

DEBATE MATE ANNUAL REPORT 2023-24



Foreword from our Founder & CEO

As we enter our 17th year, I am struck that we have made so much progress at Debate Mate, and yet the world is in such a precarious place politically, environmentally and economically. It is more important than ever that Debate Mate continues to grow and expand, creating a generation of leaders who can work as a global community to help solve these issues. I know this is something that we can achieve together.

This academic year has been full of achievements: we have trained thousands more students in the essential skills that are required for success in the workplace and beyond, we have partnered with some amazing organisations, bringing together our expertise and theirs to enhance the Debate Mate students' experiences, and we finally returned to delivering our International Programmes, in-person in Nepal and for the first time, in Sri Lanka. I am so proud of the team and everything they have done to make 23-24 such a success!

In our increasingly polarised world, Debate Mate students are being given the tools to succeed: to disagree agreeably, to engage with opposing views, to listen with empathy, to work collaboratively and to think critically. Combined, these skills will ensure we have the leaders we need to take us through the advances of the coming years, with AI shaping all of our collective future.

I would like to take this opportunity to extend my heartfelt thanks to everyone who has supported us this year.

I am excited, I am hopeful and I look forward to sharing our successes with you!



Margaret McCabe
Founder & CEO, Debate Mate



Contents

- What's the Issue? 01
- What's the Solution?03
- The Core Programme 05
- Results 07
- Partner Spotlight 09
- Additional Programmes 13
- A Year in a Debate Mate school 15
- International Programmes 17
- Looking Ahead 21
- Our Supporters 22

What's the Issue?

The United Kingdom has one of the **worst rates of social mobility** in the developed world, performing poorly on every critical measurement of social mobility (The Social Mobility Commission, 2021; World Economic Forum, 2020).

Socioeconomic **inequalities emerge from birth and often widen during a child's time in education**, impacting a child's ability to develop and learn, and therefore achieve academically and develop soft skills, as well as impacting a child's aspirations as they grow up (Masten and Cicchetti, 2010).

These factors in turn influence young people's access to higher education, quality apprenticeships or skilled work upon leaving school - directly impacting labour market trends and the UK's overall rate of social mobility. In the context of already declining social mobility, **disadvantaged young people have been hit the hardest by Covid-19, with repercussions that threaten to impact them for many years to come** (Ikeda, 2022).



4.3 million children
are growing up in poverty in the UK.
(The Social Mobility Commission, 2021).

Children born into the **poorest fifth of families** in the UK are **almost 13 times more likely to experience poor health and educational outcomes** by the age of 17 (York University). Poverty affects not only children's educational outcomes and life chances, but also their mental wellbeing, with children's living in poverty reporting as more **hungry, tired, worried and unable to concentrate**.

The Impact of Disadvantage

In 2023, **44% of disadvantaged year 6 students met expected standards** in reading, writing and maths, **compared to 66% of their peers**. This **attainment gap** has widened since the pandemic (State of the Nation 2024).

Children from **disadvantaged households** are much less likely than their peers to take part in extracurricular activities. Of all extracurricular activities, **academic activities** are the **least likely** to be offered to students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Key barriers to student participation in extracurricular activities are **high cost, low confidence**, and difficulties in access. (The Social Mobility Commission, 2019).

By the age of 16, disadvantaged pupils are **19.2 months behind** their peers in key educational attainment measurements. This gap has grown since the pandemic. (Education Policy Institute, 2024).

29% of students in receipt of Free School Meals reach **higher education** by the age of 19, compared to 46% of their more advantaged peers. (Department for Education, 2023).

Pupils in receipt of Free School Meals are **23% less likely** to be in sustained employment by the age of 27, compared to their peers who were not eligible for FSM (Department for Education, 2018).

Gaps in key 21st Century soft skills are as widely reported by employers as gaps in job-specific and technical skills (The Social Mobility Commission, 2019).

What's the Solution?

Founded in 2007, Debate Mate tackles social immobility by delivering after-school debate clubs in areas of high child deprivation, using a **highly effective peer-to-peer mentoring** model. Our debating curriculum is delivered by inspirational university mentors from the UK's top universities, and focuses on building **key transferable skills** and **raising students' aspirations** to empower them to be successful academically and in the professional world.

