

EuroSkills *Gdańsk 2023*



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FOR TEAM UK

FEWEEK

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Introducing EuroSkills 2023



ANVIKSHA PATEL

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War, a pandemic, gruelling training, and a new CEO.

WorldSkills UK's preparation for the EuroSkills competition had a fair few changes to face head-on since its last European competition in 2018.

But despite being off the competition floor for five years, this year's cohort of 19 young skilled people have been so inspiring and incredibly talented to say the least.

They had to work non-stop with training, studying and working for months on end just to be ready for this year's EuroSkills, held in Gdańsk, Poland.

And it sure did pay off. Team UK brought home nine medals after three long and tiring competition days resulting in some well-earned celebrations!

This special souvenir supplement from *FE Week* will cover the war-torn road to Gdańsk and Poland's tireless work to host the competition in a short turnaround after Russia was suspended from hosting the 2023 event.

The competition in brought together nearly

600 young people, aged 18 to 25, from 32 countries across the continent to compete in 43 different skill areas from hairdressing to web development.

I flew out with the team on September 4 and spent the following five days watching them wave to thousands of supporters at an opening ceremony, endure three long days of competition and celebrate their achievements at an emotional medals ceremony.

I'll also be revealing my first-hand experience from covering EuroSkills on the ground.

Then you will see how Team UK's "unsung heroes", the training managers, helped the competitors with their training schedule. The training team donated much of their free time to help the competitors to be internationally competitive.

The closing ceremony and awards reception followed. You can also find out which country claimed top spot in the overall medals table.

We then have a few words from skills minister Robert Halfon before all eyes then turn to Lyon in France, who will be hosting next year's WorldSkills competition.

FE Week is proud to be the official media partner of Team UK and will be there every step of the way over the next 12 months before WorldSkills Lyon.

Congratulations to the entire Team UK for your hard work at EuroSkills 2023.

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Graham Hasting-Evans

Chief executive,
NOCN Group



Designing a skills system fit for the future

We live in a time of rapid and continuous change, affecting the future skills people will need to enter employment and develop their careers.

Our EuroSkills team, and those competing from 31 other countries, are at the top of their game and the start of long careers in a global economy destined for rapid change.

The transition to a low-carbon, net-zero society will mean that economies will generate completely new occupations and skills as well as the demand for people who can adapt and develop their skills and competencies throughout their working lives.

People will change careers and occupations much more often than they have done previously. They will be using ever-changing digital technologies, new materials, more efficient ways of doing things and sustainably utilising the world's resources. The understanding and ability to interpret data will be critical as will interpersonal, problem solving and cognitive skills.

This agile and ever-evolving environment will create considerable challenges for our traditional education and skills development approach. Educational policy in many countries is based upon fixed programmes of 2 to 3 years with a curriculum which remains relatively unchanged year on year. These have been designed to provide the learners with the knowledge, skills and behaviours for a long career.

With constantly changing requirements these programmes are going to need to be much more flexible and agile to remain relevant. Policymakers and curriculum designers are going to have to revise programmes regularly and be able to keep

themselves and teaching personnel up to date.

Young people coming through the system, like those competing in skills competitions, are going to need to develop the ability and resilience to cope with change as well as a wide range of employability or 'soft' skills.

There is an even greater challenge of up-skilling the existing workforce in each country's economy. This is not going to be a one-off exercise, but a regime of lifelong learning with people needing to keep their knowledge, skills and competency up to date on a regular basis.

For the occupations that remain, albeit in a transformed state, people will need to be retrained through modular quality-assured training or micro-credentials. One can envisage that individuals' training records will become critical assets to demonstrate to employers they can operate competently in an agile and sustainable economy.

If well designed, these assured short courses for the existing workforce can be utilised to refresh the longer programmes taught to new entrants coming into employment.

For new occupations that will evolve in the economy, we will need assured training courses that can transition people working in an existing, possibly declining, occupation and give them additional skills and competencies to bridge the gap to the new requirements.

The countries that can make their skills system reactive, agile and responsive to the digital and sustainability drivers will be successful in transitioning to future skills and a future economy. Those who do not address the challenge will face economic decline.



The war-torn road to Gdańsk

The road to this year's EuroSkills has been nothing if not treacherous.

The war in Ukraine and a global pandemic made it unfeasible for the UK to showcase the next generation of skilled workers for five long years.

The event was the first EuroSkills competition that the UK has participated in since 2018.

Five years ago, the UK won one gold medal, three bronze medals and seven medallions for excellence at the competition in Budapest, Hungary, placing them ninth in Europe.

The next EuroSkills event, which takes place every two years, was due to be held in the Austrian city of Graz and was pushed back by a year to September 2021 due to the Covid pandemic lockdowns and safety precautions.

In an unprecedented decision, the UK pulled out of the 2021 competition because of "too much ongoing uncertainty", according to then WorldSkills UK chief executive Neil Bentley-Gockmann and changing conditions of Covid security. It was the first time the UK has pulled out of any WorldSkills competition in its 73-year history. Only 19 countries in total competed at EuroSkills Graz 2021.

For many hopeful UK young apprentices wanting to compete against the best and brightest in Europe, the lifting of Covid restrictions was meant to be the end of the delay.

The 2023 event – making it the eighth EuroSkills competition – was originally scheduled to take place in St Petersburg, Russia this August.

But the biennial event but was postponed

after Russia and Belarus were suspended from the WorldSkills and EuroSkills 2023 competitions due to its "enormous breach of the WorldSkills code of ethics and conduct" following its invasion of Ukraine.

Last year, Poland was chosen to host EuroSkills 2023 in the city of Gdańsk and Team UK finally made it to the competition after dedicating all their evenings, weekends and holidays to training, according to Ben Blackledge, current chief executive of WorldSkills UK.

