



Monitoring community attitudes toward refugee settlement in Armidale, NSW

November 2019

We acknowledge the traditional custodians of Australia's land and waterways.
We pay our respects to elders, past and present, and commit ourselves
to a future with reconciliation and renewal at its heart.

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Executive summary

In recent years, successive federal governments have turned to regional areas to offer a home for people who arrive in Australia under our humanitarian program, fleeing conflict or persecution.

The NSW city of Armidale is Australia's newest regional settlement location, with around 300 refugees arriving in the region between March 2018 and February 2019.

When the Federal Government announced Armidale as a new settlement location in 2017, many community members responded positively with offers of donations and volunteering to assist the new arrivals. However, community concerns were also evident on social media and through calls to Armidale Regional Council.

Successful settlement and integration involves mutual adaptation by the host community and new arrivals, and initiatives that work with the spectrum of community attitudes and concerns.

In addition, social research tells us that multiple positive experiences between host communities and new arrivals are needed to strengthen social ties, especially as negative experiences can have a stronger impact.

In light of this, UNE in partnership with Settlement Services International (SSI), initiated research to empirically gauge community attitudes to refugees arriving in Armidale.

Through a series of three pulse surveys, we assessed host community attitudes, concerns and responses to the arrival of refugees in the first 12 months of settlement.

The findings revealed increasingly positive attitudes towards refugees settling in Armidale across clusters of the local community. Sentiment increased in positivity and, at survey three, our clusters had to expand to accommodate a new, highly enthusiastic group that we labelled "Champions".

Further analyses of the data showed that, over time community members:

- Reported more positive contact with refugees generally;
- Felt more willing to help refugees in Armidale; and
- Perceived their fellow community members to be feeling more positively towards the refugees coming to Armidale.

This was tempered by a minority of people who expressed concerns about the arrival of refugees, but this decreased across the three surveys. The main concerns were perceptions of the effect on local jobs, the adequacy of local services to support refugees and concern that refugees might not integrate.

These findings helped SSI, the local provider of on-arrival settlement support, to balance the concerns and aspirations of both new arrivals and different segments of the Armidale community and guided decisions in line with what was best for the community as a whole.

Ultimately, this research adds to the emerging picture of the overall impact of refugee settlement in Armidale, which will continue to evolve as these new arrivals become an integral part of the fabric of the local community.

Background

There is increasing attention on the potential benefits of migration to address some of the challenges facing regional Australia (Parliament of Australia, 2019). Over the past decade, settlement data show that an increasing proportion of new arrivals under Australia's humanitarian program have been settled across regional areas of Australia (Feist, Tan, McDougall, & Hugo, 2015). In August 2017, the Federal Government announced that Armidale was to be a new designated refugee settlement location. Following the announcement, there was a strong positive community response, with offers of donations, volunteerism and community mobilisation.

However, the attitudes were not uniformly positive, and some negative opinions were expressed. The Armidale community-monitoring research was set up to gauge how different segments of the local community responded to the arrival of refugees.

The research was established by Dr Sue Watt, University of New England, and SSI, with the support of Armidale Regional Council. Through telephone surveys, the study aimed to track local community attitudes towards refugees settling in Armidale, enabling stakeholders to understand and respond to issues as they arose, and provided a "snapshot" of community sentiment at regular intervals.

At the time of the baseline survey in April 2018, the first refugee families (around 30 individuals) had recently arrived in Armidale. By the time of the second survey in September 2018, around 170 refugees had arrived and were more visible going about their daily lives in the community. When the third survey was conducted in February 2019, about 300 refugees had settled in Armidale, and there had been several public events for refugees and others in the local community to get to know one another. The refugees settled in Armidale are individuals and families from the Ezidi minority (also known as Yazidi) community who are indigenous to parts of Iraq, Syria and Turkey.

