



consultations with refugee and asylum seeker children and young people

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Office of the
Advocate for Children
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Office Office of the Advocate for Children and Young People
Report Consultations with refugee and asylum seeker children and young people
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The Advocate for Children and Young People is under the FACS (Family and Community Services) ABN 80 597 369 676

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We wish to pay our respects to Aboriginal elders – past, present and emerging – and acknowledge the important role of Aboriginal people and culture within the NSW community. ACYP advises Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander readers this report may contain images of people who may have passed away.



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background

Between November 2018 and January 2019, ACYP in partnership with the Coordinator-General for Refugee Resettlement in NSW and the Joint Party Working Group Refugee Youth Sub Group conducted a series of focus group style consultations with young refugees and asylum seekers. The purpose of the consultations was to hear from young people what supports and services are working well for young people arriving in NSW and what they think would better help them during the settlement process. These insights would then be used to inform the NSW Government's Refugee Youth Policy Initiative.

methodology

In total, 176 young people aged between 12 and 24 years took part in 36 focus group style consultations. They were residing in Sydney, South West Sydney, North West Sydney, Newcastle, Coffs Harbour and Wollongong.

Young people had come to Australia from a wide range of countries including Iraq, Syria, Iran, Nigeria, Afghanistan, Uganda, Myanmar, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Cambodia, India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Lebanon. Just under one-third of these young people had been in Australia for less than 12 months.

Young people were recruited through NSW secondary schools as well as from services that provide supports to refugee and asylum seeker young people (NAVITAS; SCARF; Asylum Seeker Centre).

Each focus group was conducted around the following questions:

- 1 **What were the things that helped you when you first arrived in Australia?**
- 2 **What things could have helped you even more when you first arrived in Australia?**



findings



1.

What were the things that helped you when you first arrived in Australia?

Young people's discussions about things that helped them upon their arrival in Australia could be grouped into two distinct themes. First they spoke about the good things offered in Australia that were not always available in their home countries (e.g. safety, education, transport, free health care). Second, they spoke about the supports and services that were provided to them and their families to assist with the settlement process.



Good things about being in Australia

Above all, young people reported that feeling safe was one of the best things about being in Australia.

“It’s a safe country, not like our countries, there is security in this country.”

“In our country there was a war going on but when we came to Australia everyone was friendly, everyone was helping each other....we felt really safe.”

“Where we’re coming from you wouldn’t really want to be outside at night, whereas in Australia it’s safe to be anywhere you want to go, any time, day or night.”

Linked to feelings of safety and security, some young people also spoke about having freedom in Australia with freedom of thought and religion being mentioned specifically.

“No one forces you to do anything.”

Education was also frequently raised as one of the best things about being in Australia. Young people across all focus groups spoke about the importance of a good education to open up opportunities for their futures.

“We had education in our country but it wasn’t quite as helpful because the teachers didn’t really care....in Australia the teachers actually push you to do your very best.”

“Education is so different, like there’s more things you do, more opportunities. We really didn’t do any excursions. Here it’s so different, there’s camps to go to, places to go, travelling and stuff like that.”

“More opportunities, chances to achieve your goals.”

Affordable public transport and health care were raised by all young people as a good aspect of living in Australia.

“There’s buses and it doesn’t cost that much and you can go out anywhere you want.”

“I think the positive thing about Australia is health care. In Africa you have to pay for health care, it’s so expensive. In Australia there’s more opportunities and different ways to pay for health care. It’s much better.”

Young people were also very excited about the advanced technology, including computers, iPhones, Wi-Fi and social media.



Supports and services that helped with settlement

Education

Young people across all groups reported that their schools had overall been very supportive during the settlement process. They spoke favourably about the wider variety of subjects available than in their home countries (e.g. woodwork and metalwork) and about the support received from most teachers and the homework centres.

“Teachers treat young people well and help with all problems, not just reading and writing. Like if we had any problem she would solve it with us and listen to us.”

“Teachers push students to do their best.”

“The homework centre is good, when the teacher gives you homework, the homework centre can help you with things you don’t know....they will sit with you.”

Young people also reported enjoying school excursions, something they had not experienced in their home countries.

Specialist programs and services

Young people in regional NSW reported that the NSW Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors (STARTTS) had been extremely helpful in assisting them to adjust to Australian life. They enjoyed attending the weekly youth groups and taking part in the social activities offered.

