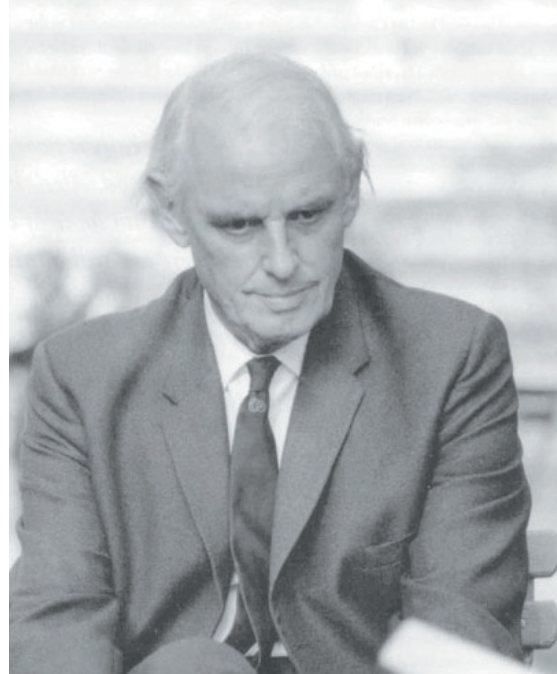


## Alec Peterson

Alec Peterson was born in Edinburgh in 1908 and entered the teaching profession in 1932. During the second world war Peterson was deputy-director of psychological warfare for South-East Asia Command, serving on Lord Mountbatten's staff; and from 1952–54 he was director general of information services during the Malaysian emergency. This military background was to provide him with contacts at the highest levels—contacts that greatly assisted the acceptance of the IB by ministries of education and governments.



Peterson was headmaster of government and independent schools in England, the last of which was Dover College, where he had started an international sixth form. He then became director of the Department of Educational Studies at Oxford in 1958 where he remained for 15 years. As long-time chair until 1977 of the editorial board of the prestigious journal *Comparative Education*, he was a recognized expert in the field of comparative education and a leading pioneer in international education in Britain and beyond.

He met Kurt Hahn at a conference on international education in Belgium in 1957. Through this acquaintance with Hahn's educational philosophy together with his military connections Peterson visited the new Atlantic College at St Donats (Wales) for the first time in 1961 (before any students had been enrolled). Kurt Hahn had helped to establish the school with Rear-Admiral Desmond Hoare as founding headmaster and Robert Blackburn as deputy headmaster. During the summer of 1962 Peterson worked with Blackburn to provide a broad academic curriculum to the students who were to enter this first of the United World Colleges in September of the same year.

Peterson was a staunch campaigner against what he regarded as the over-specialization of British education at pre-university level. In 1960 he published a report *Arts and Science Sides in the Sixth Form* based on research funded by the Gulbenkian Foundation. It is noteworthy how closely the content of the report resembles not only the philosophy but also the structure of the IB Diploma Programme, which had only begun to be elaborated a few years later. The Oxford Department of Education report extolled the need for a broader education that also allowed for a degree of specialization. It pleaded for ethics in science, and for humanities specialists to know something about the beauty of mathematics. It promoted critical analysis and learning to learn rather than encyclopedic knowledge and memorization. It proposed increasing the number of specialized subjects in the British sixth form from two to four, spread over the humanities and the sciences. A fifth block of time was to be added to cover religious and physical education, the creative arts and a new course of about 60 hours

that would enable students to “make a unity” of their whole learning experience. “The fifth block should therefore include a course, similar to the best and not the worst of the *classes de philosophie*, on the methodology of the subjects” (Peterson 1987 p42). It is remarkable that this precursor of the Diploma Programme’s theory of knowledge course should arise quite independently out of the subject of the same name that had been mooted by those developing IB courses in Geneva before Peterson became involved.

