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A guide to embedding competitions into the curriculum

How to initiate, develop and sustain skills competition activity



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Introduction

WorldSkills UK competitions play a vital role in teaching and learning environments by complementing different teaching approaches and bringing learning to life.

They challenge, motivate, inspire and raise the skills and knowledge of learners so that they get the most out of their learning experience. Equally important, WorldSkills UK competition activities contribute to young people's career decisions and preparation for employment.

Competition activity develops professional and technical skills to high levels of excellence and enhances capacity in attributes valued by employers such as teamwork, problem solving, time management, judgment and working under pressure. Competitions are unique in developing the skills that employers need within their workplace. This is because of the real-life environment in which these skills are developed. This mix of technical, employability and personal skills is a key strength of the competition model.

By building skills competitions into the core teaching and learning curriculum, providers of vocational education and training can ensure their learners and staff aspire to and showcase excellence in their skill.

From raising self-esteem through to providing opportunities to develop skill levels further and benchmark training delivery, skills competitions really can drive up the quality and profile of vocational education.

This guide is designed to provide information and tools for all providers to help them embed WorldSkills UK Competition activity within their teaching and learning programmes.

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1. Benefits

Skills competition activities can benefit everyone – learners, tutors, providers and employers – by raising standards, improving outcomes and enhancing engagement

Learners

- Improves personal, technical and employability skills
- More likely to complete their courses and achieve qualification goals
- Has a positive effect on their ambition and aspirations for their future career
- Inspires them to complete higher-level training

Tutors & trainers

- Greater scope for creativity in teaching, training and learning techniques
- Opportunities to benchmark and learn from others
- Great for continuing professional development – extending pedagogical skills and knowledge
- Personal recognition and development – opportunities to become competition judges, coaches and experts

Colleges & training providers

- Supports the move from competence to excellence
- Provides evidence for inspections
- Delivering skills that underpin economic competitiveness
- National and international benchmarking and experience

“The WorldSkills UK competitions are a significant motivator for my staff and students”

Curriculum Leader

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2. Myth busters

Staff will be involved in a lot of extra work

- Having competition activity within the curriculum and its delivery is not necessarily about doing anything extra. Many aspects of the curriculum can be delivered or enhanced by internal and external competitions.
- Setting up an assignment or activity may take some time initially but it may make the job easier in the longer term as learners' motivation and skills increase. Support from colleagues with competition experience helps to reduce the set-up time.

Some colleges have set aside resources for an Innovation Fund, as a key driver of curriculum and competition development. Another college has a competitions manager, who drives the competitions across the college, and competition coordinators for every curriculum area. These staff have reduced teaching loads.

Some learners are uncomfortable about competing

- Tutors need to be sensitive to learners who initially find competitions uncomfortable and be ready to provide support. The learners should be introduced to the concept gradually and taught to cope with the pressure and learn from their performance. Classroom competitions help hugely with confidence building.
- A Level 3 BTEC IT Systems Support learner who entered a WorldSkills UK competition said "I used to be shy and didn't talk a lot. Now I feel free to talk to new people."

One college's approach to assessing a classroom hairdressing competition was to start with anonymous peer assessment. This was done in a non-threatening way with students writing their score of another student's work on a piece of paper. These were collated by the tutor who used them as a prompt for discussion rather than judgement.

Competitions cost a lot: this is spending money on the few

- Informal use of competition activity as a teaching, training and learning tool should not require extra budget and can benefit all learners.
- Competition activity at higher levels does require more coaching, practice and equipment but some providers may fund this partly from existing resources if they judge it to be a good way of furthering the skills of learners and success rates. Others proactively seek extra sources of funding or support, notably from employers.

