



# Further education college participation in WorldSkills and other skills competitions

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Project 4

DuVE: Developing and understanding Vocational Excellence

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Jennifer Allen, SKOPE, University of Oxford

Dr Susan James, SKOPE, University of Oxford

Professor Ken Mayhew, SKOPE, University of Oxford

## Preface

The *Developing and understanding Vocational Excellence* (DuVE) suite of research projects focuses on WorldSkills competitions (WSC). This research is timely because the current vocational education system in the United Kingdom is struggling to meet the demands of the workforce and the needs of many young people. While problems with vocational education have been widely noted in research, few studies have focused on understanding vocational excellence. Gaining this understanding is the primary aim of the DuVE projects.

WorldSkills competitions are held every two years and are organised by WorldSkills International (WSI) as part of their mission to 'raise the profile and recognition of skilled people, and show how important skills are in achieving economic growth and personal success' (WSI, 2015). Competitors from 53 countries participated at WorldSkills Leipzig 2013 in Germany, where over 1000 young people mostly aged 18-22 competed in 46 skill areas.

The UK started to compete in WSC in 1953 and hosted competitions in Glasgow in 1965, in Birmingham in 1989 and in London in 2011. In 1990 UK Skills was established as an independent charity to organise and support UK participation in WSC. Renamed WorldSkills UK in 2011, it is now part of Find a Future, a new organisation which brings together skills and careers initiatives from across the UK.

The WSC are recognised by many as the pinnacle of excellence in vocational education and training (VET). The Centre on Skills, Knowledge and Organisational Performance (SKOPE) has been researching WSC since 2007 to understand better how vocational excellence is developed through competition and to inform the development of Squad and Team UK. Between 2007 and 2009, two small projects investigated the individual characteristics of the competitors and their workplace learning environments and covered the competition cycles of WSC 2009 and 2011. The overarching questions addressed were:

- What are the characteristics of individuals who excel?
- What kinds of support enable the development of high-level vocational skills?
- How can vocational education be structured to aim not simply for adequate standards of achievement but for high achievement that reflects world class standards?
- Can broader societal benefits to developing vocational excellence be identified?

Following on from these two initial studies, the first phase of DuVE consists of three projects conducted between 2011 and 2013 and incorporating the competition cycle leading up to WorldSkills Leipzig 2013:

- Project 1: What Contributes to Vocational Excellence? A study of the characteristics of WorldSkills UK participants for WorldSkills Leipzig 2013
- Project 2: Learning Environments to Develop Vocational Excellence
- Project 3: Benefits of Developing Vocational Excellence

Find a Future then funded Phase 2, consisting of three follow-on projects and three new DuVE projects. The six projects are:

- Project 1: Modelling the Characteristics of Vocational Excellence
- Project 2: Learning Environments to Develop Vocational Excellence
- Project 3: Benefits of Developing Vocational Excellence
- Project 4: Further Education College Participation in WorldSkills and other Skills Competitions
- Project 5: WorldSkills UK Competitors and Entrepreneurship
- Project 6: Training Managers: Benefits from and Barriers to WorldSkills UK Participation

Taken together, the suite of six DuVE projects form one of the five legacy projects (funded by the National Apprenticeship Service and now Find a Future), which are intended to use evidence-based research to further develop high quality WorldSkills practice.

Projects 4, 5 and 6 build on Project 3, Phase 1. Reports from the projects can be found on the DuVE website: <http://vocationalexcellence.education.ox.ac.uk/publications/reports/>. Projects 1-3 continue through WorldSkills São Paulo 2015. The findings from this project contain practical recommendations for WorldSkills UK practice and can potentially inform the VET system in the UK more broadly.

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## Executive summary

This study focused on the ways in which colleges participate in skills competitions, why participation might vary across colleges in the United Kingdom, the institutional benefits and costs of being involved and how colleges fund their participation. As the findings are based on a small sample, they are not necessarily representative of all UK colleges.

There are many different ways in which colleges participate in competitions. These activities include both small-scale (e.g. in-house competitions in the classroom) and large-scale initiatives (e.g. hosting competitions). The nature and extent of involvement varies from one institution to another and also from one department to another within individual colleges.

Variation in participation appears to be due to several factors, including: relative awareness of and exposure to competitions; reliance on enthusiasm and goodwill on the part of college staff engaged in competition-related activities; alignment with institutional priorities; availability of resources; availability of competitions; and accessibility of competitions. The colleges who are most highly involved typically have senior leaders and staff with first-hand experience of competitions; are enthusiastic about being involved in competitions and willing to dedicate time to this involvement; have competitions work embedded within the institution's teaching and learning strategy; have the time and money available to allocate these resources to competitions work; and have competitions available that suit their college's students, staff and specialisations.

Interviewees reported benefits for colleges (including teaching staff) and for students. The benefits for colleges include: continuing professional development opportunities for teaching staff; enhancing the quality of teaching and learning; contributing to positive publicity and reputation; acquiring new equipment and developing relationships with employers. The main reported benefits for students are the development of their technical skills and soft skills.

It is difficult in many cases to estimate the overall cost to colleges of being involved in competitions, though it is clear that costs vary with the nature and extent of a college's involvement. The costs involved can include: materials; transportation; accommodation; competition judges' expenses; and staff time. Three models for funding competitions were identified: using money from the college's central budget (which is either allocated to departments or to a specific competitions fund); using sponsorship or funding from other external sources (including government funding); or some combination of these.

We make the following recommendations:

1. Senior leaders of colleges to be encouraged to attend competitions events in person.
2. The potential benefits of being involved in competitions, in particular with how they can be used as evidence of excellence for Ofsted inspections, could be more clearly communicated to colleges.
3. Facilitating knowledge exchange between colleges regarding different ways of being involved in competitions could support those colleges who are interested in becoming involved.
4. Providing colleges with clear examples of how competition participation can contribute to excellence in teaching and learning could stimulate greater interest in participation.
5. Facilitating knowledge exchange between colleges to learn how other colleges fund their participation would be particularly valuable to colleges beginning or intending to increase their competitions engagement.

## 1 Introduction

Participation in skills competitions potentially contributes to excellent teaching and learning at many further education (FE) colleges (Learning and Skills Improvement Service (LSIS), 2013). It is important to understand how and why colleges become involved in skills competitions, the factors that influence involvement and the institutional costs of participation as well as the benefits. Within this context, this research addresses four key questions:

1. How do FE colleges participate in skills competitions?
2. What are the factors that determine the varying levels of participation in skills competitions by FE colleges?
3. What are the benefits of participation in skills competitions for FE colleges?
4. What are the costs of participation in skills competitions for FE colleges?

This study systematically explores what involvement in these competitions means at the institutional level and the effects, both positive and negative, of this involvement on FE colleges. This report serves as a resource for a better understanding of what involvement in skills competitions means for colleges, why involvement varies across UK FE colleges and how greater participation could be stimulated.

The report begins with a review of the literature, followed by discussion of the methodology used. It continues with the presentation of the key findings, linked to each research question. It concludes with recommendations designed to further enhance the potential of skills competitions to contribute to excellent teaching and learning at FE colleges.

