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Skills Competitions as a Response to Teacher Burnout: Integrating Job Demands–Resources model, Self-Determination Theory, and Maslach's Burnout Framework

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Abstract: Burnout represents one of the most pressing challenges in contemporary work and learning environments shaped by a rapid technological change, performance pressures, and lifelong learning imperatives. While burnout researchers haves extensively examined corporate employees, healthcare professionals, and entrepreneurs (Shoman et al., 2021), vocational education and training (VET) teachers remain underrepresented, despite occupying hybrid professional roles bridging education, industry, and workforce development.

This article conducts a theoretical and conceptual analysis of skills competitions, particularly those embedded within the WorldSkills ecosystem, as a systemic intervention mitigating teacher burnout. Integrating Maslach's multidimensional burnout theory, the Self-Determination Theory (SDT), and the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) model, the paper proposes a framework that explains how competition-based learning environments transform occupational demands into developmental and motivational resources.

Drawing on the organisational logic of WorldSkillsoriented roles (e.g. Skills Expert, Skills Competition Coordinator) and assessment practices (Test Projects, Marking Schemes), the study argues that skills competitions enhance autonomy, competence, and relatedness, while simultaneously restoring professional meaning, recognition, and work engagement. Consequently, skills competitions function not merely as talent-development tools for learners, but also as system-level burnout-prevention mechanisms for educators within contemporary learning economies.

Introduction

Burnout has evolved from an individual psychological condition into a structural phenomenon embedded in the contemporary work and learning systems. The accelerated technological innovation, the continuous demands of reskilling, the digital transformation, and the increasingly blurred boundaries between work, learning, and personal life have fundamentally reshaped the professional experience (Demerouti et al., 2001; Maslach & Leiter, 1997; Bakker et al., 2023). In this context, burnout should be interpreted less as a personal fragility and more as a manifestation of a systemic imbalance between

Teachers operate within lifelong learning societies in which education increasingly mirrors labourmarket dynamics characterised by uncertainty, rapid innovation cycles, and heightened performance accountability (OECD, 2019; Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). VET teachers constitute a particularly exposed yet insufficiently researched professional group, positioned at the intersection of education, industry, and technological change (Cedefop, 2020).

Recent European evidence confirms that VET teachers face growing structural pressures. Findings from the Cedefop European Vocational Teacher Survey (EVTS) pilot indicate that only 9% of teachers believe their profession is socially valued, while just 13% consider their remuneration adequate relative to their responsibilities. Nearly half report taking on additional duties due to staff shortages, and more than one-third experience significant administrative overload (Psifidou et al., 2026). These organisational conditions translate directly into wellbeing outcomes: approximately 60% of VET teachers report physical exhaustion and sleep difficulties, while 42% frequently feel emotionally drained by their work (Psifidou et al., 2026). Such patterns point to a systemic wellbeing crisis rather than isolated individual experiences.

The risk of burnout among VET teachers is further intensified by technological acceleration. Teachers must continuously update their occupational competences, integrate digital tools, respond to sustainability transitions, and adapt to the emerging applications of artificial intelligence, while simultaneously supporting increasingly diverse learner populations. Around onethird of teachers report substantial needs for digital upskilling and uncertainty about the future role of teachers in technology-mediated education (Psifidou et al., 2026). These expanding expectations increase the cognitive and emotional strain while rarely being accompanied by a proportional institutional support or professional autonomy.

At the same time, VET teaching remains strongly purposedriven. Many educators continue to perceive their work as intellectually stimulating and professionally meaningful when opportunities for authentic professional development are available (Psifidou et al., 2026; Maslach & Leiter, 1997). This paradox suggests that burnout does not stem from a diminished motivation but from the progressive erosion of organisational conditions that enable a meaningful professional engagement.

VET teachers simultaneously teach formal curricula, mentor practical skills, collaborate with industry partners, and manage complex hybrid learning environments that bridge school and workplace contexts. These multifaceted expectations substantially increase the risk of burnout but also create space for innovative organisational responses that go beyond individual coping strategies (Demerouti et al., 2001). One such emerging

approach is the expansion of skills competitions, particularly those aligned with the WorldSkills model, which integrate education, industrydefined standards, and authentic performancebased assessment.

This article, therefore, investigates whether participation in skills competitions can serve as an organisational resource to support teacher wellbeing and mitigate burnout in contemporary VET systems.

