



# Benefits of Developing Vocational Excellence

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**Project 3**

**DuVE: Developing and understanding vocational excellence**

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## Preface

The *Developing and Understanding Vocational Excellence* (DuVE) suite of research projects focuses on WorldSkills competitions (WSC). This research is timely because the current vocational education system in the United Kingdom is struggling to meet the demands of the workforce and the needs of many young people. While problems with vocational education have been widely noted in research, few studies have focused on understanding vocational excellence. Gaining this understanding is the primary aim of the DuVE projects.

WorldSkills competitions are held every two years and are organised by WorldSkills International (WSI) as part of their mission to 'raise the profile and recognition of skilled people, and show how important skills are in achieving economic growth and personal success' (WSI, 2015). Approximately 1200 competitors from 59 countries participated in WorldSkills São Paulo 2015 in Brazil.

The UK started to compete in WSC in 1953 and hosted competitions in Glasgow in 1965, in Birmingham in 1989 and in London in 2011. In 1990 UK Skills was established as an independent charity to organise and support UK participation in WSC. Renamed WorldSkills UK in 2011, it is now part of Find a Future, a new organisation which brings together skills and careers initiatives from across the UK.

The WSC is recognised by many as the pinnacle of excellence in vocational education and training (VET). The Centre on Skills, Knowledge and Organisational Performance (SKOPE) has been researching WSC since 2007 to understand better how vocational excellence is developed through competition and to inform the development of Squad and Team UK. Between 2007 and 2009, two small projects investigated the individual characteristics of the competitors and their workplace learning environments and covered the competition cycles of WSC 2009 and 2011. The overarching questions addressed were:

- What are the characteristics of individuals who excel?
- What kinds of support enable the development of high-level vocational skills?
- How can vocational education be structured to aim not simply for adequate standards of achievement but for high achievement that reflects world class standards?
- Can broader societal benefits to developing vocational excellence be identified?

Following on from these two initial studies, the first phase of DuVE consisted of three projects conducted between 2011 and 2013, incorporating the competition cycle leading up to WorldSkills Leipzig 2013:

- Project 1: What Contributes to Vocational Excellence? A study of the characteristics of WorldSkills UK participants for WorldSkills Leipzig 2013
- Project 2: Learning Environments to Develop Vocational Excellence
- Project 3: Benefits of Developing Vocational Excellence

Find a Future then funded Phase 2, consisting of three follow-on projects and three new DuVE projects. The six projects are:

- Project 1: Modelling the Characteristics of Vocational Excellence
- Project 2: Learning Environments to Develop Vocational Excellence
- Project 3: Benefits of Developing Vocational Excellence
- Project 4: Further Education College Participation in WorldSkills and other Skills Competitions
- Project 5: WorldSkills UK Competitors and Entrepreneurship
- Project 6: Training Managers: Benefits from and Barriers to WorldSkills UK Participation

Taken together, this suite of six DuVE projects forms one of the five legacy projects (funded by the National Apprenticeship Service and now Find a Future), which are intended to use evidence-based research to further develop high quality WorldSkills practice.

Reports from the previous projects can be found on the DuVE website: <http://vocationalexcellence.education.ox.ac.uk/publications/reports/>.

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## List of Abbreviations

CT - College Tutor

DuVE - Developing and Understanding Vocational Excellence

FE - Further Education

MoE - Medallion of Excellence

MoVE - Modelling Vocational Excellence

SKOPE - A research centre on Skills, Knowledge and Organisational Performance

TM - Training Manager

VET - Vocational Education and Training

WSA - WorldSkills Australia

WSC - WorldSkills Competition

WSI - WorldSkills International

## Executive summary

This project examined the benefits of skills competitions accruing to WorldSkills competitors, their employers and sectors, and wider society. The benefits of skills competitions take time to accrue; therefore, the report does not examine the experiences of the most recent team that represented the UK in São Paulo in August 2015. The results presented in this report are based on 33 individual semi-structured interviews with 14 competitors who competed at WorldSkills Leipzig 2013 and their 19 associates. The latter included 8 employers and 11 family members/friends. The results are not necessarily representative of all stakeholders, but are suggestive of the array of benefits that WSC participation can produce. The main beneficiaries of WorldSkills Competitions are the competitors themselves. The majority of competitors reported enhanced confidence, and development of communication skills and time management capabilities. Career development and progression opportunities, particularly those related to self-employment, networking and professional reputation, were also identified as important benefits.

For employers and industry, the main benefits of supporting the WSC related to exposure to new techniques or products, teamwork-related benefits, enhanced employee performance, good publicity and higher prestige, attracting more business clients and some improvements in recruiting new talent.

Finally, the study suggests that skills competitions can contribute to improving the attractiveness of VET by raising awareness about vocational occupations and helping young people understand that the vocational route can lead to a good career.

The study yields several issues for Find a Future to consider:

- Employers gave many examples of positive experiences. These could be used to form case studies to show the benefits for other non-participating employers.
- Improving the publicity for not only WorldSkills competitions but national, regional and local competitions. This could enhance the benefits of WorldSkills for all.
- Find a Future is working hard to promote the visits of school children to the Skills Show in order to raise awareness of vocational occupations. Encouraging schools to visit their local FE college when local and regional competitions are occurring could also help to raise awareness not only amongst school children but also amongst their teachers and parents.

- Find a Future could provide a platform for WS competitors to speak about their experiences to young people.

## 1 Introduction

International skills competitions started in post-WWII Europe. In 1950 the first *Skill Olympics* were held between Portugal and Spain, involving 12 competitors. This competition has evolved into a global contest known as the WorldSkills Competition (WSC) held every two years. At WorldSkills Sao Paulo 2015, contestants from 59 countries competed in 49 skill areas.

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. They also provide an opportunity to better understand the factors that contribute to the development of vocational skills to a high standard.

