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# ***The competitive edge***

*Insights into how skills competitions are improving participation and employability at a local level*

 The Edge  
Foundation

# Foreword



**Dr Neil Bentley**  
CEO WorldSkills UK

**Employers, colleges and training providers have to work harder than ever to ensure that there is a talent pipeline coming through to address existing skills shortages.** Questions remain, in anticipation of Brexit, about how the UK will go about responding to these skills shortages. This covers everything from new technical education policies to develop home-grown talent to support the delivery of broader economic goals in industrial strategy, inward investment and international trade. All of this is set in the context of addressing a longstanding and seemingly intractable challenge: the need to increase the value associated with *apprenticeships and technical education as a premium start for a young person's career.*

Many training providers and employers have told us how skills competitions provide a form of accelerated development in which young people achieve greater technical excellence in their skill, in a goal to meet ambitious standards set in the competitions. Further, young people who participate in competitions develop invaluable transferable skills and come out as well-rounded individuals. This is particularly valuable when you consider that 86% of employers believe that attitude towards work to be of greater importance than general academic ability (43%), (CBI/Pearson, Helping The UK Thrive 2017).

So we wanted to explore in a more structured way how taking part in skills competitions can contribute to boosting the prestige of apprenticeships and technical careers. Working with the Edge Foundation, we set out to create a more comprehensive evidence base to help demonstrate the benefits of skills competitions and how we can harness and grow this potential further across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland in line with public policy goals for skills and careers advice.

The findings demonstrate three key things. Firstly, the value of skills competitions is clear as a successful tool for driving up standards and inspiring young people to excel in their technical education and apprenticeships, developing the skills the economy needs. Secondly, showcasing participation in skills competitions at local, regional and national levels has a positive impact on a young person's development and career prospects. Thirdly, that this positive impact is derived by participating in the competition at any level and is not necessarily dependent on the level of success achieved.

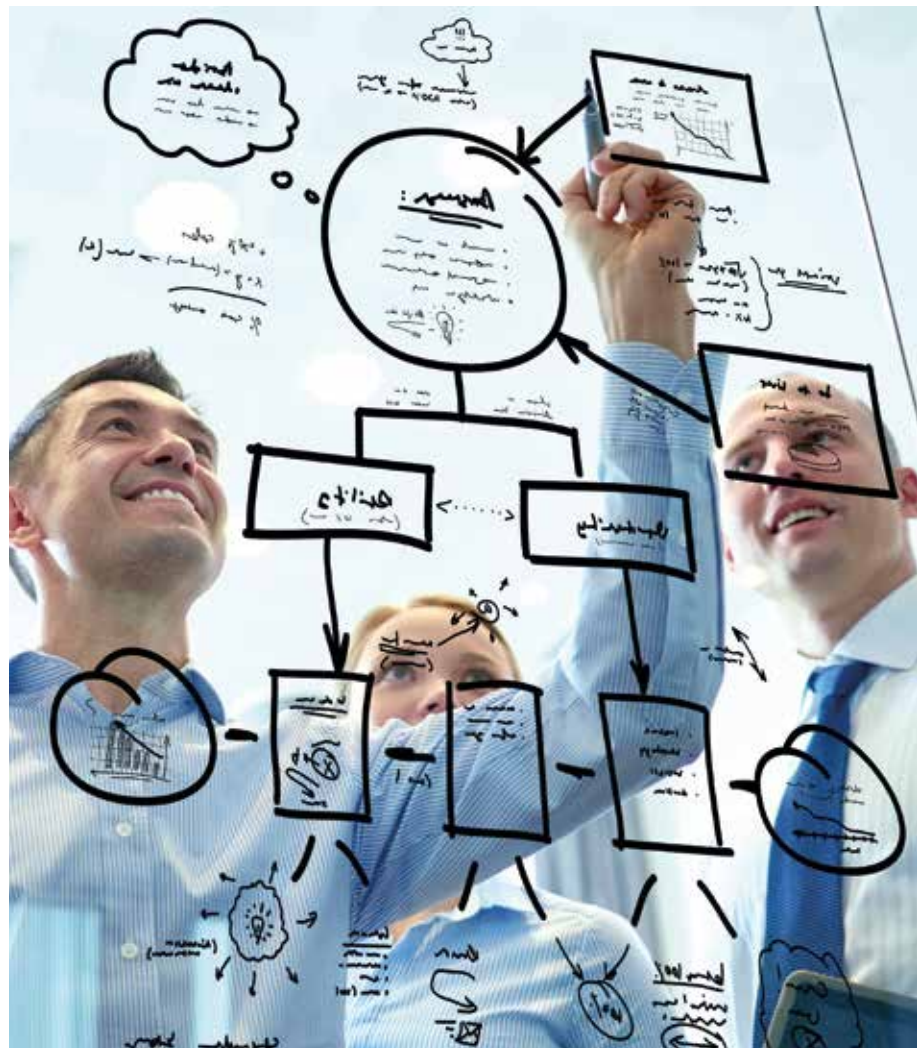
As a result of these findings, we will work with our partners to do more to ensure that schools, colleges, employers and young people are aware of skills competitions and the benefits they bring. We want to increase participation so that more young people can access the benefits of participating. Further, we will promote these benefits to employers, parents and policy makers and, in doing so, contribute to enhancing the value and prestige of apprenticeships and technical career routes. Because ultimately, boosting the numbers of highly skilled and ambitious young people filling technical career routes and apprenticeships will benefit the economy and help more young people get a better start in work and life.

