

# United World Colleges – from a NATO-Spin-Off to Schools with Global Concern?

A history of a project for international education

## Education Initiative in the Cold War Era

**T**HE NEED OF BRINGING up a new generation that would be capable of conflict resolution gained momentum in the post-World-War-II situation. During centuries many great minds had reflected upon the possibility of getting rid of wars through changing people's minds. The most systematic agenda had been presented by Immanuel Kant, and perhaps the most pragmatic project by American Quakers. However, neither a theory nor an example by a religious group did not stimulate school world. After 1945, a sound pragmatic project was in demand.

A primus motor was required for a peace education project to start. Kurt Hahn, a German Jew, had made his conclusions from the world war and felt even more strongly challenged by the Cold War. Hahn was a public figure, who already in 1919 during the peace negotiation had widely spoken and written for politics of reconciliation. In the inter-war period he had established schools

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with a human ethos and a civic programme. They were called Salem-schools, and became known, apart from their resistance to Nazi education, for their educational emphasis on community service.

In 1956, in the year of the Suez crisis and the Hungarian uprising, Kurt Hahn was invited to give a lecture in the NATO Defence College in Paris. An important encounter took place. The British commandant Air Marshall Sir Lawrance Darvall was inspired by Kurt Hahn's analysis of Western Society and the state of the minds of the young people. Hahn, for his part, was impressed by the way the former enemies, the French, Brits and the Germans worked and studied together for the common cause. A reconciliation of former enmities seemed to take place. A similar attempt in a non-military context seemed worth-while. The young people of the Atlantic community would need an opportunity to come together to learn about each other and peace. Kurt Hahn and Lawrance Darvall committed themselves to the idea of founding a college for such a purpose.(Schuster 1979, 167-174).

Lord Louis Mountbatten, who at an early stage got involved in the project and in 1967 agreed to take the position of president of the International Council of the project United World Colleges, phrased the acute need of international education in the following words:

"At no time in human history has there been a greater need for drawing together the races and nations of the world so that their energies and many sided genius can be combined in peace instead of being wasted in conflict." (Quoted in Sutcliffe 1983, 108)

The proposed college was intended for 17-20 year-olds. According to Kurt Hahn, in that special age the young people were sensitive to ideas for a better world. They already had the basic educational assets enabling them to absorb and process ample information. They were young enough not to be bothered by career expectations and open for fresh avenues of thinking.

Hahn's idea corresponds to what the sociologist Karl Mannheim in the 1920' suggested in his theory of generations. Accord-

ing to him, at the age of 18–30 individuals went through the key experiences that would make them into ‘an actualised generation’. An actualised generation shared common aspirations, based on a shared key experience and a potential for the materialisation of the aspirations. (Mannheim 1927/1974, 276–320)

The project had its dubious sides, too. Traditionally, European education systems were meant to support a growth of national identity and nationally idiosyncratic. Would the young people in an international school environment grow into rootless cosmopolitans? They were living through the most formative years of their personality. They would not study in their native languages nor learn the great narratives of their native histories. The doubt was well founded. However, identities are constituted by several layers. A person can at the same time be a Finn, an European and a member of the global community. In fact, the world would not survive without its dwellers sharing some common commitments. The young people in the new project were expected to grow both as individuals, citizens of a nation-state and members of the global community.

Another problem of the project was the NATO-connection. The NATO-school of Paris had stimulated Kurt Hahn, and Lawrance Darvall was a NATO-officer. The participation of NATO-militaries in the project kept growing during the first years. The first board of the Atlantic College incorporated Rear-Admiral Desmond Hoare, Captain John Pearson and Major-General William Hare. Soon Sir George Schuster, a veteran from as long ago as the Allied intervention to the Russian civil war in 1919, joined the project. Later on in the 1970s, Lord Mountbatten, a naval commander, was invited to take the chair of the International Council of the project. Admiral Hoare became the first headmaster of the Atlantic College, after having taken an early retirement from the navy. The nature of the project as a Cold War spin-off cannot be denied. The founders regarded the college as a demonstration of the values of the Atlantic community and as a challenge to the communist block. (Schuster 1979, 167–70.)

