



REFUGEE SETTLEMENT SNAPSHOT 2018: TOOWOOMBA, 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 Technology 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 27 Syrian, Iraqi and Afghan families who became participants in Toowoomba. In 2018, these families were interviewed, mainly in their homes, providing valuable insights into their settlement experiences. In these Toowoomba families, 53 adults (21 Afghan; 16 Syrian; and 16 Iraqi, including 11 Ezidi) and 23 young people (12 Afghan; 5 Syrian; and 6 Iraqi, all Ezidi) participated in interviews and completed an accompanying online survey which is informed by the national BNLA survey in order to ensure benchmarking with this instrument. This snapshot identifies some of the respondent's hopes, opinions and concerns about their settlement.

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

- Coming to Australia
- English language skills
- Access to and participation in employment
- Settlement services provision
- Housing
- The local area / neighbourhood
- Bringing up children / education
- Social integration / belonging
- Future plans

Starting a new life in a new land is difficult. **Some Toowoomba family members were excited and happy to be coming to Australia, to leave behind conflict in their homeland:**

Yeah, very excited, because this was our target or our goal in our life, just to start a new life in any other place than Syria, just to be safe and just to live among people. Your country has laws. This country has laws and has respect from the people. So you have to live there and promote your peace and promote your good traditions from your culture. So that was very good and exciting for us, just to be here and live here. (Syrian male, 2018)

We didn't know that we are going to Australia. So the UN themselves chose this country for us. We were happy to go anywhere.' (young Afghan female, 2018)

'Yeah, I am very happy. When I arrived in Australia, I feel as though I am born now.' (Afghan female, 2018)

I was so happy when you arrived, especially when I got to the plane. I like Australia. First, they offered for us to go to the USA, but, we refused it and we came here... We were so happy to come here. Yeah, of course we knew about Australia before we came. I have friends here, so, I had some idea. They are refugees like us... No, we didn't choose Toowoomba, the Government did. The Government told us it's only Toowoomba, because we don't have a cousin or a brother, so, we have to come here. If we refused, that would mean that we would have to wait longer. (young Iraqi male, 2018)

But for others the move was bewildering:

'If you are happy with your decision to come, then it will be good, but if you are not happy, don't discover anything, just sad.' (Syrian female, 2018)

'I was homesick. I was like there's nowhere to go. We didn't know many people around, like our own Afghans. ' (14 year old Afghan female, 2018)

We were a bit not comfortable, because of the different language, different lifestyle, because of leaving our loved ones.' (Afghan male, 2018)

I didn't have any idea about how people really help refugees when they arrive here. When we came here, the first day at the airport, [the case officer] was there. She is the one who received us and I didn't know where she was coming from, what was it all about, and then we found out that the MDA is taking care of the refugees coming over. They're taking care of their accommodation and getting them to schools and taking them to banks and everything. They make you familiar with all of the places around. They have been very helpful along the way.' (Afghan female, 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 adult Toowoomba family members said about meeting people, particularly in English language classes:**

It is very good for me, especially I met with different nationalities from Chinese people or Japanese or something like that. I meet with them, talk with them, make a conversation. It's helped me to improve my English. (Syrian male, 2018)

I think because of the language. We don't care about Christian or Muslim, we just care that we can talk to each other and be understood and can communicate. (Iraqi male, 2018)

It is better from TAFE, because you learn English with everyone different background, and everyone is not Australian, so their accents are different. So when we learn English at TAFE and go out with different English, it's so hard for us. But when I did these courses, it helped me to improve my English more. (Syrian male, 2018)

Learning the English language for adults and children can be very difficult. Sometimes individual accents were an issue:

Well talking about my Year 6, I had problem with speaking about for two months and I think I was kind of depressed of life. I was good after two months. I could speak, but yeah, didn't feel confident I couldn't know what people were saying. Yeah because we used to speak American English. (12 year old Afghan male, 2018)

We are isolated in - when you go to TAFE, for example, you deal with Pakistanis, overseas, they are speaking in their own accent and their own language. (Syrian male and female, 2018)

Or there could be problems due to different abilities or levels of participation:

There are different language groups that talk among themselves and this makes it noisy. (Afghan female, 2018)

