

Homestay Hosts of Saudi Students

Focus Groups

Four focus groups were conducted as follows:

2nd March 2009 Gold Coast Participants - 16

3rd March 2009 Newcastle Participants - 9

4th March 2009 Sydney Participants - 5

5th March 2009 Melbourne Participants - 20

Total – 50 Participants

The one hour focus groups were conducted by David Bycroft (Australian Homestay Network) over a four day period. Participants had no knowledge of other participants taking part and all participants were provided through different homestay supervisors. The questions being asked at the focus group were not made available to the participants prior to the focus groups. Representatives of the homestay supervisors for those hosts participating were present to view their group but were not permitted to participate without invitation from the facilitator.

The focus groups aim was to develop insight and direction, rather than providing precise measures. In one location (Sydney) there were only 5 participants however this did not detract from the quality of the information received.

The participants in all focus groups were active in giving information and answers in a very open and relaxed manner.

The purpose of the focus groups is to obtain the perceptions, opinions, beliefs and attitudes of the hosts with respect to Saudi students in homestay.

The understandings gained from these focus groups will be used by ISANA, AEI Dubai and the Australian Homestay Network (AHN) to improve communications and training with both Saudi students and Australian homestay hosts.

Participants – Their Background

Participants generally were either in the process of hosting a Saudi student or had recently hosted a Saudi student. There was a cross section of older host couples (55+) (approximately 50%), middle aged host couples (40-55) (approximately 35%), single female hosts (approximately 10%) and single male hosts (approximately 5%).

Why participants participated as a homestay host:

The ability to earn tax free money is seen as the key driver for participants becoming involved in homestay; however there is a trend where in most instances this is being overtaken by the opportunity for cultural exchange (this was evident particularly in Newcastle where there has been an extra effort put into host education specifically for host taking Saudi students). Empty nesters/rooms/loneliness is also considered a key driver. This supports the need for a homestay student to be interested in the cultural exchange aspect of the program and also be prepared to participate in establishing an interest in the host and meeting their expectations.

Summary of reasons given that the hosts participated in homestay were as follows:

Gold Coast

- Money
- Love the interaction with students
- Cultural experience

- Something to do
- So their son can interact with students from other cultures
- Brings something extra into the home
- Give back homestay experience to other students as host was a homestay student once in Australia and now lives here
- Social experience
- Company in the house
- Makes it fun at home having students

Newcastle

- Cultural experience
- Enjoy having younger people in the house
- Originally for the money now for cultural experience
- Help and support other cultures
- Keeps the host young, fit and with an active brain
- Strong philosophy of volunteering
- Teaching/learning cooking and helping to teach English to students

Sydney

- Money
- Like to share different cultures
- Helps pay the bills
- Cultural experience

Melbourne

- Money
- Helps pay off the mortgage
- Company
- Relevant to social trends and appreciation of total package/education package
- Missed the stimulation of having young people in the home
- Had empty rooms to fill
- Love having a full house
- Security with people in the house
- Hated the empty nest
- Cultural experience
- Interesting conversation at the dinner table
- Able to afford to go away for breaks/holidays

The above has been presented by region to highlight the similarity between regions for the reasons that homestay hosts participate in homestay. With respect to the Newcastle region where considerable effort was evident with respect to Homestay Host training for Saudi Students there was a stronger sense of cultural exchange.

QUESTIONS, KEY FINDINGS AND RESPONSES

All of the focus groups were facilitated by using the same questions. Below are each of the questions and a summary of the key finding for each question.

These are not presented by region.

1. What did you find enjoyable about having a student from Saudi Arabia stay in your home?

Key Finding 1 – What homestay hosts found enjoyable about hosting a Saudi Student:

The vast majority of hosts reported very enjoyable and positive experiences with Saudi students when the student was committed to participating in the cultural exchange. Hosts generally had a genuine interest in learning about the student's life and culture and enjoyed assisting the student participate in the Australian way of life. Hosts common reaction to what they enjoyed about Saudi students were reported as the students being reliable, respectful, caring, polite, honest, and involved in "family life".

2. What things did you find difficult about having a student from Saudi Arabia stay in your home?

Key Finding 2 – What homestay hosts found difficult about hosting a Saudi Student:

Clear issues emerged regarding use of water/bathroom cleanliness, lack of respect for women, sleeping habits, party culture, noise levels late at night (on phone/internet), hygiene, meal time punctuality, 'servant' expectation and lack of knowledge/preparation of the Saudi student for the homestay experience in Australia.

3. What knowledge did you have about the student's cultural background before he/she arrived from Saudi Arabia?

Key Finding 3 – Hosts prior knowledge/training re Saudi student's culture:

Lack of prior knowledge/training of hosts is a clear issue. Successful placements often resulted when the host had gone to some trouble to understand the culture of the student prior to arrival. Hosts who did prepare generally did this as their own initiative using internet however some support was evident from some Homestay Supervisors in preparing hosts.

4. Do you think that the student had any understanding of Australian ways before they came to stay with you?

Key Finding 4 – Students prior knowledge/training re Australian culture/homestay:

A major issue is clearly the lack of the preparation of the Saudi student before they arrive in Australia. Where a student did preparation and was willing to participate in the cultural exchange there were more positive outcomes.

5. What do you think that the student learned from you?

Key Finding 5 – What Saudi Students learned from Homestay Hosts:

In most cases genuine positive learning experiences for the students were reported by hosts. These centred on the cultural exchange opportunities. Prominent areas of learning included: understanding equality of Australian women, personal responsibility and tidiness, and improvements in learning English.

6. What do you think that you learned from the student?

Key Finding 6 – What Australian Homestay Hosts learned from Saudi Students:

There were some mixed responses here as some hosts had experienced a 'bad' placement. The main learning here for hosts was the knowledge gained from the cultural exchange experience (diet, family, religion, lifestyle, etc.) which was positively received.

