

In partnership with



Refuge and Family Futures in Australia: Settlement outcomes of recently arrived refugees from Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan: *Executive Summary*



By:

- Professor Jock Collins (UTS Business School),
- Professor Carol Reid, (Western Sydney University),
- Associate Professor Dimitria Groutsis, (The University of Sydney Business School),
- Stuart Hughes (Western Sydney University),
- Dr Katherine Watson (UTS Business School),
- Dr Annika Kaabel (University of Sydney/Diversity Council of Australia).

Corresponding Authors:

Jock Collins jock.collins@uts.edu.au

Carol Reid c.reid@westernsydney.edu.au

Dimitria Groutsis dimitria.groutsis@sydney.edu.au

© 2023 University of Technology Sydney

ISBN Print: 978-1-74210-559-8

ISBN E-Book: 978-1-74210-560-4

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the Australian Research Council, our Industry Partners – Settlement Services International (NSW), Multicultural Australia (Qld), Access Community Services (Qld) and AMES (Vic) – the migrant resource centres in Parramatta, Fairfield, Liverpool and Auburn and other community organisations who assisted in our fieldwork, and the industry stakeholders who provided their valuable insights. We would like to thank Dr Zainab Mourad for research assistance, particularly the education aspects. Finally, we would like to thank our **refugee family informants** – adults and young people – who invited us into their homes and into their lives. They shared their stories of displacement, their hopes and dreams, their worries, and their aspirations. They also shared many cups of coffee, tea, cakes, biscuits, nuts, and lollies and opened up their doors and hearts to us.

Citation for this report

Collins, J., Reid, C., Groutsis, D., Hughes, S., Watson, K., Kaabel, A. 2023, *Refuge and Family Futures in Australia: Settlement outcomes of recently arrived refugees from Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan: Executive Summary*, University of Sydney Business School and the MERCI@WResearch Group.

We recognise and pay respect to the Elders and communities – past, present, and emerging – of the lands that the University of Sydney's campuses stand on. For thousands of years they have shared and exchanged knowledges across innumerable generations for the benefit of all.

Cover image:
'Refugees Welcome'. Getty Images.

Research snapshot

Australia's strong response to the humanitarian conflict in Syria/Iraq saw a one-off intake through 2016-17 of 12,000 refugees from the region. A four-year (2018-2021), three-stage longitudinal study of recently arrived refugee families from Syria and Iraq in metropolitan and regional areas of New South Wales, Queensland, and Victoria – with a control group of refugee families from Afghanistan – **found that overall, settlement outcomes have been highly positive for the refugee families and Australia.**

Funded by the Australian Research Council, in Round 1 (2018-19) the research project interviewed 246 refugee families – 131 Syrian, 84 Iraqi and 33 Afghan – and surveyed 500 adults and 199 young people. By Round 3 (2020-21) 169 refugee families were interviewed, and 326 refugee adults and 102 youth surveyed about life before and after resettlement in Australia. The survey was derived from the BNLA (Building a New Life in Australia) conducted by the Australian government since 2013 to provide a benchmark of refugee settlement outcomes.

The key characteristics of the Syrian conflict intake are that most were Christians, and most were middle class. Specifically, the majority of the Syrian and Iraqi refugee families (73%) were Christian, all Afghan families – 20% of those surveyed – were Muslim, while 7% were Ezidi. In terms of education, 47% of Iraqi refugee adults and 42% of Syrians had prior tertiary education qualifications (cf 35% of BNLA and 39% of the Australian population). Only 9% of Afghans had a university education, while nearly half (47%) had no schooling at all.

What we found

Settlement outcomes for refugee families improved over four years.

Employment: by Round 3 of the project, 55% of refugees surveyed who were looking for work had secured employment: 59% of Syrian refugees, 58% of Iraqis, and 26% of Afghans.

English language: by Round 3 of the project, two in three adult refugees from Syria, and half of those from Iraq and Afghanistan, reported that they spoke and read English well or very well.

Social outcomes: from the outset, more than 90% of refugees found their neighbourhood a **safe** place to live and found the people in their neighbourhood **friendly**. By Round 3, 76% found it easy to make friends (cf BNLA 55%).

Neighbourhood experiences of settlement: overall, nine out of ten (90%) refugee families are **happy** living in Australia.

A good place to bring up the children: in Round 1, 92% of the respondents thought that their neighbourhood was a 'good place to bring up children', rising to 98% by Round 3 (cf BNLA 88%). By Round 3, 98% of refugees surveyed thought that their neighbourhood had good schools (cf BNLA 86%).

Young refugees were very impressive in their confidence and strong aspirations. Right from the start over three in four rated their **educational experience** as 'very good' to 'excellent'. Two in three young refugees felt that they **belonged** 'most of the time' or 'always'. Most young refugees had more than two friends, with more than half reporting that they had five or more friends from different backgrounds.

