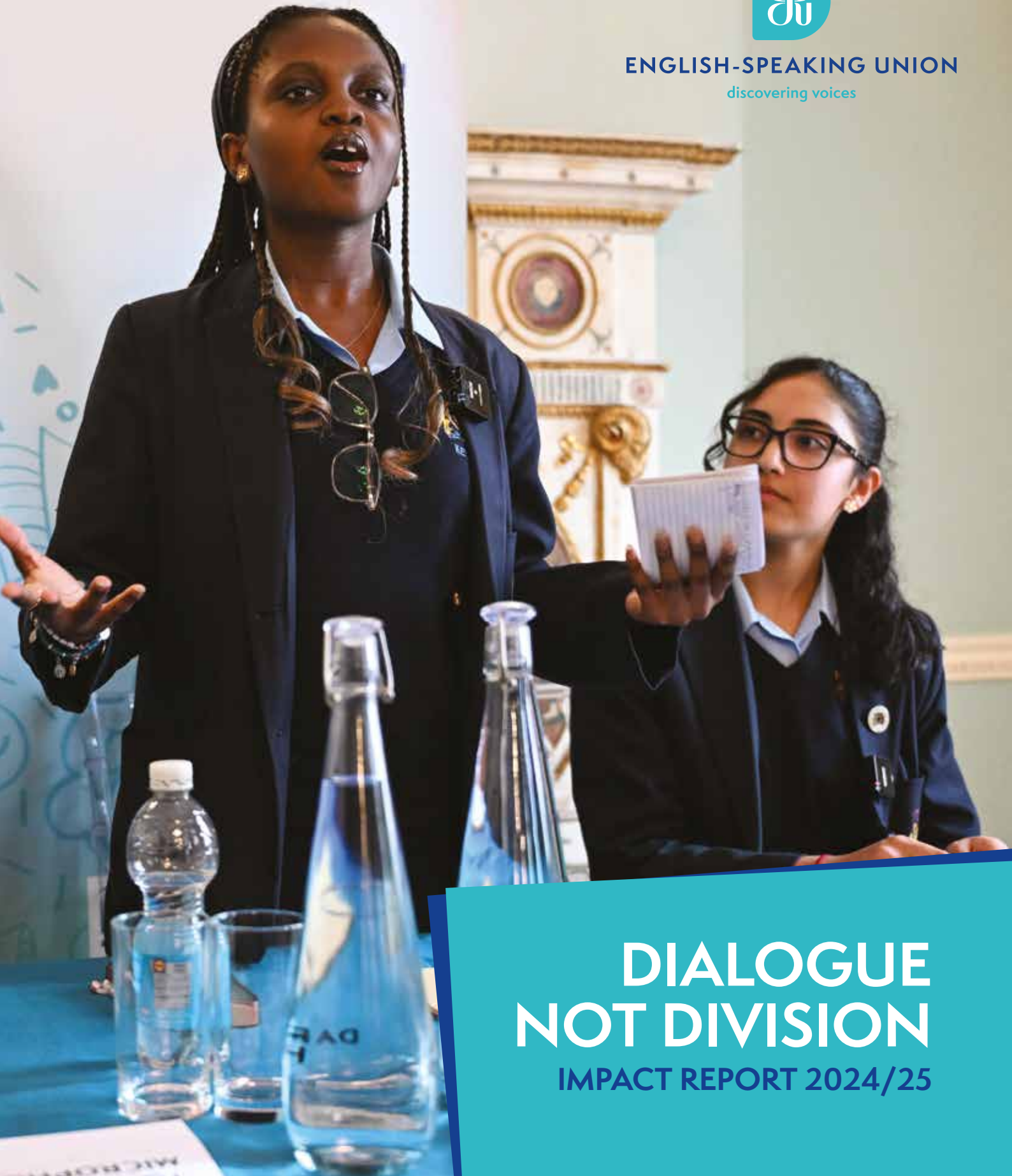




ENGLISH-SPEAKING UNION

discovering voices



DIALOGUE NOT DIVISION

IMPACT REPORT 2024/25



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WELCOME

Welcome from our DIRECTOR-GENERAL



Thank you for your support for the English-Speaking Union

Nationally and internationally, public discussion and political debate are increasingly polarised, divided and divisive. Social media, fake news and the outputs of new technologies such as AI can create echo chambers, where claims pass unchallenged, and different views are hard to find, much less examined or dispassionately debated.

More than ever, the challenges facing us as individuals and nations require global solutions. We need people who can work with others, regardless of their backgrounds or points of view. We need people who can listen, engage and communicate and find points of commonality from which to build.

Excitingly, these are more or less exactly the conclusions that the recent curriculum review, announced last autumn, has come to. The government has accepted the vast majority of its recommendations, and oracy will feature in both the primary and secondary curricula from September 2028, with critical thinking and citizenship given far greater emphasis, too. We believe that these developments will be transformational for young people and look forward to building on the strong foundations we have built in this academic year.

Thanks to your support, from September 2024 to August 2025, we have increased our reach, improving the speaking and listening abilities and cultural understanding of over 5,000 young people through our UK competitions (an increase of 18 per cent on last year). Over 115,000 young people worldwide took part in our International Public Speaking Competition, all learning to listen, to appreciate different perspectives and to clearly explain their own point of view. Our relaunched Continuing Professional Development programme trained over 125 teachers –

who will reach many thousands of children – to better teach these skills in their own classrooms, wherever they may be.

Alongside our international exchanges and scholarships, our activities help young people gain confidence in themselves and their abilities, and enable them to practice and hone their teamwork, communication and other leadership skills. They meet people from different cultures, generations and walks of life, building a more positive, rounded world view which enables them to live their lives to the fullest and to address our shared challenges together.

This sense of collective agency – and of positivity – is felt nowhere more strongly than at our competition finals, where our alumni often tell us they make lasting friendships with people from different schools or countries. They tell us they like the supportive atmosphere, the detailed feedback from the judges, and the sense that everyone is there to improve and enjoy the experience, rather than only to win.

It's also been gratifying to note how many teachers have brought their students – sometimes entire classes – to watch the competitions, knowing what an inspiration they are. As Ali Boucher, head of Drama at Ackworth School says on page 13, as well as boosting oracy skills, we help young people 'find their people'. It's your support which helps us to do this and, in a world crying out for connection, I can think of few things more important.

CHARLES BYRNE CBE, DIRECTOR-GENERAL

Dialogue NOT DIVISION

OUR VISION To create a world where people communicate skilfully and confidently, using English as a common language, to solve the challenges we face.

OUR MISSION To equip young people with the communication skills and cross-cultural understanding they need to thrive and build a more collaborative world.