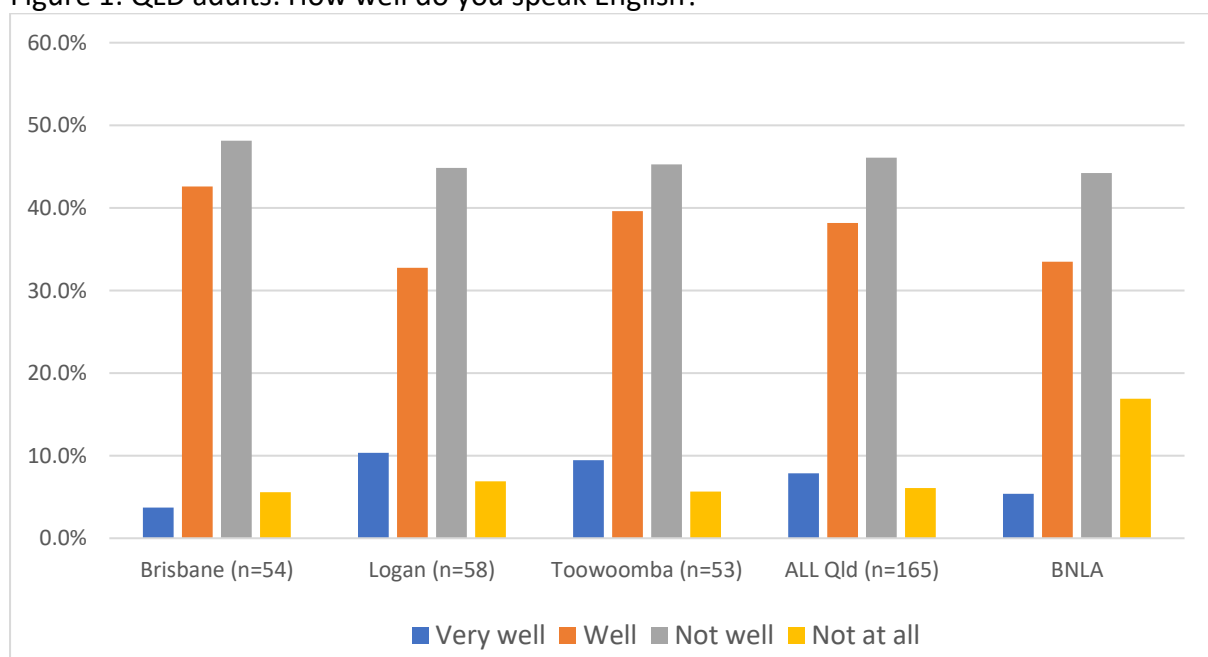
The problem with classes was that there were different levels in the same class and when people arrive they go back to the beginning again. I prefer to work with people at the same level. (Afghan female, 2018)

Some adults in Toowoomba wanted to learn English for specific fields of study and employment:

The legal language is extremely hard and luckily I had this teacher at [university], she gave me a book before getting into this degree in December and I studied that. It was just the basic of law, but I am still finding it very hard. I'm still getting used to it. English, as a language itself, it's very hard, you know. (Afghan female, 2018)

We asked the adults in Brisbane, Logan and Toowoomba who were refugees from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan whether they could speak English 'very well', 'well', 'not well' or 'not at all'. The results were better than those refugees surveyed in the national BNLA survey. **Almost half (49%) of the adults in Toowoomba assessed themselves as being able to speak English 'very well' or 'well', a higher proportion than in Brisbane (46%) or Logan (43%) (Figure 1).**

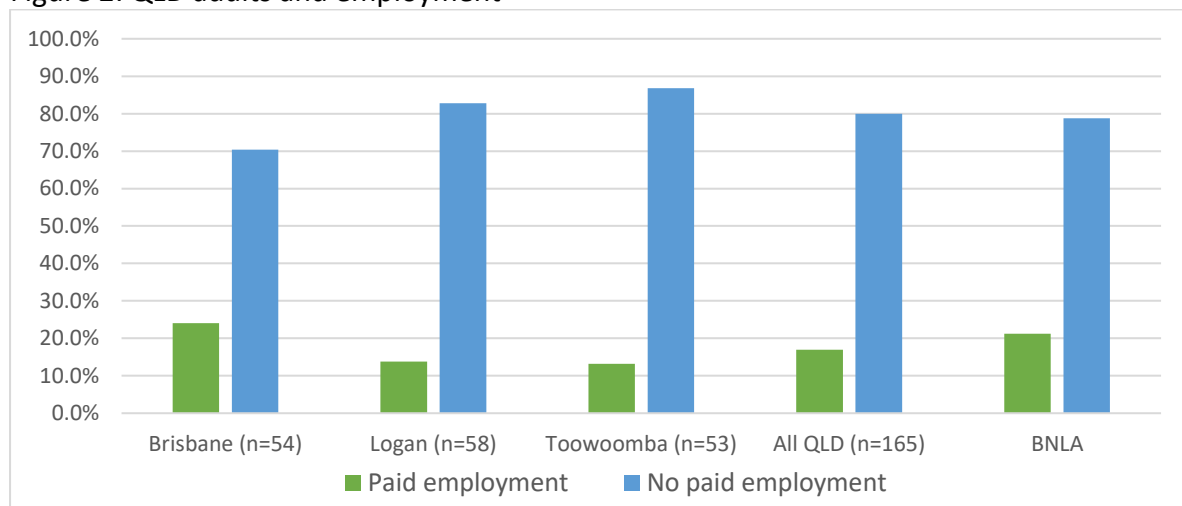
Figure 1: QLD adults: How well do you speak English?



