



REFUGEE SETTLEMENT SNAPSHOT 2018: BRISBANE, QLD



In 2017 the number of refugees arriving in Australia effectively doubled the intake of previous decades. This is because most of the special one-off intake of 12,000 Syrian Conflict refugees that was announced by Prime Minister Abbott in 2015 in fact arrived in 2017. In addition, the annual intake of humanitarian entrants was increased to 16,250 in 2017-18. Most of these newly-arrived refugee families settled in NSW, Victoria and Queensland.

As part of a study on Settlement Outcomes of Refugee Families in Australia, funded by the Australian Research Council, and led by Professor Jock Collins (University of Sydney), Professor Carol Reid (Western Sydney University), and Associate Professor Dimitria Groutsis (University of Sydney), the first of three years of data collection has been completed. We interviewed and surveyed newly arrived refugee families from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan in three sites in Queensland: Logan, Brisbane and Toowoomba. Multicultural Development Australia (MDA) Ltd, a partner in the research, identified Syrian and Iraqi participants in Brisbane. In 2018, these 23 families were interviewed, mainly in their homes, providing valuable insights into their settlement experiences. In these Brisbane families, 54 adults and 9 young people participated in interviews and completed online surveys. This snapshot identifies some of their concerns, hopes and opinions.

Broad themes emerging from the interviews with the Brisbane family members included:

- Coming to Australia
- Family networks
- English language skills
- Access to employment
- Housing
- The local area / neighbourhood
- Bringing up children / education
- Social integration / belonging

Starting a new life in a strange land is difficult. **Some Brisbane family members wanted to come to Australia in particular:**

[Australia] is my dream. Every time I watch TV, National Geographic, I see Australia everywhere, and in work in animal zoo, Steve [Irwin]...Yes, every time I watched him. No, did not try to go to Canada or USA or anywhere. Because I don't love. I love in Australia, what I listening from Australia. (Syrian male, 2018)

We heard from people from our community, that Australia embassy has opened the doors for the Iraqi refugees. When we left Iraq, we hoped to come to Australia, but you know, as a refugee, you don't know which country is going to accept you. But we were hoping to come here. (Iraqi male, 2018)

Other refugee families were just grateful for a safe haven from conflict in their homeland:

For us as refugees who lost everything in the war, we wanted to go basically anywhere safe for me and my family. And at that time, Australia had the doors open, and I am really grateful and thankful for that. We didn't have any background information; we knew it was safe. At that stage, we just wanted to be away from terrorism. (Iraqi male, 2018)

I like the weather hot. I not like the cold. That's why I not go to Canada. I not have friends. I don't know anything but I know the weather is nice. That give me a little bit confident and I am happy, I and my brother. (young Syrian male, 2018)

The importance of **English language skills** to refugee families was clear, both in order to communicate and interact with others in their new neighbourhoods and to get an education or a job. **This is what some Brisbane family members said about English language ability and meeting people:**

