

# SACEE NEWS

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## NATIONAL ENGLISH OLYMPIAD CELEBRATES 50 YEARS

Mihir Modi from Greenside High School was announced as the number one candidate in the Home Language division of the 50th English Olympiad prize-giving held at the 1820 Settlers Monument in Makhanda/Grahamstown on 3 July 2025. Bohlale Tsupa from Machabeng College took top honours in the First Additional Language division.

Speaking at the prize-giving, Dr Malcolm Venter, National Chairperson of SACEE and founder of the Olympiad, made the comment that, 'when something has been around a long while, one often forgets that there was a time when it did not exist. And one tends to think that it somehow just happened spontaneously.' He went on to elaborate as follows:

But that's not how things actually come about. Everything has to have a beginning.

In the case of the English Olympiad, the beginning was in 1975 – 50 years ago, long before the majority of people in this room were born.

In that year a question was posed at a meeting of the Eastern Cape branch of SACEE in Port Elizabeth. The Chairperson made the following comment: 'I was asked by a schoolboy the other day: "We have a Science Olympiad and a Maths Olympiad, but why don't we have an English Olympiad?"' (cfd on page 3)



*Mihir Modi with the 2025 English Olympiad examiners, Yvette Morgan and Malcolm Venter*

### All in the family!

Mihir Modi, who came first in this year's English Olympiad, was accompanied to the prize-giving by his English teacher, Ms Sandy Shoolman. When Ms Shoolman joined Greenside High School as Head of the English Department in 2019, she expressed a wish to increase participation and promote interest in the English Olympiad – and to achieve a winner. Her dream came true on Thursday 3 July 2025.

'My passion for the English Olympiad,' she says, 'began with my own participation in 1978 as a Grade 11 learner. The syllabus was Charles Dickens, and the prescribed novels were *Great Expectations*, *Hard Times* and *Bleak House* (yes, I still remember).'

Her own children participated enthusiastically in the English Olympiad. Saul Musker was ranked 2<sup>nd</sup> in 2012, and Samuel Musker ranked first in 2014.

'The English Olympiad,' says Ms Shoolman, 'has enriched my life and those of my children and learners.'

## From my Chair ...



This year has been a milestone year for SACEE.

In the first place, we are celebrating 70 years of service to English in South Africa. We reported on this in a special newsletter earlier in the year.

It is also the year in which the 50th examination of the English Olympiad was written.

Meanwhile the branches have continued with their local and national projects, and I am delighted that there have been some new projects and that we are serving a greater diversity of schools and learners.

Grateful thanks to Alison Gwynn-Evans, chairperson of the Cape Town branch, for her initiative in organising a striking new logo for SACEE and a special 70th version of the new logo.

I am confident that SACEE, thanks to the hard work of a number of enthusiastic volunteers, will continue to provide opportunities for young people to engage creatively with the English language in the years to come.



## WHO IS SACEE?

The South African Council for English Education is a registered non-profit association mainly consisting of voluntary members. SACEE was established in 1955 by a small group of people who were dedicated to the protection of English usage. That was necessary at the time, as the Nationalist government, which had taken office in 1948, aimed to sideline English in favour of Afrikaans.

Our mission statement – to support the teaching, learning and appreciation of English—is our focus now that that situation no longer pertains.

Through a network of branches and membership, the Council succeeds in initiating and sustaining a wide variety of worthwhile activities and projects, undertaken voluntarily by members and aimed at benefitting teachers, learners as well as college and university students. SACEE provides a practical means for individuals and organisations to participate in the development of skills and in the enjoyment of the English language. SACEE draws together people with an appreciation of the richness of the language, a concern for clarity of thought and a respect for the multilingual diversity of South Africa.

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Bohlale Tsupa (FAL 1st place)

The chairperson then turned to me, a young English teacher at the time, and said, 'Malcolm why don't you do something about it?' So I obediently launched a pilot project in 1976 on my own, in the Eastern Cape, on behalf of SACEE, with 119 candidates and a first prize of R50. It meant typing and copying and posting all the documents, liaising with the examiner and arranging the small prize-giving. Now that was manageable for one person. But I realised that SACEE did not have the administrative resources to manage a larger project.

So I turned to my former Rhodes Professor of English, Guy Butler (who, incidentally, was a key figure in the establishment of this great monument and the Nation Arts Festival), to bring the Grahamstown Foundation on board. With their support, we were able to extend the project to the whole of the old Cape Province the next year and to the country as a whole in 1978.

The Olympiad thus became, and still is, a joint national project of SACEE, which manages the academic aspects (currently under the very able leadership of Robert Sharman), and the Grahamstown Foundation, which undertakes the administration (currently led by the very efficient Prarochna Rama). SACEE is deeply grateful to the Foundation for their involvement in this project.

