

Summer 2023 Revisited

Most years we have a couple of days when we have rain. This year, we had a couple of days when it didn't rain. July 2023 was the coldest, cloudiest, rainiest summer ever. The two portable air-conditioners I had brought in would have remained unused had they not had a heating function. The Sports/Social crew operated their wet-weather programme, but eventually events happened whatever precipitation was forecast.

First, the words of the people we serve:

'I came to VacStuds filled with anxiety and worry, unable to seize many opportunities. Now, I firmly believe that I will be able to grasp any opportunity presented my way, despite feelings of anxiety, and I cannot thank you enough for that. I will truly treasure the memories and friends that I have made at VacStuds for the rest of my life. Despite the highs and lows this summer, the lessons that you have taught me directly and the lessons that the camp has taught me indirectly I will also certainly take with me for the rest of my life.' (A student)

'There is nothing I would want more than to work at Vacational Studies for another year. I would love to use this year to improve and prepare as much as possible in order to make next year the best it possibly can be.

Vacational Studies has been an outlet for me to be completely myself when life back home has not treated me as well. The friends, experiences, and connections I have made over the years here are unlike any other and are held very close to my heart. What you have created over the last 50 years is more than just a summer school, it is a family, and I thank you endlessly for all your work.' (A former student)

'I feel very amazed for X's self-management. I think it must be come from the experience from the summer school. Thanks so much for the encouragement and care from you and all the staff.' (A parent)

'Thanks a lot for the wonderful time the girls spent with you and your team. They are so happy and they are still in contact with all their new friends. They had a gorgeous time. Also, they loved to be without the phone. Their biggest wish is to come back next year and we try to make it possible for them.' (A parent)

'Please allow me, first of all, to thank you dearly for the wonderful experience that X was able to have at Vacational Studies. One of the very first things that he told me while heading home from the airport was that he definitely wanted to go back next summer, which is proof enough that we had made the right decision by signing him up this year. I must admit that, knowing him, I was unsure about what to expect. However, the mixture of fun, learning, and bonding has been enriching and rewarding for him, and for that we thank you greatly.' (A parent)

'I also wanted to thank you again for taking care of everything that was on my mind right away, so that I could calm down quickly.' (A parent)

'A very happy and tired X that we picked up Saturday. She certainly had the time of her life, with new friendship from all over the world. (Just as me in '92). Already talking about next year.'

There are, of course, more. These tributes are straight from the heart. Now to the Course itself:

Back in charge as Course Manager was Tom Goodwin in his 15th year with us. As a former primary school teacher, Tom has insight into the ways of children - and their parents. Several appreciated his wise words this summer.

Sitting by Tom Goodwin in the office was his Deputy Course Manager, Matt Debney, in his 13th year with us.

In charge of the teaching side in 2023 was Academic Manager Joe Wallis in his 16th summer with us. There was also Neal Caplin in his 10th summer now with the title 'Sports/Social Liaison'. Stephen Luff became Senior Teacher, now in his 2nd year. As teachers, Ashley Simpson returned for his 3rd year. Newcomers were Fiona Joyce, Owen Braithwaite, Gary

Eaton, Aitken Pearson, Beata Kucharska-Pik and Francesca Alsina-Reynolds. We look forward to seeing some back again.

Paddy Douglass was back as Senior Sports/Social Organiser in his 5th year with us. Sports/Social Organisers were Louise Gogstad for Mary Hare in her 6th year, Josh Gray for Douai-Elstree in his 3rd year. Ellyn Roberts for Cheam in her 4th year, and Benedict Smith in his 7th year. Sports/Social Assistants were Rafael Martínez Quiles for Douai-Elstree in his 7th year and also a qualified lifeguard, Julius Baumöller for Hawtreys and also a qualified lifeguard and drone-operator par excellence in his 3rd year with Michelle Pretka in her 7th year, Toby Douglass for Cheam in his 2nd year with Sofia Martinez-Villaseñor in her 6th year and also Assistant Matron, Adriana Tur Mari for Mary Hare in her 8th year and very newcomer Felix Hunter in his 1st year – uniquely who was never with us as a student. He became fully VacStudised after a day or so and is now fully-fledged in the ways of VacStuds.

