

**Weekend Break Program:
Encouraging intercultural community connections**

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Abstract

Exit surveys and feedback from *Returning Home* programs indicate that many international students have an unmet desire for a 'real Australian experience'. Those students that lived on their own or with other international students while studying in Australia reported that, despite completing a degree here, they had not had the opportunity to be invited into an Australian home. Related findings from *A Growing Experience* (University of Melbourne, 2006) identified that Australian universities need to take on the challenge of developing programs that connect students into the community.

This motivated La Trobe International to develop a cross cultural weekend break program to encourage intercultural community connection. The program has grown from small experimental beginnings, to one of several regularly scheduled events. They are designed to link students from three campuses to families within the community, thereby providing a contrast to their place of study and enriching the student journey. The unique benefit of the program is that it operates across three campuses; one metropolitan and two regional. Students from La Trobe's Melbourne campus who elect to participate can experience life in a rural/regional setting for a weekend break in either Bendigo or Albury/Wodonga. Likewise, students from either of the regional campuses can visit Melbourne.

Students have described this immersion into a new environment as providing 'a better idea of how an Australian family is run'; 'a new environment and an eye-opening experience [Melbourne]', and a tree-change – 'Now I can recognize different types of cows!'. The benefits are mutual, for some rural/regional families, coming from what is essentially a mono-cultural community, this program gives the opportunity to engage with other cultures. For regional students visiting a metropolitan family, they benefit immensely from a safe and friendly guided tour of the city.

This paper details the research that informed the program's development, describes its implementation and notes some of its' design advantages. It will outline recruitment including the allocation and briefing processes; explore challenges/risks inherent in running a community outreach program; and document evaluations including the excitement of the student journey.

Key words: community, engagement, connectedness, cultural exchange, metropolitan, rural/regional

Surveying the landscape

International education has been at the centre of a series of articles written in the popular press during 2008, drawing attention to the more negative aspects of the international student experience. The coverage highlights some of the social and academic challenges faced by both local and international students, including the language divide identified as a critical link to a student's ability to develop intercultural community connections.

'Connie Zhang, a Chinese student studying commerce ... said last night: "We don't really hang out with the locals. In the first few years I tried to get along with them, but it's kind of difficult. In the third year I just hung out with international students." Her friend Hua Feng said some international students lacked the confidence to speak in English. "It's a totally different world."' (Das & Jensen, 23 July, *Sydney Morning Herald*).

The above quote illustrates student reluctance, and perhaps a lack of constructed opportunities, to engage in social activity with locals. Whether real or perceived, much of the media coverage points to a deficit of opportunities for local and international students to build understanding and relationships through social interaction.

International students are acknowledged as having unique and specific needs, evidenced by the Education Standards for Overseas Students (ESOS) legislative framework. This aims to both protect international students studying in Australia and outline the roles and responsibilities of educational institutions. There are varied responses from individual institutions to student support needs. The recent media coverage alongside substantial evidence supported by the international education sector, further highlights challenges for international students. It highlights the need for institutions to provide innovative and engaging programs to enable students to achieve academic and personal growth in a new cultural environment.

Rosenthal, Russell & Thomson (2006) suggest that the majority of institutional research concentrates on international students' academic requirements rather than a holistic approach to health & well-being. Their paper examines students' self-perceptions of their health & well-being in terms of 'relating to others while living in Australian society; living and studying in Melbourne; and, health and health-related behaviour' (Rosenthal et. al., 2006: 22). The study analysed data from 979 international students' responses (from a total sample of 2,276 students). Of particular relevance to this paper is the examination of social connectedness, cultural adaptation and stressors. To summarise, the researchers identified a typical situation as an

'unconnected and stressed student ... a pattern which, in an extreme form, means that students experience their university life as unpleasant, even painful, and possibly achieve well below their capacity. With appropriate support, these students could have much more satisfying and productive experiences as university students' (Rosenthal et. al., 2006: 116).

