

High standards

Accommodation and welfare provision can make or break the study abroad experience for high school students. High schools in Australia ensure standards in these areas through a network of regulations. Bethan Norris reports.

One of the main concerns of parents when they send their children to study overseas - especially children of high school age - is accommodation standards, because it [has a direct effect] on their study,' says Mai Le Quyen from Baltic International Education Services Company in Vietnam. 'Good accommodation provides good conditions for their lives [which] leads to a good study result.'

Zhang Weiqiao, from Shenyang Sunshine International Corp in China, agrees that accommodation is an important issue for all students and their parents, and adds, '[whether] high school students or under- or postgraduate students, the most important thing about their accommodation is safety.'

Many high schools in Australia offer their international students a choice of boarding facilities or host family and both accommodation options are subject to federal, state or individual school policies. Overall responsibility for accommodation and the care of international students under the age of 18 falls to the education provider, under Australian visa regulations for high school students, and the Education Services for Overseas Students (Esos) Act 2000 also sets out requirements for providers of education to international students in its National Code.

'The National Code imposes an obligation on providers to approve accommodation/welfare arrangements for overseas students under the age of 18 years, consistent with Dimia [Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs] requirements,' says Elizabeth De Luca at the Australian Department of Education Science and Training (Dest). 'Failure to comply with the requirements under the National Code... can lead to action being taken against that provider's registration to provide courses to overseas students.'

All Saints Anglican School in Merrimac, QLD, offers both host family and boarding facilities to international students and Michael Bartlett at the school says that both options have their advantages. 'We prefer new students to spend some time in homestay to help improve their English,' he says. 'Later we prefer them to board because of the academic assistance they receive at the boarding house.'

Host families can offer numerous benefits to international students, including full integration into the Australian way of life, and care is taken at every level to ensure the standard and safety of those families chosen to host students. 'Law now requires all prospective [host] families to undertake screening



Selection of high schools in Australia

Name	Location	Pay agency commission	No. of students	% int. students
All Saints Anglican School	Merrimac, QLD	✓	1,600	5
Firbank Grammar School	Brighton, VIC	✓	1,110	7
Hamilton and Alexandra College	Hamilton, VIC	✓	400	4
John Paul International College	Daisy Hill, QLD	✓	2,500	10
St Brigid's College	Lesmurdie, WA	✓	1,200	0.7
The Cathedral School	Townsville, QLD	✓	450	3
The Knox School	Wantirna South, VIC	✓	805	6
Townsville Grammar School	Townsville, QLD	✓	1,150	1.5
Whitefriars College	Donvale, VIC	✓	1,040	4

through the Commission for Children and Young Adults,' says Russell Welch from John Paul International College in Daisy Hill, QLD. 'In Queensland, we are obliged to police check prospective homestay parents.'

As well as relying on police checks, most schools conduct their own interviews with prospective homestay parents, ask for references and do their best to assess the compatibility of each child with their host family. Often, schools prefer to rely on families already known to the school. 'We invite parents of students at our own school to provide homestay,' says Terri Redpath at Hamilton and Alexandra College in Hamilton, VIC. 'We know these people well, and having students at the same school who speak English and know the school routine is an enormous help.'

When dealing with adolescent students, problems inevitably arise (see box right) and the National Code also requires that education providers have a 'student contact officer' available to deal with welfare issues. Some schools take this further. 'I am available to discuss problems brought to me by students or families,' says Evelyn Diradj at Whitefriars College in Donvale, VIC. 'There is a full-time counsellor on campus or, in some cases, we have used the services of a Chinese-speaking psychologist and family therapist.'

Dealing with problems

'[The] most common problems [among international students] are to do with homesickness,' says Kristell Lyne from Townsville Grammar School in Townsville, QLD. '[Students] are usually a long way from home and find it difficult to express themselves in English. We use [a student counsellor, house parents and boarding staff] to try to keep them active and involved so that they do not have too long alone to dwell on their problems.'

While most problems can be dealt with swiftly by teachers or counsellors at the school, sometimes consultants can find themselves acting as mediators. 'Sometimes the homestay [was] too far away from the school or sometimes the host families did not provide good food and living conditions for students,' says Mai Le Quyen from Baltic International Education Services Company in Vietnam. 'All we needed to do was talk to the accommodation officer to re-arrange it all.'

However, some schools are reluctant to use the support of consultants for student welfare purposes. 'We consider an agent as a commercial relationship, therefore any contact with the student is required to be by appointment through the [host] family,' says Russell Welch from John Paul International College in Daisy Hill, QLD.