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SUPPLEMENT**

Celebrating TEAM UK

Well done for your performance
at WorldSkills Shanghai.

Your talent has inspired a nation.

Your skill, hard work and determination
are an incredible achievement,
and an inspiration to everyone
following in your footsteps.

Congratulations
from all of us at AQA.



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FE WEEK

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*FE Week is published by
EducationScape Ltd.*EducationScape
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*EducationScape Ltd. registered in
England and Wales. No. 7423341.
VAT Number: 103586724
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Shane Chowen



Welcome

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Welcome to our special edition supplement marking Team UK's fantastic performance at WorldSkills Shanghai 2026.

As media partner, it has been a joy to have followed the journeys of our tenacious 28 from their initial selection to Team UK, competing in EuroSkills and then finally in Shanghai for WorldSkills.

We do it because Team UK represent everything about further education and skills that gets us excited. Each competitor is passionate about their craft, and their drive to be the best gives us a formidable counterbalance to a national discourse about young people that is negative, lazy and tired.

Practical, technical and vocational education is once again in the national spotlight and with it a renewed focus on high standards. This is welcome. But what these pages tell us is that we are not starting from scratch. WorldSkills UK, through competitions and its wider programmes, knows what excellence looks like and what it takes to get there.

Congratulations to all 28 competitors, and thank you to the training managers, experts, colleges, training providers, employers and families who got them to Shanghai. Your results are the best reply to anyone who talks young people and vocational education down.

WorldSkills and AQA – our common purpose

ANNA TRETHEWEY
CHIEF STRATEGY AND
VOCATIONAL OFFICER, AQA

What a week we had in Shanghai! I was delighted to have been involved and surrounded by so many inspiring individuals. I was told that the scale would be immense and it didn't disappoint.

Years of hard work, grit and determination went into getting there. Young people full of talent, the best in the world at what they do, travelled across the country, from places like Accrington, Ashby-de-la-Zouch and Biggleswade, to form Team UK. The level of dedication – and national pride – was wonderful to see. I'm full of admiration for the talent and levels of commitment and ability I saw.

The opening ceremony was absolutely out of this world. Not only was it a fantastic opportunity to cheer on Team UK along with the other 67 countries taking part, but it was great to see the prominence the skills agenda has in China. Chinese Premier Li Qiang attended to officially open the ceremony, and the show – including a slightly terrifying part where robots danced with humans – showed the art of the possible when investment is prioritised in skills.

I'd like to congratulate all of Team UK – Shelby, Madeleine and Elyot, to name just three of them – for showcasing their skills in painting and decorating, renewable energy and aircraft maintenance, in one of the most economically dynamic cities in the world.

I also appreciated our approach to which categories we enter – picking areas where we know there

are skills shortages and the need for economic growth, like in bricklaying, where our first entrant in ten years, Joe, created some really impressive work. Overall, I was delighted to see the best Team UK medals tally in a decade: two gold medals, one silver, three bronze, and 13 medals for excellence, something we should be incredibly proud of.

Skills Olympics

That's why WorldSkills really matters, because excellence deserves to be celebrated and recognised. The Skills Olympics, as it's been dubbed, is a fantastic opportunity to highlight the sheer diversity and dynamism of this sector.

As Ben Blackledge, WorldSkills UK chief executive, has said, if we are serious about tackling the NEET (not in education, employment or training) challenge then we need to get more young people ready for work. Competitions such as WorldSkills really help with engagement and work-readiness and helps put vocational training on the map.

The wider emphasis on skills matters too: there's also a strong emphasis on how well competitors present and speak about their work, something incredibly important when it comes to thriving in the workplace. This was very evident from the tour we had from Jason and Lewis, previous competitors and now Skills Ambassadors. They spoke with pride about the impact WorldSkills has had on them and other competitors.

This competition also brought together young people, college and training providers, governments and employers. Opportunities to come together and

celebrate the power of vocational skills, learn from one another and compare notes are rare, and WorldSkills week was a powerful reminder of what it matters.

In England, there is a growing focus on strengthening vocational and technical education, and rightly so.

Events like WorldSkills play an important role in showcasing and celebrating the breadth of opportunities available. But raising awareness is only part of the answer. We also need to provide young people with more pathways that feel accessible to them. The examples, inspiration and talent on display at WorldSkills helped bring those possibilities to life and encouraged more learners to see vocational education as a route to a bright future.

At AQA, we're championing the need to better prepare young people for the world of work regardless of the pathway they choose to follow, and that's why I was delighted to have been there in Shanghai, playing my part. Shanghai also has significance for AQA. Our vocational awarding organisation, TQUK, is the only UK vocational awarding organisation to gain recognition in Shanghai, so to visit and see first-hand the impact our vocational assessments are having internationally was a real privilege.

Open doors

Back in August, we saw lots of coverage about the hundreds of thousands of young people who were awarded GCSE and A Level grades. Quite right too. These are life-changing qualifications that open doors for young people to go on to further study, a job or an apprenticeship.

