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# National and European skills competitions – the experience of Cyprus

Krajowe i europejskie konkursy umiejętności – doświadczenia cypryjskie

**Słowa kluczowe:** konkursy umiejętności, kształcenie i szkolenie zawodowe, wiedza branżowa, doskonałość, wspólne inicjatywy

**Streszczenie:** Cypr odbudował swoją gospodarkę po kryzysie finansowym z lat 2012–2013 na wielu płaszczyznach, a Europejskie Badanie Jakości Życia 2017 wskazuje na to, że mieszkańcy osiągnęli poziom zadowolenia, który pokrywa się ze średnią europejską. Cypr wdrożył między innymi pierwszą fazę Krajowego Systemu Opieki Zdrowotnej (GESY), wprowadził ustawowe wynagrodzenie minimalne dla wszystkich pracowników i rozpoczął reformę systemu edukacji. Warto zauważyć, że wznowienie układu zbiorowego w budownictwie zakończyło długotrwały spór i strajki w tej branży. Porozumienie przywróciło świadczenia pracownicze i zlikwidowało cięcia wynagrodzeń nałożone w 2013. Obecnie branża potrzebuje wykwalifikowanych pracowników, a rząd Cypru dostrzega fakt, że umiejętności są paszportem do zatrudnienia; im lepiej wykwalifikowane osoby, tym większe są szanse na zatrudnienie. Umiejętności zawodowe na wysokim poziomie zapewniają również lepszą jakość miejsc pracy i lepsze zarobki.

**Keywords:** skills competitions, vocational education and training, relevant industry knowledge, skills excellence, joint initiatives

**Abstract.** Cyprus has restored its economy after the 2012–2013 financial crisis on many levels and reached the EU average life satisfaction in 2017<sup>1</sup>. It has implemented the first phase of the National Health System (GESY), introduced a statutory minimum wage for all employees in all economic activities, and begun to reform the educational system. Noteworthy, the renewal of the collective agreements in the construction industry brought an end to a long-running dispute and strikes in the sector. The agreement restored working benefits and salary cuts imposed with the austerity measures in 2013. The industry needs skilled workers at the moment and the government of Cyprus recognizes the fact that skills are the passport to employment; the better skilled the individuals, the more employable they are. Good skills also tend to secure better-quality jobs and better earnings.

<sup>1</sup> European Quality of Life Survey, [https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/data/european-quality-of-life-survey?locale=EN&dataSource=EQLS2017&media=png&width=500&question=Y16\\_Q4&plot=heatMap&countryGroup=linear&subset=Y16\\_Activity\\_status&subsetValue=All&answer=Mean of 8.03.2021](https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/data/european-quality-of-life-survey?locale=EN&dataSource=EQLS2017&media=png&width=500&question=Y16_Q4&plot=heatMap&countryGroup=linear&subset=Y16_Activity_status&subsetValue=All&answer=Mean of 8.03.2021)

## Introduction

Vocational education in Cyprus developed significantly after 1960, when Cyprus gained its independence from the United Kingdom and Cypriot economy experienced a spectacular growth. The need for an adequately trained workforce in all sectors of the economy led educational institutions at all levels to increase in number and scope. Adult education was also promoted through various initiatives and institutional arrangements. The establishment of the Human Resource Development Authority (HRDA) provided a significant impetus to the training of employees and the unemployed.

Education in Cyprus is available from the pre-primary to the postgraduate levels. It is compulsory at the pre-primary, primary (grades one to six), and lower secondary (grades seven to nine) levels, until a student reaches the age of 15. In upper secondary education, which lasts for three years (grades 10 to 12) there are two types of schools: the unified lyceum and technical schools. Tertiary education, including postgraduate courses, is provided at three public and four private universities; several private colleges and institutions provide courses at the post-secondary non-university level.