A lecturer said "One of the businesses with whom I have already forged strong working relationships now works very closely with us. The company also provides free training to the learners and me and has also donated thousands of pounds worth of equipment and consumables"

Competitions are elitist and damaging

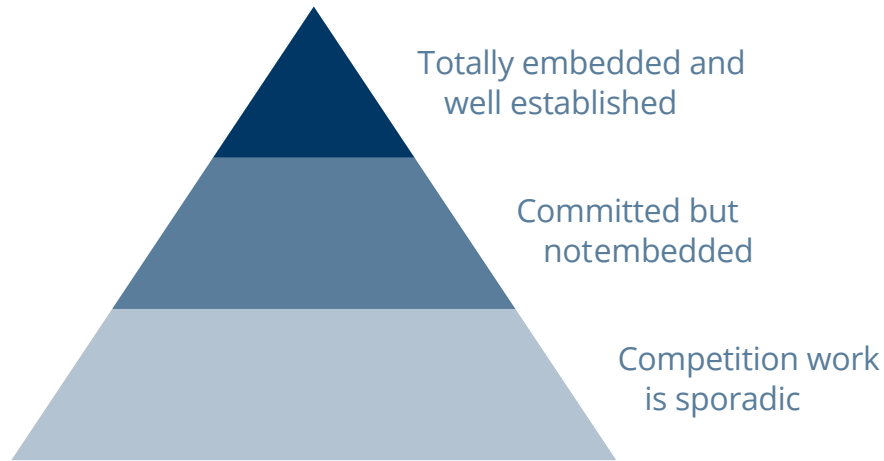
- In informal and formal competition activity tutors need to develop learners' capacity to learn from their mistakes and critically evaluate what they need to do to improve and succeed and competitions can help them to do this
- Many colleges start running local competitions for foundation, level 1 and 2 learners to help them gain confidence and encourage competition activity.

A floristry learner said "I suppose people not involved in the competition might get upset or jealous, but I've never found this. Most people are happy and say I have inspired them and helped to give them more confidence"

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3. Features

Key features of three models of embedding competitions found in further education and skills provider organisations.



Examples of the types of activity in each feature:

Totally embedded and well established

- There is leadership and active commitment from the chief executive/principal and governors.
- Performance in competitions is used to inform the organisation's benchmarking processes.
- Quality improvement and self-assessment processes explicitly include competition activity.
- Competition activity is inclusive and is a feature of all learning programmes for young people.
- Commitment to skills competition activity is visible in mission and strategic plan, all relevant policy documents, schemes of work and marketing activity.
- Competition activity is planned, and formal competition work is aligned with major competition cycles, such as WorldSkills.

Committed but not embedded

- Commitment from principal/chief executive is periodic.
- There is commitment to competition work in some policy documents, but it does not run through all documentation.
- Big wins are celebrated but opportunities for publicity are not capitalised on.
- Evidence of the impact of competition activity on learner performance is not routinely collected.
- There is some scepticism among senior team and staff who find it hard to prioritise competition activity.
- There is a small budget for competition activity but the system for gaining access to it is not clear.

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Competition work is sporadic

- Competitions are brought to the attention of the principal/ chief executive just before a major competition or if a team or individual has been successful.
- Activity is run by enthusiasts who spot likely winners and coach them exclusively in their own time.
- Competition commitments often get in the way of routine duties.
- There is no budget for competition activity and funds are sought on a 'special case' basis.
- There is little dissemination of the practice developed through competition activity.
- When an enthusiastic member of staff leaves all competition activity in that area ceases.

4. Going about it

Stages in embedding competition activity



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Developing commitment

Before embarking on the development of a policy and strategy for introducing competitions, the chief executive, other senior managers and governors need to articulate their vision, to assess the added value this will bring.

Preparatory research may involve the following:

1. Visit a big competition – such as the national skills competition finals at WorldSkillsUK LIVE.
2. Visit several colleges that have embraced competitions and are embedding them as part of routine delivery in apprenticeships and technical learning. Check the evidence – some colleges are collecting data on retention and success rates.
3. Talk to employer that have supported apprentices in competitions and to their employees who might be involved about the benefits and issues.
4. Talk to learners and staff who have been involved in competitions.
5. Get together with colleagues to discuss your vision and how competitions can play a vital part in its achievement.
6. Revisit your mission and strategy, and consult governors, employers and staff on how to make explicit reference to embedding competition in them.
7. Communicate your commitment to staff and students – initially and then reiterate frequently.

