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- [Arts](#)
- [Community](#)
- [Culture](#)
- [Dining](#)
- [Phuket Entertainment](#)
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- [Health](#)
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Bright Futures: UWCT students earning scholarships for top-flight universities

In the north of Phuket, halfway along a quiet, forest-lined road, is the surprisingly vibrant campus of UWC Thailand (UWCT). The international school, founded in 2008, is well known for its comprehensive International Baccalaureate (IB) programmes, mindfulness-based practices and perceived bohemian approach to learning; however, it's the diverse and inspiring student body that makes it so extraordinary.

Education

By Amy Bryant

Sunday 2 June 2019, 10:00AM



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A handful of UWCT students come from refugee backgrounds. Having made their way to the school against the odds and despite circumstances unimaginable, these students go on to great academic and personal success, including securing dream scholarships to some of the top universities and colleges in the world, funded by philanthropists, such as Shelby Davis, or universities themselves. Quite incredible for an independent school in the foothills of our small island.

These scholarships lead to degrees, professions and changed lives, and without them, these students would face the prospect of returning to the conflict and instability of their home countries.

On a Friday afternoon amidst their IB exams, four of these soon-to-be scholars kindly took the time to tell *The Phuket News* about their experiences of navigating the important path to higher education. Their names are Elias, Tala, Laura and Zane and they are wonderful ambassadors for their home countries, for UWC and for Thailand.

*

The first time Elias Nkuansambo boarded a flight, it was the long-haul departure that took him from his home country of Angola to Thailand. He wasn't entirely sure where UWCT was and had only a handful of English words in his vocabulary.

"That was difficult at the airport in Bangkok!" Elias jokes. "But learning English is one of the greatest experiences that has impacted my life."

Just 18 months after his airport debacle, Elias is fluent and has an ease with language and storytelling akin to that of a stand-up comedian. He has the room in stitches.

The acquisition of the English language was Elias' launchpad into a scholarship for Concordia College in Minnesota. In fact, he received seven offers from different universities, but chose Concordia after much introspection and many a visit to the office of Len Peters, the school guidance and university counsellor.

"The knowledge I'll learn I want to take outside of the classroom. I'm also looking forward to a change in climate. I want to see snow," Elias says.

Tala Khalil, from Syria, is equally excited to head for colder climes having been admitted to the University of British Columbia (UBC) in Vancouver.

Tala's application process came with a set of individual challenges, though, including the United States' draconian travel ban which inhibited her from applying to universities and colleges there. Instead, she focused her energy on four places in Asia, Europe and Canada. And it was UBC that ticked the right boxes for her.

After being nominated by UWCT, Tala also successfully passed through a separate selection process for the Donald Wehrung International Student Award for high academic achievers who show leadership skills and come from war-torn areas.

"UWCT has been a life-changing experience and I'm leaving with a toolkit," she explains. "I won't hesitate to go to a new place and meet new people and speak English every day. I have more self-confidence and more understanding of myself."



Laura Avetisyan is similarly grateful to UWCT for the transformative education it has given her.

"What UWCT has done for me is expanded the way I think. That's probably going to be the most significant thing I take from here. You are always seeking to look at things from multiple angles," she explains.

It's this critical thinking and reasoning that caught the attention of Laura's future alma mater, University College London (UCL). And she is looking forward to life in the bustling capital. Originally from Nagorno-Karabakh, a mountainous disputed region between Armenia and Azerbaijan, and now enjoying island life in Phuket, she has yet to live in a

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Laura applied to UCL a few days before the deadline. Competition was fierce with students applying from 17 UWC schools worldwide and only two scholarships available.

"It looked very unrealistic and I felt discouraged to write the 1,000-word essay. But I wrote it," says Laura, who blew UCL away with her answer to 'If an entire country disappeared as a result of natural disaster or climate change, how should the international community respond?' and was promptly awarded one of the two coveted scholarships.

Unlike Laura, Zane Sabbagh's application process was a lengthy one which started over a year ago and saw him writing 25 essays over the December break – from 'Write a letter to a tree' to 'Tell us about your arch nemesis, fictional or real' – and covering 3,000 kilometres over a fortnight visiting university and college campuses.

"I chose Stanford University, California in the end because the student body has a reputation for creativity and I want to surround myself with people like that," explains Zane.

He's also excited to live in the United States again. Although a US citizen, of Jordanian-Palestinian heritage, the last time he was resident there was some 15 years ago.

Zane's time at UWCT has taught him to manage competing priorities, but his lasting memory of the school will be something quite different.

"It's a diverse environment and it's nice that we take away knowledge of places we had never even heard of before," he says as he smiles and nods to his Angolan roommate Elias.

The school's core belief is that education can be a force to unite people, nations and cultures for peace and a sustainable future. And there it was in action, in a single nod, in a school office on a small island between two students who 18 months ago were worlds apart, but not anymore.

Further information about UWC Thailand's scholarship programme is available [here](#).

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