Burnout in Contemporary Work and Learning Contexts. Theoretical concepts

Maslach's Multidimensional Burnout Theory

The concept of burnout, developed by Christina Maslach, is one of the most influential frameworks for understanding occupational well-being in contemporary professional environments. Burnout is conceptualised not as an individual weakness or temporary fatigue, but as a psychological response to chronic interpersonal and organisational stress embedded within work systems (Maslach, 1982b). In this perspective, burnout emerges from sustained exposure to demanding work environments rather than from personal inadequacy or lack of resilience.

Maslach and Leiter define burnout as a multidimensional syndrome comprising emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation (or cynicism), and a reduced sense of personal accomplishment, which develops gradually as a consequence of prolonged imbalance between te professional demands and the available psychological resources (Maslach & Leiter, 1997). Importantly, burnout is understood as a social phenomenon situated within organisational contexts, in which workplace relationships and structural conditions play a central role (Maslach, 1993).

Burnout in education, therefore, frequently arises from a paradoxical situation in which strong intrinsic motivation confronts structural constraints. Many teachers enter the profession driven by vocational commitment and a desire to support learners' development. However, organisational rigidity, bureaucratic expansion, and limited professional autonomy may gradually erode this initial sense of purpose, shifting motivation from internally driven engagement toward compliance-oriented performance (Maslach & Leiter, 1997).

The risk of burnout becomes particularly visible in vocational education and training contexts. VET teachers operate simultaneously according to the educational and industrial logics, requiring constant alignment between pedagogical practice and evolving labour market standards. Technological acceleration intensifies this challenge. New production

methods, digital tools, automated processes, and safety regulations demand continuous updates of technical competences, often at a pace that exceeds the capacity of institutional support mechanisms. Professional development frequently takes the form of fragmented training sessions focused on compliance or certification rather than experiential, practice-based learning embedded in authentic professional communities.

Consequently, vocational teachers may experience a growing discrepancy between the expectations placed upon them and the opportunities for meaningful competence development. The requirement to remain industry-relevant while fulfilling traditional teaching responsibilities increases cognitive load and professional uncertainty. Within Maslach's framework, such conditions simultaneously amplify emotional exhaustion, encourage psychological distancing, and weaken the perceived professional accomplishment. Understanding burnout through this multidimensional lens allows it to be interpreted not merely as an individual psychological state but as a systemic outcome of contemporary work and learning environments undergoing continuous transformation (Maslach, 1993; Maslach & Leiter, 1997).

The Job Demands–Resources (JDR) Model

The Job Demands–Resources (JD–R) model is a comprehensive framework explaining how organisational conditions influence well-being, motivation, and performance. Developed by Demerouti et al. (2001) and expanded by Bakker and Demerouti (2017), it conceptualises burnout as the outcome of interaction between job demands and job resources embedded in the work design rather than as an individual deficit. This systemic perspective aligns with Maslach's theory, which also situates burnout within organisational contexts (Maslach, 1993; Maslach & Leiter, 1997).

Job demands are the physical, cognitive, or emotional aspects of work that require sustained effort and entail psychological costs. Job resources include organisational, social, and professional factors that support goal achievement, learning, and resilience against stress (Demerouti et al., 2001). Maslach and Leiter's areas of job–person mismatch, workload, control, reward, community, fairness, and values closely correspond to resource dimensions, demonstrating conceptual complementarity.

The JD–R model distinguishes hindrance and challenge demands. Hindrance demands, such as bureaucracy or unclear expectations, drain energy without supporting development, accelerating exhaustion and disengagement. Challenge demands may enhance motivation and learning when sufficient resources are available (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). Burnout occurs when demands increase while resources decline, leading to a gradual depletion of energy that weakens engagement and professional efficacy.

These dynamics are particularly salient in the vocational education and training contexts. VET teachers operate within hybrid institutional environments that combine educational and labourmarket logics, requiring a constant alignment between pedagogical practice and evolving occupational standards. Rapid technological change necessitates a frequent curriculum revision and a continuous updating of vocational competences, often in close collaboration with employers, examination bodies, and sectoral organisations. At the same time, accountability mechanisms increasingly link educational performance to employability outcomes, positioning VET teachers as key actors responsible for learners' transitions into the labour market (Maslach & Leiter, 1997; Psifidou et al., 2026).

