

International Education: Mirage or Oasis?

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I felt very honoured and excited when asked to give this lecture. Anxiety of course then took over and grew steadily, reaching the point of “boiling over” at this moment. I cannot forget the advice of a colleague: The three most difficult things are to climb a fence that is leaning towards you, kiss a girl who is leaning away from you, and say something original about international education. There are many definitions. One that has stuck in my mind was that used by a chairman of Atlantic College (UK) at an important meeting with sponsors. “Come and visit our College”, he said, “and experience it at first hand. You will see our boys and girls studying together, adventuring together, serving together, sleeping together...” We did not raise any funds.

Happily, there is no need for me to try to be original. Alec Peterson always told his students at Oxford that seeking a new idea in education is like standing in a bus queue. “Don’t worry if you have just missed one; there will be another one along shortly.” I also feel much comforted by his remark in the introduction to his book *A Hundred Years of Education*: “I hope it may also interest some schoolmasters and schoolmistresses who, like myself, have no time to qualify as educational experts.”

When he died, Alec was described in an obituary in one heavyweight British newspaper as “among the best known—if not especially influential—educationalists of the 1960s and 1970s.” Another equally heavyweight paper held him to be “one of the most pervasively influential educationalists in Europe”.

Alec Peterson

The director general of the IBO has asked me to say a few words about Alec the man.

Alec’s parents lived in India. Alec attended a boarding school in Britain from a very early age. He worried intensely that he might not recognize his mother when she came to visit. He was right. He confused her with the wife of the headmaster. He was looked after in the holidays by a formidable aunt whom he later described as a puritan, an ascetic and an idealist. There were no hugs or kisses. Her large house was always freezing cold. These were powerful influences. His decline as a scholar set in, he was to claim, when at the age of ten Greek was added to Latin. But, as he also said, people nowadays are surprised to learn that at twelve he was reading and translating Sophocles and Euripides. A year or two later, a tutor from Oxford attended a class on Virgil and, after hearing him perform, said: “That’s a very idle boy. Put him in for Balliol and we’ll give him a scholarship.” Another year on, and when top of the classical sixth form and editor of the *Radleian*, the school magazine, he was, he recalled, beaten by the captain of boats for leaving an oar in the wrong place in the boat house. In his family memoirs he wrote that the horror of school had not really been the bullying or the caning or the persecution, but the “deadly deadly boredom”. Small wonder that he treasured above all others the comment of an old boy of the Adams Grammar School in Shropshire, where he held his first headmastership: “We had such fun”.

University was another life.

A little while ago, in preparation for this lecture, I went to see his widow Corinne and asked her what she would like me to say about him. “Tell them”, she said, “that he was so energetic, loved new challenges, travel, writing, he was so volatile, too versatile, switched around, he had such stamina, he was a wonderful father, and (rather breathlessly)...gosh, he was so good-looking.”

He was. His IBO image is all wrong. There is this photograph of him with a beard, and a thin, drawn face. Late one night, preparing to move house the next day from Oxford to London, he fell from a ladder. The next morning his furniture went to London, he to hospital to wait for three months to know whether he would walk again. He grew the beard to conceal an ugly face injury.

Oxford! Friends. The Classics. History. Philosophy. He founded a new university weekly publication that was suspended after two issues for obscenity. Undeterred, he went on to write simultaneously for *Cherwell*, *Isis* and the *Oxford Magazine* under three different noms-de-plume. He was an actor and a producer, and romantic. He made his first proposal of marriage. “Oh Alec. I’d marry you tomorrow if I thought you would be faithful.” And this without their having even held hands, let alone exchanged a kiss! Looking back, he described Oxford as “a world of love and friendship—I envied anyone whose family came from and lived in one place and had connections—to find myself accepted by people who liked books and politics and travel and yet were funny and frivolous and light-hearted, and yet were romantic and felt or thought they felt deeply about each other and about social causes, was like entering an enchanted garden.”

Then came a period in industry. Alec learned that money was no compensation for boredom, that happiness is “the by-product of unfrustrated activity”. He also had an insight into poverty and social distress through some involvement in the activities of Toynebee Hall in London.

