

Skills Competitions in Finland for People with Special Needs



Päivi Pynnönen (ed.)

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Photo: Editor, principal lecturer Päivi Pynnönen is one of the pioneers in Finland in developing special needs vocational education utilizing skills competitions as one of the methods.

Introduction

Competitions intended to develop vocational education and training and instruction were first held in Finland in 1988. It was then that the first national vocational skills competition was held in Hämeenlinna. It was also around that time that a group of experts left Finland to acquaint themselves with international vocational skills competitions. Today, approximately 1,700 – 2,000 youths participate in national vocational skills competitions every year, and representatives are sent to compete in international competitions as the Finnish national team in dozens of categories.

Right from the start, vocational skills competitions have brought together a wide-ranging group of movers and shakers in vocational education and training. This still holds true today. Vocational institutions, the Ministry of Education and Culture, Finnish National Board of Education, coaching units formed through international competitions, employer and employee unions, companies, teacher education units, universities of applied sciences, the university sector and, nowadays, also more than a thousand private persons: teachers, former competitors and workplace representatives. In 1993, Skills Finland was founded to co-ordinate Finnish competitions and represent our country in international youth vocational skills

competitions in an official capacity. The association also owns the National Skills Competition Taitaja brand.

Internationalisation and international co-operation are constantly expanding through teacher co-operation, student exchanges, the development of international competitions and international project and research activities. The latest initiative is in export of education. The first export agreement involving competition expertise was made in 2014 between the Häme University of Applied Sciences and a Brazilian partner.

The Finnish Academy for Skills Excellence (formerly the Skills Trainers' Academy) was founded in 2008 within the Häme University of Applied Sciences for the purpose of providing the wide-ranging training required for vocational competition activities as well as developing vocational teacher education and teacher competence through competitions.

The Academy is involved in training Finnish national team experts for the National Skills Competition Taitaja as well as the international WorldSkills, EuroSkills and International Abilympics competitions. The training involves co-operation with the competition network, where Skills Finland is a major partner.

The purpose of this publication by the Finnish Academy for Skills Excellence is to present the wide range of activities carried out in vocational skills competitions and coaching for people with special needs in recent years. Vocational skills competition activities for people with special needs began in Finland in the autumn of 2007, when Finnish competitors participated in the 7th International Abilympics in Japan. In Finland, national vocational skills competitions for people with special needs were held for the first time on 16 – 19 April 2008 in connection with the Taitaja competition. That same year, the HAMK School of Professional Teacher Education offered its first training program in coaching, which was intended for developing competitions and coaching for people with special needs.

This publication also includes articles that were previously published in the Academy's Finnish-language *Kilpailuja kaikille* publications as well as articles describing new visions for competitions. The articles in this publication were written by people involved in national and international vocational skills competitions for people with special needs regarding their experiences. Matti Kauppinen serves as Skills Finland's TaitajaPLUS and Abilympics co-ordinator. In his article, he discusses the past and present of vocational skills competitions for people with special needs in Finland as well as the participation of Finns in international vocational skills competitions. Markku Aunola is the Skills Finland representative for the International Abilympic Federation (IAF) and sits on its board. He has long been involved with vocational skills competition activities, e.g. as a member of the Skills Finland board and various steering groups for vocational

special needs education. In his article, he addresses the ideas behind and vision for vocational skills competitions for people with special needs.

A majority of the Finnish vocational students with special needs study in public educational institutions. In special needs education, every effort is made to identify and support each student's individual strengths in order to develop their personal potential into a vocational skill through study and training. The aim of vocational skills competitions is to offer educational institutions new operating models for special needs education and demonstrate the vocational skills of people with special needs to employers. It is important for each educational institution to consider opportunities for participating in various competition events as well as in a competition form suitable for each student. Maria Sipari, a student at the South Karelia Vocational College, participated in the National Skills Competition Taitaja in the skill of Confectioner/Pastry Cook. In her article, she writes about her own experiences as a competitor as well as the importance of the competition in establishing a strong vocational foundation for the future. Markku Vengasaho, who served as Maria's competition coach, wrote about his experiences as a teacher and vocational skill coach, who plays a key role in promoting each student's growth and motivating their vocational development. Tomas Varala talks about his own competition experiences as Finland's representative in the Electronic Assembly and Testing skill at the 7th International Abilympics in Japan in 2007.

Finnish Academy for Skills Excellence Executive Manager Tuomas Eerola and HAMK School of Professional Teacher Education Dean Seija Mahlamäki-Kultanen present Academy operations in their article. Academy trainers Päivi Pynnönen and Heikki Saarinen have for several years worked in various vocational skills training programs and competitions, in which they have interviewed competitors, coaches and other involved auxiliary personnel. The interview results were used in the planning of training programs for vocational coaching, and also served as the source material for various publications, including this one.

As the editor of this publication, I would like to thank everyone contributing for their outstanding co-operation, especially the article authors, whose enthusiasm for and sheer enjoyment of vocational skills competitions for people with special needs and their development is so clearly expressed in the articles of this publication.

Hämeenlinna 31 January 2016

Päivi Pynnönen

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Photo: Team Finland has a funclub in every competition. Here in South Korea 2011.

Päivi Pynnönen

Trainer, Finnish Academy for Skills Excellence

Gaining professional skills in vocational skills competitions

Taitaja, the Finnish national vocational skills competition, has been held since 1989. At that time, some thirty youths competed in two skills categories. Over the years, the competitions have grown into major events, with hundreds of competitors vying for the Finnish championship in over 40 skill categories, not to mention the thousands of visitors in attendance. Taitaja competitions are intended for youths in vocational education and training who are under 20 years of age. Each year, dozens of semi-finals are held, with over a thousand students participating. Taitaja is a major development event for vocational education and training, bringing together employers, educational institutions and their students and teachers. (Skills Finland ry 2016.)

All people have a need to gain recognition and feel that they are part of society. Making vocational skills competitions available to all students reinforces a sense of belonging and, in turn, supports youths in their transition to adulthood. Being together, competing and participating increase social and cultural capital and promote life-long learning skills, which have been found to increase engagement and prevent marginalisation in society. (Miettinen 2009.) As vocational skills competitions allow teachers and students establish new co-operation networks with other educational

institutions, companies and employers, they provide an opportunity to reduce prejudices and make attitudes more positive toward participation by everyone in society. (Pynnönen, Kaloinen and Saarinen 2013.)

All vocational skills competitions should be organised in a such a way that allows everyone unimpeded access to both participate in the competition and observe it as a spectator. Accessibility is a whole in which all citizens are able to participate in doing work, hobbies, culture and study. Accessibility also involves the availability of services, usability of implements and appliances, comprehensibility of information and the ability for individuals to participate in making decisions that affect them. In this case, we are referring to creating a physical, mental and social environment that allows each and every individual to function on an equal basis with others, regardless of their particular traits and abilities. Achieving equality is also the goal in the development of vocational skills competitions and coaching. (Pynnönen, Kaloinen and Saarinen 2013.)

TaitajaPLUS is a vocational skills competition specifically intended for vocational students with special needs. It is held every year in connection with the Taitaja competition. The purpose of the TaitajaPLUS competition is to promote competition accessibility and equality, professional expertise, the quality and recognition of specialised vocational education, and improve the employability of students with special needs. All students for whom an individual education plan (IEP) has been drawn up in an educational institution can take part in TaitajaPLUS competitions. The top 3–8 competitors in individual skills or the top 3–6 competing pairs in pair skills are admitted to the competition final based on the points earned in semi-final rounds (held if necessary). TaitajaPLUS has its own competition rules. (Skills Finland ry, TaitajaPLUS rules 11/2012.)

In addition to the TaitajaPLUS skill categories, competitors with special needs may also participate in Taitaja skills announced in advance by the competition organiser as a +1 competitor. The +1 competitor earning the most points in each skill of the Taitaja semi-finals is entitled to compete in the Taitaja competition final as an "extra competitor". In accordance with the Taitaja competition rules, +1 competitors must be 20 years of age or younger during the competition year. The TaitajaPLUS competition, on the other hand, has no maximum age limit. In addition to the above, competitors with special needs may participate in all Taitaja skills without special status, thus allowing them to be evaluated equally with the other competitors, in accordance with the Taitaja rules. (Skills Finland ry 2016.)

Held every four years, the International Abilympics are a vocational skills competition specifically intended for students with special needs. The Abilympics are organised by the International Abilympic Federation (IAF), into which Skills Finland was admitted as a member in December 2005. In the International Abilympics, competitors participate in vocational, recreational and life skill categories. Participants must be 15 years of age or

older. Participants in the Abilympics must have a medical certificate verifying that they have a disability that restricts their daily life. Finland's first participation in Abilympics was in Japan in 2007. (Skills Finland ry 2016.)

Vocational skills coaching

The first vocational skills competition in Finland for students with special needs was held on 16–19 April 2008. That same year, the HAMK School of Professional Teacher Education offered its first training program in coaching, which was intended for developing competitions and coaching for people with special needs. In vocational skills coaching, every effort is made to identify and support each student's individual strengths in order to develop their personal potential into a vocational skill through study and training. (Pynnönen, Kaloinen and Saarinen 2013.)

In the vocational skills coaching of students, an emphasis is given to the student's comprehensive development, which focuses not only on their key knowledge and skills, but also individual social and emotional development. Each student has his or her personal talent profile, and these profiles can be a very uneven mix. Students may be talented in one or several areas, while also being extremely weak in another area. They may be a top talent, while also having various learning difficulties or behavioural problems that might obscure that talent. (cf. Mäkelä 2009.) Skill and mastery are linked to potential and personal characteristics. There are different aspects of talent, which develop into specialised personal proclivities. In a favourable, motivating and encouraging environment, these proclivities grow into capabilities, which are manifested in the skilled completion of tasks, such as outstanding work performance. (Helakorpi 2009.) The purpose of vocational skills coaching is to identify the students' learning strengths and develop instruction to correspond with their abilities and developmental needs, thus taking full advantage of each student's talent potential in vocational education. (cf. Mäkelä 2009.)

On-the-job learning plays a key role for students with special needs as a facilitator for professional development and employment. On-the-job learning requires students to function in a new environment. Every time students move from instruction to on-the-job learning, they must be coached in how to deal with various workplace and job requirements. Coaching is crucial to achieving success in on-the-job learning as part of the studies. Coaching for on-the-job learning involves the co-operation of the student, teacher and workplace, where the main focus is the student. Vocational skills competitions are a different type of environment, for which students must be coached. As on-the-job learning courses must be individually planned for each student, so too should a personal coaching plan be made for vocational skills competitions. A coaching plan based on mutually agreed targets provides a precise description of the goals and progress of coaching. When making such a plan, attention must be given to

matters specific to the individual, competition and skill that will have an impact on coaching. (Pynnönen, Kaloinen and Saarinen 2013.)

Vocational skills coaching also enhances competition skills, which include a command of the arrangements involved in the competition as a whole as well as the respective skill categories. The goal is to optimally plan and execute the work to be performed, the use of guides, assistants or interpreters, getting around, meals and any other activities engaged in during the competition. This is especially challenging in foreign competitions, where cultural customs, food, drink and other aspects differ from those one is familiar with in their home country. In order to develop competition skills, coaching must include a familiarisation with various competitions.

