

REFUGEE SETTLEMENT SNAPSHOT 2018: VICTORIA



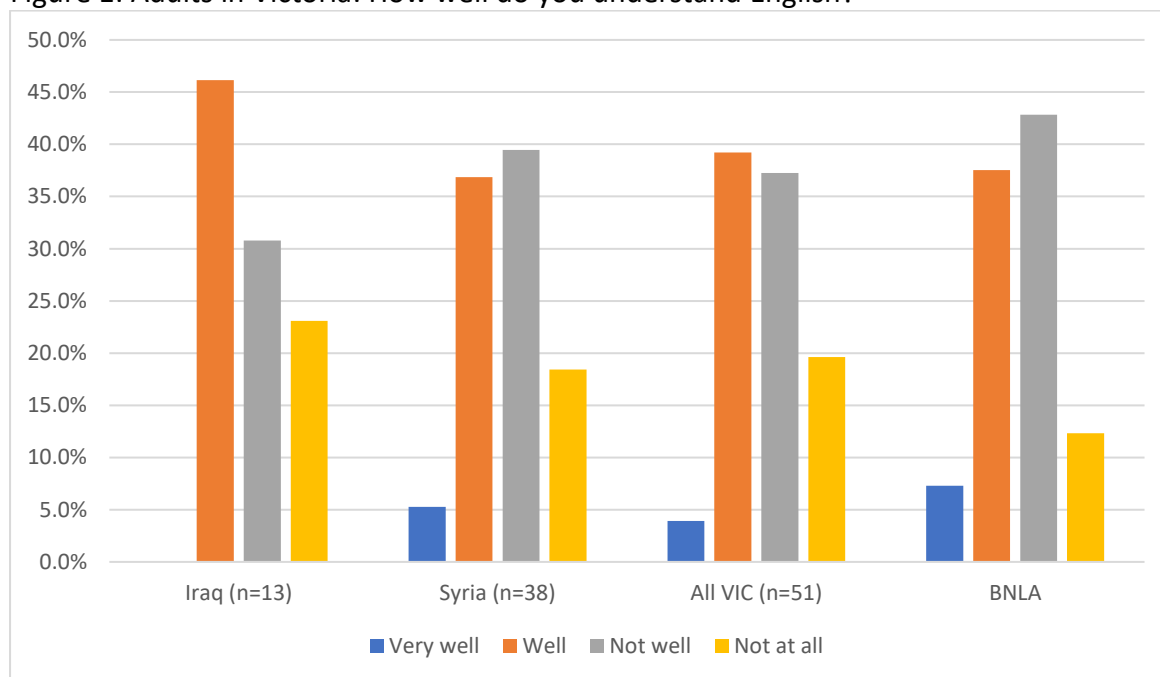
In 2017 the number of refugees arriving in Australia effectively doubled the intake of previous decades. This is because most of the special one-off intake of 12,000 Syrian Conflict refugees that was announced by Prime Minister Abbott in 2015 in fact arrived in 2017. In addition, the annual intake of 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 two states, New South Wales and Queensland. AMES Australia, a partner in the research, interviewed and surveyed newly arrived refugee families from Syria and Iraq in metropolitan Melbourne and in regional Shepparton, Victoria.

AMES Australia identified 25 Syrian and Iraqi families who became participants in Victoria. In 2018, these families were interviewed, some in their homes and some by telephone, providing valuable insights into their settlement experiences. In these Victoria families, 51 adults (39 Syrian and 13 Iraqi) and 26 young people (20 Syrian and 6 Iraqi) participated in interviews and completed an accompanying online survey. The survey 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.

The importance of **English language skills** was clear, both in order to communicate and interact with others in their new neighbourhoods and to get an education or to secure employment. We asked the adults in Victoria who were refugees from Syria and Iraq whether they could understand spoken English ‘very well’, ‘well’, ‘not well’ or ‘not at all’. The results were similar to those refugees surveyed in the national longitudinal survey of refugees (the BNLA survey). **Almost half (43.1%) of the adults in Victoria assessed themselves as being able to understand English ‘very well’ or ‘well’ (Figure 1), similar to BNLA results.**