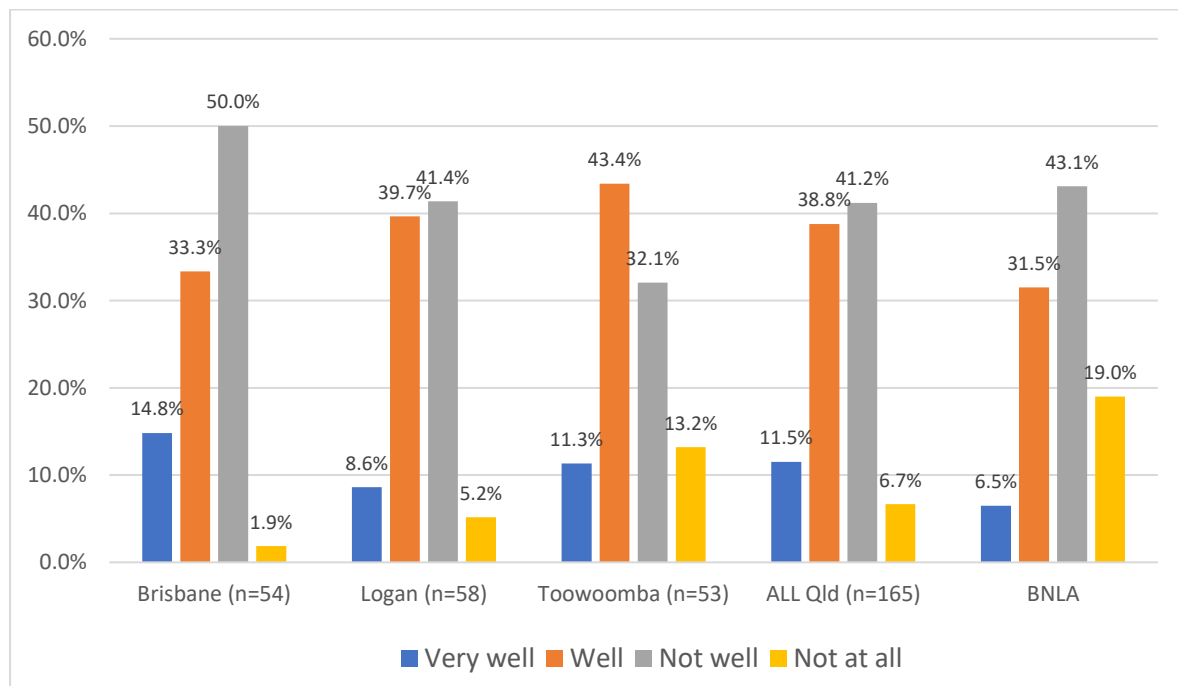
We don't have strong English skills so that's why maybe the communication might be difficult if we have a friend who speaks English only. We like to make friendships with Australian people but at the same time, sometimes we are shy. We can't go and say hello. (Iraqi female, 2018)

We are new in this country. We are not start working. When you start working you will have so much friend. You can speak English more good. You can doing friend. (young Syrian male, 2018)

We are not good enough for communication, that's why [no non-Arabic friends]. When our English is good enough, we will start to find the friends who speak English, so we can communicate easily. (Iraqi male, 2018)

We asked the adults in the refugee families from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan, in Brisbane, Logan and Toowoomba, whether they could write in the English language 'very well', 'well', 'not well' or 'not at all'. **Adults in Brisbane assessed themselves to be particularly skilled in writing English, having the highest proportion (14.8%) who could write English 'very well' and the lowest proportion (1.9%) who could 'not write English at all' (Figure 1).**

Figure 1: QLD adults: English writing ability by location



BNLA = Building a New Life in Australia (The Longitudinal Study of Humanitarian Migrants)

Nevertheless, lack of English language skills was a frustrating barrier to employment, as several Brisbane adult refugees explained:

If I can't speak English, how can I work? (Syrian male, 2018)

No, no work. Because I need to... more learning English, because my job... I don't... how I do it here, because I need the English very well. (Syrian male, 2018)

Just making things easy for employment. Like, hundreds of companies needs that people, the experienced people, but they are ... not hiring us to do this job maybe because of the English barrier. Like, in the job I'm doing now just, like, telling me what to do. I don't need that much of - of English and from my experience I know what I have to do before even telling me what I have to do. So just making employment easier. (Syrian male, 2018)

For adult refugees generally and for those in Brisbane, getting a job in Australia is their highest priority. Since this was the first year of settlement in Australia for most of the Queensland refugees interviewed/surveyed, most of them had not yet found employment. This was because most were still learning English. We will follow them over the next two years and hope to see these employment results improve greatly. In spite of focusing on developing their English language skills, **adults in Brisbane were more likely to have a paid job than adults in Logan and Toowoomba (Figure 2).**

Figure 2: QLD adults and employment



The lack of recognition of their prior employment qualifications and experience was another reason for frustration for the Brisbane refugees interviewed:

The problem with the recognition, you know. I had the qualification for the philosophy and I got all the transcript in it for six years. I went to make the recognition but they asked me to do a test first ... and after that I can start from the beginning, studying, I mean ... After that, I chose to work. (Iraqi male, 2018)

It's hard to get employment because we came from Syria and I have 35 years' experience in painting and when I ask for employment here they just ask for a four years course. So it will be kind of impossible for me to do that course, plus the language barrier. So all of these things just are abolishing all the experience that I have... (Syrian male, 2018)

So too was the pressure to take low-skilled dead-end jobs:

Survival job (Iraqi male, 2018)

He must change his mind to something not familiar to his job is Iraq, like security. He's working the nightshift. (Iraqi female, 2018)