In 1990 UK Skills was established as an independent charity to organise and support UK participation in WSC. Renamed WorldSkills UK in 2011, it is now part of Find a Future, an organisation which brings together skills and careers initiatives from across the UK.<sup>1</sup> Young people, mostly aged 18-22,<sup>2</sup> compete in the skills competitions. They undergo a selection process that begins with numerous regional and national competitions held throughout the UK. Competitors for these UK-based competitions may be Further Education college students or apprentices or employees in enterprises that recognise the benefits of skills competitions. Competitors are also identified through the National Apprenticeship Awards, Awarding Bodies, City & Guilds Awards of Excellence, Sector and Industry Awards and through Sector Skills Councils. The short-listed candidates attend a residential induction programme. Advancement from the shortlist to the squad involves a 'pressure test'. Candidates receive two weeks training, followed by a pressure test benchmarked to the WorldSkills International standards for facilities, test projects (often from a previous WSI competition), marking schemes and rigour. After participating in a training programme over approximately six months (including further competitions), Team UK is selected from the squad members. Team selection is a four-day competition event replicating as much as possible the conditions of a WorldSkills

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<sup>1</sup> Find a Future is responsible for WorldSkills UK skills competitions, The Skills Show and The Skills Show Experience. More information on Find a Future can be found at <http://www.findafuture.org.uk>.

<sup>2</sup> The upper age limit to compete at a WSC is 22; exceptions are: Information Network Cabling, Manufacturing Team Challenge, Mechatronics, and Aircraft Maintenance where the age limit is 25 years.

Competition. After team selection, the competitors continue with intensive skill development and training<sup>3</sup> to build their skills to world-class standard.

This report follows on from an earlier DuVE study (Mayhew, James, Chankseliani, & Laczik, 2013) and focuses on understanding the wider benefits from participating in a WSC. Benefits can accrue to the individual competitor or to other individuals and organisations associated with competitors. The competitor could benefit his/her employer by being more productive and by potentially increasing the productivity of other workers. Some competitors may become self-employed and in the process create jobs and economic opportunities for others. Industries may see the benefits in terms of higher standards and improved profile. The impact of competing may change not just the aspirations and attitudes of the contestants but also those of friends and family. There may also be wider societal benefits related to making vocational education and apprenticeships more attractive to young people and encouraging them to choose a vocational route into the labour market.

This report is organised as follows. Section 2 provides details about the project, explains the methodology used and the participants involved in this qualitative study. Section 3 provides context for the findings through a literature review on the benefits of skills competitions. Section 4 presents findings.

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<sup>3</sup> Some members of Team UK also compete in EuroSkills as part of their training: <http://www.euroskills.org>



## 2 Approach and methods

This chapter provides an overview of the research methodology, details on the study participants, the data analysis process, and limitations of the design.

### 2.1 Participants

The results presented in this report are based on semi-structured interviews with 14 WorldSkills competitors and 19 of their associates. The associates included 8 employers and 11 family members/friends. Of the family members/friends interviewed, the majority were WS competitors' parents, and two were competitors' friends. Two companion studies investigated the benefits of the WorldSkills competition for FE colleges (Allen, James, & Mayhew, 2015) and for training managers (Wilde, James, & Mayhew, 2015).

To recruit study participants, we contacted all 31 competitors who represented the UK at the WorldSkills competition in Leipzig 2013. Fourteen out of 31 competitors agreed to participate in the study. We recruited family members/friends and employers through the interviewed competitors. The interviews took place between April 2014 and June 2015.

Among the participants, one was a gold medallist, one a silver medallist, and nine were awarded a Medallion of Excellence. Four out of fourteen competitors were female. Nine had apprenticeship experience.

Separate semi-structured schedules were prepared with slightly different foci for competitors, their employers, and family members/friends. We conducted the interview with the competitor first. During the interviews we asked competitors to nominate a family member or friend and to give us the details of their employer. Appendix 1 provides the interview schedule used for the competitors. On average, face-to-face interviews with competitors lasted for an hour and telephone interviews with their associates lasted for approximately 45 minutes. Interviews with competitors were preceded by a telephone conversation or an email communication to introduce the research study. All interviews were recorded and fully transcribed.

The study participants differed in their employment status. Three were self-employed, eight worked with the same employer from their time of the WorldSkills Competition. One worked for a different employer. The interviewees represented the following skills categories and current occupations:

Skills category	Current Occupation
Architectural stonemasonry	Banker mason
Beauty therapy	Beauty therapist
Cabinetmaking	Cabinetmaker
Carpentry	Carpenter
Cooking	Junior sous chef
Floristry	Florist
Hairdressing	Senior Stylist
Landscape gardening	Landscape gardener
Manufacturing team challenge	Design engineer
Manufacturing team challenge	Electrical engineer
Manufacturing team challenge	Field service engineer
Refrigeration and air conditioning	Head engineer
Sheet metal technology	Press break operator
Wall and floor tiling	Tiler

We obtained informed consent from each participant prior to audio-recording his or her interviews. Following conditions of confidentiality, none of the participants are named in the report and we have made the necessary precautions to avoid identification of individuals by inference.

## 2.2 Analysis

The transcribed interview data were analysed in several stages. Using NVivo software, narratives were divided into the three main benefit categories: benefits for competitors, benefits for employers and wider benefits for society. Then we systematically categorised the interview texts in relation to each main thematic category, established sub-categories, and summarised findings by interviewee and theme.

## 2.3 Limitations

There are two important study limitations. First, the study relies on self-reported data. Second, the study gathers data from a small number of competitors and their associates. The findings cannot necessarily be generalised to the population of WorldSkills UK 2013 competitors or to WSC competitors in general.

### 3 What do we know about the benefits of skills competitions?

While WSI has a long history of promoting and staging competitions and European Commission policy encourages skills competitions as a way to enhance the image of vocational education (see, for example, Bruges Communiqué, 2010), there has been little research on the benefits of skills competitions. Four studies from the DuVE suite of research projects (Allen et al., 2015; Chankseliani, James, & Mayhew, 2015; Mayhew et al., 2013; Wilde et al., 2015) have addressed this topic.

