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**Paper:** Homestay: Opening a World of Opportunity

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**Paper Title: Homestay: Opening a World of Opportunity**

**Presenter: Kathryn Richardson**

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**Abstract**

Discussion has arisen in recent times regarding the quality of cultural exchange experienced by international students studying in Australia. Homestay accommodation has unique potential to promote cultural awareness and cultural exchange through sharing life and family experience. While much of the research has focused on educational outcomes and the psychological wellbeing of international students, there is very little research into how homestay has encouraged mutual exchanges of culture between international students and their Australian hosts.

This paper draws on recent research into homestay accommodation and investigates the theoretical purposes of homestay, and the myriad possibilities in homestay for mutual cultural exchange between homestay students and hosts. The research investigates perceived relationships and roles within homestay families, which raises questions regarding the extent of reciprocal cultural exchange within homestay: To what extent do homestay hosts try to learn about the students' cultures? To what extent are homestay families encouraged to share their cultural values and practice with the international students in their care, and vice versa? Do homestay organisations provide enough support for homestay hosts and homestay students in developing two-way cultural exchange within a family setting?

**Paper**

The Homestay Context

The term *homestay* may create a range of different images in various people's minds. Some may imagine a comfortable living room with lively conversation and happy interactions; others may conjure images of flooded bathrooms and massive electricity bills; still others might just look blankly and comment, "Homestay? What's that?" Whether the respondent is an international student or a homestay host their responses would reflect their individual experiences not only with regard to homestay, but also their understanding of cultural diversity.

Although homestay is relatively new as an industry, the term *homestay* is merely a new word used to describe the age-old concept of travellers residing with a family other than their own. However, the exponential increase in international students attending Australian secondary and tertiary educational institutions has facilitated a dramatic boom in the demand for homestay accommodation. Research into homestay is still in its infancy (Knight & Schmidt-Rinehart, 2002; Richardson, 2002), and there is a growing need for further investigation into matters surrounding homestay, particularly as issues of quality assurance have arisen with regard to international student experience in Australia (IDP Education Australia: 2003). With this in mind, this paper employs a degree of speculation in analysing issues arising in homestay.

This paper investigates the potential of homestay to promote mutual exchange of cultural understanding for both international students and their hosts, thus opening a world of

opportunity for all primary stakeholders. Benefits of homestay for international students and educational institutions will be addressed along with issues of cross-cultural interactions within homestay. Homestay host perceptions regarding benefits for their family, as well as for students in their care will be discussed. While it reports on information gathered from recent research into the roles of homestay hosts the intent of this paper is not to give answers, rather to raise questions and speculate on the wealth of possibilities and opportunities emerging within homestay for homestay hosts, students and organisations.

#### *The Benefits of Homestay For International Students and Educational Organisations*

Homestay has become a popular choice of accommodation for international students and educational institutions alike. It is ideal for housing students under the age of eighteen, who require adult supervision. More and more secondary schools are developing international student programs. As such there is a significant number of young students requiring adult care. Homestay can allow for the student to be supervised by an adult for most of the day. Unlike boarding houses, where a few adults are responsible for multiple students, homestay allows hosts to care for as few as one homestay student at a time. The homestay option tends to be popular with secondary schools due to the relative simplicity of legal requirements of running a homestay program. Currently, it is far less fraught with legal regulation than boarding house programs.

From an educational perspective, international students are provided with an environment in which they are fully immersed in Australian culture and language. Laffer (1997: 4) states, "*Homestay gives you the opportunity to learn about Australian culture 'from the inside.'*" The host family serves two main purposes. Firstly, it gives the student informal contact with the target culture. Secondly, homestay is intended to provide a safe and supportive learning environment for the students. As Kleppinger (1995:1) states,

*...The student is actually studying in two universities at the same time – for the price of one. The acknowledged university on the inside and the actual, real life situation university 'school of hard knocks' on the outside.*

This means that one of the purposes of homestay is to provide authentic learning experiences for international students. Moreover, homestay is intended to be a 'home away from home'. The Holmesglen Institute of TAFE internet site (2001) suggests, "*For many students who are away from home for the first time, it is a good way to learn about the Australian lifestyle and customs while living in a family environment.*"

From a financial perspective, homestay is less expensive than rental accommodation, therefore economically appealing to both the families of minors and older students. Some older students reside in homestay in order to assist them settle into the new country before launching into rental or shared accommodation. Staying in an Australian household in the initial weeks after arrival can help the students come to terms with Australian culture, economics and way of life. In other words, the benefits of homestay accommodation for educational organizations and international students can be clearly and easily articulated.