The seed which was planted in 1975 has since grown into a prestigious project with five to six thousand entrants and top prizes valued at over R30 000.

I was deeply honoured to be invited to serve as the Chief Examiner for the 50<sup>th</sup> examination. I accepted the position on condition that Yvette Morgan be appointed as the co-examiner. Her keen, creative mind, along with her current involvement with teaching, was a necessary complement.

I decided to opt for a positive theme, partly because we were, after all, celebrating something; and partly because these days we tend to feed young minds (and they feed their own minds) with angst, negativity, political correctness and a sense of victimhood. So I chose 'celebration' – of love, life and land – as the theme and the basis of the anthology.

Today we celebrate

- The founders of the Olympiad;
- Those who have carried it on since then;
- All who have entered and those who have emerged as winners over the years;
- And especially the winners of the 50<sup>th</sup> Olympiad.

I'd like to conclude with a challenge to the young people in this room today: Maybe you, too, could be the seed planter and/or developer in your lifetime of some venture which brings benefit to other people. Then you can experience the satisfaction of leaving the world a better place than you found it.

*During the ceremony, Rob Sharman, National Academic Co-ordinator of the English Olympiad, made a presentation to Dr Malcolm Venter, who founded the Olympiad and who has, over the past 49 years, maintained his involvement in SACEE and, in several guises, in the project.*





## FROM THE MOUTHS OF WINNERS

*The winners were invited to speak at the prize-giving. Here are excerpts from those who elected to do so:*



**AMARA ODUGWU**

**2nd Home Language**

**Merrifield College and Prep School**

When my peers and I chose to enter the Olympiad, we weren't entirely sure what to expect. We just knew we wanted to challenge ourselves – to broach our comfort zones, to see how our writing measured up beyond the boundaries of school, and to explore what we might be capable of when we put pen to paper with purpose. It wasn't just about a competition; it was about fulfilling potential we sensed we hadn't yet tapped into.

And what an eye-opening journey it's been.

At first, the theme seemed simple but as we read story after composition, poem after essay, we began to understand celebration in its most complex, layered, and unexpected forms. It expanded our perspectives – showing us how celebration can emerge from struggle, from resistance, from small everyday moments, and even from grief. It reminded us that writing, too, is a celebration – of thought, of emotion, and of the human experience.

Most importantly, through this Olympiad, many of us realised something profound: writing doesn't have to end at the classroom door. There are platforms, communities, and opportunities – like this one – that exist to nurture young voices and ideas. And that discovery alone has lit a spark in many

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**OGILVIE BOTHA**

**(tied) 3<sup>rd</sup> in FAL**

**Outeniqua High School**

As we reach the end of this incredible journey, I want to take a moment to acknowledge the people who made it possible. To the committee – thank you for your vision, your effort, your guidance and the opportunity to grow through simple discussions. To the teachers who guided us through every draft, every idea, every moment, and who taught us to preserve every droplet of courage – you've shaped more than our writing, acting and judiciousness; you've shaped how we see ourselves and our peers.

For me, this has been more than learning English in different fonts and through different viewpoints. It's been a moment of metamorphosis. A moment of realising that our words – no matter where we come from, what accent we carry, or what language we first learned to dream in – contains unmeasurable power. And it is our full responsibility to do everything in our power to retain that gift for as long as we can.

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**PRINCESS MAKOELE**

**(tied) 3<sup>rd</sup> FAL**

**Hoërskool Drieboek**

I was encouraged by my English teacher, Miss Derksen, who truly shaped my love for the English language, to enter for the English Olympiad. Her belief in me opened this door—and it's one I stepped through with both excitement and gratitude.

I come from an Afrikaans Home Language school and chose to compete in the English FAL category. That choice wasn't just academic—it was personal. It was about stepping beyond what's familiar and embracing growth through challenge.

Through the Olympiad, we've gained more than marks. We've learned to interpret with precision, to reflect deeply, and to express boldly. We've learned that language is both mirror and map—it shows us who we are, and where we can go.

# Western Cape Branch

Alison Gwynne-Evans

I would like to start this report by expressing my deep appreciation for the SACEE Western Cape and *English Alive* teams – the broader team has really taken on leadership and initiative over the past year. During this time, I have seen the team develop a new confidence in one another and ownership of processes and projects – leaving me freer to concentrate on building partnerships.



