

Report #1

Settlement experiences of recently arrived refugees from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan in Queensland in 2018: Executive Summary

Professor Jock Collins
UTS Business School

Professor Carol Reid,
WSU Centre for Educational Research,

Associate Professor Dimitria Groutsis,
USyd Business School,

Dr Katherine Watson
UTS Business School,

Dr Annika Kaabel
USyd Business School

Stuart Hughes
WSU, Centre for Educational Research



Corresponding Author:

Katherine Watson

UTS Business School

katherine.watson@uts.edu.au

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Research Team

The research team consists of Professor Jock Collins (University of Technology Sydney), Professor Carol Reid (Western Sydney University), Associate Professor Dimitria Groutsis (University of Sydney), and research assistants Dr Katherine Watson (University of Technology Sydney), Dr Annika Kaabel (University of Sydney) and Stuart Hughes (Western Sydney University). The Australian Research Council (ARC) is funding the project as part of the Linkage Project Scheme for the period of 2017-2020.

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Cover illustration: 'Refugees Welcome' (Photo: Dimitria Groutsis, 2017)

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Abbreviations

ARC	Australian Research Council
BNLA	Building a New Life in Australia (The Longitudinal Study of Humanitarian Migrants)
BRA	Bilingual Research Assistant
CI	Chief Investigator
DFAT	Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade
DIBP	Department of Immigration and Border Protection
IT	Information Technology
MDA	Multicultural Development Australia
NEIS	New Enterprise Incentive Scheme
NGO	Non-government organisation
NSW	New South Wales
Qld	Queensland
SSI	Settlement Services International
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UTS	University Technology Sydney
USyd	University of Sydney
WSU	Western Sydney University

Background

There is no more controversial issue related to Australia's contemporary immigration program than that of refugees, those who arrive in Australia under the humanitarian component of the annual permanent intake program plus those unauthorised arrivals who are determined by Australia to have refugee status. Refugees were arriving on Australian shores seeking asylum prior to the Second World War. Following the fall of Saigon in 1975, thousands of Vietnamese arrived after a dangerous, perilous journey by small boat. From the 1990s small boats of asylum seekers again began to arrive on north-west Australian shores, this time mostly people escaping conflict and persecution in the Middle East. Since that time – under Coalition and Labor governments – boat people have been pilloried as queue-jumpers unsuitable for life in Australia, as the boat people issue became a political football.

Much of the refugee debate in Australia is based on stereotypes, generalisations and pre-determined political ideology. We urgently need to reinsert evidence-based research about the settlement experiences and outcomes of recently-arrived refugees in Australia into this debate.

The present report is the first of three place-based reports on the outcomes of the first year of a three-year research project – funded by the Australian Research Council – examining the settlement, employment and education experiences and outcomes of recently-arrived Syrian Iraqi and Afghan refugees. It is a longitudinal study: we have interviewed 233 refugee families – 200 Syrian and Iraqi families and 33 Afghan families – and surveyed 632 individuals settling in New South Wales (NSW), Queensland (Qld) and Victoria (Vic).

In 2015, the Australian Government announced the one-off resettlement of 12,000 Syrian and Iraqi refugees in addition to the annual intake of refugees under the humanitarian program. These two groups were identified and targeted as in need of support because the Syrian conflict and the Islamic State (ISIS) persecution in Iraq displaced millions of refugees and generated unprecedented flows of refugees to Europe. Like the Canadian government, the Australian government opened its doors to Syrian-conflict refugees. Most arrived in Australia in 2017, when the Humanitarian Program was increased from 13,750 refugees in 2016-2017 to 16,250 refugees in 2017-2018. The intake will further increase to 18,750 refugees in 2018-2019 (DSS 2019).