Regional settlement of refugee families has been very successful in most places and should continue.

Citizenship: for those eligible, most refugee adults and young people wanted to become Australian citizens.

Worries: the major worry of refugee families is employment and their family members – most often aged parents – who were still back in the homeland. Family reunion in Australia is their main goal, contributing to the labour market and the economy, finding purpose and putting their skills and qualifications to good use was also echoed by the majority of those who are of working age.

Executive Summary

The research project

This project employs a focus on social transformation as its approach (Polanyi).¹ By providing refuge for families, Australia has provided refugee adults and children safe haven and prospect of strong futures. The lives of the refugee families in this study have been transformed in many ways over the four to five years of this longitudinal study. Despite COVID-19 refugee family experiences have generally been very positive and while the families' lives have changed, so too have organisations' practices, policies, and resources.

Longitudinal study of refugee families: this report presents the findings of a **four-year (2018–2021), three-stage longitudinal study of recently arrived refugee families from Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan** settling in metropolitan and regional areas of New South Wales (NSW), Queensland (Qld) and Victoria (Vic). Funded by the Australian Research Council Linkage Program¹, with Industry Partners – Settlement Services International (NSW), Multicultural Australia (Qld), Access Community Services (Qld) and AMES (Vic) – the research focussed on the settlement, employment, and education experiences and outcomes of refugee families and the adults and young people in them.

Aim: the research aim was to look at the **settlement outcomes** of the one-off intake of Syrian-conflict refugees from Syria and Iraq introduced by the Abbott government in 2015 and mostly arriving in 2016–17. Afghan refugees – who arrived under the annual humanitarian intake – were used as a control group. Refugee families who settled into regional areas were also included to investigate the viability of future regional refugee settlement.

Interviews: in Round 1 (2018–19) we interviewed **246 refugee families** (75 Qld, 40 Vic, 131 NSW). Of these 131 were Syrian, 84 Iraqi and 33 Afghan families. In Round 2 (2019–20) we interviewed **183 refugee families** (62 Qld, 22 Vic, 99 NSW). In Round 3 (2020–21) we interviewed **169 refugee families** (51 Qld, 31 Vic, 87 NSW). Except for the Victorian fieldwork, rounds 1 and 2 interviews were mainly held in the homes of the refugees. Because of COVID-19, Round 3 interviews were delayed and conducted via Zoom or phone.

Surveys: using an iPad, we also surveyed (Qualtrics platform) 699 individuals: 500 adults (273 from Syria, 167 from Iraq and 60 from Afghanistan) and 199 young people (107 from Syria, 49 from Iraq and 42 from Afghanistan; the origin country of one young person was unconfirmed). By Round 3, 326 adult refugees and 102 young refugees remained in the longitudinal survey. The survey drew on questions from the BNLA (Building a New Life in Australia) conducted by the Australian government since 2013. We used BNLA Wave 3 data for benchmarking purposes and comparison with our survey data.

Characteristics of the refugee informants

Gender: there was a strong gender balance with 233 adult males and 267 adult females, and 104 young males and 95 young females (aged 5–18 yrs) in Round 1, surveyed and interviewed.

Ethnic diversity: adult informants self-identified their ethnicity. Most of the Afghan refugees were Hazara while others were Tajik, Pashtun, and Uzbek. Iraqi refugees provided 13 ethnic identities, with Iraqi, Assyrian, Chaldean, Syriac and Ezidiⁱⁱⁱ the most frequent responses. Refugees from Syria responded to this question giving 11 different ethnicities, with Syrian, Armenian, Assyrian, Arab, Syriac and Kurdish the most common.

Linguistic diversity: Arabic was the most widely spoken language (41%), followed by English (15%). Most of the Afghan refugee informants spoke Dari. Most Ezidi refugees spoke Kurmanji. The adults displayed a broad range of English language proficiency. 94% of our young refugee informants spoke English in the playground at school.

Religion: 73% of our survey respondents were Christians of various denominations (Armenian, Armenian Apostolic, Assyrian Christian, Catholic, Chaldean, Christian Armenian, Christian Assyrian, Orthodox; this group includes Mandaean). One in five informants were of Muslim faith (100% of the Afghan informants, 11% of Syrian informants and 4% of informants from Iraq). 7% of the survey population were Ezidi.

1. ARC Linkage Grant (2017–20) LP 160101735 'Settlement Outcomes of Syrian-conflict Refugee Families in Australia'. Prof Jock H Collins (UTS), Professor Carol Reid (WSU) and Dr Dimitria Groutsis (USyd)

Visas: most informants from Syria and Iraq arrived on 200 or 202 Visas. Many from Afghanistan were on Women at Risk 204 Visas (2 out of 3 women). A few families arrived on 201 Visas. Most of those who arrived on 202 Visas were nominated and/or sponsored by family members already living in Australia.