Significant in this year was the passing of Robin Malan on the 18th September 2024, a founding member of SACEE, who was editor of *English Alive* over many years and who built the *English Alive* brand and community through his tireless commitment to this cohort, extending the community of schools participating in *English Alive* beyond the borders of South Africa during his tenure. Robin will be remembered as a giant in his own right in terms of his creative output and his support of others. His stalwart commitment to writing and writers has left an enduring legacy. Robin, we salute you!

In 2018, SACEE Western Cape bestowed the 'Order of Imbewu' on Robin in for his contributions to *English Alive* over 50 years, and we need to re-acknowledge his lifetime commitment to developing literary talent in South Africa. 'Imbewu' is a Xhosa word for seeds, and this award recognised the way Robin built love, appreciation and care into the literary environment over an extended period.

We now have a bunch of young leaders on most of the SACEE projects, a willingness to try new things, and a structure that is open to drawing in young people to develop their project management in an area that they are passionate about. This structure can flexibly draw in and develop leadership that can build depth and energy within English education. This year we have trialled the *English Alive* Creative Writing Workshop format at six schools, and the project is ready to expand. Elsie McGuffog has also developed a Poetry workshop for teachers to develop their creativity so they can better inspire their learners.

I have particularly appreciated the spirit of collaboration that has developed – celebrated at the end of last year with a trip to Artscape to watch the ballet, *The Nutcracker*. What has also become clear to me that makes what SACEE achieves possible is the role of the team that works in the background making sure things happen – the type-setting and publishing team, led by Jo-anne Friedlander of UserFriendly, the marketing team represented by Bronwyn Horn, the stakeholder identification and building role played unobtrusively and energetically by Jasantha Singh of Aurora, and the communication with the broader community, the long-standing and well-loved committee members such as Terril Nicolay and Twanji Kalula, who are there with their depth of wisdom and experience to support and encourage, and the past committee members such as Anne Schlebusch and Roger Graham with their wealth of experience and service. And then to our WONDERFUL treasurer Catharina Sone, who has steered this ship through financially tricky waters with sound advice and a chuckle at the challenges we encounter and negotiate. Thank you, Catharina!

*English Alive* has also had a change of editor – Naelah Kamaldien stepped back, and Kirsten Deane took over at the end of last year. We are grateful to have Naelah's closing report for 2024 and look forward to see how Kirsten builds onto what is already there. Kirsten has already initiated a connection with the Cape Flats Literary Festival early in the New Year. As part of the core *English Alive* team, I would like to make special mention of Bronwyn Horn and Jasantha Singh, who have poured energy and vision into establishing our links with communities and in supporting and profiling young writers.

Lesa McEwan of Curro Somerset West took over running the Spellcheck competition and initiated new systems and processes. We hope she will continue in this role, despite her busy schedule! A huge thank you to Patrick Boltler, who stepped back from an enticing retirement to support us through the Spellcheck process when our systems failed us.

Murray Hines of Abbots College runs the SACEE Public Speaking Competition, and this year offered it in both an online and an in-person format. Charne Bailey from Holy Cross and now CBC St Johns will partner with him in building this further.

Last year saw the re-launch of the SACEE Forum Discussions under the leadership of Hannah Nelson. We appreciate Hannah's energy and connection with the schools. Hannah was supported by Roger Graham, previously of Westerford, who stepped in to share his experience and systems with us from his nearly 30 years leading the Forum Discussions. We look forward to seeing the Forum Discussions growing in 2025 and to Anelisa Hlongwane of Heathfield High School bringing her talents to develop this.



(Ctd on page 6)

We also have a number of useful partnerships:

- Our partnership with the Iziko Museum has been fruitful in terms of linkages and includes Iziko Museums advertising in the cover pages of *English Alive* and profiling *English Alive* writers at Iziko events.
- Fazeela Hafferjee, Head of English at WCED, retired, so we have connected with Glynis Schreuder, the new head and Justin Kennedy, the liaison person who circulates SACEE correspondence.
- Through the Jakes Gerwel Fellowship we have connected with wonderful and passionate educators at the start of their careers. Thanks Murray Hines, Annelise Hlongwane, Boitumelo Diale and Nthabiseng Khetla.
- And a thank you to Bishops for their support over the year through the Jagger Bequest – and for hosting our AGM.

SACEE could not do half of what it does without the support of the team and the community partners.



*English Alive workshop series with Iziko Museums celebrating 70 years of SACEE*



**Naeelah Kamaldien**

I served as the editor for the 2024 edition, with help from assistant editors Twanji Kalula and Tina Lawrence. The edition was formally launched at Springfield Convent School in Wynberg, Cape Town. We received submissions from high schools around the country.

Due to the rise of AI-generated content in schools, learners and teachers were asked to submit a declaration with learners' work, to confirm that the work is their own and that they had not utilised any AI programme.

