based on progress so far, it seems probable that the target will not be met in time. *In its response to this report, the FCO should tell us whether it expects that target to be met, and if not, what impact it believes this will have on cross-government capability in trade policy and negotiations after March 2019, and how it intends to fill the gap.*

European diplomacy

36. As the UK leaves the EU, the skills its diplomats need for managing the UK’s relationship with the EU, and with its individual members, might change considerably. As Sir Simon Fraser told us for the Global Britain inquiry, “we are going to have a far bigger task on our hands of lobbying, finding out information and influencing decisions in the European Union as a non-member than at present”.⁶⁸ Former German Ambassador to the UK Peter Ammon and Dr Simon Duke of the European Institute of Public Administration made similar arguments in written evidence to this inquiry.⁶⁹ In a June 2018 story on the future of the UK Representation to the EU, *Politico* quoted an unnamed UK official:

We are going to have to completely rethink what we do ... We are going to need new skills, the best diplomats we’ve got, to find out what is going on now that we’re no longer sitting at the table. The whole purpose is going to change.⁷⁰

37. In our report on the future of UK diplomacy in Europe, we recommended the creation of a dedicated FCO cadre with understanding of the EU institutions and the domestic politics of member states, and asked the Government to set out its plans for the future of the UK Representation to the EU in Brussels (UKRep). We also recommended the creation of a dedicated Minister for Europe to focus on these relationships.⁷¹ The Government responded with details of the officials the FCO already has with understanding of EU institutions and the domestic politics of member states, and said that its staffing strategy would reflect the need for Europe-based expertise in London, at UKRep and the “enhanced role” of bilateral missions across the Europe network. It said that the Diplomatic Academy’s Europe Faculty supports the development of Europe expertise. The FCO said that a project to establish the future role of UKRep was ongoing, and that decisions regarding Ministerial portfolios would be for the Prime Minister to make at the appropriate time.⁷² The Foreign Secretary has since told us that UKRep will “continue to be the centre of EU expertise inside the FCO”, and that “we have been expanding it and we will continue to expand it.”⁷³

38. We continue to believe, as we concluded in our previous report, that the FCO faces “a considerable challenge to ensure that its European network can cope with the increased demands of maintaining effective diplomatic relationships with the

68 [Oral evidence: Global Britain](#), 6 February 2018, Q109

69 See Dr Peter Ammon ([SK10011](#)) and European Institute of Public Administration ([SK10001](#))

70 Tom McTague, [Britain Moves Big Into Brussels](#), *Politico*, 3 July 2018

71 Foreign Affairs Committee, Second Report of Session 2017–19, [The future of UK diplomacy in Europe](#), HC 435, paragraphs 55 and 60

72 Foreign Affairs Committee, Fifth Special Report of Session 2017–19, [The future of UK diplomacy in Europe: Government response to the Committee’s Second Report](#), HC 918

73 [Oral Evidence from the Foreign Secretary](#), 31 October 2018, Q368

EU27, without the level of automatic and regular access to the EU27 governments that came with EU membership”. *In its response to this report, the FCO should set out the assessment it has made of the new skills relating to European diplomacy its staff will need after the UK leaves the EU, its plan for ensuring that its staff have those skills, and the changes it has made to the process for developing cross-FCO Europe expertise since the referendum.*

39. As March 2019 approaches, the urgency of having a clear and detailed plan for the future of the UK’s Representation to the EU (UKRep) is increasing sharply. It is essential that UKRep is ready on 30 March 2019 to manage the demands of the proposed implementation period, when the UK will remain bound by EU law but will no longer be present in the rooms where decisions are made. *In its response to this report, the Government should set out the results of its consultations on the future of UKRep, and its plan for UKRep’s future role, shape and functions, particularly in the transition period when our ability to influence decisions will have a direct impact on UK national interests. The FCO should also set out a precise timetable for implementing this plan. We reiterate our recommendation that the Government should consider creating a dedicated Minister for Europe, who would focus solely on the UK’s relationship with the EU and its Member States, and would be resident in Brussels, with lead responsibility for the FCO’s European network.*