This study follows on from an initial investigation on the benefits of skills competitions (Mayhew et al., 2013) which indicated that the main beneficiaries of WorldSkills Competitions are the competitors themselves. Benefits included access to training that resulted in greater technical skill development; enhanced development of communication skills and time management capabilities; and development of self-reflection skills and confidence. Career development and progression opportunities, particularly self-employment and the possibility to pass on their knowledge and skills, were also identified as important benefits of participating in WSC. Benefits for employers and their sector included publicity and enhanced prestige; improved performance by the employee (competitor); employer satisfaction from being committed to skills development; teamwork-related benefits; the introduction of new techniques/products; more clients; improved recruitment; a better industry profile; and improved industry standards.

Beyond individual groups of stakeholders, the evidence pointed to four overarching benefits of skills competitions for the vocational education and training system:

- Presented an opportunity for young people to learn about a variety of vocations;
- Helped to create an understanding that acquiring vocational skills can lead to promising careers;
- Provided an opportunity for young people to see the level of excellence and success that could be achieved in vocational occupations and the confidence that accompanies this;
- Helped improve the profile of selected industries and FE colleges, and potentially attracted more talent to vocational education and apprenticeships (Mayhew et al., 2013).

A separate study on FE college participation in skills competitions (Allen et al., 2015) confirmed some of the findings of Mayhew et al. (2013) regarding the benefits of FE college participation. These were: 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.

A further study on the benefits from, and barriers to, WorldSkills participation for training managers (Wilde et al., 2015) also confirmed some of the findings of Mayhew et al. (2013) regarding the benefits of being involved in skills competitions. A number of benefits of participation for TMs were identified and included: enhancing and maintaining cutting edge skills and knowledge through participation in WorldSkills; and networking with other professionals in their own and other fields.

The present study contributes to the earlier work by adding information from the 2013 competitors and their associates about benefits of competitions. The next section provides the findings from our interviews.

## **4 Beneficiaries of benefits of skills competitions**

Interviewees acknowledged that the central beneficiaries of the WSC were the competitors themselves. However, colleges, employers and industries were also considered to be beneficiaries. In addition, some interviewees recognised the benefits of the WSC for wider society and argued that skills competitions could be used to raise attractiveness of VET. This chapter is organised in three subsections examining benefits for competitors, their employers and industry, and the wider society.

### **4.1 Benefits for competitors**

Study participants talked about the influence of the WS experience on advancing competitors' technical and social skills, as well as their career opportunities. Moreover some of the participants held the view that WSC had a broader, holistic impact on their character development.

#### **4.1.1 Technical skills development**

The interviews with the Team UK 2013 and their associates confirmed the previous findings (Mayhew et al., 2013) that the development of technical skills is a major benefit stemming from the WorldSkills Competition.

Prior to the WorldSkills training, most of the competitors we interviewed had received on- and off-the-job training that allowed them to meet their professional or industry standards. That was a good foundation for advancing their skills in one-to-one 'specialised training with experts from all over the country.' Through WorldSkills training 'your technical training goes up, and your technical ability goes up massively,' noted a competitor.

When asked what differentiated WorldSkills training from their apprenticeship training, some mentioned a focus on the attention to detail, which was 'a lot more in-depth knowledge you have compared to your apprenticeship.' Others referred to the fault finding aspect of technical skills development: 'there was a lot of focus on finding faults which can only help me in the future.' The development of attention to detail and fault finding techniques were facilitated by one-to-one training that WorldSkills offered. Yet others talked about the creative side of WorldSkills training that allowed the competitors to develop expertise in unusual techniques that could be introduced into their everyday practice: 'training is very basic in college, [...] whereas [WorldSkills is] very avant-garde and very creative. So, those different techniques you learn to create these weird and wonderful styles, you can adapt to everyday [industry name].'

Learning new techniques, which helped raise work standards, was one of the main benefits of training for WorldSkills for a number of competitors. The standards were also improved through the refinement of existing techniques and the drive to achieve outstanding results. Many competitors noted that they became perfectionists striving for a higher standard:

The main thing is the competition makes you a perfectionist, [...] that bar raises to a higher standard. I wouldn't have that without the competition. The competition is so specific and there's so much training to be the best.

Some competitors benefited from being exposed to different international practices in their skill category. As one competitor noted: 'the biggest benefit in the competition I was told was that my work didn't look English. [...] swapping and changing, all the different cultures I picked up on, from all these different people I spoke to and learnt from.'

In most of the cases, the technical skills improvement was recognised and highly appreciated by employers. Although employers noted that time-away for training caused some inconvenience at the workplace, they all recognised that it was worthwhile in terms of developing competitors' technical skills. When asked how WS training differed from the workplace learning they provided, one of the employers explained that the competitor received training in different aspects of his trade from the most qualified people in the field. The employer referred to him as 'a jack of all trades where he knew a little bit about everything.'

Many competitors were promoted because of the improvement of their skills. 'All the training that you get with WorldSkills is one of the reasons I have been promoted because you do everything from obviously your technical skills,' explained a competitor. However, there were also exceptions: 'I think I definitely produce work faster and to a better standard which is great for myself but not really appreciated by my employers.'

#### **4.1.2. Training and competition provided opportunities to develop non-technical skills**

Other, non-technical, skills are also important in the labour market. Confirming our earlier findings (Mayhew et al., 2013), this study showed that the WSC training had positive benefits in developing some important skills: communication, confidence and time management.

##### **4.1.2.1 Communication skills improved**

The skill of 'just being able to talk to people' seemed to be very important for the competitors and most talked about the role of WorldSkills in developing that skill. The training process involved a lot of communication with a variety of stakeholders, including training managers, FE college tutors, employers, representatives of organisations that competitors visited for specialised training, fellow

team members, WorldSkills alumni, media, government officials, various dignitaries, and the wider public.

Competitors who worked at big companies found it particularly useful to improve communication with their superiors: 'I'm on speaking terms with the general manager whereas before I probably never spoke to him. It makes you broaden your horizons with people at work.' Another competitor noted:

We [had] to talk to managers and present what we'd been doing through the WorldSkills journey. That was a good year and a half of constant interaction with the managers above us. That set the ball rolling and you've just got to gain from it.