## 2 The lack of knowledge about FE college participation in skills competitions

Following WorldSkills London 2011, the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) claimed '[o]ur ambition [for FE] must be that all our students and trainees receive the type of training our World Skills (sic) competitors received' (BIS, 2011: 16). Despite this ambition, skills competitions do not feature strongly in policy documents or the research literature about FE. In other countries, such as Finland, 'skills competitions are fully embedded in vocational teaching and learning as an organic and powerful means of maintaining its acknowledged world class VET system' (Skills Funding Agency, 2013: 41). However, when skills competitions are mentioned within UK-based reform plans and reports about FE, they are typically presented as supplementary rather than essential to the future success of the sector and its institutions. For example, in the 2011 FE reform plan entitled *New Challenges, New Chances*, BIS claimed that '[s]kills competitions and awards can play an important part [in helping FE colleges work towards excellence] *if they have prestige within the FE sector and beyond*' (our emphasis; BIS, 2011: 27). This statement essentially echoes the only comment related to skills competitions in the entire 2006 Leitch Review of Skills, which stated '[s]kills competitions can promote excellence in vocational skills' (Leitch, 2006: 107). There is no mention of their importance relative to other initiatives. The 2005 Foster Review of FE does not mention skills competitions at all (Foster, 2005).

In terms of research, studies about skills competitions are largely concerned with the experiences and development of the competitors (James and Holmes, 2012; Nokelainen, Smith, Rahimi, Stasz and James, 2012; Nokelainen, Stasz and James, 2013), the training managers (Rowe, Windmill, Willis and Opie, 2013) or are based outside of the UK (Kaloinen, Pynnönen and Saarinen, 2010). A few studies have looked at the benefits of participation for various stakeholders (e.g. LSIS, 2012: 13-17; Mayhew, James, Chankseliani and Laczik, 2013), but little is known about how and why colleges become involved.

### 2.1 The benefits and costs of competitions for FE colleges

While not focusing solely on the benefits of competitions for colleges, previous reports (LSIS, 2012: 13-17; Mayhew et al., 2013; and Rowe et al., 2013: 26) found institutional benefits in a number of categories, including:

- Enhancing or improving the reputation of FE providers and VET more broadly;
- Increasing opportunities for staff and students at the college;
- Improving teaching and learning at the college;



- Providing international experience;
- Providing access to resources, including new equipment; and
- Facilitating relationships with partners, such as schools or employers.

Of course, whether or not colleges obtain any or all of these benefits will depend on their level of participation and other factors. However, the lack of information about the costs of participation, in terms of time and money, makes it difficult for colleges to plan for involvement in competitions at any level.

## 2.2 Initiating and developing FE college involvement in competitions

Some information is available about how FE colleges can become involved in competitions (e.g. LSIS, 2012; WorldSkills UK, 2015a). However, there is very little information available about how colleges who already participate became involved in the first place.

The most comprehensive information about initiating and developing college involvement in competitions is in *Inspiring Excellence: a Guide to Embedding Skills Activity in Apprenticeships and Vocational Learning* (LSIS, 2012). This guide<sup>1</sup> was created for FE and skills providers in order to outline how they can ‘embed WorldSkills UK competition activity in their teaching and learning programmes’ (LSIS, 2012: 3).<sup>2</sup> It provides two suggestions for how to develop a college’s involvement that are especially relevant to this study. First, it recommends that senior college leaders should get involved in these activities. Without this senior-level commitment, competitions work ‘is unlikely to achieve much impact beyond the team or individual learners taking part’ (LSIS, 2012: 30). Therefore, for senior leaders who are new to competitions, the guide recommends readers to ‘[i]dentify 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’ (LSIS, 2012: 31).

Second, the guide suggests that the chief executive and/or principal and other senior managers of an institution see these competitions as ‘a major teaching, training, and learning strategy’ to be embedded within college curriculum (LSIS, 2012: 30). To this end, the guide points to the importance

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<sup>1</sup> *Inspiring Excellence* was ‘commissioned by the National Apprentice Service (NAS) and produced by the Learning and Skills Improvement Service’ (LSIS, 2012: 4). The LSIS has since closed, and the guide is now available through the Excellence Gateway at [www.excellencegateway.org.uk](http://www.excellencegateway.org.uk), which is managed by the Education and Training Foundation (ETF).

<sup>2</sup> It is worth noting that the guide focuses primarily on activities related to WorldSkills, rather than the range of competitions available, and was compiled on the basis of a consultation with only nine colleges, so it does not fully reflect the shape and scope of possible college participation.

of developing 'a policy and strategy for introducing competitions' (LSIS, 2012: 30). Although involvement in competitions can 'provide opportunities for presenting evidence for Ofsted inspections and self-assessment reports' (LSIS, 2012: 19), thus potentially benefiting colleges, participation is not currently an Ofsted requirement and therefore is not necessarily prioritised within college strategies and policies.

## 3 Methodology

### 3.1 Overview

Two sets of interviews were conducted: one set was with college staff who were subject matter experts; and the other was with college or associated<sup>3</sup> staff who varied in their competitions experience.

### 3.2 Expert interviews

Six subject matter experts were interviewed in order to develop an initial understanding of key issues from some participating colleges. The experts included senior college leaders and other administrative staff with direct experience of competitions work from a selection of FE colleges in England and Scotland. They were recruited using purposive sampling. The interview schedule is provided in Appendix A.

### 3.3 Questionnaire

An online questionnaire was developed to recruit potential interviewees from other colleges. A link to the questionnaire was emailed in the summer of 2014 to 265 UK FE college principals. Only principals of general FE colleges<sup>4</sup> were included to ensure institutions surveyed were comparable.<sup>5</sup> Their names were found via lists of colleges and principals on the Association of Colleges website (AoC, 2015).<sup>6</sup> The link was further circulated to principals by the regional offices of the Association of Colleges, through a notice in the Find a Future Partnership Newsletter and by some individual principals who agreed to forward the link to other principals in their region.

The questionnaire was designed to gather information about the extent of college involvement in competitions, such as the number of competitions in which they participate at various levels (institutional, local, regional, national and international); the number of student competitors from the college entering competitions at each level; the number of staff members involved in the

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<sup>3</sup> One interviewee worked for a wholly owned subsidiary of a college.

<sup>4</sup> The Association of Colleges divides FE colleges into six types: General Further Education Colleges; Sixth Form Colleges; Land-based Colleges; Art, Design and Performing Arts Colleges; Specialist Designated Colleges; and Independent Specialist Colleges (AoC, 2015).

<sup>5</sup> Although the questionnaire was only distributed to general further education colleges, one expert interviewee came from an independent specialist college.

<sup>6</sup> The lists accessed only provided principals' names, not their contact information. Most of their email addresses were obtained from college websites. Find a Future provided email addresses for those principals whose contact information was not available on college websites.

college's competition participation; and the funding available from the institution's budget in order to support competition involvement. This information is not readily available. It also asked whether the respondent or any relevant staff members would be willing to be interviewed for the study.

