

School Resource Kit

Chapter 6: Homestay guidelines
International student program

Every
child,
every
opportunity

Contents

1. Homestay – more than “accommodation”

Cultural adjustments	1
Homestay host families – recruitment and selection	2
Homestay register	2
Commercial homestay providers	2
Conflict of interest – homestay and school staff	3
Working with Children Checks – For all persons aged over 18 years	3
Homestay cost and payment arrangements	4

2. Preparing a homestay for student placement

Briefing	6
Information session	6
On arrival	6
Internet access	7
Attendance at school	7
Illness	7
Student independence	7
Visitors and overnight stay arrangements	8
School holidays	8
Going out	9
Unauthorised overnight or extended absence	9

3. Preparing students for homestay

Common expectations	10
Communication	10
Responsibilities	10

4. Monitoring homestay

ISP Quality Standards	12
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Contents continued

Complaints	13
Giving notice	13
Students over 18	14

5. Resources

1. Homestay – more than “accommodation”

The majority of international students enrolled in secondary schools in the International Student Program (ISP) will require their host school to arrange appropriate homestay accommodation with a local family for the duration of their stay. The homestay experience is an excellent way for students to improve their English, learn more about Australian culture and make the most of their international education experience. It is essential that the homestay accommodation arranged by the school is of high quality and provides a safe, comfortable and caring environment.

What is homestay?

Homestay is full board accommodation offered by a family, couple or single person for which a set, weekly fee is charged. This fee covers expenses associated with hosting an international student but is not intended as a source of income.

The preferred homestay arrangement is where students are compatible and are not from the same language background. Schools must not place more than three students in the one homestay, regardless of provider. Legal issues may also arise if several homestay students are accommodated at one domestic residence, and can contravene a range of Victorian legislation and many local council planning laws.

Homestay host parents and third parties must reside in the same residence as the students.

Homestay services include provision of:

- A single bedroom for the student's exclusive use
- Three meals a day, seven days a week
- Facilities including a bed, wardrobe, towels and linen
- Gas, electricity, heating and water
- Cleaning services of common living areas
- Use of living areas within residence
- Study facilities, including a desk, study light and bookcase.

Cultural adjustments

International students studying in the schools sector are teenagers, and arriving in a strange country can be a new and daunting experience for them. They will have to adjust to a different lifestyle, food, culture and language. They may initially feel homesick or lonely and show a lack of enthusiasm at times. Tiredness and minor illness is often an initial reaction to these stresses.

Homestay parents play an important role in providing support, stability and a nurturing home environment during an international student's stay in Australia. Host families are encouraged to assist the student's cultural adjustment and support their community and social integration. Australian families with children attending the same school provide an opportunity for the student to develop social relationships and shared experiences that strengthen the homestay relationships and valued cultural experience.

Homestay host families – recruitment and selection

No student is to be placed in a homestay without the school undertaking its own approval process including a site visit and verification of Working With Children Checks for all persons aged over 18 years residing or frequently residing within the homestay residence.

The ideal homestay families are part of the school community, whose own children attend or have attended the school. Most schools with an established ISP have produced a list or register of local homestay families, largely comprising parents of current or former students at their school.

Many schools provide information about the benefits of hosting an international student to current school families, local community and sporting organisations, and write directly to alumni families—the parents of students whose children have recently graduated from the school. Becoming a homestay parent is one way a family can establish a continuing connection with the school.

The recruitment of homestay families can frequently be aided by schools seeking information about the student's hobbies or sports interests from the student once the Request to Place is signed. For some students with particular interests in sports or hobbies, it may be appropriate for schools or homestay families to provide information about relevant local clubs or associations.

Homestay register

The development of a register of approved local homestay families is an important undertaking by the school, which will benefit the school's program and its international students.

Recognising the importance of homestay family networks, many schools use a best-practice strategy by hosting periodic informal functions, family days for homestay hosts and providing quarterly newsletters. Positive homestay hosts well supported by schools often recruit other families and some continue to host students for many years.

Commercial homestay providers

The Department recognises that schools will sometimes be unable to recruit sufficient homestay families from within their school and local community. Schools may utilise the services of commercial homestay providers and referral services to source potential homestay families providing:

- Communication with the commercial homestay provider is undertaken by the International Student Coordinator (ISC) (or a designated staff member within the school on the ISC's behalf) in accordance with the Department's policies, procedures and guidelines.
- The use of commercial homestay providers in referring potential homestay families does not in any way negate the school's

responsibility to assess and approve/not approve homestay families. This responsibility cannot be “outsourced” or delegated in any way.