WHAT YOUR SUPPORT HAS ACHIEVED

115,254 young people worldwide were involved in our International Public Speaking Competition

5,930 children in England & Wales whose **speaking and listening skills and cross-cultural understanding** we improved

5,016 pupils were involved in our **competitions in England & Wales** – an increase of 18%

1,879 students took part in a **Discover Your Voice** workshop

128 teachers trained to better **teach oracy**

39 countries took part in the **International Public Speaking Competition** with winners from 34 nations and regions at the grand final in London

37 Romanian students took part in a mini **'Debate Academy'** in Market Harborough

7 students travelled to America on the **Secondary School Exchange**

3 professional scholarships **awarded**

2 alumni travelled to the US for a **Debate Tour**

97% of IPSC finals week students plan to use their skills to **effect positive change** in their community/wider society

96.3% of students in our national competitions say they improved their expression and delivery skills and **95.7%** that they improved their reasoning and evidence skills



COMPETITIONS

- ▶ Public Speaking Competition
- ▶ Schools' Mace Debating Competition
- ▶ Performing Shakespeare Competition
- ▶ International Public Speaking Competition
- ▶ East Region Sixth Form Public Speaking Competition
- ▶ South Wales Primary Public Speaking Competition

SCHOLARSHIPS & EXCHANGES

- ▶ Secondary School Exchange
- ▶ Lindemann Fellowship
- ▶ Debate Tour
- ▶ Ann Chilton Art History Scholarship

TRAINING & RESEARCH

- ▶ Discover Your Voice
- ▶ Continuing Professional Development (CPD)
- ▶ Action Research

AWARDS

- ▶ ESU-Rutland Oracy Culture Award
- ▶ ESU-Rutland Oracy Teacher Award



Theory of CHANGE

The work we do changes lives. Through our respected competitions, workshops and CPD for teachers, we teach young people to express themselves, to listen to and appreciate different points of view, and to make themselves heard. They gain confidence in themselves and their abilities, and are able to practice and hone their teamwork, collaboration, communication and other leadership skills. They also meet people from different cultures, generations and walks of life, building a more positive, rounded world view which will stand them in good stead as they progress through life.

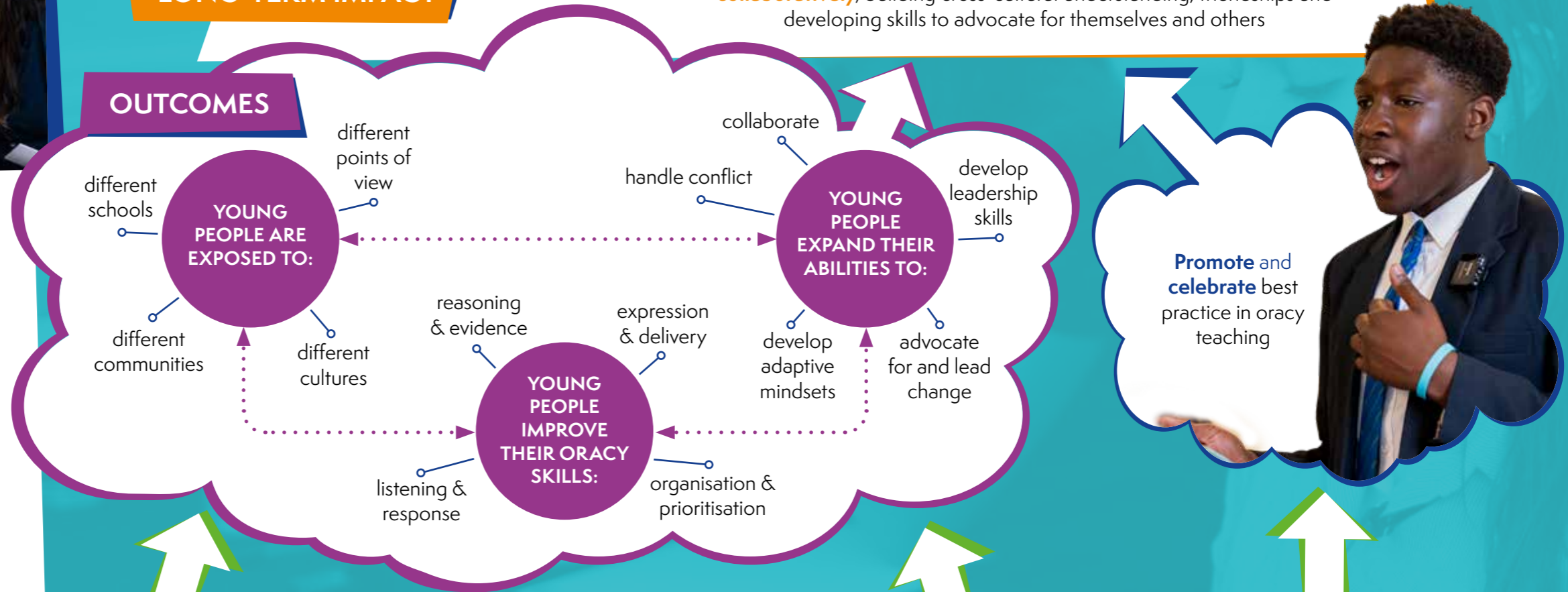
LONG-TERM OUTCOMES

A world where people **communicate skilfully** & **confidently** using English as a common language to solve the challenges we face

LONG-TERM IMPACT

Young people develop their abilities to **communicate effectively** and **collaboratively**, building cross-cultural understanding, friendships and developing skills to advocate for themselves and others

OUTCOMES



YOUNG PEOPLE IN ENGLAND AND WALES

- Public Speaking Competition
- Schools' Mace Competition
- Performing Shakespeare Competition
- Regional Competitions
- Discover Your Voice
- Secondary School Exchange

WHAT WE DO

YOUNG PEOPLE INTERNATIONALLY

- International Public Speaking Competition

TEACHERS IN ENGLAND AND WALES

- Continuing Professional Development Awards
- Action Research

OUR MISSION

To equip young people with the **communication skills** and **cross-cultural understanding** they need to thrive and build a more collaborative world

Where we WORK

The English-Speaking Union currently has over 50 national ESUs around the world from Albania to Yemen. All are invited to our International Council Meeting, which took place in Cleveland, Ohio in 2024, and to regular online sessions and workshops to share ideas, best practice and resources. Here is a taste of some of the work that has gone on in various countries this year, from free English-teaching programmes for under-privileged children in Sri Lanka to oracy summer camps organised by ESU Romania.

USA

Alongside its national Public Speaking Competition, ESU USA runs a number of programmes including English in Action, which pairs volunteer English tutors with newcomers to America for one-to-one conversation practice; the Andrew Romay New Immigrant Center, which offers language classes, mentoring and cultural learning opportunities to over 500 recent immigrants; Travel & Learn Abroad (TLab) which provided 46 teachers with summer study programmes in the UK (many funded by TLab scholarships); and a national Shakespeare Competition, which this year had 42 finalists from over 15,000 entrants. In partnership with Claremont McKenna College, it also runs a Middle School Debate Program teaching over 600 students in grades 5-8 (ages 10-14) the fundamentals of critical thinking and language arts skills. The ESU New York Debate League also successfully piloted three one-week summer camps for middle school students in June and July. 'At the end of the week, we asked the students, "What was your least favourite part of camp?"' says Lead Instructor Evan Streams. 'One answered, "speaking in front of other people." We then asked, "What was your favourite part of camp?" and she said, "Overcoming my biggest fear."'



LEBANON

Lebanon's national Public Speaking Competition in 2024, its 20th, was the first after a five-year hiatus due to the country's economic collapse. This year, thanks to the ESU Lebanon's small but tenacious steering committee, it was able to run the competition again, extending formal invitations to 15 universities. After rigorous internal selection processes, 13 then nominated 18 candidates, who battled it out for a place in the International Public Speaking Competition in London, the costs for which were sponsored by English-Speaking Union of the Commonwealth. The judging panel comprised Hilda Maalouf Melki, Head of Group Media and Communications at Bank of Beirut (which partially sponsored the competition); debate coach Marwa Abi Farraj; Tamar Zaidan, winner of the 2019 ESU PSC Lebanon; and acclaimed broadcaster Zaven Kouyoumdjian, who declared 20-year-old Farah Jadayel the winner.