Then education. He became a junior master at Shrewsbury School, a public school in Shropshire. His younger brother was a senior prefect there. Alec had no illusions about the realities of public school life. Whenever he had disciplinary problems, he told the offenders he would report them to his brother. “It always worked.” He began to experiment in the classroom. In studying the *Aeneid*, he gave each boy forty different lines to prepare for homework. The principle was that they helped one another. They completed the first four books in one term. They wrote a “Shakespearean play”—some boys wrote the tragic speeches, others the comic. “Today, neither you nor I know any American history. We shall learn it together.” He was later proud of a geography book he published, *The Social Geography of the Far East*, which was translated into French and used by Australian universities; he had studied no geography after the age of 14. He remained passionately opposed throughout his life to one-subject teaching. “The best is the enemy of the good.” He was the exemplary generalist. I recall his comment when director of the Department of Education at Oxford about researchers “crawling along the frontiers of knowledge with a magnifying glass”. Perhaps he had been influenced by the example of his Uncle Fred, who devoted the last twenty years of his intellectual life to the study of snails’ teeth (he was much in demand at the London Natural History Museum).

Alec was not motivated by money. He did not have much understanding of it either. After taking up his first post as headmaster he found a plaque on the wall of a school corridor: “The salary of the Headmaster is fixed at £40.00 for ever.” He had not asked about remuneration. When as director general of the IBO he found himself, thanks to Lord Mountbatten, in the study of the Shah of Persia asking for sponsorship, he was astonished to be given a cheque on the spot and realized only then that he had completely underplayed his hand. When the time came for him to leave Oxford to become the founding director general of the International Baccalaureate Organization, he totally overlooked

the fact that his fourteen years of service would have entitled him to another year's sabbatical salary. I have a special memory of an occasion in his dingy London office in June 1976. Some weeks earlier, he had circulated a memorandum to the few IB schools of the time, informing them that the grave financial situation now compelled the closure of the IB offices, and that we were to inform our governors and parents that the IB could no longer be offered from the following September. Fortunately we rebelled. A few of us heads offered to put up some money from our school budgets to give the IB another chance. "How much money do you need, Alec?" I shall never forget the exasperation in Dick Irvine's [then head of Iranzamin International School in Teheran] voice: "But Alec, it has cost more than that for me to fly here from Teheran for this meeting!"

Alec's experiences during the second world war were typically special. He was seconded to work for the Propaganda Branch of the Special Operations Executive and later, under Mountbatten, for the India Forward Broadcasting Unit in the Burma campaign. He made the significant educational discovery that, despite all the horrors of the time, he could not find any individuals who, having learned Japanese as a foreign language, were able to harbour feelings of hatred towards the Japanese people and military. In the early 1950s, he was called out to Malaya by Sir Gerald Templer [high commissioner and commander in chief in Malaya] to lead the Information Services in the emergency. His intensive cooperation with the powerful personalities of Mountbatten and Templer gave him an acute sense of the importance of combining thought with action. His admiration was enriched by a helpful touch of cynicism. Some years later, attending a think tank in Santa Barbara on political warfare, he was asked for his advice on how America might escape from the nightmare of Vietnam. "Set aside 50,000,000 US dollars to bribe some of the leading South Vietnamese politicians to make insulting remarks about Yankee interference. Then President Johnson can tell the country: OK, if that's what the bastards think, we'll leave them to it." A listening US senator, much impressed, immediately telephoned Washington and Alec flew there for a high-level appointment, but this intriguing solution to the Vietnamese holocaust never saw the light of day.

Alec's educational activities mirrored faithfully his devotion to generalism. At Dover College he began his experimentation with a group of international students. He became the chairman of the Royal Commonwealth Society's Education Committee and a member of a government working party on youth activities in the Commonwealth. He was "of some help" in the founding of Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO). He was a member of the Annan Committee on the Teaching of Russian and chairman of the Army Education Advisory Board. He persuaded an American idealist, Gene Rietzke, to fund an Anglo-American conference at Ditchley Park on correspondence education, which was to become a seminal influence in the creation of the British Open University. As educational spokesman for the Liberal Party he once stood for Parliament. "Peace. Progress. Prosperity." Can those who knew Alec imagine him standing, as he did, at the entry turnstiles of the Oxford Football Club on a Saturday afternoon bombarding the soccer fans through a megaphone with his election message? Talk about Oxonian enthusiasm for lost causes!