Others mentioned the benefits of improved communication with their clients. Being able to initiate small talk seemed to have influenced business considerably. Following his WorldSkills experiences, one competitor reported becoming much more confident and communicating with all clients with great ease: 'having that confidence [...] goes a long way with customers because if they see somebody is not very confident, they will be a little bit wary of them doing the job.'

Quite a few employers and family members noted that competitors gained a lot of confidence and improved their presentation skills through WorldSkills training:

She can hold a conversation with any type of peer or professional, or whatever; a professional; whether it be a client, a young student, the Prime Minister. She's had to deal with people like that; Princess Beatrice and Eugenie, film stars; she really, really has become; it's made her the lady that she is (Family member).

Advancement of communication skills went hand in hand with the development of confidence.

#### *4.1.2.2 WSC helped to develop confidence*

Most of the interviewees felt they gained a lot in terms of confidence building through WorldSkills training:

Confidence grows from every situation you're in, even outside the WorldSkills in work. I've had a girlfriend for five years and the difference from when we first met, she's seen me through all the WorldSkills process and beyond and she says the confidence and change in your personality is massive, you can't describe it. Coming from a shy little boy to someone who's done quite a lot for a 22 year old.

I am more confident in my ability and I know I can do it. If I can stand up on a world stage I can do anything.

Even those competitors who felt they were quite confident prior to their involvement with WorldSkills, recognized confidence-building in others:

'A lot of people were very shy, didn't really interact with others. By the end of the WorldSkills they were completely different people, more confident, could get up in front of a group and talk to people, believed in themselves more.'

Confidence helped competitors at their workplace when they had to deal with customers:

I personally find when you're working for a customer, they look at you and if there's a slight nervousness in your voice, they feel worried. So you've got to fill them with confidence all the time and make sure what you're doing is correct and you are going to do it to a success rate.

Another benefit for the workplace related to the confidence to work independently. A competitor explained:

I'd do a job and then I would be unsure and [...] I would go and ask somebody to give me a bit of feedback. Now I, kind of, look at it and think if it is right, I'll go with it, and if it's not, I'll fix it and then go with it, so yes, it's just the confidence to work independently.

Employers and family members also recognised growing confidence in competitors. One family member stated:

She would not hesitate now to go and stand up in front of somebody, or in front of an audience and do a speech, or walk into a room, which she may well have been quite insecure about, when she started all of this.

#### *4.1.2.3 Time management skills are acquired*

A few competitors mentioned that WorldSkills improved their time management. They said they used to have difficulties in breaking down big tasks into smaller tasks and concentrating on those one by one. Encouraged by training managers, some competitors realised that time management is a skill that can be developed with practice:

My training manager said to me you need to concentrate. And, it's something you can't teach, you have to teach yourself, and it was only through practice, time tasks, being quite stern on myself that I learnt it, and it was only through repetition and experience.

Improved skills of time management helped to increase efficiency of performance at the WSC as well at the workplace:

I've cut down a lot on my timing, so I can do a lot more clients. [...] in competition you do it so often to train, so now going back into the [workplace], even though everything is to that high standard, I can do it a lot, lot quicker, so I probably do a lot more clients in the same clients that I was working.

Competitors said they worked faster to produce output of the required quality. Efficiency, as one of the entrepreneurial competitors explained, meant not wasting time and materials:

Making sure that the quality matters where it needs to matter, and where it's not seen, doesn't matter, where you can cut corners, if that makes sense. [...] You don't have to make



everything perfectly. I know this table isn't made perfectly, but you never see [that part of] the table. That's where you make the money.

The competition marking scheme also taught competitors to allocate specific time periods to different tasks:

I get six marks for that and I get two marks for that. I've got half an hour left; I'll do the six marks one first, and I'll do that [one mark at] the very end, if I'm out of time, it doesn't matter. Working like that [...] teaches you a lot.

Many employers also indicated that throughout the process of training they noticed how competitors improved their time management skills:

When she was first starting out doing [...] perfectly it did take a bit more time, the more she learnt it at the WorldSkills and perfected her skills there then her timing got a lot better.

### **4.1.3 Participation in the WSC benefited career development**

Competitors enjoyed significant career benefits that were linked to their experiences of participating in the WSC. Four main areas were identified: networking, career progression, reputation, and self-employment.

#### ***4.1.3.1 More extensive networking opportunities emerged***

All interviewees talked with great passion about the excitement of meeting new people, and building and retaining relationships through the WorldSkills experience. They also talked about the comfort of sharing the competition experience with others and referred to WorldSkills networks as 'a little family.'

Competitors identified five networks as the most important: professional networks, customer networks, WorldSkills community networks, family networks, and friendship networks (which sometimes overlapped with WorldSkills community networks).<sup>4</sup> WorldSkills competitors recognised professional networks as the most important for their professional success, followed by family networks. Those who have benefitted from WS networks talked about different opportunities that stemmed from the contacts they made during WorldSkills. For example, interviewees referred to their links with fellow competitors that would allow them to deliver specific business services in

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<sup>4</sup> Family networks included competitors' immediate and extended family members. Professional networks included colleagues from current and past workplace(s), managers and leaders in the industry, contacts acquired through professional association membership and students/apprentices with whom WorldSkills competitors worked. Friends were competitors' close associates who did not practise the same profession and were not family members. Customer networks included the clients with whom the respondent had worked. WorldSkills community networks included training managers, other competitors, and professionals that the respondents met through WorldSkills.

partnership and even start new ventures together. Yet others used WorldSkills networks to get involved in international consultancy projects promoting skills training in different countries.

TMs seemed to be a particularly useful source of advice for a few competitors who called them once in a while to share their career updates and ask for their opinion on a variety of job-related issues:

I still keep in contact with him and talk to him quite a lot. For example, organising this training thing, he's at the end of the phone, and luckily he's retired now so I can get him quite easily. So, he's been there for me a lot throughout the whole journey really, and he knows me well enough now that I can ask him anything.

#### *4.1.3.2 Competitors' career progression benefited from WSC*

WorldSkills experience accelerated career progression for the majority of the interviewed competitors:

'Without the training I wouldn't be in the position I am now. I'm up the ladder quite quickly because I'm still only 22 and one of the youngest members of the team and hold such a high role already.'