At the same time, many young people were celebrated for achievements in technical and vocational qualifications, but there's more we can all be doing to highlight this. Awareness is improving, but events like WorldSkills lead the way in championing, celebrating and showcasing the power of technical and vocational education. Bring on WorldSkills 2028!



Anna Trethewey

Countdown to gold: my Shanghai diary

Senior reporter Anviksha Patel spent a week on the competition floor with Team UK's 28 competitors. These are the moments, the nerves and the conversations that stood out

Tuesday 22 September: The parade

Team UK's 28 competitors walked into the Shanghai World Expo Cultural Centre tonight behind flagbearer Elyot Harmston. The aircraft maintenance competitor had told us the team was feeling "positive about the coming days".

More than 1,400 competitors from 68 countries and regions are here, across 64 skills from bricklaying to cyber security. Li Qiang, premier of China's State Council, declared the 48th WorldSkills competition open. A message from President Xi Jinping was read out by state councillor Shen Yiqin, and organisers billed one ceremony performance the world's first dance between humans and humanoid robots. Incredible.

I spotted UK skills minister Jacqui Smith and Department for Education permanent secretary Susan Acland-Hood in the opening ceremony audience on their feet as Team UK passed during the parade of nations.

At WorldSkills Lyon two years ago,



Mechatronics competitor Liz Hopkinson

Team UK came home with two silvers, two bronze and 12 medals for excellence. That's the benchmark for the week.

Wednesday 23 September: Day one

Ruth Douglas, the chemical laboratory technician from Northern Ireland, was still buzzing from the parade when I caught her this morning. She called it "surreal". "I'm quite a reserved person, I'm not really into big events, but honestly I loved every second of it."

Her first test was a four-hour task on an auto-titrator. "I'm used to doing manual titration. It was a challenge using that equipment and getting it to do what I wanted it to do."

I spotted skills minister Jacqui Smith on her feet at the opening ceremony when Team UK passed

In refrigeration and air conditioning, Sam Jones from Wigan installed and commissioned an air-to-water heat pump. His training has mostly been on air-to-air systems. The set-up, he said, felt like "something you see on TV".

Robot systems integration pair Peter Jenkins and Pratham Lohia have trained together for just six months. Their trainer Jason Scott, a former competitor, was candid: "After this morning, it was absolute panic, but now they'll hit the flow state; they'll hit the rhythm of this competition."

His advice for the final presentation

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CNC Milling competitor Tomas Ankers

was to keep it "concise and eloquent". The week, he said, would be "a lifelong memory that they will never forget".

Thursday 24 September: Day two

Today was about the clock. Tomas Ankers from Wrexham spent four hours machining tugboat parts in CNC milling. He already holds a medal for excellence from EuroSkills Herring. He tells me his method: "Focus on the next five minutes, which blocks out the distractions."

In milling, he explained, "you can't come back and fix anything, so it's important to just ahead to the next step".

Elyot Harmston, our flagbearer, worked through one of five aircraft maintenance modules with a stopwatch at his side. "Everything is really tight on time and you have to go flat out the entire time," he said. "I've been sweating a lot." Structural sheet metal repairs are still to come.

Once their tools were down, both took a walk around the competition floor. Harmston made a

beeline for the bakery and cooking demonstrations.

Ankers will find out on Sunday whether his five-minute method can turn his Herning medal for excellence into something more.



Friday 25 September: Day three

China's mid-autumn festival started today, which brought big crowds to the competition and exhibition floors.

Neve Dunn from South Shields is the UK's first international beauty therapy competitor since Rebecca West won gold in WorldSkills Kazan in 2019. Treatments on paid models, including full-body, facial and pedicure work, carry 55 per cent of the marks. Judges score communication and hygiene, not whether the client enjoyed it.

"I feel like the training can prepare you as much as possible, but it's not until you actually get here that you realise how big it is," she told me.

Today was nails. Tomorrow is fantasy make-up and nails, with a theme handed over on the spot. Dunn has a hunch. "I've done a lot of Chinese-themed make-up, a lot of reds and golds, so I can make it big for the make-up show. Hopefully being in Shanghai it will be something related to that."

In health and social care, Keele University physiotherapy student Grace Longden has treated volunteer patients presenting with



Health and Social Care
competitor Grace Longden



Cabinet Making competitor Stanley Mackintosh

diabetes, tuberculosis, alcohol-related issues and end-of-life needs across three modules in two days.

"I think about how the patient must be feeling if this was a real situation and then empathise with them. We get a lot of marks for that so it's a part of our skills."



Saturday 26 September: The final countdown

Officials, families and FE Week reporters raced across Shanghai's National Exhibition and Convention Centre to catch the final 10-second countdowns in Team UK's 25 competitions. DfE's Hannah Sheehan, WorldSkills UK chair Marion Plant and AELP chair Nicki Hay were among them.