# Introduction

## Competitor Journey



**WorldSkills UK Competitions have been creating excitement and passion for learning in young people for 65 years.** Two hundred and fifty five WorldSkills UK competitors were surveyed as part of this project. This covered those who had participated in local, regional, national and international skills competitions. WorldSkills UK brings together apprentices and young people from across the UK to compete to be the best in their chosen skill – first in national competitions and then as members of Team UK in international skills competitions. Local competition activities run internally by colleges, training providers and businesses enable organisations to identify their best apprentices and students to register for the national competition cycle. The diagram on the left demonstrates the progress young people may make from entering a local skills competition to participating at the international skills competition.





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# Increasing participation

Part of this project involved developing a better understanding of what participation in skills competitions looks like from a local to international level. This encompasses how people first get involved in competitions, their motivations for doing so and the benefits they have received from this. This information can help to develop a more effective pathway into competitions and act as a catalyst for empowering competitors at all levels.

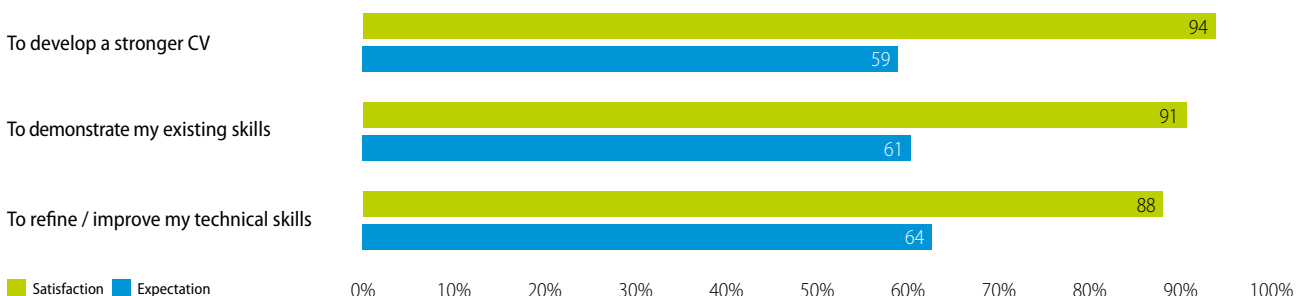
More than **70%** of respondents had taken part in an informal competition at their college/ training provider and more than **40%** in a sector initiated competition.

**90%** of competitors were encouraged to take part by a tutor/ teacher making this by far the most common route into skills competitions.

**81%** of respondents were apprentices or training at a college when they competed, which suggests that strengthening advertising of competitions through tutors/teachers could help more people to find out about these opportunities.

Additional one-to-one support from a tutor (**59%**) and practice in the training providers' workshops (**56%**) were the most common forms of help to prepare for participation in a skills competition.

Competitors described what they hoped to get out of taking part, and how satisfied they were that skills competition(s) met their objectives.