Debating has been shown to be effective in increasing academic and learning attainment, and also in improving a **range of higher-order thinking skills and non-cognitive abilities** such as confidence, teamwork and leadership (Akerman and Neale, 2011; APPG, 2021). Using a debate-based methodology, our programmes **address the widening skills gap** between education and employment, whilst simultaneously **raising aspirations** and helping students to **make informed post-18 choices**.

At Debate Mate we believe **every student** should have the opportunity to debate and **should leave school with the aspiration, core confidence and skill-set necessary to succeed in whatever they wish to do**. We have developed a variety of different programmes to meet this mission, working with students from the age of eight to eighteen at **all levels of educational** attainment and engagement. From supporting students who are disillusioned with mainstream education, to supporting students to be a part of, and even captain, the England World Schools debate team - we show that **debating is for everyone!**



Debate Mate in Numbers

4,400
students every week

200
primary & secondary schools

6 cities & regions

6 programmes



The Core Programme

The Core Programme is a 17-week debating programme. It is comprised of 14 teaching weeks and 3 weeks preparing for, and participating in, national debating competitions - the largest of their kind in the UK.

All elements of the programme have been designed with four central goals in mind:

1. To accelerate attainment in Speaking and Listening
2. To strengthen emotional capacity by building confidence, self-esteem, and resilience
3. To develop key employability skills such as leadership, teamwork, critical thinking, and self-management
4. To heighten aspirations towards both tertiary education and meaningful employment.

The Launch Event

Each year the Core Programme kicks off with a launch event, which gets students excited about the Debate Mate clubs and competitions to come. These are hosted at inspirational venues such as local universities. The Launch features a show-debate by world class debaters, Debate Mate mentors and current Debate Mate students, who demonstrate the high calibre of debating towards which new students can progress. Through showing a range of role models on stage, the Launch Event breaks down any previous stereotypes students might have about debating.

The After School Clubs

Debate Mate recruits and trains university students from top UK universities to deliver our 17 week programme. We place over 500 university student mentors in schools across the UK to deliver our unique debating curriculum to students in Years 5 to 10.

Our curriculum focuses on giving students the skills needed to express themselves clearly, concisely and persuasively, and teaches them to research and argue for statements that they might not necessarily agree with. This teaches the vital skill of empathy, which allows students to consider issues from multiple viewpoints

Students are also taught how to deliver points stylistically, structure arguments in a convincing manner, and to debate strategically.

National Competitions

Debate Mate runs 2 national competitions each year for all Debate Mate students to take part in. The Urban Debate League - an after-school competition where students compete against schools in their local area, and the Debate Mate Cup - a full-day event where students across the regions debate at inspiring university venues. Due to restrictions on school trips, we ran this year's first UDL round online, and continued to offer virtual competitions throughout the year.

National Finals

The schools that finish at the top of our national Urban Debate League leaderboard, or win their regional round of the Debate Mate Cup, are invited to our National Finals, held at prestigious venues across the UK such as the Houses of Parliament, Bank of America offices, Salesforce Tower and Christ Church College, Oxford.

2024 Winners:

- 🏆 Primary Urban Debate League Winners
Elmhurst Primary School, London
- 🏆 Secondary Urban Debate League Winners
Central Foundation Boys School, London
- 🏆 Novice Urban Debate League Winners
St Matthew Academy, London
- 🏆 Primary Debate Mate Cup Winners
St Wilfrid's Primary School, Manchester
- 🏆 Secondary Debate Mate Cup Winners
Harris Academy Girls, East Dulwich



Grimsby Programme

In 2024 Debate Mate returned to Grimsby for the second time, following on from its highly successful pilot programme in 2023. 10 weekly sessions were delivered to 3 secondary and 5 primary schools, with an average of 75 students per week taking part. Students also experienced a virtual Launch Event and an Urban Debate League, with weekly virtual sessions culminating in an in-person Debate Mate Cup competition, from which the winning teams were invited to participate in the national Grand Finals.

We are pleased to continue establishing our programme in Grimsby - a region where it is imperative for students to receive our vital skills training to prepare them for their future.

