

Good Weekend

## Indian student Raghav found a place to rent. The catch? It was a garden shed

The housing shortage has been especially brutal for overseas students. But some find another place to call home.

By Jane Cadzow

FEBRUARY 8, 2024



Indian student Raghav Motani felt deceived and “very sad” after being offered somewhere to live in a space designed for a wheelbarrow and lawnmower. WOLTER PEETERS



Listen to this article

22 min

**B**afflement was Raghav Motani’s first reaction. It was the first week in January, and the 23-year-old marketing student had answered an advertisement for accommodation in a six-bedroom house in the inner-west Sydney suburb of Strathfield. He caught a train from the

city, then walked from the station to the address he had been given. There, the agent for the letting company delivered confounding news: the pleasant room pictured online wasn't actually available. In fact, all the bedrooms in the house were already rented. What was being offered for \$290 a week was the garden shed.

Motani is an amiable, upbeat character. He will tell you that he has matured in the year he has been in Australia: he is more resilient than when he arrived from India, and more resourceful. "You have to stand for your own self over here," he says. "That is very good. I've been able to explore my capabilities." But he admits he was rattled by the Strathfield experience – not just because someone had seen fit to install a bed in a space designed to hold a lawnmower and wheelbarrow, but because of the deceptiveness of the ad. He had been led up the garden path. Literally. As he made his way back to the train station, he realised he was more than disappointed: "I was very sad."

The number of foreign students enrolled in Australian tertiary education institutions has never been higher. Motani's was one of 577,000 student visas granted last financial year – about 40 per cent more than the previous record of 406,000 in 2019. By last December, some 650,000 international students were in the country. The influx has been a bonanza for universities because foreigners pay much higher tuition fees than local students. In effect, they substantially bankroll our otherwise underfunded centres of higher learning, subsidising Australians' university studies and financing up to 40 per cent of research. It is estimated that in 2023, they contributed more than \$40 billion to the economy.

There's a problem, though. The presence of so many temporary residents has exacerbated an acute national shortage of housing. The national vacancy rate for rental properties is about one per cent, and some property owners are exploiting the situation, pulling swifties like passing off sheds as bedrooms and charging tenants ever higher prices. [In the past four years](#), landlords have raised house rents by 40 per cent in Sydney and 28 per cent in Melbourne, according to the Domain Rental Report. Apartment rents have shot up by 33 per cent in Sydney and 24 per cent in Melbourne. As Motani says: "Demand is very high, supply is very low, and they take good advantage of that."

In a bid to ease the accommodation squeeze, the federal government is moving to slash net migration to 250,000 a year by 2025. This may help, but competition for affordable places to live is forecast to remain intense for years to come. And the international education industry is expected to continue to boom. For the foreseeable future, long lines to inspect rental premises are likely to include a sizeable quota of forlorn foreign students. Unless, of course, something that's happening in the Melbourne suburb of Doncaster catches on.

---

**W**hen Catherine and Tony Bensa married a decade ago, they hoped to have kids. In anticipation, they bought a block of land in Doncaster, in Melbourne's north-east, and built a large family home. The plan didn't work out. "We couldn't have children," Catherine says. "So, we were living in this big house with all these empty rooms. It was like, 'Okay, what do we do now?'"

Both liked the idea of taking in lodgers, so they signed up with the Australian Homestay Network, an agency that places international students with hosts. Catherine still worked full-time, but Tony had recently retired from his career as a gym-owner and manufacturer of exercise equipment, so he undertook to take care of the students – cooking their meals and doing whatever else was required. The first paying guest was a 19-year-old from Japan

embarking on an advanced English-language course. Tony and Catherine were hooked right away. “As soon as we got him, we asked for a second student,” Tony says.

In the six years since then, the Bensas have had about 50 young people live with them for periods ranging from two weeks to 12 months. Tony says their place is perfectly set up for it: “There’s a whole end of the house with three beautiful bedrooms, a big entertaining area of its own and its own bathrooms.” The couple originally intended to host only two students at a time, saving the remaining spare bedroom for Catherine to use as her home office, but accommodation is in such demand that a year ago they agreed to accept a third. When Catherine brings work home, she happily does it at the dining room table. “I really love having the students,” she says. “They bring so much joy.”

