

CCLP Indaba 2026



Welcome to the Jungle: Leadership Beyond the Laws of Nature

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"We are heading back to the law of the jungle – where the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must."

At the same time on Sunday, 1 February 2026, students and educators from different time zones in Asia, Africa, Europe, North America, and Australia connected through a shared screen for the CCLP Big Indaba titled "Geopolitics 2026: Welcome to the Jungle."

For students from every school in the World Leading Schools Association (WLSA), an **indaba**, derived from Zulu and Xhosa traditions in Southern Africa, is **an event where a serious cross-community conversation is conducted in the spirit of mutual respect and collective thinking.**

In preparation for this publication, a formal interview was conducted with **Mr. Hughes, WLSA's Director of Global Student Affairs.** The "jungle," as framed by Mr. Hughes, described a world where rules still exist, but no longer reliably restrain power. Institutions remain standing, but the sense of efficacy and confidence in them is thinning.

Unlike regular mini-indabas, this particular Big Indaba event brought together the intellectual depth of an unprecedented span of students across continents alongside senior educators, policy commentators, board representatives. However, what made this Indaba particularly distinctive was not only its scale, but also its lively engagement: participants responded to

global instability with seriousness, courage, and responsibility rather than pessimism or cynicism, which, according to a student participant, provided **"hope and direction for the future roles [they could] play as young leaders."**

A World That Feels Exposed

Mr. Hughes opened the discussion with the sobering assessment that 2025 was not the year the international order collapsed; instead, it was the year it stopped pretending to hold itself together.

Together, students examined early 2026 developments: tensions in Venezuela, strategic debates surrounding Greenland, escalation risks around Iran, and long-running crises in Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo. These case studies illustrated the defining characteristics of modern-day crises: uneven enforcement of norms, selective prioritization of crises, and a system where power increasingly shapes outcomes.

Referencing the political philosophy of Thomas Hobbes, Mr. Hughes observed that without a functioning authority capable of enforcing restraint like the Leviathan, international life begins to resemble a modern variation of the "state of nature"—"nasty, brutish, and short."



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“That [was what] shifted the room.” According to Mr. Hughes, these were signs that students were not “politely” “performing engagement,” but “diagnosing what [they] see” in the world.

As the indaba ran its course, the conversation shifted from analyzing the world to asking what kind of leaders it now requires.

In responses across schools, three themes emerged: *moral integrity and accountability, emotional intelligence and empathy, and judgement and adaptability*. Most notably, students prioritized taking responsibility instead of pushing for individual dominance.

In a world described as a “jungle,” they argued, strength without restraint destabilizes, but restraint without strength breeds exploitation. Leadership, therefore, becomes a delicate balance grounded in both strategy and values.

Cross-Cultural Leadership as a Skill

“It starts from the idea that knowledge too often stops at the waterline — the boundary of one’s nation, comfort zone, or cultural perspective.” The CCLP is designed by Mr. Hughes “to push students beyond that boundary.”

The danger, he noted, is not that institutions visibly collapse, but that “outcomes depend less on rules than on leverage and power.”

“The erosion of trust—between states, within societies, between generations” is what Mr. Hughes believes to be the gravest concern of the international community. “When trust declines, miscalculation becomes more likely and cooperation harder, precisely when we need both most.”

In a pre-recorded commentary, foreign policy expert Mr. Mike argued that the post-Cold War settlement is no longer functioning as intended. The danger, he suggested, is not the sudden collapse of the global order, but is a world that grows increasingly accustomed to coercion without accountability.

During the interview, Mr. Hughes cautioned the temptation to assume that every conflicting perspective is manipulative or illegitimate. “Don’t immediately assume that everything you evaluate that does not align with your worldview is a lie designed to control you.” Effective leadership, however, requires the opposite: disciplined thinking, intellectual humility, and the willingness to stand in another’s cultural position before forming judgement.

For many students, Mr. Mike’s statement strongly resonated with their own global observations. When asked to describe the current state of the world order, students used words like “polarized,” “unstable,” and “power-driven.” One Chinese student observed that the term “rogue state” — usually reserved for North Korea or Iran — could now reasonably be applied to the United States. Another South African student argued that multilateralism was never designed to serve everyone equally in the first place. Some questioned whether we are returning to an era where “might makes right.” Others pointed out that even within competition, there remains space for cooperation and agency. The most important premise behind the design of the Cross-Cultural Leadership Programme (CCLP) at WLSA is that leadership in the 21st century is cross-cultural by default.



We live in a pluralist global system defined by competing national and ideological narratives, intensifying geopolitical rivalry, and rapid technological acceleration. Using technical knowledge alone to navigate the world is insufficient. Instead, leadership is an exercise in interpretation, translation, and judgement across differences.

The Programme emphasises three domains—**Head**, **Hand**, and **Heart**—a leadership framework articulated by a former Oxford college head and current UN official.

Head refers to strategic literacy: understanding geopolitics, historical patterns, institutional dynamics, and technological shifts. This includes systems thinking, an essential leadership skill that focuses on how different parts of a system interact, interrelate, and influence one

"In this 'Age of the Polycrisis,' multiple, interconnected challenges amplify each other's impacts, making cultural competence and cross-cultural dialogue more crucial than ever."

As one participant in the indaba observed, “Education is upstream diplomacy.” CCLP is distinctive for its cross-disciplinary and cross-cultural design with a curriculum designed to introduce students to topics such as Cultural Intelligence, Hofstede’s 6 dimensions, multipolarity, environmental governance, nuclear deterrence. To prepare students for the challenges of the 21st century, CCLP provides in-depth training of leadership skills such as systems thinking, emotional intelligence, moral courage, adaptability, and digital literacy through (inter)national leadership simulation activities and reflection toolkits.

Since the onset of the CCLP program, WLSA Shanghai Academy aims to promote the spirit of CCLP across campus to invite not only humanities students, but also science and STEM students to engage in the discussion of global affairs: AI competition, digital governance, sustainability, and security are not confined to one academic field, but are challenges requiring cross-disciplinary knowledge and skills in collaboration and communication. Indabas are a wonderful opportunity for students at WLSA Shanghai academy to engage in international discussions with WLSA students all around the world.

Looking Ahead

When everyone left “Welcome to the Jungle,” they were not promised that institutions would self-correct or that geopolitical rivalry would soften. Instead, they were reminded they were operating in a system where constraints are weaker and agency matters more.



As students, we are not just observing global change, but preparing to navigate it across cultures, across disciplines, and across differences to unite differing forces and rise to the occasion.

Especially in an increasingly multipolar world like ours, leadership must go beyond the laws of nature. In a global system increasingly described as a jungle, ethical, effective leadership must carefully consider how power is exercised, how decisions are made, and how responsibility is assumed.

**AND THAT CONVERSATION,
FOR US, IS ONLY JUST
BEGINNING.....**