

Competitions for Everyone



Sara Kaloinen, Päivi Pynnönen & Heikki Saarinen (ed.)

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**HAMK University of Applied Sciences
Vocational Teacher Education Unit**

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Dear reader

Vocational skills competitions have become established as a form of supporting and developing vocational education. Currently a topical issue lies in developing opportunities for competitors with special needs to enter.

Competitions for Everyone explains the main concepts related to the topic, and describes competition activities and the main organisations that arrange them. In this publication, we discuss the general development stages of vocational skills competitions, consider skills competitions as a social phenomenon and look at competing as a philosophical element in vocational education. We also reflect on some of the challenges that will be faced by skills competitions due to changes related to sustainable development and future developments. The publication is intended for vocational special education teachers and tutors, workplace mentors and trainers, and anyone else interested in vocational skills competitions.

Competitions for Everyone is the first instalment in a publication series whose other segments will cover the topics of professional skills coaching for those with special needs, and how skills competitions are organised.

The publication is proof of the active collaboration that takes place within the Taitaja network. The publication is funded in Finland by the National Board of Education, and the project has also received support from the European Social Fund.

We wish to extend warm thanks to all those involved in the editing process, as well as the participating competitors, trainers, judges, article writers, organisers of Taitaja competitions, Skills Finland ry, and the project's funders.

Hopefully our work will encourage new participants to enter the inspiring world of Skills.

Hämeenlinna, 30 April 2009

HAMK Skills Trainers' Academy

Sara Kaloinen
Päivi Pynnönen
Heikki Saarinen



TaitajaPLUS

The Finnish vocational skills competition for those with special needs was renamed in May 2009. From now on it will be known as TaitajaPLUS.

Taitaja 8+1 Series

In the Taitaja 8+1 series, students with special needs enter Taitaja semifinals in various disciplines. The winner of the semifinals, i.e. the student with special needs with the top score in each discipline, participates in the three-day Taitaja final as a competitor (+1) with eight other finalists. The semifinals and finals follow the rules of Taitaja competitions.

Abilympics

Finland's first-ever national skills competition for special needs entrants was organised under the Abilympics name. The term can also refer to the International Abilympics, which are the world championships in vocational skills for the disabled.

International Abilympics

The International Abilympics are a worldwide contest in vocational skills for people with special needs.

Skills Finland ry

Skills Finland ry is a non-governmental organisation that promotes Finnish top-level expertise through vocational skills competitions, training and education. The association is also in charge of arranging the Finnish national vocational skills team's representation in WorldSkills, EuroSkills and the International Abilympics. Skills Finland's members include both private individuals and organisations.

HAMK Skills Trainers' Academy

HAMK Skills Trainers' Academy is a competence hub built within the HAMK Vocational Teacher Education Unit, which supports the maintenance of the Skills operator network, organises training for experts in competition activities, promotes top expertise through projects, research and publications, and disseminates good practices in competition activities within vocational education.

Kajja Miettinen, HAMK Vocational Teacher Education Unit

Social Perspective of Vocational Skills Competitions in Vocational Special Needs Education

The central purpose of the Finnish education system is to offer equal and fair educational opportunities for the entire population (Ministry of Education 2008, 7). This means that education is also available to those with problems in learning and those for whom the traditional education system is not the most suitable way of learning. Almost all Finnish children who complete elementary school go on to receive upper secondary education, either at a general upper secondary school or in vocational education. This means that secondary education also receives students whose individual learning requirements must be taken into account through special needs education. In 2006, there were 14,700 students with special needs in professional vocational education in Finland (Kumpulainen 2008, 95), so the quantity is by no means negligible.

Another general objective is that all children and adolescents should study together with their age groups, regardless of their learning abilities. Some of the concepts applied in Finland are “shared education” and “unrestricted access to learning environments”. Shared learning and getting to know one’s peers enhance young people’s understanding and acceptance of diversity, and therefore increase tolerance. In higher education these issues are promoted through the Inclusive Higher Education (ESOK) project run at the University of Jyväskylä by the Ministry of Education. The concept is linked to the ideology of a society shared equally by all citizens, to which Finland is committed through its Constitution and through several international agreements.

The concept of shared and equitable education also encompasses full access for all students to the activities of their peers. In making the vocational special needs education strategy (Ministry of Education 2002), the ministry found that special needs students lacked the opportunity to demonstrate their vocational skills in competitions. There had been positive experiences of students with special needs participating in cultural contests organised by SAKU ry, an organisation that promotes the well-being of vocational school students through physical exercise and culture. It was decided that the same model should be applied to demonstrating vocational competence. The International Abi-

The central purpose of the Finnish education system is to offer equal and fair educational opportunities for the entire population (Ministry of Education 2008, 7). This means that education is also available to those with problems in learning and those for whom the traditional education system is not the most suitable way of learning. In 2006, there were 14,700 students with special needs in professional vocational education in Finland (Kumpulainen 2008, 95).

By opening competitions also to students with special needs, we can strengthen their sense of belonging and thereby support their growth into adulthood in similar ways to those available to ordinary young people. Furthermore, participation in competitions has drawn attention to the strengths of vocational education in Finland, and its attempts to foster the learning opportunities of all students alike. We can be proud of this.

lympics offered opportunities for participation in a skills competition, so Finnish participation in the 2007 Abilympics in Japan was set as a target. The target was fulfilled, and, in addition, doors were opened for students with special needs to enter the national Taitaja competition thanks to unprejudiced actions by Skills Finland ry and educational institutions.

What is the social significance of such competition activities? They promote the development of a more equitable and socially just society and prevent the problems and marginalisation that can be caused by segregation. All people have the need to receive recognition and feel part of their society. By opening competitions also to students with special needs, we can strengthen their sense of belonging and thereby support their growth into adulthood in similar ways to those available to ordinary young people. Allowing this access in principle is another small step towards a more inclusive society. Togetherness, competition and participation increase students' social and cultural capital, and promote their skills in lifelong learning – all elements that have been found to advance inclusion and prevent marginalisation. The internal cohesion and balanced development of society also lie behind inclusive activities.

Furthermore, participation in competitions has drawn attention to the strengths of vocational education in Finland, and its attempts to foster the learning opportunities of all students. We can be proud of this.

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Matti Kauppinen, Luovi Vocational Institute, Skills Finland ry

National Competitions for Competitors with Special Needs in Finland

Development of Finnish Abilympics into TaitajaPLUS

The Abilympics were first presented in Finland at the Tampere 2006 Taitaja competition, where work demonstrations were given by practical nurses and website developers from the Arla Institute and by artisans from Kuhankoski Special Needs Vocational College. The small but active Abilympics stall was well received and feedback was positive.