This research suggests that social connectedness is a critical factor in the international student experience, requiring both the ability and opportunity to interact with people from other cultures. The researchers conclude that 'connectedness is a fundamental dimension of students' experience of well-being. Designing new and better ways to increase students' sense of connectedness would be of great value' (Rosenthal et. al., 2006: 136).

The social model of health is a useful framework through which to view international student issues and potential support interventions. The World Health Organisation (WHO) views health as 'a complete state of physical, mental and social wellbeing,

not merely the absence of disease or infirmity' (WHO in Wass 2000: 7). In other words, it is critical to recognise that the support needs of international students extend beyond visa requirements to include financial, personal, social, psychological needs.

There is a significant body of research that suggests that individual health status can be increased through building healthy communities. A 'health promotion' styled approach to supporting and enriching the international student experience, emphasises (amongst other things) the need to create connections between international students, the broader student community and the broader community.

International travel and displacement within a new culture has a significant impact on an individual's identity. Nadarajah explores the concept of globalisation and its influence on 'people's sense of identity, their experiences of places [as well as its] impact on the shared understandings, values, desires, myths, hopes and fears that have developed around locally situated life' (Nadarajah, 2005a: 67). Engagement between visitor (or international student) and local involves considerable cultural exploration and a coming together which can, at its best, be transformative.

The benefits of forming meaningful relationships with others is outlined in the work of Froma Walsh, a Professor of Social Services Administration and Psychiatry (University of Chicago) who believes one of the key factors of resilience is finding purpose outside oneself through beliefs that transcend the limits of personal knowledge. Walsh states that,

'a transcendent value system enables us to define our lives and our relationships to others as meaningful and significant. Just as individuals prosper within significant relationships, families thrive when connected to larger communities and value systems' (Building Resilience 2008).

The relevance of this to international students particularly, is that many of them have left behind their support networks of family and friends, and need to take on the challenge of developing new connections and relationships within their new communities. According to Walsh, we are more able to navigate interpersonal challenges 'when we have the hope that comes from continuity and purpose outside our own experience' (Building Resilience 2008). Walsh concludes that 'without this larger view, or moral compass,' she says, 'we are more vulnerable to hopelessness and despair' (Building Resilience 2008).

La Trobe International (LTI) has a strong commitment to create and promote opportunities to students that increase confidence and connection to campus and broader community. Survey data showed that students craved for a 'real Australian experience.' This point is echoed in newspaper coverage documenting the experience of 21 year old Elizabeth Lai, Singaporean student studying at University of Melbourne, who is not alone in lacking connection with local students and communities. Lai reportedly felt her time in Australia lacked opportunities to meet locals.

' "I was looking forward to meeting more Australian friends, but it's hard," she said yesterday. "Because of language and cultural differences, it's really difficult for international students." (Smith, 2008).

It is critical to recognise that there are multiple international student experiences, varying between students, campuses, and between metropolitan and regional areas. Many papers have been written on building cultural communities, on academic and classroom issues, and on enhancing student communities on-campus to improve the international student experience. This paper, however, documents a program that

encourages engagement and connection between international students and the broader community.

As previously stated, the research findings documented in *A Growing Experience* (Rosenthal et al., 2006) identified that Australian universities needed to take on the challenge of developing social connectedness programs. The principles underpinning the Local-Global program (2005b), in bridging the metropolitan/rural divide by engaging students with rural communities, were also a key influence in the development of a new program. LTI saw a need to augment the educational experience of students, to give them a richer Australian experience.

In 2002, in addition to a suite of support based programs, LTI sought to develop and implement a targeted program that was financially viable and utilised a network of campuses from both metropolitan (Bundoora) and regional (Albury-Wodonga) settings. The *Weekend Break Program* was created and the result was a cross-cultural immersion for the brave and curious. The program offered students a break with an experience completely different from the University environment, and one that would encourage meaningful connection with others. The *Weekend Break Program* has grown from small experimental beginnings, to a strong component of LTI international student support programs.

