

Overcoming vocational prejudice: how can skills competitions improve the attractiveness of vocational education and training in the UK?

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Raising the attractiveness of vocational education and training (VET) has been on the UK as well as the European agenda for some time, primarily for economic and social development reasons. However, little is known about the role of skills competitions in improving the attractiveness of VET. This study uses data from 110 interviews with WorldSkills competitors and their associates to examine the potential contributions of skills competitions to revitalise VET in the UK. Adopting the enhancement strategy we propose that the experiences of young people who have been internationally recognised for excellence in their respective vocations are inspiring for others. Such experiences have the potential to refocus the attention from a deficit model of VET to the level of excellence that can be achieved through competitions. However, the enhancement strategy in and of itself is not enough to raise the attractiveness of VET. To do so requires consistent policy efforts oriented on spreading excellence throughout the entire VET sector. The ultimate disruption of the policy cycle that perpetuates the existing vocational/academic divide may be achieved through a systemic approach that builds upon the examples of vocational excellence.

Keywords: vocational education and training; attractiveness; vocational–academic divide; skills competitions; WorldSkills

Introduction

The vocational–academic divide has persisted in the UK education and training sector for a long time. The vocational route is considered inferior to the academic one, attracting disproportionately high numbers of low-income students who may be excluded from general/academic education and often come from areas of multiple disadvantage (Cabinet Office, 2011; Crawford et al., 2011; Lewis, 1994; Pring et al., 2009). Although the 1944 Education Act might have contributed to the establishment of the divide, the literature recognises that the relative unattractiveness of VET may stem from the historically lower levels of esteem for manual workers when compared with those who could afford to engage with theoretical ideas and knowledge (Hyland & Winch, 2007; Silver & Brennan, 1988). Although VET is stigmatised in many societies (Virolainen & Stenström, 2014), it has been suggested that it is less well-regarded in liberal market economies (e.g. the UK, the USA) than in coordinated market economies (e.g. Denmark or Germany); the former view VET as a track for those with lower academic performance while the latter see VET as a contributor to an innovation-based economy (Bosch & Charest, 2008). Although the intellectual and professional nature of much VET is increasingly recognised because of the number of medium- and high-skilled jobs that are now considered vocational (Clifton et al., 2014), the general perception of VET in this country predominantly identifies it with low-skilled manual work with little or no progression opportunities (Rutter, 2013). It is an intent of this paper to try to move away from this stereotype. Recognising this deep and abiding failure to value VET, policymakers have made ‘cyclical frustrated attempts . . . to redress the vocational/academic divide in which VET in FE [further education] in England seems to be trapped’ (Jameson, 2007, p. xi). However, in aiming to become ‘one of the top eight countries in the world for skills, jobs and productivity’ (UKCES, 2009, p. 3), the

Coalition Government's VET policy was primarily focused on qualifications, institutional reform and cuts in public expenditure. Herein lies the problem: it is not just about increasing the number of qualifications into the labour market. The vocational education and training route needs to be seen as attractive to young people. Watters (2009) acknowledges that the attractiveness of VET is a 'subjective and value-laden concept' (p. 12), which is generally linked with its quality, labour market relevance, educational and occupational mobility and wage premium associated with VET qualifications, as well as effectively communicating these to the wider society (Lasonen & Gordon, 2009; Watters, 2009). The vocational/academic divide needs to be viewed in the context of the weaknesses and strengths of the VET sector. The latter include but are not limited to abundant examples of good practice in VET, flexibility of the sector and diversity of VET provision. However, some of the weaknesses do not allow these strengths to be translated into across-the-board excellence. Uncertainty about funding, a lack of in-depth engagement of employers, the low status of VET and instability of the VET sector are among the weaknesses.¹ Although there is some literature highlighting good practice (Guile, 2010; Unwin, 2004), most of it remains policy-focused rather than practice-oriented. This paper attempts to move from the deficit model and stereotyping to examples of vocational excellence, through examining practice rather than policy. We use empirical evidence to demonstrate how we can build on one of the existing strengths (good practice) to improve the attractiveness of the vocational pathway in its own right and thus contribute to the improvement of VET status. In doing so we will answer the following research question: how can skills competitions improve the attractiveness of VET in the UK? The next section introduces the WorldSkills Competition (WSC), followed by a review of the existing literature on skills competitions, VET attractiveness and parity of esteem. We then present our methodological approach. The penultimate section details three main findings of the research. We conclude by discussing the findings in light of how skills competitions can enhance the attractiveness of VET in the UK.

It is important to note that this article makes reference to VET across the UK. Although VET sectors in the four countries of the UK have different strengths and weaknesses, this study focuses on the entire UK because of the following two reasons. First, the UK enters the WSC—the empirical spotlight of the study—as one state with a single team that consists of representatives from the constituent four countries. Second, there is no evidence to indicate that any of the four countries do not face the vocational/academic divide and would not benefit from raising the attractiveness of VET.