All employers interviewed confirmed the importance of WS experience for competitors' careers. 'They have got that on their CV for the rest of their life that they participated in this. I think it is a fantastic competition,' explained an employer. Another employer who supported a number of WS competitors indicated that they now held 'bigger and better roles in the organisation, which [was] fantastic to see.'

Accelerated career progression involved expansion of work duties and responsibilities and often doing more managerial work. It made them 'a lot higher' at their workplace:

All the training that you get with WorldSkills is one of the reasons I have been promoted because you do everything from obviously your technical skills but then obviously you do a lot of team work and support and mentoring as well amongst WorldSkills. So it's all come part and parcel with me getting this promotion which is the biggest change for me.

Such changes were sometimes accompanied by pay rises. One of the competitors had received two increases to her pay since her participation in the WSC:

[The employer was] very proud of everything I'd achieved, it was great. My wage was matched with the other two [employees], and since they've left, because I've got more responsibility, I've been given another pay rise.

Others talked about progressing from the shop floor to high-skilled technical work during their apprenticeship: 'there's a lot more qualification needed to be in the office and with the training I received, it's lifted my level of knowledge and skills up so the office staff thought they could utilise these skills that I'd gained.'

However, some of the competitors did not seem to benefit career-wise as much as others. There were generally fewer opportunities for progression within small companies run by their founders and thus offered no managerial positions.

#### ***4.1.3.3 Competitors' professional reputation improved***

Participation in WSC acts as a positive signal for the competitors' reputation. According to one competitor's associate: 'WorldSkills creates a name for somebody. People therefore see them in a different manner, so they are more qualified than somebody else.'

WorldSkills was perceived as 'something that most people can never put on their CV' (Family member). This led to either improved career opportunities and/or improved client base for the firms where the competitors worked.

A few competitors who received a promotion at work indicated that their career progress possibly would have taken longer without WorldSkills. The WSC experience 'set them apart from everyone else' and made the employers realise that 'these lads [were] quite special.' The signalling benefits for career progression and new employment opportunities may differ by sector however. For example, in hairdressing, it was argued, few people know about WorldSkills, and therefore the signalling might not be that effective. In car painting, it is more likely that WorldSkills participation improves career opportunities as employers 'send people there to spot people.' The same benefit was noted for cooking: 'you can go and work in a top restaurant if you've done World Skills.'

WorldSkills can signal excellence to clients: 'we've got a lot of clients that are actually travelling to us through, kind of, knowing, obviously, I've been a WorldSkills competitor, so it's definitely raised the [firm] as well.'

## **4.2 Benefits for employers and industry**

Competitors and employers interviewed for this study noted a number of benefits from their support of competitors: competitors exposed their employers to new techniques or products; companies reaped teamwork-related benefits; employers observed enhanced employee performance; employers enjoyed good publicity and higher prestige; some companies attracted more business clients; and some firms reported on or hoped for improvements in recruitment.

### **4.2.1 Competitors exposed their employers to new techniques or products**

Employers and competitors provided a number of examples that demonstrate WS competitors' contributions to successful performance of the companies where they were employed, including:

changing suppliers, trying new raw materials, offering new products to customers, working to change the attitude of customers to existing or new products, trying new techniques, experimenting with different ways of packaging products, attracting more corporate/bigger clients, initiating participation in industry-specific shows and fairs, designing and building new machines that were cheaper, quicker or lighter than the existing ones. Such activities helped small as well as large businesses, service and creative industries as well as relatively traditional skill areas.

Competitors sometimes learned about new products and services during their WS training trips abroad and shared that information with their employers:

I'm more likely to approach my employer and say, I've heard about this product, is there any way we can try it, get some training on it, and go from there. For example, we've got one next week, we've got this new product coming out, so I looked into how we can get it, what we can do, how it will benefit the [company], and we've got some training on it next Tuesday, so that will be good. So, I'm definitely more confident looking into different things.

Exposure to the new techniques that competitors acquired via WS training incentivised some employers (small-firm owners) to take up more training. 'When I finished the World Skills my boss actually enrolled herself on a level four course, because she wanted to start learning again.'

#### **4.2.2 Companies reaped teamwork-related benefits**

For the most part, working in a team with a WS competitor had a positive influence on work colleagues. The presence of a WS competitor had some spill-over effects on other employees in terms of sharing technical skills and knowledge and advancing the skills of others, improving team work ethic, and professionally inspiring colleagues.

Quite a few competitors participated in training other staff members. Such an opportunity allowed competitors 'to become much more important within the workshop, because [they] could nurture the other young guys coming through the workshop' (Employer). At another workplace the employer did all the basic training with new employees and then asked the WS competitor to do some advanced training with younger members of staff.

Some employers observed that the presence of a WS competitor improved the organisation of the workplace and work ethic in their firm: 'all of my guys now have copied the way they [WS competitors] do things, they clear up after themselves, so, yes, it's absolutely imperative that [others] have taken on board the efficiency that the WorldSkills has brought with these guys' (Employer). However, not all teams were positive about learning from WS competitors. One employer who arranged a few company-wide events to recognise the success of WS competitors employed at the company had received the feedback from other employees through a survey that

'other employees out there felt that they were a bit in the shade.'

WS competitors were seen as inspirational to other team members: 'inspiring people to do the same and follow the same process, it could give other people a bit more of a drive to do well as well' (Competitor). In addition, the opportunity to work with a WS competitor incentivised others to perform better and be more ambitious:

Seeing [WS competitors] move up influences the other apprentices to think when I get to that stage, I want to do that, I want to be part of the WorldSkills and move into a job role that's higher than the shop floor or whatever ambitions they've got. I know it'd make it easier to do that in the future if they did attend the WorldSkills. (Competitor)

#### **4.2.3 Employers observed enhanced employee performance**

Both competitors and employers recognised that the WS experience considerably enhanced employee performance at workplace:

They appreciate that we're an asset to the company in the sense that we can achieve great results wherever we go and they obviously think we're an asset in the sense that they can rely or give us some responsibility and we'll be all right with that. (Competitor).