...my case manager in Jobactive, she advised me to work many jobs, she advised me as a truck driver, and just I start that two days ago, working as a truck driver. And I accept that, it's not my goal ... because I need work, to support my family, pay bills, everything... (Syrian male, 2018)

When we went to Jobactive I talk to staff there... I said 'if you find me jeweller job I will work. Today I will start to work, but if you say there is some job, there is no certificate, I will work for one year, two years and then I will stay at home. I don't want that'. So I'm hearing there is some people working packaging. 'There is no future' I said to her. I have my job. I have certificate in Syria. I want to doing my job. I don't want any job there is no certificate. After five years, what I will do? (young Syrian male, 2018)

Brisbane participants spoke of the importance of social networks or local contacts for both employment and to enable more opportunities to learn and practice conversational English:

Maybe finding relationships, you know, like friends and making friends here, you get more people so you will have more often jobs, for example. (Iraqi male, 2018)

Here is a different culture from where we came from. There is much difference between the cultures. [Here] every person is responsible about himself, every person can like his life. In my country, you live as a family, as a group. Maybe the language is a problem. (Iraqi male, 2018)

Many refugee families in Brisbane think that it is easier to get a job in Sydney but worry they will not acquire solid English language competency if they move to Sydney:

You can't learn English in Sydney because there is maybe 30,000 Armenian and Arabic people. You can't learn English. I have a friend, Armenian friend in Sydney. He is working car technician, mechanic. So he told me 'I can't speak English like you'. 'You speak English better than me', because he has Armenian and Arabic friends. They don't need English language. (young Syrian male, 2018)

I went to Sydney to visit my cousin and I worked for a week there in Sydney. I just been introduced to how to work here in Australia and to do the painting thing. In Sydney, yeah, it will be easier to do this because lots of Arab there. But Syrians short in Brisbane. I have to first know some Australians doing the same business to tell me what I have to do. (Syrian male, 2018)

Many refugees want more conversational English than they receive in TAFE courses:

*Learning English from work is better than English classes. (Iraqi male, 2018)
We all know if you want to learn, you don't need just the school, you want to do with yourself. (young Syrian female, 2018)*

You can start work and we can teach you slowly. I give you more for work - get you more for English. (Syrian male, 2018)

One of the key reasons that refugees come to Australia is to find a safe environment to bring up their families. **Nearly all of the adult and young family members interviewed in Brisbane felt safe in the area where they lived: 96.3% of the adults and all 100% of the young people felt safe (Figures 3 and 4).**

Figure 3: QLD adults: Do you feel safe in your neighbourhood?