Developing vocational pedagogy

On one hand, national competitions in vocational skills promote the individualistic nature of vocational education and training, while on the other, its orientation towards the workplace. Motivated youths with diverse talents who wish to strive for their personal best are increasingly entering vocational education and training after completing basic education. It is important to provide youths with a study path, in which their strengths and areas needing guidance are given individual consideration. Vocational skills competitions can promote the continuous development of youth skills, thus also supporting the achievement targets set for lifelong learning and entrepreneurial education. Individual study paths as well as coaching and guidance methods developed within the framework of the competition activities can be applied to benefit all those pursuing vocational studies. (Eerola 2013.)

The role of teachers at educational institutions and competition coaches is extremely important in all phases of vocational development. Vocational teachers play a key role in sparking interest in a vocational field and vocational skills competitions. The coach also plays an important role in helping youths develop their skills to the very top level. Encouragement given by parents and teachers promotes the long-term development of the students' vocational skills. (Henriksson and Talikka 2011)

Vocational skills coaching brings new pedagogical approaches to educational institutions. For example, in coaching practical nurses for vocational skills competitions, some educational institutions have begun using more student-oriented and active teaching methods, such as drama, in their instruction. All students are given the opportunity to participate in competition coaching. Old competition tasks may be used for all students in instruction, as the tasks effectively represent the skills needed in the workplace. Many teachers have found that, by providing students with guidance and coaching for competitions, they can motivate their entire group toward more effective learning. The entire class might be involved

in a vocational skills competition as assistants, evaluators, competitors and supporters. Even though not everyone needs to compete, competition coaching does provide each student with excellent tools for the development of their vocational skills. It is important to make competitions a regular part of an educational institution's operations, in which everyone is welcome to participate. The goal of competitions does not need to be only the achievement of top skills, but rather skills that are as good as possible in relation to each student's individual abilities. The aim is not to make top skills an exclusive right and opportunity reserved for a small and talented group of elites. Everyone being coached, coaching and otherwise participating in vocational skills competitions can be top talent. Success in competitions should not, however, be overemphasised. Participation in semi-finals is still useful, even if the competitor never makes it to the final round. In any case, each youth will encounter competition along their career path, such as when applying for a job. (Eerola 2013.)

Participation in coaching and competitions makes it possible for people to monitor their own professional development, offers them an opportunity to establish co-operative networks in their respective professions, learn new ways of updating their own instruction, and allows them to refresh and develop their professional skills. The evaluation methods used for different skills are also developed in competitions. In the future, the development of vocational skills competitions will place more emphasis on improving the quality and utility of competitions. The goal is to make it possible for competitions to be used more diversely in the development of vocational education and training and raising its profile. The Taitaja competition should be linked more effectively with instruction and the semi-finals system should be developed so that more vocational education institutions will be able to use competitions in the development of their own expertise and its marketing. Productive teaching and learning methods created in competitions should be made available to and used by all teachers and students. International competitions can be used to benchmark Finnish expertise and gain valuable information for use in further developing Finnish vocational education and training. (Alhojärvi 2009.)

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Photo: Matti Kauppinen works as a TaitajaPLUS and Abilympics co-ordinator in Skills Finland association.

Matti Kauppinen

TaitajaPLUS and Abilympics co-ordinator, Skills Finland ry.

TaitajaPLUS and Abilympics competitions in Finland

History

The idea for vocational skills competitions aimed at people with special needs was proposed in the early 2000s, when an informal working group was appointed to give further thought to the matter. The working group was comprised of, among others, representatives and officials from vocational special education institutions as well as the (then) Ministry of Education and National Board of Education. The timing was natural, as the Taitaja competition had also set a new course at the beginning of the millennium.

However, the real impetus for establishing vocational skills competitions for people with special needs in Finland came during an IAF (International Abilympics Federation) delegation visit and meeting with Skills Finland representatives in May of 2005 at the WorldSkills competition in Helsinki. Plans were being made to hold the 2007 WorldSkills competition and International Abilympics (IA) in Japan at the same time.

In September of 2005, Japan hosted both national vocational skills competitions and the Abilympics, which a small Finnish delegation visited.

That same autumn, Skills Finland made a decision on the position of an Abilympics co-ordinator, and preparations and planning were begun for hosting an Abilympics in Finland and participation in the IA to be held in Japan in 2007.

Four Finnish competitors, accompanied by their coaches and team leader, participated in the IA in Japan. Coaching for the competition was something of a crapshoot, because there was no information on, for example, the level of IA competitions. The competition went well, even though there was no success in the form of medals. The Finnish team was the youngest in the IA, consisting primarily of second and third-year students approximately 18 years of age from the Kiipula, Keskuspuisto and Luovi Vocational Colleges. Our national team faced opponents who had been in their professions for years or even decades.

Abilympics in Finland

When first coming up with ideas for Abilympics in Finland, it was clear that the structure should be as similar as possible to that of the Taitaja competition: the competitors would be students at vocational education institutions aiming for a vocational upper secondary qualification. However, much of the discussion centred around, for example, age limits. The Finnish Abilympics was, indeed, something of a compromise: the requirement was that the participant was a student in a vocational education institution who had an individual education plan (IEP), but no maximum age limit was set and no medical certificate was required.

Students from vocational special education institutions performed work demonstrations for the first time at the Tampere Taitaja competition in 2006 and in Joensuu in 2007. The first official Abilympics were held at the Espoo and Uusimaa Taitaja competitions the following year, also boldly including competitors in the 8+1 model, in which students with special needs were able to compete in the five-skill final as an outside competitor.

It was soon noticed that the name "Abilympics" was difficult to understand and, after some deliberation, it was re-named TaitajaPLUS. "Taitaja" refers to the vocational skills competitions and "PLUS" is a positive extra. The TaitajaPLUS competition was also given its own rules.

TaitajaPLUS has found its own model. Within the purview of the set rules, organisers were able to try different solutions for hosting a competition. The objective was to ensure the accessibility of the competition and, of course, bring vocational special education to the forefront as a part of Finnish vocational education and training.

The range of skills differed from those of the other Taitaja finals. Various innovative solutions were showcased in organising TaitajaPLUS

competitions. A debt of gratitude is owed to the many vocational special education teachers, who have organised the competitions over the years.

The number of participants in TaitajaPLUS semi-finals has grown, with students coming from different types of educational institutions. Today, the TaitajaPLUS competitions contain, depending on the year, 3–5 categories from different vocational qualifications, with 6 competitors in each category for the finals. All competitions are generally held in the same competition area. Co-operation on the competition area and use of the same equipment has been tried in, for example, the Taitaja Cleaning Services category.

Future of the competition

The structure and organisation of TaitajaPLUS is very functional. It is a good product and one can only admire all the different ways it is organised year after year. However, as in many other Taitaja skill categories, there is a limited number of actors involved. Each year, the competition arrangements rely on vocational special education institutions operating within the Taitaja competition area. A Taitaja competition organiser will happily order the TaitajaPLUS competition from a vocational special education institution operating in the area in question.

However, one of the objectives of the TaitajaPLUS competition is also to develop vocational special education in a broader sense. The problem with this is that a majority of the students in vocational special education attend general vocational education institutions, not vocational special education institutions. An ideal situation would be one in which a TaitajaPLUS competition was jointly organised by the vocational special education teachers of the education provider in charge of the competition together with teachers from special education institutions. Thus, more in-depth information or expertise on vocational special education would be more widely disseminated and it would be possible to maintain active contact.

The TaitajaPLUS competition has an accepted, recognised role among Finnish vocational skills competitions. However, its structure could be updated. A natural change and step forward might be extending the competition period and expanding the scope of competition tasks in some PLUS skill categories. It should also be possible for competitors to perform professional skills demonstrations during the competition.

At present, the Taitaja organiser chooses 3–5 PLUS skills categories from a prescribed list. In addition to this, the organiser may propose a skill not found on the list for inclusion in the PLUS competition. The same categories are, on the whole, found on the competition list every year. Indeed, a great deal of special education is provided at the national level in these categories.

Any changes in the Taitaja concept and the financial situation of the competition organisers will naturally have an effect on the PLUS competitions. Co-operation with various Taitaja skills must be increased, although PLUS actors are perhaps already willing to do so. In some skill categories, competition areas could be combined and equipment could be shared in them. Is having pairs, where one of the competitors has special needs, such a radical idea for pairs competition? Expanding the range of skills categories would also increase the number of participants in TaitajaPLUS competitions. Entirely new educational fields could be included in the competition. In addition to this, the skills could also vary from year to year. This would help get new actors involved.

Nothing is set in stone. Our sights should be kept firmly on the horizon, regularly assessing whether it would be possible for PLUS competitions to keep up with the changes and economic trends in vocational education. Would we be able to develop vocational special education in the future with this tried and true concept?



Photo: Markku Aunola (in the middle on the right) is “the grand old man” of vocational competitions for special needs students in Finland.

Markku Aunola

Skills Finland representative and board member of the International Abilympic Federation (IAF)

Ideas and future visions for vocational skills competitions for people with special needs

In Finnish educational policy, it is considered important that vocational skills competitions be made available to everyone, even those with special needs. Our equal educational system also extends to competitive activities, even though the top students in their respective age groups are always involved in actual competitions. The objectives of this also include making competitions a part of everyday activities at educational institutions, including special education.

Vocational education for people with disabilities and special needs has involved certain specific educational fields both in Finland and in other countries. The traditional professions for disabled people can be found, in some cases, in fields which are labour-intensive or require manual skills. Some cases of specialisation can also be found, such as blind brush and basket makers. Other professions, such as craftsperson, small appliance repair technician, precision mechanic, piano tuner, masseuse and cleaner, are still considered professions for the disabled in other cultures and, to a certain extent, also here in Finland. Agrarian societies employ all those who are able. In some countries, there are still limitations as to which fields disabled persons may study in and which professions they may practice. In Finland, these kinds of limitations have been eliminated, even if

there is still room for improvement where attitudes are concerned. Here in Finland at least, positions in property and environmental management, logistics, trade and care are some of the new fields on the rise.

Competitions for people with special needs can be seen as a window into the world of work and skills of disabled people. This kind of designation has been especially important in developing countries and countries where both the educational system and labour market are highly segregated. Skills based on sheltered workshop positions can still be found in Abilitympics skill categories. In Finland and certainly elsewhere in Europe, there is a desire to move competitions toward the current teamwork model, where teams include people with a variety of skills, including those with special needs. In this case, an individual work performance is not important – it is the end result achieved by the team as a whole.

This also raises the question: Why are separate vocational skills competitions held for people with disabilities? Why can't all competitors be integrated in the same competition? Could equality be better promoted by holding competitions together or separately? In the world of sports, there are also the Paralympics and Special Olympics, which have been put on a par with the "normal" games, at least in the press. From the participants' standpoint, the competitions are extremely important. In addition to competition, participation, togetherness and networking seem to be the keywords of choice. Presumably, both joint and separate competitions have their place when it comes to sport and skills alike.

