

I first started the WorldSkills UK (<https://www.worldskillsuk.org/>) international training and development programme in 2013, winning the silver medal in Visual Merchandising at EuroSkills Lille 2014. It was an amazing experience to be named one of the top visual merchandisers in Europe, and I learnt so much from the experience. But straight after that competition, I was back training with my expert, Julianne Lavery, a lecturer at the Istituto Marangoni, focusing on WorldSkills São Paulo 2015.

Narrowly missing out on a place in Team UK for that competition, I had a decision to make. I could re-join the training programme for WorldSkills Abu Dhabi 2017 (<https://worldskillsabudhabi2017.com/en/>) or walk away from everything I had been training so hard for. There was no short-cut, no guarantee that I would make Team UK this year.

WorldSkills training

Training for the WorldSkills Competition is tough. As a team, (<https://www.tes.com/news/further-education/breaking-news/members-worldskills-team-uk-unveiled>) we have collectively put in around 71,000 hours with our experts, on top of our day jobs. I've missed family weddings, 21st birthday parties and holidays to attend sessions with Julianne, but that is what it takes to be a world champion.

Knowing I could be among the best visual merchandisers in the world and having the support of my employer, TopShop, to carry on, I knew I had to continue with WorldSkills UK. And Julianne is a hard woman to say no to. If it wasn't for her support and total commitment to the competition, I wouldn't be where I am today. I can't thank her enough.

It still slightly confuses my family and friends when I tell them I'm flying to the United Arab Emirates for a competition which will involve more than 1,000 of the world's most talented young people compete for gold, silver and bronze medals in their chosen skill. I describe it as the "Olympics for Skills" and they are starting to understand what it will be like. However, my old tutor at Windsor College, from where three previous visual merchandise students have competed at WorldSkills, and my manager at TopShop, Ellie Ridley, hugely value the competition training run by WorldSkills UK. Ellie has seen my skills and abilities develop – and how I use my competition training at work. She has also been great at letting me have time off at short notice to attend training sessions.

Making friends

The technical work is a huge part of my training. I attend sessions at the London College of Fashion, where I cover everything from Photoshop design with renowned digital artist Doug McCarthy to sourcing fabrics. I have even attended training with Peter Walters, from Stoke-on-Trent College, who is the expert for painting and decorating. He has taught me different painting techniques that I will use in my designs. That's one of the reasons I love the competitions: you get to make friends across many different skills that you usually wouldn't get a chance to interact with.

In Abu Dhabi, I know my competition task will involve creating a unique window installation in 22 hours. I will have to produce and will be judged on drawings, plans and research developing a suitable theme. The catch? I won't know the full brief until the first day of competition.

I knew that that the technical training would be a huge part of the development programme, but I didn't realise how important the mindset training would be. This has been key to my development. We follow the same programme as Team GB. We have been taught about eating the right foods, which will allow us to compete for eight hours a day in the heat of Abu Dhabi, how to sleep properly – yes, that's a thing – and techniques on how to get back on track if things aren't going to plan.

I won't lie: I am a little nervous. But I know when I step out in front of more than 100,000 visitors, my teammates will have my back, we will all be supporting each other. Together we will show just how talented we are in the UK.

Catherine Abbott will represent Team UK in visual merchandising at WorldSkills in Abu Dhabi. She was talking to Julia Belgutay

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