“Each Wednesday we go to the youth group and we can meet our friends from different schools...it really helps us to find new friends.”

“They teach us how to go swimming...she gave us free lessons.”

“Sometimes on the weekend and stuff she takes us to the beach or like to have a BBQ.”

“They do a lot of activities like last year we went to a camp they made us more confident about ourselves and it was really challenging, so it was like about how to face new life.”

Young asylum seekers reported that they had received great support through the Asylum Seeker Centre. Through the Centre they had found housing and assistance to attend school. The Centre also organised events to keep them occupied and took them on outing, such as to the zoo.

All young people spoke about the support received from settlement services, including SSI, NAVITAS and the MRCs. They reported that case managers helped with housing, getting into schools, taking them to doctors, Centrelink, translating for them, taking them shopping, teaching them how to use public transport and how to use the banks.

“They are providing furniture, they are helping the refugees to find a house, they are teaching people how to interact with the community.”

“SSI helped us a lot, like to find houses and they walked us around Coffs Harbour and stuff like that.”

“The people in NAVITAS welcome us, we feel safe in Australia, when we came to Australia NAVITAS help us to learn the rules in Aust. Each family has a person who speaks our language to help us to go to shopping and to the bank and school.”

“NAVITAS picked us up from the airport and dropped us directly in front of our houses with a case worker in it.”

“They took us shopping and taught us how to use the machines, how to look at the aisles and how much things are worth and where to find the price of it and how to take it to the counter.”

The older groups also reported that some services were very helpful in assisting them to apply for jobs. They taught young people how to write a resume and a cover letter for their job applications. The older groups were also enjoying the courses that have been made available to them, such as barista and make up courses.

For young people seeking asylum it is not as easy to find out how to access support services. They discussed that for many of them their first contact in Australia is with their lawyer. Some reported that their lawyer had been very helpful in telling them about the various organisations in NSW that provide support, although not all had had this experience.



Friendly community

Some young people in regional NSW reported that the friendly community was helpful in assisting them to settle in with people from the neighbourhood coming to their houses and welcoming them.

“When we moved to our new house our neighbor just came to our house and greet us...and then we became friendly and every time when we make new dishes we always go and give them and then they give us back something new.”



Transport

All groups discussed the benefits of affordable public transport in Australia, something they did not experience in their home countries. Students also enjoyed the free buses to get to and from school, reporting that in their home countries they had to walk to school.

“There’s buses and it doesn’t cost that much and you can go anywhere you want.”



Volunteering

Some young people, in particular those seeking asylum, reported that opportunities for volunteering had been extremely beneficial for their mental health and wellbeing. They described the experience as a way occupy their time and give back to the community and feel as though they are making a difference and are of benefit to people.

Some older young people reported that volunteering was also a good way for them to gain work experience to assist them to enter the work force.



2.

What things could have helped you even more when you first arrived in Australia?



When discussing things that could have assisted them even more when they first arrived, young people spoke about what was most confusing for them at the beginning and also what supports and services could have been helpful.



What was most confusing upon arrival in Australia

First and foremost, all young people reported that not knowing the English language was the most difficult and confusing aspect of arriving in Australia. They also reported finding the Australian accent particularly difficult to understand.

“Difficult to understand what they say because some of them they talk quite fast.”

“We found the accents of Australians really frightening almost because we have never experienced that sort of accent before.”

Traffic and road rules were other aspects reported by all young people as particularly confusing. Many were not used to traffic lights and pedestrian crossings.

“In our country we go on the right lane but here we go on the left lane.”

“What we found confusing was the traffic and pedestrian crossings because we didn't really have that, we just sort of made way when we could in our countries.”

Young people were also exposed to advanced technology that did not exist in many of their home countries.

“Technology and iPhones, any sort of phone really, we found that very confusing to adapt to as well because we never used such advanced technology before.”

Many also discussed having to adapt to different food and not being able to find their traditional foods.

“In our culture we sort of had all the cultural food whereas here there is plenty of different foods...and we had that confusion of are we allowed to eat this when we got here.”

Young people also reported being very confused with the different school system in Australia. They were not used to the school hours, different school periods, using computers and smartboards and moving from class to class for each lesson. Many reported wanting to be better prepared for this before arriving at school.