The original aim of collecting these data was to divide respondents into three groups: those from institutions with a high level of involvement, a moderate level involvement and a low (or non-existent) level of involvement.<sup>7</sup> Such categorisation would have allowed between-group comparison during analysis to determine whether different issues were specific to a particular level of involvement. However, because only 8.3 per cent of the 265 colleges responded to the questionnaire, there was insufficient differentiation in the sample to use these categories. Instead, these data were used as a sorting mechanism to help us understand where each college stood in relation to the others in terms of their participation levels. All colleges that responded to the questionnaire participated in competitions to some degree.

### **3.4 Post-questionnaire interviews**

Eighteen semi-structured interviews were conducted following the questionnaire. Including the six expert interviews, this resulted in a total of 24 interviewees from 20 FE colleges (some interviewees were from the same institution) for the study as a whole. Most of the interviewees were either survey respondents or colleagues of survey respondents; some were recruited from other DuVE projects. All interviewees were told that their names and the names of their institutions would not be used in reports about this research. The majority of the interviews were conducted in person and the rest over the telephone. The interview schedule is provided in Appendix A.

The total sample of 24 included nine principals, three vice or assistant principals, ten heads/directors/managers of particular subsections, departments or subsidiary organisations of the college, one person solely in charge of the college's competitions involvement and one lecturer. The sample included representatives from FE colleges in England (19 interviewees), Scotland (4 interviewees) and Wales (1 interviewee). Unfortunately no colleges from Northern Ireland responded to invitations to participate in the research. Seventeen of the interviews conducted were recorded and transcribed; notes were taken during those that were not recorded.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Levels of involvement would primarily be based on the number of competitions in which an FE college participated and the number of students involved.

<sup>8</sup> As some interviewees were interviewed together, these 17 interviews included a total of 19 interviewees. The interviews that were not recorded took place in a group setting within a noisy environment. Therefore, obtaining a high-quality recording was not possible.

### **3.5 Data analysis**

Themes from the post-questionnaire interviews were divided into four categories: how FE colleges participate in competitions; reasons for varying levels of participation amongst colleges; institutional benefits of participation; and institutional costs of participation. A list of key words was also developed in order to record words or phrases frequently used by interviewees in describing important issues (e.g. embed, excellence, inspire, aspire, inspirational, aspirational).

### **3.6 Limitations**

The study is based on self-reported interview data that capture respondents' opinions. In addition, the respondents were aware that Find a Future had funded this study and this may have influenced responses. The sample is small and not representative of all FE colleges in terms of level of participation and geographical location. In particular, all colleges represented in the sample participate in competitions at some level, and so we cannot comment on reasons why colleges choose not to participate. Furthermore, the sample is too small to make systematic comparisons between the home countries, although some differences are discussed. As such, the findings should be regarded as suggestive rather than generalizable.

Many colleges who are involved in competitions either do not participate in WorldSkills or participate in WorldSkills alongside many other types of competitions. Therefore, unless stated otherwise, findings describe college participation in skills competitions more generally. When a finding is related to WorldSkills specifically, this is explicitly stated.

## 4 Findings

### 4.1 How FE colleges participate in skills competitions

College involvement in competitions can include a wide range of activities which take place at multiple levels across different skill areas. Some examples reported by interviewees include:

- tutors organising in-class competitions;
- staff sitting on or chairing external boards related to competitions;
- staff serving as regional representatives for particular skill areas;
- competitions being run within individual colleges or a small group of local colleges;
- registering students to visit or participate in local, regional, national and international competitions; and
- hosting competitions, Vocational Masterclasses or Have a Go activities.<sup>9</sup>

All of these activities, which are not necessarily directly linked to WorldSkills, run alongside those that are, such as college staff serving as WorldSkills champions/representatives, staff working as Training Managers (TMs)<sup>10</sup> or students participating in the selection processes for Squad and Team UK.

Since there are many ways to be involved in competitions, and different college departments often have separate histories of involvement, it can be difficult to establish when and how an institution first began participating in competitions. Of the 24 interviewees, three could clearly describe the origins of their institution's involvement in competitions work. In two cases, the interviewees described first hearing about competitions when attending an unrelated event or meeting. For example, one interviewee said:

Probably four years ago...I was at an event where I heard the principal [of another college] speaking about skills competitions...and trying to get principals of colleges more engaged in getting people to get involved in them.

In the third case, the interviewee described finding out about competitions through some publicity material he had received:

[A]bout eight years or so ago now, I had this info come across my desk – I think it was UK Skills at the time – where there were these competitions which, given I pretended to be at least a

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<sup>9</sup> Masterclasses and Have a Go activities are short-term events (usually held over one or two days) designed to showcase vocational skills and competitions. For more information about Vocational Masterclasses, see WorldSkills UK, 2015b. For more information about Have a Go experiences, see The Skills Show, 2015.

<sup>10</sup> For more information about TMs, see Wilde, James and Mayhew, 2015.

sports coach by trade and like sports and the competitive nature of sports, [I thought] we have things like sports teams [which are] great for students but nothing from their own skill aspect, and this stuff comes across my desk which looked really, really interesting – competitions for people doing particular courses, which I thought is a no-brainer for want of a better description. So we [first] entered back then.

For all other institutions included in the study, interviewees either were not certain or did not know exactly when their college began participating in competitions.<sup>11</sup> In a couple of these cases, interviewees could not accurately describe the origins of their college's involvement because of a college merger. For instance, one principal claimed that the college as it now exists has participated in competitions since the point of merging but could not describe the participation levels of the constituent colleges prior to the merger. In other cases, staff changes over time led to a loss of historical knowledge about a college's involvement. In the majority of cases, the college's participation simply predated the interviewee's employment with the institution. Interviewees in this situation typically described the college as having 'always' participated.

## **4.2 Reasons for varying levels of participation amongst UK FE colleges**

The contributory factors to the varying participation levels amongst FE colleges, according to the interviewees, can be divided into six categories: relative awareness of and exposure to competitions; reliance on enthusiasm and goodwill; alignment with institutional priorities; availability of resources; availability of competitions; and accessibility of competitions.

### **4.2.1 Relative awareness of and exposure to competitions**

#### ***Lack of awareness about competitions***

Many interviewees suggested that a college's awareness of and exposure to competitions, particularly amongst senior college leaders, significantly influences their participation level. Interviewees described two aspects of this lack of awareness: awareness of competitions in general; and knowledge of how to get involved in competitions.

If a college simply does not know about competitions or the process of getting involved, then it is not likely to participate in them:

Quite often [colleges do not participate] because they're not clear about the process about how you get involved. From where I sit that's quite surprising, given this stuff is all out there in

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<sup>11</sup> As all participants in the study worked at colleges who participate in competitions, there are no examples in this study of colleges who could be asked why they do not participate. Some potential reasons for not participating are described in LSIS, 2012: 25-27.

the public ether, but you have to really sit and listen to that, and sometimes it is the not knowing which is almost the start of the barrier.