Demonstrations were also given at the Joensuu Taitaja competition the next year. Special needs education was represented by potters from Kuhankoski, sewers from Perttula Special Vocational School, photographers from Merikoski, electronics experts and poster-makers from Keskuspuisto Vocational Institute and florists from Kiipula Vocational College.

The first Finnish vocational skills championships for students with special needs were held at the 2008 Taitaja competition in Espoo. There were five categories: practical nursing, customer service and selling, web design, IT PC/network support and photography. Students with special needs also entered five categories via the 8+1 model, where the top scorers out of students with special needs entering ordinary Taitaja semifinals could enter the Taitaja final.

The Taitaja 2009 competition in Vaasa had three categories for competitors with special needs: practical nursing, cleaning services and web design. There were also two demonstration disciplines: landscaping and property maintenance. The top three in each category received a medal and a monetary award.

Specific competition rules were created for competitors with special needs jointly by Skills Finland ry, the HAMK Vocational Teacher Education Unit and special vocational institutions. The applicability of the rules was tested at the Vaasa Taitaja competition in 2009. They will be officially adopted at the Oulu competition in 2010. The rules are based on the Taitaja competition rules, but they account for the special needs of disabled entrants and those requiring extra support. The competition rules and any later revisions must be

Vocational education for students with special needs was first included in a Taitaja competition in the form of skills demonstrations in Tampere in 2006. Demonstrations were also given at the Joensuu Taitaja competition the next year.

The first Finnish vocational skills championships for special needs students were held at Taitaja 2008 in Espoo (Uusimaa). There were five categories. The same competition also hosted the first application of the 8+1 model, which was used in five competition series.



approved by the board of Skills Finland ry. The first official rules will be approved in the early summer of 2009.

TaitajaPLUS: Organisation and Training

The TaitajaPLUS vocational skills competition for special needs competitors will be organised annually as a part of the Finnish championships in vocational skills (i.e. the Taitaja competition). The Taitaja organiser is in charge of appointing a coordinator for TaitajaPLUS in the competition organisation, as well as a separate PLUS category coordinator. The person appointed to the task should be a qualified special education teacher or have sufficient experience of special vocational education. In certain cases, the practical arrangements for the TaitajaPLUS competition can be outsourced to a different educational institution. Certain local knowledge is essential, however, in the category coordination group, in order for the organisation and implementation to be successful.

In addition to the TaitajaPLUS competition coordinator, the TaitajaPLUS steering group includes the coordinators of the previous and following competitions, all the PLUS category coordinators, and representatives from Skills Finland ry, the Finnish National Board of Education, vocational special education teacher training and, when possible, employers, employee organisations or the labour market.

All operatives in the TaitajaPLUS competitions, including category coordinators, judges and other organisers, take part in Taitaja competition training with other Taitaja organisers. National and regional TaitajaPLUS training is mainly arranged by the HAMK Skills Trainers' Academy. The training helps to ensure the successful implementation of competitions and allows organisers to share and utilise earlier competition and training experiences.

Competitions

In selecting TaitajaPLUS categories, regional factors should be considered in addition to the national criteria. These factors include how much special vocational education is offered in the region's general educational institutions and special vocational schools, what subjects are available, and how many special needs students there are in each field in proportion to national levels. It is important for different fields of study to be given the opportunity to participate in TaitajaPLUS over the years. This allows special vocational education to present itself more widely, and as many students as possible to demonstrate their skills. The categories

The TaitajaPLUS steering group comprises:

The TaitajaPLUS competition coordinator, the coordinators of the previous and following competitions, all the PLUS category coordinators, and representatives from Skills Finland ry, the Finnish National Board of Education, vocational special education teacher training and, when possible, employers, employee organisations or the labour market.

Currently, it is a condition for entry into TaitajaPLUS and the Taitaja 8+1 series that the student have an individual educational plan (IEP).

for each TaitajaPLUS competition are decided on by Skills Finland ry, based on a proposal by the competition organisers.

TaitajaPLUS can be divided into two parts: the actual TaitajaPLUS categories, and the Taitaja 8+1 series.

The TaitajaPLUS category finals take 3-6 hours and involve the top competitors from the TaitajaPLUS semifinals, i.e. 3-6 entrants in individual disciplines and 3-6 pairs/teams in team disciplines. The number of categories may vary from year to year, depending for instance on the physical resources of the event site.

In the Taitaja 8+1 series, special needs students enter the ordinary Taitaja semifinals in various disciplines. The winner of the semifinals, i.e. the special needs student with the top score in each discipline, participates in the three-day Taitaja final as an entrant (+1) together with eight other finalists. The semifinals and finals follow the rules of Taitaja competitions. In the 8+1 series, particular attention must be paid to the accessibility of the competition site: all finalists must enjoy the same conditions for demonstrating their skills, regardless of possible needs for individual aids or support for mobility, hearing or seeing.

Conditions and Rules for Entry

Currently, it is a condition for entry into TaitajaPLUS and the Taitaja 8+1 series that the student have an individual educational plan (IEP).

Competitors are entered to the Taitaja competition by their educational institutions, using the competition organiser's online entry system. Each competitor may only be entered once. The organisers announce the entry period on their website. The entry period lasts for one month and must end at the latest four months before the beginning of the Taitaja final. Each year's rules and instructions can be found on www.skillsfinland.fi.

Entry Fee

The entering institution pays an entry fee for each competitor, which entitles the competitor to enter either TaitajaPLUS or the Taitaja 8+1 series. The entry fee covers entry into both the semifinals and the final. The prices and payment instructions for Taitaja entry fees are posted on the competition organiser's website.

The entry fee goes towards organising the semifinals and final, and developing the competition as a whole. Decisions on the entry fee and payment practices are made by Skills Finland ry.



Eija Alhojärvi, Skills Finland ry

Future of Vocational Skills Competitions: TaitajaPLUS and Abilympics as a Part of the Finnish Skills Competition System

Why are Vocational Skills Competitions Needed?

Skills competitions have long provided hope in difficult times. Skills Finland ry was established in 1993, during the economic recession. The roots of international skills competitions, meanwhile, lead back to the time of postwar reconstruction. An Iberian competition held between Portugal and Spain in 1950 later developed into the WorldSkills system and the creation of its maintaining organisation, WorldSkills International (WSI), which now has more than 50 member states. In Finland, as elsewhere in the world, there has long been a belief that in difficult times the future lies in competence and professional skills. It has always been believed that financial investment into top expertise is beneficial even – or perhaps particularly – in bad times.

The purpose of work skills competitions all around the world and throughout their history has been to promote professional competence and appreciation for it.

Impact of the Finnish Professional Skills Competition System

Skills competition activities have been developed systematically in Finland since the late 1980s. The Taitaja competition was first held in its current form in 1988. Far-reaching and persistent efforts in arranging skills competitions have produced results, by developing professional top-level expertise, fostering respect for professional competence and improving the recognition and attraction of vocational education. The number of applicants for vocational education has grown steadily throughout the twenty-first century in Finland, and for two years running (2008 and 2009) it has exceeded the number of applicants to upper secondary schools.