For the purposes of our study we have conducted interviews and surveys with **Syrian** and **Iraqi** refugee families in order to evaluate the settlement outcomes of the Syrian-conflict intake. Since the eruption of the Syrian conflict in 2011 nearly seven million Syrians and Iraqis have fled the region seeking safety in neighbouring countries including Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey for instance; and beyond, including various countries in Europe, Australia and Canada. The Australian Government placed a priority on 'persecuted minorities who sought refuge from the conflict in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey' (DFAT, 2015). Refugees were selected for settlement in Australia from either United Nations High

Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) camps or directly from urban communities in Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey (DFAT, 2017). Between 1 July 2015 and 31 December 2017, the number of Syrian and Iraqi refugees (mainly Christian) rose to 24,926 – the 12,000 plus Syrians and Iraqis who arrived in the annual humanitarian intake – with the majority settling in metropolitan areas in New South Wales and Victoria, followed by Queensland (Collins et al. 2018, 5).



Community information session, Brisbane, with research project Chief Investigators Jock Collins, Carol Reid and Dimitria Groutsis, February 2018.

We also interviewed and surveyed refugee families from **Afghanistan** (mainly Muslim) as a *control group* to provide an evaluation of the convergence and divergence between the services provided and settlement outcomes and experiences of the targeted and select group of Syrian and Iraqi refugees, and those entering Australia under the main humanitarian program. According to the UNHCR there are almost 2.5 million registered refugees from Afghanistan (<https://www.unhcr.org/en-au/afghanistan.html>). We spoke with refugee families who arrived from approximately mid-2015 to the end of 2017, though most arrived in 2017.

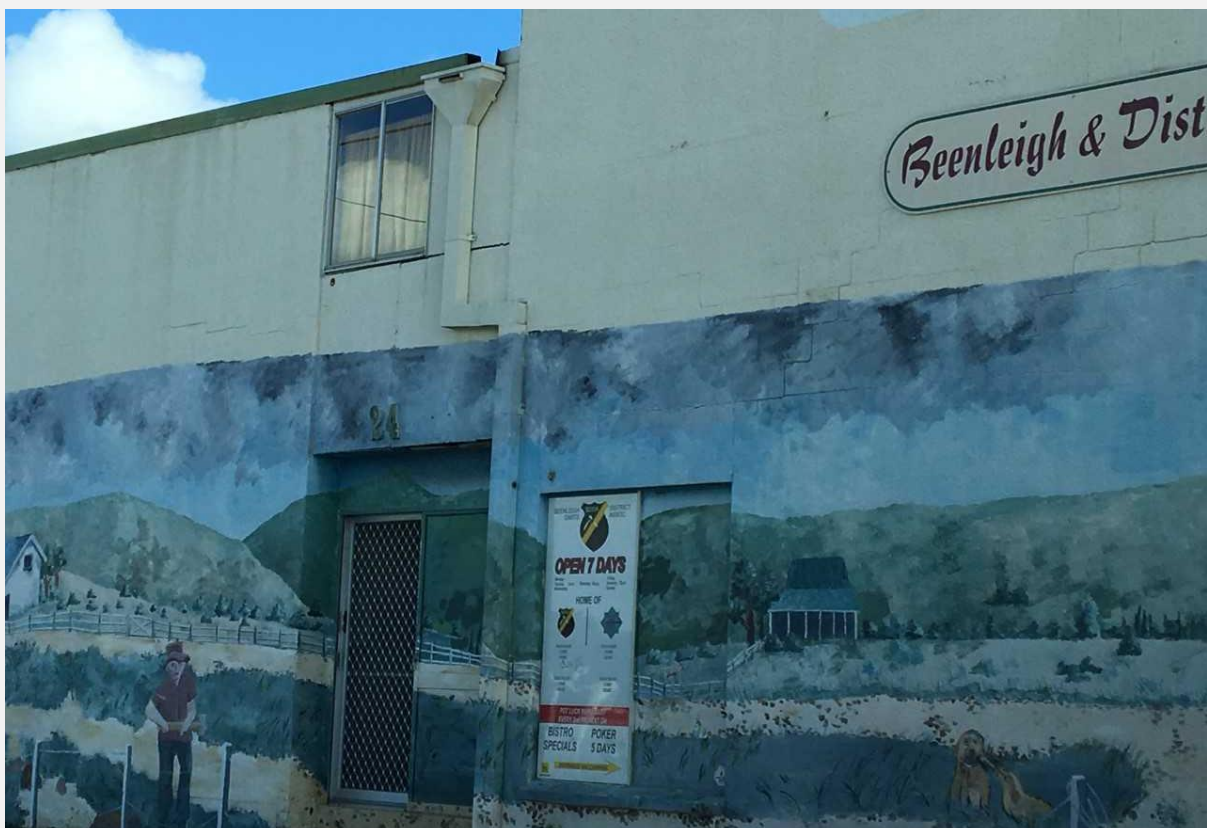
The focus of this first report – we will report on NSW and Victoria late in 2019 – is to explore the challenges and opportunities of settlement in Australia from the experiences of the Syrian, Iraqi and Afghan refugees themselves in Queensland. Ultimately the aim of the three reports is not only to present evidence but to spark a conversation about, and to contribute to an understanding of, the contribution that refugees make to Australian society and how we can enhance the social well-being, employability prospects, economic security and educational opportunities of recently arrived refugees in Australia. An evidence-based approach which draws on the lived experience of recent arrivals can also inform policy and services to enhance the settlement experience of this group.