Settlement and integration

Successful settlement and integration is a key goal shared by refugees themselves, the local communities where they settle and government at all levels. In the Australian context, integration is usually defined as the capacity to participate fully in economic, social, cultural and civic life (Fozdar & Hartley, 2013). One of the most influential frameworks outlining the critical domains of integration was developed by the UK Home Office in 2004 (Ager & Strang, 2008). In 2019, the Home Office released an updated and expanded framework (UK Home Office, 2019). The key principles underpinning this evidence-based framework are that integration is:

- Multi-dimensional – depending on multiple factors encompassing access to resources and opportunities as well as social mixing;
- Multi-directional – involving mutual adaptation by everyone in a society or community;
- A shared responsibility that depends on everyone taking responsibility for their own contribution including new arrivals, host communities and government at all levels; and
- Needs to be understood in relation to its particular context of host and newcomer communities, in this case in a regional town in NSW, and that each context influences the timeframe of integration.

Intergroup attitudes

Research in social psychology has shown that the experiences a person and their extended circle has with a particular group influence intergroup attitudes, such as attitudes between a host community and a migrant or refugee group. Positive experiences have an effect, but negative experiences have a significantly stronger impact (Barlow et al., 2012). Fortunately, positive encounters are typically much more frequent than negative ones (Graf et al., 2014), but problems could arise if the balance tips towards fewer positive contacts. It also means that small unfortunate events, such as playground conflicts, can have significant ripple effects. While we cannot prevent these things from happening, we can monitor and respond appropriately if attitudes become negative and need redressing.

Community responses to migrants or refugees can also reflect whether there is a perception of threat. 'Realistic threats' refer to threats to material welfare, such as perceived competition for jobs and resources (Stephan et al., 2005). 'Symbolic threats' refer to perceived group differences in morals, values, standards, beliefs, and attitudes (Stephan

et al., 2005). For example, some Australians dislike the hijab, a head covering worn by some women for religious or cultural reasons, as they take it as a symbol of inequality between men and women. Based on these issues of contact and intergroup threat, the Armidale community monitoring research asks questions about attitudes towards the refugees, contact with them, and concerns (threats) that participants may have about the refugees coming to Armidale.

Research aims

Following the initial government announcement in mid-2017, there was a strong Armidale community response, but attitudes were not uniformly positive. For example, there was a flurry of comments on a “Thumbs up, Thumbs down” Facebook page, and the Armidale Regional Council fielded phone calls from people who were concerned about this development and its potential impact on the town. Instead of being swayed by “loud voices” or guessing how the community was responding this research was initiated to empirically gauge community attitudes to refugees arriving in this locality.

The research aimed to:

- Understand the extent to which Armidale can be considered a welcoming community in terms of attitudes to refugees;
- Identify different segments of the community, and the attitudes they hold, to allow service providers to target interventions to particular groups; and
- Provide an analysis of trends over time.

Methodology

Three surveys were conducted in the first 12 months of settlement, in April 2018 (Baseline), September 2018 (Survey 2), and February 2019 (Survey 3).

Each survey sampled 200 community members via a random dialling telephone survey. Quotas were set for age and gender, and a different sample was drawn each time. There was high participation in the study, with just over 90% of people contacted in the first two surveys agreeing to the telephone interview, and 85% in Survey 3.

The survey included some questions from Mapping Social Cohesion (led by the Scanlon Foundation and Monash University) which, since 2007, has conducted an annual survey charting Australian public opinion on various aspects of migration and social cohesion.

Findings

Key markers of community sentiment over time

The initial attitudes towards the refugees (on a scale of 0 to 100, where 0 = extremely unfavourable, and 100 = extremely favourable) coming to Armidale were positive, with an average rating of 68/100 at Baseline and in Survey 2. In Survey 3, attitudes were significantly more positive, with an average rating of 73/100 (Fig. 1).

Consistent with the more positive attitudes in Survey 3, the level of concern (on a scale of 1-5, where 1 = not concerned at all, and 5 = very concerned) about the impact of refugees coming to Armidale was significantly lower in Survey 3 than at Baseline and in Survey 2 (Fig. 2).

Community attitudes segmentation

Cluster analysis was used to divide the Armidale community into groups of like-minded people according to their responses to the surveys. The same set of indicators was used for each survey, and in each case, the Armidale community was divided into four groups. At Baseline and in Survey 2, we labelled the groups:

“Enthusiastic”, “Positive”, “Concerned”, and “Resistant”.