Weekend Break Program

The *Weekend Break Program* is organized by the cross-campus Student Life Team and funded by LTI. Each campus draws hosts from the local community, to offer hospitality to students for a weekend. The advantage of the weekend for facilitators, students and hosts is that it is short term and not during work time. For students, it replaces what may be missing - a weekend 'at home'. It is a manageable commitment for hosts - only two nights and a guest or two for a weekend, particularly as hosts are encouraged to do usual family activities, which can take on an interesting dimension when shared with someone from another culture.

For LTI there are three clear and positive outcomes of the program. Firstly, connection with community by strengthening existing links with hosts or developing new relationships. Secondly, it creates awareness of university programs through campus visits by hosts and students (there is anecdotal evidence that such incidental visits to a campus can later result in enrolments or involvement with the university, a less anticipated, but appreciated outcome). Thirdly, the program adds an invaluable dimension to the students' educational experience.

Exit surveys indicate high satisfaction with the experience - for some it is the highlight of their time at university: 'It was really, really fun! I did not expect the host family to be so nice and eager to meet us'. At the outset, the program information states the hope that participation will plant a seed of friendship. A relationship that lasts beyond the weekend does not always eventuate but, for some, a significant friendship *does* result from the program. Student and host feedback indicates that considerable personal growth and mutual understanding is gained from participation.

Many international students are focused on the post-student phase of their journey. Students seeking permanent residency at the conclusion of their studies are affected by changes in 2008 to the Independent (Residence) Visa Subclass 885. To take advantage of the provision of extra points for Australian work experience and English language ability, there is further need for students to be better acculturated and connected with community, in order to obtain paid work related to their studies in Australia. The *Weekend Break Program* can assist the changing face of international student needs, acting not only as an enriching weekend break from studies, but also as a resource for students, providing an opportunity for students to interact with

locals, building their connection with community and providing meaningful ways for students to increase English language proficiency. This may ultimately contribute to students developing further skills to secure employment needed to satisfy skilled migration requirements.

In 2008, the program scope broadened to include a third campus, it became one metropolitan (Bundoora) and two regional campuses (Bendigo and Albury-Wodonga). For logistical reasons and host availability there is a limit on student numbers but the program is open to students from all campuses to stay with hosts recruited at another campus. In this particular year, however, the greatest interest in the program came from Bundoora students. Perhaps metropolitan students having greater need for constructed opportunities to engage with locals; that despite being surrounded by people, genuine engagement can be less frequent. In addition to being curious about regional Australia, metropolitan students from urban backgrounds generally have less knowledge of how to travel to and function in rural areas, and possibly, in some cases, have some fear of the countryside. Students frequently comment on the perceived danger of isolation in a sparse population, the vast horizon and lack of light at night - they may feel the need for a *guided* regional/rural experience. Students from regional campuses, on the other hand, are likely to have come from a large city and know how they operate. Many visit Melbourne with friends.

It has been observed that at the Albury-Wodonga campus for example, where the ratio of international to domestic students is small, international students have domestic students as friends and speak English 'most of the time'. In 2008 there was no interest from regional students to participate in the program. It could be said that they have less perceived need to engage in a constructed homestay break.

Demographically speaking, from its inception in 2005, the program has been particularly popular with students from South East Asia. This may be due to a cultural preference for organised group activities. Thomson, Rosenthal & Russell (2006) report that 'students from Asian countries report [the feeling they do not belong, to a considerable or great degree] significantly more often than other students'. This research positively frames the higher number of students from Asian countries accessing the *Weekend Break Program*.

Immersion in a new environment provides students with 'a better idea of how an Australian family is run', 'a new environment and an eye-opening experience', and for metropolitan students, a tree-change, 'now I can recognize different types of cows!' For regional students who may visit a metropolitan host, the benefit is a safe and guided city experience. The benefits are mutual, for some rural/regional families, coming from what is essentially a mono-cultural community, the program creates the opportunity to engage with other cultures and to expand horizons.

