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# Junior focus

Catering for the junior market – students under the age of 16 – can be a difficult and daunting prospect, yet for the schools that have embarked on this route the rewards are significant. Kristina Stewart from Stewart College of Languages in Victoria, BC, Canada says that the junior market now makes up 30-to-40 per cent of their business, compared with 15 per cent five years ago, and demand for programmes remains high. “There is a continuing pressure to provide courses and homestay for eight-to-10-year-old Asian and Mexican students, which we’ve resisted,” she says. “Our minimum for homestay and tuition is 11 years old, unless it is a closed group programme.”

A growing demand for junior programmes is a trend noted around the world in non-English speaking destinations too. Frederic Parrilla from International House Sevilla – CLIC in Spain says that junior programmes make up 20 per cent of overall courses and have shown a general increase in recent years. He adds, “[Junior programmes] will be an increasing market, not only in Spanish but in many other languages apart from English due to the demand for multicultural knowledge for a new globalised world.”

### Catch them young

The accepted belief that learning a language at a younger age can help dramatically with the speed of acquisition is fuelling this demand for junior programmes and many providers report that students are getting younger. Corinne Xuereb from IH Malta-Gozo in Malta says that demand from younger students in both groups and as individuals is increasing and “we get requests for seven and eight year olds”. She adds, “[Students are] younger because English is being introduced in schools at an early stage.”

Susan Evans, from Kingswood Group in the UK, says that they offer activity camps for students aged between seven and 17 years at centres in the UK and at ski resorts in Europe yet demand for courses from even younger students means that they cannot accommodate everyone. “We are finding that the students are getting younger and have even been asked for residential programmes for four and five year olds,” she says.

The special needs of very young students means that many providers have a cut-off age below which they won’t accept students. Guido Schillig from Anglo-Continental School in Bournemouth, UK, says, “The marketplace has generally accepted that the typical minimum age for junior courses is 10 years, so requests for seven- and eight-year-olds to attend our courses would be declined.” However, the rising demand from such students means that some schools are developing ways to cater for them.

Jeremy Philp from Global Village Noosa in Australia says that they have recently introduced a parent and child language course. “This particular programme has been designed around the increasing demand for students to start learning English and to be immersed into English language culture at a much younger age. Parents are integrated into Global Village campuses for daily English and

activities, while their children are integrated into the local primary school, giving them the chance to fully immerse themselves in a supportive English-speaking environment.”

Going overseas for the first time can be a daunting experience and providers doubt the benefits of sending students on a junior language programme abroad before they are ready. Lets Speak English in the UK caters for French students between the ages of 10 and 16 years and Linda Embling says that they have to be extremely flexible to individual student’s requirements when dealing with the younger age groups. “For instance, students under the age of 14 who are in the early stages of developing their English language are encouraged to come to us as a ‘sharer’,” she says. “In effect, they share their homestay experience with another student of the same age and nationality. This can be a positive thing and prevents young students getting stressed and lonely in a foreign country.”

Another way very young children can benefit from a study trip overseas is by taking part in an organised school group and Petra Heintze, from Carl Duisberg Centren in Radolfzell, Germany, says that she has seen a growth in bookings for study tour groups. “Our school is not only the perfect location for that, but we also have a

lot of experience in this special field.” The school is located by Lake Constance meaning that there are numerous activities for such tour groups to take part in. “Surfing, sailing, canoeing, paddle-boating, tennis, horse riding and fitness courses can be done here as well,” she says, adding, “A special accommodation is in our teepees directly located at the lake shore.”

The popularity of such study tours can be enhanced by government support of language learning in school classrooms, which in many countries is occurring at a younger age. In France, central government support for language learning is being transcribed into local

council financial support for schools to organise their own study abroad trips. Evans in the UK says that this has definitely boosted French enrolments in recent years. “The French government is encouraging French schools to link up with English schools,” she says. “We can help schools in France apply for funding to pay for their stay and travel costs from the local council. It is complicated because they have to apply for funding for each trip separately and sometimes it is not always to the same council.”

