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WeRskills project recommendations: quality of VET, improving the skills of young professionals, professional development of trainers

Zalecenia projektu WeRskills: jakość kształcenia i szkolenia zawodowego, doskonalenie umiejętności młodych fachowców, rozwój zawodowy trenerów

Key words: skills competitions, vocational education programs, young professionals, cooperation among sectors.

Abstract: In the following publication we propose an enhancement strategy to support the process of acquiring talents to participate in skills competitions at the national and European level and raise the attractiveness of VET. We would like to inspire vocational teachers and trainers as well as training providers and employers to use skills competitions as a means to boost the structural development of talents and excellence in VET. The set of recommendations included in the article is a result of the project entitled *WeRskills – informational and consulting platform supporting the process of acquiring talents to participate in skills competitions at national and European level*. The project was run in the international partnership of Polish, Hungarian and Cyprian institutions which advocated skills competitions as instruments to innovate vocational education programs in order to meet the European needs of today.

WeRskills Project Recommendations include different aspects of vocational education and focus on five areas of expertise. The article will be published in two installments the first of which introduces the following recommendations: Skills Competitions enhance the quality of VET, Skills Competitions inspire skills excellence in youth, Skills Competitions may be a hub for the professional development of trainers.

Słowa kluczowe: konkursy umiejętności, programy kształcenia i szkolenia zawodowego, młodzi profesjonaliści, współpraca międzysektorowa.

Streszczenie: W poniższej publikacji proponujemy strategię doskonalenia wspierającą proces pozyskiwania talentów do udziału w konkursach umiejętności zawodowych na poziomie krajowym i europejskim. Chcielibyśmy zainspirować szkoły zawodowe, centra szkoleniowe i pracodawców do wykorzystywania konkursów umiejętności zawodowych jako sposobu na rozwój młodych talentów. Zawarty w artykule zestaw rekomendacji jest wynikiem projektu *WeRskills – platforma informacyjno-doradcza wspierająca proces pozyskiwania talentów do udziału w konkursach umiejętności na poziomie krajowym i europejskim*. Projekt ten był realizowany w międzynarodowym partnerstwie instytucji polskich, węgierskich i cypryjskich, które proponują, by konkursy umiejętności zawodowych stały się stałym elementem programów kształcenia i szkolenia zawodowego.

Rekomendacje projektu WeRskills obejmują różne aspekty kształcenia zawodowego i koncentrują się na pięciu obszarach. Artykuł ukaże się w dwóch częściach, z których pierwsza dotyczy jakości kształcenia i szkolenia zawodowego, doskonalenia umiejętności wśród młodych fachowców oraz rozwoju zawodowego trenerów.

Introduction

Raising the attractiveness of vocational education and training (VET) has been on the European agenda for some time, primarily for economic and social development reasons. However, little is still known about the role of skills competitions in improving the attractiveness of VET. One of the WeRskills project intentions was to examine the potential contributions of skills competitions to revitalize VET in Poland, Hungary and Cyprus.

Further growth and development of national and international skills competitions depends very much on the willingness, capabilities and enthusiasm of VET providers and teachers, as they form an important channel to stimulate, support and guide students to competition activities.

Helping colleges and teachers to have a better understanding of the perspectives, possibilities and added value of skills competitions in the overall quality of VET will strengthen the competitions in individual countries and over Europe and accelerate the use of the power of skills. Not only for those who participate in the competitions, but also for 'regular' VET-students. This can be done by using skills competitions methods and instruments 'within' VET-curricula, assessments and exams.

In the following publication we propose an enhancement strategy to support the process of acquiring talents to participate in skills competitions at the national and European level and raise the attractiveness of VET. We would like to inspire vocational teachers and trainers in colleges, training providers and employers to use skills competitions as a means to boost the structural development of talents and excellence in VET.

WeRskills project recommendations are grouped under five main headings:

1. Skills Competitions enhance the quality of VET
2. Skills Competitions inspire skills excellence in youth

3. Skills Competitions may be a hub for the professional development of trainers
4. Industry benefits from Skills Competitions
5. Skills Competitions deliver value for money

Consistent policy efforts oriented on spreading excellence throughout the entire VET sector is necessary to raise its attractiveness.