Core Programme Results

Debate Mate’s programmes help students to develop key skills for success in higher education and 21st century employment. To evaluate our impact, we carry out assessments which measure students’ hard and soft skills, reflecting how students have progressed as a result of their participation in our programme. These evaluations also inform changes and improvements to the programme year-on-year.

Hard Skills Assessment

Debate Mate uses a bespoke Speaking and Listening metric, designed in consultation with teachers, to measure students’ hard skills development. The skills assessed are derived from the National Curriculum at Key Stages 2 and 3 (Department for Education, 2014). These guidelines were mapped onto the skills that Debate Mate teaches to form a holistic metric, up to GCSE-level and beyond, that tracks students’ progress through seven skill categories:



In a normal year, we gather data for our hard skills evaluation in Weeks 5 and 15. Following the lockdown of schools and resulting logistical difficulties, our usual hard skills data collection processes were disrupted. Consequently, we were unable to collect statistically significant hard skills data for the 2020-2022 programme years.

The results from our bespoke Speaking and Listening metric between 2015 and 2019 and from 2022 to 2024 show that students progressed from an average Level of 2.7 in their first debate, to an average of 4.2 in their last debate, thus making 1.5 levels of progress.

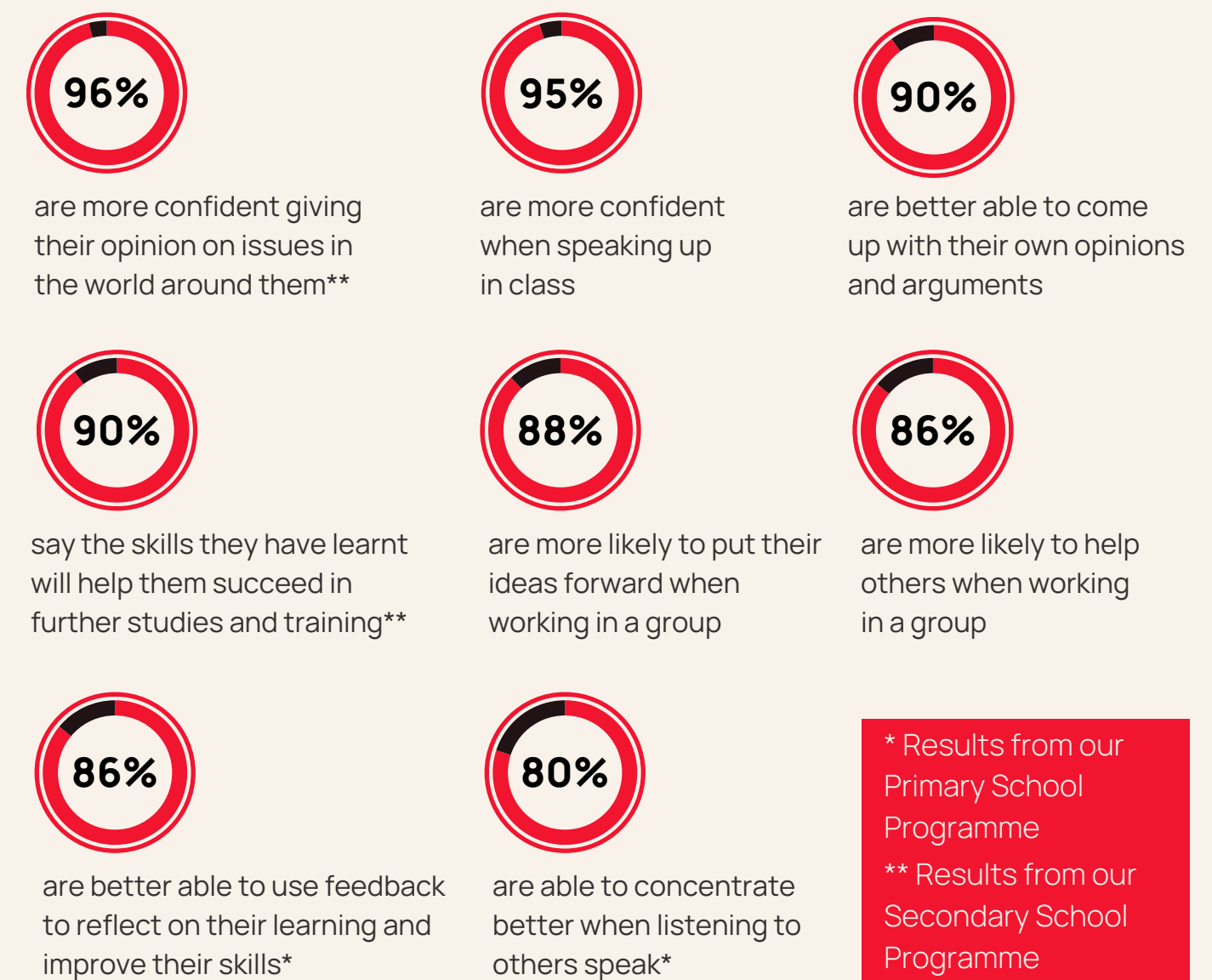
A Level 3 student will only occasionally engage in group discussions, will make relevant but unstructured arguments, and will read from their notes. Comparatively, a Level 4 student will engage in group discussions, offer relevant rebuttal, create an argument that is structured clearly and delivered with confidence, use notes for reference only, and use basic persuasive devices and vocabulary.