Competitions for people with special needs can, on the whole, be justified from at least three perspectives:

- 1. Equality perspective:** Disabled people have the right to work. At the international level, active proponents of this have been the UN, International Labour Organization (ILO) and Rehabilitation International (RI), along with other organisations representing disabled persons.
- 2. Prestige of vocational education perspective:** Vocational education and training are, even according to international surveys, traditionally considered the form of education for people of lower status (people who are disabled, marginalised and ethnic minorities). It has even been viewed as being subordinate and secondary to academic or university-level education. In Finland, the increased number of applicants for vocational education indicates that the prestige of vocational education can be improved. This plays a key role in Skills Finland operations.

- 3. International and pedagogical dimensions of competitions:** Competitions are one opportunity for both students and the teachers supervising them to engage in networking and internationalisation. As a pedagogical method, it offers a variety of possibilities, also for special needs groups. As someone who has observed the competitions from a close range, I could point to their positive impact on student motivation as one example. From a teachers' standpoint, the demonstration of skills and development in one's own field are crucial. Competitions offer the perfect setting for this.

What does competition mean to the individual? Interviews revealed such things as improved self-esteem, exceeding oneself, comparing one's own skills with those of another, measuring one's own employability, internationalisation, networking and goal-oriented coaching for tasks. To some extent, these things have also been examined among students, but a longer-term study is needed. One indicator might be that the same students want to compete again.

Competition is actually quite a topical form of activity. Television is chock full of different programmes, where contestants compete for all sorts of things. Competition has always been part of education and learning. Examinations, demonstrations, etc. are all a sort of competition in themselves. Experiences with the Taitaja competitions show that, even though there might only be a single person competing, the entire community feels like they took part.

Future challenges

Even though many vocational skills competitions have evolved over time, there are still plenty of challenges to be faced in further developing them. Educational institutions should give thought to how special needs students in "normal" institutions could be included in competitions. Competitions should also be more effectively integrated in the existing curricula and implementation plans of educational institutions. It is important to increase employers' interest in TaitajaPLUS. Although there are already excellent partners involved, more are needed.

In the future, a vocational education and training and vocational special education aspect should be more strongly introduced in international vocational skills competitions. We need to include skills events for students and youths in, among others, the Abilympics. Competition tasks should also correspond with the very latest workplace culture and jobs.

The future challenges mentioned above pertain, in part, to the fact that the IAF has had a strong rehabilitation-orientation throughout its history. Vocational special education in modern-day Finland is, on the other hand, primarily habilitation, i.e. developing the skills of youths with special

needs in order to provide them with employable qualifications. This dichotomy of habilitation vs. rehabilitation also involves one of the key issues in the Abilympics: Are competitors adult professionals who already possess advanced professional skills or youths with special needs just entering the field? Indeed, the history in Finland – at least in vocational schools for the disabled – has been very much rehabilitation-oriented in the decades following the Second World War. The exception to this has been people with sensory disabilities, whose vocational education and training has an even longer history. The needs of people requiring special assistance have become more diverse and complex with, for example, developments in diagnostics. Furthermore, defining the need for assistance is extremely difficult to pin down precisely. This is the reason that, even in international skills competitions, the pitfalls of "doping" lie in wait, perhaps simply by submitting a medical certificate required of participants.

What has Finland gained for its participation in the Abilympics?

In international vocational skills competitions, Finland has been able to showcase its equal education system and the inclusion of an entire age class. We have also introduced the WorldSkills model in the organisation of competitions, such as for judging panels and evaluation. We have highlighted educational integration and the inclusion perspective, giving particular emphasis to vocational special education and European education.

While there have been attempts at WorldSkills and the IAF to bring companies closer together, the most concrete manifestation of this remains the Japan Abilympics in 2007, where both competitions coincided, albeit in different cities. There has been interest in co-operation at the European level. The aim is to also organise some sort of "Eurolympics" in connection with the EuroSkills competitions. Following Finland's example, a few other European countries have also joined the Abilympics. Some of the more active European actors have been earlier Austria and the Czech Republic, along with newcomers such as France and the Netherlands.

The Abilympics has provided a glimpse of the direction in which the skills development and employment of disabled people is headed. There is also some need for international comparisons in this sector, so that we can develop vocational education and training for people with special needs in Finland. Thus far, the findings indicate that we have made a great deal of progress in development. Indeed, Finns have not enjoyed success in actual competitions, but this has not even been the primary objective. Involvement has offered the entire age class an opportunity for internationalisation also in the competitions themselves, even though it has been through a very small group – for the time being. For staff and students participating in competitions, the opportunities afforded by national and international networking are considerable now and will continue to be so in the future.



Photo: Tuomas Eerola (in the front on the left) and Seija Mahlamäki-Kultanen (in the front on the right) are the key persons in the development of the vocational teacher education by using vocational competitions as one of the teaching methods.

Tuomas Eerola

Executive Manager, Finnish Academy for Skills Excellence

Seija Mahlamäki-Kultanen

Dean, HAMK School of Professional Teacher Education

Finnish Academy for Skills Excellence

In Finland, there has long been a desire to, on one hand, increase the workplace orientation of vocational education and, on the other, its individual orientation. Many educational policy approaches have been used to increase the degree of co-operation between vocational education and training and the world of work as well as develop flexible study paths that meet the personal learning outcomes of students. Study paths, particularly those that meet the needs of potential top expertise, have been developed recently, such as paths leading to a double degree, paths that link vocational upper secondary education to university of applied sciences studies, expanded on-the-job learning paths, in which various work tasks are "pedagogised", international study paths and entrepreneurship paths (cf. Eerola et al. 2014). In addition to the above, vocational skills competitions and preparations for them offer a worthwhile alternative to study for potential top expertise.

Competitions have always played a key role in developing top expertise. Taking part in competitions encourages one to strive for ever improving expertise – in physical and mental performance alike. Top performance often requires both. Competitions were introduced as an instrument for developing vocational education in Finland immediately after the Second

World War. At that time, industrial working skills competitions were launched, organised for the first time in Lohja in 1948 (Purhonen, 2005). Today, Skills competitions for youth are on many levels an influential, important tool for the development of vocational education and training (Eerola 2013).

The Häme University of Applied Sciences is an active developer of top expertise and actor in the national Skills network (Eerola & Majuri 2014). The HAMK School of Professional Teacher Education trains a significant percentage of Finland's professional teachers, guidance counsellors and special education teachers. The HAMK School of Professional Teacher Education is responsible for providing a significant portion of continuing education and competence maintenance for teachers, in co-operation with an extensive network of education providers. The Häme University of Applied Sciences is especially interested in the effect that vocational skills competitions have on the maintenance and development of teacher competence. A key research and development theme is: How can we most effectively utilise both national and international vocational skills competitions as a tool for developing teacher competence? The Pedagogy of Top Expertise in which the strengths of vocational students are recognised and supported through personal guidance has long been under development at the Häme University of Applied Sciences (cf. Isokorpi 2013, Pynnönen & Raudasoja 2013). In addition to national activities, the development of top expertise has become one of the leading themes for export of education at the Häme University of Applied Sciences.

Vocational skills competitions and their use is part of every vocational teacher's work and should be, where basic knowledge is concerned, included in the educational competence requirements for pedagogical qualifications. On the other hand, the entirety of vocational skills competitions includes tasks that are more demanding than normal teaching work and have more stringent competence requirements, even approaching the top international level of competence requirements for teacher educators or vocational education developers and development managers. The Finnish Academy for Skills Excellence (FASE) was founded at the Häme University of Applied Sciences to ensure that these stringent competence requirements would be met. In addition to the professional teachers, company advisers, coaches and experts also participate in the Academy's training programme.

Professional teacher areas of expertise and competence to be achieved in competitions

Skills Finland and the Finnish Academy of Skills Excellence are responsible for guaranteeing the competence of Finnish vocational skills competition actors. As their experience and competence grows, competition actors often progress from regional to national and then international-level competitions.

The table below shows the competence requirements for international-level competition actors. Learning events organised by the FASE aim to guarantee this required competence for competition actor. FASE coaches, educates, and organises projects for competition actors both in Finland and internationally. The framework is based on studies (Mäki, Vanhanen-Nuutinen, Guttorn, Mäntylä, Stenlund & Weissmann 2015; Paaso 2010) and Mahlamäki-Kultanen has developed a framework by contextualising previous studies on the competence of future teacher educators and teachers and by building a model with experienced competition actors.

Area of competence of European/ international vocational skill competition actors and area of evaluation	<p>Criterion for the level excellent</p> <p>The individual</p>
Pedagogical competence	<p>is able to plan, implement, evaluate and develop personalised training processes for a young person participating in European/ international competitions at the top-level of vocational skills</p> <p>is able to support a competitor and a competing group during their preparation for a competition and during the competition through methods of interaction and mental training</p>
Building a teaching identity	<p>has the ability to communicate, as part of his/her teaching work, in his/her work organisation, regionally and internationally, about vocational skills competitions and preparation for these in a way that will strengthen the positive image of Finnish teachers and Finnish teacher identity</p> <p>is able to motivate and activate new teachers and representatives of the world of work in European/international vocational skills competitions</p>
Management and leadership of teaching and competence	<p>knows how to build learning environments (physical, virtual, social, psychological) for the training process, optimising the expenses and benefits of the process with regard to learning and success in European/international vocational skills competitions</p> <p>is able to work as part of a competing team at the European/ international-level</p>
Facilitating personalised solutions	<p>is able to utilise the training process' nonformal, informal and formal learning possibilities cost-effectively in a manner that best supports an individual's needs and skills</p> <p>has the ability to improve one's own learning in European/ international competition activities in a goal-oriented and documented manner</p>

Workplace competence	is able to recognise, innovate and implement solutions for competition activities and the related training that will create a competitive edge for companies and educational institutions
Multicultural competence	<p>is able to take part in European/international vocational skills competition activities, identifying vocational skills concepts and the importance of cultural differences with regard to them</p> <p>is able to take part in European/international vocational skills competitions using the English language, and has a command of the English terminology used in competition activities</p> <p>has a sufficient command of the basics of the language spoken in the country organising the competition so as to be able to communicate on matters related to the competition</p>
Building learning communities	has the ability to use competition activities to build a learning community that will support Finnish competitors and is based on improved competition rules and operating models
Optimisation of learning resources	<p>is able to identify and innovate alternative forms of funding for training activities, to give valid reasons for funding to different actors and implement training activities so that they meet with the profit expectations of financiers</p> <p>is able to plan, implement, evaluate and develop training so that it is linked as effectively as possible to the education provider's other processes (student recruitment, guidance, vocational skills demonstrations) and to the entire student group's studies</p> <p>has the ability to share his/her own competence with other competition actors and to learn from others all the while renewing and developing activities</p>
Substance-related competence	is able to compile and analyse information in connection with competition activities (online content and services produced by EuroSkills and World Skills, competition-related activities and presentations) on the European/international development of his/her vocational field to support his/her own teaching and vocational development.
Other objectives of an international organisation	

The Finnish Academy for Skills Excellence (FASE)

The purpose of FASE operations is to promote the development of vocational top expertise by various means: coaching and training, research and development projects. The Academy participates in national competition quality control as well as the dissemination of good practices developed in vocational skills competitions and promoting the use of these practices. The Academy also participates in export of education within its area of expertise and further develops the pedagogy of top expertise. Academy operations are based on the entire Skills network expertise and networking activities. (FASE Strategy 2015 – 2020.)