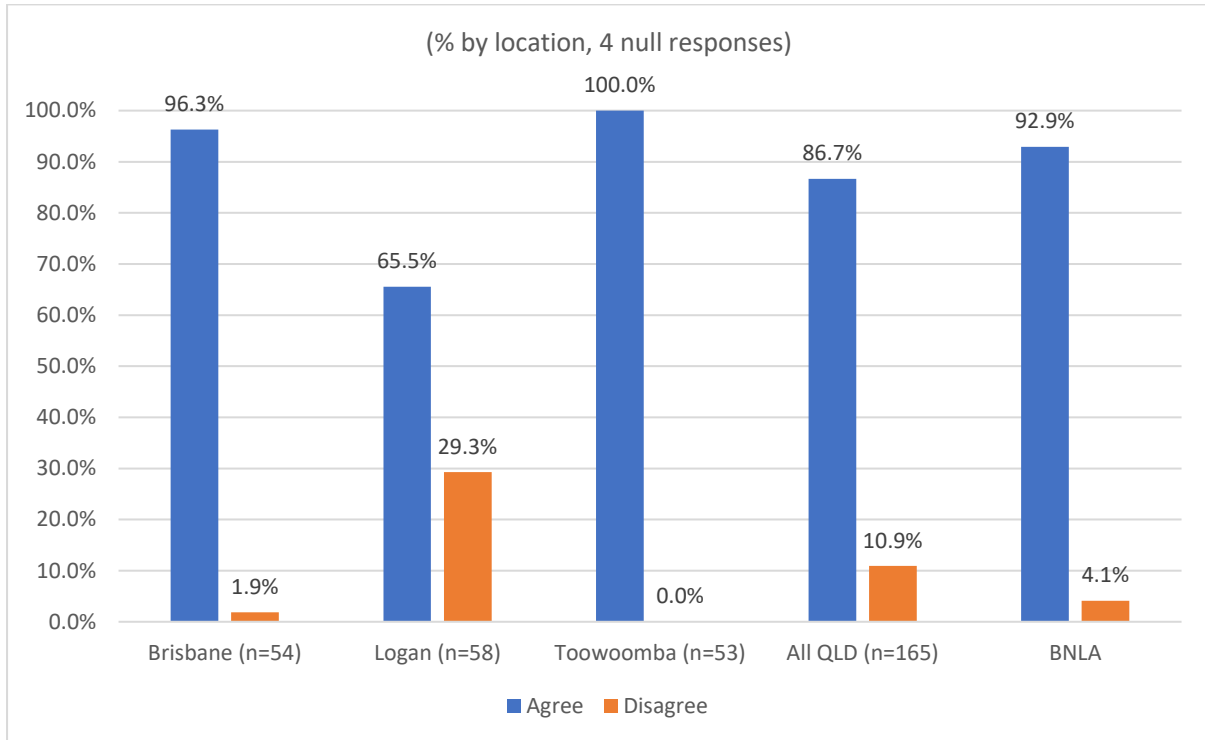
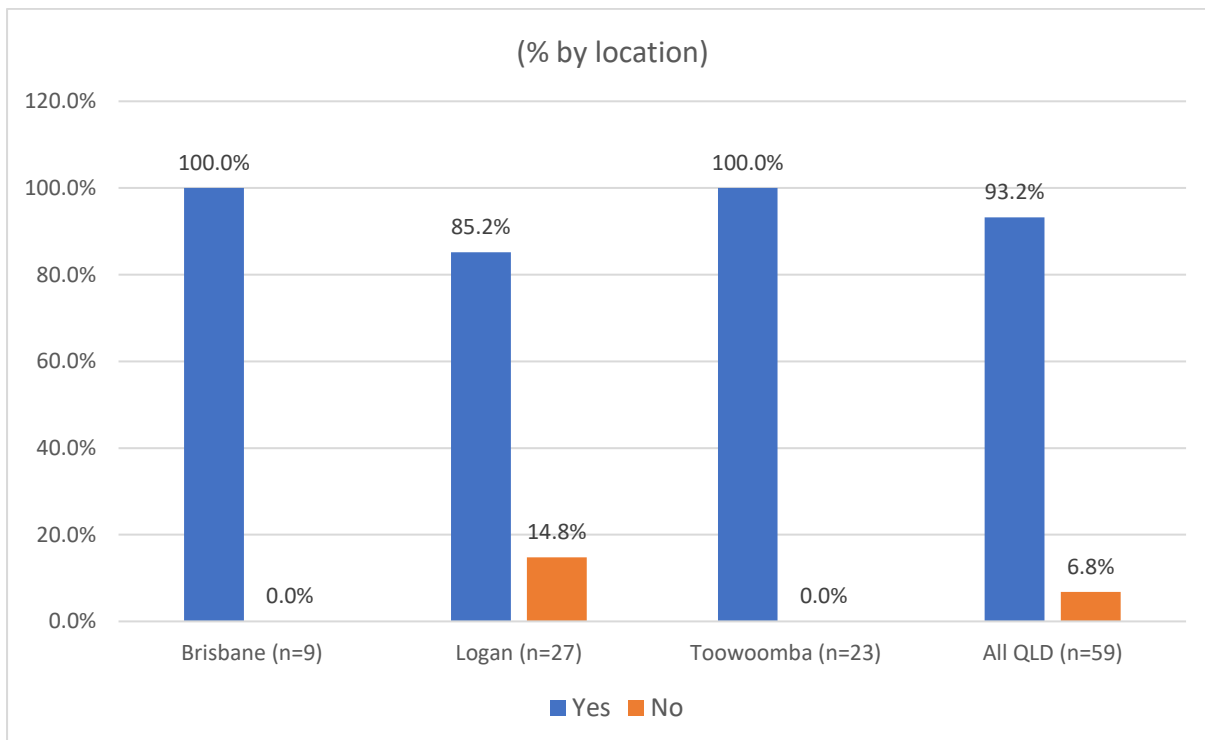


Figure 4: QLD young people: Do you feel safe in your neighbourhood?