However, there are other stakeholders in the homestay industry, namely the homestay hosts and their children, who until recently have had little voice in the development of homestay principles. While a few papers and articles have been presented on the roles and experiences of homestay hosts (Knight & Schmidt-Rinehart, 2002; Richardson, 2002; Richardson 2003a, Richardson 2003b), there is no information regarding the experiences, needs and perceptions of the children of homestay hosts. Questions arise regarding the benefits to the homestay hosts and their families. How can homestay be mutually beneficial to homestay hosts, their own children and the international students in their care?

#### Research Methodology

The organisation participating in the research was an English language school located in Melbourne's inner-eastern suburbs. Approximately four hundred students attended the institution at any given time and the organisation had about 375 host families on their database. Roughly sixty percent of the student population lived in homestay accommodation. The homestay students included both adult students and students under the age of eighteen. The majority of the students attending the school were Japanese.

A number of qualitative methods were used in order to explore the needs of homestay hosts and homestay providers. The purpose of qualitative research was to allow hosts and providers to express their experiences and opinions, give insight into their ideas regarding homestay and indicate areas that may require further research. Firstly, questionnaires were distributed to homestay hosts, which allowed for analysis of host profiles, and preliminary probe into the hosts concerns and issues. Of the 346 questionnaires sent out, 133 questionnaires were returned containing useable data. All participants were either currently hosting or had hosted homestay students in the past. Several participants had hosted for more than one organisation.

The questionnaires were followed by three focus groups. Seventeen homestay hosts volunteered to participate in the focus groups, which were designed to flesh out the issues presented in the questionnaires in order to provide more insight into the perceived needs and concerns of the hosts. The groups were organised according to availability. One male volunteered to participate in the focus groups. Finally, two representatives of the homestay organisation participated in a semi-structured interview. The interview was designed to explore the providers' perceptions of the needs of the homestay hosts and to delve into difficulties faced when running a homestay program.

### The Homestay Potential

#### *Reasons for Becoming a Homestay Host*

There is a plethora of reasons why homestay hosts begin hosting. However, it could be argued that the extent to which mutual cultural exchange can take place within homestay will depend largely upon two factors: (a) The reasons for which the host has chosen to become involved in homestay and (b) The extent to which the student wishes to become involved in the homestay. This paper mainly deals with the hosts' perceptions, as there is very limited information on student attitudes within the homestay industry.

In both the questionnaires and the focus groups, respondents were asked to specify the reasons why they decided to become homestay hosts. Many of the responses indicated that the homestay hosts had several reasons for becoming involved in homestay. In total, about three quarters of the questionnaire respondents showed that finance was part of the initial motivation for becoming a host, although only eighteen participants indicated their initial motivation for hosting was purely financial. Approximately two thirds of the respondents indicated a desire for cross-cultural experience and several hosts indicated that their primary reason was for the benefit of their own children. This suggests that many potential hosts entering homestay programs appear to be willing to share cultural experience, thus allowing for the possibility of mutual cultural exchange within many homestays.

#### *Beneficial Outcomes for Children of Homestay Hosts*

Homestay hosting does not only affect adults within the homestay. For some hosts their primary reasons for becoming involved in a homestay program was to benefit their children and enrich their family life. One host stated,

*I did it, really, I think because I thought my family was too small. We've two children and they become a bit precious, life can be a bit easy. So it was really to give them tolerance and I think that's very important. Tolerance of religion and attitude and just to make them think.*

Another host wrote that they became involved in homestay "...to overcome [my] 15 year old son's racism."

With this in mind, the educational aspects of homestay are not only beneficial to international students. Homestay can be seen to promote an authentic learning environment for Australian children as well, where multicultural education is not isolated from the realities of life. Moreover, it can encourage exposure to different cultures, and expand the world knowledge of Australian students, even when there are not enough finances available within the household to send the children overseas.