While professional expectations expand, organisational support structures do not always evolve at the same pace. Many vocational education systems intensify performance and accountability requirements without proportionally increasing teachers' autonomy, professional recognition, time for collaborative learning, or access to meaningful professional development. Under such conditions, job demands primarily function as hindrances rather than developmental challenges. The JD–R model predicts that when teachers lack access to adequate resources, even intrinsically meaningful vocational teaching may become exhausting, as sustained effort fails to generate experiences of mastery, progress, or professional fulfilment (Demerouti et al., 2001; Maslach, 1993).

From this perspective, burnout in vocational education is best understood as a structural issue of work design, not as a failure of individual resilience or commitment. This reframing invites closer examination of organisational practices that can transform demanding professional roles into motivating ones. Skills competitions constitute a particularly relevant case. By providing opportunities for professional autonomy, peer collaboration, exposure to innovation, and public recognition of vocational expertise, participation in skills competitions may introduce additional job resources into teachers' work environments. In JD–R terms, such practices have the potential to transform high demands into challenge demands, fostering engagement, learning, and professional vitality rather than exhaustion and withdrawal.

The SelfDetermination Theory and Burnout in Vocational Education

The Self-Determination Theory (SDT), developed by Deci and Ryan, explains how workplace environments influence motivation, well-being, and long-term engagement (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2017). SDT assumes that sustainable motivation depends on satisfying three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. When these needs are fulfilled, individuals experience intrinsic motivation

and professional satisfaction; when they are chronically frustrated, disengagement and burnout may emerge (Ryan & Deci, 2017; Vansteenkiste et al., 2020).

Autonomy refers to the experience of agency and professional self-direction. In highly regulated education systems, standardised procedures and administrative accountability can limit teachers' sense of ownership, shifting teaching toward compliance rather than creative practice (Deci et al., 2017; Maslach & Leiter, 1997). Competence involves feeling effective and professionally capable. For vocational teachers, rapidly changing technologies combined with fragmented professional development may erode confidence and increase the risk of burnout (Ryan & Deci, 2017; Psifidou et al., 2026). Relatedness concerns meaningful professional relationships. Limited collaboration, recognition, and weak links between education and industry may reduce the sense of belonging and social support, undermining motivation and well-being (Vansteenkiste et al., 2020; Maslach, 1993).

From the SDT perspective, burnout emerges not simply from workload intensity but from prolonged exposure to work environments that simultaneously undermine autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Skills competitions, particularly those organised within the WorldSkills framework, can create conditions that help restore these psychological resources. Participation enables teachers to exercise pedagogical independence, engage in authentic competence development aligned with industry practice, and become embedded in vibrant professional networks that recognise and value vocational expertise. Such contexts transform professional engagement into an intrinsically meaningful activity, supporting sustained motivation and psychological wellbeing rather than depletion and disengagement (Ryan & Deci, 2017; Bakker & Demerouti, 2017).

Skills Competitions as Learning and Work Environments

Contemporary skills competitions aligned with the WorldSkills format should not be understood as isolated events focused solely on performance ranking, but rather as complex socioeducational ecosystems that integrate learning, assessment, work simulation, and professional collaboration. As documented in the SkillsComp project materials (Erasmus+ programme, 2022), WorldSkillsbased competitions are structured around authentic occupational tasks (Test Projects), transparent and competencebased assessment systems (Marking Schemes), clearly defined professional roles (such as Skills Experts and Skills Competition Coordinators), systematic industry involvement, and iterative feedback and evaluation cycles that extend before, during, and after the

competition itself (Sieć Badawcza Łukasiewicz – ITEE et al., 2024a; Sieć Badawcza Łukasiewicz – ITEE et al., 2024b).

From a vocational education perspective, the pedagogical significance of this configuration lies in its alignment with the principles of authentic learning and competencebased assessment. Test Projects are explicitly designed as realistic simulations of workplace tasks that reflect professional standards, time constraints, safety requirements, and quality expectations derived from real occupational contexts. Assessment is not based on intuitive judgment but on structured Marking Schemes that combine objective measurement with calibrated judgment anchored in explicit performance descriptors. This architecture enables fairness, transparency, and comparability across competitors while simultaneously generating rich formative feedback that supports learning and reflection (Sieć Badawcza Łukasiewicz – ITEE et al., 2024e).

