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Developing high-level skills in upholstery and soft furnishings – Wendy Shorter Interiors

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Brief description

Students at Wendy Shorter Interiors work towards practical qualifications set by the trade association for upholstery and soft furnishings, The Association of Master Upholsterers & Soft Furnishers (AMUSF). The trainers combine their direct experience of working in the industry with good skills in training and assessment to enable students to develop the very high level of craft skills required by the industry.

Overview – the provider's message

'Upholstery is a craft skill which research has shown takes 10,000 hours to perfect. This was in effect offered by the old-style indentured apprenticeships. There are no quick fixes or magic formula that can be taught or learnt in a short space of time. Craft skills, like upholstery, depend largely on eye, feel and judgement, and these skills only come with lots of practice and patience.



Good practical skills can therefore only be learnt by hands-on practical work that is constantly assessed by tutors that have the relevant practical craft skills and experience themselves. The practical aspect of the training has given many students, who may not have

achieved academically at school, an opportunity to develop high level craft skills.

Since starting my training centre seven years ago, about 40% of my students have gone onto work within the industry or have started their own small businesses, which I think is testament to this system of teaching working well. The other students use their skills for their own enjoyment at home.'

Wendy Shorter, Director of Training, Association of Master Upholsterers and Soft Furnishers

The good practice in detail

The Association of Master Upholsterers and Soft Furnishers (AMUSF) had concerns that the quality of existing training did not consistently meet the needs of the industry. It wanted to ensure that the qualifications prepared students to meet industry-standards. In 2005, the AMUSF developed its own craft qualifications which ensured that training was focused more on developing students' high-level practical skills. These qualifications are reviewed frequently to ensure that they are up to date with developments in the industry. The three stages of the qualifications provide training in skills that are approximately equivalent to the national vocational levels 2, 3 and above. This has not been formally verified. Students are able to progress from the stage 3 qualification to degree courses in furniture restoration.

A combination of sustained practice and the understanding of the industry

The four trainers gained their craft qualifications at Wendy Shorter Interiors and worked in the industry before returning as trainers. They set high standards from the start for the many students that join a course with little or no prior knowledge or experience in upholstery or soft furnishings. The students know that their work is going to be assessed and verified by an experienced practitioner and not someone that just knows the theory.

The training is very carefully structured so that the students build their skills through a set of practical tasks and projects. Each stage involves approximately 210 guided learning hours over about 36 weeks.

- Stage 1 upholstery skills includes:
 - exercise frames that develop and consolidate their traditional and modern upholstery skills.
 - producing two assessment pieces: a sprung dining chair and an upholstered box with deep-buttoned lid.
- Stage 2 upholstery skills includes developing their:
 - traditional skills on an antique armless chair
 - modern upholstery skills on a post 1950s armchair



- Stage 3 upholstery skills includes developing advanced skills in:
 - traditional upholstery on substantial armchairs
 - tailoring and modern upholstery on mid-century curved-shaped chairs
- Stage 1 soft furnishing skills includes:
 - starting with sample pieces that develop their stitch and decorative techniques
 - producing two assessment pieces: a pair of lined curtains and cushions
- Stage 2 soft furnishing skills include more advanced techniques, including:
 - hand-stitched lined curtains and roman blinds
 - cushions and bed throw
 - a loose cover for an upright armless chair
- Stage 3 soft furnishings skills include much more advanced techniques, including:
 - interlined curtains for arched windows and Swags & Tails drapery
 - a loose cover for a large armchair

A [research project](#) is also included at each stage.

Key to success

- High professional standards that motivate students to raise their game so that they are confident that their work will meet the requirements of the industry and their future customers.
- Good, clear and [informative handouts](#) that mean students do not have to write copious notes and they have good references for future work.
- Presentations, group discussions and question and answer sessions that interest and challenge their understanding. Continuous assessment and feedback to the students as they carry out their practical work, so that they are brought into the 'real world'. Students are allowed to make mistakes and learn how to rectify them, building on from one project to the next.
- The trainers provide examples and case studies from their personal experience.
- Very clear information on the safety requirements of the industry and how to implement them at work and in home-based workshops.

Students' views

'Wendy and the team are cracking at responding to any queries we come up with as they have such a good understanding of the industry. They'll even look up the very technical problems immediately so that we know we have accurate and up-to-date information straight away.'