In relation to *social life*, many family members in Brisbane talked about the differences between life in Australia and in Syria and Iraq, particularly visiting neighbours:

Australians here have different way of social life. So in Syria it's really common for people, for neighbours to spend like sometimes the whole day at each other's houses. But here it's more like, there is some form of interaction, but most people would meet outside, and neighbours would mind their own business. (young Syrian male, 2018)

[In] Australia it's friendly but friendly outside. But not all the Australian invite me to their home. (Syrian female, 2018)

The Australian do not like socialising. They little bit isolated, like, it's not like the Middle Eastern societies where they used to visit each other every day almost. We have one - one neighbour here, he just, like, pass by us without saying hi. [On the other hand Australians] help a lot even if you ask for something they'll leave what they are doing and try to assist you. (Syrian female, 2018)

And one man described how the comfort of having the Arabic community around them came at the cost of lost opportunities for English conversation:

It's good that they can still communicate with the people from the same culture and it's good that in Arabic culture, or Middle Eastern culture, we have a strong relationship with neighbours...but the other thing is that it's affecting the English learning capability, so you are spending most of your time speaking Arabic. (Iraqi male, 2018)

Older people face strong barriers to learning English:

For the older people, it's very hard. They stay there for six hours sitting so sometimes that's a bad thing. It's very hard, especially for the older couples and the older people. It's very long, you know, that duration. (Iraqi male, 2018)

Probably more hours [of classes would be better], because it's too much information for us to digest at this age. (Iraqi female, 2018)

One problem with TAFE English classes is that refugees with a wide range of English-language ability are all in the one class. One refugee suggested separate classes for older refugees, illustrating the need to provide classes based on ability:

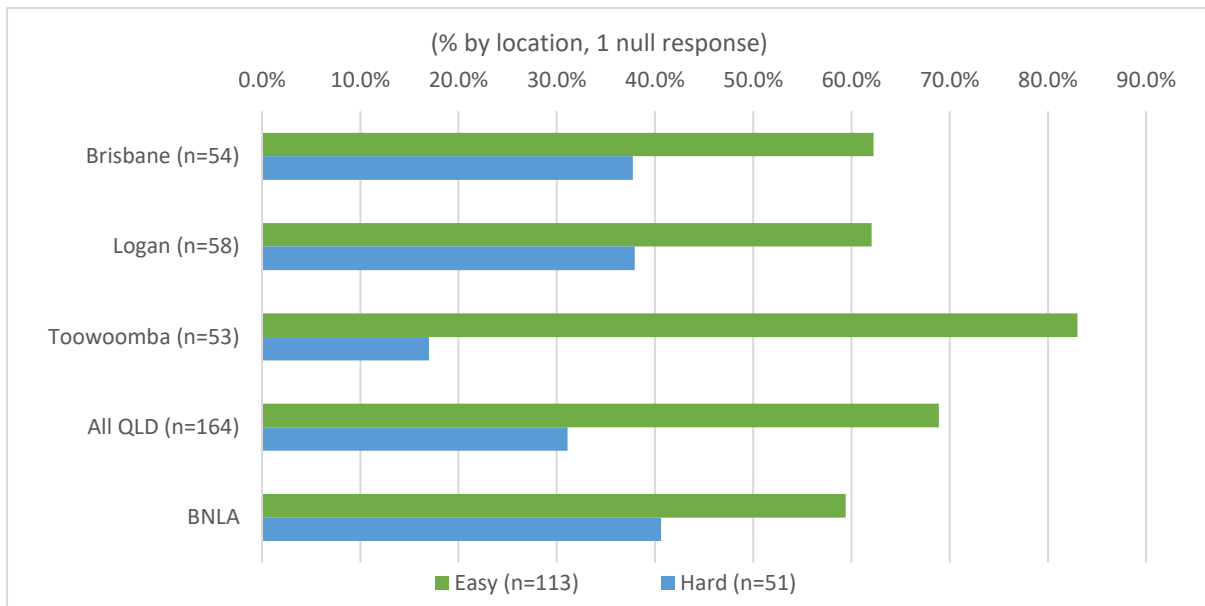
I go up there sometimes and they give us not that good studying material and some teachers are so fast, especially for us at our age. I just suggested to separate the classes. I mean put the age classes, like a class for the youngest people and a class for the older people and they can just make it easier for the older people. (Iraqi male, 2018)

One girl in Year 11 recognised the need to learn every-day Australian language:

The problem is at my school, I learn just the formal words, like you know you just learn the formal words. Yeah, that is problem. Yes, I want to know the colloquial English. Like many peoples when like do the conversation for example, like some people give the Aussie, the Aussie language. (young Syrian female, 2018)

It is very different living in Australia than in the Middle East, yet after one to two years of settlement two in three family members living in Brisbane said that they found it easy to understand the Australian way of life (Figure 5).