Lack of awareness also exists within individual institutions. Since competition participation is typically organised by curriculum areas rather than across a college, departments that are not involved in competitions are not necessarily aware of departments that are involved. There are also cases where multiple departments, all of which are involved in competitions, do not know about the nature or extent of other departments' involvement. As one interviewee described:

different areas do their own thing...there are many different competitions going on, so obviously the ones leading into WorldSkills are the most structured, but the hospitality industry have things that they do. Hair, particularly, have things that they do...[w]e don't only do this one brand of competition.

Many interviewees pointed out that some skill areas lend themselves more naturally to competitions or have a more established history of participating than others, such as 'hair and beauty, hospitality and some of the construction trades'. In a similar vein, FE staff with experience in industry might be more aware of competitions than staff without that experience:

I think also because it was perhaps the teachers themselves hadn't come from, as a lot of people in FE do, hadn't come from an industry background, and perhaps didn't understand the element of competition...it's important to recognise that a lot of people who teach in FE haven't worked in industry, so may not be aware of [competitions work].

Regardless of how involved a particular curriculum area may be, '[i]t's very difficult to cascade that [knowledge] across the college'. Individual departments may be involved in competitions without senior leaders even knowing about it; indeed, one principal found out about the college's involvement 'by chance'. Of the 20 colleges represented in this study, only three reported having a staff member or central team officially in charge of coordinating competition activity for the whole college. More often, participation is either organised by individuals or coordinated by a department or school head for the skills within their area.

Another problem commonly reported by interviewees was that colleges can know *about* competitions without necessarily fully understanding *how* to get involved. Although some information is available about how to get involved in competitions (see, for example, WorldSkills UK 2015a), interviewees reported that it can be intimidating for newcomers to piece together exactly how to get started, particularly if they do not have knowledgeable colleagues to help them. One interviewee with significant experience in competitions said that unless there are other staff members in the college who know what to do, 'you need a fool's guide to how to start competitions [work]'. Another interviewee, who was responsible for developing her college's involvement in competitions, described how difficult it can be at first:



[I]t's quite a complex journey. It's not easy, and it would put people off. Because I found it hard even to understand what is WorldSkills, and then the competitions cycle, that was quite difficult to understand, and all the dates.

Therefore, there may be staff within colleges who are trying to get involved or would like to be involved more but do not necessarily have the information, advice, guidance or support they need.

### *Lack of exposure to competitions by senior leaders*

Some interviewees felt that a lack of exposure to competitions by senior leaders meant that they could not see the potential benefits that participation in skills competitions could bring to their institutions and students.<sup>12</sup> In fact, one interviewee believed the primary reason for varying participation levels 'must just be that people don't accept the benefits, because if they really accepted the benefits then there wouldn't be a reason not to [get involved]'. However, telling people about competitions in 'theoretical' terms may not be enough to encourage involvement:

I think some colleges have had no experience, because what ignites an involvement in skills competitions is seeing and feeling the impact of competitions...I can stand up and talk to people about skills competitions, and I do it a lot; I can go and talk to college principals and talk about skills competitions, and they can be very polite and nod and say yes...[but] until they're immersed into the experience, it doesn't hook them. Over and over again, some colleagues of mine I've spoken to over the years...they haven't got hooked until they've actually come to an event, or by chance have got a student working through events, and then they get it.

Experiencing first-hand the Skills Show, or similar large-scale skills competition events, appears to change perceptions more successfully than discussions about such occasions, regardless of any potential benefits that may be described. Another interviewee expressed this viewpoint through recounting how, until visiting the Skills Show in person, it was difficult to envision the scale and intensity of competitions:

Now, it's only when I went down and saw for myself the scale, the intensity of competition, the proximity of competitors to members of the public, the kind of concentration of the young people, the structure of the competition; that experience was quite inspirational and transformational, and that encouraged me to then say okay, I need to get people there so that they see it.

Being exposed to competitions in person appears to partially ignite the enthusiasm of individuals within colleges, which, according to interviewees, is essential to college participation in competitions.

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<sup>12</sup> Mayhew et al., 2013 discuss the potential benefits of skills competitions for various stakeholders, including competitors themselves and FE colleges.

#### 4.2.2 Reliance on enthusiasm and goodwill

Since college staff members (from teaching staff through to senior leaders) are not necessarily remunerated for their skills competition-related work, enthusiasm and goodwill may be critical to sustaining college involvement. Enthusiasm is important from the start. According to one interviewee, 'the barrier [to getting involved] is sometimes getting staff to be enthusiastic about it'. Likewise, as other interviewees explained:

I can say that I think [competitions] are wonderful and senior management can also say that they think they are wonderful, but unless there are members of staff who are keen to get involved, it doesn't happen.

It's extra work and nobody wants extra work, so it's either you are interested in it or you are not. That's where people kind of get involved in skill competitions; all colleges will be the same. There will be certain skill areas in a college that excel. That will be down to the member of staff who is really motivated by them, likes his students to be involved...and goes from there.

[A] lot of [involvement in competitions] depends on the staff. I mean even in a college it depends on the staff in each department. You know, some of the departments are not as enthusiastic as others. So I would say that the level of enthusiasm in the college staff will probably lead to a variation of involvement.

Similarly, one interviewee argued that, even if he does the administrative work of organising competitions, buy-in from teaching staff is still fundamental to success:

I do think quite often it's down to the individuals, whether that's the teaching staff that share that passion or the managers that see the complete importance of competitions...I can do lots of the wider stuff – registering people, liaising, ensuring that travel arrangements are in place, ensuring that you've got your competition briefs to help you prepare students, etcetera, but it still does need quite a bit of buy-in obviously from the teaching staff of those areas.

However, staff involvement also entails a high level of commitment on their part. This is where goodwill becomes important. In discussing further development of competitions work, one interviewee said 'the big problem you have is obviously freeing up staff, because there's no money to pay people to do this. It's all done on goodwill'. For example, one interviewee described how she travels to competitions with students in her spare time:

I believe in being at the chalk face and for me the only way you can learn – I went to all the competitions with them. I got on the bus and went to [the competition] to see and be with those students, and to feel what they felt, and I would say that's why it's been successful, because I know what those students are going through...they do respect me because I do muck in.

Without initial enthusiasm about competitions, interviewees reported that it was unlikely the goodwill necessary to sustain involvement would be generated. In the words of one interviewee, 'if you continue to expect goodwill, it will run out eventually'.

### 4.2.3 Alignment with institutional priorities

Since, at present, competitions involvement is not officially required for FE colleges, it can be difficult to justify investing resources in this initiative. Many interviewees felt this could be one reason why participation levels vary amongst colleges, particularly given the importance of Ofsted inspections relative to the perceived importance of competitions work. As one interviewee said:

I would have to say that it is the pressure on overall budgets and targets. At the end of the day, Ofsted inspection grades are what drive [FE provision], and I suppose...you can't say [competitions are] your most important work because for all of this, if I go back tomorrow and we've got a grade three and we require a reinspection again, we've kind of missed a very important part of our business.

