

RUNNING A BETTER ROOMING HOUSE

Serving international students and tenants

This brochure is a summary of important cultural and best practice tips which we suggest you consider when you operate a rooming house for international students and tenants.

It should be read in conjunction with our publication ***Running a better rooming house: Your legal obligations*** and Consumer Affairs Victoria's ***Rooming houses: A guide for residents and operators***.

These publications are available on RAAV's website www.raav.org.au

New licensing scheme for rooming house operators

A new rooming house operators licensing scheme, established under the *Rooming House Operators Act 2016*, **came into effect on 26 April 2017**. Rooming house operators must apply for a licence in order to continue to legally operate their rooming house(s).

For more information on the rooming house licensing scheme, view Consumer Affairs Victoria website consumer.vic.gov.au/roominghouseoperators

Downloads of key Information on the new licensing scheme are available in the Rooming House Operators section in following languages: English, Arabic, Simplified Chinese and Vietnamese.

The Consumer Affairs Victoria website provides detailed information on:

- The Rooming House Operators licensing scheme
- Applying for a license
- Renew a license
- Refusal of a license
- Penalties and ongoing legal obligations
- Fees
- Definitions

RAAV has also produced a summary of the licensing requirements which is available on RAAV's website.

Understanding your legal obligations

RAAV has produced a brochure that summarises your legal obligations as a rooming house operator. Chinese, Arabic and Vietnamese language versions are available by visiting RAAV's website www.raav.org.au or by contacting RAAV.

The brochure "***Running a better rooming house: Your legal obligations***" will assist you to manage your rooming house more effectively and contains important information about:

- Who are residents and operators?
- What is a rooming house?
- When can an operator use a building as a rooming house?
- Types of rooming houses
- Minimum standards in rooming houses
- Keeping records
- When a resident moves in
- House rules
- Forms available from Consumer Affairs Victoria
- Handling bonds and rents

This information is produced by the Registered Accommodation Association of Victoria (RAAV) and funded by the Residential Tenancies Fund on the approval of Consumer Affairs Victoria.

RAAV represents owners and operators of registered rooming houses and assists its members with a wide range of services. Contact RAAV for more information.

Email: info@raav.org.au

Website: raav.org.au

Telephone: 0412 008 996



Raav

Registered Accommodation
Association of Victoria

www.raav.org.au

Running a better Rooming House: *Serving international students and tenants*

1. Health and safety issues in rooming houses

• Health issues

Lack of personal health and hygiene practices can have an impact on other residents. It is important to provide adequate bathing and toilet facilities. Consider placing signs in bathrooms advocating washing of hands before eating and after using the toilet, and providing antibacterial soap in all toilets and communal wash basins.

Regular pest control should be undertaken and the cost included in your income and expense budget.

The health and hygiene standards you must maintain are contained in the *Health and Wellbeing Regulations 2009* which can be viewed at legislation.vic.gov.au.

• Safety and fire checks

Melbourne Metropolitan Fire Brigade (MFB) research shows that most rooming house fires start in kitchens and bedrooms.

The main causes are:

- cooking left unattended
- misuse of electrical equipment, such as overloading circuits or illegal wiring
- faulty electrical appliances
- smoking.

Residents can take fire safety precautions such as:

- not smoking in bed
- not leaving electrical appliances like hairdryers and laptops on bedding
- ensuring electronic devices such as monitors, laptops and televisions have good air flow around them
- never leaving candles, incense or oil burners unattended and keep them away from curtains and other flammable items
- cleaning the lint filter in washing machines and clothes dryers after use
- letting the clothes dryer complete its cool down cycle before stopping it
- turning off portable heaters before leaving the house or going to sleep
- keeping stoves and cooking areas free from grease and dust
- servicing fire extinguishers and fire blankets regularly
- keeping entrances and exits clear
- checking emergency lighting and exit signs.

Have a maintenance checklist of items that could affect residents' safety such as smoke alarms, ducted heating and cooking appliances.

• Hoarding is dangerous

Hoarding can cause fire and other health risks. For information on how to identify clutter, assess the level of hoarding and develop a program to counter this threat, visit the MFB website - mfb.vic.gov.au - and type 'hoarding' into the search field.

2. Running a rooming house

• Welcome pack

Consider providing new residents with a welcome pack which may include:

- the house rules
- a local map
- public transport information

- local community services (for example, doctors, pharmacies, health services, entertainment, events, council services)
- affordable food and shopping
- Information about the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal (VCAT) and how residents can access it.

• Providing basic information

Rooming house operators can provide basic information to help residents adjust to their new environment, including information on:

- arranging a mobile phone contract
- opening a bank account
- using a Myki card
- driving school to obtain a driving licence
- arranging personal insurance
- getting a Tax File Number (if working in Australia)
- government support agencies
- their rights and obligations under the *Residential Tenancies Act (1997)*.