The key FASE operating areas are:

Development of expertise

The Academy is a partner to developers of vocational top expertise. The Academy meets the developmental needs of its partners. Individualisation, competence-based practices and the use of research data form the basis for the development of expertise. Expertise is recognised based on demonstration. The competence of experts in vocational skills competitions is developed in co-operation with Skills Finland, taking its strategic targets into consideration. In the training, an emphasis is placed on the use of good practices developed in competitions, the application of the possibilities offered by qualification requirements, and the development of one's own expertise as a right for all. Authentic learning environments and digital tools are used in the development of expertise.

Publishing and the dissemination of good practices

The Academy gathers and develops information related to top expertise and ensures the influence of good practices. The Academy also ensures that the expertise of more experienced actors is shared with newcomers. The Academy arranges coaching, mentoring, training and seminars, produces publications, and makes use of social media in its distribution. The target groups for distribution are persons working in vocational education and training both in Finland and abroad.

Top expertise research and development projects

The Academy supports top expertise research under a separate research programme. The Academy manages and acts as a partner in development projects related to its area of expertise. A timely and key opportunity to support possibilities offered by degree reform in the promotion of top expertise is a central research interest. Special areas of research and development are: recognition and promo-

tion of strengths; special instruction for gifted students; pedagogy of top expertise and development methods; importance and influence of vocational skills competitions.

Export of education

The Academy participates in export of education within its own area of expertise and develops new export products primarily based on partnerships, in co-operation with the HAMK School of Professional Teacher Education and other actors.

Vocational education and training should be fair and effective. This means that any students in an educationally disadvantageous position and at risk of being marginalised should be given special attention. It also means that vocational education and training should offer not only basic vocational expertise, but also top-level expertise, in order to avoid a deficiency in expertise and shortage of skilled people, while maintaining innovation activities and growth in an information society. (Helakorpi 2010.)

The basis and grounds for competitions for students with special needs is inclusion – inclusive education and participative education. Inclusion means that:

- all students study together;
- common instruction and guidance is provided in accordance with each student's personal requirements and needs;
- each and every student and instructor can feel that he or she is an accepted and appreciated member of the community.

Inclusion is not a realised state, but rather the continuous participation in breaking down barriers.

Supporting national competitions for students with special needs is one of the FASE operating areas. In developing the competence needed in competitions, FASE applies the principles of inclusion: both national TaitajaPLUS and international Abilympics actors develop top expertise together with other competition actors.

Developing Excellence in Skills – Programme for VET Teachers and Trainers

In addition to programmes intended for the Finnish market, FASE also organises the Developing Excellence in Skills – Programme for VET Teachers and Trainers, which is aimed at export of education. One of the main goals of the programme is to work with the client to come up with new

operating approaches and ideas for developing the attractiveness and quality of vocational education and training as well as top expertise. Another goal is to promote the pedagogical abilities of teachers and guidance counsellors to guide potential top experts. A programme implementation agreement is always made with an educational organisation – private persons cannot be clients, at least not at the moment.

The programme includes three modules. The first module is called Orientation level, which examines the principles of developing top expertise. The second module is called Organisational level, in which the Finnish education system and good practices taken from vocational skills competitions are benchmarked, and a development project is completed within the student's own organisation. The third module is called Personal level, in which the student deepens their own personal guidance skills and, wherever possible, gains experience with the Finnish system by taking a study trip to Finland.

The content is based on the Finnish education system and professional teacher education, pedagogical development in the HAMK School of Professional Teacher Education, and good practices created in vocational skills competitions. However, attention is also given to the needs of the client: the content and approaches used are tailored to meet the client's needs. The programme can consist of all three modules or just one.

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Photo: In 2009 the trainers Heikki Saarinen and Päivi Pynnönen (in the front) published “Competitions for Everyone” which was the first publication in Finland dealing with vocational competitions for students with special needs. The English translation was published in 2010.

Päivi Pynnönen

Trainer, Finnish Academy for Skills Excellence

Heikki Saarinen

Trainer, Finnish Academy for Skills Excellence

Competitions for everyone – student and teacher experiences in vocational skills competitions for people with special needs

"The students have enjoyed being part of such a major event. Here, they can meet students from other schools in the same fields of study, learn about new vocational fields and demonstrate their skills."

"The competition itself is just a small part of this learning process, in which people work together to plan trips and book accommodations, organise meals and think about things to do and see in the city. For many students--and teachers, too--this is an unforgettable adventure. It requires a great deal from teachers and students, but it also gives so much in return."

The popularity of vocational skills competitions has enjoyed explosive growth in recent years, and interest in vocational skills coaching has also increased considerably. Many teachers have found that, by providing students with guidance and coaching for competitions, they can motivate

their entire group toward more effective learning. The entire class might be involved in a vocational skills competition as assistants, evaluators, competitors and supporters. Through competitions and coaching, teachers and students have also built new co-operation networks with other educational institutions, companies and employers. Vocational skills competitions offer an opportunity to break down prejudices and improve attitudes regarding the participation of all people in society.

The concept of inclusion lies behind the development of competitions for people with special needs. The Finnish state has committed itself to inclusion through several agreements. Inclusion means that all people are able to participate and be a member of the community, which is founded on human rights and equality. In accordance with the principles of inclusion, all students must be given an opportunity to participate in vocational skills competitions as both a competitor and visitor.

Accessibility of vocational skills competitions

Accessibility involves adapting various environments and services in society to suit the needs and abilities of as wide a range of people as possible. Offering accessibility is of the utmost importance to people who, for example, are disabled, elderly or belong to a cultural or language minority. Highly accessible environments and services in society can be used by all people.

Accessibility is one area involving the creation of a physical, mental and social environment that allows each and every individual to function on an equal basis with others, regardless of their particular traits and abilities. In many cases, accessibility refers only to that of a built environment. Accessibility is a comprehensive whole, in which all citizens are able to participate in doing work, hobbies, culture and study. Accessibility also involves the availability of services, usability of implements and appliances, comprehensibility of information and the ability for individuals to participate in making decisions that affect them. In this case, we are referring to creating a physical, mental and social environment that allows each and every individual to function on an equal basis with others, regardless of their particular traits and abilities. Achieving equality is also the goal in the development of vocational skills competitions and coaching. All vocational skills competitions should be organised in a such a way that allows everyone unimpeded access to both participate in the competition and observe it as a spectator.

1. Physical accessibility of vocational skills competitions

When designing the competition environment, attention should be given to the width of passageways and the height of thresholds and fences, in order to ensure that all people (such as those in wheelchairs) can move about safely and easily within the competition area. Attention should also be given to ensuring accessibility for spectators. When designing toilet and restaurant services, the needs of different user groups should be kept in mind in ensuring their accessibility. Competition area signage should be easy-to-understand and consistent in colour and readability. The need for adequate lighting in the competition areas should also be examined. Special attention should be given to the use of colours and contrast, such as for visually-impaired competitors. When planning competitions, the various actors should acquaint themselves with the safety plan, check the clarity and uniformity of signs, and establish procedures for dealing with emergency situations and how instructions can be communicated to the different competitor and visitor groups.

2. Mental accessibility of vocational skills competitions

Attention should be given to competitors with different native languages, such as people who use sign language. The use of pictographs in, for example, presenting the various TaitajaPLUS skills and their tasks as well as the different vocational fields, should be increased, as some visitors are illiterate or otherwise have a special need for visual communication.

The structure of competition tasks should follow a logical progression and be presented in plain language, so that the demonstration of vocational skills is not hindered by a task description that is vague or difficult to understand, long sentences, or a font that is too small or hard to read.

3. Social accessibility of vocational skills competitions

Competition organisers should allow for different forms of competition, such as TaitajaPLUS and Abilympics, thus giving all vocational education and training students an opportunity to participate in vocational skills competitions and demonstrate their vocational skills in them.

Actors in charge of organising various forms of competition for the same skill should work in co-operation, so that the competitors can find the right form of competition for their own skill area. All skills should have transparent rules and explained procedures, such as providing information on skills, selecting judges, awarding winners, etc. These procedures should be as uniform as possible, so that all competitors and visitors will feel like they are part of the same Taitaja competition.

Vocational skills competition goals and plans

"I'm not afraid to try new things."

"I was watching a competition and I thought it would be great to participate. I told my teacher that I wanted to compete, because I thought it would be a great experience."

"I participated last year. Participation shows employers that you're proactive in your work and your field."

"The competitions and their tasks provide a smooth segue into the workplace. Sure, students love it when they're able to ask for some time off of their on-the-job learning course to take part in a vocational skills competition. The prestige that comes from competing can help you later when you're looking for a job. It shows that you're active and dedicated to your field."

Vocational skills competitions for students with special needs provide them with an opportunity to develop their vocational knowledge and skills as well as demonstrate their expertise. Student interviews reveal that many need the motivation and encouragement of others to get them to compete. Many special needs students have decided to participate when they saw one of their fellow special needs students competing.

"I've never been to a competition, but thought it might be fun to go. Last year's winner from our school told us what it was like. Then, when the teacher asked who would like to participate, I said that I would."

"The other competitors from previous years also inspired me, as did the teacher. Then, I just said 'I'm in!'".

It is important for the teacher and student to sit down together and consider the importance, opportunities and requirements of vocational skills competitions. A competition can be held on a small scale, with only a small, in-house group of students, or by participating as a visitor in a Taitaja competition.

"Our classmates voted in two candidates for the competitions. Then, I interviewed the students and asked about their interest in the competitions. The students who got the most votes went to the competitions. This way, the competitors had the support of their classmates. This played a crucial role in the competition. "

"The whole group was told about the opportunity to compete and I asked who wanted to join the competition team. I then directed additional questions at the students I felt had the desire/ability to

compete. I had framed my questions by discussing, also with the group leader, the suitability of the student and their ability to cope as well as by interviewing other teachers."

"We asked who wanted to compete. Some did, some didn't. We held small-scale competitions in the class and elimination rounds among the students who wanted to participate, to see who would represent the school."

Prior to examining competition-related matters, an over or underestimation might be made by both students and teachers regarding a competition situation or degree of task difficulty. Special needs students have individual skills and need for support in both learning and competition. Coaching and its goals must be determined together with the student, as is done with their individual education plan (IEP).

"As a coach, my job was to strengthen the professional growth of the competitor. When performing a task, it was important to have a command of the task as a whole as well as anticipate future challenges and make an effort to prevent or eliminate any problem areas. I was responsible for planning the coaching process objectives and timetable, making sure that I took each competitor's individual strengths and areas needing improvement into consideration."