This is one reason why many interviewees believe that one of the best ways to develop competitions involvement is to embed it within the college's strategic plan or teaching and learning strategy. Interviewees at colleges that have integrated competitions work in this way frequently described how they wanted skills competitions to become 'core' rather than 'add-on' or 'bolt-on' work:

[O]ne of our strategic objectives [that] I've said is to increase the amount of competitions work we do and link [it] to teaching and learning really...I want to make sure that people see it not as just another bolt-on and an add-on but that they do it on a day-to-day basis in their classes as well, little mini-competitions within the class competitions and inter-class competitions within the department, all levels.

I think at the end of the day, there is some academic freedom in colleges and academic leaders...still have a degree of discretion [with regard to] how they choose to prioritise learning. So we choose to promote skills competitions because we see it as an integral part of the learning process; we see it as actually saying to our students that they, the world they're moving into is a competitive world and that this is a way of making them more aware of the pressures of the world of work, but in addition to that, it is also about making them more marketable, making them more employable. So we see it more as a win-win situation. If it's seen as a bolt-on, that you follow a very didactic curriculum for an awarding body, then I can understand why people would see it as, and I can see why lecturers particularly, would see it as a bolt-on and something that's more of a distraction than a core benefit.

Most of the institutions represented in this study had reportedly integrated competitions work into their strategic plan or objectives or were in the process of doing so:

I'm just in the middle of setting a competitions policy because I've never written it down and I realised because one of your questions was, "Do we have a competitions policy?" and the answer is no, it's not written down, but we have always in our self-assessment report required curriculum areas to report on their competitions. We haven't been quite as organised in terms of the way we've documented it, but the ambition is there.

Regardless of whether competitions work was integrated, many interviewees mentioned that the advent of study programmes has helped colleges integrate competitions work more into students' qualifications:

I think the study programme now – because it's a bit of the bigger picture now about not just getting that qualification, but are they employable, are they going to get a job and what's going to help them on that CV? So that might help.

[W]ith study programmes, the strong focus of study programmes, getting the young people into employment and developing their employability skills. So, you know, there is no finer way of saying how good that person's employability skills are than putting them into a competition.

Likewise, some interviewees from FE colleges in Scotland described the connection between the potential benefits of skills competitions and the aims of Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence:

I think we're sending teams, that's something that we want to promote, because you'll know about Scotland Curriculum for Excellence, and it ticks all the buttons for that, you know, about confidence building and all of that, so it's important that we do competition work.

Although, according to some interviewees at FE colleges in England, Ofsted is now recognising involvement in competitions as 'great practice' and some colleges have managed to use their competitions work within the context of Ofsted reports, involvement is not compulsory. The nine college principals interviewed were divided as to whether instituting competition participation as a requirement would be beneficial. Some are extremely supportive of this idea:

I would support that absolutely...I would love competition success, quality assured competition success...to be one of the indicators to Ofsted on high performing colleges...I think if it was actually spelt out to inspectors that this was an area to look at, that it would be [of] significant help in terms of getting all colleges to provide the opportunities to students.

On the other hand, others felt such a requirement would change the nature of participation for the worse:

I wouldn't ever want competitions to become a requirement...because at the moment I think people who are involved with them value them and you can persuade people to value them, but if you forced people to do them they would just become another [obligation]...it's weird isn't it? We don't force people to compete, generally. People choose to test themselves. It would feel wrong to say you must participate in this and you must find somebody who will do this competition.

Regardless of their perspective on this issue, principals and other senior leaders agreed that competitions can be used as a tool to drive excellence, quality of education and the college's reputation.

#### **4.2.4 Availability of resources**

Another factor frequently reported by interviewees as to why participation varied among colleges is the lack of resources, particularly time and money, available to support competitions-related work. Concerns about financial resources in general are a constant feature for colleges, which historically have 'not been well funded in comparison with universities and schools and ha[ve] had to operate

on tight margins' (Norton, 2012: 16). Multiple principals and other staff members interviewed expressed concerns about this area:

I think at the moment, in the current climate, colleges are terribly cash conscious, and there is reduced cash, and therefore to get wholeheartedly into competitions, it does cost you – there's no disguising that, you know, you need to invest in staff time, you need to invest in travel for students, equipment for students, hosting events has a cost, even though it's great fun. I think at the minute one of the biggest barriers is colleges being anxious about affordability; that's probably the biggest block at the minute.

Other interviewees also reflected this perspective, with some focusing more on time and others more on money:

I think it's just time and money more than anything. Time covers a variety of things. Time around curriculum design, curriculum planning, time spent planning for the competition, time invested in working with the young people to get them competition ready, and everything that you can think of in terms of time invested in competition work, you know. But they're the only barriers really, because if you have the time, then you have it. If you have the money, you may not need a great deal of it, but at least you have it at your disposal, and so you can invest it wherever it needs investing really. But I think if you have time, that's the most important thing because you can...whether you're on a national or local, regional, world stage or not, you can still do competitions in your own curriculum area that don't necessarily need a lot of money.

There are also particular issues in this area with regard to apprentices. Whereas some colleges find that 'employers are quite supportive' with regard to helping apprentices who are participating in competitions, other colleges have found financing their participation to be an issue:

[T]here's a limit to our budget...so that's a barrier. The other barrier is time, you know, a lot of the members may be apprentices and it's trying to get time off of work, some of the employers pay but others...just do it yourself, you know. So it depends, I mean the economy in the last few years hasn't been great and some apprentices have lost their jobs and things like that, so it's not easy going to an employer and saying, 'Look can you sponsor the apprentice for three days to go to [a competition]'.

I've often heard stories, and in fact we've had this experience ourselves, where apprentices who have competed within the college and want to go on...the college wants to support them to go on to compete at regional and national levels. Often employers, you know, because they have different pressures, don't want to release apprentices to do that, which is a huge pity, and we've been in the position as a college of, you know, actually paying for their travel and so on because the companies won't, which is a great pity I think. You know, obviously those positive-minded companies use it in a positive way, you know, as publicity for their company and can gain a lot from it, but others just see, you know, the negative side of it that they haven't got that apprentice on that day to work for them.

For most colleges, there is no question that 'if we had more funding we would do more'. Equally, however, interviewees were quick to point out that staff time is a significant cost as well, because 'anything that involves additional staff time is going to cost you; that's the reality'. Since lack of time and money can both be a struggle, one interviewee said 'you have to find creative ways of ensuring

that there is some funding available for that and that you've got creative ways of using your staff time as well'.

Regardless of the extent of a college's involvement in competitions, initiating, developing and sustaining an institution's participation was described as a significant administrative undertaking. According to an interviewee with responsibility for coordinating competitions activity across two colleges, the work involved includes:

all the operational type work, from registering candidates, to making sure they get to the correct venues, they've got all the equipment and materials they need, the lecturers know what they're doing and the training is given, bid writing for some of the funding that goes alongside the Skills Show, for the local show experiences...and then the general event management when we're hosting competitions.

