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THE UNITED WORLD COLLEGES: A UNIQUE MODEL OF INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

The factors that make a school truly 'international' are open to debate. Is a school international because of its distinctive curriculum, the composition of its student population, its co-curricular program, or its ethos?

The 10 (soon to be 12) United World Colleges are unique among international schools in that they do not cater for a local expatriate population, but attempt to create their own truly global environment by bringing exceptional students from all around the world to study and live together, regardless of ability to pay. Originally a product of the Cold War, the United World Colleges were established to form the next generation of future leaders from all parts of the world, educate them to the highest possible standard so they will assume positions of influence when they return to their homelands, have them live together as they study together so can really understand each other, and develop a love of service towards others. Students are selected by voluntary National Committees in their home countries purely on the basis of merit, regardless of race, religion, nationality, background or financial means. Today, the United World Colleges attempt to implement the founders' vision in a way that meets the needs and demands of an increasingly globalised world.

This paper examines the growth and development of the United World College movement and its educational philosophy, inspired by the great educationalist Kurt Hahn. Using the first United World College in China (Li Po Chun UWC in Hong Kong) as an example, the four distinctive facets of a United World College education are explored, these being academics, creativity/action/service, special projects and residential life.

"Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world. It is through education that the daughter of a peasant can become a doctor; that the son of a mine worker can become the head of a mine, that a child of farm workers can become the president of a great nation.... The striking feature of the United World Colleges is that they embrace the entire world across all divides of race, history, culture, wealth, religion, economic status and political belief: they are unique and they are conscious of their responsibilities.'

-Nelson Mandela, United World Colleges Honorary President.

WHAT IS INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION?

The factors that make a school truly 'international' are open to debate. Is a school international because of its distinctive curriculum, the composition of its student population, its co-curricular program, or its ethos? As Thompson (2004) noted, "international education is not only ill-defined in its own right but it is also used interchangeably and even synonymously with other terms". The word 'international' in 'international education' is often confused with 'global', 'multicultural', 'intercultural', 'multinational', 'multilingual' or simply 'expatriate'.

The mission statement of the International Baccalaureate Organisation (IBO) suggests, perhaps not surprisingly for an organization offering an international curriculum, that "international education is what is experienced when an international curriculum is offered". On the other hand, research by Hayden and Thompson suggests that the formal curriculum is *not* the most important dimension of international education in the minds of students and teachers, being less significant than the mix of students and teachers (though more important than the local community in which the school is located, the co-curricular activities offered and the attitudes of the school leadership). Expanding the concept of international education, the-then Director-General of the International Baccalaureate Organisation, George Walker, suggested in 2002 that an international education should include:

- the celebration of diversity
- an understanding of culture
- a study of global issues
- a recognition of different ways of developing understanding

Others would argue that authentic international education is an even richer and more diverse concept than these four points would suggest. For example, Heywood (2002) sees effective international education as developing 'the competencies, understandings, attitudes, language proficiencies, participation and identities necessary for effective cross-cultural engagement', or 'intercultural literacy' as he defines the concept. My fellow-UWC Head, Malcolm McKenzie, emphasises the importance of community, likening international schools to miniature worlds that mirror little planets unto themselves. He has argued (2004) that an effective international school community should have four basic characteristics:

- Communities co-operate and try not to confront
- Communities discourage rampant individualism
- Communities encourage teamwork and team building
- Communities stigmatise instant gratification.

It was perhaps with this rich concept of international education in mind that led George Walker to make the following observation in his weblog, shortly before his retirement in December 2005: “to those who ask me, *how can I best see international education in action?*, my reply has always been *visit a United World College*”.

THE UNITED WORLD COLLEGES

The 10 (soon to be 12) United World Colleges are unique among international schools in that they do not cater for a local expatriate population, but attempt to create their own truly global environment by bringing exceptional students from all around the world to study and live together, regardless of ability to pay.

The first United World College, Atlantic College in Wales, was opened in 1962 when the Cold War was at its height. It was the result of a conference held at the NATO College in Paris in the late 1950s, during which two key questions were posed: how can we create a more secure world without war and conflict, and how can we build lasting peace?

