

Inspiring excellence: a guide to embedding skills competition activity in Apprenticeships and vocational learning

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Foreword



WorldSkills UK Skills Competitions recognise and reward real talent and drive up levels of expertise in Apprenticeships, skills and further education.

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

Speaking with competitors who have been involved in the WorldSkills UK journey, from taking part in regional competition heats through to representing the UK at the international competition WorldSkills, ***I am convinced of the benefits that skills competitions deliver to individuals and their organisations.*** From raising self-esteem through to providing opportunities to develop skill levels further and benchmark training delivery, skills competitions really can drive up the quality and profile of vocational education.

This guide is designed to provide information and tools for all providers to help them embed WorldSkills UK Competition activity in their teaching and learning programmes. It provides practical approaches to establishing competitions as an important part of the learners' experience. Over time this guide will be adapted to reflect more accurately the diversity of approaches from all four nations.

I strongly encourage you all to engage in skills competitions and I hope we can recruit ambitious young people and teaching staff from your organisation to participate in Team UK for future international WorldSkills Competition.

Jaïne Bolton

Chief Operating Officer, National Apprenticeship Service and UK Official Delegate for WorldSkills and WorldSkills Europe

1. Introduction

“ The vision is about the whole rather than just those who are competing and it’s about improving teaching and learning. ”

Stella Mbubaegbu, Principal, Highbury College Portsmouth



Skills competition activities can benefit everyone – learners, apprentices, teachers and trainers, management and employers – by raising standards, improving outcomes and enhancing engagement.

This guide, commissioned by the National Apprenticeship Service (NAS) and produced by the Learning and Skills Improvement Service (LSIS), will provide senior managers in the Further Education and Skills sector with practical approaches to making competition activity an established tool within teaching, training and learning. It demonstrates why recognised competitions need to become integrated into learners’ experience and will also provide valuable background information to use in tenders that include a skills competition element.

Inspiring excellence draws on expertise from senior managers, staff and learners in colleges and work-based learning (WBL) providers across a range of regions, sizes and types where skills competition activity features strongly. It also shows how skills competition work can benefit apprentices, including those in small companies.

It includes:

- reasons for undertaking skills competition activity;
- an exploration of how to overcome possible difficulties and allay concerns;
- guidance on relating skills competitions to self-assessment and quality improvement, specifically Ofsted inspection and the Common Inspection Framework (CIF);
- a step-by-step guide to developing an embedded approach to skills competition activity;
- a checklist to help you assess how well-embedded skills competition activity is in your organisation;
- examples of good practice in a range of settings and at a range of levels; and
- signposts to other useful resources.

Note: The learners described in this guide may be any post-16 learner involved in vocational education and training or Apprenticeships – students, apprentices or employees.

An online version of this guide is available, supported by resources that give the views of providers and learners. www.excellencegateway.org.uk/skillscompetitions

The guide may also be used in conjunction with the information and competition toolkits available from the www.worldskills.org

Background

Skills competitions and competition-related activities have the power to transform learning outcomes through innovations in teaching and assessment practices in Apprenticeships and other vocational learning programmes. National and international competitions can be used as powerful improvement tools to enhance the image of vocational education in the UK and raise standards.

Competition activity may range from quick quizzes in class to international demonstrations of top-level skills in formal competitions such as EuroSkills and WorldSkills. It can take place inside colleges, learning or training centres and workplaces – between groups and departments – and include taster and ‘Have a Go’ activities. It may also involve industry through sponsorship and links with employers.

Used in Apprenticeship programmes and the vocational curriculum, competition activity can hone attention to detail, develop Personal Learning and Thinking Skills, and promote bonding across departments and organisations. What’s more, it can be fun!



“ Skills competitions are one of our quality improvement strategies – and one we most enjoy. ”

Marion Plant, Principal, North Warwickshire and Hinckley College

Of course, competition activity cannot be undertaken lightly – there are undoubtedly risks that must be managed and health and safety issues that must be addressed. It is also important to ensure that formal competition activity is not a stand-alone or marginal activity but an integral part of the mission and strategy.



2. Who gains what? Benefits of competition activity

“Apprentices would be expected to be able to perform a car service within an hour or hour and a half. If this is taking, say 2 – 2½ hours, then it is down to the Assessor to give constructive feedback to get the learner to the next level. Trying to put a bit of a competitive edge to the work, through games, brings benefits.”

Paul Dancer, Director of Transport and Engineering,
North Warwickshire and Hinckley College

Most people respond to challenges and competitions. The success of so many television programmes involving competition, from music and dance to commerce, cooking and crafts, is testament to this. Further, the use of competitions and competitive games is an established strategy in teaching, training and learning. Embedding skills competition activity in Apprenticeship programmes and vocational learning capitalises on these approaches to enliven the learning experience and motivate learners.



Apprentices in Motor Vehicle Engineering need to be able to perform tasks in the workshop within a given time and to a high level of accuracy. Some colleges build up these skills through a ‘pit-stop challenge’, where teams compete to change wheels in the fastest time.

A group of Level 3 Hairdressing learners at North Hertfordshire College were given the task of designing hairstyles on the theme of ‘bonfire night’. They began with a demonstration of different styles and spent some time practising the techniques themselves. They researched possible designs and approaches then designed and produced their own styles drawing on the techniques developed earlier. Finally the learners conducted peer assessment using criteria agreed earlier, evaluated the styles and said why they thought one was the best.

Competitive activities can be powerful tools for boosting confidence, developing high-level technical competence and encouraging self-reliance. The enthusiasm of people who take part – learners, teaching staff and managers, is overwhelming. We outline some of the benefits to learners, staff, organisations and employers in the following pages.



Benefits to learners

Benefits to learners are likely to include:

- building stronger relationships with other learners;
- building collaboration between the tutor / trainer and the learner;
- identifying strengths and weaknesses;
- contributing to individual learning plans;
- developing wider networks in other colleges and in industry;
- identifying a network of possible employers;
- improving commitment and reliability;
- better problem-solving skills;
- gaining experience in associated and wider skills – eg some may need to get involved in purchasing materials.

Other substantive benefits are described in more detail below.



Supports the all-round development of learners

Competition activity can both develop vocational skills to high levels of excellence and enhance capacity in skills and attributes valued by employers such as team work, prioritisation, time management, judgement and working under pressure. Alongside other enrichment activities, such as enterprise education, work experience and cultural experiences, skills competitions can contribute to setting clear and stretching targets for learning and achievement.

“ It’s a good way of testing your abilities and learning from that. ”

Third year Electrical Engineering apprentice

Integrating skills competitions activity into Apprenticeship programmes is in line with the concept of expansive Apprenticeships, which aim to stretch learners to become rounded experts who contribute to many areas of business success throughout worthwhile careers. For more details see *Creating and Supporting Expansive Apprenticeships* (2010) and *Towards Expansive Apprenticeships: A Commentary by the Teaching and Learning Research Programme* (2008) both by Alison Fuller and Lorna Unwin. The combination of vocational excellence with the skills required for work and life is important to employers.

“ There are a wider range of skills needed in addition to manufacturing skills. It’s not all about engineering and finance; these are important skills but managing customers and dealing with problems are equally important. Marketing is also important: most people don’t understand this and the effect it has. Engineers need a course on business management, not just financial management – although this is important, it is only one part of the jigsaw. ”

Stephen Burrows, Milling Products Manager, AgieCharmilles

2. Who gains what? Benefits of competition activity

Learners benefit from the extra mentoring associated with competition preparation, the feedback they receive from industry experts and the extra tuition. Apprentices get the opportunity to work with competitors from other companies. They can then pass on these enhanced skills to peers and colleagues. Involvement in competitions can be a powerful means of growing a learner's self-esteem and self-confidence.



Competitors who do not win still gain. Several learners commented on feeling nervous before a competition, but learnt to cope with their nerves by focusing on the task before them. Pre-competition coaching by tutors is particularly helpful to young competitors in helping them deal with pressure and has value well beyond the competition.