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

For adult refugees generally - and for those in Toowoomba more specifically - getting a job in Australia is an important 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 because most were still learning English and settling into their life in Australia. Notably, employment outcomes for the recently arrived refugees in Qld were similar to those refugees surveyed in the national BNLA survey. We will follow these same families over the next two years and hope to see these employment results improve greatly. **Of the groups interviewed in Queensland, those in Toowoomba were most likely not to be in employment (Figure 2).**

Figure 2: QLD adults and employment



Many adults from Toowoomba families expressed frustration trying to get a job:

The [career] pathway is very difficult too. In regard to TAFE and in regard to refugees who is qualified in some area or some field or some domain, [it is difficult to] to find someone who help them how to find themselves to find a job. (Syrian male, 2018; a medical professional)

As you know everybody is suffering from the working issue, from applying for any job. So yes, that's the main problem with any family, Iraqi or Syrian family. They only need the jobs - or even at least the husband or the man of the family can get a job just to make the financial issues better and better. (Syrian female, 2018)

Even though Toowoomba adults could speak English better than other Qld refugees, a lack of English language skills was still a barrier to employment, a result which was compounded by their age:

I was going to learn English. The Government gave us about 500 hours, so I finish. All the students go to job centre and give them another 800 hours. I go there like them, after speaking and talking and they ask another one and she come back, told me, you are not eligible. Why - because you are old man. So I understand why his name job centre. So I am staying here in the house now. (Syrian male, 2018)

The people here want certificate from us and for my husband they always said 'you are old'. They need young people and certificate. (Iraqi female, 2018)

Child care was also a barrier to employment:

You start in 8:30, because 8:00, I need to pick up my children at school that take them to school and first 2:30, because 3:00, I need to pick up my children from school. (Afghan female, 2018)

One of the key reasons that refugees come to Australia is to find a safe environment to bring up their families. **Every one of the adult and young family members interviewed in Toowoomba felt safe living there (Figures 3 and 4).**

