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September 18, 2009

Richard Walker, President and CEO  
WorldSkills Calgary 2009  
Colonel Walker Building - 2nd Floor  
1301-16 Avenue NW  
Calgary, Alberta T2M 0L4

Dear Mr. Richard Walker:

Immigrant Sector Council of Calgary (ISCC) is a unique community infrastructure consisting of representatives from Calgary's immigrant-serving agencies, government, funders, public institutions and ethno-cultural communities. Our mission is to provide leadership and resources to influence public attitudes and knowledge and support capacity of service providers in the immigrant sector. Immigrant Sector Council of Calgary submits this letter in light of the regrettable occurrences during WorldSkills 2009 in Calgary, AB. Two 15 year-old girls volunteered to act as make-up models, but were turned down. They were told their physical attributes did not meet the criteria being sought: fair-skin, blue eyes and blonde hair.

We understand that the harm caused by this occurrence was likely unintended. As a body concerned with the impacts of policies, practices and behaviours, we would like to contextualize the negative public response you have received from concerned citizens and why it is important for WorldSkills to reflect on this experience.

The mainstream modeling industry has historically idealized the above listed qualities, while models of darker tones have struggled to be recognized as beautiful. In fact, in North America, it was not until 1974 when the first black-model made the front cover of a mainstream fashion magazine. While the industry has made significant strides with respect to valuing diverse forms of beauty, images of thin, blonde, blue-eyed and fair-skinned women are primarily featured in magazines and corporate advertising, on billboards and television. These images bombard impressionable young women with notions of 'what' and 'who' is considered worthy of such attention. Department stores and drug stores carrying bleaching creams, coloured contacts, and hair dyes speak to the demand for products that will help women achieve idealized beauty and to how deeply these messages perforate our society. The developmental impact on young women is real and, sadly, associated with high rates of low self-confidence, depression, and eating disorders.

Hence, while your participant criteria may have seemed harmless, excluding volunteer models whose physical attributes have been historically under-valued, dismissed, and often, derided, did not go unnoticed. While modeling agencies and the like seem to get away with these kinds of practices, the public holds higher standards for a respected international event focused on skill and achievement.

We recommend that WorldSkills consider the underlying messaging that might accompany criteria set for participants. We must remember that we do not live in a world where inclusion/exclusion is devoid of politics and a social history that continues to impact human lives, and society as a whole.

Finally, we would like to inquire - what has been your learning experience as a result of the public response you have received regarding this issue? Do you have plans to improve your organization's skill in cultural competency? If so, we would like to help. For example, we would be happy to provide you with a multitude of resources that explain how to succeed at living in a diverse world. We look forward to hearing from you!

Sincerely,



Beba Svigir  
Co-Chair



Djaka Blais-Amare  
Co-Chair

Cc. David Hoey, CEO, WorldSkills International  
Maureen O'Hara-Leman, Volunteer Director, WorldSkills Calgary 2009