ROMANIA

ESU Romania hosts one of our largest national competitions, with around 1,500 students aged between 16 and 20 taking part across the country, but that's not all it does. As well as running a junior competition, for the first time this summer it also organised two public speaking and debating summer camps, held at Brookhouse College in Market Harborough. A total of 37 students attended, working on their oracy skills in the morning and taking part in cultural activities including trips to London, Cambridge and Oxford in the afternoons. 'The students loved meeting new people and the fact that the workshops were fun and quite different to what they do in school,' says Ela Nicolae, President of ESU Romania. 'We're hoping to do even more next year.' Florina Niculescu of ESU Constanța has also been hard at work, running monthly public speaking and debating clubs; organising an English outreach group in poorer areas, and taking 22 students to the USA where they took an English course at Pace University, New York, and took part in ESU USA's national Shakespeare Competition.

SRI LANKA

As well as training over 100 young people for its national Public Speaking Competition 2025 – one of whom, 16-year-old Sashane Dassanayake, emerged as our international winner – ESU Sri Lanka has also launched a new project to teach English to under-privileged students free of charge.

Religious leaders of all faiths were asked to suggest suitable children whom they knew from their communities in the suburbs of Colombo. On 10 May 2025, 25 students began a six-month course, 80 per cent of which was sponsored by the Soroptimist International of Colombo. ESU Sri Lanka hopes to have similar programmes in the near future in all major cities on the island.



HONG KONG

ESU Hong Kong runs a number of innovative activities in addition to its national Public Speaking Competition, including a creative writing festival and its Impromptu Speaking and Reader's Theatre programmes. The former, in which students are coached in how to give a short speech with just a short amount of prep time, reached 639 students and 41 teachers in 2025/25. The latter sees popular novels turned into scripts for five or six characters and students are then coached on their oracy skills and how best to perform/read these. Their teachers select the best groups who then submit video entries to a professional actor who judges them. Six hundred and twenty-nine students and 35 teachers took part this year, with one teacher commenting, 'I am pleased to say that the workshops have been a success, and most of the participants have given positive feedback on the learning experience. I myself benefitted much from the tutor, particularly the strategies she used in training students' use of voice and expressiveness in reading aloud. I'm grateful to you for providing us and our students with this valuable and fruitful learning experience.'



SCHOOLS' MACE

The English-Speaking Union's Schools' Mace, the oldest and largest debating competition for schools in England and Wales, hones students' debate, critical thinking and presentation skills in a fun, competitive environment. This year's grand final was won by defending champions Radley College, Oxfordshire, opposing the motion 'This House Believes that AI-generated content weakens critical thinking and creativity.' Their counterparts and worthy runners-up were Bristol Cathedral Choir School who, like another semi-finalist Woodcote High School, were almost entirely self-run and organised, with minimal teacher support.

Political commentator and author Sam Freedman, one of the judges, said: 'Debate, engagement and thinking through ideas should be a really important part of anyone's education. I was very, very impressed by the quality of debate today and enjoyed listening to the arguments and how the students were reacting to one another in real time. I spend a lot of time watching parliamentary debates and the quality is often pretty poor, with people more focused on capturing a 20-second talking point for the clip that they're going to post on social media, rather than trying to engage with each other's arguments. If competitions like this can encourage young people to debate like that and to bring that back into the way that we think about politics and other areas of life, then that would be a big bonus.'



'I was new to the Mace, and it felt as if the environment and the people surrounding it were incredibly welcoming and kind. The social aspects between debates were an unexpected positive'

Schools' Mace competitor

A TEACHER'S VIEW

How one teacher saw her students develop through just one year of ESU competitions



St John The Baptist Church in Wales High School, a comprehensive in Aberdare, South Wales, has not historically had much of a culture of debating, public speaking or performance. There is a small debate club, but no drama department or drama studio to speak of.

But in autumn 2024, prompted by a small group of keen students, Jo Watkins, Second in English Curriculum Area, decided to sign up the school for not one or two, but all three of the ESU's competitions (Schools' Mace, Public Speaking and Performing Shakespeare), despite never having done them before.

The prospect of competing with other schools immediately had a galvanising effect on the students: 'We started off with a mock debate, which they were quite miffed they didn't win,' says Jo, 'but then they were just so determined to do well the second time – which they did.' And the students kept on winning, their determination driving them through to the regional finals of all three of the competitions.

Through the various heats, Jo saw her students' oracy skills flourish, most particularly in 'Listening & Response' (one of the ESU's Four Key Skill Sets) and she believes this will benefit them hugely in the future: 'One of the most impressive things that I saw pupils do was how they got involved in the questioning. It's such an important skill – for their future education, at university

or whatever they decide to do.' More immediately, the skills and knowledge learned in the competitions are clearly supporting students in their academic studies too: 'Now, when we're talking about writing a speech in English lessons, we're using a lot of the strategies and terminology from the debating competition – persuasive devices, rebuttals and the like, which I think is quite interesting.'

Not only do the ESU competitions help to develop students' skills, they also provide a unique opportunity to connect with other students and adults whom they wouldn't usually have met – experiences that Jo values highly for her students. 'They loved going to Howell's School [one of Wales's top independent schools] – they got on so well with everyone there and it was so pleasing to see that they weren't in any way intimidated. It's given them a far wider circle of friends.'

'I think the most important thing for me was to see how much value they saw in themselves,' she continues. 'To see that they could hold their own and in fact win in that sort of environment – I don't think you can underestimate the impact that that has on your self-esteem and confidence.'

IN NUMBERS*

- 388 schools
- 1,500 students
- 114 heats & regional finals
- 94% agree they would use these skills to improve their school/community
- 89% agree it improved their reasoning and evidence skills
- 89% agree it has improved their leadership skills

*Statistics throughout have been collected from students and teachers who attended finals days

PERFORMING SHAKESPEARE

It's a warm June day at the Globe Theatre on London's Southbank. Outside, crowds surge, some pausing to photograph the building's timber-framed exterior, others jostling to get a better view of St Paul's opposite. Inside, in the Globe's beautiful Sam Wanamaker Playhouse, it's also hot and crowded, but instead of noise, there is silence, and the sense of anticipation and energy are palpable.

Year 9 student Angelo Forkwe, from Warwick School, is centre-stage, setting the scene for the monologue he's about to give. 'Let me take you to 1599,' he booms. 'England is in the midst of a war. The Elizabethan era is ending and everybody is wondering who will rule next. This is where I think Shakespeare got his inspiration from to write his play *Julius Caesar*. Although set in ancient Rome it has themes that transcend time. It explores power, betrayal and the consequences of political ambition.'

Months of commitment

This is the grand final of our Performing Shakespeare Competition 2025, in which nearly 2,000 young people have taken part, rehearsing and competing for months to make it to this point where only 12 schools remain. The students' task is three-fold. They need to deliver a word-perfect performance of a Shakespearean monologue or duologue, that makes Shakespeare's meaning clear, even to those who may never have read or seen his works. They need to engage with the audience – to make them feel something, whether that be laughter, fear, sadness or disgust. And, crucially, they have to introduce their performance, explaining the context and why they have chosen the piece, building

their public speaking and reasoning skills in the process.

The power of words

To warm them up, the day starts with a tour of the Globe during which the students witness a professional rehearsal, followed by an actor-led workshop. Then it's time for the final, watched not only by the audience but a panel of esteemed judges including actor Abigail Cruttenden; Lucy Cuthbertson, Director of Education (Learning) at Shakespeare's Globe; and theatre director Anthony Shrubshall. After 12 performances, the tension is riding high. The audience has laughed and it has cried. There has been song and dance, love and hate – and even some remarkably convincing physical violence.