The “Enthusiastic” and “Positive” groups formed the majority, while the “Concerned” and “Resistant” groups formed the minority.

Survey 3 produced a different ‘best fit’ solution. Consistent with the more positive attitudes shown in that survey, the cluster analysis identified a new group with extremely positive attitudes. We labelled this group “Champions”. The “Positive” and “Enthusiastic” groups were still present. A fourth group that formed just 20% of the sample was labelled “Resistant/Concerned” - in essence, an amalgamation of two group labels from Baseline and Survey 2. Thus, the Survey 3 solution produced the following groups:

“Champions”, “Enthusiastic”, “Positive”, “Resistant/Concerned”.

80% of the sample fell into the first three (positive) groups (Fig. 3).

Fig. 1 Average attitudes towards refugees

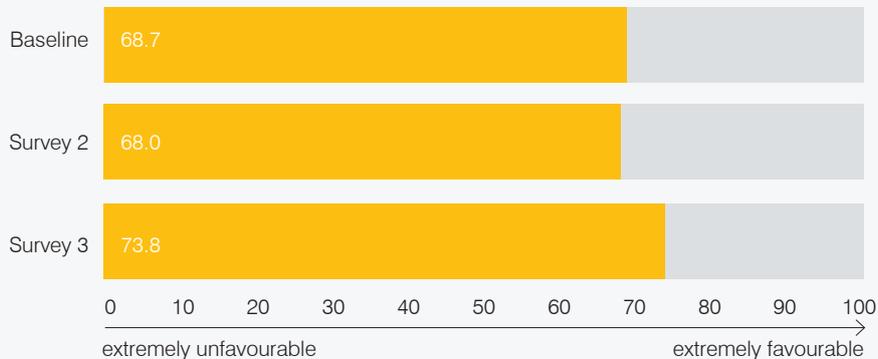


Fig. 2 Average level of concern

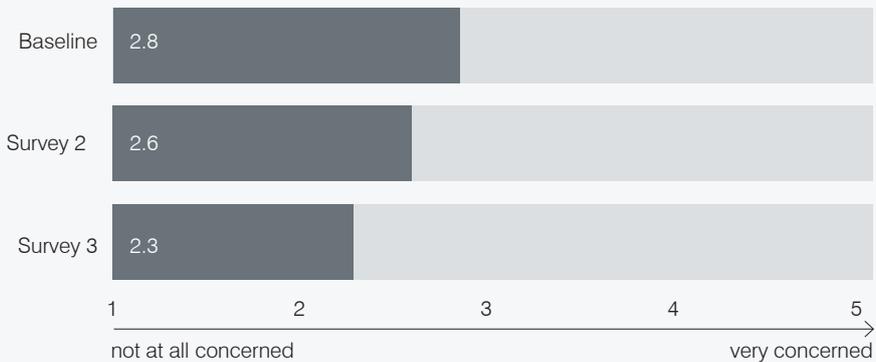
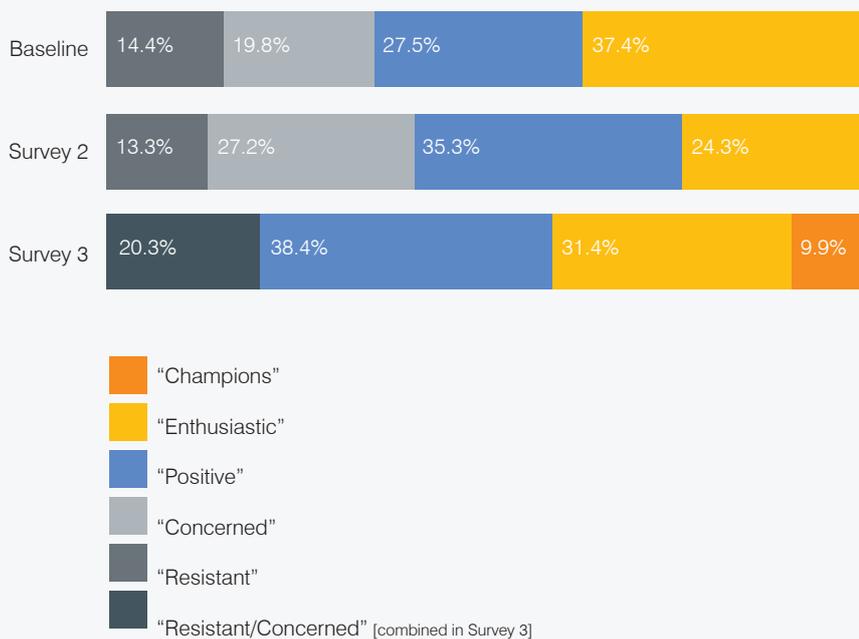


