

ESU SCHOOLS' MACE DEBATING COMPETITION

Volunteer Judge Handbook 2025-26



ENGLISH-SPEAKING UNION
discovering voices



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WELCOME

Dear volunteer judges,

Thank you so much for offering your time and expertise to judge the ESU Schools' Mace. The competition depends on generous volunteers like yourself to enable it to run successfully. One of the biggest and oldest debating competitions in England and Wales, the Schools' Mace has been challenging students to dive into hot topics and sharpen their debating skills since 1957.

This handbook outlines the format of the competition and gives guidance on judging, marking and giving feedback.

It is vital that all judges, no matter how experienced, read the ESU Volunteer Agreement and complete the online training. The ESU as an educational charity and you as a volunteer both have a duty of care to the young people who take part in our programmes. The training covers competition rules and judging guidelines as well as vital safeguarding issues. Further details will be shared with you separately from this handbook.

Full information about the competition can be found at esu.org/competitions/schools-mace/.

If you have any questions about the competition or being a volunteer judge with the ESU, please do not hesitate to contact us. Contact details are below.

- Competitions team, for any questions about the competition itself: competition@esu.org | 0207 529 1565
- Anna Mitchell and Harry Hodges, Supporter Services and Engagement team, for questions about your role as a volunteer: volunteering@esu.org.uk | 02075291587

Once again, thank you for your generosity in giving up your time to support the ESU Schools' Mace. We hope you are looking forward to your first competition heat.

Best regards,

Harry Hodges

Supporter Services and Engagement Manager

HOW THE COMPETITION WORKS

The ESU Schools' Mace consists of five rounds.

- **Round One:** takes place in local schools and regional sponsorship centres
- **Round Two:** takes place in local schools and regional sponsorship centres
- **Regional Finals:** take place in local schools, or regional sponsorship centres
- **Semi-Finals:** take place on the morning of finals day in London
- **Grand Final:** takes place on the afternoon of finals day in London

Who Can Enter?

The ESU Schools' Mace is open to all schools in England and Wales. All students must be aged 11-18 throughout the competition.

Team Setup

- Each team has 3-5 students, all from the same school.
- Only three students will participate at a time, but team members may rotate between rounds.



Competition Setup

The ESU Schools' Mace format is simple and aims to get as many students and schools involved in debating as possible.

Each debate consists of two teams – a proposition and an opposition – of three speakers. The order of speeches is as follows:

| Speech Order | Duration | Points of Information | Gavel |
|--------------------------------|-----------|---|---|
| 1. First Proposition | 7 minutes | 1 minute protected time 5 minutes points of information allowed 1 minute protected time | 1 minute 6 minutes 7 minutes (double) |
| 2. First Opposition | 7 minutes | 1 minute protected time 5 minutes points of information allowed 1 minute protected time | 1 minute 6 minutes 7 minutes (double) |
| 3. Second Proposition | 7 minutes | 1 minute protected time 5 minutes points of information allowed 1 minute protected time | 1 minute 6 minutes 7 minutes (double) |
| 4. Second Opposition | 7 minutes | 1 minute protected time 5 minutes points of information allowed 1 minute protected time | 1 minute 6 minutes 7 minutes (double) |
| Floor debate | | | |
| 5. Opposition Summary Speaker | 5 minutes | All protected time | 4 minutes 5 minutes (double) |
| 6. Proposition Summary Speaker | 5 minutes | All protected time | 4 minutes 5 minutes (double) |

The Floor Debate

This is moderated either by the chair of the debate (if one is provided by the host school), the competition lead, or the chair of the judging panel. In this time two or three questions to each side should be posed by the audience. These questions may be to raise issues that have not been previously considered in the debate or to ask for clarity on the points that have been made.

Timekeeping

A bang of the gavel (or knock on the table) should be given as indicated in the table above, to indicate the beginning and end of protected time, or the end of the speaker's time. If a speaker goes over their time, a triple knock should be given every 15 seconds. This should be done either by the chair for the debate, the competition lead, the timekeeper (if one is provided by the host school), or the chair of the judging panel. This individual should also keep track of any speeches which run over or under by 30 seconds or more, and report this to the judging panel.

Points of Information and Protected Time

A point of information (or POI) is a short, 10 to 15 second interjection into a speech by the opposite team. In a point of information, a speaker should concisely raise an objection to an argument being made, ask a question, or make another pertinent remark. This may be a criticism of factual accuracy or an assumption that is made in their argument.