After the judges return from their deliberations, Poppy Letting from Ibstock Place School is announced as the winner of the Don Miller award, voted for by the audience, for her performance of *Macbeth*, Act V, sc. i. Millie Godfrey from Stonar School wins the runner-up for her take on Act III, sc. ii of *Romeo and Juliet*. And the winner? It's Angelo Forkwe for his masterful performance, the introduction to which is likely to resonate for some time to come. As he says: 'We live in a time where it is impossible to know the full truth. Everything we see on the news has been filtered through the politics of the media. And we, just like the people of Rome, find ourselves unable to pick a side. Yet despite all this, in this monologue, in mere minutes Mark Anthony skilfully manipulates a bloodthirsty mob into a regretful crowd. His actions show us time and time again, the power that words hold.' ●



'I love the fact that these young people have not just found a home with your competition, but that they have found their people in each other.'

Ali Boucher, Head of Drama, Ackworth School



A TEACHER'S VIEW

Ali Boucher, Head of Drama, Ackworth School

'I am still a bit grumpy we didn't place, but much better it's their teacher who is small-minded and competitive, rather than his students! Bethan and Vida are delighted by the whole experience. My grumpiness is ridiculous, I know, but I am proud to feel so strongly for my students, and really, if I'm being honest, I know that my grumpiness is a distant third to the pride I feel at Vida and Bethan's performance, and a distant second to the joy that I felt in seeing all of those young people perform. I love the fact that these 12 people – those 2,000 students overall – who love drama and Shakespeare and performance, have not just found a home with your competition, but found their people in each other. That's what it's all about, and that is why what you do is so important. To those people who find it hard to find a home, you give them a place that they can call their own. For a lost 13 year old, there is nothing more valuable that you could offer.'



A STUDENT'S VIEW

Millie Godfrey, Stonar School

'When you say you love acting people automatically assume you're confident, and I am, when I'm on a stage and I know my lines and I'm a different character; but not when I have to talk about me or my feelings. But [through the competition] I've learned more about how to get up on stage and be me. I think it's definitely helped me to be more confident.'

IN NUMBERS

137 schools

2,000 students

100% agree it helped them meet those of different schools, regions, communities and age groups and that this had been positive

93% strongly agree it improved their expression and delivery skills

88% strongly agree it improved their reasoning and evidence skills



PUBLIC SPEAKING COMPETITION

Every year, hundreds of school children take part in our Public Speaking Competition. After scores of in-school heats, the teams compete in regional heats and finals, before making it to the national semi-finals and, for those talented enough to proceed, on to the grand final at Dartmouth House.

Teams comprise a speaker, a chair and a questioner but, instead of simply competing team-on-team, our competition pairs the speaker from one team with the chair and questioner of another, adding to the camaraderie and connection-building possibilities of the whole event.

Past winners include comedian Rory Bremner and journalists and authors Anita Anand and Michael Crick. This year's winning team was Torquay Girls' Grammar School, with best speaker won by Tamoy Cameron from King Edward VI Handsworth School for Girls, who gave an animated speech on why financial literacy should be taught as part of the curriculum.

But what impact does the PSC make on those who take part? What benefits do they reap? We caught up with four alumni from over the years to find out.



'I'd say we gained a huge amount of confidence, a sense that a wider world was out there, and that speaking could be a gateway to opportunities in life'

weren't on stage; and on Jessie's sharp, but not brutal, questioning. Actor Michael Maloney, one of the other judges, also talked about our use of language, and the humour we'd used, which we were very chuffed about.

As part of our prize, we were later invited to Buckingham Palace where, to our amazement, Prince Philip himself presented us with a certificate. I'd say the main thing we got out of it though was a huge amount of confidence, a sense that a wider world was out there, and that speaking could be a gateway to opportunities in life. It went pretty high up on my CV and, at my interviews for university and early jobs in TV, it was the only thing anyone talked about. Having done the competition really helped get me noticed in an industry where maybe 100 people or more apply for every post.

Picking up the phone and talking to people is a skill that is as important today as it has ever been but, working in news, I see how easy it is for young members of staff to hide behind screens. When we go out and film the public too, we meet so many people who are not confident in voicing their opinions, which puts you at a real disadvantage in life. With technology taking over in so many areas, I think you really need to have a voice.'



1997
HELEN CARNELL
ITV news Tyne Tees correspondent

'My involvement with the Public Speaking Competition was all down to my lovely English teacher, Mr Buckingham, at Wadebridge School in Cornwall. In Year 10 he entered three of us – me as speaker, Jessie Retallick as questioner and Jo Williams as chair – in the ESU's competition. We'd practise at lunchtimes and, as the event drew nearer, he'd get us a little audience – basically pupils on detention, who gave us a bit of heckling.

The earlier rounds were held in schools much grander than ours and many of the other students had a real aura of confidence about them, which couldn't have been said about us. I was a bit overawed, but I remember Mr Buckingham saying, "Don't worry, you're the best team here", and, sure enough, we went through to the finals.

Ever since I was about four or five, I'd wanted to be a TV news reporter and the lead judge at the finals was my idol, Anna Ford, who gave us some really lovely and very specific feedback on our performance, commenting on our politeness; our attentiveness to the other teams, even when we

2005
ROBERT STAGG
Director, New Variorum Shakespeare, Texas A & M University



'I don't remember a huge amount about the competition, apart from how enjoyable it was, particularly the questioning from the other teams which was not "Jeremy Paxman-style", to trip you up or to annihilate your chances of winning, but instead consisted of helpful and interesting questions designed to let you expand on the subject about which you'd been speaking.

Overall, I think the competition [Robert won best speaker, outstanding personality and was part of the winning team] gave me a confidence boost of the best kind – not one that merely feeds into your ego or fuels a sense of hubris or arrogance, but a pleasant feeling that other people think you're good at something, even if you're not completely sure of that yourself.

Its longer-term impact has certainly been significant in that it gave me a high degree of confidence in public speaking, something which has proved to be very useful in my career as a university lecturer. It also taught me how to write a speech or presentation and, crucially, how to think on my feet and handle different types of questions.

It also very much taught me about working as part of a team. Despite my personal awards, this

was a not a one-man show, it was three people who'd planned how we might work together, but also to think, somewhat spontaneously, about who would do what in response to the various things the opposing teams might bring up. Knowing when to be quiet is as important a skill as knowing when to speak.

There's a tendency in university life at the moment to try to spare students public speaking opportunities – there's a worry that they might not feel comfortable. I try to accommodate that in different ways, but it's undoubtedly an important skill to learn as, without it, the impression students give is one of sheer nervousness and anxiety. In almost every line of work they will have to do some sort of public speaking. It might not be a formal set piece, but they will have to speak to people they don't know; they will have to present findings or facts; they will have to think on their feet; and they will have to learn to hide their nervousness. It's part of the working world.' >

2017

MAXWELL DUNCAN
Appeals litigator

'I first entered the ESU's Public Speaking Competition in Year 9 and one of the things I learnt early on is that it really is a group effort and you cannot succeed without everyone pulling their weight, enjoying the process and working together well. While interesting, that lesson was very frustrating for me for the first two years I entered until, in Year 11, we finally had a team who were all equally committed and with whom I'm still incredibly close now.

We were at St Clement Danes School in Hertfordshire and lucky to have an extremely supportive English department which encouraged a rigorous approach. We practised as much as possible, held one another to account, and were very robust with our feedback. Our questioner, Florence McGrath, was a real disciplinarian, without whom we definitely wouldn't have got as far as we did, but even with her guidance, I'd often find myself writing my speeches on the way to, or even at, the podium.