The WorldSkills competition

International skills competitions started in post-World War II Europe. In 1950 the first Skill Olympics were held between Portugal and Spain. Five other European countries joined the international skills competition in 1953 and it subsequently evolved into a global contest known as the WorldSkills Competition (WSC). Currently, the competition brings together around 1000 contestants mostly aged from 18 to 21 from 53 countries, who gather every two years to compete publicly and demonstrate excellence in more than 40 skill areas. The skills areas are grouped into six skills sectors: Transportation and Logistics, Construction and Building Technology, Manufacturing and Engineering Technology, Information and Communication Technology, Creative Arts and Fashion, and Social and Personal Services. The WSC is organised by WorldSkills International (WSI). WSI is a non-profit association that promotes VET internationally in traditional trades and crafts as well as in multi-skilled vocations, such as manufacturing team challenge, and those utilising newer technologies and innovative services.

The UK first entered a team in the WSC in 1953. Although the competition was

held in Glasgow in 1965 and in Birmingham in 1989, it was not until 1990 that the State became involved. UK Skills was established as an independent charity in 1990 and renamed WorldSkills UK in 2011 when the UK hosted the WSC in London. WorldSkills UK is now part of Find a Future, a new organisation that brings together skills and careers experiences from across the UK (WorldSkills UK, 2014b). WorldSkills UK runs skills competitions in partnership with industry and educational institutions (WorldSkills UK, 2014a). The Board of Find a Future consists of FE college principals, practitioners and leaders from the VET sector. Find a Future works closely with the Association of Colleges (AoC), the Education and Training Foundation (ETF), the Association of Employment and Learning Providers (AELP) and Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) to ensure that the work and message of skills competitions reach young people, the FE sector, employers and training providers. However, as we show below, the lack of systematic mechanisms to inform these stakeholders about skills competitions often prevents the message from spreading.

The potential competitors undergo a selection process that begins with regional and national skill competitions held throughout the UK. The candidates for these UK-based competitions may be FE college students or apprentices or employees in enterprises. 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. Selected young people attend a residential induction programme over four days in the first instance. If candidates wish to be considered for the squad, they attend three to four training events held over the following months. The last of these events involves the candidates receiving two weeks training followed by a test project from a previous WSC. Based on their performance, candidates advance from the shortlist to the UK squad. Squad members participate in a training programme over approximately six months and then compete for selection into Team UK. Team selection is a four-day competition replicating the conditions of a WSC and is called The Skills Show. A panel of judges in each skill sector is drawn from industry and VET providers. The judges' decisions are independently moderated before being confirmed. After team selection the competitors continue with intensive training to build their skills to world-class standards.

The WSC is recognised by many as the pinnacle of excellence in VET. Ninety out of 110 participants of this study talked about the development of vocational excellence through the WSC that provides both a benchmark for high performance and an objective way to assess vocational excellence. It also presents an opportunity to better understand the factors that contribute to the development of vocational skills to a high standard and the benefits of this vocational excellence development. Therefore, skills competitions could carry some potential for interrupting the policy cycle that perpetuates the existing vocational/academic divide.

Skills competitions developing vocational excellence

The literature on skills competitions suggests that such competitions promote expertise and proficiency in the acquisition of skills and help improve learning and teaching in the field of VET (Helakorpi, 2010; Hughes et al., 2004; James & Holmes, 2012; Wilson, 2000). One of the first studies that examined these connections focused on the development of a curriculum for excellence through competitions at seven FE colleges (Hughes et al., 2004). The study argued that 'skills competitions are competitions with a difference', as they facilitate the development of technical skills together with communication, teamwork and business skills (p. 22).

A study of Finnish participants in the WSC showed that the support received from institutions and trainers was considered to be important throughout the different stages of skill development in preparation for competitions. The role of encouraging

teachers was vital in the early stages of training (Nokelainen & Ruohotie, 2009). In 2010, skills competitions were studied in the Australian context based on Nokelainen's research. Modelling Vocational Excellence (MoVE) Australia used online questionnaires to collect the data from competitors, employers and judges during the WorldSkills Australia National Competition. The data were gathered from 254 of the 478 competitors, 123 judges and skill category experts, and 16 employers. The study found that almost 66% of the competitors considered skill enhancement as a benefit of participating in WSC. Competitors (27%) thought that the WSC provided an important opportunity to try to 'gauge your performance against others and against accredited standards' and to achieve recognition (Smith & Rahimi, 2011).

A WSI-sponsored study called MoVE International surveyed 413 competitors and 165 experts from 38 WorldSkills member countries who participated in WSC London 2011 to look at the factors that promote high-quality vocational skills and to examine the impact of the WSC on skills and occupational identity development. The research found that most of the competitors were motivated by taking on a new challenge mixed with the desire to learn and succeed. Competitors reported that passion for the work, enjoyment of learning and opportunities to use new technologies made their occupations attractive to them (Nokelainen et al., 2012).

Thus, the literature on the WSC mainly focuses on various aspects of developing vocational excellence and does not connect it to the potential impact of such competitions on improving the status of VET. That is what we attempt to do in this paper.