In some cases, the staff time required extended beyond the day-to-day administration up to senior management level:

[A]ctually it requires a considerable amount of senior staff time too, in addition to, if you like, their day jobs or their operational responsibilities or indeed their strategic responsibilities; it requires them to take a huge amount of interest in that beyond the norm.

College size and location are also issues here, in particular for smaller, rural colleges that might have less funding, fewer staff members and be further away from where larger competitions take place. According to interviewees from such colleges, these issues present significant barriers to them initiating or further developing their involvement.

#### **4.2.5 Availability and accessibility of competitions**

The issue of availability is twofold. Firstly, a small number of interviewees discussed how the availability of competitions could influence participation levels. Secondly, if a college does not offer provision in a particular subject or skill area, then it is not able to enter competitions for that subject or skill area.<sup>13</sup>

A related issue mentioned was the accessibility of competitions. Some students, particularly those attending independent specialist colleges, are learning at a level below the minimum required for many competitions. Therefore, although they might be keen to participate, the competitions available are not accessible to them. One interviewee described how her students struggle to be involved because they are not taught at the level required for most mainstream competitions:

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<sup>13</sup> Some interviewees also believed that competitions for vocational subjects are more frequent and longer established than competitions for academic subjects. Therefore, they are less likely to be involved in competitions for the academic subjects they offer. While some colleges do organise or participate in academic-related competitions, this area reportedly remains small compared to vocational skills competitions.

So what I was interested in, are learners that are operating below [level 2], because actually...all young people should have the opportunity to excel at their level, and also there is something for everybody but it needs to be at their level in terms of having a job...so it's about having the activity at the right level.

Some interviewees from general FE colleges also expressed an interest in being more involved:

One of the things I'm interested in looking at is the inclusive skill competitions as well. I do know...some other colleges have got together a raft of inclusive skills competitions, so it is an area that, I think...we can engage a coach to look at supporting teachers to deliver and develop some inclusive skills competitions.

Although some inclusive skills competitions are available in the UK, this remains an area for potential development.<sup>14</sup>

Therefore, in some cases a lack of participation is not necessarily linked to a lack of desire to be involved but to whether appropriate competitions are available.

### **4.3 The benefits to FE colleges and students of participating in skills competitions**

The benefits reported were wide-ranging and are divided below according to each group.

#### **4.3.1 Benefits to colleges**

Benefits to colleges reported by interviewees include: continuing professional development opportunities for teaching staff; enhancing the quality of teaching and learning; contributing to positive publicity and reputation; accessing new equipment; and developing relationships with employers.

##### *Continuing professional development opportunities for teaching staff*

According to interviewees, the benefits for teaching staff were primarily related to what some interviewees described as 'cost-effective' continuing professional development (CPD) opportunities. One interviewee referred to this benefit as 'stolen goods' CPD because staff can take what they learn elsewhere and integrate it back into the college.

Interviewees described how competitions-related work exposes staff to new ways of operating and to new skills; provides the opportunity to network with others in their field; trains them in using the

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<sup>14</sup> We are aware of some work already being done in this area, such as the Association of Colleges National Skills Competition CPD Programme, which aims to support colleges in extending the outreach of competitions work to include more disabled and Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) students.

latest equipment and techniques in their field; and can be motivational and spark their enthusiasm.

One interviewee described the benefits as follows:

The networking, the benefits, I just see staff blossoming because they're actually getting to know people from [outside] the institution, people with different expertise and knowledge, like coaches and mentors...It's transformational. You can see their standards rising...driving up levels of attainment, meeting needs of employers. I suppose what I'm trying to say, it's contributing to the organisational development of [the] college.

Hence, many of the benefits to staff at an individual level can also benefit the college as a whole.

### *Enhancing the quality of teaching and learning*

Many interviewees discussed how being involved in competitions can enhance the quality of teaching and learning at a college. This is linked to the fact that competition involvement requires training to a high standard, and students and staff bring back what they have learned to the colleges:

I really put a lot of emphasis on competitions and how they can aid and enhance quality. They'd be hard-pressed to find a college that doesn't have any element of quality in any of their delivery plans or strategic targets. If you're a college that doesn't have that in, then fair enough, I can't argue the fact that competitions do help quality in relation to some of the things that I've mentioned previously. From that point of view, it would be my biggest argument. It's the argument that carries the most weight.

I think one of the big benefits here is, it's the core learning and teaching and quality improvement. You've got to really embed it into your core learning and teaching and your quality assurance system as well, so that you can see it can drive up improvement.

Therefore, many interviewees expressed the possibility for competitions to test the quality of what the college delivers and generally 'up their game' in their teaching and learning. Students then also benefit from higher quality teaching and learning as a 'by-product' of the college being involved.

### *Contributing to positive publicity and reputation*

Many interviewees indicated that participating in competitions, particularly successful participation, contributes to good publicity for the college. According to one principal, 'it gives us positive new stories. It helps us say to students, it is that sense of, well, we have a student who is that good so we must be doing something right'. Other interviewees agreed:

It's all free publicity, because the college can't afford to keep having half-page adverts and things like that, so the best publicity is word of mouth, student experience, results.

There's undoubtedly a reputational benefit. We milked the publicity around our involvement in WorldSkills. We regularly get articles in the paper about it, [and] we talk about it.

From a publicity point of view, or marketing point of view...yes, 100% definitely, you could say you're the best in your discipline...That's quite powerful; that's quite a headline trying to approach industry to get employer engagement. I think that would be quite a powerful tool if



you could demonstrate that this is the standard of what you produce in that sector and we want to engage with you because of X, Y and Z. I think that's a powerful argument definitely.

Some interviewees also believed that positive publicity could 'attract more learners' to the college, though it proved challenging to provide hard evidence of this outcome. Therefore, the primary benefit of such publicity is likely more closely linked to the college's reputation in their local community.

### *Accessing new equipment*

Interviewees remarked that some competitions offered unique opportunities for colleges, such as the chance to obtain new equipment that might not otherwise be affordable. In some cases, interviewees reported being able to permanently keep equipment that was purchased by employers or other sponsors for a particular competition. This situation is reportedly most common when a college hosts a competition. Other interviewees described bidding for equipment at a discount following larger competitive events, such as after WorldSkills when it was held in London:

You sometimes get equipment. You get, well not a lot, but perhaps with the WorldSkills when it was in London, you could bid for the equipment at a very cheap rate. We actually did and benefited from some of that brand new equipment that was used in the competitions.

Such opportunities also feed into the enhancement of teaching and learning, as students and staff not involved in competitions are then able to use the latest equipment in classes.

### *Developing relationships with employers*

Other interviewees mentioned the ability to 'raise their profile' with employers through competitions work as a key benefit for colleges:

[W]e are really successful in hairdressing and in sport so it does raise our profile; it helps get employers involved. So we can go to employers and say 'You know, this is our, these are our Level 3's team...topping men's barbering, you know, they were topping women's fashion' and so on, so it raises our profile generally and with employers.