I still sometimes do this today in my work in the courts as an appeals litigator and, while it's not a good habit, that experience has been very useful because in life you can't always be prepared. Sometimes you've just got to be ready to just go with it. I loved how formal the

'I've learnt that people just want to connect, and effective communication is all about authenticity'

competitions were, the grand venues they were held in (Magdalene and Churchill Colleges, Cambridge, in my year) and, most of all, how we

students were treated as adults and equals by the judges and organisers. I didn't make the most of my time at the IPSC [where Maxwell went on to represent

England and Wales] as I was too focused on trying to win, but the experience was easily one of the best educational opportunities of my life.

My competitiveness can still get the better of me but ultimately, I've

learnt that people just want to connect, and effective communication is all about authenticity. Despite my liking for formality, I like to take a light-hearted approach, seeing my speeches as an opportunity to give the audience a bit of a break and maybe a bit of a laugh. Whatever approach I choose, and whatever I've had to write – from university essays to speeches to court addresses – I've learnt to think more about what the audience wants and needs, and going through that process at that age has been immensely helpful for everything I've done since.'



2023

AMY ALLISON
University student

'It was pure accident that I got involved in public speaking – the team's chair caught Covid just before the regional finals and so my teacher asked if I'd step in. I did, and found I really enjoyed the team set up, the different roles, and listening to what everyone had to say and how they answered questions. I asked if I could stay and, the following year, took on the role of speaker.

This was more momentous than it might sound because I am dyslexic. I read really slowly and can't spell to save my life, which often got in the way of my trying to write essays at school. But I always knew I had something to say and this competition allowed me to prove that I could express myself, just in a different way. It's boosted my self-confidence, my critical thinking and my ability to think on my feet and adapt to different situations.

'I am dyslexic and struggled to write essays at school. But I always knew I had something to say and this competition allowed me to prove it'

I think it's really important that more young people get to experience this because making speeches and giving presentations is not normally something we have the chance to do. Speaking wasn't part of my GCSE curriculum and so, unless I'd been approached for the PSC, I still wouldn't know that I was any good at it. Plenty of students in my year still don't.

I was so nervous before the final, but I was paired up with the loveliest girls and I remember we had a great



chat outside Churchill College on the picnic benches and, by the time we went in, we all felt relaxed and like we were going to have fun. The ESU competitions are more enjoyable and less stressful than others I have done – they're as much about trying to foster connections as about winning.

This was especially apparent at the IPSC the following year where, because I'd won best speaker, I was invited to represent England and Wales. In that unforgettable week, I was lucky enough to meet around 30 young people from all over the world, many of whom had English as a second or third language, and to discover just how amazing people are. The competition has changed my life in other ways too, as it has led to my applying to study law at university. I hadn't considered law before the PSC, but I met so many interesting people who had studied it, and who were so generous with their contacts and advice, that I decided to go for it – and I started at Oxford in October. ●

IN NUMBERS

- 225 teams
- 1,400 students
- 95 heats & regional finals
- 100% agree it improved their listening and response skills
- 96% agree it improved their expression and delivery skills
- 96% agree it helped them meet those of different schools, regions, communities and age groups



As told to Natasha Goodfellow

'Not winning the IPSC is the best thing that has happened to me'



Markus Aksli represented Estonia in the grand final of the International Public Speaking Competition 2018. Here he tells us why he's glad he didn't go home with the trophy – and what he took away with him instead

In May 2018, 19-year-old Estonian Markus Aksli took to the floor at the Royal Institution as one of the grand finalists in the ESU's International Public Speaking Competition. The winner of his country's national final, Markus had arrived – along with dozens of other national winners – in London a week earlier for an intense few days of public speaking training, heats and cultural visits.

A niggling feeling

Now, he was one of the remaining six, and hoping to win top spot with his speech on the importance of discussing difficult issues openly. As you might imagine, the bar at this stage is very high and, by anyone's

standards, Markus's speech was slick and compellingly delivered. He didn't win – that honour went to Johanne Jazmin Tan Jabines from the Philippines – but instead of feeling proud that he'd got so far, he had a niggling feeling that he'd done something wrong.

'For a while, I just assumed that it was because I hadn't won,' he says. 'But as time went on, I realised that it was something else entirely. I admitted to myself that I hadn't done that much research into the topic – I'd just watched some YouTube videos. I'd never really tried to argue against myself or to convince myself that I was wrong. I was more focused on crafting a convincing-sounding speech rather than one I felt strongly about. That's

why I think that not winning the IPSC is the best thing that has happened to me. If I'd won, I would have been rewarded for presentation and the trappings of technique – and would never have realised that the real prize is something quite different.

'Public speaking is all about expressing yourself – but the real dilemma is choosing which version of you to express. Public speaking also happens to be a nightmarish combination of performance pressure, social risk and a raw test of likability and character, rendering it terrifying for most people. Compound this with the sting of losing, and it's no wonder the easier path is to polish the surface. You can try to play to the

judges, defend yourself from being seen as boring or rigid or stupid or pretentious – all for the low price of expressing something you might not fundamentally believe, or that you understand in a slightly false way. You can self-deprecate, massage every syllable and pause, and obsess over the perception of others rather than what you can give them.

Working out what matters

'But external validation will only get you so far. For internal validation – to feel as if you're being true to yourself – you need to take the harder path. You need to really think. You need to read and research thoroughly, putting in the work and presence of mind required to figure out what really matters to you, and pinning down what exactly you think is true and important enough for someone to hear. It also means seriously questioning your assumptions and considering whether you could be wrong. It means distilling the core of what you now believe into the short

time you're given and delivering it honestly. What I realised is that I'd taken the easier path. I'd failed to properly exploit the opportunity to think seriously about a subject I care about, and I deprived the audience of what could have resulted from that.

'What I realised is that I'd taken the easier path. I'd failed to properly exploit the opportunity to think seriously about a subject I care about'

A valuable skill

'Through the IPSC and my reflections afterwards, I've learnt that there's a lot to be said for paying attention to something for 30 minutes rather than 30

seconds, despite everything modern life does to prevent this. There's something redemptive about thinking hard about an issue, figuring out what's true, and how you can best convey that to other people. I find writing my thoughts helps me to clarify them, and this is a process that works as well for writing a speech as it does for navigating life. These days, I write whenever anything complicated or heavy comes up (more often than 19-year-old me could have ever imagined). As a skill, it's as fundamental



as it gets, but you only learn it if you have your priorities straight.

'My experience of my high school in Estonia was that it was a sort of shark tank, where showing any kind of interest towards anything would see you attacked unless you self-deprecated first. So it was such a life-altering and affirming experience to go to London for the IPSC final and meet all these people at the opposite end of the spectrum – people who were very open, who liked thinking about stuff, and who were interested in listening to what others have to say. I realised that, for me, that's where the real value of public speaking lies. In working out what you think, you work out what matters to you – and in saying it honestly and effectively, you might just spark a real moment of human connection.' ●



IN NUMBERS

115,254 students involved in IPSC 2025

39 countries and regions took part in the competition

34 countries and regions represented at the international finals week

100% would recommend the experience of the IPSC and IPSC week to friends and family

97% plan to use their skills to affect positive change in their community/wider society

91% of finals week students agree or strongly agree that meeting people from other cultures is a positive and enriching experience

A Life-Changing CHARITY

What our alumni, their parents and teachers think of our work

'Simply put, it was the best experience of my life. I have made friendships that will last forever, learned skills to improve my oracy, but most of all, I found confidence that I didn't know I had. The IPSC helped me tap into the potential I know we all have, but seldom realise.'