VET system in Cyprus is playing a significant role in dealing with the adverse effects of the major economic downturn of 2012–2014 as well as laying the foundations for future development. To meet the expectations of the Cypriot economy and society, VET is undergoing essential reforms. The structure of VET is being transformed with the introduction of a new modern apprenticeship scheme, an alternative pathway for young people between 14 and 20, and the establishment of post-secondary VET institutions, which offer students an intermediate level of education. Secondary Technical and Vocational Education (STVE) is open to students who have graduated from the Gymnasium. It comprises a three-year-long cycle of studies which is offered at the Technical/Vocational Schools. Three types of programs are offered – formal secondary technical and vocational education; apprenticeship scheme; and, lifelong learning. STVE provides a broad range of initial training programmes in Cyprus. Its new curricula, developed by 2015, enhanced the attractiveness of VET and matched specialisations with the current needs of the labour market.

STVE became an important part of the Cypriot Lifelong Learning strategy, which *"aims to form a system that ensures that all individuals have the motivation, support, means, resources and time to participate in learning activities throughout their lifetime. The aims of the National Strategy for Lifelong Learning 2014-2020 include creating a society in which all citizens have the skills that enable them to deal with any challenges, they have the opportunity to move freely between learning settings, jobs, regions, and countries, and they participate actively and equally, thus helping to strengthen the country's productivity, innovation, competitiveness, and dynamism."*<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> National Strategy for Lifelong Learning 2014-2020, [https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/content/lifelong-learning-strategy-15\\_en](https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/content/lifelong-learning-strategy-15_en) of 9.03.2021.

Main imperatives of the National Lifelong Learning Strategy 2014-2020 include the enhancement of counselling services, facilitation of horizontal and vertical movement within the VET system, the development of a national qualifications framework (NQF) and promotion of the actions to deal with the high levels of unemployment caused by to the economic crisis.

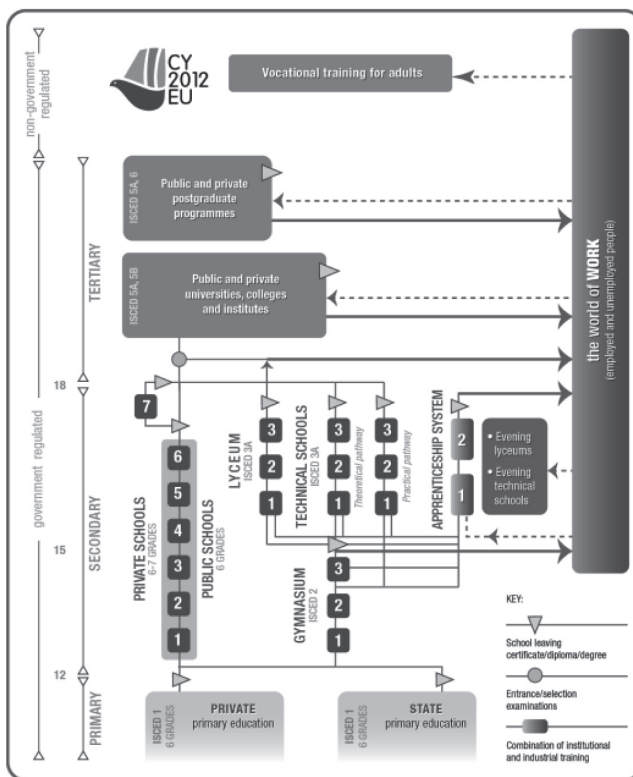


Chart 1. The Educational System of Cyprus

### WorldSkills & EuroSkills

One of the forms of cooperation between the educational sector and employers are skills competitions for VET trainees. WorldSkills International and WorldSkills Europe are non-profit organizations that promote excellence in the field of skills and competence development. The organizations raise awareness of the importance of high quality vocational education and training around the world and in Europe. Their main aim is to inspire young people to turn their passions into a profession by means of the biennial Worldskills and EuroSkills events, which gather hundreds of participants and thousands of viewers making the contests a point of reference. The EuroSkills event fits in the EU policy to promote skills and raise awareness of the importance and the need for highly trained and skilled workforce in Europe.

