

CONVERGENCE



Introducing **Dr. Jeff Aitken**



SPECIAL LITE EDITION

INTERVIEW WITH DR. AITKEN, NEW HEAD OF UPPER SCHOOL

KEVIN LIU
EDITOR IN CHIEF

On August 1, 2021, Upper Canada College welcomed Dr. Jeff Aitken as its new Head of the Upper School. Dr. Aitken is an educational leader with extensive international experience, including leadership roles in several IB schools. Going into a new school year, I know many of us in the UCC Community are very interested in getting to know our new Head of Upper School better. Therefore, on August 13, I sat down with Dr. Aitken and asked about his personal life, career background, and visions for the Upper School. Below is the transcript of this interview, and I'm also attaching the school's official introduction of Dr. Aitken after the transcript.

Dr. Aitken, welcome to UCC. Have you already moved to Toronto? It must be difficult to move a family amid a pandemic - how's the moving process?

Thanks Kevin. Under normal circumstances, moving is a challenge. Obviously, as we came from Singapore, we experienced one move, and international travel these days is certainly a challenge. But that went relatively smoothly. My wife and I didn't have to quarantine but our children did because of their age.

We were based in Niagara for a couple of weeks before moving on to campus. We moved onto campus about two weeks ago, so we experienced two moves really, and all of the logistics and challenges that come with that. We are in fact on campus now and already enjoying the campus and our connections to the college.

I understand that you are a Canadian, but you have extensive teaching experience in Singapore, U.K., Venezuela, and Malaysia. Could you tell our readers more about your overseas experience? What prompted you to pursue your career in so many parts of the world, and what

are those experiences you love the most?

Absolutely. This is an important question because it informs quite a bit of who I am, not only as an individual but also as an educator.

I am from Canada originally, but following university I entered into international adventures. I pursued some university in the UK and worked in the UK, and after that, as you mentioned, I've lived in a number of countries around the world.

The reason for doing that is really connected to a desire and an interest to understand more about the world and the people in it. I enjoy understanding and celebrating differences - differences in cultures and people and ways of learning. That interest and passion is what connected me to the International Baccalaureate quite early in my career, about 20 years ago when I started working for the IB. So my pursuit for international education was really connected to that desire. As a result I've just thoroughly enjoyed connecting to different cultures in different ways for different periods of time, getting to connect to different people around the world, and as a result getting to understand and to celebrate differences.

You were quoted as saying that "I feel strongly connected to UCC's values". Could you tell me in your opinion, what are the key pillars of UCC's values? And what's your vision for the Upper School?

I felt very much connected to all the values. All five of them resonate with me in different ways. They impacted me when I originally started looking into the role and UCC. For example, community resonates with me deeply, and so does well-being.

I have to say one that really stood out to me is learning. As I mentioned, much of my career has been connected to the IB and the notion of lifelong learning, collaboration, and curiosity being fundamental to how a school works. This has always been a big part of what I do and who I am. Therefore an interest in a high standard and innovation in teaching and learning is certainly one of the values that draws me to Upper Canada College.

The other one I have to mention is pluralism, and that is connected to some of the comments I mentioned previously. Diversity, equity and inclusion have been a significant part of my work in previous schools. There was a great phrase I remember "the pluralism and the promise of Canada". I'm not sure



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who wrote that but I love it. And it connects to the reason I went internationally, really. I've always been interested in understanding and celebrating the differences in perspectives, people and cultures. I think more often we Canadians need to remind ourselves that this idea, this diversity, is the promise of Canada. It's the origins of what Canada truly is. The pluralism and the promise of Canada resonates with me not only as an educator but as a person.

Do you have any goals to accomplish at the Upper School in the next school year or so?

Yes, I would say my first and most important goal is about connection. When I say that I mean for me personally, and I also mean as a goal for the Upper School.

I think it is really important for the Head of the Upper School to take sufficient time and invest time in authentic connections to the school and community. And that means connecting students and understanding them, and connecting to teachers and parents. I will just try to understand as much as I can, observe as much as I can, and listen as much as I can. So that is a goal for me personally and professionally, certainly in this academic year.

And I have to say when you ask me what is the goal for the Upper School, I think there has to be a very similar goal. I think we have to be intentional about connections. All of us around the world have gone through an extraordinary and unusual year and a half. I think we have to be intentional about connecting with each other again. It's been a difficult and challenging time for schools; I think we need to work to find ways to connect again. And like I said, to be intentional about the way we connect with one another.

I noticed that you are a Professional Development Evaluator for IB's Global Quality Assurance Framework. Could you quickly describe your role there? Do you notice any sort of trends occurring with the IB over the years?

You're absolutely right. That is one of the roles I've had with the IB. That role

is connected to looking at the approach and quality of professional development within the IB and internationally. It's been an extremely rewarding role for me because it allows me to connect to what teachers are doing and how the IB is attempting to advance teacher development and learning. That's always been very important for me.