WorldSkills and EuroSkills are international biennial skills competitions aimed at promoting professional skills. They are organized on a grand scale. You can compare those events to the sports Olympics where above-average skills matter. Competitors who represent their countries must demonstrate a higher level of professionalization than their competitors. National teams are supported by coaches and sponsors. If we keep the sports metaphor, WorldSkills will be the equivalent of the world championships, EuroSkills – the European championships, and i.e. Skills Poland – the national championships.

The analogy to sports competitions is obvious, but this system does not translate into industry competitions either in Poland, Hungary or Cyprus. Why? What is missing?

The idea of **WorldSkills** has been developed for almost 70 years. It was initiated in Spain (M. Kowalska, 2021). By 2021, 45 WorldSkills competitions had been organized, with the first WorldSkills competition held in 1950 at the Vocational Training Institute "Virgen de la Paloma" in Madrid, Spain. At the moment WorldSkills International counts 85 Member states around the world (worldskills.org/members, accessed: 23/03/2022).

WorldSkills initiative inspires young people to develop their passions and pursue excellence by preparing and participating in international skills competitions, which are the main goal of WorldSkills International. WorldSkills events are held every 2 years. The next competition will be held October 12–17, 2022 in Shanghai.

European countries are associated in **WorldSkills Europe**, which is a part of the global WorldSkills movement. According to the data on the association's website, 31 countries currently support this initiative (worldskillseurope.org/index.php/about/members, accessed: 23/03/2022). It should be emphasized that each country can be represented by one Member organization. Membership in the association allows to register teams to participate in the EuroSkills competitions which are organized every two years. The next 8th edition of the EuroSkills competition will take place in 2023 in Poland.

Thousands of young people meet during biennial WorldSkills and EuroSkills events to compete for several days in skills of their choice. The best in Europe receive gold, silver or bronze medals, or special awards like the "Best of Nation" and "Jos de Goey" Best in Europe Award.

WorldSkills Europe Members are represented by designated national institutions. Usually those are institutions closely related to VET. In Poland, the institution



responsible for organizing competitions at the national level is the Foundation for the Development of the Education System (www.frse.org.pl), in Hungary – the Hungarian Chamber of Commerce & Industry (www.mkik.hu), in Cyprus – the Cyprus Productivity Center (www.kepa.gov.cy/skillscyprus).

Skills Competitions enhance the quality of VET

Recommendation 1.

Developing an integrated and multi-level Model of organizing skills competitions

WorldSkills raises the profile and recognition of skilled people, and shows how important skills are in achieving economic growth and personal success.

HOWEVER

Meeting the excellence standards required at WorldSkills competitions depends primarily on the quality of each Member's national VET system, which in turn is shaped by the currency and quality of their VET curriculum, the capability of highly skilled teachers and trainers, and assessment methodologies that ensure reliable and consistent standards.

To be successful, Worldskills Members need to support their national VET systems.

Skills competitions are a great opportunity to do it.

We believe that organization of skills competitions according to an integrated multi-level model proposed by the WeRskills project will make WorldSkills formula popular among VET students and their teachers. The model will support institutions from the VET ecosystem to organize vocational skills competitions based on WorldSkills format. By sharing and implementing WorldSkills models of best practice in VET system design, we will meet UNESCO's goals for the international recognition of qualifications and convince VET providers and experts from various industries that it is worth investing in young people.

Skills competitions at different levels will improve the quality of VET.

WeRskills project proposes a bottom-up approach for leveraging skills competitions for the development of national VET systems. The bottom-up approach is focused on VET schools as individual entities that have the potential to plan and deliver skills competitions. From EU policy level perspective, this bottom-up approach is aligned with "Osnabrück Declaration on vocational education and training as an enabler of recovery and just transitions to digital and green economies" signed by all Ministers of Education of the EU countries in November 2020. The declaration states that all the EU countries must use skills competitions to raise the attractiveness and image of VET, promote VET excellence in Europe and to achieve champion status in the global WorldSkills competitions.

