

Evaluating the QUT Homestay Program – lessons learnt in providing quality services to international students

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Abstract:

The QUT Homestay Program is an essential part of the university's commitment to meet the accommodation needs of international students. Despite the importance of this style of accommodation, there is very little research addressing issues related to homestay arrangements. The program at Queensland University of Technology (QUT) was evaluated in 2002 to develop a continuous improvement framework to ensure provision of quality homestay services to international students.

This paper presents an overview of the evaluation and key lessons learnt in providing quality homestay services to international students. It will cover social and cross-cultural issues faced by providers and international students in the homestay environment, the homestay support needs, program information, policies, procedures and code of practice governing the program.

Key Words:

Homestay accommodation, program evaluation, homestay providers, international students, cross-cultural issues

Introduction: The homestay context in Australia

The concept of homestay as a support service emerged in response to the accommodation needs of growing numbers of students studying in Australian educational institutions. The projected figures for international students by the year 2025 suggest there will be more than 560 000 international students studying on shore in higher education (Bohm et al, 2002) and therefore, the need for student accommodation is likely to continue to increase (Richardson, 2002). Some of the major concerns arising with homestay accommodation may include issues such as the regulation of the industry; ethical policies and guidelines; expectations placed on providers and students; guardianship and training requirements affecting homestay.

Definition, scope and characteristics

Homestay accommodation is a term with specific cultural associations (Learning and Teaching Support Network, 2004). In Australia, the term "homestay" refers to the concept of sojourners residing with a family within a target culture (Richardson, 2003) and has been associated with bed and breakfast accommodation and international student accommodation. This paper refers exclusively to homestay within the international student context. "Homestay providers" refer to individuals or families, who offer their homes to international students for part of, or the duration of their stay in Australia. "Homestay Coordinators" refer to the Coordinator or Administrator of Homestay Accommodation Programs. "Homestay students" are international students studying in Australian institutions and include both minors (< 18year olds) and adults.

Homestay accommodation and international students

Homestay accommodation is common in secondary and tertiary institutions, particularly where there are no alternative residential accommodation infrastructures (such as QUT). It has become a popular choice among English Language Program (ELP) students and those under the age of eighteen because of individual care provided for the student and an environment that allows them to integrate into the Australian culture and language (Laffer 1997).

Although homestay has become an integral part of international education for both students and universities, there is very little research addressing issues related to homestay arrangements. At present, there is no such thing as homestay sector literature. Homestays have been suggested to offer an opportunity for fostering intercultural relations and increasing intercultural understanding (Kleppinger, 1995; Clayton, 1984). However, the role of and experiences of homestay providers and international students in homestays have been generally ignored in International and Australian literature.

Currently there is no research documented on systematic evaluations of homestays and negligible research into the organizational structures and policies of homestay programs in Australia. As the homestay industry has grown extensively over the past five years, one of the most visible impacts of this growth has been the number of stakeholders involved in the process and may comprise of students, agents, Host University, a school, academic staff and host families. It is because of this great diversity in stakeholders that a set of standards and guidelines, good practices and or code of ethics is needed for homestays. One of the most widely accepted set of standards and a system of program evaluation was first developed in the USA in 1984 by the Council on International Educational Exchange (Standards for international Education Travel Programs (CSIET) and then revised in 1987 and in 1991 to provide a set of standards across the country providing ethical conduct within the homestay student area (CIEE, 1996). The standards and guidelines set by CSIET cover the following areas of educational perspective, organizational profile, financial responsibility, promotion, student selection and orientation, student placement, student insurance and adherence to government regulations (Lewohl, 2001). In 2001, the New Zealand Ministry of Education released *Export Education: A Strategic Approach* whereby one of its "Key Initiatives" was the development of a mandatory code of practice aimed at institutions with full fee-paying international students. The Code of Practice for the Pastoral Care of International Students was subsequently developed after extensive consultation with sector representatives, gazetted and then published. The Code establishes a framework for minimum standards, good practice procedures and a complaints procedure for institutions enrolling international students (Ministry of Education, 2004).

QUT Homestay Program

The Homestay Program at Queensland University of Technology was established in 1992 within International Student Services (ISS) as part of the university's commitment to provide quality accommodation services to international students undertaking English Language Programs (ELP), University Entry Programs, Undergraduate and Postgraduate studies. Since its introduction in 1992, more than 3200 ELP students have participated in the program. Presently around 80% of all students in the program are from ELP, mainly from Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Indonesia and Thailand. Every year an average of 320-350 international students from more than 20 countries participate in the program. In the last two years 331 (2002) and 374 (2003) international students were placed in homestays (ISS, 2003¹). Figure 1 shows the number and nationality of international student homestay placements for 2003.

