



Registered Accommodation
Association of Victoria
www.raav.org.au

Understanding the student rooming house market

The third edition of the *“Running a better rooming house; A best practice handbook for operators”* contains material on best practice for operators who provide accommodation for students.

In order to gain a better understanding of this important rooming house sector, RAAV obtained feedback from key stakeholders as acknowledged in the handbook.

1. The importance of international students to Victoria’s economy.

A recent study by the City of Melbourne states that in 2011 around 125,000 International students were enrolled in Victorian education institutions and they make a unique contribution to Victoria’s economy and a beneficial impact on our retail, employment, housing and knowledge sectors. They help drive the retail and hospitality sectors through their demand for goods and services.

The report states that *“They study in universities, TAFE and vocational education providers, English language colleges, primary and secondary schools. They may be student visa holders, full time or part-time students, students who have recently graduated and are looking for work experience opportunities, students with dependent children, spouses or relatives, temporary residents on tourist, holiday or business visas who are studying at a Victorian education institution.*

“The English language proficiency amongst international students varies greatly as does their familiarity with student responsibilities and rights. International students in Melbourne collectively speak over 100 different languages other than English. The majority are here alone with neither friends nor family from their home country”.

This places added responsibility on accommodation providers to assist them during their stay in Victoria. Students who are satisfied with their accommodation are more likely to be successful in their education outcomes.

2. Accommodation options for students.

Finding suitable accommodation can be very difficult when students first move to Australia. Often advice provided to the students before they arrive varies and will influence the accommodation they will choose. The most common options are:

- **Rooming houses** that are approved by the education institutions.
- **Boarding houses at schools:** a popular choice for school-aged students.
- **Student housing:** this is usually located either on-campus or very close-by.

- **Homestay:** Many international students choose to live with a family when they first arrive.
- **Rental:** Renting a unit or a flat is also an option for students at Universities or TAFEs.
- **Shared housing:** This can be a cheaper option if they can live harmoniously with other persons.
- **Relative**

Most international students live off-campus, preferring private rental options. Many select their accommodation to suit ethnic or financial situations. Over time, they will move several times during their stay in Australia, tending to seek out cheaper rental options as they become more settled.

Helpful hint

Ask your local campus if you can inspect a standard room to learn about the size and quality of the furnishing which are usually provided.

3. Filling an information gap.

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

Your website can be useful in giving students some more information before they arrive and also demonstrates that you are aware of their needs. Providing an information pack, which contains matters specific to your location, will add value. It should contain local and social information which will supplement the material that is available from education providers including a detailed explanation of the house rules, local ethnic restaurants/cheap eating places, a locality map, transport options and timetables, religious facilities, health services, entertainment and upcoming social events.

Domestic and international students have differing levels of expenditure. International students on average may have slightly higher

income than local students but may have higher education related expenses and higher levels of debt.

Some international students face financial stress around the cost of living, particularly transport, which takes up an average of about 10% of international students’ total expenditure. Most international students use public transport frequently to commute between workplaces, educational providers and residences and this is a significant expense. They often rely on part-time employment for up to 15 hours per week which supplements their overseas allowances.

Cultural and language issues may affect satisfactory communication with overseas students. A good host will take an interest in the students and provide opportunities to communicate in English to help accelerate their language skills.

Many of these students have not previously lived overseas or undertaken household chores that students from Australian homes usually perform. Sometimes even the simplest functions need to be demonstrated.

4. Providing basic information.

Whilst education providers have comprehensive websites to assist their students, the rooming house operators can be a prime source in providing some basic information to the students to assist them to assimilate quickly into their new environment. International students may lack a familiarity with various bureaucratic processes and may not have access to assistance to understand their legal rights and questions may arise about:

- Obtaining introduction to a legal service and accounting firm
- How to arrange a mobile phone contract
- How to open a bank account
- How to obtain and use a Myki card for transport
- Introduction to a driving school to obtain a driving licence
- Arranging personal insurance
- How to arrange a Tax File Number if the students work during their time in Australia
- Identifying government support agencies
- Their rights and obligations under the Residential Tenancies Act (1997)

5. Where overseas students may differ from local students.

Do not make the assumption that overseas students are like Australian students as there may be many cultural differences.

If the rooming house provides meals, **meal times** can be difficult for international students until they become more proficient in the English language. Some students find talking at the dinner table difficult as it is normal in some cultures for families to eat in silence. Also food differs a great deal between cultures and often to Australian food. Understanding what is normally acceptable to overseas students will make their stay more comfortable.