In terms of trends, I would say that over the past few years, the IB is looking very closely at areas of contextual wellbeing within IB programs, and trying to look at how the IB programs can develop or shift to accommodate the many changes happening in people's lives right now. And I think that's very exciting. They're looking more closely at global citizenship, and the places that global skills and global citizenship have in academic subjects. I think that's a really important area of development, and the IB is the first to acknowledge that. They're not there

yet, but it is an area they're looking into closely, as well as the impact that it can have on individual courses and subjects, and how it connects to new ways of learning, project-based learning, skills development and more. So it is a really important area trending in professional development.

I guess that must have been very important in the past few years with the pandemic.

Absolutely, you've hit the nail on the head. A couple of years ago when the members of the IB committees were having these conversations, certain areas of the organization felt they were ready to make decisions and make changes in approaches to learning and new curricular areas. The last one or two years had just shown us that perhaps more thought is needed, as new areas of concerns and new areas of professional development, global citizenship, and wellbeing have surfaced. These new developments suggest we need more time to look really closely at certain areas and their impact on students, teachers, families, and schools.

Could you tell us a bit more about your family?

Yes, absolutely. My wife, Mariana, is also an educator. We met in Venezuela when I was teaching there. She is Venezuelan and British, so she has two passports. She is a very talented woman, who teaches Spanish, French, and dance, which she's extremely passionate about. She's probably not going to teach for a couple of years now because she wants to focus on her Master's, and she also works for the IB. So she's going to focus on that for now.

Of course, in addition to my wife, there are my two boys. Nico is going on to Year 9 in the Upper School, so we're pleased to have him join. And our younger son Alex is going into Year 7 in the Prep School. Both boys are very excited to be joining Upper Canada College and living on campus. They love sports, they're a big fan of baseball, and they love music as well. They both play a music instrument: Nico's played Trumpet for about seven years, and Alex has played Alto Sax for about five years.

What do you enjoy the most when you are not working?

In terms of my passion in life, I love theatre. I love watching theatre, going to the theatre for sure. I also love baseball - I'm passionate about the Blue Jays and supporting them, and I'm excited about being home now so I'm closer to the Blue Jays. What else do I love doing? I love being outside with my family. We enjoy biking, hiking, going for walks, going up north and spending time by a lake. Being outside with my family is probably what I enjoy the most.

Lastly, a near-term question - the school initially announced that it would use the 20-day format for next school year, but it recently sent out a survey asking for parents' and students' preference. Did the school face some pushback on the 20-day format? When do you expect the school to announce its final decision?

First of all, the school will announce its decision over the next couple of weeks, by the end of August.

I'll say secondly, that the feedback we received has been incredibly valuable. People have been really complimentary of how the College has done in the past, despite difficult circumstances. People have also been really helpful in giving

their input as to how we can be better and what their opinions are when it comes to the four-course model and the eight-course model.

We are committed to having students on campus every day and we're committed to having some form of co-curricular activities. It's clear, regardless of whether we go with the four-course model or the eight-course model, what's important to our community is that our students are on campus and involved in co-curricular activities to some extent. We're committed to that, we want that; of course

we will continue to evaluate the situation in the province and in Toronto, if we can make it happen, that is absolutely our plan.

Are there any other messages you would like to deliver to the UCC community through Convergence?

I guess a thank you, really, to those members of the community that I've already had the pleasure of being in contact with. It's very clear to me that this is a thoughtful, warm, and welcoming community, and my first impressions

are very positive. It's clear that student wellbeing and learning is at the forefront of what we do. We're very excited to start our journey as a family and my journey in the Upper School and in the community. Thank you to those who have reached out and made us feel very welcome so far.

Thank you so much for taking the time today to take this interview. Welcome to UCC, and I look forward to seeing you on campus in just under a month!

A COMMUNITY MESSAGE FROM PRINCIPAL SAM MCKINNEY WELCOMING DR. AITKEN

I'm very pleased to share that following a global recruitment search, we have appointed Dr. Jeff Aitken as our new Head of the Upper School, effective August 1, 2021. Dr. Aitken is an exceptional educational leader with extensive international experience, including leadership roles in several International Baccalaureate (IB) schools.

Dr. Aitken joins UCC from Dulwich College, Singapore, where he currently serves as Head of the Senior School. A Canadian who has taught internationally for much of his career, he began his work in education in the U.K. Prior to Dulwich College, Dr. Aitken was Head of School at St. John's Kilmarnock School in the Waterloo Region, and Assistant Head of Tanglin Trust School, Singapore, where he was responsible for curriculum as well as managing the IB, IGCSE and A Level programs. He was also at the American International School in Caracas, Venezuela and the British International School of Penang, Malaysia. His global outlook and his commitment to the student experience will further strengthen our ability to deliver transformational learning experiences.



As a dedicated leader, Dr. Aitken has demonstrated the ability to successfully implement strategic and educational innovations across multiple schools. He has worked extensively for the IB, as a Deputy Chief and Principal Examiner, a Teacher Workshop Leader and a Professional Development Evaluator for IB's Global Quality Assurance Framework. He also served as a member of the International Baccalaureate Heads Council, for three years as Vice-Chair.