To secure a place in Team UK, the apprentices and students went through an exhaustive selection process and beating thousands of their peers across the country in the national heats.

“

They have been working so hard to get to this point

The training programme to be ready for EuroSkills is no mean feat, consisting of enduring technical skill training and performance training.

Devised by performance psychologists, Team UK members follow a similar performance training programme to Olympic athletes, Blackledge told *FE Week*.

"Team UK follow a similar programme to that of our successful sports stars with



They've landed! #TeamUK are finally in Gdańsk, ready and raring to go for #euroskills2023. @ESGdansk2023 @WorldSkillsEuro



a specific focus on effective team working, building resilience, self-organisation, high impact goal setting and how to use imagery to manage a situation or achieve a particular goal," he said.

They even attend a workshop on improving sleep, so they are at the top of their game to compete.

As for the technical training, training managers support the Team UK members and utilise the WorldSkills specialist centres located across the country.

They also participate in other national finals in Europe, such as electrician apprentice Daniel Knox, who recently returned from Finland, where he participated in its national finals.

The 19 chosen apprentices and students went head-to-head with 600 other skilled young professionals from 32 countries participating across 43 different skills and trades.

"Team UK are ready for the competition, they have been working so hard to get to this point, dedicating all their evenings, weekends and holidays to training – they really are ready to go," Blackledge added.

Skills minister Robert Halfon said: "The dedication and expertise they bring to the competition are a testament to the excellence of our skills education.

"WorldSkills UK is fostering the next generation of skilled workers and ensuring equal access to opportunities, whilst championing technical education globally."



OPENING CEREMONY

Off with a bang

Live performances including sand arts and DJ sets got competitors pumped up at EuroSkills Gdańsk's stunning opening ceremony, but it was a rousing speech from a former UK gold medallist who inspired them ahead of competition.

The event was live streamed from across the continent straight from Polsat Plus Arena, one of Poland's largest football stadiums capable of fitting over 40,000 people.

Thousands of people in the audience enjoyed unique live performances from Polish artists, such as live artistic sand painting by Tetiana Galitsyna, where she poured sand in real time to create iconic European monuments.

Spectators also watched music producer DJ Gromee perform a live DJ set complete with dancers and an artistic light painting by Tony Dream, who used a torch to create an impressive painting.

Team UK had the experience of a lifetime going up on stage and flying the flag during the parade of nations, which saw competitors from the 32 participating countries cross the stage. The UK team's flag bearer was Charlotte Lloyd, hairdressing apprentice with Reds Hair Company.

"I've been in crowds but not a crowd as big as that," said Daniel Knox, Team UK's competitor in electrical installations. "It was exciting to go on stage as a full team."

Ben Blackledge, WorldSkills UK chief executive, said seeing the team cross the stage after pulling out of EuroSkills Graz 2021 made this year's ceremony even sweeter.

"Seeing the competitors on stage and seeing how much it means to them, and then to do that in person, it was brilliant," he said.

Łukasz Kobytecki, Polish competitor in restaurant service, said that he was proud to set the stage as a host participant. "You can hear that I have a sore throat from the



Continued on next page ➡

OPENING CEREMONY

Continued



opening ceremony.

"It was a beautiful experience to visit the stadium, one of the biggest stadiums in Poland. My heart was [full]."

The ceremony also featured a stirring speech from former UK champ Dan McCabe who gave inspiring words to the nearly 600 competitors.

He told competitors to relish the experience as it will be something "your fellow competitors will only truly understand and it's a bond that you will form a family over".

McCabe was part of Team UK at WorldSkills Abu Dhabi 2017 in 3D Digital Game Art and won gold medals at the

2015 WorldSkills UK National Finals and EuroSkills Gothenburg 2016 and is now part of the WorldSkills Champions Trust.

He said the whole point of the competition was not about winning, but about promoting excellence in skills that "keep the world moving".

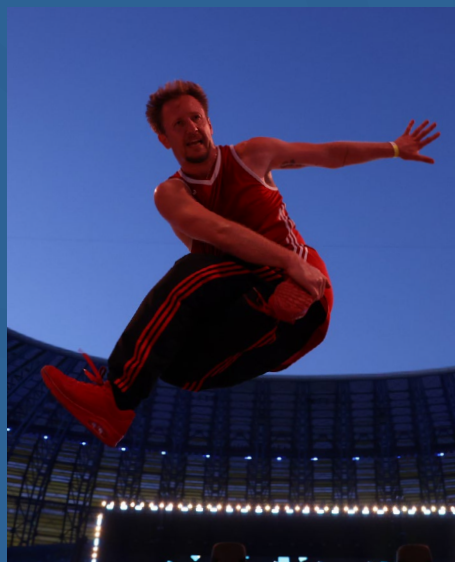
"We are promoting excellence, your excellence. Showing the skills keep our world moving and that you are the people with the skills that can do that."

Two competitor and experts then read oaths to declare the 2023 competition officially open.

DJ Gromee finished the night with a final set to get the audience out of their seats, and perhaps left more voices sore the next day.



Dan McCabe, competed in 3D Digital Game Art at WorldSkills Abu Dhabi 2017



Behind the scenes at EuroSkills

On location FE Week senior reporter Anviksha Patel gives her behind the scenes take on EuroSkills 2023...

When I was asked if I wanted to go to Poland to cover a skills competition, I absolutely jumped at the chance. Travelling for my job is a blessing, and I hadn't much opportunity since the pandemic began.

The nerves came about fairly quickly though. It was going to be a long week, with lots of running about and quick turnarounds for articles. I had to be prepared.

The city of Gdańsk is incredibly beautiful and the site where the competitions and ceremonies were held were kitted out well.

You had the Amber Expo exhibition hall where all the manufacturing and engineering skills workshops were set up, such as welding, joinery, CNC milling, mechatronics.