Top Tip: Seeing and feeling the benefits of competition activity at first hand is the starting point in understanding what is best for the college

Getting started

Once you are convinced that competitive activities can enhance your education and training provision, you should assess your starting point and begin strategic planning to introduce skills competition activity.

To set the ball rolling:

1. Establish a baseline for competition activity within your organisation to identify gaps and from which to measure progress (such as number of areas involved in skills and number of students involved)
2. Review curriculum plans and identify areas of the curriculum in which you may want to develop competition activity. If you have not previously been involved in competitions, you may want to choose one curriculum area, develop a competition around it, use it as a pilot, deliver it, evaluate, refine and roll out to other curriculum areas.
3. Identify relevant competitions to match curriculum offer and gaps. You may even want to focus on certain ages or curriculum areas that link to local/regional priorities for skills and employment
4. Develop a strategic framework for your competition strategy. This should be a long-term strategy that starts from your corporate plan and links into plans for quality improvement, staff development and marketing.
5. Train key staff up on how to deliver competitions effectively so they in turn can support colleagues to develop and run competitions. Best practice is to appoint a skills competition coordinator for your organisation, or, make it a part of someone's existing role.
6. Secure the resources needed to make it happen, with a clear budget and staffing commitment, perhaps through a central competitions fund, or through ring-fenced delegated budgets.
7. Allocate strategic responsibility to a committed member of the SMT to lead the operational implementation.

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8. Establish competition recording systems and regular reporting procedures that provide clear criteria for recording progress and achievement.

Top Tip: Identify a key member of staff who can be your competition lead for your organisation to co-ordinate competition activity and provide advice and guidance to staff on how to develop and run competitions

Creating momentum

1. Once the plans are in place, a budget allocated, coordinating support arranged and competition activity endorsed by senior managers, the process of embedding and expanding activity can be stepped up.
2. Celebrate participation and achievement as much as possible – the successes of staff as well as competitors. Use every opportunity, formal and informal, when this can happen.
3. Involve SLT and governors: report progress on the strategy regularly and engage their support in recognising staff and learners' commitment and achievements.
4. Support apprentices as fully as possible to take part in competitions. Their successes may well attract more apprentices into that curriculum area.
5. Enhance your employer engagement strategy by involving them in competitions and
6. Encourage participation by their apprentices. Some, particularly SMEs, may be reluctant initially, but many have been won over by potential marketing and business development opportunities. They also benefit from the extra skills training their apprentices receive.
7. Employers will often be pleased to judge internal competitions and to coach competitors. Some may also sponsor competitions

or supply specialist equipment, facilities or work experience.

8. Give staff recognition for their contributions and support for competition work by ensuring the work is incorporated into their normal duties and rewarded accordingly.
9. Initiate or participate in competitions with other providers and local schools.
10. Involve occupational experts. They bring an external perspective that learners respect and are especially valuable for coaching and judging.
11. Incorporate into the assessment process to anchor competitions into the curriculum.

Top Tip: Involve stakeholders such as awarding bodies and employers and request their support in judging, offering prizes and placement opportunities

Embedding an ethos

Competition activity generates a more holistic approach to learning by providing enrichment and cross-departmental collaboration.

1. Encourage staff to develop their skills and to apply to become competition judges, specialist training experts or coaches. These roles can complement existing positions and enhance your organisation's reputation.
2. Align competition cycles to individual learning plans and schemes of work. Most competitions have a regular cycle and once staff are familiar with this, they can often easily build it into work plans.
3. Develop and agree benchmarks for competition engagement and impact (such as proportion of students participating and course completion rates).
4. Consider hosting competitions. Initially these may be with local partners such as colleges and other training providers; later you might offer to host regional

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competition events such as qualifying heats. These all provide excellent opportunities for staff and learners to participate or observe competitions.