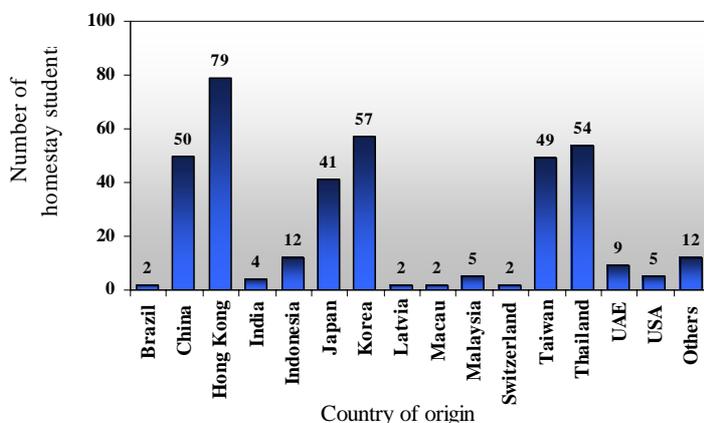


Figure 1. Number of international students placed in homestay by country for 2003

¹ Results of the ELP homestay student intake, data accessed from ISS Homestay Accommodation Database

The program's main responsibility is to place international students in a 'homestay' with an Australian family for a period of two weeks (short-term homestay accommodation) up to the duration of the course (long-term homestay accommodation) and is a significant mechanism for students to improve their comprehension and spoken English, experience the Australian culture whilst living within a homestay environment, or simply to be looked after. The emphasis of the program is on the education of the participating student, the provider, and the local community and is managed by significant processes to ensure that the students are matched and placed with appropriate selected homestay providers.

Process of arranging homestay for international students

Figure 2 illustrates the key steps taken to place and monitor international students requiring homestay accommodation within the QUT Homestay Program. The process for students begins in their home country, usually by a referral from an education agent². It is also becoming increasingly common for students to request a homestay on arrival in Australia. Through the agents, students receive an information package on the program, Airport Reception & Accommodation Forms. Information is also accessible to international students through their network (such as friends and family living in Brisbane) and the QUT International Homepage. Once a student has decided to enter the program, the following procedures are undertaken to ensure safe, appropriate and adequate placement:

- Students submit the 'Homestay Request Form' to the program which is sent to them as part of the ELP package
- The Homestay Coordinator arranges for the homestay accommodation by matching students request with the family (provider) profile
- Once the homestay is confirmed by the Homestay Coordinator, the 'Family Profile' is sent to the student and a 'Student Profile' is send to the family
- Student sends the 'Airport Reception Form' advising of their travel arrangements
- Student arrives in Australia and is taken by the contracted arrival service directly to their homestay
- During orientation students are introduced to the Homestay Coordinator