Then in between the hall and the Polsat Plus arena, where the opening and closing ceremonies were held, were huge tents with fully fitted kitchens, mini electrical workshops, and even a makeshift hotel reception and much more.

The morning of the first day of the event, I headed to the Polsat Plus arena to attend a media briefing for all the journalists where we were then given a tour of the stadium floor and the competition site.

There was my first glimpse of what the week would look like. We spotted Dior Regan from Team UK practising her painting and decorating skill as competitors were given a few hours to familiarise themselves with their workshop areas and tools at their disposal ahead of competition.

Then it was time for the dazzling opening ceremony. The cheers from the UK delegation and the competitors' families when Team UK took the stage waving their flags was so special for them.

"I've been in crowds, but nothing as big as that," said electrical installations competitor Daniel Knox from Northern Ireland.

"It was amazing going on stage as a full team. We all really enjoyed it."

Day one and two were long gruelling days for the competitors, who were in a new country with unfamiliar equipment and thousands of members of the public



Anviksha interviewing Michael McGuire, Digital Construction Training Manager

watching them from the sidelines.

Cookery competitor Samantha Watkins said on day two that her tasks went well but navigating a new environment was a challenge.

"It was very difficult at first trying to get used to the new set out of the kitchen, trying to understand how different equipment works, and they have different plugs as well and it's all in a different language," she said. "That's been a bit of a challenge."

Day three was exciting as I signed up to be a customer being waited on in a makeshift fine dining restaurant for the restaurant services competition. My waiter was Elsa Delgado, the Spanish competitor, who was brilliant and anticipated all our needs. She ultimately won a medallion for excellence alongside our very own Daniel Davies. ¡Felicidades a todos (congratulations)!

As each of the 19 UK competitors' final day tasks finished at different times, family, friends and supporters all gathered around with flags and vuvuzelas, cheering on their country representatives and many tears were flowing from the delegation. The atmosphere was electric when the countdown from 10 started. Every country had their own chants for the competitors and the cheers were almost deafening.

I got to see bronze medallist Charlotte Lloyd's final task; she was asked to cut and style a shaggy short women's hairdo. The focus and precision she had was incredible, and to see her get emotional and hug her training manager Linzie Weare afterwards

made me tear up too.

These competitors have been training for months, some even years, and the end of the competition is understandably overwhelming. As Lloyd told me in the winner's circle at the closing ceremony, entering EuroSkills has "changed her life in so many different way".

The closing ceremony was even more dazzling than the opening as the crowd was even bigger and the cheers were much louder as the winners were announced.

For many medallists, being able to come to EuroSkills was an achievement, let alone being recognised as one of the best in Europe for their skill.

Isabelle Barron's first comments after winning gold in digital construction was that she was "very overwhelmed".

"I just couldn't believe it," she said, after the presenters announced her name as gold medal winner on stage.

"I'm going to celebrate and then train again and hopefully go to Lyon," she added.

A few days before, I didn't know any of these young people and in such a short time, you see their talent and tenacity and you can't help but root for their success.

There were so many things about EuroSkills that felt special that you really must see it to believe it. For my first year covering the skills Olympics, it's safe to say that the whole week was such an adventure and that I'll be back again – to a WorldSkills competition and of course to the beautiful city of Gdańsk.

Meet the unsung heroes of Team UK

Behind the team of young skilled competitors representing the UK is a squad of unsung heroes – the dedicated training managers and team leaders.

Before competing in Gdańsk, WorldSkills UK coordinates an Olympics-style training programme that enlists a team of experts to help budding young professionals to achieve the standard expected to be a European or world-class competitor.

The training schedule has been jam-packed for Team UK and their training managers alike. Most are lecturers at colleges and universities across the UK, some are from their respective industry and all give up their time voluntarily.

Cookery competitor Samantha Watkins, said her training manager Sean Owens from Ulster University, tailored her training

programme to suit her needs.

"He's been absolutely brilliant," Watkins said, who also works as commis chef at the Gordon Ramsay 1890 Restaurant at the Savoy Hotel, London.

"He really understood me as a person, and he adapted the training techniques to suit me. I couldn't ask for better training."

After finding out the type of tasks she would face at EuroSkills a few months ago, Owens and Watkins set up a game plan.

"We had meetings every week on Monday just to talk through it and plan what we were going to do when we do meet because he lives in Belfast and I'm in London, so it is a very long journey."

Michael McGuire, who was training manager for gold medallist Isabelle Barron in digital construction, said training Barron was easier than other skills because it's a

digital skill.

"Once a month we get together for a weekend and then if she wants to do more than that I can support her remotely," he said.

McGuire, who was a lecturer at New College Lanarkshire for nearly 22 years, said that the digital construction has been running as a competition since 2019, something he helped create given its economical importance.

"One of the biggest things about the competition style is that you look for every single way you can cut time. If you take these competitors and put them in a workplace, they don't work as fast as they do here but they're still faster."

"The course I came from at the college had 100 per cent employment after two years," he said.

TRAINING MANAGERS



SKILL
CNC Milling
NAME
Adam Youens
EMPLOYER
Coleg Cambria



SKILL
Joinery
NAME
Andrew Pengelly
EMPLOYER
Chichester College Group



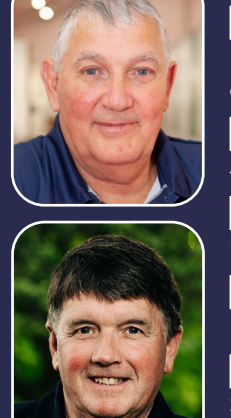
SKILL
Cabinet Making
NAME
Angus Bruce-Gardner
EMPLOYER
Self employed