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

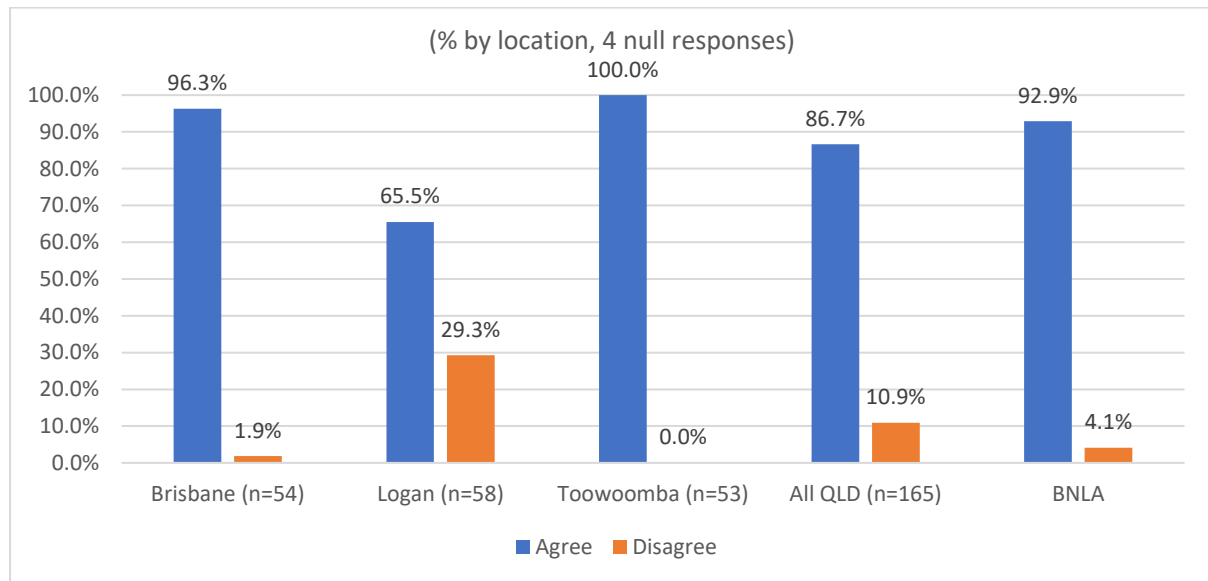
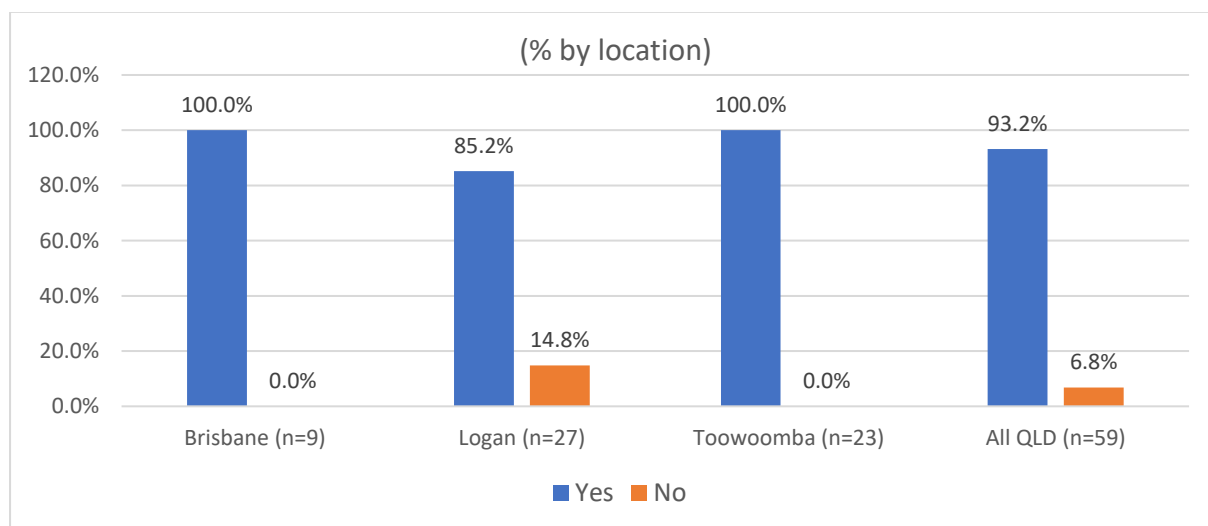


Figure 4: QLD young people: Do you feel safe in your neighbourhood?



Some of the adult family members in Toowoomba described their feeling of safety and belonging compared to their prior traumatic experiences of displacement:

Yes, it is safe... It's difficult. I guess the problem is how we can [be] feeling safe after all this traumatic stress we have. (Syrian male, 2018)

It is very safe and comfortable living here as a refugee. We have never been called Afghan or said something for being different. (Afghan female, 2018)

There's been a few times that people call bad words while driving. Yeah, driving past. We didn't realise what they said, but learnt it was not nice. It is not important for us, but at the places where we're going to study and meet people, it has not happened. (Afghan female, 2018)

I'm considering myself as an Australian citizenship. It's not about this small document. It's about how you feel and how you live. Yes, feel you belong is the main thing. (Syrian male, 2018)

The adults and young people in the families in Toowoomba had strong community ties and developed friendships both within their own community and importantly across ethnic communities:

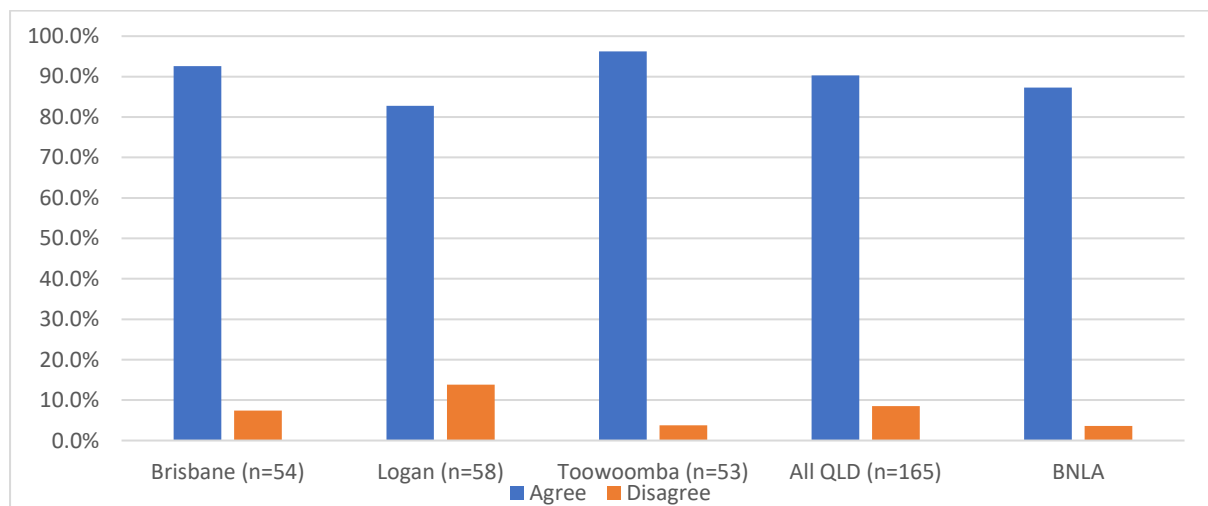
Yeah, I have a lot of friends. We have a big community, Afghan community, yeah, all is my friends. (Afghan female, 2018)