The answer to these questions lay not in the fields of diplomacy, politics or the military as the attendees may have expected, but in education. The answer that emerged was to build deep understandings among *younger* people who were not hardened by prejudice and hatred like older leaders. To achieve this goal in practice, it was proposed that a completely new type of school be established to form the next generation of future leaders from all parts of the world, educate them to the highest possible standards so they can assume positions of influence when they return to their homelands, have them live together as they study together so can really understand each other, and develop a love of serving others – putting the needs of others before their own.

Voluntary National Committees were established in many countries around the world to select students purely on the basis of merit, regardless of race, religion, nationality, background or financial means. A team of educationalists was brought into the project at that point under the leadership of Kurt Hahn, a German Jew who had founded Salem School, and then fled Nazi Germany for the United Kingdom where he became Head of Gordonstoun School in Scotland. In addition to his pivotal role in starting the United World Colleges, Kurt Hahn was also instrumental in founding many other educational initiatives including Outward Bound, the Round Square, and the International Award for Young People. Summarising his approach to educating young people, Kurt Hahn said:

“I regard it as the foremost task of education to ensure the survival of these qualities: an enterprising curiosity, an undefeatable spirit, tenacity in pursuit, readiness for sensible self-denial, and above all, compassion.”

Quoting words he saw on the wall of a farmhouse in Belgium in 1914 – *Your disability is your opportunity; there is more in you than you think* – Kurt Hahn also emphasized the importance of taking young people beyond their comfort zones in all areas so that they can discover their true potential.

Today, the Cold War is over, and the United World Colleges attempt to implement the founders’ vision in a way that meets the needs and demands of an increasingly globalised world. Although superpower rivalries have diminished, conflicts continue and the world is confronted by new

challenges and terrors, many of which feed upon cultural ignorance which leads to misunderstanding and then on to antagonism. The need for the United World Colleges has never been greater or more relevant.

Today, there are 10 United World Colleges, located in Wales, Norway, Italy, Swaziland, India, Hong Kong, Singapore, Venezuela, Canada and the United States¹. In September this year, two more United World Colleges will open, one in Costa Rica and one in Bosnia-Herzegovina². Each College is a completely independent not-for-profit (charitable) institution, with its own governing board and articles of incorporation under local law. However, there is an international office in London that co-ordinates the recruitment of students through the 130 National Committees around the world, and which provides a coherent philosophical and organizational framework within which the different Colleges can operate and co-operate. All the Colleges share the same mission statement which derives from Nelson Mandela's words at the start of this article. The Mission Statement is *to make education a force to unite people, nations and cultures for peace and a sustainable future*. The Colleges also subscribe to a common set of core values:

- International and intercultural understanding
- Celebration of difference
- Personal responsibility and integrity
- Mutual responsibility and respect
- Compassion and service
- Respect for the environment
- A sense of idealism
- Personal challenge
- Action and personal example

The most common model for United World Colleges is to be a two-year residential college for 16-19 year olds, teaching the International Baccalaureate Diploma program as a credential for university entry. Exceptions to this 'standard model' are the United World College in Venezuela, which is an agricultural training college, and the colleges in Swaziland and Singapore which also have younger students. Several new United World Colleges are in advanced stages of planning.

Once the decision had been made to establish the United World Colleges, the search began to find the most suitable curriculum. It was decided that a truly international school should not teach a national curriculum, so the United World Colleges, together with a handful of other pioneering international schools, initiated a new international curriculum and examinations system that is known today as the International Baccalaureate.

¹ Wales – United World College of the Atlantic, Cardiff (opened 1962)

Singapore – United World College of South-East Asia, Singapore (opened 1971)

Canada – Lester B Pearson United World College of the Pacific, Vancouver (opened 1974)

Swaziland – Waterford KaMhlaba United World College of Southern Africa, Mbabane (opened 1981)

USA – Armand Hammer United World College of the American West, Montezuma (opened 1982)

Italy – United World College of the Adriatic, Duino (opened 1982)

Venezuela – Simón Bolívar United World College of Agriculture, Caracas (opened 1988)

China – Li Po Chun United World College of Hong Kong, Hong Kong (opened 1992)

Norway – Red Cross Nordic United World College, Flekke (opened 1995)

India – Mahindra United World College of India, Pune (opened 1997)

² Costa Rica – United World College of Costa Rica, Santa Ana (opens 2006)

Bosnia-Herzegovina – United World College in Mostar Gymnazium, Mostar (opens 2006)

Although sharing a common philosophy and purpose, each of the United World Colleges has its own special emphases. For example, Atlantic College (United Kingdom) operates a life saving service off the coast of Wales, Pearson College (Canada) emphasizes outdoor pursuits, Mahindra College (India) emphasizes economic development and community building, and Li Po Chun United World College (Hong Kong) tries to be a two-way bridge of understanding between Chinese culture and the global community.

