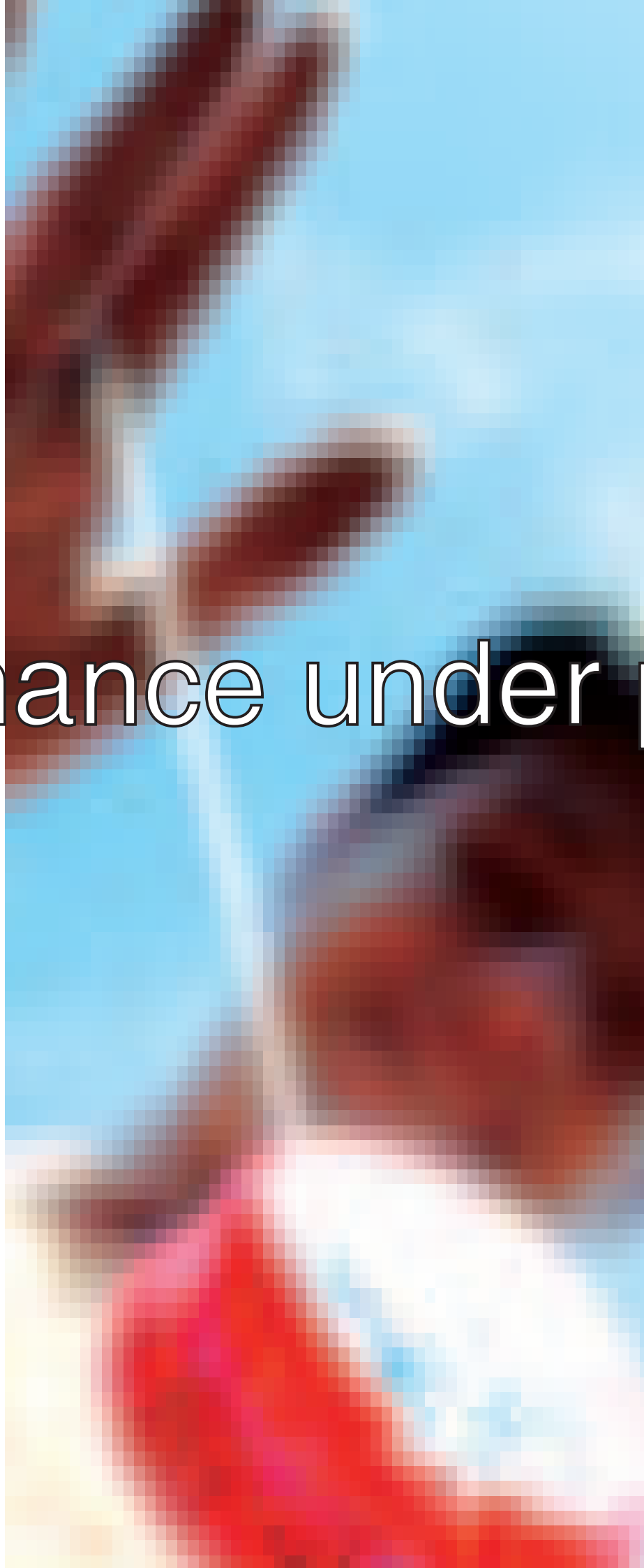


Summer vacation courses, popular among junior and

performance under

teenage clients, make up a highly competitive sector of the industry, with schools around the world aiming to attract agency business during this lucrative season. **AMY BAKER** charts how schools ensure their products remain innovative and of a high standard during the busy summer months.



Grigory Ugarov of Open World agency in Russia notes school quality and reputation as the most important factors to consider when choosing which summer language programmes to work with, as well as “programme peculiarities, price and location”.

In a nutshell, Ugarov sums up what all agencies are seeking above all else when offering a summer vacation programme – a guarantee of customer satisfaction. If a school can maintain agents’ confidence in the quality of service and experience that it will provide, then factors such as location and price will not count against it, even if more competitive elements are offered elsewhere.

There is a good deal of loyalty among agents when it comes to placing summer vacation bookings, particularly those that specialise in school-age students. Roger Akoka of Ofacil in France, which places 80 per cent of its junior clients on vacation programmes, relates, “Most of our providers have been

pressure

with us for the last 10 to 12 years. We rarely change [providers] and if we do, it’s on recommendation.”

Adriana Cantu, from Cursos de Idiomas en el Exterior in Argentina, adds that she has worked with some schools for a long time. “It’s like coming home [when you arrive there with a student group],” she says. However, Cantu observes that for the Argentine market, price does take precedence in the decision-making process, and she looks for competitive deals from school partners.

Ugarov, who places 15 per cent of his clients on summer vacation programmes, also notes that “prices are growing from year to year and market competition encourages schools to make their programmes more diverse”. For this reason, the summer programmes market remains one of the most dynamic and competitive sectors of the industry.

Timeframes

Summer vacation programmes differ from standard intensive courses because they usually have additional activities incorporated into the package. Some of these, such as outdoor activities in the UK or Ireland, may be only available in the summer due to weather considerations. However, in countries such as Australia or New Zealand, vacation programmes are also offered in July and August, despite the fact that it is wintertime in the southern hemisphere.

