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Best of British summer

Melanie Butler analyses the rankings of the UK's top summer school providers based on the British Council inspection results

In the eyes of the British Council inspectors the 22 summer school operators listed on this page are currently the best in Britain. All of them rank in the top 20 per cent of schools in the country based on the results of their British Council inspections.

To find them, the *EL Gazette* analysed the publishable statements of all the vacation-course-only operators and of summer schools run by schools which admit under-16s year-round. There are of course plenty of top year-round private language schools which only take under-16s in the summer, but since we couldn't be sure if their inspections included under-16s we reluctantly left them out. It is also true, as school owners who don't make *Gazette* rankings constantly remind us, that schools are inspected only every four years, and four years can be a long time in the life of a school.

However, there is no doubt that the schools listed here are exceptional. The top, St Edmund's College Ware, the oldest Catholic boarding school in Britain, gained thirteen out of a possible fourteen points in



Courtesy Windermere School

LEARNING NATURALLY Windermere International Summer School in the Lake District mixes indoor and outdoor education

its inspection this summer. Or look at the newly accredited Windermere School, a boarding establishment in the Lake District which follows the Kurt Hahn philosophy of adventure learning and outdoor education, which achieved twelve out of fourteen points in its first ever inspection, the highest new entrant ever recorded by the *EL Gazette*.

Boarding schools

Boarding-school-owned and run courses dominate the top of the chart. All six top summer programmes are run by boarding schools, as are seven of the top ten. There are only 22 boarding schools accredited by the British Council, not all of which run summer schools, and eleven of them are listed in this ranking. All eleven are members of the Independent Schools Council, the lead association for Britain's public (i.e. top private) schools.

British parents will not be surprised about any of this. After all, British boarding schools have been educating children for centuries, are renowned for their academic standards and are governed by some of the strictest child safeguarding legislation in Europe. They also have the facilities and the expertise to run summer schools well.

British boarding schools are famous for the importance they give to ethos, the fundamental values peculiar to a school.

Private language schools

Bell Young Learners, the top-ranking private language operation, is also known for its ethos and teaching the children in its care about the vision of its founder Frank Bell. Formerly joint top of the *Gazette* centres of excellence listing and in the top 0.5 per cent of British Council schools, Bell may have suffered slightly from the 'top school curse', which sees centres falling by an average of two points on re-inspection, but it remains only one of two British chains to have its summer operation in the list. The other is Isis, which owns Bucksmore Education and UIC vacation courses.

Most of the private language school operations in the list are small, family-run businesses, such

as International Summer Club which has worked with Halebury, the famous public school, for many years, or MM Oxford, which runs only in the summer. The fact that long-established family schools such as Vacation Studies can rank alongside Harrow School's Babasco operations shows just how good private language summer operations can be. Although it is not a legal requirement, all the top private language summer schools insist of criminal record checks for all staff.

Another notable feature of the schools in this list, both boarding and private language centres, is just how many of them run operations that include native speaker English children. Heathfield, the famous British girls' school mixes the British girls from its summer camp with international girls from its summer school for evening activities. At Millfield they often mix for sports and the school also employs native speaker mentors, a little older than the students, as do Vocational Studies and Discovery Summer. For over thirty years Cambridge Language and Activity Centre has run English courses for international students along with Spanish, French and German classes for their British peers. Brighton International Summer School is based at Dorothy Stinger High school, a top-performing state comprehensive in Brighton, where international kids attend some courses with the British pupils outside the summer and both mingle for activities in the summer. ■

Top 20 UK summer schools

- 1 St Edmund's College (B)
- 2= Concord College (B), d'Overbroeck's College (B), Windermere International Summer School (B)
- 5 Bede's Summer Schools (B)
- 6 Bell Young Learners
- 7= Discovery Summer, Heathfield Summer School (B), International Language Holidays
- 10= Bucksmore Education, International Student Club
- 12= Babasco (B), EJO, International Summer School (Accord), Vocational Studies
- 15= Brighton International Summer School, Fettes CLC (B)
- 17= Absolutely English, Bedford School (B), Cambridge Language and Activity Centre, Millfield School (B), MM Oxford, Taunton School (B), UIC Vacation

B = Boarding-school-owned and run

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Summer sums up St Edmund's philosophy

It's all about the whole child,
Lee Hawkes tells *Melanie Butler*

“EFL teachers tend to be solitary. When I was teaching in London, I moved from school to school. We all did. I'd get friendly with someone when I was teaching in the West End, and six weeks later I'd run in to them teaching in Hampstead.”

I have grabbed a few minutes with Lee Hawkes, Director of the Summer school at St Edmund's College, Ware. It's the oldest Catholic boarding school in Britain, founded 450 years ago, and a permanent fixture at the top of the *EL Gazette* rankings. I want to find out why boarding schools do so well.

“When I got my first job as the EAL teacher at St Edmund's, it was a culture shock. This was an institution. A community. In a language school they just leave teachers to get on with it.”

I get the impression that the solitary Hawkes was uncomfortable at first. Until he began to understand where the focus of this community was.

The focus of a boarding school is on the whole child. “You see a child and you ask yourself: Has the child eaten? Does the child need a haircut? You see a child looking unhappy at breakfast and you send a message to the geography teacher to have a quiet word at break time.”

“The whole child. It is in the DNA of a boarding school,” says Lee. “Private language schools... see students as epistemic agents.”

My mental lexicon goes into meltdown. Lee, who mixed his time as an EFL privateer with stints running a university EAP programme and writing a PhD on acculturation in international students, tries to explain. I think he means they see young learners as sort of learning machines, where you shove language in at one end, and hope something usable comes out the other.

Hawkes's doctorate was put on hold when, in the same year, he had a second child and almost immediately, took over as Academic Manager of the summer school. “I had been academic director for some years. But nothing prepares you for this job.”



Students in a summer ESL class at St Edmund's College, where the programme focuses on the whole child.

It takes time, it takes planning it takes military precision. “I spend three hundred days a year planning this. Hundreds of pieces of paper. And then the first child arrives, and all that preparation gets put to the test...”

From there, it is down to the community. The boarding school ethos has to be instilled into every member of staff. It's not about you. It's not just about the learning. It's about the child. The child. The whole child.

Gradually, as in every boarding school, the children become a community too. “They learn more outside the classroom, than in it. I've always said that.”

But what they are learning, what they need to learn, is changing. “The traditional model of an EFL summer school has had its day. English in the morning, an activity in the afternoon, a quick trip to Cambridge on Saturday.”

The reason for this change is simple. “Their language level is much higher. Not only in Southern Europe, everywhere. Especially China. Whatever they're doing over there, it's working! The Chinese 11-year-olds we get have a higher level of English than the 17-year-olds.”

Boarding schools will adapt. When you have been around for 450 years you have seen a lot of change.

St Edmund's introduced English through other subjects, what we might call CLIL, a decade ago. Now they are working on the new ‘big thing’, based on the OECD vision of the future of education, what people call 21st Century skills.

“For parents, it's about giving your child the edge, the advantage. It always has been.”

But if it is no longer about the language, what then is the future of the language summer school and the lone language teacher?

Lee has left the solitary life, turned away, too, from the lonely life of the academic. He has become the leader of a summer school, a community, an institution.

“I know it sounds cheesy, but the reward of this job is...not when a child thanks me, they very rarely do that! It's when they see me out of the corner of their eye, and give a little smile.”

Focus on the child. The child. The whole child.



An aerial view of St Edmund's College, in Ware.