"Coaching for the competitions was a learning experience for all our students. It's a good thing that the competition tasks, which are basic cleaning tasks, are known in advance. Competition tasks give the students a reason to pay closer attention to their own performance."

The skill-related targets of vocational skills competition coaching are determined according to the competition tasks. The tasks are based on the vocational upper secondary qualification skill requirements specified for the Taitaja and Taitaja PLUS competitions, even though these may only involve some areas of the qualifications. In the International Abilympics, the tasks are more demanding. The wishes and demands of experts from various participant countries affect their composition.

When a decision is made to participate in the competitions, the situation at that point – what competence means and in what areas more practice is needed – must be jointly assessed. The goals must be concrete and based on the competition tasks for that skill. The most important thing is for the coach and competitor to define the goals at the beginning of coaching.

"I get the competitor to concentrate on the vocational goals. I start by working with the student, mapping out their personal strengths and areas that need work. Based on this, I was then able to put together an effective coaching programme, which we used to focus

on key areas right from the start. The goal of the coaching programme was to build up the competitor's strong sides in vocational skills and work toward preventing them from stumbling over their own weaknesses before or during the competition."

Personal coaching

"The whole group practised producing designs, and then we exhibited the finished pieces."

"We held an in-school competition, where the students had to design a wall hanging for the school cafeteria, using the colours of the municipal coat-of-arms. The students presented their designs to invited guests."

Vocational skills competitions are a different type of environment, for which students must be coached. As on-the-job learning courses must be individually planned for each student, so too should a personal coaching plan be made for vocational skills competitions. A coaching plan based on mutually agreed targets provides a precise description of the goals and progress of coaching. When making such a plan, attention must be given to matters specific to the individual, competition and skill that will have an impact on coaching. The goals are checked and refined during coaching. They should be in line with the targets of the vocational qualification being sought, competition tasks and performance.

"We began preparing for the competition in the fall. We offered a product design course for all interested students, where they had to design a decorative panel based on images of nature. The course was optional for the students. It was from this course that we found our school representative for the competition."

"Coaching was part of the instruction. I presented the event and competition idea to our entire student group. We thought about who would enjoy something like this and I asked if anyone wanted to compete. We made a few plans together with the entire group. Later, we looked more closely at things related to the plan with the competitor, so that they would have a more professional and clearly-defined understanding of the plan."

It is important to divide the goals into smaller sub-goals in accordance with student's personal needs. These sub-goals can be practised and evaluated together and detailed feedback on them can be obtained. This is further emphasised in the coaching of special needs students, where practice tasks are designed for the student, who can experience the joy of succeeding as their skills improve through repetition and smaller sub-goals.

"The areas of the competition task were put together piece by piece to form a larger whole, and then included in the performance of the task. We were forced to go over things again and repeat them, because the things we learned at the beginning might be forgotten, or the student needed a reminder. When the task became more familiar, we started to fine-tune things."

"We started out with mopping using both techniques, i.e. the figure eight and S-form. We practised sorting waste and then worked on the difference between a wet, damp and moist cloth."

It is also important for the coach and competitor to go over previous competition tasks and evaluation criteria, and compare them to the set goals.

"The actual competition task was sent to us by mail well before the competition, which gave us plenty of time to familiarise ourselves with it. The task was broken up into several smaller parts. These parts were examined more closely and we went over the things we had learned before in relation to the task. The competitors were given small investigative tasks, which were then examined during the coaching sessions. The tasks were assigned either orally, in writing or by email. They had to be turned in by the set deadline, but we gave a lot of leeway where the investigation work was concerned. Some of the competitors finished the tasks in writing, while others made an oral presentation. However, the assignments were completed very responsibly."

The competition tasks represent key vocational skills and many teachers use them as exercises for all students. Competition tasks define the goals of practise more precisely and clearly than in normal instruction and are a key factor in achieving better results.

"The competition tasks even help out with my everyday household chores. They help me to notice even the smallest things in my own work and how it's done."

Competitor characteristics

"A competition is a process, for which the student has to be coached. Just practising for the competition task is not enough – the competitor needs to hang in there for the whole competition day. They have to know how to travel, how to be in a foreign environment, to wait for their turn, get used to people being around them and so much more."

When practising competition tasks, it is important to have a command of the knowledge and skills required for them. Turning in a good performance

requires many personal characteristics, which coaching attempts to develop. In the University of Tampere, Faculty of Education Research Centre for Vocational and Professional Education study Modelling Vocational Excellence (Ruohotie, Nokelainen and Korpelainen, 2009), World Skills competitors, their parents, coaches and workplace representatives were interviewed.

The target group of the study represented four vocational fields: Information Technology, Web Design, Plumbing and Beauty Therapy. According to the study's findings, the characteristics of top expertise are:

- stress tolerance (calmness, sang-froid)
- perseverance (precision, concentration, determination, thoroughness)
- capacity for development (manual skills, ability to conceptualise, problem-solving ability, speed)
- competitiveness (ambition)
- interest in work
- sociability
- time management (methodicalness)

These top expertise characteristics are very broad and multifaceted in meaning. They serve well as a basis for discussion when making a coaching plan. One point of departure might be that the coaches and competitors rate the competitor for each characteristic. The ratings are then discussed together: How do the ratings differ from one another? How do the different characteristics appear in practice? What characteristics are especially needed in the skill being coached? What characteristics can be developed? How can the development of characteristics be monitored? The results of the discussion are entered in the coaching plan and their development is also monitored in the agreed manner and timetable.

The above-mentioned top expertise characteristics are general attributes, which appear in the top expertise of different skill categories. Depending on the skill in question, their emphasis is based on the nature of the category tasks. For example, sociability is emphasised in service tasks more than technical tasks. Because these characteristics are also needed in the workplace, practising them is not solely related to competitions. These are also characteristics whose individual development poses a challenge to special needs students and their coaching. Ideally, competitions can serve as a way to motivate students to develop, for example, time management and methodicalness in their work, when the above-mentioned items are

monitored in coaching in a practical manner. Competitions also assign new meaning to the way things are managed and offer an opportunity to demonstrate this.

Characteristics of a good coach

*"Ability to listen and understand.
A desire to help and faith in development.
Perseverance and courage."*

In the study *Modelling Vocational Excellence* (Ruohotie, Nokelainen and Korpelainen, 2009), respondents were asked to describe the characteristics required in coaches of top expertise. In the results obtained, as the most important characteristic was considered that the coach have genuine interest in and enthusiasm for their own field and skill as well as in coaching itself. Other key characteristics mentioned were the coach's own wide-ranging professional skills and desire to develop. Other good characteristics for coaches included sociability, perseverance and competitiveness.

"I think that extremely strong professional skills and years of work experience are a coach's strengths. With these, a coach can analyse the competition tasks and the timetables given for their completion. A coach who carefully and thoroughly goes over the competition tasks will be able to help the competitor plan their work and work processes in accordance with their own abilities."

Good coaching involves a warm, positive attitude. In addition to this, a coach should have the ability to keep their own activities and those of the competitor realistic as well as the skill to set limits for coaching, where necessary. Motivation, active involvement and co-operation are also characteristics of a good coach (Isokorpi, 2004).

"The most important thing is that I'm calm and able to constantly provide encouragement, even for the smallest amount of progress."

"You can't do the work on the student's behalf. They must be able to manage with just guidance and talk."

"Inconceivably small things might turn out to be extremely big."

Interaction skills are emphasised in coaching. The coach must constantly assess their own efforts and see how interaction works in different coaching situations. The coach must communicate clearly and establish an open, trusting partnership between themselves and the competitor. They must be a good listener, who knows how to listen to the needs of the competitor and is able to observe their own emotional state and that of the competitor. In coaching, it is vital to possess an emotional intelligence, which

includes the sensibility to be present in various situations and the ability to function in them flexibly in the manner they require. Expressing feelings and their management. According to Isokorpi (2004, 2011), a coach can serve to promote a sense of empowerment in the competitor. This is especially emphasised in the manner in which a coach provides feedback on the student's performance and development during coaching and following the competition.

Feedback should be a driving force and encouraging. A coach is also the person who helps in dealing with feelings, in both moments of success and failure, when a sense of optimism needs to be maintained to support the competitor. A coach must keep in mind that they are helping to build the competitor's sense of self.

"Giving positive feedback is crucial. An emphasis must be placed on what the student is doing well and work tasks should be planned accordingly. And extra tasks for things needing practice can be assigned, such as bringing raw materials home or written assignments if the student is interested in them."

Aspects of a personality that make a good coach are empathy and a sensitivity in reading various verbal and non-verbal messages. The emotional state of the competitor should be constantly listened to and observed.

Benefits of vocational skills competitions

Although the knowledge and skills acquired by students through vocational skills competitions are assets for their future in the workplace, in many cases the experience of having the courage to compete and participate in the unique atmosphere of a competition are the best, unforgettable rewards.

"In a competition, students notice that they are developing and also inspiring others to do the same, because the methods used in instruction also work for competitions."

"The entire competition event is place for students to grow. Even after just a couple days, I've noticed how the student's self-confidence and pride in their accomplishments have positively blossomed."

"At the very least, you're learning more about work in the field."

"I've made so many new acquaintances and friends."

"It's an amazing feeling to know how to do things and do them well."

For teachers, coaching and being involved in competitions provides opportunities to follow developments in one's own professional field, establish good co-operative networks, learn new approaches to teaching and develop their professional skills in a variety of ways.

"The competitions have expanded my professional competence, both as a coach and in my own professional work, not to mention enhancing my work motivation. My co-operative network has grown considerably and given me self-confidence in my own abilities."

"Serving as a coach has given me joy, allowed me to experience success and failure, and breathed new life into my teaching. It helps me to introduce even more important things to my teaching."

"As a coach, the most gratifying thing for me is when a competitor says that the competition was a challenging and enjoyable experience that they want to do again."

In addition to students and teachers, coaching and competitions are beneficial to educational institutions and employers. Educational institutions are provided with new instruction approaches, which inspire the most gifted students to work harder in developing their vocational skills. Furthermore, the attractiveness of vocational education and training and the participating educational institution are increased through positive information. Participating employers also have an opportunity to recruit motivated and improving employees.

"This is a well-known competition that even employers respect."

"This raises the profile of our field."

"Even others can see that we're becoming experts"

Resources

Interviews

Disabled and special needs competitors in vocational skills competitions and their coaches at Taitaja competitions in Oulu (2010), Kuopio (2011) and Jyväskylä (2012) as well as the Abilympics in Japan (2007) and Korea (2011).

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Photo: Maria Sipari has shared a lot of information and good practices about vocational competitions. She competed at Taitaja in 2009. After her graduation she has worked as a baker.

Maria Sipari
Taitaja competitor

Study and vocational skills competition experiences of a competitor in the Confectioner – Pastry Cook skill category

I am Maria Sipari from Lappeenranta. I have completed my basic education and graduated with a qualification for Confectioner/Pastry Cook. I am achondroplastic, which is a form of dwarfism. I am therefore shorter than the average person. In this article, I will be discussing my years studying for a qualification as a Confectioner/Pastry Cook and competitions in the field.