Saesha Goyal, IPSC competitor, India



'I've learnt so much from all of the different pieces, and even if I've heard the monologue twice it's always different in some way.'

Angelo Forkwe, Warwick School, Performing Shakespeare winner 2025



'I took part in ESU competitions when I was at school. They took us out of our school and out of our town, and we got to visit other places and meet young people from other parts of our region. I really valued that opportunity.'

Helen Hayes, MP, alumna and PSC 2025 judge



'I learnt so many things while researching my speech – it was a really fun experience. As well as my speaking skills, the competition has honed my listening skills too because, during the questioning, you have to listen really carefully to be able to answer effectively.'

Tamoy Cameron, King Edward VI Handsworth School for Girls, best speaker, PSC 2025



'I'd spent a year in America before I did the IPSC and my week at the competition was like my US experience multiplied by 34 – the number of countries at the final that year. It maximises your mindset.'

Ali Mohammed, Yemeni IPSC winner 2007



'Children today are told not to talk to strangers, but this is what kids need to learn to do – the skill of networking – to talk to adults and students in different demographics and different contexts. And they don't learn it unless they're put in spaces where that is enabled.'

Noor Wafa, Assistant Subject Leader for English, Royal Grammar School (High Wycombe)



'The experiences you have in the International Public Speaking Competition, they shape you as an individual. Every single person has a story to tell. You can learn from their cultures and talk about global issues, and these conversations, they stick with you for life.'

Emilijus Latakas, Lithuanian PSC winner 2024 and judge 25



'Our cohort are quite diverse, and they come from socioeconomic backgrounds that have a lot of challenges. I want them to feel empowered enough to use their voice where people might not invite them to do so, and competitions like the IPSC open up aspiration for them that they might not otherwise have.'

Charley Troy, English teacher, Callerton Academy, Newcastle upon Tyne



'I think in a lot of schools, it's not okay to be clever. Debating allows boys to say, "Actually, I'm not really into rugby, or cricket, or football. I just like reading books and having an opinion on something." It lets them embrace the fact that they're clever and shout about it.'

Charlotte Diamond, mother of Schools' Mace 2025 competitor



'It's a really good way to learn to see things from a different perspective.'

Seth, St Aidan's Church of England High School, Mace semi-finalist



'The team's confidence has grown, the ideas and conversation they bring to class are really impressive, and their drive and success is inspiring other students too. A lot of our Year 9 and 10s have said, "I want to be like them".'

Beth Taylor, Head of Geography, Woodcote High School (Mace entrants)



'The SSE has been the most transformative, exciting and enriching chapter of my life'

Lucia Gamble, a recent scholar on our Secondary School Exchange programme, tells us about her experience



'In such a short space of time, my experience in the USA has opened my eyes and inspired me in too many ways to count. I am so grateful to everyone who has supported me on this journey'

It's hard to believe that my year at Mercersburg Academy in Pennsylvania has come to an end. What began in London nearly two years ago with a competitive application to the English-Speaking Union's Secondary School Exchange scholarship has since become the most transformative, exciting and enriching chapter of my life.

From the moment I arrived, Mercersburg became more than just a school; it became a second home. I threw myself into a vibrant academic and arts community, studying 10 different art subjects, including photography, videography, painting, drawing, ceramics, sculpture, dance, choral performance, arts practicum, and voice and vision. I also took two advanced English courses – Stories of Post-Colonial Resilience and Introduction to Professional Criticism – both of which pushed me intellectually and gave me new ways to view the world.

This feeling was heightened by being on campus for the US presidential election,

which meant that I experienced the controversy and strong opinions that come with a vote this significant. Since Pennsylvania is one of the main swing states, the intensity was amplified, leading to contrasting thoughts from both staff and students. For me this was fascinating to overhear, and attending the watch party organised by the school for both the debates and the voting announcement gave me the full American perspective.

This opportunity to meet new people and hear new ideas continued throughout my stay, thanks in part to the semi-formal dinners which were held every Monday night to celebrate the start of a new week. Table plans are randomly selected and rotated every two weeks so you always had the chance to meet new faces and have engaging conversations to get to know your peers on a deeper level. These sit-down dinners were often followed by prestigious guest speakers, for example Olympic gold medalists, actors and authors.

What made my time at Mercersburg even

more meaningful was how much I stepped outside of my comfort zone. Despite having no prior experience, I auditioned for the choir and was given a place as a soprano, something I never imagined myself doing. We performed across a wide range of events, singing everything from Latin choral pieces to African heritage songs and contemporary arrangements at concerts, convocations, and even charity events.

Dance quickly became a huge part of my weekly routine with 15 to 20 hours of training each week, sometimes more, with guest choreographers and workshops. I had the opportunity to perform in three large public concerts, and we also took time to give back, performing at a local care home during Christmas and making cards for the residents.

Beyond the classroom, I embraced opportunities to connect with the wider community, volunteering to pack clothes and toys for Samaritan's Angel Tree Trust and assembling food parcels for a local homeless shelter. During the holiday season, my friends and I went carolling at the local library for young children, accompanied by the school jazz band. These moments grounded me and reminded me of the impact small acts of kindness can have.

I was also selected to join the school ski team, which was incredible! Skiing four days a week with friends as part of the curriculum was everything I could've imagined – and more. It took me to the mountains of Colorado, New Hampshire, and local resorts in Pennsylvania, an unforgettable way to experience winter in the US. When I was not skiing or dancing, I was travelling. Over the course of the year, I explored more than 15 states from the Midwest to the East Coast, the deep south to the Rockies, including Ohio, Illinois, New York, Washington DC, West Virginia and beyond.



Dorm life was its own adventure. I lived in Swank Hall with 36 incredible girls and our much-loved dorm dog, Mulligan. We built a family together, sharing the highs and lows of daily life and taking part in unforgettable school traditions like Paint the Number, Founder's Day, 'Swanksgiving', The Christmas Dance, and Declamation, the highly-respected Irving-Marshall speaking contest. This event is the culmination of a week's activities, with each society represented by five students who perform 8-10 minute monologues in front of the entire school. After Declamation, the judges' critiques are compared, the results are tallied, and Head of School Mr. McDowell announces the winning society at an all-school dance that evening. This year, Irving – my society – emerged victorious! And then of course there was graduation, one of the most beautiful and emotional days of my life, a perfect close to a year that exceeded all expectations.

When I first boarded the flight to the US, I was nervous about fitting in and adapting to a new culture. But after just a few weeks, homesickness faded and Mercersburg felt like home. I miss it every single day.

In such a short space of time, my experience in the USA has opened my eyes and inspired me in too many ways to count. I am so grateful to everyone who has supported me on this journey. Thank you to Mercersburg, the ESU, my teachers, my friends, my dorm, my teammates, and everyone who made this year one I will carry with me forever. ●



IN NUMBERS

- 7 UK scholars travelled to America on the Secondary School Exchange
- 2 art students received art history scholarships
- 2 ESU alumni travelled on a debating tour in America
- 1 post-doctoral scientist awarded a Lindemann Trust Fellowship to pursue their research in the US



DISCOVER YOUR VOICE

This year, nearly 2,000 young people have benefitted from our fun, interactive oracy workshops. This includes around 1,000 students from 38 state schools which were entering one of our competitions for the first time. Each received a free half-day session to help prepare their cohorts. We were also pleased to run sessions for other groups including the Royal Borough of Kensington & Chelsea, part-funded by London branch; and leading social mobility organisation the Sutton Trust. Here, we ran workshops as part of the Trust's conferences to help academically able students from state schools and/or with challenging backgrounds to access university. A spokesperson there said, 'I can really see how your sessions impact the students. The quality of all the oracy leaders is brilliant and it is impressive to have such consistency. The sessions have been a great addition to the conferences this year, and I'd really like them to be there again next year.'