As well, occasionally, some more progressive colleges see that it's a good way of forming relationships with employers, because what you're actually doing is suggesting that you're competitive on the business front, that you're producing high performers, that you recognise that you've constantly got to be stretching your students and your staff. And, you know, I mean, I know from my own experience that what comes back towards you and your relationships are a completely new set of opportunities.

Some of the opportunities gained through employer relationships included: employers sponsoring college-hosted competitions; sponsoring prizes for competitions; providing equipment for competitions; serving as judges; and developing competitions briefs for their skill areas. Through

opportunities like these, competitions help to facilitate connections and build partnerships between colleges and employers that benefit both.

#### 4.3.2 Benefits to students

Benefits to students reported by interviewees were closely aligned with those described in previous research (Mayhew et al., 2013). In general, interviewees explained how being involved in competitions develops students' technical skills and soft skills, both of which potentially enhance their employability and 'help them stand out when they start applying for jobs':

If you're trying to stand out from all the other young people who have also got the same qualifications as you, if you're able to say well I did this, especially if you were able to say I had to practise in my own time and I was motivated to do it, those are things that employers are likely to be pleased by...you could translate some of the things that you were doing not just onto your CV but actually to help you answer questions at interview.

The interesting thing is in the trades, for example, one of the things that you will hear employers say or maybe employers who are involved with competitions say is that competitions improve speed and one of the things that...the difference between when you were a student and when you actually go to work is the pace. So anything that improves their pace makes them more employable and more productive more quickly. So there is something about one of the benefits of being in a competition is that working to a deadline and urgency.

Clearly, the benefits to students can then also become potential benefits for future employers. Many interviewees pointed out the fact that competitions work helps them 'meet the skill needs of employers', sometimes faster than they are able to do so with qualifications.

In terms of soft skills development, some of the ones most frequently reported were: potential improvements in levels of resilience (or mental toughness), self-esteem, confidence, emotional intelligence, time management, organisation (as an individual, within a team and for competition events) and tenacity. Interviewees also discussed how competitions developed a sense of pride in students and could raise their aspirations.

More broadly, interviewees also described how competitions can: motivate students, boost their morale, spark their enthusiasm, stretch them beyond the boundaries of their qualifications, expose students to new ways of thinking about their subject, and give them the opportunity to network and open doors to other opportunities.

Overall, most interviewees believed that competitions help to prepare students for 'a competitive world':

Lots of aspects of life are a competition, so preparing yourself to take part in any competition, whether that's an interview for a job, whether it's playing for your local sports team, I think that's really, really important.

Because it's a competitive world and many of the areas we work in our young people go and they're self-employed or they go and work for quite small enterprises, sole traders and things like that, and they need to have that element of competition whether it was within business [or] just for survival really, and I think it's quite healthy having competition in college as well and between colleges.

Being involved in skills competitions allows students to grow accustomed to competing with others in an educational context in advance of competing in other circumstances.

#### **4.4 The costs for FE colleges of participating in skills competitions**

##### **4.4.1 The costs involved in competition participation**

The costs involved in competitions-related activity can include: materials/consumables, transportation, accommodation, judges' expenses and staff time. As discussed above, costs were frequently mentioned as a barrier to greater participation. However, when asked about the cost of participation, many interviewees were not able to report how much they spent on competition involvement per year. Responses ranged from a few hundred pounds to tens of thousands of pounds, depending upon the extent to which a college was involved. The inability to provide a total cost figure may be partly due to the fact that much involvement takes place on a department-by-department basis:

Well, it depends on the curriculum area. I would certainly always ring-fence some monies, or [have] included it in my budget considerations, because we've always entered, but I can't talk for others. Again, it depends very much on the area. If you don't have a lot of resource spend, it's a bit easier to do.

In other cases, interviewees noted a separation between allocated costs and 'unseen' costs, such as staff time:

[I]n terms of unseen costs which is staff time, we don't put a "cost" on that but there are obviously staff costs from that point of view.

Interviewees also discussed the cost differences of being involved in skills competitions at different levels (e.g. regional, national, etc.). Some reported that WorldSkills in particular is costly relative to other types of competitions:

There are a lot of expenses...depending on the level to which you get it to... We've sometimes got people through to the nationals, so that means they've gone to the regionals and then gone on to the nationals, and of course you then have to put them up in a hotel and all this...if you go to the next level, [WorldSkills is] more costly than other competitions that we do.

Although the amount of expenses reported varied, most interviewees agreed that it could be difficult to cover the costs of being involved at any level.

#### 4.4.2 How colleges fund their participation

In general, there are three models for funding competitions: using money from the college's central budget (which is either allocated to departments or is a specific competitions fund); using sponsorship or funding from other external sources (including government funding); or some combination of these.

Colleges that funded competitions-related work from their central budget employed a number of different methods for making this money available. The majority of interviewees reported that their college operated a system in which the funding for competitions came out of individual department budgets. However, a few colleges have earmarked funds from the central budget:

The college has dedicated, for a number of years now in their budget, an amount of money for an innovation fund, which historically has been around about £100,000 a year, which has two real themes to it. One is to develop the curriculum, and the other is to support competition work...around 40% to 50% of the innovation fund goes on competitions, because you can't expect to support staff and students without a cost implication.

Another reported that the college used funds from the marketing budget because competitions are linked into publicity.

Other interviewees described obtaining funding via sponsorship from employers or the government:

I know there are various kinds of grants you can get, like the one I mentioned earlier...they put up quite a bit of money that they got from companies and things like that to help sponsor it...we've also got money from [a skills-related organisation], who are a body that kind of try and pool all the colleges together and they get money from the government to support staff development and learning development...and things like that. So if there was something that we wanted to go to...we could put in a bid to [them], who may or may not have funds to support this, so that's one way. There's SDS as well, Skills Development Scotland, who can support us. So it's not impossible, it's just you have to go through the procedures to get support.

In most cases, colleges obtain funding from multiple sources to support their competitions work.

## 5 Conclusions and recommendations

This report has built on previous research by describing the ways in which colleges participate in skills competitions, why participation levels might vary amongst colleges in the UK, the costs of involvement and how colleges fund their participation. It also examined the benefits of participation. It is important to note that because the sample was limited in terms of participation levels and geographical location, the findings are representative rather than generalizable.

The colleges represented by the interviewees in this study are all participating in skills competitions, albeit some to a greater extent than others. The reasons for varying levels of participation are complex. They ranged from relative awareness of and exposure to competitions and the availability of competitions for the areas of study within the college, not least whether these are geographically accessible, to how aligned skills competitions are with institutional priorities, and the availability of resources to hold and participate in competitions. Underpinning all of these is the reliance on the enthusiasm and goodwill of senior management, staff and potential competitors. In many instances, participation did seem to come down to one or two individuals or departments who propelled the college's competition involvement. Without clear incentives, it is not immediately apparent how college involvement can be broadened or further stimulated.