Cabinet maker Stan Mackintosh revealed he had finished with time to spare. "I was sort of pretending a little bit to keep busy ... I just spent 10 minutes looking over everything."

Painter and decorator Shelby Fitzakerly was emotional. "It was hard but you have got to stay calm ... I've loved every minute. I can't believe it's over."

Bricklayer Joe Shingler is the UK's first competitor in his skill since 2017. "I'm overwhelmed to be honest... To try and put the UK back on the map... is fantastic."

Plumber Andrew McCann thanked

his support network and was modest about his chances: "I think I'll do relatively well."



Sunday 27 September: Results day

Team UK leaves Shanghai with 19 medals: two golds, one silver, three bronzes and 13 medals for excellence. Its 30 medal points put it eighth on average medal points out of 68 countries, and is the UK's best score since Abu Dhabi in 2017.

Ruth Douglas, who told me on day one she wasn't into big events, took gold. So did Sam Jones, on his air-to-water heat pump. Flagbearer Elyot Harmston won silver after four flat-out days with his stopwatch.

Neve Dunn took bronze in beauty therapy, alongside Oisín McKerr in car painting and Oliver Coombs in additive manufacturing. Tomas Ankers and Andrew McCann both earned medals for excellence. McCann did, it turned out, do relatively well.

"Each team member put in phenomenal effort over three years of competing and evolving their skills," said WorldSkills UK chief executive Ben Blackledge. Jacqui Smith said she "couldn't be prouder of Team UK".

The flag now passes to Aichi, Japan, for WorldSkills 2028.



As Team UK's media partner, *FE Week* went behind the scenes for four episodes of *FE Week on Location*. We spoke to competitors, their parents and their trainers on the competition floor, and to the skills minister and sector leaders about what the UK can learn from the world's best. Scan the QR codes to watch every episode on YouTube.

EPISODE 1

Shanghai's shining opening ceremony and competitions begin

What does a skills minister do at WorldSkills? Jacqui Smith tells Shane Chownen what she has learned about technical education systems on her visit to China, and Anviksha Patel catches up with Team UK's refrigeration and air conditioning competitor Sam Jones and chemical laboratory technology competitor Ruth Douglas.



EPISODE 2

Laser focus, momentum and energy

What is a technical delegate? What does it take to raise a skills champion? Team UK update us on their progress, and Shane Chownen speaks to the UK's technical delegate Parisa Shirazi and bumps into a competitor's parents.

EPISODE 3

Insights from the competition floor

The *FE Week* team speak to competitors, teachers and experts on the competition floor, and Shane Chownen interviews WorldSkills UK chief executive Ben Blackledge and AQA's chief vocational and strategy officer Anna Trethewey.



EPISODE 4

The final countdown

A bumper final episode as the team captures the thrilling and emotional conclusion of the competition. We hear from a small business about how it benefits from supporting its employee through EuroSkills, plus guest appearances from AQA's head of strategic innovation Natasha Armstrong and WorldSkills Düsseldorf president Michael Hafner.

PICTURE HIGHLIGHTS



Team UK



Peter Jenkins and Stuart Lyons



Opening ceremony



Linzi Weare, Hairdressing training manager



Team UK meeting UK skills minister Jacqui Smith



Ruth Douglas



Finn Gallagher and Pratham Lohia





Elyot Harmston



Liz Hopkinson



Katie Sime

PICTURE HIGHLIGHTS





Gold medallist and Best of Nation recipient Samuel Jones



Gold medallist Ruth Douglas



Bronze medallist Oliver Coombs



Medal for Excellence recipient Patrick Sheerin



Medal for Excellence recipient Shelby Fitzakerly



Medal for Excellence recipient Logan Cook

MEET TEAM UK

**MEDAL FOR EXCELLENCE**

Competition:
3D Digital Game Art

Name:
Logan Cook

Organisation:
**Coleg Gwent
(Training Provider)**

**BRONZE MEDAL**

Competition:
**Additive
Manufacturing**

Name:
Oliver Coombs

Organisation:
**Bath College
(Training Provider)
BIMTek (Employer)**

**SILVER MEDAL**

Competition:
**Aircraft
Maintenance**

Name:
Elyot Harmston

Organisation:
**The Shuttleworth
Collection
(Employer)**

**MEDAL FOR EXCELLENCE**

Competition:
Autobody Repair

Name:
Joe Wilton

Organisation:
**Riverpark Training
(Training Provider)
SDM Paintwork
(Employer)**

**BRONZE MEDAL**

Competition:
Beauty Therapy

Name:
Neve Dunn

Organisation:
**Tyne Coast College
(Training Provider)
Crown Hair & Beauty
(Employer)**

**MEDAL FOR EXCELLENCE**

Competition:
Bricklaying

Name:
Joseph Shingler

Organisation:
**Shrewsbury College
(Training Provider)
The Shingler Group
(Employer)**