Teachers who prepare and deliver such competitions experience a marked transformation in their professional role. Within the SkillsComp framework, VET teachers are not merely instructors relaying curriculum content but mentors, coaches, assessors, and project leaders responsible for guiding learners through complex, high-stakes yet educationally meaningful tasks (Sieć Badawcza Łukasiewicz – ITEE et al., 2024c). As Skills Experts, teachers participate directly in the design of Test Projects, the construction of assessment criteria, and the calibration of judgment with peers. As trainers, they supervise competitor preparation, balancing technical skill development with emotional support and motivation. When they assess, they apply shared professional standards and ethical principles to ensure objectivity, fairness, and alignment with industry expectations (Sieć Badawcza Łukasiewicz – ITEE et al., 2024d).

This role configuration closely resembles what organisational research describes as highinvolvement work systems, typically associated with innovative and learningoriented organisations. Such systems are characterised by high levels of autonomy, shared decisionmaking, skill utilisation, feedback, and collective responsibility for quality outcomes (Boxall & Macky, 2014). In skills competitions, teachers exercise substantial professional autonomy in task design and instructional strategy, engage in collaborative decisionmaking with other Experts and Coordinators, and receive immediate, performancebased feedback through assessment outcomes and peer calibration processes. Unlike conventional school environments, where work is often fragmented and proceduralised, the competition environment integrates planning, execution, evaluation, and reflection into a coherent professional activity (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017).

For VET teachers, this integrated environment has important implications for motivation and wellbeing. As shown in the SkillsComp training modules, participation in competitions

provides opportunities for continuous learning, exposure to innovation, and direct engagement with industry standards that are often difficult to access within routine school structures (Sieć Badawcza Łukasiewicz – ITEE et al., 2024c; Sieć Badawcza Łukasiewicz – ITEE et al., 2024f). Professional competence is reinforced through handson engagement with uptodate technologies and assessment practices, while relatedness is strengthened through a sustained collaboration with peers, industry representatives, and international networks. Autonomy is supported by the discretionary space teachers have in shaping tasks, mentoring strategies, and assessment approaches, conditions known to foster intrinsic motivation and professional vitality (Ryan & Deci, 2017).

Crucially, skills competitions also function as structured boundary spaces between education and work. The involvement of employers and industry experts in task validation, assessment, and resource provision ensures that learning remains occupationally relevant and forwardlooking, even amid rapid technological change (Sieć Badawcza Łukasiewicz – ITEE et al., 2024a; Cedefop, 2020). According to the SkillsComp project results, this reduces the disconnect between curriculum requirements and labour-market realities for teachers, a welldocumented source of professional strain in VET systems. Rather than experiencing external demands as imposed accountability pressures, educators engage with industry expectations as shared professional challenges embedded within meaningful practice.

Viewed through this lens, the WorldSkillsaligned competitions reconfigure demanding professional tasks into cognitively and emotionally sustainable forms of engagement. The structured yet flexible design of competition environments transforms high job demands into challenge demands that stimulate rather than deplete learning, collaboration, and professional growth. As such, skills competitions can be conceptualised not only as pedagogical tools for students but as organisational resources that reshape teachers' work in ways consistent with preventive approaches to burnout grounded in the Job Demands–Resources and SelfDetermination frameworks.

Theoretical Integration: Skills Competitions as BurnoutPrevention Mechanisms

Reducing Emotional Exhaustion

Emotional exhaustion, the core component of burnout, emerges when sustained professional effort is not accompanied by psychological renewal or visible outcomes (Maslach, 1993). In education, repetitive teaching routines, administrative overload, and

weak feedback mechanisms often disconnect effort from meaningful results, making work feel endless and unrewarding (Maslach & Leiter, 1997).

The WorldSkills-aligned skills competitions introduce a different motivational structure. Preparation transforms routine teaching into goal-oriented, time-limited projects linked to clear performance standards and observable achievements, such as competitor results or assessment outcomes (Sieć Badawcza Łukasiewicz – ITEE et al., 2024e). This project logic provides rhythm, purpose, and closure, preventing effort from dissolving into a continuous workload.

Within the Job Demands–Resources framework, competitions convert hindrance demands into challenge demands (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). Activities such as coaching competitors, designing tasks, and collaborating with experts require high effort but are supported by autonomy, feedback, cooperation, and professional recognition. Research shows that competition environments strengthen control over teaching strategies, provide immediate feedback, and create shared responsibility among educators and industry partners (Sieć Badawcza Łukasiewicz – ITEE et al., 2024c).