Attractiveness and parity of esteem: theory and evidence

Two constructs are used with reference to the status of VET in the literature: attractiveness and parity of esteem. Attractiveness refers to the status of VET in its own right whereas parity of esteem focuses on the relative value of VET compared with academic education. Parity of esteem is related to various socio-economic rewards that the vocational pathway may bring as opposed to the academic one. Such rewards may include social status, wage premium, prestige, educational mobility and career progression (Lasonen & Gordon, 2009). We deal with attractiveness first.

Attractiveness

Improving the attractiveness of VET has been a major item not only in the UK but also on the European agenda for economic and social development. The European Commission (2004, 2006, 2008, 2010) Communiqués confirm the existence of this policy priority at the European level. The European Parliament's Resolution on Rethinking Education 'urges the Member States to promote the attractiveness and improve the labour market relevance of VET' (2013, par. 22).

There are two indicators that can be used to measure VET attractiveness: participation rates in vocational programmes and the image of VET. First, VET participation rates are not very high in the UK. European Commission (2011b) data on the proportions of students enrolled on vocational courses at International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) level 3 show that the UK is far below the EU average of 52% with only 36% of students at ISCED level 3 undertaking a vocational course (Figure 1). According to the European Commission (2013) definition, ISCED Level 3 generally begins at the end of compulsory education. The entrance age is 15–16 years.

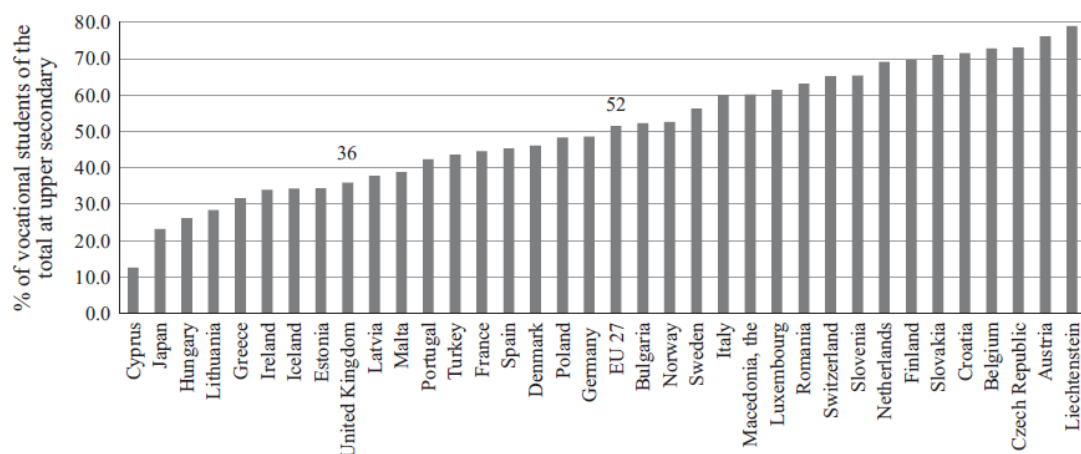


Figure 1. Students at ISCED level 3-VOC as a percentage of all students at ISCED level 3
Source: Own calculations based on European Commission (2011b) data.

Second, and in light of the above-cited evidence, the results of the Special Eurobarometer survey on the image of VET are slightly surprising. Of the UK respondents, 70% indicated that VET has a very positive image (European Commission, 2011a). Although this is an exceptionally positive figure on its own, there are two factors to consider. First, the UK is slightly below the EU average and there are a number of other countries, such as Malta (92%), Finland (90%), Austria (88%), Germany (84%) and Italy (79%), where VET seems to have a very positive image among a higher proportion of respondents than in the UK. Second, the question asked was ‘do you think that VET has a very positive, fairly positive, fairly negative or very negative image in your country?’ When answering this question, respondents could have provided their views on the image of VET as perceived by others rather than as related to their own and their immediate family members’ choices. This could have introduced bias in the responses since VET in the UK is beheld as ‘a great idea for other people’s children’ (Wolf, 2002, p. 56).

Parity of esteem

The parity of esteem of VET in relation to general/academic education was measured at the European level with the Special Eurobarometer survey. Respondents were asked the question, ‘which of the following would you recommend to a young person who is finishing compulsory education?’ Only 26% of the UK respondents would recommend VET (European Commission, 2011a). This result places the UK below the EU average of 32% (Figure 2).