**MEDAL FOR EXCELLENCE**

Competition:
Cabinet Making

Name:
Stanley Mackintosh

Organisation:
**Rycotewood College
(Training Provider)
Bill Cleyndert
& Company
(Employer)**

**BRONZE MEDAL**

Competition:
Car Painting

Name:
Oisín McKerr

Organisation:
**Southern Regional
College (Training
Provider)
Porters Body Shop
(Employer)**

**GOLD MEDAL**

Competition:
**Chemical Laboratory
Technician**

Name:
Ruth Douglas

Organisation:
**Southern Regional
College (Training
Provider)
Almac (Employer)**

**MEDAL FOR EXCELLENCE**

Competition:
CNC Milling

Name:
Tomas Ankers

Organisation:
**Coleg Cambria
(Training Provider)
Electroimpact
(Employer)**

MEDAL FOR EXCELLENCE

Competition:
Electrical Installation

Name:
Jonathan Gough

Organisation:
Southern Regional College (Training Provider)
Self-Employed

MEDAL FOR EXCELLENCE

Competition:
Hairdressing

Name:
Katie Sime

Organisation:
Reds Hair Company (Training Provider and Employer)

MEDAL FOR EXCELLENCE

Competition:
Health and Social Care

Name:
Grace Longden

Organisation:
Macclesfield College (Training Provider)
Keele University (Training Provider)



Competition:
Industry 4.0

Name:
Caolan McCartan

Organisation:
Southern Regional College (Training Provider)

MEDAL FOR EXCELLENCE

Competition:
Industry 4.0

Name:
Patrick Sheerin

Organisation:
Southern Regional College (Training Provider)
A J Power (Employer)

MEDAL FOR EXCELLENCE

Competition:
IT Network Systems Administration

Name:
Charlie Priestley

Organisation:
North East Scotland College (Training Provider and Employer)
Robert Gordon University (Training Provider)



Competition:
Joinery

Name:
Jamie Matthews

Organisation:
Northern Regional College (Training Provider)
Mivan (Employer)



Competition:
Mechanical Engineering CAD

Name:
Stuart Lyons

Organisation:
New College Lanarkshire (Training Provider and Employer)

MEDAL FOR EXCELLENCE

Competition:
Mechatronics

Name:
Emily Bettridge

Organisation:
Toyota Manufacturing UK (Training Provider and Employer)

MEDAL FOR EXCELLENCE

Competition:
Mechatronics

Name:
Liz Hopkinson

Organisation:
Toyota Manufacturing UK (Training Provider and Employer)

MEDAL FOR EXCELLENCE

Competition:
Painting and Decorating

Name:
Shelby Fitzakerly

Organisation:
Accrington and Rossendale College (Training Provider)
SPAIN Building and Maintenance (Employer)

MEDAL FOR EXCELLENCE

Competition:
Plumbing and Heating

Name:
Andrew McCann

Organisation:
South West College (Training Provider and Employer)
AMC Plumbing and Heating Services (Employer)

BEST OF NATION**GOLD MEDAL**

Competition:
Refrigeration & Air Conditioning

Name:
Samuel Jones

Organisation:
PRTC Burnley (Training Provider)
Industrial Cooling Equipment Ltd (Employer)

MEDAL FOR EXCELLENCE

Competition:
Renewable Energy

Name:
Madeleine Warburton

Organisation:
Grwp Coleg Menai (Training Provider)
RWE (Employer)



Competition:
Restaurant Services

Name:
Yulia Batrak

Organisation:
Grwp Llandrillo Menai (Training Provider)
St George's Hotel, Llandudno

MEDAL FOR EXCELLENCE

Competition:
Robot Systems Integration

Name:
Peter Jenkins

Organisation:
Coleg Menai (Training Provider)
Science and Technology Facilities Council (STFC) (Employer)



Competition:
Robot Systems Integration

Name:
Pratham Lohia

Organisation:
Middlesex University



Competition:
Web Technologies

Name:
Finn Gallagher

Organisation:
Cardiff University

MEDAL POINT COUNT

Position	Member	Average Medal Points	Number of Competitors	Gold	Silver	Bronze	Medal for Excellence
1	China	3.30	64	41	11	4	6
2	Korea	1.76	49	4	14	6	16
3	Switzerland	1.50	38	4	2	6	23
4	France	1.47	32	4	1	5	18
5	Chinese Taipei	1.38	47	3	3	7	30
6	Portugal	1.29	7	0	1	0	6
7	Singapore	1.26	31	0	4	4	19
8	United Kingdom	1.20	25	2	1	3	13
9	South Tyrol, Italy	1.08	13	1	0	1	8
10	Austria	1.05	42	0	4	6	20

'Invest in the human': WorldSkills president's message to employers

WorldSkills president Francis Hourant tells Anviksha Patel what Europe can learn from China, and why young workers should ask employers for a training plan

Francis Hourant has a simple message for UK employers reluctant to invest in training.