For example, a school may have had many successful potential homestay referrals from a particular commercial homestay provider, all of which have been appropriate and approved by the school. At short notice the school needs to find a homestay for a student and use the same commercial homestay provider host family as used previously. However appropriate the referral may appear, school assessment is still required.

Conflict of interest – homestay and school staff

Principals, teachers and members of the school staff must not host international students enrolled at the school.

It is a breach of the Victorian Institute of Teaching's Code of Conduct for teachers to have an ongoing commercial relationship with a student. A teacher hosting an international student on an ongoing basis creates at least the appearance of a financial or personal conflict of interest, particularly in circumstances where the student's academic performance or attendance becomes an issue. This situation also presents difficulties for the student who may feel unable to raise concerns or complaints about their homestay circumstances with their ISC, due to the school connections of the host.

In urgent or emergency circumstances, where standard homestay accommodation arrangements are interrupted, teaching or school staff may provide short-term accommodation until a new homestay family is arranged. All schools must have a registered pool of staff that can provide temporary accommodation to students in the event of an emergency. In these circumstances, the teacher or staff member should not receive any payment from the student. The staff member's additional expenses involved should be paid directly by the school.

Working with Children Checks – For all persons aged over 18 years

All homestay providers are required to obtain Working with Children Checks for all persons over 18 years residing, or frequently residing, at the homestay premises.

This includes the primary homestay host and all family members aged over 18 years of age who are residing at the homestay premises.

Potential host families who refuse Working with Children Checks cannot host students under any circumstances.

Schools are required to undertake regular site visits as specified in the Quality Standard, and as part of each visit the school is required to confirm with the homestay provider, any changes to adults residing at the premises.

The school should cross-check all Working with Children Checks on file with persons aged over 18 years residing in the premises, and also make note of persons residing or frequently residing at the homestay who are approaching 18 years of age, and will require a Working with Children Check. For clarification please contact your Program Development Officer (PDO).

More information

Refer to 'Obtaining a Working with Children Check' in Chapter 12 – Resources or visit www.justice.vic.gov.au/workingwithchildren

Homestay cost and payment arrangements

The cost of homestay accommodation is determined and communicated to parents before the student enters the accommodation arrangement. The cost of homestay may vary between homestay providers depending on the facilities and services provided, and the location of the home.

The initial payment should include two weeks' rent in advance plus a bond that is the equivalent of two weeks' rent. The bond is refundable at the conclusion of the homestay period after all expenses, repairs or damage (if any) have been paid. Students and parents are responsible for any outstanding costs to homestay providers, such as costs to property damage. Schools must collect and manage homestay bonds and need to implement an appropriate homestay payment arrangement.

There are several payment options including:

1. The family can pay the entire homestay costs, at the agreed homestay rate, to the school. The school holds this money in trust and pays the agreed homestay rate to the homestay provider fortnightly or monthly. Schools are responsible for invoicing parents/agents directly.
Note: For some international students from countries such as Germany or Brazil, this homestay payment arrangement is necessary as their education agents have received the homestay money from the parents. These agents require schools to invoice the relevant agent to receive the homestay fees and then to manage the periodic disbursement of the homestay payment.
2. The school can assist the student's parents and the homestay provider in establishing a mutually convenient email and/or direct debit bank transaction system, through which the parents pay the money directly into the homestay provider's bank account each fortnight or month.

Every effort should be made to ensure that homestay accommodation payment methods avoid the student being involved in the transaction, unless the student is over 18 years of age.

In particular, homestay providers with concerns about payments must not involve the student directly in any discussion or dispute—any matters concerning homestay payments should be resolved by the ISC, the student's parents and the homestay provider.

Note: For information about study abroad payment arrangements, refer to Chapter 4 – Application and Enrolment.

Homestay Responsibility Agreement

Payment of homestay has to be made by the date specified in the Homestay Responsibility Agreement, which should be signed by the homestay host, the school and the student after discussion shortly after arrival, and by the parents where the student is under 18 years of age. Students under 18 years of age must sign the Homestay Responsibility Agreement in acknowledgement of the content. This agreement can be useful in resolving compliance issues and during dispute resolution. A copy of a standard PPSSU Homestay Responsibility Agreement can be found in Chapter 12 - Resources.