5. Continue to send staff and learners to participate and observe competitions whenever possible, including at the annual WSUK LIVE event.
6. Consider encouraging an 'identity' for the learners engaged in competition. Some colleges have created competition squads who sport badges or special shirts to wear during competition.
7. Create "Skills Champions" from students who have achieved success in competitions and can act as peer role models.

Top Tip: Include competition activities in curriculum planning, lesson plans, schemes of work and end point assessments

Going further

1. Competitions offer opportunities to challenge staff and learners to aspire to do the best they can. Once staff have 'got it' and have seen the benefits of competitions for their learners, they will not turn back. Suggestions for further embedding and expanding competitive activities include:
 2. Take full advantage of competition activities and successes for marketing purposes. Competitions showcase the organisation at its best and joint marketing with employers can be beneficial for both and help to cement relationships
 3. Display posters of competition successes and products generated as outcomes of competition in public areas.
 4. Systematically collect data on competition participation and how it links to the retention, achievement and progression of participants.
 5. Encourage staff to engage in CPD to develop innovative practice in preparation of learners for competition.
 6. Develop innovative practice using competition activities for ongoing improvements to the quality of teaching and learning.
 7. Share best practice with other providers and learn from other providers.
 8. Build into strategic plans with local partners.

Top Tip: Be on the look-out for external sources of funding support that can help competition development

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5. Case Studies

Qualification alignment

Gower College Swansea is dedicated to helping learners achieve their world-class standards through WorldSkills UK Competitions. Nicola Grant-Rees, Hospitality Demonstrator and WorldSkills UK Instructor, uses competitions to ensure her Restaurant Services students get the best start in their careers.

Embedding WorldSkills UK competitions into the day-to-day syllabus is vital for Nicola and her students. Aligning competition standards to students' courses helps them develop their skills to a world-class level, without adding unrealistic pressure.

"My Hospitality and Catering students really benefit from bringing WorldSkills UK competitions into the classroom," she explains. "The competition specification is very well aligned to the qualification standard, so adding elements from the competition supports what they're learning day-to-day."

Creating alignment

Beginning with Level 1 students, Nicola introduces competition activity early on in the course to add an element of fun to the experience. From Level 1 to 3, learners benefit from the chance to learn new high-level skills and challenge themselves.

This includes putting on in-classroom competitions using the WorldSkills UK National Competition brief – from cocktails to fine dining service – to help learners get a taste of where their skills could take them.

"We can tell that WorldSkills UK Competitions were designed with our industry in mind," Nicola says. "I can choose modules that align with what I'm teaching so that students get extra information but without adding too much to their workload."

Student designed competitions

Gower College Swansea has also begun a peer-led model for promoting the electronic engineering competition and engaging students in the ideas surrounding WorldSkills. In 2019 the WorldSkills UK national finalists ran a competition for 48 other students in the college, including:

- Planning the event
- Writing the competition
- Creating a WSUK standard marking scheme
- Judging the competition in WSUK style marking teams
- Running all aspects of the competition including technical support

Having students lead the design and management of within-college competitions can create capacity and act as a powerful model for engaging students in their learning.

To find out more contact:

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Inclusive excellence: Embedding for all learners

New College Durham has been involved in inclusive Skills Competitions since 2015. Using the WorldSkills UK method and structure, Colin Galley (Programme Leader for Vocational Access) has created in-classroom competitions that reflect the curriculum and needs of his learners – from ironing to IT.

The trigger to embedding competitions into the curriculum at New College Durham began with the desire of the principal to create an ethos of competition across the college. With the support of senior management there was an interest to develop and promote a competition model for SEND students.

The aim was to use competitions to help students with their individual growth and support lower-level learners into the workplace.

