

[Home](#) > [FCO areas of research interest \(ARI\) 2020: coronavirus \(COVID-19\) update](#)

[Foreign &
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Research and analysis

FCO areas of research interest: coronavirus (COVID-19) update, May 2020

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Contents

[Background](#)

[Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) related areas of research interest](#)

[Relevant FCO units, departments and cadres](#)

[Impact and the Research Excellence Framework \(REF\) 2021 \(now postponed due to COVID-19\)](#)



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This publication is available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/fco-areas-of-research-interest-ari-2020-coronavirus-covid-19-update/fco-areas-of-research-interest-coronavirus-covid-19-update-may-2020>

Background

The Foreign & Commonwealth Office (FCO) is working with other government departments to address the impacts of the coronavirus (COVID-19) crisis. In doing so we are conscious of the excellence of the UK's academic and research base, appreciative of offers of support we have received and aware that researchers from many disciplines are devising research projects and bidding for funding, or modifying existing research plans to meet the coronavirus crisis.

This post therefore shares our current coronavirus related Areas of Research Interest for the medium to longer term. The list may be updated and does not include epidemiological, mathematical, engineering or other STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) science questions about the SARS-CoV-2 virus or medical technology and therapies to address it. These are covered by the [Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies \(SAGE\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/groups/scientific-advisory-group-for-emergencies-sage) (<https://www.gov.uk/government/groups/scientific-advisory-group-for-emergencies-sage>) at which the FCO is represented by its [Chief Scientific Adviser, Professor Carole Mundell](https://www.gov.uk/government/people/carole-mundell). (<https://www.gov.uk/government/people/carole-mundell>)

The list also does not cover, though it may overlap with, the research interests of the Department for International Development (DFID). DFID has a dedicated research and evidence budget of circa £400 million per annum to meet its needs. Find more information on [research at DFID](https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/department-for-international-development/about/research) (<https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/department-for-international-development/about/research>) and [@DFID_Research](https://twitter.com/dfid_research) (https://twitter.com/dfid_research).

We work closely with DFID and share 7 Ministers but have different structures, some details of which are provided below. The FCO does not have a dedicated research and development budget.

Coronavirus (COVID-19) related areas of research interest

Our remit is global and our interests correspondingly wide. The below are indicative rather than fully comprehensive questions of relevance for our work and are arranged into ten overlapping categories.

The dynamic nature of world events and diplomatic work around them mean that we often need research based insights to help anticipate, shape, manage and benefit from unfolding developments and possible futures. The synthesised expertise of researchers can help us make judgements in a policy environment where experimental trials and replicable results are often impossible or inappropriate.

Because time can be of the essence we value emerging results and insights shared via updates, short events, websites and similar, in advance of peer reviewed articles.

Global health, legal and historical dimensions

For example:

- the history of epidemics, pandemics and their aftermath. What lessons for recovery from coronavirus can we learn from past recoveries from pandemics or other major crises
- analysis of intellectual property considerations in developing and distributing a coronavirus vaccine
- analysis of the extent to which sanctions inhibit humanitarian responses to pandemics and the impact of humanitarian exemptions on sanctions policy
- the compatibility of coronavirus related restrictions with human rights law obligations or with other obligations under international law

Climate and biodiversity

For example:

- how will the economic impact of coronavirus affect governments' ambitions for climate change targets and biodiversity? What opportunities are afforded the UK in its efforts to tackle the global threat
- what is the impact of coronavirus on the multilateral and international alignments on climate change consensus? What opportunities are afforded the UK in its efforts to tackle the global threat
- how will public attitudes be affected? Are individuals, cities or communities motivated by the drop in emission levels resulting from reduced travel? Are they more or less fearful of ambitious decision making to protect the climate? What opportunities does this present the UK
- what impact will coronavirus have on global attitudes to traditional medicines derived from animal products
- how will the health and economic impacts of coronavirus affect the attitude of governments and publics to the illegal wildlife trade

Emerging technology, research and science diplomacy

For example:

- how are different countries balancing privacy concerns around digital contact tracing apps
- is coronavirus accelerating trends in emerging technologies? How might these trends affect global employment and immigration patterns
- how will coronavirus impact on international co-operation on emerging technologies
- what will future international scientific collaboration look like in a post-coronavirus world? Will scientists collaborate in a different way

- how will coronavirus impact on the uptake of international study? What are the longer term implications for the research ecosystem in the UK and internationally? What will be the impact on the UK's reputation as a leading science nation

Economics and trade

For example:

- how might the coronavirus outbreak affect global supply-chains
- how will coronavirus impact on forecasted global peak oil demand? What implications does this have for the transition to renewable resources
- how will the composition of sovereign debt change in countries post-coronavirus
- what are the implications for stability of the euro area
- how will global patterns of consumption, saving and investment change post-coronavirus? How will productivity growth change
- to what extent will the UK's main trading partners adopt a more protectionist stance? How could this affect trade negotiations going forward
- what will be the distributional impacts? Will developing countries and emerging markets be hit relatively harder by the long run economic consequences of coronavirus? Will women?
- what will be the long run economic pressure on international institutions and where or how should the UK engage to ensure most influence
- analysis of the impact and implications of price gouging by industries and sectors due to or during coronavirus