Soft Skills Assessment

To monitor our impact on soft skills, we have developed a student self-assessment survey to collect data on each of our measurement objectives: **confidence, self-esteem, resilience, leadership, teamwork, self-management, critical thinking, and aspirations**. The soft-skills metric was designed in consultation with New Philanthropy Capital and draws upon existing literature on each of the characteristics measured.

In total 200 schools took part in our 2023-2024 Core Programme, and 1695 students completed our post-programme survey. We aim for an average attainment outcome of at least 80% across all categories, and in 2023-24 we achieved 83% overall - 82% in our national secondary evaluation, 84% in our national primary evaluation.

We have highlighted some key responses below:



Spotlight on Partners

In 2023-24 programme year, Debate Mate were delighted to partner with several prestigious companies and organisations including Sony Music UK’s Social Justice Fund, Bank of America and Deloitte. These partnerships provided students with a fantastic opportunity to engage with employees from various companies, network, and learn more about the world of work.

Bank of America

Bank of America through the Bank of America Charitable Foundation have kindly supported our programmes for many years. In 2023-24 they sponsored 7 schools on our Core and Debate Mate Plus Programmes, 5 schools on our Virtual Core Programme and 132 secondary schools through our Urban Debate League competition.

Nearly 3,000 students took part in Round 1 and Round 2 of the Urban Debate League competition, with 16 schools from across the UK attending the Grand Final hosted at the Bank of America offices in central London. Students debated a range of motions, including whether secondary students should be allowed to vote in General Elections, and whether social media platforms should be held responsible for spreading misinformation during elections. Throughout the partnership we welcomed 15 Bank of America volunteers, who interacted with our students and took part in our popular Network Bingo event at the Grand Final.

We are so grateful to Bank of America for their ongoing support of our work and our programmes!



Sony Music UK’s Social Justice Fund

Sony Music UK’s Social Justice Fund generously supported eight schools on our Accelerate Programme in London and Manchester, as well as sponsoring our Debate Mate Cup competition for 200 Primary and Secondary schools in London, Manchester, the West Midlands, Liverpool and Grimsby. These full day competitions are held at prestigious universities across the regions we work in, allowing students to speak to student ambassadors and experience what attending university could look like. Venues included: The University of Manchester, Liverpool John Moores University, Middlesex University, the University of Greenwich and Queen Mary University, among others.

Both secondary and primary school students debated music-themed motions at the competitions, with secondary debating whether social media makes it more difficult to become a successful musician, and primary students discussing whether or not music should be a core subject in schools.

Students on our Accelerate Programme had the opportunity to enter a pitch competition, with the top 3 schools being invited to a Pitch Challenge afternoon at Sony Music’s offices in London. For some students from outside of London, this was their first experience of leaving their home cities. Students worked with volunteers to create a pitch for a new band or artist to be signed by one of Sony Music’s record labels and the winning team received vouchers and goody bags.

Across our launch event, Debate Mate Cups, Debate Mate Cup Final and Accelerate Pitch Event, 23 volunteers gave a total of 138 hours of their time.