For a country in the grip of a housing crisis, Australia has a lot of spare bedrooms. Thirteen million of them, give or take. The Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute reported in 2022 that about [a third of dwellings had one spare bedroom](#), another third had two, and 12 per cent had three or more. What if more Australians followed the Bensas’ example and opened up their homes to foreign students? Pressing even a fraction of those spare rooms into service could significantly thin out rental queues. “It’s a great option for people to think about,” says Victorian Labor MP Julian Hill, co-convenor of the federal government’s Council for International Education, who points out that students benefit from homestay programs in several ways. Besides having a roof over their heads, they experience life in an Australian household and get the opportunity to form genuine bonds with their hosts.

Hill regards Australians as hospitable people, but research suggests that as a group we have failed to embrace international students. “Too many of them, when they leave Australia, feel like they missed out on something because they never made a real Australian friend,” Hill says. “They never really felt like they connected with the Australian community.”



Tony and Catherine Bensa with international house guests Emmanuel Olugbenga (middle) and Kaia Dashijiro (right). “We all end up eating together and having a bit of a laugh,” says Tony. PETER TARASIUK

**L**ATE last year, coroner Simon McGregor released a report on the suicides of five international students in Victoria in 2020. The students came from five different countries and attended four different universities. They were aged between 19 and 35, and had a range of living arrangements – from staying in on-campus accommodation to renting rooms in share houses and boarding with relatives. McGregor identified one common denominator: before their deaths, none of the students had sought mental health treatment. The challenge was to work out how to encourage international students to seek help from university health services, he wrote, adding that perhaps “the challenge is even broader than this: how to encourage international students to seek help at all.”

Sociologist Alan Morris points out that foreign students come to this country in the hope of having a bright future. “If you’ve got an Australian degree, that’s very good,” says Morris, an urban studies specialist in the institute for public policy and governance at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS). “It opens up the world for you, in a way.” For that opportunity, they are prepared to pay a bomb. In 2024, Sydney’s Macquarie University is charging international students \$42,600 in tuition fees for the first year of an information technology course. At Melbourne University, a bachelor of science degree is costing them at least \$48,500 a year.

The hefty price tags have led to a widespread assumption that international students come from rich families. This is true in some cases, says Morris, but more often their parents struggle to scrape the fees together. When [he surveyed more than 7000 foreign students](#) in Sydney and Melbourne in 2019, he found that many tried to ease the financial burden on their families by promising to pay for their own rent and living expenses. “But when they get here, they realise it’s very tough.”

Securing part-time work for reasonable wages can be difficult, especially if you don't speak fluent English. Underpayment of international students is rife, Morris says, and many find themselves in a near-impossible bind. Officially, they're allowed to work only 48 hours a fortnight. If they work longer in an effort to cover their costs, they're left with insufficient time to do the study required to get their degrees and justify their parents' investment in them. "The levels of stress for some of these students are absolutely phenomenal."

---

***"Too many of them feel like they missed out on something because they never made a real Australian friend."***

Victorian Labor MP Julian Hill

About half the students surveyed had no financial problems, Morris says. A quarter were just managing to make ends meet, and the other quarter were in a highly precarious position. In supplementary interviews, those in the latter group told Morris of sharing bedrooms with strangers in overcrowded apartments in order to minimise rent. A Vietnamese PhD student said she paid \$180 a week to live in a two-bedroom Sydney unit with about 14 occupants, six of whom slept on bunks in the living room. She wasn't sure of the exact number of tenants because she didn't have access to the "male bedroom". "The way she coped was that she more or less lived at the university," says Morris. "Left the apartment early in the morning and came home late at night."

He vividly remembers the young woman from India whose job as a hotel cleaner paid only \$10 an hour (about half the legal minimum at the time). Forced to take on additional work in order to pay her rent, she ended up in hospital, suffering from exhaustion. Then there was the 22-year-old Hong Kong student who shared a one-bedroom Melbourne apartment with three others – one from the Philippines, one from Singapore and one from India. She told Morris that, despite the close quarters, she and her flatmates barely communicated. "I find it so strange that even [though there are] four of us at home, it is totally silent," she said.