Alec's time as head of the Oxford Department of Education was devoted above all to his great passion—the sins of British sixth form education. Neither Alec nor education had an easy time then. Maurice Bowra of Wadham College told Alec he could count on him as a "malevolent neutral". His opposite number at Cambridge was a medievalist. When asked by the selection board what he proposed to research into, the latter had replied: "Well, I couldn't research into education, could I? That would be ridiculous. I shall continue my researches into medieval sermons." His appointment was confirmed, together with a fellowship to Trinity. Alec fought the establishment—his own Oxford

University, the Headmasters' Conference of the British Public Schools, the Heads' Association of Secondary Schools. I believe he simply had too much imagination for his time. It is surely no accident that the only university to award him an honorary degree was the Italian University of Trieste. Perhaps the obituary that had identified Alec as "the most pervasively influential educationalist in Europe" was more perceptive than I thought—but only of course if one really does regard the English Channel as an unnegotiable barrier.

International Education: Mirage or Oasis?

And so from Oxford to the IBO, and the United World Colleges, and to a moment of reflection for us here on where international education is now. Mirage or oasis? This is also a moment of personal reflection for me as I complete forty years of work on behalf of the United World Colleges. How much can happen in forty years? It was Dame Rebecca West [British author and commentator on the Nuremberg trials] who pointed out that the Munich Agreement occurred only thirty-seven years after the death of Queen Victoria.

A recent edition of *The Economist* carried a special feature on the world's youth, above all in the USA. Children are more knowledgeable and literate than ever before. There is greater dialogue between the generations. Child labour in the third world?—more that 50% of teenagers in America over 14 hold a job and 25% of 12–13 year olds do so. Harvard has had to abandon its policy of forbidding its students to conduct e-mail businesses from the dorms because the best students started going elsewhere, taking with them the enterprises they had started up in high school. There is no more rebellion against the older generations—how do you rebel against helplessness? My question is: What does international education have to offer to young people who work with such range and speed?

The same edition of *The Economist* reported that two thirds of two billion young people live outside the industrialized world, 36% of them are younger than fifteen and 600,000,000 children and adolescents live on less than US\$1 a day. The number of poor children in China exceeds the entire population of Europe.

Where does international education position itself between these two extremes? Does it have to position itself?

The director general of the IBO, addressing the UWC Regional Conference and UWC of the Adriatic community last November [2000] in Prague, commented that life will continue much as it is now for all those aged over 55. Those between 25 and 55 will need unusually good luck. For those under 25 there is no chance at all. As we meet here today, we have some 40,000 students writing the IB Diploma Programme examinations. What are our obligations towards them?

Can we continue, in David Wilkinson's [head of Mahindra UWC in India] words, a system that supports the education of an ever-narrowing upper band of the world's population?

I was struck by the formulation, the power-based model of international education, that I found in the book *International Education: Principles and Practice* (J Thompson and M Hayden eds)—"an open system in the global village created by those elements in power positions in their societies in order to perpetuate their values".

At the Adriatic College (Italy) we recently had a visit from an educational pioneer whom some of you may know—Peter Dalglish, the founder of Canadian Streetkids International and several like-minded initiatives. His questions to our students (all full scholarship students) were uncomfortable: How many of you have a camera, a mobile telephone, a TV set at home, two sets, one or two cars? How many of you had visited another country, another continent before joining the UWC? **How representative are you of the world's youth?**

How do IB schools in general fare on the Dalglish test?

My suggestion is that we have behind us (I include the United World Colleges in my reflection) the **achievement of excellence**. We now face the **challenge of relevance**.

How can one not be struck by the vast field of acquired expertise at our disposal? The book I have just referred to contains, among other things, an illuminating list of five clearly differing definitions of the very word *international*. Yet one has to ask where the values are. In this same book, edited by a distinguished gentleman sitting not too far away from me as I speak, the words hunger and poverty do not appear even once. As to religion, there is one brief mention of Buddhism and one mention of Islam sandwiched between references to the teaching of mathematics and multi-lingual educational reform in Singapore. I just wonder whether George Steiner has not got something to say to us in his latest book, *The Grammar of Creation*, when he tackles the theme of creativity in an age of atheism. A senior UWC colleague has a telling question: “Where nowadays do the most idealistic young teachers look for a job? If not with us, then we are doing our business badly.” I recently had the disappointing experience, a first for me, of failing to finalize an appointment to a new department in our College because none of the three highly qualified and shortlisted applicants felt that the conditions—working, facilities and resources, remuneration—were quite right. I could not help recalling that we started the Adriatic College in 1982 with 12 teachers, only one of whom had previous IB experience. All the others wanted to “get in”. Am I right to begin to worry about the assumptions and expectations of the IB and international teachers? I am reminded of Sir Ralf Dahrendorf’s comment about Europe? “Those in the West have it, those in the East believe in it?”