Figure 5: QLD adults and understanding Australian ways



All refugees want their children to have a good future in Australia. They will be happy that almost 90% of young people living in Brisbane thought that their school or TAFE was ‘excellent’ or ‘very good’ (Figure 6). One little girl described her friendships:

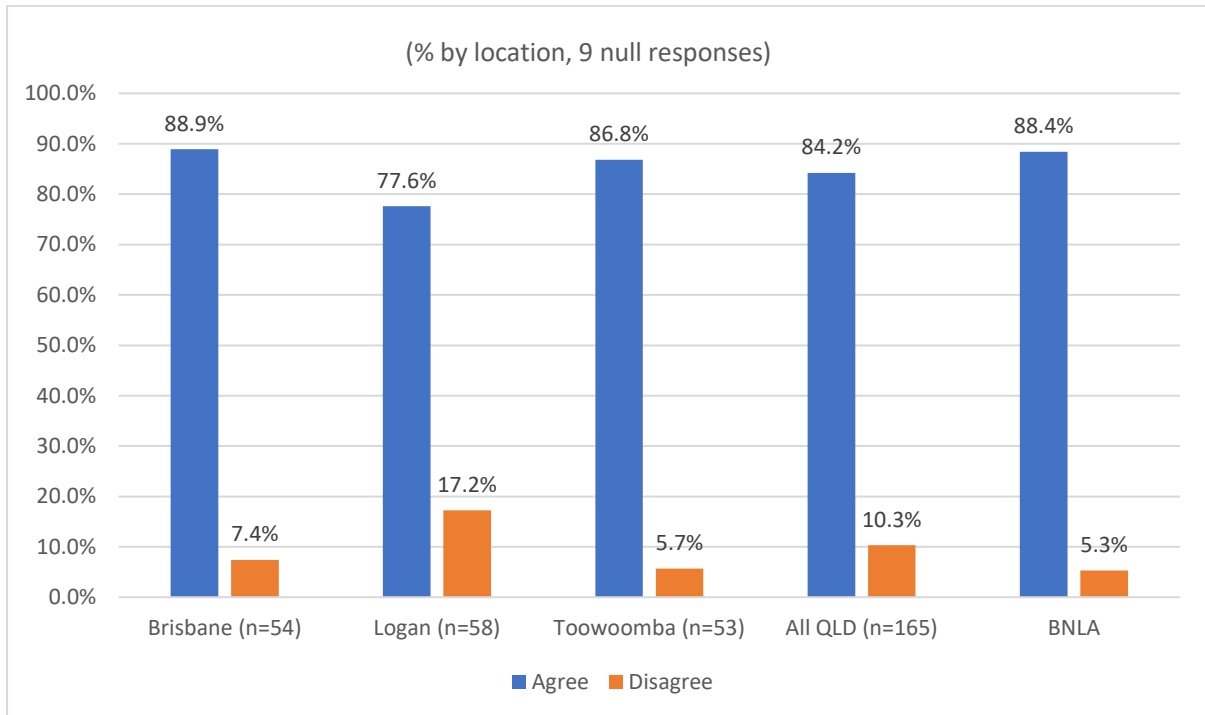
I have got six friends. My friend is five years old and [another] is five years old as well and [another] is six right now and she is my best friend. She asked me to look after her guinea pigs. [They speak] English and Arabic, only two speak Arabic (young Syrian female, 2018)

Figure 6: QLD young people: how is school/TAFE?



