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# ***Dispersed Belongings***

***A participatory arts-based study of experiences of resettled refugee young people in regional cities in Australia and the United Kingdom***

## **Findings Report for Project Partners**

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Clockwise from top left: *P.P.'s Journey of Belonging*, Pan; *We Will be Back* (detail), Tariq; *Nests of Belonging*, Htoo Gay, Lwe Pree, NC, Pan; *Nostalgia for Home* (detail), Asaad

*Dispersed Belongings* is a partnership between Durham University and Bendigo Community Health Service, City of Greater Bendigo Arts and Culture, Gateshead Council, GemArts, Karen Organisation of Bendigo and Victoria University's Centre for Cultural Diversity and Wellbeing. It is funded through the Marie Skłodowska-Curie actions/Durham University COFUND scheme, the Gateshead Council Social Isolation Innovation Fund, and the Durham University ESRC IAA Mentoring Impact Scheme, with in-kind support from BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art, Morley's Emporium, and Shipley Art Gallery.



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## 1. Introduction

This report presents a summary of findings from the *Dispersed Belongings* study. This participatory arts-based study was conducted in 2016-17 in partnership with local governments, organisations, artists, and refugee-background young people in Gateshead, North East England, and Bendigo, Central Victoria, Australia.

This report draws together data from both field sites in order to:

- Identify the key places, communities, activities, and institutions through which refugee young people negotiate (non)belonging in resettlement
- Highlight the common experiences, opportunities and challenges of (non)belonging in these spheres
- Examine the potential of participatory arts-based interventions for exploring, communicating and supporting belonging among resettled refugee young people

It additionally attends to the ways in which youth resettlement in regional cities may differ from superdiverse metropolitan settings.

The report is intended as a resource for project partners – and other local governments and organisations – to support policy and practice in relation to refugee youth resettlement, participatory arts, and belonging.

## 2. Key findings

### 2.1 Refugee youth (non)belonging

- Resettled refugee **young people negotiate (non)belonging across many communities, places, activities and institutions** – local, national and inter/transnational – often facing conflicting expectations and experiences.
- Common spheres of (non)belonging include:
  - **Family**
  - **Ethnic community and culture**
  - **Religion**
  - **Friendship and recreation**
  - **Local community and place**
  - **Education and employment**
  - **Homeland and countries of asylum**
  - **Resettlement country**
- Both the spheres of (non)belonging and young people's relation to them **change over time**, including in response to duration of settlement.
- **Safety, freedom and respect** are among the key conditions for establishing belonging in the resettlement location
- Young people are generally **positive about their resettlement experience** and **optimistic about the future**.
- **Local language literacy is overwhelmingly experienced as the most significant barrier to belonging** in resettlement contexts.
- **Young people are often at the forefront of refugee-local relations** and carry significant responsibilities and opportunities for transforming places, communities and institutions.
- **Discrimination and exclusion are common**, particularly in their more subtle 'everyday' forms, which young people often struggle to address effectively.
- **Local (non)belonging in resettlement is affected by non-local forces**, such as situations in countries of origin and asylum, and national policies and discourses.

- **Rural and regional settings** can offer particular opportunities and challenges, including:
  - Being **valued as quiet, small and safe**
  - Fostering a **positive relation to the natural environment**
  - Presenting practical and financial **barriers to mobility** – within and beyond the locality
  - Comprising communities and institutions **less experienced in, and less prepared for, accepting and accommodating refugee-background young people**, and diverse communities more generally

## 2.2 Participatory arts and belonging

- **Collaboration** between research, arts, resettlement and ethnic organisations brings together complementary resources, knowledge and networks to support resettled young people, and fosters knowledge exchange within and beyond the project.
- A **trusting, inclusive environment** is foundational to all aspects of participatory arts projects.
- Art and music – in all their forms/genres – provide **innovative, affective and embodied modes of exploring and communicating (non)belonging**.
- **Flexibility** across all aspects of the project – including scheduling, art forms, modes of engagement, and subject matter – supports youth participation and creates space for diverse and unanticipated outcomes.
- Participatory arts projects can **challenge and transform – but also at times reinforce – existing relations of (non)belonging** outside of the project.
- Participatory arts projects offer particular benefits for **supporting belonging among recently-arrived young people and emerging communities**.
- **Fostering meaningful consent and genuine youth ownership is an educative, iterative process** that must be embedded throughout the project.
- Navigating **language barriers** – including if and how to use interpreters – requires careful evaluation of opportunities and challenges.
- Creating and presenting art and music helps **young people gain recognition as active agents** – as artists, critical thinkers, representatives of their communities, and leaders.
- **Audience matters**. Co-ethnic/local and supportive/critical audiences for arts outcomes offer different risks and opportunities for young people.