Diaspora: Australia's refugee communities are part of a global diaspora; 170 families mentioned that they still had family networks in origin countries; 117 families mentioned that they had family members who were still in transit countries awaiting refugee settlement; 151 families mentioned that they had family members in another Western country.

Virtual family: the refugee families who we interviewed were in regular – usually daily – communication with their diasporic family members. While their virtual family was an invaluable source of support in their daily lives in Australia, it was also a source of worry.

Pre-migration experiences of the adult refugee informants

Education: the Syrian-conflict refugee intake was very highly educated with 47% of refugees surveyed from Iraq and 42% from Syria having prior tertiary education qualifications (cf 35% of BNLA and 39% of the Australian population). Only 9% of Afghan adult refugees had a university education on arrival while nearly half (47%) had no schooling at all (cf 6% of refugees from Iraq, 7% from Syria and 16% from the BNLA).

Employment: many of the Syrian conflict intake had very high-paying jobs at senior ranks or in professions, particularly in the engineering, health and management professions. 97 Syrian and Iraqi refugees had their own business pre-migration.

Middle-class refugees: unlike most of Australia's refugee intakes, *more than half of the Syrian conflict intake had middle class backgrounds:* 84/246 of those had owned a business and 78/246 had a university education in their origin country. In 25 cases the informant owned a business in the origin country *and* someone in the family was university educated. According to this counting, there were 137/246 refugee families who were middle class in their origin countries.

Settlement outcomes of adult refugees

Accommodation: the average family size of the refugee families was 4.55 people, with Muslim and Ezidi families larger than Christian families. Most were full of praise for the refugee settlement support agencies finding initial accommodation. Accommodation difficulty was greatest in metropolitan areas but reduced over time, with less than half of all refugee families surveyed reporting that accommodation was a difficult issue for them, and with expense being a primary concern.

Employment: overcoming the factors that block their access to the Australian labour market is one of the greatest settlement challenges that refugees face, with refugees having the highest unemployment rates of non-Indigenous Australians. Employment outcomes improved dramatically over the four years of settlement. In Round 1, when most refugees were still learning English and had not yet entered the labour market, only 14% surveyed *had paid employment*. By Round 2, this increased to 38% and by Round 3, 55% of refugees surveyed who were looking for work had secured employment. Female refugees had higher unemployment rates than male refugees. Syrian refugees had the greatest success in gaining employment by the third round (20% R1 to 59% R3), followed by Iraqi refugees (7% R1 to 58% R3), and Afghan refugees (8% R1 to 26% R3). These employment outcomes are similar to the Syrian-conflict refugees who settled in Canada (57% reported being employed, approximately two and a half years after settlement).ⁱⁱⁱ

English language proficiency: English language ability is an important social indicator of refugee settlement outcomes, and improves in the first years of settlement. In Round 1, about half of those adults surveyed – Afghan (48%), Syrian (50%), and Iraqi (52%) – reported that they understood English 'well' to 'very well'. Four years later by Round 3 this increased to 80% of Syrian and 81% of Iraqi refugees compared to 55% of Afghan refugees. By Round 3, two in three refugees from Syria reported that they spoke and read English 'well' or 'very well', though for Iraqi and Afghan refugees it was lower. Afghan refugees reported better English reading and writing outcomes (45% for both) than those from Iraq (44% and 39% respectively).

Understanding Australian ways and culture: when asked ‘Since you came to Australia, how easy have you found it to understand Australian ways/culture?’, 63% of Round 1 responses indicated ‘easy’. By Round 3 this had improved significantly to 76% (cf BNLA 59%).

Happiness: we asked our adult refugees a final question: ‘all things considered, how happy are you with your current life in Australia?’. In Round 1, three in four (74%) adult refugees said they were ‘mostly’ to ‘very’ happy with their current life in Australia, increasing to nine out of ten (90%) in Round 3. When we break down survey results into religion – Christian, Ezidi, and Muslim – of our adult refugee informants, a more complex pattern emerged. As might be expected, refugee happiness improved with time living in Australia. Muslim refugees – mostly from Afghanistan – were the happiest about life in Australia, increasing from 80% in Round 1 to 95% in Round 3. While 63% of Christian respondents in Round 1 said that they were ‘mostly’ to ‘very’ happy with their current life in Australia, by Round 3 this increased to 93%. This pattern is reversed for Ezidis, for whom the proportion saying that they were ‘mostly’ to ‘very’ happy with their current life in Australia fell from 84% in Round 1 to 65% in Round 3. Ezidis had particularly horrific pre-migration experiences.