"You invest in the machine. Please invest in the human," the WorldSkills president says.

We meet on a stand in the busy exhibition hall at WorldSkills Shanghai 2026. Shanghai was due to host the 46th competition in 2021, but it was postponed and later cancelled because of the covid pandemic.

For Hourant, who was CEO of WorldSkills Belgium for 15 years before being elected president in 2024, hosting the competition was a chance for China's political leaders to showcase how they have used skills competitions as part of their education strategy.

"In China, WorldSkills is one of the cornerstones of their strategy for TVET [technical and vocational education and training]," he says.

"They want to develop the economy with skilled and qualified people. They invest in the colleges, they have a very big political engagement, and they use WorldSkills as an inspiring tool."

He stops short of calling China's system the best in the world.

"I don't know if the system is the best one. We just know the results during the competition, and we know the Chinese will probably be on each podium, more or less."

China finished top of the medal table for the fifth consecutive



Francis Hourant

competition, with 41 gold, 11 silver and four bronze medals, and six medals for excellence.

He believes Europe must learn from this and build the same engagement at every level.

"In schools, at the political level and in industry. The time when we could say 'go to university and you will have a good life' is finished. We really need skilled people."

'It's not a cost'

Hourant's gripe is with businesses that too often see training as an expense rather than an investment.

"To the employer, I just have to say: it's not a cost. You invest in your own enterprise because you invest in your human resources. At the same time, you involve these people in your enterprise culture."

He recalls an entrepreneur he met at a WorldSkills conference in Switzerland several years ago, who told him the return on training his staff was far bigger than the cost.

"Very often, if you look just at the short term, you think 'oh my God, I

ANVIKSHA PATEL
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have to invest £2,000 each month'. But you will receive maybe £4,000 after one, two, three years."

Let young people choose

Hourant knows first-hand how much sway parents have over young people's choices. As a teenager, he asked his father if he could become an electrician.

"He said no. Finish your secondary school, then you can choose. So I went to university."

He let his own children choose, and his advice to other parents is the same.

"Let your children choose by themselves what they want."

Competitors have changed. Fifteen or 20 years ago, Belgian competitors came from secondary schools and manual trades. Now they come from universities and polytechnics.

The jobs have changed too, he says.

"The conditions are totally different from before. You can become your own employer. And you don't do the same thing every day."

With AI set to change so much about work, Hourant says people will need to keep learning throughout their careers.

"If you are a young worker, you should ask 'what is your plan for training me?', because what you learn when you are 25, and what you have to do when you are 40 or 50, it will be completely different."

Human first

In his speech at the opening



Aircraft Maintenance competitor Elyot Harmston

ceremony, Hourant told the audience: "The world stands at the edge of a new industrial revolution. The smarter machines become, the more human we must be."

"We don't have to be afraid, because it's an industrial revolution that we have to manage," he says. "And who can manage it? The human."

At one WorldSkills event, he asked staff from a large German company where AI fits into its processes. The answer was human first, then AI, then human again at the end.

"Yes, the machine is smart. Yes, the machine can change a lot of things, but we have to control it."

He admits he doesn't have all the answers yet. But he is clear that people without good skills or qualifications risk being left behind – teachers included.

"We also have to train the trainer with the AI, because schools will change very quickly."

Changing the competition

WorldSkills is "at the beginning" of working out how AI will change the competition, he says, including how it could support assessment and how competitors' own use of AI should be judged.

The skills on offer have always evolved with industry. Print media technology was dropped for Lyon 2024 when not enough countries entered, while cybersecurity, cloud computing and robotics have been added. Other skills keep the same name but look very different in practice.

"AI will arrive progressively, when industry uses it or needs it," he says. "Our Vision 2035 is clear: we need human skills first, and technical skills just after."

Members around the world decide which skills are included. He says that is why renewable energy only joined the competition in 2022, and why sustainable practice was first assessed at Lyon in 2024. Three new skills are planned for Aichi, Japan, in 2028, including butchery.

What the UK gets right

Hourant visited the WorldSkills UK Live event at the NEC in Birmingham twice, and says Belgium borrowed "a lot of ideas" from it.

"A young person sees a competitor and says 'wow, tomorrow I could do that'. Then they try the skill, and directly they can get information on how to get involved," he says.

"For me it's a great contribution

from the UK. When I saw that, I said: we will do the same."

WorldSkills UK launched the event in 2012 as The Skills Show and renamed it WorldSkills UK Live in 2018. After covid cancellations, the charity replaced it with annual national finals held across venues in a host region. This year's finals take place in south Wales in November, before moving to London for the following two years.

A young person sees a competitor and says, 'wow, I could do that'

He has also urged WorldSkills UK to keep holding regional competitions across England that combine all three elements: competition, try-a-skill and careers advice.

'Be ambitious'

Spending on technical education in England is significantly lower than a generation ago. College funding is around 11 per cent lower than in 2010, and spending on adult skills and apprenticeships is 23 per cent below 2010 levels.

