

AIDC inaugural Schools Invitational Debate gets tongues wagging

From June to September this year, as part of its corporate social responsibility program, AIDC ran a unique and highly successful Invitational Debating competition for Year 10 students. Drawing students from both public and private schools across Sydney; Moorebank High School, Christian Brothers' High School Lewisham and Alexandria Park Community School, the program outcomes exceeded all expectations.

For six consecutive weeks, twenty-four students together with their support teachers spent their Friday evenings at AIDC, developing debating skills under the guidance of experienced University coaches and Junior Lawyers. Three debates were held simultaneously each evening, and three cafes near the AIDC headquarters chipped in generously by providing snacks for the participants.

What made the competition different was that rather than having the three schools competing against each other, the pupils were put into mixed teams of three – one from each school. “This enabled students to make new friendships, broaden their networks and develop their social skills,” said the chief executive officer of the AIDC, Deborah Lockhart.

“It was also an opportunity for those students who had limited or no previous experience of debating to benefit from specialist coaching. Debating teaches you how to construct a persuasive argument, how to communicate your thoughts as a public speaker and how to think on your feet. It was an absolute delight watching the progress of the students from week to week as they found their voice. It was also a chance for the legal fraternity and debaters at various Sydney universities to support the young students and pass on their knowledge,” Deborah said.



Moorebank High School teacher Sam Vasiliou said the unique format of the competition was highly beneficial. “It forced the students to work collaboratively with students from other schools, exposing them to students from different backgrounds and social perspectives.”

“I felt the students were quite privileged to receive coaching from the debating experts each week,” Sam said. “This type of professional guidance is usually out of reach for them.” The theme throughout the program was conflict and dispute resolution. The topics for debate, such as whether restorative justice should be used for teenagers instead of jail, helped the

students examine the nature of conflict and ways it may be resolved, and also heightened their awareness of important issues within society.



For the organisers and coaches, the benefits of the program became more and more evident with each passing week.

The chief adjudicator and one of the coaches for the Invitational Debate was Nita Rao, who was part of the Monash University team that won the World Universities Debating Championship in Berlin last year and who works as a Judge's Associate in the Supreme Court of NSW.

“For many of the students it was their first taste of debating,” Nita Rao said. “Some of them were terrified at first, but by the fourth or fifth week they were starting to show confidence. It was great to see how far they progressed.”

The program was very well received by the students and parents. Mushrat Jahan, a parent of one of the Alexandria Park students, described it as “an amazing six weeks of interacting, learning and mastering the art of debating”.

Likewise, three participants from Moorebank High, William Blackmore, Cynthia Nguyen and Lauren Jones, said the experience was very enjoyable, and the skills and strategies they had learnt would be put to good advantage in the future, “whether we are doing law-related courses, taking part in school-based debating tournaments or just arguing with our parents to let us go out to a party!

“We made a lot of friends whom we will cherish for the rest of our lives,” they concluded.

At the Grand Final hosted by King & Wood Mallesons on September 12, the Hon Justice Francois Kunc of the NSW Supreme Court gave a welcoming address. Students also had the opportunity to meet members of the NSW Bar and the ADR community, as well as Board

members of AIDC. After an excellent Grand Final, awards were presented for the Top Five Speakers, Student Collaboration and Collegiality and the Grand Team Prize and Overall Best Speaker.

“The final of the debate was a fantastic experience,” Sam Vasiliou said. “The students appreciated the fact that they could experience it – unlike other tournaments in which once you are eliminated you do not see the end result. This sense of finality validated their experiences throughout the debating tournament. We are already looking forward to participating next year!”

AIDC would like to extend warm congratulations to all participants and gratitude to the school staff and volunteer coaches for their ongoing support of this debating initiative.