LI PO CHUN UNITED WORLD COLLEGE

As the first United World College in China, Li Po Chun United World College (LPCUWC) is of special interest to this conference. Since it was established in 1992, Li Po Chun United World College has enjoyed a special relationship with talented students from all parts of China. Indeed, every year the College offers a number of full scholarships through the China Scholarships Council to high ability students from all parts of China to come to Hong Kong and study at the College. After studying at LPCUWC, many of these students have achieved outstanding success in entering prestigious universities in other countries on full scholarships, gaining skills that will enable them to make significant contributions to China's economy and society in the years ahead.

Today, the College has 256 students from 80 different countries. Almost all the students receive scholarships to study for their two pre-university years, having been selected on merit by their National Committee (except China, where selection is done through the China Scholarships Council). All the students and teachers reside on the campus, which is a 6 hectare site on the shores of Tolo Harbour, backed by Ma On Shan Country Park in Hong Kong's New Territories. 42% of the students come from Hong Kong, and those from elsewhere come to Hong Kong especially to study at the College. Classes start at 7:30 am each day from Monday to Friday, and finish at 1:30 pm to enable the students to do community service in the afternoons. The College is among the highest academically achieving IB schools in the world.

The students' experiences at the College have four distinctive facets, which can be likened to the four legs of a chair. These facets – being academics, *quan cai*, special projects and residential life – will now be examined.

The first 'leg' of the LPCUWC experience is *academics*. All students study the International Baccalaureate (IB) Diploma, a two-year program of study that now has almost 40 years of history as the 'Passport to Universities' around the world. IB programs are now taught in almost 1800 schools in 122 countries. The Organisation's headquarters is in Geneva (Switzerland), and regional offices are situated in New York (USA), Buenos Aires (Argentina) and Singapore. The first students from China ever to study the IB Diploma did so at Li Po Chun United World College.

The College has had considerable success in the IB Diploma examinations. Table 1 below shows the recent statistics³:

³ In the IB Diploma, the maximum possible score is 45, comprising 7 for each of six subjects plus 3 points for Theory of Knowledge and the Extended Essay. A 'pass' grade is 24 points, representing the equivalent of a minimum pass (4 points) in each of the six subjects studied. Please note that the results from the May 2006 examinations were not yet available at the time of writing.

Points	All IB Schools	LPCUWC 2002	LPCUWC 2003	LPCUWC 2004	LPCUWC 2005
45	0.20%	0.80%	3.30%	0.80%	4.00%
40 or more	6.70%	35.50%	37.70%	32.50%	30.60%
35 or more	25.80%	69.40%	80.30%	73.30%	69.40%
30 or more	56.10%	91.90%	94.30%	90.80%	96.00%
24 or more	88.80%	99.20%	100.00%	100.00%	99.20%

Every year, students from LPCUWC are accepted by universities in many countries, including Canada, France, Hong Kong, Italy, Netherlands, Norway, United Kingdom and the United States. In recent years, 72% of US university offers to LPCUWC students have carried substantial scholarship support. Over half of LPCUWC's 2005 graduates entered university on scholarships.

For many students, especially those from disadvantaged families in poorer countries, excellence in academic formation is usually their only chance to break free from a background of poverty and gain admission to a university that will equip them with the skills to make a significant contribution to their society. For most students at United World Colleges, the 'real' UWC experience of serving others and making a contribution comes after their graduation.

Although excellence in academic formation is the prime focus for many students, it is important to remember that it is just one 'leg' of the UWC experience at LPCUWC. As one student commented:

"The tangible reward of getting the IB Diploma was something to strive for, but ultimately it's just a sheet of paper. The IB Program did us all good through less tangible, more abstract ways... It wasn't just an education of the mind, but also an education and deepening of the soul".

