Debating coaches get the last word

They’re in high demand as schools vie to come out tops in the art of verbal sparring

Melissa Sim

THE gift of the gab can earn an undergraduate good money — $20 an hour, to be exact.

Especially if he or she has national, tertiary or even secondary school experience in the art of verbal cut and thrust.

No longer just another co-curricular activity, debating is now taken seriously by schools who vie for the services of coaches.

Ms Joan Lim, for example, coaches Anglo-Chinese School (Independent) debaters. The school emerged champion in the A division of this year’s Secondary Schools Debating Championships.

The 21-year-old law undergraduate at the National University of Singapore (NUS) says she gets paid the market rate of between $40 and $70 an hour.

Two or three other schools have also asked me to coach their teams,” says Ms Lim, who is a former Taiping Junior College debater and is now an NUS student.

Another coach whose services are in great demand is national debating champion Rohini Singh, 21. The undergraduate at Wesleyan University in the United States was even asked to coach teams when back in Singapore for summer holidays.

Back in 2001, Raffles Institution (RI) paid its debating coach only $500 a month, or $33 an hour. Today, however, the school has forked out the market rate.

Mrs Rosie Smith, the teacher-in-charge of debate at RI, says: “Debate coaches are really sought after and many schools are willing to pay for good coaches for their teams.”

Mrs Florence Tan, teacher-in-charge of debate at Singapore Chinese Girls’ School, agrees. She says: “Debate coaches become necessary when the world’s style of debate was adopted and it became too technical for teachers to handle.”

In 1999, when the Julia Gabriel Centre started sponsoring and organising the Secondary Schools Debating Championships, the World Schools Debating Championships’ style of debate was adopted.

This is the three-on-three style, where opponents can interrupt during a speech through “points of information”.

It was adopted because it’s a more interactive and more dynamic approach compared to the four-on-four format used previously,” says Mr Mark Gabriel, tournament director of the Singapore Secondary Schools Debating Championship.

In the old format, there were four debaters on each side with points of information.

“The new format has definitely improved. Singaporean debaters have always been strong in terms of the substance of their arguments, and younger debaters have acquired the vocabulary and maturity to handle even more philosophically rigorous and demanding issues,” says Mr Aaron Maniam, president of the Debate Association (DA).

The past five years have seen not only an increase in standards but also a surge of interest in debating.

“Where there were just 20 schools involved in the main national competition before 2000, we now have 77 schools participating, and these include many schools which don’t have an established debate culture,” says Mr Gabriel.

An example is St Margaret’s Secondary School, which only started participating in external debating competitions last year.

This year, the school emerged champion of the C division of the Singapore Secondary Schools Debating Championship.

“St Margaret’s, the debate has gained popularity because the school encourages the view that anyone can debate, not just the academically brilliant,” says Rebecca Grace Tan Tian En, 16, a member of St Margaret’s debating team.

Evergreen Secondary School has also seen interest in debating spike among its students. Currently, 30 of its students are actively involved in debating.

“The number rises each year, primarily due to the whole-school approach that we take in getting more pupils involved. The teachers are involved in helping to spot the lower secondary students with talent,” says Mr Ratish Balakrishnan, teacher-in-charge of debating at the school.

This interest is also fuelled by the increasing number of debating competitions organised.

“It’s a cycle. More students are interested in debate and there are more competitions, which give debaters more exposure and this in turn heightens the interest,” says Jonathan Anyong, 15, a debater from RI.

About five to six years back, there were just two main competitions each year. Today, around seven or eight competitions are organised every year for secondary schools.

There are also the Youth-16 debates organised by the DA, which target debaters aged 14 and below.

RI now organises a competition for Primary Five pupils, which started last year.

ACS (I) debater Arshad A Kalam, 16, thinks the debating trend is likely to become even more popular in the future.

He says: “Two to three years ago, if you asked a student to join debate, they would reply, ‘We have a debate club!’ Now, almost all people know there is a debate club and hopefully in five years’ time, they will say, ‘Is there a debate club? We want to join!’”

PHOTO: MANG NUI FEN

WINNERS ALL THE ACS (I) debating team with coach Joan Lim. The team won this year’s A division Secondary Schools Debating Championship, clockwise from left are Samuel Chan, 14, Sean Tan, 15, Paul Chu, 15, Lloyd Seah, 15, and Samuel Cronin, 15.

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Those interested in finding out more about debate can visit the Singapore Debate Association website at www.debate.org.sg or e-mail info@debates.org.sg