Four strategies have been used to promote the parity of esteem between vocational and academic/general education. These are unification, linkages, enrichment and enhancement (Lasonen, 2010). Unification refers to bringing vocational and general

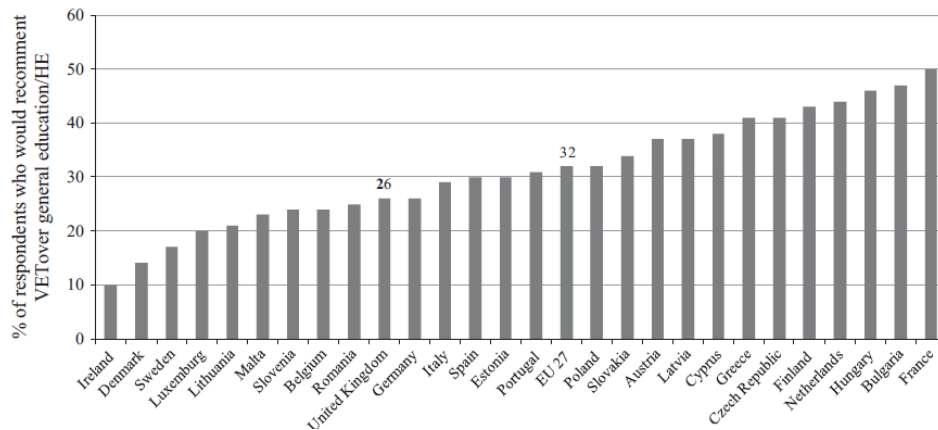


Figure 2. Relative esteem of VET in relation to general education
Source: Own calculations based on European Commission (2011a) data.

education into a single post-16 education system, where the distinction between academic and vocational is abolished. Linkages are made by connecting the two routes through a common certification framework, credit recognition and transfer as well as curriculum. Enrichment encourages cooperation between vocational and general/academic institutions to offer integrated courses. Finally, enhancement focuses on the distinctive ethos of vocational education by promoting measures that preserve and reinforce the unique characteristics of VET, such as the high standards of curriculum and pedagogy that lead to good employment, to higher education (HE) or to improving collaboration with employers (Lasonen, 2010). While the first three strategies assume the improvement of VET status solely in relation to the academic pathway, the fourth strategy focuses on VET status as relatively independent from the academic alternative.

The enhancement strategy has little to do with ‘parity’ and more to do with the value of VET in its own right. Therefore, we propose to separate the enhancement strategy from the other three strategies and use it to serve a broader goal of raising the attractiveness of VET. We base our argument on the idea that a good degree of esteem and not parity of esteem needs to be sought, as “‘parity of esteem’ is probably a chimera; a good degree of esteem, will however, greatly enhance the attractiveness of TVET’ (Winch, 2013, p. 96). This is the key idea from the literature that helps explain the theoretical angle we chose for this study. Those who find VET attractive and acquire a vocational occupation may not necessarily think that socio-economic rewards associated with the vocational pathway are comparable with those that the academic pathway may lead into. VET may be attractive in its own right, for its intrinsic value. Instead of promoting VET by seeking alignment of the vocational with academic education, the enhancement strategy places the distinctive characteristics of vocationalism in the spotlight. It builds on reinforcing and promoting the unique ethos of VET through high standards of teaching and learning. It is the enhancement of the attractiveness of VET rather than the establishment of parity of esteem that we are focusing on in this study.

Why would the enhancement strategy be useful when discussing ways of raising the attractiveness of VET through skills competitions? The development of high standards of vocational teaching and learning, i.e. the development of vocational excellence, is at the core of the enhancement strategy. Skills competitions contribute to the development of vocational excellence in the same way as the high-quality apprenticeship programmes at Rolls Royce, BT or Nissan. In what follows, we do not avoid presenting the evidence on low esteem of VET as it emerged from the

interview data. However, we try to shift the focus onto the attractiveness of VET in its own right.

Methodological approach and assumptions

The study is based on 110 individual semi-structured interviews with 39 WorldSkills competitors and their 71 associates. The associates included 20 employers, 25 family members/friends, 14 college tutors (CT)/university lecturers (UL), seven training managers (TM) and five professionals who acted as college tutors and also training managers (CT & TM). These key associates worked individually and collaboratively to support the competitors throughout their journey of developing vocational excellence.

The entire population of interest consisted of 109 competitors who were the Team UK members in 2005, 2007, 2009 and 2011. We communicated with 79 competitors, of which 39 agreed to be involved. We contacted participants via email or telephone in the first instance depending on the available contact information. We became aware that some of this information was out-of-date and therefore the competitor may not have received our request to participate.

Aiming for ‘nuanced generalization only in-depth interview studies may possibly provide’ through probability sampling (Lucas, 2014, p. 21), we sought to avoid nonprobability sampling. This was, however, not feasible and we had to use a mixture of probability and non-probability sampling strategies for selecting participants. WorldSkills UK provided the contact details of the competitors from 2009 and 2011. The Team UK members from these years were randomly selected until saturation was reached. Convenience sampling and snowballing were used to identify the 2005 and 2007 Team UK members, as their current contact details were not readily accessible.

Of the 39 competitors interviewed, six competed in 2005, nine in 2007, 10 in 2009, and 14 in 2011. Among them, nine were gold medallists, one was a silver medallist and four were bronze medallists, while 16 were awarded medallions of excellence. Seven interviewed competitors were female.