The Research

The project employs a *mixed-method approach* which includes face-to-face interviews, a survey and an analysis of primary and secondary source material. In addition to giving voice to refugee families, evidence building also includes insights from conversations with key stakeholders in the field, such as policymakers, Non-government organisation (NGO) representatives, employers and educators along with our national and international partners. Finally, the dominant popular discourse is also assessed with examinations of secondary source material appearing in the media.

The project is funded by an *Australian Research Council (ARC)-Linkage Grant* and industry partners in Australia including Access Community Services, AMES Australia, Multicultural Development Australia (MDA) and Settlement Services International (SSI) who provide valuable input in interviewee recruitment and research outputs. Challenging and/or affirming our approach to policy and practice on refugee settlement are our discussions and collaborations with these industry partners in Australia along with researchers in Canada, Finland, Germany, New Zealand, Sweden and the UK.

A key point of departure from the extant literature and policy documents is that the *family* is the social unit through which refugee settlement is experienced and negotiated and hence where settlement outcomes are investigated. In 2018, we interviewed **233 families**: that is, a total of **632 individuals**, across NSW, Queensland and Victoria, comprised of 118 Syrian, 82 Iraqi and 33 Afghan families (the latter is our control group). Children aged 5-18 years who were also willing participated in the research with their parent's consent.



Mural in Beenleigh, a suburb of Logan (Photo: Carol Reid)

Another key point of departure is that while most refugees settled in Sydney, Brisbane and Melbourne, *regional Australia* has become increasingly important as a destination for refugee arrivals. In order to evaluate the experience of newly-arrived refugee families in regional areas we interviewed refugee families in Logan and Toowoomba in Queensland, in Wollongong and Coffs Harbor in NSW, and in Shepparton in Victoria.

The purpose of this report is to present the findings from the Queensland interviews and surveys which included 75 families in total, 44 from Syria, 21 from Iraq and 10 from Afghanistan. Interview and survey data were collected across three locations, including Logan (Syria, n=17; and Iraq, n=8), Toowoomba (Syria, n=10; Iraq, n=7; and Afghanistan, n=10) and Brisbane (Syria, n=17; and Iraq, n=6). The informants were recruited through our Industry Partner networks.