The ideal model for the organization of skills competitions is multi-level and integrated. It fits into the bottom-up approach and predicts organization of skills competitions at different levels:

- 1) school level
- 2) local level
- 3) regional level
- 4) national level (e.g. SkillsPoland, Szakma Sztár Fesztivál)
- 5) European level (EuroSkills)
- 6) world level (WorldSkills)

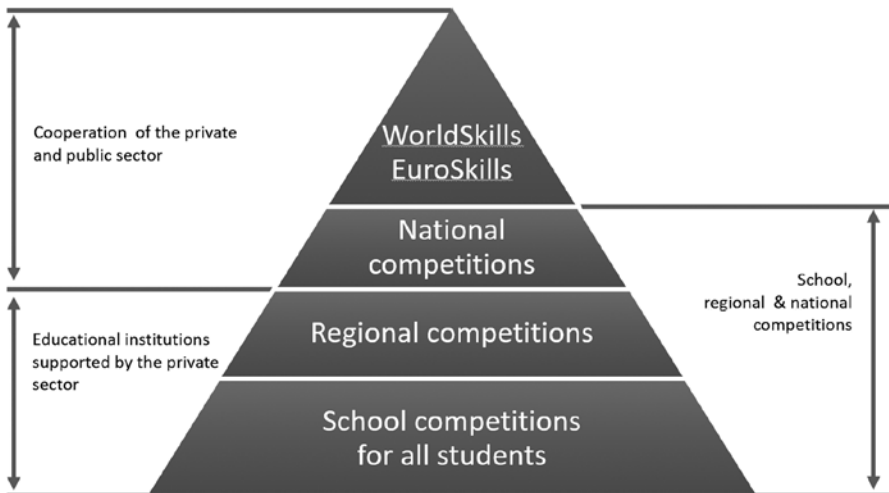
Justification:

We have observed that there is a need to develop a network of cooperation at the lower levels of the proposed Model in order to increase the awareness

about the importance and relevance of skills competitions. VET stakeholders like VET schools; entrepreneurs; trainers and job coaches from various industries; professional organizations; guilds; regional and national VET institutions; local and central authorities; VET teachers, students have to be encouraged to organize skills competitions if we want to achieve excellence and champion status as a nation and a Member state in the global WorldSkills competitions.

According to the bottom-up approach, it is necessary to prepare school staff for cooperating with entrepreneurs and organizing skills competitions at local and regional levels. Local and regional events will unquestionably increase the popularity of VET and they will be the qualifying rounds for skills competitions at the top level of our Model.

In most WorldSkills Member states, the process begins with skills competitions at the school level, and ends with the national finals. Medal winners become national champions in the skills of their choice and compete internationally. The pyramid below illustrates the process of creating excellence through WorldSkills competitions with solid foundations in VET.



Recommendation 2.

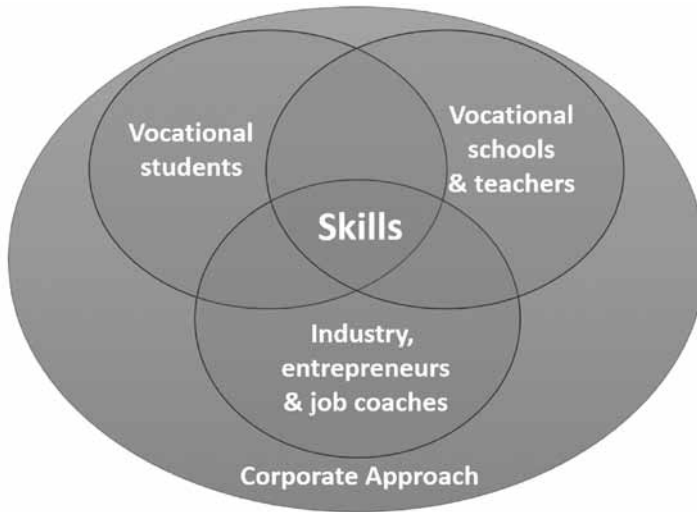
Developing vocational excellence through Corporate Approach

Success is not a random occurrence, but rather a series of right decisions taken at the right instances. Meticulous planning, preparation, and execution determines success for most organizations and initiatives. All this starts with defining the right approach.

By Corporate Approach we mean a constant effort to engage all kind of VET stakeholders in the competition activity which provides a range of benefits. It is

a strategic plan which defines the overall goals and directions of skills competitions at different levels.