To offer a point of information, a member of the opposite bench should stand up, raise their hand, or simply say 'point of information' to alert the speaker to their desire to interject without disrupting the flow of the speech in progress. It is the speaker's choice whether to accept a point of information or not, and a refusal can be signalled verbally or by 'waving a speaker down'. Speakers are expected to accept one or two points of information in their speech. Speakers who accept more should not be penalised, although it is likely that they will have less time to develop their reasoning and argumentation. Likewise, those who accept fewer points or information should not have actively deducted marks, although it is likely their listening and response will be worse, as they have not engaged as much with the ideas of others.

Protected time is the part of the speech where points of information are not allowed. Both summary speeches are entirely protected time.



ROLES

Each speaker in the debate has a specific role to play. This is reflected in the mark scheme.



First Speaker of the Proposition

The first speaker for the proposition is expected to provide a definition and a mechanism for the debate.

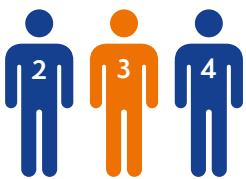
The definition should provide a clear idea of the key terms of the debate:

For example, in 'This House Would Legalise Drugs', what do we mean by 'drugs'? Do we include all currently illegal drugs? Do we include drugs which are currently prescription only, but currently available drugs?

The mechanism is the means by which the proposition will be carried out:

If the debate was 'This House Would Invade Syria', The mechanism might be: who will be invading? What means will be used for the invasion?

Once a reasonable definition and mechanism for the motion has been set out, the first speaker of the proposition should then outline and begin to argue the most important two or three arguments for the proposition.



Following Speakers

The following three speakers follow with rebuttal to the previous speeches from the opposite bench. They should aim to highlight issues with the previous opposing points, and argue two or three main arguments which support their side of the debate.



Summary Speakers

The summary speakers play two roles. Firstly, they must respond to the floor questions, either directly or through reference to the rest of their arguments in the debate. Secondly, they should seek to provide a summary of the debate including two or three main 'points of clash'. This should clarify the debate and demonstrate why their side won.

JUDGING

The ESU Schools' Mace is a competition that is first and foremost aimed at providing young debaters around England the opportunity to grow and develop as speakers. Debating allows students to build the key skills, such as analytical reasoning and the ability to use and apply relevant evidence, that debating can bring. It is therefore crucial that judging is carried out on a consistent basis. We ask all judges to weigh the elements of debating and persuasion based upon the mark scheme provided and the guidance in this handbook.



Judges for the Schools' Mace are asked to act as a neutral, well informed global citizen. We recognise that our judges often have specific areas of expertise, whether from academic work or professional experience, and we also realise that all of us have personal opinions and biases about certain topics.

However, it is essential that debating teams are judged only in relation to their ability to build persuasive arguments and by comparison to the other team in the debate, rather than by the external knowledge and opinions of the judges. We are not testing specialist knowledge or understanding of current affairs, but rather the ability to prepare evidence and build logical, rigorous and persuasive arguments.

Each team is judged in isolation from other teams when possible. For example, reasoning, evidence and style can all be looked at in terms of the mark scheme descriptors irrespective of the team they are paired with. However, certain skills such as listening and response make debating different from public speaking and require an opposing team to fully explore. Some skills will fall on both sides, and you will see that they can be judged independently to an extent, but may be improved or challenged by the other team. Therefore, your appraisal of each team will require an isolated look at each team as well as consideration of how they worked with and against the opposing team.

How The Heat Will Run

You will receive a heat briefing prior to every heat you judge, which will include all relevant information and the procedures for the format of the heat. This will include the competition schools, motions, logistics, information about the host school (such as whether there is parking) and other heat information. You will need this briefing as a reference, along with this handbook and the judge summary sheet for recording notes and marks.

When you get together as a panel, one judge will be appointed chair.

Usually there are three judges, but if there are an even number the chair will have a casting vote on any controversial decision. The ESU competition lead will take you through the mechanics of the marking sheets and may also sit on the judging panel.

At the end of this document is a page on the art of giving feedback. It is vital that you read this carefully and adhere to the ESU feedback guidelines.



