

# Developing Materials for Homestays and Students from Saudi Arabia

Felicity Fallon  
President

ISANA International Education Association  
Email: [frfallon@gmail.com](mailto:frfallon@gmail.com)

David Bycroft  
Managing Director

Australian Homestay Network  
Email: [dbycroft@homestaynetwork.org](mailto:dbycroft@homestaynetwork.org)

## Abstract

*In 2008/2009 ISANA has been working on developing materials to assist in making the time students from Saudi Arabia spend in homestay accommodation more happy and profitable for all concerned, using funding from AEI (Dubai). We have been assisted in this process by the Australian Homestay Network. To enable these materials to be of the highest quality, two preliminary activities were undertaken prior to their development. A full literature search of all research and material related to this area was conducted. The research pointed to culture differences that exist between the students and their host families and the way these differences can cause clashes and conflict. Education of both parties can provide a basis for the reduction of these clashes and conflict. Focus groups of homestay hosts were also conducted to identify the practical issues involved.*

## Keywords

Homestay accommodation, Middle Eastern Students, Cultural Issues

## Introduction

At the ISANA conference in 2008, concerns were raised in the Accommodation Special Interest Group about difficulties that members were experiencing in the accommodation situation for students coming from Saudi Arabia to study English in Australia. Those providing their scholarships to do this study had specified that these students live in homestay accommodation to help them improve their English but many problems and difficulties were arising. Experienced homestay families were withdrawing from providing such accommodation because of difficult experiences that they had had with these students. Approaches were made to AEI representatives at the conference and eventually to AEI (Dubai) about this matter and the need to work cooperatively to resolve it. As a result of lengthy discussions on this matter, AEI (Dubai) made funding available to ISANA to produce three sets of materials.

Material which looks at the cultural differences that exist between family life in Saudi Arabia and family life in Australia was prepared with the intention that it be given to students before they leave Saudi Arabia to come to Australia. A two-hour workshop was designed to be used with homestay hosts. The workshop addresses the cultural issues involved when people from Australia and the Middle East attempt to live together in a household. It is not intended that this workshop should replace more generic training given to homestay hosts but that it be an extra resource available for those who take on this particularly challenging role. Both sets of material are freely available for education providers to use and they can be obtained from Felicity Fallon at [frfallon@gmail.com](mailto:frfallon@gmail.com). It is recommended, however, that the first of the host family workshops be run for the institution so that those who run such workshops in the future understand fully the way the material should be used. A three-hour workshop was also designed which expands the host family workshop and includes other issues relating to the allocation of homestay accommodation and dealing with problems that arise from cultural issues in these accommodation situations. This is an ISANA TRaCs workshop and is available on the same basis as other TRaCs workshops through the Vice President (Professional Development). The first of these workshops is being run on the Tuesday prior to the conference.

To enable these materials to be of the highest standard, two preliminary activities were undertaken. A thorough Literature Search enabled the materials to be based on the research that has been conducted in this area and Focus Groups were conducted to obtain practical evidence of the problems that had been experienced.

## Literature Review

## **Research on Homestay Accommodation**

There has been no research specifically on the accommodation of students from Saudi Arabia in Australian homestays. The relatively small number of Saudi Arabian students studying in Australia and the small use of homestay accommodation in the Higher Education and VET sectors may have contributed to this situation.

Most of the research conducted on homestay accommodation has been done in Australia and New Zealand. Both Ward and Masgoret (2004) and Akbar (2004) identified the relationship that a student develops with the homestay family as an important aspect to the student's satisfaction and adjustment. Difficulties in developing this relationship were found to arise from cultural differences and communication difficulties. Richardson (2003a) examined the cultural differences in expectations about the role of homestay parents. Both homestay parents and students expected the other party to conform to their cultural understanding. Akbar discusses how a low level of English can both prevent students from joining in the regular family conversations and lead to misunderstandings. Doria (2005) paints a more rosy picture of homestay accommodation. The main theme of these pieces of research is the role of cultural diversity in preventing good communications in these situations and creating clashes and conflict. There is a need for training to help alleviate the problems caused in this way.