It is tempting, perhaps because it is neat, to believe that we have now accomplished phase one of international education and need to move on to phase two.

Phase one had its roots in idealism born of wartime experience. The founders of Atlantic College, Air Marshall Lawrance Darvall and Rear-Admiral Desmond Hoare, were serving officers. Kurt Hahn, a Jew, had been Hitler’s first political prisoner in 1933. The founding president of the IBO, John Goormaghtigh, was a member as a young man of the Belgian Resistance and survived Dachau following imprisonment in isolation, torture, and the execution within hearing distance of many of his friends. (He was saved by a distant cousin from the States, a soldier in the American Army, who found his copy of Plato lying on the ground outside the camp and therefore knew he must have been an inmate, whether still alive or not). And there was too the idealism for Europe: Alec Peterson himself, Recteur Capelle from France, Helmuth Becker and Fischer Wollpert from Germany, Gerard Renaud, all convinced that their work would have a direct and eventually measurable influence on the European ideal. But John Goormaghtigh wrote to me in 1997:

Lately I have been thinking a lot about international education and I wonder if our concept is not out of date, seriously. The world system has changed fundamentally since the end of the Cold War, and events in ex-Yugoslavia, Rwanda, Algeria, etc. have taught us that knowing our neighbour does not prevent us from torturing him.

His words are hard to deny.

International education has strength, expertise and resources. Has it the will to re-deploy them? Can it find the way? Let me draw a simple analogy.

A journalist visiting the Atlantic College in the mid-1960's asked why we were educating only one half of humanity (he was referring to the fact that we were a boys' school only). The matter was very quickly remedied, despite some distressing but ultimately quirky resignations from the governing body, and the first girls entered the following September.

International education is serving its own pupils superbly. Has the time not come for it to serve the world more widely?

I find myself again led back to George Steiner, or rather to a comment on him. "You cannot be a prophetic voice in a comfortable, consensual position in the heartlands." Is it not perhaps time for us to return to the margins?

My conviction is that it is now time to take international education to where it is most needed, which is, by definition, where it cannot be afforded and where in its current form it may be of doubtful relevance anyway.

I believe that international education needs to seek an organic resolution of this dilemma and challenge. It must accept the commitment for the integrity and health of international education itself and for the sake of the people who need it.

The problems are overwhelming. George Walker, again in Prague last year [2000], said: "We no longer fully understand." He repeated himself three times.

Of course, we can protect ourselves. Kurt Hahn often referred to do-gooders who look at the world through the wrong end of a telescope—everything appears well ordered and peaceful. But we can also take some guidance from George Eliot: "The best introduction to astronomy is to think of the nightly heavens as a little lot of stars belonging to one's own homestead."

I think we can all quote helpful personal and professional examples.

At my own school, the UWC of the Adriatic in Italy (where, by the way, since last September [2000] we are not accepting any more students whose selection relies on family contribution to the fees—all are on full scholarship), we are seeking to recruit for this coming September an Arab and a Kurd from Iraq, a refugee from Chechnya, a member of the Roma community from Macedonia, three victims of mines, and a continuing representation from the West Bank and the Gaza Strip and from the Sudanese, Ethiopian and Eritrean refugee communities in camps in Kenya. I wonder whether all IB schools could not accept a similar commitment, not being deterred by being day schools but, on the contrary, taking advantage of lesser costs and the almost certain willing cooperation of families of IB students.

Our United World College in South East Asia (Singapore) has a truly impressive record of achievement in its global issues programme: six ongoing projects for streetkids, sponsorship of four schools and two orphanages in developing countries, six groups aimed at adult literacy and the empowerment of women, and a list of aid projects in India (6), Pakistan (2), Indonesia (4), Thailand (2), The Philippines (1), Cambodia (2), Vietnam (1), Swaziland (2), Kenya (1), Nepal (3).

They have sponsored the education of 65 child workers in Nepal and India, have established a library and computer facilities for street children in New Delhi, fund 26 orphans in Ho Chi Minh City in Vietnam, have raised the funds to build two schools in Nepal and Pakistan, and sponsor another 60 pupils in Ladakh and 28 in Bangkok. And this is a partial list.

Of course, many other IB schools have similar, perhaps even more challenging programmes. What an impact it would make if we could give all these IB-inspired activities a greater focus—for our teachers and our students as well as for our image and mission.