The second 'leg' of the LPCUWC experience is the *quan cai* program. *Quan cai* (全才) is the term used at the College to describe the co-curricular (or CAS – creativity, action, service and campus support) program. Each term, students are required to engage in at least one activity from each of the four *quan cai* areas. In each area, a huge range of activities is offered, comprising a mix of teacher-led and student-initiated activities. To give an idea of the range of *quan cai* activities available to students, the following list shows the offerings in 2006:

Creativity: 24-hour Drama, Advanced Print Making, African Dance, Art for Non-Artists, Cantonese basics, Cheerleading Team, Chess, Chinese Calligraphy and Painting, Chinese Cooking, Chinese Dance and Music, Chinese Debating, Dragon and Lion Dance Team, Drama, Eclipse Dance Group, English Debating, Initiative for Peace – Focus on Kashmir, International Cooking, Italian Cooking, Juggling, Latin American Dance, LPC Choir, LPC Circus, LPC Web Radio DJ, Model United Nations (MUN), Photography, Pottery Making, Spanish Learning Club, Speech, Theatre Production.

Action: Athletics Team Training, Badminton, Basketball (Boys), Basketball (Girls), Climbing (Beginner and Experienced levels), Cricket, Field Hockey, Fitness Training, Football, Hiking Expeditions, Indoor Football, Karate, Kayaking Expeditions, Squash (Beginner and Intermediate levels), Swimming, Table Tennis, Volleyball (Boys), Volleyball (Girls), Yoga.

Service: AIDS Orphans, Best Buddies, Caritas Tai Wai, Chungking Mansions, Coral Monitoring, Crossroads, Global Concerns Action Team (GCAT), Greenagers, Handicapped Children, Home for the Aged, Mai Po Ecostem, Peer Support at Yiu On, Pinehill Village, Playback, Poinsettia (Nepali) School, Riding for the Disabled, Ronald McDonald House, Sound Travels, TeenAIDS, World Wildlife Foundation (WWF) Marine Centre.

Campus Support: Audio-Visual Service, BTW Magazine, Café, Camp Store, Conflict Resolution, English Tutorials for Maintenance and Janitorial Staff, English Buddies, Environmental Action Group, Filming and Editing, First Aid, French Buddies, Ga Seung Hwa (conversational Cantonese for students), Graduation and Reflection Weekend Co-ordinators, International Current Affairs (ICA), Laboratory Service, Language Office Aides, Lighting Crew, LPC News, LPC Outreach, LPC Publicity and Promotion, LPC Souvenirs, LPC Web Radio, Main Office Support, Mandarin Tutors, Maths Buddies, Quan Cai Tournament, Relaxation Co-ordinators, Student Support System (S³), Spanish Buddies, Sports Centre Service, Student Consultative Committee, Student Initiatives, Student Leaders, UWC Communication, Web Design and Development, Yearbook.

The third 'leg' of the LPCUWC experience is *Special Projects*. These are divided into two main groups, China Week and Project Week.

In the first week of November each year, classes are suspended for *China Week*, in which all 1st Year students go to China to do service work and/or to extend themselves in outdoor pursuits. During the latest China Week in November 2005, the students traveled in eight groups as follows:

- Yao Tribe, Linnan, northern Guangdong (including Nan Gong Primary School, Nan Gong Secondary School, Linzhou town), two groups.
- She Tribe, Ning De county, Fujian (including Xin Lou Primary School, Hou Dun Primary School, English Teachers' Training Institute, Fuzhou city), two groups.
- Shaoguan Life Experiences, Shaoguan, northern Guangdong (including Yao village, time with local farmers and work on a farm, activities in a village school, mountain hike to Red Rock Park, visiting a Hakka house, training at the Armed Police Training School, care centre for the elderly, lessons in Shaoguan College and games with students), two groups.
- Kunming, Yunnan, (service work with an AIDS clinic).
- Lijiang, Yunnan, (service work building a self-flushing toilet with associated irrigation works in a lepers' village called Ma Chan, trekking through Tiger Leaping Gorge, and understanding Naxi minority culture in Lijiang).