With nearly a million young people in the UK not in education, employment or training, what would he say to policymakers?

His answer is the same one he gave Belgian ministers when he left his previous job: "Be ambitious with the youth and invest in projects like WorldSkills."

"If you are ambitious about skills, you can develop education. You can develop your economy. You can develop your country."

"Don't only say 'we don't have money'. You have money. Invest in the right way."

Gold by design: How high-performing nations build champions

China, South Korea and Switzerland take different routes to the WorldSkills podium, but each knows what it wants from the competition. Shane Chown investigates the systems behind their success – and what the UK could learn before Aichi 2028

Chen Xinyuan, it was reported, trained for more than 1,000 days for WorldSkills, working from 9am until midnight with one month off a year.

In 2022, the Shenzhen competitor won China's first gold medal in cloud computing. Three years later, the UK withdrew its cloud computing entry for Shanghai after the Department for Education cut WorldSkills UK's grant by £1 million.

China has finished first overall at every WorldSkills competition since Abu Dhabi 2017. Before that, South Korea won five overall titles in a row from Shizuoka 2007 to São Paulo 2015. China, which joined in 2010, did not win a single gold at its first competition, London 2011. In Shanghai, it entered all 64 skills competitions with 71 competitors and won 41 golds, 11 silvers, four bronzes and six medals for excellence, its best result yet.

The nations that followed, South Korea and Switzerland, with Chinese Taipei and France not far behind, take very different routes to the podium.

How nations measure up

FE Week ranks nations on average medal points: four for a gold, three for a silver, two for a bronze and one for a medal for excellence, divided by the number of skills a nation entered.

China's average has risen at every competition since Abu Dhabi 2017, from 2.32 to 3.30. South Korea has finished second or third at all five, and Switzerland between second and fourth. Team UK was 14th in Abu Dhabi, 16th in



Kazan and 14th at both the 2022 special edition and Lyon, before climbing to eighth in Shanghai.

In Shanghai, China's 3.30 average medal points score was nearly double South Korea's 1.76. Switzerland was third with 1.50, ahead of France (1.47) and Chinese Taipei (1.38).

Average medal points are one of four measures in WorldSkills' results system. The others are total medal points and the total and average marks of a nation's competitors. Every competitor is marked, and anyone scoring 700 or more points without placing in a podium position earns a medal for excellence, signifying the achievement of the international benchmark. Totals favour big teams whereas averages favour smaller, stronger teams.

The rankings you see in press releases depend on who is sending them. Nations tend to report the measure that makes them look best: China cites its first place on golds and on team total score. Korea, not China, had the best average mark in Abu Dhabi 2017.

On the composite score Korea uses, which blends totals and averages, Chinese Taipei was third in Shanghai and Switzerland fourth.

But SwissSkills puts Switzerland third, as does WorldSkills' official comparison by average medal points. Team UK's position ranges from seventh to 12th depending on the measure.

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China: 345 training bases

China's first gold came at São Paulo 2015, won by Zeng Zhengchao, a 20-year-old welder. Eleven years later, it won 41.

By 2022, China had designated 345 training bases for 63 skills, most of them in vocational colleges, alongside WorldSkills research centres in Tianjin, Guangzhou, Shanghai and Chongqing. Selection is a long process. Cabinet-making candidates went through about 18 months of training rounds across several bases before one was picked.

Provinces and cities pay for success. Guangdong supplied half of China's 16 golds at Kazan 2019, mostly from its technical colleges. Guangzhou paid each of its nine gold medallists from Lyon 2024 500,000 yuan (about £56,000), and the same again to each skill's coaching team. Beijing paid its Lyon gold medallists 300,000 yuan each, promoted them to senior technician grade and fast-tracked them for professional titles.

After Shanghai, China's Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security said the team had shown "Chinese youth's confidence and pursuit of excellence to the world".



South Korea: the Samsung pipeline

South Korea has won 19 overall titles since its WorldSkills debut in 1967. Its biggest company treats WorldSkills as a recruitment pipeline.

Samsung sponsored every WorldSkills competition from 2007 to 2024, and was a headline sponsor from Leipzig 2013 to the 2022 special edition. Between 2007 and 2022, its affiliates reportedly hired 1,424 technicians who had competed in South Korea's national skills competitions, about 100 a year.

In 2022, 22 of South Korea's 51 competitors worked for Samsung companies. In Shanghai, Samsung employees won three of South Korea's four golds, in web technologies, industrial control and optoelectronics.

**Competitiveness
in the field
comes from
technical talent**

"Marketing and management are important, but the strength of manufacturing ultimately lies in the field," Lee Jae-yong, Samsung's now-chairman, said in 2009. "Competitiveness in the field comes from technical talent."

The country also adds cash. Gold medallists have received 67.2 million

won (about £37,500), silver medallists 56 million and bronze 39.2 million, along with exemptions from national qualification exams and access to "alternative military service".