We are so indebted to Sony Music UK’s Social Justice Fund for supporting our largest national competition and giving our students the opportunity to learn about this exciting industry.



Deloitte Social Value

Debate Mate has a long standing relationship with Deloitte, and we have collaborated in many different ways during this time. Through Deloitte’s Social Value initiative, Debate Mate were included in three government bids in the 23-24 year; these included Synergy, Government Digital Services (GDS) and the Met Police.

The Synergy Partnership supported 8 secondary schools in the West Midlands. A core group of Deloitte volunteers worked with the Debate Mate team to co-design a motion, tackling whether or not AI will be the greatest threat to the future of jobs, and then attended sessions and competition rounds alongside students. The Deloitte volunteers shared valuable insights on the motion and provided professional perspectives, answering student’s questions and allowing students to learn first hand about their careers.

Another important partnership was with Government Digital Service (GDS), who funded 8 secondary schools in Manchester and attended our annual Mentor Careers Fair to showcase the various career opportunities that GDS offer. This provided our mentors with insights into the routes available into GDS and the Civil Service. We know that approximately 30% of our mentors were students on our programme, so we are thrilled that we can continue to support these young people beyond school.

We are so thankful for the support Deloitte and their Social Value Team have provided, and we look forward to the coming year!

The Green Room Podcast

This year, we collaborated with Deloitte to give students a unique opportunity to take over The Green Room podcast. Through a national competition, young people from across the UK pitched their dream podcast ideas, sharing the topics they would explore and the celebrities they would love to interview.

The winning team from Grey Coat Hospital School in London stepped into the role of podcasters, learning the ins and outs of podcasting - from scriptwriting and editing to sound production and social media. Their episode, released on November 5th 2024, focused on role models - how they shape us, evolve, and inspire future generations. Featuring an exclusive interview with Team GB Olympian Eilish McColgan, the episode was entirely planned, produced, and even hosted by the students themselves.

This collaboration showcased the power of young voices, equipping them with real-world skills and a platform to engage in meaningful conversations.

You can watch here - [The Green Room Podcast, Ep. #76: How can we remodel role models?](#)



Additional Programmes

The Accelerate Programme

Through teaching our unique debating methodology during school time, the Accelerate Programme empowers students who have been identified as having behavioural issues, being disengaged in the classroom, and at risk of exclusion.

This intervention programme focuses on giving students the skills to express themselves clearly and the ability to disagree with composure – improving their engagement in the classroom, around school and elsewhere outside of education. Students take part in 15 weeks of teaching sessions and an exclusive Accelerate Competition. The competition was held online this year due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Students are also invited to take part in the Debate Mate Cup, alongside their peers on the Core Programme.

This year we ran the programme in 19 primary and secondary schools across Liverpool, Manchester and London, reaching nearly 200 students.

DebateBox

We are pleased to have continued our longstanding partnership at the Harrow Club for DebateBox's seventh year. The programme is now offered to 7 schools, with an expanded focus on West and South-West London boroughs, and over this past year, we have welcomed our first primary school students to the 10 week programme. We run 2 DebateBox programmes annually, launching in October and May. Programmes are attended by up to 20 students from participating schools, who are selected by their teachers based on their levels of disengagement.

The programme consists of weekly sessions, where students participate in an hour of boxing coaching then an hour of Debate Mate training. The programme focuses on the shared skills needed to excel in both disciplines: self-control, creative and critical thinking, resilience, determination, commitment and self-confidence. The programme works towards a competitive DebateBox Cup, in an innovative and engaging format where students debate and box in succession.

Virtual Programme

The Virtual Core Programme was established to offer a regular debating programme to schools that are eligible for the Core Programme, but fall outside of the geographical reach of Debate Mate's core regions. The programme worked with 4 schools in the UK with an average weekly attendance of 17 students per session. Several schools also took part in our Virtual Blended model, where they had weekly online sessions and attended in-person events and competitions. This adjusted model allows schools that are slightly outside the regions we operate in to have regular weekly sessions while still participating in our exciting Launch and Competition Events in-person.

Debate Mate Plus

The Debate Mate Plus programme is aimed at 14-18 year old students and is designed to put their debating skills to use in the real world. Students are guided through a curriculum that focuses on the application of debating skills in a professional context, and have the opportunity to engage with employees from a range of industries throughout the course of the programme.