Another key point of departure is that the research project is *longitudinal* in design. We visit the refugee families once a year for three years in order to better capture their changing settlement experiences and outcomes. Our survey questions – answered on iPad and linked to Qualtrics – were derived from some questions furnishing the BNLA (Building a New Life in Australia) longitudinal survey of newly-arrived refugees in Australia, conducted by the Department of Social Services since 2013. The first wave of data collection ran from October 2013 to March 2014, with following waves conducted in October to March each year subsequently. This allows us to compare and benchmark the outcomes for Syrian, Iraqi and Afghan refugees in 2018 with the BNLA results. It also permits us to measure the change in an individual's outcomes – say in terms of number of friends, English language ability, employment and education, and of course challenges and opportunities during the settlement process – over the three years of the study.

In the next section we highlight some of the key findings of the Queensland research with refugee families in their settlement process.

Key findings

Thankful to Australia

All the refugees we interviewed were very grateful for the opportunity provided by Australia to provide refuge for themselves and their families. They all want to repay that by contributing to Australia through their employment expertise, and young people, by contributing to the community, economy and labour market – and society.

On Arrival Programs and Services for Refugees

The overall finding is that policies and procedures that have been established to support humanitarian immigrant and refugee settlement in the first years of arrival – and the organisations that have successfully tendered to provide these services – are very successful. It is often said that Australia provides world's best practice for the reception of newly-arrived refugees. The evidence strongly supports this assertion in two ways. First, nearly every one of the 233 humanitarian immigrant families interviewed in 2018 were full of praise for the support that they received on-arrival, a time of great stress and uncertainty for them. These families could not speak more highly of the support that they received in these first three months. Second, in 2017 the number of refugees arriving in Australia effectively doubled the intake of previous decades – putting unprecedented stress on service providers. In light of these amplified pressures on service providers, these outcomes are even more remarkable.



Brisbane (Photo: Carol Reid)

Refugee Employment a Key Challenge

The evidence strongly attests that for refugees and humanitarian immigrants getting **access to the Australian labour market is perhaps the greatest settlement challenge** that they face. Of the three states sampled, Qld had the most successful refugee employment outcomes but only 28.6% of adult males and 6.8% of adult females reported that they were employed. Of the locations sampled within Qld, Brisbane had the highest employment (24.1%); this was a higher percentage than that found in the BNLA.

The Syrian-conflict intake selected mainly Christian refugees from Syria and Iraq with impressive education and employment histories and achievements. Many Syrians were professionals. Finding a job in Australia – particularly one where they can use their education, skills and experience – is the most obvious challenge. Most noted a desire to get their English language fluency up to speed first – a key feature in gaining access to the labour market and to social engagement more broadly. As noted by one respondent of English language competency: *This is the challenge of refugee economic inclusion in Queensland and other parts of Australia.*

The refugees we interviewed **hated not working and hated being on welfare benefits in Australia.** While grateful for the Centrelink payments, they do not want “sit down money”: They are anxious to start working as soon as possible to repay Australian society for providing safe refuge for them and their families.

English Language Training

English language competency was seen by refugees as their biggest hurdle in accessing employment: most were delaying entry into the labour market while their English-language ability was getting up to speed.

While there was a lot of praise for **English language classes** there was also considerable concern voiced by the adults interviewed in families, regarding overcrowding, and inflexibility in delivery including place, time of day and level of education related to language ability. Furthermore, there was a clash noted between participation in English language classes and seeking employment, which created significant frustrations for the refugee respondents. Again, the doubling of the intake has put considerable stress on resources.

Friendly Neighbours

Over 90 per cent of the refugee adults surveyed in Queensland reported that people in their neighbourhood were friendly compared to 87.3% of refugees in the national BNLA survey. Queensland refugees were just behind NSW refugees (92.3%) in this regard. Toowoomba had the strongest results, followed by Brisbane and Logan, though even in Logan 82.8% of refugees reported that people in their neighbourhood were friendly.

A Good Place to Bring up their Children

The overall motivation of most of our refugee informants to come to Australia was driven by the need to secure a better future for their children. Many of the adults conceded that while they themselves might have difficulties with language or employment **they were confident that their children would have a good life in Australia**: 84.2% of Queensland refugees thought that their neighbourhood is a good place to bring up their children. This was similar to the NSW result and only slightly behind the BNLA national result.

