Independent Schools Guide

ADVERTISING FEATURE

A winning approach to ethical conundrums

The International Ethics Olympiad is a challenging, think-on-your-feet meet, writes Fran Molloy.

Last year, certain governments were accused of misrepresenting information about the proportion of people under 50 falling ill from COVID-19 to imply that young people were more vulnerable to the virus than was actually the case.

"The aim was to prevent people from going out and partying and spreading the virus as much," explains Callum Wardman-Browne, a year 11 student at Sydney's Redlands.

Exploring the claim saw the school's ethics team win a gold medal in the NSW Senior High School Olympiads held in May.

The Redlands team is now deep in the competition rounds of the 2021 Senior Students International Ethics Olympiad Final against schools from across Australia, New Zealand, Hong Kong, Singapore and Canada.

Wardman-Browne says each team receives the same package of eight case studies and, during their three heats, must address discussion questions, deconstruct the issues and explain the ethical frameworks they use.

In May's NSW round, the Redlands team applied the framework of consequentialism when discussing the case about statistics and misrepresentation, titled 'The ethics of truth and public safety during the COVID-19 pandemic'.

"Our analysis found that there was a dichotomy between truth and safety, with a decision to be made: do we want to live in an honest society or a safe society?" he says.

Applying a consequentialism framework helped the team explore the implications of each choice. In a nutshell, says Wardman-Browne: "If we live in an honest society, more people might die; but living in a safe society could lead to greater distrust of the government."

Teacher Dr Matthew Wills started Australia's Ethics Olympiad in 2013, inspired by similar competitions held between student groups in the United States, and says the contest is both collaborative and competitive.

More than 90 public, independent and Catholic schools take part in heats in NSW alone, he says.

The first international competition was held last year and took place by video-conference, which Wills says will probably become a permanent feature as it allows more schools from regional areas to take part.





The ethics team from Redlands are, from left, Katina Casimaty, Omar Rihani, Amelie Heard, Callum Wardman-Browne, Sophia Maxwell and Jack Murray; right, practice sessions using the whiteboard table. PHOTOS: SUPPLIED

For the international finals, each team is given new discussion questions based on the same ethical case studies they worked on in earlier rounds.

"The aim of the exercise is to get students to think on their feet and to work together to come up with the best possible response they can to an ethical question based on the cases they will be very familiar with," says Wills.

"The judges look for good reasoning, collaboration skills and creativity in the responses."

Redlands' senior students study either NSW HSC subjects or the International Baccalaureate diploma. Ethics forms part of the IB 'theory of knowledge' core subject, so for IB diploma students the competition relates to their wider education, says Conrad Del Villar, English teacher and Redlands' year 11 ethics team coach.

He has worked with the team to prepare for the Olympiad using a close examination of eight case studies – all of which are contemporary political, cultural or societal situations.

"This year's topics include questions around the Korean pop industry, defunding the police, and the Netflix *Tiger King* series – all things that are important to the lives of a lot of younger people," he says.

The cases include a detailed exploration of each issue along with discussion questions the team works through. Del Villar says an important part of the process involves selecting an ethical framework to apply.

He helps the team see how to apply the framework to the decisions made by different people in an ethical situation, and what personal values each might draw on to argue a particular position.

"Thinking about what's really important to each of the actors in the scene helps them analyse complex situations from multiple perspectives," he says.

Part of the reason the Redlands senior team has done so well is because they all contribute different perspectives, says team member Sophia Maxwell, who cites the collective strengths the team brought to a case about the ethics of fast fashion.

"At first it seems obvious – fast fashion workers are exploited by low wages and poor conditions and the clothes don't last and go into landfill, so fast fashion should be banned to protect the workers and the environment," she says.

But during competition, she says, the team raised a range of perspectives: Should the cost burden of making fashion sustainable fall on business, on governments or on consumers? How will fast fashion workers survive? How do the ethical issues get addressed – via legislation or consumer pressure? How can we have control on an international scale?

"It's a great exercise in critical thinking under pressure and we had to learn to work collaboratively and deal with very sophisticated issues," Maxwell says.

With Sydney under lockdown during the international Olympiad finals, the school workspace, with its useful circular whiteboard table, is unavailable. However, the skills required to make a complex argument in a concise manner, with the clock ticking, don't change.

Some Olympiad teams rely on one or two presenters, but Maxwell says each Redlands team member has a voice. She's also a debater and says while the two disciplines share some common skills, ethics engenders a "positive competitive atmosphere".

"It is really refreshing – it is less about trying to prove that the other team is wrong, more about trying to present a contrasting perspective that might build on what the other team is saying, as opposed to tearing it down."


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