An employer in Construction and Building Technology who supported two WS competitors explained how he felt they differed from other employees:

Some guys are stuck in their ways and that's the only way it'll work, but those two guys because of their experience and of working under time pressures could think laterally and come up with new ideas of doing things that were quicker, more efficient, and I think that, again, is one of those benefits of the World Skills, it is working outside the box when you're under pressure. If something goes wrong you can't let your head go down you've just got to grapple with it, deal with it and get on with it and put it right, and that's a very important part of what we do, and those two had it in bucket loads. (Employer).

Independent work ethic was one aspect of enhanced productivity that a few employers mentioned:

I could let him go to a job [entirely on his own] and be confident enough to do that, whereas beforehand he probably wouldn't have done without me overlooking every step (Employer).

#### **4.2.4 Employers enjoyed good publicity and higher prestige**

Almost all competitors and some employers indicated that their participation in WS definitely benefited firms by increasing the visibility of their business. 'We've won the Queen's Award and we've got guys going to the WorldSkills, you know. We're a credible company that has a lot to offer.'

Competitors noted how publicity benefitted the business:

It's the publicity mainly, I mean, we're very well known for our competitions, and being involved with World Skills. For example, the gold medals that are on the wall in the reception.

Obviously people know how much training we have to do to get there. So, you can see customers sort of, wow, medals everywhere, it gives the business, publicises the business as well as you personally. Because, I think wherever I won [the medal] it was [the company name], and people go, where's that, and you tend to quite a lot of publicity really (Competitor).

A few employers used social media to promote the competitors they supported:

A lot of our business we do through Facebook and Twitter. [The employer] was using the social media to promote [me], saying [the competitor] is off here and doing this today, and keep all the clients up to date (Competitor).

Finally, some participants linked better publicity with improving a company's financial standing: 'It was great publicity for the company so it was a commercial gain for this place as well' (Competitor).

#### **4.2.5 Some companies attracted more business clients**

A third of the employers/competitors interviewed talked about WS competitors' role in increasing the number of clients and thus contributing to increasing the profit margin at their companies:

[My employer] noticed a big effect in the [firm]. We've got a lot of clients that are actually travelling to us through, kind of, knowing, obviously, I've been a WorldSkills competitor, so it's definitely raised the salon as well. (Competitor).

Because of the skills that [competitor] learnt, everything is done to perfection and a very high standard, so she has a very big client base; [competitor] is fully booked every single day because she is so good. Her skills are perfected and then obviously the media coverage as well and what we could then promote her as the winner of the world skills, so it brought clients to us (Employer).

Yet another competitor mentioned that the number of clients increased so dramatically that the company was not able to accommodate the demand:

We've got more clients coming in, and now there's not enough staff to accommodate. We're always fully booked a month in advance, so we need that extra premises to then be able to get more staff (Competitor).

More than half of the employers interviewed did not notice a change in customers but said that the presence of WS competitors helped them maintain that client base, especially in times of economic unease.

#### **4.2.6 Some firms reported on, or hoped for, improvements in recruitment**

Supporting WS competitors might impact some companies' chances of becoming more attractive to young people:

They can attract new employees. Speaking for my friends, I've got friends who seriously want to get into [this company], seeing what they do for us, the amount of money they've put into

the WorldSkills is quite something. It's like a short-term loan, the company will see it back within the next so many years. (Competitor)

In the engineering sector, where the interviewees believed there was a large shortfall in the supply of engineers between 26 and 44 year-old, the competitors and employees claimed that skills competitions could carry some benefits in terms of improving recruitment. Furthermore, it was through showing the commitment to skills development that some employers hoped to improve their recruitment and attract more talented young people:

I always think of recruitment as a two-way process and obviously you're assessing those coming in. But they're also assessing you and if you're an apprentice how [you are] going to get developed, what's the commitment to [your] training going to be. (Employer).

However, not all employers saw a clear link between supporting WS and seeing improvements in recruitment. One of them explained that they were always looking for new talent but they had not witnessed a dramatic increase in the number of young people who approached them: 'which is quite weird, you would have thought with the reputation we have within the industry, that there would be more people wanting to come and work for us' (Employer). This could be linked to poor publicity of WorldSkills that was mentioned by many interviewees in both phases of the research project.

#### **4.2.7 WSC benefits sectors**

Skills competitions may contribute to raising sector profiles by showcasing what each sector is about:

'Think getting it out there on the bigger circuit most definitely helps the industry' (Employer).

They go out into the wider world and tell people about our industry and that's very, very important because we need as much publicity as we can get, and for people to understand what we do to allow us to actually run successful businesses.' (Employer).

WS training was viewed as investment in people which could only be positive: 'If we're going to beat our competition and we're going to stay here and be as strong as we want to be for the next 50 years, then it's all in our people. And that'll keep the Chinese away and everybody else' (Employer). Some interviewees argued that considering the benefits for individuals and industries, the expenditure on WS was justified: 'There's an awful lot of [government] money spent on [WSC]. In my opinion, it's money well spent and it does so much especially for the building trades', said one of the competitors. A number of competitors, collectively, would raise industry standards, some participants argued:

The training side of things gets everybody to a higher standard and then, when they take that standard back to the workplace and then help other people to raise their game as well, I think it just benefits individual companies. Collectively then, it will benefit the industry as a whole

anyway, so yes, I think it's little gains and then it kind of grows into something a bit bigger. (Competitor).

However, not all respondents agreed that the benefits for companies translated into the benefits for the sector concerned; a competitor talked about the competitors of the business where he worked and indicated that 'the companies want the best, that's one thing. For the wider industry, I'm not sure.' A competitor explains how the impact may occur:

It's certainly going to influence the industry, not on a massive scale because it's only so many competitors that get the chance to compete but the skills they take from the competition, you've got to rehearse them and have it down to a fine art, they go into the industry and the industry sees the benefit of their skills, it's definitely going to raise the industry standards. (Competitor)

Employers and competitors also noted that WS needed a higher marketing profile in order to translate the success of individuals into wider industry-level benefits: 'They are flying the flag for themselves, it's a big thing [but] as far as the industry itself goes, WorldSkill is not a benefit because basically nobody knows about it' (Employer).