Public opinion and the information environment

For example:

- analysis of how UK citizens and regions' expectations of UK government's international efforts are evolving
- analysis of how international efforts can most benefit UK citizens after the pandemic
- analysis of how public trust in democratic, religious and social institutions is evolving in different countries and communities
- analysis of international polling and other survey indicators of the impact on public attitudes towards globalisation. Are there differences between developed vs. lower and middle income countries, or generational differences, and do these suggest significant changes compared to results from recent decades
- public and state attitudes in China and the US towards the provision of 'global goods', particularly health provision in developing nations, for example hospital building or support for NGOs and the World Health Organisation (WHO). How is the 'global good' narrative promoted at home and overseas

- how will disinformation techniques evolve to profit from the crisis? How do different societies or groups imbibe, use or combat rumour and misinformation? How will fear of pandemic resurgence affect the willingness of publics to accept greater surveillance

Demographics and migration

For example:

- analysis of the relevance of demographics for the impact coronavirus has in different parts of the world
- how do different social groups or demographics respond to information on coronavirus in different countries
- analysis of how coronavirus may affect relations between generations and/or ethnic, religious or other identity groups in different countries
- how might coronavirus affect migration trends? For example, as an amplifier or as a driver of migration in itself? If it impacts, which regions of the world are likely to be most affected

Geopolitics

For example:

- how state and non-state actors are adjusting their approaches to geopolitical issues during the course of the pandemic
- analysis of the role of soft power efforts, public diplomacy and international aid in geopolitical contest between larger powers
- analysis of the impacts of the pandemic on international cooperation and relationships between states

International institutions

For example:

- analysis of the impact of coronavirus on key constituencies' approach to global governance and to particular institutions or groups of them within the multilateral system
- analysis of the responses of and dynamics within and between multilateral institutions and the implications of these developments for global governance as a whole
- analysis of possible reforms to the WHO and of measures to improve implementation of the International Health Regulations

Democracy, religion and ideologies

For example:

- analysis of new transnational movements, platforms, community mobilisations and networks emerging from coronavirus and what they might mean for the UK
- analysis of the impact of coronavirus on freedom of religion or belief
- analysis of whether, where and how states or non state actors use the disruption caused by the crisis to curtail minority rights or promote ideologies

Conflict, instability and terror

For example:

- analysis of how conflict and terrorist dynamics may change as a direct or indirect result of coronavirus
- analysis of what new conflicts may arise and where there might be new opportunities to resolve conflict
- analysis of how coronavirus interacts with other factors of instability in different countries

Relevant FCO units, departments and cadres

The FCO has over 270 overseas posts in 168 countries and usually works on a wide range of issues including long term challenges and short term crises. At present many FCO staff are redeployed on the immediate consular and international coordination challenges thrown up by the pandemic.

We do not have a single Research, Evidence & Analysis Directorate but several parts of the FCO base in London have regular or occasional interaction with academia, for example through attending conferences held by Universities, Learned Societies and Think Tanks, by inviting academics in to events in the FCO, by reading academic papers, hosting fellows, or through informal discussions. All synthesise and analyse research and evidence rather than conducting primary academic research and most play an important role in providing or procuring the training offered by the Diplomatic Academy.

Research Analysts

The Research Analysts (RA) ([@FCOResearch](https://twitter.com/fcoresearch) (<https://twitter.com/fcoresearch>)) form a specialist cadre of geographical and thematic experts who provide timely, high quality, evidence-based research and analysis to FCO Ministers and senior officials. They are divided into 10 research groups, each attached to a directorate or directorates in the FCO. Most Research Analysts work is commissioned by the relevant policy directorate or initiated by RA to inform the Directorate: RAs are an integral part of the policy process and an important contributor to Diplomatic Academy training offers. The cadre's origins lie in Chatham House and Oxford's Balliol College, Professor Arnold Toynbee came up with the idea on the eve of World War 2 to provide expert insight to the country's war effort. See [Herald of a noisy world: interpreting the news of all nations](#)

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/herald-of-a-noisy-world-interpreting-the-news-of-all-nations>).