One disappointed learner soon realised the experience had made him stronger and worked out how he could overcome his nerves to do better next time; another was able to analyse the winning entries to work out how she could improve her own work.

Young people engaged in Apprenticeships and vocational learning will need to operate in a global economy and may need to work abroad. Even those who stay within the UK need to understand and value different cultures.

“What the skills competitions linked to WorldSkills do is give you those international benchmarks and many of our students will need to develop global careers. How better to do that than to see what the potential is beyond that with which we are familiar in this country?”

Marion Plant, Principal, North Warwickshire and Hinckley College

External competitions, including WorldSkills, provide opportunities for students to meet learners from other parts of the country and further afield, and gain experience of different cultural values.

“You can adapt things you have learned [in competitions] to other life situations. I met loads of people from all the other countries – different cultures and everything.”

Level 2 learner, Floristry

A computing student who won a Gold Award in IT at WorldSkills 2011 was asked to accompany his college principal to China. The experience of going there was hugely positive for him as he was treated like a celebrity by the Chinese students and talked to many of them about his work.

Helps to achieve qualification goals

Competition activity can be used to contextualise the criteria for qualifications.

At Newcastle College there are lots of cross-discipline competitions encompassing performance and self-presentation, which provide a great way of drawing different types of performers together. Some of the criteria for competition work are embedded in the performing arts curriculum and judging performance against criteria is key. The learners learn how to meet the criteria for presentation, time management, reliability, confidence and group work.



Anecdotal evidence, along with data now systematically collected and analysed by some of the providers consulted, suggests the learners who take part in competitions are more likely to complete their courses and achieve their qualification goals.

One college has recorded data demonstrating that between 2008 and October 2012 all 306 participants in vocational skills competitions achieved their main qualification goal.

Where relevant data has been collected and analysed, colleges found that all learners who had taken part in external competitions in the past few years had achieved their qualification goals.

Develops skills for employability

Competition activity develops the generic skills that are so important for employability. Young people learn how to work in a competitive environment, how to cope with disappointment, to react quickly and to prepare thoroughly.

“ If they are to compete in the market place, they have to have the other skills. In a job interview, nobody is going to say ‘talk to me about unit 9’ because they are not interested in that. They really want to know: what skills have you got? Show me what you can do. Who have you worked for? What have you done?’ So competition work is a way to demonstrate real skills and also a passion and hunger to learn more and develop real talents and skills that move students forward. ”

Ian Wynd, Quality & Performance Leader, North Warwickshire and Hinckley College

“ The skills for competitions link to those needed in work. The attitudes are the same and can be developed from Level 1 Foundation students upwards. ”

Angela Allan, Director of Projects and Partnerships, Newcastle College

Awakens inspiration and ambition

Competitions open learners' eyes to wider possibilities in life and work. They can show what skills they will need to develop and to what level.

“ It teaches them to pay attention to detail ... when you are in competition you have just a short time to read the requirements of the job and understand them and do them. Then you have to have the ability to pick out the important facts and disregard everything else. ”

Christine Vokins, Competitions Coordinator,
City of Bristol College

Competitors can inspire and motivate, becoming role models for other learners, especially where the college celebrates participation in competitions. Observing excellence can fire the desire to achieve similar standards; it is often a matter of honing skills through practice and trying different techniques.



“ It gives you the opportunity to learn new things and push yourself just that little bit further. ”

2nd year Electrical Engineering Apprentice

Celebrating participation and success of competitors gives recognition and encourages participation of their peers and younger learners.

Many learners and apprentices in the Further Education and Skills sector have modest aspirations and live in areas where employment prospects are mostly limited to jobs with low levels of skills. Competition activity can be instrumental in increasing motivation, widening horizons and improving achievement.



Increases motivation and enjoyment

Embedding competition activity in the Apprenticeship programmes and vocational curriculum can motivate learners by making the curriculum more interesting than strict adherence to the basic qualification structure – it's a break from usual routine and more exciting.

“ External competitions provide opportunities for raising aspirations and for students to meet other students from around the world – which is vital in terms of valuing diversity. Learners and tutors involved come back buzzing and this is infectious. It can have an effect on raising standards. ”

Maggie Cawthorn, Director of Curriculum and Quality,
Kendal College

Many of the teachers consulted noticed positive changes in the behaviour of learners who took an interest in competitions – both the participants and the observers.

“ It is fun for the learners. They gain so much confidence from involvement and get to meet like-minded learners from all over the country. ”

Janet Smith, Deputy Principal, South Thames College



Benefits to teachers and trainers

Greater scope for creativity in teaching, training and learning techniques

Competition activity stretches teachers, trainers and assessors as well as learners.

“An interdisciplinary competition was a fabulous experience for learners and teachers. The theme was recycling, which added a further ‘green’ dimension, and there was a real buzz about the college. The competition also provided a vehicle for joint working between the two teaching teams (hair and beauty) and between the two groups of learners. A new programme, on hair and media make-up, will require a similar cross-disciplinary approach.”

Lorraine Gammon, Head of Creative Studies, Stephenson College

Many people with whom we consulted commented that competition activity was great continuing professional development (CPD) for staff – updating and extending their subject specialist and pedagogical skills and knowledge.

Job satisfaction

There is huge motivation and enjoyment in training learners to a standard that has the potential to change their lives.

2. Who gains what? Benefits of competition activity

“ There is real motivation for staff when their learners participate and achieve success. ”

Andrew Beardall, Head of Student Engagement and Enrichment, South Thames College

Opportunities to benchmark and learn from others

Competitions offer staff the opportunity to visit other training providers both within the UK and internationally, and compare the standards expected in internal, regional, national and international competition.

They report having been “bowled over” by the scale of major WorldSkills competitions, and the levels of skills on show. They are also able to see new and different techniques on display.

“ I think sometimes seeing is believing...too many of us are too busy inside our organisations and we don't get out and look enough. It takes one trip to a national skills competition or indeed the privilege of going to London WorldSkills and the minute you immerse yourself in that, it captures you and you never look back. ”

Marion Plant, Principal, North Warwickshire and Hinckley College

One Head of Department commented that competitive activities were particularly helpful for improving performance standards with learners at Levels 2 and 3 because their next step is into industry where there are time constraints.



Enhanced networking

Teachers and trainers develop relationships beyond their own organisations with staff and employers, making contacts and developing communities of practice with their peers in the same specialist areas.

“ I feel that working with private training organisations and other colleges sharing training techniques and resources has been very beneficial to both Newcastle College and the other parties; we have all benefited from the skills that I and others have delivered and shared with WorldSkills and their stakeholders. ”

Rod Reed, Lecturer, Automotive Engineering, Newcastle College

Personal recognition and development

Staff get the opportunity to become competition judges, coaches and training experts and showcase themselves in front of their peers and employers.

“ Staff involved in supporting learners through competition are pleased to see their students develop their skills and do well in competition and being able to report on improvements and success gives them a buzz. ”

Rob Higgins, Head of Department for Construction Crafts and Multi-crafts, Highbury College

Some colleges support staff to obtain coaching qualifications and use their coaching skills in a cross-college capacity to support competitors in different specialisms.

Benefits to Further Education and Skills providers

Increased employability of learners

“Giving learners the edge” – participation in competitions is something learners can add to their CVs and talk about.