I started my studies in the autumn of 2006 at the Lappeenranta Vocational College. Since childhood, baking has always been an enjoyable and fascinating activity for me. As a child, I was often able to spend time with my grandmother, watching her make rye bread and many other baked goods. In the final year of lower secondary school, when I was supposed to make a decision about continuing my studies, my choice was quite clear as I had baking in my blood. When my study place was confirmed, I was overjoyed. My greatest motivator was a desire to learn new things, develop my skills and do the work that I love, not to mention being able to see the fruits of my labour. To this day, I have not once regretted my choice and I think I probably never will.

At school and work

Of course, I was a bit nervous on my first day at vocational school, in a new environment, but I soon made many nice friends. The teachers in our department treated me with such kindness. Due to my short stature (132 cm), they were ready to help me by getting special aids and making any necessary arrangements. They did not, however, have to do these things, as the step-stool our department had for my entire three years of study was the only aid I needed and an invaluable one. My classmates and even our department teachers took my needs into consideration so nicely: they came to help if I could not reach something or when I otherwise needed some assistance, they were always ready to lend a hand. Naturally, I always like to try to do things myself first and then ask for help if I need it.

A year ago in March, at the beginning of the on-the-job learning period, I was able to work in a bakery store. I loved working there. It was quite close to my home, the work was satisfying and enriching, and it was in my field. My workmates were so very kind, friendly and happy. My work there allowed me to see and deal directly with the customers a lot. I was able to see how happy they were when I handed them a freshly baked loaf of bread, baguette, coffee bun, etc. The customer feedback I received from them was extremely important and meaningful. I was given a genuine taste of what is really involved in a baker's work and what kind of character and attitude one should have. I had a real insight as to what is actually involved in the work of a baker and what it requires of them. This experience was one more steady step toward the future. Last summer, the same employer gave a summer job, which allowed me to pay for driving school myself.

Time for competing

At the beginning of my final year of study, our teacher Markku Vengasaho told us about competitions in our field and opportunities for participating in them. In my own case, I had no impulse whatsoever to enter any sort of competition. During the autumn, our class held an election for potential competitors. I was one of the five students who received the most votes. After that, the teacher interviewed us and asked if we would be interested in competing.

There are qualification rounds for the Taitaja competition. Two weeks before the qualification rounds, one of the other competitors cancelled for personal reasons. Our department head came to talk to our teacher, suggesting that perhaps I could participate in the "normal" competition. It was not long before our teacher extended the invitation to compete to me. "What? I haven't made any of the competition products and the qualification rounds are just two weeks away! Do you really want me to just show up with nothing but my current skills and embarrass myself and the department?" I said to the teacher, full of doubt. My teacher did not give in.

The other student in the competition from our class came to encourage me, as did teachers from other departments. Eventually, I agreed to compete.

Coaching

A total of 29 Confectioner/Pastry Cook students had signed up for the semi-finals. The competitors were divided into two groups, each with their own competition day. Based on points awarded by three judges, the eight competitors with the most points made it to the final. The competition tasks included the preparation of, for example, cinnamon rolls and Alexander pastries, Christmas bun loaves (sliced) and a Christmas-themed decorative marzipan slab. The competition time given was seven hours. Each competitor worked independently.

At the end of the qualification round, the judges also gave oral feedback to each competitor with their own teacher present as well as a certificate of merit for exemplary participation in the competition. A few days after the competition, I received a phone call from my teacher: I had made it into the finals! "You had the fifth highest score and your friend Saara had the highest score," he said over the phone. For a moment, I was beside myself, feeling a bit woozy and quite speechless. Our entire school and, above all, our own department and its staff were very happy for us. Before us, no one from our school had ever made it to the finals.

At the Taitaja competition

In March, the Taitaja Finnish Championship finals were held in Vaasa – Saara and I had made it through. Practice for the competition was tough, as the ingredients, among other things, were limited and, based on this, we had to come up with all the competition products. Finding the right decorations and flavours took several tries. Even here, our department teachers, students and professionals working in the field provided us with a lot of helpful, important advice for the development and preparation of products.

Once we were satisfied with the competition products we had come up with, going to the competition was actually enjoyable. I have to admit that sometimes I was pretty tired, as I had also been working weekends at the Fazer bakery store.

The competition was tough and the days were long. We did not set out with victory in mind. Spectators were able to watch us right up close, as there was nothing but a sheet of plexiglas separating us. Here, if anywhere, was a place where a competitor's concentration would be put to the test! In my case, I was able to shut out everything around me and focus solely on my

work. I had already got used to this at my job, as the customers can watch us bakers hard at work the whole time.

On the first day, the competition products in Vaasa were 2 gelee cakes and a fruit pastry. On the second day, we had to make a layer cake depicting Finland for an international event. The cake had to include images of nature, purity, water and "Finnishness" as well as marzipan fruits and a basket. This task received a 30% change in marks from the judges. Some kinds of gestures had to be made for one of the fruits. On the last day of the competition, we were given the most challenging task, which was sugar work describing the region of Ostrobothnia. I did my best work in Vaasa. Even the sugar work, which I thought was fun afterwards. In that regard, I was being a creative person, who did not correct the mistake that she noticed just a bit too late. But, even here, I learned and internalised that, when you make a mistake, you have to think about whether you should fix it or it. When the three-day competition was over and I had given it my all, my personal best, I felt completely spent. Saara and I were satisfied with our work, as were our teachers.

Five judges had been observing the competitors and awarding points. I placed seventh and Saara placed sixth. At our school, our accomplishments were celebrated, which made us very happy. Even though we did not earn any medals, we came to realise that, when it comes to matters of taste and appearance, each and every one of us is unique. Some people like things big and heavy, while others prefer simplicity in decorations and even flavours. But, this competition was unique. It provides an outstanding foundation for the future.

Be bold!

If you have the interest and opportunity to participate in competitions, any competition at all, by all means do so. Don't be afraid to express yourself, even if you were born with achondroplasia or have some other kind of disorder. Beat your fears, gather your courage and take part, as you won't get many opportunities like this in life. These are unique events and provide you with powerful resources for your future. Anyone entering a competition has to have determination, courage and, above all, a positive attitude. You should also know how to appreciate your own accomplishments. I hope that I can use my own example to show that even a person with achondroplasia has just as much chance of tackling life's challenges as anyone else. You just have to take a chance, because no one knows how long or short their lives will be. No one knows what tomorrow or each new week will bring. I've been able to live, experience and see this personally!



Photo: Markku Vengasaho is a Taitaja coach who encourages his students to discover their own possibilities and top expertise.

Markku Vengasaho
Taitaja coach

Along for the ride as Maria's coach

Vocational skills coaching is a resource, which adds just the right amount of spice to everyday work. I work as a lecturer in Food Industry at the Saimaa Vocational College (formerly the South Karelia Vocational College) and a teacher in Confectioner/Pastry Cook subjects aimed for young people. I also teach Confectioner/Pastry Cook subjects to adult students in the bakery industry. I first became involved with Taitaja competitions eight years ago. Our school's Taitaja team member Tuula Ravattinen had asked me about my interest in participating in the Taitaja competitions with my students. I had generally responded by saying something along the lines of: We just don't have the kind of students who would be suitable for a competition right now. Looking back, the thing I notice is the fact that, before I joined in coaching activities, I was held back by a variety of barriers. These included a fear of failure and lack of time and compensation to be paid for coaching, i.e. resources.

Let me say a few words about these barriers:

The fear of failure: I was more focused on the end result. I was fairly blinded by the gleam of medals, so I hadn't noticed the opportunities that competing would offer the students.

Time to be used for coaching: My attention was fixed more on the potential amount of time to spent on coaching. Coaching would take up some of my time – but where would I find it? Coaching forced me to think about the unnecessary or less important things I currently spend time on in my work.

Compensation to be paid for coaching: I was focused on the money. I thought the only thing of value I would gain from coaching was money. Coaching offers new experiences, it helps develop your professional skills, it expands your co-operative network and gives you the opportunity to help your students find their way to a profession in a whole new way.

I had been wrestling with these thoughts for some time, when the rector of our school came to visit our department's open house. We were doing sugar work and had some of the other work done by the students on display. The rector asked why we were not participating in the Taitaja competitions when the students were doing such fine work. That is when I thought, if the rector thinks that we could enter a competition with this work, then we would do that very thing the following year. Since then, I have been in the Taitaja semi-finals a total of six times and in the finals three times with my students. I am grateful to all the supporters, who inspired me to get involved in competitions.

Along for the ride on Maria's journey

I was Maria Sipari's teacher during the 2008 – 2009 school year. At this point, Maria was already in her third year of Confectioner/Pastry Cook studies. Registration for the Taitaja semi-finals was fast approaching. I had talked about the Taitaja competitions with my class and two or three students wished to go to the semi-finals. I was registering two students for the semi-finals – Maria was not among them. One of the students cancelled her registration and the other was unsure about participating, because her original companion would not be with her. Then I asked Maria if she wanted in. Saara, who was the other remaining competitor, was excited to have Maria along. And so, we were on our way to the semi-finals, which were being held in Oulu. It was at this time that I agreed on some common rules with Maria and Saara.

We all agreed that the girls would do their best in the semi-finals and then think about how far they could go. The other rule was that the work should be enjoyed, not endured. As a result, the semi-finals went very well. There were just over 30 competitors, with Saara finishing first and Maria fifth. We were able to experience the thrill of succeeding. Maria and Saara were the first students I had who made it into the Taitaja finals. The next objective was the Taitaja competitions in Vaasa. We headed off to face new challenges. Up to that point, I was positively walking on air. It was that amazing!

My feet came back down to earth in the spring, when we received the final tasks, which was to do sugar work with an Ostrobothnian theme. We had a tough time getting a handle on the task. I was, myself, very busy at that time. But, the competitions went very well. Maria placed seventh and all the tasks were completed. Nothing was left unfinished.

Following the competitions, Maria became a key partner to me, as she still is today. She has served as, among others, a demonstration evaluator and support person for current competitors. She has also evaluated competition work and provided moral support to the competitors and even me.

My values and guideposts for vocational skills competitions

My own work as a coach is based on the following seven principles:

1. Mutual respect
2. Openness
3. Commitment
4. Co-operation
5. Positivity
6. Courage
7. Desire to learn new things

Mutual respect

The basis for enduring and trusting co-operation is mutual respect. While I was with Maria during the competitions, I also learned how to take others into consideration in little ways and genuinely show respect for others.

Openness

Maria and I openly talked about everything between heaven and earth. This also included a discussion about what things I would have to take into consideration regarding Maria's height. The school had a suitable stepstool, which Maria had used earlier during workshop classes. We found that there were no other special needs. We agreed that Maria would ask for help when she needed it, and I would not have to focus on making any special arrangements, even though Maria was smaller than all the other competitors. She had the very same goals as everyone else in the competition.