Because competition cycles are intensive yet finite, they generate meaningful engagement rather than chronic pressure. Evaluation moments and reflection enable psychological closure and recovery. Thus, skills competitions function as protective professional experiences that realign effort with visible progress and shared meaning, helping interrupt the energy-depletion process underlying emotional exhaustion (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017).

Restoring Personal Accomplishment

Reduced personal accomplishment reflects a decline in teachers' belief that their work produces meaningful outcomes. In Maslach's framework, this dimension results less from workload than from limited feedback and weak links between effort and visible results (Maslach, 1993). In vocational education, the risk is high because teachers often receive delayed or unclear signals about the labour-market impact of their teaching.

The WorldSkills-aligned skills competitions reshape this dynamic by providing immediate and credible feedback. Unlike routine teaching, competitions generate clear evidence of effectiveness through learners' performance in authentic Test Projects assessed against transparent occupational standards (Sieć Badawcza Łukasiewicz – ITEE et al., 2024e). Teachers can directly observe how coaching and instruction translate into measurable competence.

Standardised marking schemes further strengthen professional efficacy by making assessment explicit, comparable, and collaboratively calibrated among Skills Experts (Sieć Badawcza Łukasiewicz – ITEE et al., 2024d). External recognition from peers and industry partners validates teaching quality beyond school structures, reinforcing professional identity and labour-market relevance (Sieć Badawcza Łukasiewicz – ITEE et al., 2024c).

Benchmarking against national and international standards situates teaching within a broader culture of excellence, restoring confidence and purpose. From the JD–R and Self-Determination Theory perspectives, feedback, recognition, and learning opportunities function as key job resources that rebuild competence, motivation, and professional pride, counteracting burnout-related loss of accomplishment (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Ryan & Deci, 2017).

Strengthening Autonomy

Autonomy, defined in the Self-Determination Theory as acting out of volition and with professional agency, is a key resource that supports motivation and resilience (Ryan & Deci, 2017). In highly standardised education systems, externally imposed curricula and procedural accountability often reduce teachers' autonomy to compliance, limiting professional judgment and increasing the risk of burnout when demands remain high (Maslach & Leiter, 1997).

The WorldSkills-aligned skills competitions reshape this dynamic by granting VET teachers real decision-making power. As Skills Experts, teachers co-design Test Projects reflecting authentic occupational practice, selecting tools, technologies, and workflows aligned with industry standards rather than rigid curricular prescriptions (Sieć Badawcza Łukasiewicz – ITEE et al., 2024e).

Autonomy is further strengthened through pedagogical choice. Teachers adapt training pathways, sequence tasks, and adjust instructional strategies to learner needs and performance feedback (Sieć Badawcza Łukasiewicz – ITEE et al., 2024c). This autonomy directly influences how professional expertise is applied. From a Job Demands–Resources perspective, expanded decision latitude functions as a key job resource, transforming demanding work into self-endorsed professional engagement (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). By restoring agency and creative practice, skills competitions enhance intrinsic motivation and support burnout prevention (Ryan & Deci, 2017).

Enhancing Competence through Meaningful Lifelong Learning

Competence satisfaction, the need to feel effective and capable, is a central element of the Self-Determination Theory and an important buffer against burnout (Ryan & Deci,

2017). In many education systems, professional development is mandatory yet weakly connected to everyday teaching practice, reducing its motivational value and impact on perceived competence.

The WorldSkills-aligned competitions create a different model of professional learning. Teachers continuously update skills in line with industry standards and emerging technologies, applying new knowledge directly while designing Test Projects, calibrating assessments, and preparing competitors for authentic tasks (Sieć Badawcza Łukasiewicz – ITEE et al., 2024d; 2024e). Learning is therefore purposeful, practice-based, and immediately relevant.

Competition learning is closely linked to action and feedback. Teachers observe outcomes through learner performance, assessment results, and peer collaboration, strengthening confidence and supporting internalisation of new competences (Sieć Badawcza Łukasiewicz – ITEE et al., 2024c). Recognition by peers and industry experts further validates expertise. From the Job Demands–Resources perspective, such learning opportunities function as key job resources that sustain engagement (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). By embedding lifelong learning into professional practice, skills competitions reinforce mastery, relevance, and continuous growth, counteracting burnout linked to stagnation.

Building Relatedness and Professional Community

Relatedness, defined in the Self-Determination Theory as the need to feel connected, respected, and valued within a professional community, is a key factor protecting against burnout (Ryan & Deci, 2017). In vocational education, teachers often experience professional isolation and limited sustained collaboration, which can lead to increased depersonalisation and emotional withdrawal.