• The house rules

There is no legal obligation to have house rules but some rooming house operators choose to have rules which all residents must follow. House rules should cater for residents who have different sleeping and studying schedules due to their age and study commitments. Some items to include are:

- residents' legal rights and duties
- rent payment
- room inspections
- property damage
- fire safety
- items that are not permitted for safety reasons, e.g. electricity double adaptors, extension cords, hotplates
- health and wellbeing issues, e.g. abusive language, bullying, anti-social behaviour, alcohol, smoking, illegal drugs and illegal activities
- noise and visiting times for visitors
- respect for other residents' privacy
- use and cleanliness of shared facilities
- keeping running costs down
- rubbish disposal
- internet usage policy and charges
- whether pets are allowed
- contact details for emergencies
- avoid loud music and shouting

Residents must be given seven days' notice before new requirements begin.

• Arrange appropriate insurance cover

Make sure you know what kind of insurance you need for your rooming house. A normal household insurance policy is not appropriate for rooming houses due to the multiple tenant arrangements.

Insurance companies provide a variety of policies that cover small businesses.

Your policy may cover:

- professional indemnity
- public liability
- furniture and furnishing contents
- loss of rent
- damage to property.

An insurance policy may also provide financial support if your business is unable to operate following an unexpected event such as a fire or natural disaster.

Running a better Rooming House: *Serving international students and tenants*

3. Cultural considerations - educating international students

RAAV has surveyed student accommodation providers and has compiled these best practice tips to help you manage your student rooming house:

- create an informative website with testimonials from satisfied students
- have strict guidelines around drinking alcohol on the premises (if religious considerations allow consumption of alcohol)
- display emergency phone numbers in common areas
- provide contacts for student support services at their education facilities
- obtain students' mobile phone numbers and emergency contact details
- explain the common facilities in the kitchen, bathroom, laundry, safe use of appliances, housekeeping chores
- implement a realistic internet charge policy.

It is important to form a good working relationship with local education providers who may promote your rooming house to students if it meets their conditions.

• Cultural sensitivity

Providing accommodation for international students requires an appreciation of cultural differences from other students. Some examples are:

Chinese students -

- Rooming Houses are popular with Chinese students and the parents may visit the student at the start of their stay in Australia and often more frequently. It is important that parents advise the rooming house operators that they intend to visit. The visits can be lengthy - up to two or three months.

If parents visit the students, they should be counselled to understand any restrictions before they leave China as the additional guests in the property can put the common areas and facilities under a strain by not understanding the regime within the property and in particular the use of the kitchen and the impact of their visit on the other residents. Due to compliance (WWC Act and Victorian Child Safe Act) rooming houses hosting under 18 students will not allow adults without an approved WWC to live on the premises.

- Many Chinese students are not comfortable using washing machines in common areas for hygiene and privacy reasons. Some females have modesty considerations and object to having their underwear on public display. This is one of the biggest complaints received by rooming house operators from Chinese students.

Students from Muslim countries -

- With the increasing number of students coming from countries such as Malaysia, Indonesia and the Middle East, prayer times should be identified and respected during the week and especially on Fridays. Care should be taken to provide separate Hallal cooking facilities and utensils such as plates and cutlery if you are hosting Muslim students. During Ramadan (9th month of the Islamic calendar), Muslim students fast from dawn to sunset for 30 days, abstaining totally from food and drink.

Language barriers -

- International students are often more comfortable staying in accommodation with other students from their country as this overcomes the lack of English language competency at the start of their studies.

• Settling into Victoria

Most international students are here alone with neither friends nor family from their home country. They may not have previously lived overseas or lived away from home and been responsible for household chores and living expenses. You may need to demonstrate how to use cooking and bathroom facilities or provide translated instructions for some appliances.

• Parents' visits to Australia

Rooming house operators should check that the room permits multiple tenancies under the *Health and Wellbeing Act*.

Some operators put a small surcharge on the parents' stay - \$50 per parent is a guide used by some operators to cover the increased cost of providing the utilities in the property.

• Filling an information gap

Education providers usually have detailed information on their websites which will assist students to settle into their new surroundings. However, many overseas students arrive knowing little about the locality, transport arrangements, retail facilities in the vicinity of their rooming house and the cost of living in Australia making it difficult for them to predict how much to budget for expenses.

Your website can be useful in giving students more information before they arrive and also demonstrates that you are aware of their needs.

• Use of appliances

Simple but detailed house rules in the students' language are needed so that the residents and visitors understand what is expected of them as the students may not have been expected to operate the appliances at home or appliances in Australia may be very different to the ones in their home country.

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Why you should implement best practice

Implementing best practice principles will help you improve your rooming house operations and assist your social obligations towards the residents and tenants.

Other benefits of adopting best practice in your rooming house include:

- improving the image of your property
- improving the health and wellbeing of your residents
- retaining residents longer and increasing your profits
- setting you apart from other rooming house operators who do not implement best practice.