Measured in terms of success in international work skills competitions, the level of competence produced by Finnish vocational schools has clearly increased. Finland had little success in its first entries to seven categories of the WorldSkills competition in 1989; since then, however, winnings

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Vocational skills competitions benefit all the participating

competitors,
vocational education organisers,
teachers,
workplace supervisors and
employers.

have been on the increase. By 2008, Finland had achieved 32 world championship medals, of which ten were golden. The gold medals were in nine categories.

The impact of vocational skills competitions is based on persistent, target-oriented work. The competition system offers tools for genuine and concrete collaboration between diverse parties. Competitions can be utilised in many different ways, also to solve new challenges that may arise. In two decades, vocational skills competitions have been moulded into a versatile tool for developing vocational education.

Benefits of Vocational Skills Competitions

Skills competitions benefit all the parties involved. For competitors, preparing for and entering the competitions means an opportunity to develop into a top expert in the field. In addition to their professional skills, competitors improve their social skills, ability to make independent decisions, self-confidence, motivation, healthy professional pride and, in the case of international contests, also language skills and other international activities.

The organisers of vocational education can use competition activities to improve the competence and professional abilities of their staff, compare the level of their competence both nationally and internationally, promote mutual learning through networking between teachers and workplace supervisors, and improve their reputation as first-rate educational institutions and employers.

For employers, competitions are an opportunity to compare the quality of their operations to others', to promote practical innovations in vocational skills, to prove their commitment to top-level vocational education and personnel development, to improve their visibility and therefore demand for their products and services, and to facilitate the recruitment of top experts.

TaitajaPLUS and Abilympics as a Part of the Finnish Skills Competition System

Good results have been achieved by vocational skills competitions in Finland. That is why there was a desire in the country to investigate the possibility of using competitions also in vocational special needs education. After a four-year trial period (2005-2008), it was evident that TaitajaPLUS at the national level and the Abilympics at the international level would form an essential part of the Finnish skills competition system. TaitajaPLUS now has excellent opportuni-

ties for utilising advances that have already been made in the field of competitions, as well as the existing partnership networks and international contacts.

Many of the good practices generally identified for skills competitions are applicable to the needs of TaitajaPLUS and Abilympics. In future, any development efforts will cater for the needs of TaitajaPLUS in addition to Taitaja. The interaction between the two competitions has already led to many new insights; one good example is the accessibility of the Taitaja events, to which attention was first paid thanks to trials related to competitions for competitors with special needs. Accessibility has now been considered from the points of view of competitors and the audience, and some new solutions have already been implemented.

Vocational skills competitions are a new opening for special vocational education. Similarly, TaitajaPLUS and the International Abilympics are an opportunity for the Finnish skills competition system as a whole.

Future of Vocational Skills Competitions

Mostly, the professional skills competition system in Finland is well-established, smoothly functioning and productive. The popularity of the competitions has been increasing constantly. The number of participating institutions and competitors in both the Taitaja and Taitaja 9 competitions has grown consistently, while the Taitaja competition has developed into a well-publicised, esteemed event with a significant number of visitors each year.

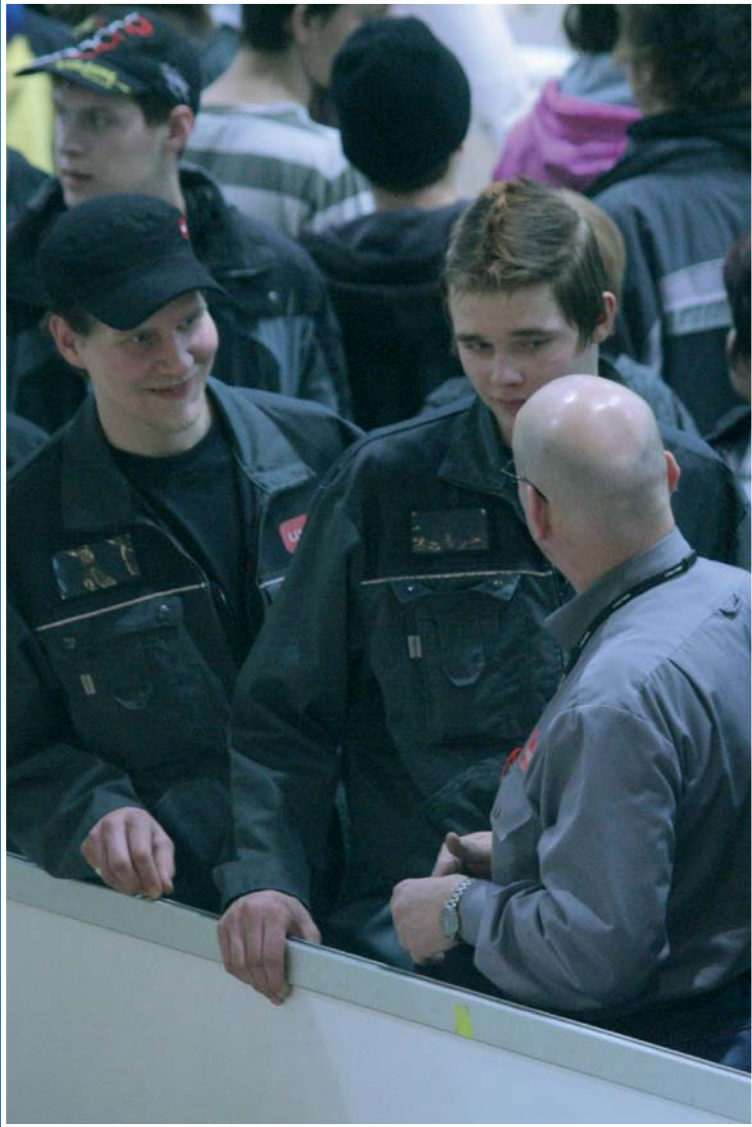
The popularity of vocational skills competitions is also on the rise globally. New countries are joining the WorldSkills organisation. Almost all European countries are working on developing skills competitions, and the European Commission views competitions as an important way of promoting pan-European objectives for vocational education. Abilympics activities, which have traditionally centred on Asia and Africa, are attracting increasing interest in Europe. The Finnish skills competition system and expertise in competitions are well-known and respected internationally, and Finland partners actively with other countries in international activities.

