

UK·SKILLS

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So you now have proof that you're brilliant!

best wishes

Jonathan

with compliments

GUEST SPOT

The media miss out on a Dutch treat

THE 31st International Youth Skill Olympics took place in Amsterdam a few weeks ago. The event raised the world's media to a high pitch of apathy. As you might imagine, therefore, it was full of interest. The drama of the competition was itself enough to make it so. But the reflections it prompted are a source of illumination too.

Imagine a vast exhibition hall. It is full of low partitions cordoning the areas in which the competition in each trade takes place. There are 34 of them and there are some 500 competitors from 25 countries.

The elephantine shapes of combine harvesters and other farm machinery to test the skills of young agricultural engineers loom in one part. In another there are the dust and racket of stonemasons at work. Lightning flashes from welding booths. And, an oasis of elegance, there are the restaurant tables laid out to test the skills

of waiters. Each trade has its own atmosphere.

There is quite a bustle in the gangways. The Dutch officials staging the competition cycle round with endless good humour, expertly sorting out queries and difficulties. The public clusters round watching the chefs and the jewellers work their magic. The experts who form the juries for each trade hover alertly. While the competitors work, theirs is largely a watching brief, and they can spare the time to answer questions and explain the projects. Their hours of intense activity come later with the judging.

As it should be, it is the competitors themselves who catch the eye. These are young men and women who for four days concentrate thought, energy, nervous tension, life and soul on their projects. They mostly dream about them at night too. In intervals they can relax a bit, make friends with rivals,

laugh and get through gallons of soft drinks. What fascinates is the withdrawn concentration, the deftness of hand and eye, the working together of brain and muscle, the total absorption of applied expertise, as each project takes visible shape. How dare anyone despise such mastery of craft?

Our team won three silver and three bronze medals and 10 diplomas of excellence, all things considered a good performance and but a whisker away from a better one still in a number of cases. And if there had been the equivalent of the medal for fair play at football's World Cup, one for team conduct, we might well have won that too, because our team leaders Archie Sharkie and Martin Jones – Scot and Geordie – were brilliant and our team responded to them.

So what does it add up to? First, it's a celebration of excellence. A celebration because it's fun and it's serious

too. Excellence because this is a display of practical skills at the highest level – skills which are at the heart of the quality of life in every modern country. It's an experience the competitors will never forget.

Then, it's a demonstration to other young people of the opportunities they too can take to have the joy and the reward of mastering and exercising a craft. Skill competitions – local as much as international – have the power to prove before your very eyes what you might do and be.

And then again, it's a chance to measure ourselves by the highest international standards. The fearsome success of the Pacific countries – Taiwan, Korea and Japan – in engineering trades tells us much more than that their competitors prepare thoroughly (though they do). The national standards set and reached by them in those trades are simply higher than

our own. Shouldn't that give us furious cause to think?

And again, the definitions of trades change and they change for a multitude of technological and industrial reasons. The evidence is here for us to mark and act on.

The next International Youth Skill Olympics are in Taiwan in 1993. We shall better this year's performance because we have learned from it. And wouldn't it be good if the media were there to help others share it?

Sir John Cassels, director of the National Commission on Education and former director general of Nedo, is also chairman of UK Skills, an organisation set up last year to be responsible for UK entries to the International Youth Skill Olympics.

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