All the [Hazara] community are like sister and brother, for me, like sister and brother. (Afghan female, 2018)

So the good thing in my life that happened last year was ... the Pastor came to our home and introduced us to church. Though we are not Christians we still go there. It's a youth group. So there we found many friends. We got to know more about other Afghans living in [the area we live in] and other culture. It was like other people from different cultures, Sudani, Arabs - multicultural. I love it. (14 year old Afghan female, 2018)

Toowoomba provided a warm welcome to these refugee families. Almost all of the adults (96%) thought that their neighbours in Toowoomba were friendly (Figure 5).

Figure 5: QLD Adults: The people in my neighbourhood are friendly?



Several of the refugee families we spoke to in Toowoomba loved living there:

The decision is for my son and the other when they come, but I love this city [Toowoomba] and it's very quiet and beautiful. (Syrian male, 2018)

Before we arrived, our decision was we stay for one month, and after that, we move to big city. But when we arrive, we like it, and it was Christmas time, and we went to Brisbane, and it's so big, city, and so busy city. We wanted to stay here. One of our reasons to stay here was [MDA], because all their staff so friendly. (Syrian male, 2018)

When the family are sent here, when we come at first, we're insisting even on the way from Brisbane to here that we would like to go to Melbourne, we like Sydney. We have heard Toowoomba is a small city – okay, then 'go, if you can manage, you can go'. Then, when we spent the first six months, we said, 'we will not move from Toowoomba'...while, at the first weeks, I had a big plan to move, yeah, I [now do not] have not any plan, I want my children to stay here and find their way, then we will see what happens. (Afghan female, 2018)

It is very different living in Australia than in the Middle East, yet after one to two years of settlement three out of five family members living in Toowoomba said that it was easy to talk to their Australian neighbours (Figure 6); and four out of five said that they found it easy to understand the Australian way of life (Figure 7).

Figure 6: QLD adults : How easy has it been to talk to your Australian neighbours?

