NEWS FROM:

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EMBARGOED until 21h00, Wednesday, 1 June 2011 (After prize winners are announced)

UCT Maths Competition 2011 champ achieves 100% for fifth year running

Grade 12 learner Sean Wentzel of Westerford High School to receive top honours at UCT Mathematics Competition prize giving tonight: 19h00, Baxter Theatre Concert Hall, Rondebosch

The top participant in the University of Cape Town Mathematics Competition has achieved perfect scores since he first began participating as a Grade 8 learner in 2007 – the first participant to achieve an unbroken record in the 35-year history of the competition.

Grade 12 learner Sean Wentzel of Westerford High School will be awarded first-place honours at the prize-giving ceremony beginning at 19h00 at the Baxter Theatre Concert Hall tonight. He will be joined at the podium by Grade 12 runner-up Ashraf Moolla of Rondebosch Boys' High School. Moolla tied with Wentzel in Grades 9 and 11 and was second in Grades 8, 10 and 12. They are the only two current participants who have made it to the competition's Top Ten every year throughout their five-year history with the UCT Mathematics Competition.

The award for Top Girl participant will go to Khadija Brey of Wynberg Girls' High School, who came second overall in the Grade 11 division. (She also won the Top Girl award in Grade 9.)

The competition on 14 April drew 6636 students, representing 134 Western Cape schools. Gold Awards and Casio watches or calculators will be presented to the top individuals and top pairs in each grade. The top student in each school who has not won a Gold Award will receive a book prize, donated by Oxford University Press.

Another noteworthy achievement of our Western Cape young mathematicians is their excellent record in the International Mathematical Olympiad. This year the event will be held in the Netherlands, and a team of six will represent South Africa. Of that team, four are from the Western Cape: Kira Düsterwald of Springfield Convent Senior School, Ashraf Moolla of Rondebosch Boys' High School, and Sean Wentzel and Robert Spencer of Westerford High School.

The competition papers are not like exam papers with a pass/fail mark. The questions start off very easy, then get mildly difficult and the last few are intentionally tough, with only a small proportion of contestants managing to crack them. It is rare for a contestant to score full marks. The papers are not predictable like school exams, and they always contain problems of an unfamiliar type. A lot of effort is made to ensure that the papers are interesting, and provide teachers with novel ideas for classroom discussion.

Maths proficiency as a door to university

UCT Mathematics Associate Professor Christopher Gilmour points out that there has been much publicity about the revised Senior Certificate maths curriculum and one-size-fits-all exam paper. "There is no doubt that the new matric single-grade maths papers have been seen to be significantly less challenging than the previous Higher Grade exams, and there has been substantial grade inflation," Gilmour said. "Everybody seems to get an A for Maths. This is worrying."

Gilmour said that universities are now co-operating to set a maths proficiency test, which has been piloted in the last couple of years and is this year being widely launched. This is not an entrance examination, but will be used as a placement test to determine which university maths courses are most appropriate for the new student. "So it will be a factor in getting into certain programmes which require maths," Gilmour said.

This proficiency test will be a three-hour paper of 50-odd problems. It will be targeted at those who plan to take courses at universities requiring maths, including science, commerce and engineering. "It will be more challenging and more discriminating than the Senior Certificate, but will be less predictable," he said. "No calculators will be allowed during this test. It is not giving away any secrets to say that this test will look more like a UCT Mathematics Competition paper than a Senior Certificate exam."

Background

The UCT Mathematics Competition, the university's biggest outreach project for schools, began in 1977 as a school-based event, organised by local teachers. In 1980 it moved to the UCT campus. This year is therefore its 35th, and its 32nd year at UCT. The competition took place this year on the evening of Thursday 14 April, with a record entry of 6700 participants from the 138 schools that entered. The competition is sponsored by Aurecon, Africa's largest consulting engineering company.

Gold Awards are awarded to the Top 10 places in each grade, and a School Prize is given to the top pupil in a school that entered at least 10 individuals but did not receive a Gold

Award. A total of 28 schools won Gold Awards in 2011, and 77 further schools qualified for School Prizes. So three-quarters of the schools that took part in the Competition this year will be represented by prize winners this evening. A School Prize Winner receives a book prize, donated by Oxford University Press.

The UCT Department of Mathematics puts out a magazine for high schools: *Mathematical Digest.*

It also organises the UCT Mathematics Circle on Wednesday afternoons: a fast-track enrichment programme, going beyond the horizon of the school curriculum. Maths Circles originated in Russia in the 1930s, with universities inviting local schools to take part in mathematics enrichment programmes. They are today springing up in many other places around the world. Recently the UCT Mathematics Circle achieved a measure of international success in an online international maths contest called The Purple Comet, in which 49 countries took part on 10 April 2011. A team of six UCT Mathematics Circle members took part in the "Mixed High School Teams" division and were ranked 15th out of 110 teams in this division. Overall, there were 907 high school teams, from 49 countries, and the UCT Maths Circle Team ranked 63rd.

Success in the UCT Mathematics Competition can be seen as the beginning of opportunities for further achievement in mathematics. Invitations were sent out to the top pupils to take part in the UCT Invitational Mathematics Challenge, which took place on 14 May. Even though there are no prizes for taking part in this event, it always gets a strong response.

One of the targets of the UCT programme looks ahead to the Interprovincial Mathematics Olympiad, held in September each year, and provincial teams for Western Province and Boland are selected from those identified as high fliers in the UCT Maths Competition. In last year's event, the Western Province Junior team came third out of 21 teams, while the Western Province Senior teams took first and second place out of 16 teams. The teams were coached by UCT students, themselves former winners in the UCT Mathematics Competition.

ENDS

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