South Korea's gold haul fell from 10 in Lyon to four in Shanghai. Its 14 silvers and 16 medals for excellence kept it in second place.

Switzerland: Apprentices first

Switzerland, a country of 9 million people, has stayed near the top through its apprenticeship system.

Its competitors are apprentices or recently qualified, selected through SwissSkills national championships run by trade associations. When Switzerland won 11 golds in Abu Dhabi in 2017, its competitors had all completed apprenticeships and prepared for competitions in their spare time.

The 42 picked for Shanghai were to "invest around 1,000 hours" in preparation, backed by experts, trade associations and employers. Preparations for Lyon began with team-building weekends and a family event that brought employers and trade bodies in from the start.

Officials say skills competitions "raise the profile of the VET (vocational education and training) system and draw attention to various occupations", said Rémy Hübschi, deputy director of the State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation, after Lyon.

In 2022, more than 55 per cent of the Swiss team achieved a podium position; only China and Korea had a better medal rate. Before Shanghai, SwissSkills set two targets: top three in the world and best in Europe, and achieved both with four golds from 42 competitors.

France borrows from elite sport. Île-de-France holds preparation weekends for its regional squad at an elite sports centre, with double world handball champion Joël Abati as WorldSkills coordinator. The national team works on stress management,



2026 closing ceremony podium winners

sleep and nutrition as well as technique. France's 36 competitors won four golds in Shanghai.

UK needs a purpose

Team UK's 28 competitors won two golds, one silver, three bronzes and 13 medals for excellence in Shanghai. Its 30 medal points were the best since Abu Dhabi 2017, when it scored 32.

China sent 71 competitors, Korea 56, Chinese Taipei 53 and Switzerland 42. On average medal points, a measure which strips out squad size, the UK was eighth, with 1.20, its best average in the last five competitions.

The leading nations spread the cost. China's bill falls on ministries, provinces and cities; Korea's on the state and Samsung; Switzerland's on the employers and trade associations that run apprenticeships.

WorldSkills UK's DfE grant was cut to £5.7 million in 2025-26, ending entries in cloud computing, software testing and logistics and freight forwarding. South Korea won silver in software testing in Shanghai.

What high-performing countries have in common is this: they know what they want from WorldSkills. China uses it to build a technician class, Korea to supply its manufacturers, and Switzerland to sell apprenticeships to young people. Before Aichi 2028, the UK could do with a reason of its own.



Web Technologies Competitor Finn Gallagher

AQA – Shaping the Future of Vocational Education

ANNA TRETHEWEY
CHIEF STRATEGY AND
VOCATIONAL OFFICER, AQA

This time next year, the vocational landscape will look a little different as young people across England will be embarking on a new generation of qualifications – V Levels and Level 2 Certificates. AQA, along with Training Qualifications UK (TQUK), part of the AQA group, is delighted to be playing its part in making this a reality.

Many readers out there will know AQA for its long history in developing and delivering GCSEs and A Levels – and before that, O Levels and CSEs too! AQA was founded in 1903 as a pathway to higher education. Five leading universities set up what later became the charity AQA to allow young people to continue to learn and make the most of their potential.

Today, many recognise AQA as a trusted awarding organisation which gives students the opportunity to show what they can do and progress to the next stage of their lives.

Given that we've been in the assessment world for over 120 years, we're delighted to bring some of that expertise into the vocational world. As a charity, we have a responsibility to support a wide range of learners, which is why AQA is continuing its expansion into vocational qualifications and training. That's why we're delighted to have been approved to develop V Levels and Level 2 Certificates, helping more 16 to 19-year-olds gain the knowledge and skills they need to succeed in the workplace and beyond.

While AQA has got a back catalogue in some of the more archaic vocational subjects out there, such as a CSE in

Rural Studies and another in Life Skills, it's only in recent years, since bringing TQUK, Construction EPA and Realise Training Group into AQA that we've really expanded our vocational ambitions. We're proud that we now provide young people with a range of opportunities to help them learn and progress, whatever that pathway looks like.

That's also why our support for WorldSkills matters. Celebrating the achievements of young people who excel in vocational learning and get to showcase their talents on the world stage demonstrates what's truly possible when skills take the spotlight.

The setting for the competition is also important to us. TQUK, which offers training in sectors as diverse as childcare, first aid and hospitality, is also the only UK vocational awarding organisation to receive recognition for its qualifications in caregiving and elderly care in Shanghai after several years operating in Hong Kong. Indeed, AQA Group as a whole works in more than 100 countries.

Looking to the future

As an education charity, AQA reinvests the money we make back into education and research. Our more than a century of experience means we're well-placed to offer high quality qualifications to young people, providing the real skills and understanding that will lift their prospects and to help the Government meet its ambitions.