## 3. Background

Resettlement is one of United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees' (UNHCR) three durable solutions to forced displacement (along with voluntary repatriation and local integration). It involves 'the transfer of refugees from an asylum country to another State that has agreed to admit them and ultimately grant them permanent settlement.' (UNHCR 2018).

### 3.1 Regional refugee resettlement

Overwhelmingly, refugees are resettled in superdiverse metropolitan centres with established multicultural and refugee services and communities that can support settlement and integration.

Regional towns and cities are, however, playing an increasing role in settling refugees in receiving countries across Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand. Rationales and objectives of regional resettlement differ between countries and include spreading the perceived financial and social burden, taking advantage of affordable housing stock, and addressing rural and regional population decline and labour needs.

The increasing settlement of refugees in regional locations presents new opportunities and challenges – both for refugees and for host communities (Wilding & Nunn 2018). Yet refugee resettlement research has emerged almost exclusively from superdiverse metropolitan locations. It is not clear to what extent this research is applicable to regional resettlement contexts.

While a clear distinction between metropolitan and regional settings cannot be easily drawn, for the purposes of this study, ‘regional’ relates to cities and towns that are both geographically and discursively distinct from the major metropolitan centres of the nation.

### **3.2 Refugee young people**

Resettlement schemes generally focus on families and women at risk. They therefore include significant numbers of children and young people. Following the UNESCO definition, youth here refers to those aged 15 to 24 years.

Young people face opportunities and challenges in resettlement that differ from those of adults. Their engagement with mainstream education and propensity to more quickly adapt to new linguistic and sociocultural contexts often places them at the forefront of refugee-local relations. Further, those arriving in adolescence must simultaneously navigate the transition to a new country and sociocultural context and their transition into adulthood.

Young people are widely regarded as offering both the brightest possibilities and the biggest risks to resettled refugee groups and the communities in which they settle. It is critical that we understand their experiences.

### **3.3 (Non)Belonging**

Belonging is a dynamic process of establishing, maintaining and transforming relations with and attachments to people, places, activities and institutions. It is most accurately conceptualised as *(non)belonging*, encapsulating a spectrum of positive and negative relations that vary in intensity across time and context.

An important human need and desire (Baumeister and Leary 1995), belonging takes on particular significance in refugee resettlement, providing the formal, practical, emotional and sociocultural foundations upon which young people build their futures.

(Non)belonging is a two-way process of seeking (or rejecting) and granting (or refusing), mediated by the desires and resources of individuals and by the politics of (non)belonging in any given sphere (community, place, activity, institution). In resettlement, belonging is not solely the work of refugees. It relies on host communities providing positive conditions for, and removing barriers to, belonging.

Key aspects include:

- Motivation: Why does a person seek to not/belong (for example, out of desire, necessity)?
- Resources: What resources does a person have that mediate their capacity to belong (e.g. social/economic/cultural/other capital)?
- Politics: How is (non)belonging in a sphere determined, and by who? How easy is it to be accepted? How accommodating is the sphere to alternative ways of being and doing?
- Effects: What are the practical and emotional effects of (non)belonging in a sphere?

Young people in general experience dynamic relations of (non)belonging as they navigate the intensive period of identity formation that is part of the transition to adulthood. For refugee-background young people, this is further complicated by the simultaneous challenges of adapting to a new home, negotiating multiple – at times conflicting – relations and attachments, and dealing with the ongoing effects of refugee experiences.

Resettled young people experience (non)belonging across many spheres including family, friendship, school, nation, and diaspora. They may feel a strong sense of belonging in one sphere, and of non-belonging in another.

Moreover, (non)belonging in one sphere can affect relations in other spheres. For example, belonging to a religious group may positively or negatively affect belonging in a local community.