7. If you had problems with the student, what do you think was the best way to solve them? What worked for you?

Key Finding 7 – Best ways to solve problems:

All Homestay Hosts encouraged formal discussions with students as the best way to resolve any issues. For major issues referral to Institution/Homestay Supervisor was seen as the preferred option.

8. What score out of 10 would you rate your overall experience?

Key Finding 8 – Overall score:

Australian Homestay Hosts interviewed had mostly positive experiences however when a 'bad' experience occurs it is reported as very bad.

The scores below represent those participants who were happy to respond to this question and provide a score out of 10 for their most recent homestay experience. A score of 1 was explained to be extremely unsatisfactory (a terrible experience) and a score of 10 was seen as an excellent experience (couldn't be better). Any scores below 5 are considered unacceptable.

SUMMARY OF THOSE RESPONDING TO QUESTION 8

- **Group 1:** 9+, 1, 10, 10, 3, 8, 10, 7, 9, 10
- **Group 2:** 8, 4, 10, 10, 10, 8, 8, 8, 5
- **Group 3:** 7+, 9, 9
- **Group 4:** 8, 8, 7, 9, 10, 9, 8, 7, 4, 7, 10

9. Would you consider having a Saudi student again?

Key Finding 9 – Having a Saudi student again in Homestay:

There was very strong support for having a Saudi student again (90% of participants) and most hosts reported that they would be much better prepared for having already had a Saudi student in Homestay.

10. Additional comments/information that you (the participant) would like to add?

Key Finding 10 – Additional Comments/Other information:

All participants were vocal and interested in making additional comments. The varied responses reinforced the major issues and were included for consideration in making the recommendations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Communication and Promotion

1. That promotional material (including online access) is developed highlighting the enjoyable and positive experiences between Australian homestay hosts and Saudi students.

This could include examples of the type of research and preparation work carried out prior to the student arriving in Australia. It should also include examples of positive cultural exchanges that have taken place with homestay including the opportunity for the student to improve their English.

2. That an online up to date presentation be developed to be made available to Agents/Government as part of a compulsory briefing for Saudi students coming to Australia and staying in homestay.

That this presentation/briefing covers the following items:

- Information about Australian food and healthy eating in Australia
- Australian culture regarding pets

- Acceptable internet usage
- Education regarding the danger of peer pressure in a new country
- Encouragement of speaking English as preferred first language when with Saudi friends
- Develop better information regarding airport arrival and 'first 72 hours' in Australia
- Encourage students to bring photos of their family/home when coming to Australia to share with hosts
- Need to produce promotional material in student's language
- Students need to be cautioned that the internet is not for entertainment but rather an education tool
- Students need to be made to have compulsory Australian health insurance for duration of stay
- Students should have compulsory contents insurance
- Student with driver's licences need a briefing on Australian road and pedestrian rules

Training

3. That a training module is also produced highlighting the issues that Australian homestay hosts have had with Saudi students and advising of more acceptable/appropriate behaviour options.

This module to include such things as:

- conservation of water and electricity
- bathroom cleanliness/etiquette
- communication requirements; (regarding meal times/coming home late etc.)
- respect for women
- sleeping habits
- party culture
- noise levels late at night (on phone/internet)
- personal hygiene
- meal time punctuality
- 'servant' expectation
- use of heaters/air conditioners
- understanding equality of Australian women
- personal responsibility and tidiness

4. That ISANA and AHN develop an online up to date training package/presentation to be made available to Australian homestay hosts as part of a compulsory briefing for hosts agreeing to have Saudi students in homestay.

5. That the following issues raised be included in training materials/action plans for the purpose of improving the cultural exchange homestay experience for all parties.

For Saudi Students

- Information about Australian food and healthy eating in Australia
- Australian culture regarding pets
- Acceptable internet usage
- Education regarding the danger of peer pressure in a new country
- Encouragement of speaking English as preferred first language when with Saudi friends
- Develop better information regarding airport arrival and 'first 72 hours' in Australia
- Encourage students to bring photos of their family/home when coming to Australia to share with hosts

- Need to produce promotional material in student's language
- Students need to be cautioned that the internet is not for entertainment but rather an education tool
- Students need to be made to have compulsory Australian health insurance for duration of stay
- Students should have compulsory contents insurance
- Student with driver's licences need a briefing on Australian road and pedestrian rules

For Homestay Hosts

- Australian hosts need access to general information on appropriate local services (e.g. where to buy Halal meat and where the local Mosque is)
- Hosts need to know about Saudi religion
- Education required for hosts regarding tax free homestay fees and homestay relevance to Australian laws regarding pensions etc.
- Halal education for hosts

For both Homestay Hosts and Students

- Education regarding the importance of organising social gatherings
- Promoting the disadvantages of having two Saudi students in the one homestay
- Education on tips to minimise the effects of depression/homesickness/stress in a new country
- Promotion of 24/7 telephone and online support services for students
- Promotion of emergency 000 number
- Alcohol education for both students and hosts
- Information about Saudi and Australian cultural dress
- That procedures are put in place for the student to pay the supervisors and the
- Supervisors pay the homestay hosts

6. That an agent training package on homestay in Australia is developed promoting the importance of using compliant homestay services. To take action to promote the importance of agents only referring Saudi students to homestay supervisors who demonstrate adequate support services and the provision of appropriate education/training materials for both hosts and students.

Conclusion

The process used in this project has proved to a valuable one in that both over-arching value-related aspects and practical aspects of the problems have been revealed. This has allowed materials addressing both these aspects to be developed. It is recommended that this process could be replicated for students coming into homestay accommodation from other cultural backgrounds.