

Notes for Vacational Studies Staff Helpers 2011

These 'Notes'

are very direct and frank. I want to be absolutely straightforward with potential SHs so that they know exactly what is expected of them. Changes to the text for 2011 are in red.

What a Staff Helper is

Staff Helpers (SHs) are students returning to help us, usually at 19-22 (but we have no fixed age limits). Generally, it is not a good idea to have SHs the year after they left us as students. The posts are unpaid. Although the work is similar to that of an Assistant Staff, there are differences. Assistants are usually native English-speaking and do duties. Occasionally, an exceptional SH with fluent English may graduate to Assistant or beyond. SH posts are unpaid and there is no contract of employment. In effect, SHs are my guests. Nevertheless, we expect SHs to function like any other member of staff, be willing to work and regard the post as a 'job'.

SHs are essentially supernumerary and will be taken on only if they appear to have exceptional skills that will enhance the Course. SHs will be appointed to a particular House.

I am happy to write a reference or testimonial for a good SH, if I am asked. The experience of leadership and taste of responsibility a SH can gain at quite an early age is invaluable and likely to impress a college or an employer.

What a Staff Helper gets

The opportunity to be in charge of people; to join in with and supervise sports; to mix with native English-speakers on equal terms; to take responsibility. Accommodation and all meals are provided. SHs are covered by insurance under the same terms as our students (see the 'Insurance 2011' information sheet.)

...and doesn't get

Pay - and the cost of travel to and from Britain are not provided. The job is its own reward. It is also absolutely *not* designed as a way to provide a SH with girl/boyfriends from among the students.

What we expect a Staff Helper to have

The maturity and personality to work with older people on equal terms; a liking for people; an understanding of the aims of the Course; trustworthiness; organisational skills; initiative. Interest and ability in sports, stamina and fitness are essential, of course. An excellent command of spoken English is expected, too.

What we expect a Staff Helper to do

To see that the students are happy. They may, for example, find it easier to express their opinions to a SH than to a paid member of staff.

To spend time with students in sports, social activities, or just chatting.

To use English for *all* communication with *all* students - *even those who are from the SH's own country.*

To help sort out inter-student problems.

To help the S/SO (Sports/Social Organiser) in the mornings by going round the classes for games groups, drawing posters and charts, setting up equipment and organising activities.

Encouraging participation in games, etc. and seeing that initial enthusiasm does not wear off. Checking that competitions are played.

To join in with and supervise sports as requested by the S/SO.

To run 'hot chocolate' and the 'Club' in the evenings and take charge of the music centre (by actively supervising its use and not letting it be moved.)

To help spend the Club budget (£8 per student) on music, equipment, posters, decorations and board games.

To keep the drinks container full; to bring the hot chocolate container from the kitchen; to move rubbish bags; to shift furniture; to help set the

School up before the students arrive and do other menial jobs which are tedious, but necessary for the Course to run.

To help the Matron on a rota basis, even though this is far less fun than helping the SSO.

A Staff Helper is responsible to...

the Course Manager in the first place. The Course Manager will arrange for SHs to help the S/SO and Matron. Ultimate loyalty is to me as the person who invited you.

A Staff Helper's legal status

You are not a paid employee, so you must not supervise any hazardous activity (like swimming), no matter how competent you may be. Check with the Course Manager before supervising anything other than games. For legal reasons, you cannot supervise children on trips. You can be helpful, though.

and social status

You are to be friendly with everyone, no matter how objectionable they may be. Like the rest of the staff, you do not meet the students on equal terms. You are in a privileged position and you must not be exclusive in your relationships. Girl/boyfriend relationships breach this privilege and are not acceptable to us. Remember that the example a SH sets is followed by the students. Every action is open to misinterpretation (sometimes deliberate misinterpretation) and a SH must take care to be above suspicion.