On average, the face-to-face interviews with WorldSkills competitors lasted for an hour and telephone interviews with their associates lasted for approximately 45 minutes. The interviews were conducted in the period of August 2012 to February 2013 by two researchers.

These competitors represented the following skill categories: autobody repair (1), automotive technology (1), beauty therapy (1), bricklaying (2), cabinet making (2), car painting (2), carpentry (2), confectionary/pastry (3), cooking (4), electrical installations (2), floristry (1), graphic design technology (1), jewellery (1), landscape gardening (2), manufacturing team challenge (1), mechanical engineering CAD (1), mobile robotics (1), painting and decorating (2), plumbing and heating (2), restaurant service (2), stonemasonry (3), visual merchandising (1), welding (1).

The data collected through interviews with WorldSkills competitors, their employers, college tutors, training managers and competitors’ family members/friends were audio-recorded, fully transcribed and analysed in several stages. The first stage involved transcribing and close reading. NVivo software was used to break down narratives into themes of interest and to put together demographic and educational information on each competitor. Then we took interview texts through a systematic process of analysis, noting in particular the passages related to the benefits of skills competitions. Finally, the themes were merged into a narrative expanding on and interpreting the core areas of interest established through the analysis of the interview data—how the WSC may contribute to raising the attractiveness of VET for young people.

In providing anonymity for the participants in our study we indicate their position, that is competitor, TM, CT, etc. and the year of participation in the WSC for competitors only. When we mention the information on medal winning, we avoid referring to the year of the competitor's participation to limit the possibility of identifying the interviewee.

This study relies on two important assumptions. First, establishing the impacts of social phenomena is considered to be an extremely complex process, as a counterfactual cannot be known. By relying on self-reporting, we assume that the opinions of competitors, employers, college tutors, training managers and competitors' family members/friends are appropriate measures of the benefits that such competitions may bring in terms of raising the attractiveness of VET. Second, the study gathered data from a small group of competitors and their associates. The exploratory nature of this research relied on the 'logic of discovery' instead of the 'logic of verification' (Luker, 2010). Statistical generalisation was not a goal of this study. Instead, by aiming at a theoretical generalisation of these findings, we used the rich data generated from the semi-structured interviews to explore those aspects of successful vocational performance that could potentially contribute to improving the attractiveness of VET.

Interview evidence: how to make VET more attractive?

In line with our analysis of the European Commission (2011a,b) data on the parity of esteem and attractiveness of VET in the UK, our data shows that the idea of choosing a non-academic, vocational pathway for those not academically inclined is a wellrooted stereotype: 'I worked all over the world in vocational training, in developing countries and things, and vocational skills in this country are still seen as second best' (CT & TM). The former employer of a WorldSkills gold medallist expanded on the phenomenon using his own and the competitor's experiences:

It's a kind of a cultural thing; we're not very impressed by people who are good at doing things. Artisans in this country, although they might have studied as long or longer than somebody who would need to be a doctor, or an architect, they don't carry the same kudos and it's not as impressive. I always remember with [the gold medallist], there was a mention in [a newspaper] and I don't actually know what it is they asked [the gold medallist], but the answer to their question was, 'The only time I write anything, every week, is when I fill out my time sheet'. And there was a kind of backhanded compliment there in terms of, 'you're not very academic, so it's great that you've found something you're good at'. Which is far from the truth. A lot of the people that we take on have got very good marks at GCSEs and A levels, and they're very intelligent, and they've just chosen to follow a nonacademic direction.

In this context, skills competitions 'inspire youngsters to come and follow in the footsteps' of WS competitors (Competitor, 2005). Competitors enjoy a positive societal image and their post-competition experiences show that significant economic benefits may be associated with vocational careers.

It is through three factors that skills competitions may hold some potential for raising the attractiveness of VET. Seventy-eight out of 110 participants talked about the potential impact WSC may have on improving the attractiveness of VET. First, viewing their peers engaged in achieving outstanding results in a variety of vocational occupations may incentivise young people to pursue similar careers; such experiences may be useful in recognising the type of work that young people feel they are suited to doing. Second, seeing competitors reap the rewards of successful vocational careers and the economic benefits associated with them may prompt young people to have higher aspirations through the VET route. Third, in a society where the prevalent images of young people are somewhat negative (Coleman & Schofield, 2007; Pring et al., 2009), seeing successful women and men in vocational occupations may contribute to raising the attractiveness of some vocational trades. Interestingly, the

respondents' approaches to the potential of skills competitions in improving the attractiveness of VET did not substantially differ by their skill category or gender.

Raising awareness on outstanding performance in a variety of vocational occupations

Skills competitions bring together young people with exceptional skills who are motivated to compete and demonstrate expertise in their vocations. These events draw on the best knowledge and practice from workplaces and VET providers. Whether it is a local, regional, national or international competition, competitors put their greatest effort into the technical skill development, creating the atmosphere of a 'celebration of skills' (Competitor, 2009). Obviously, as the level of the competition increases, so do the stakes and the contestants are expected to demonstrate higher levels of expertise. The national competition (The Skills Show) and the international competition (WSC) are, therefore, larger celebrations of vocational excellence than local and regional ones. Only those who are the best of the best in their countries are given a chance to compete internationally.