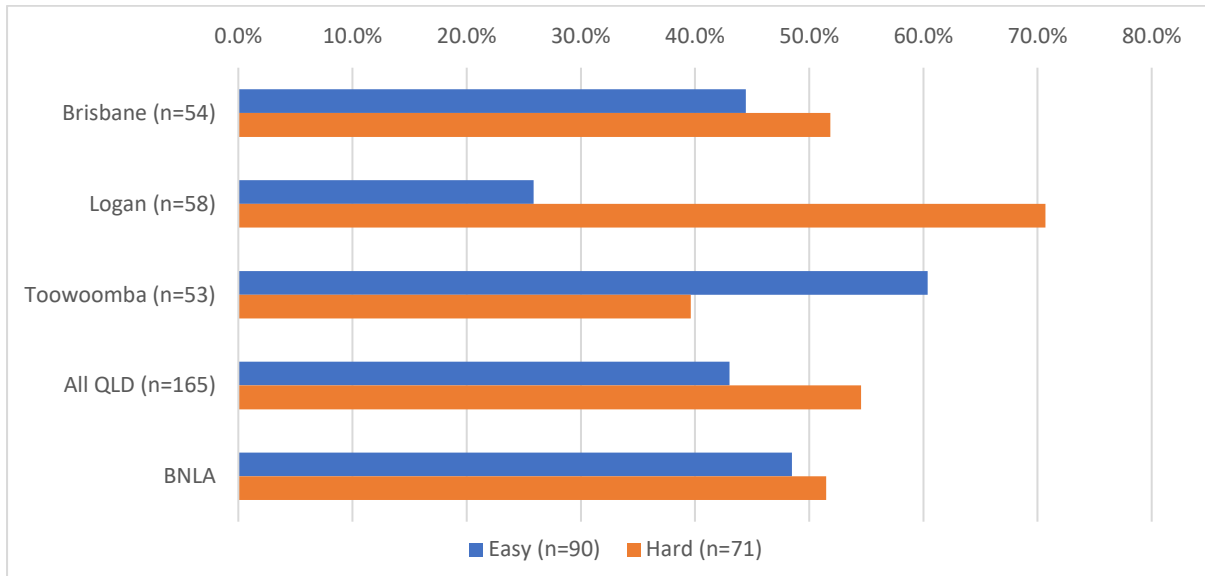
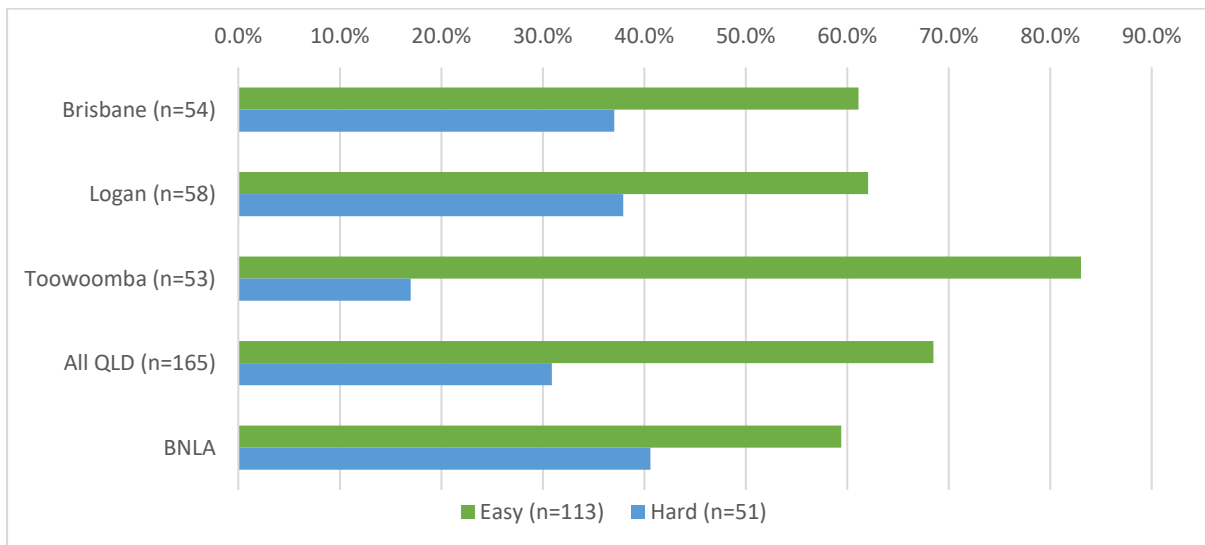


Figure 7: QLD adults and understanding Australian ways



Some young people in Toowoomba talked about some cultural differences:

It was hard, like a culture shock. Like in Pakistan we used to see people in hijab and here, whoa, it's different culture shock. Some do. But not everyone. And clothing, language, other traditions, eating. There we used to sit on the floor. (14 year old Afghan female, 2018)

Back in our own country it's not a big deal living together but when we came here eight people living together they were like really shocked at how eight people are living together. It's hard here. But we are used to it. Once Australian families get a kid they move out, whereas we keep living in the family, yes. (young Afghan female, 2018)