Fig. 3 Community segment analysis



The “Champions” group¹ was a new cluster in Survey 3. They were extremely positive about the refugees coming and had very favourable attitudes to the refugees. These people would like to see a higher refugee intake in Armidale. They believed that Armidale has the capacity to take the refugees and had few concerns. These individuals showed keen interest in other cultures and intercultural contact, and they were highly likely to volunteer to help the refugees. Compared with the other clusters, the “Champions” were more likely to be university educated, and not from a migrant background themselves. They were also the youngest cluster (average of 46 years old) and had been in Armidale the shortest time (average of 23 years).

The “Enthusiastic” group were very positive about the refugees coming. They were highly educated, idealistic, keen for cultural exchange, and would enjoy contact with the refugees. Compared with the other clusters, they were more likely to come from a diverse background themselves. They would like Armidale to have a higher refugee intake. They were especially keen for the refugees to bring cultural diversity to Armidale, but expressed some worries around whether the community would accept them and whether they would integrate.

The “Positive” group were also positive about the refugees coming to Armidale. These people thought the number of refugees coming was about right, and they were receptive to intercultural contact and contact with the refugees. They expressed some concern about whether there would be enough support services for the refugees and whether there were enough jobs for them.

The “Concerned” group were less positive about the refugees coming to Armidale. They had neutral attitudes to the refugees but thought that the intake was too high, and they expressed concern that there may not be enough jobs for the refugees. This group had completed less formal education than the other groups (38% completed school to Year 10 or below), and their financial status was more often described as “Just getting along”. It is possible that they felt competition with the refugees for jobs, which can be seen as a ‘realistic’ threat. However, this group was receptive to other cultures and may enjoy intercultural days.

The “Resistant” group had negative attitudes regarding the refugees coming to Armidale. They were of a similar age to the other groups but had been in Armidale the longest (average = 38 years). They tended to have a technical education, and very few came from a migrant background themselves. This group showed little interest in other cultures. Consistent with this, members of this group tended to worry that the refugees may not integrate into Australian society or accept Australian ways, highlighting that they view the arrival of refugees as a ‘symbolic’ threat.

The “Resistant/Concerned” group² showed a high level of concern about the impact of refugees on Armidale. Their main reason for this response was concern about jobs, and they thought that the number of refugees coming to Armidale was too high. Despite this, their attitude to the refugees was just slightly negative. They were quite neutral when it came to engagement with other cultures, with neither strong approach nor avoidance of them. Compared with the other clusters, members of this group were more likely to have completed education at high school level, and their financial circumstances were lower than other groups.

¹ “Champions” were a new group in the cluster analysis in Survey 3 who had extremely positive attitudes. The “Positive” and “Enthusiastic” groups were still present.

² In Survey 3, the fourth group, forming just 20% of the Survey sample, was labelled “Resistant/Concerned” — in essence an amalgamation of two group labels from Baseline and Survey 2.