JUDGE MARKSHEETS

Adjudication is based on the ESU's Four Key Skillsets:

- Reasoning and Evidence
- Organisation and Prioritisation
- Listening and Response
- Expression and Delivery

These criteria are weighted in the following manner:

| Position | Reasoning and Evidence | Organisation and Prioritisation | Listening and Response | Expression and Delivery |
|-----------------------------|------------------------|---------------------------------|------------------------|-------------------------|
| First Proposition Speaker | 15 | 10 | 5 | 10 |
| First Opposition Speaker | 10 | 10 | 10 | 10 |
| Second Proposition Speaker | 10 | 10 | 10 | 10 |
| Second Opposition Speaker | 10 | 10 | 10 | 10 |
| Opposition Summary Speaker | 10 | 10 | 10 | 10 |
| Proposition Summary Speaker | 10 | 10 | 10 | 10 |

Numerical scores are a guideline for deliberations and the judging panel should discuss the strengths and weaknesses of each participant as they reach an agreement on the winning team/s.

The judging criteria for the ESU Schools' Mace seeks to explicitly develop the constituent elements of persuasive speaking. In some formats of debating, such as British Parliamentary, there is a more holistic approach to judging. However, this does not necessarily lead to the most conscious development of the complete range of oracy skills that are required in debating and elsewhere.



Reasoning and Evidence

Relevancy of arguments, relevant empirical evidence to support ideas, analysed arguments from premise to conclusions.

- Speeches that score highly are very relevant and well-constructed, providing logical and persuasive arguments for their side. They work through from basic assertions to well justified conclusions, making use of evidence that supports their case.
- Arguments are not only relevant and well analysed, but also must have their importance demonstrated, and a weight given in reference to other material in the debate.



Organisation and Prioritisation

Marked out arguments, signposted ideas, internal structure, ranking of most relevant ideas, preference best ideas.

- Speeches that score highly are exceptionally clear in communicating ideas. They introduce the most relevant ideas and make use of them, without rushing through or introducing every possible relevant argument.



Listening and Response

Rebuttal and points of information, relevance to arguments, level of response given, prioritisation.

- Speeches that score highly show a sharp ability to engage with the roots of the case presented by the opposing bench. Rather than simply tackling examples or evidence, they undermine the principles or concepts on top of which arguments are built.
- Speakers will aim to undermine the most important material in both rebuttal, points of information, and also their main constructive material. They will be flexible in their approach to the debate and will weight their own ideas in reference to the opposing bench.



Expression and Delivery

Eye contact, hand gestures, stance, pacing, emotive language, rhetorical devices and questions.

- Speeches that score highly demonstrate a clear awareness of rhetoric and attempt to engage an audience. They make use of tools such as eye contact, hand gestures, and some emotive language to engage with the judges. They may make use of notes, but as a prompt, rather than to rehearse or read the speech.



DELIBERATION



Once all of the debates in the heat have finished, it is time for the judges to deliberate over their decisions.

First, please check your heat briefing very carefully for the number of teams you are selecting to advance. This may be different from one heat to the next and depending on the size of the region. Errors (announcing too many teams, or too few) can be upsetting for participants, so please ensure you check carefully. If you are in any doubt, please check with the competition lead.

You should then take some time to consider the debates and the relative performances. You can also use this time to consolidate, prepare and reflect on the feedback you will give.

It is unsatisfying for the participants to see a judge 'instantly' reach their choice, so you should always take this adjudication time.

Remember, in the Schools' Mace it is the best performing teams who advance, not necessarily just the winners of each debate - it is entirely possible to lose a debate and still be one of the best two or three teams in the heat.

Once you have reached a decision it is the responsibility of the competition lead to report this back to the ESU competitions team.

It is then the responsibility of the Chair Judge to provide feedback to the participating teams, following the guidelines on feedback outlined in the next section, and announce the teams progressing to the next round.



GIVING FEEDBACK

The competition heats are a chance for students to not only show their oracy and debating skills, but to learn about public speaking too. Feedback is an essential part of this and the most important thing to remember is to keep a positive tone and to make sure that all critique is constructive. We want every child to come away from the event with a feeling that they have gained something and enjoyed the experience, win or not. Below are guidelines for giving feedback, which must be adhered to by all judges.

Follow the ESU Criteria

It is essential that all judges use the criteria and marking guidelines in this handbook. Teams have been coached to these criteria and will be expecting feedback relating to them.