Two competitors from 2011 and 2005 compared the WorldSkills Competition with the Olympic Games and discussed the opportunities one could think about when exposed to the examples of exceptional performance in sports or skills:

It's the same with the Olympics, it's giving a generation something to think about. And as a young person, to see this, it gives you a lot of options in life. (Competitor, 2011)
The Olympics in London, it's the same thing, just on a bigger scale. People see others doing well, everyone wants to come into that area, and everyone wants to get better at what they're doing. (Competitor, 2005)

Through presenting inspiring examples of success, skills competitions demonstrate the level of excellence that can be achieved in VET and raise the general awareness of various occupations. Moreover, individual cases of successful WorldSkills competitors could have an impact on the reputation of VET. Witnessing excellence and accomplishments that can be achieved by pursuing a vocational career may serve as an inspiration for young people to train in new skills or improve existing ones:

It's enabling young people to be able to demonstrate their skills to a wider audience. It's quite easy for people to think, oh yeah they're at college and they're doing a qualification, that's great, but what are qualifications worth these days? But seeing how they actually apply the knowledge and develop skills, and want to be involved in something like this, that's a really positive experience. (CT)

The theme of the WSC helping young people learn about a variety of vocations, types and levels of skills involved in different occupations emerged in many interviews. Developing such knowledge, interviewees argued, may prove to be useful for understanding the type of work that people may feel suited to doing. The fact that school pupils attend skills competitions may affect their choices of career pathways: 'It gives them a very good understanding of the different occupations and the levels of skill involved with them' (Competitor, 2005). A family member who attended the competition in London recollected: 'there're a lot of people walking around and watching. It was a good help to them to have a look at exactly what could be done, either on a computer, or with a machine, or with a hammer and a chisel'. Employers and TMs were also positive about skills competitions' potential for allowing young people to learn first hand what each particular occupation involves as 'they can see what they're doing, they can see what standard they're working to. If it's brickwork, they can see the kind of work they can produce. For people looking at what career they want, it'd be fantastic for them to see that' (Employer). In addition,

'Unless you are actually showing people careers, they don't always realise there are opportunities out there', a TMsaid and argued that skills events like competitions inspire young

people who may think: ‘yes, that’s the career I want to go into’, and then go and seek out the training.

One of the interviewed CTs, who also served as a TM, shared that young people at the age of 16–19 may not always know which occupation they would like to pursue. WorldSkills squad training that usually takes place at the time when the college is recruiting proves to be beneficial in helping young people identify the trade they want to specialise in and also ‘aspire to be in that squad’ (CT & TM).

As well as the competition performance, it was through talks and teaching that the WorldSkills competitors shared their experiences of developing vocational excellence with the wider public. Seeing and talking to WorldSkills competitors helped others appreciate vocational occupations and gain the confidence that they could also achieve the same level of excellence. A competitor’s family member highly valued his efforts of talking to young people at local schools. She shared that when learning about the competitor’s skills, people thought, ‘yes, that maybe a good thing’. It was somewhat challenging for the interviewees to quantify the influence of their experiences on other people’s career decisions. However, they were positive about such possibilities. A gold medallist believed that her experiences inspired quite a few youngsters:

A lot more people want to do it [the occupation], because of all the experiences I’ve told them about, all the opportunities I’ve had, loads of people want to get involved. And that’s the same at my college, where it basically all started; I’ve left quite a big, huge impact there.

Finally, the meaning of the word ‘vocational’ changed for some competitors and their associates following their experiences with skills competitions. It used to refer to a less desirable career; ‘it didn’t mean quality, it just sounded like you do something like that if you weren’t clever; that’s how I felt, and a lot of people think like that’ (Competitor’s family). However, the WSC entirely changed her understanding of the word ‘vocational’:

If people actually saw what these people were producing, it was incredible, absolutely incredible, in every skill there was, it was amazing! There’s a lot of possibility out there that people do not realise is available.

Demonstrating that VET can lead to a successful vocational career and economic benefits

Many of the competitors talked about a dramatic increase of their reputation and expansion of their networks, as the WSC provided a solid signal to employers and clients regarding competitors’ technical and transferable skills. Positive influences on competitors’ reputation, networking and signalling were reflected in the economic benefits that competitors reaped following their experiences of developing vocational excellence through skills competitions.

In the majority of cases WorldSkills competitors presented excellent illustrations of successful vocational career building. Eighty-one out of 110 participants mentioned that participation in the WSC results in considerable career benefits for competitors. The evidence shows that quite a few competitors took on higher managerial, administrative and supervisory occupations, such as Partner in Family Business, Company Director, Business Owner, Senior Paint Technician, Premier Sous Chef, Workshop Supervisor, Chef de Partie, Head Chef, Project Manager, Head Chocolatier and Mechanical Supervisor. These occupations place the selected competitors in the top socio-economic class, based on the seven-class national statistics socio-economic classification (NS-SEC) (ONS, 2013).