Morris realised that living in intense proximity with little interaction heightened that student's sense of isolation. She wasn't the only one in his survey to report feeling friendless. "Loneliness emerged as a very big issue," he says.

---

**A**t Catherine and Tony Bensa's place, interaction is compulsory. "If they're in their rooms for too long, I get a little bit upset," Tony says. "I encourage them to come out and watch a movie with me or something." The Bensas receive \$320 a week from each of their three students – currently a young man from Nigeria and two from Japan. In approved homestay arrangements, revenue from up to two student boarders is tax-free because it's classified as reimbursement of expenses rather than as assessable income. Tony says he uses the money to buy groceries and pay household bills. Hosting the students means he no longer has to dip into his savings, as he did when he first retired. "I was using my funds that I'd built over the years," he says, "and they were going fast, I can tell you that."

Not that his bank balance is his first concern. Tony gives the impression he is totally dedicated to his students: they are his reason for getting up in the morning. He tells me he was at a loose end when he sold his businesses. "I found that I was waking up at 10 in the morning, and

wasting half the day.” Becoming a homestay host has changed that. He rises at 7am, so he can fit in a work-out in his home gym before making the boys’ breakfast and driving them to the bus stop. When they return from university or college in the afternoons, he is keen to have a chat with them about their day. “A lot of the time they’re looking at their phones, to be honest,” he says, “but that’s what all kids are doing nowadays.” In the evenings, the students set the table while he cooks. “And we end up all eating together and having a bit of a laugh.”

Tony likes to try his hand at traditional dishes from the students’ home countries. He also gets a kick out of introducing them to typical Australian fare and the hearty Italian food on which he was raised. “My mother would make sure that everyone filled their bellies up before they left the table,” he says, “and I’m a bit the same way. I’ll be honest with you, I get upset if they don’t eat. I say, ‘Okay, I’ll make you something else.’” (“Tony cooks very good food,” says Kimsoung Luong, who stayed with the Bensas for six months after arriving from Cambodia to study accounting in 2022. “I gained 10 or 15 kilos while I lived with them.”)

Last year, China and India supplied most students to Australia. Then followed Nepal, Colombia and the Philippines. Homestay hosts can generally nominate which nationality they would prefer, and whether they would like a female or male, but Kylie Downing says she wasn’t fussy when she registered with an agency in mid-2022: “I was just happy to have a student.” At the time, Downing was living with her partner and son in a rented house in southern Sydney. Khai Nguyen, the Vietnamese computer science student assigned to them, fitted in so well that when Downing later bought a place in another suburb, she invited him to make the move with the family. “He came to look at the house, and he was like, ‘Yeah, I’d love to come with you.’”



Kylie Downing liked 19-year-old Vietnamese student Khai Nguyen so much that when her family moved to another Sydney suburb, she invited him to join them. JAMES BRICKWOOD

For Downing, having Khai around has never felt burdensome. “I cook meals most nights,” she says, “but if I’m away, or out working in the evening, he’s very self-sufficient. He knows how to

use the air fryer, the microwave, the stove.” He also knows how to use the washing machine, having asked Downing at the outset if he could do his own laundry. “I said, ‘*Absolutely.*’ ”

Khai, 19, has taught Downing to play chess. She taught him backgammon. The way she sees it, there’s a lot of give and take in the homestay system: “We have a reasonably big mortgage, so I actually do find the income from it quite helpful. I feel like I’m helping Khai too.” More than that, she and her family are extremely fond of him. “We do little photos and videos he can send home to his mum, just so she knows that someone is caring for him.”

---

**R**aghav Motani misses both his mother and father, though not as desperately as when he arrived in Sydney last February. It was his first trip outside India – his family lives in a village in the eastern state of Bihar, which borders Nepal – and he says he was initially overwhelmed by how different things were in this country: “I had no idea what was going on. It was all new for me.”