Neighbourhood experiences of settlement

Making friends: when asked ‘since you came to Australia, how easy have you found it to make friends?’, more than half (58%) of adults surveyed in Round 1 replied that they found it easy make friends. This important social outcome improved each round. By Round 3 this had improved significantly to three in four (76%), better than the BNLA yardstick (55%).

Ease of talking to neighbours: in responses to the question ‘how easy have you found it to talk to your Australian neighbours?’, 42% of Round 1 adult responses indicated ‘easy’ and by Round 3 this had improved significantly to 68% (cf BNLA 49%).

Are people in your neighbourhood friendly?: right from the outset the refugees commented on the warmth of the welcome they felt after settling in Australia, with 90% of Round 1 adult respondents agreeing to the question ‘do you feel that the people in your neighbourhood are friendly’(cf BNLA 87%).

Safety: refugee families flee danger and conflict, seeking safety. By Round 3, 98% of refugee informants felt safe in Australia. Safety had the highest positive perception of all the survey items, for both young people and adults (cf BNLA 93%).

A good place to bring up the children: most refugees take the risky journey of displacement, and the unsafe journey that has led to resettlement in Australia, for the future of their children. When asked whether ‘the neighbourhood is a good place to bring up children’, 92% of Round 1 adult respondents agreed, rising to 98% by Round 3 (cf BNLA 88%). When asked whether ‘the neighbourhood has good schools for their children’, 87% of Round 1 respondents agreed, rising to 98% by Round 3 (cf BNLA 86%).

Regional settlement: while most refugees settle in Australian cities, an increasing number are settling in regional cities and towns. The surveys and interviews of refugee families show that regional settlement of refugees is generally successful, particularly when there is a ‘whole of community’ buy in to support new refugee settlement such as in Toowoomba. Employment outcomes and the warmth of the welcome are as good as or better than outcomes for those refugees who settle in major metropolitan areas, though post-COVID-19 internal migration patterns have led to greater accommodation challenges for new refugee families. There are now nearly 5000 Ezidi refugees who have resettled in Toowoomba without any matching increase in resources for service delivery, putting strong pressure on service delivery there.

Settlement outcomes of young refugees

Schooling: educational opportunity is critical to young people’s successful settlement. In Round 1, 79% of refugee youth surveyed rated their educational experience as ‘very good’ to ‘excellent’. This rose to 87% in the Round 2 survey, though fell slightly to 84% by Round 3, probably because of the impact of COVID-19 on schooling. Social participation, particularly in school life, is a key settlement indicator. Comments about school life were generally positive and many cited relationships with teachers and peers, or subjects studied. The supportive nature of teachers was often cited.

Post school aspirations: young refugees had strong educational aspirations, including in the field of medicine, law and engineering. Proportionally, university study was mentioned in comments far more than TAFE. However, some young people had firm ambitions about trades roles. Twice as many girls as boys expressed interest in high-paying roles such as doctor, lawyer, and engineer. Medicine and engineering were most preferred, with girls seemingly more interested in medicine, and boys only slightly more inclined towards engineering.

English language ability: young people's attitude to English language acquisition was overwhelmingly one of confidence and optimism. They want to be good at English and many seem to rejoice in their newfound linguistic ability. Phrases such as 'I like English...' and 'I'm good at English' are found quite frequently among the comments, particularly among younger, primary-aged participants: the former is about attitude, the latter is about perceived ability. Young refugee males and females showed significant improvement over the three Rounds with the majority rating their ability to speak, read, write, and listen to English 'very good' to 'excellent'. The exception was in Round 3 English listening ability because of the COVID-19 restrictions on social contact. Several young people commented about accent in the context of attuning or 'fitting in' to their new environment. Accent also relates to a sense of Australian identity.

The process of acquiring English language within the family may come at the expense of the continued use of the first language. Several parents seemed upset at a growing linguistic divide between themselves and their children.

Belonging: young refugees were asked about their sense of belonging in their new country, with the question 'do you feel you belong to the local community?'. In Round 1, two in three responded that they do 'most of the time' or 'always', with young refugee females demonstrating higher levels of belonging than males. This is a remarkable outcome given that they generally had been in their neighbourhood for only 12-18 months.

Safety: nearly all the young refugees surveyed – 98% in Rounds 1 and 2 and 99% in Round 3 – felt safe in Australia irrespective of their gender and of their country of origin. While adults may be more forthcoming about the

dangerous living conditions they left behind, young people appear to define safety in contexts of more immediate circumstances such as the local neighbourhood or school. Negative social behaviours in the local community impact young people's sense of safety. The disapproval of substance abuse, particularly on the part of minors, was linked to safety.

Racism and discrimination: experiences of overt racism were rarely commented upon. A degree of casual or 'everyday' racism was alluded to in some comments. Many reported 'no racism' which is subtly qualified with: '...generally speaking...' or '...most of the time..' Acts of cultural disrespect, if not overt racism, were occasionally reported, such as comments about head coverings, in one instance having it ripped off in the playground.