SKILL
Mechatronics
NAME
Calum Knott
EMPLOYER
Didactic Services Ltd



SKILL
Electrical Installations
NAME
Geoff Shaw
EMPLOYER
Cardiff and Vale College



SKILL
Plumbing and Heating
NAME
Jim Mackinnon
EMPLOYER
UHI Moray
NAME
Ronnie Ferris
EMPLOYER
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Systems
Integration
NAME
Karla Kosch
EMPLOYER
Northern
Regional
College



SKILL
Hairdressing
NAME
Linzi Weare
EMPLOYER
Reds Hair
Company



SKILL
Digital
Construction
NAME
Michael
McGuire
EMPLOYER
Glasgow
Caledonian
University



SKILL
Painting and
Decorating
NAME
Mike Swan
EMPLOYER
Dundee
and Angus
College



SKILL
ICT
Specialists
NAME
Nitheesh
Kaliyamurthy
EMPLOYER
University of
Wales Trinity
St David



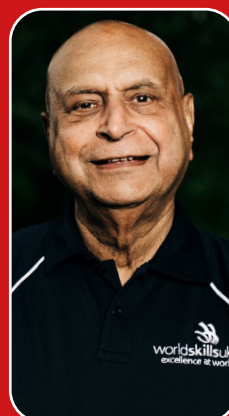
SKILL
Car Painting
NAME
Richard
Wheeler
EMPLOYER
Coleg
Gwent



SKILL
Mechanical
Engineering
CAD
NAME
Ryan
Sheridan
EMPLOYER
New College
Lanarkshire



SKILL
Cooking
NAME
Sean Owens
EMPLOYER
Ulster
University



SKILL
Restaurant
Service
NAME
Shyam
Patiar
EMPLOYER
Self
employed



SKILL
Team
Leader
NAME
Dr
Stephanie
Tibbert
EMPLOYER
AECC
University
College



SKILL
Electronics
Prototyping
NAME
Stephen
Williams
EMPLOYER
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SKILL
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Development
NAME
Valentin
Adamescu
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University of
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Team UK scoops gold in Gdańsk

Team UK scooped nine medals at this year's EuroSkills competition in Gdańsk, including one gold and two bronze.

The elite team of young people representing the UK at the European skills Olympics swooped into 13th place out of a total of 32 competing countries across the continent.

Isabelle Barron, aged 22, from Clitheroe in Lancashire, won gold for her specialism in digital construction, an achievement that she said was "beyond her wildest dreams".

"Being recognised as the best in Europe is life-changing," she said. "I hope that I can use my experience as part of Team UK, to dispel some of the myths about working in construction and show young people the range of different opportunities that exist."

She was also awarded the coveted "best in nation" title for the UK.

Barron works for global architects Chapman Taylor and has a BSc Honours from Sheffield Hallam University.

Barron's training manager Michael McGuire told *FE Week* on the first day of the competition she was "doing spectacularly well" on her task.

"As chief expert, it's my role to firefight after any issues and I've had nothing to do," he said. "I've been able to stand and just watch all the competitors actually enjoy the competition and test their skills."

Taking home bronze medals were 21-year-old Ruben Duggan for plumbing and heating and 20-year-old Charlotte Lloyd in the hairdressing skill.

"It's unbelievable. I didn't even come here to win a medal," Duggan said in the winner's circle when he came fresh off the stage at the closing ceremony.

Lloyd agreed. "You can't even put into words how it feels. It's just a surreal feeling and there's so many emotions, I can't stop crying," she said backstage at the closing ceremony.

All three medallists said they will be training for WorldSkills 2024 in Lyon next year.

Lloyd added that training for EuroSkills in the last two years has changed her life in more ways than she can imagine.

"I've become a better person, I can manage things more, I've gone so much further in training at my salon at Reds [Hair Company]," she said. "I've gone from being a junior and



Isabelle Barron won a gold medal for Digital Construction

not really having a clue about anything to now being a stylist that's fully booked all the time."

The awards were handed out at a sparkling closing ceremony at the Polsat Plus Arena in Gdańsk, attracting thousands of spectators.

Six medallions for excellence were also announced in front of the audience for achieving the international standard in their skills – a minimum of 700 points.

The Team UK medallion winners were Rhydian Brown in web development, Harry Scolding for joinery, Lucy Yelland and Ben Love for mechatronics, Daniel Knox for electrical installations, Daniel Davies for restaurant service, and robot systems integration duo Charlie Carson and Jason Scott.

Nineteen individuals made up this year's Team UK, after car painting specialist Miguel Harvey had to withdraw competition due to unforeseen circumstances.

"It's such a lovely team, we've all bonded so well so we are really like a family," Lloyd told *FE Week*.

At the last competition that the UK participated in – EuroSkills Budapest in 2018 – the UK brought home one gold medal, three bronze medals and seven medallions for excellence at the competition in Budapest, Hungary, placing them ninth in Europe.

This year, Austria came out on top with the highest number of total medal points, followed by France and then Switzerland.

Switzerland took home the most gold



Charlotte Lloyd won a bronze medal for Hairdressing



Ruben Duggan won a bronze medal Plumbing and Heating

medals. Its team was awarded a whopping 12 gold medals from 16 competitors.

Ben Blackledge, chief executive of WorldSkills UK, said: "This is a tremendous result for Team UK – and the nation. Each one of them should be proud of their achievement."

"These competitions provide a unique opportunity for us to learn from the best in the world and bring that international best practice back to the UK through the programmes we run at WorldSkills UK."

Skills minister Robert Halfon added: "Congratulations to the exceptional UK competitors who showcased their skills at EuroSkills in Gdańsk. The EuroSkills competitions provide an unparalleled opportunity for gifted young people to hone their skills and climb the ladder of opportunity towards a better and brighter future."