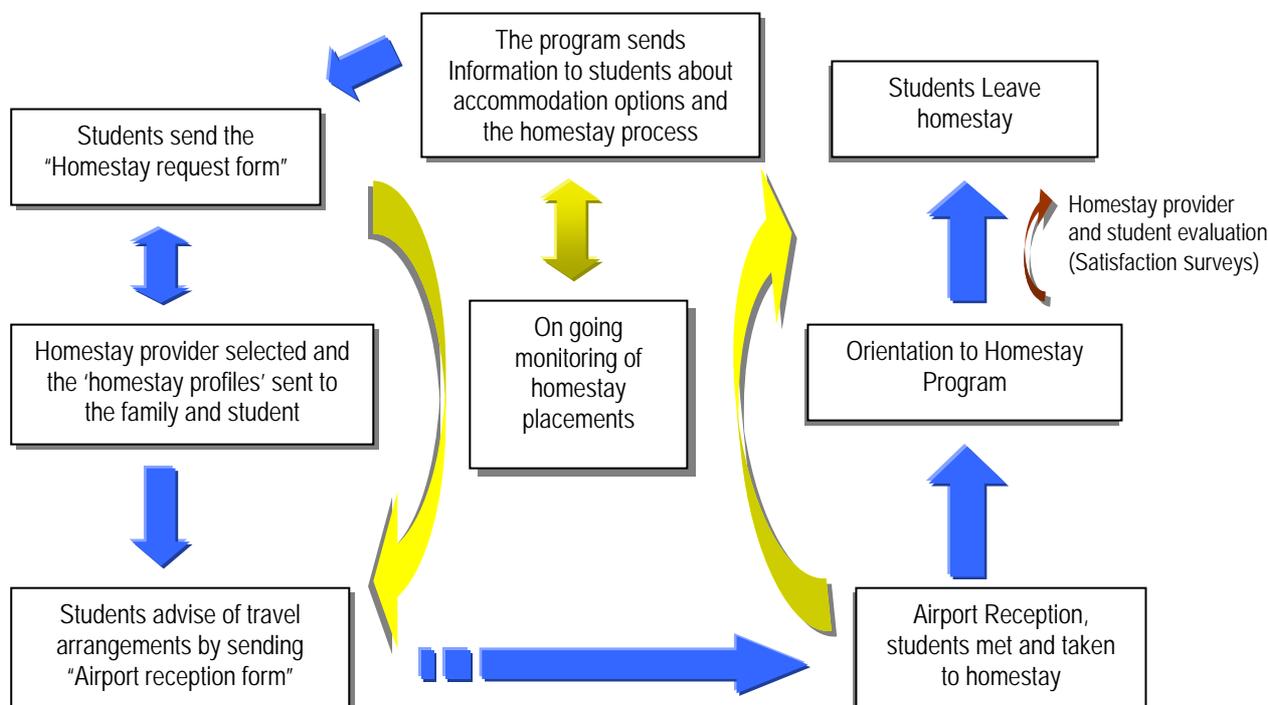


Figure 2. International Student Services Homestay Program - key stages for arranging and monitoring homestays for International Students studying at QUT

² Education agents – means the overseas education agent who engage in managing the placement of international students at QUT

The process for families or providers begins when they express their interest, usually by calling the homestay office. QUT plays a significant role in promoting the service through the Student Support Service Department and the International Marketing Office. Advertising and referral from homestay organisations or word of mouth are other effective recruitment methods. Prospective providers are sent the 'Provider Pamphlet', should they fall within the catchment area of the program. The Homestay Coordinator then interviews the providers in their homes. At this point they are given information about the program in the form of a six-page brochure and verbal information. If they are considered acceptable, a file is created with their personal details. Through the details listed on this file and those on the Homestay Request Form, students are matched to providers. At present there are approximately 250 homestay providers currently registered on the International Students Services Homestay Accommodation Database

As the student numbers have grown, some of the significant changes in the program that impacted on the quality of the service were:

- Homestay Coordinators called to check up on the international students and providers after two weeks of their placements into Homestay during the early years of the program. With the growing number of Homestay students this happens less often.
- A number of student surveys including ELP student satisfaction evaluations have been conducted to provide feedback to the program and ISS.
- "Homestay Evenings" were held as a support network for providers which in the last couple of years have ceased due to limited funding and resources as well as with the growing demands of the homestay program.
- Several homestay policies and procedures (guidelines) had been developed but not reviewed within the current context of the program

During its 12-year history, the program has not been systematically evaluated. With the increasing demand for homestays by international students at QUT, a review was conducted in 2002 to identify areas for improvement in the homestay program. The aim of the review was to develop a systematic evaluation framework³ (Patton, 1990) for homestay programs that will be used in the continuous improvement of providing appropriate, safe and quality homestays for international students.

The study was designed to examine the perceptions and experiences of homestay providers and international students regarding their needs and concerns with the homestay program. It explores social and cross cultural issues faced by the providers, international students and the program staff and examines the current policy and practices affecting homestays at QUT with a view to identifying what is a quality homestay service? The purpose of this paper is to report on the findings of the evaluation (Van Bael et al 2002)⁴ and key lessons learnt in providing quality services to international students.

Methods:

Taking an action research paradigm (Dick, 1997), information was collected using four strategies (Patton, 1990)

1. A document review of protocols, policies and procedures
2. SWOT analysis to identify gaps governing the QUT homestay program
3. Extensive consultations involving semi-structured interviews, natural groups and focus group discussions with key informants and staff of universities, homestay providers and homestay international students to identify the needs and concerns of the international students and homestay providers with the homestay and explore cross cultural experiences in homestays
4. Developing strategies for a continuous improvement framework through workshops and forums and consultations with key stakeholders

³ Program evaluation is the systematic collection, analysis, and reporting of information about a program to assist in decision-making.