Refugee identity: young people generally accepted their identity as refugees, though often accompanied with the notion of 'moving on' from their refugee background. In reference to being a refugee, phrases such as 'I don't mind..' or 'I'm not bothered by..' were common. No comments expressed overt shame about being a refugee, though the eagerness (or at least a willingness) to identify with a new environment and its people was evident. 'Feeling' Australian suggests a more personal embrace of their new culture, beyond socio-cultural means (such as English language proficiency).

Making new friends: most of the young refugees surveyed had more than two friends, with more than half reporting that they had five or more friends from different backgrounds, and three out of ten reporting that they had more than ten friends from different backgrounds. Sport was frequently mentioned in comments about friendship networks, particularly in school contexts, with no significant gender differences. In the wider community, most people are able to socialise in what Oldenburg calls a *third place* (<https://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2014/04/13/the-pros-and-cons-of-gentrification/every-community-deserves-a-third-place>), such as a place of worship, café or sporting field, which is a separate social surrounding from the home (first place) and the workplace (second place). The importance of local parks and playgrounds in providing a 'third place' for young refugees was often alluded to in comments.

Key findings

Regional settlement: our research has confirmed that regional settlement of refugees is mostly successful. Accommodation is cheaper and more available, and employment has been secured with equal or better success than that of metropolitan refugee settlers: by Round 3, 50% of metropolitan and 63% of regional refugees surveyed had secured employment. In terms of most of the subjective aspects of the settlement experience – including the warmth of the welcome from locals – there was little difference between metropolitan and regional refugee settlers. [NB post-COVID-19 internal migration to regional areas has impacted negatively on housing availability].

Employment: finding a job commensurate with their abilities has been a key concern of refugee adults in each stage of the research. Families in the Syrian and Iraqi intake were carefully chosen to include high numbers of professionals and those with higher education qualifications and a strong employment history. Most of these have not yet been able to move into similar employment positions in Australia.

Family reunion: nearly all refugee families had family members – most often aged parents – who were still back in the homeland or who settled in other countries. Their welfare was a constant cause of worry for the refugee families in Australia, most seeking to get their family members visa pathways to Australia.

Citizenship: one very strong finding of this research was that *nearly all the refugee adults and young people interviewed and surveyed were very keen to become Australian citizens*. Citizenship means to refugees that they are finally ‘Australian’, that they can travel on an Australian passport, and can formally call Australia home. It also means that they can repay Australia for the opportunity of refuge for their family, for which all refugee families are immensely thankful.

Identity: the number of refugees identifying as Australian increased over the time of settlement. By Round 3, more than half of the refugee adults interviewed felt Australian, while more than a third indicated that they were feeling partly Australian and partly another identity.

Experiences of racism: while the issue of racism was not systematically raised with all refugee adults and youth, when the subject did arise in family interviews, most refugees said that they did not experience racism in Australia. Those who did make mention indicated that racism occurred as isolated incidences in public spaces.

Family futures: the centrality of better futures for all family members, particularly for the children, was the main recurring narrative in this project. Refugee parents valued the safety and education opportunities Australia afforded, where safety meant the freedom for their children to become whatever they wanted to be. Young people valued the support in schools given by teachers and local community organisations, excited by the possibilities open to them.

Impact of COVID-19: the third round of the fieldwork for this research project corresponded with the onset of COVID-19. This meant that the third stage of the fieldwork was delayed, and we moved from family visits to virtual interviews via Zoom and phone. This led to fewer respondents to the interviews and surveys in Round 3. COVID-19 *impacted on the refugees* mainly in the domain of work, learning and social life. Young refugees lost opportunities for conversation in English while undertaking remote learning. COVID-19 also transformed Australian settlement patterns and the economy, impacting on the housing and employment opportunities for refugees who arrived after the fieldwork was completed in 2021-2022.

Social Transformation: By providing refuge for refugee families, Australia has provided refugee adults and children safe haven and prospects of a strong future. The lives of refugee families have been transformed positively over the four to five years of this longitudinal study. Adult refugees are so thankful of the opportunity that Australia has provided for them and their families. They are keen to repay Australia over their future lives as Australian citizens and workers. Refugee young people have adopted to Australian life quickly, and are very confident of their education and employment future and identify strongly with Australia.

Conclusion

During the first Round of interviews for this research project, when we mostly interviewed refugees who arrived in Australia in 2017, Australia's refugee intakes were *approximately double* the average humanitarian intake of the past two decades. This is because of the arrival of the Syrian-conflict intake of refugees at the same time as refugees arrived under the annual humanitarian program. The settlement outcomes of the Syrian-conflict refugees and Afghan control group were thus a litmus test of the capacity of Australia to receive and resettle refugees and of Australia's institutional capacity to overcome the difficulties that new refugee families face on arrival in Australia. Our research has revealed that the refugee families were overwhelmingly grateful for – and praising of – the on-arrival services of their service providers (our Industry Partners: Settlement Services International (NSW), Multicultural Australia (Qld), Access Community Services (Qld) and AMES (Vic)).