It complements the VET credit system in practical aspects of vocational training. The main motto of the international skills competition is: *"Skills are the foundation of modern life. They are the driving force behind successful careers and companies, thriving industries and economies. Skills change lives."*<sup>3</sup> The EuroSkills is the most important professional skills competition for young people in Europe. Qualification of participants for the competition is based on achievements in regional and national competitions assessing the professional skills of young people who have just entered a professional career. The competition is accompanied by various presentations, shows, exhibitions, conferences and industry seminars. It encourages young people to improve the quality of their professional skills in close cooperation with employers and promotes the latest solutions in vocational education and training. The initiative also creates a unique opportunity to exchange experience and good practices, promote achievements, establish contacts, and build educational and market partnerships. We read on the WorldSkills Europe website that it promotes skilled careers working with young people, educators, governments, and industries to help prepare the workforce and talent of today for the jobs of the future including all the skilled areas related to the construction world: *"Traditional plastering involves a high degree of accuracy, care and skill. Preparation for plastering work requires complex mathematical calculations. The practitioner needs to be able to read, interpret and analyze complex specifications describing the work and be able to convert these plans into reality."*<sup>4</sup>

## WeRskills project

The project entitled *WeRskills – informational and consulting platform supporting the process of acquiring talents to participate in skills competitions at national and European level* is co-funded by the Erasmus+ Program of the European Union. The project is aimed primarily at supporting the promotion of vocational education and training. It seeks to motivate young people to learn a profession, inspire an excellence in skills and introduce youth to a variety of skilled careers available on the labor market through participating in national skills competitions. The project is particularly devoted to development of a common recruitment pattern for national skills competitions in the construction industry, which will not only promote the power of skills but it will also serve as means to select national champions to compete in the international EuroSkills competition – a spectacular promotion of the professions held every two years in one of the WorldSkills Europe member states. The project intends to involve guilds and businesses into the popularization of skills competitions and promote vocational, technological and service oriented education and training.

<sup>3</sup> WorldSkills Europe, <https://worldskillseurope.org/index.php/about/organisation> of 7.03.2021

<sup>4</sup> Plastering and Drywall Systems, <https://worldskillseurope.org/index.php/what-we-do/promoting-skills/construction-and-building-technology/plastering-and-drywall-systems> of 7.03.2021

International partnership of the project seeks to develop, transfer and implement innovative practices as well as joint initiatives promoting cooperation and exchange of experience at the European level. We believe that skills competitions are instruments to innovate vocational education programs in order to meet the European needs of today.

Diverse institutions composing the partnership will enable exchange of experience and specific expertise to achieve high quality results. WeRskills project consortium was properly selected and includes 5 institutions from 3 countries: Poland, Hungary, and Cyprus. Partners have been chosen according to the project's aims and the expertise needed. They represent different culture and traditions of vocational education, construction sector of industry as well as they assure geographical diversity of the partnership.

The results of the project are expected to contribute to the development of skills and qualifications of young people who pursue technical and technological professions towards a skilled career and future. The results are primarily directed at institutions organizing national skills competitions, educational and training institutions, young employees and entrepreneurs in construction sector, construction industry manufacturers and employers' associations, VET students, teachers and trainers, local and central authorities responsible for vocational education and training. We planned the following results/products of the project:

- Report on good practices related to the organization of national skills competitions and qualification events for EuroSkills in Poland, Cyprus and Hungary;
- Skills tests for Plastering and Drywall Systems;
- National skills competition in construction and building technology – pilot testing activity in Poland;
- Best Practices Guide with advice on preparation of experts and competitors for international skills competitions;
- E-platform for the exchange of knowledge, experience and good practices;
- Publication on good practices and outcomes of the project with recommendations for local and central authorities.

WeRskills project addresses the international question of work mobility and in the long run it may influence the mobility and competitiveness of young people on the European labor market. The project may also be a source of knowledge and good practices for countries aspiring to become WorldSkills International and WorldSkills Europe members. Finally, WeRskills project promotes the idea of Lifelong Learning on local and national levels by inspiring school-aged youth and young workers to take part in a stimulating learning experience. It also helps to develop an efficient vocational education and training sector across Europe.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Kowalska M., Pete Z., Vidovszky I., *National and European skills competitions – Hungarian experience*, „Edukacja Ustawiczna Dorosłych” 2020, no 2, pp. 38–39.