The Homestay Responsibility Agreement sets out the terms and conditions of the homestay arrangement between the homestay provider and the student as endorsed by the School. Some homestays may require a holding deposit during holiday periods. This arrangement is negotiated between the parents, the homestay provider and the school.

2. Preparing a homestay for student placement

Briefing

Homestay parents along with the host school are required to exercise a duty of care towards international students. It is, therefore, necessary for homestay families to be thoroughly briefed before the international student arrives at their home. The briefing program should outline the following:

- A knowledge and understanding of the needs of adolescents
- An understanding of cultural, linguistic and religious differences
- An understanding of the needs of young people away from their home environment
- A flexible approach to matters of discipline, house rules and cooperative living
- What to do if a problem occurs.

Information session

As a minimum requirement, schools must conduct an annual information session for their homestay providers to keep them up-to-date with school events and to share/discuss any issues regarding hosting international students. Many schools also host annual dinners or barbeques as a way to thank homestay parents and as an opportunity for them to share their experiences.

On arrival

On arrival, the following will need to be clearly explained to the student:

- House rules
- The use of household facilities
- Making overseas calls from home
- Internet access / usage

Upon the student's arrival, a Homestay Responsibility Agreement between the student and the homestay provider must be signed by both parties. Schools should ensure that the signed agreement clearly specifies the cost, bond, method of payment, living arrangements and expected standard of behaviour between the parties. This agreement must be kept in the student's file at school.

Homestay families should also be made aware of the following:

- Some international students may have had servants in their home and not be used to doing household chores.
- Many international students may not be used to eating a western diet and homestay parents should be aware of any food a student cannot eat due to religious beliefs.

Internet access

In most circumstances it is expected that homestay families will have internet access in the home. While students are responsible for their own telephone call costs, and can manage these by using personal mobile phones, telephone cards and reverse charge calls, internet access can present some problems. The PPSSU recommends that students have the opportunity for some internet access (to email family and friends) included in the homestay costs. Extended periods of internet use for school research or private use should be paid for by the student.

Students should be reminded that they should not provide any personal information such as student visa status, family details, contact addresses in Australia and/or overseas, and banking details via online chat rooms, discussion boards, forums, etc. Schools should encourage students to use direct, secure email accounts to communicate with family and friends, as opposed to public chat rooms and forums where personal information can be extracted for criminal purposes.

Attendance at school

Schools need to ensure that homestay providers are fully aware of their role in the student's relationship with the school, that they will need to provide a note of explanation for students unable to attend school due to illness, and that they communicate all relevant matters to the ISC promptly.

Students should carry a card with their homestay family's address and contact numbers, and the contact number for the ISC at all times.

Illness

All students are required to maintain Overseas Student Health Cover (OSHC) during their stay in Australia. Medibank Private cards are sent to schools which distribute these to students. If a card does not arrive, please contact Medibank directly on 132 331. They may initially need assistance with making medical and dental appointments and Medibank Private claims. If a student is ill and unable to attend school, the homestay parent is required to notify the school.

Student independence

In briefing new homestay families, schools need to provide information and guidance about respecting student privacy and managing student independence.

Privacy is important, and personal possessions and personal space of students should be respected. Students will normally be provided with a house key, will be required to clean and tidy their own rooms, and to clean common areas of the home (such as bathrooms).

Some students may have after school activities and may be home later than expected. Students must notify their homestay providers if they will be home late or if they will not be home for dinner. It is reasonable to expect students to be home at a specified time, and for homestay parents to establish appropriate times for students to be home on

weeknights and weekends. Curfew times should be stipulated in the Homestay Responsibility Agreement.

Students need to ask permission from their homestay families if they wish to go out. For safety reasons, they should tell their host families where they are going, with whom, and the time they expect to return.

International students should be aware of the following for their safety and wellbeing:

- Take emergency contact phone numbers with them
- Do not carry too much cash
- Travel together in a group where possible
- Avoid catching public transport late in the evening
- Read public transport timetables carefully so as not to miss the last train or tram home
- Avoid walking down quiet or dark streets, whether alone or with friends, after dark
- Seek advice from their host family or ISC on local areas

As part of the orientation program ISCs need to assist students in opening appropriate bank accounts with ATM access, and advise them not to leave large amounts of cash or valuables around their homestay residence. In some cases students may need to open a safety deposit box, but in most circumstances it will not be necessary or appropriate for students to bring large amounts of cash or valuables into Australia. Students should be made aware of this prior to their commencement of study.