Hosts at Albury-Wodonga were drawn from members of the local Landcare group and the weekend included a tree planting day. Landcare benefited by having student assistance with re-vegetation projects and the weekend fulfills Landcare's mission to educate people about environmental issues. When asked to describe what they learned that they didn't know before, student feedback resonated with the values of Landcare. Responses showed they learned about protecting the environment, sharing resources, and the interconnectedness of peoples' lives. One student said 'I learned that people are contented with what they have, they make full use of everything and make the best of what they have. They are friendly and ever ready to share. They have a passion for nature.'

Participating in this program gives many students a first visit to a rural area in Australia. Many international students are urban dwellers and have very little

knowledge of country life. For students participating in the Albury-Wodonga tree planting project, living for a weekend on a farm was rich and challenging – ‘tree planting took six hours in sunny beautiful landscapes’, and ‘just the farms make you go gaga’. For most, planting trees was a physical challenge, they were surprised by the time it took and the extent of the project. On one day 2,500 trees, of a larger 18,000 tree-planting-project, were planted. The students were able to make a lasting and valuable contribution – there was lots of discussion about coming back to visit the trees and see the progress.

For students visiting regional/ rural areas, lack of experience with animals can be an issue, particularly when allocating students to hosts. Students had experiences ranging from ‘going to the wildlife park, helping to feed wombats and see how injured animals are nursed’, to seeing kangaroos and riding a horse. Many students enjoyed spending time on farms; they learned about farming and gained an understanding of water issues. They marveled at the fact that many hosts had built their own houses, one student remarking that ‘I’m very surprise because my host family can build their house by themselves’.

Making the journey

Evaluation of the program was developed internally and administered using an on-line survey tool. For the 2008 program, each participating student and host in the program completed the on-line survey at the conclusion of the program, with a total sample of 36 respondents (24 students/12 hosts). Participation in the survey was voluntary and anonymous. Survey data was collated and the qualitative data analysed using thematic analysis, allowing for exploration of the participant experience and identification of key themes (Aronson, 1994). Several key themes emerged from the data including: cultural exchange, community connectedness and relationships.

Cultural exchange was one of the main drivers for hosts’ involvement in the program. Hosts reported the most enjoyable thing about hosting students was ‘sharing the experience & learning about similarities/differences’ and said the students ‘display acceptance and honesty.’ Hosts commented on the many questions students asked about a huge variety of subjects and the subsequent need to interrogate one’s own cultural values. One student offered a valuable and confronting insight - ‘the greatest challenge was to share cultural experience to my host family because I just realized that I did not know my country that well.’ Students advised that future participants should ‘get to know your country better then you can share it with the host family’.

Students learned new Aussie slang and jokes. They commented on the Aussie sense of humour, advising future students not to ‘take everything too seriously - relating to the jokes Australians prefer to make’. One host farmer was quite a joker. He knew that some students were worried about dogs and greeted them by saying ‘right, I need to inspect your teeth before we head off. I don’t want any of you biting my dogs!’ The students’ jaws dropped and then, as they saw his huge smile, they got the joke! In any interaction there are possibilities of misinterpretation and both students and hosts need to navigate through this cultural minefield. That is part of the challenge of the weekend. Hosts and students are provided with basic cultural information; it is then up to each participant to negotiate the cultural exchange. Many students said that the greatest challenge was ‘to express myself with the correct English terms’ and ‘to speak English for a whole weekend’. Despite this, many students believe that it is invaluable experience and encouraged future students saying ‘don’t be shy, communicate with others as much as possible’.

Food, the great intercultural connector, can be a challenge for hosts, who whilst worrying their guests may not like what was provided were also delighted, when the

guest enjoyed what was offered or better still they all cooked together. Some students actually cooked for their hosts who very much enjoyed their 'international dinner'. A student reported on how their host overcame the problem of what to offer by displaying 'the different kinds of breakfast I can have each morning'. In one household, students and hosts prepared and shared food from Bhutan, China, and Australia.

