

ISANA Annual Conference *November 2010*
Student Safety in the Homestay Environment

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Abstract

Homestay is the accommodation of choice for many International Students but how safe is it really? An education provider's reputation can be at stake if their students' safety is compromised. Students are matched with hosts, often by default, and for students over eighteen there are police checks but no compulsory working with children checks. After the Senate Inquiry into the Welfare of International Students and the ESOS Review, Homestay providers must take responsibility to keep their students safe. Foreign governments are seriously concerned and are looking to providers for assurance that their students will be safe.

The rising number of safety issues in the Homestay home need to be addressed with sexual harassment coming top of the list. How can we help, what processes need to be in place to reduce the incidents and what do we do if it happens. Must it be reported? Is it hearsay? Can we prove it?

There are a number of simple procedures and checklists which can dramatically increase Student Safety.

This interactive presentation aims to discuss what can be done and the severity of the problem. Participants will have time to raise their own questions.

Overview

This paper has been prepared to assist Homestay providers deal with harassment in the Homestay environment in an impartial and unbiased way ensuring that the rights of all individuals are professionally maintained and confidentiality is respected. In a practical format, it includes a checklist to assist at interview.

Both Federal and State Governments are encouraging providers to take positive steps to raise awareness and educate both staff, Homestay hosts and students to recognise actions which may be construed as harassment to prevent such behaviour occurring. Ways of doing this include visible policy, the recognition of legislative responsibility and by promoting positive outcomes. It is important that the student is aware that it is acceptable to contact their Homestay provider or has the name of a contact staff member at their education provider. In addition it is important that effective procedures are in place and may include disciplinary action.

Introduction

Homestay students remain a “forgotten” and an extremely vulnerable group where, due to lack of regulation, there is no accountable body for monitoring Homestay hosts at Government level.

There are concerns beginning to surface in many countries about the need to regulate homestay programs. Regulations can help to decrease “moral hazard” and balance public welfare with private consumer choice. While many families may provide safe environments, others require more guidance in providing a nurturing environment for their students. Simply requiring a criminal record check and a room is insufficient; in the absence of regulations, education providers have a role in ensuring these students’ health and wellbeing is not threatened. More work is needed in understanding Homestay students’ perspectives and their challenges living in a foreign country. Some recommendations can be made especially for the safety of female Homestay students. Host families need more training on maintaining a healthy, nurturing environment and for younger hosts, resources on parenting adolescents, and ongoing support.

Increasing support given to the student’s parents is warranted. Biological parents remain several thousand miles away and have no involvement in their child’s day-to-day activities. Much trust is placed in host families’ abilities to recognize when these young people need help, physically and emotionally. Measures could be implemented to give biological parents a better understanding of adolescent life in the host country, and familiarise them with the local host customs.

The Government is only now recognizing that it is important to protect and strengthen Australia’s reputation as a safe destination for international students. Despite recent attacks and adverse media attention, Australia is still viewed by most overseas students as a safe and most rewarding place to study.

So what are other countries doing? The UK is introducing the Vetting and Barring System where all existing staff and volunteers engaged in a “regulated activity” as defined by the Act will be required to join the scheme operated by the Independent Safeguarding Authority (“the ISA Scheme”) and employers will be required to check the status of those whom they wish to engage in regulated activity before employing them. www.child-safe.org.uk

In July 2010 New Zealand Pastoral Code of Conduct was updated and it is a very useful referral document. <http://www.minedu.govt.nz/~media/MinEdu/Files/EducationSectors/InternationalEducation/ProvidersOfIntEd/CodeOfPractice2010.pdf>

Government recommends that international students be provided with personal safety information and be encouraged to report any problems prior to leaving on their journey to Australia. This should be reinforced at the orientation session after arrival and students should be shown how to report and what they should report.

Sexual harassment in Homestay is one area that is causing concern in the industry and is extremely difficult to deal with. It is defined as any form of sexual behavior, discriminatory activity or innuendo seen as an unwelcome sexual advance, unwelcome request for sexual favours or other unwelcome conduct of a sexual nature which makes a person feel offended, humiliated or intimidated. Broken down to day to day language sexual harassment is:

- Leering, patting, pinching, touching;
- Sexual suggestions
- Displays of sexually offensive pictures, posters and graffiti;
- Dirty jokes, derogatory comments, and offensive telephone calls;
- Offensive written messages, email and electronic images;

Sexual harassment has serious consequences in our society and can be most damaging to a healthy family environment. Most of our students are given a briefing about our society on their arrival here but sometimes some cultural characteristics are misinterpreted and what is regarded in some societies as affectionate behaviour, wearing of scant clothing, or hugging can be taken as quite the opposite in another society. To avoid any misunderstanding

arising, hosts should be advised to be careful how they greet or farewell their student and to be sensitive to their reactions.

How can we help, what processes need to be in place to reduce the incidents and what do we do if there is an accusation. Must it be reported? Is it hearsay? Can we prove it?