Having attended our virtual programme launch, held in partnership with Bank of America, students from 12 schools took part in weekly after-school debating sessions and attended 1 competition hosted at Neuberger Berman. We were delighted to also offer our Debate Mate Plus students incredible careers sessions with our partners at Janus Henderson, Frontier Economics and PIMCO.

Graduate School

Every Saturday (in-person) and Thursday (online), students who have excelled on our Core Programme have the opportunity to receive advanced debate coaching and take part in social leadership projects in their own communities. This year we welcomed 85 students from Liverpool, Manchester, the West Midlands and Cardiff to our Virtual Graduate School, which has now been running for three years.

Our students compete in, and thrive at, national debating competitions historically dominated by students from the top private schools. This year, they competed in seven national British Parliamentary competitions, including Imperial, Oxford and Durham Schools, as well as a variety of public speaking competitions, regularly reaching finals and coming in the top ten best speakers at competition.

Debating alongside some of the top private school and university student debaters from across the country helps develop our students' debate skills, but also builds confidence competing against and alongside students from a range of backgrounds and abilities. We are extremely proud of Joshua and Kalel from our Graduate School who have made it on to Team England!

Many Graduate School students have begun mentoring on our programmes, becoming some of our most passionate mentors, and have developed their understanding of competitive debates by taking on leadership roles at Debate Mate Schools competitions.



A Year in a Debate Mate School

Sydney Russell School

Sydney Russell School in Dagenham has been a proud participant in the Debate Mate programme for over a decade. With a strong commitment to fostering student growth and development, the school has integrated Debate Mate into its culture, impacting hundreds of students since joining the programme in 2014. Despite challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the school has continued to nurture and expand its Debate Mate programme, making it a cornerstone of student life and learning.

Debate Mate's Core Programme focuses on building essential life skills through after-school debating sessions. At Sydney Russell, the programme has seen remarkable success, with students from Year 7 through to Year 11 improving their debating abilities and experiencing significant personal growth.

Jo Carter, an English teacher and Debate Mate coordinator at Sydney Russell, shared how the programme is embedded in the school's culture. She emphasised, "Debate Mate has become a key part of our students' lives. It's incredible to see their confidence soar, not just in debating but across all aspects of their education."

From the student perspective, Debate Mate has been transformative. Student A, who is in Year 11, began her Debate Mate journey in Year 7. Reflecting on her experience, she highlighted the programme's role in developing her leadership skills: "Debate Mate pushed me to take on leadership roles, which has helped me in all aspects of my life. By Year 10, I was elected House Captain, something I would never have imagined before."

One of the most valued aspects of the Debate Mate programme at Sydney Russell are the university mentors. Both students and teachers have praised the role of mentors, many of whom are former pupils. "Having ex-pupils as mentors has been a game-changer," Jo Carter noted. "They connect with our students on a personal level, offering guidance that goes beyond debating." Students, too, have found their mentors to be a source of inspiration. Student B, from Year 7, said, "Our mentor is really relatable. He understands our background and helps us see what's possible for our future."

Without hesitation, staff and students at Sydney Russell School would recommend the Debate Mate programme to other schools. "It's an experience every student should have," Student A emphasised, "Debate Mate has changed my life, and it can do the same for others."

Kier Starmer

September 2023

Kier Starmer visited Sydney Russell school to watch the students debate and speak to them.

"Meeting Keir Starmer was incredible. It sparked my interest in politics and showed me how much is possible when you step out of your comfort zone."



Urban Debate League Round 2

February 2024

Sydney Russell hosted the biggest ever UDL Round 2 competition, with 13 schools entering 34 teams.



International Women's Day Debate

March 2024

Students spoke at the Aquis Show Debate for International Women's Day debating: 'This House believes that International Women's Day has become a symbolic gesture rather than a vehicle for change.'



The Debate Mate Cup

April 2024

Putting into practice learning and feedback from the year, two teams attended the Debate Mate Cup at the University of Greenwich, competing against 30 other teams.

"Going to different schools and universities like Greenwich has broadened my horizons. I never knew these places existed, and now I want to go to university myself."