They also discussed the difficulties experienced with not knowing the way around their neighbourhoods and confusion as to why most shopping centres are closed by 5 or 6pm. They reported that once the centres are closed there is nothing to do and thought there should be more activities for young people, especially at night.



Supports and services that would be more helpful

Education



While young people spoke extremely favourably about the support received by their schools, there was some discussion about whether the Intensive English Centres were the most appropriate way to teach English to refugee and migrant students.

Some suggested that migrants should be put into classes with Australian students straight away to avoid them only socialising with other migrants in their own languages.

“The new migrant students should be placed with students who can speak good English in class, so they can communicate with them.”

“Mix normal students with IEC students. Like since we have IEC right now, I think we shouldn't have IEC we should just mix them all together and just provide more support and that will make it even better. Because basically in IEC you meet people from your background that can speak your language and then you will probably waste your time speaking in your own language than speaking the new language. It's going to be more difficult to learn the language.”

Others found the IEC classes helpful and some that were not offered this reported they would have like such a class.

There was also much discussion and frustration expressed around many newly arrived refugees being placed in lower grades without testing young people first to determine their abilities.

“When they put you in a lower class, I hate that, when you come to Australia they choose what's best for you but they never really gave you a test to see what strengths you have and what you need to improve in. They just think she doesn't know something, let's just put her in the class.”

“When I came I was supposed to be in Year 7 but I was put in Year 6.”

While the majority of young people described their teachers as supportive and helpful, there was some discussion around the need for some teachers to be more aware and understanding of newly arrived refugee students and take the time to explain each task in more simple ways.

“Teachers need to be more aware. I would not understand a single word on the board and he used to make me do all the work... he should know better, that I didn't know anything and he shouldn't have expected much from me.”

“I just wasted 7 weeks. I would just grab a book to make it look like I'm doing something to get the teacher out of my face.”

Linked to this, a few young people were frustrated at having to learn a foreign language at school at the same time they were trying to learn English.

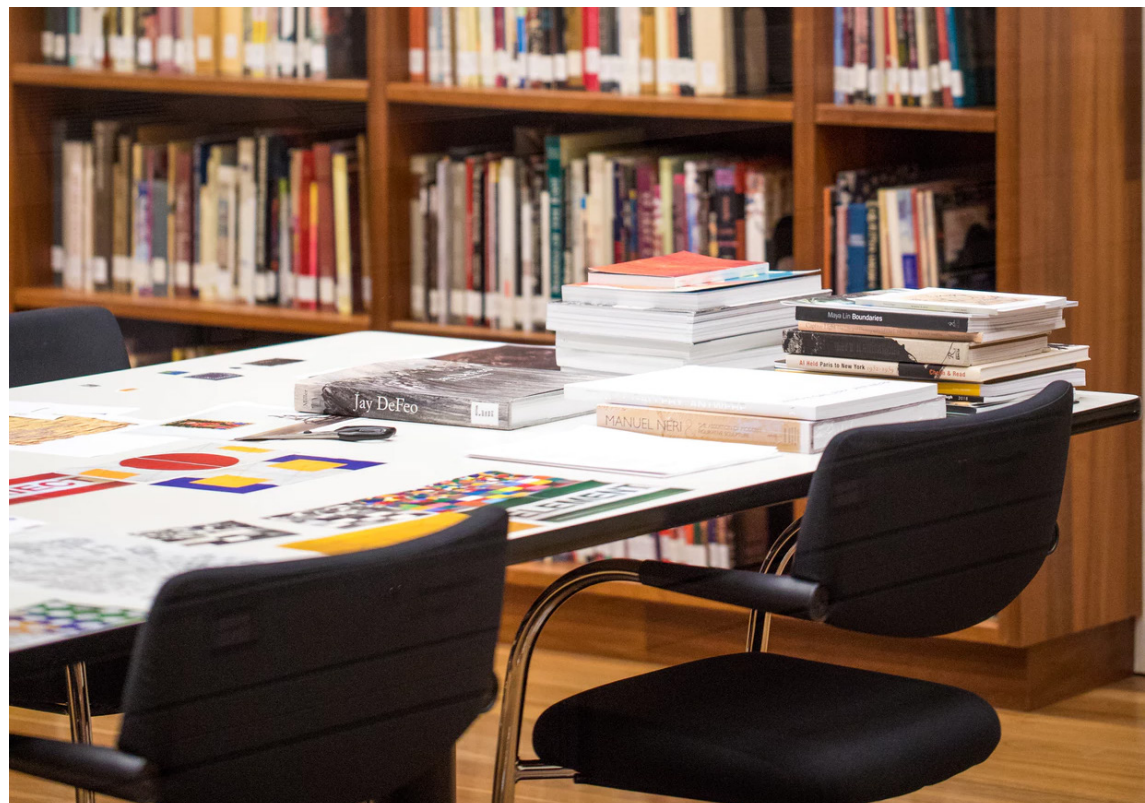
“When I came to high school I was trying to learn English and they were forcing me to learn German as well...it was super hard for me because I didn’t know English and had to learn another language.”