This research provides the *most extensive contemporary data base and evidence-based research* from which to evaluate refugee settlement outcomes in Australia. A key finding is the great diversity – ethnicity, class, religion, language spoken and pre-displacement experiences of education and employment – of the refugee intake from the countries of Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan, a point often overlooked in stereotypical discourses about refugees in Australia.

The findings are overwhelmingly positive about Australia's capacity to receive and resettle refugee families who suffer trauma and sometimes torture, as they flee their homeland for an uncertain future. The refugee families feel safe living in Australia, they perceive a warm welcome from their new neighbours in Australian suburbs and regional towns, they feel happy living in Australia, and are very optimistic about their future in Australia. They are repeatedly thankful to Australians for giving them a new beginning to life, and want to repay Australia by taking out Australian citizenship as soon as it is available. More than two thirds identify as Australian and feel that they belong here. The young refugees settled very quickly and have strong aspirations for their future in Australia.

The longitudinal study found that refugee *settlement outcomes improve over time*. Of course not all refugee families have the same degree of settlement success, but our study used the BNLA Longitudinal study as a benchmark and found the settlement outcomes of the Syrian, Iraqi, and Afghan families exceeded the BNLA benchmark by a considerable amount in nearly all socio-economic and subjective indicators. This is further evidence of the successful settlement outcomes of these Syrian, Iraqi, and Afghan families. Employment and family reunion challenges are of most concern to refugee families and require more innovative policy responses.

Policy recommendations

Since the completion of this research project there has been a change of government at the Federal level and in some States. This has led to the transformation of the policy environment that impacts on refugee families directly and indirectly, particularly at the level of employment services [cf Workforce Australia]. The Albanese Labor Government is also currently reviewing Australia's immigration policy and programs (www.homeaffairs.gov.au/reports-and-publications/reviews-and-inquiries/departmental-reviews/migration-system-for-australias-future). At the same time COVID-19 has impacted on internal migration settlement patterns, particularly in regional areas, transforming housing prices and availability. Moreover, the states of NSW, Queensland, and Victoria – where our refugee families have settled – have different programs and policy regimes that impact on refugee settlement outcomes. Therefore, these policy recommendations that relate to the areas of refugee employment, education, and family settlement, are of a general nature and complement the recommendations of the Shergold Report.^{iv} We indicate some recent policy initiatives in the field.

Overall

The key recommendation of this research is to **provide better funding for the refugee service provider agencies** – including our Industry Partners: Settlement Services International (NSW), Multicultural Australia (Qld), Access Community Services (Qld) and AMES (Vic) – whose support services are critical to better settlement outcomes for refugee families in Australia. While the institutional arrival support services for new refugee families are world class and settlement outcomes very positive in the main, our research has identified areas where policy and programmatic support for refugee families can be improved.

Employment

Refugee job-seekers

1. **Provide individualised case management and tailored pathways for Employment Support Services:** continue to reform the job service provider system to be more refugee-centred and tailor services based on age and skill level, considering the diverse capabilities, qualifications, backgrounds, and English language capabilities of refugee jobseekers.

Employment consultants should conduct thorough assessments and develop tailored pathways to meet the individual needs and aspirations of each jobseeker. This would involve considering their skills, experience, language proficiency, and health conditions to match them with suitable employment opportunities (cf NSW Government's Refugee Employment Support Program [RESP] <https://www.ssi.org.au/news/media-releases/2928-nsw-government-extends-employment-support-program-for-refugees>).

2. **Support refugees with care responsibilities:** a tripartite approach involving local/state government, employers, and migrant resource centres to provide comprehensive assistance in accessing affordable and quality care services for refugees with carer responsibilities. This could include tripartite partnering with childcare centres, eldercare facilities, and community organisations to offer subsidies, flexible working, and education arrangements, and support for refugee families. By addressing their care needs, refugees can more effectively participate in the labour market.
3. **Support volunteering initiatives:** recognise and resource volunteering as a pathway to refugee employment in work that aligns with their skills and interests. Create pathways from volunteering to paid employment, offering training and mentorship programs to enhance refugees' employability. Ensure transparency and outcomes to this process to safeguard against exploitation while also facilitating a process of gaining local experience and local know-how (cf newly-launched National Strategy for Volunteering – [National Strategy for Volunteering – Volunteering Australia](#)).
4. **Promote gender equality:** migrant resource centres and support services to offer targeted support and training programs that empower refugee women to enter (particularly) non-traditional sectors and leadership roles, promoting gender equality and economic empowerment.
5. **Promote entrepreneurship and self-employment:** support refugee entrepreneurship and self-employment by resourcing programs like SSI's Ignite! (<https://ignite.ssi.org.au>) that provide wholistic,

bespoke, support for refugees who start a new business, and Thrive Refugee Enterprises (<https://www.thriverefugeeenterprise.org.au>) that provides refugees access to business finance. Other programs provide microfinance/financial literacy programs, business development resources, and mentorship opportunities to refugees.