The golden thread running through all

AQA will be listening to colleges, employers and young people about what they want to see

this is AQA's ambition to support more young people to get on in life and follow their ambitions, and in the process to support local economic growth – thanks to the national standards that these qualifications offer.

Over the next 12 months, colleagues across AQA will be listening to further education colleges, employers and young people about what they want to see in these new qualifications. We'll be working hard to make sure that as we look to the future, and the next 100 years of AQA, that we're as synonymous for our work in technical and vocational education, as we are in GCSEs and A Levels.



IT Network Systems Administration competitor Charlie Priestley with training manager Nitheesh Kaliyammurthy

Next stop: Wales, Düsseldorf, Aichi

Shanghai is done, but there's no rest for WorldSkills UK. Shane Chown sets out the three dates for the sector's diary

Shanghai's closing ceremony handed the WorldSkills flag to Japan, and the race for Team UK places for Aichi 2028 has already started. Before then, though, come two more big dates: the UK national finals next month and EuroSkills next September.

Last stop in Wales

WorldSkills UK's own domestic national finals take place in November across four south Wales venues: Cardiff and Vale College, Bridgend College's Pencoed campus, Coleg Gwent in Newport and the University of Wales Trinity Saint David in Swansea.

Around 400 apprentices and students from UK colleges, training providers and employers will compete across more than 40 disciplines, with the closing medal ceremony taking place at ICC Wales.

Participation from higher education is up 42 per cent on last year and from training providers is up 37 per cent. There will also be a new esports demonstration competition with six finalists.

It's the second and final year in Wales. As *FE Week* revealed in June, the finals move to London for 2027 and 2028. Capital City College's Mosaic@Soho, Waltham Forest College and London South East Colleges' Bromley campus will host in November 2027. Wales has done the finals proud. Team Wales won 61 medals on home soil last year, and Welsh colleges topped the medal table.

Some of the young people competing in Wales next month will be part of Team UK in Aichi, Japan, in 2028.

Ben Blackledge, WorldSkills

UK's chief executive, told the AELP conference in June that colleges are over-represented in the competitions. His plea to independent training providers was to "get involved in this". The rise in provider entries this year suggests some are listening.

Düsseldorf 2027: Everyone's invited

Next September, Europe's skills community gathers in Germany for EuroSkills at Messe Düsseldorf. It's the tenth edition of EuroSkills, coinciding with the 20th anniversary of WorldSkills Europe.

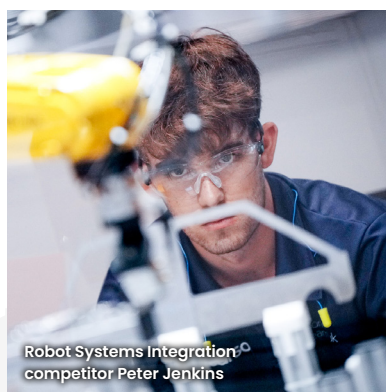
Organisers say around 800 under-25s from 36 countries will compete across 51 skills and demonstrations, with 150,000 visitors expected. For comparison, last year's EuroSkills in Herning had 585 competitors from 33 countries and attracted almost 103,000 visitors.

It'll be the first time two countries will host together. Luxembourg is running supporting programmes at EuroSkills, including an international youth camp.

FE Week caught up with Michael Hafner, president of EuroSkills Düsseldorf, on the WorldSkills Germany stand in Shanghai.

He said the "special thing" about 2027 is that two countries are organising the competition for the first time.

His message to UK college and training provider leaders was that



Robot Systems Integration competitor Peter Jenkins

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EuroSkills is "growing up", and he wants to see lots of UK experts, trainers and competitors there. "We will invite you all to come to Düsseldorf."

Hafner left us with a recommendation for Altbier, a Düsseldorf speciality dark beer.

Team UK finished 15th out of 33 nations at EuroSkills Herning in 2025, with one bronze in Industry 4.0 for Southern Regional College's Patrick Sheerin and Caolan McCartan, plus five medals for excellence. WorldSkills UK picked a young team to face more experienced European competitors to "accelerate their development" for Shanghai. That approach paid off.

Konnichiwa, Aichi 2028

The 49th WorldSkills competition takes place in Aichi, Japan in November 2028 at Aichi Sky Expo, one of the country's largest exhibition centres. Aichi is Japan's manufacturing heartland, a hub for the automotive and aerospace industries.

Japan expects around 1,700 competitors from 65 or more countries and regions, and wants 300,000 visitors through the doors, including large numbers of students.

Japan knows how to put on a WorldSkills. This will be its fourth after Tokyo 1970, Osaka 1985 and Shizuoka 2007. Tokyo was the first competition held outside of Europe.

China topped the Shanghai medal table for the fifth time running, with 41 gold medals. Team UK's job in Aichi is to build on its best result in a decade and keep climbing the medal table.

The road to Japan starts in south Wales next month. If your college or provider isn't represented there, entries for the London finals open in March.

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**Team
UK**

SHANGHAI 2026

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