

Skill Olympics: is the starting pistol being held to our heads?

Frontiers of work

Peter Large
Technology Editor

THERE are toolmakers from Brazil, hairdressers from Leamington, chefs from Australia, bricklayers from Stowmarket, motor mechanics from New Guinea, waiters from Macao, plumbers from Finland, dressmakers from Ilford...

Nearly 400 young people from 21 nations are competing this week in 36 crafts at the Skill Olympics, which fill two of the huge halls at the National Exhibition Centre in Birmingham.

Though admission is free, the event is surprisingly box-office. The cooking and hairdressing are so viewable that the organisers have provided seating three rows deep.

'One reason for the U-turn is obvious: Itecs cost nearly twice as much as routine youth training'

There are only 37 girls in the field, most in "feminine" jobs. Britain, fourth in the medals table last time in Australia, fields a contestant in all 36 categories. Korea is next with 31.

The teams are at work for a total of 24 hours, spread over four days of constant attention from the public and roving judges. Winners of gold, silver, and bronze medals will be announced on Sunday.

The UK's finalists, aged from 19 to 23, were chosen in regional contests. They attended a training camp in Norfolk in June, where preparation included physical training and lectures from a psychologist on attitude and concentration.

The idea of the Skill Olympics was born in Spain. Britain is hosting the event for the

second time in its 40 years — and is the first nation to introduce current skills, albeit "on trial". Even electronic assembly did not find a place until this decade.

In addition to the 34 official skills, the UK is pioneering demonstration contests in information technology and computer-aided design. The winners there will still get medals and the UK organisers hope these disciplines will be officially accepted at the next Olympics in the Netherlands.

Robert Arculus, UK delegate on the international technical committee, admits there is a "defensive attitude" towards older skills. But he defends the slow pace of change with a shrewd observation.

Mr Arculus, former principal of Coventry Technical College, says it's easier to judge individual skills in traditional crafts than in computer-related ones. The problem has already been encountered in machine tools.

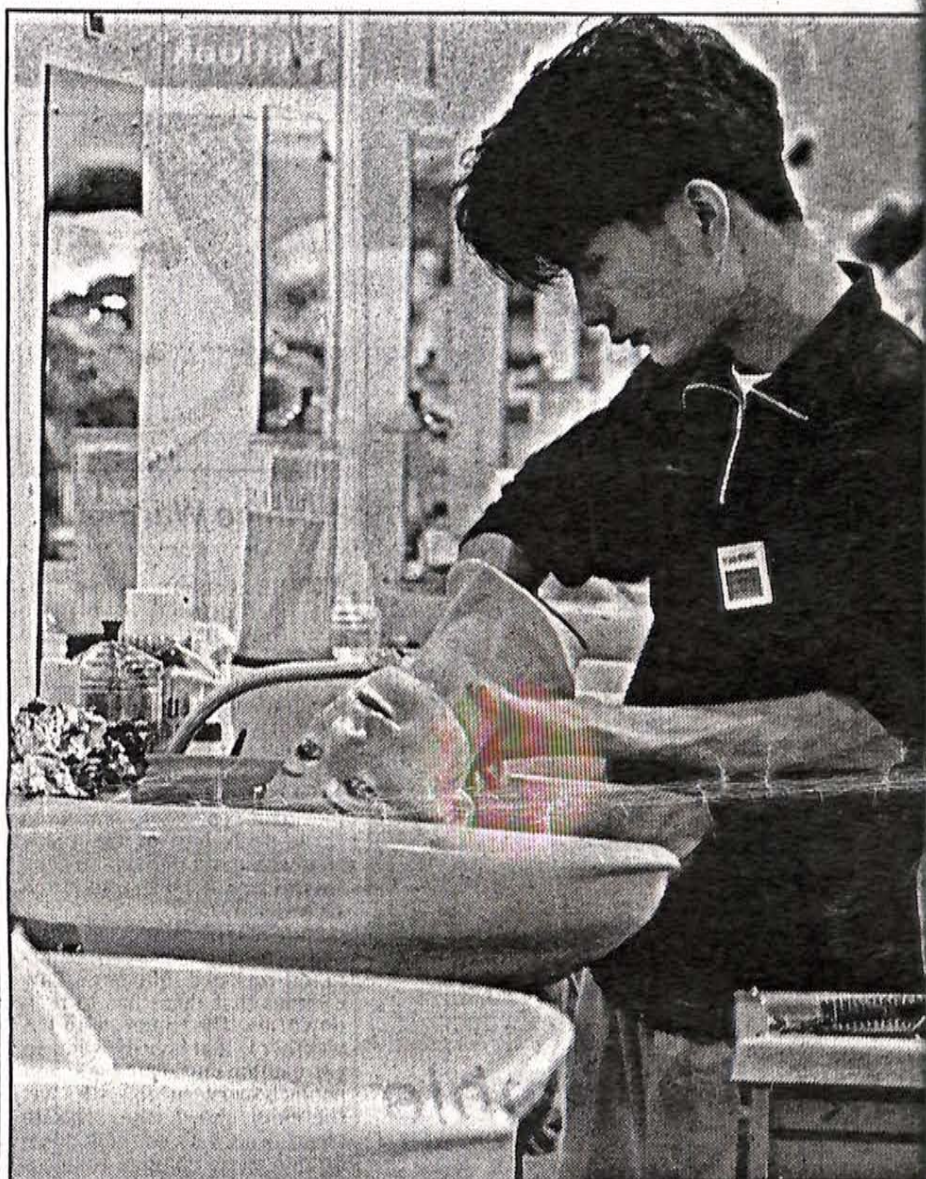
There is, at last, a section for computer-run tools but, he says, they have still not truly settled the assessment because the skills involved lie so much more in the computer programming than in the operation.

The trial contest in information technology holds two typically British bitter-sweet lessons. The contest depends on enterprising and thorough sponsorship work by an IT company, but that company is not a native one; it's the American giant IBM.

The programme IBM has devised provides a thorough test of computer literacy. The contestants have to combine word-processing skills with manipulation of graphics and spreadsheets. They also have to build their own databases and handle computer communications.

Whence arises Lesson Two. When he saw the requirements, Peter Neate of the City and Guilds examination team thought they would have to look to undergraduates and A-level students for team candidates.

He is delighted to be proved wrong. The UK team — all male, but competing against girls from Australia and New Zealand — has been chosen entirely from Itecs.



If you want to get ahead, get a skill: but could the Government do more? PHOTOGRAPH BY JIM HARRIS

Itecs are training centres in computer programming and electronic engineering which have rescued thousands of teenagers whose talents were overlooked at school.

The Government backed the idea in 1982 with a £50 million programme to provide 150 Itecs. The target was later raised to 200 but never achieved once the project was absorbed by the official Training Agency.

The agency's own research has produced awesome evidence of Itecs' effectiveness. On the highest level of computer

literacy, 35 per cent of Itecs were rated effective in a consultancy study — while none of the commercial training firms used by the Agency passed the test. And at basic levels the scores were 87 per cent against 7.

Yet funding is to drop. Itecs are supposed to become more commercial "in partnership with industry", which means, of course, that those in prosperous parts may thrive while inner-city Itecs (which the Government saw as an objective at the start) could struggle.

It may also mean that Itec

standards will fall, some could be forced firms' narrow needs in giving their students' dent, comprehensive reason for the U-turn: Itecs cost nearly much as routine training.

The Skill Olympics is a less questionable industrial partnership cost about £5 million and the bulk of that a year from 500 sponsors. Government has given £200,000.