In Finland, the future development of competitions will focus particularly on improving quality and utilisation. The aim is that competitions may be utilised more widely than before in developing vocational education and increasing its renown. A new Taitaja quality assurance system is to be implemented during 2009. The links between Taitaja event or-

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organisation and teaching will be tightened and the semifinal system will be improved, so that more vocational schools will have the ability to make use of competitions in developing and marketing their competence. The development of Taitaja competitions and tasks is tied to the Finnish reform of professional vocational qualifications. A development project spanning several years has been set up to promote entrepreneurship through competitions, while the opportunities for native Swedish-speakers to enter are being improved. Taitaja activities are concentrating especially on improving guidance by developing study paths. Meanwhile, there is an ambitious nationwide project whose aim is to model the good practices used in training in order to make the fruitful teaching and learning methods used in the activities available to all teachers and students. International competitions are used for benchmarking Finnish competence and providing valuable information on the basis of which the training system can be developed.





Markku Aunola, Kiipula Vocational College, IAF Executive Committee Member

International Competitions for Students with Special Needs in Finland

Background

When operations related to vocational skills competitions for competitors with special needs were being started up in Finland, it was clear from the start that the objective was to enter international competitions. A Finnish member first joined the International Abilympics Federation (IAF) in 2006. Before that, Finnish representatives had met with some of the Japanese coordinators of IAF and visited the national event in Japan. Finns had already visited the competition held in the Czech Republic in 2000, but that had not led to any further participation. What sets Finland apart in comparison with other members of IAF was that the membership is held by Skills Finland, while members from other countries are mostly organisations that work with diverse education and employment issues for the disabled.

International Abilympics Federation (IAF)

IAF works in close collaboration with two international organisations – the International Labour Organization (ILO) and Rehabilitation International (RI). ILO, which comes under the United Nations, is a major developer and organiser of vocational rehabilitation, particularly in the developing countries. Competition activities in these countries have been partly funded by ILO. RI, on the other hand, brings together organisations for the disabled, service providers and official bodies worldwide. The main emphasis in RI's activities is on equality, education and rehabilitation for the disabled. Vocational rehabilitation in particular is at the centre of the activities of the Rehabilitation International Finnish Committee (RIFI), which is a member organisation of RI. RIFI's members are customer organisations and service providers within rehabilitation, as well as other major rehabilitation bodies. IAF is a kind of sister organisation for RI, and for instance the Secretary General of RI is a member of the IAF Executive Committee. In 2005, the RI Secretary General at the time, Tomas Lagervall, visited the Helsinki WSC and we discussed the inclusion of Finland in IAF activities together with Japanese representatives.

Finland joined the International Abilympics Federation (IAF) in 2006. The organisation's Finnish representative is Skills Finland ry.

IAF

International Abilympics Federation

The organisation that runs the International Abilympics. It has 57 members from 38 countries.

ILO

International Labour Organisation

A United Nations organisation that plays a significant role in developing and producing professional rehabilitation, particularly in developing countries.

RI

Rehabilitation International

An organisation whose main emphasis is on equality, education and rehabilitation for the disabled.

RIFI ry

Rehabilitation International Finnish Committee

RIFI is a member organisation of RI. Its members are customer organisations and service providers within rehabilitation, as well as other major rehabilitation bodies.

WSC

World Skills Competition

The first International Abilympics were held in Japan during the UN's International Year of Disabled Persons in 1981. The subsequent hosts of the contest were:

Colombia 1985

Hong Kong 1989

Australia 1995

Czech Republic 2000

India 2003

Japan 2007

The next Abilympics will take place in South Korea in 2011.

The first International Abilympics were held in Japan during the UN's International Year of Disabled Persons in 1981. The next competition took place in Colombia in 1985, and then in Hong Kong, where IAF was officially established. Since then the event has been held in Australia in 1995, the Czech Republic in 2000 and India in 2003. The organisation currently has a total of 57 members from 38 countries, as more than one organisation can enter from one country. There are rules for Abilympics operations, including instructions for the host country in organising the competition and other events. In addition to professional skills categories, the competitions include "leisure and living skills" contests.

The World Skills and Abilympics competitions were held together for the first time in Shizuoka, Japan in 2007. Finland entered four competitors and also took part in the IAF general assembly for the first time. The general assembly is held every four years in conjunction with the Abilympics. At the Shizuoka assembly, the undersigned was first appointed a member of the IAF Executive Committee (EXCO). EXCO has 12 members, including the RI Secretary General. EXCO also has representation from the next Abilympics host, which is currently South Korea. The next competition will be held in Seoul in June 2011, in the same arena as the 1988 Seoul Olympic Games and WSC 2001. The South Korean games will be the eighth in Abilympic history. The other countries that are represented in EXCO are Austria, Australia, India, Lebanon, Malaysia, China and naturally Japan, which is home to both the IAF President and the secretariat.

EXCO convenes annually at the RI congress. The last congress was held in Quebec, Canada in August 2008, and the next one is scheduled for November 2009 in Dubai. Between meetings, committee members communicate by email, and decisions such as the approval of new members can, when necessary, be made in email meetings.

Future Outlook

Strong participation from Asian and African developing countries is visible in international competition activities – both in terms of rules and in category choices. In these countries, vocational rehabilitation is to a great extent related to adults and people who have contracted a disability in adulthood, as for various reasons people are more likely to become disabled at a later age in these areas. Many of the competition categories are ones in which disabled people are trained and employed in the developing world. These countries' economies continue to be labour-intensive, and the focus is on traditional craft-oriented trades as well as on information technology. The main disability groups that

are represented are physical and sensory disabilities. For the abovementioned reasons, the competitions have no maximum age limit, which means that the competitors may include professionals with several years' experience.

The objective of Finland and the other European countries, as of the industrialised world as a whole, is to focus Abilympics operations also on young special needs contestants. In the Japanese event, Finland's competitors were the youngest entrants. Another objective is to extend the selection of categories to new fields, ones where people with disabilities find employment in the industrialised world. That would mean getting closer to the WSC category classification. In future, the games could have separate series for younger and older competitors. The third objective is derived from the above objectives and relates to a revision of the competition rules. Finland's representatives would like to see the rules being developed in the direction of the WSC rules, meaning that for instance the number of entrants per country would be limited and the jury would be more multinational. There is also room for improvement in the transparency of tasks.

Such changes are not easy to implement, because the circumstances and challenges for vocational rehabilitation of disabled people vary greatly from country to country, due to differences in socioeconomic situations and in the status of people with special needs in education, the labour market and society at large. It is important to remember that more than 90 per cent of the world's approximately 60 million people with disabilities live in developing countries, and of them, nearly 90 per cent are in rural areas. Thus, organising uniform vocational skills competitions for people with disabilities and special needs is significantly more difficult than in WSC.

