



Benefits of Developing Vocational Excellence through Skills Competitions

Research Brief

September 2013

Professor Ken Mayhew, SKOPE, University of Oxford

Dr Susan James, SKOPE, University of Oxford

Dr Maia Chankseliani, SKOPE, University of Oxford

Dr Andrea Laczik, CEI, University of Warwick

The National Apprenticeship Service

The National Apprenticeship Service (NAS) champions apprenticeships throughout England. It works to develop partnerships with industry and education organisations to identify, develop and train, and support vocational talent through skills competitions. WorldSkills UK, housed within NAS, manages the local, regional and national competitions and selects and trains competitors for Team UK in preparation for the World Skills Competitions (WSC).

DuVE

NAS commissioned a suite of three projects, carried out by SKOPE, under the banner *Developing and Understanding Vocational Excellence (DuVE)*. The purpose of these projects is to better understand how participation in the WSC contributes to NAS's aim of promoting skills development and improving the skills base in the UK. This research brief describes work done within SKOPE and documented in *Benefits of Developing Vocational Excellence*, A report to the National Apprenticeship Service. Further information on the projects can be found at:

<http://vocationalexcellence.education.ox.ac.uk>

ox.ac.uk

Developing vocational excellence

International skills competitions started in post-WWII Europe. In 1950, the first *Skill Olympics* were held between Portugal and Spain. In 1953, five other European countries, including the UK, joined this competition. It has evolved into a global contest known as the World Skills Competition (WSC). Currently, the WSC involves young contestants from 53 countries, who gather every two years to compete publicly and demonstrate excellence in 46 skill areas.

The WSC is organised by WorldSkills International (WSI).ⁱ The WSC is recognised by many as the pinnacle of excellence in vocational education and training (VET). These competitions provide both a benchmark for high-performance and an objective way to assess vocational excellence. Young people, mostly aged 18-22, can participate. They undergo a selection process that begins with numerous regional and national skill competitions held throughout the UK. A shortlist of potential squad members is identified, and most are interviewed. The short-listed candidates participate in a residential induction programme where three to four events may be held over a few months. Advancement from the shortlist to the squad involves

Abstract

Skills competitions provide a showcase for demonstrating and rewarding vocational excellence. This project focuses on understanding the broader benefits of WorldSkills UK's participation in skills competitions. It identifies a range of benefits that accrue not only to the competitors but also to colleges, tutors and trainers, employers and industry and the wider society.

two weeks training, a 'pressure test' on a project (often from a previous WSC) benchmarked to the WSI standards, followed by a training programme of approximately six months (including further competitions) after which Team UK is selected. Team selection is a four-day competition event, *The Skills Show*, which replicates as much as possible the conditions of the WSC. After team selection the competitors continue with intensive skill development and training to build their skills to world-class standard and prepare for WSC.



Benefits

Benefits from training for and competing in skills competitions can accrue to the individual competitor or to other individuals and organisations with whom that competitor is associated at the time of competing or subsequently. Anecdotal evidence suggests a wide range of potential benefits. Some benefits of participating in a skills competition may be immediate, such as development of technical skills, whereas others may take some time to accumulate. Benefits may be short-term or long-lasting. The competitor could benefit his/her employer by being more productive and by potentially increasing the productivity of other workers. Some contestants become self-employed and thereby may create jobs and economic opportunities for others. Industries may realise benefits in terms of raised standards and an improved profile of the occupation and industry more broadly. The colleges may gain prestige, especially if their students win medals. Competitors can influence the aspirations and attitudes of friends and family. The wider public can gain a greater appreciation of high-quality vocational education by attending skill shows and competitions. This can improve the image and attractiveness of vocational education and apprenticeships. This research aimed to gather more systematic evidence on the wider benefits of skills competitions.

Participants

A number of stakeholders are involved in the WorldSkills UK programme, including the competitors, their training managers, employers, college tutors or university lecturers, and family members and friends. These stakeholders work individually and jointly to support the competitors throughout their journey to develop vocational excellence and to compete at the WSC.

The results presented in this study of the benefits of participation are based on 110 individual semi-structured interviews with 39 competitors and their 71 associates. The associates included 20 employers, 25 family members/friends, 14 college tutors, seven training managers and five professionals who had dual roles as both college tutors and training managers.

Of the 39 competitors interviewed, six competed in 2005, nine in 2007, ten in 2009, and 14 in 2011. Nine were gold medallists, one was a silver medallist, four were bronze medallists and sixteen were awarded a Medallion of Excellence (competitor achieves at least 500 points). The remaining nine competitors won neither a medal nor a medallion. Of

the competitors 18% are female, 81% are male and 57% of females are medallists. Overall, 62% percent of the interviewed competitors were apprentices.

