

Further education college participation in WorldSkills and other skills competitions

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DuVE

Find a Future commissioned a suite of six 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 WorldSkills Competition, through WorldSkills UK, contributes to Find a Future's aim of promoting skills development and improving the skills base in the UK. Further information on the projects can be found at:

www.vocationalexcellence.education.ox.ac.uk

Introduction

Since participation in skills competitions could potentially contribute to excellent teaching and learning at many further education (FE) colleges, it is important to understand how and why colleges become involved in skills competitions, the factors that influence involvement and the institutional benefits and costs of participation.

This research addressed four key questions:

1. How do FE colleges participate in skills competitions?
2. What are the factors that determine the varying levels of participation in skills competitions by FE colleges?
3. What are the benefits of participation in skills competitions for FE colleges?
4. What are the costs of participation in skills competitions for FE colleges?

Approach and methods

Twenty-four semi-structured interviews were conducted: six with FE college staff who were subject matter experts and 18 with college or associated staff members who varied in their skills competitions experience. The sample included nine principals; three vice or assistant principals; ten heads, directors or managers of particular subsections, departments or subsidiary organisations of the college; one person solely in charge of the college's competition involvement; and one lecturer. The sample included representatives from FE colleges in England (19 interviewees), Scotland (four interviewees) and Wales

Abstract

This project focused on the ways in which further education (FE) colleges participate in skills competitions, why participation might vary across colleges in the United Kingdom (UK), the institutional benefits and costs of being involved and how colleges fund their participation.

(one interviewee). Although the small sample size limits the generalisability of the findings, it provides a starting point for further investigation. Interviewees' responses were analysed and divided into four categories in line with the research questions.

Findings

How FE colleges participate in skills competitions

College involvement in skills competitions can include a wide range of activities which take place at multiple levels across different skill areas. Some examples reported by interviewees included:

- Tutors organising in-class competitions;
- Staff serving as regional representatives for particular skill areas;
- Competitions being run within individual colleges or a small group of local colleges;
- Registering students to visit or participate in local, regional, national and international competitions; and

- Hosting competitions, Vocational Masterclasses or Have a Go activities.

All of these activities, which are not necessarily directly linked to WorldSkills, run alongside those that are, such as college staff serving as WorldSkills champions or representatives, staff working as Training Managers or students participating in the selection processes for Squad and Team UK. Therefore, colleges participate in activities linked to a variety of different skills competitions, including but not limited to those related to WorldSkills.

Reasons for varying levels of participation amongst FE colleges

The contributory factors to the varying participation levels amongst FE colleges in this study can be divided into the following five categories:

1. Awareness of and exposure to competitions;
2. Reliance on enthusiasm and goodwill of staff;
3. Alignment with institutional priorities;
4. Availability of resources; and
5. Availability and accessibility of competitions.

The benefits to FE colleges and students of participating in skills competitions

The benefits to the FE colleges in this study included:

- Continuing Professional Development opportunities for teaching staff;
- Enhancing the quality of teaching and learning;
- Contributing to positive publicity and reputation;
- Accessing new equipment; and
- Developing relationships with employers.

Benefits to students as reported by interviewees included:

- Developing technical and soft skills, which potentially add to employability;
- Boosting motivation, morale and enthusiasm;
- Stretching students beyond the boundaries of their qualifications;
- Exposure to new ways of thinking about their subjects;
- Chances to network; and
- Opening doors to other opportunities.

The costs for FE colleges of participating in skills competitions

The costs involved in competitions-related activity reported by interviewees included: materials, transportation, accommodation, judges' expenses and staff time. Costs were frequently mentioned as a barrier to increasing a college's participation. However, many interviewees were not able to put a

figure on how much they spent on competition involvement per year. Responses ranged from a few hundred pounds to tens of thousands of pounds, depending upon the extent to which a college was involved. Three main models for funding competitions were identified:

1. Using money from the college's central budget (which is either allocated to departments or is allocated as a specific competitions fund);
2. Using sponsorship or funding from other external sources (including government funding); or
3. Some combination of these.

In most cases, colleges obtained funding from multiple sources to support their competitions work.

Recommendations

These findings led to several recommendations for Find a Future:

- Encourage senior leaders of colleges to attend competitions events in person. It might be particularly helpful to encourage senior leaders who are new to competitions and associated activities to attend with leaders from colleges who are highly involved.
- Communicate the potential benefits of competitions to colleges, in particular how involvement can be used as evidence of excellence for Ofsted inspections.
- Facilitate knowledge exchange between colleges regarding different ways of being involved in competitions as a way to support those colleges who are interested in becoming involved. The existing WorldSkills champions network could help facilitate this process.
- The WorldSkills champions network could also be used to provide colleges with clear examples of how competition participation can contribute to excellence in teaching and learning. Offering this information could stimulate greater interest in participation.
- Facilitate knowledge exchange between colleges to learn how other colleges fund their participation. This exchange would be particularly valuable to colleges just embarking on more competition engagement, as this challenge is one all colleges face regardless of their relative levels of involvement.

The full report for this project is available at: <http://vocationalexcellence.education.ox.ac.uk/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Project-4-Further-education-college-participation-in-WorldSkills-and-other-skills-competitions.pdf>