Despite the potential for success, many of the vocational careers are viewed as

‘pretty jobs’ or ways to make a living, noted some respondents. Such competitions help people understand that trades do not serve the sole purpose of making a living (Competitor’s family) and establish skills such as bricklaying and visual merchandising as valid occupations (Competitor, 2011):

It gives you a real good backbone. We’ve trained very hard, the techniques we do, only a trained [occupation] can do and you’re treated differently, not just like a small shop assistant. We do beautiful work that only [occupation] can make. (Competitor, 2007)

Some competitors shared their thoughts on the low esteem of their occupations in society, as opposed to those occupations that require a higher education degree for entry. The WSC, some interviewees maintained, puts vocational careers in a very positive light. The WSC gives a vocational career ‘an appeal, lift[ing] it from being what could be seen as a mundane job, that you can go to very high levels doing this, it flags that up to people’ (CT). Thus, it is this possibility of change in perception that may be occurring as a result of skills competitions that matters.

The experiences of WorldSkills competitors showed the level of success one can achieve in a vocational occupation as well as the income one may have at an early stage of one’s career. Financial benefits in terms of higher incomes came in various forms: pay rises related to a quicker career progression at work; more work completed because the employee was much more skilled after the competition; more clients served because the competitor attracted more clients; starting a business; and additional work such as teaching. Young contestants reaped significant economic benefits:

Ninety per cent of the people that I speak to want to get an apprenticeship. They don’t want to do the university/college route. They want to go out and learn because they’ve seen the benefits. I see the benefits. I’m twenty-two. I’ve got two cars. My own house. Someone that’s gone to college and university doesn’t have that. I have no debts. (Competitor, 2011)

‘Some people go to university because they think, they have to’, said one competitor (2011) who had tried to explain through his media appearances that the ‘academic route isn’t the only route’. He thought he had proved that through an apprenticeship route ‘you can still do well; you don’t have to go to university to do well’. Interestingly, it emerged that occupation-related satisfaction was often more important than monetary benefits for some competitors: ‘The money is not as attractive to me as enjoying my job’ (Competitor, 2007). Although economic benefits may not be one of the main reasons why a young person would choose VET, they may still play some role in the decision-making process. A medal winner from a relatively disadvantaged area observed that, people wanted to be like him in order to improve their economic well-being: ‘I always see a lot of people who I haven’t seen in many [years] and they’d love to be a [occupation], they’d love to, but I only think that they say that, and they want to do that, because they see I’m doing good.’ The competitor did not approve of this attitude; he assumed the focus on good wages shifted attention from the substantive interest in the skill to a secondary, economic point.

Thus, those who pursue VET and participate in the WSC may enjoy ‘phenomenal’ opportunities of developing their technical and personal skills, expanding their networks and climbing up the career ladder. Learning about such opportunities ‘gives the new generation a little bit of hope’ (Competitor’s family).

Creating a positive societal image of young people who choose a vocational pathway

There is a prevalent, negative image of young people in the UK. Politicians talk about a ‘broken society’ with anti-social behaviour, fewer enduring marriages, single parents, crimes committed by young people, and drug and alcohol abuse (Coleman &

Schofield, 2007). Pring et al. (2009) suggest that society needs to be more cautious with such apocalyptic analyses. A more accurate picture would be that, despite significant behavioural changes and despite this being a period of experimentation, the vast majority of young people turn out to be mature and responsible grown-ups, have caring adults to help them get jobs and do not commit crimes (p. 29). This same positive thinking emerges from a competitor (2007):

There's so much bad news all the time that it would be good for the country to see young talent shine through. We've had all that ASBOs and young kids having bad names, but then you look at young skills athletes, doing great things, and making the country better. That's what is important.

The WSC can help develop 'the belief in youngsters [at a time when] people seem to be losing faith in young humans' (Competitor, 2011). The WSC seems to be promoting the image of 'young people who are putting their time into something like this, rather than idling time away' (CT & TM). 'Learning about respectable people of their age may affect feelings of self-respect among the youth' (Competitor, 2011) and give rise to some sense of pride in their communities that is related to young people's success in their vocations nationally and internationally. Some of the study participants referred to this as a 'feel good factor'.

Experiences of WorldSkills competitors may serve not only as sources of hope for young people, but also as evidence that anything can be achieved through hard work.

'Hard work actually does pay back, does pay off' (Competitor, 2011), and it pays off irrespective of a competitor's socio-economic background:

Not only hope, it gives them the initiative to actually get off their backsides and do something because there's a whole new world out there that's just waiting to be found. She comes from a working class family, we're nothing special, we all work, we've instilled into all of children that you have to work and she's worked and she's worked bloody hard and look at her achievements. You only get out of life what you put into it. (Competitor's family)

Young competitors are often viewed as role models and may inspire others to 'just go and take a vocational job, a qualification, get involved with something, it's only positive that can come from it, not negative', said a gold medallist. A CT & TM had a similar viewpoint:

We've got out there, a couple of very, very good young people who have gone through the training cycle, who are now, to some extent, inspirational to other young people, to see where they can end up and what they can do. If you ask me if it's worthwhile, I would say yes, definitely!

