



Charles Sturt
University



University of
South Australia



Learning from Leeton: A case study of refugee settlement in rural Australia

Executive Summary

Multicultural Council of Wagga Wagga (MCWW)



MULTICULTURAL COUNCIL
OF WAGGA WAGGA

Refugees Rejuvenating and Connecting Communities

Research Team



Dr David Radford is a Senior Lecturer (Sociology), UniSA Justice and Society, University of South Australia. David researches the challenges and opportunities of migration, with a particular focus on refugee-background migrants in rural and urban communities.



Prof Branka Krivokapic-Skoko is a Professor in Management at the School of Business, Charles Sturt University. Her research focuses on regional and rural Australia, global countryside, and immigrant and refugee entrepreneurship.



Dr Heidi Hetz is a lecturer in the enabling pathway programs at UniSA College, University of South Australia, where she has been teaching sociology, academic writing and literacy since 2015. As a sociologist, Heidi is interested in refugee narratives and (self-) representation.



Dr Yapa Bandara is an adjunct Senior Lecturer at Charles Sturt University. His research area is applied economics and he has focused on issues related to regional growth and development in Australia. Yapa has substantial experience working with multicultural communities and institutions in regional NSW.



Dr George Tan is a Research Fellow at the Northern Institute at Charles Darwin University. International migration is a key research focus of his, particularly international students, skilled migrants, refugees and asylum seekers.

Recommended citation:

Radford, David; Krivokapic-Skoko, Branka; Hetz, Heidi; Bandara, Yapa; Tan, George 2021. *Learning from Leeton: A case study of refugee settlement in rural Australia – Executive Report*, University of South Australia, Adelaide.

© 2022 Copyright University of South Australia.

For access to the summary, full and web versions of the report please see:

www.learningfromleeton.lpage.com.au

Executive summary

This report describes how refugee-background migrant settlement in rural Australian communities has often been framed within the context of public discourses of refugees as a burden, cost or threat, or as unwilling or unable to integrate into – become a part of – local communities. Rural and regional communities have been impacted by national and global structural changes impacting their economies as well as government policies that have sought to significantly increase the numbers of refugees and migrants settling in these communities, and away from larger metropolitan centres. We argue in this report that, while refugee-background migrants can have a positive impact on rural communities, it is important that we learn from the experiences of rural communities that already have a history of refugee settlement. Those experiences can provide evidence-based information that can maximise the potential for success – for the refugee-background migrants themselves, local rural communities and, of course, government settlement policies – what we might call a win-win-win outcome.

Rural communities have strong self-identities and histories and want these to continue to be positively written into the future. Economic and development challenges have impacted employment and migration trajectories, but challenges remain in this environment to both attract and retain existing community members and newer migrants, including those from a refugee background such as Hazara Afghans. Refugee-background migrants on the other hand arrive in rural communities with short and long-term needs, hopes and dreams for themselves, their families and their community.

This report provides an in-depth case study of one rural Australian community, Leeton, NSW, which has had a largely positive experience of refugee settlement. The first half of the report outlines the background and context of the research in Leeton. Since its inception, Leeton has always had a strong migrant flavour to its population. The second half of the report explores the lived experience of settlement from the perspective of Hazara Afghans as well as longer-standing members of the Leeton community. The report highlights the complex nature of refugee settlement and the importance of taking into account the needs, perspectives and aspirations of all involved.

Chapter 1 is an introductory chapter that provides the context for this research on humanitarian settlement in Leeton. We argue that what is missing in much information on rural humanitarian settlement are in-depth local case studies of rural communities where humanitarian settlement is already taking place. The present report, *Learning from Leeton*, is one such attempt to explore the ways in which one rural community, Leeton, NSW, has responded to humanitarian migrant settlement and what we can learn from its experience to support other rural communities.

Chapter 2 briefly outlines the migration history of Leeton and examines how the type of industry and development shaped immigration in general, as well as non-Anglo immigration. The chapter first outlines the richness and uniqueness of the immigration flows to the community of Leeton as seen mainly by the long-term non-Hazara residents. It then presents authentic accounts of Leeton as a community where everyone can belong, and a community embracing and welcoming new settlers, immigrants and refugees.