Language skills

40. Our predecessor Committees, along with many external observers, have expressed concern about a decline in the FCO’s language capabilities.⁷⁴ The FCO’s in-house language centre was reopened in 2013 under the then-Foreign Secretary William Hague, after a period in which language training was outsourced. The FCO told us that 55% of officers in speaker slots in the FCO network—that is, roles where knowledge of the relevant language is deemed necessary—are now at the target-level attainment (TLA) in the relevant language,⁷⁵ up from 39% in December 2015. 74% of Heads of Mission are now at TLA, from below 60% in July 2015.⁷⁶ The FCO told us that TLA in Mandarin is at “nearly 70%”.⁷⁷ Target level attainment for Russian is 53%.⁷⁸ The FCO told us that around two thirds of officers expelled by Russia following the Salisbury attack were Russian speakers.⁷⁹ For Arabic, TLA is 30%, although the FCO told us that it was 49% as recently as December 2017, and that the drop off was due to rotation of officers in posts.⁸⁰ The FCO has set a general target of reaching 80% TLA for all grades by 2020.⁸¹

74 See, for example, Foreign Affairs Committee, Ninth Report of Session 2014–15, [The FCO’s performance and finances in 2013–2014](#), HC (2014–15) 605, paragraphs 24–28

75 The FCO told us that “almost all” speaker slots have a target level of C1 or C2 on the Common European Framework of References for Languages. The FCO told us that it has the following number of staff in speaker slots at the highest level of proficiency, C2 (or “Expert”), in its Priority 1 languages: 4 Arabic speakers, 18 French speakers, 9 Mandarin speakers, 6 Russian speakers, and 36 Spanish speakers. The FCO told us that the “decision on whether an overseas role is designated a speaker slot and at what target level lies with the geographical Directorates in consultation with the relevant overseas Post”. Foreign and Commonwealth Office ([SKI0017](#))

76 [Letter from Sir Simon McDonald to the Chair](#), 23 October 2018

77 Foreign and Commonwealth Office ([SKI0004](#))

78 Foreign and Commonwealth Office ([SKI0017](#))

79 Foreign and Commonwealth Office ([SKI0017](#))

80 Foreign and Commonwealth Office ([SKI0017](#))

81 Foreign and Commonwealth Office ([SKI0004](#))

41. In October, the Foreign Secretary announced that the number of languages taught at the FCO would be increased from 50 to 70 in the next five years, and within the next ten years the number of language speakers in the FCO would be doubled from 500 to 1,000.⁸² When asked for details of how this would be achieved and with what additional resources, he told us that “officials are working up the detail of implementation”, and that the question of where the language speakers would be based was “being worked through”. The Foreign Secretary told us that the 80% target for 2020 would be maintained.⁸³ The FCO had previously told us that its plan for hitting its 2020 target involved “improved and innovative teaching...ensuring officers are able to complete their allocated training hours before being deployed, and by ensuring appointment boards take proper account of officers’ languages capability when selecting officers for overseas speaker slots”.⁸⁴ Jon Benjamin called the 80% target “challenging and reasonable”.⁸⁵ He said that meeting it would require greater “discipline”, saying that the FCO had already become stricter in correcting a “tendency for people in their language training to be pulled out to post a little early, because of requirements there, before they had the chance to finish”.⁸⁶

42. Languages are the foundation of diplomacy, and failure to excel in foreign languages undermines whatever other skills our diplomats may develop. We welcome the improvement made in the past few years in foreign language skills at the FCO, but there is a long way to go. We are encouraged by the FCO’s relatively high attainment in Mandarin, and concerned by the lower figures for Russian and Arabic. The FCO cannot allow under-resourcing to mean that operational demands result in officers being sent on postings before they have met the required language proficiency. The FCO’s goal of having 80% of officers in speaker slots at their target-level language attainment by 2020, while a significant improvement over past performance, is still conservative in absolute terms. Yet, based on the current track record, even this goal will be challenging to reach. The Foreign Secretary’s commitment to double the number of FCO language speakers and increase the number of languages taught is laudable, but it is clear to us that this will require considerable additional resources, and sustained, senior-level attention to achieve.

43. The FCO must, as a matter of urgency, determine and report to us clear and realistic figures for the additional budgetary resources required to deliver on the Foreign Secretary’s goals for expanding the FCO’s languages capacity. In its response to this report, the Government should also outline any resourcing or operational issues it believes could prevent the 80% TLA goal from being reached by 2020 or which could hinder improvement thereafter, and provide details of its plan for addressing those issues. The FCO’s goals should not be achieved by simply lowering the standards of language proficiency that officers are expected to reach. We expect the Permanent Under-Secretary regularly to report progress to us on language attainment, against a consistent set of metrics, in the quarterly operational update he provides.