In 2006, it is hoped to add additional trips such as a drama group working in Shanghai and a cycling group exploring Yangshuo.

In the first week of March each year, classes are suspended again for a week and all the students (1st Year and 2nd Year) leave Hong Kong to do service work or engage in special projects that will enhance the UWC mission. Known as *Project Week*, some of the trips are led and organized by staff, while others are initiated and organized by 2nd Year students. In March 2006, the project week trips were as follows:

- Cambodia (cultural experiences in Siem Riep)
- Cambodia, Phnom Penh (service and cultural)
- China, Conghua (GCAT/Habitat for Humanity service)
- Hong Kong (labour/service)
- Indonesia, Bali (cultural)
- Laos (SOS service)
- Laos (cultural)
- Malaysia, Kota Kinabalu (cultural)
- Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur (cultural)
- Malaysia, Sabah (cultural)
- North Korea (UWC initiative/cultural)
- Philippines (coral monitoring)
- Philippines, Manila (service)
- Sri Lanka (tsunami relief)
- Thailand, Bangkok (SOS service)
- Thailand, Bangkok (Theatre service)
- Thailand, Chiang Mai (Elephant hospital service)
- Thailand, Koh Phanagan (cultural)
- Vietnam, Hanoi (cultural)
- Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh City (Service, children's foundation)

The fourth 'leg' of the LPCUWC experience is *life in an international residential community* – the challenges and benefits of living together. For many students, coming to a United World College means living away from parents for the first time in their lives. There are particular challenges and compromises required to share a 30 square metre living space with three other students. Similarly, some students must adjust their dietary habits to eating in a canteen, although at LPCUWC great efforts are made to cater for different diets by supplying both vegetarian and non-vegetarian options within each of Western and Asian offerings at all meals in addition to offering sandwich bars, salad bars, soup, bread, etc.

At LPCUWC, the basic unit of residential care is the tutor group. All students are members of a tutor group that typically comprises about 10 students, five from 1st Year plus five from 2nd Year. The tutor groups are under the case of a teacher (referred to as a 'tutor' when filling this residential role), who tries to form the group into an extended family-type unit, something that is very important for students whose families are living a long way from Hong Kong. Tutor groups usually meet every week or two in the tutor's flat for dinner, supper or just a friendly chat.

CONCLUSION

The four 'legs' of the LPCUWC experience constitute the uniqueness of a United World College education. In 2005, George Walker, former Director-General of the IBO, summed up the type of student which United World Colleges seek to form in these words:

A global citizen is one who seeks out a range of views and perspectives when solving problems. He or she does not "tolerate" or "accept" cultural differences or viewpoints, since these words often implicitly place the speaker at the centre of what is acceptable and right. Global citizens proactively seek out those who have backgrounds that are different from their own, examine ideas that challenge their own, and then enjoy the

complexity. We must go beyond tolerance and acceptance.

Noting that authentic international understanding is achieved only when people move beyond tolerance to true understanding, he then defined effective global citizens as people who can:

- take themselves away from the centre of what is right and acceptable
- examine the ideas of others that challenge their own beliefs
- go beyond mere tolerance and acceptance
- enjoy the complexity of ambiguity
- nonetheless reach rational conclusions
- in short, have begun to make the transition from knowing to understanding.

The President of the United World Colleges, Nelson Mandela, expressed a similar view very succinctly when he said simply: “A good head and a good heart are always a formidable combination”.

Perhaps it would be appropriate to conclude with the words of Xie Yinghai, a student who was in the first group to graduate from Li Po Chun United World College in 1994. Yinghai was one of the pioneer students of the College, arriving on a full scholarship from China in 1992. Since graduating, he has become a successful financial analyst and was elected Chair of the UWC Graduates’ Organisation in Hong Kong in 2000, serving in that role until 2005. Yinghai’s reflection on his experience as a student at Li Po Chun United World College was as follows:

UWC taught me to think, to learn and to explore the infinite possibilities for creative responses to the unknown world. It has provided me with the initiative to meet, interact, and relate freely to peers, to teachers, and to strangers who could become friends. UWC created an environment which can only be compared to that of a tightly knit family. The closeness of my new extended family encouraged me to let go of my inhibitions and embrace the world!

Xie Yinghai, LPCUWC 1992-1994

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