The challenge was how to adapt a one-size-fits all competition approach for those who need extra care and attention. The college began by looking to Natspec and other WorldSkills UK competitions to see how competitions could support their goals.

The process of embedding

- The starting point was mapping a competition model onto different areas of the curriculum. Catering, hairdressing and IT were identified as subject areas where competitions would complement the curriculum well. In these subjects competitions are used as part of the study programme for all students. Within the year a number of competitions take place in the classroom and across the department. Other areas were also identified where the transferable soft skills gained from competitions would benefit the learner, such as in preparing for independence.
- Competitions create a different assessment model which support different ways of teaching key aspects. Ensuring the competition tasks were appropriate for the curriculum level required aligning the two and ensuring that the standards were comparable.

- Creating resources was the next step. Developing a workbook of standards and off-the-shelf training was needed to help support tutors in delivering competitions. These were created by pulling together resources from the internet and creating a shared drive area to make them readily available. Good communications have expanded these resources over the years as best practice is added.

“As each student is different, there are plenty of tips and techniques that teachers can adapt to their needs. We encourage teachers to share their experiences and resources too, so we can grow these tools and help even more young learners to succeed” explains Colin.

As leaders in Inclusive Skills Competitions, New College Durham is able to share information and tools with colleges across the UK to help others take part. This includes running inter-college Competitions so that SEND learners can meet others and put their new skills to the test.

Colin’s one piece of advice for those considering embedding competitions is to “Have a go – don’t be frightened by the word competition!”

To find out more contact:

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A collaborative approach to competitions

Each year, colleges from across Greater Manchester compete in over 50 skills to develop and celebrate the talent of young people studying in the region. The annual event sees over 700 students participate in competitions hosted by the 9 colleges involved.

The inter-college competitions were developed by the **Greater Manchester College's Group (GMCG)** as a strategy to give students an outstanding learning experience and meet a range of objectives including:

- enhancing teaching, learning and assessment by supporting the move from competence to excellence, and;
- enhancing the development of world-class skills that underpin economic competitiveness for Greater Manchester and the region.

Jackie Moores, principal at Tameside College, said: "Competitions are really important for students to take part in as it gives them experience outside the classroom and teaches them about working under pressure"

The competitions are a collaborative event which is managed by a steering group with representatives from the colleges involved and backed by the principals. Drawing on the WorldSkills model the competitions involve a time-focused task developed by sector specialists, a scoring framework, independent judges and a celebration of achievement.

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Organisation is key

A steering group co-ordinates the activity across the colleges, chaired by Joan Scott, Director at Trafford College Group, to drive the activity forward, ensure that messages are communicated, and the events are co-ordinated.

The steering group's role involves:

- Identifying which skills should run in the competitions - only skills that are taught in most of the colleges are adopted into the event.
- Providing advice and support to staff who have not been involved in competitions before to help them prepare or host an effective competition.
- Identifying which colleges are best placed to host a competition based on factors such as how many times they have hosted before and facilities.
- Setting out the process and rules for the competition, including the arrangements for registration, scoring and provision of prizes.
- Promoting the event, securing buy-in and helping to get suppliers to sponsor a competition.

Lisa Radcliffe, Manager at Trafford College Group, said: "The nature of qualification units means that they're easy to pick apart and embed competition activities into. When students are given realistic experiences, they can see their end goal and they're interested. Students learn additional workplace tasks not because they're being prepped for a competition but because they're important. I feel competitions covers all bases."

The colleges' engagement with competitions have deepened over the years as more skills have come on board and more staff have witnessed the benefits of competition. A culture has emerged of an expectation of participation in local competitions which have acted as a catalyst to involvement in WorldSkills competitions. GMCG has seen huge growth in the number of students and apprentices entering WorldSkills UK competitions which has helped the North West become the top region in England for registrations, finalists and medal points.