### **4.3 Wider potential benefit of skills competitions: making VET more attractive for young people**

Skills competitions could potentially contribute to improving the attractiveness of VET by raising awareness about vocational occupations and helping young people understand that the vocational route can lead to a rewarding career. The interviewees were asked to comment on these issues and this section captures their views.

#### **4.3.1 Skills competitions can raise awareness about vocational occupations**

Making career choice is not easy. Almost all interviewees agreed that events like the WSC that showcase different occupations and young people who excel in those occupations can be beneficial:

'I'm sure [WS] does inspire them. Young people find it hard to know what to do, when they get to that age. When they see the ones that have done well, they are bound to think, "Maybe I could do that"' (Parent).

'You can't imagine until you go to those competitions and see the skill that is involved in them. You think a joiner is just a joiner, but when you go there, the skill they have and see that in action, it's amazing' (Parent).

If you are in college or trying to choose on a career, being able to see the best of what is there entails you to want to do it more. For example, people watch football, they see the best footballers in the world, they want to be a footballer. If you are watching telly and you are watching the best chefs compete then you want to be a chef and someone making some incredible food and people are impressed by it. It makes people want to do it. (Friend)



There were quite a few examples of WS competitors' experiences influencing their friends, colleagues, employers and family members in terms of professional choices and professional development. For example, a competitor's sibling who was dyslexic and did not do well at school was inspired by witnessing the WSC and decided to start skills training. Some friends of competitors saw an alternative, vocational route having witnessed the training of the WS competitor: 'Originally I was going to go to University, but I decided that I would prefer to get a trade than go to University and not get a job at the end of it' (Friend). The person was confident he made the right decision.

There was a case when a person working with a WS competitor was motivated to develop his skills further and for this purpose he started an apprenticeship and planned to train for and participate in WS. The young person learned about the competitor and his experiences through family connections. Another competitor shared the story of a colleague who was very much inspired by the training the competitor was undertaking. Although the colleague was beyond the age limit to enter the WSC, she did enter the UK heat and won a medal: 'She never knew anything about competitions before coming here, and obviously she wasn't employed or trained by us, so that was quite nice for her' (Competitor).

A parent of a competitor explained how her daughter's experience helped her change other people's opinions about vocational education and training. Raising awareness, it was argued, had to be done at a grassroots level, by having more regional competitions that would allow reaching out to more young people and involving career advisors:

The competitions are a showcase for the skill, but actually it's much more grassroots than that. The careers advisors who came and looked at our workshops probably didn't know construction was available as a career effectively. They see it as something people might fall into if there's nothing else to do. There's no encouragement. (Employer)

#### **4.3.2 Skills competitions can help young people understand that the vocational route can lead to a rewarding career**

Some interviewees were of the opinion that vocational education is not always regarded as an effective pathway toward a career. They felt that skills competitions played a role in changing this perception:

Some people overlook [skill area]. It's looked at as it's not a great career path to take. You be a lawyer or you be a doctor or do things that are perceived to be much better than other careers. [Skill area] is sometimes just pushed to the back. WorldSkills gets it out there that you can be successful at something out of the normal (Competitor)

A lot of people nowadays think you have to go to university and go and do a degree, where, actually, it's proved that us as competitors have been just as successful, or even more

successful than we would if we'd gone to university. So if that was publicised more that this is an alternative option, it may make people realise that a lot of people who go to university, do their degree but then end up going back to college because they didn't enjoy it, or they just wanted to go to uni, but, actually, then they've had to take that different path to then pick up a skill to then go out into the industry.

Furthermore, the experiences of WS competitors demonstrated what a young person could achieve by investing a lot of time and effort in training:

All my friends, it makes them realise what you can achieve. Anyone can do it if they want to. Just because I'm the guy from [an area in the UK] who's the best in the world. You wouldn't believe that I could do it. I didn't believe that I did it. I didn't believe that I could do it. I just did it to spread the message of, they can do it if they want to, if they work hard enough.

One of the parents admitted she used to assume that only the academic route leads to a rewarding career: 'I wanted [my son] to do a job using his brain, but [he] wanted to do a job using his hands. I thought if [he] did something using his hands, it was a waste of his brain.' She admitted later in the conversation that her assumption changed following her son's WS experience: 'I couldn't be any prouder of [him] than what I am, I really couldn't. I think what he has achieved, these last few years, in his job, and his life, he is buying his first house and he has got a car. I am so proud of him, I am brimming with pride, I am.' (Parent).

Finally, despite the fact that the majority of interviewees argued that WS has the potential to influence the vocational-academic divide by incentivising and inspiring young people to start or excel in vocational skills in their own right, they were still not optimistic that it would ever be achieved in this country:

People ought to know more about those skills. I think schools should push college and vocational skills more. I know that's not going to happen, because I work in the education system, but I do think that they should be pushing more for students to take up these sorts of courses. (Parent)

#### **4.3.3 Lack of publicity – the main impediment to wider benefits**

The importance of better publicity emerged as a theme in each and every interview we conducted. The absolute majority of the interviewees pointed to the lack of publicity as the main obstacle to enhancing the benefits of the WSC. 'WorldSkills is quite under-publicised, it needs to be publicised a lot more,' said one competitor. 'WorldSkills is not promoted at all, said another and noted that without such promotion the impact of the competition on industries or wider society would remain negligible:

'The more people who know about it, the stronger the competition will be'. (Competitor)

Better publicity, interviewees maintained, needed to involve more colleges and schools attending skills competitions. Also, 'past competitors going out and actually speaking to them about their experience, and seeing the photos and images of what it actually is' would help in promoting the WSC (Competitor). 'I think you just need to inspire the next generation of students or young people by promoting it,' said a competitor.

## 5 Concluding remarks

Most of the participants of the study agreed that participation in WS does benefit different actors: individual competitors; their employers; FE colleges; and immediate associates of competitors, mainly their colleagues at workplace. The data obtained from the Leipzig 2013 Team confirmed the main findings of the earlier phase of this study that involved the competitors and their associates from the UK teams that competed in 2005, 2007, 2009, and 2011 (Mayhew et al., 2013). Those interviewed for Phase I of the study had between 1.5 to 7.5 years for the benefits to accrue, while the 2013 team members had approximately seven months to two years. As such a few of the differences in the benefits between the 2013 team members and those who competed in the earlier years could be attributed to the difference in the interval between the WSC participation and the interview.

