

UK skills take centre

Concerns over the lack of traditional apprentice schemes being run in the last century were first raised by the Lord Leitch Report of 2005. It revealed that UK engineering skills primarily lay in the 40 to 60 years age bracket and, given the age profile of the engineering workforce in the UK, warned that the growing skills gap needed to be addressed as a matter of urgency.

Today, the figures speak for themselves. Of the 300,000 graduates in the UK each year, only 24,000 are from engineering disciplines – and, of those, only 13,000 are UK students.

A number of UK initiatives have been established to tackle this skills gap, but Juergen Maier, managing director for Siemens Industry UK, believes more measures need to be taken. "The numbers in engineering vocational training are even more concerning as the manufacturing sector will need 235,000 at apprentice/technician level over the next 10 years," he notes. "It is encouraging that the Government has acknowledged this skills gap and has pledged investment in apprenticeships and vocational routes but, unfortunately, we have a 20-year gap of investment to fill. This is where WorldSkills comes in – it's a key way to raise the profile of engineering and manufacturing and help encourage new recruits into the industry."

WorldSkills International is a global competition that first took place in Spain in 1947. Since 1971, it has been held every two years and this year it makes its third UK appearance, taking place from 5 to 8 October at ExCel, London.

WorldSkills London 2011 looks set to be the biggest event yet, with 1000 competitors from more than 50 countries/regions competing in 45 vocational skills – each vying for the chance to win gold, silver or bronze medals. Medallions for excellence will also be awarded and visitors will be offered impartial advice and guidance on careers and apprenticeships.

The organisers expect approximately 150,000 visitors over the four days, while Visit London estimates the competition will bring £28million in direct economic benefit to the city. Chris Humphries CBE, chief executive of the UK Commission for Employment

and Skills, believes WorldSkills London 2011 can provide UK industry with a platform to showcase its true capability. "But we need businesses to come on board," he warns.

"Hosting an event of this magnitude will not only require funding, but also the equipment and raw materials. I call upon UK plc to pledge its support to this unique opportunity."

Competitors are generally aged 22 or younger and most participating countries and regions have already selected teams from previous heats. All eyes will be on the UK team, which ranked seventh in the



world at the last event in Calgary – four places higher than it achieved in 2007. The targets for the UK team are high; it will compete in 30 skills and expects to win 10 medals, including five golds, and gain a top five ranking in the world. Categories include Mechatronics, Robotics and Mechanical Engineering CAD.

The selection and training of UK competitors was managed by the National Apprenticeship Service. Potential competitors were drawn from a shortlist and competitions, then further training was given before they competed at a final selection event. The best overall performing competitors were chosen to be part of Team UK.

Skills Minister John Hayes announced the 43 members of Team UK at the end of June and described their role in bringing the value of vocational skills and practical learning to national attention as "hugely important". "I offer my warm support and congratulations to every member of the team," he said. "To support the ambitions of young people everywhere in our country, we have created a record number of apprenticeships, and we are building the best skills training system we've ever had."

Sponsors back WorldSkills

Industry giants have jumped at the chance to sponsor the broad range of categories. Siemens, for example, is providing automation and drive components for the Industrial Control and Polymechanics/Automation



stage

This October, London plays host to the largest skills competition in the world. Chris Shaw takes a closer look at WorldSkills London 2011.



competitions. "Importantly, taking part is inspiring and exciting for young people as it's a chance for them to engage with like-minded peers," observed Maier. "We also mustn't forget the thousands of visitors who will attend WorldSkills - many of whom will be young people from across the UK - and how inspiring the skills competitions and exhibition element of the event will be for them. Siemens is delighted to be able to showcase its technology at the exhibition where it will be seen by pupils from schools and colleagues across the UK and spark ideas and interest in the minds of the engineers and manufacturers of tomorrow."

Pneumatic and electrical automation technology specialist Festo

is sponsoring both the Mechatronics and Mobile Robotics sections. Kim Holm, regional manager at Festo Didactic (Finland), wanted the company to be associated with an event designed to encourage young people into the industry. "Both mechatronics and mobile



Team UK rises to the challenge

**Mobile Robotics**

Darron Lewis, representing Team UK, is 21 and believes WorldSkills London 2011 will enable him to excel in robotics. Working towards a BSc (Hons) in Product Design and Robotics, Lewis has already decided on a career in robotics. "The work is current, interesting and a challenge," he said. "By getting involved in international competitions I'm more likely to impress future employers. My ambition is to keep improving in my skill and continue to make up to date our eyes."

Puja Varsani, currently in the final year of her undergraduate degree at Middlesex University, described the opportunity to represent Team UK in Mobile Robotics as "a huge honour". "I hope this opportunity will allow me to showcase how vocational training can lead to successful employment and career opportunities," she said. "I know the next few months will be tough as I will be in training for the event and I really hope the whole of the country gets behind Team UK."

**Mechanical Engineering CAD**

At 20 years old, Ryan Sheridan has already won a gold medal in EuroSkills 2010 and a silver in WorldSkills UK Mechanical Engineering CAD 2010. His college lecturer at Motherwell College told him about the competitions and he believes these will help him get the relevant training he needs to progress in life. "My ambition is to be the best I can and I would say to other young people considering a vocational career, 'if it makes you happy, go for it!'"

**Mechatronics**

At the age of 23, Chris Downey already holds a bronze medal for WorldSkills UK Mechatronics 2010 and hopes to improve upon that this October. "My biggest achievement would be getting to the UK final of Mechatronics," he said. "My ambition is to complete my training and become an hardened engineer as well as getting a master's degree in engineering. By competing for a place at WorldSkills London 2011, I hope to learn different things about myself while also learning how different countries approach my skill. I want to finish as high as I can in the competition and strive to win a gold medal for the UK. This will greatly help my future career prospects when applying for jobs and enable me to make new contacts in the industry."