The aim of the Corporate Approach is to encourage VET schools, entrepreneurs, trainers and job coaches from various industries, professional associations, training providers and employers, local and central authorities to work together and use skills competitions to improve the quality of their provision and the quality of VET in general.



1. Corporate Approach at the school level involves:
 - a. **Local authorities** that support schools in organizing skills competitions. They may promote skills competitions and provide a venue for the competition.
 - b. **School management and teaching staff** that provide competitors with their professional knowledge and experience by becoming Test project authors, trainers, jurors. Keeping the principle of impartiality of course (Test project author cannot be a trainer, but he can join the jury).
 - c. **Employers and industry** who could support competitions financially or by providing necessary materials or give access to machinery and equipment. Job coaches from industry can be jurors and co-authors of the Test projects.
 - d. **VET students** as competitors.
2. Corporate Approach at the local level involves:
 - a. **Local authorities, management of VET schools and teaching staff, employers and industry representatives** who are encouraged to sign agreements to organize local competitions on a regular basis.
 - b. **VET schools** as organizers of local skills competitions supported by local authorities, employers and industry.
 - c. **VET students** who were the best at the school level.
 - d. **Apprentices or young employees from an industry**
 - e. **VET teachers and trainers**

- f. **Job coaches** from an industry
 - g. **Entrepreneurs** from an industry
 - h. **Local media** as an instrument to promote the idea of a skills competitions.
3. Corporate Approach at the regional level involves:
- a. **Institutions organizing national skills competitions, regional and local authorities, management of VET schools, employers and industry representatives** who are encouraged to sign agreements to organize regional competitions.
 - b. **VET schools** as organisers of regional skills competitions supported by regional and local authorities, employers and industry.
 - c. **VET students, apprentices or young employees** who were the best at the local level.
 - d. **VET teachers and trainers**
 - e. **Job coaches** from an industry
 - f. **Entrepreneurs** from an industry
 - g. **Local and regional media** as an important instrument to promote the idea of skills competitions at the regional level.

Benefits from training for and competing in skills competitions can accrue to the individual competitor or to other individuals and organizations with whom that competitor is associated at the time of competing or subsequently. The table below highlights the benefits for each of those groups and the ways of enhancing quality in VET.

Recommendation 3.

Preparing vocational school staff and professionals from industries to become Skills Competitions Coordinators

We have observed that organization of vocational skills competitions requires engagement of many people performing different roles such as the role of a team leader, a manager, a skills expert, a technical assistant, a workshop manager, or a health and safety officer. When it comes to skills competitions at the lower levels: school, local and regional, it often happens that those roles are combined into one person who is a sort of a middle manager – a contact person among vocational schools, industries and WorldSkills institutions in particular countries.

WeRskills project showed that it is not easy to find skill enthusiasts who have formal or recognized qualifications, practical or industrial experience in their specialization and communicate well in English and convince them to be part of the WorldSkills initiative. We have observed that it is very difficult for VET teachers to give up on the traditional type of skills competitions and use the new format of multi-staged practical events introduced by WorldSkills. Competitions based on WorldSkills format are very demanding in terms of organisation, proficiency of tasks and training of competitors. They also require cooperation with entrepreneurs. Consequently, not

many people are interested in taking up the challenge and becoming coordinators of such events. Few people have time to do it and even fewer of them are empathetic enough to build deep relationships with the competitors. A combination of those features is rare nowadays. In fact, it is easier to find sponsors to support skills competitions than experts of that sort.

We imagine the Skills Competitions Coordinator to be a person who is willing to invest his knowledge, training skills and time in the process of organization of skills competitions at school, local and regional levels. A real skills enthusiast!

Skills Competitions Coordinators:

- initiate a competition activity
- run an informative campaign
- search for business partners
- integrate Test projects authors and jurors
- organize materials and equipment
- organize venue and accommodation
- cooperate with national WorldSkills institutions
- cooperate with local and regional authorities

The list of Skills Competitions Coordinators' responsibilities is open and ongoing. That is why, it is so important to make skills competitions based on the WorldSkills format popular and encourage people associated with VET (not only teachers and trainers) to become the skills leaders for the young. With this recommendation we would like to convince all skills enthusiasts that it is worth investing in young people and organize practical skills competitions.