Chapter 3 presents an overview of contemporary international migration to Leeton. Drawing from the Australian Census of Population and Housing from 1996 to 2016, we provide an overview of the overseas-born population in Leeton in the last 20 years before turning attention to exploring the various socio-economic indicators of the Afghan-born population. The Afghan-born population, as the analysis will show, was a newly emerging and significant part of the overseas-born community in Leeton at the time of the 2016 Census. This chapter shows how immigrants have been, and continue to be, a part of Leeton's community fabric; however, some of the longstanding migrant communities in Leeton are ageing and recent arrivals, including Hazara Afghans, are playing a role in offsetting some of the population loss driven by ageing and outmigration.

Chapter 4 explores the reasons why Hazara Afghans have moved to and decided to stay in Leeton. These include work opportunities, visa requirements, the country lifestyle and affordability, and experiences of support, reciprocity and belonging. We conclude that, for the Hazara in this research, Leeton has become a town that feels like home and a place that allowed them to 'find their feet' in Australia, including the ability to learn English, adapt to the culture, form connections with long-term residents, build local employment experience and even accumulate savings to establish a business. Leeton has equally gained from the Hazara as they have filled job vacancies, their children have attended local schools, and they have contributed to the social and cultural life of Leeton.

Chapter 5 explores the reasons why some Hazara have decided to leave Leeton. Reasons include the lack of tertiary education opportunities once the children finish high school, the lack of diverse employment and business opportunities, and social and cultural isolation. In Leeton, like in the rest of Australia, the Hazara experience difficulties in accessing citizenship and family reunion. Some have moved to capital cities to start a new chapter in their lives in Australia, providing access to a wider range of employment opportunities. Just as settling in Leeton and staying for many years may not be a 'forever choice', neither is their departure from Leeton.

Chapter 6 identifies the various ways in which the mayor, Leeton Shire Council and Leeton Multicultural Support Group provide practical assistance to support the Hazara's personal, family and community needs. This assistance includes support and advocacy for employment needs, facilitating Hazara Afghans' social and cultural needs, supporting formal and informal English language learning, and schooling/education needs for their children, building friendships in the broader community, and working with the police and other government service providers to address issues the Hazara face.

Chapter 7 explores the strategies that were developed to help nurture a culture of welcome in Leeton for refugees, migrants and new settlers through a whole-of-community approach where all sections of the community are engaged in welcome; and all sections of the community are included in the benefits that this engagement brings. The activities that are implemented to support that whole-of-community approach include embedding policy deliverables in the Leeton Shire Council strategic plan, working with local media, promoting events and programs that facilitate cultural and social interaction, and advocacy with state and federal government authorities. Given that there are now many rural and regional communities that are receiving and supporting humanitarian settlement there is good reason to see Leeton as a model that other rural communities could emulate.

Chapter 8 presents a brief account of the evidence on the economic contribution of migrants, refugees included, in Australia. It shows how existing knowledge widely recognises that refugees contribute to the Australian economy through employment, business, fulfilling regional labour shortages, and other undertakings in their settlement areas. The chapter then attempts to provide a measure for the economic contribution that humanitarian settlers make to regional NSW, with reference to the Leeton Shire region. The higher multiplier for Leeton means that there is a very high potential for Leeton to achieve higher economic growth if increased government expenditure and private sector investment are directed to the Leeton economy.

Chapter 9 explores how Leeton is drawing on a variety of documents, programs, organisations and networks to forge future directions for the community. These documents address key issues to foster regional development, increase population growth and attract immigrant settlers, including skilled, temporary and humanitarian-background migrants. They were also adopted to support the development of a strong, cohesive, welcoming community.

Chapter 10 provides an overall conclusion and summary of the report.

The report also provides examples of resistance to the arrival of culturally diverse migrants including those from a humanitarian background. This is important because every community has a variety of opinions and views, and sometimes these are opposing, critical or negative. The report describes how the Leeton mayor and Shire Council worked through these concerns, seeking to bring all members of the community with them on the journey over time. Nevertheless, the largely positive impact of welcome and support offered to the Hazara in Leeton was underscored by Hazara man Hussain, a former resident of Leeton, who reflected: 'I've got good memories from Leeton, which I have not yet experienced living elsewhere.' The report does not suggest that Leeton is a perfect refugee-background settlement community, but rather that there are things that we can learn from Leeton's experience to help other rural communities and state and federal government bodies in their welcome and support.

