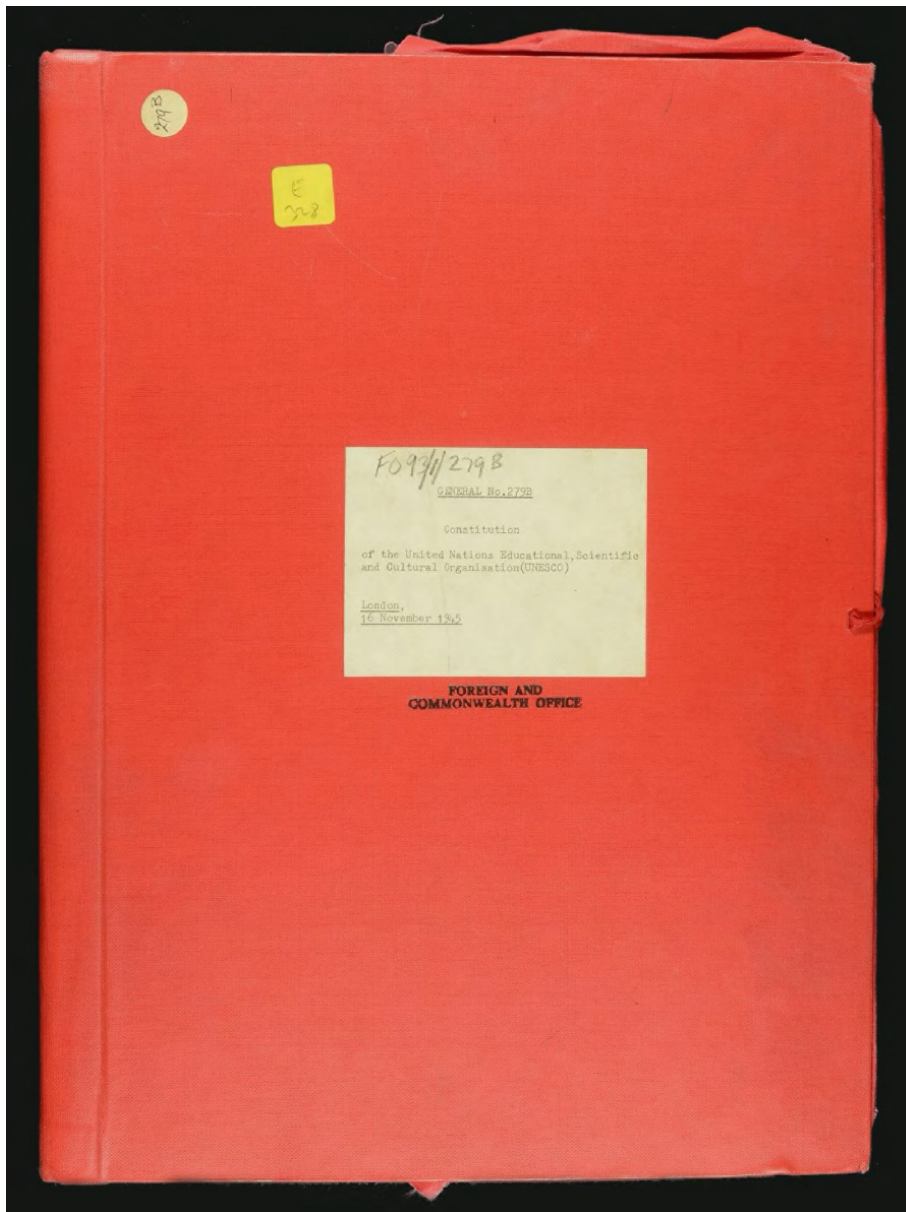


## UNESCO at 80

By James Bridge, Chief Executive and Secretary-General of the UK National Commission for UNESCO

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), founded in London in 1945, begins its 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations in November this year. This piece looks at why UNESCO was formed and whether it is holding true to its founding principles.



*Fig 1. Cover of original UNESCO Constitution Document. Courtesy J Bridge*

## The Formation of UNESCO

The horrors of the Second World War inspired new thinking and a spirit of international cooperation to help prevent future global conflicts.

The Conference of Allied Ministers (CAME) emerged during the summer of 1942 in the offices of Rab Butler MP, the UK Minister of Education, and Malcolm Robertson, Chair of the British Council. Taking advantage of the many governments-in-exile in London, they convened a meeting of the Allied Educational Ministers for collaboration on educational questions affecting the Allied countries of Europe.

CAME first convened in London in November 1942 and continued to do so for the following three years, bringing together a group of men and women who viewed education, culture, communication and finally science as vital elements build a more peaceful future.

CAME led to the formation of the United Nations Conference for the Establishment of an Education and Cultural Organisation which was held at the Institute of Civil Engineers, London from 1-16 November 1945, with forty-four governments represented – they knew that to prevent war, more was needed than economic and military alliances.



*Fig 2. UNESCO foundation meeting - ICE London 1945. Courtesy J Bridge*

On the final day of the Conference (16 November 1945), the UK Minister of Education, Ellen Wilkinson, proclaimed the adoption of UNESCO's Constitution (1), declaring:

*“That since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defenses of peace must be constructed”*



Fig 3. Ellen Cicely Wilkinson. Courtesy J Bridge

### Measuring success

It is timely to review the principles set out in UNESCO's Constitution to see if they continue to ring true in 2025.

Considering the contemporary challenges facing the world, it is vital to recall that those who had been through global conflict eighty years ago were certain that a body

focused on education, science, culture and communication and information was needed to secure peace, not only military and economic alliances.