The WorldSkills-based competitions create structured communities of practice that reduce this isolation. The ecosystem links VET teachers, Skills Experts, coordinators, industry representatives, and international peers. Joint engagement in task design, assessment calibration, and evaluation fosters shared responsibility, trust, and mutual learning (Sieć Badawcza Łukasiewicz – ITEE et al., 2024a; 2024f). This community is reinforced by formal standards and ethical frameworks, including the WorldSkills Code of Ethics and Conduct, which supports psychological safety and professional respect (Sieć Badawcza Łukasiewicz – ITEE et al., 2024d). These conditions enable open feedback and constructive exchange, strengthening professional identity.

From the Job Demands–Resources perspective, social support is a key resource that buffers against burnout under high demands (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). Competitions

embed this support structurally through regular collaboration, shared problem-solving, and reflection. For VET teachers, this restores a sense of belonging and counters cynicism by situating their work within a broader, meaningful professional community.

Skills Competitions as Organisational Innovation

From a systemic perspective, the WorldSkillsaligned skills competitions can be conceptualised as decentralised human resource development (HRD) structures embedded within educational systems rather than as peripheral pedagogical initiatives. They operate across institutional boundaries, mobilising teachers, learners, employers, and coordinators into temporary yet repeatable configurations that resemble innovationoriented organisational forms more commonly associated with industry than with schools.

In functional terms, skills competitions bear strong similarities to innovation laboratories and highperformance talent programmes. They provide protected spaces for experimentation, where educators design and test new instructional approaches, assessment methods, and technologysupported practices under conditions that reward initiative and learning rather than risk avoidance. The iterative development of Test Projects and Marking Schemes mirrors design thinking cycles found in innovative organisations, where prototypes are piloted, evaluated, and refined based on feedback and evidence rather than compliance with rigid rules (Sieć Badawcza Łukasiewicz – ITEE et al., 2024e).

Competitions also resemble entrepreneurial ecosystems in the way they assemble heterogeneous actors around shared value creation. VET teachers collaborate with industry partners, assessment experts, and coordinators to coproduce learning environments that reflect real occupational challenges. This collaboration redistributes expertise across the system, reducing the reliance on hierarchical control, and fostering the horizontal knowledge exchange. Rather than centralising professional development within formal training departments, skills competitions distribute learning and innovation throughout the system, enabling local adaptation while maintaining shared standards (Sieć Badawcza Łukasiewicz – ITEE et al., 2024a; Sieć Badawcza Łukasiewicz – ITEE et al., 2024f).

From an organisational wellbeing perspective, this structure aligns with contemporary approaches that emphasise redesigning work itself rather than treating burnout as an individual pathology requiring remedial intervention. In organisational psychology, burnout prevention increasingly focuses on creating resourcerich environments that combine autonomy, learning, feedback, and social support, thereby addressing the root causes of chronic strain (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Maslach & Leiter, 1997). Skills

competitions exemplify such environments by embedding these resources directly into core professional activity.

Rather than adding another responsibility to already overloaded teachers, competitions reorganise existing work into coherent projects with clear goals, meaningful standards, and collective ownership. In doing so, they shift the institutional logic from reactive stress management to proactive organisational design. Skills competitions thus function as structural innovations that recalibrate the relationships among effort, meaning, and reward in vocational education, offering a scalable alternative to individualised burnout-mitigation strategies that leave underlying work conditions unchanged.

Adult Education Perspective: Learning as a Protective Resource

Adult education research increasingly distinguishes between learning experienced as a demand and as a resource. When learning is imposed, bureaucratised, or disconnected from practitioners' real challenges, it becomes an additional burden that competes with existing workloads and contributes to stress rather than growth. Conversely, when learning is empowering, meaningful, socially recognised, and integrated into practice, it functions as a protective resource that strengthens professional identity and resilience (Ryan & Deci, 2017).

The WorldSkillsstyle skills competitions exemplify learning as a resource in this second, generative sense. Teachers do not engage in learning as passive recipients of prescribed content but as active participants in collaborative, masteryoriented processes. Learning occurs through joint problemsolving, task design, calibration of assessment, and reflection on performance, situating professional development within authentic contexts that matter to participants (Sieć Badawcza Łukasiewicz – ITEE et al., 2024c; Sieć Badawcza Łukasiewicz – ITEE et al., 2024e).