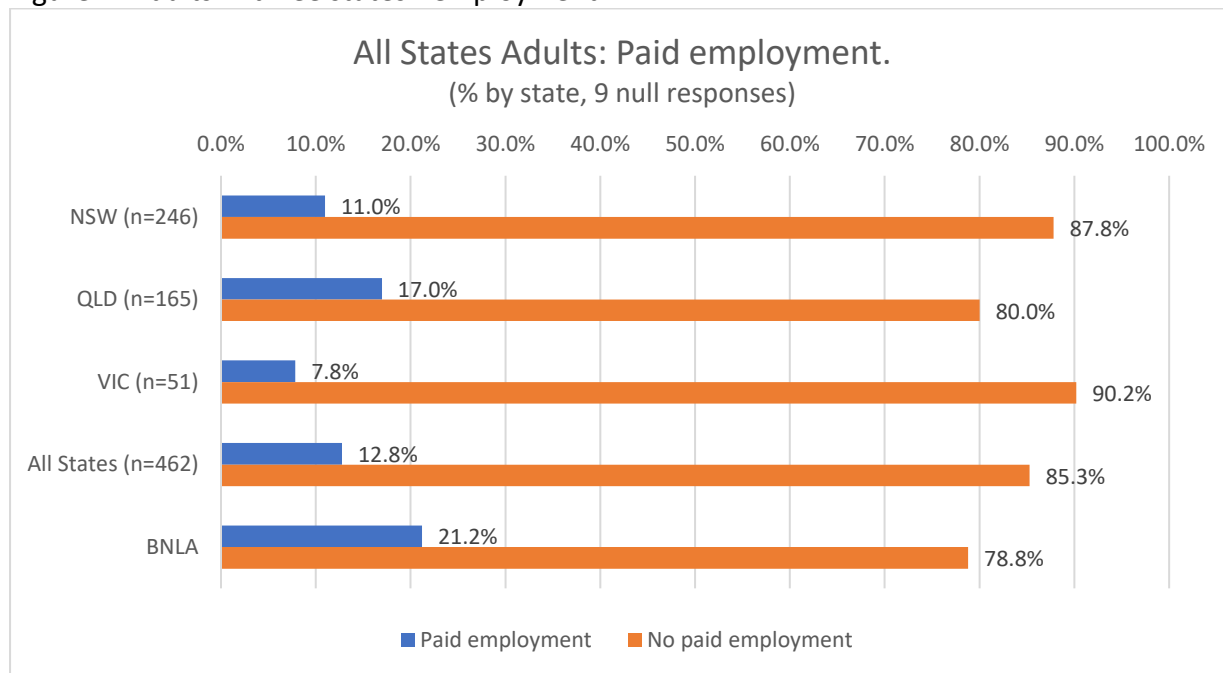
Figure 1: Adults in Victoria: How well do you understand English?



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

For adult refugees generally - and for those in Victoria 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 refugees interviewed/surveyed in all three states, 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 Victoria were similar to the outcomes for refugees surveyed in NSW: in both of these states the proportion of refugees in paid employment was less than the proportion indicated 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 NSW, Qld and Vic, those in Victoria were most likely not to be in employment (Figure 2).**

Figure 2: Adults in three states - employment



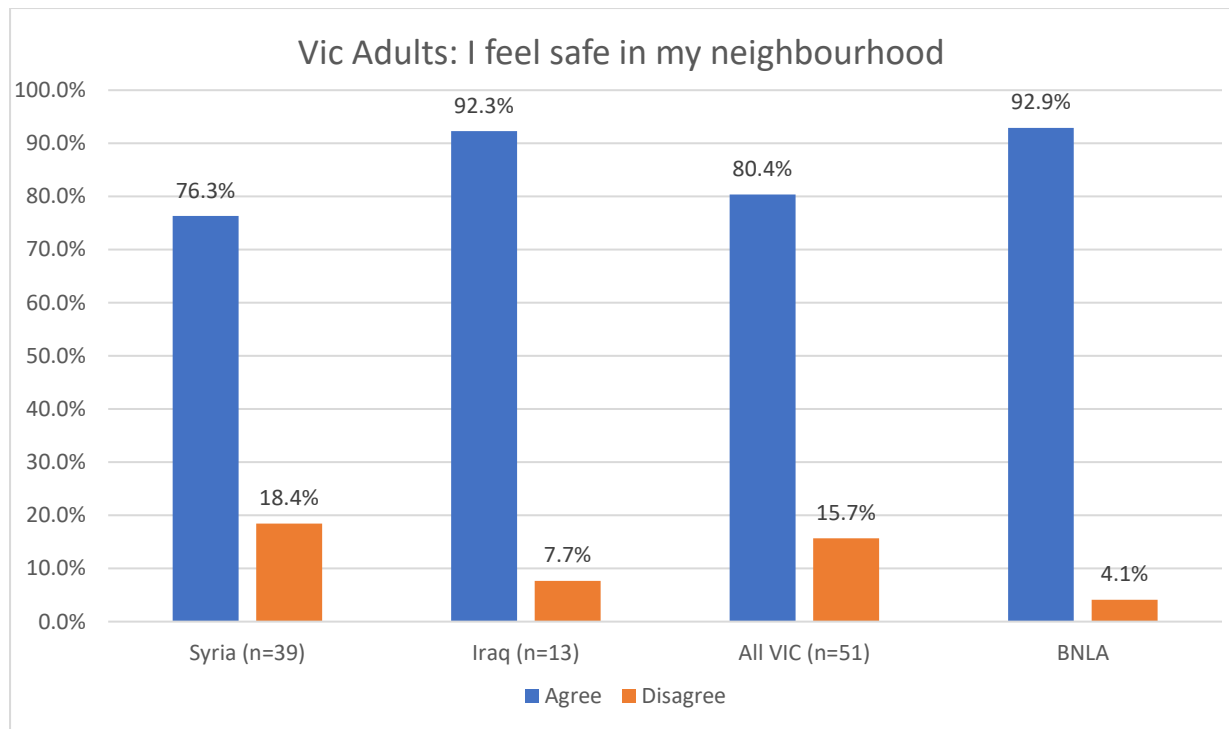
Family Profile

A family of three from Iraq and now living in metropolitan Victoria consisted of a married couple and their daughter, born in Jordan, aged 11 months at the time of interview. The female had a university degree in English language and literature, but had not had any work experience since she is raising their child. She wanted to find a job as a teacher. The male had worked in a bank and then owned his own clothing shop. They were happy until forced to leave their home in Iraq. They keep in touch with relatives in Iraq and America, and here in Australia, by Viber and Skype. They like the suburb where they live – it is quiet and safe, and close to shops, but they cannot communicate with neighbours because of the language barrier. The male was very frustrated trying to get work, a frustration amplified by his job network appointments. He wanted to find a good job so he could support his wife with her study and support his family:

‘I am studying English language full time, currently at level 1. I applied for few jobs – like at a factory making caravans – and some of them are rejected and some are really far and I don’t drive at the moment... These [job network] appointments it’s just to make people angry and unhappy! I am studying full time so I don’t know where I am going to find the time to go to work if I find one. I want to find a job and work but I need to improve my language first’. (Iraqi male, 2018)

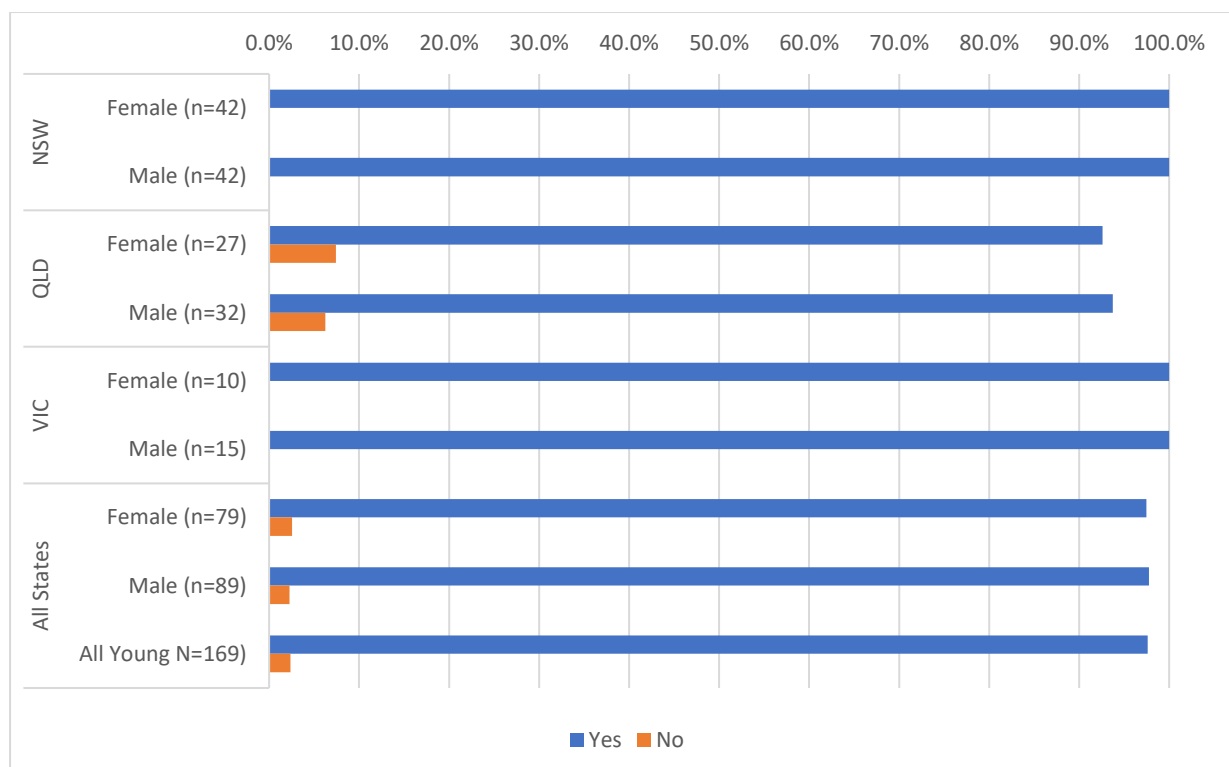
One of the key reasons that refugees come to Australia is to find a safe environment to bring up their families. **Victoria is a safe place to live for refugees: of the Syrian and Iraqi adult refugees surveyed in Victoria, four out of five (80.4%) felt safe living there (Figure 3).**

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



And every one of the young family members in Victoria felt safe living there (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Young people in three states: Do you feel safe in your neighbourhood?



Family Profile

A family of six from Syria and now living in regional Victoria consisted of a couple and their four children: two daughters aged 12 and 5, and two sons aged 10 and 7. The male head of the household had worked as a builder for about 17 years in his homeland, before moving to Lebanon where he worked as a manager and cashier at a small supermarket. The female head of the household had looked after the family. The couple were from a small village where they did not use social media, but began using it once they moved to Lebanon and continue to use it here in Australia to communicate with family members back in Syria, Lebanon and Jordan. They had no relatives in Australia and were having difficulties settling. Their children were not finding learning the English language hard; and they enjoyed playing sport, including Taekwondo, swimming, soccer and tennis, and watching TV. However, the strain of distance from close relatives was evident for the young people as well: the two elder children said that they wanted to become lawyers to help family members to come to Australia.