## EuroSkills Coordinator in Cyprus

The Ministry of Labour, Welfare and Social Insurance has been a member of the European Skills Promotion Agency WorldSkills Europe since 2008 and it is represented in the Organization by the Cyprus Productivity Centre (KEPA). The long standing objective of the Cyprus Productivity Centre is continuous improvement, the introduction of innovation and the provision of new services, programs and activities based on the needs of organizations and their employees, thus contributing to the enhancement of their competitiveness and supporting them so that they are able to face successfully the challenges of the 21st century. Following the accession of Cyprus to the European Union, in May 2004, the Cyprus Productivity Centre has redirected its focus towards areas of activity which support the efforts of individuals, companies and organizations, social partners and state authorities to adjust to the rapidly changing environment so that the country can make a successful transition and have a secure future in the globalised world.

Cyprus Productivity Centre has contributed towards the economic and social development of Cyprus, the improvement of the quality of life of its citizens and the best possible use of the human and capital resources of the country.

Recently, the role of the Cyprus Productivity Centre has become even more vital as it focuses on the provision of the highest possible level of vocational training and managerial development. CPC works on structures, procedures, rules, and related documentation to make a significant contribution to the improvement of the national productivity and the reduction of unemployment. The education material designed by CPC is introduced at every level of education. The cartoon "Phoebus the Productive" was developed for students of High School, Lyceum and Technical Schools to demonstrate them that a good performance in school does not require hard work but a little bit of cleverness. Phoebus is a teenager who talks about the habits that he follows in his daily life in order to be efficient and productive. Phoebus also learns more about the concept of productivity in the labor sector and its connection to economic growth and social prosperity. "We are working properly, we are moving forward" was a TV spot developed by CPC as part of another initiative called the Public Productivity Awareness Campaign. Moreover, CPC runs a Digital Productivity Course addressed to entrepreneurs, employees, representatives of the Social Partners and the general public and is available for free use through the e-Learning system of KEPA e-gnosis. Using text, audio, image, simulations and video, digital material the course approaches the concept and importance of measuring productivity, the factors that affect it and ways to improve it.

Finally, CPC is responsible for the organization of the National Skills Competition, which focuses on the professions and skills considered necessary to maintain the country's competitiveness and aims to attract more young people to the technical professions. Depending on the sector, CPC collaborates with various local

associations/professional bodies to organize the competition. For example, to introduce the Drywall Systems trade in the National Skills Competition 2012, CPC collaborated with the Cyriot Association of Building Contractors (OSEOK).

## National Skills Competitions

The CPC announced the 6th National Skills Competition SkillsCyprus 2020 to be held at the Laboratories of the Productivity Center in Nicosia in March 2020.<sup>6</sup> The Competition was to observe heating technicians, cooling technicians, car engineers, welders, electricians; beauticians, hairdressers and mechanical design technicians (CAD) compete to enter the EuroSkills 2020 which will take place in Graz, Austria. Unfortunately, the Covid-19 pandemic stopped the event from taking place.

After holding an interview with Mr. Horattas and Mr. Styllianou, the key persons for the National Skills Competition and the EuroSkills competition, we were informed that CPC collaborates with professional associations and bodies who support implementation of the competitions. The Plastering and Drywall Systems trade was supported by the Association of Building Contractors (OSEOK). However, Cyprus team did not achieve any major success during the EuroSkills competition for 2 consecutive years and it was decided that the trade would not be financed any more. CPC and OSEOK came to the conclusion that there was a major gap between the level of the EuroSkills competition and the skills acquired by young builders in Cyprus, which stopped the Cyprus team from winning at the international skills championships.

When it comes to the National Skills Competition, the best young professionals from the country compete at the CPC's premises in Nicosia and the winners are then coached by trainers appointed by the CPC to participate in the EuroSkills competition. It should be noted that not all winners from the National Skills Competition enter the training programs for Euroskills. The choice depends on many aspects like the quality of results in each profession, budget available as well as the real chances to succeed/win at the international event. Consequently, the Cyprus team consists of few but reliable competitors.

