

Summer specialists

Independent schools in the UK are responding to international student demand for a wider range of specialist summer programmes.

Summer school programmes for international language students have been a central component of the independent school landscape for some time now, with schools keen to capitalise on their facilities and academic reputation in order to attract students to their classrooms during the long summer holidays. Many independent schools now have summer programmes that offer students a comprehensive range of sporting and academic elements, as well as language tuition. According to Barbara Carson from the British Association of Boarding School Short Courses (Babssco), demand for such programmes is currently very strong.

"Firstly, EFL courses are attracting a younger market and... as the five schools we represent are all boarding schools, none of our students stay in host families and the parents and agents that we work with all seem to much prefer this arrangement," she explains. "Secondly, I think a summer school programme in a mainstream school can offer the full facilities that each school has on-site, rather than have to try and bring in equipment."

Extensive facilities and an established system of pastoral care are often important selling points for parents as well as students, some of whom may be venturing away from home for the first time. Maria Yermolova from Oxbridge Educational Travel Consulting in Russia says that her clients' parents prefer summer programmes at independent schools because of their boarding facilities, "where students are guaranteed 24-hour supervision and support from residential staff".

Independent schools are also fortunate in being able to tap into their supply of regular staff to provide summer school students with language tuition. "The majority of our staff are full-time employees of the school and are used to working within a structure that is consistent with a mainstream school," says Susan Harris from Taunton International Study Centre, attached to Taunton School, in Somerset. "Our courses also provide a helpful introduction to boarding school life for students who may be joining a UK school later."

John Allinson from Parkland International Language School, which runs language programmes at Leighton Park School in Reading, says that the high professional standards shown in their language school are derived from the extensive experience of the course managers. "As far as is possible, there is a degree of continuity between the ethos of the main school and that of the summer school," he confirms, and adds, "Students from the main school are employed by the summer school as conversation assistants and come in for the afternoon to take part in the activities programme."

While the popularity of summer school programmes at independent schools is assured, there is evidence that these programmes are evolving to meet the needs of clients. Students often embark on summer school programmes with the intention of eventually moving on to mainstream education in the UK, either at the same school or somewhere else, and Saint Michael's College in Worcestershire, has recently updated its course offerings to reflect this trend. "We run a summer academic programme that is more focused upon academic study," says Janine Faulkner at the school. "The students share the same sports and social programme as those students on the general course but their classes are designed to prepare them more fully for the academic year."

Jenny Stephens from Bosworth Independent College in Northampton has also noticed an increased demand for more academically-oriented summer programmes from international students. "[Our] recreational courses [have been] abandoned in favour of more academic ones," she says. "[Our intensive English] summer school is proving to be very popular with our international students who are keen to develop their IELTS grades and prepare for academic courses in September."

However, the demand for an academic focus to summer school programmes is also matched by an alternative demand for more activity-based programmes, says Carson. "More and more parents/agents are looking for something different," she says. "This is why schools are having to find something different to offer."

Carson points out that many mainstream schools have the facilities to offer activities such as fencing, archery, wall climbing and assault courses, and demand for courses that provide more unusual activities is high. "Babssco has launched a very popular outdoors experience course in Scotland this year, where students get the chance to experience abseiling, climbing, kayaking, land yachting, surfing, orienteering, camping and a survival night," she says.

Millfield School in Somerset is well known for producing sporting talent and its summer school makes full use of the main school's extensive sports facilities. One of its summer courses, English plus academy sports, provides expert tuition in golf, tennis, football, riding, basketball, badminton and chess, as well as English lessons in the mornings. "The courses use the magnificent sports facilities at Millfield which are some of the best in Europe," says Douglas Humphrey at the school. "More Western European students are attending than have in the past, which probably reflects the [popularity of] English plus academy sports run by professional coaches."