

Education

Top Asian School Debating Teams off to Compete in Britain

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Published: 12:00am, 23 Dec, 2016 ▼

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Plenty of quick thinking and rigorous reasoning was in evidence at the first Asian Schools British Parliamentary Debating Championship to be staged in Hong Kong. A total of 60 teams, including 24 from local secondary schools, took part in the two-day event co-organised by Capstone Education Group and the Cambridge Union.

Hosted by Munsang College in Kowloon, participants from the mainland, Singapore, Malaysia, the Philippines, Sri Lanka and Taiwan argued the pros and cons of a host of current issues. These included whether individuals who lead unhealthy lifestyles - by smoking, drinking or taking drugs - should be entitled to free healthcare and if it is fair

to punish individuals living beneath the poverty line for committing the “economic crime” of minor theft. Other topics dealt with the merits and downside of “tiger parents” and whether stay-at-home spouses should be compensated for work done for the home.

Each debate was adjudicated by experienced judges from the Cambridge Union who were in Hong Kong especially for the event. Eight winning teams will now travel to Britain next year to compete in the Cambridge Schools Debating Competition Finals.

Learning to debate well requires a combination of skills, namely critical thinking, effective communication, the ability to present and refute arguments, and teamwork. These are all important attributes for a successful career, according to Ronald Po, founder of Capstone Education Group, which specialises in debate training, language development, and advisory services for those applying to overseas universities or boarding schools.

“A lot of technical aspects and soft skills learned from debating, such as constructing an argument and presenting it fluently, can be applied in academic and everyday situations,” Po says. He notes that Capstone's non-profit “Tomorrow's Leaders” initiative aims to increase access for students to debating competitions which develop public speaking, critical thinking and leadership skills. “Our goal is to create competitions with minimum entry requirements, which allow students to compete against the best and see how they get along.”



Having already supported secondary school debating for about 10 years, a particular objective is to give more opportunities to students who may not be an automatic choice for their school teams. “A key part of our philosophy is to encourage young people to set the bar higher for themselves and attain new personal achievements,” Po says.



Daryl Isla, debating coach at Capstone Education Group would also like to see more students taking “a leap of faith” and experiencing the satisfaction and exhilaration of debating. “We encourage students to set aside the fear of not doing well and focus instead on measuring their skills and improvement against their last performance - not the performance of their opponents,” Isla says.

A good example is the achievement of two Capstone-trained debaters who were ranked among the world's top five individuals at the most recent Schools Debating Championship held in Germany.

Edith Chow, a student at the German Swiss International School in Hong Kong, felt the competition was a chance to learn new skills and techniques from overseas teams. “We also learned a lot from the judges, who gave us tips and did a demonstration session,” Chow says.

Commenting on the standards at the first Hong Kong Parliamentary Debating Championship, Alasdair Donovan, the Cambridge Union's deputy chief adjudicator, noted that many of the contestants were as good, if not better, than those he has seen in Britain. "The fact that English is a second language for many of the debaters seemed to make very little difference," he says.

Winners Kevin Tang and John George from the Anglo-Chinese Junior College, Singapore and runners-up Ateneo de Manila University each received US\$2,000 to subsidise their trip to Cambridge to take part in the Finals Day set for February.



In addition, finalists C.M.C. Ladies College from Colombo, Sri Lanka and Miriam College High School from the Philippines each received US\$1,000 and will also compete in Cambridge. Four teams, including Anuj Samant and Vikram Singh from the German Swiss International School in Hong Kong were awarded US\$500 prizes. The Best Team award in the 13 and under category was won by Hong Kong competitors Isaac Lam and Douglas Yang "This is the first time a full contingent of eight debating teams from Asia will travel to Cambridge to compete against top schools from Britain and Europe," Po says.