Commitment

When entering a vocational skills competition, it helps when the competitor has a passion for their field. This, in itself, eliminates many problems. Maria had a passion for her field and competition. One of her special talents is that she can focus on the task at hand. Maria did not count the hours while she was training for the competition, also in her free time. Her team mate Saara was very supportive during the competitions. Maria and Saara prepared for the competitions--just the two of them--in our school's Confectioner/Pastry Cook class when I was unable to participate.

Co-operation

Without such a good competition team, we would never have gone so far. We invited all the classmates, who had been closely involved in, for example, tasting products and evaluating appearance, to join our team. A few times each week, we held a morning meeting in the class, where the classmates were able to taste the products and give their feedback on them. Our team also had representatives from businesses in the field. Among other things, they helped in evaluating product taste. Leila Viitanen, an art student at a university of applied sciences, helped with the visual design of our products. She joined us when we were doing marzipan work and evaluated the appearance of the products. My own closest colleagues gave our team moral support. Our school also had a joint Taitaja team, which met three times during the training period. The team handled such things as organising joint training sessions, taking care of press matters, competition uniforms and making travel and accommodation arrangements.

Positivity

Competitions should be seen as an opportunity. I have sometimes asked myself the question: Why am I a teacher? I have also thought about what kind of teacher I want to be. Personally, I want to inspire, encourage and offer new opportunities equally to all students, regardless of what they might have or not have to start out with. Each and every student should be given an opportunity to try. Many things are only a matter of making the right arrangements. I have also learned how to think about whether a goal is my own or that of the student. If a student is satisfied with something, am I also satisfied with it? Where is the line of ambition drawn? A medal is not only a symbol of success. I have noticed that just participating in the semi-finals is a victory for each student. In some cases, the student's placement in a competition has no meaning at all.

Courage

As I said above, placement does not have any real, intrinsic meaning. The courage to try and surpass one's own limits, and try new things. One of the coach's key tasks is to instil courage. Competition teaches courage in a variety of ways. As a vocational skills competitor, you have to have the courage to leave the familiarity of your class and compete, working under the scrutiny of others. You also have to deal with publicity in the media.

However, it is difficult to be brave if you do not know where you are heading, if work or coaching is being done by shouting orders, hiding things and on your own. Courage requires a strong foundation on which to rely. Then, you have to have faith in the idea that you won't be rejected if the job doesn't go according to plan. For me, the most important people have been the workmates who were always encouraging me to get involved in competitions. They were genuinely happy when I did. They had taught me to always remember what is important: The fact that you're competing, not what place you end up with. I was always happy to get back to my own workmates, no matter what the results were. They also took our competitors into consideration through their actions and thoughtfulness. When we are heading out for a competition, we never leave without some good luck wishes and hugs.

The crux of it all is that you learn new things by coaching. There is no script for it. Things change along the way. Coaching empowers and serves as a resource. It takes a lot, but it also teaches you new things, things you don't expect. On this journey, you'll feel alive! I encourage everyone to try coaching. But, let me warn you – you might just get hooked on it...

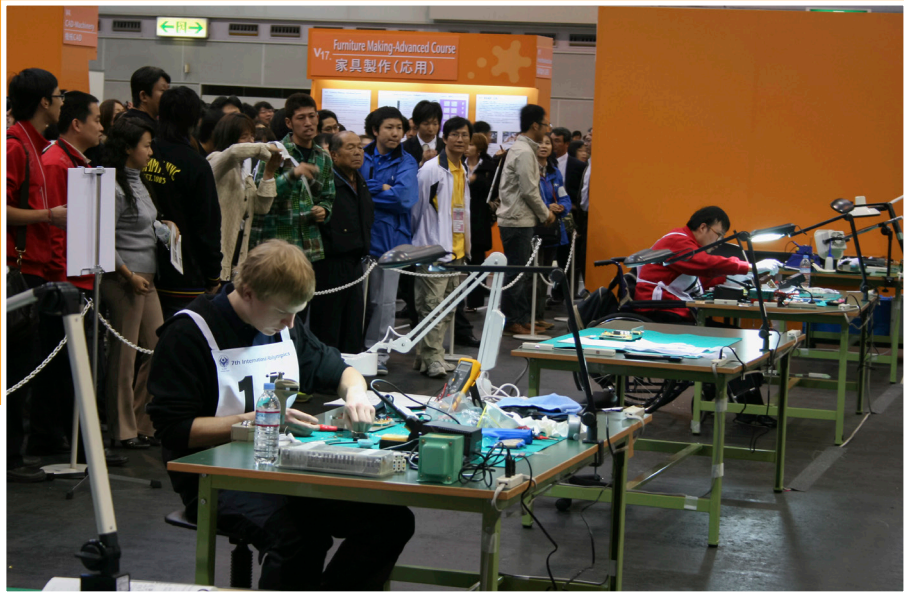


Photo: Tomas Vaarala is concentrating on his competition tasks at Abilympics International in Japan in 2007.

Tomas Vaarala

Abilympics competitor in the Electronic Assembly and Testing skill category

Competition experiences from the 2007 Abilympics in Japan

Article is based on an interview with Vaarala, written by Päivi Pynnönen

Preparing for the competition

I studied at the Keskuspuisto Vocational College, where I received a great deal of assistance and support for coaching and training. We visited the Abilympics International website to see what the coming competition tasks would entail and then began to train for them intensively. The importance of training cannot be understated, as the level of competition is very tough. The Team Finland camps also played a major role in my training. The mental coaching received at camp was, in my opinion, absolutely vital. During coaching and the competition itself, the interpreter arrangements for sign language were well provided for.

Even though the competition in Japan was held in November, we were informed about the competition tasks in the spring and began training hard right away. Before heading off to the competition, it was important to remember the competition tasks well and ensure that I had – and was familiar with – all the necessary tools and equipment.

Another essential part of my training programme was the national team camps – I was able to attend the second and third camp. The camps helped

me to become part of the competition team. I received mental coaching along with the other competitors who had normal hearing and, in my opinion, this part of the coaching was crucial. Future competitors should also make every effort to get as much as possible out of these lectures. In addition to this, we were coached on, for example, eating properly and often reminded how important it is to drink enough fluids. The camps were well planned, the coaching was expert and adequate.

As a whole, I feel that my coaching was effective, but one can always practice more. The more a task is concretely practised, the better the competition performance will be. During coaching, it would be a good idea to take the differences between the WorldSkills and Abilympics competitions into greater consideration, even at the camps. For example, the fact that Abilympics competitors are provided with information on their tasks in advance, while at the WorldSkills competitions they partly come as a surprise. The more effectively the special needs of Abilympics competitors can be taken into consideration, such as in my case using sign language, the better the result will surely be. More information on the competitions should also be provided to students to inspire greater numbers of them to enter. I was personally surprised to find so many deaf competitors from so many countries. Others should have a chance to see just what an amazing experience the competitions are.

Competition in Japan

I participated in the Japan Abilympics in the Electronic Assembly and Testing skill category. The task involved soldering various types of electrical components to a circuit board. Work speed and high quality played a key role – the solders had to be clean and the finished unit had to look good. Naturally, there was a great deal of stress, because the task was tough and time was limited. It was extremely important to maintain strict focus, so that I would be able to do my best. Taking a systematic approach was key. If something went wrong, I had to collect myself and calm down fast, correct the error and continue with the task. We had received excellent mental coaching for just such a scenario at the camps – how to keep your cool in a competition situation and keep pushing despite any setbacks. I thought I did very well in this regard. I was a bit hindered by the jet lag, but even there I quickly adjusted – in other words, just normal competition life.

The interpreting arrangements were good. Before each competition task, there was an information session, with interpreters present. This provided me with ample information for the task. Then, we were able to focus solely on the task. The interpreter and my coach watched the competition actively. For example, if a judge needed to say something to me, the interpreter came over immediately and the matter was cleared up quickly. I was also very satisfied with the judging arrangements. Everything went very

smoothly and there was sufficient information provided. Things naturally felt quite tense at first, when the spectators started gathering in the competition venue. I initially wondered how I would ever be able to concentrate. But, then I just thought to myself that it was pointless to worry about it. I just believed in myself and focused on my work and soon I didn't even notice that there were any spectators.

The hotel, transport, meal and other related arrangements were all outstanding. I was extremely satisfied and have no complaints whatsoever. I was also free in the evenings, when I could go out to eat where I wanted and meet new people. I made numerous contacts with so many nice competitors from different countries. One nice little detail was that Team Finland had made us all our own business cards, which contained our email address and mobile phone number. The cards were certainly put to use, as I made lots of new contacts during the competition.

It was easy to fit in on Team Finland. At first, it was naturally new for some that I was deaf, but we quickly got used to each other and communication was not a problem. There was a wonderful team spirit, especially among us four Abilympics competitors. I was also very satisfied with the team leadership. They had an excellent knowledge of everything and, whenever necessary, they obtained additional information. The activities were managed well. The instructors at the camps and on the team were great people.

Some of the teams at the Abilympics were positively enormous. It seemed like there were many veteran competitors, who had already gained a great deal of work and life experience. As there was no maximum age limit, I think the competitor ages ranged from eighteen all the way up to forty or even fifty. There were some real professionals there, too. Many of the other countries' competitors I talked with told me that this was their fourth or fifth competition – one even said it was their tenth. Evidently, there is no limit to the number of times you can compete. One person said that the competitions were an important hobby. Everyone I talked with said they absolutely enjoyed the international atmosphere and the opportunity to meet new people.

The competition programme was exceptionally well organised – not too heavy, with plenty of time for everything. Japanese culture offers plenty of interesting things to see and do. The competition arrangements were handled well. The indisputable highlight of the entire experience was the closing ceremony and banquet, which exceeded all my expectations. The banquet offered us a wide variety of impressive performances, such as a play based on Japanese fables and many dance, instrumental and other types of performances. There were also disabled performers – it was great to see them showcasing their talents.

Benefits of the competition experience

Finland should absolutely be actively engaged in Abilympics activities. Information on the event should be distributed to students, so that even more will be inspired to join. And, considering that Finland's TaitajaPLUS competition has so many skilled individuals, they would be excellent Finnish representatives at the Abilympics.

I believe that Finland should also develop its activities at the international level. There are truly expert people in Finland. We are known all over the world for our ability to effectively organise things. A good example of this is the WorldSkills competition held in Finland in 2005. People all over the world say that Finland would make an outstanding competition destination. We would also surely be able to organise an excellent International Abilympics. And I, for one, would be very excited to attend competitions – they always have such a wonderful international atmosphere and are a great place to meet new people!

Coaching and the competition experience helped me to grow a great deal as a person, both in terms of knowledge and skills. I am now even more prepared to enter the workforce. I also made numerous international contacts, exchanged email addresses with people from ten different countries and have stayed in touch with them, even meeting some in person. You never know where you might travel to next. Now, I have friends all over the world!