ESU Mark sheet

The ESU's Four Key Skill Sets form the mark scheme for our competitions. We encourage both educators and students to study and discuss this section of the handbook, as it not only forms the basis of our judging criteria, but is a means-tested tool to effectively develop your oracy skills beyond our competitions. There are 40 marks available for each speaker.

You can find a copy of the marksheet [here](#).

General Feedback

There are two types of feedback: general and individual. After deliberations and before the results of the competition are announced, the chair judge will give general feedback to all participants.

General feedback will cover general advice that the majority of participants will benefit from. For example that you were particularly impressed with a certain aspect of the speeches you saw, such as that POIs were thoughtful and useful, or that you were particularly impressed with the summary speeches and the way they responded to the floor debate. General feedback can also include general critique and feedback on how teams could improve.

Individual Feedback

After the results of the competition have been announced, the judges will give individual feedback to each student. This is your chance to offer constructive feedback and advice which is specific to each student.

This is usually done with the whole team from each school, away from other schools. The teacher for the team must always be present and a judge must never be alone with any student/s. This is for safeguarding reasons and as some students feel particularly nervous or tense when receiving feedback, especially if they have not gone through to the next round, and having another adult with whom they are more familiar is often helpful to put them at ease and manage their emotions.

The speakers must accept the judges' decision; you should refer to your mark sheets for detailed comments, but the speakers have no right to see them or hear their marks. In the rare event that a student or teacher becomes overly frustrated and is rude or unprofessional, remove yourself from the situation. Alert the ESU competition lead immediately and later report it to the ESU competitions team.

The Sandwich Method

The ESU requires feedback to be given following the sandwich method, to ensure students feel positive about their experience.

The sandwich method begins and ends with praise, and the notes on how the student could improve next time is sandwiched in between.

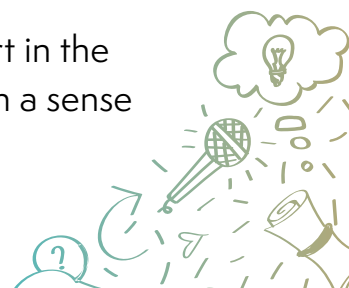
Make sure you know what you would like to feedback to the student before you begin, and when giving feedback remember to be positive and encouraging.

Feedback should be relevant to the criteria explained earlier in this handbook. It could include, but is not limited to, the following:

- What you were looking for in their role and whether this was fulfilled by the student
- What was challenging about the role or motion and how the student overcame the challenge or how they could overcome it next time
- How voice, expression, body language or eye contact was used by the student and how this was successful or could be improved
- How pace, anecdotes or humour was used to engage the audience and why this was successful or how it could be improved in future
- How POIs and rebuttal were used and how they could be improved in future

Do not make specific references to the competencies or difficulties encountered by other participants.

Make sure to highlight the significance of their achievement in taking part in the competition, ideally at the end of the feedback so the students leave with a sense of accomplishment and pride.



If Individual Feedback Cannot be Given

Some teams will need to leave quickly or early, without hearing their individual feedback. The competition lead must be aware of any teams who do leave early and this should have been agreed with the competitions team prior to the heat.

In this case, the competition lead is responsible for passing feedback to the competitions team, who will in turn pass the feedback to the teacher to relay to their students. Please support the competition lead with this, ensuring they have the full feedback either verbally or in writing, before leaving the heat.

Giving feedback in writing is important for students but is a time-consuming process for all parties involved. Therefore, please do your best to ensure feedback is given in person at the heat whenever possible.

Be Inclusive

Never refer to a student's dress sense, hairstyle or any physical characteristic, including their voice. Such remarks are at best inappropriate and at worst hurtful.

If and when you come across unfamiliar names, give the student the respect of your best attempt at pronunciation and if possible ask their teacher for guidance beforehand.

It has now become common practice in debating competitions for judges and participants to express their preferred pronouns at the beginning of the debate. This small statement, which takes up very little of everyone's time, can ensure that debates remain as inclusive as possible to all participants, including those who may identify as transgender or non-binary.

In practice, this means that at the beginning of each debate participants, when they are introduced, will express what pronouns they prefer to be referred to by.

The English-Speaking Union is committed to providing opportunities for individuals of all backgrounds to access and develop communication skills. Make sure you read and adhere to the [ESU Equity Policy](#) and [ESU safeguarding policy](#).