⁴ Detailed study design and the report on the Homestay Program Evaluation and the development of Homestay Program Evaluation Framework (work-in progress) are available from QUT International Student Services.

Tools

The study employed a number of qualitative methods by combining natural and focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews with 20 ELP homestay students, 8 homestay providers and 5 program and ISS support staff as key informants (Table 1). A questionnaire (likert scale) was also sent to 21 QUT recruitment agents and of those 7 (30%) responded from Hong Kong, Indonesia, Taiwan, China, Korea and Japan. The interview guide/questionnaire were developed and pre-tested with undergraduate international students attending International Student Services and moderated and reappraised throughout the study in consultation with the key informants, student advisors and research coordinator.

Table 1. Number of primary participants included in the study

<i>Participant</i>	<i>Total Number</i>
<i>Homestay Students</i>	20 (10 females + 10 males)
<i>Homestay Providers</i>	8*
<i>Key Informants</i>	5
Total	33

*This constitutes eleven homestay (separate) provider

Participants

Participants (Homestay providers, ELP homestay students) were purposively recruited (Fine & Weis, 2000) through key informants and contacts at International Student Services and the English Language Program. The Homestay “student and “family (provider) profiles” from the Homestay Accommodation Database were used for selecting the provider and student participants and the characteristics of each group are described below:

Key Informants

Key informants were the reference point for this review and thus recruited on the basis of their long standing involvement with either the Homestay Program or homestay students. The key informants included two current and one past Coordinator of the Homestay Program, Director of ELP and Head of ISS who also helped with the recruitment and logistical organisation of interviews and groups.

Homestay Students

Using the ‘homestay student profile’, participants for the focus group sessions were selected on the basis of their country of origin (with three countries most represented - Japan, Taiwan and Korea), and the date of arrival. The students in the natural groups/interviews were recruited from the advanced English language classes in Queensland University of Technology International College (QUTIC) self access centre. Although Taiwan, Thailand, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Korea, Japan and China were most represented in the natural groups and semi-structured interviews, the participants were not selected on a country of origin basis but simply that they had been or were currently in a homestay.

Homestay Providers

Key informants facilitated the selection of the homestay providers for focus group discussion and interviews using the ‘homestay family profile’ Appropriateness was judged by the Homestay Coordinator who had detailed knowledge of the providers, such as their likeliness to participate, how long they have been in the program, their location and their experience.

Data collection and analysis

Two focus group sessions were held with a group of five Japanese students and five homestay providers and three natural groups’ discussions conducted with ELP students (four in each group)⁵. Each discussion lasted

⁵ Initially the study was designed to include three focus groups based on nationality with an interpreter to assist the students. One of the aims of this approach was to look at the experiences of different cultural groups. Only one focus group was eventuated and therefore, participants were recruited from the QUTUC self-access class for natural group discussions. There was a great diversity in the nationality of ELP students represented and the number was too small to gain any understanding of the experiences of different cultural groups. This was a particularly significant limitation, as cultural differences were one of the main issues discussed by both students and providers.

between 90 -120 minutes. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with three homestay students and three homestay providers that lasted between 40 -60 minutes for each interview (Table 2). For the group discussions and interviews, there were at least two researchers present and the information collected was discussed after each session. The data was then transcribed verbatim from the notes, tapes and discussions between the researchers.

Table 2: A summary of data collection tools and the number of sessions included for each research methods

<i>Research tools</i>	<i>Number of sessions</i>
<i>Focus groups</i>	<i>2 (IFG with 5 students & IFG with 5 providers)</i>
<i>Natural groups</i>	<i>3 (group of 4 homestay students)</i>
<i>Interviews</i>	<i>6 (3 homestay students & 3 homestay providers)</i>
<i>Questionnaire</i>	<i>Sent via electronic and post mail (21 agents)</i>

Preliminary key informant interviews and group discussions identified key concerns, needs and experiences of students and homestay providers with the program. The group discussions provided insights into the experiences and views of homestay. It allowed participants to share their ideas and take into account their experiences in light of the wider social context, allowing for clarification of comments and group consensus (Patton, 1990) regarding the importance of issues and possible solution. Interviews (semi-structured and in depth) were conducted to identify possible gaps in the service and suggestions for improvement to the program. The interviews with key informants were designed to develop an understanding of the way the homestay program has worked in the past and to investigate issues from an organisational and systems perspective. In addition their input was sought on problems commonly faced by students and homestay providers. Finally, the questionnaire provided information from the agents regarding accessibility and dissemination of current (updated) and appropriate Homestay Program Information.