All in all, the competitions were a positive surprise. At first, I just thought that it would kind of fun to compete in Japan, because I had never been there before. I honestly did not know what to expect. At first, I just trained, made it onto the team and headed off to the competition. When I first arrived, I stepped into the big competition hall and noticed that there were also deaf people from other countries. I talked with, for example, some deaf competitors from India. But, the biggest surprise for me was the closing ceremonies and banquet. When I looked around, I saw people signing here and there. More and more kept coming in until there were some six or even seven hundred deaf people in the place! It was absolutely unbelievable! There was a great, open and equal feeling among the competitors. We looked at a map to see where each of the competitors were from. We exchanged pins, souvenirs and business cards. At the closing ceremonies and banquet, I even exchanged competition shirts with one of the Japanese competitors. It was truly a mind-expanding experience to talk with dozens of different people and learn about them. The competitions were something I'll never forget!



Photo: Executive Manager Tuomas Eerola (on the left) and Finnish Academy for Skills Excellence create and promote excellence in the field of vocational education.

Päivi Pynnönen

Trainer, Finnish Academy for Skills Excellence

Tuomas Eerola

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Impact of vocational skills competitions

Vocational skills competitions are a major development event for vocational education and training, bringing together the workplace, educational institutions and their students and teachers. Vocational skills competitions are forums for promoting the objectives and influence of vocational education and training on many levels. The influence of education can be defined by means of individual and group learning outcomes as an individual, organisational or social relevance, i.e. appropriate, useful, beneficial and meaningful (Raivola 2000). The influence of vocational skills competitions can be examined on different levels. Competitions in vocational skills improve the recognition, attractiveness and appreciation of vocational education and training. For educational institutions, the vocational skills competitions provide an opportunity to market the education they provide and compare learning outcomes. The exposure brought by competitions increases the number of people interested in seeking vocational education and training. Individual study paths as well as coaching and guidance methods developed within the framework of the competition activities can be applied to benefit all those pursuing vocational studies. For the public at large, competitions are major showcases for vocational skills and education. (Eerola 2013.) Using the above-mentioned examples, it can be stated that vocational skills competitions have, over the decades, grown

to become an appropriate, useful, beneficial and meaningful instrument for the development of vocational education and training.

Promoting equality and accessibility in society

Equality is one of the key principles of Finnish social policy which has been promoted through, among other things, legislation. Education falls within the scope of the Non-Discrimination Act. Each and every person has the right to receive an education, regardless of their personal characteristics, such as a disability. In practice, equality is not about homogenisation, but rather taking individual needs into consideration. Vocational skills competitions are used to promote the development of a more equal and socially just society. What is important is that all people have a need to gain recognition and feel that they are part of society. Making competitions accessible to special needs students also reinforces a sense of belonging and supports the youth's development into adulthood (Miettinen 2009). As vocational skills competitions allow teachers and students establish new co-operation networks with other educational institutions, companies and employers, they provide an opportunity to reduce prejudices and make attitudes more positive toward participation by everyone in society. Achieving equality is also the goal in the development of vocational skills competitions and coaching. (Pynnönen, Kaloinen and Saarinen 2013.)

Development of vocational education and training

The publication *The Most Highly Skilled Country in the World* (Maa-ilman osaavin kansa, 2013) states that expertise is one of the cornerstones of Finland's well-being and success. The collective expertise of individuals and groups is based on a high-quality and accessible education system, research and culture. Improving the level of expertise requires continuous development of the education system. The Finnish national skills competition Taitaja is an important tool for developing education. The competitions also promote inter-institutional co-operation and networking between teachers. Coaching and organising vocational skills competitions develop the professional skills of teachers as well as the internal operations, internationalisation and business co-operation of educational institutions.

The organisers of vocational skills competitions deepen the expertise and professional skills of their employees, promote mutual learning through the networking of teachers and workplace supervisors, improve their own reputation as a high-quality place of study and employment, and compare the level of their own expertise at both the national and international level. Through coaching, workplace-based and individual learning guidance methods are developed and can be used throughout the entire field of

vocational education and training. For example, the Excellence in Health and Safety at Work project co-ordinated by Skills Finland integrated occupational safety and health matters more systematically with vocational skills competitions. In 2004–2005, the project developed the "Passport to health and safety skills", which was based on constructive pedagogy. The Passport consisted of 48 task cards. During vocational skills coaching, youths and coaches distributed the Passports among educational institutions and places of employment. In educational institutions, the Passport can be used as an instructional tool, while the task cards in the workplace section were useful in, for example, job orientation.

When participating in competitions, the pedagogical expertise of teachers is deepened and, in turn, their motivation for and interest in competitions increase. Vocational skills competitions are an excellent way to reify things that might even seem abstract, such as entrepreneurship or the concept of sustainable development, bringing them closer to instruction in various vocational fields and the evaluation of expertise. When expertise in sustainable development is included as one concrete, measurable and evaluable area of the competition tasks, the competition is also involved in more extensively promoting the inclusion of sustainable development in instruction and vocational skills demonstrations. (Lundgren 2009.)

When coaching students for vocational skills competitions, the teacher must give greater consideration to both pedagogical and financial solutions in their activities. This also ensures that creativity and innovation receive greater exposure. This was revealed in a joint survey conducted among the semi-final support personnel by the Finnish Academy for Skills Excellence and the Finnish Association for the Development of Vocational Education and Training AMKE. According to the respondents, the vocational skills competition semi-finals are an excellent opportunity to share experiences and thus develop one's professional skills as well as to network with actors in the field. When working together and in a group, the group members learn a lot from each other, and expertise is shared co-operatively. (Tuominen 2013.)

Internationalisation opportunities

In the Education and Research Development Plan for 2012–2016, the goal is to enhance the recognition of studies completed abroad, on-the-job learning and recognition of work experience as part of completing a vocational qualification. At the same time, the opportunities for education providers to participate in international peer learning and assessment is promoted, the goal-setting of European vocational education and training policy is actively influenced, and the achievement of targets for vocational education and training and European co-operation in Finland is promoted. The objective is also to increase the degree of co-operation of vocational education administration and vocational education provider networks

with countries outside the European Union. Vocational skills competitions provide an opportunity to compare the level of education and expertise both at the national and international level.

Selection of the Finnish national team for international competitions is done through a dedicated coaching system. Many countries send youths who are expected to win prizes to international competitions. In this case, the only objective of national competitions may be to serve as heats for the world championships. Finland takes a different view. In order to develop a specific field, we even feel that it is more important to send a representative to an event where we do not expect particular success than to one in which we are hoping to do well. The success of the Finnish team should therefore not be evaluated based on the number of medals and diplomas, but the success of the entire team. The aim of this approach is not only to coach youths for competitions, but also to ensure that knowledge and expertise are drawn from vocational skills competitions and utilized in vocational education and training (Eerola 2013).

An increasingly multicultural workplace and international labour market put pressure on education providers to develop international co-operation. The changes brought about by a "multiculturalising" society and their impact on vocational skill requirements should be taken into consideration in, for example, the development of teaching content. In the future, educational institution projects will work with other countries to develop functions for maintaining and developing high-quality vocational education. The projects should produce high-quality operating models to support instruction and organisational development, so that workplace skill requirements can be met by developing the expertise of staff and students at educational institutions. (Koramo 2009.)

Workplace orientation

In recent years, a wide variety of projects carried out at educational institutions have dealt with preventing marginalisation, with the focus of discussion often being students, their activities and support for them. But, the topic of developing vocational institutions to more effectively meet the needs of students and the workplace has been given less attention. (Raudasoja 2013.)

The test projects assigned in the Taitaja competition and the assessment of vocational skills are continuously discussed in national working groups for the various skill categories. The test projects make it possible to respond quickly to changes in the workplace. Consequently, competitions also have an impact on curriculum work. The test projects and attendant marking scheme of vocational skills are saved in an open database, where anyone can use them as training exercises or even tasks for a vocational skills demonstration. The test projects are a concrete demonstration of the

skills required for excellence in vocational upper secondary education as well as how the skills are assessed. (Eerola 2013.)

Competition preparations are made and skills are evaluated in co-operation with employers. For employers, competitions offer an opportunity to compare the quality of their own operations, promote practical vocational skill innovations, demonstrate their commitment to high-quality vocational education and training and personnel development, raise the profile of their own operations in order to increase the demand for their products and services, and promote the recruitment of top experts (Alhojärvi 2009).

When preparing for competitions, forms of co-operation are sought that optimally point the way to top expertise. These contacts and co-operation practices can also be made useful for all those pursuing vocational studies. Practising skills in an authentic work environment expands the youth's expertise in not only practical aspects, but also key skills in lifelong learning. Students might later be given a job at the workplace where they completed their on-the-job learning and the company gains a skilled employee as well as the reputation for being a supporter of top expertise. Vocational skills coaching, work tasks to be performed and feedback discussions planned in tripartite cooperation all facilitate the commitment of participants to a common process. In this respect, the realisation of the coaching process approaches personalised training for workplace supervisors. (Tuominen 2013.)

Surveys conducted by the Finnish Academy for Skills Excellence indicate that almost all vocational educational institutions in Finland are involved in competitions in one way or another. They feel that the competitions significantly contribute to promoting the orientation towards the workplace, individuality as well as the attractiveness and internationalisation of vocational education and training. It is extremely important that the various methods developed in competitions are utilised by all those studying in that vocational field. (Eerola 2013.)

Recognising and supporting a student's special strengths

The objective of achieving flexibility, individuality and the appreciation of uniqueness is constantly emphasised in education. This can be seen as individual study paths included in various educational programmes. In education, it is important to show each student their strengths. Learning can never be based on weaknesses. In vocational education and training, the personal characteristics of students should be recognised and supported as unique potential ability, building study and educational processes so that they will support and motivate learning and vocational development based on personal proclivities. (Helakorpi 2009.) The most important tasks of a teacher are to foster the student's enthusiasm for learning, bolster their self-esteem as a learner, strengthen their belief in their own

abilities, create tools for learning and guide them in seeing learning outcomes (Kerkola 2001).

Each year, dozens of Taitaja semi-finals are held, with over a thousand students participating. Coaching for competitions and participating in them provides youths with an opportunity to build toward achieving top expertise. In the competitions, the young people can demonstrate their skills and compare them to the expertise other people of the same age have. For competitors, preparing for and participating in competitions offers the opportunity to reach the top in their profession and personal competence potential. In addition to vocational skills, the competitor also develops their social skills, ability to make independent decisions, self-knowledge, motivation and a healthy pride in their profession. In international competitions, language proficiency and other international skills are also developed (Alhojärvi 2009).

Vocational skills competitions spur young people to continuously improve their skills and thus support the objectives of lifelong learning. Lifelong learning and the importance of key lifelong learning skills to the workplace and vocational skills ensure expertise in an ever changing world. It is vital that, during their studies, youths are committed to the development of their respective vocational fields as well as the continuous maintenance and updating of their vocational skills. The ultimate goal is for the future professional to share their expertise in their career, keep an eye on changes in their field, and actively promote the well-being of their own work and living environment. (Tuominen 2013.)

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Finnish team has participated the International Abilympics competition twice, in Japan and in South Korea. Third time will be 23.–27.3.2016 in Bordeaux, France. Our team has ten competitors, who compete in seven different skills. Slogan of International Abilympics 2016 is Common Skills, Uncommon People.

We wish you all the best!