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Getting the hang of slang and other Australian traits

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Inspector Ian Geddes talks to Indian students at an orientation session run by the Australia India Society.
Photo: Rebecca Hallas

"DO YOU think it's necessary to go to the pub to be involved in Australian culture?"

Amanpreet Kaur, 26 and from the Punjab, lobs her searing question during a role-play session to introduce international students to the peculiarities of an adopted life Down Under.

"Definitely not," reassures Dr Manjula O'Connor in her cultured Strine. A psychiatrist by training, the vice-president of the Australia-India Society of Victoria made her migratory journey from Delhi in 1971. That was when being an Indian in Australia was a rarity.

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Now she is ready to impart her wisdom to the 50 or so overseas students assembled at KAPS vocational college campus in Queen Street. Dr O'Connor's opening gambit is attention-grabbing but one that Tourism Australia might balk at, however.

Life in Australia was like, well, Mars, Dr O'Connor suggests. **"Do you know what limbo-land means?" she adds to underscore the point of these unique life lessons.**

Another local resident, Amit Tiwari, undertakes to introduce the group to the simplicities of Australian time-keeping: if you are going to be late, don't say; "I'll be there in five minutes," he implores.

"Everyone in India knows that five minutes is 45 minutes to two hours," Mr Tiwari says to guffaws.

The day-long orientation yesterday, which included a presentation from police and a cross-cultural trainer, is a novel attempt by Australia's oldest Indian community organisation to build some bridges into the hinterland of isolation and (sometimes) alienation that too many overseas students, especially from India, have experienced recently.

"We wanted to do something for the students, too many seemed to living in ghettos of their own and not really mixing in mainstream society," says Dr O'Connor.

This cultural dialogue is diverse: ranging from the ins and outs of share houses, how to ask questions loudly in tutorials and - apparently instructive for male attendees - how not to assume the offer of a lift from a friendly Aussie female is an invitation to grope her.

The approach might seem sledgehammer at times, but the intention is well appreciated by the students.

No Australian custom, however, was more befuddling than the rituals of drinking in a pub, confessed Mandeep Singh, 21, who is studying for a diploma in community welfare.

"Aussie slang is hard," he says.

"When I first came here, I was having a drink with an Australian friend.

"He bought me a drink and next time he said: 'It's time for your shout' ... I absolutely had no idea what he meant."