

UWC Pastoral Care Conference June 2016 – Welcome Address

It is with great pleasure that I welcome you here today to the UWC Pastoral Care Conference. The team here at Pearson has asked me to acknowledge that this conference takes place on the traditional lands of the Beecher Bay First Nation.

In the first half of 2015 Libby, the Dean of Students here at Pearson, took a sabbatical term and decided to visit a set of different UWC schools and colleges as a form of professional development. In the final phase of her itinerary, she headed to Red Cross Nordic and began to discuss with Summer, our then Director of Residential Life, the possibility of running a conference designed to bring together residential staff from all UWCs in the spirit of connectivity and collaboration.

Over a year on, we are all gathered here today as a result of Libby's vision for a conference of this nature and the commitment from the residential and administrative teams here at Pearson to deliver a stimulating, thought-provoking and challenging programme for us all.

Thank you to the Pearson team for all that you have done in the run-up to this conference.

The Heads have been observing 'in the wings' with keen interest as the conference has taken shape and identity. Many of the Heads asked if they too could attend the conference but we decided at a biannual meeting at Mahindra in May 2015 that we should strive to create a space for the residential staff of our schools to connect, share stories, and share expertise – without extensive and possible over-representation from the Heads.

We agreed that I would act as the Head liaison at the Conference and that we should invite Laurence Nodder of UWC Robert Bosch to attend given his extensive experience as a UWC Head. Desiree of Pearson will also be here as the hosting Head whilst we are on campus. Our role is to listen and to learn from you all – and to give feedback to the Heads' forum, to our communities and to other key stakeholders in advance of October's Congress in Trieste.

I was at a strategic / Congress planning meeting in Spain at the very end of May with Jill Longson, the Vice Chair of the International Board, and she asked me to share this message with you:

'The UWC International board recognises the pivotal role of pastoral care within UWC communities and greatly appreciates the commitments that all of you give to the welfare, development and support of our students - individually and, as importantly, collectively.

We look forward to hearing the outcomes of your discussions - insights gleaned, best practice shared and importantly your collective recommended approaches for the future. And we wish you a very positive and productive few days. Jill.'

We are delighted that all the UWC schools and colleges have responded to this call for a focus on pastoral care and that today there is representation from each UWC including the two new campuses in Japan and Thailand – and congratulations to UWC Thailand for winning Final Approval at last Friday's International Board Meeting. In fact, we have been struck by the number of delegates gathered here today, the ideas generated for the programme in advance of the conference and the supportive feedback received so far.

I am also very pleased that Jens Waltermann, Executive Director of the International Office, has also confirmed that he will be joining us later this week to listen and learn about pastoral developments on our campuses.

We also appreciate that many of you have given up valuable holiday time with your families in mid-June to be here for this conference. Thank you.

At UWCs, we believe in the integrity of difference and strive to provide education for a deliberately diverse community - expressed in terms of geopolitical, cultural, gender and socio-economic diversity. Our distinctiveness is established at the very heart of our Educational Model: we strive to be a 'deliberately diverse, engaged and motivated community in pursuit of the UWC mission'. We are rightly proud of our diverse communities and we champion diversity and often celebrate it – but with this undoubtedly comes real responsibility.

We intentionally bring students together from across the world – and seek to support them as they face a set of challenges including relocation from their home contexts, language acquisition, a rigorous academic programme, and much more. Laurence calls them the 'deliberately disorientating dilemmas' of the UWC experience.

Parents and National Committees trust us to provide excellent pastoral care – and it is essential that we recognise that we are in loco parentis in our role as educators at this level. It is our responsibility as staff to accompany our students on their journey through UWC - not as their friends but as their guides, charged and trusted by their families and National Committees to help steer them to the next stage of their educations. A good teacher, a good guide is one who makes himself or herself 'progressively unnecessary' [Thomas Carruthers].

Fitting for our location here at Pearson and Pedder Bay, each campus stands as a natural harbour for our students and strives to provide safe and secure anchorage – a place for sea trials, a place to lose one's bearings (and to find them again), a place to charter new waters, and to connect with different cultures.

It is important that we teach our students to test themselves in order that they acquire the skills necessary to navigate beyond the UWC experience. Life beyond UWC represents new adventures, important challenges on the horizon. For all of our graduates, in some sense, it is a journey into the unknown, into risk – towards life's improbabilities.

Lawrence of Arabia, as part of his deliberate anonymity and retirement from the post war political world, took an isolated cottage in the county of Dorset in South West England and inscribed a line in Greek from Herodotus - Ou Phrontis (or 'Why worry?') on the architrave above the door. As a Head, I sometimes dream of an isolated cottage with little or no associated responsibility – and an escape from the sleeplessness that comes with the responsibility for the health and wellbeing of students in a residential context.