PICTURE HIGHLIGHTS



PICTURE HIGHLIGHTS



Alex Whitmore



Charlotte Lloyd



Lucy Yelland



Michael Crilley



Daniel Davies



Daniel Knox



Isaac Bingham

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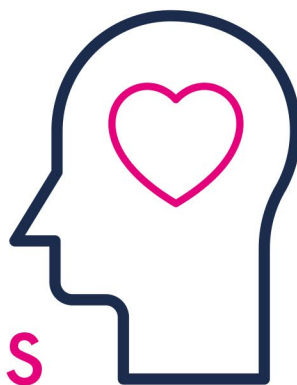
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PICTURE HIGHLIGHTS



Ruben Duggan, Isabelle Barron and Charlotte Lloyd



Isabelle Barron receiving the gold medal for Digital Construction



Daniel Knox, Charlie Carson, Jason Scott and Isaac Bingham



EuroSkills 2023 medal table

	Member	Total Points	Number of competitors	Gold	Silver	Bronze	Medallion for excellence
1	Austria	65.00	38	7	6	5	9
2	France	64.00	36	5	5	7	15
3	Switzerland	57.00	16	12	3	0	0
4	Germany	53.00	26	4	9	1	8
5	Hungary	38.00	21	5	1	4	7
6	Denmark	27.00	20	0	5	3	6
6	Poland	27.00	36	3	1	3	6
8	Finland	26.00	21	1	3	2	9
9	Belgium	19.00	19	1	3	0	6
9	Portugal	19.00	15	0	3	2	6
11	Netherlands	17.00	20	1	0	2	9
12	Sweden	15.00	18	1	1	2	4
13	Spain	14.00	26	1	0	1	8
13	United Kingdom	14.00	16	1	0	2	6
15	Norway	11.00	14	1	0	2	3
16	Italy	10.00	11	0	2	1	2
17	Kazakhstan	9.00	24	0	1	1	4
18	Lithuania	7.00	10	1	0	1	1
19	Slovenia	6.00	9	0	0	1	4
20	Estonia	4.00	16	0	0	0	4
20	Iceland	4.00	11	0	0	0	4
22	Croatia	3.00	7	0	0	1	1
22	Romania	3.00	7	0	0	0	3
22	Slovakia	3.00	9	0	0	1	1
25	Ireland	2.00	4	0	0	0	2
25	Principality of Liechtenstein	2.00	2	0	0	0	2
27	Czech Republic	1.00	9	0	0	0	1
27	Latvia	1.00	8	0	0	0	1
29	Cyprus	0.00	6	0	0	0	0
29	Greece	0.00	3	0	0	0	0
29	Luxembourg	0.00	12	0	0	0	0
29	Montenegro	0.00	5	0	0	0	0

Ben Blackledge

Chief executive,
WorldSkills UK



WorldSkills UK's new chief

Though Ben Blackledge didn't study any technical skills in his early years, it's clear that he lives and breathes it now.

The newly appointed WorldSkills UK chief executive has been at the organisation since 2015 and moved his way up the ranks until July this year, when he took over the top job from Dr Neil Bentley-Gockmann who held the post for seven years.

However, his love for nurturing young people and their potential started way before that.

During his time studying business studies at Cardiff University, he got involved with a local church to mentor young people from deprived backgrounds.

"Those young people that haven't been kind of given a lot of support or a lot of investment, so we did mentoring as well as activities at the weekend," he said.

"There were four young men aged 14 to 16 when I met them with behavioural issues. I didn't do anything special but give them a bit of time and support and

actually they're all doing amazing things in terms of their career now."

Giving time and support is exactly what Blackledge is looking to do for WorldSkills UK and the cohort of young people competing in skills competitions through the organisation.

It's why the charity has introduced Centres of Excellence, a workforce development programme to raise the quality and standards of technical and vocational teaching, in partnership with NCFE.

Its three-year pilot programme was rolled out across 49 colleges and training providers and inserts a high-performance skills coach into the environment to help teachers have "an understanding of what excellence looks like" and to refine curriculum.

Blackledge is hoping the Centre of Excellence will make Team UK entering WorldSkills and EuroSkills competitions more internationally competitive but also raise "the whole skill system up".

"That's not bashing tutors and teachers.

INTERVIEW

They're hardworking, they're excellent," he vowed.

"We just think that there are different ways of looking at things and so if we can bring in new ideas and new approaches, and then work with them to see how that applies to their college in their situation, it's great."

The Centres of Excellence will draw on two things: CPD for workforce development, and a network of innovation to share ideas and best practice, which will use the WorldSkills pool of experts globally to bring together with tutors and principals in colleges across the UK.

The knock-on effect will not just be positive on learners, Blackledge says. In the context of the college recruitment and retention crisis, WorldSkills UK is here to help.

"Our brief is to look at upskilling the tutors and the teachers within the current system to develop the best they possibly can because it makes them feel more motivated. There's better chance of retention recruitment if they're being invested in."

Blackledge spoke to *FE Week* on site of EuroSkills Gdańsk and said his aim for Team UK was to rank in the Top 10 in anticipation of the main event next year: WorldSkills Lyon 2024.

"The other slightly quirky thing is that the medallions for excellence are almost more important than the medals. It's about saying, 'have we trained everyone to be internationally competitive?'" he added.

Though this year's cohort of young people from Team UK didn't meet Blackledge's top 10 aim – they ranked 13th in Europe – the team did bag six medallions.

It is evident that the team at this year's EuroSkills, however, is not racially diverse nor does it have a balanced gender split. This is an issue WorldSkills UK has faced for many years.

"It's something we're really, really aware of. We've been on a journey over the last three or four years," Blackledge acknowledged.

The squad for Team UK is picked from the national finals, the last one of which drew in over 6,000 registrations.

Ethnic minorities registering for WorldSkills UK National Finals in 2023 was



Ben Blackledge watching the opening ceremony

Continued on next page

INTERVIEW

Continued



14 per cent, up from 12 per cent in 2022. The make-up of women registering for the finals was 44 per cent, up from 39 per cent in 2022.