"Debate Mate has shifted our school culture, students are more willing to share their thoughts, engage in healthy debates, and take on leadership roles. It's been an incredible journey, and we are excited to see where it takes our students next." - Jo Carter

"I used to be quiet in class, but Debate Mate has given me the confidence to speak up. Now, I love contributing to class discussions." - Year 7 student

International Programmes

Nepal Programme

After a five-year hiatus, Debate Mate returned to Nepal in 2024, reigniting our long-standing partnership with the Samata Schools.

Over the course of our visit, we delivered debate training to 500 students across three key locations: Kathmandu, Bhaktapur, and Pokhara. These schools have always been crucial partners in our mission to empower young people with essential communication skills.

Throughout the programme, we ran intensive debate workshops tailored to students in Years 8-10. Despite varying levels of English proficiency, particularly between different regions, students demonstrated incredible enthusiasm and progress. The programme culminated in a national competition in Kathmandu, where teams from all three locations competed in lively debates on topics such as education incentives and the role of tourism in Nepal's development. The final, held in front of all of the students at the Kathmandu Samata School, saw Mount Everest School from Pokhara emerge victorious after a compelling debate. The impact of the programme was profound:



of students believe the skills gained would help them access higher education.



of students expressed a desire to continue debating



reported increased confidence in public speaking

Looking ahead, we aim to expand our reach to new regions while maintaining our commitment to sustainable engagement with returning students.

Sri Lanka Programme

In 2024, Debate Mate launched its first-ever programme in Sri Lanka, working in partnership with Learn for Life Lanka, a local educational organisation.

This pilot initiative took place in Colombo, delivering intensive debate training to 250 students from 15 schools, as well as professional development for 65 teachers. By incorporating debate into their pedagogy, teachers gained valuable tools to enhance student engagement and critical-thinking in the classroom.

The student training sessions, held at Khairiya Girls' College, focused on fundamental debating techniques, confidence-building, and structured argumentation. With students from diverse linguistic backgrounds, we adapted our teaching approach, making use of translation support and visual learning techniques. The programme concluded with a competition, where 20 teams debated motions on social media bans, tourism, and environmental activism. The event not only celebrated student achievements but also empowered them to engage in meaningful discussions about local and global issues.



of students enjoyed the programme



of students believed the skills they gained would support their future education

Looking ahead, we aim to scale up our efforts, extending the programme's duration and reach. This first step in Sri Lanka was a resounding success, and we are excited to build on this foundation in the coming years.



Looking to the Year Ahead

Debate Mate is working to break the cycle of poverty that prevents young people in the UK from thriving in school, the workplace and beyond. As child poverty rises in the UK, it is imperative that Debate Mate continues to work with deprived communities, changing the trajectory of thousands of disadvantaged students every year by giving them the skills to be successful in further education and in the workplace.

With AI rapidly developing, the World Economic Forum reports that every worker will be expected to adapt 44% of the core skills they are applying in the workplace within the next 4 years alone. Fortunately for our students, 7 of the top 10 desirable core skills according to employers are key tenets of our curriculum: analytical thinking, creative thinking, resilience, flexibility and agility, motivation and self-awareness, curiosity and lifelong learning, empathy and active listening and leadership and social influence (WEF Future of Jobs Report 2023). In this rapidly changing landscape, Debate Mate is ensuring our students are given a toolkit of essential human skills for the workplace of tomorrow.

This year we have developed our partnerships with businesses and organisations to facilitate interactions for students with professionals from a range of industries. We are so grateful to all of our sponsors and supporters, without whom we wouldn't be able to deliver our programmes. We were delighted to return in-person to Nepal to deliver our programme to students in Kathmandu, Pokhara and Bhaktapur, as well as deliver a new programme in Sri Lanka in partnership with Learn for Life Lanka. These programmes ensure we are working in some of the poorest communities internationally and teaching our key skills to those who need them the most.

As Debate Mate enters its 18th year, we look forward to continuing our work and embracing the possibilities that developments in technology will bring, allowing us to expand the delivery of our programmes in the UK and around the world!



Our Supporters

On behalf of our programme participants, we would like to thank the many individual and corporate supporters, trusts, foundations and institutions who enabled us to support more young people across the UK. Thank you for championing the next generation.