Analysis

The data was analysed using thematic and content analysis (Patton, 1990; Berg, 2001). The information gathered was first coded by the researchers who independently noted key themes and then developed it into a list of five mutually accepted categories: social and cross cultural issues; communication issues; accessibility of homestay services; program orientation and information and; policies and procedures. Using content analysis, the recurring issues and those considered significant by the informants were further examined.

Results and discussions:

Three main areas are discussed:

- social and cross cultural issues faced by the homestay students and providers in order to develop an understanding of their needs within the homestay context,
- homestay students support needs such as the information they receive about homestay and accessibility to the program and the providers (families) issues including information they receive about the program and their learning/ training or development as homestay providers.
- the effectiveness of the policies and structures governing the Homestay Program and how it could be improved

The first part will address two key social and cultural issues faced by both the homestay students and providers in the homestay environment, namely, (a) the cultural differences arising from interactions between the parties and (b) the communication difficulties related to cultural adjustment and misunderstandings. The issues will be illustrated with participant quotes. The second part will describe two areas of homestay support needs which include (a) accessing the homestay program and support services (b) the program information and training needs for homestay students and providers. Finally, policies and procedures affecting the overall function of the program including issues surrounding the duty of care, guardianship and training needs of homestay providers and Program staff will be discussed.

The perceptions and cross-cultural experiences of students and providers in Homestay

An important aspect of student's adjustment to living in homestay in a new country is the relationship they develop with their homestay provider. This relationship frames their homestay experience. In the homestay context, both students and providers are likely to enter the homestay situation with different ideas of roles within the family and it is inevitable that the parties involved in homestay will experience varying degrees of cultural adjustment, as the homestay situation goes beyond everyday interactions. The paradoxical roles of providers can be complex (Richardson, 2002) particularly when dealing with cultural diversity in the homestay.

Although the concept of homestay provider roles is still unclear, Richardson 2002, explored the way providers perceived their roles in homestay and identified three different categories of *The Servant Role, The Pseudo-Parental Role, and The Cross-Cultural Adviser Role*. The Cross-Cultural role was referred to mostly by the providers where they are expected to have a broad knowledge of the culture, and assist the homestay student to understand cultural similarities and differences. Similarly, students also acknowledged this role of their homestay providers although further research is essential to understand and define the roles of providers within the emerging homestay industry and in international education.

Responses from homestay providers indicated that the financial benefits, the company of students and the experience of the cultural exchange as significant reasons for becoming homestay providers.

Cultural Difference

The experiences of homestay providers were diverse. While several providers did not feel they had experienced difficulties with regard to cross-cultural interactions in their home, some had encountered challenges and expressed symptoms of *culture clash* (Seelye and Seelye-James 1995). The ideological differences arising from diversity between cultures and sub cultures include the way people from the target culture interact with those of low target language proficiency (Ellis, 1994), ideas of politeness (Finegan et al 1997), and appropriate interactions within different social settings (Hofstede, 1997). The main intercultural issues identified by providers were related to food, communication barriers, differences in attitudes toward family and gender roles, cultural 'do's' and 'taboos' (including table etiquette, politeness, honesty and courtesy, and using toilet and bathroom), behaviour and moral values and privacy issues in terms of maintaining personal space (Van Bael et al (2002). During a focus group discussion, homestay providers' comments included

"Food is always an issue with homestay students. They don't like the taste of our (Australian) food. The Chinese girls won't eat salad or bread. We have been advised by the Homestay Coordinator during the interview to cook rice meals, particularly for Asian students".

"The showering culture is very different from ours, I'm talking about the Japanese girls I have had. Firstly they would 'scrub up' (scrub their bodies with a loofah) and then they would be in the shower for a long time. 'Some students could be in the bathroom for one hour...".

"The washing of the smalls (undies etc) has proved a bit of a challenge. As well as the hanging out their clothes - undies especially".

Gender preferences and maturity of homestay students were major influences for the homestay providers to decide whom they preferred (chose) as their homestay student. A majority of the providers stated a preference for females, especially Japanese females as they seem to be easier to live with and are more polite.

"Well we would pick girls over boys because they are generally cleaner and more polite. I think my wife likes it as well, she can relate more easily to the girls".