Case study: Providing dietary information

One student rooming house operator provides a food dietary chart in their kitchen which outlines the calorific value of common foods and ingredients. These items may differ from items which they consume in their country. If students crave for home food or enjoy eating out in an ethnic restaurant, it is a good idea to provide a list of nearby restaurants which are both economical and which will cater for their needs.

Housekeeping can be a mystery to some students who have grown up in an environment where the household chores are performed by servants or done by women. Others might have come from families where everyone helps with the household chores. It is important to outline what the requirements are for basic chores like room tidiness, bathroom and toilet hygiene, kitchen "duties" so that other students or residents are not inconvenienced by their inexperience.

Some students can be more difficult to persuade to help with household chores as they might have the perception that they are paying the host for services. To assist overcoming this, it might help explaining to the students about living standards in Australia and the cost of maintaining those living standards.

The use of water during bathing can be excessive and expensive for the rooming house operator. Some students come from hot, wet countries where water conservation has less priority compared with Australia. Others are used to having bathrooms with drains in the middle of the floor allowing extra drainage or they ladle water over their bodies. Find out what the students are used to and explain the bathing and toilet functions in the property.

Toilet use around the world can differ immensely. Not only do toilets differ in appearance, but they also differ in the ways they are used and how people use to

clean themselves. Using a toilet may be uncomplicated to us but it may be very confusing for a student who has come from a country where toilet use is different in Australia. Find out if the students have used western toilets and if necessary, explain how to use the toilet when they arrive.

Laundry facilities should be explained to students when they arrive. There may be modesty considerations for some females who require particular clothing not be seen. If they insist on washing these items in their room, it is advisable to provide a small clothes rack where they can dry their clothes and plastic sheeting to protect the floor.

Costs in running a rooming house and the students' personal safety should be explained to them and the effect that excessive use of utilities may have on the amount of rent which is charged. Examples are the use of excessive heat during winter and the costs and danger of leaving blow heaters and electric blankets on during the night are common examples.

Telephone costs can soon get out of control. **One way of keeping** them under control is to require students to buy prepaid mobile phones. Students who access **Internet and Wi-Fi** must bear in mind that uploading constantly at high speed may interfere with other users by slowing the network and costs can escalate quickly.



Case study: Keeping internet costs under control

One rooming house operator provides internet service which is restricted to email and web browsing only. Every student is allocated 4GB per week (equivalent to 18GB per month). Any usage beyond the weekly quota is automatically disconnected or slowed down. The quota will be reset on the first day of the following week. The operator does not offer any IT support but recommends an external IT consultant for assistance, which will cater for their tastes.

Politeness and saving face is very important in some Asian countries and operators may not realise this. It can be impolite to express one's true feelings if they lead to disagreements or arguments. Sometimes this sense of politeness can be misinterpreted by Australians as dishonesty whereas it is possible that the students are merely trying to please or save face.

Spoken English is not as readily understood as written English and some students may feel uncomfortable in asking questions or seeking clarification if they do not understand an

instruction. If you are giving verbal instructions, remember to speak slowly and clearly.

Written house rules are preferable to explaining them verbally. This is no difference to when you check into a motel which usually has the rules written and shown on the back of the door.

Privacy and Personal Space varies in many cultures which have different ideas about how much personal space and privacy an individual should have. **Homesickness** may become an issue. Symptoms of homesickness can include being withdrawn, anti-social behaviour, depression, loss of appetite, etc. It is important to encourage students to do things with which they are familiar.

6. Students may require some special wellbeing.

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. Knowing the students is the most fundamental issue in identifying any mental illness and understanding triggers is important. It is only by having a pre-existing relationship with these students and knowledge of 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.

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 the students' need to escape the pressure of communication from time to time.

House rules should contain requirements tailored to student accommodation. They should cater for students who have different sleeping and studying schedules due to their age and study commitments and all residents should respect these differences. Playing music at a high volume or shouting loudly which may cause disturbance to others should be discouraged. Working harmoniously with the other students and/or residents for the use of any shared facilities (bathroom and kitchen) is important.

7. Adopting rooming house best practice.

The benefits of adopting best practice in student rooming houses demonstrates to education providers that the rooming house operators are prepared to accept minimum operating and Government standards.



Produced by the

Registered Accommodation Association of Victoria (RAAV)
PO Box 504, North Melbourne VIC 3051
Telephone: 0412 008 996