We have learnt that there needs to be clear, and more readily-available, submission guidelines as some learners and teachers were confused about factors such as number of submissions allowed per learner, and the maximum word count of each piece. There were also enquiries about whether co-written pieces could be accepted. Additionally, we have learnt that the SACEE email database of schools needs to be updated as many of the emails are inactive.

Although attempts were made to reach schools in disadvantaged, underrepresented areas in Cape Town, we unfortunately only received a few submissions from these schools. This was definitely a learning curve and I think there will be greater representation of all demographics in future. The 2024 edition was a success thanks to the entire *English Alive* team.

## Eastern Cape

**Yvette Morgan**



This year we are venturing to offer a Public Speaking Challenge which is open to Juniors (Gr 7 – 9) and Seniors (Gr 10 – 12). Each term we offer a challenge covering different aspects

of public speaking:

**Term 1:** Spelling Bee

**Term 2:** Dramatic Monologue or Interpretive Reading

**Term 3:** Prepared and Unprepared Speeches

**Term 4:** The top 3 in each category will compete for first place.

Though this project is in its infancy, it has been well received by schools in and around Port Elizabeth/Gqeberha.



## NATIONAL ENGLISH OLYMPIAD

**ROBERT SHARMAN**

As per usual, this year's examinations were written on the first Tuesday in March – a day that seems to be convenient for most schools.

More state and IEB schools were added to the mailing list for the 2025 Olympiad, bringing the total number to 565. This resulted in a slight increase in the number of participating schools, to 264, but this is still lower than pre-Covid levels when, for example, 334 schools participated in the 2019 Olympiad. Pleasingly, however, the number of individual candidates rose by nearly 10%: 5524 candidates wrote this year's examination.

Given the ongoing lack of sponsorship for the Olympiad, the future of the project is uncertain. Although many expenses have been greatly reduced over the past five years, others have increased substantially – e.g. mailing/distribution costs have increased four-fold because of the need to use private courier services because of the unreliability of the services of the SA Post Office.

A planning meeting of SACEE and the Grahamstown Foundation took place on 7 April, and numerous topics were discussed. A follow-up planning meeting is due to take place on 31 July.

## Border Branch

Lisa Musto

2024 was another year filled with highlights for the SACEE Border Branch. We went into the year with a clear vision in mind: to, once again, improve upon participation in events and to continue to innovate and offer exciting projects for the learners to partake in. Upon reflection, we were able to meet that vision.

The 2024 AGM was held at Merrifield on the 20 February 2024 and was attended by 25 members. At the meeting, Verushka Packery announced that she would be stepping down as Chairperson and taking a break from serving on the SACEE Committee. Lisa Musto thanked Verushka for her many years of service and contributions.

To the principals, educators and SACEE School Reps, thank you so much for the role you have played this past year, and for your consistent support. We also wish to extend a special thank you to Gonubie Primary, George Randell Primary, Stirling Primary, Merrifield, Hudson Park Primary and Clarendon High who have willingly hosted and made the various events possible.

### NATIONAL LANGUAGE CHALLENGE AND PUZZLE PARADE

2024 saw yet another successful National Puzzle Parade and Language Challenge. This year saw a slight increase in the number of participants (in total 31 628, up from 29 132 in 2023), which is largely due to the increase in the number of high schools that participated. Participants came from all nine provinces, with the largest numbers from Eastern Cape (11 253), Gauteng (7 761), Western Cape (6 950) and Kwa-Zulu Natal (2 671). There were also 401 who took part online.



The SACEE National Language Challenge and Puzzle Parade serves as a valuable benchmark for schools to assess their students' performance. We hope you find the results informative and useful for benchmarking your school's English language proficiency against national standards and averages. For schools that have participated in previous years, these results will also help you track and measure your progress over time.

### NATIONAL SHORT STORY COMPETITION

We had a total of 667 entries in the 2024 100-Word Short Story Competition. There were 463 entries from Primary Schools and 204 High School entrants. A total of 17 entries received Gold and 64 received Silver Awards.

The Gold and Silver recipients' work was distinguished by their innovative perspectives and creative language. Their stories were coherent and well-executed, resulting in satisfying resolutions that left no doubt about the outcome. Of all the submissions, however, a significant portion were more descriptive than narrative, lacking the necessary conflict to qualify as short stories. Furthermore, authors will improve their chances of achieving an award by meticulously editing their work for punctuation and grammar errors, as these significantly impacted the judging process.