At the urging of his parents, he had contracted to stay for a year in one of the purpose-built student accommodation towers that have sprung up in Australian cities. For \$400 a week, he shared a room with, first, a Chinese student and later, a Malaysian. The language barrier meant there was little conversation. Motani was accustomed to the warmth and clamour of a large household – five related families living under one roof. Suddenly he was effectively on his own. “The first few months, it was very hard for me to exist in Australia,” he says. “There were one or two points when I was like, ‘Nah, I can’t take this any more.’ I was about to book a ticket back home.”

Obtaining a master’s degree in marketing was only one of Motani’s goals when he came to Australia: “My main focus was to meet people from a different culture. Talk to them. See how they live their lives.” But even after he polished his English, started to learn his way around the city and launched into his studies at UTS, getting to know Australians wasn’t easy. “Making friends here is very hard for an international student,” he says.



Raghav Motani in his student accommodation at Scape, Haymarket, Sydney. WOLTER PEETERS

---

**T**ony Bensa prides himself on housing his lodgers in considerable style. “We’ve got the theatre room where they can watch movies,” he says. “Then we’ve got the gym, the pool, the sauna. Table tennis. It’s like a resort here!” Tina Brown, managing director of the All About Homestay agency, makes clear that this level of luxury isn’t required. “You certainly don’t want to host if you’ve got a tiny apartment, and you’re at home all the time,” Brown says. “I think that would drive you insane. But it doesn’t have to be a mansion.”

The basic necessity, apart from being within an hour’s travel time of colleges and universities, is a bedroom for the student’s exclusive use. It cannot double as an ironing room, for instance, or a storage space. “It must have a wardrobe, a study desk and a freestanding bed – not a mattress on the floor,” Brown says. “It must have a window and a light. I always say to hosts, ‘The nicer you make the room, the more comfortable and at home the student is going to feel and the more likely it is that they’re going to stay longer. Put in the effort because it’s worth it.’”

Brown’s hosts tend to fall into two distinct groups: “I’ve got a whole heap in their 60s and 70s, who are retired. Then I’ve got a whole heap who are working and have mortgages and kids.” Not everyone who applies to be a host is accepted. Brown says she has developed a finely tuned sense of who will make the cut. “You know straight away when you walk in,” she says. “It’s more about the host than the home, actually. Is the host approachable and friendly and warm and down-to-earth? Even if the house is stunning and huge, if the vibe isn’t right, we can’t use them.”





The Bensas receive \$320 a week from their guests Emmanuel Olugbenga (left), from Nigeria, and Kaia Dashijiro, from Japan. PETER TARASIUK

The weeding-out process doesn't always work, as Beijing-raised Joy Xu knows all too well. An international student officer at UTS, where she is studying law, Xu came to Australia when she was 18. She knew no one in Sydney, she says. "And back then, my English wasn't good. I couldn't understand most of the conversation and I couldn't speak in full sentences." The homestay family she was assigned (not by Brown's agency) seemed nice at first, but then they started asking Xu to lend them money. A few hundred dollars the first time. More than \$1000 the next. Xu borrowed the cash from her mother and handed it over. International students are babes in the woods, she says, and will do almost anything to avoid confrontation. "Even if they think something is not normal, they don't want trouble." When she called a halt to the loans, which eventually were repaid, her relationship with the host family soured to the point where she had to leave. "I didn't feel comfortable living there any more."

---

***"We can't build our way out of this housing crisis," she says, "but we can share our way through it."***

The Room Xchange founder Ludwina Dautovic

Xu's friend, Zixuan Gao, had an equally depressing homestay experience. She says she had hoped that living with Australians would help her improve her spoken English. That didn't happen because the retired couple who hosted her occupied a separate part of the house and had almost nothing to do with her. "It wasn't until I had been there for a month that I found out there was a pet dog," says Gao, who is now back in China. "I had never seen it before." Despite distancing themselves from her, the couple closely monitored her food consumption –

right down to how much salt she used. “Being treated differently reinforced the feeling of ‘I’m not belonging here,’” Gao says. “Although living in a family, I did not feel the warmth of home.”