However, the linkage to the Western block of the cold war campaign loosened with the time passing. Kurt Hahn wanted from the very beginning to attract students from Russia and Eastern Europe. First there was no success in this respect. Only gradually, in the course of the 1970s, the aim was materialised. Lord Mountbatten, since 1968 the president of the International Council of the project, worked hard on the issue and managed to make both Russia and the People's Republic of China to send students to the college. In order to remove the NATO-connection, he also insisted on the change of the name of college: instead of the Atlantic College it was to be called the United World College of the Atlantic. (Sutcliffe 1983, 88, 106; Schuster 174–79) By this point the project had grown to comprise already four colleges all over the world and new colleges were in the course of being established.

The purpose of complementing the military alliance of the Atlantic community was overshadowed by educational goals. Among them were high academic standards, service commitment and intercultural coexistence. The old reputation of a NATO-spin-off did not prevent a country like Finland to take part in the project. Already in the fourth year of the college, 1966, three Finnish boys were sent and paid by the Finnish Cultural Foundation to study in the college. Among them were two later economic leaders Pentti Kouri and Jorma Ollila (Bäckman & Koskinen 1990).

### Atlantic College – the flagship of the UWC-project

The first college of the project, the Atlantic College, deserves recognition from the aftermath. A remarkable economic effort was invested in the making of it. The real burden was carried by a small number of dedicated people. The first money came from private admirers of Kurt Hahn's ideas and friends of the other founders. The most important and decisive was the donation by M. Antonin Besse, a French millionaire and friend of Kurt Hahn.

His money enabled the acquisition of St. Donat's castle in Wales for the purpose of accommodating the college. The castle had been in charge of Randolph Hearst, the American media magnate, who had restored and decorated it in the 1930s as one of his pompous free-time homes. The castle was from late mediaeval period and situated at Bristol Channel. With the course of time, a set of dormitories and other buildings for domestic facilities were built around it. (Sutcliffe 1983, 89, Schuster 1979, 167)

The Atlantic college was run by donations and funds that were raised by a special committee. In 1962, the Ford Foundation provided a remarkable grant, and later many other multinationals, among them companies like Unilever and Rio-Tinto-Zinc. Such contributions might have in the course of time affected the educational autonomy of the college. Therefore it was important to have public money with a democratic control coming in. The year 1964 was decisive. The Federal government of West Germany announced a substantial subsidy to the project. It was followed by the British government and soon by many other state governments. (Schuster 1979, 171-3) For instance, the Finnish Ministry of Education committed itself to paying one student every year to the college. As the Finnish Cultural Foundation defined its three scholarships to be meant for Finnish-speaking boys, the Ministry promised to send annually one Swedish-speaking girl.

The Atlantic college was originally a boys' school. When the board in 1966 suggested a change to a co-educational school, a crisis broke out. Some donors threatened to withdraw their money. However, co-education appealed to many of the state governments and private donors and was adopted. In the 1970s, when a big and successful effort was made to recruit Asian students, among them Muslims, the co-educational form of the college again constituted a problem. However, the threshold was overcome, even if some governments restricted their policy to scholarships for boys only. (Sutcliffe 1983, 102; Schuster 1979, 171)

The success in raising funds from governments enabled an important decision in regard to student recruitment. Equal op-

portunity was one of the tenets of the project philosophy. The Atlantic college was not meant to be another private school for privileged young people. Therefore only students with scholarships from their state or another public source were accepted. This policy contributed to the pursuit of high standards in learning. At the same time, the students were expected to show public spirit. The service commitment was a strict requirement and a substantial part of the curriculum.

In Atlantic college, every member of the community, independently of whether she or he was a student or a teacher, had to serve the local community. The service could be sea or cliff rescue or social service. The college was responsible for the life-saving on a length of 30 miles of Welsh coast. A minor service opportunity was constituted by estate work, as the college was running a small farm, where sheep were reared, vegetables grown and bees kept.

Kurt Hahn's idea of a balanced education was well materialised in the first United World College. Civic and social growth was pursued equally together with academic ambitions. The balance was challenged by an ambitious plan to develop a demanding truly international curriculum for the colleges. However, it seems from a thirty years perspective, that the growing competition for academic merits has not made Hahn's ideas redundant. On the contrary, the service commitment has been incorporated in the curriculum of the International Baccalaureate, which means that the numerous IB-schools even if not belonging to the actual UWC project still require a service commitment from their students.