When participating in a program like this playing cultural detective can be very revealing – consciously observing and questioning to clarify interpretation of behaviour. A host reporting a student's cultural detective work reflected that they took 'the students to what seemed to me the most boring hockey match with few spectators and little action! It emerged that the students [in fact] observed Australian family life at its best - watching the interaction of a young family that were sitting nearby. Very different from their own culture apparently'.

Some participants are skilled at cultural detective work and others less so. For example some students commented that it was hard to make decisions about what activities to do – they felt that the hosts were not sure what activities to suggest. Differences in cultural decision-making styles may have been a factor. Providing succinct information on cultural styles, whilst avoiding stereotypes, can be difficult. When facilitating, it can be a delicate balance to provide adequate preparation and yet also encourage individuals to have an experience that is not overly mediated.

Community connectedness and engagement was another strong theme that emerged from the data. Many students cited their main reason for joining the program was 'to meet new people' and to 'spend time with a family'. A student commented that their host 'treated me like their own family member', an experience missed during time spent away from their own families. One student reflected 'it is so warm and nice, especially for us leaving home for study here'. Hosts made efforts to ensure students felt connected to the host group and community they were placed with, one citing 'after just one day the students seemed like part of the family, helping with the cooking, cleaning and conversation'. This is a valuable experience for any traveler, but especially a young person living so far from home. Student feedback also showed they most enjoyed the opportunity to 'get to know other people and share experiences with each other' and 'talk about different issues with the family'. Others really valued 'the company, friendship and their welcome.'

In some cases an ongoing relationship is built between host and student(s). For others the program is simply a much appreciated break from university routine. Many students have kept in touch with hosts by email and have returned for visits and family get-togethers, and some even return with their own families during the Christmas break. Others meet up occasionally in Melbourne for meals or coffee. Some students include their friends in the network - for example a student participant in the 2007 *Weekend Break Program* in, so loved her experience on a farm that she returned with a friend over the Christmas break before returning home to Vietnam. Now the friend keeps up the connection and is still visiting the family.

In 2008, 100% of hosts reported the intention to keep in touch with the student(s). This is an originally unintended but highly significant outcome of the program. There are of course others who enjoy the weekend, but do not establish long lasting friendships. From observation and feedback, it is often the simple acts that bring about the greatest connection, such as preparing food together, looking at family photographs, and talking about travel and local customs. At the conclusion of the program farewells can be prolonged and emotional. For example, a Chinese student was so overwhelmed during the farewell at the railway station that she cried on the platform and was the last student to get onto the train. Cultural expectation aside, the appreciation expressed by the students is echoed in the gifts and cards they give

their hosts and the feedback they give. Future students are advised to 'be excited, don't worry about being not treated well. The host family is just as excited as you are, or a lot more than you'.

A secondary aspect of community connectedness is the student friendship network that develops. The excited bubble of talk as students meet up on the return journey is an indicator of a good time. Students report that they share experiences on their home journey and swap contact details. Students often comment on their enjoyment of meeting other students and a desire to continue these new friendships with students that live locally.

Launching pad

A successful program requires certain essential elements – reliable hosts, enthusiastic students, consistent and detailed communication, and sustainability. Hosts are the key to program sustainability; ensuring hosts are well informed and supported is critical to ongoing involvement with the program. Highlighting benefits to hosts and their community of interest is likely to generate and sustain enthusiasm for the program. Giving hosts the right information is crucial, particularly the itinerary and cross cultural information. Instead of asking hosts to attend a briefing session, the information is given to them in written format via post or email. Hosts are usually busy people so it is important to keep the process simple – limit unnecessary paperwork or meetings.

Host recruitment is an interesting and inspiring process. Finding people who are prepared to take a complete stranger into their home for the weekend can be challenging. In regional areas it may be easier to recruit hosts because of the often high level of university staff engagement in the local community. It is a testament to people's warmth and generosity that, in all the years this program has run, there have always been enough hosts. From the organiser's point of view it is helpful to identify a target group for host recruitment. Staff from the university are an obvious target, however may not always be the best people to host students. Students are looking for friendship, not an extension of university experience. In the early years of the program, links to hosts were made via local secondary schools.