Although college engagement is patchy, those colleges which were involved were able to identify clear benefits, many of which related to improving teaching and learning. For colleges, these benefits related to CPD opportunities for the staff, whereby competitions-related work exposes staff to new skills and equipment and working with others in their field. Competitions, through successful participation, can also contribute to positive publicity and marketing opportunities. There were also opportunities to develop relationships with employers, as advocated by the Commission on Adult Vocational Teaching and Learning report (LSIS, 2013).

Competitions were found to be equally beneficial to FE students. Students were able to develop both technical skills and soft skills through competition participation. Many interviewees felt this added to their employability. In addition, competitions were able to motivate students and provide stretch and challenge in the learning of their chosen field.

However, competition participation came at a cost. It was difficult for interviewees to name an exact amount, but the main areas highlighted were materials/consumables, transportation, accommodation, and staff time to name a few. These costs increased with the level of competition, that is in-college competitions did not seem to be as expensive as having a competitor or staff member involved in national or WorldSkills competitions.

Even so, these colleges were finding ways to cover these costs. Three main models for funding competitions were identified:

1. using money from the college's central budget (which is either allocated to departments or is allocated as a specific competitions fund);
2. using sponsorship or funding from other external sources (including government funding); or
3. some combination of these.

Throughout the interviews, respondents talked about 'the converted'. These are the colleges and individuals who, after experiencing a skills competition, especially either The Skills Show (national level) or a competition at international level (WorldSkills or EuroSkills), were converted to the power of skills competitions to improve teaching and learning. Colleges who cannot or choose not to participate in competitions were not represented in this study, although the reasons for non-participation may not differ drastically to the ones outlined in this report in section 4.2. This is a clear area whether further research is needed. As discussed in section 4.3.1, being involved in skills competitions can contribute to enhancing teaching and learning within a college. Focusing more specifically on the ways that competition involvement impacts on teaching and learning would be another area for further research. Finally, although there are clear potential benefits to being involved in competitions, there are also institutional risks in allocating resources to an activity viewed by some colleges as extra rather than essential to world-class skills provision. However, in some countries (for example, Finland), competition participation is viewed as an integral part of skills provision. Therefore, a third area for further research is investigating in more detail the ways in which colleges embed competitions work within their institutional strategic plans and objectives.

Based on the findings of this study, the following are provided as recommendations to be considered by Find a Future:

1. Senior leaders of colleges to be encouraged to attend competitions events in person. It might be particularly helpful to encourage senior leaders who are new to competitions work to attend with leaders from colleges who are highly involved.
2. The potential benefits of being involved in competitions, in particular with how they can be used as evidence of excellence for Ofsted inspections, could be more clearly communicated to colleges, potentially through the regional offices of the Association of Colleges.
3. Facilitating knowledge exchange between colleges regarding different ways of being involved in competitions could support those colleges who are interested in becoming involved. Such an exchange could help spread awareness of competitions to colleges who

are not involved or involved on a limited basis. Using the existing WorldSkills champions network could facilitate this process.

4. The WorldSkills champions network could also be used to provide colleges with clear examples of how competition participation can contribute to excellence in teaching and learning. Offering this information could stimulate greater interest in participation.
5. Facilitating knowledge exchange between colleges to learn how other colleges fund their participation would be particularly valuable to colleges just embarking on more competition engagement, particularly because this challenge is one all colleges face regardless of their relative level of involvement.

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## 8 Appendices

### 8.1 Appendix A: Interview schedules

The interview schedules used for expert and post-questionnaire interviews differ only slightly. While both ask similar questions, the post-questionnaire interview schedule accounts for the fact that most of these interviewees had already provided some data (via their questionnaire answers) in advance of their interview.

#### 8.1.1 Expert interview schedule

##### Section 1: Skills competitions/involvement in general

1. How do colleges begin to be involved in skills competitions?
2. What does participation in skills competitions involve for colleges?
3. Who at colleges is normally involved when institutions participate in skills competitions?
4. Why do you think participation varies among colleges in the UK?

##### Section 2: Personal experience

5. How long have you/your college been involved in skills competitions?
6. How did you/your college first become involved in skills competitions?
7. In which skills competitions is your college currently involved?
8. Could you briefly explain your role and responsibilities within the college in relation to skills competitions?
9. Who else is involved in skills competitions at your college? What are their roles and responsibilities in relation to skills competitions?
10. Does your college ever host skills competitions? If so, how often and what sort?
11. In total, how much does your college's participation in skills competitions cost per year?
12. Is there funding set aside in your college's annual budget to cover the costs of participating in skills competitions? If so, how much? What proportion of your total expenditure does this represent? If not, how is this participation funded?
13. In the context of skills competitions, could you please describe what a training manager does? Have you in the past or would you in the future allow a staff member be a training manager?

14. In your experience, what are the benefits of participation in skills competitions for FE colleges?

15. In your experience, what are the barriers to participation in skills competitions for FE colleges?

### **Section 3: Moving forward and conclusion**

16. In the future, do you think your college's participation in skills competitions will decrease, stay the same, or increase? Why do you think this?

17. Do you personally know people at other colleges who are directly involved in skills competitions? If so, could you please give us their names and job titles?

18. Is there anything else with regard to this topic that you would like to comment on or discuss?

### **8.1.2 Post-questionnaire interview schedule**

#### **Section 1: Personal experience**

1. How long have you/your college been involved in skills competitions?
2. How did you/your college first become involved in skills competitions?
3. Could you briefly explain your role and responsibilities within the college in relation to skills competitions?

#### **Section 2: Follow up from questionnaire**

4. I understand from your questionnaire answers that there are [insert number] of staff members involved in skills competitions at your college. Could you please tell me more about their roles/responsibilities?
5. I also noticed in your answers that you see skills competitions as being [important/very important/essential] to your college. Why do you think this?
6. On the questionnaire, you indicated that you are currently involved in [insert number of competitions at each level (i.e. institutional, local, regional, etc.)) and that approximately [insert number] of students are involved. How have you developed your involvement to this level?
7. I also saw in your survey that [insert subjects/skills areas] are the primary areas involved in skills competitions at your college. Could you please tell me more about why these

subjects/skill areas are involved? Are there any other subjects/skill areas that plan to get involved in the future?

8. You also shared in the questionnaire that involvement in competitions is/is not included in your college's strategic plan. (If yes) Could you please tell me how including it in the strategic plan came about? (If no) Could you please tell me why not? Would the college consider including it in the future?
9. I saw from your questionnaire answers that there is [insert number] set aside in the college's budget to cover the costs of participating in skills competitions. Could you please tell me more about the expenses this covers? Are there any expenses not covered by this? If so, how are these paid?

### **Section 3: Reflection and conclusion**

10. In your experience, what are the benefits of participation in skills competitions for FE colleges?
11. In your experience, what are the barriers to participation in skills competitions for FE colleges?
12. Why do you think participation varies among colleges in the UK?
13. In the future, do you think your college's participation in skills competitions will decrease, stay the same, or increase? Why do you think this?
14. Do you personally know people at other colleges who are directly involved in skills competitions? If so, could you please give us their names and job titles?
15. Is there anything else with regard to this topic that you would like to comment on or discuss?