

A woman with dark hair and a bindi, wearing a vibrant yellow and orange sari, stands on a metal railing overlooking a sandy beach. She is smiling and looking towards the camera. The background shows a clear blue sky and the ocean waves. The magazine title 'Weekend' is written in large white letters at the top, with 'MAGAZINE' in smaller letters below it. The date 'Saturday, May 9, 2020' is printed below the title. The main headline 'DON'T GO IT ALONE' is at the bottom, with a subtitle 'OPENING OUR HEARTS AND HOMES TO SAVE STUDENTS FROM HOMELESSNESS' below it.

Sunshine Coast Daily

Weekend

MAGAZINE

Saturday, May 9, 2020

'DON'T GO IT ALONE'

OPENING OUR HEARTS AND HOMES TO SAVE STUDENTS FROM HOMELESSNESS

A STUDY IN COMPASSION

COAST FAMILIES FEAR THAT STRANDED INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS WILL BECOME DESTITUTE AS MANY STRUGGLE WITHOUT AN INCOME DURING COVID-19

WORDS: NICKY MOFFAT

Families are opening their homes to Sunshine Coast international students amid fears the coronavirus lockdown will drive many to homelessness.

Australian Homestay Network founder David Bycroft said hundreds of hosts, including 20 from the Coast, had put their hands up to help international students struggling after suddenly losing jobs they relied on to support themselves.

"They've lost their income. They now are having trouble living," he said.

"We would believe there would be a lot of students on the Sunshine Coast looking for help during this time.

"Many of them are going to be homeless over the next few months, so we're looking for people who will take them in their homes, just until this situation resolves itself."

Mr Bycroft explained that some students were unable to return home because their home country's borders were closed – or for a host of other reasons.

The financial support of parents at home is, for many, no longer reliable due to the global economic shutdown; and student visa-holders are not eligible for Centrelink benefits that are bringing some relief to Australian students.

100,000 at risk of homelessness

International Education Association of Australia CEO Phil Honeywood warned last month that 100,000 international students could be at risk of becoming destitute if more wasn't done to assist them. Speaking on SBS News, he called for a national hardship fund to be set up for struggling international students, who number more than half a million and contribute about \$39 billion to the national economy each year.

Nambour resident Thanalechumi Roysmith and husband Michael have never hosted a visiting student before, but volunteered their spare room the same day they saw an appeal to help students hit by the lockdown.

"I was concerned because I did think, 'What are they going to do?'" Mrs Roysmith said.

Having studied in Australia as an international psychology student 25 years ago, Singapore-born Mrs Roysmith knows the challenges these students face, especially for recent arrivals in their first semester of study.

Students for whom English is a second – third or fourth – language are also especially

vulnerable, she said.

"The Covid-19 pandemic situation has added an additional layer of distress and complexity ... for international students. If they are working, if they are depending on their Australian income for their rent, certainly it would be very difficult," she said.

"If they leave Australia they can't (easily) come back, and some of them can't even go back to their own countries (due to closed borders)."

International students returning home would have to reapply for a visa if hoping to restart their studies in Australia – a process, which involves fees and paperwork.

For many, the coronavirus pandemic may have ended their plans to gain a qualification while experiencing life "Down Under".

Mrs Roysmith hoped international students needing help would reach out, even though it may be difficult culturally for them to do so.

"The biggest problem is we don't know who needs help. A few weeks ago, I (thought), 'I just don't know how these people are coping'."

The Roysmiths are part of a recently announced program aiming to facilitate low-cost accommodation for international students affected by the coronavirus lockdown, launched late last month by the Australian Homestay Network.

"The Prime Minister has told international students to return home if they can't afford to support themselves but the reality of the situation is, it isn't that simple," Mr Bycroft said.

"For many students, going home is not an option. Mr Morrison has underestimated the difficulties international students are facing and needs to acknowledge the valuable contribution international students make to our community and the local economy."

The ISSN is working with educational institutions including the University of the Sunshine Coast to match students in need with willing hosts. Hosts will receive about \$120 per week in exchange for providing shelter and three meals a day.

Homestay hosts' joy

Experienced homestay hosts, Buderim couple Michelle and Paul Williamson, have had 13 students at their home since becoming involved in AHN seven years ago.

"It's a really good cultural experience – both for the student and for us. We get to learn about different places in the world,

(and) it's also really nice watching the students change and grow as they experience the Australian way of life," Mr Williamson said.

"The look on their face when they've come across something they've never seen before, or tasting something they've never experienced – it's very rewarding for both the student and for us."

For the Williamsons, the length of stay has ranged from two weeks to four months – although ISSN hosts would make their own arrangements about timeframes.

The homestay guests were usually students in their first year, who needed a "leg up" from some locals before finding their own accommodation. Mr Williamson said he enjoyed helping integrate a traveller to Australian life.

"We've hosted students from different places in the world – Japan, China, Russia, Korea, the Philippines," he said.

"(We) show them around, get them to know places, food, shopping, the local area.

"Obviously, getting started at uni, all those basic things (are unfamiliar)."

Uni offers help

The Coast's largest tertiary institution, USC, had 3600 international students enrolled last year, according to January 2020 data in its most recent annual report.

About 3 per cent of international students across USC's Queensland campuses were studying online from their home countries, after the university paused face-to-face teaching in March, a USC spokesman said.

Most of its enrolled international students remain in Australia and on the Sunshine Coast.

"USC has received a substantial increase in the number of international students requiring financial assistance this year," the spokesman said. "Most requests are from students who have lost their jobs and are struggling to pay for food and rent."

The uni had awarded emergency bursaries of \$1000 to 650 international students, and planned to award more soon.

USC emergency support for food is available through the Student Guild's food bank. Students seeking help with accommodation can contact USC's tenancy and welfare officer on 5430 1226.

To inquire about hosting, contact AHN at homestaynetwork.org. To seek a homestay placement through AHN, contact your tertiary institution.



WELCOME: Homestay host and Nambour resident Thana Roysmith wants struggling international students to reach out for help. **BELOW:** Buderim residents Paul and Michelle Williamson with students they've hosted over many years.

Pictures: Warren Lynam and Paul Williamson