## **Research on adjusting to a new culture**

The concepts of acculturation and acculturation stress in the form of Culture Shock has been discussed by many authors in a variety of contexts (Berry et al 1997; Berry 2005; Ward & Kenned, 1999; Cushner & Brislin 1997; Brown & Holloway 2007; Heshanova-Alampay et al 2002; Carson 2005). From these studies, it can be seen that the acculturation process will affect all young people moving to a new culture to study and it will affect most those whose home culture is radically different from the host culture. Homestay accommodation is a situation where such difference in culture can be very evident because of the close way in which the student and the host family are living together.

## **Hofstede's Cultural Value Dimensions**

Hofstede (2001, 2005) has identified five value areas in which people from different cultures generally adhere to these values to different degrees. His five value dimensions – Power Distance, Individualist/Collectivist, Masculinity/Femininity, Uncertainty Avoidance and Long- and Short-Term Orientation. When a comparison is made of Arabic Countries and Australia on these Cultural Value Dimensions, the two cultures differ markedly on the four dimensions for which data is available. It should be noted that diversity exists within both cultures in relation to these cultural values. In discussing the Saudi Arabian culture, Kamal (2008) identified differences between those who live in cities and those who live in rural areas and between those who live in the north and those who live in the south of the country. When the possible differences in the values held by Saudi Arabian students and by their homestay families are explored further, many differences are found. They include the areas of the ways that relationships both inside and outside the family are viewed and expressed and they constitute potential areas where conflicts can arise within homestay situations and where the student can experience Culture Shock and adjustment stress. Both sides need to be educated about the way the other views the world. Mechanisms also need to be developed for addressing, both within the home and through the education provider, conflict situations that arise.

## **Relevant research on Middle Eastern people**

Some recent research has demonstrated cultural characteristics displayed by people from Middle Eastern countries. Nasser-McMillan and Hakim-Larson (2003) noted a survival-orientation and lack of tolerance to open criticism among Arab American clients. Schvaneveldt et al (2005) looked at differences in attitudes in pairs of mothers and daughters in the United Arab Emirates to family life and the role of women. Islamic societies tend to be very patriarchal in nature. This can make it difficult for Arabic students to understand the way an Australian household functions. Dwairy and Achoui (2006) discuss authoritarian parenting in Arabic societies. Differences in perceptions of why things occur can lead to a lack of understanding and poor communication. Al-Awadi et al (2002) studied perceptions of and attitudes towards mental illness in Oman and found that the Omani people understand that spirits play a considerable role in the creation of mental illness. How we perceive what others are communicating is important. Al-Simadi (2000) found that the cues used by Jordanian students to identify deception are different from those used by Americans. The author suggests that the cues associated with deception are culturally specific and possibly learned. Low level of facility in English can cause a lack of communication between a student and their homestay family. Rabab'ah (2005) looks at the communication problems encountered by Arab learners of English.

## **Research on Arab students**

Difficulties in cultural adjustment by Arab students have been found by researchers working in a variety of countries. Khan and Khan (2007) found a classic adjustment curve for Arabic students studying in Malaysia.

Alreshoud and Loeske (2007) found that the amount of contact between Saudi Arabian students and Americans was limited because of extreme cultural difference, communication barriers, and possible negative stereotypes. Asvat and Malcarne (2008) found a link between level of acculturation and depressive symptoms in Muslim students in the United States and Canada. These students were immigrants not international students. De Luca (2004) studied Jordanian postgraduate nursing students in the United States, both male and female. The students spoke of loneliness, missing family and friends, feeling in-between, anxiety, uncertainty, and losing their self. Mehdizadeh and Scott (2005) looked at the adjustment problems of Iranian international students studying in Scotland. They had practical problems relating to their families, problems with academic language and cultural issues and difficulty in participating in social and leisure activities. They wanted more pre-departure information and multicultural training workshops.

## **Muslims in Australia**

In a study of Muslim migrants in Australia, Khawaja (2007) looked at the way these immigrants dealt with the stress of a very significant adjustment process. These migrants come from collectivist, interdependent cultures with an emphasis on social support and belongingness and they would not divulge personal problems to someone outside their family and their community. Mansouri and Trembath (2005) found that, following the September 11 event in America, the way Arab-Australians were perceived and treated by the community changed. Arab-Australians reported being perceived as a homogeneous group and experiencing verbal abuse and structured exclusion from accessing mainstream social resources such as employment.