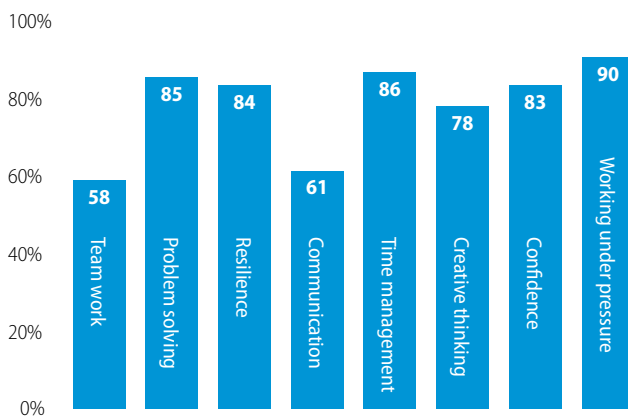


# Employability

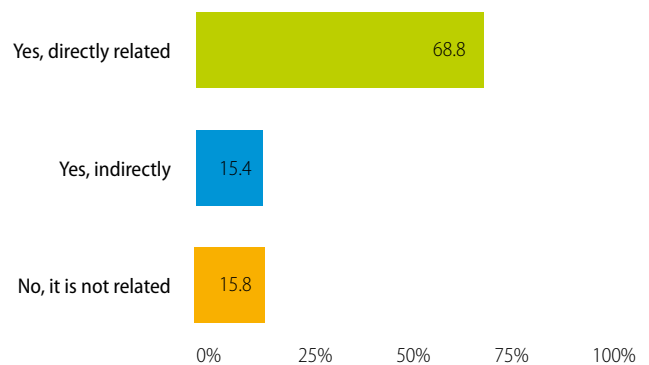
Throughout the competition journey, competitors gain exposure to a wide range of developmental opportunities, whether this is focused on their technical skills or their wider 'soft' or transferable employment skills.

This provides a platform to support them as they enter the labour market, also providing a test case of what kind of elements from skills competitions are taken with them into the workplace.

## Participants who agreed competitions helped developed transferable skills



## Competitors whose current job is in a field directly related to the area/sector in which they took part in skills competition(s)



More than three quarters (78%) mentioned the skills competitions on their CVs, 71% in an informal discussion with their employer and 58% at an interview or assessment centre.

Looking more broadly at their careers so far, 57% of respondents said that they regularly or often use the skills developed through skills competitions in their work.

Two-fifths of respondents (40%) said they felt that skills competitions had added very much to their likelihood of getting a job, and a further 46% agreed that it had added to this a little.

# Elliott Byers

## Motor mechanic – Case study

Elliott was working as an apprentice for Subaru and studying in college when he first became involved in skills competitions. His lecturer had supported a previous WorldSkills UK competitor and encouraged him to apply. Elliott saw it as a good way to test the knowledge he already had and a valuable opportunity to find out what his weaknesses were, and by identifying them enabling him to work harder at overcoming them.

He ended up making it all the way to the regional finals in Birmingham, along with three of his classmates and they were placed 1st, 2nd and 3rd in terms of medals. The experience exceeded his expectations:

***Even if you don't qualify and get to the NEC, you still learn a lot. The tasks that were set were really good because in this day and age it's difficult for mechanics to get the wide spectrum that they used to be able to. Because everyone outsources things like engine rebuilds – a lot of people get third parties to do that. Gearbox rebuilds are also third party but when you go to this competition and that is your task, setting up a backlash on rear differentials for example – is not something that a lot of people have done.***

These lessons have helped Elliott to get his current job. When he joined Tesla at 24 he was going to be the first technician in Scotland - there were a lot of candidates who were a lot older and had more experience but one of the selling points was that he had competed with WorldSkills UK.

He now uses examples from WorldSkills UK and other competitions when interviewing technical candidates for different positions within the UK. He probes them on a wide range of skills learnt through the competitions, so it's all fed back to those experiences.

***Because it really did open my eyes to learn – wow – these are my weaknesses, these are my strengths. And it's good. Whenever I get guys coming through the service centres I'm always saying to them you should go for WorldSkills UK. If you see any type of competition you should go for it.***



# Alfie Hopkin

## Web design – Case study

Alfie was doing his Level 3 in Extended IT in college when one of his lecturers told him about the Welsh Skills Competition. He won that competition and from there found out more about the WorldSkills UK Competitions.