If conflicts arose, it was because of a clash between the students 'sense of fitting in' to a new homes and the provider's expectations of what the student should and should not do. For example, it was found that conflict arose with regard to who did the chores around the house. Many providers commented that some students did not know how to do household chores such as mopping and washing dishes and, in some instances, it was noted that male students in particular had difficulty with participating in any household chores.

On the other hand, cultural differences arising from interactions between students and providers were cited by students as being a significant part of the homestay experience. For instance, one student indicated that *'sometimes cultural difference can be good, but sometimes bad.'* The differences were viewed as an interesting part of the Australian experience rather than an overwhelming problem. As in Meakara's experience where she expressed that *"the only problems (I have) are cultural difference, which can be a good thing"*. Students found that aspects of family life such as food and family meals, electricity and water usage (in terms of showering, dish and clothes washing), and household rules/chores were most common issues experienced in homestays and these were expressed during group discussions:

"I am a vegetarian and sometimes they have meat on the table, which I don't like".

"...the homestay cooking was quite good. But sometimes I would like to cook for myself, but they don't really want me in the kitchen".

"They know about Chinese culture but not about Chinese food culture. They do not give me enough for my breakfast and lunch. We like to have bigger meals at this time, so I am hungry".

"I am only allowed to shower for 10 mins. It is too quick, it is not enough time to wash my hair and clean myself and everything".

"When my clothes are hung on the line sometimes my homestay father helps get the clothes off the line; it doesn't feel comfortable for me. Even my father in Japan doesn't do that".

A number of students noted that they were uncomfortable reporting problems with their homestays due to cultural reasons. Homestay Coordinators are expected to be aware of the different ways people from diverse cultures deal with problems.

Communication

Communication between the homestay provider and the student is perceived as one of the most important aspects of the homestay experience. The major concern expressed by providers was communication difficulties (or poor communication) because of language barriers. This language barrier was reported to be quite frustrating for both the student and the provider as neither completely understands what is expected. For instance,

"When the English is not the best it takes a lot of patience to get the message through".

"I must admit with the boy we have now, I am not very patient as it takes such a lot of time to explain and I'm often tired when I come home from work. For example he brought a didgeridoo and it took me so long to explain that he would have to keep the bubble wrap and the packaging for when he took it home - it was hard trying to get it through".

Communication for homestay students proved to be a multi-faceted issue, which affected various students in different ways. ELP students chose homestay because of their desire to improve their English skills and as such communicating effectively with the providers; expressing problems and interacting with the homestay provider were main concerns for many. Some the responses expressed were:

"I find it difficult to understand much about Australians especially people talking. Australians talk very fast, even in my family. When I am with my family they talk slowly when they are talking to me but when they are talking to each other they talk quickly. So they keep the conversation between themselves a lot of the time".

"The English people speak is too fast. When I went to my homestay there was a Taiwanese student already staying there that could speak good English. I didn't know what to say so I just copied everything she said. I say 'yes' to everything. I don't know how to solve this problem".

"...students have complained about not having enough interactions with families. For example the parties do not converse with each other much, or the student does not go anywhere with the family, they are just left at home". (Director of ELP)

"my homestay family helps my English because it is better if we talk. But sometimes my homestay mother and father are not very talkative".

While many providers found communication with their homestay students was initially difficult, these were often overcome by writing basic instructions about the boundaries (“house rules”) for students. Students, providers and Homestay Coordinators (KI) have all indicated house rules as being a useful strategy in preventing problems from developing in a homestay situation. The significance of setting boundaries and having clear communication is illustrated in Francine's story below.

“Once when I was a new homestay mother my male student at the time came home from a night out with two girls. They were two girls that were just his friends, and they stayed for the night. I didn't want him bringing home anyone, let alone girls but I didn't say anything. The next week he did it again. He brought home two girls and they had been drinking. They were making noise and carrying on at all hours of the night. I was furious, I felt used and violated and unsafe in my house. The next morning we had a long talk about what happened. Sometimes it's hard to set boundaries but it has to be your home”.

Others have also indicated that

“they have a list, which we give them in Japanese or Korean. The house rules include stuff about showering, local calls, international calls, about the children. It includes not showering after 11:00pm, no one to stay overnight unless we say it is OK, no couples in the room and students are not allowed to pass the key on to anybody else”.

“We have house rules but I find that it works better if you go through and explain and discuss the rules with your homestays”.