## **Muslim international students in Australia and New Zealand**

Ferguson (2008) found that 58.7% of his sample of male Muslim international students in Sydney and Canberra felt that they had become more religious as a result of adjustment to life in Australia. Kamal (2008) discussed the Middle Eastern concept of 'wasta' which affects the way students from this area seek help for their problems and their motivation and attendance in class. He also discussed the differences in the level of independence given to their children by Western parents and those from Middle Eastern countries. Rao (2008) found the Saudi Arabian students and their teachers had different concepts of meaning of respect. All these differences can be linked to Hofstede's Cultural Value Dimensions.

Thus there is considerable research evidence that strong cultural difference will exist between a student from Saudi Arabia and their host family in a homestay situation. These differences can lead to clashes and conflict. Education about these cultural differences and ways of addressing them can be given to both the students and their host families and this should provide a basis on which such classes are reduced and conflicts resolved.

## **The Focus Groups**

Four focus groups were conducted as follows:

2nd March 2009 Gold Coast Participants - 16

3rd March 2009 Newcastle Participants - 9

4th March 2009 Sydney Participants - 5

5th March 2009 Melbourne Participants - 20

**Total – 50 Participants**

The one hour focus groups were conducted by David Bycroft (Australian Homestay Network) over a four day period. Participants had no knowledge of other participants taking part and all participants were provided through different homestay supervisors. The questions being asked at the focus group were not made available to the participants prior to the focus groups. Representatives of the homestay supervisors for those hosts participating were present to view their group but were not permitted to participate without invitation from the facilitator.

The focus groups aim was to develop insight and direction, rather than providing precise measures. In one location (Sydney) there were only 5 participants however this did not detract from the quality of the information received.

The participants in all focus groups were active in giving information and answers in a very open and relaxed manner.

The purpose of the focus groups is to obtain the perceptions, opinions, beliefs and attitudes of the hosts with respect to Saudi students in homestay.

The understandings gained from these focus groups will be used by ISANA, AEI Dubai and the Australian Homestay Network (AHN) to improve communications and training with both Saudi students and Australian homestay hosts.

## **Participants – Their Background**

Participants generally were either in the process of hosting a Saudi student or had recently hosted a Saudi student. There was a cross section of older host couples (55+) (approximately 50%), middle aged host couples (40-55) (approximately 35%), single female hosts (approximately 10%) and single male hosts (approximately 5%).

### **Why participants participated as a homestay host:**

*The ability to earn tax free money is seen as the key driver for participants becoming involved in homestay; however there is a trend where in most instances this is being overtaken by the opportunity for cultural exchange (this was evident particularly in Newcastle where there has been an extra effort put into host education specifically for host taking Saudi students). Empty nesters/rooms/loneliness is also considered a key driver. This supports the need for a homestay student to be interested in the cultural exchange aspect of the program and also be prepared to participate in establishing an interest in the host and meeting their expectations.*

### **Summary of reasons given that the hosts participated in homestay were as follows:**

#### **Gold Coast**

- Money
- Love the interaction with students
- Cultural experience
- Something to do
- So their son can interact with students from other cultures
- Brings something extra into the home
- Give back homestay experience to other students as host was a homestay student once in Australia and now lives here
- Social experience
- Company in the house
- Makes it fun at home having students

#### **Newcastle**

- Cultural experience
- Enjoy having younger people in the house
- Originally for the money now for cultural experience
- Help and support other cultures
- Keeps the host young, fit and with an active brain
- Strong philosophy of volunteering
- Teaching/learning cooking and helping to teach English to students

#### **Sydney**

- Money
- Like to share different cultures
- Helps pay the bills
- Cultural experience

#### **Melbourne**

- Money
- Helps pay off the mortgage
- Company
- Relevant to social trends and appreciation of total package/education package
- Missed the stimulation of having young people in the home
- Had empty rooms to fill
- Love having a full house
- Security with people in the house
- Hated the empty nest
- Cultural experience
- Interesting conversation at the dinner table
- Able to afford to go away for breaks/holidays

The above has been presented by region to highlight the similarity between regions for the reasons that homestay hosts participate in homestay. With respect to the Newcastle region where considerable effort was evident with respect to Homestay Host training for Saudi Students there was a stronger sense of cultural exchange.