Visitors and overnight stay arrangements

Students should ask permission from their homestay family before inviting friends to visit them. Some homestay families will agree to provide meals for friends when given appropriate notice.

Students under 18 must have parental/school/homestay permission to stay overnight away from their designated homestay provider, and all students should provide their homestay host family with the name and contact phone number of the person they are staying with.

Homestay host families should notify the school ISC if these arrangements are not observed or if overnight stays become frequent or are of concern.

ISCs need to consider the frequency of such arrangements. Infrequent “sleepovers” at friends’ homes may be agreed to by the parents/school/homestay providers, but any regular overnight stays at distant relatives or friends will require the school to ensure that all person/s over 18 years of age living in such a residence have Working with Children Checks.

School holidays

Students need to inform their school and homestay family in advance as to whether they are returning home for school holidays. ISCs need to establish a register or record of where students will be during vacation periods - either at home overseas, with their homestay family or in limited circumstances, with parental permission, staying with local

relatives/friends. Dates of departure and return should be at the discretion of the host school's Principal Class Officer (PCO) and should take into consideration the attendance requirements.

Going out

Some students will be from cultures where they are allowed a lot of freedom in terms of going out and socialising. Students need to ask permission of their homestay families if they wish to go out. For safety reasons, they should tell their host families where they are going, with whom, and the expected time of their return. Students must return home by the agreed time. If they think they will be home later than the agreed time, they must ring the homestay family and let them know. The Homestay Responsibility Agreement must set out timeframes for when students are expected to be home on school nights and weekends.

Unauthorised overnight or extended absence

International students on student visas are subject to a number of visa conditions, and students under 18 who are living in homestay must abide by condition 8532:

Change of accommodation and general welfare arrangements

You [the international student] must maintain accommodation, support and general welfare arrangements that have been approved by your education provider if you:

- *Have not turned 18*
 - *Are not an AusAid student or a Defence student*
 - *Are not staying in Australia with:*
 - *A parent*
 - *A custodian*
- OR
- *A relative who has been nominated by your parent or a custodian is aged at least 21 and is of good character*

Note: you must not change those arrangements without the written approval of your education provider.

If a student in homestay accommodation leaves without notice or commences staying overnight away from their designated homestay without permission, the homestay provider must report the matter immediately to the PCO and ISC.

A breach of visa condition 8532 is a very serious matter and could ultimately result in a students' visa being cancelled and their removal from Australia.

3. Preparing students for homestay

Schools should give international students advice and guidelines that will help them adjust to homestay accommodation. Generally members of Australian families assist each other in the home and students will be expected to do their share of household duties.

Common expectations

Some common expectations of the homestay family may include:

- Treating the homestay family members with care and respect
- Helping with some household chores such as washing dishes and cleaning one's own room
- Not spending too much time on the telephone and paying for one's telephone calls
- Paying for products for personal use, such as shampoo etc.
- Asking the family for permission to bring home friends
- Limiting the amount of noise; for example, the use of stereo or radio.

Schools should remind students that they are guests of the homestay family who have welcomed them into their home. Homestay accommodation is not hotel accommodation. Students are accepted into a family and some customs may be very different from those in their own home. Students must follow the rules set by the homestay family.

Communication

It is important for international students to communicate with their homestay family so they can learn more about each other. It is also a good way for international students to improve their English. Some guidelines for communication include:

- Greeting members of the family
- Talking to the family about school activities, studies, family and background.

Students should be invited to participate in family outings and activities.

Responsibilities

Students should be made aware of their responsibilities which include:

- Keeping their bedroom and study area tidy
- Keeping other areas of the house tidy after use, including the kitchen, bathroom and toilet
- Keeping their valuables and personal possessions safe and not leaving them lying around the house
- Placing valuables in a safety deposit box or with the homestay family for safekeeping.

Students may want to take out a personal insurance policy to cover valuable items against theft or damage. It is important that they do not carry large amounts of cash with them, or leave it lying around at home. The money should be deposited into a bank account as soon as possible.

4. Monitoring homestay

Schools must monitor students who are placed in homestay accommodation and maintain regular contact with providers of the accommodation to ensure the students' successful adjustment to life and study in Victoria.

Schools must conduct an initial review after 6–8 weeks and an annual review of their homestay providers and inspect the homestay at least once each semester (minimum requirement) to ensure that student needs are being met. This requirement is in addition to any reviews that may be conducted by the homestay referral service.