Other homestay hosts had recently gone through a divorce and were "...trying to create some sense of family environment" through taking homestay students into their house. Not only does homestay have the potential to open a world of educational opportunity to Australian

and international students alike, it can also serve to create family environments for both hosts and students.

#### *Relationships in Homestay*

Many of the hosts considered their homestay students as a member of their extended family. In fact, the hosts participating in the focus groups used terminology such as *'Our concern as mothers...'*, and *'I really have to be very motherly...'*. Another homestay host mentioned that she received Mother's Day cards from ex-homestay students. This suggests that the homestay host/student relationship on the whole can be fairly strong, and can last beyond the duration of time the student spends within a particular household. However the homestay hosts indicated that the students are often treated neither as a guest, nor as a child of the host, but occupy a unique position within the homestay family structure. This unique relationship was referred to as the Pseudo-Parental Role in the research.

It was also apparent through the research that homestay hosting can serve to 'fill the gap' for empty nesters. The results indicated that a quarter of the homestay hosts' households comprised only two people prior to the intake of international students. Additionally 64% of the respondents were over the age of forty-six. This could indicate that homestay hosting may help ease the transition for parents when their own children leave home.

#### Hurdles to Overcome or Hidden Opportunities?

##### *Cross-Cultural Issues in Homestay*

###### *i) The Culture Shock Factor*

In homestay, it is not merely the visiting students who are exposed to Australian culture; the hosts also have a degree of exposure to the student's home culture. In fact, the majority of homestay hosts indicated the need for significant changes to their lifestyle in order to accommodate international students. This means that while homestay hosts are looking after international students and trying to help them overcome homesickness and culture shock, many hosts themselves display symptoms of culture shock, although it is not often recognized. Psychological symptoms of culture shock include irritability, distrust, hypersensitivity, depression, homesickness, helplessness, fear, anger, anxiety, mild paranoia, burn out and deindividuation (displaying atypical behaviour for either culture) (Cushner & Brislin, 1996:250-255; Seelye et al, 1995: 4; Oberg, 1960: 178). Comments made by homestay hosts indicate that many hosts experience one or more of the above symptoms at some time during their hosting career.

Irritability and hypersensitivity were evident in many comments made by homestay hosts. One host complained about *"Students who leave lights on all night, electric blankets or heaters – take very long showers, don't realise that being wasteful or not security conscious makes life more difficult."* Several hosts indicated annoyance at the students' eating habits. Other indications of culture shock experienced by homestay hosts included mild forms of deindividuation. For example, 'Rachel' referred to the celebration of birthdays saying, *"...I tend to go overboard on their cake, I don't know why. With my own kids, it's sort of quickly get a sponge and throw some candles on. But on the others I tend to put a bit more fuss."*

Most of the homestay hosts in the research expressed mild forms of culture shock. However, there were indications that other hosts experienced culture shock to a greater degree. As 'Vera' explained, *"I was talking to another host. I was trying to get her to come along today, but she's sort of having a break. She's sort of fed up for a while."*

Aside from the apparent symptoms of culture shock about three quarters of homestay hosts indicated they were interested in understanding different cultures. This suggests that many homestay hosts possess a curiosity about culture and people, which in turn indicates a willingness to participate in a mutual exchange of culture given they had the information and opportunity. Although, it is also possible that the lack of recognition of culture shock experienced by hosts could interfere with the extent to which mutual exchange can take place. Currently, from an organisational perspective, there does not appear to be a framework through which promotion of mutual exchange can be fully fostered.

However, there may be latent opportunities for the development of programs designed to help homestay hosts by immersing them briefly in the cultures of the students they are likely to host. This may involve offshore activities such as homestay conferences, or visits to some of the families of their homestay students. There are also possibilities for local activities such as *cultural days*. These could ideally be run by the homestay students, and designed to expose the homestay hosts to aspects of the students' languages and cultures. Perhaps this may be something for organisations to consider tackling in a more systematic way.