VET students benefits

- Dramatically boost skills, confidence and performance at work
- Raising level of technical skills
- Enhancing employability skills including:
 - ✓ Time management prioritization
 - ✓ Pace
 - ✓ Networking and communication skills
 - ✓ Commitment and responsibility
 - ✓ Resilience
 - ✓ Problem-solving skills
 - ✓ Working to specific standards
- Establishing relationships with other students and the teacher
- Identification your strengths and weaknesses
- Professional motivation
- Extra training for vocational exams
- Access to potential employers

VET schools benefits

- Competitions add value to the organization by:
- Increasing learners' motivation, progression and achievement
 - Providing opportunities for self-assessment reports
 - Preparing candidates for vocational exams
 - Enriching the offer to future students
 - Raising the profile of the organization
 - Providing marketing and promotional opportunities
- To individual teachers and trainers by:
- Enhancing teaching and training techniques
 - Increasing job satisfaction
 - Providing networking and opportunities to learn from others
 - Introducing competences based assessment

Employers benefits

- Boosting your business performance
- Teaching learners to work efficiently under pressure
- Increasing learners' productivity e.g. by improving their time management
- Learners being more aware of leading-edge practice and more able to work to exacting standards
- Raising the profile and reputation of your business
- Adjusting education to the needs of the labor market

Benefits at the national level

- Exchanging teaching and training methods internationally
- Promoting new technologies and international know-how
- Analyzing new professions and skills of the future
- Developing innovative teaching and training methods

Skills Competitions inspire skills excellence in youth

Recommendation 1.

The experiences of young people who have been internationally recognized for excellence in their respective vocations are inspiring for others.

At the top of the mountain!



Yes! That's how inspiring it can be when you enter a competition! Not necessarily because you have won, but because you pushed yourself to the limits and made it. You completed a project! You have been given an opportunity to see how well you can be prepared, how well you can manage your time and how rewarding it can be! And I repeat. Not necessarily because

you won. But because you took the challenge, you tried and you competed in a worldwide setting. That alone is rewarding.

Measuring your strength...

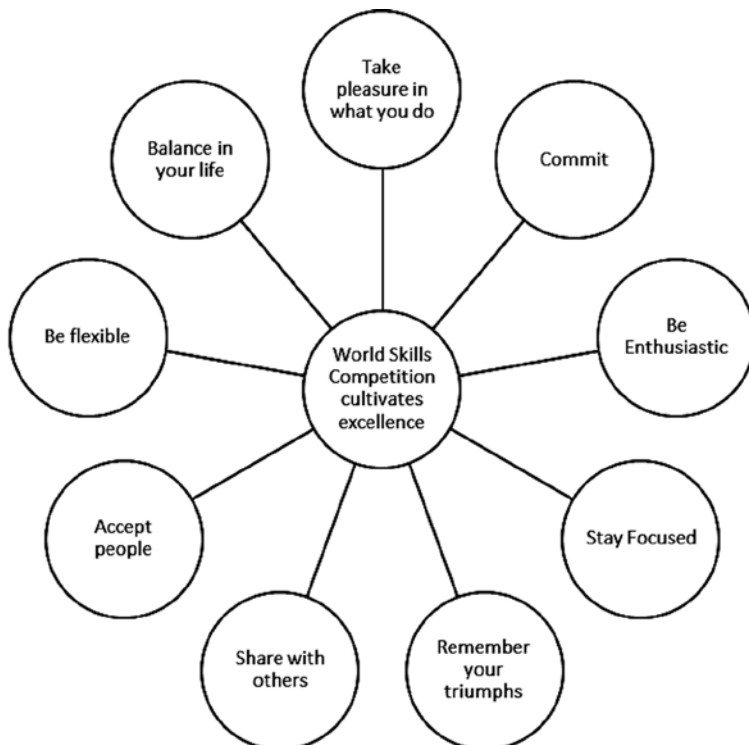
Be entering a worldwide competition is a challenge on its own. It requires preparation, self-management, goal setting, tutoring, practice, hours from your leisure time. And then you go to compete. And a whole new world opens up. You get to meet other young people from various countries with different, maybe approaches and methods of doing things, you learn new things, unavoidably you make your comparisons (why were they better, what were my weaknesses and my strengths, how can I be better) and you become even more motivated to become better at what you do, to learn more, to reach excellence.