In 2008 when Bendigo Campus joined the program, Bendigo hosts were drawn from groups with previous involvement in host programs run by other university units, including having hosted visiting scholars for 10 weeks. All currently participating hosts involved indicated a desire to be included in the program next year. The criteria for a suitable group connection is specific in that the group should be non-political or religious; offer students a different experience from their usual environment; and above all, the group should benefit from the hosting experience. Landcare, a voluntary organization concerned with protecting and repairing the natural environment in Albury-Wodonga fit the criteria. The Albury-Wodonga weekend was promoted to students as an opportunity to meet regional people, learn about Australian family life and participate in a planting project improving the environment.

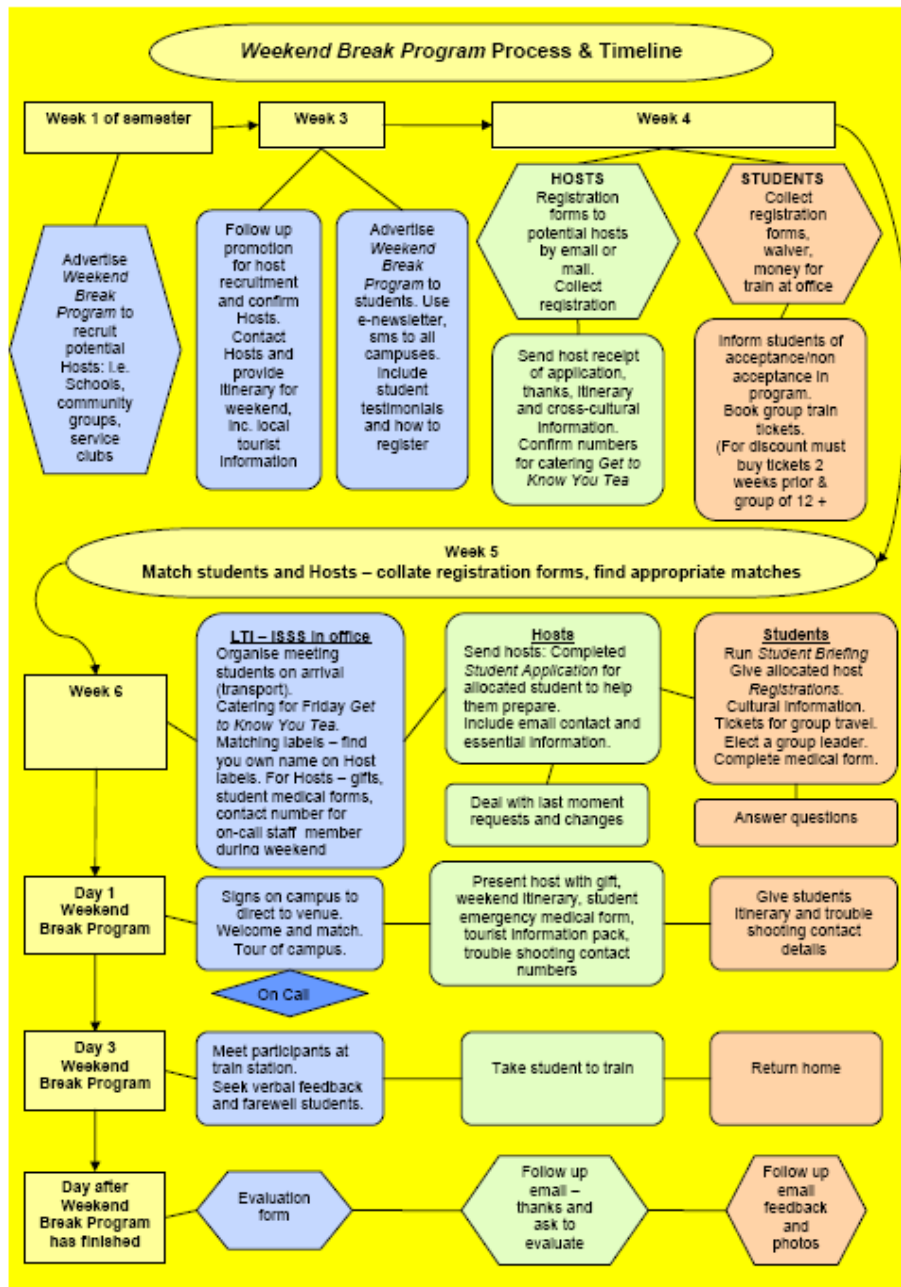
It is essential that the initial information explaining the program entuses potential hosts. This information has been changed over the years to reflect concerns raised by hosts. For instance, in the first year it became apparent that it was important to differentiate this program from other exchange programs – some misinterpreted the program and were reluctant to host students for long periods or to host students in a quasi parent role. So ensuring the information emphasised that this program was for students over 18 and for only a weekend was important. The buzz words that people have responded to are: weekend, international, social, regional/rural, cultural exchange, and welcoming community.