Employer / industry initiatives

6. **Explain and ensure worker's rights/rights at work:** refugees are often compelled into gig-economy jobs (in particular), requiring no prior local experience, networks, or a CV, and need safeguards against wage theft and underpayment like other permanent and temporary immigrant arrivals.
7. **Address discrimination and bias:** implement anti-discrimination policies and awareness campaigns to combat discriminatory practices in recruitment and employment. Foster diversity and inclusivity in workplaces by promoting cultural competence training for employers and staff/teams and establish mechanisms to address grievances related to discrimination based on age, linguistic background, refugee status, or any other form of bias. Drive a rights-based campaign to inform refugees about their workplace rights in relation to discrimination.
8. **Implement targeted employer incentives:** introduce incentives for businesses and employers to hire refugees, such as tax breaks or financial subsidies. These incentives can help alleviate potential employer biases and encourage the recruitment of refugees based on their skills and qualifications rather than their refugee status. Collaborating with industry/professional associations and chambers of commerce can facilitate the implementation and promotion of these incentives (cf the Federal government's Economic Pathways to Refugee Integration (EPRI) grants, <https://www.immi.homeaffairs.gov.au/settling-in-australia/coordinator-general-for-migrant-services/employment-pathways-for-refugees>).

Employment enablers

9. **Implement recognition of international qualifications and experience:** establish a streamlined process for recognising and validating the qualifications and work experience that refugees bring to their new

country of settlement. By establishing a swift process of qualifications accreditation and verification of vocational experience, Australia can ensure that refugees have a fair chance to compete for jobs that align with their expertise. This recognition process should be transparent, efficient, and accessible to all refugees (cf the Federal government's Skills Assessment Pilot, <https://www.dewr.gov.au/skills-assessment-pilot>).

10. **Improve access to employment networks:** establish a centralised platform or database to provide refugees with accurate and up-to-date information about available job opportunities (a one-stop-shop portal). In addition to online offerings, develop partnerships with local community organisations, employers, and professional associations to disseminate information and build networking channels for refugees. This can help overcome the lack of local networks and limited access to job information.
11. **Invest in training and retraining:** establish comprehensive training and retraining programs that align with the current job market demands. Provide financial incentives and resources to encourage refugees to participate in vocational training, skill development, and certification programs. Collaborate with educational institutions and industry stakeholders to design relevant and accessible training courses that enhance refugees' employability, particularly in areas of labour market need such as training in aged and disability care.
12. **Provide digital literacy and access:** bridge the digital divide by providing computer literacy training and access to digital resources for refugees with low levels of computer literacy. Establish digital inclusion programs to ensure refugees have the necessary skills to navigate online job platforms, submit applications, and engage in remote work opportunities (cf the recently announced twelve month pilot for digital literacy training for migrant and refugee women, <https://ministers.dss.gov.au/media-releases/11566>).
13. **Provide mentorship programs:** establish robust mentorship programs that connect refugees with Australian employers. These programs can provide personalised support, guidance, and networking opportunities to refugees, helping them navigate the job market and secure suitable employment.

Young people

Education

14. **Maintain equitable outcomes for all:** where new refugees are settled, access to and provision of equitable resources to all refugee groups is critical. This is also particularly important in low SES communities more broadly. Consulting with schools explicitly at the time of placement would resolve these concerns. Education departments and philanthropic organisations need to make sure that bilingual aides, clothing pools, and other support that was found to be invaluable in this project are also available to other groups in need.
15. **Strengthen youth transition programs:** continue to strengthen the Youth Transition Program and implement its recommendations, particularly those related to place-based *communities of practice*.^v
16. **Increase the number of Intensive English Centres/Schools:** these are highly successful, well-received, and provide a different climate to school and TAFE, with their focus on young people of a similar age, and use of staff with considerable expertise.
17. **Increase the age of access to Intensive English sites:** young people at school are well-supported. However, those who have missed schooling and are over the age of 18 are less catered for. Thus, widened access to Intensive English Centres attached to schools is needed for young people including those who may not be school students, up to the age of 20.
18. **Support young Afghan males towards further education:** where young men feel pressures to leave school to gain employment in support of a single-parent family (particularly in families led by women on at-risk visas) there is a need for engagement with community members, TAFE, and employer organisations to enable continuing education to occur.