How can skills competitions enhance the attractiveness of VET in the UK?

Lorna Unwin observed, 'England always has great examples of good practice. But we don't have a good system' (Wolf, 2011, p. 69). This paper has largely focused on the tip of the good practice—excellence in VET, high standards that can be achieved by those few young people who participate in international skills competitions. The interview data demonstrated which aspects of skills competitions can be used to improve the attractiveness of the vocational pathway in its own right and thus contribute to the improvement of the status of VET in the UK. We attempted to refocus the discussion from parity of esteem to the attractiveness of VET in its own right, by placing the evidence on skills competitions in the framework of the enhancement strategy, thus, promoting an alternative, excellence model for the analysis of VET status in the UK. The important question is: how can these individual cases potentially

affect wider societal perceptions and choices related to pursuing VET? The enhancement strategy of raising the attractiveness of VET would require consistent policy efforts to spread the excellence throughout the entire sector, translating the exceptional practices into policies that would make systemic differences.

Despite the evidence on the potential benefits that skills competitions may offer, the Special Eurobarometer study on attitudes towards VET showed that only 17% of young people in the UK used events, including skills competitions, as a source of information when choosing their educational pathway (European Commission, 2011a). One of the reasons behind such a limited utilisation of skills events as a source of career information could be poor publicity. One employer believed it was difficult to influence young people's post-compulsory decision making through skills competitions without an adequate publicity campaign, 'because if the press aren't particularly interested, then it's very hard to get the message out there'. Another employer argued that he would expect the government to put in place deliberate, systematic strategies of using WorldSkills competitors for promoting vocational excellence, similar to how sports champions promote different sports. Only such systematic publicity campaigns would justify the public spending on skills competitions. The current publicity, the employer added, involved brief news reports on the number of medals the UK won every other year; this served only the political interests of the government and did not translate to wider benefits for the society.

The overwhelming majority of the respondents talked about the lack of publicity for the WSC, even more so in 2011 when it was held in London, where significantly more benefits could have been reaped from a better publicity campaign: 'It wasn't very well profiled in any way. The WorldSkills is an incredible competition, equivalent to the Olympics. A massive event up in London, both ExCels taken and there wasn't anyone really media-wise, they weren't really interested' (Employer). Some interviewees hypothesised that the low level of interest from mass media could have been explained by the eagerness of general audience to hear negative stories than positive ones: 'and it's always an uphill struggle to get the good publicity out' (TM). Another reason for the low level of media attention was the perceived low status of vocational education as opposed to academic education: 'WorldSkills London wasn't promoted as high as it could have been. Maybe that's because VET is pushed down the ladder, as opposed to the academic skills, but now it's the time that skills need to be pushed harder' (CT).

In addition, schools have an important role in developing aspirations in pupils. With the existing vocational/academic divide, schools generally encourage highperforming students to choose university education rather than the FE college/apprenticeship route (Hyland & Winch, 2007). Our interview data confirmed this long-standing trend: 'we never at school got told if you do well in your exams you could get an apprenticeship. You never get told that you can do bricklaying or you can be a plumber' (Competitor, 2009).

Informed guidance on career options is important for successful decision making. A WorldSkills bronze medallist recollected that at school he was strongly encouraged to do A-levels and go to university; he commented on his experience that 'you can't give [people] one and only option because it doesn't work like that'. Moreover, the advice needs to suit the local environment, as the AoC suggests. They believe the poor quality of advice given to navigate the transition between education and work needs improving by building careers advice into the wider curriculum, using skills competitions as an experiential model through which to deliver careers education, and for the Careers Service to work with, and in, partnerships to good effect for local employment contexts (AoC, 2013, p. 10).

More expansive publicity campaigns on the examples of vocational excellence and career success associated with it, as well as using skills competitions to increase VET

aspirations at schools, may carry some potential for revitalising VET. By establishing a positive societal image of young people, such competitions may contribute to raising the attractiveness of VET to the degree that it becomes a respected, high-status learning pathway in its own right. So while it is important to hear Ministers speak of high quality vocational education, it is also important for policymakers to understand that ‘no amount of exhortation will get us there’ (Hancock, 2013). The ultimate disruption of the policy cycle that perpetuates the existing vocational/academic divide requires a systemic approach that builds upon good practices of achieving vocational excellence. Only then will we not need to worry about parity of esteem.

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NOTE

¹ On strengths and weaknesses of the VET system, see, e.g. Cabinet Office (2011); City & Guilds (2014); Dolphin (2014); Fisher & Simmons (2012); Hammond (2005); Hodgson & Spours (2008); Keep (2014); Pring et al. (2009); Wolf (2011).

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