◀ I'm so proud of the work I've done on precious pieces of furniture. I would never have believed I could tackle such work with so stunning

results. I'm about to start my business in designing and making chairs, such as innovative chairs for children. ʘ

A clear line of sight to employment and self-employment

The industry is mainly made of small and micro businesses which provide the main source of external employment for the students. The larger companies tend to provide in-house training that focuses on their specific products. It is therefore critical for the students to develop high level of practical skills so that prospective employers know that they will be productive at work from the start and that they will be able to carry out a complete project, independently, to the required high standard.

Work experience is difficult to arrange because of the high level of finishing that is always required on the end products. The trainers encourage students to develop working relationships with other upholsterers and make arrangements for students to work on their own projects alongside a practising upholsterer so that they can absorb the environment and their ways of working.



Throughout their training, students pick up tips about working in the industry and running a business. These include:

- legal and financial requirements for setting up self-employment
- setting up partnerships to increase the chances of making a business viable
- a thorough [one-day course](#) covering the main aspects specific to starting a business in upholstery and soft-furnishing – including for those who have completed their qualifications elsewhere.

Understanding the industry

Students benefit from a wide range of visits and activities that enhance their understanding of the history of the craft and current industry. Examples include:



- Visits to relevant sector businesses and museums, such as Wesley Barrell, the Geffrye Museum, the Warner Archive Collection, the Furniture Industry Research Association, Waddesdon Manor's Conservation Department, the Victoria & Albert Museum and various stately homes.
- Visiting speakers that talk about their work and experiences.

- Competitions for good-quality and creative practical work that is sponsored by businesses in the industry. Winning entries are exhibited at the Interiors UK trade show.

A commitment to the two-way street

The City Livery Companies can trace their histories back to the early days of the Craft Guilds in which was fostered the high quality of goods and the high standards of workmanship that have always been the pride of English industry. The Worshipful Company of Upholders, the Worshipful Company of Drapers and the Worshipful Company of Furniture Makers have continued to support the industry and forged links with the trade association.



Wendy Shorter promotes training throughout the industry through her links with these livery companies and through her role as Director of Training for the AMUSF. She also keeps in touch with AMUSF members to forge links with the industry and to respond to any emerging vacancies or projects nationally.



Examples of work to promote training and employment related to the craft of upholstery and soft furnishings that benefit students and the industry, include:

- The Worshipful Company of Drapers has funded a pilot course for sixth form students from two local schools to undertake the Stage 1 upholstery qualification. They may further fund a student into an apprenticeship.
- The Worshipful Company of Upholders, in association with the AMUSF, is developing the Livery Companies Apprenticeship Scheme for upholstery and soft furnishings.
- The Worshipful Company of Furniture Makers takes a small group of students on an annual tour of various furniture manufacturers and suppliers in the Manchester area.
- With the prize money received from Craft Skills Awards 2013, presented by HRH the Prince of Wales, Wendy is funding a young student to complete the Stage 2 qualification.

Provider background



[Wendy Shorter Interiors](#) is a multi-award winning private training centre in Hertfordshire set up in 2006 to teach upholstery and soft furnishing qualifications at stages 1 to 3 to self-funding students over the age of 18 years, and stage 1 to young people in the sixth form at two local schools. Approximately 75 students attend courses one or two days a week and work towards the Association of Master Upholsterers and Soft Furnishers qualifications.

Background

It's about work... the summary report of the Commission on Adult Vocational Teaching and Learning (CAVTL) highlighted characteristics and features of outstanding vocational teaching, learning and assessment. These are in line with the criteria for judging the quality of teaching, learning and assessment in Ofsted's [Common Inspection Framework for FE and skills 2012](#), but also focus on the additional, distinctive processes of design and delivery which characterise excellent vocational provision.

The case studies in this set were compiled in response to the CAVTL report which highlighted the importance of ensuring a 'clear line of sight to work' on vocational programmes.

[The Education Training Foundation](#) has been asked to take forward the recommendations from the Commission's report.

Other examples in this set

Barking and Dagenham (employability): www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/140003

Barking and Dagenham (motorsport): www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/140004

Bridgwater College: www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/140005

Exeter College: www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/130259

Foxes Academy: www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/140006

Hull College: www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/130258

Leeds City College: www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/140007

People and Business Development Ltd: www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/140009

University Hospital Southampton NHS Foundation Trust:
www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/140008

Are you thinking of putting these ideas into practice; or already doing something similar that could help other providers; or just interested? We'd welcome your views and ideas. Get in touch [here](#).

To view other good practice examples, go to:
www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/goodpractice