“ It is quite clear that when learners enter competitions they become more used to that type of environment. So they can take those skills to a competitive job interview. It also teaches them that the only way you are going to succeed in a competitive world is if you prepare yourself properly. ”

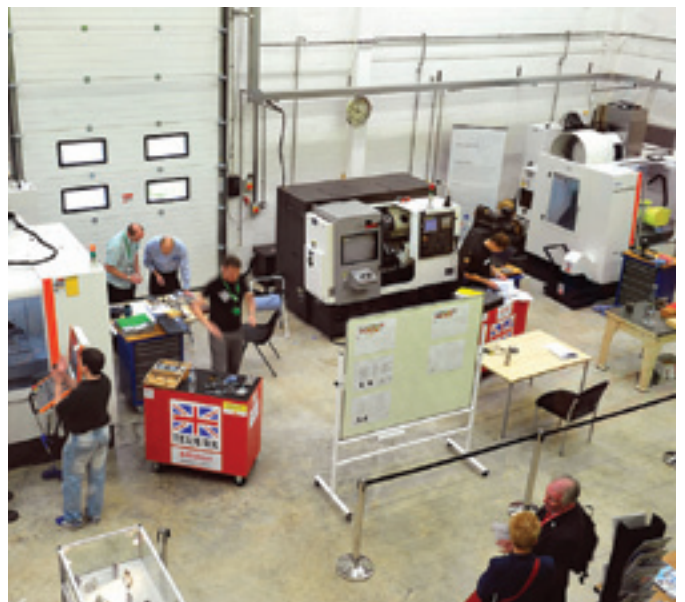
Keith Ham, Curriculum Manager, Construction,
City of Bristol College

Access to additional resources

Successful competition enhances reputation, which brings in more learners, and more resources come with more learners.

Colleges involved in hosting or even just participating in competitions have been able to acquire state of the art machinery at substantial discounts.

There may also be opportunities to attract additional funding or in-kind support from local employers or the European Social Fund (ESF).



2. Who gains what? Benefits of competition activity

Supports the move from competence to excellence

“Some colleges may see competitions as a gimmick to get your name in lights, but actually it’s not what it is about at all. It’s about moving from the ordinary to the outstanding or excellent.”

Peter Lavender, College Governor, North Warwickshire and Hinckley College

There can be a gap between striving for excellence in skills and performance and the requirements of qualifications. Many providers of vocational learning and skills are concerned at the lack of differentiation in some vocational qualifications, noting that:

“If you get a Level 3, that’s all you get; what about if you are capable of a Level 4, 5 or 6 or what if you are capable of technical skills development that takes you to world class?”

Marion Plant, Principal, North Warwickshire and Hinckley College

Some colleges we consulted are looking at how competitions could be embedded within units of qualifications.

The vocational excellence exhibited in skills competitions can demonstrate what true excellence means in a vocational context.

“It is really quite remarkable the difference in the learners who have taken part in WorldSkills against those that haven’t and how much further they have progressed in their unit.”

Joe Skelner, Lecturer, Computer Aided Engineering, City of Bristol College

Raises the profile of Apprenticeships and vocational learning

The impact of skills competitions in action and the achievements of competitors can transform parents’ and learners’ views on the value of vocational learning and help them appreciate that vocational skills are not a second best to academic study. This could contribute to changing perceptions of vocational learning and career choice.



“A learner in one college won a regional final in IT. His parents had no idea that he had such talent until his father accompanied him to the regional final and then both parents to the regional celebration event. You could see the awe in their reaction to his success.”

Stella Mbubaegbu, Principal, Highbury College Portsmouth

The publicity associated with competition activity can also contribute to improved perceptions of both vocational learning and the provider organisation.

At Leeds College of Building, mini competitions that typically last half a day are held during Open Days. These have attracted sponsorship and are great for raising the profile of vocational skills with parents, prospective students and employers.

Marketing and promotional opportunities

Involvement in competitions can raise the profile of the college or college department and enhance its reputation – at least one college we consulted found they attracted more apprentices as a result. Increasingly, Further Education colleges are using their involvement in competitions as part of their marketing strategies and learners and staff involved in competition events act as ambassadors for the college. Participating in competitions also raises the profile of the college or provider with national and local politicians. Taking part in competitions may lead to opportunities to host or even create new competitions, thus raising the profile even more and improving links with employers.



“ Develops motivation and inspiration ... both for the competitors and the wider learner group. There is a lot of celebration of participation, so everyone in the college will be aware of it and there are posters highlighting competition involvement and success all around the college. ”

Andrew Beardall, Head of Student Engagement and Enrichment, South Thames College

Improving links with schools and the wider community

Competitions can also develop links with local schools.

Kendal College has successfully engaged disaffected young learners from local schools in an activity where the participants needed to build a vehicle that was able to move across ramps. The competition was judged according to several criteria, which meant that there were winners in several categories

There are many similar opportunities for engaging in competitions with local schools and the wider community.



2. Who gains what? Benefits of competition activity

Newcastle College runs an annual competition that embraces equality and diversity. Each curriculum area decides on a theme, following a common brief but ensuring it is related to their curriculum and qualification objectives. This year the brief included working with the local community and raising awareness of equality and diversity issues. The competition ends with an event and an exhibition. Newcastle United football club usually sends players to present prizes and 'Show Racism the Red Card' is represented. Key people are invited to be guest speakers – Paralympian Stephen Miller made the keynote speech in 2012.

Competitions can inspire younger learners to emulate the learners at higher levels. They watch and rehearse to try to reach the same standard.

“ Some simply enjoy participating in ‘Have a go’ activities where they can try out different experiences. It makes it just a bit more motivating for them. These activities have been very popular. ”

Janet Smith, Deputy Principal, South Thames College

Developing the world-class skills that underpin economic competitiveness

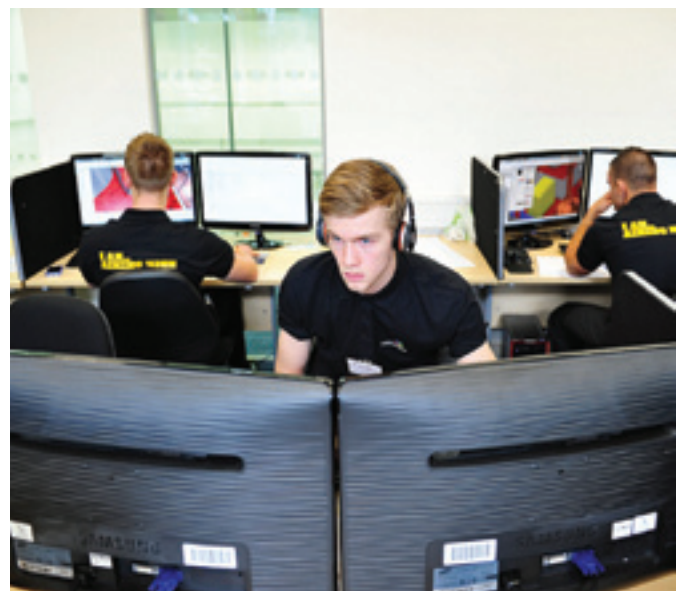
The defining feature of Further Education and Skills providers is their focus on developing the skills and knowledge required in a world-class workforce. Skills competitions show staff and learners what they could be aiming for.

“ The infrastructure of the world rests on skills, and if we have these high standards of skills, it’s transformational. It’s about raising standards of skills that the whole world benefits from – and is infinitely more important than a sports competition. So, if we are about skills and we are passionate about raising the standards of skills, it opens a whole new world of benefits. ”

Stella Mbubaegbu, Principal, Highbury College Portsmouth

International benchmarking and experience

Many providers refer to “being world class” in their mission statement and strategic plan. Involvement in skills competition activity at local, regional, national and international levels provides examples against which organisations, staff and learners can benchmark their performance.



As a country we also need to be aware of how our competitors are doing. The biennial WorldSkills International competition, for example, involves 61 member countries/regions and around 1000 learners aged 18–23 from across the world competing for medals in more than 40 different skills. Although compared with the resources and time invested by top-scoring countries like Korea and Switzerland, we still have some way to go, the performance of Team UK has greatly improved over the years. The Further Education and Skills sector has contributed significantly to Squad and Team selection and development, and provided facilities and training experts.

In WorldSkills 2011, young learners from the UK, many of them apprentices, won five gold medals in skills from visual merchandising to bricklaying, silver medals in landscape gardening and autobody repair and bronze medals in skills from refrigeration to car painting. They also achieved 12 Medallions of Excellence. Behind the excellent performance of these young people lies a large squad of participants with outstanding skills, inspired by the chance to take part.