Student safety remains an important priority in monitoring homestay. The ISP Quality Standards for schools list the following

ISP Quality Standards

The ISP Quality Standard for schools regarding **Accommodation arrangements** states:

Outcomes

Schools demonstrate due diligence in the selection and monitoring of homestay arrangements (including all accommodation arrangements that do not include a parent).

Schools maintain an adequate number of high quality homestay hosts with reference to the number of proposed students each year.

Schools select homestay hosts with reference to a set of clear criteria and student needs, expectations and preferences.

Schools have capacity to provide alternative / emergency accommodation arrangements if required.

Performance Indicators

Schools actively seek host families to ensure there are sufficient homestay providers on the school register to support the proposed number of students.

To select and approve the homestay host, schools:

- Use the Homestay Site Visit Checklist to help with the site visit before approval of the homestay host
- Have a set of structured interview questions to ask the homestay host
- Have proof of Working With Children Checks for all persons over 18 years of age living in the house
- Ensure all relevant parties sign the Homestay Responsibility Agreement
- Include host in the homestay register with the documentation from the site visit
- Provide details of the homestay to parents/agent and the International Education Division (IED) as soon as placement is confirmed using the Homestay Profile

To monitor the homestay hosts, schools:

- Visit the student at the homestay each semester
- Invite the homestay host to school events and activities
- Involve the homestay host in monitoring the student's attendance and academic performance
- Undertake an annual appraisal of homestay hosts, including a confidential discussion with the student.

To keep records of homestay arrangements, schools keep confidential records on:

- Number of students in each homestay (schools must not place more than three students in the one homestay, regardless of provider.)
- Number of students changing homestay
- Issues and problems with homestay

Schools have a registered pool of staff that can provide temporary accommodation to students in the event of an emergency. Working with Children Checks are also required for all adults residing in any such emergency homestay accommodation.

The school develops and has the school council endorse a homestay policy that is consistent with IED guidelines and the Homestay Policy Template.

Complaints

Schools are responsible for resolving any disagreements or disputes that may occur between the student, the student's parents and the homestay family. If the homestay is found to be unsuitable for either party, or if there is any danger or a dispute that cannot be resolved, it may be necessary to move the student to another homestay provider.

When a situation cannot be resolved, the PPSSU must be informed and the school must assist the student to find another homestay. In urgent circumstances, temporary accommodation may be arranged with appropriate school staff (though no payment should be made by the student directly to the staff member—see the *'Conflict of Interest'* section in this chapter.)

Giving notice

If international students are unsatisfied with the homestay accommodation that has been arranged, they can request that a more suitable homestay be found. Students will have to give the school and homestay provider reasons for requesting the change and at least two weeks notice if they want to change homestay. A student who moves without giving two weeks notice will forfeit the bond.

Alternatively, if a homestay provider wishes to terminate the homestay agreement, the student and the host school must be given at least two weeks notice and seek the host school's approval before proceeding with the termination process.

Students over 18

Schools may need to manage accommodation arrangements for students who turn 18 during their enrolment in a Victorian Government School, depending on the school homestay policy.

While it is understandable that students over 18 want greater independence, and DEECD is no longer responsible for their accommodation arrangements under ESOS as it is for under 18 students (not under the welfare and accommodation of parents or relatives), schools have an ongoing duty of care for students.

Some students, on turning 18, seek to live independently in rented accommodation or in a house-sharing arrangement with other students or adults. In considering whether a school will support a student's request to live independently, the school should consider:

- The wishes of the student's parents and the extent to which they are fully aware of the options, risks and alternatives
- The capacity of the individual student to effectively manage independent living and study in Victoria
- The duration of the period of independent living while a secondary student
- The potential impact that agreement for one student could have on disrupting homestay living arrangements for other international students
- Any local risk factors that may be relevant
- The proximity of the accommodation to the school.

Schools should inform the student's parents of the independent living arrangements and discuss any concerns relating to these living arrangements under their general duty of care.

5. Resources

- Homestay Policy Template
- Homestay Profile (Formerly Homestay Info sheet for students and parents)
- Homestay Responsibility Agreement
- Homestay Site Visit Checklist
- Information for Homestay Providers and Third Parties
- ISP Quality Standards for schools
- Obtaining a Working with Children Check
www.justice.vic.gov.au/workingwithchildren