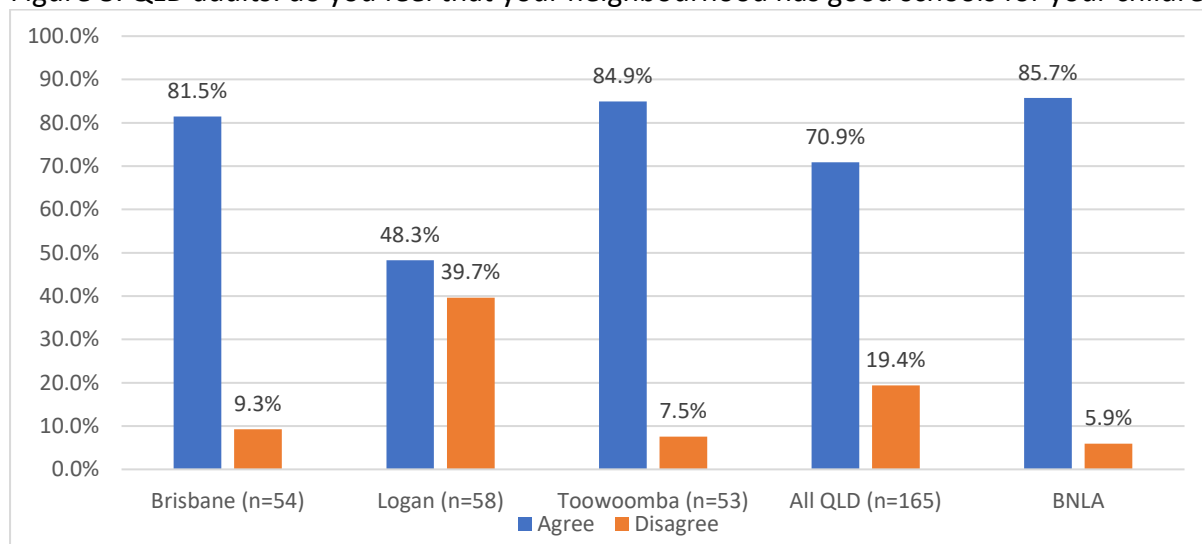
All refugee parents in Toowoomba thought that there was a bright future for their children in Australia:

My older son likes to [become a] pilot. I don't know about the younger, but the older is hardworking at his school. At home, when he comes home, he is busy for writing for reading, to remember, yeah. Every time, I say for him, 'I am proud of you. You can do it. You choose a good job for you and I am proud of you.' I think, I hope he can come. (Afghan female, 2018)

Yes [I am optimistic for ourselves and for our children, our future in Australia]. They have a good language before they came here because they were studying in school teaching them all the subjects in English..., They haven't any problems with language. They are good in their school. They will find their pathways here by themselves. (Syrian male, 2018)

Most adults were confident about their children's education; four out of five adults thought that the Toowoomba schools were good (Figure 8).

Figure 8: QLD adults: do you feel that your neighbourhood has good schools for your children



Young refugees in Toowoomba felt that they had support from their teachers and from their friends at school, many of whom were from different ethnic backgrounds:

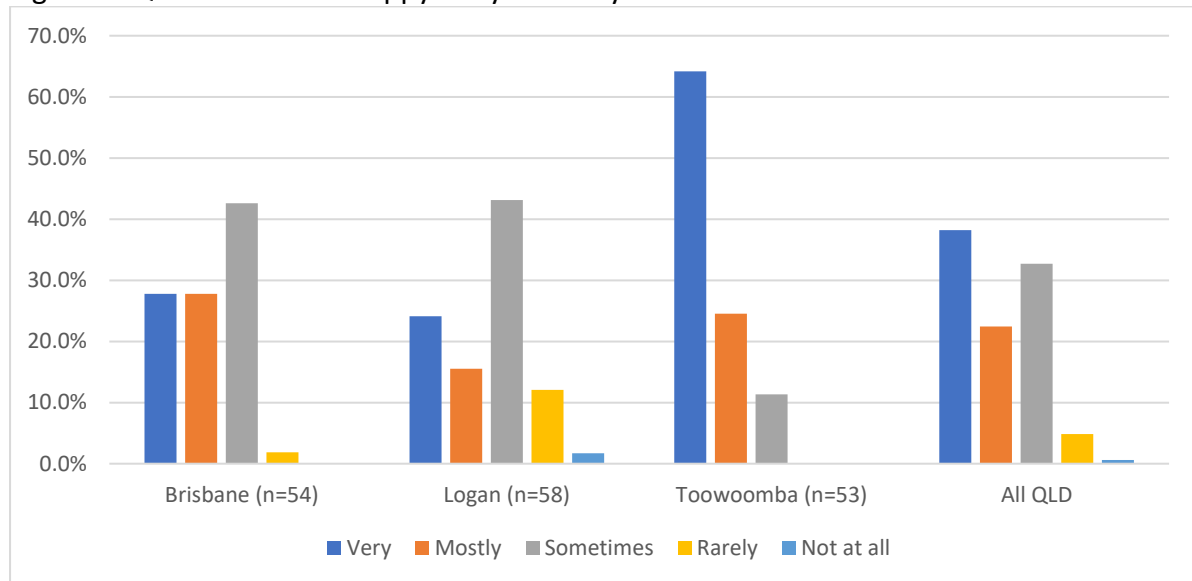
I have a lot of friends. We play together. They are from Australia and Pakistan – that's all. I am the only one from Afghanistan in my class. (8 year old Afghan male, 2018)