Some young people commented that schools could better explain their rules and expectations to newly arrived refugees.

“The behaviours and school rules, it was very different because at school (in Australia) you are actually punished or given a consequence, whereas in our country no one really cared.”

Some groups talked about not having their traditional games available at school. For example, one group of young people spoke about a game they used to play with a rope – because their school did not have the games they were used to they were sitting down and not being active.

Young asylum seekers face additional barriers to being able to access education immediately. Some reported not being able to enroll in university as they are considered international students while on their bridging visas and are unable to afford the fees. They also reported being unable to access scholarships that are available for refugee young people on humanitarian visas.





Racism

Some refugee and asylum seeker young people had experienced racism at school and in the community with people sometimes staring at them, avoiding them or taunting them. They discussed the negative effects this had on their mental health and wellbeing, often feeling alienated and depressed.

“We’ve faced some racism in school like they were looking at us in different ways like not the way they treat other students.”

“And even in class when we sit near them they look at us like something is strange and they go away from us.”

“They said go back to your country because we are Muslim.”

“Because I have dark skin they say I’m a terrorist.”

Young people had specific ideas for how to change this:

“Maybe tell them what’s happening in our country and why we are here so they don’t think we are in their country for something bad. Some of them maybe don’t like us because we are from countries with war in it. So maybe if they know more about our countries and what’s going on in it maybe they would understand us better.”

There was also some discussion that refugees can also be racist towards each other and that more supports were needed around educating refugee groups to be more understanding towards each other.

“The most annoying thing I don’t like is when another refugee is racist to another refugee... Sometimes refugees don’t accept certain races and they talk down to them and are rude to them. But at the end of the day we are all in the same situation.”



Settlement services



Young people reported that while they appreciated their caseworkers taking them to places like Centrelink and showing them hospitals and banks etc., they also want to be taken to socialise with other young people; such as through picnics and activities for newly arrived young refugees. Young people also wanted their case workers to show them where they could buy market food and general things required for day to day living, such as how to use the recycling bins, washing machines, dishwashers and vacuum cleaners.

There also appeared to be a lack of consistency among young refugees with regards to what supports were provided by settlement services. Some young people reported being provided with a great deal of information about Australia such as being taught rules such as crossing roads, cultural norms and how to behave. Others said they were just shown the basic things like where the school and hospital were and wanted to be shown around the city more. They also wanted more help to understand the rules and day to day things about being a young person in Australia e.g. manners and laws; cultural norms (e.g. when it is appropriate to touch a person and when not to); road rules; how to get to different places; suburbs that are dangerous and should be avoided; what to say if someone offers them drugs.

“Maybe they can give us a map of the city or they can show them the city more and places they can go on the weekend but like when we come here we get really bored on the weekend but we didn’t know any place to go.”

“When refugees don’t really get educated about manners and the laws in Australia and people think they’re idiots but they didn’t even teach us about it.”

“We didn’t know certain animals are accepted in Australia or cared for, like dogs.”

Confusion around mutual responsibility regarding Centrelink payments was raised consistently across the groups. Many young people expressed it was unfair that they and their family members were expected to find work so soon after arriving in Australia. Many young people were also of the misperception that this was an expectation placed only on refugees and not on Australians.

“They put us under pressure that you need job job job, look for a job and like for example I need to study to complete my study to like have a good job and a future and no they put you under pressure and say you must find a job. Like every month I should find 20 jobs, every month.”

“They call 3 times a week. For example my mum has to go for a job interview 3 times a week. For three hours or two hours a day. It’s a lot. She just has to go there and sit. It’s just wasting time.”