Joan Scott, Director at Trafford College Group, said: "Within the Trafford College Group we had our most successful year in 2019, with nine students through to the UK finals, winning a gold and two silver medals. I'm thrilled that Ben Metcalfe has been chosen for Squad UK, the experience he has had to date has been amazing and he now will further develop his talent in preparation for WorldSkills 2021 in Shanghai. WorldSkills competitions really do help students to 'go further, faster', this involves a huge amount of hard work on behalf of the students and their tutors."

To find out more contact:

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Trafford College Group
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6. Checklist

You can use this checklist of features of embedded approaches to skills competition activity to assess how embedded your approach to skills competition activity is and to identify what else you might consider introducing to embed it further

| Features of embedded approaches to skills competition activity | Fully in place | Partly in place | Not in place |
|---|----------------|-----------------|--------------|
| 1. There is explicit commitment to embedding competition activity on the part of the chief executive/principal, governors and senior managers | | | |
| 2. Competition activity is reported on and discussed at governing body, SLT and departmental meetings | | | |
| 3. Performance in competitions is used to inform benchmarking processes | | | |
| 4. Quality improvement and self-assessment processes include competition activity | | | |
| 5. Developing staff skills and training is linked to competition activity | | | |
| 6. Commitment to competition activity is explicit in the mission, strategy and other policy documentation | | | |
| 7. The budget for supporting involvement in skills competition is set at a realistic level | | | |
| 8. Employers are involved in supporting apprentices in competition activity | | | |
| 9. Employers are involved in sponsoring local competitions | | | |
| 10. Competition activity is included at the early stages of learning programmes for young people | | | |
| 11. Competition activity is planned within overall learning programmes | | | |
| 12. Competition activity is aligned to major competition cycles such as WorldSkills | | | |
| 13. Support for the competition activity is coordinated across the organisation | | | |
| 14. Publicity relating to skills competitions is capitalised upon | | | |
| 15. Learners and staff are encouraged to participate in competitions | | | |
| 16. Evidence of the impact of participation on learner retention and achievement is routinely collected | | | |
| 17. Mechanisms are in place for sharing good practice in embedding competitions into teaching and learning | | | |
| 18. Examples of competition-related delivery strategies are disseminated for others to incorporate into their delivery | | | |
| 19. Specific reference to competition activity is included within stakeholder feedback for learners, employers, staff wellbeing surveys, etc | | | |
| 20. Celebrate participation and achievement – the successes of staff as well as competitors | | | |
| 21. Track performance and measure the difference participation makes | | | |

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7. Resources

1. *The Case for Skills Competitions*

Further case studies on the benefits of adopting competitions

<https://www.worldskillsuk.org/media/4457/case-studies-colleges.pdf>

2. *Igniting Education: Making more and better use of skills competitions*

A report from the Netherlands on the research behind skills competitions alongside further tips and tricks to embedding competitions

<https://www.worldskillsuk.org/accelerate/our-research/our-research-projects/igniting-education-making-more-and-better-use-of-skills-competitions>

3. *Practical guides on taking part in a WorldSkills UK competition*

Information on the process, pre-competition activity and competition rules

<https://www.worldskillsuk.org/champions/national-skills-competitions/what-are-worldskills-uk-competitions>

4. *Sample test projects and marking schemes*

Competition briefs, competencies, test projects and marking schemes for each skill

<https://www.worldskillsuk.org/champions/national-skills-competitions/find-a-competition>

5. *The challenges of mainstreaming excellence in technical education*

A report on how to get World-class standards into the education system

https://www.worldskillsuk.org/media/6152/skope_pages.pdf

6. *Adopting skills innovation for the UK*

A report on what the UK can learn from the rest of the world to improve technical education

<https://www.thersa.org/globalassets/pdfs/reports/rsa-adopting-global-skills-innovation-for-the-uk.pdf>

7. *Skills Development Hub*

The WorldSkills UK Skills Development Hub

<https://www.worldskillsuk.org/skills/skills-development-hub>

For further information and support please contact:

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