Hopes for the future:

'To keep our family's boundaries tightened and find a good work'. (Syrian male, 2018)

'To find work and help my family to come here'. (Syrian female, 2018)

Finding work:

'I am studying the language here (full time). I am applying for a job – 15 jobs a month – but could not get any. I would like to work in shops as I have an experience in customer services. Shops like Coles or Kmart, or any other factory... We wish we knew how much we need the language. At least we [could have] studied some courses provided by UN in Lebanon or we could take some courses like forklift'. (Syrian male, 2018)

'I am studying the language part time 3 days because I have to look after my little daughter. We tried to work at SPC factory but it did not work. We are planning to have our own business – a fruit shop. If I knew how much we need the language I could have taken some course in knitting, hairdressing, cooking or nursing'. (Syrian female, 2018)

Settling in:

'I am happy because I believe my kids will have a good future here'. (Syrian female, 2018)

'We have no idea about the area. We came here through UN and AMES put us here. We are not sure we will continue here because the opportunity to find a job here is very limited, so we are intending to move to Melbourne. I like the area though it's quiet and good to raise up my kids... We just have some friends who we met here. I am happy because it's a safe place for my family'. (Syrian male, 2018)

Finding work:

'I am still studying English language and currently I am at level 1. I don't have any work experience; I need to improve my language. I hope I can finish my study so I can find a job to support my family here in Australia, and in Iraq'. (Iraqi male, 2018)

Settling in:

'It's a nice suburb and where we are living it's quiet and safe, close to the shopping centre and the other facilities and to the kids School, at the moment I like to stay here. AMES helped find us this property'. (Iraqi male, 2018)

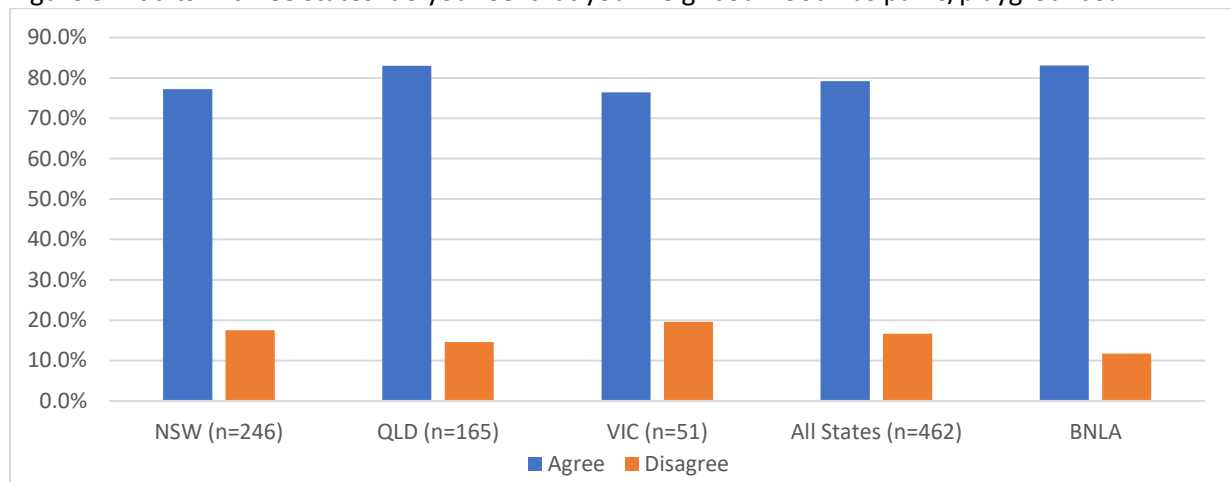
'I like living in my suburb - it's quiet and safe. We didn't have any idea about the suburbs in Australia, it was hard to find suitable house because the size of our family. Our neighbours are okay but we don't communicate with them because of the English barrier'. (Iraqi female, 2018)

Family Profile

A family of six from Iraq and now living in metropolitan Victoria consisted of a married couple and their four children: three sons aged between 6 and 11, and a daughter aged 2. The male head of the household gained a university degree in visual and fine arts in Mosul, and worked as a high school art teacher. The female head of the household looked after the family. Their life was safe and quiet and they were happy until forced to leave when their city was attacked. They have a lot of family and friends back in Iraq, as well as Jordan, Lebanon and the Netherlands, and still contact them via Viber and Skype. The male also has family here in Australia. At the time of interview, their boys were happy at school and thought that their teachers were helpful and friendly, and they all had a lot of friends. After doing their homework they liked to play outside on their bikes, and with their iPads.

The majority of adults in the Victoria cohort of refugees surveyed also thought that their neighbourhood had amenities for their families to enjoy. Public spaces provide refugee families opportunities for sport, recreation and social interaction. **Almost four out of five adults in Victoria, a similar proportion to the other states, agreed that their neighbourhood had parks and playgrounds (Figure 5).**

Figure 5: Adults in three states: do you feel that your neighbourhood has parks/playgrounds?



Family Profile

A family of seven from Syria and now living in regional Victoria consisted of a couple and their five children: three daughters aged 15, 10 and 5; and two sons aged 12 and 10. Back in his homeland, in the big city where they lived, for over twenty years the male head of the household had owned and operated a shoe factory, while the female head of the household had looked after the large family. Although they had many friends and family in Syria, as well as family in Turkey, France, and Canada, they did not use social media to communicate until they came to Australia. The parents and sister of the female head of the household live in Australia, the sister close by. The young people were very happy in Australia but did not feel that they belonged to the area they were living in and did not much like their schools, although the eldest said that ‘classes are different from Syria, much better here – more discipline and teacher is lovely here’. Although they thought that it was hard to learn English, three of the four older children rated their English language skills as ‘very good’ or ‘excellent’; and the other rated his skills as ‘okay’.