Within IAF, there is great interest in involving more European countries in the movement. Finland only became involved in the Abilympics movement very recently, although very actively and using a new model. There is now pressure on Finland to organise the competition; this is influenced by Finland's renown as a reliable competition organiser. There is also the possibility that the Abilympics and WSC will be held together in 2015. The IAF board has tasked its President with being in contact with the WSI President in this matter. The application process for hosting the 2015 competition begins with expressing an interest in hosting it at the 2010 EXCO meeting. The decision on the next host will be made at the IAF general assembly to be held at the 2011 games in South Korea. It would also be possible for several European countries to cooperate in this matter. Interest in skills competitions is awakening in Europe; for instance France is drawn to the Finnish-proposed model of includ-

Strong participation from Asian and African developing countries is visible in international competition activities – both in terms of rules and in category choices. For the most part, vocational rehabilitation in these countries relates to rehabilitation of adults and people who have become disabled at a later stage.

The objective of Finland and the other European countries, as of the industrialised world as a whole, is to open Abilympics operations more to young special needs contestants.

Another objective is to extend the selection of categories to new fields. The third objective relates to improving the conditions for participation of young people, which would require changes to the competition rules. There is also room for improvement in the transparency of tasks.

Interest in vocational skills competitions is growing in Europe. The Finnish model of organising the TaitajaPLUS competition for special needs competitors and the Taitaja 8+1 series as a part of “normal” Taitaja competitions has attracted attention from other European countries.

ing the Abilympics within the World Skills organisation. An international Abilympics conference is planned for the Oulu Taitaja event; at that point it will be possible to discuss the national and international development of the operations on a European level, and probe the interest of European countries in organising the 2015 event.



Abilympics



Finalistit - Finalister



Hänninen Kirsi
Keskuspuiston ammattiopisto,
Arian toimipaikka
Espoo



Ruohoneva Jenni
Ammattiopisto Luovi
Uusikaupunki



Ruohola Mika
Omnian ammattiopisto
Espoo



Mollanen Santtu
Ammattiopisto Luovi
Alavus



Kärttunen Laura
Keskuspuiston ammattiopisto,
Arian toimipaikka
Espoo



Jantunen Jenny
Käipolan ammattiopisto,
Hämeenlinna

Diversity of Vocational Skills Competitions

Vocational skills competitions for young people are forums that promote the objectives of vocational education in many ways. They bring together students of various professions, vocational teachers, workplace representatives, prospective students and the broader public. Preparing for and participating in competitions allows young people to develop their top expertise and demonstrate their competence. For businesses, the competitions are an excellent opportunity to become familiar with the level of vocational education, to further the workplace orientation of education, to recruit young professionals and to promote the business and its activities.

Coaching students and organising skills competitions develop the competence of teachers, as well as the internal operations, internationalisation and business partnerships of educational institutions. Competitions offer an opportunity to compare the levels of education and competence nationally and internationally. The publicity received by competitions clearly has an impact on the number of applications received by vocational education. Training and coaching help to develop both individually oriented and workplace-oriented tuition methods, which can then be utilised right across the vocational education field. For the public, the competitions are important showcases of vocational competence and vocational education.

The starting point behind competitions for entrants with special needs is inclusion, i.e. inclusive and participatory education. Inclusion implies that:

- all students study together;
- joint teaching and tutoring is arranged with the students' individual circumstances and needs in mind;
- every member of the community – students and tutors alike – feel accepted and valued.

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Inclusion is not a specific completed state to be attained but rather a continuous process of removal of obstacles to participation.

Some of the driving forces behind the development of competitions for students with special needs in Finland were Finland's entry into the International Abilympics Federation in 2005, and a letter from the Minister of Education and Science, Antti Kalliomäki, to organisers of vocational education (23 November 2006) stating the importance of vocational skills competitions as a way for students with special needs to demonstrate their competence.

Starting up national competition activities for competitors with special needs is one of the functions of HAMK's Skills Trainers' Academy. Established in 2008 within the Vocational Teacher Education Unit of HAMK University of Applied Sciences, the Skills Trainers' Academy works to increase the attractiveness of certain vocations and to improve the quality of vocational education.

The main areas of operation of the HAMK Skills Trainers' Academy are:

- Maintaining the nationwide Skills network of operators and providing training in competition expertise;
- Supporting regional Skills projects;
- National Abilympics activities;
- Projects, research and publications that promote top-level expertise;
- International competition activities, related e.g. to WorldSkills, EuroSkills and International Abilympics;
- Reporting on and disseminating good practices developed in competition activities within the field of vocational education.

Even before the establishment of the academy, HAMK University of Applied Sciences played an active part in starting up Abilympics operations in Finland. During the AKVA projects carried out in 2000–2007, HAMK held start-up seminars, which created a network of all those interested in the operations. HAMK subsequently began offering Abilympics coach training in partnership with other members of the network.

Another important factor for the initiation of these operations in Finland was the approval of Skills Finland ry as a member of the International Abilympics Federation (IAF) in December 2005. Furthermore, there was a letter from the Minister of Education and Science to the organisers of vocational education, dated 23 November 2006, regarding the importance of vocational skills competitions as a way for students with special needs to demonstrate their competence.





Seppo Helakorpi, HAMK Vocational Teacher Education Unit

The Philosophy behind Vocational Skills Competitions

Background

Throughout its history, Finland's educational policy has centred on a philosophy of equality. Finns have always considered it important for all citizens to have the opportunity to receive an education, regardless of their place of residence, wealth, ethnic origin or sex. The situation that has been thus attained in Finland is by no means standard in all countries. While equality has been a shared objective in the education sector, competition has not. Now and again, debate arises on the nature of competition and the opportunities for competition in education. References are made to a neoliberal view of education, which focuses on cost-effectiveness and efficiency. Some people are critical of education being defined in financial terms. The debate is fuelled by ideas regarding the application of quality assurance concepts to education. Some parts of the debate have taken on farcical qualities, when some writers have not familiarised themselves sufficiently with the basic concepts of the quality philosophy. It has been interesting to see how Finland's success in PISA surveys has been accepted by many as sufficient proof of a well-functioning educational system. For some reason, the Finnish matriculation examination system and its competitive scenario are not considered inappropriate by these same people.

Competition in education arises at the individual student's level, when the performance of students is compared for instance in specific subjects. Competition can also be present at group level; we are all familiar with inter-school sporting events, for instance. Schools can compete in performance, too, for example in terms of the success of their graduating students in matriculation examinations. Plenty of statistical data is gathered these days, making comparisons easy. In Finland we have been wary of competition, due to a fear of it corroding the foundations of equality. Some are horrified by the idea of compiling rankings of school performance. Others consider competing to be a natural human activity; after all, even small children compete at an early age for example in running or sand-castle-building.

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Competition versus Equality

More lies behind the running of competitions than man's natural competitive instinct. Particularly when speaking of competence, the globalising world economy forces businesses to compete in terms of products and services – i.e. in competence. Performing well in at least one area appears to be a condition for success. Most businesses have begun eliminating inessential activities from their operations and focusing on their core areas of competence. New alliances and partnerships are made. This has quietly turned competition into a communal sport. We have realised that people, like businesses, are all different, and that this diversity is a resource. We also speak of collective intelligence or expertise. How does this fit in with the equality doctrine?