*ii) Them and Us*

In spite of the obvious good will and willingness to go out of their way to help international students settle into Australian life, many of the comments made indicated a focus on difference. Exclusive and inclusive pronouns were used frequently throughout the interviews. For example 'Lauren' informed her focus group,

*"...and I try to tell all of **them** that [the bedroom's] where **they** sleep but **they** live with **us** down here. That this is the dinner table, **they** come down of an evening for a meal, **they** do **their** homework down at the table so **they** can ask questions, and **we** can sort of help **them**."*

While the intent of the comments was not to be exclusive, it may indicate that homestay hosts do not always see homestay as a mutual exchange, rather it is largely a one-way passage of cultural information.

However, this is not a problem unique to homestay. In discussing issues in global education, Gaudelli (2003: 20) asserts that, "*Questions remain in global education about how to effectively study Others in ways that do not bifurcate any person or group of people from any other.*" Traditionally cultural studies have highlighted differences between cultures (Hofstede, 1997; O'Sullivan, 1994; Hall, 1983). While it is impossible not to notice cultural difference (particularly when faced with it in one's own home), questions arise: Are homestay hosts inadvertently promoting their own culture above that of their students, thus promoting a Western hegemony? Is there a need for recognition of similarity between cultures as well as difference? Should homestay organizations offer training to homestay hosts and homestay students alike in order to promote cultural uniqueness, as well as promoting mutual cultural exchange? To what extent can homestay help to reduce perceptions of western imperialism and promote intercultural understanding?

*iii) "That's not the way we do it!" Dealing with difference in the home*

Perhaps the most obvious perceived hurdle in any homestay is the fact that international students do things in different ways than their host families. Homestay hosts observed a vast assortment of differences: From evening meal time traditions to family and sharing time; ideas of politeness and honesty; expectations of behaviour, relationships and sex; the use of toilets and bathrooms; and opinions about privacy and personal space. Such an array of difference can lead to confusion, particularly when, up until now, homestay hosts have had few tangible resources to help them understand their job better.

The homestay hosts participating in the research expressed concern that they were often not told about these differences nor were they given sufficient information to help them understand. 'Joy' expressed her concern:

*Just talking about that food thing, it just reminded me that we'd always, from right in the early days, thought, "Great! We're all busy, we're at work, studying or what ever, but family meal at night would be the really important thing, to sit around the table and have a designated mealtime and all of that." But then all of a sudden one day this lady that had done homestay ... she said in a lot of Asian countries when they sit down to eat a meal they don't talk. They just sit down and eat. And here we are thinking this meal thing - and she said, "You'll actually have to say in Australia we talk ... we eat and this is the time to catch up and to share and it helps your English and so on. So we'd been going on for about two or three years trying to do this meal thing and we're struggling to get these kids to talk. But it was this cultural thing that we just didn't know."*

Rather than viewing these differences as hurdles, perhaps this is another opportunity for homestay hosts to be exposed to the homestay students' cultures. With

appropriate support and planning by homestay organisations, schools and host networks, it could become a fascinating, rather than intimidating or alienating part of the homestay experience for homestay hosts.

#### *Perceptions of Roles within the Homestay*

The apparent ambiguity of the roles of homestay hosts can create confusion for homestay hosts and their international students. The study found three major roles expected of the homestay hosts: *The Servant Role*, *the Pseudo-Parental Role*, and *the Cross-Cultural Advisor Role*. The vast majority of the homestay hosts who responded to the study (99% of whom were female) indicated they often felt like a servant in their own home. 'Sarah' articulated her feelings:

*I mean they're not disrespectful, but they're not necessarily respectful with people in the family. And I try to treat them all the same, but there is an element of 'you are an inferior person to me'.*

There are several possible reasons for the perception of the servant role. Firstly, because international students living in homestay pay money towards their living costs it may be perceived by some that they are also paying for services. Other students may be unaware of the demands of being a homestay host in terms of cooking, cleaning and costs, while some students may come from cultures with clearly delineated gender roles within the family. 'Wilma' commented that,

*The boys are mostly hopeless and as I said before, we've mostly had boys and you know young men and some of them don't have a clue about anything. And to get them to use a vacuum - and we have always done, you know, pushed the, "You look after your own room," And some of them have been absolutely ... appalled.*

While this stereotype might not be true of all male homestay students, many of the hosts made similar observations.

