

On the occasion of the unveiling of the Blue Plaque for Alec Peterson: Old Headington, Oxford, 26 September 2026

Tribute by Ruth Rawling, Vice Chair, UWC Atlantic

My name is Ruth Rawling and I am the Vice Chair of the Board of the United World College of the Atlantic – Atlantic College.¹ I am honoured to be representing the College here today at the unveiling of this plaque in testimony to Alec Peterson's leadership in education.

Atlantic College was founded in 1962. It was the first stand-alone sixth form college in the UK and it was deliberately international. It was founded to 'advance education and learning and in particular the education of youth in leadership, loyalty, responsibility and respect for and understanding of human dignity, life, and rights'. There was a particular focus on 'the education of young people in environmental stewardship, service to others and global citizenship'.

Alec Peterson was a member of the Founding Committee of Atlantic College and crucial in developing the educational offering. He was able to bring his years of experience to bear in creating a truly innovative sixth form curriculum. He left an indelible mark on the character of the school.

From his experience of working as an educator and also in a variety of other, far-flung diplomatic and wartime roles, he brought both vision and the skill of implementation. His vision of the need for a broader sixth form education, suitable for students from all over the world, married with his skill in being able to corral various people and groups into coalescing around a concrete experiment, created the innovation. He was a major influence on the College's curriculum from the early sixties, using it to test out courses for what eventually became the International Baccalaureate. The College became the first school in the world to wholeheartedly adopt the International Baccalaureate for its students in 1971.

I am a product of that innovation – though I'm not sure I realised just how different it was at the time! I entered the College in 1974 and graduated in 1976 when I think there were in total only around 1000 students anywhere in the world with an International Baccalaureate. At that stage both the IB Organisation and the College were striving to promote the IB to universities near and far – not least here in Oxford! Success came over time: today there are about 130,000 graduates annually from several thousand schools worldwide.

¹ [UWC Atlantic College | Transforming Education for Global Impact](#)

I never met Alec Peterson but one of my teachers who did and who worked with him is here today: Andrew Maclehose. He remembers the fervour of those early years, the speed at which they had to create curricula – often a few days – and Alec Peterson’s skill at balancing off the different national educators’ needs. One particularly significant outcome was the course on the Theory of Knowledge, which accompanies the main curriculum, and which is compulsory for all IB students still today. Andrew was one of its early teachers. It was the result of Alec Peterson’s diplomacy, leadership and ability to find a way forward amongst strongly competing views.

As a member of the current Board, I feel Alec Peterson’s lessons are alive and well today. As the world changes, innovation is always needed. Ideas are all very well but you have to make them real if they are to count. The College is again innovating in his spirit, working with the IB in developing a new curriculum for 16 to 18-year-olds suited to the world of the 21st century. We call it the Systems Transformation Pathway.² We hope Alec Peterson would approve.

² [Systems Transformation Pathway | Academic | Learning | UWC Atlantic College](#)