These learners deserve recognition for their impressive use of vocabulary, featuring the following words in their stories: *Effulgence* - Hollie McLean, Gr 7, Oakhill School; *Avaricious* - Bohlokwa Oliphant, Gr 9, Creston College; *Prognostication* - Mila Apostolo, Gr 9, CBC St John's; *Dolorous* - Isabella da Silva, Gr 11, The Mountain Cambridge School.

## Mid-Vaal Branch

Annastella Papageorgiou

This year the Junior Original Writing Competition for Primary Schools was led by Annastella Papageorgiou from Mondeor Primary School. She was assisted by Heather Tutton, Ella Leite, Talita Bedessy, Paula De Oliveira, and the Miss Earth SA Team.

Individual pieces of writing were submitted by ten schools. All entrants received a certificate of participation, merit, runner-up or winner. The floating trophy in memory of Mrs Beverly Liebenberg was awarded to the schools with the most winning pieces (Auckland Park Preparatory School and Mondeor Primary School) and a trophy was presented to the runner-up school (Roedean School) in honour of Dr Richard Hayward, a founder of this particular competition. The winning pieces are allocated points according to their level of achievement: three points for an overall win, two points for the winner slot and one point for each runner-up.

Each school is allowed to submit 30 entries at R20 per entry. If disadvantaged schools cannot afford to pay the fee, this monetary amount is waived. The competition was sponsored by The Glen Shopping Centre, Mondeor Primary School, The Miss Earth South Africa Programme and Generation Earth.



## Johannesburg Branch

**Warwick Brown**

### **Debating**

The debating programme has seen a stability of participation at just over 100 teams per section with enthusiastic participation from the district to provincial level. The Pretoria section has experienced a slow but steady revival after a period of malaise and its ongoing growth is anticipated. The finals for the League were held at St John's College and were recorded visually for the purposes of training. The standard of these debates was very high and it is gratifying to report that the participants went on to occupy a lot of the positions in the Gauteng Schools Debating teams which dominated all the other provinces at the National Schools Championships.

It is noted with regret that all efforts to extend the nature of the league to include electronic participation have failed; beyond technical challenges arising out of connectivity and access to data, there were too many instances of improper conduct during debates which proved impossible to eradicate.

A secondary concern regards the professionalism of some of the participating coaches. The increasing trend is for schools to employ university students as debating coaches and adjudicators in place of educators. These students also fill in as chaperones for the debaters. It is not uncommon for entire debate sessions to take place without the presence of more than a handful of educators and this means that there is no one to police the behaviour and participation of the debaters. A 'win-at-all costs' attitude has been inculcated by the students who are remunerated for their team's success, and this had led to the need for the creation of an ethical oversight committee as part of the overall adjudication panel to deal with the increasing number of complaints being lodged, as well as the drafting of a code of conduct for participation.

### **Creative Writing**

The creative writing project has once again experienced growth in the number of entrants and entries. The standard of submission is good and the winning pieces are truly impressive. Unfortunately, the advent of AI has led to more efforts having to be made to prevent cheating on the part of some candidates despite each school being asked to sign a declaration certifying the authenticity of the pieces.

### **Shakespeare Monologue Competition 2024**

The annual collaboration between National Children's Theatre and the South African Council for English Education continued in 2024. There were entries from as far afield as Polokwane! Eventually forty-six monologues, fourteen duologues and eleven scenes were entered in the junior, senior and adult sections over the four days of the festival, taken from more than twenty plays and the sonnets. Selections ranged from well-known plays like *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* to less popular plays such as *King Henry VI, Part 3* and *Pericles*.



## Pretoria Branch

**Amanda Swanepoel**

A new committee was elected for the SACEE Pretoria Branch at an AGM held on 9 June 2025. Amanda Swanepoel was elected as the new Chair.

### **Primary Schools**

A new project under the leadership of Amanda Swanepoel aimed at the primary schools in and around Pretoria has been launched. Being a pioneering project, the Spelling Bee for 2025 was by invitation, specifically aimed at Grade 6 & 7 learners for both English FAL and English HL. Corporate sponsors include Bidvest Waltons as well as Bargain Books, who will be doing marketing and book sales on the day of the event. Both Bidvest Waltons and Bargain Books have sponsored prizes for the Top Ten winners in each category i.e. English HL and English FAL. I may have more sponsors on board.

### **High Schools**

We will be resuscitating the Creative Writing competition.

### **General**

We will be contacting all the participants on the SACEE Whatsapp Group (27 in total) individually to ascertain a) whether they are indeed still active members of SACEE and if so b) what their expectations are of the branch and c) how they propose getting involved. Since none of the group members attended the AGM, one can assume that there is a void that needs to be addressed. If we can generate more involvement from the members, we should certainly be able to grow the branch exponentially.