"I know it's not huge, but it's a kind of incremental change," Blackledge said.

WorldSkills UK commissioned research a few years ago into its diversity problems, and what they found was attracting minority groups into competing was the issue.

"Once they get into the programme, there doesn't seem to be any bias in terms of going through the system," Blackledge said.

"We find is that at the entry point, it's maybe not as diverse as possible.

"We've done lots of work in terms of looking at unconscious bias, in our imagery, in words like competition, does that put people off?"

As well as establishing an EDI advisory group, WorldSkills UK is talking to colleges to push people from other backgrounds into competing.

"I'm not blaming colleges, to be clear. But what is it about our competitions that means that these are the people that have been put forward?"

Blackledge also has a mission on his hands to hone the skills that the UK brings forward to international competitions. His organisation conducts an annual review of all skills looking at medal and points rankings and the other is where government policy is driving them.

"What we do well matters because we

want to make sure that we're in the top 10 of world skills," he said. "But also it's about what's important to the UK.

"Things like digital construction, we're doing for the first time here. We've got renewable energy, active manufacturing, we've got cybersecurity, these are all skills that align with what what's needed."

It's the reason why WorldSkills UK decided not to take forward some skills to competitions this year.

"After Kazan, we stopped doing carpentry. That's because actually the competition of carpentry internationally did not align with what we do and what we need in the UK, it wasn't a good use of resource and time to do that."

Sometimes it's out of their hands, such as dropping stonemasonry, which WorldSkills International removed from the portfolio because "there wasn't enough interest from the countries," according to Blackledge.

And of course, funding is always a factor.

At EuroSkills, Blackledge has been involved in conversations with delegates from the Department for Education, and referenced when he used to be on the other side, when he worked at the department's Learning and Skills Council and Skills Funding Agency (now known as the Education and Skills Funding Agency).



Team UK at the opening ceremony

"This (side) is more fun," he jokes.

Blackledge says that WorldSkills UK has always had a "positive but challenging relationship" with DfE regarding funding.

"We've actually had a really good, positive but challenging relationship in terms of them saying, 'we want this' and us saying, 'actually, I think what you want is this.'"

WorldSkills UK had a campaign to bid to host WorldSkills 2027. He says there's appetite for it with ministers but it's about timing and money.

"We're framing it not as a big event, we're framing it as a kind of catalyst for skills," he said. "But at the moment, as we know, across the board funding is very tight.

"It's about when do we really push it and we don't think probably now is the right time to really push it with the current situation funding."

The last few months have been huge for Blackledge, learning a new role in an organisation that he's more than familiar with. And throw into the mix having a young family and moving house, plus EuroSkills Gdańsk, it's clear he has a lot on his plate.

But as the new CEO, Blackledge is not about steering the organisation from square one, though he will want to operate things differently from his predecessor.

"It's not a revolution, so it's not like throwing everything out and starting again, because actually, I've been heavily involved in getting to where we are," he said.

"I think, for me, it's about focus."



Ben Blackledge, Ruben Duggan, Isabelle Barron and Charlotte Lloyd



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Minister for skills,
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Team UK is proof of our world-class skills system

One of my top priorities as minister is getting more young people from all backgrounds onto the ladder of opportunity so that they can develop the skills they will need to excel in their future careers. Few events encapsulate this ambition better than the EuroSkills competition that was held in Gdańsk last week.

Bringing together skilled young people from 32 countries, the EuroSkills competition is a fantastic way to showcase the breadth of talent on offer in the UK across a range of sectors. From plumbing and joinery to web development, mechatronics and digital construction, these young people have demonstrated that age is no barrier to expertise. This takes courage, commitment and perseverance, and I applaud all the competitors for their

efforts.

These young people are a testament to the excellence of our technical education system. Through high-quality apprenticeships, T Levels and higher technical qualifications, they can have confidence that they are gaining the skills that employers say they need.

Over half of all apprenticeship starts in 2021/22 were under 25, which is brilliant news. To encourage even more young people to take on an apprenticeship, we are investing £3.2 million a year to promote apprenticeships in schools and colleges, alongside our 'Get the Jump' campaign. We're also working with UCAS



These young people are a testament to the excellence of our technical education system

to expand their service so that young people can see apprenticeship vacancies alongside undergraduate courses on the UCAS Hub, and from 2024 students can apply for apprenticeships alongside traditional degrees.

For care leavers, we're going the extra mile by increasing the apprenticeships bursary to £3,000. This is on top of the £1,000 available to both their employer and training provider, making a total of £5,000 additional funding available for every care leaver apprentice. This is crucial to boosting social mobility and giving everyone a fair chance at climbing the ladder of opportunity.

Our higher technical qualifications are a fantastic way to get the skills employers are looking for. Available in key sectors including digital and construction, HTQs equip people with the skills they need to go straight into work, or on to further study. HTQs are adding new sectors each year including engineering and education & early years for 2024, and agriculture, catering and creative & design the following year.

As they are designed in collaboration with employers, HTQ students can be confident that they will gain the skills needed to secure great careers in their chosen sector.

Finally, T Levels offer students the opportunity to gain invaluable industry experience that will prepare them for their next steps. From this September, 18 T Levels are available in everything from construction and engineering to legal services and education and early years. Students, teachers, and employers continue to give us great feedback on the quality of T Level courses, but to give them an extra boost, we have committed over £450 million to improve buildings and buy state-of-the-art equipment. We have also launched a new £12 million Employer Support Fund to help reimburse employers for the costs of delivering industry placements in 2023-24.

Whichever route these young people are taking, they are setting themselves on a path to success. Congratulations to every one of them, you have demonstrated that our skills offerings really are world-class.



Team UK Hall of Fame

Arguably the most nerve-wracking part of any competition is finding out the results. And Team UK was no different.