Fig. 4 Average rating of other people's attitudes towards refugees

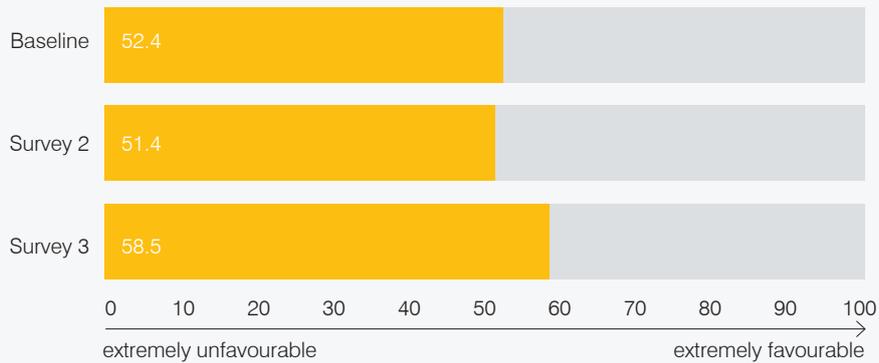
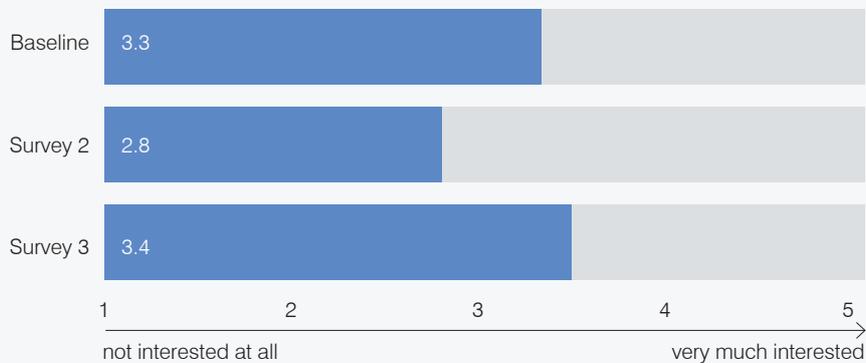


Fig. 5 Average willingness to volunteer



Other significant changes in community sentiment over time

The three surveys were designed to provide successive snapshots of community sentiment, allowing us to identify shifts in sentiment in the first 12 months of refugee resettlement.

The three samples were very similar in terms of demographics, with no differences in age, gender, level of education, employment profile, or financial circumstances. Each survey also included a similar proportion of people with a migrant background or close family members who were migrants.

We tested for changes from Baseline to Survey 2 to Survey 3. The following statistically significant (i.e., non-random) changes were found:

- **Ratings of own attitude** (scale from 0 to 100): Attitudes to the refugees coming to Armidale were significantly more positive in Survey 3 than in the Baseline survey and in Survey 2 (Fig. 1).

- **Ratings of others' attitudes** (scale from 0 to 100): Participants rated other people's attitudes about the refugees coming to Armidale significantly more positively in Survey 3 than in the Baseline survey and Survey 2 (Fig. 4). In all surveys, participants rated other people's attitudes lower than the community average showed. This was exaggerated among people with negative attitudes, such that they perceived the community as being negative towards the refugees, whereas the community was, on average, positive towards the settlement of refugees in Armidale.
- Survey 3 participants reported significantly more positive **contact experiences with refugees generally** (not restricted to refugees in Armidale) than Baseline and Survey 2 participants.
- On a measure of "**behavioural tendencies**", Survey 3 participants were slightly but significantly more willing to help refugees, changing from an average of 4.1/5 in the first two surveys to 4.3/5 in Survey 3.

- **Willingness to volunteer** time to help refugees started high in the Baseline survey, dropped in Survey 2, and in Survey 3 returned to the same level as the Baseline survey (Fig. 5).
- The level of **concern** about the impact of refugees coming to Armidale decreased significantly across the three surveys (Fig. 2).

Reasons for rating of concern

Respondents were asked to explain the reason for their rating of the question “Do you have any concerns about the impact of refugees coming to Armidale?” (some people indicated no concern at all). Across the three surveys, the most frequent reasons related to:

- Whether there would be enough jobs for refugees and a sense of ‘competition’ with refugees for jobs;
- Concern that Armidale doesn’t have enough support services for refugees;
- Concern that the refugees will not integrate. This concern was mentioned more frequently in Survey 3 than in Baseline and Survey 2. In Survey 3, several participants also commented that they are settling in well (positive comment);
- Refugees will bring cultural diversity (positive comment); and
- Armidale has the capacity to take the refugees (positive comment).