82 [An Invisible Chain: speech by the Foreign Secretary](#), Policy Exchange, 31 October 2018

83 [Letter from the Foreign Secretary to the Chair on Policy Exchange speech](#), 12 November 2018

84 Foreign and Commonwealth Office ([SK10004](#))

85 [Q50](#)

86 [Q51](#)

Russia

44. Our predecessor Committee’s report on UK relations with Russia called for the FCO to invest in “the analytical capability to understand Russian decision-making”, engage with outside sources of expertise, and develop Russian language skills.⁸⁷ Russia appears in the FCO’s priority outcomes for 2018–19 and in the Priority Skills Statement.⁸⁸ In written evidence, the FCO told us its progress in strengthening expertise on Russia: 13 staff from eight Eastern Europe/Central Asia posts have passed the Foundation level diploma of the Diplomatic Academy’s relevant faculty, the “highest pass rate of any region”; the FCO has established the EECADRE, “a cross-HMG network of people with expertise on the region”; Russian language training was extended from 10 to 14 months; and the proportion of staff at TLA in Russian, although still relatively low as noted above, has increased by a third since 2016.⁸⁹

45. **The challenge to the UK from Russia has increased yet further in just 18 months since our predecessor Committee’s report. We welcome the priority the FCO has placed on dealing with this challenge, and the FCO’s diplomatic success in responding to the Salisbury attack. However, we note that the EECADRE, established in 2015, is a recent development, and we do not have sufficient evidence from this inquiry to judge whether its achievements and ambition match the scale of the challenge at hand. We welcome the progress made in Russian language skills since 2016, but note that overall attainment remains troublingly low. We also note that a potential side-effect of Russia’s expulsion of UK diplomats is to make it more difficult for FCO officers to improve their first-hand understanding of Russia. *In its response to this report, the FCO should set out its plans for mitigating the effects of Russia’s diplomatic expulsions on the FCO’s Russian expertise and language skills. The FCO should also confirm that it expects Russian TLA to reach 80% by 2020, in line with the target set for overall attainment.***

China

46. When asked to name his single biggest priority, the Foreign Secretary told us that aside from Brexit, the most important issue was changes in the global balance of power, and the change from “a period with one superpower” to “a period with two”.⁹⁰ He told us that the rise of China will “cause a fundamental change in the way nations interact with each other”, and that he wanted to “make sure we are ready for it”.⁹¹ China is not specifically mentioned in the FCO’s objectives and priority outcomes for 2018–19.⁹² In the FCO’s Priority Skills Statement, China is listed in the section on geographical knowledge and the international system under “major strategic relationships”, and Mandarin is a priority

87 Foreign Affairs Committee, Seventh Report of Session 2016–17, [The United Kingdom’s relations with Russia](#), HC (2016–17) 120, paragraph 176

88 Ensuring “an effective Western response to Russian security challenges” forms part of Priority Outcome 3 on Euro-Atlantic Security. FCO, [Annual Report & Accounts 2017–2018](#), HC 1216, page 42. In the Priority Skills Statement, Russian is a Priority 1 language, and Russia appears in the section on geographical knowledge and the international system under “major strategic relationships”. Foreign and Commonwealth Office ([SKI0004](#))

89 Foreign and Commonwealth Office ([SKI0004](#))

90 [Oral Evidence from the Foreign Secretary](#), 31 October 2018, Q343

91 [Oral Evidence from the Foreign Secretary](#), 31 October 2018, Q421

92 Nor is the Asia-Pacific more broadly, aside from North Korean proliferation and the Rohingya crisis. FCO, [Annual Report & Accounts 2017–18](#), HC 1216, page 42

1 language.⁹³ The FCO told us about some of the steps it has been taking to strengthen expertise on China. China “forms an important part of the Asia Pacific Practitioner curriculum in the Diplomatic Academy, and “regular training courses are delivered on China’s internal and external policies”; for the last three years, about 20 officials have attended an LSE summer school at Peking University on aspects of Chinese policy; the Beijing Embassy has worked with HR to identify suitable officers to take up positions in China, targeting officers willing to learn Mandarin; and there are proposals to add “a number of slots designed to strengthen our capability to engage on issues relating to China, including implementation of the Belt and Road initiative”.⁹⁴