Increasing participation in skills competitions among colleges and WBL providers could also contribute to increasing the pool of excellent UK competitors and encourage an ethos of striving for excellence throughout the Further Education and Skills sector.



Benefits to employers

Better skilled trainees and prospective employees

Learners are more aware of leading-edge practice and more able to work to exacting standards.

“ The increased capacity of tutors and assessors, due to adopting WorldSkills standards of teaching and high standards of assessing and marking, result in better trained apprentices and prospective employees. ”

Rod Reed, Lecturer, Automotive Engineering,
Newcastle College

“ If you want these learners to go on in the next five or so years from being an employee to starting their own business, creating wealth and employing people, the soft skills are incredibly important. And if they don't understand that, the business will probably fail more because of the lack of soft skills than because they are bad engineers. If they are bad engineers they probably wouldn't get to the stage of forming a business anyway. ”

Stephen Burrows, Milling Product Manager, AgieCharmilles

2. Who gains what? Benefits of competition activity



Some colleges offer extra tuition for their trainees at no cost if the employers provide time for the learners to take part in competitions.

The principal of Leeds College of Building approached companies in the sector and proposed that the college would provide extra tuition for their trainees at no cost if the employers would provide time for the learners to take part in competitions. In addition, the college marketing team would work with the employers to maximise the publicity from the competitions for the company as well as the college. Both the college and the employers have benefited from this arrangement.

Enhanced company profile and marketing opportunities

Competition publicity has proved to be mutually beneficial for the profiles and reputations of both companies and colleges.

“ It is useful to work in this way with training managers in companies. It builds links and relationships, and the good publicity from competitions is welcomed by the employers. ”

Nigel Leigh, Principal, Stephenson College

“ The SME employer of a learner who got into Squad UK recognised that the skills that were being performed at that very high level improved the performance and the reputation of the company. WorldSkills exposure was something they were very proud to have and they took pride in the reputational benefit that it had brought to them. ”

Martin Shelton, Vice Principal, North Warwickshire and Hinckley College

Improved business performance

Some employers are branching into new areas of business because their apprentices have done specific training as part of preparation for competitions and brought new skills back to the company.

“ Some providers are finding that employers are recognising the benefit of competitions because there is a direct impact on business performance. Their apprentices are developing the skills to develop the business and give the employers business ideas or suggest markets they have not yet explored. ”

Peter Lavender, College Governor, North Warwickshire and Hinckley College

3. Skills competitions and quality improvement

Embedding competition activity within the vocational curriculum provides a valuable lever for self-assessment and quality improvement. The embedded approach could contribute to improving the performance of individuals, groups of learners, their teachers and assessors, and organisations as a whole.

However, competition activity must be seen as an integral part of the provider's quality improvement cycle, with direct reference to the self-assessment and improvement process.

“ The approach should lead to better teaching and learning and as such can contribute to self-assessment for Ofsted inspection. However, the link needs to be made clear. ”

Nigel Leigh, Principal, Stephenson College

Highbury College maintains a special competitions file that is shown to the Inspectors and is useful in supporting the judgements made on the impact of the work. It details every entry they have had, the results, the school they went to, the employer that they are with. Every department has a 'good practice' file and competitions form a major part of that file.

Skills competitions and the Common Inspection Framework

Skills competitions provide opportunities for presenting evidence for Ofsted inspections and self-assessment reports. Of course the competition activity needs to be seen alongside other aspects of the provider's work and sit within a comprehensive system for self-assessment and quality improvement. We would expect, for example, that issues relating to safeguarding would be properly addressed and

that the impact of competition activity should be assessed across the whole of each main CIF heading as appropriate to each provider.

This section looks at the criteria Ofsted Inspectors use when making judgements about how well providers are meeting the needs of learners and suggests how competition activity could contribute to evidence of effectiveness. The criteria are based on the revised Common Inspection Framework 2012. The changes of most relevance include the increased focus on teaching, learning and assessment, more emphasis on wider skills and outcomes for learners, and the effective use of learner, employer and stakeholder views for improvement.

Ofsted would expect to see quantitative data on the impact of competition activity to support any qualitative examples in self-assessment reports. We have suggested some examples of the types of activity that may contribute to evidence of effectiveness and quality, based on the information obtained from the colleges with whom we consulted. However, examples need to be justified by the systematic collection of data on achievement and success of cohorts as well as individuals.

Outcomes for learners

Ofsted Inspectors will look for evidence that:

- *All learners achieve and make progress relative to their starting points and learning goals*



3. Skills competition and quality improvement

Ofsted expects targets to be set and achievement measured against starting points and learning goals. Encouraging skills development at a high level for learners is the obvious desired outcome of judgement on 'outcomes for learners'. Targets should be monitored throughout the year and distance travelled measured. Many of the providers consulted were clear that learners involved in competitions achieved or exceeded their qualification aims.

“Students have very high standards of work and develop very good practical and work-related skills. Many students win awards at regional and national competitions.”

Ofsted Inspection Report, Highbury College 2011

In Hairdressing and Performing Arts cohorts at North Hertfordshire College there has been substantial year-on-year improvement in retention and success rates over the past five years. They attribute this partly to involvement in competition work.

- **Learners develop personal, social and employability skills**

Many of the learners with whom we consulted commented on the development of their employability skills.



A group of South Thames students discussed their experiences of competition activity and the different ways they had benefited. One entered the WorldSkills competition in 2011 and got 2nd place: the experience made him more efficient and conscious of time management because he had two hours to complete the competition task. A learner who was not involved in the actual competitions but helped with organisation said, “Our task was to meet and greet everyone and to show off the skills our College has in creativity.” This young woman is now enthusiastic about getting involved in competition in the future herself.

- **Learners progress to courses leading to higher-level qualifications and into jobs that meet local and national needs.**

Providers engaged in competition activity are convinced that this stretches and extends the achievement of their learners and leads to employment in better jobs.

An ESOL learner from Latvia was having great difficulty in understanding the terms being used on her Level 1 Hair and Beauty course. She became involved in a competition and her motivation grew enormously. She won the competition and has progressed to year 2.

A South Thames College learner is keen to progress to university and do something similar to the competition work but at a higher level.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Ofsted Inspectors will look for evidence that:

- **Learners benefit from high expectations, engagement, care, support and motivation from staff**

High expectations, care, support and motivation from staff are key features of competition activity. The self-assessment process could record examples of this and report on the impact on learner performance.

Learners are prepared for national and international competitions in a similar way to athletes preparing for high-level competitions; they are advised on diet and lifestyle and how to perform under pressure.

Going to the WorldSkills competitions in London impressed one lecturer with the magnitude of the competitions and the levels of skills on show. He observed:

“The learners involved in competitions have an awesome experience and this gives them ambition to raise their standards.”

Rod Reed, Lecturer, Automotive Engineering, Newcastle College

- **Staff initially assess learners' starting points and monitor their progress, set challenging tasks, and build on and extend learning for all learners.**

This is perhaps where skills competition activity needs further alignment with the Common Inspection Framework. While challenging tasks may be set, there may not be a direct relationship to the initial assessment process, nor to progression through individual learning plans. However, this could easily be

addressed: for example, induction activities could be adapted to provide a mechanism for spotting students with natural aptitude for the work or to identify areas for particular improvement.

At Kendal College, activities are undertaken during induction week to encourage bonding and build confidence. These may involve group work to overcome challenges, eg 'trust' challenges, or may be vocationally based, eg making something out of wood in carpentry. There are small prizes for these competitions.

Targets related to competition activity should be part of overall review of progress for learners who participate in them or provide active support for competitors. It may be more difficult to establish the benefit to all learners from the involvement of some learners in higher level competitions but in many cases competitors are seen as role models by other learners.

One tutor observed that he typically would work with all learners in the group: perhaps only three out of 20 have the talent and desire to go further in competition work, but the experience of these students helps the rest.