We should consider this pillar of our educational system – equality – in a bit more depth. It has sparked a debate regarding the duties of education and teaching: should we offer everyone education that aims for the same objectives, or should the same resources be applied to achieving individual objectives? The question is extensive and it involves a basic issue regarding educational equality. Should education and edification aim for:

- equal opportunities in the availability of education,
- equal opportunities in the implementation of education, or
- equal opportunities in the outcomes of education?

The principle of access to education entails that every citizen must have the same opportunities for accessing education, regardless of their place of residence, wealth or any other factor. The principle of equality in educational implementation implies that everyone must receive the same kind of and similarly resourced education. The principle of equality in educational outcomes means that similar results should be achieved for instance by providing different kinds of teaching. At one extreme there is the thought that “everyone can learn everything”, as long as teaching is sufficiently differentiated. The problems of this can be illustrated using the following figure.

The first sector represents a kind of utopia. Because people have different learning abilities and respond differently to the same teaching, it is impossible to reach the same outcomes even with the same education for all.

The second scenario represents a fairly ordinary situation, where different learners achieve different outcomes as a result of cohesively applied teaching. Some do not meet the set objectives and others exceed them.

The third sector represents personalised teaching and study. In it, different learners are offered study paths based on their personal learning abilities, which means that everyone can attain the basic objectives. On the basis of their different learning outcomes, students can then find different positions in our postmodern society. Traditional Finnish “one-track education” produces similar qualifications and competence, when the labour market is actually in need of workers with different kinds of competence. Equal opportunities could be fulfilled so that each student receives access to education that corresponds to his or her abilities and needs, and eventually finds employment in a position where his or her competence is valued.

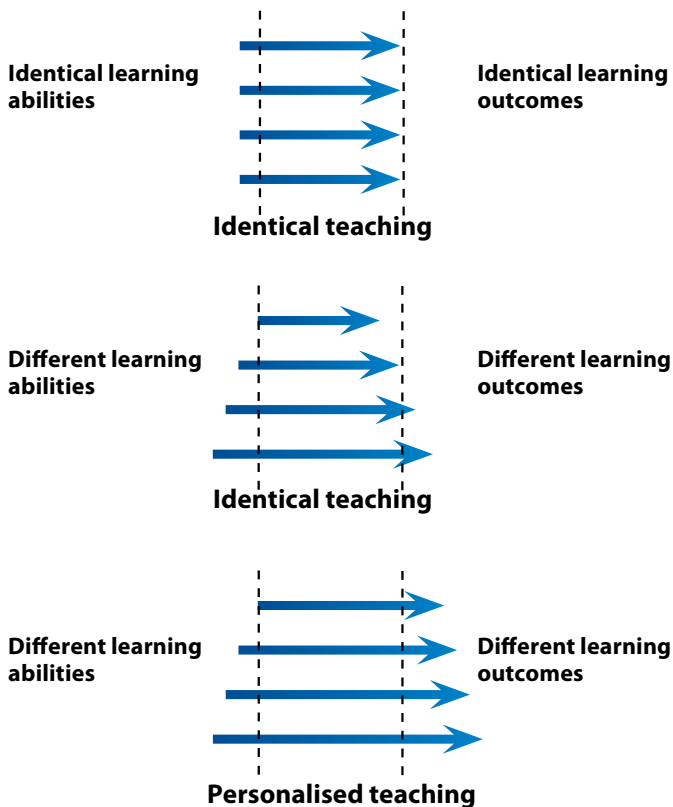


FIGURE 1. Problems in educational equality.

The Finnish Ministry of Education approved a proposal for quality management in vocational education made by the National Board of Education for the purpose of encouraging organisers of vocational education to improve the quality of their operations towards excellence. The model's elements are planning, implementation, evaluation and feedback/change processes, and each has defined quality criteria.

Education is a social service, whose objectives are set in legislation. However, it is subject to limited financial resources coming from taxpayers' money, which means that it is not released from obligations regarding efficiency and cost-effectiveness. This has given rise to discussions on educational quality. One of the cornerstones of the European Union's education policy is the Bologna Declaration, whose aim is to harmonise educational practices within the Union. It has led to reflection on the objectives of vocational education, and on the qualifications and competences of various professions. Finland is committed to the EU's programmes. In conjunction with the Copenhagen Process, a Common Quality Assurance Framework (CQAF) was built for supporting quality assurance in vocational education. It is based on the EFQM model. The framework also has its roots in the principle of continuous improvement known as the Deming Quality Cycle (plan, do, check, act). The Finnish Ministry of Education approved a proposal for quality management in vocational education made by the National Board of Education for the purpose of encouraging organisers of vocational education to always improve the quality of their operations towards excellence. The model's elements are planning, implementation, evaluation and feedback/change processes, and each has defined quality criteria. Quality assurance is about evaluating and improving processes. Applied to a school, it does not mean evaluating individual students but assessing and developing the whole school's teaching and learning processes. The Maastricht Declaration drew attention to improvements in cost-efficiency, pupils in danger of marginalisation, individual and flexible study paths, predictive education, learning methods and the competence of teachers and trainers. The EU summit in Maastricht (2004) reached an agreement on cooperation, with the aim of:

- modernising vocational education, in order to improve the competitiveness of the European economy
- offering all Europeans – whether they be young, old, employed, unemployed or vulnerable – the knowledge and skills they need to participate fully in our developing knowledge-intensive society, and creating more and better jobs.

The European Union's Helsinki Communiqué (2006) stresses the fact that education policy-makers must promote high-level vocational education and make it possible for those already in employment to update their competence. The objective must be to involve all young people in either vocational or higher education. The knowledge and skills they achieve in their studies must be an advantage both in their work and in their future lives. The communiqué also emphasises the

need for flexible study paths, allowing students to move on to different levels of education – particularly from vocational into higher education. Vocational education should be equitable and effective. This means that those whose circumstances are unfavourable in terms of education and those who risk marginalisation must be taken into particular account. It also means that vocational education must offer not only basic professional skills but also top-level expertise, in order to prevent lack of competence or shortages in skilled employees, and in order to maintain innovation and growth in our information society.

Personalised Education and Competition Activities

A striving for flexibility, individualism, specialism and uniqueness has appeared in education, both at individual and at social level, which in practice has led to the personalisation of education. In today's society we can further our own skills and needs in ways that lie outside of organised education. The competence needed in life and at work can be developed for instance through pastimes, the constantly diversifying media, webs and networks. Enriching communities are abundant and it appears that young people in particular are adopting their ways. The great challenge for education is how to identify and recognise skills and knowledge acquired outside of the educational system. The ultimate purpose of attending school is by no means to achieve certain grades but to acquire competence. Similarly the objective of educational institutions is not to fulfil the (education) system per se, but rather to conduct the operations that serve individuals and the community in the best possible ways.

