

Summer 2024 Revisited

'We just got the final report for L and we wanted to express our sincere thanks for the remarkable experience our son had at Mary Hare this summer. The month-long residential course was truly transformative for him. He has returned home with a newfound confidence, greatly improved language skills, and a deepened appreciation for different cultures.'

The immersive environment you provided at VacStuds has not only advanced his English proficiency, but also broadened his horizons. He has spoken so warmly of the friendships he formed with students from across the globe, and it's clear these connections have enriched his understanding of the world. The activities and excursions he took part in were not only educational but also filled with fun and excitement, creating memories he will treasure for a lifetime.

We are genuinely thankful for the care, dedication, and expertise of the entire VacStuds team. Your commitment to fostering a positive, supportive, and enriching environment was evident in every aspect of the programme. My son's time at VacStuds has left a lasting impression, and we are thrilled with the progress he made during his stay.

Looking forward to 2025!' (An Israeli parent and former student)

'Thank you so much to you and all the staff for all your efforts to create such a magical stay at Mary Hare this summer and thank you for all the wonderful pictures you have posted that have given us some insight into the activities they have been lucky to take part in! It has been really touching and lovely to see!' (A Norwegian parent and former student)

'A is still flooding me with experiences of the last four weeks. All of them had a great time and already hours after their return they asked us if they could „do it again“ next year! Thanks for your support and the great work you and your team just did (again)! (A German parent and former student)

'M came back really excited for the unforgettable month, as every year.' (An Italian parent and former student)

'Full of impressions and new friends, we have already heard that she wants back next year.' (A Norwegian parent)

'The summer of 2024 has made a positive difference in M's life. As you say this is 'an investment that lasts a lifetime.' VacStuds creates multiple opportunities for later contacts and personal progress. My admiration and respect for what VacStuds stands for goes further than my imagination.' (A Norwegian grandfather of former students)

'The children arrived home safely and very happy (and sad to be back!). We want to warmly thank you and all staff for this wonderful opportunity. They met many new friends and learnt a lot! They have lots of stories to tell us and we feel that it was really a great experience for all of them.' (An Italian parent)

'Vacational Studies has been one of the best things that could have happened to me. Here I found a family. During this past month I had the chance to see and learn how the sports and social team works and prepare for every event and I realized how much I want to become one of them. I want to come up with new ideas, help the rest of the team, work together and spend another incredible summer in my second home. Nothing would make me more excited than to follow the steps of my mom and my aunt and work just as they did some

years ago and give the best of me as them. As I said in my public speech in Dulverton, I know that these were days that I'll remember all my life.' (A Spanish student)

'His feedback after one week: "I hate it and I want to come home asap."

...after two weeks: "It's okay and I am getting to know people."

...after three weeks: "I have made fantastic friends and I really like it here."

...after four weeks: "It was great and I want to be back next year!"

So thanks a lot to you and your team. You have made this summer very special for my son.'
(A German parent whose son will, of course, be back.)

The parental comment above is a living example of how VacStuds takes time – at least four weeks. The two and three week options are not accelerated versions of the full-length experience. I have put the comment on the application form.

So – any number of happy people - and a VacStuds 2025 that is taking shape.

How about the summer just gone? After a damp first week, the sun shone and the Course blossomed.

In charge again as Course Manager was Tom Goodwin in his 16th summer with us. Now graced with a second VacStuds baby, Alice, born on New Year's Day. Tom is a walking example of how VacStuds can change one's life.

Alongside him in the Office was Matt Debney in his 14th year who might say something similar.

Our Academic Manager again was Joe Wallis in his 17th summer. Senior Teacher, Georgios Pardalidis, was new to us, but in his element. Neal Caplin returned as Teacher/Sports Social liaison for his 11th season with us. Teachers Francesca Alsina-Reynolds. Beata Kucharska-Pik, Owen Braithwaite and Aitken Pearson came back for their 2nd summer and Jacob White, Alex Allison and Wayne Brown debuted.

In charge of the Sports/Social programme was Benedict Smith for his 8th summer. Under his watchful and experienced eye, old favourites made a reappearance, each with a twist to make it fresh. An enormous amount of work and an equal amount of passion went into making each event memorable. An instance of this is on the video of the Casino which shows the accoutrements as little works of art.

Sports/Social Organisers were Louise Gogstad in her 7th year, Josh Gray for Douai-Elstree in his 4th year, Ellyn Roberts for Cheam in her 5th year and the ubiquitous Adriana Tur – also i/c photography, video and social media - in her 9th year. Sports/Social Assistants were Rafael Martinez Quiles in his 8th summer with Douai-Elstree, Julius Baumöller in his 4th summer with Hawtreys also as professional lifeguard and drone pilot. Toby Douglass was back at Douai-Elstree for his 3rd summer now also a professional lifeguard, Michelle Pretka at Hawtreys for her 8th. Charlotte Ehret was at Mary Hare for her 4th and Madalena Valente at Douai-Elstree for her 4th. Sofia Martinez-Villaseñor was in her 7th summer at Cheam also as Assistant Matron and Felix Hunter joined us for his 2nd summer as Assistant. Luca Trucco was in his 1st summer as staff after several as student and apprentice. My son, Lars, was back for his umpteenth summer.