The day after the competition ended, thousands of people gathered once more at the Polsat Plus arena to watch the closing ceremony to see who would win gold, silver, and bronze medals.

The presenters went through each skill, announcing the three countries that had won a podium place, as well as who had achieved the international standard in their skill to win a medallion for excellence.

Cheers roared from the stadium stands from family, friends and supporters when the names of the UK medallists were declared.

Each skill is scored in various ways, but competitors had to achieve 700 points or more out of a possible 800 to claim a medallion for excellence.

On the same night, WorldSkills UK held an awards reception following the show with all 19 Team UK members and supporters celebrating the winners and handing out the medallions.

KEY:  **GOLD**  **SILVER**  **BRONZE**  **MEDALLION FOR EXCELLENCE**

CNC MILLING



NAME
Alex Whitmore

AGE
21

HOME REGION
South West

TRAINING PROVIDER
Babcock International

EMPLOYER / ORGANISATION
Babcock International

Working off a drawing supplied to all competitors, Alex had to programme a laptop using different tools and software. He also had to create a series of complex metal shapes, running a machine that was operated from the information programmed from the laptop.



CABINET MAKING



NAME
Isaac Bingham

AGE
21

HOME REGION
Northern Ireland

TRAINING PROVIDER
Southern Regional College

EMPLOYER / ORGANISATION
Self-employed

Isaac made an item of furniture within 18 hours from a drawing shown to him and the other competitors the day before. The cabinet had a door, drawer carcass and leg frame and a veneering element.



COOKING



NAME
Samantha Watkins

AGE
19

HOME REGION
East Midlands

TRAINING PROVIDER
Loughborough College

EMPLOYER / ORGANISATION
Savoy Hotel

Sam underwent an intense three-day competition preparing, cooking and presenting complex dishes to the international standard of excellence. Dishes that she served to judges included bouillabaisse, croustis, a celeriac dessert and plant-based vegan dessert.



DIGITAL CONSTRUCTION



NAME

Isabelle Barron

AGE

22

HOME REGION

North West

TRAINING PROVIDER

Sheffield Hallam University

EMPLOYER / ORGANISATION

Chapman Taylor

Using Autodesk Construction Cloud and software including Revit, Isabelle had to create architectural and structural models. She also had to inspect co-ordination of multidiscipline models for errors and created 4D animations of construction sequencing allowing her to design the most efficient construction plan.



ELECTRICAL INSTALLATIONS



NAME

Daniel Knox

AGE

21

HOME REGION

Northern Ireland

TRAINING PROVIDER

South West College

EMPLOYER / ORGANISATION

GP Electrical and Security LTD

Daniel had to design, install and programme an electrical structure, identifying and correcting faults within timed modules.



ELECTRONICS PROTOTYPING



NAME

Michael Crilley

AGE

20

HOME REGION

South West

TRAINING PROVIDER

Gloucestershire Engineering Training

EMPLOYER / ORGANISATION

Customade Group

Michael prototyped electronic designs, manufacturing printed circuit boards, coding embedded systems and finally demonstrated his fault-finding skills.



HAIRDRESSING



NAME

Charlotte Lloyd

AGE

20

HOME REGION

East Midlands

TRAINING PROVIDER

Reds Hair Company

EMPLOYER / ORGANISATION

Reds Hair Company

Charlotte carried out five different modules on live models and mannequin heads ranging from bridal hair up, men's perm, and complete restyles with cutting and colouring.



ICT SPECIALISTS



NAME

Tyler Lewis

AGE

20

HOME REGION

East of England

TRAINING PROVIDER

HCUC

EMPLOYER / ORGANISATION

Haydon School

Tyler demonstrated his technical prowess in viably configuring and effectively managing enterprise networks. In a team with Nathaniel, they efficiently maintained IT infrastructure in Windows and Linux environments alongside Cisco Networking solutions whilst troubleshooting issues, and implementing security measures.



ICT SPECIALISTS



NAME

Nathaniel Patrick

AGE

19

HOME REGION

Scotland

TRAINING PROVIDER

New College Lanarkshire

EMPLOYER / ORGANISATION

N/A

Nathaniel along with his teammate Tyler, utilised his skillset to configure servers, optimize network performance, troubleshoot issues, and implement security measures on various top-rated technologies in the industry such as Cisco, Microsoft and Linux.



JOINERY



NAME

Harry Scolding

AGE

20

HOME REGION

West Midlands

TRAINING PROVIDER

Solihull College

EMPLOYER / ORGANISATION

HDS Joinery

Harry made a window and frame using traditional joinery work over an 18-hour period. The window and frame needed to be designed to fit for any wall, with applied hinges and standing on its feet.



MECHANICAL ENGINEERING CAD



NAME

Ben Hay

AGE

19

HOME REGION

Wales

TRAINING PROVIDER

St. David's College

EMPLOYER / ORGANISATION

WeCycle

Ben created 3D models of engineering designs and solved technical design challenges.



MECHATRONICS



NAME

Ben Love

AGE

20

HOME REGION

North West

TRAINING PROVIDER

Tameside College

EMPLOYER / ORGANISATION

Siemens



Ben, along with his teammate Lucy, conducted a number of tasks during the three-day competition. These included building, wiring, programming and commissioning an industrial production line and performing maintenance activities.

MECHATRONICS



NAME

Lucy Yelland

AGE

21

HOME REGION

West Midlands

TRAINING PROVIDER

Tameside College

EMPLOYER / ORGANISATION

Siemens



Lucy conducted a number of tasks during the three-day competition alongside her teammate Ben. These included building, wiring, programming & commissioning an industrial production line and performing maintenance activities.

PAINTING AND DECORATING



NAME

Dior Regan

AGE

19

HOME REGION

East Midlands

TRAINING PROVIDER

Lincoln College

EMPLOYER / ORGANISATION

Lindum Group



Dior completed the application of water bone gloss paint systems to doors, panel mouldings and woodwork trim/facings and skirtings. She also enlarged and replicated a design mural using freehand application techniques, a speed application module to paint a design as fast as possible with correct quality of work, applying stencil masks and design foils.

