

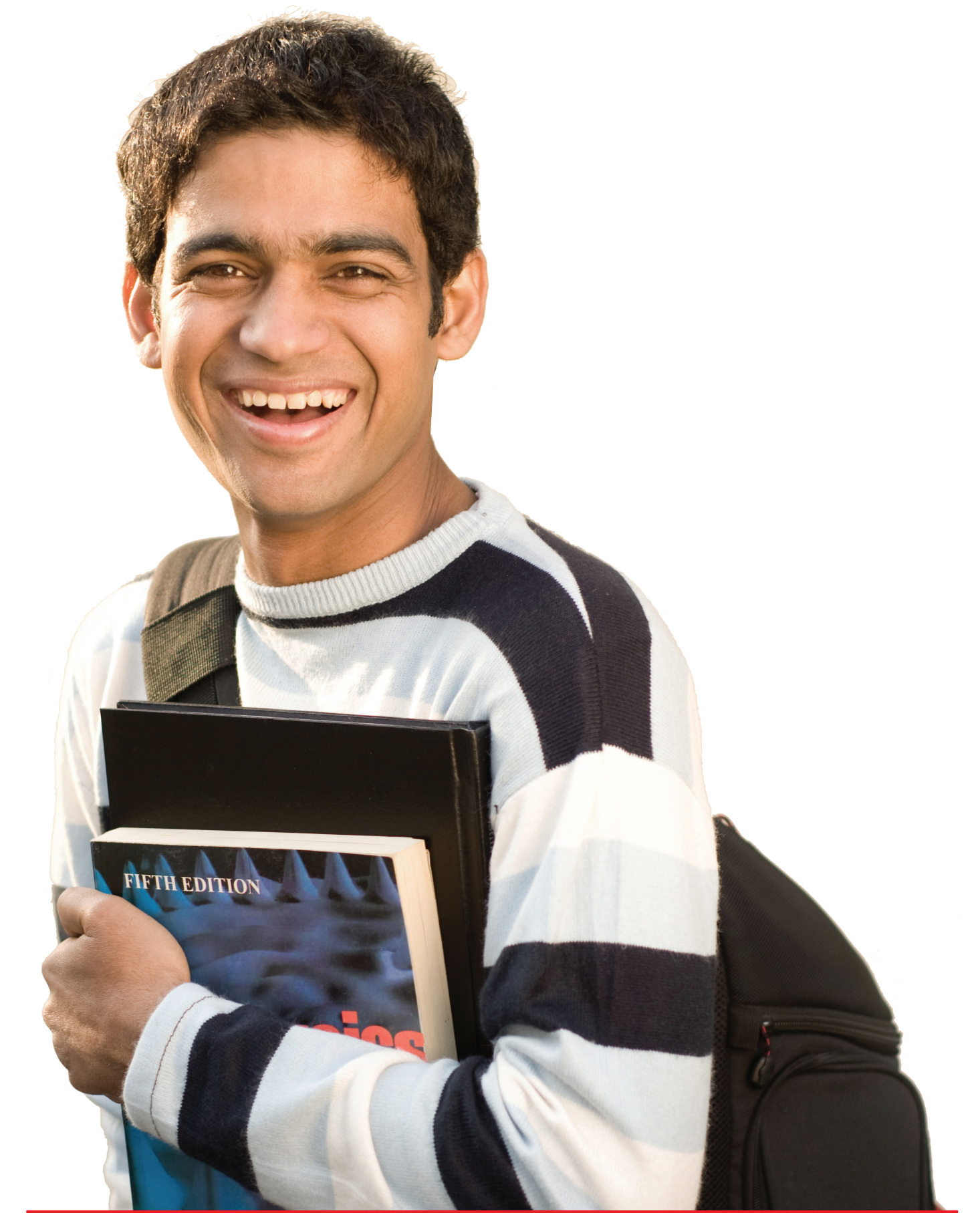
“So, what should I do?”

Talking Sexual Health to Gay International Students

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INTRODUCTION:

International education is the third largest export in Australia with more than half a million students enrolled in secondary, tertiary, English, and vocational education every year. There are several factors that contribute to a students' decision to study abroad. The most common reasons include living independently abroad, obtaining a quality overseas education, and gaining valuable life experiences. For some students, Australia provides a haven to embrace their sexuality which might not be possible in their home countries. However, there are not enough support services specific to the unique needs of LGBTIQ international students. Language and cultural barriers coupled with negative experiences of being discriminated on the basis of race, religion and culture can make some students feel disengaged from the mainstream LGBTIQ community. In relation to sexual health, limited resources in different community languages and the lack of peer-based programs for LGBTIQ international students can affect their sexual health literacy. This includes knowledge around HIV and STIs, consent, communication, healthy relationships, and body image.



METHODS:

Rainbow International Student Network (RIS'N) is a joint initiative of the Victorian AIDS Council (VAC) and Study Melbourne Student Centre (SMSC). The aim is to provide a welcoming and inclusive environment for LGBTIQ international students. The support group also provides a culturally safe environment for students to talk about issues that matter to them and that celebrates their unique identity.

The group also provides opportunity for VAC to talk about sexual health to gay male international students in a culturally safe environment. An experiential learning framework is used by relating students' lived experiences with sexual health information. A peer education model is implemented by utilising a Health Educator who was a former international student.

RESULTS:

VAC attended two social events organised by RIS'N, the Student Welcome Party and Hot Pot Night. Most of the attendees were students from South East, East and South Asian countries. Conversations about sexual health were initiated by the students, with questions ranging from body image to HIV and STI prevention strategies. Culturally specific topics include coming out in Asian cultures, sexual racism, and interracial relationships.

The Health Educator created an interactive learning environment for these topics to be discussed openly and without judgement. Questions specific to HIV and STI prevention were answered in a culturally safe manner by respecting students' cultural backgrounds where sex is often seen as a taboo topic.

The Health Educator framed sexual health information based on students' lived experiences, and used terms and languages preferred by the students.

Students felt connected with the Health Educator due to a shared identity and shared lived experiences. A supportive social environment further facilitated their learning, as students were able to connect with and support each other in a safe environment. Shared knowledge and wisdom further enhanced students' sexual health literacy.

“Where can I meet guys for relationship?”

“Is there a place for free testing?”

“I'm too embarrassed to buy condom, where can I go?”

CONCLUSION:

Health Promotion Programs can benefit from using peer education, experiential learning, and community engagement models to communicate sexual health knowledge to gay male international students. Recruiting a former international student and/or training current students to be peer educators can facilitate the creation of a supportive and culturally safe learning environment. In addition, creating an inclusive social space can further benefit LGBTIQ international students to break down social isolation and increase their participation in the wider LGBTIQ community in celebration of diversity.

“There's no way I can be out to my Asian parents”

“I'm not buffed like other guys, and that's what they like”

“It can be difficult for my White boyfriend to understand where I'm coming from.”