3. Skills competition and quality improvement

- *Learners understand how to improve as a result of frequent, detailed and accurate feedback from staff following assessment of their learning*

One of the key features of competition activity is being able to understand the extent to which learner performance meets criteria for excellence. There is generally a sustained emphasis on critical reviewing of learners' own work and comparing it with other competitors.



“Competitions are great for looking at other people's work, being inspired by it and also inspiring other people. That's what I like doing, seeing my ideas being brought to life. It all starts in your head or on a piece of paper then you start building it up from there. So it's creative.”

2nd year Floristry learner

Effectiveness of leadership and management

Ofsted Inspectors will look for evidence that:

- *Providers demonstrate an ambitious vision, have high expectations for what all learners can achieve, and attain high standards of quality and performance*

Embedded approaches to competition activity need strong leadership and a clear strategic direction. The leaders of the organisations interviewed for this guide demonstrated their commitment to excellence in vocational learning and provided a facilitating infrastructure to put this into practice.

One of Leeds College of Building's key strategic aims is to become an outstanding college, and the principal sees competitions activity as a contributor to this.

The culture of North Warwickshire and Hinckley College is one of ambition and aspiration and the principal believes this is enhanced by whole-college engagement in skills competitions.

Many senior managers see competition activity as a way of overcoming the low aspirations and lack of self-esteem that are common in some areas of deprivation. Some have developed 10-year plans to incorporate competition activity designed to provide world-class provision and training.



- *Providers improve teaching and learning through rigorous performance management and appropriate professional development*



The principal of Highbury College saw a clear role for competition activity in changing the once-pervasive local culture of low aspirations, ambition and attainment and offering the ladders of progression that young people need to raise their ambition. She observed,

“ In the last inspection, Inspectors said that the college’s culture of high expectations permeates everything. We expect students to enter competitions. We expect people to want to be the best. ”

However, involvement in competition activity must be a visible focus within a range of strategies for improvement and achieving excellence.

Leeds College of Building has a long history of entering competitions and students have won many medals and awards, including gold medals at WorldSkills. The principal made a point of showing how competition work was instrumental in setting challenging targets for learners during their Ofsted Inspection.

Competition work demands discipline and working at very high levels of skills and accuracy. For the learners and tutors who take part, and for the learners and others who see the competitions, it provides examples of vocational excellence.

Providers should routinely include competition activity within their review of the learner journey,

At North Warwickshire and Hinckley College the five quality and performance leaders examine the learner journey by following the experience of individual learners; including some of the learners who have taken part in higher level competitions. As a result they have reports of learners’ views on competition work and how they have benefited.

3. Skills competition and quality improvement

Embedded approaches to skills competition activity should also be routinely included in lesson observations:

“Some of the best lessons I have seen as an observer have included competitions. One I observed just recently was a Grade 1 lesson in beauty therapy. It was a theory class but there was a competition at the end as to who had retained the most knowledge and understanding and it was just brilliant. So it's not just about external competitions; it's about curriculum and how teaching and learning is enhanced by competitions.”

Jackie Page, Director the Skilled and Talented Academy and Head of Centre for Workbased Learning, Highbury College

Some colleges link continuing professional development (CPD) activities to the competition work, seeing it as a valuable way of updating staff and making their teaching more relevant. In some cases, the staff are taking coaching awards, enhancing their ability to coach and mentor their colleagues and competitors.

A hairdressing manager in one college is planning to take a coaching qualification and is already coaching competitors in other curriculum areas. For example, she is working with a construction learner to prepare him for a competition.

- ***Providers successfully plan, establish and manage the curriculum and learning programmes to meet the needs and interests of learners, employers and the local and national community***



Embedding skills competition activity into Apprenticeship programmes and the wider curriculum must be done coherently to ensure that the activity is relevant and contributes to individual learning plans and targets. All the providers consulted saw a clear relationship between motivating and stretching learners and competition activity, but it is important that the evidence supporting this view is credible and recorded systematically.

The quality manager at Kendal College noted that Inspectors would need to see standards being set and the level of achievement raised, and evidence that competitions contribute to raising standards. Evidence of ‘distance travelled’ was seen as key alongside inclusive activities.

Skills competitions provide a natural platform for meeting the needs of the local community in the development of a world-class workforce but they also require the full support of apprentices’ employers. Even then it may require learners to put in extra time in evenings and at weekends.

“One apprentice who got through to higher levels of skills competitions did extra work in his own time. The employer in this particular case is a former student of the college and sees the benefit of involvement in competitions.”

Lorraine Gammon, Head of Creative Studies, Stephenson College

4. What are the potential objections? Allaying concerns

Some of the more pressing objections voiced against competitions are outlined below along with possible solutions used by the colleges we consulted.

“Staff will be involved in a lot of extra work”

A major concern for some staff is that they will be required to do a lot of extra, unpaid work. Some involvement in competition activities may be additional to normal duties, but a great deal can be accomplished within the normal curriculum delivery process with some planning and imaginative teaching, training and learning strategies:

“ Having a thread relating to competition activity within the curriculum and its delivery is not necessarily about doing extra. Many aspects of the learners’ programmes can be delivered or enhanced by internal competitions and by classroom or workshop activity. Setting up an assignment or activity may take some time initially but it may make the job easier in the longer term as learners’ motivation and skills increase. ”

Nigel Leigh, Principal, Stephenson College

On a practical level, for example, remission or rewards may be negotiated.

Some colleges have set aside resources for an Innovation Fund, which is one of the key drivers of curriculum and competition development. Tutors can access the funds through a bidding process and use the money to develop a curriculum idea or support competitions within teaching, training and learning.

Many of the colleges visited had a designated coordinator or manager for the competition activity. Having systems to coordinate the extra administration and planning required for more formal competition activity can also relieve the pressure on teaching staff.

One college has a competitions manager, who drives the competitions across the college, and competition coordinators for every curriculum area. These staff have reduced teaching loads, which enables them to provide additional tuition above that provided for NVQ Levels 2 and 3.

“Some learners are uncomfortable about competing”

Tutors need to be sensitive to learners who find competition uncomfortable, and ready to provide support. The learners should be introduced to the concept gradually and taught to cope with the pressure and learn from their performance.

“ When learners first start they are often very apprehensive about peer assessment and don’t want to judge one another, but it’s done in a non-threatening, anonymous way. They write their number (for the assessment) on a piece of paper, fold it and all the papers get put into a pile and are then opened up and counted. It’s all done in a very sensitive way and the tutor avoids any ‘preferential’ or negative types of judgements. ”

Rachel Hopkins, Hairdressing Lecturer and Coach, North Warwickshire and Hinckley College

4. What are the potential objections? Allaying concerns

If this support is provided, learners who lack confidence often find competition activity particularly rewarding.

Two Level 3 BTEC IT Systems Support learners who entered a WorldSkills UK competition said how much they enjoyed it and felt they gained a lot of confidence: “It gave us a real insight on what we had to do because it was our first competition and we didn’t really know what we were meant to do. This year we are going to go again and hopefully we will get better results.” One added: “I used to be shy and didn’t talk a lot. Now I feel free to talk to new people.”

“Teachers focus more on competitions than on the qualification”

Clearly, it is important not to take the focus away from learning that leads to the learner achieving their qualification.

“However, competition is part of life and learners need to be prepared for it. Where possible, tutors should look for naturally occurring opportunities to use competition activity in the curriculum. If competition activity is embedded in the curriculum teachers will value what happens naturally and the activity will be a real preparation for life.”

Maggie Cawthorn, Director of Curriculum and Quality, Kendal College

Some teachers may use approaches where teams develop questions for each other – perhaps on some aspects of their course. This helps both teams to reflect on learning as the people asking the questions also need to know the answers.

Some vocational areas routinely incorporate competition activity within their courses. Kendal College Hair and Beauty, for example, run lots of competitions and select a ‘student of the month’.