Some young people spoke about wanting clothes when they first arrive. They were told in their home country they would be given clothes but this never happened.

“I would like them to give us clothes when we arrive and shoes and a bicycle.”

This was conveyed by young people as especially important given the change from wearing their traditional clothing to shorts and T-shirts.

“The clothing changed. We wear different clothes back home, different culture.”

Some young people reported that clothing was a major aspect that separated them from Australian children. They discussed wanting to fit in by wearing the same clothes, although they were unable to afford them.

“Finding new clothes and trying to fit in with other kids, some kids are wearing Adidas and you’re wearing Big W and stuff.”

Young people felt that their case workers could help them more with finding clothes and telling them where they can buy cheaper clothing.

Some groups also suggested that in addition to showing them the basic things regarding day to day living, settlement services could also help young people to engage in their hobbies and interests.

“Ask for their interests, what they’re interested in, for their free time, maybe like playing basketball or drawing or they’re interested in arts, they like swimming.”

“Yeah, they want to do free time. To participate.”

There were also groups of older young people that asked for more assistance to understand taxation.

“I want to know why we need to pay tax and why we need a tax file number.”

Some groups also discussed the importance of Wi-Fi. For them, this is their way to access information. However, they reported not having access to Wi-Fi at home and not always knowing the places where to access free Wi-Fi, such as libraries and shopping centres. They suggested that settlement services could show all young

people the places near them where they can get free Wi-Fi.

Finally some young people expressed frustration at not receiving assistance from settlement services for a long enough period of time. They reported that they were left to their own devices before they felt ready.

“The service helped them only for one month. But they don’t know where to go or what they have to do. No one can tell them or help them because the service helped them only from the beginning, for one month.”



Health and mental health

Some groups reported feeling frustrated with the lack of availability of interpreters in hospitals. One young person reported that she had been forced to miss out on a lot of school as she had to help her mother by translating for her at doctors’ appointments.

One focus group conducted with a group of refugee students who were also deaf reported additional difficulties with there not always being AUSLAN interpreters available in hospitals.

Another group talked about young people not accessing mental health services due to feeling that they were only for people with serious conditions. They had reported feeling alienated when they first arrived and like they didn’t belong. Some had done a Google search for mental health services and thought that the services appeared too formal and closed off to them. Young people said that they would be more likely to seek help in a casual, informal environment.



Sport

All groups talked about wanting access to more sports. Like all young people, they viewed sport as something for them to do and a way to make new friends. However, many reported not being able to afford the membership fees. Young people said that it would be helpful if they could get some financial assistance to be able to engage in sporting activities.



Housing

Some groups of young people discussed the fact that refugees from the same backgrounds are often housed in the same communities and separated from other communities. Young people suggested that it would be better to spread them out so they can integrate with Australians.