Cleve Brown of Worldwide School of English in New Zealand notes, “Winter – July and August – is fairly busy with groups from Japan and Korea but we also have [other markets] all coming at different times of the year.” And Barry Bolton of International English Institute in Christchurch adds that the traditional

“Students from the southern hemisphere also like to travel in their winter, July and August, to take advantage of the summer weather in other countries”

short-term vacation programme is not in high demand in New Zealand, and his school does not offer it.

“[New Zealand] has become an expensive option for groups looking for a short programme,” he explains.

For students from the northern hemisphere, summertime in July and August is the natural time to travel during school holidays, but students from the southern hemisphere also like to travel during this time in order to take advantage of the summer weather in other countries. Cantu in Argentina relates that she offers group study trips twice a year – in January and July – and the three-week trip in July is most popular with students, with the UK being the traditional destination choice.

Best practice

David Jones, Director of Red Dragon Languages Consultancy in the UK, underlines what he feels a



quality summer vacation product should offer, pointing to a wide range of sports and social activities as well as the standard 15-hour-per-week study programme. "An excellent summer course that we have had experience of... included the best elements of a holiday camp together with excellent lessons that had been prepared well in advance by professionally-qualified and experienced teachers," he says.

Agents relate tales of sub-standard programmes, including four students living together in one host family, inexperienced teachers, makeshift classrooms in church halls and little organisational involvement in extra-curricular activities. The implication is that some schools inadequately prepare for the additional student population during vacation times.

However, many schools regularly analyse the activities and services they offer, as well as the tuition content and style of the course, to ensure a consistently high quality product. Evgeniya Samoylenko, of VIP Service International agency in Russia, identifies some ways that she has noted of schools trying to improve their programmes. "Schools are offering new activities and a more flexible policy," she says, adding that some summer schools "try to build a bridge from short-term courses to long-term programmes for international students".

Cantu in Argentina says that offering subjects available to study in the afternoons is an attractive proposal for some of her clients, while changing the teachers regularly in a classroom group, ensuring a range of teaching styles for students, is another idea that more schools are introducing.

In Australia, Margaret Twelves, Principal of Aspect ILA in Perth, attests, "We believe the market is becoming much more sophisticated as the quality of English language teaching overseas gets better and better. We try to meet the changed demand by altering the teaching style to be more focused on improving fluency and by providing a better choice of activity, including visits to parliament, visits to local schools and treasure hunts in the park."

Finnian Matthews at Dalmac Language Institute in Rush, Ireland, points to the importance of continual assessment of their summer programme and of surveying students at the end of their course for their opinion of the experience. "Dalmac is constantly improving and updating our summer programme to meet the needs of a changing market," he says. "We are very conscious of the fact that teaching methods, activities and excursions that appeal to teenagers are constantly evolving."

Agents are in agreement. Heiner Giese from Offährte Sprachreisen in Germany claims that many providers do not fully understand the needs of the predominantly junior clientele that undertake summer vacation programmes. "There are only a few specialists in the marketplace knowing [better than others]

what young people want," he claims. "In the future, it will be important to serve young people's expectations."

These he lists as encompassing a fun approach to learning with the ability to meet same-aged students, comfortable accommodation, professional staff, an international class mix, a central location and an intercultural experience.

Cutting-edge activities

Activities are one of the areas in which schools can stand out from the crowd and capture students' and agents' attention. In Mexico, Becari language school has put considerable effort into improving its range of activities. "During the past years, we have introduced more active learning and recreational activities for the summer programme," says Beat Salzmänn at the school. Examples include a weekend on a ranch with horse riding, turtle and dolphin watching, and visiting waterfalls and coffee plantations.

At Dalmac Language Institute, activities and excursions include water sports, Gaelic football, cookery, arts and crafts, beach parties and "being Irish for a day". Matthews explains, "Students are shown the workings of an Irish farm and take part in activities such as tending animals, visiting a bog on the back of a tractor, turf cutting, rope making, etc."

Dalmac can also offer what many agents like to see as part of a summer vacation programme – interaction with native speakers. "This is a vital aspect for our summer students," says Matthews. "We also include Irish students in our summer programmes, the only difference being that they study German or French while our foreign students study English. They take part in all the afternoon and evening activities."

While desirable, interaction with locals is not always possible to achieve, claims Peter Maximilian at The Language Academy in Fort Lauderdale, USA. He observes, "We try to arrange for this type of inter-

"We are very conscious of the fact that teaching methods, activities and excursions that appeal to teenagers are constantly evolving"

action [with native speakers] via friends, parties [and] gatherings... this is not a given, however. Most students tend to form groups and interact internationally."

Busy season

Another aspect of the summer vacation programme that schools pay close attention to is the supply of

Destination choice

Summer vacation programmes are offered as both closed group and mixed group programmes, and the clientele that they attract are largely junior and teenage clients whose parents are hoping for them

to have a fun, educational experience. "Younger clients who like to have some fun while they study seem to prefer these programmes," testifies David Jones of Red Dragon Language Consultancy in the UK.