### New products

In this sector of the language travel market above any other, it certainly pays to stay up to date with the latest demands and trends when it comes to course content. Juniors expect lots of activities during their language course and the type and scope of these activities expands every year, according to providers. Philp in Australia says, “The onus is on us as a school to produce attractive new products to cater for the growing market and we have addressed this in the last 12 months.” The school has developed a range of teen activity programmes called TAP General, TAP Tennis and TAP Surfing that provide specialist tuition in one activity as

Student numbers for junior programmes are on the up, although the extra expertise involved in catering successfully for this market means that more providers are becoming specialists in this sector and the number of overall providers may be going down. BETHAN NORRIS examines junior course trends among language schools worldwide.





### Long-haul travel and visa issues

The main student markets for junior language programme providers are usually neighbouring countries so that the students don't have to travel – often unaccompanied – on long air journeys and face a very unfamiliar culture to their own on arrival. However, maybe today's junior travellers are becoming more sophisticated in their requirements as schools report that long-haul destinations are now becoming popular with this age group.

Jeremy Philp from Global Village Noosa in Australia says that the European student market has recently become more significant for them. "We are delighted with the number of French, Italian and Spanish students travelling to Noosa to take part in our programmes," he said. "If these trends continue as they are now, we will see those countries overtake more traditional markets such as Japan and Korea in the next year or so."

This trend is also being noted elsewhere in the world. Giorgia Biccelli, Director of Linguadue in Italy says, "We have seen an increase from students coming from the USA, Brazil, Mexico, Colombia and Spain. Countries like Turkey, Russia and Switzerland show a very stable trend." Elsewhere in Europe, visa issues have hit traditional local markets. Guido Schillig from Anglo-Continental in the UK says that they welcomed junior students from 45 countries this year. However, he adds, "The nationalities that were not well represented were juniors from Russia, the Ukraine and Kazakhstan. The reason being universally cited by our representatives was visa problems."

In the UK there are fears among those providing seasonal junior programmes that the new points-based visa system being introduced in 2009 will have a negative effect on business. While under-18s can enter the UK on a child visitor visa for short-term courses, the rules state that child visitor visa holders coming to the UK to undertake a course at a language school have to show that the school they are attending is accredited and therefore listed on the Department of Innovation, Universities and Skills register of sponsors. Summer-only operators have therefore been worried that they will be unable to enrol students from outside Europe from next year as they do not qualify for accreditation from the relevant bodies. Ella Tyler from Mountlands in the UK says,

studies, town studies and a vast array of computer technology programmes." The school has also recently launched a new programme called Interactive, which effectively partners a foreign school with an English school and students from both schools attend the centre at the same time. In this way, foreign students are usually more successful at gaining language skills as they are learning in an informal setting. Evans says, "The students that come and stay with us tend to have an excellent basic knowledge of the English language, however they are simply lacking in confidence. Coming to an English activity centre, mixing with our staff and English students, ensure the students learn English in record time."

In contrast to the junior language course providers who have focused on developing their leisure activity provision, demand

well as English. Philps adds, "The students who enrol on our TAP courses are generally seeking valuable educational and cultural learning experiences while having fun."

In France, offering programmes that enable junior students to undertake one particular activity in some depth is also a route taken by SILC in Angoulême. "We [have introduced a] soccer camp and environmental programmes, discovering a more authentic France," says Volodia Maury-Laribiere at the school.

As well as demanding a greater array of more exciting activities, today's junior language students are also more technically-savvy than many older students and expect more gadgetry in the classroom and outside.

Parrilla in Spain says that this is something that they have concentrated on at their school. "[Junior students] are more and more demanding in terms of small things such as access

***"Today's junior language students are more technically-savvy than many older students and expect more gadgetry in the classroom and outside"***

to computers and new technologies in their free time," he says. "New technologies in the classroom, such as a smartboard, are important for that age group."