47. We plan to return to the question of the FCO’s expertise in this area as part of our separate inquiry into China and the international rules-based system. However, in advance of the completion of that work it is already evident to us that the geopolitical importance of China means it needs to be consistently highlighted as a priority for the FCO, and we are surprised, given the Foreign Secretary’s personal recognition of its importance, that it is not specifically named as such in the FCO’s objectives. Generating and maintaining deep expertise on China, its foreign-policy approach and its role in the world will be increasingly important for the FCO in the years ahead, across a wide range of policy areas. *In its response, the FCO needs convincingly to counter the impression given in its objectives and priority outcomes that the UK’s approach to China is not being treated with the urgency and focus it merits. The FCO should commit to specifically highlighting the need to deal with the rise of China in its objectives and priority outcomes for 2019–20.*

Digital diplomacy

48. Witnesses told us about the importance of digital diplomacy, primarily in the context of diplomats using social media.⁹⁵ This requires learning new skills, and, as Jon Benjamin told us, then applying them to a task—public diplomacy—that is not fundamentally new in itself.⁹⁶ However, digital tools may open up potential audiences for UK foreign-policy messaging that were not previously reachable, which is a significant opportunity if executed well. We heard clear evidence that getting this right means empowering individual diplomats to take risks that might traditionally have been avoided.⁹⁷ As Dr Schake put it, this means sometimes “saying, ‘This was a mistake; let’s move on’ in the way people who actually live social media lives do”.⁹⁸

49. The Priority Skills Statement refers to “digital, data and technology”, and “social media and digital” is included in the communications strand of the core diplomatic skills defined by the Diplomatic Academy.⁹⁹ The FCO told us that “around 100” people in the global diplomatic network work on digital issues, and that it runs training “to ensure anyone with a communications role can do basic digital communication”. There are

93 Foreign and Commonwealth Office ([SKI0004](#))

94 Foreign and Commonwealth Office ([SKI0004](#))

95 See [Q15](#), [Q27](#), [Q85](#), and Dr Heidrun (“Heidi”) Maurer ([SKI0003](#))

96 [Q85](#)

97 [Q28](#), [Q85](#)

98 [Q15](#)

99 Foreign and Commonwealth Office ([SKI0004](#))

nine digital communications specialists in London and “approximately ten to 15” digital specialists posted overseas.¹⁰⁰ We also heard anecdotal testimony of FCO successes in social media and digital diplomacy.¹⁰¹

50. We welcome the FCO’s recognition that digital communication, including social media, is now a core aspect of diplomacy. The appointment of a head of the Diplomatic Academy with a strong personal track record in digital diplomacy is also a valuable implicit signal from the FCO of the importance of this skill. *We encourage FCO ministers and senior officials to set a tone for digital diplomacy—leading by the example of their own social media activity—that encourages calculated risk taking and promotes creativity and innovation.*

100 Foreign and Commonwealth Office ([SK10004](#))

101 [Q2](#)