Eighty years on then, the idea of having grassroots, community driven body, within an inter- governmental multilateral structure, remains a brilliant one – but how this is working in practice needs to be continuously reviewed to ensure it is meeting its goals and the needs of people in its members states and an as an organisation.

The most recent United Nations Multilateral Organisation Performance Assessment Network (MOPAN) (2) of UNESCO highlights its strengths and weaknesses. On the plus side its powerful contribution to global norms and best practice stands out. On the less positive is its need to complete its commitment to corporate reform – with a focus on enhancing accountability and supporting the ever-growing demand for UNESCO sites, projects and patronage in its member states. Countries and communities continue to see the value and scope for positive change that UNESCO Designations, such as World Heritage Sites, Biospheres, Geoparks (The Isle of Arran became a UNESCO Global Geopark in April 2025 for example) and the networks they create can provide.

The land-based Designation schemes are, of course, just part of a myriad UNESCO programmes and initiatives including Memory of the World (for documentary heritage), Associated Schools Network (ASPnet) schools, Intergovernmental Hydrological Programme (IHP), and Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission (IOC) and UNESCO university Chairs.

That the growing array of UNESCO Designations, programmes and initiatives are working to cooperate more closely together in regional, national, and global networks with their respective National Commissions for UNESCO (3) is encouraging, especially when tested against UNESCO's founding principles that:

*“lasting peace must be built upon the intellectual and moral solidarity of humankind” (4).*





Fig 4. National Commissions Meeting - Istanbul April 2024. Courtesy J Bridge



Fig 5. UNESCO Nat Comms Meeting - October 2024. Courtesy J Bridge

### What makes UNESCO special?

Looking more broadly, in a world where multilateralism is at a crossroads, and disinformation poses an increasing danger, it is worthwhile highlighting six key

constitutional principles of UNESCO and how they have been applied in the UK – a country that sits at the heart of multilateralism.

#### Convening Power

UNESCO provides a framework to bring countries, nations, people, and organisations together. In the UK, recent examples include the annual UK UNESCO Chairs' Conference in July 2025 at the University of Portsmouth assembling great expertise to address global challenges; UKNC's 'Local to Global' and 'Climate Change and UNESCO Heritage' regional and national workshops for UNESCO Site Coordinators with UK UNESCO Designations; and Scotland's UNESCO Trail.

#### Standard Setting

UNESCO Conventions, Recommendations or Declarations, such as the 1972 World Heritage Convention (5) or the UNESCO Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence (6) and the Recommendation on the Ethics of Neurotechnology, being sent to the November 2025 UNESCO General Conference, are a means to negotiate global standards, set frameworks and reach agreements between nations. They offer value in being agreed standards, not opinions.

#### (A) Global Network

The UNESCO global network comprising 194 Member States (and with Associate Member States making two hundred National Commissions in total) spans the Earth and delivers hundreds of essential programmes and initiatives - such as the Global Tsunami Warning System (7).

#### Cross-sectoral Work

UNESCO's global impact is driven by collaboration across education, science, culture, and communication. Here, UKNC fosters connections across our sites, experts in higher education, and partner organisations such as ICOMOS UK to create the 'UNESCO in the UK Network.'

#### A Laboratory of Ideas

UNESCO is often referred to as a "laboratory of ideas" because it serves as a global forum for discussion, debate, and the generation of innovative solutions to address complex challenges across its fields of expertise. The UK's UNESCO Chairs and UKNC's 'Research & Innovation Group' are part of this.

#### The UNESCO Name

The UNESCO name, badge, or overall 'brand' is a protected and internationally recognized symbol for peace through learning, connection and understanding. As the National Commission in the UK, we utilise these values when we afford Patronage to events and initiatives such as the 'Great Science Share for Schools' and the Urdd Gobaith Wales Peace and Goodwill Message.

## In conclusion – achievements and challenges

As UNESCO moves into its eightieth year, there is much for the organisation and its global network to reflect on, not least what its member states and the communities within them would like UNESCO to achieve by the time it reaches its centenary in 2045.

There is a pressing need to gather evidence on the contribution of UNESCO's programmes and initiatives to the building of understanding between people and nations. Companies, for example, Alphabet (Google and You Tube) and Meta (Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp) are masters of gathering and utilizing social networks, ideas, stories, and connections between people, so clearly it can be done. UNESCO's work, focused on the public good and continually inspiring individuals and communities, needs communicating and measuring in a way that makes its contribution even clearer to governments, political leaders, global funders, and the private sector. In other words, it needs to tell its story better.

UNESCO continues to innovate and develop through its grassroots and global network of UNESCO Designations, National Commissions, its expert headquarters and field office Secretariat, and key components of the UNESCO ecosystem such as ICOMOS, all wrapped up in its Ministry and ambassador led and inter-governmental multilateral structure.

UNESCO is evolving, and with increasing experience should come increased institutional and collective wisdom. The future opportunities for UNESCO to grasp are wide and varied– driven significantly by its grassroots – who continue to be inspired by the scope offered by its founding principles. The perpetual task of building the defenses of peace in the minds of people remains as vital as ever.

Further information on the work of UNESCO in the UK can be found at:

[www.unesco.org.uk](http://www.unesco.org.uk)

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He worked on EU Trade and Partnership Agreements at the European Parliament; was a stagiaire at the Secretariat-General of the European Commission; worked at Age UK (then Age Concern England), the Royal College of Nursing, Greater London Enterprise, the UK Financial Services Authority; and ran the Brussels offices of the Law Societies, Save the Children International, MHA Associates and the start-up Internet company I-Wave Limited.

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