Conflicting with feelings of servitude, hosts often assume a parental role as well (although some might say they are one and the same!). Many hosts stated they had to teach the international students in their care how to clean, look after them when they are sick, and make sure their clothes are suitable for Melbourne's changeable weather. One host even found it necessary to talk to one of her female students about safe sex. 'Vera' summed it up by saying, *"I've had to do a bit of parenting, but very strange type of parenting."*

Thirdly, homestay hosts are expected to undertake the role of a cross-cultural advisor. King and Huff (1997:25) referred to homestay hosts as cultural advisors, defining the host assuming the role as *"...a person who is both familiar with the new culture and willing to help explain the behaviour of its inhabitants"*. However, definitions such as this connote ethnocentric ideologies, and a unidirectional approach to cultural exchange. In order to infer mutual sharing of each culture, the term *cross-cultural* advisor will be used for the purposes of this paper. This role calls for hosts to have a broad knowledge of Australian cultures, understand the differences and similarities between their own and the students' cultures, and a desire to learn more about other cultures.

A fourth role has emerged in recent times. This is the role of employee, or perhaps more accurately, *contractor* to homestay organisations (Richardson, 2003b). Homestay organisations have certain expectations of each homestay host. Hosts are expected to help the international students in their care settle into the Australian culture, help the international students with their English language acquisition, be proven to be of good character, provide meals and shelter, etc. In order to help with the costs, the international students pay anything from \$180 to \$270 per week towards their keep. This payment, while considered by some as a contribution towards living costs, can also be interpreted by students (and perhaps some hosts) as remuneration for services. Could this then highlight an opportunity for homestay organisations and other homestay host supports (such as Homestay Magazine) to help homestay hosts provide the best services possible to international students (the clients of the homestay organisations)?

While homestay hosts are expected to fill each of these roles, the emphasis on individual roles will change according to the expectations and background experiences of each

international student. Understandably considering the implications of these roles, the homestay hosts job is an intensive and, at times, exhausting one. However, opportunities arise regarding the sharing of expertise and experience through the development of networks and support groups, as well as opportunities for learning through seminars and other forms of written resources.

#### Conclusion: Presenting Possibilities

Currently there are moves towards recognising the needs of homestay hosts and providing them with information to help them discover the various opportunities homestay offers. Many homestay organisations send out newsletters and run periodic seminars to help hosts and promote networking, although many of these seminars are not compulsory and are often not attended by the majority of homestay hosts.

However, there are new moves afoot. Homestay hosts are now becoming proactive in learning more about their job. *Homestay Magazine* has just been launched and is specifically designed by homestay hosts for homestay hosts. It has been set up to compliment the support offered by homestay organisations and hopes to be a source of information and a trigger for developing networks between homestay hosts.

The homestay hosts involved in the focus groups expressed a need to form networks, as they often felt isolated. The formation of networks would help new homestay hosts come to terms with different opportunities, would form a basis for sharing ideas and would provide a support for hosts who are struggling for various reasons.

There is also opportunity here for more comprehensive initiation programs to be developed for new homestay hosts, and for international students moving into homestay. This would ensure the homestay hosts, as contractors of homestay organisations, are well trained and informed to fulfil their duties with the utmost competence. Throughout the research into the roles of homestay hosts it was apparent that the majority of respondents acted with the best intentions to help the students in their care understand Australian culture. Perhaps the development of a more systematic approach to helping homestay hosts would benefit all stakeholders, thus opening a world of opportunity for all involved in the homestay industry.

Because the homestay industry is still in its infancy, a myriad of opportunities and possibilities are emerging. Homestay hosts are the gatekeepers to Australian society for homestay students. As such, their role is critical to the provision of quality international education programs. International students carry their impressions of Australia back to their own countries. Students enjoying their 'Australian experience' are a positive form of advertising for both Australian educational institutions and our tourism industry. As such, there is potential for homestay to play a significant role in promoting mutual cultural exchange and opening a world of opportunity to the hosts, their children and the international students in their care. In order to achieve the hidden potential in homestay there are several movements in motion, such as the development of *Homestay Magazine*, seminars run by individual homestay organisations and newsletters. However, there is a need for a more systematic approach towards supporting homestay hosts before the full potential of homestay is discovered.

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