Other people's mistakes

Learn from these rather than from your own. The majority of Staff Helpers have been excellent, but a few have used their privileged position for their own ends, rather than for the good of the Course as a whole. Below are some examples of unimpressive behaviour. While we like SHs to be charismatic, we expect them to be reliable.

Some years ago a Staff Helper was removed from his post for being found (by me) kissing one of the students. When you are 18, you have the privileges of adulthood. You must also accept the responsibilities. What the Staff Helper considered a 'relationship' is, to put it bluntly, child-abuse.

I heard from parents that Staff Helpers had told students that if they were not *actually caught* smoking, there was nothing the staff could do. However carefully phrased it is, students understand it to mean that they can smoke as long as they are not seen to do so. This is not a liberal approach. It is just disloyal. SHs are with us to follow our guidelines, not interpret them.

Staff Helpers have brought alcohol into the School for students. This is absolutely forbidden. It should not be necessary to state this. Sadly, it is. If alcohol is found, SHs can be accused.

A male Staff Helper visited a girls' dorm while under the influence of alcohol and fell asleep there. He was sent home. These were appalling breaches of trust. We do not treat SHs like overgrown children and do not expect them to behave like them. We insist that SHs are loyal to the staff - their colleagues. We will not tolerate having our reputation for integrity brought into question by the actions of irresponsible adolescents testing out the boundaries of their freedom. If this happens, we ask your parents to take you back.

Although the Course is fun, it is most certainly not a holiday. It is not a way for someone aged 18+ to return as a 'super student'.

When a Sports/Social Organiser complains about a Staff Helper it is generally because the SH is not to be found when needed. SHs must be sensitive to the needs of the staff and to the job they are doing for a large number of children.

Occasionally, SHs have seen the rôle as a 'sympathetic listener'. While friendly sympathy can be useful at appropriate times, we expect SHs to be constructive and active. For example, empathising with older students who think they are too old and that this is 'one year too many' is not constructive. Helping them get on with enjoying the Course is what we want the SH to do.

SHs have a good command of English. We expect their language to be appropriate at all times. Staff were offended by one SH's obscenities. A SH is there to help and encourage others, not show off. The SH job is not an excuse for an ego-trip. Students also resent being bossed around by those only a year or two older. A SH slapped a student. Even under provocation, this is unacceptable. I requested the SH's resignation.

On the other hand, sometimes SHs are more talented and 'professional' than some staff. SHs also have the advantage over new staff of knowing how the Course works. If a good working relationship does not appear to be happening in the first few days, see the Course Manager - and me. I need to know, too.

I tell staff that no use must be made of their position with students for personal gratification. The same applies to SHs. Adults (= 18+) with children are de facto in an 'in loco parentis' position.

Saying 'no'

This is more difficult than saying 'yes'. It's tempting to feel you are gaining popularity among the students by letting them have their way - especially if other staff have said 'no'. This is a recipe for disaster. People who always say 'yes' tend not to be respected anyway. SHs are older and must be wiser than the students. They have to show authority. This means saying 'no' - quite often. For example, you must say 'no' to requests for you to bring illicit goods into the School; you must say 'no' to romantic advances from students; you must say 'no' to being alone with a student; you must say 'no' to any situation that would not be acceptable for a member of staff to be in. Being a Staff Helper is not a 'growing-up experience'. We expect SHs to be grown-up already.

Gossip

This is likely in any small community. Confidential information you hear in the Staff Room must not be communicated to the students. The easily-won popularity one gains by gossiping is not worth having. On the other hand, you should pass on information to the rest of the staff if you know something that they should know about a student. Realising the difference between gossiping and the communication of information is part of being grown-up.

Smoking and drinking

A school is a public place in which smoking is not allowed by law. The staff often feel the need to unwind in the pub. You may not have the same need. The age limit for drinking alcohol in a pub is 18. We do not permit alcohol consumption inside the School and have a rule that no one apparently over the legal blood/alcohol driving limit is allowed there.