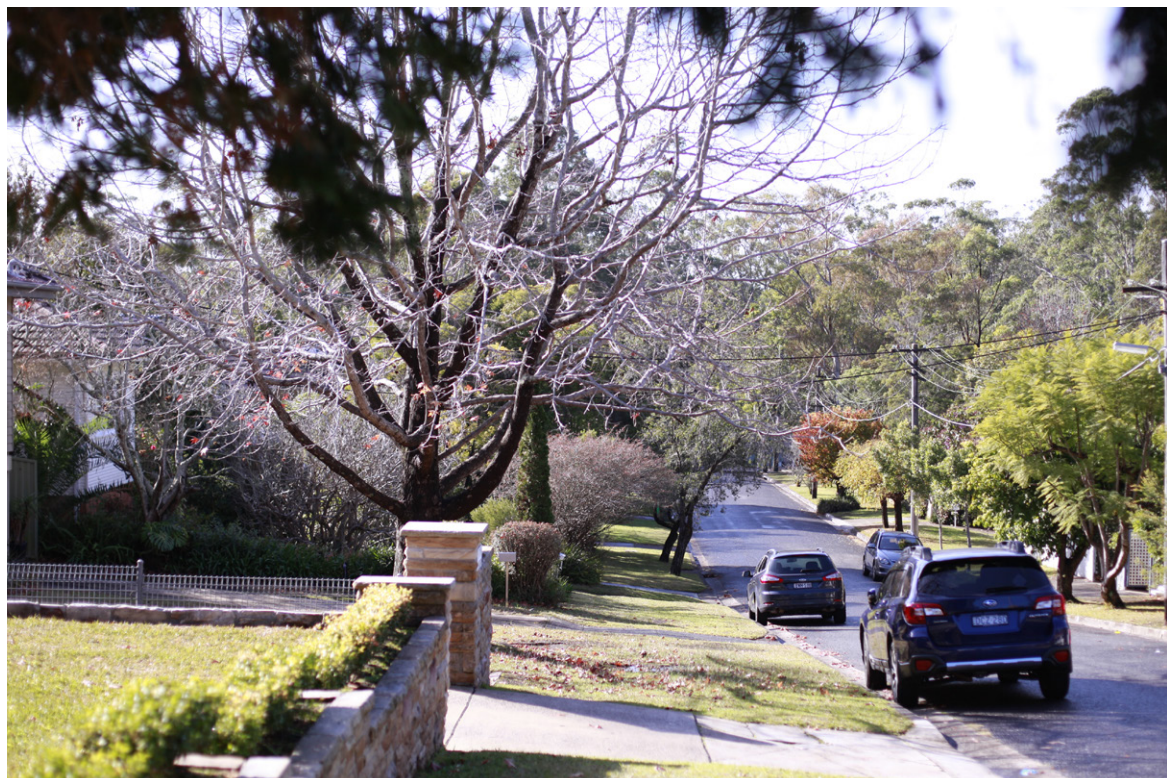


Driving

All young people reported wanting more assistance to get their driver's licenses. They expressed frustration at not being able to afford driving lessons.

“Getting your L’s – there’s no one there to help you.”

“Problem with not enough transport and parents don’t have a license, for example I had to drive my sister to hospital but I only had learners permit and I got a \$60 fine and the license suspension.”





Activities with other young people

Young refugees that were in high school expressed a desire for more opportunities to be with other young people from a variety of backgrounds both inside and outside of school and to not only engage in activities with young people from refugee backgrounds.

Young refugees that were above school age expressed a desire to have more events that were just for young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds to be together and meet each other.

Some young people reported wanting more youth programs to be available in the school holidays.

“Like a youth program, especially in school holidays because I don’t think, especially for refugee kids, they don’t go away on holidays. And the school holidays is one of the most important thing to have youth programs around here to do activities like kayaking, camping, a walk around or just any sort of activity.”

One group of young people talked about arriving in Australia during a two week school holiday period. They discussed that it would have been good to have organised activities during that time as they did nothing while waiting for school to start.



Employment

Nearly all groups reported the difficulties they had experienced in finding jobs. While this is typically an issue raised by all young people living in NSW, young refugees reported the additional difficulties of having to apply online and of employers wanting young people to have local experience.

“I’m just looking for work, like weekend, so I went to Big W and everywhere and Kmart and asked about a job and they said you have to do like online and I said I don’t know how to do online and so I just searched it and I didn’t find, and managers want like two years local experience.”

Young people asked for more assistance from services to find jobs and also how to perform the jobs. They felt that this help would be best provided by someone from a similar background to them.

“Some mentors from the same background to show how to, to show you the steps and help you with some things.”

Some also raised the frustration at being paid fortnightly and wanted to be told this in advance so they were prepared.

Another issue regarding employment raised by all older groups was the expectation to work and study at the same time. As mentioned earlier, many were of the belief that this expectation was only placed on young people from refugee backgrounds and not young Australians. It was raised across all focus groups that they want to be able to finish learning English and other studies before being expected to find work.

“They say you must study and work.”

“I want to complete my study, I have goals in my life but I want to be learning more English and then be looking for a job.”

“We want to finish study first, after that we want a job.”

Some school aged young people also reported that it was difficult for them to get a job as they spend all day at school and then have homework. This was stressful for them as they needed to work to help support the family. Some groups suggested that the school day should be shorter so they would have more time to work in a job.



concluding comments

Many of the issues raised by young refugees in the consultations were the same as those raised by all young people in NSW. These include difficulty gaining employment, wanting more life skills education like how to pay taxes, difficulties in obtaining a driver's license, reluctance to seek mental health support and wanting more activities to do, especially at night. Young refugees, however, have the additional pressures and demands of arriving in a new country; adapting to a new culture; learning a new language; starting a new school; having to form new friendships and helping to support their families. The young people that took part in these consultations have suggested several avenues for services and communities to assist with these transitions and settlement journeys.







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