## Development of an International Curriculum

From the very beginning of the project United World Colleges – originally the Atlantic College project – it was obvious that for international education a special curriculum and examination was in demand. Apart from the ideological reasons, there were very practical needs to develop a 16+ examination, that would

be acceptable to universities all over the world. The British A-levels, the examination that was done by the first generation of Atlantic College students, represented a very narrow idea of education. The students normally did only three subjects. In contrast to that, in France and Germany the compulsory subjects were too many, and in America the choice was too open. As a result from nearly ten years of development work, and the establishment of the International Baccalaureate Office in Geneva, the first International Baccalaureate was accomplished by Atlantic College students in spring 1973.

A broad idea of education was the foundation of the new curriculum. Still, also depth of knowledge was pursued. Therefore subjects were divided into six domains of knowledge: mother tongue, foreign language, mathematics, sciences, study of man in society and arts. In each domain there was a choice of a subjects to be made. Only one subject per domain may be chosen. For instance, within the domain 'Study of man in society' a student may study either history, geography, economics, religious studies, psychology or anthropology. The last three could only be taken as subsidiary subjects, while the first three incorporated both higher and subsidiary level courses. A choice was available also in the rest of domains and subjects. (International Baccalaureate Office 2001)

It took years for the advocates of the International Baccalaureate (IB) to gain the acceptance of universities in different countries. The national traditions were strong and enjoyed the trust of the academic world. The British universities first regarded the IB as too shallow for a successful attendance in higher education. The view changed with time, and since the 1980s the IB has been accepted. It has even influenced as the development of the British A-level examination. In France the IB was long considered lacking in substance and rigor, but the idea of choice has eventually gained momentum.

Among the aspects that appealed to educators was the special ethos of the IB curriculum. The IB curriculum is at the same time

rigorous and liberal. The students are regarded as young adults with individual ambitions and a need of a sufficient autonomy. They are given assignments that require persistence but also a sufficient margin of individual choice of what to read and how to organise her or his work. For instance, in history often no standard textbooks are used. Instead, a student is given a reading list and stimuli to look for different interpretations of the past. For teachers, the syllabus guidelines leave ample of opportunities to make choices of area and substance of the courses. Critical individual project work is required from every student.

The final examinations are coordinated and examined by moderators nominated by the central IB Office. Also a sample of internally assessed pieces of work from the schools is sent to the examiners in order to moderate the standards of the internal assessment. The trustworthiness of the IB-studies in the different parts of the world is this way ensured.

The International Baccalaureate as a curriculum and the United World Colleges as a wider educational project are not identical. There are more than 1500 IB-schools in the world but only eleven United World Colleges. The latter are residential institutions with an international mix of students, selected by national selection committees. The impact of the school on a student is naturally stronger in a United World College than in the ordinary IB school. In a United World College the service commitment is taken very seriously, as well the duty of a student to take part in a serious artistic or physical activity.

Still, an IB-school is never allowed to shrink its educational pursuit into a purely academic work. An educated person is expected to have a broad range of interests and commitments in her or his life. A true interest or commitment means more than just a free time hobby. A person shall invest effort and ambition in the activity. That way it becomes meaningful and rewarding. Therefore an UWC-student would not be allowed to prioritise the academic work at the cost of her or his service duties. This has constituted a problem to some of the most ambitious stu-



dents, who, at least when preparing for the final examination, feel like reducing the time spent on the service. One Finnish student left the college because of the contradictory pressures of study and service. The International Baccalaureate is a very competitive examination, but the college philosophy does not allow a young person to grow into an one-sided meritocrat.

Kurt Hahn's legacy was idealistic and high-minded. Education in the United World Colleges aimed both at physical, intellectual and moral competency. The UWC-project was eventually challenged by postcolonial cultural developments. A question was raised, whether the IB curriculum represented an equal regard to all world cultures. The domain of "the study of man in society" went through some changes in this regard. Another challenge came from the new competitive ethos of the 1990s. Could the balance between academic merits and personal and social growth be maintained in the world of competition? An answer was provided through the expansion of the UWC project to the countries where social and political problems were as big as not to allow a selfish pursuit of competitive assets at the cost of social concern.