Crucially, competitions dissolve rigid hierarchical distinctions between teaching and learning roles. Teachers learn alongside students as they adapt to new technologies, emerging standards, and evolving occupational practices. This shared learning dynamic transforms traditional teacher–learner hierarchies into collaborative learning partnerships grounded in mutual engagement with expertise. Rather than undermining authority, this process strengthens professional identity by repositioning teachers as reflective practitioners and colearners in rapidly changing vocational fields.

From the SDT perspective, such learning environments simultaneously satisfy the needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Teachers exercise agency in directing their

learning trajectories, experience growth in competence through immediate application and feedback, and build relationships within professional communities that validate their expertise (Ryan & Deci, 2017). These conditions explain why competitionrelated learning is experienced as energising rather than exhausting, even when it requires substantial effort.

Within the JD–R framework, learning opportunities are among the most robust job resources for sustaining engagement and preventing burnout, particularly in professions facing constant change (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). Skills competitions institutionalise learning as part of everyday professional practice rather than as an external obligation, ensuring that development is continuous, relevant, and valued. Importantly, the social visibility and recognition attached to competition learning further enhance its protective function, counteracting the sense of invisibility that often characterises teachers' professional development efforts.

From an adult education perspective, skills competitions represent more than instructional events or assessment tools. They constitute learning infrastructures that support identityaffirming, socially embedded, and purposedriven learning across the lifespan. By transforming learning from a bureaucratic demand into a professionally meaningful resource, competitions reinforce resilience, sustain motivation, and contribute to longterm teacher wellbeing within vocational education systems.

An Integrated Conceptual Framework

Building on the preceding theoretical analyses, this article proposes an integrated conceptual framework in which the WorldSkillsaligned skills competitions serve as systemic mechanisms for preventing burnout in vocational education and training. The framework conceptualises competitions not as isolated interventions but as organisational environments that activate job resources, satisfy fundamental psychological needs, foster work engagement, and ultimately reduce the risk of burnout among educators.

At the core of the framework, we propose a causal sequence linking skills competitions to enhanced wellbeing outcomes. Participation in skills competitions increases access to critical job resources, including autonomy in task design, opportunities for meaningful professional learning, structured feedback, external recognition, and sustained social support. Within the Job Demands–Resources framework, these resources offset high job demands and shift professional effort from energydepleting hindrances toward motivating challenge demands (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). The model thus explains

how competitions do not merely add demands, but reorganise work in ways that make demanding activity sustainable and energising.

The SelfDetermination Theory provides the motivational mechanism through which these resources exert their protective effect. Skills competitions systematically satisfy the needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness by granting educators discretion over professional practice, offering credible evidence of effectiveness through assessment and benchmarking, and embedding teachers in communities of practice that value shared standards and ethical collaboration (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Need satisfaction transforms external demands into internally endorsed goals, fostering the intrinsic motivation and the longterm engagement rather than a controlled compliance.

Maslach's burnout framework explains the outcome level of this process. By restoring energy through meaningful challenge, competitions reduce emotional exhaustion. By generating a visible impact and recognition, they counteract the reduced personal accomplishment. By embedding teaching within collaborative professional communities, they mitigate depersonalisation and cynicism (Maslach, 1993; Maslach & Leiter, 1997). The integrated framework, therefore, demonstrates how skills competitions simultaneously intervene across all three burnout dimensions, a rare achievement for individuallevel coping or resilience programs.

Taken together, the framework positions skills competitions as organisationally embedded wellbeing infrastructures. They illustrate how burnout prevention can be achieved not by reducing professional standards or demands, but by redesigning work environments to activate resources, satisfy psychological needs, and reconnect educators with the meaning and social value of their work.

Implications

Implications for Educational Management

Intended for educational leaders and institutional managers, the model highlights the need to move beyond fragmented wellbeing initiatives toward structurally embedded solutions. Integrating competitionbased professional development into human resource and wellbeing strategies allows schools and training centres to align teacher engagement, innovation, and health objectives within a single framework. Rather than treating skills competitions as extracurricular or elite activities, educational management can recognise them as legitimate organisational tools for professional growth, knowledge renewal, and

retention. This shift requires redefining educators not solely as instructional deliverers, but as innovation professionals who design, assess, and continuously adapt learning environments in response to the evolving work realities.