To become better at what you do first you need to identify what your weaknesses are and then your strengths. Competitions like the WorldSkills competition, give you an opportunity to do exactly that. Not in the narrow setting of your home country, where the standards are set by the market, the employers or the customers. The standards in a WorldSkills competition are world class standards. Being able to measure your weaknesses and strengths in a worldwide setting is strict and very competitive. So, imagine if you have the strictest teacher evaluating you! Isn't that rewarding? It may sound scary but in fact if you truly know your strengths and weaknesses, that is the first step to success. Because you now know where to put

Aiming for Excellence...

WorldSkills competition is not just another competition. Is a competition that measures your skills on your chosen (or dream) job and promotes excellence. Work is a defining factor in people's lives. Aiming at excellence will be a decisive factor in your career. Remember that people who excel at their jobs they come to love their jobs. How you do better? By excellence.

Excellence is performing at your highest level. Whether it's raising your self-esteem, doing well at your job or having satisfying relationships engaging in excellence means you carefully think through your goal and make logical plans, you take the time to do your best, and you work hard at achieving what you desire. World Skills Competition cultivates excellence. WSC cultivates those elements that you need to succeed.



Pursuing excellence begins with a decision you make, an ideal you envision. Once that vision is in place, you do whatever is necessary to make it a reality. Aiming for excellence does not happen by chance. You need a strategy and discipline to attain excellence in your life.

First and foremost you need to take pleasure in what you do to do it well. Remember that your job and how well you do it is your vehicle to achieve your dreams. Imagine reaching your full potential by becoming your best self. Imagine being happy and living the life of your dreams, growing and achieving in all aspects of your life. There are two types of people: those who succeed because they do the things that help them realize their highest potential, and those who are disappointed because they neglect to do what is required for success. Striving for self-improvement and the desire to continue to grow and develop are often natural for people with healthy self-esteem.

Then, you need to commit to doing what is required to excel. After you make a plan to reach your goal, your commitment to do everything that's required to reach it is essential. This commitment involves having a high level of dedication and self-discipline. Being committed is persevering through all the ups and downs that happen, persisting in the face of any obstacles that appear before you, and continuously striving to do your best.

Know yourself! Personal excellence requires that you evaluate your strengths and weaknesses. Your strengths are those things that are easy for you to do and what you do best. They are your natural talents and skills. You may not even notice them because they're so instinctive to you. Your strengths may or may not be what you like to do. They can be, but that's not always the case.

Have enthusiastic feelings that lead to creativity. In order to achieve excellence, you need to have a keen interest in accomplishing what you desire. Without these deep feelings of enthusiasm, you won't have much motivation and you'll stop partway through without completing what you started. Your enthusiasm about your goal engenders creativity, and this creativity then generates even more enthusiasm. As you inspire yourself and others to take the steps that are needed to reach your goals, your passion increases even more.

Stay focused on what you want. Maintaining a constructive focus on your goal keeps you applying your efforts in a positive direction. If you get frustrated because your goal isn't turning out as you first imagined, don't let yourself fall into the trap of being a victim. Think about exactly what has gone wrong and gain from it. Reflect on what you did well as well as how you can improve in the future. Concentrate on working on those particular points. Consider different options to overcome these obstacles and choose one or more that make the most sense.

To attain excellence remind yourself of past triumphs. Congratulate yourself on what you've accomplished and the good you've already done. Remind yourself that

any important goal takes a lot of work and that most things are possible if you try hard enough.

Be willing to share your feelings with others. Everyone experiences obstacles reaching goals, and these setbacks can lead to annoyance and frustration. It is normal to feel that way when things don't go the way you planned. Sharing your feelings helps to overcome your failures and proceed with reaching your goal.

Accept people for who they are and look for the good in them. In order to live a life of excellence with more happiness, it's better to accept people for who they are rather than try to change them. This includes people who are involved with you in meeting your goals.