Looking for work:

‘I go to language school part time as I look after my family and my little daughter. Sometimes I go to church to learn English conversation (church groups). I would like to study interpreting after I improve my English. I can’t work in a farm as I never done before’. (Syrian female, 2018)

‘I attend the language school part time as I have some health problems. It’s very hard to get a job here. The only job they offer here is farming which is hard for me as I have a lower back pain. We wish we know that we are 100% coming here and it’s very important to know English very well. At least we could learn some before we came here. We stayed in Turkey for three years’. (Syrian male, 2018)

Settling in:

‘We have no idea about this area. We did not choose it. It’s a nice and quiet area. But we might change it and move to Melbourne because we don’t have opportunity to find work here. Also we heard that the school in Melbourne are better than the ones here. I am not very happy here and I feel lonely. I hope to see my children living a good life here and building their future’ (Syrian male, 2018)

After school and the future:

‘I do my homework then watch TV and play sports sometimes... I want to finish high school and become Ophthalmologist’. (Young Syrian female, 2018)

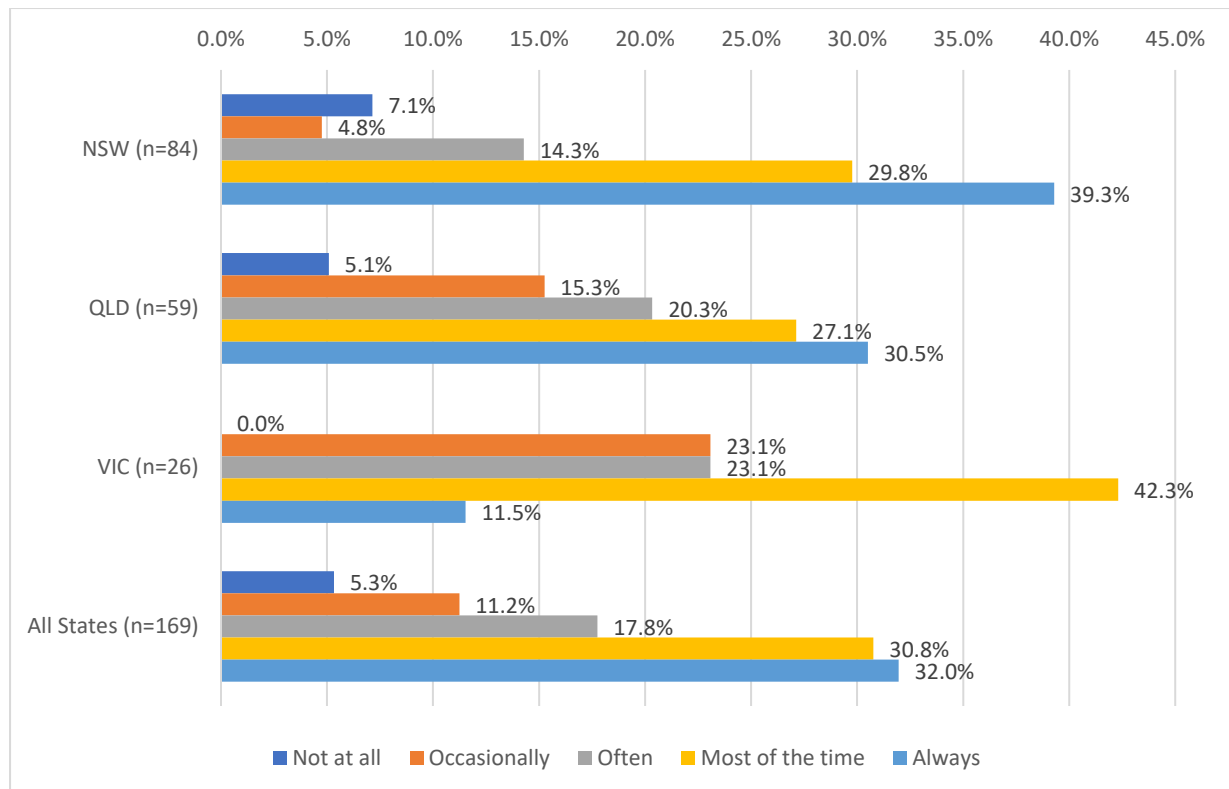
‘I watch TV and do my homework. Afterward I play computer games and do sport sometimes. I want to become a GP’. (Young Syrian male, 2018)

‘I do my homework, have lunch, watch TV and do sport sometimes. I want to learn English very well and become Interpreter and Translator’. (Young Syrian male, 2018)

‘I do my homework then watch TV and go shopping sometimes. I want to become a lawyer and also a sport commentator’ (Young Syrian female, 2018)