A similar programme, *Raising Aspirations*, supported and sponsored by Wadham College, Oxford and the Connolly Foundation, focuses on students in Bedfordshire, where we delivered Discover Your Voice workshops to 75 Year 11 students, with more to follow in 25/26.

'I think the workshop was brilliant. A great structure and tangible things students can take forward.'

Teacher feedback

IN NUMBERS

c.1,914 students

90.5% of respondents rate our workshops 4 or 5 stars



ACTION RESEARCH

Our Action Research programme, run in conjunction with academics at the University of Sussex and University of Durham, is designed to support schools to develop their in-house research capacity and contribute to collective understanding of 'what works' in oracy-based classroom practice.

This year, we welcomed 13 schools onto the 10-month project, providing bespoke support, guidance and CPD as the teachers formulated their research question, led the practical work and then structured their final reports. Subjects covered included building a positive culture around questions; whether formal debate can improve KS3 boys' written speeches and to what extent does explicit oracy instruction and practice of listening skills affect student ability to build on the ideas of their peers? All participants were invited to share their findings at our annual Oracy Research Conference in the autumn.

CONTINUING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Our relaunched Continuing Professional Development (CPD) programme got off to a great start this year with 128 teachers taking part in the workshops booked by individual schools, borough councils and multi-academy trusts. We checked in with one of them to find out about their experience.

Summit Learning Trust is based in the West Midlands and has 8,000 learners across five primary schools, three secondary schools and a sixth form college, all with high levels of Pupil Premium. English as an Additional Language (EAL) levels are often also markedly above average. Literacy, including digital literacy and oracy, is one of the Trust's strategic priorities, intended to help the children to access the curriculum and also to empower them and increase their confidence. 'We want our learners to develop as global citizens, knowing that they can stand alongside anyone else and articulate themselves and have an informed discussion,' says Rebecca Lillington, Director of Professional Learning and South Birmingham SCITT (School-Centred Initial Teacher Training) at the Trust.

Approaches to oracy vary across the individual schools and at the moment the Trust is looking at how it can maximise opportunities for oracy and ensure that best practice is shared across the board. 'We want all our teachers, no matter what their subject or department, to see themselves as teachers of oracy,' says Rebecca.

To that end, Rebecca has brought



in the ESU to work on a number of different CPD offerings this year, including the Trust's ITAP (intensive training and practice) weeks for trainee teachers, and with its Early Career Teachers, in both their first and second year after qualifying. 'All had really great feedback,' says Rebecca. 'For those groups, the content was tailored to both boost practitioners' own confidence in presenting, and to train them in the habits that can allow oracy to flourish in a classroom – how to move away from 'chalk and talk' [teacher-centric] type lessons to lessons where learners can share, explain and develop their arguments, and challenge those of others.'

The ESU has also delivered CPD sessions to the Trust's more experienced teachers, where the focus has been on giving them tried-and-tested activities that they can add to their repertoires and

start using straightaway in their classrooms. And at its summer conference, we worked with them on a highly successful 'debate in a day' activity. 'ESU oracy leaders ran workshops with the children (across all age groups and academies) in the mornings, based on curriculum topics

'We want all our teachers, no matter what their subject or department, to see themselves as teachers of oracy'

we'd provided, while simultaneously running workshops with teachers about what and how the children were being taught,' says Rebecca. 'Teachers could then go and observe the learner sessions, a really

powerful opportunity to see debate training in action and to consider what might work well in their own settings. In the afternoon, the children presented to an audience and they were absolutely fantastic – and really buzzing with excitement afterwards. We very much hope to work with you in the coming year and to continue benefitting from the fantastic work you're doing.' ●

'We've no doubt that oracy is the way forward'

Come with us on a visit to St Michael's School, Stewkley, winner of the ESU-Rutland Oracy Culture Award 2025

'Hello boys, how are you?' says Mrs Hann, the learning mentor at St Michael's C of E primary school, Stewkley, to two Year 4s walking down the corridor. Both reply 'good', but only one turns to look at the teacher. 'I'd love it if you could look at me when you speak to me,' she says to the more recalcitrant of the two. 'Come and tell me what you did at the weekend,' she continues, taking him gently by the hand and walking with him towards his classroom.



Like the other classrooms, it is bright and welcoming with sentence stems – 'I noticed that...'; 'So are you saying....?'; 'Building on X's idea...' – pinned prominently around the board. Each work table boasts a colourfully-illustrated booklet containing the same stems and more (also included in each child's reading records), for students to refer to as they seek to challenge, summarise, probe, clarify or build on another student's argument. Posters highlighting the four key aspects of oracy (physical; linguistic; cognitive; and social and emotional) are hung in every corridor, breakout space and classroom. And staff have cue cards with suggestions for aspect-specific oracy praise attached to their lanyards.

When I witness an energetic, engaged and profoundly articulate Year 4 maths lesson in which students verbally reason why this or that statement may always, never or sometimes be true, it is clear that the school's winning application to our 2025 ESU-Rutland Oracy Culture



Award contained no hyperbole, but pure fact. Its hope 'to embed a lasting culture of speaking and listening' does indeed show signs of 'permeat[ing] every classroom, corridor and community interaction'. Its commitment to oracy is evidently 'not an "add on", [but] an embedded ethos'. And, after sitting in on a Year 2 discussion activity and some Year 6 two-minute presentations in which pupils not only speak but handle questions more confidently and coherently than many adults would, it is obvious that oracy is indeed 'the heartbeat of [their] school' and one which 'intertwines throughout [their] curriculum'.

Unbelievably, the school has been teaching oracy explicitly for only the past two years, after teacher



'Oracy is an essential part of what independent schools do to support their students to make them successful and I think we have a moral imperative to level up the playing field'

Emily Venters and deputy head Lucy Deverill visited another school and realised how transformative it could be. 'I think that children deserve to be heard and to feel like they have a voice,' says Emily, 'but we know that there are lots of children who maybe don't have the chance to have discussions at home, or who don't have the confidence to have them at school. We realised we could really make a difference.' Their enthusiasm was further ignited when their research led them to Edward Booth, a teacher at Braunstone Frith Primary Academy in Leicester, who told them how big an impact oracy interventions had had at his school – not only in terms of student confidence, but also in terms of their written work.

Having decided on their direction of travel, the next step was to get the teaching staff on board. Head teacher David Morley needed no convincing. 'Oracy is an essential part of what independent schools do to support their students to make them successful and I think we have a moral

imperative to level up the playing field,' he says. 'And if we want to give children the best start on their oracy journey, then we need to start them young. They're not only very capable of having discussions, they have the joy of doing it.' Research backs this up: a child's spoken language skills at five years old are the strongest predictors of attainment at age 11. 'It shouldn't be surprising,' says David. 'How can we expect our children to be able to write effectively if they don't have the oracy skills to be able to say those things?'

At first, the school tried to introduce all four oracy strands at once but, when staff felt overwhelmed with the amount of information they had to absorb, they took a step back. 'This is the culture of what we want St. Michael's to be, and we want this here forever,' says Emily, 'so, since then, we've been taking it slow and steady. We've introduced one strand at a time and have highlighted that all our teachers



Head teacher David Morley

have been teaching oracy for years, this is just about making it our focus.'