PLUMBING AND HEATING



NAME

Ruben Duggan

AGE

21

HOME REGION

Wales

TRAINING PROVIDER

Coleg Y Cymoedd

EMPLOYER / ORGANISATION

Powerserv LTD



Ruben had to install a central heating system. Everything had to be as accurate as possible to the drawing, with all angles within one degree and measurements within two millimetres.

RESTAURANT SERVICE



NAME

Daniel Davies

AGE

21

HOME REGION

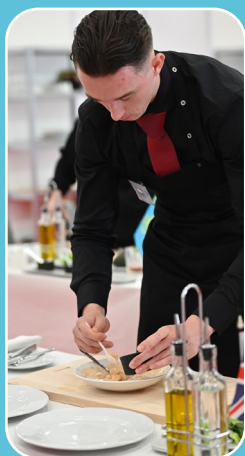
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TRAINING PROVIDER

Coleg Ceredigion

EMPLOYER / ORGANISATION

Yr Hen Printworks



Daniel demonstrated a variety of restaurant service skills during the competition: fine dining service, where he served A la Carte and Table d'Hotel menus. He served a quick service menu during a casual dining service and classical cocktails and a signature cocktail during bar service. He also showed various coffee services as a barista and underwent an individual skill test to demonstrate higher-level skills, such as flambée dishes, fruit carving.

ROBOT SYSTEMS INTEGRATION



NAME

Charlie Carson

AGE

20

HOME REGION

Northern Ireland

TRAINING PROVIDER

Northern Regional College and University of Ulster

EMPLOYER / ORGANISATION

N/A



As part of a team Charlie had to programme a robotic arm for a production line against a specification provided by EuroSkills. As well as programming it and finding faults, they had to write a document package to provide to a customer.

ROBOT SYSTEMS INTEGRATION



NAME

Jason Scott

AGE

21

HOME REGION

Northern Ireland

TRAINING PROVIDER

Northern Regional College

EMPLOYER / ORGANISATION

AES Global



Alongside his teammate, Jason had to programme a robotic arm for a production line using a specification outlined by EuroSkills judges. He then had to find faults and also write a document package to provide to a customer.

WEB DEVELOPMENT



NAME

Rhyddian Brown

AGE

19

HOME REGION

Wales

TRAINING PROVIDER

Cardiff University

EMPLOYER / ORGANISATION

N/A



Rhyddian excelled overcoming real-world scenarios involving problem-solving, team collaboration, and agile development methods. He had to think on his feet and adapt to challenges spanning multiple programming languages and frameworks. Rhyddian built APIs and server-rendered websites and was up to the more advanced tasks like automated testing and creative, collaborative project.

Looking ahead to Lyon

Now the EuroSkills 2023 chapter has ended, the next page turner will be the WorldSkills competition in Lyon, France next September.

Though WorldSkills competitions are held every two years, the 46th WorldSkills event, due to be held in Shanghai, China was postponed due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

The last in-person WorldSkills competition was held in Kazan, Russia, where the UK won two gold medals, one silver and one bronze.

Last year, a special edition of WorldSkills was held. Between September and November 2022, the WorldSkills global network hosted competitions across 26 cities in 15 countries. The UK won two golds and four bronze medals.

The 2024 competition is set to be bigger and bolder than EuroSkills Gdańsk – and greener. Organisers of Lyon 2024 have set a goal to host the most environmentally responsible competition ever by employing a group of sustainability experts to provide eco-friendly solutions for the competition, which will also seek the ISO 20121 event sustainability certification, an accreditation for sustainable events.

Team UK from this year's EuroSkills won't have much time to rest after the competition as they will return to the squad training for next year's skills event.

Squad UK is comprised of around 70 young people so far. This will be slimmed down to around 30 to 35 people at an event in April which will decide who has been chosen to represent Team UK in Lyon.



Place Bellecour, Lyon

They will join some 1,500 competitors coming from across the globe entering 60 skills competitions.

The 47th WorldSkills competition will take place September 10-15, 2024, in Lyon.

A WorldSkills history lesson

WorldSkills has had a rich, if not complex history.

Previously known as the International Vocational Training Organisation, it began as an initiative to boost the skills opportunities that were ravaged during the Second World War across Europe.

The competition began in 1950 in Madrid, Spain under the Francoist dictatorship and

the events were held in the country for a number of years post Spanish Civil War as a way to rebuild Spain's economy and skills shortage after the war.

The UK made its first appearance in the 1953 competition in Madrid, sending Doug Hill, aged 17 at the time who won silver for cabinet making.

"One minute I was planing a piece of wood in Canterbury and the next I was in this huge competition and then a palace – it was awe-inspiring," he said in an interview with *FE Week* in 2021.

"The palace was beautiful and I shook Franco's hand but, at the time, I didn't realise he was a dictator."

It was not until 1989 that the UK government – under Margaret Thatcher – became involved, when the 1989 Skills Olympics were held in Birmingham.

Thatcher was reportedly "dismayed" that the UK only won one gold medal, in hairdressing, that she ordered the Department for Education to set up the organisation we now know as WorldSkills UK.

UK Skills was founded in 1990 as an independent charity with the aim to help industry by "promoting world-class standards of vocational skills through competitions".

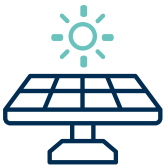
The organisation was renamed WorldSkills UK in 2011, when the UK hosted WorldSkills again, this time in London.



Margaret Thatcher attending the 1989 Skills Olympics

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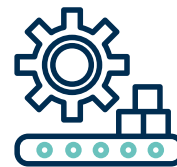
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