A violent crime put the [homestay system in the news in 2018](#). A Bangladeshi student, Momena Shoma, stabbed her host as he slept beside his five-year-old daughter at his home at Mill Park, in northern Melbourne. Shoma pleaded guilty to a terrorist act and received a 42-year jail sentence. The host, Roger Singaravelu, sued the Australian Homestay Network, saying the agency had failed to warn him that Shoma had been removed from her first host family after erratic behaviour that included stabbing a mattress. The case was settled out of court.

Shoma should never have been granted a visa, says David Bycroft, the agency’s executive director, who blames the government for failing to identify her as an Islamic State sympathiser. Bycroft describes the attack as “a one-in-a-million event”. Singaravelu’s lawyer, Aki Munir, says more checks and regulations are needed to ensure the safety of homestay hosts and guests.

---

**O**n the Gold Coast, where last year Mayor Tom Tate wrote to 55,000 residents, urging them to consider offering their spare bedrooms to international students, Hannele and Christian Ulrichsen are pioneers of homestay hosting. In 16 years from 1997, they welcomed 260 students from 12 countries. Christian says they helped the kids explore south-east Queensland, taking them kayaking and bushwalking. A drive through the rural hinterland with a recently arrived Japanese student sticks in his memory. One minute, they were all enjoying the scenery. “The next thing, we heard this huge scream coming from the back seat. I put on the brakes, and she’s sitting there with her hand on her mouth, pointing. It was the first time she’d seen a farm animal.” Hannele laughs: “A cow.”

Another of their Japanese students later married their son. Hannele says many of their former boarders have stayed in touch. “And lots of them have come back to visit us. We have made lifelong friends.” Says Christian: “You get back what you give.”

Ludwina Dautovic makes the point that not everyone wants to give the same amount. Dautovic is the Melbourne-based founder of The Room Xchange, a variation on the homestay theme aimed at those who wouldn’t mind some company and extra cash but can’t necessarily be bothered cooking for a long-term house-guest. Under this scheme, boarders can arrange to pay less rent in exchange for doing some chores around the house. Dautovic, who lets her adult daughter’s old bedroom to a student from the UK, reckons we may as well accept that the construction industry will take a very long time to provide shelter for everyone who needs it. “We can’t build our way out of this housing crisis,” she says, “but we can share our way through it.”



Bangladeshi student Momena Shoma was sentenced to 42 years’ jail for stabbing her homestay host in 2018. EDDIE JIM

Her optimism is echoed by Sean Stimson, who heads the international student legal service at Redfern Legal Centre in Sydney. Stimson sees how ugly things can get in the open rental market when property-owners try to profiteer from the scarcity of accommodation: excessive rent increases, arbitrary evictions and so on. “Students are regarded as a bit of an easy target by some landlords,” he says. “I think homestay, if it works as it should, could be the perfect solution to the problem.”

David Bycroft says his agency is adding 300 new hosts to its books each month but many more are needed to meet the demand. “We’re all in the same boat,” says All About Homestay’s Tina Brown. “We’re all frantically recruiting hosts.” Tony Bensa’s advice to rookies: treat the students as members of your family. “It’s not only a room for hire,” Bensa says. “I look at myself as a father for hire, to be honest.”

Raghav Motani – who hadn’t heard of the home-stay program until I mentioned it to him – is pleased to report he has made some friends. “Back in India, I was a very introverted person, but now that’s changing,” he says. As part of his effort to plug into the Australian community, he has been working as a volunteer for the Red Cross emergency service and the Australian Kookaburra Kids Foundation, which supports children and teenagers who have family members with mental illnesses. When I contact Renée Coffey, the foundation’s chief executive, she praises Motani’s kindness, compassion and sense of fun: “On our programs, young people flock to him during free time to play games.”

Motani has found somewhere to live – a room in an inner-Sydney apartment that was advertised for \$300 a week. After he paid the bond, the owner upped the rent to \$320. “I said, ‘It’s OK. I can pay \$20 extra.’”

I ask Motani whether he is happy he came to Australia. “Yes, I am very happy,” he says, sounding surprised that anyone would doubt it.

**To read more from *Good Weekend* magazine, visit our page at [The Sydney Morning Herald](#), [The Age](#) and [Brisbane Times](#).**



**Jane Cadzow** is a senior writer with Good Weekend magazine.

---