Beneficiaries of skills competitions

The study identified a wide range of beneficiaries to WSC participation, including competitors, employers and industry, colleges, training managers and the wider public. In the words of one college tutor/training manager:

I think society benefits, I think that young people who are putting their time into something like this, rather than idling time away, benefit. I think the country benefits, because you have skilled young people out there, who know what quality looks like, who know how to talk to people ... it's a win/win situation all round. People who meet the past competitors and chat to them, they're very impressed with them ... They're very confident young people, they have a lot of self-esteem, and they're quite willing to put themselves out, they're quite willing to work long hours. And I believe that the whole country, everybody benefits.

Benefits for competitors

The WorldSkills experience helped competitors to develop technical skills and 'soft' skills that are crucial for their career progression. Most competitors claimed that the WorldSkills training helped them to achieve excellence in their respective professions, and to also acquire and develop communication and interpersonal skills that allowed them to present their expertise more effectively.

Accelerated technical skills development

A major benefit of the WSC is the development of technical skills through intense training. Skills are developed at a more rapid rate. One competitor reported:

My technical skills have obviously come on massively. Jumped me like three, four years above the people I went to college with.

Before the WSC training, most of the competitors were engaged in training that would allow them to meet their professional or industry standards. The WSC training brought them to a higher proficiency level because they had to compete to world-class, international standards: 'I just had to raise the standard and learn the techniques to bring it from the industry standard to the competition standard' (Competitor, 2005). The training helped competitors gain higher levels of accuracy and precision and more in-depth understanding of technical problems they faced.

Development of soft skills

The development of confidence and self-reflection, together with the skills of time management and communication were the most important soft skills developed through the WSC training process; however, communication skills were at the top of the list. Improved communication skills helped in their day-to-day work:

I can get my ideas across better, and I have no qualms with going to my manager's level and above, and saying 'well, I don't agree with that, I think you should look at it this way.' I think that's increased since the competition, because I queried so much during it. I did, I asked a lot of questions.

Career development

In the overwhelming majority of cases participation in the WSC resulted in considerable career benefits for competitors that would not have otherwise materialised or would have taken much longer to realise. Four main areas were identified: career progression; signalling value; reputation; and networking.

The signalling power of WSCs positively enhanced competitors' reputations, especially if they were medal winners. The majority of competitors who were not self-employed were promoted following their participation in the WSC. They reportedly would not have been promoted as quickly without the WorldSkills experience. Networking was also seen as important in terms of providing information on a variety of career options as well as in terms of getting jobs.

Development of entrepreneurship

Almost 25% of the competitors interviewed became self-employed. Freedom in professional decision-making was named as one of the primary reasons. The majority indicated that they would not have started their own businesses without the WorldSkills training, which gave them the necessary confidence, self-esteem and people skills. A few competitors also spoke of entrepreneurial opportunities with their current employers. For example, one competitor talked of spearheading a new section of the company with the ideas and skills he developed through WorldSkills UK.

Economic benefits

About 60% of competitors indicated some economic benefits related to their participation in the WSC, including: pay rises related to career progression at work; more work completed due to being more skilled after the competition; more clients served because the competitor attracted more clients; and

additional work such as teaching. In addition, the value to competitors is not always monetary:

She's appreciative of the opportunities it's opened for her. And those opportunities for all of them, aren't necessarily monetary value, but exposure and it's opened doors. (Employer, 2011)



Benefits for Employers and Industry

Employers highlighted seven main benefits associated with having a WorldSkills competitor. In addition, WSC participation is associated with benefits to industry

Employers enjoyed good publicity and higher prestige

Good publicity and higher prestige stemming from the WorldSkills experience seemed to be the main benefit of having 'a highly regarded' or 'the world's best' professional. Employers found it difficult to quantify the publicity benefits, but believed that 'there is certainly a reputation benefit' stemming from their support of a WSC competitor.

Employee performance was enhanced

Employers believed that the quality of the work delivered by their employee improved through WSC training. The competitors reportedly became more efficient, more accurate and faster. These improvements allowed one employer to bid for 'bigger and more interesting jobs' requiring high level skills, that the company 'wouldn't normally have been able to quote for without the knowledge that he's learnt, the skills that he's learnt.' Employers noted that competitors were now well-rounded, with excellent technical as well as interpersonal skills.

Employers gained satisfaction from being committed to skills development

Employers gained satisfaction from their commitment to the professional development of young people. They also expressed their belief in the power of competitions to help young people develop excellence. Some were driven by the desire to 'support [the competitor] all the way. I saw it as a once in a lifetime opportunity for him and I was there to encourage him all the way and ... offer support wherever I could assist with his training.' Many employers spoke of their commitment, and support was largely seen as altruistic.

Companies reaped teamwork-related benefits

The presence of the competitor influenced the drive and aspirations of colleagues, thereby benefitting the whole team. In some cases, a WSC competitor became a positive role model for other apprentices working at the company, who tried to compete with and learn from him. Some employers thought this atmosphere positively influenced the development of high standards of work within the team.