### **QUESTIONS, KEY FINDINGS AND RESPONSES**

All of the focus groups were facilitated by using the same questions. Below are each of the questions and a summary of the key finding for each question.

These are not presented by region.

#### **1. What did you find enjoyable about having a student from Saudi Arabia stay in your home?**

**Key Finding 1 – What homestay hosts found enjoyable about hosting a Saudi Student:**

*The vast majority of hosts reported very enjoyable and positive experiences with Saudi students when the student was committed to participating in the cultural exchange. Hosts generally had a genuine interest in learning about the student's life and culture and enjoyed assisting the student participate in the Australian way of life. Hosts common reaction to what they enjoyed about*

*Saudi students were reported as the students being reliable, respectful, caring, polite, honest, and involved in "family life".*

**2. What things did you find difficult about having a student from Saudi Arabia stay in your home?**

**Key Finding 2 – What homestay hosts found difficult about hosting a Saudi Student:**

*Clear issues emerged regarding use of water/bathroom cleanliness, lack of respect for women, sleeping habits, party culture, noise levels late at night (on phone/internet), hygiene, meal time punctuality, 'servant' expectation and lack of knowledge/preparation of the Saudi student for the homestay experience in Australia.*

**3. What knowledge did you have about the student's cultural background before he/she arrived from Saudi Arabia?**

**Key Finding 3 – Hosts prior knowledge/training re Saudi student's culture:**

*Lack of prior knowledge/training of hosts is a clear issue. Successful placements often resulted when the host had gone to some trouble to understand the culture of the student prior to arrival. Hosts who did prepare generally did this as their own initiative using internet however some support was evident from some Homestay Supervisors in preparing hosts.*

**4. Do you think that the student had any understanding of Australian ways before they came to stay with you?**

**Key Finding 4 – Students prior knowledge/training re Australian culture/homestay:**

*A major issue is clearly the lack of the preparation of the Saudi student before they arrive in Australia. Where a student did preparation and was willing to participate in the cultural exchange there were more positive outcomes.*

**5. What do you think that the student learned from you?**

**Key Finding 5 – What Saudi Students learned from Homestay Hosts:**

*In most cases genuine positive learning experiences for the students were reported by hosts. These centred on the cultural exchange opportunities. Prominent areas of learning included: understanding equality of Australian women, personal responsibility and tidiness, and improvements in learning English.*

**6. What do you think that you learned from the student?**

**Key Finding 6 – What Australian Homestay Hosts learned from Saudi Students:**

*There were some mixed responses here as some hosts had experienced a 'bad' placement.*

*The main learning here for hosts was the knowledge gained from the cultural exchange experience (diet, family, religion, lifestyle, etc.) which was positively received.*

**7. If you had problems with the student, what do you think was the best way to solve them? What worked for you?**

**Key Finding 7 – Best ways to solve problems:**

*All Homestay Hosts encouraged formal discussions with students as the best way to resolve any issues. For major issues referral to Institution/Homestay Supervisor was seen as the preferred option.*

**8. What score out of 10 would you rate your overall experience?**

**Key Finding 8 – Overall score:**

*Australian Homestay Hosts interviewed had mostly positive experiences however when a 'bad' experience occurs it is reported as very bad.*

*The scores below represent those participants who were happy to respond to this question and provide a score out of 10 for their most recent homestay experience. A score of 1 was explained to be extremely unsatisfactory (a terrible experience) and a score of 10 was seen as an excellent experience (couldn't be better). Any scores below 5 are considered unacceptable.*

**SUMMARY OF THOSE RESPONDING TO QUESTION 8**

- **Group 1:** 9+, 1, 10, 10, 3, 8, 10, 7, 9, 10
- **Group 2:** 8, 4, 10, 10, 10, 8, 8, 8, 8, 5
- **Group 3:** 7+, 9, 9

- **Group 4:** 8, 8, 7, 9, 10, 9, 8, 7, 4, 7, 10

### **9. Would you consider having a Saudi student again?**

#### **Key Finding 9 – Having a Saudi student again in Homestay:**

*There was very strong support for having a Saudi student again (90% of participants) and most hosts reported that they would be much better prepared for having already had a Saudi student in Homestay.*

### **10. Additional comments/information that you (the participant) would like to add?**

#### **Key Finding 10 – Additional Comments/Other information:**

*All participants were vocal and interested in making additional comments. The varied responses reinforced the major issues and were included for consideration in making the recommendations.*

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Communication and Promotion**

**1.** That promotional material (including online access) is developed highlighting the enjoyable and positive experiences between Australian homestay hosts and Saudi students.