Conclusions and recommendations

What is the FCO for? Skills and the purpose of diplomacy

1. We are concerned that a lack of clarity over the FCO's purpose and its role in government, and the FCO's continuing failure to prioritise among its objectives, could have detrimental effects on the skills of its staff. A lack of clarity and sense of purpose makes it harder to set priorities for skills development. In the long term, it also threatens the prestige of the FCO as an employer, potentially making it harder to attract and retain highly skilled staff. Continued reference to the concept of Global Britain without a clear sense of what Global Britain is, and why the FCO is uniquely placed to deliver it, is likely to exacerbate these risks. The fragmentation of government responsibilities relating to international affairs compounds the problem. Without a clear sense of what the FCO exists to do, a proper assessment of the skills it needs is impossible. *We again urge the Government to set out full and detailed responses to the questions we posed on the meaning and substance of the Global Britain strategy and the FCO's role in delivering it, first set out in our report on Global Britain and inadequately answered in the Government's response to that report.* (Paragraph 13)
2. The FCO's Priority Skills Statement and Skills Framework are good first steps towards developing a system that helps ensure the FCO has the full range of skills it needs for modern diplomacy. However, a list of 20 or more separate skills is not a clear guide to where the FCO should concentrate its limited resources. We believe that in order for the FCO's effort in defining priority skills to be truly meaningful, the FCO must have an accurate and systematic understanding of the skills its staff hold and the areas where there are shortcomings. The challenges currently facing the FCO are significant and, in many ways, unprecedented—which makes it all the more imperative that the FCO knows what skills are already available to it, and where there are gaps. *We recommend that a skills audit be carried out as soon as possible once the Atlas Enterprise Resource Planning system is introduced, and by no later than the end of 2019. This audit should be used to identify those priority skills in which it is judged the FCO particularly lacks capacity, and where resources should be concentrated.* (Paragraph 17)
3. By the time a skills audit has been carried out, the FCO will be near the end of the original lifespan, set at 2020, of the Priority Skills Statement. The effort expended in developing the original Priority Skills Statement should not be a one-off. *We recommend that by 2020 the FCO should be ready to produce a Priority Skills Statement for 2025 (or an equivalent, forward-looking, FCO-specific document under the technical element of the Civil Service Success Profile). Internal consultations to identify new skills that might need to be included in this statement, drawing on the experience of the Future FCO report, should begin now. The FCO should also consult with external stakeholders and learn from best practices adopted by other diplomatic services.* (Paragraph 18)

Career paths: is the FCO an employer that values skills?

4. The FCO's evidence to this inquiry makes clear that low pay is affecting staff morale and retention, and that similarly qualified staff are offered considerably higher pay at other government departments. This is alarming. The FCO's future as a home for the best that the Civil Service has to offer is at stake. We agree with the FCO that this situation is unsustainable if we are to retain the quality of people needed to deliver effective foreign policy, and while we welcome the Treasury's decision to approve the FCO's pay flexibility case, pay at the FCO is a long-term problem with deep roots. The FCO cannot expect indefinitely to attract Premiership talent if it consistently offers Championship salaries. This is especially the case at a time when the FCO's fundamental purpose is under question. *We urge the Government to look at further options for improving the pay offer at the FCO, both for centrally contracted staff and for local hires abroad. In addition, a specific exercise led by external consultants should compare the reward package of officials doing similar jobs at the FCO and DFID—and the Government should commit to keeping these closely in line in future.* (Paragraph 21)
5. We welcome the efforts the FCO has made to emphasise skills in performance measurement and promotion. However, the FCO does not yet appear to have the ability to track accurately the progress that its staff are making against the targets set out for skills development, which increases the risk that priorities will be established but not enforced. We are also concerned that the FCO is yet to define what an expert looks like in the majority of its priority skills. *We recommend that the FCO measure the proportion of its staff reaching the expected attainment in Foundation- and Practitioner-level skills as soon as is practical once the Atlas system is in place, and that it set out a plan for ensuring that staff not yet at the expected level reach it promptly. We call on the FCO to set a specific time scale for this work, and to commit to reporting the figures to us once they are available. The FCO should also produce a definition of expert-level attainment in core diplomatic skills, and should add this to the criteria used by the Senior Appointments Board.* (Paragraph 25)
6. Although the announcement of external appointments to Ambassadorial positions gained considerable media attention, we agree with the Foreign Secretary that it does not represent a significant change in FCO recruitment policy. If the FCO is serious about opening itself up to external talent, reforms will have to go much further—and there is no obvious reason why this should be limited to heads of mission. We are concerned that too few posts are to be subjected to open competition. Further, in sticking rigidly to a recruitment procedure which values traditional public-sector skills, and with which existing FCO staff are familiar, we fear that external candidates will face a formidably high barrier to appointment. (Paragraph 27)
7. *The FCO needs to be more ambitious in seeking to recruit high-quality external candidates to complement its undoubtedly high-calibre existing workforce. To that end, we recommend that it produces plans to extend open recruitment to a wider tranche of roles, including those at deputy head of mission level, and that it reports those plans to us within six months. Further, it should require external, expert headhunters to review its plans for the three open competitions to be held next year, with a view to making them as accessible as possible to external candidates. Finally, a full review of those competitions should be conducted after they are completed,*

looking at the number and quality of external candidates; that review should seek the feedback of external candidates to identify any challenges and barriers encountered in the recruitment process. We will expect to receive a full copy of that review. The FCO has made a tentative step in a positive direction but it needs to go further faster if it is to have the fullest range of talent at its disposal. (Paragraph 28)