New techniques/products are introduced

Some employers mentioned that the competitor brought back new ideas and information from the

WSC training and experience. Some competitors learned new work-related skills that they showed to colleagues.

One employer talked about the new products and techniques that the WorldSkills competitor introduced to his business. For example, new product development, improvement of the image of final products, getting the product out quicker, and increasing commercial viability of products.

Companies attracted more business clients

About 10% of employers mentioned an increase in the number of clients due to employing a WSC competitor. Some said they also acquired a different type of customers. For example, an ex-employer said that the company attracted customers nationwide because of the competitor's links with a professional association, established through participation in the WSC.

Involvement in the WSC improved recruitment

Some employers noted that involvement in the WSC helped establish a reputation that the company cared for its employees. Even those employers who did not see significant benefits in supporting WorldSkills competitors thought that their involvement with the WSC helped to secure good employees, especially apprentices.

The WSC raised industry profiles

The majority of employers recognised industry benefits associated with the WSC. Some employers considered the WSC to be a celebration of different industries that highlighted industry-wide quality.

The training and publicity associated with the WSC raised industry profiles. The WSC spotlight directed attention to achievements in manual skills and traditional crafts, such as stonemasonry and furniture-making, thereby raising awareness of these professions.

The WSC raises industry standards

As the WSC brings together highly skilled professionals from all over the world, it is not surprising that it facilitated advances in industry standards. This occurred most prominently through participation of competitors. As noted by one employer, 'his standard is now our standard as a company.'

Training managers helped raise standards through their active involvement in determining international standards in all WorldSkills industries, and they did so in collaboration with employers in the various sectors.

Benefits for Colleges and College Tutors

FE tutors and colleges reaped a variety of benefits from being involved in the WSC. This involvement facilitated better teaching and learning, helped them attract more students, and had positive influences on the student body. The most significant benefit, however, was in enhancing the colleges' reputations.

Involvement in WSC enhanced colleges' reputations

Almost all the college tutors and competitors said the main benefit for FE colleges was in raising the profile of individual colleges.

Involvement in the WSC widened colleges' profiles and made outsiders more aware of what the college and the staff members do. Some FE colleges publicised their involvement in skills competitions at their welcome days and other events. Also, where a competitor was a medallist, colleges received considerable media attention that helped them promote their programmes.

Standards of teaching and learning improved

FE tutors reportedly developed new methods and strategies of teaching through their involvement in WorldSkills training. Many competitors also thought that their college tutors had picked up new training ideas to use with their students.

Participating FE tutors also learned about expensive state-of-the-art tools and equipment that is not affordable for many colleges. It also made them more eager to find ways of acquiring them.

More students attracted by WSC involvement

Some interviewees attributed an increase in new students to the WSC: 'The numbers that we've had generally since then have been larger, there's no question of a doubt about that' (College Tutor).

It was a big plus there, particularly when it came to recruitment, they [could] say, 'Well listen, in the vocational area, we actually have a student who's competed at WorldSkills level, that's the level of training you'll receive here. (Competitor, 2005)

College involvement in the WSC influenced their student body

The presence of a competitor at an FE college was seen as a very positive influence on other students. The competitor provided a comparison point for other students' own work: 'some of them think that you know their work is already a good standard until they see what's been done' (College Tutor). A Training Manager thought it helped to expand students' aspirations as they were inspired by a successful young person of the same age. When WorldSkills competitors provided demonstrations for students, the 'workshop was brought to a standstill,'

everyone wanted to be the same as the competitor, have the same standard' (CT).

Inspiration sometimes resulted in more effort from college students, some of whom reportedly started to spend more time practicing their skills and became more motivated. Staff members also became more motivated to encourage students to invest more time and energy into their skills development.

Benefits for Training Managers

Regardless of the serious time commitment required, most of the training managers (TMs) said they benefitted from the WSC. TMs named such benefits as: professional satisfaction, career benefits, awareness of the latest development in industry, improvement of teaching and training skills and learning from international exchanges.

TMs received professional satisfaction

The experience of serving as a WorldSkills TM was professionally satisfying to these experts. They enjoyed the process of training WorldSkills competitors in technical skills, and observing competitors' personal development, and formed strong bonds with competitors that lasted post-competition. They also enjoyed collaborating with other WorldSkills experts, as well as the recognition they received from their industries.

Some training managers received industry and wider recognition for training WorldSkills medallists. One of the interviewed TMs had been engaged with the WorldSkills for 11 years and three TMs were honoured with MBEs due in part to their participation in WSC.

The WSC brought career benefits to TMs

TMs saw concrete career benefits as a result of their involvement with the WorldSkills UK. 'I would say in a nutshell it's the best thing I ever did with my career,' said one TM with 16 years' experience.