***For me, my involvement was all about self-achievement. I wanted to see how I'd fare against other people my age in the area I wanted to work in. I wanted to check whether I was where I should be in my progress.***

As time went on he progressed through the different stages of competition all the way up to competing on the international stage in Abu Dhabi 2017. During that period of time he also finished college and started looking for a job. Whilst going through Team Selection he got offered the job with Probe RTS. It was the first time that they had heard of WorldSkills UK but they were kind enough to support him through the boot camp training for Squad UK that looks at mind-set and technical skills training.



*Alfie Hopkin, WorldSkills UK National Finalist in Web Design 2017.*

***In my day-to-day job I'm using technologies that I wouldn't have even touched if I hadn't done WorldSkills UK. The current system we use at work is a framework that I learnt about through WorldSkills UK training. I wouldn't have even looked at the framework if I hadn't had the motivation of the competition. It was only when I was put in that environment where I needed to learn things and compete against other people that I went away and learnt as much as I did about it.***

It wasn't just about technical skills though but the soft skills as well. Alfie learnt a lot at the Loughborough (Squad UK) events and they were some of the best times he's ever had.

***I met some brilliant people and made some long-term friends from it. The personal skills I developed from the events included the ability to talk in front of crowds which I would have never done a couple of years ago. A lot of people comment on that and how I'm not just a programmer but I can talk to people as well and share my thoughts.***

Internationally, Alfie came 19th out of 35 and whilst he might not have been completely satisfied with his performance, he is still proud to have competed and done the best he could all the way through.

***What you learn in WorldSkills UK is completely different from what you learn in education. You learn the technical skills but also have the opportunity to learn soft skills. So you get the best of both worlds instead of just going into college and gaining a qualification that you may or may not know all aspects of.***

# James Aucote

## Carpentry – Case study

James is a carpenter joiner. He has been self-employed for over two years and works on contracts for Heritage Building & Conservation. He enjoys his work in restoration and conservation. Previously James worked for Fairhurst Ward Abbots and did his apprenticeship with them. He decided to become self-employed when the company went into liquidation. James enjoys his work in restoration, he likes taking sash windows apart, looking at the pockets of the sash window and finding out their history by discovering previous tradesmens' names and dates written on the back. Work can be challenging at times but then he takes a step back and rethinks.



*WorldSkills UK National Finalists in Joinery.*

### ***If [work] wouldn't be challenging, it would be boring.***

James's college lecturer Dave Brough approached him to see whether he would be willing to represent the trade and the college at the regional skills competition. This appealed to James but he was also inspired by the fact that the college lecturer believed that he had the abilities and could do well.

He participated in two SkillBuild Competitions while he was an apprentice. He did the first competition when he was 20 years old in 2013. At that time he was working towards a bench joinery carpentry qualification in Burton and South Derbyshire College to fit bedrooms, bathrooms and kitchens. He remembers how the pressure got to him too much at his first competition.

### ***I felt under pressure and stressed and work did not go according to plan and I did not finish the project on that day.***

A year later he was already working on conservation and heritage projects when he went back to compete again. While he has received training before both competitions, this time it was different. Prior to the competition he trained twice a week in college, his tutor brought him past competition papers and timed James on those. Having learnt from his first competition experience, he has received a lot of training on time-management. James has also received encouragement and plenty of good advice from his tutor while training:

### ***Don't look at the time constantly, don't look at what the others are doing because they may have made a mistake early on, concentrate on yourself and do your best.***

Skills competitions helped James to develop high level skills. He developed an eye for detail and working at a high standard.

### ***It is not about rushing things but taking time and taking pride. You need to check and double check - you can always cut more off but not the other way round. You do develop certain key skills like this. When you work on windows or doors you use these skills on a day-to-day basis, do the same things, you draw it in a full scale, mark it out and manufacture it.***

These skills helped him in his work as making a mistake can be very expensive. James thinks that the three most important skills he has developed are team working, stress management and time management. These also helped him to achieve well when doing college assessment tasks. He has become more self-confident as a result of participating in skills competitions.