8. We welcome the steps that the FCO has taken to reduce the impact of churn, including increasing some tour lengths. However, it is important that a systematic effort is made to ensure that expertise, once acquired, is not wasted, and that as far as possible there is continuity in the expertise the FCO can apply to a subject, and the networks that its staff have built up. *The FCO should now act on the recommendation that a formal two-week training margin for all staff entering new roles be introduced, and commit to do so within the next year. The FCO should also assess whether the handover procedures it describes as “customary practice” adequately transfer the expertise that outgoing staff have built up, and should issue formal guidance on handover practices incorporating any changes deemed necessary following this assessment. (Paragraph 31)*

Skills for Global Britain

9. We note that the Diplomatic Academy’s target for training 240 cross-government staff to expert level in trade policy and negotiations by March 2019 is a challenging one, and based on progress so far, it seems probable that the target will not be met in time. *In its response to this report, the FCO should tell us whether it expects that target to be met, and if not, what impact it believes this will have on cross-government capability in trade policy and negotiations after March 2019, and how it intends to fill the gap. (Paragraph 35)*
10. We continue to believe, as we concluded in our previous report, that the FCO faces “a considerable challenge to ensure that its European network can cope with the increased demands of maintaining effective diplomatic relationships with the EU27, without the level of automatic and regular access to the EU27 governments that came with EU membership”. *In its response to this report, the FCO should set out the assessment it has made of the new skills relating to European diplomacy its staff will need after the UK leaves the EU, its plan for ensuring that its staff have those skills, and the changes it has made to the process for developing cross-FCO Europe expertise since the referendum. (Paragraph 38)*
11. As March 2019 approaches, the urgency of having a clear and detailed plan for the future of the UK’s Representation to the EU (UKRep) is increasing sharply. It is essential that UKRep is ready on 30 March 2019 to manage the demands of the proposed implementation period, when the UK will remain bound by EU law but will no longer be present in the rooms where decisions are made. *In its response to this report, the Government should set out the results of its consultations on the future of UKRep, and its plan for UKRep’s future role, shape and functions, particularly in the transition period when our ability to influence decisions will have a direct impact on UK national interests. The FCO should also set out a precise timetable for implementing this plan. We reiterate our recommendation that the Government*

should consider creating a dedicated Minister for Europe, who would focus solely on the UK's relationship with the EU and its Member States, and would be resident in Brussels, with lead responsibility for the FCO's European network. (Paragraph 39)

12. Languages are the foundation of diplomacy, and failure to excel in foreign languages undermines whatever other skills our diplomats may develop. We welcome the improvement made in the past few years in foreign language skills at the FCO, but there is a long way to go. We are encouraged by the FCO's relatively high attainment in Mandarin, and concerned by the lower figures for Russian and Arabic. The FCO cannot allow under-resourcing to mean that operational demands result in officers being sent on postings before they have met the required language proficiency. The FCO's goal of having 80% of officers in speaker slots at their target-level language attainment (TLA) by 2020, while a significant improvement over past performance, is still conservative in absolute terms. Yet, based on the current track record, even this goal will be challenging to reach. The Foreign Secretary's commitment to double the number of FCO language speakers and increase the number of languages taught is laudable, but it is clear to us that this will require considerable additional resources, and sustained, senior-level attention to achieve. (Paragraph 42)
13. *The FCO must, as a matter of urgency, determine and report to us clear and realistic figures for the additional budgetary resources required to deliver on the Foreign Secretary's goals for expanding the FCO's languages capacity. In its response to this report, the Government should also outline any resourcing or operational issues it believes could prevent the 80% TLA goal from being reached by 2020 or which could hinder improvement thereafter, and provide details of its plan for addressing those issues. The FCO's goals should not be achieved by simply lowering the standards of language proficiency that officers are expected to reach. We expect the Permanent Under-Secretary regularly to report progress to us on language attainment, against a consistent set of metrics, in the quarterly operational update he provides. (Paragraph 43)*
14. The challenge to the UK from Russia has increased yet further in just 18 months since our predecessor Committee's report. We welcome the priority the FCO has placed on dealing with this challenge, and the FCO's diplomatic success in responding to the Salisbury attack. However, we note that the EECADRE, established in 2015, is a recent development, and we do not have sufficient evidence from this inquiry to judge whether its achievements and ambition match the scale of the challenge at hand. We welcome the progress made in Russian language skills since 2016, but note that overall attainment remains troublingly low. We also note that a potential side-effect of Russia's expulsion of UK diplomats is to make it more difficult for FCO officers to improve their first-hand understanding of Russia. *In its response to this report, the FCO should set out its plans for mitigating the effects of Russia's diplomatic expulsions on the FCO's Russian expertise and language skills. The FCO should also confirm that it expects Russian TLA to reach 80% by 2020, in line with the target set for overall attainment. (Paragraph 45)*
15. We plan to return to the question of the FCO's expertise in this area as part of our separate inquiry into China and the international rules-based system. However, in advance of the completion of that work it is already evident to us that the geopolitical importance of China means it needs to be consistently highlighted as a priority for the FCO, and we are surprised, given the Foreign Secretary's personal recognition

