

UWC Magazine – Editorial

Sir John Daniel, Chair, International Board

Relevance

“In a word, Dr Alington, what are you educating my child for?’ ‘In a word, Madam, death.’ So ran an exchange in the 1930s between a parent and the headmaster of England’s Eton College. How would a UWC head reply if asked the same question today: ‘life’, ‘fulfilment’, ‘happiness’, ‘empathy’...? It’s tough to summarise the purpose of a UWC education in a single word. We believe the experience that children gain by attending a UWC is an especially valuable preparation for life in the 21st century, but what do we really do to maximise its relevance to the opportunities and challenges that alumni will face in the ‘real’ world?

For Kurt Hahn and those launching the UWC movement in the 1960s both ends and means were clear. Children from many countries would be educated together residentially through an internationally oriented curriculum with challenging outdoor activities and community service. Catastrophes like the two world wars would be prevented by tens of thousands of deep cross-border friendships between nationally eminent UWC alumni.

Today the gauge of UWC’s success is less the avoidance – so far at least – of World War III, than the widespread copying of its approach in educational systems worldwide. Migration means that the ethnic and linguistic profiles of pupils in ordinary public schools can be as diverse as in UWCs. The IB curriculum, a UWC creation, is now offered in thousands of schools. Many educational institutions claim to offer sport, outdoor activities and community service.

Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, but if all its distinctive clothes have been borrowed, how should UWC renew its wardrobe? The answer lies less in inventing new activities than in achieving our lofty ambitions more fully and authentically than others.

Public schools around the world, especially in countries that welcome immigrants like my own Canada, are becoming very multi-national. But this diversity turns up willy-nilly at the school door and teachers cope with it as best they can. UWC is distinctive in its policy of *deliberate* diversity. It does not just aim for a broad international profile but also seeks to bring together youngsters from the same country who would never otherwise meet each other. The tremendous response to the new programme of ‘tension twins’ is inspiring. This year there will be a least 40 of them, bringing together children who, at home, would be separated for life by divides of wealth, religion, ethnicity and language.

Similarly, unlike most international schools, UWC institutions do not simply seek to create a melting pot that gives pupils a working knowledge of English and a smattering of western liberal values. UWC teachers emphasise that pupils must maintain proficiency in

their own first language. Apart from its importance for personal identity and self-esteem, fluent and educated use of the first language is essential if, as we hope, most alumni return to contribute to life in their home countries after a few years of wandering the world.

Curricula are vital and UWC teachers punch above their weight in contributing as examiners and subject specialists to the on-going evolution of the IB Diploma. This must maintain its pre-eminence both as an internationally accepted qualification and as an education that fosters international awareness better than any national education system.

Sport, outdoor activities and community service are often called ‘extra-curricular’ activities, with the clear implication that they are less deserving of pupils’ attention than academic courses – although they may be more fun! It is good to see UWC institutions integrating these activities into the curriculum so thoroughly that the term ‘extra’ becomes obsolete.

UWC institutions also expect pupils to play an unusually large role in the design, planning and implementation of these character-building activities, which, elsewhere, may more commonly be imposed from the top down. Having pupils take charge of such work helps them learn how to lead and how to follow, both important skills. Some prefer to substitute ‘entrepreneurship’ for ‘leadership’ and ‘collaboration’ for ‘followership’, but being given responsibility early cultivates these too.

In sum, UWC ensures its relevance through an international education that, by being differently conceived and better taught, is an excellent preparation for both life and death!