Starting with the social and emotional strand – which encourages turn-taking and focuses on ensuring students feel listened to and heard – the oracy programme is now all-encompassing. Children as young as four in the foundation stage are encouraged to talk in full sentences, to make eye contact and to turn towards those they are speaking to. 'All children that age want to do is talk,' says Emily. >



'They're so curious and passionate about everything, it's the best time to start instilling these skills.' Opportunities for different types of talk are used in all subjects, from history to science. In the weekly staff meetings, Emily models, and other teachers join in, different oracy activities. 'They're almost like mini CPD sessions,' says David, 'and help break up our meetings in the same way that they provide an opportunity for engagement within lessons.' A weekly email containing an oracy activity that was originally sent to all teachers has now been expanded to cover all staff – teaching assistants, midday

staff and office assistants alike. 'The whole school is here to promote discussion,' says Emily.

Then there are the presentational opportunities. Year 6s are elected, on the basis of a speech, to act as house captains, something which causes great excitement. There are elections for eco council and digital leads, plus regular opportunities to address the whole school in assemblies – something students do with ease by their final year. There is an annual 'pen-down' day during which no writing is allowed, and a virtual public-speaking event, currently with three other schools, though Emily has plans to expand this, just as she tries to encourage speaking outside of the school environment. Each week, she suggests a topic for family discussion in her form's homework books, something many parents comment they enjoy, noting that it often sparks connections with siblings or grandparents.

Mrs McColm, a teaching assistant who also has a child at the school, concurs. 'My daughter absolutely loves all the oracy activities and, although she's only in Year 3, she's already comfortable asking questions and ordering food in restaurants for example. My son, on the other hand, who is just coming up 17, hates having to talk to new adults and struggles to keep a conversation going. I'm sure that if oracy had been a focus while he was at school, it would have taken away a lot of that angst.'

There is other evidence of the difference oracy is making, too. The school improvement partner, also a lead moderator, has noticed marked



WHAT THE STUDENTS SAY

'Oracy helps children because then they can have their voice heard. And when they're speaking as an adult in places, it's easier for them.'

Jacob, Year 4

'Talking to people in a responsible way is a life skill that you have to learn. I think it's good to do it at school so that you're ready when you're an adult.'

Lucy, Year 4

'When we were little, we all used to shout out, but now we take it in turns. And if someone says something wrong, we can challenge them and help them get it right.'

Olympia, Year 6

'Oracy makes you more confident and we've learnt how to probe someone and dig deeper into an explanation if we don't understand something.'

Luisa, Year 6

progress in the children's writing. 'In the past, SATS questions asking for an agree/disagree response might have been answered by writing 'I disagree', whereas now the children explain their answer citing the evidence,' says Emily. Some parents are keen to tell Emily and David how much their children enjoy challenging them at home, while others are astonished when they hear their child stand up and speak at a school assembly or fair. 'There's a level of enthusiasm for speaking and listening skills that wasn't there before,' says David. 'I don't want to fast forward time, but I can't wait to see what it's like in 10 years,' says Emily. 'If we can do all this in just two years then, oh my goodness...!'

In 10 years time of course, the children will be at other schools, and this is something that preoccupies Emily a lot. 'I would hate for them not to have the opportunity to continue to build their skills, or to shy away from it because others don't have the same level of skills,' she says. 'That would really upset

me.' To that end she is already working with other local schools, including secondaries, to extend oracy provision and share best practice in the area. 'Bridging that gap between primary and secondary is probably one of our biggest next steps,' she continues, 'but we've no doubt that oracy is the way forward.'



Teacher Emily Venters



MEET THE WINNERS

We had nearly 60 applications for our Oracy Awards this year, kindly sponsored by the Rutland Foundation. St Michael Church of England Primary School, Stewkley, won our ESU-Rutland Oracy Culture Award, with Ellesmere Port Catholic High School as the runner-up. Dr Tim Schmalz, Head of History and Master-in-Charge of Debating was the proud recipient of our ESU-Rutland Teacher of the Year Award, with Alexandra Kent, Assistant Headteacher at North Halifax Grammar School, taking the runner-up spot. 'Oracy is all about civility and listening – the two things we need so much in the world today,' says Tim.

THANK YOU!

Just as we are immensely grateful to our members and supporters, we are enormously grateful to our volunteers who give so generously of their time and expertise to help run and judge our competitions, and to give such insightful feedback to the teams.

Particular thanks go to Brian Cooke of Colchester branch for his work running the East Region Sixth Form Online Public Speaking Competition which involved 26 students from seven schools, and to Sue Clements of South Wales branch for her organisation of the branch's Primary Public Speaking Competition, which involved 90 students from 10 schools. We are also grateful to Steve Gray of Ouse Valley branch, who organised a pilot programme of Discover Your Voice workshops as part of the larger Raising Aspirations programme supported and sponsored by Wadham College, Oxford and the Connolly Foundation, see page 24. And huge thanks as always to Tony Harris of Brighton branch who has given up so much of his time to film, livestream and edit so many of our competitions, including all our grand finals this year.



'The performers themselves were a joy, and I found the role itself incredibly rewarding. The three of us on the panel all brought different areas of expertise, so we were able to deliver a useful range of feedback.'

Stephanie Underwood-Webb, volunteer judge



VOLUNTEER WITH US

Would you like to volunteer to help judge our competitions? Or perhaps you have other skills such as videography or film editing which could help us reach more schools and more young people. If you'd like to get involved, please visit esu.org/volunteer, or drop us a line at volunteering@esu.org. Whatever you choose to do, our volunteers tell us that it's a highly worthwhile experience, allowing you to meet other like-minded people, to witness first-hand the impact of the work we do, and to see just how talented and inspiring young people can be!



IN NUMBERS

1,200+ hours of time volunteered

37% increase on 2023/24

OUR PEOPLE

In July 2025 we were delighted to announce that Her Royal Highness The Princess Royal had graciously accepted the role of Patron of the English-Speaking Union.

Over many years as our President, Princess Anne has provided invaluable support to the ESU, championing our work in building oracy skills and cross-cultural understanding in young people across the world. The Princess has met the young participants of our International Public Speaking Competition on several occasions and has been the guest speaker at our annual Sir Evelyn Wrench Lecture, and we are immensely grateful for her ongoing support.

IMAGE: JEREMY MAKINSON



OUR HISTORY & PURPOSE

Founded in 1918 by Sir Evelyn Wrench (below) in the belief that greater understanding between countries would improve the chances of world peace, the English-Speaking Union is an international education organisation with representation around the globe. Today, as public discussion and political debate become increasingly polarised, our mission is to equip young people with the communication skills and cross-cultural understanding they need to thrive and build a more collaborative world.



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JOIN US IN LONDON FOR THE INTERNATIONAL COUNCIL MEETING 2026

13-17 July 2026



We're thrilled to invite you to this year's International Council Meeting, to be held in London from 13-17 July. Planned to coincide with our International Public Speaking Competition (IPSC), the week will give attendees the chance not only to mix with other ESU members from around the globe, but to experience our work first-hand, too.

The programme begins with a welcome dinner at Dartmouth House on the Monday evening and includes a range of quintessentially British activities such as tours of London's cultural landmarks and a West End theatre performance. The highlight will of course be the grand final of the IPSC where the best young speakers in the world take to the stage at the Royal Institution. Always an inspiring, high-octane event, it attracts a truly multi-cultural audience and is a great example of our mission to build a more collaborative world. We look forward to seeing you there!

FIND OUT MORE

Tickets cost **£550** for the full week (plus transport and accommodation). For more information see [esu.org/events](https://www.esu.org/events)



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discovering voices

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