Finally, it is found that homestay interactions help to facilitate the process of the homestay students of becoming comfortable and developing their understanding of the English language (Van Bael et al, 2002). In many cases students reported satisfaction with the level of interaction with their homestay providers, especially where they are encouraged to take part in social activities with their host families (ISS, 2003).

Provider and student support needs - experiences with the QUT Homestay Program

Access to the Homestay Program

Students' responses varied in their willingness to access and use the Homestay services. These were attributed to the programs' *physical location within the university, its visibility in terms of having contacts with the university and program staff members* and *“being culturally sensitive”*.

Although a large number of students were aware of the Homestay Program, its physical isolation within the University was a significant barrier to students accessing the program. The study indicated that 92% (11/12) of students were aware of the service and of which 60% also were able to identify with other student support services such as ISS, the QUTIC Welfare Officer, and Health Services within QUT. Their willingness to access these services, however, varied among students and many were confident that they would access the service in the event of a problem. As one student stated, *“Yes, I would confide in QUT with my problem because they charge fee's to find my homestay so I think they should help”*.

Others expressed that they would use the homestay service if they had a problem but only after trying other alternatives. For example, a student said *“...when I have a problem, at first, I would talk with my friends and my homestay family and try to solve the problem myself”*. Then if it was important I would contact the Coordinator.” On the other hand, there were those who stated that they would not use the service for various reasons *“no I wouldn't talk to anyone (about my problems with homestay) because I don't like talking in English, don't feel comfortable with it”* and as a result problems faced by students were sometimes not reported back to the homestay Coordinators.

Whilst visibility was related to the program's physical location, it was referred mainly to the actual contact staff members of the program and university had with the Homestay students. Homestay Coordinators commented on this problem in relation to not being able to facilitate feedback from the Homestay students, especially as feedback is important in improving the quality of homestays. Homestay students were more likely to access and use the service if they established some sort of relationship with the program staff.

Program information and training needs for homestay student and providers

In coming to Australia to study, international students are undergoing a major life transition and therefore, the information they receive before they leave their home country and on arrival in Australia helps facilitate this process. The majority of homestay students were not able to articulate the information offered by their Agents or QUT regarding homestay or living in Australia and identified that more information on living expenses, about the Australian culture and more specific details of their homestay providers before leaving their home country would have been useful. Likewise, the providers were also aware of the lack of knowledge of international students, particularly on 'Australian way of life' and how that contributed to problems experienced in a homestay environment. They emphasised the importance of accessing updated and current information about the program.

Homestay providers received information on both the program and the students via a brochure and during the interview with the Homestay Coordinator (figure 2) at their homes. How much of this is retained by the providers, however, is unclear. Although the providers were more satisfied with the information they received, many of them had difficulty understanding the culture of the students. They reported the need for detailed information in relation to cultural issues and training in understanding specific cultures of their students. As one of the providers interviewed stated

"... we still need some sort of cultural handbook and culturally specific information about hygiene (would be useful), being polite and appropriate manners/behaviours, medical coverage ...some students aren't really aware of what happens with their medical coverage. I had one girl who bumped her head and she had to go the hospital but she didn't know if she was covered or not and neither did I".

In addition to the information given to people before enlisting as a homestay provider, continuing support and training is essential for the in on-going development as a homestay provider. The majority of providers want to ensure the homestay experience is as rewarding as possible for students. Many felt feedback from students about their experiences would be useful in helping them identify their strengths as a homestay provider and areas for improvement.

"...the problem is getting information from the students, it is very hard. That's what I would like, some kind of feedback from the students".

The students also recognised the importance of their feedback in improving the Homestay Program, especially in ensuring the quality of the homestay provider. For students to be able to give feedback, however, the service needs to be easily accessed and culturally appropriate. It was recommended that there needs to be a culturally sensitive system (protocol or procedures) in place within the program in which students can easily express their opinions and provide feedback without feeling threatened. The Homestay Coordinators found feedback to be also necessary in determining when providers were inappropriate and in guaranteeing the calibre of the homestay providers.

"If they come to us early we can work through it with the students and the families. ... But usually they let it go and things build up till the student just wants to move out".

Most providers, however, want to provide a caring, culturally sensitive homestay for students. To achieve this, providers suggested specific support for them and the students on their arrival. These were namely, to ensure a two week check-up takes place with the provider by the Homestay Coordinator, student feedback (that is, feedback sessions from students on the homestay providers), student satisfaction evaluations, homestay provider satisfaction evaluations, a detailed homestay information and homestay provider workshops on relevant cultural and training needs.