of its importance, that it is not specifically named as such in the FCO's objectives. Generating and maintaining deep expertise on China, its foreign-policy approach and its role in the world will be increasingly important for the FCO in the years ahead, across a wide range of policy areas. *In its response, the FCO needs convincingly to counter the impression given in its objectives and priority outcomes that the UK's approach to China is not being treated with the urgency and focus it merits. The FCO should commit to specifically highlighting the need to deal with the rise of China in its objectives and priority outcomes for 2019–20.* (Paragraph 47)

16. We welcome the FCO's recognition that digital communication, including social media, is now a core aspect of diplomacy. The appointment of a head of the Diplomatic Academy with a strong personal track record in digital diplomacy is also a valuable implicit signal from the FCO of the importance of this skill. *We encourage FCO ministers and senior officials to set a tone for digital diplomacy—leading by the example of their own social media activity—that encourages calculated risk taking and promotes creativity and innovation.* (Paragraph 50)

Formal minutes

Tuesday 20 November 2018

Members present:

Tom Tugendhat, in the Chair

Ian Austin	Priti Patel
Chris Bryant	Mr Bob Seely
Ian Murray	Royston Smith

Draft Report (*Delivering Global Britain: FCO Skills*), proposed by the Chair, brought up and read.

Ordered, That the draft Report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraphs 1 to 50 read and agreed to.

Summary agreed to.

Resolved, That the Report be the Fourteenth Report of the Committee to the House.

Ordered, That the Chair make the Report to the House.

Ordered, That embargoed copies of the Report be made available, in accordance with the provisions of Standing Order No. 134.

[Adjourned till Tuesday 27 November at 2.15pm]

Witnesses

The following witnesses gave evidence. Transcripts can be viewed on the [inquiry publications page](#) of the Committee's website.

Tuesday 17 July 2018

Question number

Dr Peter Ammon, former Ambassador of Germany to the UK; **The Hon. Alexander Downer**, former Foreign Minister of Australia and former High Commissioner of Australia to the UK; and **Dr Kori Schake**, Deputy Director-General of the International Institute for Strategic Studies

[Q1–16](#)

Patrick Horgan, Regional Director, North-East Asia, Rolls-Royce plc; and **Dr Catherine Fieschi**, Director, Counterpoint

[Q17–31](#)

Wednesday 5 September 2018

Rt Hon Sir Alan Duncan KCMG, Minister of State; **Jon Benjamin**, Director of Diplomatic Academy; **Angus Lapsley**, Director of Defence, International Security and South East Europe; and **Victoria Smith**, Head of Talent and Capability, Foreign and Commonwealth Office

[Q32–102](#)

Published written evidence

The following written evidence was received and can be viewed on the [inquiry publications page](#) of the Committee's website.

SKI numbers are generated by the evidence processing system and so may not be complete.