Back as Matron for her swansong performance was Madalena Tavares for her 9th summer with us. At her suggestion, students now come with a health form detailing any medical

issues and any necessary medication to be taken on a daily basis. Several were sent with boxes of such essentials with daily queues to the Medical Centre for doses we were requested to administer for reasons we could not, in most cases, fathom.

The native-speaking 'UK Reps' were from far-flung places this time. Liv Shemmings was from New Zealand and Magnus Svenningsen from The Faroe Islands.

The prize for English speaking was won by Rebecca Abecasis and for academic excellence by Vittoria Pisapia.

Head Mentor once again was Eyze Eenhorst who capably and charmingly chaired meetings as did his brother, Willem, on the School Council.

Catering was in the capable hands of Nick Leith and the remarkable kitchen staff who rise to every special occasion from Christmas to Valentine's. Housekeeping again was overseen by Sam Worthy and Patsy Barrett.

Ian Wright and David Gibson were on hand to help with day-to-day issues concerning maintenance. The business manager Paddy deals with is Louise Gore. Mary Hare does not provide its services for nothing. The price rise for 2025 will reflect only part of the increase to us.

There were several Masterclasses. A few were run by me along traditional lines. We looked at Shakespearian sonnets and at examples of Anglo-Saxon writing from around 900 and Chaucer's Middle English from around 1387. Neal Caplin explored the more modern terminology of Rap music. Paddy Douglass looked at accents across the UK. I have never seen the boardroom so full. A student-led session on why it is good for teenagers to work was also well-attended and, as it involved a great deal of language-use, could be described as a Masterclass. One or two of the Board Meetings were also student-led. It has become clear to me that what we offer by giving young people the opportunity to take control is rarely the case in European schools. I propose to continue this idea.

This year's hoodie is in RAF blue – a great colour choice and more fashionable than last year's VacStuds blue. It contains the names of everyone involved at the start of VacStuds 2024. One or two didn't make it to the end.

We were last inspected by The British Council in 2019. This summer our re-inspection was due. My co-director, Paddy Douglass was entrusted with masterminding this and providing the inspectors with the voluminous information demanded. At the start, one of the inspectors told his colleague 'This will be a unique inspection.' We shall discover how unique in October and I shall provide a link to the report on the website. Paddy was also in charge of work visa applications – an expensive and tedious nonsense that we have the previous government to thank for. Employing anyone from the EU is deliberately made complicated for politically expedient reasons, but we shall continue to offer sports/social employment to the most talented of our former students. We are spoiled for choice. Paddy has grown up in a time of bureaucracy and compliance and accepts both as part of modern life. Had they been around in 1973, Vocational Studies would never have started.

The reputation Vocational Studies enjoys is reflected in the trust parents place in us and I like to think that we justify this confidence in the way we deal with situations which this year ranged from a child with a cold to ten children unable to return because of two cancelled flights. The latter was easier to deal with than the former. We found that a mobile phone and a transitory childhood illness like a cold can be a toxic combination resulting in fear and panic. A paracetamol from the Matron is described as a visit to the doctor to be medicated

with the child telling the parent 'I feel terrible' and the parent telling us a hospital visit is essential and checking progress over several days. The two 'Telephone Sundays' will be from 10.00 to 13.00 only to stop such over-reactions.

I have included this in the information sheet 'Incidents, illnesses, emergencies, rolling TV news and FEAR' on the Parents' Page.

On the 'Parents' Page' this year, I included an information sheet headed 'Last Minute Essential Information' with links to everything we could think of that might help facilitate arrival and departure from packing essentials in hand-baggage in case a suitcase is lost to photographing the passport to enable the return check-in. It was easy to identify those who didn't read it. There are also those who prefer to send a question via e-mail rather than read the instructions. They tend to receive a link to where the information is.

On 3 August in the grey dawn that is 5 a.m. with a failing voice, I attempted to instruct those on the first bus to put their bags in specific places in the hold of the bus and decided that this would be the last time we offered our free service to flights departing from 10.00 to 13.00. This will change to 11.00 to 14.00 for 2025.

'VacStuds is unrelenting', I said to Paddy as we made preparations to welcome back from a cancelled flight those we had just waved farewell to. I like to think we are the best we can be. In any case, we are as good as our last Course.

Having the influence over young people's lives that Vocational Studies has given me is a huge privilege. My thanks to all those who entrust their children to our care.

Ian Mucklejohn – 02 September 2024