## Colleges for Conflict Ridden Areas

In the course of the 1970s the UWC grew to a worldwide movement of international education. National Committees were established all over the world to promote UWC-awareness and, in pragmatic terms, to find scholarships for students. Apart from the Atlantic College in Britain, the Pearson College in Canada and the UW College in Singapore, all from the 1970s, new United World Colleges were established in the different corners of the world. In South Africa, in order to oppose apartheid policies, the multiracial Waterford KaMhala School were joined to the UWC-project. In Venezuela, the Simón Bolívar United World College of Agriculture was started to tackle with the social and

economic problems of developing countries. With a focus on humanitarian issues, the Red Cross Nordic United College started in Norway and the Mahindra United World College in India, both in the 1990s. Meanwhile, colleges belonging to the UWC-chain had been found in New Mexico in the US, Hong Kong in China and Trieste in Italy.

Many minds dedicated their efforts to the project. Pearson College was strived for by the Nobel Peace laureate Lester Pearson, and the Venezuelan college was pushed by the agro-economist Dr Luis Marcano Coello, an expert of development politics. In the case of the Red Cross college, the interest and dedication by the explorer Thor Heyerdal in the UWC project was of great importance.

The bringing of a body of international students to study in the very heart of a political conflict is risky. Young people have a right to safe growth. However, in 2006 a new United World College will start in Mostar, Bosnia, where an ethnic conflict prevails and the scars of a recent war are still visible. The purpose of the establishment of the United World College of Mostar was to support the work of international institutions like the UN and the EU in post-conflict reconciliation. Moreover, Bosnian people needed an assurance of the trust of the international community in the sincerity of their will for peace and reconciliation.

Bosnia has since 1995 pursued a reconciliation of ethnic dissonances. Surprisingly, the Dayton Agreement of 1995, which ended the war and established the current constitutional setup, did not include any clauses of educational reconstruction. As a result, education, the crucial tenet of civil society, has remained deeply divided, the schools are segregated, teaching is lacking in objectivity, and teachers and students feel isolated. ([ibo-uwc-bosnia.uwc.org/](http://ibo-uwc-bosnia.uwc.org/)).

According to the IBO-UWC initiative equal numbers of students from the three historical communities of Bosnia, the Bosniacs (Muslims), the Croats and the Serbs will study and serve the community together in the Mostar college. After the segre-

gation in the basic education they will have an opportunity to get to know each other and young people from other countries. In the first year there will be 70 Bosnians and 30 international students making the school community. Among the international students there are Kosovo Albans, Israelis, Palestinians and a few Western Europeans – among them one Finn. ([ibo-uwc-bosnia.uwc.org/](http://ibo-uwc-bosnia.uwc.org/)) The IB curriculum will give opportunities e.g. in history to practise multiperspectival studies and learn to take the views of other people into account.

The Mostar college resulted from the work of the veterans of the UWC project. Sir Antonin Besse agreed to be the main donor, like he had been in the 1960s in the foundation of the Atlantic College. He and David Sutcliffe, the former headmaster of two United World colleges, believed that the ethos of the UWC project could work as an impetus for achieving harmony and trust in a troubled community.

## The UWC Project on the Waves of History

The United World Colleges project started as a response to the Cold War. Its first agents, the educationist Kurt Hahn and the soldier Lawrence Darvall thought of consolidating the Western block, the Atlantic community through bringing the children of the former enemies together in the auspices of good education. Soon, however, it became obvious that for the sake of the future of the global community it was vital to include the other party of the cold war. Lord Mountbatten worked hard to engage the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China in the project.

The Cold War ended, but the conflicts of the world did not. The North-South antagonism loomed as a threat to the future of the global community, and eventually an influx of ethnic and religious hatreds and crises struck also the old continent. Hope was invested in the education of the young people. The new United World Colleges of the time took the challenges of the

emerging new threats. The latest college was established right on the ruins of a cruel civil war.

Education is commonly cherished as a national institution. It is normally rooted in the indigenous tradition and bolsters the aspirations shared by a national community. Through education the people of a country identify themselves with the common aspirations. The UWC project cannot aim at the replacement of national educational institutions. However, regarding the mutual interdependence of the world, it is vital to educate young people towards an awareness of the global common challenges. The young people graduating from the United World Colleges aspire such awareness.

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