The overwhelming majority of the participants in both phases of Project 3 on *Benefits of Developing Vocational Excellence* (overall 176 interviewees) argued that a systematic strategy of publicity was required in order to promote WorldSkills in the UK. The existing ad-hoc efforts, some of the employers argued, did not justify the public spending on skills competitions, and did not allow for WorldSkills experiences to translate into wider benefits for the society. One employer noted, 'It is the Oxbridge of training, because you have got the pinnacle. You've got the best employers with the best employees where craft's concerned. And then it should come filtering down through everyone' (Employer). Another employer believed that the WSC should be 'the pinnacle of something else that's happening', there needs to be more information available to the potential beneficiaries because at the moment, he said, 'no one knows they're happening. Well that's not going to benefit anyone, is it?'

Despite some scepticism about the WS publicity campaign, competitors and family members were extremely excited to share their WS experiences. The majority of employers were very proud to have supported competitors through their journeys of developing vocational excellence:

To do the World Skills event and to be successful and win it, not everybody can do it, it's a very specialist field and you have to be exceptional, and those two guys were exceptional and are exceptional. I mean they're probably the best two guys that I've ever had come through the workshop. (Employer).

## 6 Recommendations

The study yields several issues for Find a Future to consider:

- Employers gave many examples of positive experiences. These could be used to form case studies to show the benefits for other non-participating employers.
- Improving the publicity for not only WorldSkills competitions but national, regional and local competitions. This could enhance the benefits of WorldSkills for all.
- Find a Future is working hard to promote the visits of school children to the Skills Show in order to raise awareness of vocational occupations. Encouraging schools to visit their local FE college when local and regional competitions are occurring could also help to raise awareness not only amongst school children but also amongst their teachers and parents.
- Find a Future could provide a platform for WS competitors to speak about their experiences to young people.

## **7. Acknowledgements**

We would like to thank the participants in this study for their time in explaining to us their experience of being involved in WorldSkills.

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## Appendix 1. WS competitor interview schedule

### Current employment

1. What does your current job involve?
2. Your employer is X, what is the company's business?
3. Do you enjoy your job at this company? Why/why not?
4. Have you changed your job or your employer since your participation at WSC?
- 5a. If with same employer: did your participation result in any benefits—for example were you given greater responsibility or discretion in your job? Did you get any special recognition? Did you receive a pay rise as a result of your participation in WSC?
- 5b. If changed employer or changed job with same employer, or became self-employed ask): Were these changes at all related to your participation in WSC (e.g. got a job offer after participation, got a promotion at same place of employment; realised you could do better for yourself). Ask for examples.
- 6a. If with different employer: why did you leave? Probe: better job/ better pay/faster promotion
- 6b. If self-employed: did you become self-employed before or after WSC? Probe: why, what prompted this, e.g. entrepreneurial flair, saw others do it.
- 6c. If self-employed before WSC: Do you get more work as a result of participating in WSC? Can you charge more?
- 6d. If not in any employment, why?

### Benefits to the individual

7. Why did you compete in WSC? What did you hope to gain from the experience?
8. How did the training and participation in the WSC influence the development of your technical skills? Please give examples.
9. How did the training and participation in the WSC develop your social skills, such as communication and public speaking, time management, self-reflection and confidence? Please give examples. Did the WSC help you develop any other skills? If yes, how?
10. How did the training and participation in the WSC influence your career in terms of career progression, signalling benefits, professional reputation and networking? Please give examples. Did the WSC influence your career in any other way? If yes, how?
11. To summarise the benefits of WSC for you as an individual, what would you consider to be the main short-term and long-term benefits?



### **Benefits to employer and other colleagues**

12. How did your employer benefit from your participation in the WSC? Probe: better publicity and higher prestige, enhanced individual performance, satisfaction from being committed to skills development, teamwork benefits, new techniques/products, more clients, and recruitment benefits. Please give examples.
13. Did your training and participation in the WSC benefit your employer in any other way? If yes, how? Please give examples.

### **Benefits to College/University and other students**

14. How did your college/university benefit from your participation in the WSC ? Prove: better teaching and learning, helped them attract more students, had positive influences on existing students, enhanced college reputation.
15. Did your training and participation in the WSC benefit your college/university in any other way? If yes, how? Please give examples.

### **Benefits to family, friends, other associates**

16. Do you think your training and participation in the WSC impact on your immediate or extended family? Please give examples for each benefit.
17. Do you think your training and participation in the WSC impact on your friends? Please give examples for each benefit.
18. Do you think your training and participation in the WSC impact on your neighbours / acquaintances? Please give examples for each benefit.

### **Benefits to the industry**

19. How do you think the industry/sector may benefit from skills competitions? Probe: raising industry profile, improving industry standards, attracting new talent. Please give examples relevant to your industry/sector.

### **Benefits to Society**

20. Do you think the WSC, or skills competitions in general, have any effect on wider society? Probe and ask for examples:
  - raising attractiveness of vocational education and training, opportunity for young people to learn about a variety of vocations;
  - creating an understanding that acquiring vocational skills can lead to promising careers;

- 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;
- improving the profile of selected industries and FE colleges;
- attracting more talent to vocational education and apprenticeships.

21. In terms of society, who do you think are the most important beneficiaries of WSC?

22. Have you given any talks/presentations/lectures at schools, colleges, universities, local communities, companies, professional associations or other groups on skills training, competitions or any other topic related to your profession? If so, do you think these have influenced the audiences that you talked to? How?

### **Summary**

Ask for examples here – e.g. greater advertising/promotion of skills competitions or of individual successes.

23. What needs to be done to enhance the benefits of skills competitions for employers and industry/sector?

24. What needs to be done to enhance the benefits of skills competitions for the wider society?

25. Is there anything else you would like to add regarding the benefits of skills competitions?