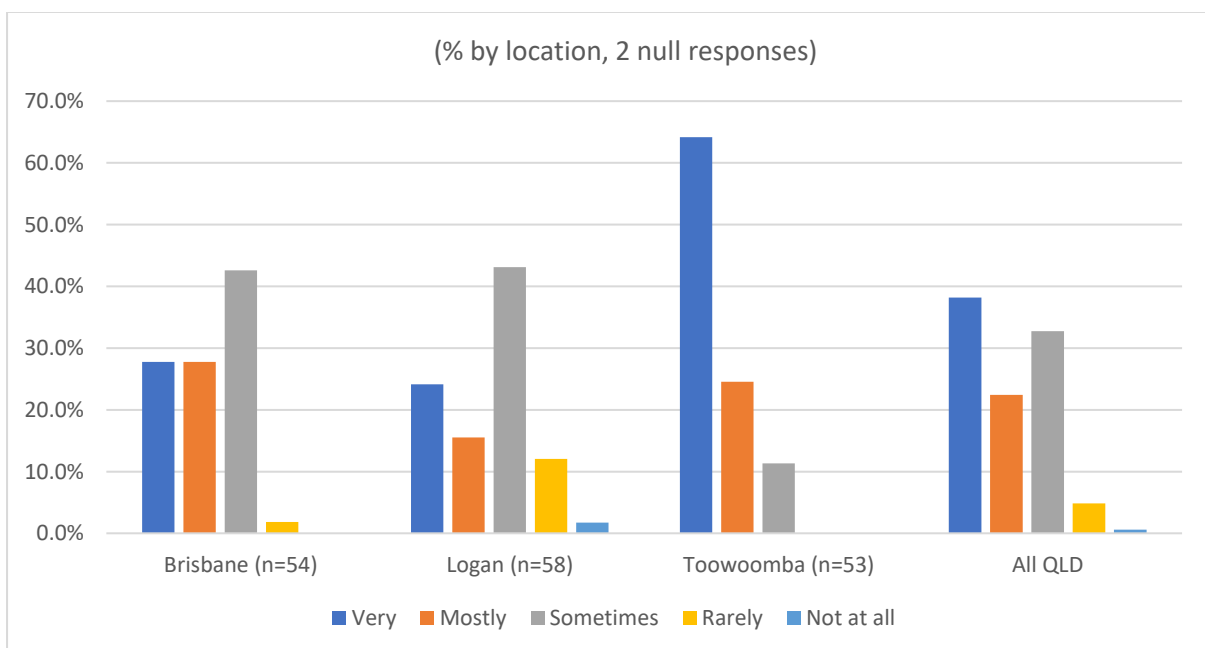
Moreover, almost 90% of the adults living in Brisbane agreed that their neighbourhood was a good place to bring up their children (Figure 7).

Figure 7: QLD adults: do you agree that your neighbourhood is a good place to bring up your children?



Moving your family to a new, strange country is difficult, particularly when you are escaping war and conflict. When asked how happy they were with life in Australia, more than half (55.6%) of Brisbane adults were ‘very’ or ‘mostly’ happy with their life in Australia (Figure 8).

Figure 8: QLD adults: how happy are you with your current life in Australia?



CONCLUSION

All of the newly-arrived Syrian and Iraqi refugees in Brisbane were very thankful for the opportunity that Australia provided for them of a safe haven. They were very confident that Australia would provide a great future for their families, though they were worried about finding a job.

All of the families interviewed in Brisbane were very satisfied with the on-arrival services provided to them and their families by Multicultural Development Australia (MDA) Ltd. They were arriving in a strange land where most knew nobody. MDA found them accommodation, linked them to welfare and English language services and guided them through the difficult first months of settlement in Queensland. This was despite the fact that MDA had more than double the normal number of refugee arrivals in 2017 when most of the families that we interviewed arrived.

Many of the newly-arrived refugees in Brisbane had highly-paid jobs in Syria and Iraq before the conflict. **Their greatest concern is to find a job in Australia.** None of the adult refugees interviewed were content to rely on welfare payments. They were very frustrated that they could not work and contribute to their new society. One frustration was that they needed Australian work experience to get a job, but could not get the Australian work experience required, creating a cycle of exclusion and frustration.

Some refugees in Brisbane had a good command of English while others did not. Most have attended the TAFE courses providing 510 hours of English Language tuition, though those with children or other caring responsibilities could not get to these classes. Attending TAFE provided them with an opportunity to make new friends in Australia. However there was a concern that the TAFE courses were not tailored to the different language needs of different refugee arrivals.

Most of the Syrian and Iraqi refugees who recently arrived in Brisbane were Christians. Local churches and schools provided strong support for them and were key places for them to meet other refugees and other locals.

We will revisit these families in 2019 and 2020 to trace these families' journey to settlement in Brisbane.

We thank them for opening their doors and their hearts to us. We also thank MDA for all the help that they provided in this research project and for the bilingual refugees who assisted in this research project as bilingual research assistants.