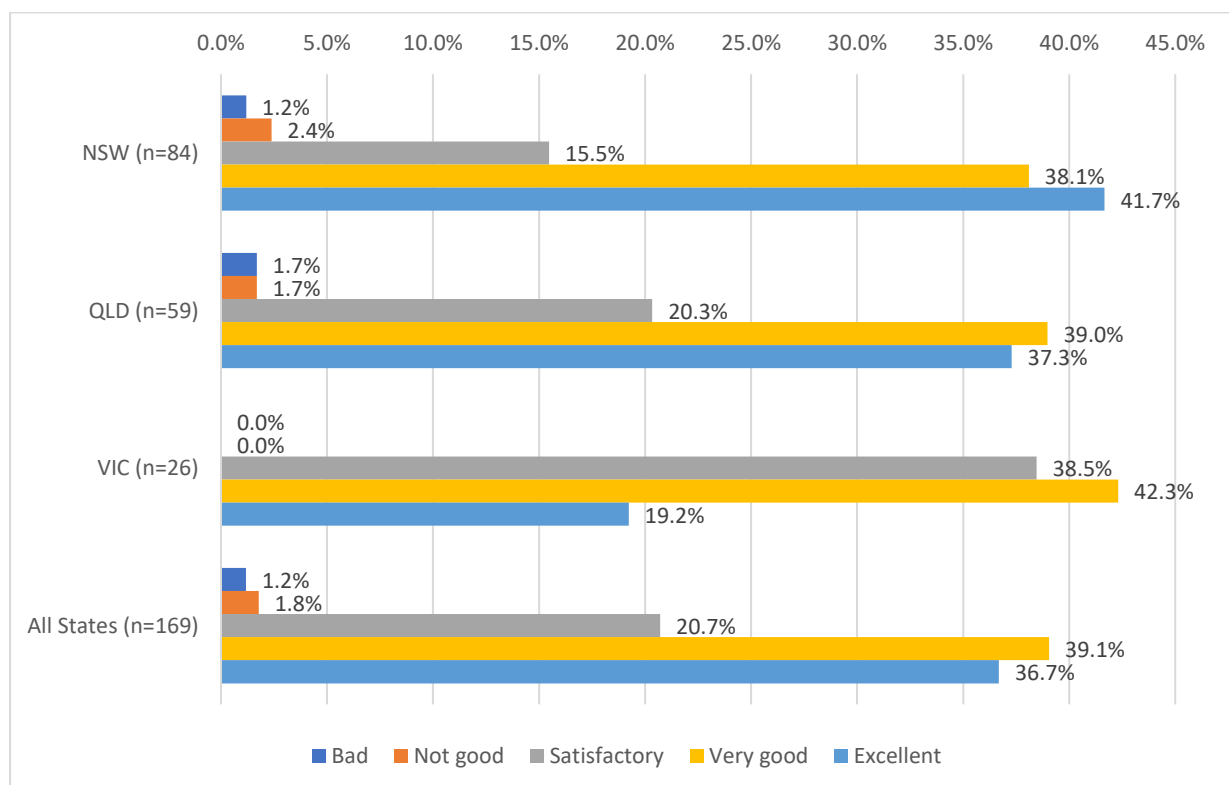
All of the young people in the Victoria cohort felt that they belonged to their community to some degree: four out of five of them felt they belonged ‘often’, ‘most of the time’ or ‘always’ (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Young people in three states: do you feel you belong to the local community?



And all of them were satisfied with their schooling, in fact three in five thought that their experience of school was ‘very good’ or ‘excellent’ (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Young people in three states: How are you finding school/TAFE?



Family Profile

A family of six from Syria and now living in metropolitan Victoria consisted of a married couple and their three teenage children, along with the mother of the male head of the household. The couple were both trained as architects back in their home country. Their children are twin daughters, aged 13 at the time of interview, and a son aged 15. The young people mainly did homework after school and watched TV or used their mobile phones or iPads. They said there were parks, gyms, a swimming pool and tennis club in the neighbourhood.

Finding work:

'Maybe [I would like] to read more about the work ways and the codes of doing job in our fields like to study the code of building in Victoria as an architect... I applied for many jobs but the opportunity did not arise yet.' (Syrian male, 2018)

'We are looking for architect opportunity, we are looking to find the good job to start building our experience in Australia'. (Syrian female, 2018)

Settling in:

'Here in Australia we found heaps of relatives. My sister has been settled in Melbourne and at the beginning we rented a house beside her, now we settled again in another suburb not that far from the old suburb'. (Syrian male, 2018)

'Here in Australia we found supporting friends and we are happy to be here in Melbourne, enjoying the technology and the nature. We've settled in and we are looking to continue living here in future. It is fun to live here, cool and quiet, well serviced and full of parks, neighbours are friendly and helpful.' (Syrian female, 2018)

Hopes for the future:

'Live in peace for the rest of my life' (Elderly Syrian female, 2018)

'To get more experience and build strong base for more Australian way of life.' (Syrian male, 2018)

'Have a job opportunity to improve our settlement here in Australia'. (Syrian female, 2018)

School:

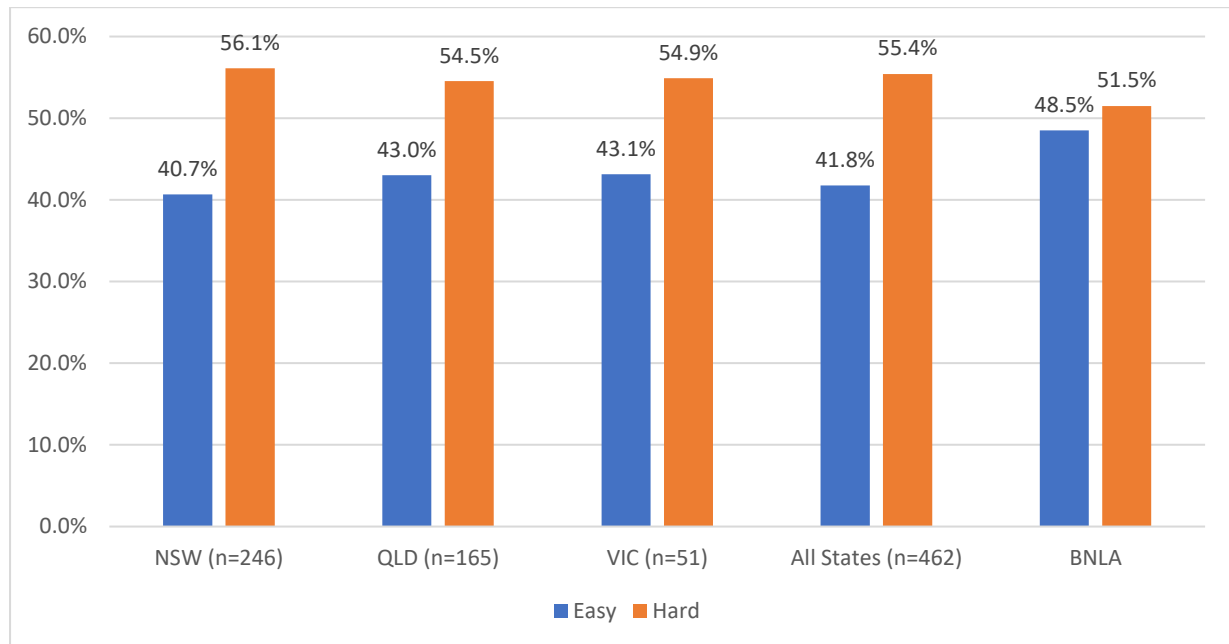
'I like acting ... and my friends know me, like I know them. I have fun at school sometimes. I like performing arts, materials and systems, maths, sports and cooking because I have fun when I do them. But I dislike humanities and English because they are boring and hard'. (Young Syrian female, 2018)

'At my school I am learning interesting information, and I have a lot of fun hanging out and learning with my friends at school. I enjoy the arts, science and math curriculum at the school. I find less enjoyment in learning about analysing and recording games of famous players in PE specialist'. (Young Syrian male, 2018)

'I like my school and my friends. My interest is basketball. In my old school, I did not hang out with my friends much and the class was so crowded with people. I like performing arts because you get to act and dance. I like drawing, basketball, dancing and acting. I dislike humanities because the tests are hard when you study but you get good grades at the end.' (Young Syrian female, 2018)

It is very different living in Australia than in the Middle East, yet after one to two years of settlement almost half of the adult refugees from Syria and Iraq living in Victoria said that it was easy to talk to their Australian neighbours (Figure 8). The proportion was similar for NSW and Qld.

Figure 8: Adults in three states: How easy has it been to talk to your Australian neighbours?



Family Profile

A family of four from Iraq and now living in metropolitan Victoria consisted of a married couple and their adult son and daughter. The couple had both worked for the government for 25 years in their home country. They had been very happy living in Baghdad but had fled to a small village and lived there for seven years before coming to Australia. Their son was a qualified teacher, and taught English in a primary school for five years. Their daughter was a student. They were sponsored to come to Australia by the sister of the female head of the household. All members of the family were learning the English language and wanted to improve and find a job as soon as possible. Although the son had some English language skills, he was looking for work other than teaching:

‘I finished level three in language... Now I am having security course. I am looking for a job’ (Young Iraqi male, 2018).

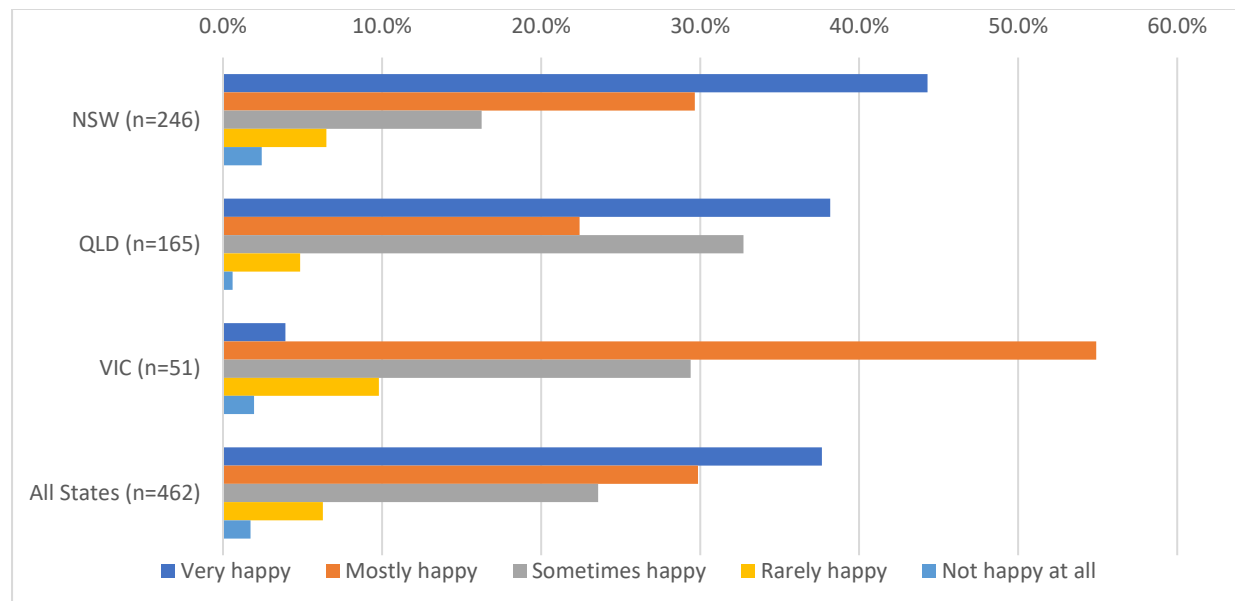
Settling in:

‘My sister is here in Melbourne and we live in the same area. It is a very good area, quiet, safe and the neighbours very friendly... We made new friends through our language study... Also we still call our friends who still live in Iraq. We are very happy here in Australia, we can feel safe, freedom and bright future for our children’. (Iraqi female, 2018)

‘Before we came here to Australia and when we spoke to our relatives they always mentioned the positives things her in Australia and they never mentioned the negative things like the high rental rates and the huge money amount of gas and electricity bills but in spite of that if anybody asks me where you would like to live I will never hesitate and I will say Australia’. (Iraqi male, 2018)

All refugee parents in Victoria thought that there was a bright future for their children in Australia, but moving your family to a new country is difficult, particularly when you are escaping war and conflict. Sometimes health problems make life difficult too. Yet, when asked how happy they were with life in Australia, three out of five adults in Victoria (58.8%) were ‘very’ happy or ‘mostly’ happy with their life in Australia (Figure 9).

Figure 9: Adults in all states: how happy are you with your current life in Australia?



Family Profile

A family of four from Syria and now living in metropolitan Victoria consisted of a married couple and their two sons, aged 25 and 18. In their homeland the male head of the household was a farmer for more than 30 years. Life was very stable and they were happy before the war happened. The female head of the household was happy looking after the family, but now she is severely disabled. They spent four years in Lebanon before coming to Australia. The male has a brother in Lebanon and other family members here in Australia. Here he is the full time carer of his wife. The elder son finished high school in Syria and worked on the farm to support his family. He said ‘my life was normal, happy, before ISIS came to my city and destroy every thing that I dreamed for. I left my country. I was scared, horrified, I didn’t know what to do. Scared from the army, from every one, until I reached Lebanon’. In Lebanon he worked as a baker. At the time of interview the younger son was studying at TAFE. He found life easy here in Australia and had a lot of friends from different countries. He wanted to work in computer engineering in the future.

Looking for work:

‘I start attending English School and I’m in level 3. I’m doing well at school. When I finish my English language classes then I will start doing some courses regarding to my experience in Lebanon. I want to be a baker.’ (Young Syrian male, 2018)

Settling in:

‘My sister brought us to Australia to settle here for the rest of our life, and to have a better life. I never had any information about Australia and I never thought I would come to this country. I was confused and scared because I was thinking how I can start a new life in a strange country. I found a better life in Australia but I still miss my home Syria. Living in this area is quite nice, a very quiet area and we just moved recently. So I don’t know much about my neighbours. I think I’m happy but it will take time to cope with the environment and it will take time to engage with the community here. My wife is disabled - she can’t talk. But I think she thinks the same way as I do. I need help and support for my wife and to find a cure for her disability. She wants to be healthy and look after her family again. All I want is to have a better life for me and my family.’ (Syrian male, 2018)

‘Coming to Australia was a dream came true. I never thought my life will change to better. Living in this suburb very nice. I think we have all our needs and I’m more than happy to be here. I have big group of friend from the city that I came from and I know all of them so it’s make me so happy. And I have my cousin too. I hope to see my mum getting well. At the moment that’s all I can think about it.’ (Young Syrian male, 2018)

CONCLUSION

All of the newly-arrived Syrian and Iraqi refugees in Victoria 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. Employment was a priority in settling where they were currently living, or determined future plans to move.

All of the families interviewed in Victoria were very satisfied with the on-arrival services provided to them and their families by AMES Australia. They were arriving in a new land where most had no formal community connections while some noted they had some informal connections – strong family bonds. On arrival, AMES found them accommodation, linked them to welfare and English language services and guided them through the difficult first months of settlement in Victoria. This was even though AMES had more than double the normal number of refugee arrivals in 2017 when most of the families that were interviewed arrived.

Many of the newly-arrived refugees in Victoria 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 Victoria had a good command of English while others did not. Most have attended the English language 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 English language courses provided them with an opportunity to make new friends in Australia. However, there was a concern that the English language 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 Victoria 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 Victoria.

We thank them for opening their doors and their hearts to us. We also thank AMES for all the work they have carried out for this research project and for the bilingual refugees who assisted in this research project as bilingual research assistants.