James came away with a Gold Medal from the regional competition and he felt a sense of achievement. He was shocked and surprised but very proud. My college lecturer had faith in me and I wanted to prove that I can do it. It is a test that you cannot fail – it is a good test. You have a good day out and a good story to tell.



# Charlotte Williams

## Beauty therapy – Case study

Charlotte owns her own complementary therapy and beauty salon, but this had not always been her plan. She went to Pembrokeshire College to study Health & Social Care, specialising in complementary therapy. Having her own business was something Charlotte had considered before but didn't have the confidence to go ahead until taking part in a skills competition gave her the boost she needed to realise this dream.

Charlotte originally heard about the competitions through being a model for one of the girls from her college who was competing in a UK Final Competition.

At first Charlotte did an in-house competition at the college, with the tutors and a past student moderating. Over the few months between the competition rounds, she practised at college and at home. Charlotte's friend from college supported her a great deal and acted as her model. They set things up just as if it was the real competition. Her family were also very supportive and came to watch her in the final.



WorldSkills UK National Finals in Beauty Therapy 2017.

When Charlotte competed in the WorldSkills Wales Competition she felt it provided a real learning opportunity. Her attitude was:

***I'll just go and do it and if I don't come out of it with anything it doesn't matter, I've gained some experience.***

In this first competition she surprised herself by gaining second place. This led her to go on to the WorldSkills UK Competition. Again, in the first round in Birmingham she was shocked when she heard her name called out as one of the winners and she went on to the finals where she achieved the Bronze Medal. Charlotte did feel she overcame some challenges along the way:

***Because I am dyslexic writing can sometimes be difficult. I was lucky to have been allocated extra time for the consultation parts though, which really helped me. Overall it just proves that if you try your best you can succeed.***

Taking part in the skills competitions gave Charlotte a lot of confidence in herself.

***Actually I can do this, I am good at what I do and that's what pushed me to go in to my own business.***

She also believes the competitions improved her communication skills – she doesn't panic now when she's doing consultations with clients. The competitions helped Charlotte with the management of paperwork for her business. Charlotte takes part in a new course every year, which in turns helps improve her confidence further and gives her opportunities to socialise with other groups of people. It keeps her motivated to learn different skills for the industry she's in.

When first opening her own salon, Charlotte gained many clients from having taken part in the competitions. She was in her local newspaper and on the achievement wall in her college. She went back to her college to act as a judge and encourage them to take part in competitions. All Charlotte's medals are on display in her salon and people still ask her what they are for, so it's an ongoing topic of conversation for her.

Charlotte has had her salon open for almost four years now. She went on to win Beauty Newcomer of the year 2016 with HB Training Wales Ltd and has plans to expand her business at the end of the year, with the hope of employing someone else to work with her. She feels that she now has the ability to bring together a team and work with others in the industry.

# Inspiration agenda

Many of the competitors that come out of skills competitions are often noted by the employer or college as having become well rounded and successful people in their own right. Taking part in a skills competition can provide them with an opportunity to inspire other young people to consider taking up technical and vocational education and apprenticeships, either in the same sector or their own area of interest. This is echoed by the number of former competitors who have become Skills Champions – a growing network of inspiring young professionals who have competed in a WorldSkills UK Competition National Final. They act as inspirational role models for future generations of apprentices and young people reaching out to around 6,000 individuals in 2017-2018.



WorldSkills UK Skills Champions in 2017/18



## ABOUT WORLDSKILLS UK

**WHAT WE DO:** We are an accelerator for young people in the start-up phase of their careers. This means we inspire more young people to take up apprenticeships and technical education; we champion their success; and we accelerate their personal and professional development.

**WHY WE DO IT:** To change the national conversation so that apprenticeships and technical education are seen as prestigious career routes for all young people.

**HOW WE DO IT:** Through experiential and digital careers advice; skills competitions, and mindset and productivity training.



## ABOUT THE EDGE FOUNDATION

Edge is the independent education charity dedicated to shaping the future of education to meet the demands of the 21st century global economy and ensure opportunity for all. Technical and creative skills are critical to our modern digital economy. Edge believes that high quality technical and professional learning should be a key part of a coherent, unified and holistic education system to support social mobility and enable all young people to fulfil their potential.

### METHODOLOGY

The findings of this research were carried out with an online survey of 255 former WorldSkills UK Competitions competitors 2018.

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