We might suggest that every IB student, on receipt of his or her diploma and in gratitude for the privilege, commit to funding the education of one illiterate young person of the same age somewhere in the world.

We might seek out a number of inner-city schools that are struggling daily with all the pressures of multicultural living and hostility and seek to introduce our programmes there. My UWC colleague even suggested that this is where we might find the most idealistic young teachers of today and of the near future.

I am not familiar with the IB Middle Years and above all the Primary Years Programmes. Would they have any relevance to refugee camps for children?

Should we be looking at IB teacher training programmes that include an obligatory period in a post in the developing world or in a difficult inner-city school?

Can we seek to place IB graduates for a part of their studies in “difficult” universities? I was much struck by accounts from Hans Cristoph von Sponeck, the UN representative who resigned his senior post in Iraq because his conscience would not allow him to continue to help administer the UN sanctions policy on account of the price being paid by Iraqi children, of the “thirst” of university students in Baghdad (and not only Iraqi students) for contacts with the outside world.

Could more IB schools follow what I believe is a Dutch initiative and adopt schools in problem countries, for example in Eastern Europe and the Republics of the former Soviet Union?

Could we contemplate an annual day dedicated to international education on which we would all together raise funds for a previously agreed target—a new school in a developing country, a new programme in literacy, carefully targeted groups of underprivileged and endangered children?

Could we (a long shot this!) imagine a year of service, carefully combined with new cultural exposure, inserted between the first and the second year of the Diploma Programme? No IB diploma would be awarded without a year of service already under your belt!

One of the really significant developments in my view under the renewed leadership of the IBO has been the readiness to look again, and with commitment, at the relationship between the IB and state systems. There is no time here to go into the detail, but I stick firmly to my conviction that a revised and more flexible form of the IB Diploma Programme will not only enable many thousands more pupils and even schools to share the IB philosophy and practices, but that the IB itself will benefit from a greater openness to proudly held national cultural traditions and beliefs. Hand in hand with such developments will come an opening of the IB to far greater linguistic diversity and to linguistic inclusion rather than exclusion.

I spoke earlier of values, and I want also to return to Alec Peterson. He was much concerned about them. He believed profoundly in “the call of the hero”: the importance of models taken from literature to moral education. He echoed Plato: *The unexamined life is not worth living*. For eight years he was the chairman of the rather quixotic Farmington Trust in Oxford that was founded to promote moral education. For fundraising purposes he wrote a paper “Results obtained by Schools affiliated to the International Baccalaureate Office in the Domain of Moral Education”. Some of his conclusions cannot be without interest to us today as we seek to review and refine our understanding of international education for the twenty-first century.

Alec saw special opportunities for schools that were international, that educated young people between the ages of 16 and 19, and that subscribed to rational and humanistic values. He believed that IB graduates were more likely to “judge more justly and act more effectively in the moral domain” as a result of their education. IB students, he thought, should be aiming to:

- recognize all other persons as of equal value
- develop the skills to empathize
- acquire the knowledge to understand the emotions and motivations of oneself and others
- gain awareness of the seriousness of moral situations
- form a commitment to generate an autonomously accepted set of moral principles and **act** upon them.

In the theory of knowledge course he saw the opportunity to include an intellectual attempt to refine the understanding of what it is to take moral decisions. CAS activities were to contribute to the formation of the essential link between the intellectual and imaginative development of moral awareness and practical moral action.

Was this, he himself worried, too rational and “cold” an approach? Interestingly for our reflections today, he also drew specific attention to “one of the moral blind spots which the IB is seeking to illuminate (and which) arises from the fact that students in international schools often come themselves from the relatively rich countries and find themselves living and going to school in the relatively poor ones”.

Let me draw to a close.

Where are the voices in international education today?

Alec Peterson was unhappy in school and was already a crusader before the second world war. The war brought him irrevocably, and alongside other second world war warriors, into international education. Other moral voices in post-war years have included voices born of captivity and deprivation—Gandhi, Nehru, Mandela.

Who in international education will now speak with passion and conviction for the refugees, the famine-stricken and the illiterate, if not the IBO? It is of course not a matter of management, but of vision and leadership.

Alec was fond of quoting Pestalozzi: “The essential principle of education is not teaching; it is love.”

I would add George Eliot: “Those who trust us educate us.”

International education too needs to be loved and to be trusted.

Are we truly representative? If we are not, are we truly international?

Only if we can answer both these questions affirmatively can we be sure that we are ready for the twenty-first century.