Our publication *Running a better rooming house: A best practice handbook for operators* contains many tips on adopting best practice.

Running a better Rooming House: *Serving international students and tenants (Continued)*

Some useful tips are:

- appliances need to be examined regularly
- range hood filters should be cleaned monthly to avoid damage and odours and clean out the oil as a high level of cooking oil is used during Asian cooking. This is both an amenity and a safety issue which will stop oil dripping down and becoming a fire hazard.
- smoke alarms should be checked every month
- the importance of smoke alarms should be explained to overseas visitors
- consider installing energy efficient appliances especially heating, and counselling residents on the cost of gas and electricity for heating and the use of water.

• Housekeeping

Depending on what situation or level of affluence the students come from they may not have been expected to undertake household chores at home and do not understand sharing facilities. In some situations, they have servants or women to do the menial tasks including serving food in their homes, although this is not true for many students.

Some students may expect housekeeping and chores such as washing, cooking and cleaning to be included in their rent. To assist overcoming this, the operator should explain that these services are not included in their rent and that they must complete certain chores. This should be clearly explained on your website and in person - prior to students signing any contract.

Cleaning rosters may break down due to study requirements. It may be advisable to engage professional cleaners for say \$10 - \$15 extra rent per week per student to overcome this situation.

• Use of washing machines

Many students do not have much clothing with them, so they tend to wash the garments daily in their rooms. They may prefer to use a bucket or sink in their room so some floor covering is recommended as this can cause damage to carpets.

It is advisable to provide a clothes rack and non-absorbent floor covering, for example plastic sheeting to catch any dripping water. In addition, it is not economical for residents to use a washing machine for a few clothes as often there would be only three articles in a 6kg machine.

• Bathing, use of water and bathroom facilities

Many students take long showers of up to 30 minutes. Some will also wash their clothes in the shower. Operators should find out what the students are used to and counsel them about the costs and resources involved. They may not realise that we are subject to water restrictions or are charged for water consumption.

Operators may also consider installing a metering system to limit the time for showers to keep down costs.

Most international students will be familiar with western toilets unlike some other cultures. However, it would be useful for operators to display charts outlining the basic requirements and the health issues which should be observed, such as the use and disposal of sanitary items or other objects in the toilets.

• Space and communications

It is good practice to inquire when students are booking about their expectations and preferences in relation to sharing a room. Some younger students will prefer not to share a room with another student as they want their own space.

Some students often talk animatedly to each other and their conversation normally contains a multitude of questions.

Due to their slower comprehension of the Australian accent students may prefer to have written instructions in addition to verbal. They will often show documents in English to friends

for clarification and use a dictionary to understand aspects of the communication.

• Internet

The provision of internet facilities is a major consideration for students. Operators should implement a policy which fairly shares the facilities in the property and does not slow down the internet connection for the other residents.

Overall around 25 to 30 GB a month is sufficient for students to do their research and have access to some entertainment without slowing down the facility for other residents.

Some operators provide an amount of data in their rental fee. One option is to provide 18 GB per month and ration this to 4 GB per week. If this amount is exceeded during the week, the resident is restricted until the following week when the 4 GB limit is restored. This limit is sufficient to enable students to undertake their research without excessive use of downloading music or movies.

Another option is to provide Wi-Fi as a service to their residents and recover the monthly cost of the installation. This could be charged at a flat rate for the first 10 GB and then discounted this for larger downloads for 50 GB. The residents appreciate this concession.

• International students under 18 years old

The Education Services for Overseas Students Act 2000 (ESOS Act) and the accompanying National Code place strict conditions on education providers for students under 18 years old. These include a requirement for providers to check the suitability of students' accommodation.

If your prospective residents include students under 18, you should seek advice from the relevant education providers to ensure you meet the ESOS Act requirements.

• Get to know your students

Students sometimes suffer from mental health issues due to stress which is heightened by new and often unfamiliar academic practices and the broad range of practical skills needed to manage day-to-day living. It is only by knowing the students and recognising their triggers and behaviours that you will be able to identify subtle shifts in their mental health such as poor personal hygiene, missing appointments or a change in diet.

Lack of quality of sleep appears to be the poorest area of international students' wellbeing. Students will often feel tired due to the enormous amount of energy they put into communicating every day. It is very important to recognise their need to escape the pressure of communication from time to time.

• Implementing a duty of care

You have a legal obligation to provide care to your residents. There are times when management and other residents are seen as 'extended families' by students in rooming houses, and are called upon to provide assistance.

It is vital to ensure that the residents' privacy is respected in these circumstances.

Disclaimer

All care has been taken in presenting material included in this brochure. However, RAAV will not accept any responsibility for any action you may take as a result of the information provided. This brochure contains general information and is not a substitute for professional legal or business advice relating to your particular circumstances. RAAV recommends you consult a solicitor, accountant and/or business adviser before acting on the information contained in this brochure.