THE PROCESS OF GIVING FEEDBACK

Feedback should be given after all debates have been completed. The chair of the judges should begin by addressing all speakers and highlighting both general strengths and weaknesses for the debate in relation to the mark scheme and aims of Mace debating: *'We felt that teams were generally good at constructing strongly evidenced arguments, but at times needed to be more forthcoming with points of information'*.

This should not be aimed at any specific team or individual, but rather reflective of all debates. Avoid mentioning or using speakers as examples. Try and balance negative feedback with positive feedback to avoid disheartening potentially inexperienced speakers.

Having addressed any general tips for the debate, outline the basis and criteria upon which the decision was made. Explain the basic idea and criteria for adjudicating the ESU Schools' Mace, and advise where you felt the major differences were between teams: *'While we judge on the basis of all four criteria, we felt that the difference between teams could be most keenly seen in the quality of listening and response'*.

You should then provide the school names of the teams that will proceed to the next round of the competition.

After the announcement you should then move to individual feedback, making sure that all teams that wish to receive personal feedback do so.

Judges' Feedback

Feedback should always be constructive and encouraging.

The most straightforward approach to feedback is simply to break down the speeches by the constituent parts of the mark scheme. You should then draw out both positive strengths and skills that they have built and should continue to make use of, as well as weaknesses that need to be focused on to improve: *'We felt that your use of examples was very good, however at times you needed to spend more time explaining why these examples were relevant to this specific debate'*.

Try to be as specific to their speeches and content as possible, rather than simply speaking in generalisations.

You should also explain the relevant strengths and weaknesses of a team in relation to the teams that progressed or performed better. You should always keep this constructive and positive: *'While we felt your use of evidence was excellent, we felt that the team that progressed were better at explaining the relevance of this evidence to this specific policy'*.

Again, try to be as specific as possible.

SAFEGUARDING

The wellbeing of volunteers and young people alike is taken very seriously by the ESU. Safeguarding is key to this and therefore we require all staff and volunteers to follow the expectations outlined below. The full safeguarding policy can be found on our website.

Safeguarding Principals

The English-Speaking Union's safeguarding principals are applicable to all staff, volunteers, members and individuals representing the ESU in any personal or professional capacity online and in-person.

These principals are:

- Promote the wellbeing of children and adults through a culture of shared responsibility for safeguarding.
- Prevent harm through full compliance with Safeguarding Policy and Procedures and the creation of a culture of informed vigilance.
- Protect through responding effectively when safeguarding concerns arise.

All staff, members and volunteers have a role to play and must be proactive in developing an understanding of safe practice and their personal responsibilities towards the beneficiaries of the charity (our young people) and each other. The ESU acknowledges its responsibility to protect staff and volunteers from harm and to create a positive and safe working environment in which every individual is respected for their contribution.

Safeguarding at ESU events

During ESU events a young person is away from their usual context and is encouraged to express themselves during competition. They may share concerns about personal situations unrelated to the event. Children and young people from a wide range of backgrounds, countries and home situations engage with ESU activities. Therefore, it is important that as a volunteer representing the ESU you recognise and are aware that this may be a period of heightened stress, emotion and excitement for the young people which could raise the possibility of a disclosure or behaviour which may raise a safeguarding concern. In all circumstances, the staff and volunteers of the ESU will listen with empathy and provide support, guidance and assistance to young people. Children and young people should never be made to feel ashamed or that they are creating a problem by reporting concerns.

Raising a Safeguarding Concern

It is everyone's responsibility to raise a safeguarding concern if any person's actions, behaviour or words create any kind of concern that harm to a child(ren) or an adult(s) at risk has occurred, may occur or will occur. Raising a concern with the Designated Safeguarding Lead for that event is an action that must be taken. The Designated Safeguarding Lead will be identified as part of the briefing volunteers receive prior to each event, and will generally be a member of ESU staff or school staff.

Our Code of Conduct

The ESU expects all volunteers to maintain a professional and honest approach in their dealings with young people, fellow volunteers, ESU members, staff, supporters and any individuals that they come into contact with in the course of their work with the ESU. As representatives of the ESU, you are expected to act in accordance with the principles of the ESU's Safeguarding policy, the ESU Equal Opportunities Policy and the Harassment and Bullying Policy; any failure to do so may result in disciplinary action or a discontinuation of your services.