## VET vs Euroskills standards

The Cyprus Human Resource Development Authority (HRDA) is the authorized body for the development of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) for Cyprus. The national qualifications framework (NQF) includes all levels and types of qualifications from all subsystems of education and training, including non-formal learning. The NQF's main objective is to classify qualifications according to predefined levels of learning outcomes. So far the HRDA has classified qualifications for the construction industry, tourism, automobile industry, retails and whole sale

<sup>6</sup> SkillsCyprus, <http://www.kepa.gov.cy/skillscyprus/Portal/PortalDocuments.aspx?DocumentId=985886a7-d0ca-4154-bbc2-ed119db134ba> of 8.03.2021



etc. A plastering and drywall system is a trade that has not been developed yet. The NQF supports recognition and validation of qualifications; enables progression and mobility; promotes lifelong learning, e.g. by certifying learning outcomes acquired outside formal education. One important policy objective is also to reinforce vocational education and training (VET) at secondary, post-secondary and tertiary levels. When it comes to skills competitions the NQF is useful for development of training programs and preparation of competitors of various professions because it improves transparency, quality, and relevance of qualifications and strengthens the links between the education sector and the labor market. The interview with Mr. Horattas confirmed that in some professions the skills acquired by Cypriots are at a very high level and they are aligned with the skills required for the EuroSkills competition. However, the skills acquired by students of other professions are poor and it would be impossible to achieve good results in an international competition such as EuroSkills with them.

Cyprus participated for the first time in the EuroSkills in 2010 with its first National Skills Team consisting of 13 competitors who participated in 12 competitions. The Cypriot National Team was formed from the winners of the first National Skills Competition SkillsCyprus 2010, which was held in Nicosia in September 2010. During the EuroSkills 2010 Competition, the Cypriot National team won gold medal for Cooking, bronze medal for the Plastering and Drywall Systems and a medal of excellence for Building Construction. In the final standings, based on the total collection of medals, Cyprus ranked 17th among 26 countries. The success has not been repeated so far.

In 2014, Human Resource Development Authority started the development of the National Qualifications Framework for various professions. It has contributed to the improvement of skills because it was used to develop the curricula taught by VET providers. The positive impact of the NQF will be more evident in the years to come when more VET providers align their curricula with the framework. Moreover, the NQF foresees new professions to be developed by the HRDA which will contribute to the improvement of skills relevant for Cyprus economy. On one hand, it is certain that the improvement of the curricula will have a positive effect on the skills of the EuroSkills competitors. On the other hand, Cyprus has professions which are more popular than others and that is reflected in the quality of VET programs provided. For example, Cyprus has high level of skilled youth in the hospitality professions (waiters, cooks, etc.) and therefore these professions dominate the National Skills Competition. We believe that a country should rely on the professions that dominate the economy if it wants to succeed at the EuroSkills competitions in future.



## Recruitment for the EuroSkills

In order to participate in the national skills competition, participants should be 17–25 years old, they should reside permanently in Cyprus and they should have a very good knowledge of the Greek and English languages. Moreover, the participants should have educational background relevant to the profession they aim to compete at. The Cyprus National Skills Competition offers prizes of €300, €200, €100 to the first three winners of each profession as well as presents from sponsors.

The National Skills Competitions are promoted by the CPC website as well as through other channels such as billboard advertisements across the island, newsletters sent to public and private VET providers, radio and TV promotion and the social media. Anybody can apply for the competition and if the above-mentioned criteria are fulfilled, a young professional is qualified for the National Skills Competition. It should be noted that the participants mainly come from CPC's collaboration with VET providers (mainly colleges in Cyprus) who encourage their best students to take part in the National Skills Competition.

A registration form can be found online at the CPC website:

<http://www.kepa.gov.cy/skillscyprus/HelperModules/UploadsHandler.ashx?UploadId=f93d4ba7-8446-4bed-90d5-cbbb8d8de33d>

The winners of the National Skills Competition are prepared for the EuroSkills competitions by expert trainers appointed by the CPC. Their preparation focuses on:

1. Development of Horizontal skills such as Project Management, Time Management, Stress Management, etc.
2. Professional Skills Training. This is offered in collaboration with Professional Associations, Employers and VET providers (i.e. colleges).

The CPC cooperates with VET providers, companies, professional bodies and associations as well as employers for the promotion of the competitions to their students, staff and members. CPC signs sponsorship agreements with those organizations. In many cases voluntary services such as experts and judges, training programs, and coaching are offered to CPC by sponsors who support the professional skills training of the young champions who win the National Skills Competition.

