

## Irish trainees go for gold at 'Olympics for apprentices'

*Dennis Kennedy*

*Last Updated: Wednesday, October 11, 2017, 01:00*

Beauty therapist Ciara Daly (19) is used to providing treatments for clients in quiet and tranquil settings.

Later this week, she will be transported to a cavernous events hall in Abu Dhabi, in the United Arab Emirates, where she will have to show off her skills in front of thousands of spectators, dozens of competitors and several eagle-eyed judges.

She is one of a team of 14 under-25s – including cabinet-makers, tool-makers, plumbers and aircraft technicians – taking part in the “Olympics for apprentices” this week.

Ciara Daly, who will represent Ireland in the beauty therapy section in WorldSkills, holding up her official Ireland badge. Photograph: Maxwellphotography.ie

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The Irish team has an impressive track record in the WorldSkills event. The team finished 11th out of 55 countries when it was last held in Brazil two years ago. There are expectations the team can do even better this time around. No pressure, then.

“To be honest, I’m pretty nervous,” says Daly, from [Listowel](#). “It has involved a lot of preparation, learning a lot of new things, new techniques. To have thousands of people around and judges staring at you . . . the whole experience is going to be nerve-wracking.”

Daly has been practising night and day for the past 12 weeks under the guidance of her trainer Tara O’Halloran at the Kerry Education and Training Board (ETB) training centre.

“My job is to make sure we represent the country and beauty therapy, to show how amazing we are and that we can compete on the world stage,” says O’Halloran.

### **Demonstrating quality**

For the education sector, the competition is also an important marker in demonstrating the quality of the further education and training sector.

While Ireland has one of the highest proportions of young people in the world going to third level education, there has been a status problem with traineeships and apprenticeships.

Some educationalists have claimed there is a misplaced “snobbery” among parents and school-leavers who are focused on third-level at all costs.

This is in contrast to countries such as Germany, where a majority of school-leavers progress into a highly rated apprenticeships.

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Paul O'Toole, chief executive of [Solas](#), the umbrella body for the further education sector, says the sector is building up its reputation over time and hopes another good performance in WorldSkills will help.

"We're doing very well in punching well above our weight. This is a highly, highly competitive arena," says O'Toole.

"They are up against the best of the best, with far greater resources than Ireland. We have stood up incredibly well in the past."

He says the quality of traineeships here is excellent, with new data to be published soon showing how courses are significantly boosting learners' job prospects.

O'Halloran, for example, says the students who graduate from her beauty therapy traineeship course have a 100 per cent employment rate.

"I'm here 10 years and we have 16 trainees each year. We had more than 120 applicants for those positions last year. They develop their skills, they get employment. Many become managers in some of the best hotels and want to hire directly from here," she says.

#### **Hands-on environment**

Students who may have struggled in school go on to blossom in a hands-on learning environment, she says.

In the meantime, all her focus has been on this week's competition. Every treatment has been tried countless times and every technique carefully honed.

O'Halloran has even tried to mimic conditions at the large events centre by getting Daly to practise in front of dozens of students at the training centre in Kerry.

"I've seen her come in as a girl who finished school, who was unsure of her pathway. Now she's blossomed and has become a national champion. She's already won a medal at an international competition in China, and now she has a great chance to show her talent."

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