Social Media

The full names of children in ESU programmes along with the school they attend should not be put on social media. Furthermore, volunteers should not take photos of children at ESU events. The only circumstances where photography is permitted is when a designated member of staff is permitted to do so, on an ESU registered device and with a signed photo permission form from the child's parents/guardians.

Confidentiality

While you are working for the ESU you may have access to confidential information about the ESU, its plans, programmes, policies, procedures, finances, members, supporters and beneficiaries. Where such information is confidential it must not be divulged to any unauthorised person either inside or outside the organisation, during or after your time with us. If you are in any doubt about the confidentiality of information, or the correct course of action in relation to divulging information, you must seek guidance from an ESU staff member.

External Communications

The ESU encourages and welcomes use of external media and social media to celebrate your participation and engagement with the ESU's work. We ask that you consider the sensitivity and professionalism of your communications e.g. in dealings with the press, media and potential supporters. The supporter services and engagement team are more than happy to support if you have any questions about external communication, wording, phrases to use or access to accompanying photographs.



PRACTICAL INFORMATION

What you will need on the day

Please bring your Judge Mark Sheet printed – some host schools may print out mark sheets however other venues may not the capacity to do so.

We encourage you to bring a bottle of water and a snack.

Swing Teams

A swing team is a team added to a debate to fill a gap and allow the debate to proceed. A swing team may be needed if a school drops out or does not attend the heat.

- A swing team may contain two or three members.
- Although swing teams cannot progress to the next round, the opportunity to take part in the debate offers valuable debating experience, and the team will receive judge feedback.
- Any team left without an opponent, and therefore unable to debate, will automatically advance to the next round.
- When judging a swing team, still follow the usual criteria, but also be mindful of the time constraints the swing team may have faced. This could mean that their speaking times are shorter than usual and that there is less content for the opposing team to respond to. If this is the case, a thoughtful question and the response from the swing team can help provide more material for the opposing team to engage with.
- Judges do not need to provide a swing team with a numerical score, so you can focus on providing them with constructive feedback to help them improve.

Punctuality

We ask you to maintain high standards of punctuality and professionalism. The young people get the most out of the competitions and experience when it runs smoothly and efficiently. Please arrive 30 minutes before the event. Arriving on time, prepared is the single most important thing you can do to help our events run smoothly and our young people have the best possible experience.

Logistics

ESU staff will share a briefing document with logistical details, including an arrival time, details of the location and facilities available. If you require any flexibility for personal reasons or think this a risk you may be late to the competition (for instance), then you please email volunteering@esu.org to explain the circumstances as early as possible.

Contact Us

If you have any issues on the day please contact volunteering@esu.org or +44 (0) 207 529 1587.

For any safeguarding issues please contact an ESU member of Staff at volunteering@esu.org or on the day contact the Competition Lead.

If you have any accessibility requirements or there are any reasonable adjustments we can make for you, please contact us at volunteering@esu.org.

POLICIES

[Volunteer agreement](#)

[Safeguarding policy](#)

[Privacy policy](#)

[Complaints policy](#)

[Whistleblowing policy](#)

USEFUL DOCUMENTS

[Schools' Mace marksheet](#)



ENJOY!

We hope you have a fantastic time as an ESU volunteer judge. Once again, thank you for your generosity in giving up your time to support students around the UK discover their voices.

Follow and tag us on social media using the QR code and let us know how you enjoy the heats using the hashtag **#ESUMace**.



By taking part in the ESU Schools' Mace, students are automatically part of the ESU's thriving alumni community. Please encourage the parents/carers who attend the heat to sign up to our **alumni mailing list** to keep up to date with opportunities and events they can be part of.

THE ENGLISH-SPEAKING UNION

The ESU is a global educational charity that brings people together across languages and cultures. We aim to build confident communicators, critical thinkers, and active citizens. Our work promotes international dialogue and cultural exchange, reflected in the diverse activities of our alumni and members worldwide.

Our goals are:

- To promote education in the English-speaking world and beyond, respecting traditions while addressing current issues.
- To use English as a tool for international communication and understanding.

We are non-political and work with people from all backgrounds. For more on our education programmes, visit [esu.org](https://www.esu.org).

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[esu.org](https://www.esu.org)

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