But we all here choose this profession and we choose to care. Indeed it is our responsibility to worry and our responsibility to provide a strong, supportive and responsive pastoral programme on each of our campuses – pastoral care is surely the essential foundation for the success of the UWC experience. If a student is happy, safe and secure whether as a day or residential student on our campuses, then he / she is in a position to succeed in other areas.

I have been excitingly observing the stage by stage development of the programme for this week with the coordinators weaving in ideas and suggestions from the delegates – and I am really looking forward to learning about good practice across our schools in terms of pastoral delivery: from mindfulness to health and wellness programmes, from professional development for staff to the provision of first rate counselling for students. I am sure that we come together having listened to feedback from our residential staff and having brought many student 'voices' (experiences, struggles, mental health issues, and personal UWC challenges) in our backpacks.

It is also an opportunity for us as staff to decompress after demanding academic years.

My simple hope for this conference is that we share our experiences and our learning and then take back what we learn from others to our different schools and colleges. In essence, this is a conference designed to provide professional development, a springboard for ongoing collaboration and support, and for the students back on our campuses to benefit from what we have shared and what we have learnt.

We always need to be wary of the demons of self-congratulation within UWC – and constantly to question whether we are providing outstanding pastoral care. UWC needs to move with the times and to be prepared for the challenges ahead associated with supporting students of our profile.

My assessment of RCN after one year as Rektor was that the will was there but the supportive and protective systems were not – and that, in some cases, we were perhaps bordering on the negligent. The in-at-the-deep-end philosophy was outdated and educationally unsound.

At RCN, we have placed pastoral care as a strategic priority and, on a day-to-day basis, seek to develop infrastructures so that RCN can be safer, healthier, more resilient and a stronger community.

One parent of a Canadian student wrote in early November: ‘Our son is loving being at RCN. We are so thankful that he is there with all of you. We can tell he is thriving. It is heartfelt to know that you and all of the teachers take such good care with all of the students’ – this message served as a reminder of the support we strive as guardians to provide for the students in our care.

But all of us in this room know of many examples of students who have struggled whilst in our care – and the sleeplessness associated with supporting them.

I often use the metaphor with the team at RCN of not spilling students, drawing from a line in a poem [‘Prayer Before Birth’] by one of my favourite Irish writers, Louis MacNeice, in which the narrator entreates ‘let them not spill me’. It is our responsibility on our campuses not to ‘spill’ these students entrusted to us by families and National Committees from across the world.

I am going to finish this welcome address with a little detour through Norse mythology.

The Norsemen and women visualized the universe as a tri-centric structure. The axis of the world was Yggdrasil, a timeless ash tree so vast that its branches spread out over the whole world with its roots providing sources of destiny, spring water and wisdom to the three worlds of gods, giants and men. Known as the guardian tree, it sustained all - and was seen as the greatest and best of trees.

The sagas reveal Yggdrasil’s recurring power to nourish and sustain but, at the same time, the tree silently suffers at the hands of those it sustains - from dragons to squirrels, from stags to wolves, which feed upon its barks and roots.

In many ways, I see RCN and other UWC schools and colleges as a form of traditional guardian tree providing care and sanctuary (and I hope wisdom) to each generation of UWC students - and UWC suffers greater hardship than many perhaps realise as it seeks to sustain those in its care - and we all, gathered here this week, must work hard together to ensure that we continue to improve the quality and consistency of pastoral delivery.

This conference is very much a trumpet-call to collective contribution, to new voices and ideas, and to delivering outstanding pastoral care to our deliberately diverse communities.

And finally, from Norse guardian trees to the redwoods of Vancouver Island, I come full circle to the First Nations.

Last Friday, Kathini and I took Poppy to the BC museum in central Victoria and one of her favourite sections was the 'Language Forest' in the Living Languages Exhibition. The Exhibition celebrates the diversity and resilience of First Nation languages in the face of change - and what actions are being taken to help them flourish. It strikes me that this is very much of what our conference is to be about - diversity, resilience and what actions we can take in the face of change to help our students with all their cultural contexts to flourish.

Richard D A Lamont

Rektor

UWC Red Cross Nordic

20th June 2016

Introduction of Dr Natalee Popadiuk:

This conference also provides us with the opportunity to invite external specialists to work with us. I'd like to introduce our key note speaker this morning, Dr Natalee Popadiuk from the University of Victoria. Natalee has done extensive work at Pearson in terms of advising on health and wellness, has also worked as a consultant for Red Cross Nordic, and has presented to all UWC heads on developing pastoral care. She is especially interested in how students' relationships affect an ability to adjust to new surroundings. It is a pleasure to invite Natalee to give the keynote address: psychologist, counsellor, educator, colleague and friend.