- 1 Andrew Ehrhardt ([SKI0005](#))
- 2 Bar Human Rights Committee ([SKI0006](#))
- 3 Dr Adam Steinhouse and Dr Adrian Rossiter ([SKI0009](#))
- 4 Dr Heidrun ("Heidi") Maurer ([SKI0003](#))
- 5 Dr Peter Ammon ([SKI0011](#))
- 6 Embassy of Ireland, London ([SKI0015](#))
- 7 Embassy of Japan, United Kingdom ([SKI0016](#))
- 8 Embassy of Mexico, United Kingdom ([SKI0018](#))
- 9 Embassy of Switzerland, United Kingdom ([SKI0020](#))
- 10 European Institute of Public Administration ([SKI0001](#))
- 11 Foreign and Commonwealth Office ([SKI0004](#))
- 12 Foreign and Commonwealth Office ([SKI0017](#))
- 13 Foreign and Commonwealth Office ([SKI0022](#))
- 14 High Commission of Canada ([SKI0019](#))
- 15 Norwegian Foreign Ministry ([SKI0021](#))
- 16 Professor Thomas Otte ([SKI0002](#))
- 17 Prospect ([SKI0010](#))
- 18 Ron Ton ([SKI0007](#))
- 19 Sarah Lain ([SKI0014](#))
- 20 The Hon. Alexander Downer ([SKI0012](#))

List of Reports from the Committee during the current Parliament

All publications from the Committee are available on the [publications page](#) of the Committee's website. The reference number of the Government's response to each Report is printed in brackets after the HC printing number.

Session 2017–19

First Report	Violence in Rakhine State and the UK's response	HC 435
Second Report	The future of UK diplomacy in Europe	HC 514
Third Report	Kurdish aspirations and the interests of the UK	HC 518
Fourth Report	2017 elections to the International Court of Justice	HC 860
Fifth Report	The UK's response to hurricanes in its Overseas Territories	HC 722
Sixth Report	Global Britain	HC 780
Seventh Report	Global Britain and the 2018 Commonwealth Summit	HC 831
Eighth Report	Moscow's Gold: Russian Corruption in the UK	HC 932
Ninth Report	The FCO's preparations for the 2018 World Cup	HC 1011
Tenth Report	Global Britain and the Western Balkans	HC 1013
Eleventh Report	UK arms exports during 2016	HC 666
Twelfth Report	Global Britain: The Responsibility to Protect and Humanitarian Intervention	HC 1005
Thirteenth Report	Global Britain: Human rights and the rule of law	HC 874
First Special Report	The United Kingdom's relations with Russia: Government Response to the Committee's Seventh Report of Session 2016–17	HC 322
Second Special Report	The UK's relations with Turkey: Government Response to the Committee's Tenth Report of Session 2016–17	HC 333
Third Special Report	'Political Islam', and the Muslim Brotherhood Review: Government Response to the Committee's Eighth Report of Session 2016–17	HC 334
Fourth Special Report	Violence in Rakhine State and the UK's response: Government Response to the Committee's First Report	HC 868

Fifth Special Report	The future of UK diplomacy in Europe: Government response to the Committee's Second Report	HC 918
Sixth Special Report	Kurdish aspirations and the interests of the UK: Government response to the Committee's Third Report	HC 983
Seventh Special Report	2017 elections to the International Court of Justice: Government response to the Committee's Fourth Report	HC 1012
Eighth Special Report	Article 50 negotiations: Implications of "No Deal": Government response to the Committee's Ninth Report	HC 1053
Ninth Special Report	The UK's response to hurricanes in its Overseas Territories: Government response to the Committee's Fifth Report	HC 1052
Tenth Special Report	Global Britain: Government response to the Committee's Sixth Report	HC 1236
Eleventh Special Report	Global Britain and the 2018 Commonwealth Summit: Government response to the Committee's Seventh Report	HC 1427
Twelfth Special Report	Moscow's Gold: Russian Corruption in the UK: Government response to the Committee's Eighth Report	HC 1488
Thirteenth Special Report	The FCO's preparations for the 2018 World Cup in Russia: Government response to the Committee's Ninth Report	HC 1507
Fourteenth Special Report	Global Britain and the Western Balkans: Government response to the Committee's Tenth Report	HC 1572
Fifteenth Special Report	Global Britain: The Responsibility to Protect and Humanitarian Intervention: Government response to the Committee's Twelfth Report	HC 1719
Sixteenth Special Report	Global Britain: Human rights and the rule of law: Government response to the Committee's Thirteenth Report	HC 1759
Seventeenth Special Report	Global Britain and the Western Balkans: Supplementary Government response to the Committee's Tenth Report	HC 1760