Returning after six years and in her 2nd year as Matron was Madalena Tavares. With several hospitalisations, her skills were constantly called-on. The queue for medications in the mornings and evenings stretched well past the Medical Centre and are a sign of how conscious of health parents are. Many of the pills that children were told to take may not have been of much practical help, but our instructions were to administer, so we did.

Catering was in the hands of Mary Hare's Head Chef, Nick. He and his staff put on special meals at a moment's notice and almost everyone loved the food. My favourite dish this year was the mussels in broth that could have graced any 5* restaurant. He and his staff complimented our children on their manners, their ability to say 'please' and 'thank you' and for their willingness to come and compliment them on their work.

Ian Wright, in charge of maintenance at Mary Hare, also spoke to the everyone thanking them for the way they were behaving. Those at the School could not have been more helpful. Sam and Patsy on the domestic side told me how happy they were to see us back. This was a view echoed by my main contacts with the School, Louise Gore and Peter Robson. They know the place their School has in the hearts of those who visit during the summer. Louise asked me if she could share my pictures with the children who are at the School during the year and I was happy to agree.

We had two 'Audiences With'. One was with Robin Askew, the newly-appointed Principal of The Mary Hare School who talked about the school's history and its place in the education of the deaf. As the person with the longest connection with The Mary Hare School of anyone there (with the exception of the wonderful Cath in the kitchen), I was able to recount my experience of the sound-absorbent dining hall flooring which I personally cleaned after our first summer in 1982 when the then staff were hunting for reasons not to have us back. I told Robin how open VacStuds is to connections with his pupils. We shall see.

We also had 'An Audience with Oleg Ots'. Oleg is an actor in Moscow and told us what his acting life is like. It was very strange to have someone who was with us thirteen years before as a child free to come and go, now lucky to be able to travel because of the political situation. The discussion became (shall we say) wide-ranging.

Yannick Mol visited us as he has several times in his capacity as Jörg Weise Association representative.

In a year in which youngsters were inside more often than usual, coughs and colds were bound to spread. They even spread to me. Unusually, Tom Goodwin was ill for some days and I was ill for some weeks. I told the children about sneezing and coughing into the crook of the elbow and not using cupped hands, but from my observations, I think this is an exercise we shall revisit in 2024 and make using the wall-based hand-sanitizers which are all over The Mary Hare second-nature. Our first-ever Prefect, Doctor Tanya Fernández Fernández, also came back to visit. I should have seen her professionally.

This year's UK Rep was Imogen Ambrose, surprisingly not from Norwich School, who seem to have lost interest in the connection we have had for the last 40+ years, but from Pangbourne College. Our male UK Rep – now to be the UK/EU Rep as we shall set our sights way beyond East Anglia – was Magnus Svenningsen from The Faroes. He will reprise the role

(with cartwheels, no doubt) in 2024.

Head Mentor this year was Eyze Eenhost (Netherlands). His mature demeanour and impeccable English while chairing meetings tells me a glittering future awaits. For the foreseeable future, he and I hope it will be with VacStuds.

The prize for Academic Excellence was awarded to Edoardo Mersirca (Italy.)

As a final Board Meeting activity, I asked the students to write on themselves the report that Tom and I would write on their social behaviour during their stay touching on their sociability, willingness to participate, co-operation, how they developed and so on. For the modest ones, this was tough and some reports were remarkably brief. Others had a pretty good idea what they are like. That the Course calls on our young visitors to push themselves forward entails, for some cultures, a re-think and for all, the willingness to leave their bubble and dare a new language and new experiences. Most manage to do so.

As part of the post-Covid recovery, we reverted to the idea of having an Apprentice for each of the Houses, one for the first two weeks and another for the second. For Cheam, we had Haakon Lindstad and Josefine Gogstad (both from Norway); for Douai-Elstree we had Stella Haagenen (Norway) and Paula Zanti (Spain); for Hawtreys we had Madalena Valente (Portugal) and Andrea Di Liddo (Italy); for Mary Hare, we had Charlotte Ehret (France) and Stefano Natalucci (Italy). As an Office Apprentice, we had Weronika Pik (Poland). We also had two Apprentices who could change House at short-notice – Cris Pumarola (Spain) and Luca Trucco (Italy). All had been with us as students for years. This was to give everyone a fair trial to see if they would make staff. In fact, our prior opinions were largely confirmed.