Actually, there's nothing I don't like about school. I like everything about school. I don't have any complaints. Yes, I have a lot of friends that support me. Some of them are Aussies and some of them are Afghans and Africans. I have mixed friends. (12 year old Afghan male, 2018)

Well, I like that, like, the school is more, like, everybody - I know it's, like, a Christian school. I'm not really religious but everybody is, like, nice; the teachers are nice and, like, I feel like I have the right to do whatever I want. Like, if someone was bullying me I could just tell the teacher. Like, I feel like there is someone protecting me. (15 year old Syrian male, 2018)

Moving your family to a new country is difficult, particularly when you are escaping war and conflict. Yet, when asked how happy they were with life in Australia, three out of five Toowoomba adults were ‘very’ happy and a further one out of five were ‘mostly’ happy with their life in Australia (Figure 9).

Figure 9: QLD adults: how happy are you with your current life in Australia?



But refugee settlement is initially difficult. Some young people described their difficulties settling in at first, especially speaking a different language:

Yes, I have a group of friends there. Yes, it was hard at first to get to know people. It was very hard and I was thinking they don't like me or they run away from me. But at the end I understood that because someone came new to the country that's hard. I understand I just need time to feel myself like Australian people or Australian students and that's good. I need time because - I understand I need time because people they still don't know me and they don't have information about me. I need time and they need time to just figure out things about me. Yes, the language helped that. (13 year old Syrian female, 2018)

Well, yeah, it was difficult being at the school with other kids, different culture, different way of speaking. I struggled with the language a little bit, not really but, yeah, a little bit. But, yeah, it wasn't, like, really difficult but it was a little bit difficult probably; different culture. (15 year old Syrian male, 2018)

But these difficulties were overcome, especially with support, particularly from church groups in Toowoomba:

Yes, I am Muslim but I still go to that church. Because it's a social - it's not just based on the religion, because there are youth groups for the kids, different kinds of programs. Social - I mean programs where kids enjoy and they have a good time. So they make friends and there are people from church who help refugee kids with their homework. (17 year old Afghan female, 2018)

Many refugees met new friends through the church community.

Young people in the Toowoomba families we spoke to had a range of thoughts about the future, some just hoping for security, and others reaching for much higher aspirations:

That's a really tough question. My dreams changed. How should I say it? I hope to have a peaceful and safe future. (16 year old Afghan female, 2018)

I'm interested with working with the United Nations as a legal advisor or advocate, in the community sector. I'm just interested in working with refugees and I'm thinking to do a degree of law as well. (young Afghan female, 2018)

I have lots of hopes for the future. It's difficult to decide because when I make up my mind I hear of something I haven't heard of before and wonder about that possibility. I learn by watching others. I want to be a good member of the community. (15 year old Afghan female, 2018)

Some were confident that Australia will be a place where they can follow their dreams:

So now [after getting university degrees here], we are ready to apply for any Australian jobs' (Syrian male, 2018)

In our country, if you work hard, you not be sure you get good result. But here, in Australia, if you work hard, you will get good result. So that what most of the Syrian families try to do. Everyone work hard. (Syrian male, 2018)

For some of the adults in the Toowoomba families, employment was uppermost in their minds when thinking about the future. Some were considering moving to find work:

We need to move to Sydney because we have more - our community; Iraqi community, big Iraqi community and more jobs. More chances for work. Because we have many family. (Iraqi male, 2018)

I like Toowoomba, but if there is work for husband, like now and in the future, I will stay here. If there be a problem finding a job, we will move somewhere else. (Afghan female, 2018)

All the refugee families want to become Australian citizens and want to give back to Australian society for the opportunities given to them to have a new life by working hard. One Toowoomba man expressed the feelings of many:

[I want to do] Many things, actually. But first things, to get Australian citizenship, because it mean for us so much, because this country help us to be safe life, and we want to finish our [unclear] and get good job, because we don't like to get money from the government. (Syrian male, 2018)

CONCLUSION

All of the newly-arrived Syrian, Iraqi and Afghan refugees in Toowoomba 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. They will stay in Toowoomba if they could find a job.

All of the families interviewed in Toowoomba 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 new land where most had no formal or informal community connections. That is, they 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 even though 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 Toowoomba 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 Toowoomba had a good command of English while others did not. Most have attended the TAFE courses which provided the 510 hours of English Language tuition, though those with children or other caring responsibilities could not get to these classes easily. 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 abilities and needs of the different refugee arrivals. An added frustration was that they could not look for employment or accept employment opportunities while learning English due to the lack of flexibility in the language tuition.

Most of the Syrian and Iraqi refugees who recently arrived in Toowoomba 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 Toowoomba.

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.