Dr. Aitken's academic background includes an honours degree from the University of Windsor, a PGCE from the University of Strathclyde in Scotland, a master's degree in Education from the University of Manchester, and a PhD in Education from Birmingham City University. His graduate studies focused on intercultural communication and educational management, and for his doctorate he developed curricula for engaging and empowering students through cultural understanding.

Dr. Aitken is looking forward to moving to Toronto and living on campus with his family. "We could not be more excited and honoured to be joining the Upper Canada College community," he says. "I feel strongly connected to UCC's values and its vision to reflect the pluralism and promise of Canada."

On a personal note, I'm delighted to welcome Dr. Aitken to the school. We share a commitment to supporting students in their journeys to becoming their best selves. His global experience, humility and dedication to learning and teaching excellence will serve us well.



The Blue Page

Unfiltered voices from the UCC community

Ms. Timusk's 19 Years at UCC
Convergence Interview

To the surprise of all of us, Ms. Deirdre Timusk, our Assistant Head of the Upper School, departed UCC at the end of last academic year. Through a wide range of roles at UCC, Ms. Timusk had been an incredibly valuable member of our community, devoting herself wholeheartedly to serving and improving our school over the past 19 years. Ms. Timusk will continue her fruitful career at Havergal College as the Head of Senior School. At the end of the last school year, Convergence interviewed her so that she could share with us her 19-year journey at UCC and some valuable advice for us.

Could you give us an overview of your 19-year journey at UCC? How did you come to our school and what kind of roles have you taken over the years?

I was brought up in Thornhill and went to Thornlea SS and then went to Queen's for physics. After I graduated I did not want a "real" job so I decided to teach overseas and have an adventure. After teaching for two years in Medellin, Colombia, which is a stunning country, at the Columbus School I moved to the United States. I taught math at a public school in St. Louis, Missouri, Hazelwood Central. It had 2500 students and two full-time police officers who were stationed as community support in our school. It was a bigger culture shock than Colombia was for me and I loved it.

After four years I decided to move back to Toronto. I applied to TDSB and I also sent in cold applications to various independent schools but didn't think it would really go anywhere. The weekend I flew up to interview with TDSB, UCC and Havergal called and I interviewed at all three places the same weekend. UCC called me back Monday morning and offered me the job and the rest is history!

I've been a volleyball coach, a math teacher, a Senior House Adviser, a Faculty Chair of Mathematics, a Director of Community Service and now the Assistant Head of Operations. I've loved every role I have had here at the school and am so grateful I was able to help make the school a better place.

When you look back at your time at UCC, what achievements are you the most proud of?

I am most proud of many things! My lead-

ership work in mathematics was very exciting. I won three CISAA U14 Volleyball championships, one of them with my son on my team. I loved bringing ideas like pumpkin carving to life in Orr's House. I'm proud of the various student committees I helped to create like the Service, Clubs, and Speakers Committees. I am proud of the assemblies I ran with Ms. Ticzon and the team. I am also happy that I played a role in helping to make the school a better place for both students and teachers by changing small things that drive people crazy, like the bells never ringing at the right time!

I am proud of the work that I have done with Ms. Marshall over the past three years to help make the school a more inclusive and fun place to be for students. My work with Mr. Bardai and the Pluralism Committees is something I am also deeply committed to and hope to continue at Havergal. I loved working with the Farastaki family and helping them settle in Canada. I'm also proud of all the close friendships I have developed at work with my colleagues. We will always still be friends even after I leave here.

But I am most proud of all of you. I have seen you all come in as little Year 8s, leave five years later as mature young men and then return, years later, as amazing individuals. I'm honoured to have played a small part in your lives and to help you along that journey. You have brought me so much joy and I am so proud of you all.

What are your most memorable and most cherished moments during your career at UCC?

There are too many to mention (or remember - I'm getting old!). Laughing in my classes with my students, Elections, Speakers or AV folks. Feeling relieved when a huge assembly went well with Ms. Ticzon and the gang. Sitting watching a game at A-Day outside, in the sun, and thinking how lucky my family is to be part of this great community.

Over the years, have you noticed any profound changes taking place in the UCC community, and what is your perspective on these changes?

I am very proud that we have Pluralism named as a value - upfront and out there for all to see. I know we have a lot of



work to do but it is one step to help us create a school that helps to dismantle systemic racism in the world. All of you will play a role in that in the future. I am seeing some great work being done to help increase the conversation around healthy relationships and consent. These conversations and awareness of these issues are of utmost importance but more needs to be done.

Is there any advice you would like to leave to UCC students and the broader community?

Three points here:

You are all leaders. Even if you aren't elected or chosen now you have it within you. It looks different in everyone and each leader leads in a different way that works for them.

Keep applying for jobs even when you get rejected. Don't give up! It's all about timing and fit and a little bit of luck.

Try and find a job that you really enjoy. I have been in education for 26 years and I have enjoyed coming to work each and every day.

Is there anything else you would like to add?

Thank you for 19 wonderful years. It's been amazing.

Thank you so much, Ms. Timusk. We wish you all the best in your future endeavors!