We shall revise the Apprentice plan for 2024. Prefectship will be a pre-cursor to Apprenticeship. Those who have leadership potential at 17+ should come back to us having applied for a Prefectship. Prefectship is described in 'Student Progression' [here](#). The Apprentices will stay for the Course and will be fewer in number. We have an excess of talent to draw from and know that many will be disappointed. There is nothing we can do about this. Everything has to come to an end and that includes the VacStuds experience for some.

Post-Brexit, anyone who is not a UK-national needs a visa to work here. They also need a reason to work in a field in which UK labour is not available.

The process I went through was not uncomplicated. It was also ridiculously expensive. First, I had to prove that I was a suitable sponsor. That cost £536 and an interview that was typed into gobbledegook that I was not allowed to correct, but was evidently accepted. Then I had to decide what category of visa was most likely to succeed. You can't request to bring just anyone into the country. For this I employed a specialist firm at £420. My suggestion was skilled/expert worker' as the only 'skill' I could envisage was their ability to translate. They thought this might work. Rather than pay their substantial fees to make the applications for me, I decided on DIY. The skilled worker applications were accepted by Immigration at £199 a shot. Then to get the visa each applicant had to proceed with the complicated form at €747 if you're happy to wait eight working weeks or €1046 if you want a yes/no in five working days. There is no refund if a visa is refused.

What became tricky was that they had to prove their knowledge of English by having one of a prescribed list of qualifications or apply for a NARIC letter at £140. NARIC is the UK Centre for Professional Qualifications provides official advice and support for the recognition of international professional qualifications in the UK.

I asked the three former students to submit their last certificate from us which gave an estimated CEFR grade of B2 with an accompanying letter from me confirming that Vocational Studies is a School Accredited by The British Council. This worked for two of them, but not for a young woman from Poland. Fortunately, she was able to submit a Trinity GESE certificate showing a C1 CEFR grade and an OFQUAL stamp. Her visa was granted the next day.

For the one who is older and a teacher, her degree in English from The University of Warsaw was not accepted. She had just taken a CELTA to work with us and this was accepted.

I think we were lucky with two of them. Those former students who want to work for us really should look at getting a Trinity certificate as OFQUAL is something external and recognisable.

Has it been hard work? Oh yes. I persisted with it because the student progression system I have had for decades is something special about Vocational Studies as all those who send their children to me know and I want to preserve it in spite of Brexit. Almost all our students are second-generation.

I often think, if I compare VocStuds 2023 with VocStuds 1973, that plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose and essentially this is so, but everything that surrounds it, especially parental expectations to be constantly informed, has become much more sophisticated – and instant. Everything can be captured, distilled and preserved. Adriana Tur was an ever-present and discreet recorder of everything that happened. Her mobile phone captured more than my Sony RX did and, while I could just about manage Facebook, she mastered Instagram, Flickr and Vimeo in an instant. I used to say that everyone, ultimately, sees VocStuds through my eyes, but now it's also through Adriana's eyes and Julius Baumöller's eye-in-the-sky via my drone.

For me, what started out as an English Language Course has become an experience for youngsters to grow up in and develop using English as a working language. In that everything is part of education, it's still a 'school', but it's more than that. VocStuds is an experience in life. We and parents work in partnership.

The positions of responsibility that began with Tanya's Prefectship 12 years ago have developed into a progressive structure that is inseparable from the Course itself, resulting in every member (bar one) of the Sports/Social crew being a former VocStuds student. The whole sports/social side of the Course hits the ground running from Day Minus-One. Vocational Studies is an institution that changes lives for the better. I have become this institution, but I am also human and I want it to outlast me.

Although my son, Lars, has become a director of the company, his passion is journalism and he must follow his dream. There is a man whose passion is VocStuds and whom I have known all his life. Paddy Douglass has become well-known on the Course and loves it. He will become a director and will work with me throughout the year. He may wish to head VocStuds into the next 50 years if I am unable to. We shall see...

My thanks, as always, to everyone who has entrusted me with what is most precious in their lives this summer.

Ian Mucklejohn – 17 August 2023