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

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

Rod Reed, Automotive Lecturer, Newcastle College, noted the benefits of forming a strong working relationship with a company through training apprentices and competition work: “One of the businesses with whom I have already forged strong

working relationships now works very closely with us. The company also provides free training to the learners and me, and has also donated thousands of pounds worth of equipment and consumables.”



“Competitions are elitist and damaging”

Some may view the use of competitions as elitist or even potentially damaging to learners who do not succeed. In informal and formal competition activity tutors need to develop learners’ capacity to learn from their mistakes and critically evaluate what they need to do to improve and succeed. Involving teams can also help to secure an inclusive approach as long as the competitive ethos does not lead to disagreements and schisms within groups of learners. This can be counterbalanced by an overall culture of support and collaboration.

Some of the colleges we consulted were running competitions for Foundation Level learners – like the Footsteps to the Future competition initiated by North Warwickshire and Hinckley College. NATSPEC, the association for independent specialist colleges that provide further education for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, also promotes skills competitions.

In many cases, competitors are simply glad to be involved in competitions and value the experience:

“ Even if people go to a competition and mess it up they still get something out of it and may be able to improve next time. Loads of other students, especially younger ones, ask me about competitions because they are interested in them. I always tell them to just do it because the amount of stuff you get out of it is just amazing. ”

Hairdressing learner

Learners involved in this research observed that, far from being envious of successful competitors, their peers are supportive:

“ I suppose people not involved in the competition might get upset or jealous, but I’ve never found this. Most people are happy and say I have inspired them and helped to give them more confidence. ”

Floristry learner

In general, most pitfalls can be avoided by ensuring that the overall values of the college – inclusivity, striving for excellence, equal opportunities – are inherent in the approach. Specifically, senior managers need to:

- emphasise that taking part and learning from the experience – not just winning – is the important thing;
- ensure that staff and learners understand that taking part in competitions is not compulsory;
- ensure that there is an inclusive approach to competition activity and it is accessible to all;
- ensure that the competitions are fair.

5. Developing and embedding competition activity

This section outlines the key features of three models of embedding competitions activity that are typical of different approaches found in Further Education and Skills provider organisations. In practice, no competition work may be undertaken in some organisations or a mix of all models may also be found in a single organisation.

Totally embedded and well established

This is an ideal stage of development and would have developed over some time.

- There is leadership and active commitment from the chief executive and governors.
- Competition activity is a regular agenda item on governing body, senior management team and departmental meetings.
- Performance in competitions is used to inform the organisation's benchmarking processes.
- Quality improvement and self-assessment processes explicitly include competition activity.
- Staff development and training are linked to competition activity both for the development of vocational specialisms and pedagogical expertise.
- Support of employers is actively sought for both the apprentices involved in competitions and for sponsorship of the activity.
- Competition activity is inclusive and is a feature of all learning programmes for young people.
- Commitment to skills competition activity is visible in mission and strategic plan, all relevant policy documents and schemes of work, as well as in promotional literature for learners, employers and the community.
- There is a realistic budget for skills competition activity, delegated to appropriate managers.
- Competition activity is planned and formal competition work is aligned with major competition cycles, such as WorldSkills.
- There is a coordinator for formal competition activity who oversees a calendar of events and makes practical arrangements, eg for travel and accommodation.
- All vocational areas have a Skills Champion, who looks for opportunities for skills competitions.
- There is an established process for capitalising on publicity relating to competitions.
- Participation in competitions by both learners and staff is encouraged.
- Participation and success are celebrated across the organisation.
- Evidence of the impact of competition activity on learner performance is routinely collected and analysed to identify trends and areas to improve.
- Extra tuition is provided for learners who wish to extend their skills.
- Competition activity is seen as a part of curriculum enrichment.
- There is cross-fertilisation of practice across vocational areas.



Committed but not embedded

There is commitment from some of the senior managers but little formal coordination and support:

- Commitment from principal/chief executive is intermittent.
- There is limited awareness of the value of competitive activities and their potential contribution to quality improvement and teaching, training and learning – and governors are not aware of the activity.
- The college is committed to providing skills for employability and developing entrepreneurship in learners.
- Big wins are celebrated but opportunities for publicity are not capitalised on.
- There is commitment to competition work in some policy documents but it does not run through all documentation.
- There is some scepticism among senior team and staff who find it hard to prioritise competition activity.
- Evidence of the impact of competition activity on learner performance is not routinely collected.
- Staff are deterred from running competitions by the lack of a coordinator because they have to make all the arrangements.
- There is a small budget for competition activity but the system for gaining access to it is not clear.

Competition work is run by enthusiasts

There are some staff who are very committed to competitions, especially those at national and international level, but without their commitment there would be no competition activity.

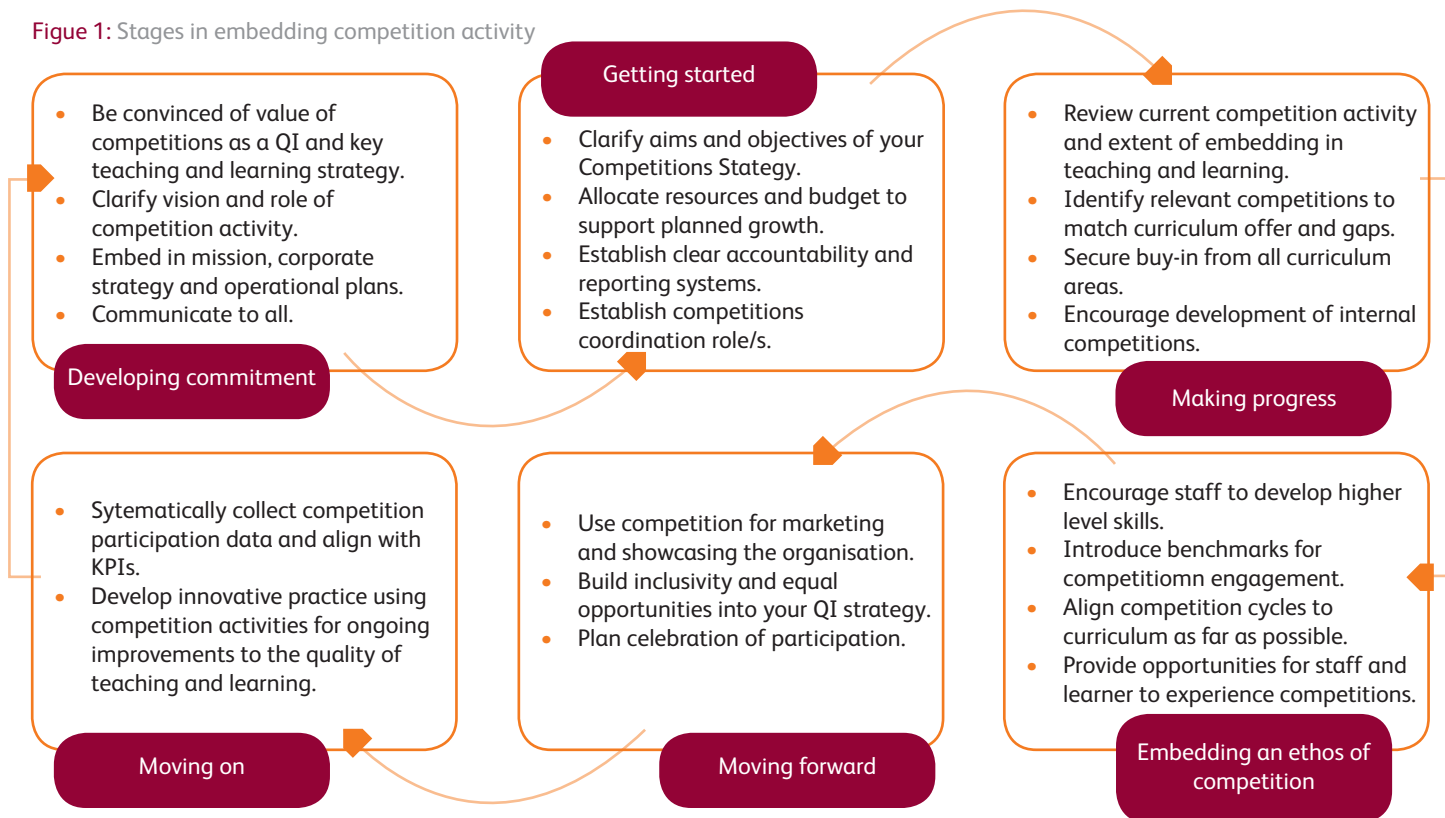
- Competitions are brought to the attention of the principal/chief executive just before a major competition or if a team or individual has been successful.
- The enthusiasts spot likely winners and coach them exclusively in their own time.
- Competition commitments often get in the way of routine duties.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

For a step-by-step guide to developing a model appropriate to your organisation, see section 6, which follows.