One way is to have robust procedures in place for recruiting hosts and encouraging hosts to exercise common sense and caution, taking into account the significant cultural differences between their own ideas of appropriate behavior and those of their students. Getting the relationship right at the start can serve to allay anxieties and alleviate or remove longer-term problems and sources of dissatisfaction. It is all about first impressions.

We all have the responsibility to ensure that high standards of integrity and personal conduct are maintained in all matters relating to sexual harassment which must be dealt with in a manner which encourages the parties to feel as if they are being treated with consideration. There must be confidence that all issues will be dealt with seriously and competently and all parties must feel comfortable that they are getting a "fair deal".

In view of this, the following functional working document may assist with a sexual harassment complaint. This document is not meant to take the place of an existing document in practice in your institution but to assist in producing a precise account of a complaint by a student about a Homestay host from the first interview.

Managing Harassment Complaints

Occasionally some international students have problems with the law, as victims or perpetrators. In interviews the police will want to use their own interpreters, but it is good practice for staff to give support by accompanying students to the police station, or to court if situations go that far, and a guardian cannot be located. Institution policy is likely to be very specific about any involvement with the law, and to require staff to report incidents to senior managers and to make no comments to the press.

This document sets out the definition and procedures for students, staff and the Homestay host to follow in the event of a harassment claim involving a student or students placed in Homestay.

The clinical definition of "harassment" is defined as an event that causes individuals to experience a strong emotional reaction that interferes with their usual coping skills. The event has a level of trauma that is beyond the normal every day experiences of those affected. Those affected can be the student/s or staff or Homestay host. Safety for the student is paramount and must always take priority.

All parties should understand that the behaviour of family members towards the homestay student is judged by the student's reasonable perception and interpretation of that behaviour, and not by the intention of the Homestay host. Please be aware that "intention" does not form a part of sexual harassment. This means that regardless of whether a person intends to act in a sexually provocative manner, any unwelcome approach may be deemed to be sexual harassment.

Complaints of sexual harassment should be considered seriously and sympathetically and be attended to promptly and confidentially with the utmost care taken to investigate complaints impartially and with the recognition of the equal rights of all parties.

The format of the interview should be unbiased and fair with two or more staff members present. If the student is more comfortable with a friend then that should be welcomed. An interpreter should also be present if the student is experiencing difficulty with explanation. It is important for the interpreter, especially if a student or staff member, to interpret only and not to become involved in the issue.

The following points may assist at interview:

- Was the behaviour unwelcome?
- Was it encouraged or accepted by the student?
- Did the student find the conduct humiliating, embarrassing or intimidating?

Examples of behaviour that may be deemed to be discriminatory or constitute sexual harassment are:

- acting towards, or speaking to a person in a threatening manner;
- making jokes, suggestive comments or offensive gestures related to a person's race, colour, ethnic origin, disability, gender or sexual characteristics;
- distribution of material (i.e. via e-mail) which may be offensive, such as sexually explicit posters or pictures, racist or sexist jokes or cartoons;
- persistent questions about a person's private life;
- personal comments about appearance, size, clothing;
- demands for sexual favours, either directly or by implication;
- unwanted and deliberate physical contact;
- indecent assault

5. Homestay Host

Keep in contact with the student/s host ensuring that support and assistance is available to them and to keep them informed of the situation as it unfolds.

6. Evaluation

Conduct debriefing session for everyone directly involved in the incident. People can express their emotions about the incident and ensure that any needs are met.

Policies, procedures and the implementation of procedures and responses should be evaluated and possible changes and improvement for future harassment issues discussed and made.

7. Documentation

Records should be kept throughout the whole response period. Including:

- detailed documentation
- copies of emails and letters
- records of significant interactions
- contact details for significant people in the process

8. Follow up

The following are possible issues that may need monitoring:

- monitor the need for counselling and maintain contact with those who may need ongoing support
- assess the need for, and organise debriefing sessions for all those involved in the incident

Checklist for management of harassment complaints

1. For the student’s safety immediate action should be taken to remove the student from their current situation.
2. Ensure all documentation is treated with confidence and is kept in a secure location
3. Treat all disclosures by the student as serious regardless of whether or not you think that the complaint is true;
4. Assure the student that they are correct in reporting the incident;
5. Do not ignore any disclosure;
6. Listen intently
7. Do not ask leading questions. (An example of a leading question could be “what did the host do?” It is better to say “can you tell me what happened?”
8. Explain to the student that the host will need to be informed of the allegations and reported; (for students under 18 reporting is mandatory).
9. Explain that the education provider may need to be advised;
10. Ascertain the level of support both parties require;
11. Ascertain the level of comprehension and communication level of all parties;
12. Ascertain whether the alleged Harasser is aware of the allegations;
13. The student’s safety is paramount. Develop strategies to ensure that the student is protected from the alleged Harasser;

Name of person completing this form: _____

Date: _____ Time incident reported: _____

Person reporting incident: _____

Homestay student’s identity: _____

Homestay Host: _____

Contact Details: _____

Student: _____

Contact details: _____

Education provider: _____

Hospital contact details: _____

Date: _____ Time: _____

Recorded by: _____

Date: _____

Follow up action for staff and student

Follow up action for the student

Follow up action for the host