Trips and the theatre

In general, you are welcome to go on trips at no charge. If possible, we shall try to allocate a theatre ticket to you. In some cases our allocation of tickets is reduced and, to enable as many of the students as possible to go, we may not be able to give you a ticket. This will almost certainly apply in the case of hits like 'The Lion King', for example.

'Days Off'

The paid staff have two 'days off' during the Course. There is no such formal provision for Staff Helpers, but there is no problem if you wish to take the occasional day or evening off. When you feel the need, just see the Course Manager.

Arrival and departure

It helps if these coincide with any other SH and with the day our buses are at Heathrow. SHs normally come on the day the staff arrive (the day before the students arrive). SHs leave the day the students leave. Arrival and departure dates are arranged with me on an individual basis.

Problems

are my business. Tell me if a problem arises. I won't blame you. I also welcome feedback. It is one of the ways I learn how to improve the Courses. Feel free to communicate ideas, etc. to me - as well as 'problems'. I think I'm receptive, non-judgmental and open to suggestion. I shall be unaware of a 'problem' unless you tell me.

Your loyalty

This is expected of you. It goes to the Organisation, to the staff and to me personally. Needless to say, I also have a responsibility to you as

you have come at my invitation. I shall make a point of fulfilling this obligation.

Please remember...

that when I ask you how things are going, I am asking because I want your *honest* opinion. I can make things happen very quickly if we need to make changes. There is no point in telling me everything is all right because that is what you think I want to hear and then writing me a letter when you are back home telling me what went wrong. (It seems silly, but it has happened several times.) I want you to have as much confidence in my judgment as I have in yours. I shall assess what you say and decide what, if any, action should be taken. I know what working in a small community is all about and would not 'drop you in it', no matter what you tell me. I know that everyone is human, everyone can make a mistake and that sometimes my function is to lend a sympathetic ear.

Discontinue your application

if you think it will be too difficult to use only English and not your own language with the students; if you are a smoker and feel it will be too difficult not to smoke; if you think you will not be able to resist the temptation to form exclusive and/or romantic associations with students; **if you are not prepared to work long hours for no financial reward - please do not proceed.**

Questions for you to answer

These 'Notes' are a general guide to help new SHs as well as to give pointed advice to 'old hands'. They are quite direct - and I mean every word. I need more than just the feeling that someone will do a good job to help me make the decision about who to appoint, however. I need to know how a potential SH views the job.

To help me to assess how you are likely to function in this position of responsibility, I would like you to think about and write a considered answer to question 1. If you have already been a SH, please answer question 2. There are no 'right or wrong' answers, but they should get you thinking. Experienced SHs can write from experience. Please do not write just what you think I would hope to read. For 'SH' read 'UK Rep' if there was no SH in your year(s).

- 1 List (i) your special personal qualities (ii) skills and (iii) experience that you think would make you suitable as a SH. What do you remember about the SHs when you were a student? In what ways (iv) were they good and (v) in what ways do you think they were not good? How (vi) could they have been better SHs?
- 2 In what ways do you feel you were a good SH? How do you think you could improve? Could changes have been made to the Course itself that would have made it more beneficial or enjoyable for the students?

Your answers will, of course, remain confidential. If you wish to 'name names' or cite specific occasions, please do so. You can be frank!

And finally...

We start the Course during the morning of the day before the students arrive. This gives the Director of Studies and the Senior Teacher time for the teacher induction, the first-aid course instructors will not feel that they are pushed for time and the staff will have a day to get to know each other before the students arrive and the pressure is on.

And even more finally...

Like the UK Reps, SHs are 'on probation' for the first week. We shall assess you at the end of the first week. If you are not shaping up, we shall ask that you be repatriated. Your parents must know this proviso and be willing to repatriate you.

Applications for SHs posts must be made before 1 March. SHs will be appointed by the end of March. I cannot guarantee that there will be SH appointments every year. It depends on the calibre of the applicants.

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