How can we know whether we are good as individuals or whether we fulfil people's needs as an organisation? At the organisational level the answer to this question is the quality philosophy, and its ideas of continuous evaluation and development (the "learning organisation"). It is no coincidence that research is now under way into the collective and communal nature of work teams and the collective and shared expertise that is linked to these teams. A fundamental part of competence lies "hidden" in the form of tacit knowledge within work communities' operating cultures.

Competence is not just a question at the individual level; particularly in our networked society it is a communal factor. Quality assurance measures, with their related evaluation and development processes, are in place to develop a community's activities. Quality work is linked to the concept of best practices. In each field and for each case there are practices that work most effectively and produce the best

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results. It is interesting to find out how others operate – particularly how successful organisations achieve good results. It is this idea that has led to the foundations of quality competitions. Even in Finland, quality competitions have been going on for decades (the Finnish Quality Award has been given out since 1976). Now they also involve public service organisations. Although it is interesting to know what organisation is the best in each field in a given year, the ultimate purpose of quality competitions lies in good practices, operational quality and its development. The Finnish National Board of Education and the Ministry of Education have set up an award for quality in education, for which educational institutions compete annually. Quality and its development have become fundamental issues at all levels of schooling. The question here is not of competing against other institutions but together with them.

As I mentioned previously, competing at the individual level has been found to be problematic in education. In the “old school”, students were given reports where their own grade average was compared to the average of the whole class. At the time of an elementary school reform in Finland, this comparative and stigmatising practice was given up, and discourse turned to target-based evaluation; in other words, looking at how well students have achieved the objectives set for their studies. This has been the basic principle behind evaluation even in vocational education to this day. Today's society is sometimes aptly called the competence society. We now want to know what competence is needed in specific tasks, and how it can be obtained. The concept of competence relates to a strong shift from knowledge-based targets to skill-based targets. The Finnish education system has been criticised for being too knowledge-oriented and placing excessive weight on facts. An example is the matriculation examination. The basic models followed in Finnish education have been equitable teaching and shared objectives for all (cf. equality principle above).

However, vocational education in particular has initiated a strong development towards competence-based orientation, where the focus is on what students already know, what other competence they should acquire, and how best to acquire it. Behind this philosophy lie new theories on learning and knowledge, including the (socio-)constructivist concept of learning, dialogic (context-bound) learning, communal knowledge construction and tacit knowledge. Today's catchwords are identifying and recognising competence. Demonstration-based studies have been under development for years. The “million-dollar question” now is, How can competence or a specific skill be demonstrated and assessed? The on-the-job learning that takes place at work is tied to the context of the workplace in question. We can think about

whether that is sufficient “proof” of broader competence. One of the central aims of vocational education is for students to achieve the best possible employment after graduation. Processes of on-the-job learning implemented in close collaboration with employers have been found to increase the aptness of education in terms of the competence requirements of the workplace.

For individuals, education is also about how flexible it can be in order to offer the education required by the student’s needs and inclinations, and to support the student’s personal growth. There has been a move to personalise and individualise education, as a shift away from the “one-track” tradition. This kind of education is based on the following ideas regarding the learning and teaching of professional skills, which is based on talent studies:

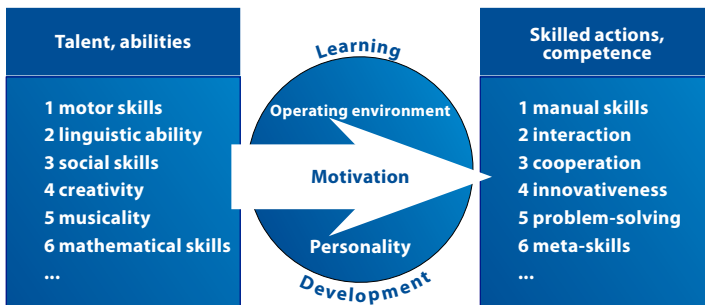


FIGURE. From ability to competence

Skills and workmanship are linked to competence potential and personal characteristics. Talent consists of various individual areas, which develop into personal inclinations. If the environment is favourable, motivating and encouraging, these inclinations develop into abilities, which are reflected in skilled actions – for instance as workmanship. Certain personal characteristics represent specific capacities, which can turn into abilities thanks to the effects of the environment and personal growth. This gives rise to motivation for certain actions. With regard to the idea of the learning organisation described above, the operations of schools should be developed in such a way that they can form an encouraging and motivating community that supports and enriches personal growth. The personal inclinations of students should be developed in order to generate the competence needed in their chosen profession. We must accept that not all students have to master all of the tasks or jobs related to the field in question. A team-based, networked community consists of diverse people and different yet complementary competences.

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Thus we arrive at two central and essential questions or challenges for vocational education: 1) to identify and recognise the students' personal characteristics as unique competence potential; and 2) to build study and education processes that support and motivate learning and professional growth based on personal inclinations.

The idea of building and supporting a specific professional identity has taken a backseat in vocational education. Students see their chosen profession as a part of their own future, which grows to be an element in their overall identity. Previously, professional pride was particularly emphasised as a part of professionalism; the experience and subsequent satisfaction of mastering one's job. Proper professional competence and professional pride do involve completing work well. When working in a hurry and under financial pressures, we are tempted to act against our professional ethics – for instance by attaching plastic flooring to wet concrete, or neglecting to dry insulating materials, or installing sockets carelessly in a crooked position. It is specifically the duty of the school to draw attention to these issues. The actual workplace used for an internship or traineeship period can give students an unrealistic picture of proper skills and professional pride. At school, students must learn about professional ethics, professional identity and the good traditions of the trade. Proper professionalism also involves continuous development of oneself and one's competence – even by surpassing of one's own boundaries. Internal professional pride and “total” professional competence contribute internal satisfaction and the motivation for completing daily tasks. Optimally, a worker can experience a state of “flow”, in which an interesting and motivating job is found to be energising and empowering. A good job gives enough independence, allowing the worker to decide on actions, to develop the work and to participate in an interesting team.

The primary purpose of vocational skills competitions is to promote the learning of professional skills and the dissemination of good practices. The competition itself is secondary. There are many levels of skills competitions: in Finland we have Taitaja competitions on a regional and national level, EuroSkills at the European level and WorldSkills at the global level. These events have made professional competence and workmanship evident to all. They have sparked wide-ranging efforts to develop and research the concepts of competence and professional skills. By touring different countries and regions, the competitions reach diverse people – particularly young people about to choose their careers, who are given concrete demonstrations of the diversity of fields and the nature of different tasks. Of course the competitive situation is not a genuine work situation, but it does give an indication of the nature of professions, their tasks and

their competence requirements. Work skills competitions have been criticised for being a kind of sterile demonstration, where skills are evaluated in a laboratory-like environment. A competition does not correspond to genuine work situations; it lacks for instance the social context – the work community, where teamwork and interaction (mutual learning, competence sharing) often play a very significant role. For this reason we must develop competition tasks to more closely resemble genuine work environments, with their customer service, teamwork and development aspects. There have also been complaints regarding the fact that identical tasks do not take into account cultural differences between countries. Different ways of completing the same task give rise to contemplation regarding the appropriateness of one's own methods of working.