This could include examples of the type of research and preparation work carried out prior to the student arriving in Australia. It should also include examples of positive cultural exchanges that have taken place with homestay including the opportunity for the student to improve their English.

**2.** That an online up to date presentation be developed to be made available to Agents/Government as part of a compulsory briefing for Saudi students coming to Australia and staying in homestay.

That this presentation/briefing covers the following items:

- Information about Australian food and healthy eating in Australia
- Australian culture regarding pets
- Acceptable internet usage
- Education regarding the danger of peer pressure in a new country
- Encouragement of speaking English as preferred first language when with Saudi friends
- Develop better information regarding airport arrival and 'first 72 hours' in Australia
- Encourage students to bring photos of their family/home when coming to Australia to share with hosts
- Need to produce promotional material in student's language
- Students need to be cautioned that the internet is not for entertainment but rather an education tool
- Students need to be made to have compulsory Australian health insurance for duration of stay
- Students should have compulsory contents insurance
- Student with driver's licences need a briefing on Australian road and pedestrian rules

### **Training**

**3.** That a training module is also produced highlighting the issues that Australian homestay hosts have had with Saudi students and advising of more acceptable/appropriate behaviour options.

This module to include such things as:

- conservation of water and electricity
- bathroom cleanliness/etiquette
- communication requirements; (regarding meal times/coming home late etc.)
- respect for women
- sleeping habits
- party culture
- noise levels late at night (on phone/internet)
- personal hygiene
- meal time punctuality
- 'servant' expectation
- use of heaters/air conditioners
- understanding equality of Australian women
- personal responsibility and tidiness

**4.** That ISANA and AHN develop an online up to date training package/presentation to be made available to Australian homestay hosts as part of a compulsory briefing for hosts agreeing to have Saudi students in homestay.

**5.** That the following issues raised be included in training materials/action plans for the purpose of improving the cultural exchange homestay experience for all parties.

### **For Saudi Students**

- Information about Australian food and healthy eating in Australia
- Australian culture regarding pets
- Acceptable internet usage
- Education regarding the danger of peer pressure in a new country
- Encouragement of speaking English as preferred first language when with Saudi friends
- Develop better information regarding airport arrival and 'first 72 hours' in Australia
- Encourage students to bring photos of their family/home when coming to Australia to share with hosts
- Need to produce promotional material in student's language
- Students need to be cautioned that the internet is not for entertainment but rather an education tool
- Students need to be made to have compulsory Australian health insurance for duration of stay
- Students should have compulsory contents insurance
- Student with driver's licences need a briefing on Australian road and pedestrian rules

### **For Homestay Hosts**

- Australian hosts need access to general information on appropriate local services (e.g. where to buy Halal meat and where the local Mosque is)
- Hosts need to know about Saudi religion
- Education required for hosts regarding tax free homestay fees and homestay relevance to Australian laws regarding pensions etc.
- Halal education for hosts

### **For both Homestay Hosts and Students**

- Education regarding the importance of organising social gatherings
- Promoting the disadvantages of having two Saudi students in the one homestay
- Education on tips to minimise the effects of depression/homesickness/stress in a new country
- Promotion of 24/7 telephone and online support services for students
- Promotion of emergency 000 number
- Alcohol education for both students and hosts
- Information about Saudi and Australian cultural dress
- That procedures are put in place for the student to pay the supervisors and the
- Supervisors pay the homestay hosts

6. That an agent training package on homestay in Australia is developed promoting the importance of using compliant homestay services. To take action to promote the importance of agents only referring Saudi students to homestay supervisors who demonstrate adequate support services and the provision of appropriate education/training materials for both hosts and students.

## **Conclusion**

The process used in this project has proved to a valuable one in that both over-arching value-related aspects and practical aspects of the problems have been revealed. This has allowed materials addressing both these aspects to be developed. It is recommended that this process could be replicated for students coming into homestay accommodation from other cultural backgrounds.

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