6. How to go about it

Figure 1: Stages in embedding competition activity



Key QI: quality improvement

KPI: key performance indicators

Developing commitment

For competition activity to make a difference, “you have to have someone passionate at the top to drive it through” (Janet Smith, Deputy Principal, South Thames College). If the chief executive and senior managers are not fully committed to embedding competitive activity as a major teaching, training and learning strategy across the curriculum, it is unlikely to achieve much impact beyond the team or individual learners taking part.

If the impression given is that “competitions are nice but not that important”, then that is how they will be viewed across the organisation – those who are already motivated will continue to do everything they can to help their learners to participate; the others will not bother.

Before embarking on the development of a policy and strategy for introducing competitions, the chief executive, other senior managers and governors need to articulate their vision, to assess the added value this will bring. They need to see and feel the benefits at first hand and look at what would be best for their college. Preparatory research may involve the following.

- Visit a big competition – such as a major multi-disciplinary WorldSkills International event or WorldSkills UK – The Skills Show.
- Visit several colleges that have embraced competitions and are embedding them as part of routine delivery in Apprenticeships and vocational learning.
- Talk to employers that have supported apprentices in competitions and to their employees who might be involved about the benefits and issues.
- Talk to learners and staff who have been involved in competitions.

- Check the evidence: some colleges are collecting data on retention and success rates.
- Recent inspection reports make increasing mention of enrichment activities, including competitions.
- Revisit your mission and strategy, and consult governors, employers and staff on how to make explicit reference to embedding competition in them.
- Get people together to discuss the vision and how competitions can play a vital part in its achievement.
- Communicate your commitment to staff and students – initially and then re-iterate frequently.

The **WorldSkills Champion Network** covers further education in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. See section 8 for the contact address.

Getting started

Key reasons to become involved in competition work are to raise awareness of what can be achieved by the best and to set inspirational targets. Once you are convinced that competitive activities can enhance your education and training provision, you should assess your starting point and begin strategic planning to introduce skills competition activity.

To set the ball rolling:

- Identify what and where competition activity is taking place in your organisation and record this to use as a baseline from which to develop and assess your progress.
- If there is no or very little competition activity, get staff and learners out to see competitions and find out what is entailed – they will be enthused.
- Bring activity from different areas together as the starting point for your new competitions strategy.
- Train up a few key staff in how to use competition activity effectively and how to sensitively introduce this to students.
- Encourage some internal competitions as a start. These can feel safer and are less likely to exclude learners.
- Identify potential barriers to the development and work out how to resolve or alleviate them through a strategic framework and supporting infrastructure.
- Develop a robust strategic framework for your competitions strategy. This should be a long-term strategy that starts from your corporate plan and links into plans for quality improvement, staff development and marketing. It should provide the incentive, support and inspiration to drive quality improvement by embedding competitive activities across the curriculum.
- Set clear aims and objectives and challenging but realistic goals for embedding competitions activity in all relevant programme areas.
- Build inclusivity and equal opportunities into your competitions strategy.
- Identify the competitions available and their relevance to curriculum areas. Be selective. There is no point entering learners for competitions with limited relevance to their curriculum.
- Produce a clear operational plan with SMART objectives, to ensure there are milestones and a means of assessing how far you have got.
- Secure the resources needed to make it happen, with a clear budget and staffing commitment, perhaps through a central competitions fund, or through ring-fenced delegated budgets.
- Allocate strategic responsibility to a committed member of the SMT to lead the operational implementation.
- Appoint a competitions coordinator with cross-organisational responsibility for all external competitions. The post-holder should have responsibility for liaison and most of the administrative support for competitions. This will ensure that activity lines up with annual cycles and administrative requirements of external competitions and avoid using teaching staff time for administrative work.
- Consider whether it would be useful to have a Skills Competition champion to promote and coordinate the competition activity in vocational areas.
- Establish competition recording systems and regular reporting procedures that provide clear criteria for recording progress and achievement.
- Ensure that there is a systematic process for recording all relevant aspects resulting from competition activity in the self-assessment process.

Marion Plant, Principal and Chief Executive of North Warwickshire and Hinckley College, talks about her starting point: “There is a definite impact of bringing different parts together into one single strategy. It ought to be heading towards a teaching and learning focused strategy, but make it a corporate strategy and one that provides opportunity for all students and all staff – not just one part of the organisation. In terms of equality and diversity, this is one way that you can really provide opportunities across the whole breadth and diversity of your college.”



North Warwickshire and Hinckley College has the following key aims in its competitions strategy:

- Promote, progress and increase Apprenticeships through competitions,
- Embed competition activity into teaching and learning,
- Widen participation through internal and external competitions.

Maintaining momentum

Once the plans are in place, a budget allocated, coordinating support arranged and competition activity endorsed by all senior managers, the process of embedding and expanding activity can be stepped up.

Approaches will differ according to the experience of staff, the nature of different curriculum areas, and the types, levels and preferences of learners. Some learners will prefer not to engage in open competitions and their wishes must be respected. However, they can still gain from observing competitions, the peer support of active competitors and from carefully planned competitive activities that form part of normal learning activities.

The colleges we consulted recommended the following strategies for maintaining commitment and enthusiasm.

- Celebrate participation and achievement as much as possible – the successes of staff as well as competitors. Use every opportunity, formal and informal, when this can happen.
- Highlight and celebrate competition activities in prospectuses and websites, and marketing activities.
- Involve governors: report progress on the strategy regularly and engage their support in recognising staff and learners' commitment and achievements.
- Support apprentices as fully as possible to take part in competitions. Their on-the-job experience can make them more competition-ready as they are used to working under pressure to exacting standards. Their successes may well attract more apprentices into that curriculum area.
- Persuade employers to support competitions and encourage participation by their apprentices. Some, particularly SMEs, may be reluctant initially, but many have been won over by potential marketing and business development opportunities. They also benefit from the extra skills training their apprentices receive. Employers will often be pleased to judge internal competitions and to coach competitors. Some may also sponsor competitions or supply specialist equipment, facilities or work experience.
- Give staff recognition for their contributions and support for competition work by ensuring the work is incorporated into their routine duties and rewarded accordingly.

- Initiate or participate in competitions with other providers and local schools.
- Involve occupational experts. They bring an external perspective that learners respect and are especially valuable for coaching and judging.



“ Getting students competing raises the bar and the competitions with other colleges get them off to a good start and helps them to develop skills earlier; eg, a competition held with Bradford College received so many applicants that two competitions had to be run. It was great for the students’ motivation and experience to mix with other students and see their levels of performance. It was also great CPD for staff. ”

Ian Billyard, Principal, Leeds College of Building

Embedding an ethos of competition

“ Our competition ethos is not just focused on WorldSkills. It is about integrating competition into curriculum delivery and everything we do. Most curriculum areas now have embedded competitions into their normal teaching and learning. ”

Jackie Page, Director the Skilled and Talented Academy and Head of Centre for Workbased Learning, Highbury College Portsmouth

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

- Encourage staff to develop higher level skills and to apply to become competition judges, specialist training experts or coaches. These roles can complement existing positions and enhance your organisation’s reputation.
- Provide professional development workshops for staff on embedding competitive activities within their regular delivery and assessment sessions.
- Align competition cycles to individual learning plans and schemes of work. Most competitions have a regular cycle and once staff are familiar with this, they can often easily build it into work plans.
- Develop and agree benchmarks for competition engagement and impact.
- Consider hosting competitions. Initially these may be with local partners such as schools and other training providers; later you might offer to host regional competition events. These all provide excellent opportunities for staff and learners to participate or observe the competitions.
- Continue to send staff and learners to participate and observe major competitions whenever possible.