Although success in a skills competition is positive and an important culmination and springboard in the careers of competitors, the purpose of competitions is primarily to raise awareness of professionalism and vocational education. It seems clear that by wandering through an event watching people only a few years older making highly skilled creations and producing genuine expert work, young people facing a career choice can receive a useful information pack and understanding of the professions that interest them. Many of their prejudices or preconceptions may change. In today's society, professions and their competence requirements change swiftly. It is very likely to be interesting for many young people to witness the equipment and environments with which professionals work. Therefore it is no coincidence that esteem for vocational education has risen in Finland to the point that, by 2008, there were more applicants to secondary vocational education than to academic upper secondary school. In addition, educational legislation has been reformed so that it is possible to progress from vocational education to higher education degrees, so interest in vocational routes should come as no surprise. Vocational skills competitions have played a role in these changes. They have also inspired the educational system to ponder on competence, to improve the teaching and learning of skills, and to provide a basis for coaching in expertise and proficiency.

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Vocational Skills Competitions as Promoters of Vocational Competence in Sustainable Development

Sustainable Development as a Workplace Challenge

The basic idea behind sustainable development is to safeguard the well-being of humans now and in the future. Sustainable development has environmental, financial, social and cultural dimensions. Environmental and financial sustainability implies sustainable use of natural resources in the long term, and making environmental utilisation and impacts proportionate to environmental capacity. Social sustainability implies safeguarding human equality, health, safety and well-being, as well as giving opportunities for participation and influence. Cultural sustainability implies maintaining cultural diversity and opportunities for free intellectual activity and ethical growth.

In the labour market, these sustainable development objectives play a role for instance through legislative requirements, through the financial benefits of environmental efficiency and, more broadly, through corporate social responsibility. In recent years, the climate change debate has caused people to widely recognise that work and operating models must be made more environmentally efficient in all fields.

The challenges of sustainable development in the workplace require competence from all employees. However, in different professions and fields, the perspectives and competences of sustainable development are different. For example, competence in environmental and financial sustainability includes material-saving and energy-efficient work methods, the use of environmentally sound raw materials and lengthening of products' useful lives. Meanwhile competence in social and cultural sustainability includes for example occupational safety, and the ability to encounter groups with special needs in customer services and in the workplace. The TaitajaPLUS competition promotes and makes evident the equal opportunities for groups with special needs in work, education and participation.

Sustainable Development in Vocational Education

Vocational education on its part strives to respond to the challenge of sustainable development. Teaching in sustain-

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able development in vocational education emphasises competence in the future profession and the ability to operate in the workplace, without forgetting the roles of the consumer and citizen. The role of vocational education in promoting sustainable development is not only to respond to the competence needs of the labour market but also actively to develop the workplace by fostering sustainable work and operating models.

Optimally, newly reformed curricula will include the principle of sustainable development in their competence requirements as a key aspect of lifelong learning, and in the professional qualifications of degrees in line with the alignments of the field. In addition, sustainable development forms a part of several supplementary subjects such as physics and chemistry, health science, ethics and business operations. Competence in sustainable development should be evaluated as a part of professional skill demonstrations. Some of the aspects of sustainable development that are considered in such evaluations might be:

- work process management
- mastery of work methods, tools and materials
- awareness of the knowledge on which the work is based
- key skills in lifelong learning

In the principles for vocational qualifications, sustainable development as a key aspect of lifelong learning is defined as follows:

“The students and degree scholars commit to working in their profession to further the environmental, financial, social and cultural principles of sustainable development. They agree to comply with the regulations, directives and agreements concerning sustainable development in their job tasks.”

The significance of education in sustainable development has been pointed out in diverse Finnish strategies and programmes. With regard to vocational education, they particularly emphasise competence in sustainable development in one’s own field. The Ministry of Education’s Sustainable Development Task Force has produced a strategy (2006), one of whose objectives is for sustainable development to be taken into account even in vocational skills competitions:

“Sustainable development should be considered even in vocational skills competitions, both in planning the categories

and in implementing the competition, because the performance of top-level experts communicates and promotes work models to future professionals.” (Finnish Ministry of Education. Promoting Sustainable Development in Education; Implementation of Baltic 21E Programme and Finnish Strategy for the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005-2014).)

Sustainable Development in Vocational Skills Competitions

Skills competitions can be used to promote the consideration of sustainable development in vocational education. Competitions are a good way to draw attention to competence and skill requirements in sustainable development, on the part of event visitors, participating institutions, and the event’s business partners alike. The competitions represent the vanguard of professional expertise, so they are a good way to demonstrate that top-level experts must also master matters related to sustainable development in their fields.

Competitions also allow for the fairly abstract-seeming concept of sustainable development to be concretised and brought closer to teaching and competence evaluation practices in various fields. The fact that competence in sustainable development is one of the concrete, measurable and assessable aspects of competence in competitions helps to promote the wider inclusion of sustainable development in teaching and professional skills demonstrations.

The Espoo Taitaja competition in 2008 was pioneering in that it was the first to systematically account for sustainable development perspectives in a professional skills competition. The category coordinators received training on the subject, and professional competence in sustainable development was assessed in every category. In many categories, the perspectives were also taken into account in the implementation of the competition tasks. Viewpoints on sustainable development and the related competence evaluations were included in the descriptions of the categories displayed at the site; the purpose of this was to bring the issue to the attention of the event’s audience.

It was by no means a question of a single-event project, but rather a process of continuous improvement. Professional competence in sustainable development was evaluated at the Vaasa Taitaja 2009 competition, and it will also be included in coming competitions.

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Accounting for Sustainable Development in Category Implementation

The perspectives of sustainable development can and should be taken into account in the organisation of the event's categories. Although our vocational skills competitions are short in duration, any event organisation has a number of environmental and other effects, for instance in the form of purchases, transports, catering services, temporary constructions and waste. It is essential take sustainable development into account in planning each category and the event as a whole.

The category coordinators play a key role in fulfilling and promoting sustainable development at our vocational skills competitions. They are largely responsible for planning the competition tasks and their evaluation, and for designing the competition sites. A Sustainable Development Handbook and checklist have been drawn up to assist the category coordinators in their work, including examples of sustainable development considerations in competition tasks and categories.

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