Addressing education access barriers

19. **Provide flexibility with options available:** remove the barrier where it exists for enrolling in TAFE when attempting to access Intensive English Centres attached to schools. That is, allow movement from one to the other.

English language recommendations

Cohort specific strategies

20. **Provide separate English classes for young people up to 25:** these are needed in TAFE and other English language centres.
21. **Provide home-based learning for the elderly:** older adults who are less mobile or have caring responsibilities need English language provision in their home.

Targeted language development

22. **Prioritise conversational English acquisition** to enable faster access to social networks and employment.
23. **Provide graduated workplace-based English language learning opportunities:** learning from the experience of refugee settlement in Germany, there is a need for *workplace-based* English language learning starting with basic skills such as naming of tools, OHS requirements and related knowledge, gradually moving through competency levels until English at the appropriate level of qualification is reached.

Language support strategies

24. **Provide classes specifically for parents/carers:** mothers with young children have expressed a clash between attending English language classes and other childcare and carer responsibilities. Dedicated classes for mothers/carers held at child-friendly sites or at times that did not impact on parental responsibilities. Workforce Australia could consider the competing demands on parents and carers.
25. **Evaluate volunteer English language teaching:** research into volunteer-led English language acquisition is needed due to the proliferation of these groups. Insights from English language learning in cafes, places of worship, libraries and so on may be useful for further refining of practices.

Settlement

Systemic settlement issues

26. **Support family reunion for refugee families:** the most common concern of refugee families interviewed related to their family members not in Australia. The diasporic refugee family network is both a source of worry and support for the refugee families in Australia. Supporting these refugee families to achieve greater family reunion outcomes would ease many of their greatest worries and concerns.
27. **Address accommodation needs:** more public housing needs to be constructed and made available for refugee families; the application process for public housing needs to be simplified and sped up; more housing suitable for the elderly or people with disability (i.e. no stairs) is required.
28. **Encourage increased regional settlement of refugee families:** our research has confirmed that regional settlement of refugees can be successful, though internal migration post-COVID-19 has put much greater pressure on housing availability and cost in regional cities. A whole of community regional city buy-in to support refugee settlement has secured the best settlement outcomes for refugee families. Improved public transport in regional towns is important to assist refugee family settlement.
29. **Continue and increase support for anti-racist and inclusive multicultural and diversity policies:** this research project has confirmed that refugee families are very diverse in terms of religion, languages spoken, ethnicity and class background. Continued support for anti-racist and inclusive multicultural policies that promote policies and practices of inclusive responses to diversity will support successful refugee family settlement outcomes in Australia.

30. **Provide resources/agency for activities to engage young people:** there is a need to consider the ages of young family members and the support, resources, and community infrastructure available where they are being placed. Isolation from social networks is overwhelmingly the key concern of young people. Councils, places of worship, schools and other local organisations need to be ready to engage young people in building their futures.

Settlement provider resourcing

31. **Support refugee families beyond the first five years of settlement:** while on-arrival services are critical, there is a need for support for refugee families to be extended to ensure their settlement outcomes improve over time.
32. **Progressively increase the humanitarian component of the annual Australian immigration program:** refugee settlement outcomes are very positive for refugees themselves and for the Australian community, and Australia has the capacity to settle more refugees.
33. **Implement communities of practice around 'place':** place-based initiatives that change how spaces are used in communities are needed to enable young people to feel they belong. This requires a whole of community approach that brings together new communities and local organisations with a specific focus on transforming how spaces are used and what meaning is attached to their use.

Endnotes

- i Polanyi, K. (2001, 1st ed. 1944) *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time*, 2nd edition, Boston: Beacon Press.
- ii Alternative spellings Ezidi and Yazidi are often used for this refugee group. In this report we stick with that used by the refugees themselves.
- iii Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (2019) *Syrian Outcomes Report*, <https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/corporate/reports-statistics/evaluations/syrian-outcomes-report-2019.html>.
- iv Shergold, P., Benson, K. and Piper, M. (2019) *Investing in Refugees, Investing in Australia: the findings of a Review into Integration, Employment and Settlement Outcomes for Refugees and Humanitarian Entrants in Australia*, <https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/reports-and-pubs/files/review-integration-employment-settlement-outcomes-refugees-humanitarian-entrants.pdf>.
- v Synergistiq (November 2019) *Youth Transition Support Services Final Evaluation*, <https://immi.homeaffairs.gov.au/settlement-services-sub-site/files/yts-final-evaluation-report.pdf>.

University of Sydney Business School
Work and Organisational Studies
+61 2 9351 2485
dimitria.groutsis@sydney.edu.au
sydney.edu.au

CRICOS 00026A TEQSA PRV12057

Produced by the University of Sydney, July 2023. The University reserves the right to make alterations to any information contained within this publication without notice.