Economics Unit

The Economics Unit is the centre of the FCO's economic expertise in London. It produces work across all foreign policy priorities. It works with the overseas economic network ensuring work produced draws on local expertise. Its 3 functions are to:

- strengthen the economic underpinning of our international policy
- provide direction and leadership for the economics network overseas
- strengthen the economics training provided to staff

FCO Historians

FCO Historians' core role is to [publish historical documents](https://issuu.com/fcohistorians) (<https://issuu.com/fcohistorians>) in the series Documents on British Policy Overseas (DBPO). Through this and other publications, together with seminars, workshops and other outreach events, they form an interface between the FCO on the one hand and the academic community and wider public on the other. Within the FCO, Historians are frequently called upon to provide historical advice and answer historical enquiries. They also have input into the FCO's Diplomatic Academy, aimed at building awareness of the historical context of UK foreign policy. The origins of [@FCOHistorians](https://twitter.com/fcohistorians) (<https://twitter.com/fcohistorians>) lie in the final days of World War One in 1918. See [History at the heart of diplomacy: historians in the Foreign Office, 1918 to 2018](https://issuu.com/fcohistorians/docs/history_at_the_heart_of_diplomacy-w?e=7707811/65869673) (https://issuu.com/fcohistorians/docs/history_at_the_heart_of_diplomacy-w?e=7707811/65869673).

Open Source Unit

The Open Source Unit focuses on online material and synthesises research insights from academic literature and online media analysis, maintaining relationships with academics working in this area and commissioning small academic projects.

Legal Directorate

The Legal Directorate, although not a specific research cadre, conducts legal research which informs its provision of legal advice across the FCO. The Directorate has 5 legal teams, each with its own geographical and/or thematic remit

Other parts of the FCO

Other parts of the FCO including the Strategy Directorate and its Policy Unit regularly work with think tanks or academics on discrete projects, to help inform new thinking.

The Diplomatic Academy does not do research or analysis but has relationships with academics and other external experts to help deliver training. The FCO also has a Counsellor for Strategy & External Expertise and a Knowledge Exchange Fellowship Scheme run jointly with UK Research and Innovation's Arts & Humanities and its Economic & Social Research Councils.

FCO Chief Scientific Adviser

The FCO's Chief Scientific Adviser, [Professor Carole Mundell](https://www.gov.uk/government/people/carole-mundell) (<https://www.gov.uk/government/people/carole-mundell>), works closely with the Science and Innovation Network (SIN, [@UKSINet](https://twitter.com/UKSINet) (<https://twitter.com/UKSINet>)) which has over 100 science officers embedded in British embassies, high commissions and consulates, in over 40 countries. SIN officers work with the local science and innovation community in support of UK policy overseas, leading to mutual benefits to the UK and the host country. SIN works to facilitate connections between innovative UK industries and scientific expertise and international opportunities to grow prosperity; deliver solutions to global challenges such as anti-microbial resistance (AMR), health, energy, the conservation and sustainable use of oceans, and enhancing resilience to natural disasters; and works to support international development goals, matching UK expertise to international need.

Impact and the Research Excellence Framework (REF) 2021 (now postponed due to COVID-19)

We appreciate the expert assistance we get from academics and are aware of the importance of [REF](https://www.ref.ac.uk/) (<https://www.ref.ac.uk/>) outcomes for them and for the Higher Education Institutions in which they work. Equally, we want academics to be able to undertake new research on emerging and ongoing challenges that might help inform FCO work.

However, measuring the impact of any particular individual or academic department, whether inside or outside the Civil Service, faces significant challenges, for example:

- in the policy process, outcomes tend to be the result of many different voices and factors rather than of the ideas or actions of a single person or team
- impact can be gradual, taking a long time to be realised
- ongoing relationships allowing for ad hoc learning by FCO staff are often more impactful than single articles or books, but can be harder to evidence
- where academics publish or broadcast in the traditional or social media the impact they have on diplomats' understanding of the world may be significant,

but similarly hard to evidence

- however good a piece of research is in its own terms, it may ultimately not affect the course of policy because it is weighed against other important factors
- conversely, research methods or conclusions which are widely challenged could nevertheless have impact by sparking debate and bringing new questions to the fore, even where this was not the researcher's primary intent

Against this backdrop we want to avoid the twin risks of providing inconsistent feedback on academic impact on a case by case basis and, on the other hand, of creating labour intensive in-house processes for comparison of competing claims to such impact.

Asked for REF feedback or statements of support for funding bids, our input will in most cases be a simple, factual statement noting the nature of the researcher's interaction with and contribution to an FCO team (for example the fact that the academic spoke at a seminar for policymakers on a particular topic) and outlining the relevance of the event, endeavour or proposed topic for FCO strategic objectives. Such statements will not seek to compare the scholar, team or research in question with other scholars and research.

There will be rarer occasions when the contribution made by an academic or academic team calls for more bespoke treatment, or where a proposed research programme promises such value to FCO work that it merits particular support and collaboration. Examples may include Knowledge Exchange fellows working within the FCO on a regular basis over many months, overseeing networks of scholars working closely with the UK government, or research proposals which speak directly to FCO needs and ways of working.

Science and Innovation Network enquiries may be addressed to the mailbox: ScienceandInnovation.NetworkGlobalInbox@fco.gov.uk. Other research enquiries may be sent to fcocorrespondence@fco.gov.uk.

[↑ Back to top](#)

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