Have flexibility and balance in your life. Don't be a slave to your goal and feel that you have to accomplish it a certain way. Flexibility is having the willingness to adapt and try something different if something isn't working as you thought it would. Be very aware of your environment and the people in it. If things aren't going as you originally planned, make changes until you find what works. Along with flexibility, it's vital to have balance in your life to allow time for the other important people and activities in your life. Although you may need to devote extra time to your project, it's best not to totally immerse yourself in one area of your life to the exclusion of all others.

Stick with your goal until it's completed. To truly reach excellence, it's crucial to persist with any project until it's completed. Giving up halfway through will diminish your self-esteem quickly. If you're unsure which direction to go, spell out exactly what steps need to be taken to finish your goal and brainstorm all the possibilities you can think of to move you through these steps.

World Skills Competition creates the perfect environment for young achievers to aim at excellence. Setting up your goal, committing to it, interacting with peers, sharing successes and failures, accepting people are a few of the traits that are offered in a world skills competition setting.

As Jeff Bezos said

"In the end, we are our choices. Build yourself a great story."

Be inspired...

WSC has been an inspiration to many over the years. WSC has opened up new opportunities and has offered new perspectives to contestants. Here is the story of Amelia Addis, who was doing her floristry apprenticeship in Palmerston North when she 'caught the WorldSkills bug'¹.

¹ <https://www.worldskills.org.nz/amelia-business-owner-and-floral-designer/>



"WorldSkills changed my perspective on floristry from being a job to becoming a career. When I went to my first WorldSkills Competition everyone was really into what they were doing, whether they were a plumber, electrician, florist or someone else. They were really all into their work. It was an electric atmosphere."

"The introduction to competition floristry was very different to what I had experienced in retail. It made me think of flowers in a different way, think about design and process differently too. I loved it."

"When you are young, you worry about what other people think. You might think 'where is this going to lead me?' Competing changed my perspective about the opportunities available to me as a florist and set me up with a really good base as a floral designer. It made me confident in my own decision, knowing floristry was what I really loved, and then helped me step up the way I pursued it."

"Now, as a business owner, I see the broader benefits of competing. Resilience, endurance, going over things until they are right, and being in a high pressure situation. All those things which I experienced during training and competition have better prepared me and made me more equipped for what else I have chosen to do."

This is one of the many stories of youngsters who competed in the competition which was a life changing experience. As some have quoted:

"WorldSkills is the ultimate test – against yourself, your skills, and others in the industry. WorldSkills has given me the confidence to know I can make the next step."

"WorldSkills enables trainees to benchmark skills with other trainees in a competitive environment."

"My employer was willing to help and give me new opportunities – my other friends from WorldSkills have had significant job offers on the basis of showing the initiative to compete and having proven their ability."

"WorldSkills is a measure of how we are performing against other companies and provides a major boost in the competence and confidence of our participating employees. This also yields a massive gain to the company through improved teamwork and employees developing way above the norm."

Skills Competitions may be a hub for the professional development of trainers

Recommendation 1.

Professional competitions are a challenge not only for the competitors, but also for the VET experts and trainers who prepare them.

This is particularly relevant in those countries that have only joined the international competition movement recently and they do not yet have adequate experience in this regard. In some countries, the requirements for national skills competitions are not as strict as for international competitions. In this case, it is extremely important that the professional requirements of international competitions be presented to an ever-widening range of VET teachers and trainer.

The professional requirements and assessment criteria of international competitions are generally much stricter than the day-to-day general requirements of a given profession. There are trainers who have a hard time accepting this. Therefore, special care must be taken to convince them to accept these expectations. This is a prerequisite for trainers themselves to be able to motivate their trainees to apply for competitions and participate in preparation. To do this, trainers should be given the opportunity to learn about the test projects of the previous competitions, the availability of working time and the assessment criteria. This knowledge is essential to improve the competitors' quality of work, develop their technical skills and boost their confidence and ability to take the initiative under pressure. This supports training providers wanting to embed competitions in their teaching practice and it will offer an overview of the benefits of embedding competition activities, how these can be easily implemented in the curriculum.

International skill competitions support young people across the world via competitions-based training, assessment and benchmarking, with members' national teams ultimately testing their ability to achieve world-class standards in the biennial skills competitions. The knowledge gained through training as part of an international network will help raise standards in the newly acceded countries. Sharing international best practices will help train trainers to provide high quality training and assessment.

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