- Consider encouraging an ‘identity’ for the learners engaged in competition. Some colleges have created competition squads who sport badges or special shirts to wear during competition – or whenever they like.

Louise McMillan, Vice Principal, City of Bristol College, works with faculty heads and their curriculum managers to develop their competitions strategy and involve as many learners as possible, not just because of the enhancement, but because it will also benefit the whole curriculum area and the staff involved. She says:

“In a competitive market – both among colleges competing with each other for learners and the competitive employment market, our young people are going out with far more skills than the curriculum of their courses alone is just going to offer them. Involvement in competition activity gives them a competitive edge when applying for jobs.”

Moving forward

“Look at the benefits for learners – because our learners have had experiences that the vast majority wouldn’t have dreamed of – beyond their wildest dreams.”

Martin Shelton, Vice Principal Curriculum, North Warwickshire and Hinckley College

The quest to achieve and maintain excellence can never end. Competitions offer renewable opportunities to challenge staff and learners to aspire to do the best they can. There is much latent talent amongst apprentices and other young learners just waiting to be released and competitions can open doors to new experiences.

Once staff have ‘got it’ and have seen the benefits of competitions for their learners, they will not turn back. Most of the managers and teaching staff interviewed when developing this guide were adamant that they would continue to use competitions to inspire and develop their learners.

Suggestions for further embedding and expanding competitive activities include:

- Take full advantage of competition activities and successes for marketing purposes. Competitions showcase the organisation at its best and joint marketing with employers can be beneficial for both and help to cement relationships with employers.
- Look out for potential case studies to illustrate the benefits of competitions. These are particularly useful for internal newsletters and will help raise the profile of competition activity and inspire others.
- Display posters of competition successes and products generated as outcomes of competition in public areas.
- Systematically collect data on competition participation and how it links to the retention, achievement and progression of participants.
- Encourage staff to engage in action research and to develop innovative practice in preparation of learners for competition.
- Be on the look-out for external sources of funding support that can support competition development. See section 8 Resources and support for some suggestions.

7. Embedding skills competition activity checklist

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

Features of embedded approaches to skills competition activity	Fully in place	Partly in place	Not in place
There is explicit commitment to embedding competition activity on the part of the chief executive, governors and senior managers.			
Competition activity is reported on and discussed at governing body, SMT and departmental meetings.			
Performance in competitions is used to inform benchmarking processes.			
Quality improvement and self-assessment processes include competition activity.			
Developing staff skills and training is linked to competition activity.			
Commitment to competition activity is explicit in the mission, strategy and other policy documentation.			
The budget for supporting involvement in skills competition is set at a realistic level.			
Employers are involved in supporting apprentices in competition activity.			
Employers are involved in sponsoring local competitions.			
Competition activity is included at the early stages of learning programmes for young people.			
Competition activity is planned within overall learning programmes.			
Competition activity is aligned to major competition cycles such as WorldSkills.			
Support for the competition activity is coordinated across the organisation.			
Skills Champions are in place across all vocational areas.			
Publicity relating to skills competitions is capitalised upon.			
Learners and staff are encouraged to participate in competitions.			
Evidence of the impact of participation on learner retention and achievement is routinely collected.			
Mechanisms are in place for sharing good practice in embedding competitions into teaching and learning.			
Examples of competition-related delivery strategies are disseminated for others to incorporate into their delivery.			
Specific reference to competition activity is included within stakeholder feedback for learners, employers, staff wellbeing surveys, etc.			

8. Resources and support

General websites

National Apprenticeship Service

<http://www.apprenticeships.org.uk/About-Us/National-Apprenticeship-Service.aspx>

Excellence Gateway

<http://www.excellencegateway.org.uk/>

Websites with more information and a range of useful resources for staging competitions or participating in WorldSkills activities

WorldSkills UK

<http://worldskillsuk.apprenticeships.org.uk/>

Websites promoting competitions (selection)

British Council Enterprise challenges

<http://www.britishcouncil.org/learning-skills-for-employability-project-enterprise-skills-challenges.htm>

WorldSkills UK

<http://worldskillsuk.apprenticeships.org.uk/>

worldskillsuk.apprenticeships.org.uk/sites/default/files/images/WSUK_CollegesandTrainingProviders.pdf

WorldSkills Champion Network Contact via:

<http://worldskillsuk.apprenticeships.org.uk/get-involved/national-competitions/worldskills-uk-champions>

Natspec: Inclusive competitions for learners with learning difficulties and disabilities <http://www.natspec.org.uk/inclusive-skills-competitions/>

Sector skills sponsored competitions including (full lists of competitions and organising partners can be found on the WorldSkills UK website noted above): Skillbuild

<http://www.cskills.org/aboutus/newsandevents/campaigns/skillbuild/> for construction industry, Skill M&E <http://www.skillmande.org.uk/About/88> for mechanical and electrical engineering sponsored by Summit Skills

Industry sponsored competitions such as: National Hairdressers Federation, <http://www.nhf.info/>

Case studies

North Warwickshire and Hinckley College: gives an overview of their competition strategy and describes some key benefits (2011) http://worldskillsuk.apprenticeships.org.uk/sites/default/files/files/case_studies/wsukcasestudynwhc.pdf

Stephenson College: explains their reasons for involvement in competitions and what they hope to achieve (2011) https://worldskillsuk.apprenticeships.org.uk/sites/default/files/files/case_studies/wsukcasestudystephensoncoll.pdf

Competitor case studies: Over 40 case studies of successful competitors in WorldSkills competitions. The importance of encouragement by their tutors is mentioned by many. They give a good introduction of what the competitions entail and how they have benefited. <http://worldskillsuk.apprenticeships.org.uk/get-involved/case-studies>

Some Further Education and Skills providers that promote competition activities on their websites

Leeds College of Building: offers a comprehensive overview of competition activities supported by the college – including a competitions calendar, types of competitions available and case studies. <http://www.lcb.ac.uk/leeds-college/competitions/introduction>

South Thames College: outline of learners' involvement in various types of competitions. <http://www.south-thames.ac.uk/PA780/Competitions - World Skills UK>

North Warwickshire and Hinckley College: an up-to-date overview of competition involvement and role in hosting engineering competition events for Squad UK selection. <http://www.nwhc.ac.uk/aboutus/competitions>

Some examples that could be adapted by colleges and providers

The following video of the use of blockwork in hairdressing uses competition against each other and the clock to encourage commercial standards among hairdressing apprentices (LSIS sponsored) Practice makes perfect at the Andrew Collinge Training Salon: <http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/good-practice-resource-practice-makes-perfect-andrew-collinge-training-salon>

The following is an older good practice database example in competition work that developed key skills but is equally applicable to functional skills: Key Skills through catering competition – Westminster Kingsway College <http://archive.excellencegateway.org.uk/page.aspx?o=4D4719DA-1AC4-4A68-8BFB-6B3E58943105>

The following Ofsted good practice example of an industry week has a competition featured to engage learners: Good practice resource – Engaging employers in the hair and beauty industry in enriching learning through industry week: Southampton City College <http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/good-practice-resource-engaging-employers-hair-and-beauty-industry-enriching-learning-through-indust>

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9. Acknowledgements

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Colleges included in the consultation

City of Bristol College
Highbury College Portsmouth
Kendal College
Leeds College of Building
Newcastle College
North Hertfordshire College
North Warwickshire and Hinckley College
South Thames College
Stephenson College

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Highbury College Portsmouth

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