TMs also noted the influence of their WorldSkills experiences on the development of their professional confidence: 'as soon as you get into that situation you become confident, and I know full well, I know what I can do, and I know what my limitations are' (TM). Improvements in management skills proved very useful for training managers' career progression, as did the development of prioritisation skills.

Awareness of the latest developments in industry

A majority of TMs confirmed that WorldSkills is a good learning experience not only for competitors but also for themselves: 'I certainly learnt an awful lot over the six years I was with it'. Another explained that there is usually a worry among lecturers that

they become 'old-fashioned and just churning out the same old thing.' She thought the WSC helped her 'to keep up to date, and I have to invest in my skills development.'

TMs also had opportunities to attend various events for professional development: 'What it does do, it ensures that you keep your own skills set at the cutting edge of industry practice'(TM).

Improvement of teaching and training skills

The WorldSkills experience helped TMs become better teachers. They found it easier to explain what needed to be done and also developed more patience in the process of training: 'I think I'm a better trainer than I ever would have been had I not been involved' (TM). Some TMs focused on the continuous development of their teaching and training skills as a requirement as well as a benefit of their role: 'that's the big thing about being a training manager' (TM).

Learning from international exchanges

The TM must collaborate with experts from different countries. It allows TMs:

to be able to almost compete really, at an international level. You are actually putting your mind against international experts, you will learn from international experts, you will get international experts who will learn from you. (TM)

The exchanges also afforded opportunities for TMs to learn about other education systems and sometimes apply that knowledge at home.

Some TMs mentioned networking benefits, which, for example, resulted in invitations to be a judge or expert at other countries' competitions.

Such benefits, however, may not be immediately recognisable. A TM put it well - although 'it doesn't happen over-night, it's an opportunity for training managers to develop themselves as people and educators.'

Wider potential benefit of skills competitions: making VET more attractive for youth

Skills competitions have the potential to promote vocational education and attract new talent to the industries. Skills competitions 'inspire youngsters to come and follow in the footsteps' (Competitor, 2005), and they have 'an impact in raising awareness for apprenticeships' (Competitor, 2011). Four themes related to the role of skills competitions in making VET more attractive emerged during our research:

- skills competitions presented an opportunity for

young people to learn about a variety of vocations;

- skills competitions helped create an understanding that acquiring vocational skills can lead to promising careers;
- skills competitions provided an opportunity for young people to see the level of excellence and success that can be achieved in vocational professions, and they can gain confidence in reaching similar success; and
- skills competitions helped improve the profile of selected industries and FE colleges, and have the potential to attract more talent to vocational education and apprenticeships.

However, to realise these benefits, more people need to know about the WSC and the national competitions that lead up to it: 'WorldSkills is probably the world's best kept secret' (Competitor, 2007). The majority of participants felt that more could be done to publicise the benefits or to engage the wider community in the skills competition experience.

Where next? Some recommendations

Many benefits of skills competitions were identified in this study. The participants strongly believed that such benefits should become more widespread:

I think that actually we're on the brink of making the most significant change and [that] is taking what we're learning from this programme and implementing it back into the standard educational system in the UK. I don't want just a handful of lucky people per year to benefit from what we're doing, I want to see thousands, tens of thousands across the UK gaining benefits from that and growing their potential to go out into the modern workplace by the skills that they can learn through implementing it into a national apprenticeship programme. (TM)

We conclude with some recommendations that emerged from the interviews with the various stakeholders for the National Apprenticeship Service to consider:

- Better publicise the WSC, as well as skills competitions in general, to capture a wider audience. This should be a sustained effort, not just around scheduled competitions;
- The continuing involvement of FE colleges often rests on the goodwill of tutors. Examine whether direct incentives to participating might widen the circle of colleges involved;
- Adjusting to life post-WSC is not a straightforward process and competitors could be better supported upon return from the WSC;

- Consider ways for employers to be more actively engaged during the WS competitors' training both in their own workplace but also during the competitors' off-site training. In this way communication between employers and TMs could be improved;
- Improve the lines of communication between competitors and TMs by setting clearer expectations of both parties in their WorldSkills UK training;
- Highlight the experience of female competitors in male-dominated fields to help promote female participation and interest in those fields.
- Use positive employer experiences as a marketing tool to increase employer involvement across skill areas.
- Improve selection procedures for skills competitions could by (a) inviting more young people to participate and (b) making more time available for training leading up to the WSC;
- Financial incentives for TMs need to be revisited to widen the pool of potential candidates; and
- Larger companies may be benefitting from supporting WorldSkills competitors more than smaller ones as the costs of supporting a competitor may be higher for smaller firms. Incentives for smaller firms to participate need to be revisited.

ⁱ WSI, 2009. WorldSkills International Vision and Mission.
http://www.worldskills.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=14&Itemid=350