"The major advantages to studying on a vacation course are that, while studying, clients are able to enjoy the destination at its best: the amenities in the chosen destination are more likely to be open and of course, there is more chance of fine weather.

These are not minor considerations, particularly when the destination is somewhere in northern Europe!" he says. With the emphasis on "leisure learning", destinations such as Malta, the south coast of England and Spain – with beaches

good, qualified teachers and staff. Maximilian advises, "My connections in the community allow me access to a variety of teachers. I often use regular school teachers who are on vacation [during the summer]."

Mersedeh Proctor, of Mercator Language School in St Austell in the UK, acknowledges, "In the peak season, it is difficult to find suitable staff, but advanced planning helps a lot." She adds, "What is also important is not to take on more students that you can cope with. [We] don't sacrifice quality in favour of short-term financial gain because it will damage long-term financial gain as well as our reputation."

"Parents are reluctant to choose not-so-intensive courses because they think their children are not going to make the most of their time"

In New Zealand, Paula Stapley, Short Study Tour Coordinator for Hawthorn English Language Centre in Auckland, points out the importance of employing

appropriate activity coordinators and welfare staff as well as teachers. "Correct staffing is vital to sustaining quality and ensuring that the needs and expectations of students are met," she says. "The staff employed by Hawthorn-Auckland are carefully selected and a great deal of consideration is given not only to qualifications and work experience, but also to personal interests and personality."

Host family accommodation is perhaps the area that is most notorious for being difficult to manage well in the summer months. Schools all have their own strategies to ensure adequate and appropriate accommodation, but as Emma Pretlove at Dorset International College in Bournemouth, UK, points out, finding families can be a problem. "During the summer we have to follow the competition in what prices they are offering host families otherwise we wouldn't have any accommodation for the students," she says. "The demand for accommodation is so high that host families have the power during the summer."

and nightlife – are popular, and many agents in Europe indicate that these countries are likely to remain at the top of the destination list for younger students.

“The most popular destinations for [summer vacation] types of courses are the south of England –

particularly Bournemouth – Malta, Malaga and Nice,” says Jones, while Grigory Ugarov of Open World agency in Russia lists the UK’s south coast and London, Malta, Dublin in Ireland, coastal areas of Spain, Nice and Paris in France as being popular.

Adriana Cantu, of Cursos de Idiomas en el Exterior in Argentina, says that South Americans also choose the UK if it is their first time away from home. She explains that this is partly because visas are not required, “that is one of the first questions asked”; and partly because “parents

[in Mendoza] want their children’s first trip abroad to have cultural [significance]”.

Asian students are as likely to choose Australia or New Zealand as they are North America or Europe as a study destination and Margaret Twelves of Aspect ILA in Perth points to

Japanese, Taiwanese, Thai and Indonesian students as typical nationalities enrolling on their vacation language programme.

Meanwhile, the USA and Canada attract a range of student nationalities. Peter Maximilian of the Language Academy in Fort Lauderdale, USA, lists Italians, French, Spanish and Japanese as typical enrollees, with Italians and French comprising around 45 per cent of enrolments.

In France, Roger Akoka of Ofacil confirms that the USA is a requested destination among clients, but underlines that with new visa interview requirements, there are problems. “It is a three-minute interview but it takes three weeks to get an appointment [at the embassy],” he says. “We have sales [to the USA] that we have to turn down. If students really want the States, we’ll try to [speed up] the procedure, but otherwise it’s a lost sale.”

German agent, Heiner Giese, of Offährte Sprachreisen in Germany, adds that Canada and the USA are popular among European clients “but inconvenient for a two or three week stay”.

In Australia, Twelves relates that one tactic she has employed is booking families for the entire period from July to September and guaranteeing families the income for this period. “This can help with loyalty at busy times,” she says.

Salzmann at Becari language school says that, in the peak season, their students also lodge with family and friends who do not usually rent out rooms in their houses. “Accommodation is difficult, as the entire city centre [in Oaxaca] is overcrowded with tourists, especially in July,” he says. “We [also] work with families that are not in the downtown area, but still at a reasonable distance to school and centre.”

Evolving programmes

In the future, a focus on serious learning within the fun, holiday vacation environment will become ever more apparent, according to Cantu. She says she has noticed a trend of parents wanting their children to study for as much as possible within a packaged trip.

Evidence of this is shown by the respective popularity of two study options that she offers in Canada, one with 15 hours of tuition per week and skiing and the other with 20-to-25 hours of tuition with skiing at weekends only. Most parents choose the latter. “Parents are reluctant to choose not-so-intensive courses because they think their children are not going to make the most of their time,” she says.

Akoka in France agrees. “Parents are much more concerned by the quality of tuition and what they get for their money,” he says. “[Summer programmes] are not just ways to keep kids occupied during summer.”

Giese predicts a departure from the traditional summer vacation programme in the future. “Ninety-nine per cent of young clients prefer centres at the beach or in a capital or famous town,” he says. “We are deeply convinced that students in the future would be very happy improving their languages in any holiday resort, not necessarily in the country where the language is spoken.” □