Peterson’s enthusiasm for the IB project is therefore not surprising. Here was the embodiment of an educational ideal he had been unsuccessfully promoting in the UK for so long. His particular interest in the theory of knowledge course was the fulfillment of something he had already foreshadowed in the Gulbenkian-funded report of 1960. Peterson had also shown interest in a range of assessment techniques that would gauge “the whole endowment and personality of the student” (Peterson 1987 p50) and that complemented his curriculum development ideas. His concept of student evaluation, developed over a number of years, later formed part of a study he did for the Council of Europe in 1970. He did not want good teaching to be distorted by intensive examination preparation. He thought highly of oral examinations with a visiting examiner (a hallmark of Diploma Programme language A, now A1, examinations for many years), of mixing a small amount of multiple-choice testing with essays, of assessing analytical skills and cultural sensitivity rather than factual recall, of qualitative measures of affective development (identified particularly via the creativity action service requirement of the IB Diploma Programme).

Peterson was a person of high leverage in educational and diplomatic circles. He was a visionary with his feet on the ground. His charisma, academic standing and international reputation provided a continuing source of inspiration to those developing the IB Diploma Programme from Geneva. When Peterson became part-time director of the International Schools Examination Syndicate (ISES) in 1966 he gave immense credibility to the IB project. When the ISES officially became the International Baccalaureate Organization in 1968, he continued as director until July 1977.

Peterson visited Geneva frequently but worked from his office at Oxford University. From January 1967. He lived in Geneva for a little more than six months while on sabbatical leave from Oxford in a villa about 100 metres from the IBO offices in Cologny. He then resumed his full-time duties as head of the department of educational studies at Oxford with the IB as his major research interest. So Peterson was a peripatetic, but extremely effective, part-time director general of the IBO.

It is a mark of his devotion to education that, after his retirement from Oxford in 1973, he moved to London and became a part-time teacher of the theory of knowledge course at Hammersmith and West London College of Further Education where he was provided, at no cost, with “a largish cupboard [that] served [as the IBO’s] office of the director general” (Peterson 1987 p79). In 1976 Peterson negotiated an agreement with London University’s Institute of Education for office space and he spent his last year, 1976–77, there as director general of the IBO.

He maintained a fervent interest in the IB until the end. At the Council of Foundation meeting in November 1988, the year in which Alec died, Robert Blackburn said:

Alec always looked forward. Until the morning of his death (when I had from him two manuscript letters and the copy of a draft speech) he was interested in the introduction of new subjects and new ideas in the IB...He was...particularly interested in the current debate on the role of internationalism in the IB. Those of us involved might well refer to his brilliant last chapter on the nature of internationalism in *Schools Across Frontiers* (Blackburn 1988).

Peterson shaped the educational philosophy of the IB, based on his own deeply humanist and liberal beliefs. This is discernible particularly in the following features: the choice of courses to stimulate the imagination rather than filling the mind with facts, the obligation to do independent research, the balance of academic work and community service, the development of critical thinking skills and the central role of theory of knowledge.

A glance through the volumes of Peterson correspondence in the IBO Geneva archives shows just how prodigious he was. During the many times when secretarial assistance was at a minimum or non-existent, there are to be found dozens and dozens of long, very neat, handwritten letters in English and French seeking funding, putting forward educational ideas to curriculum committees and examiners, discussing administrative and political matters concerning the ISES and IBO Council of Foundation, answering queries from schools, alerting an ambassador or a minister for education to the IB project, detailing long-term plans for the future, questioning the budget figures, following up with individuals met at conferences, providing background notes for Council agenda items, and so on. He provided the energy, the pedagogical vision, the educational stature and the administrative competence that allowed the IB project to blossom. His contribution was inestimable and his legacy will long be remembered.

Peterson became the first honorary member of the IBO Council of Foundation in 1983.

In order to ensure the preservation of that memory, the IBO Council of Foundation established the “Peterson lecture” where distinguished scholars would be invited to speak to the Council on issues related to international education in honour of Alec Peterson.

## Reference

Peterson, A. (1987) *Schools Across Frontiers: The Story of the International Baccalaureate and the United World Colleges*. Illinois, Open Court.