Implications for Entrepreneurship and Innovation Ecosystems

From the perspective of entrepreneurship and innovation ecosystems, the findings reposition VET teachers as the central actors in talent development and the diffusion of innovation. By operating at the intersection of education and industry, educators involved in skills competitions translate emerging technologies and occupational standards into learning practices, functioning as innovation intermediaries rather than passive transmitters of skills. Supporting competitions, therefore, strengthens regional and national innovation capacity by reinforcing the human infrastructure that connects training systems with labourmarket transformation.

Implications for Adult Education and VET Policy

At the policy level, the analysis suggests reframing skills competitions within lifelong learning strategies as preventive well-being interventions rather than as optional, event-based add-ons. Embedding competitions into adult education and VET systems provides teachers with a continuous access to autonomysupportive learning, competence growth, and professional communities, addressing burnout risks at their structural roots. This perspective aligns with the contemporary policy shifts toward sustainable work, quality education, and human-centred innovation, positioning skills competitions as cost-effective, evidence-informed tools for strengthening both educator well-being and system performance.

Conclusion

The findings of this conceptual analysis reinforce a growing consensus in burnout research: sustainable wellbeing cannot be achieved through individual stress management alone but requires a structural redesign of professional environments. Traditional interventions focused on resilience training, coping with workload, or psychological selfcare often leave intact the organisational conditions that systematically generate emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and diminished professional efficacy. By contrast, the analysis presented in this article demonstrates that skills competitions, when embedded within vocational education systems, operate precisely at the level of work design where burnout dynamics are produced.

WorldSkillsaligned competition ecosystems illustrate that high work intensity is not inherently incompatible with wellbeing. Rather, intensity becomes sustainable when professionals experience autonomy over meaningful tasks, opportunities to develop and demonstrate competence, and a strong sense of belonging within a professional community. In the competition context, demanding activity is reconfigured as a purposeful effort, supported by clear standards, visible outcomes, and shared responsibility. This aligns with the organisational research showing that engagement emerges not from workload reduction per se, but from the availability of resources that enable individuals to meet challenges effectively (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017).

The integrated framework proposed in this article further contributes to burnout theory by demonstrating how Maslach's experiential dimensions, the SelfDetermination Theory's motivational mechanisms, and the Job Demands–Resources model's structural logic can be combined into a coherent explanatory framework. Skills competitions provide a rare empirical setting in which these theories converge in practice: resources activate motivation, motivation sustains engagement, and engagement prevents burnout across all three dimensions. This convergence strengthens the argument that burnout is best understood as a relational and systemic phenomenon rather than as an individual deficit.

Importantly, while the analysis focuses on vocational education, the implications extend beyond the educational sector. Many knowledgeintensive professions, including healthcare, engineering, information technology, and creative industries, face similar pressures of rapid technological change, continuous upskilling, and escalating performance expectations. The competition-based model of work redesign outlined here suggests that project-based, standards-anchored, community-embedded professional activity may represent a transferable organisational strategy for sustaining engagement and well-being across sectors characterised by continuous adaptation.

Burnout in contemporary work environments reflects deep systemic tensions between escalating demands and insufficient developmental resources. When professionals are required to adapt continuously without autonomy, recognition, or meaningful learning opportunities, burnout becomes a predictable outcome rather than an individual failure. This article has argued that the WorldSkills-aligned skills competitions offer a novel, theoretically grounded response to this challenge within vocational education and training.

By transforming professional activity into a meaningful, collaborative, and masteryoriented practice, skills competitions activate key job resources that sustain energy, competence, and social connection. Through mechanisms articulated by Maslach's burnout theory, the Self-Determination Theory, and the Job Demands–Resources model, competition

ecosystems emerge as powerful infrastructures for long-term engagement rather than as short-term motivational events. They demonstrate how demanding work can be redesigned to support resilience without lowering standards or intensifying surveillance.

Beyond their immediate pedagogical benefits, skills competitions represent an under-recognised form of organisational innovation, integrating learning, assessment, professional development, and wellbeing into a coherent system. For educators navigating rapid technological and occupational change, such environments restore a sense of agency, professional pride, and collective purpose, essential for sustainable careers.

Future empirical research should test the proposed conceptual model across diverse educational systems, using longitudinal and mixedmethod designs to examine causal pathways between competition participation, need satisfaction, engagement, and burnout outcomes. Further studies could also explore the applicability of this framework in other occupational contexts, assessing whether competitioninspired work designs can similarly support resilience in knowledgeintensive professions beyond education.

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