There are of course risks for both host and student to be considered. Going into the home of a complete stranger involves trust and potential risk. It is understood that the students are adults and are participating in the program voluntarily. The University takes duty of care seriously and used a waiver prepared by the University legal team, and included a police record declaration on the application form. Both parties receive information about the weekend (see figure 1) and key medical information. Students are able to apply in pairs which gives a sense of security. Hosts also often find this easier because two students keep each other company.

The timing of the weekend is crucial. As potential hosts may have children it is important to choose a weekend that doesn't clash with major holidays. From experience, May and September have been the best months to run the program. From the student point of view it is important to choose a weekend that avoids peak assessment periods, such as weeks five or six of semester, exams and holidays. There is also a need to be aware of local conditions that could impact on hosts.

The flowchart (figure 1) visually represents program design and process and is intended to assist adaption of the program.

Figure 1



Conclusion

Media coverage of international student experience in Australia highlights language as a barrier to communication and a cause of student isolation and dissatisfaction. Rosenthal et al. (2006) challenge education providers to include focus on international student well-being, alongside academic success, and to create opportunities for international students to engage with others. Formal and informal evaluation of the *Weekend Break Program* indicates that participants feel connected to others as a result of participating in the program. In addition, students can develop and practise communication skills in a supportive setting. Comments from all participants reflect a desire for cultural exchange. In the words of a student, 'we can overcome the culture differences if peoples put an effort to'.

The program encourages international students to develop meaningful relationships and connections to experience the benefit of what Walsh (2008) describes as 'hope that comes from continuity and purpose outside our own experience'. The friendship and welcome into a home fills a gap created by leaving family and community behind. For many students, participating in the *Weekend Break Program* can create a positive memory for life. Students and hosts both learn through the process, sharing individual perspectives, the excitement of a new experience in their journey, and unique moments of cultural exchange. Students and hosts develop new understanding of local and international culture; many remain in contact through email or visits. The program is a positive contribution to the health and well-being of participating international students.

The learning from this program can be applied in many settings; regional, rural and metropolitan areas. Program sustainability should be a consideration when identifying potential hosts. To identify and source potential hosts/groups providers could audit existing connections with community, perhaps revealing connections to other areas, such as service clubs or schools that would be willingly involved. Local shire councils could be approached for a potential partnership or to identify a possible relationship with other councils to facilitate a metropolitan/regional exchange. After six years the program is still developing, untapped potential is evident both within the program and in the scope to extract and apply the essential elements to other areas of program design.

The *Weekend Break Program* provides students with the chance to make connections outside their immediate sphere and to experience activities that would normally be far removed from a student's planned priorities. La Trobe International views the *Weekend Break Program* as integral to university efforts to successfully engage international students, and encourages them to experience the transformative possibilities of intercultural community connections (Nadarajah, 2005a). A student reflected on her powerful experience - she 'felt warmth and there were no barrier between us even though it might be the first time we met'. And in the words of another student, 'I will remember this trip for life'.

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