Good Schools for Refugee Children

Within Queensland, around eight out of ten refugee parents living in Brisbane and Toowoomba were **very happy with their local schools**, a very strong result. Logan respondents were not so convinced about the local schooling opportunities for their children with only about half (48.3%) of the refugee parents surveyed happy with their local schools.

Young Refugees are Impressive

The **young refugees** were overwhelmingly impressive in their English language skills given the short time they had been in Australia. They were optimistic about the future, in the main had a wide network of friends from various backgrounds and really enjoyed their schools. The great majority of young refugee informants in Queensland – 76.3% – thought that school was ‘excellent’ or ‘very good’, and a further 20.3% thought that it was satisfactory. Of course, the first six months had been difficult for them, missing friends, grandparents and the lifestyle, but they had adjusted with the help of community organisations and school teachers.

Queensland a Safe Place

Queensland is a safe place for refugees to settle. Within Qld, it is remarkable that all the refugees living in Toowoomba felt safe living there, as did nearly all of those living in Brisbane (96.3%). Logan was not considered as safe as other locations but even in Logan two in three respondents (65.5%) felt safe in the area.

Talking to the Neighbours

Another aspect of social inclusion and successful settlement relates to whether new refugee arrivals had social relations with— talked to – their neighbours.

Overall 43% of our Queensland refugee informants reported that it was easy to talk to their neighbours, a similar outcome to the national BNLA study (48.5%). Notably, the Queensland refugee respondents had lived next to their neighbours for less than a year while the majority of those surveyed in the BNLA had lived next to their neighbours for several years. In contrast to this trend, Logan respondents noted the most difficulty talking to their new neighbours, with only one in four 25.9% refugee informants reporting that it was easy to talk to their neighbours.



Laneway in Toowoomba (Photo: Carol Reid)

Understanding Australian Culture

Like any country, Australia has its cultural idiosyncrasies that newcomers find different and sometimes difficult to understand and to adjust to. This is often seen in colloquial language and expressions as well as other cultural mores. In the national BNLA, six out of ten refugees (59.4%) found it easy to understand Australian ways and culture. **The newly-arrived refugees in Queensland did much better – 68.5% found it easy to understand Australian ways and culture – in a much shorter period of settlement.** Toowoomba was the area where respondents had the most success understanding Australian ways and culture with 83% finding it easy to understand Australian ways and culture.

Most Refugees Happy in Queensland

A personal aspect of successful refugee settlement relates to the level of happiness of the individual refugees. **Two in three refugees in Queensland are happy living there:** 38.2% of refugee informants in Queensland reported that they were “very happy” and another 22.4% mostly happy. This is a remarkable outcome given the trauma that these families had experienced and of course the recent timing of their arrival and settlement..

Queensland Not Racist to Newly-Arrived Refugees

We asked our refugee informants about experiences of racism in Australia. Perhaps surprisingly – given the dog whistle politics about refugees that has dominated political and public discourses in Australia for two decades at least – **most said that they had not experienced racism in Queensland.** A few informants recounted an incident in public that they felt was racist.

All Refugees Await Australian Citizenship

Most of the refugees felt happy with their lives in Australia and were positive about their future. All of those interviewed stated that they wanted to take up Australian citizenship as soon as possible.

The biggest worry that refugees in Queensland faced was that of family reunion. Most of the refugees still had family in their home country who they contacted regularly – often daily, using a range of social media and apps. Their key priority is to get these family members out to Australia, but most find that it has not been possible to do so.

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Contact UTS

For more information about this report, contact:

Katherine Watson
Senior Research Assistant
UTS Business School
E: Katherine.Watson@uts.edu.au

cbsi.uts.edu.au

Centre for Business and Social Innovation
UTS Business School
PO Box 123
Broadway NSW 2007