

# What's needed to go to Olympics of maths and science?

**Sherryn Groch**

They wear the Olympic colours, and they train around the clock. But these Canberra teens are not your typical elite athletes.

Next month, Year 12 students Rose Zhang, of Narrabundah College, and Luke Hemmingsen of Burgmann Anglican School, will represent Australia in the 2018 science Olympics, the first time in a decade two ACT students have made the cut for the national team.

Earlier in the year, more than 6000 of the top students in Australia sat "try-outs" or entrance exams for the International Science Olympiads. Less than a hundred were selected to take part in a two-week intensive training camp, hosted at the Australian National University. "Classes started at 8am and went until 8pm every day," Luke says. "[In our blazers] we look like a cricket team, and [we've] trained hard too, we'll keep training until we go."

For Rose, carrying out investigations in the field of earth science, study continued up until lights out. "It was full-on. We were learning a whole first year university course in a fortnight basically," she said.

"We'd have older mentors from previous years there with us and we'd all stay up asking them to explain difficult concepts. But it was so great to be around other people who were that passionate."

Then, following another round of exams, both practical and theoretical, the pair got the news neither of them expected - they had made the 17-strong national team and would face-off against 2000 of the best young scientific minds in the world.

"The actual competition will be



Photo: Sithikay Dithavong

## Narrabundah College's Rose Zhang will represent Australia.

more exams, hours and hours of them, and practical stuff too," Luke said. He is due to return from the Biology Olympiads in Iran just days before his own Year 12 mid-year assessments, while Rose will compete in Thailand in August.

She's the first Canberra student to make the earth science field after the discipline joined the world stage three years ago.

Last year, half of the Australian

team were girls, but this time around that number dropped back to just six out of a total of 27 competitors, including 10 taking part in the maths and coding Olympiads.

Both Rose and Luke admitted they felt outnumbered as Canberrans too. Since 1999, the territory's performance in the international competition has slumped, with fewer and fewer

students making the final cut.

Last year Claire Yung, also of Narrabundah College, became the first girl in 16 years to represent the ACT at the International Science Olympiads, taking home a bronze medal in physics.

On Monday, chief scientist Dr Alan Finkel said the program helped unlock Australia's "next generation of brilliant minds", by not only developing students'

talents but inspiring their peers back home.

He told the Olympians, the youngest of whom is just 14 years old, to think of their team blazers "as your superhero cape because in it you will do astonishing things".

"At the end of the day, politicians can only make decisions. Science and mathematics make new potential."

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6 News