The training needs for the homestay providers and program staff were surrounding issues such as legal responsibility, health and safety, cross cultural communication, food and protocols for emergency situations or risk management. Currently there is no legislative requirement to conduct training for Homestay providers. The extent of duty of care and legal responsibility the providers should have for the welfare of international Homestay students (including those under 18 years old) is unclear and it appears that educational institutions and providers are expected to provide quality accommodation without adequate

guidelines and a clear definition for what is considered to be appropriate accommodation standards (Richardson, 2002; Larsson, 1998). Emphasis was, therefore, placed on establishing specific guidelines (Policies and Procedures) and a checklist on what to expect in homestays from both the students' and the providers' perspectives.

Policy and procedures of QUT Homestay Program

The policies and procedures which include the selection process for providers and how they are processed in relation to student placement and supervision were explored. The selection process essentially refers to the interview with the providers and how they are judged as suitable potential providers. The process used to prioritise (screen) providers and deal with providers deemed inappropriate by the Homestay Coordinator is one requiring a degree of sensitivity and expertise. A provider may be considered inappropriate if there is a risk to the student's safety; there has been a significant complaint by a student or the nature of the provider makes it difficult for students to be happily placed in their home. For example, the Homestay Coordinators mentioned that *"it was difficult to place students with single men, as most students, especially females, do not feel comfortable living in this situation. As such, we were looking at the process, formal and informal, of appropriately matching students and providers"*.

The Homestay Program and its operations were assessed by the report to be working well at successfully placing students in quality homestays (Van Bael et al 2002) despite a lack of formal policies and procedures governing its operations. A more concerning aspect was the lack of guidelines for interviewing and assessing potential homestay providers. Decisions were generally made based on practice wisdom, intuition and experiences of the Homestay Coordinators which could pose a problem for new staff entering the position may not have the historical knowledge of the different providers or the experience with some of the concern of students when requesting a homestay. Alternatively specified criteria for selecting providers were suggested but not considered feasible. As a Homestay Coordinator noted that *"...(you) try to write criteria for selecting providers, trying to fit them into a box – which you can't do"*. While a criteria for providers in this context was not seen feasible considering the diversity of homestay providers, several recommendations were made regarding policies or guidelines governing the operation of the program. These included developing a checklist for selecting and screening providers; establishing guidelines and procedures around the processes and information given to the homestay providers to ensure consistency and documenting guidelines and procedures that will assist the Homestay Coordinators in understanding their responsibilities. A further recommendation was made to include policies to outline the roles and responsibilities of the program including the homestay providers, international students and student advisors. Policies and guidelines relating to institutional and legal requirements, accommodation, insurance, code of practice and ethics for homestay were emphasised as critical to providing quality homestay placements and standards for quality assurance and risk management within the program.

Finally, young international students are considered an especially vulnerable group because of their different cultural base and in most cases, the lack of fluency in English and a lower problem solving capacity. When an individual's ability to solve problems declines, problems may grow into larger conflicts and/or dilemmas.

These issues point to the need for a clearly defined Code of Ethics and Good Practice Guidelines which, it is envisaged, will eventually form a strong foundation on which dilemmas can be identified and worked through by the providers. Along with establishing clear policies and procedures, recommendations were made to update tools such as forms, pamphlets and modes of recording (collecting homestay provider data), student and provider satisfaction surveys, more frequent use of technologies such as electronic mail and the ISS homepage, particularly with overseas agents and liaising with key players who are involved in homestay (by establishing an advisory committee or using current homestay network) to inform better choices in terms of strategies and procedures for continuous assessment and improvement of the program.

Conclusion:

The evaluation of the QUT Homestay Program has given those responsible for this service an opportunity to look carefully at many aspects of the service. What was considered to be a successful Homestay Program, had over a ten year period, relied on the experience, skills and cultural knowledge of the Homestay Coordinators. As the numbers of student requesting Homestay, continues to grow, there was seen to be an

immediate need for guidelines, policies and procedures, improved communication with all stakeholders, on-going training for homestay providers and program staff and regular reviews of the program.

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Acronyms:

CIEE	Council on International Educational Exchange
CSIET	Council on International Educational Exchange (Standards for International Education Travel Programs)
ELP	English Language Program
ISS	International Student Services
QUT	Queensland University of Technology
QUTIC	Queensland University of Technology International College

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