Humanitarian settlement learnings from Leeton

1. Rural communities should consider developing whole-of-community approaches to the welcome and support of humanitarian-background migrants. Care should be taken to include various members/groups in the local community, including the local Aboriginal community, and not to be dependent on a few keen volunteers. We recommend rural communities jointly explore best practices of including Indigenous communities in a meaningful way. A whole-of-community approach should also take into consideration actions that will include other potentially marginalised non-humanitarian-background members of the community.
2. Rural and regional local government authorities should consider adopting specific policies and actions to promote welcome and inclusion of humanitarian-background migrants and other culturally diverse groups within the community.
3. Mayors of rural and regional communities are encouraged to exercise leadership and influence, which can be vital to the success of refugee-background migrant settlement, both in their formal roles in local government and as the public face of support out in the community.

4. Rural and regional communities should consider implementing local-centric ideas that promote intercultural relational engagement which brings together both the broader rural community and other diverse migrant groups, including refugees, such as the ‘Chill and Grill’ event that Leeton implemented.
5. Rural and regional communities should develop and encourage ideas that promote formal and informal relational, intercultural and reciprocal engagement between humanitarian-background migrants and members of the rural community. Belonging occurs when newer migrants feel connected and relationally welcomed into the community beyond the jobs that they work in, the schools that they attend, or the shops that they buy from.
6. Rural and regional shire councils that want to receive humanitarian-background migrants should actively seek out, support and learn from one another in their experiences, challenges and opportunities in refugee settlement, especially those shire councils that have joined the Welcoming Cities or Refugee Council of Australia Refugee Welcome Zone networks.
7. Rural and regional communities should consider promoting and developing strong volunteer refugee/migrant support groups. Volunteer support groups provide important support to the work of mayors and rural shire councils. As Leeton has shown, such support groups can grow into formalised structures that are then able to engage and access grants and other opportunities independent of local councils.
8. One of the biggest challenges for humanitarian-background migrants is the ongoing stress they experience because of the traumas of their asylum or refugee journey, their insecure visa situation, or their separation from wives and families who have not yet been able to be reunited with them. This highlights the importance both of providing emotional support and also of advocacy at local, state and federal levels as refugee-background migrants negotiate the various official processes their situation brings.
9. To address rural communities’ need to retain migrants it is important to develop diverse employment opportunities for humanitarian-background migrants beyond unskilled meatworks and agricultural work. In the short term, these unskilled jobs are important incentives to attract migrants, but in the long term they can be discouraging career options. Support for the entrepreneurial skills of refugee-background migrants may also offer new avenues for employment and rural development (see Collins, Watson & Krivokapic-Skoko 2017).
10. Attention needs to be given to the complex needs of refugee-background migrants across age groups, gender and life trajectories. This report, for example, has highlighted the particular needs of Hazara women who have limited ability to speak English, find work or participate in local community opportunities. In contexts with limited employment opportunities, working-age men need to be able to engage in manual labour, which has long-term implications for their health as they age.

11. Future efforts need to carefully consider the various demographic characteristics of refugee-background communities in determining who is likely to settle well into a rural town. Many of the Hazara participants in this research arrived as single or unaccompanied men, which provided them with greater mobility than whole family units when considering moving to a rural town. Planning for rural refugee settlement needs to take into consideration the different needs of single/unaccompanied men and those of families with children of different ages.
12. Tertiary education opportunities are a key factor for retention. Providing clear pathways to nearby larger regional educational centres such as Charles Sturt University in Wagga Wagga and TAFE NSW in Griffith may offset the perceived need for the whole family to move to larger cities.
13. Provision of regional-wide (i.e. Wagga Wagga/Griffith) cultural and religious support, such as appropriate food shopping and religious services, will help alleviate isolation, especially for smaller rural communities. At present, the nearest mosque is in Shepparton, Victoria, while access to Leeton's halls or parks for religious celebrations is provided on an ad hoc rather than ongoing basis. These resources could be provided to a wide range of cultural or refugee groups, and do not have to be limited to one group.
14. State and federal government bodies should actively engage with, partner and resource rural mayors, local government councils and migrant support groups in the development and implementation of rural and regional humanitarian migrant settlement policies. We also recommend the inclusion of humanitarian-background migrants as part of the decision-making process.
15. Increased economic activities in the Leeton region through increased government expenditure and private sector investment will generate more job opportunities for the local workforce, including refugees, enhancing the potential success of humanitarian settlement programs.

Cover Image – An Afghan Hazara family living in Naracoorte. Courtesy Ady Shane Photography