Experts and judges who take part in the National Skills Competition come from the industry. They have a proven and longstanding expertise in their profession; however, there is no formal selection process for the judges/experts. They are usually appointed by the CPC. The judges/experts are volunteers who are obliged to participate in the guidance and preparatory events organized by the CPC.

Each of the National Skills Competition requires an experts committee to be formed. It is responsible for the design of the test projects and assessment procedures. Those experts may collaborate with professional bodies, relevant associations and VET providers for the preparation of the competition. If it is possible, international standards are followed.

The CPC is financed by The Ministry of Labour, Welfare and Social Insurance, and consequently it uses state funding to organize the National Skills Competitions. The same source of funding is used to train the youth to participate in the Euroskills competitions. When Cyprus joined the WorldSkills Europe in 2008, the budget of the initiative was around of 200.000 Euro; however, the economic crisis of 2013 reduced the budget to 100.000 Euro. During our interview with 2 CPC representatives we were informed that sponsorship is welcome and may come from relevant associations, professional bodies and employers. According to the CPC representatives, the factors that could encourage organizations to sponsor the competitions and the contestants could be excellent results of the Cyprus Team during European competitions and exposure through advertising campaigns.

Sponsors are expected to provide prizes (money or presents) to the winners of national skills competitions or to fund the professional skills training of the talented youth. The sponsoring organizations may also prepare the young professionals at their own premises and using their own means. In 2020, the CPC decided on the following professions to be included in National Skills Competition:

- Cook
- Waiter
- Plumber/ Central Heating
- Cooling Technician
- Car Engineer
- Welder
- Electrician
- Beautician
- Hairdresser
- CAD Designer

From the selection of professions listed above, it is evident that Cyprus orients towards technical and hospitality professions. This is due to the nature of the Cyprus economy where hospitality and technical industries are one of the main pillars of the Cyprus economy and apparently well-trained candidates exist in these professions. Therefore, the CPC feels it is worth allocating funds in those professions.

## Conclusions

According to the CPC, further development and upgrade of the VET curricula will dramatically improve the skills of the youth in Cyprus. As a result, it will be possible to organize an annual event to choose the best professionals to represent Cyprus

in Europe. Logically, good results of the national team at a prestigious international competition would attract more youth to enter skilled careers. The international success would also attract more sponsors and let Cyprus compete in many trades without budget barriers. The TV series "Master Chef" (a televised competition for chefs) is a good example to follow because it has made the profession surprisingly attractive over the years. Therefore, we believe that VET curricula and training methods should be improved in order to incubate highly skilled youth in the country. We also feel that CPC should promote the competitions more intensely to reach a wider public and interest more young people in gaining excellence in their professions. If Cyprus wants to have a skilled workforce it should implement both strategies simultaneously.

## Recommendations

Over the last decades, technical and vocational education in Cyprus has gone through several stages and has been called upon to assume various roles, depending on the socio-economic situation and the tendencies prevailing in industry and the labor market. In this multifaceted, continually changing environment, technical and vocational education should not be viewed as a simple, static process of amassing knowledge and skills. Rather, it should be regarded as a continuous economic and social necessity, capable of providing equal opportunities to all and, thus, operating as a mechanism that combats social exclusion and promotes social cohesion. The WorldSkills International may support Cyprus youth on its way to gain solid knowledge and broad technological training. With certainty, it may make technical and vocational education an attractive option for the development of young people's talents, interests and skills, therefore leading them either towards tertiary education or the world of work. International skills competitions enhance technological understanding of modern processes and their impact on the environment. Finally, VET students develop a range of soft skills during the competitions as well as a positive attitude towards active and educated participation, co-operation and leadership at the place of work and in society in general. The team preparing the EuroSkills vocational skills competition convinces that it is an unforgettable adventure for Cyprus young people who will decide to be part of it. It is also an opportunity for attractive professional training and a source of professional workforce on the European labor market for the years to come. The most important goal of the EuroSkills initiative is to anchor the need for professional development in the minds of all young people.

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