Contact with refugees

Surveys 2 and 3 asked about contact with the refugees arriving in Armidale. This was not included in the Baseline survey, as the refugees had only just arrived. Forty-one per cent of participants in Survey 2 reported that they had experienced contact with the refugees arriving in Armidale; on average, the contact was rated as “quite positive.” The question was re-worded in Survey 3 so that it was specific to contact with Ezidi refugees. This produced a smaller number of people (31%) reporting contact with the refugees. Those who reported contact rated it on average as “quite positive”. Further analysis revealed that while the amount of contact did not relate to attitudes to the refugees, attitudes did relate to how positive or negative the contact experience was.

Comparison with other regional areas of Australia

Mapping Social Cohesion is an annual survey conducted since 2007, making it one of the definitive sources of trends in Australian public opinion in the areas of social cohesion, immigration and population issues (Markus, 2018). The survey in this research included questions from Mapping Social Cohesion to allow comparison between Armidale and similar regional areas (classified as “Inner Regional Australia”). The results showed that Armidale was on a par with similar regional areas on almost all indicators, including demographics such as age, sex, level of education, cultural diversity, and attitudes towards migration. In terms of differences, compared with other regional areas, Armidale respondents:

- Had a higher sense of belonging in Australia;
- Were more interested in learning about other ethnic groups in Australia;
- Were less inclined to think immigrants should change their behaviour to become more like Australians;
- Felt slightly more prosperous than similar regional areas in Australia;
- Reported less friendly neighbourhoods³; and
- Reported more experience of discrimination because of skin colour, ethnic origin or religion.

Together, the community monitoring research suggests very positive responses from the Armidale community to the refugee resettlement program. This is tempered by a minority of people who feel negatively about the arrival of refugees, but this number has decreased across the three surveys. Concerns persist around jobs, service provision and integration. Overall, average attitudes have become more positive, and the average level of concern has decreased.

³ Compared with Inner Regional Australia, Armidale respondents rated the following questions lower: “People in my local area are willing to help their neighbours”; “My local area is place where people from different national or ethnic backgrounds get on well together”; “I am able to have a real say on issues that are important to me in my local area”.

Implications for settlement and integration practice

The regular monitoring of community attitudes in Armidale aligned with how SSI approaches delivering support for settlement and integration. SSI is contracted to deliver the Humanitarian Settlement Program (HSP) in the Armidale area, which is the main specialised on-arrival support provided to humanitarian entrants in Australia. As part of this, SSI invests significantly in community engagement with new arrivals, host communities and other stakeholders. Underpinning SSI's approach is a recognition that integration demands a whole-of-community response involving mutual adaptation and shared responsibility by everyone, including new arrivals, host communities and government at all levels (Settlement Services International, 2019).

The Baseline survey provided a benchmark of the spectrum of community attitudes and concerns towards the settlement of refugees in Armidale. It also provided a common language and evidence of four clusters, from "Champions" to "Resistant", to guide community engagement and program delivery. For example, at Baseline, there was a widespread concern that Armidale did not have enough support services for refugees. As a result, SSI implemented a campaign to raise community awareness of the specialist support refugees received through programs such as the HSP and mainstream local services in education, health, and employment. This then fed into the development of a regular newsletter circulated to key stakeholders, regular updates in the local media and distribution to an Armidale network of service providers who are supporting refugees.

The Baseline, and subsequent surveys, also underpinned SSI's approach to consider the full spectrum of the community in decision-making. For example, offers to donate children's clothes directly to SSI were referred to charity stores in recognition that along with refugees, there are many other vulnerable families and children in the Armidale community. This also promotes the independence of refugees, who can themselves access these charities as a low-cost way to buy clothing and other essential items for their families.

SSI is conducting regular structured consultations with Ezidis and other stakeholders to identify priorities for longer-term settlement and integration in Armidale. Ongoing monitoring of community attitudes complements this work. It also offers an opportunity to gauge changes in wider community sentiment when intensive on-arrival support, available under the HSP, tapers off as refugees achieve the outcomes addressed by the HSP and are referred to longer-term settlement support and continue to access mainstream services, such as schools and community health centres. The first three waves form part of the emerging picture of the overall impact of refugee settlement in Armidale as newer arrivals and earlier arrivals, at different stages of their integration journey, become part of the fabric of the local community.

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