

# **80 YEARS OF BRITISH COUNCIL'S WORK IN EGYPT**

Dear Friends

It is with great pleasure – and a lot of humility – that I invite you to celebrate with us 80 years of the British Council working in Egypt.

It was in 1938 that the British Council opened its doors for the first time outside the UK – in Bucharest and here in Cairo. We are delighted to share the honour of being the oldest part of a network that now comprises of around 200 offices in over 100 countries all around the world.

## WHY WE EXIST

Set up in 1934 in the UK, British Council set out “to create in a country overseas, a basis of friendly knowledge and understanding” and from 1940 we defined our aim as ‘promoting a wider knowledge of [the UK] and the English language abroad and developing closer cultural relations between [the UK] and other countries.’ This has not changed over the years and is the basis for our work in Egypt as it is elsewhere.

## CHANGING PLACES

Our central office in Egypt has always been Cairo but from the early 1940s we set up a number of British Institutes around the country where much of our activities were carried out. These Institutes were, at various times, in Alexandria, Port Said, Zagazig, Tanta, Assiut, Minya, Mehalla El-Kobra & Mansoura.

During the 1950s, however, partly due to changing patterns of work but also as a reflection of fluctuations in the fortunes of the bilateral relationship, we were gradually forced to close the Institutes. Our presence has remained in Alexandria and Cairo since the 1970s. Since then, improved transport systems and communication technology have allowed us to greatly expand the reach of our work across Egypt.

## CONTINUITY IN OUR ACTIVITIES AND AREAS OF FOCUS

One of the notable things I have observed in our annual reports going back to the 1940s is the continuity in the areas of work we have been carrying out over the decades. These include: English language teaching & learning; teacher training & development; testing; academic/university exchange; science; and within the arts, film, exhibitions, drama, music and dance.

And one “golden thread” running through all of this is the emphasis on people-to-people contact and exchange. It is no coincidence that we call our work “Cultural Relations”; building individual and institutional relationships for the long-term good of all parties has always been, and remains, a key focus for us.

## SOME HIGHLIGHTS (AND LOW POINTS)

There have been many highlights during our 80 years in Egypt as well as some difficult moments. Shortly after opening in Egypt, we subsidised the reopening of Victoria College in 1941 after it was damaged by bombing. Many will know that this school has a proud tradition of developing excellent students and since 1956 it has been operating within the Egyptian system and is now known as Victory College.

A few years after the war finished, in 1950, that great eminence of literature – the “dean of Arabic Literature” – Dr Taha Hussein visited the UK as Minister of Education at our invitation. He attended many dinners and lunches hosted in his honour (all recorded in some detail by The Times newspaper) and he received an honorary doctorate from the University of Oxford during his visit that November.

Drama has been one of our biggest areas of collaboration with Egypt within the arts. The Old Vic theatre’s production at the Giza Pyramids in 1962 was by no means the first we had supported – they had brought Hamlet and Henry V here in 1939 starring the great Alec Guinness. Other productions of Shakespeare’s work continued over the decades to follow – in 1973, 1985 and 1990. The latter, brought by the UK’s National Theatre, was supported by a youthful Ahmed El Attar – now, of course, a key partner for us through D-CAF and the Arab Arts Focus.

In 1969, the Royal Ballet performed Swan Lake on a specially-constructed stage at the Temple of Chephron (1969) (video footage of it can be found [here](#)) This was part of the Cairo Millennium celebrations and was extremely well received. The Sphinx and the Swan were clearly a powerful combination.

The foundations for the current work of the British Council were laid by the signing of a new cultural convention between Egypt and the UK in 1972. Shortly afterwards, in 1974, we moved to the current location of our main branch at 192 Nile Street in Agouza.

The signing of the cultural convention between the countries recognised the need to put cultural relations between Egypt and Britain on a secure footing. This was a sign of a maturing relationship after periodic difficulties in the preceding decades. Tension between the two countries had led to physical damage to British Council buildings in the early 1950s and of course the “Suez Crisis” - or the “Tripartite Aggression” - was a time of great tension between our countries, leading to a suspension of our work for a time. However, what has a recurring pattern over the last 80 years has been a recognition of the importance of cultural relations between the two countries and a quick resumption of our work after any period of turbulence.

# PARTNERSHIP AND SCALE OF OUR WORK TODAY

One big change in our work over the years has been the sheer size and scale of it. In the 1940s and 1950s, each of our Institutes taught hundreds of people a year. Now we measure the number of English students in the tens of thousands across our six branches. And whereas we used to teach only adults, now half of our students are under 18.

The same trend is true of our work with examinations. 50 years ago, we used to examine hundreds of candidates a year; we now examine over 100,000 candidates a year, many of them with our partner schools network for International GCSE exams, which has over 120 schools attached to it.

Within another core area of work, Teacher Training, we have moved from a number of individual programmes with partner institutions across the country to a large scale nationwide project with the Ministry of Education.

In addition to these areas, we currently manage a large part of the Newton Mosharafa Fund, a large bilateral fund to support scientific research and capacity development of researchers. The total value of this is 50m GBP over 7 years. Likewise, our Premier Skills programme, using sport to develop life skills across Egypt and especially for women and girls, has reached around 65,000 people over ten years, in 27 governorates and supporting 50 separate community projects. This has been possible because of our partnership with the Premier League in England and the Ministry of Youth and Sports in Egypt.

And of course, thanks to changes in technology, we can now reach a far greater number of people than ever before. A digital component is integrated into many of our projects and our Facebook page has around 1.7 million fans – giving us, along with many other organisations of course, an ability to reach out to people that was unthinkable even 10 years ago, let alone 80. Of course, the population has grown too – in 1937, the population of Egypt was 15.9 million (source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demographics\\_of\\_Egypt](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demographics_of_Egypt)) whereas it currently stands at 94 million (plus 10 million who live outside Egypt).

Another difference these days is that we put more emphasis on creating opportunities for Egyptian artists to travel to the UK, build links with artists in the UK and create an audience for their work. In 2017, for example, we supported Egyptian artists to perform at the Arab Arts Focus at the Edinburgh Festival, Shubbak Festival, Liverpool Arab Arts Festival.

# PARTNERSHIPS FOR THE FUTURE

As we look to expand our partnerships further in Egypt, we will look to build upon our existing National Teacher Training Programme (NTTP) with the Ministry of Education and find ways to support the development of even more teachers. We will also develop our partnership with the Egyptian Knowledge Bank (EKB) to bring high-quality English learning materials (as well as support materials for teachers) to all Egyptians. And we will support the growing number of collaborations between our two countries in Higher Education - transforming the lives of thousands of Egyptian and British students.

## THE YEAR AHEAD

Last but not least, we wish to celebrate with you, our partners and friends who have accompanied us on our journey over the last amazing 80 years, and to reflect on what our work together has meant to us all.

So please send us your thoughts, comments, reminiscences, photos in the following ways:

**#80yearsBritishCouncil**  
**#BritishCouncilMoments**

We can't wait to hear from you!

Best wishes,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jeff Streeter', enclosed within a light grey rectangular border.

**Jeff Streeter**

Director, British Council, Egypt