Kingswood Group is another junior provider that recognises the more technical demands of its younger clients. Evans says, "Whilst we do offer the English package combining with activities we can tailor make the packages, including environmental

for more academic programmes for younger learners is also on the increase. Bev Harrison, Head of Young Learner Programmes at Bell in the UK and Malta, says that bookings for young learner programmes have increased by 10 per cent this year. "This year we've introduced additional junior academic programmes," she says. "A GCSE preparation programme and an A-level/International Baccalaureate preparation programme, both aimed at preparing international students for their term time studies." Harrison adds that they have noticed a slight increase in the number of older students on courses that have an intense focus on academic tuition. "This is attributed to the fact that English

is becoming more integral to school syllabuses internationally, as students are seeking extra tuition to complement their term-time studies," she says.

### Increased specialisation

While dealing with the junior market can reap dividends, this sector of the market also requires a different approach than older students and for this reason schools tend to become specialists in this area or not offer such programmes at all. Schillig from the UK says that all their students are juniors and while running such programmes for juniors is different from running them for adults, they can be a lot of fun. "It is however a lot of hard work both in the pre-planning of each course and also during the time of delivery," he says, adding that schools offering junior language programmes in the UK have to fulfill a lot of extra requirements before they can enrol younger age students.

Schillig says that for this reason fewer language schools are offering junior programmes in the UK. He adds, "These requirements are both prescriptive and implied. Prescriptive due to British Council



regulations and legal requirements – staff need to be Criminal Records Bureau checked, for example. Implied due to the expectations of parents and representatives – at Anglo-Continental’s residential programme we engage a full-time nurse [one representative asked why we did not engage a doctor!]; our student staff ratio is at least four to one; and our programme of sports and activities operates seven days a week. These and other requirements along with new ones are, for some schools, too over-bearing so they give up and the number of providers shrinks.”

In Canada too, enhanced demands mean that schools that offer such programmes are often specialists in this area. Alex Prokopenko

from Canadian International Student Services in Toronto, ONT, says that 95 per cent of their programmes are for juniors. “CISS has a dedicated staff of educational professionals who are trained to work with kids and teenagers,” he says. “Our staff has experience and background in the field of primary and secondary education and they have first-hand knowledge of working with juniors.”

The issue of accommodation is also an important one for junior programmes and can contribute to the trend towards specialisation in this area. Homestay providers are subject to government regulations in some countries and can >>

“We simply cannot find a Delta-qualified Director of Studies prepared to work for only eight weeks of the year in Devon. Therefore, we cannot become British Council accredited.”

However, such short-term summer camp operators seem to have been thrown a lifeline recently, as the Home Office confirmed, “Providers offering programmes for under-18’s only, for short periods, will not be required to obtain accreditation. They will however need to demonstrate that they have all measures in place to safeguard children and that they are appropriately regulated for the programme they deliver (where regulation applies). The participants in these programmes will come under the child visitor category. Providers offering programmes for over-18’s will need to hold accreditation by a UK Border Agency approved accreditation body. The participants in these programmes will come under the student visitor category.”

While this may come as a relief to such operators, many remain worried that individual visa issuing offices will still need to see evidence of further regulation – and visa issuance may still be a problem in the future. It remains to be seen what effect this will have on the UK summer school market for junior provision.

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***“Schools offering junior language programmes in the UK have to fulfill a lot of extra requirements before they can enrol younger age students”***

have an important bearing on the success or failure of a junior programme. Embling in the UK says that the personal touch is important in such cases. “All our host families are personally visited and interviewed by myself to ensure a continued high standard of accommodation and willingness of the family to participate in the students’ experience overall,” she says.

In Malta, Xuereb says that they have simplified their accommodation provision in order to streamline the programme offered to juniors. “We have eliminated a number of headaches by offering only residential programmes,” she says. “In this way parents who book their children with IH don’t have a choice.”

When all safeguards are in place, the running of junior language programmes can be a smooth experience, precisely because of

the extra preparation work involved, and many schools pride themselves on their repeat business and high level of personal recommendations from satisfied clients.

Pietro Cifani from Linguaviva in Milan, Italy, says, “One of the main concerns is that juniors should enjoy their programme in a safe and supervised environment. Our supervision is round the clock and we have been running our junior courses in Italy for over 10 years. We are very proud that Linguaviva is the only accredited school in Italy with a junior programme. Our growing numbers confirm that we have a reliable, safe and, for our young students, very enjoyable programme.”






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