Depending on the sphere, a person may not/belong in a variety of (often simultaneous) ways:

- Formal (e.g. citizenship, sports club membership, enrolment in school)
- Practical/substantive (e.g. residing in a neighbourhood, participating in an activity or group)
- Emotional/affective (e.g. feelings of comfort, pride, love – or fear, dislike, etc.)
- Inherited/historical (e.g. family, ancestral homeland, ethnic group)
- Sociocultural (e.g. sharing the habitus, practices, and/or beliefs of an ethnic group or a social class)

Cumulatively, these multiple factors inform a person's 'sense' of (non)belonging in a sphere.

While the concept of integration is most commonly used to understand refugee settlement, integration is only focused on (non)belonging in the settlement country, and on more practical and formal aspects of settlement. A focus on (non)belonging sheds light on relations and attachments beyond the nation, in homelands and diasporas, and to emotional and sociocultural dimensions of the settlement experience. It therefore provides a more nuanced picture of refugee youth resettlement.

### **3.4 Participatory arts**

Participatory arts approaches are widely used in both research and community contexts to creatively engage with young people. They commonly involve artists, organisations and/or researchers with both artistic and community development/youth work skills working with young people to produce and present art works and performances.

Participatory arts programmes take a range of forms, varying in relation to art forms used, the degree of autonomy young people have over the form and content of the works produced, and the relative emphasis placed on processes and outcomes.

Often focused on disadvantaged communities with poor arts access, participatory arts activities offer a range of potential benefits for young people, including:

- Gaining creative skills
- Building personal capacities, including confidence, leadership skills, teamwork
- Having fun
- Sharing ideas and experiences with each other and with audiences

In addition, participatory arts programmes often pursue social justice agendas such as addressing social issues, representing under-represented groups, and highlighting youth perspectives (GemArts 2018).

In research contexts, participatory arts-based approaches are additionally valued for their capacity to engage young people as co-researchers and to generate and communicate innovative, affective and embodied knowledge and understandings (Nunn 2017).

## **4. Project overview**

Dispersed Belongings was conducted in 2016-2017. It utilised a participatory arts-based approach to explore experiences of (non)belonging among resettled refugee young people in regional resettlement locations in Australia and the United Kingdom.

### **4.1 Aims**

The project had the following aims:

- To produce new understandings about the experiences of refugee young people in regional resettlement locations.

- To extend theories and understandings of local belonging within broader processes of multi-scalar and intersectional belonging.
- To evaluate the effectiveness of participatory arts-based approaches for reflecting, communicating and supporting belonging.
- To facilitate communication of the experiences of refugee-background young people to communities, service providers and policy makers via the creation and presentation of artworks.
- To support youth artist-researchers and artist mentors in developing new skills and competencies.

## 4.2 Field sites and refugee groups

This study was based in two non-traditional regional resettlement locations in Australia and the United Kingdom.

**Australia** takes approximately 13,500 refugees annually through its offshore humanitarian resettlement programme. Most settle in metropolitan areas with histories of hosting refugees and migrants.

**Bendigo** is a small city in central Victoria, South East Australia. The local government area of City of Greater Bendigo has a population of approximately 114,000 (2017). People born overseas comprise 14% of the local population, far below the national average of 33% (2016).

Fieldwork in Bendigo was conducted with **ethnic Karen young people**, members of the largest refugee community in the region. Originally from Burma<sup>1</sup>, the Karen in Bendigo have been resettled from camps on the Thai Burma border. In 2016 Karen people in Bendigo numbered almost 900.

**The United Kingdom**, while not a major participant in the UNHCR resettlement scheme, has periodically resettled significant numbers of refugees in response to humanitarian crises. Between 2015 and 2020 the UK is settling 20,000 Syrians and Kurdish Syrians through the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Programme.

**Gateshead** is a town and local government area in North East England, located across the river from the city of Newcastle Upon Tyne. It has an estimated population of almost 202,000, 3.7% of whom are Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic, compared to 14% across England and Wales.

Fieldwork in Gateshead was conducted with **Syrian and Kurdish Syrian young people** who have been resettled from Lebanon, Egypt and Turkey as part of the U.K. Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Programme. In 2017 there were just over 200 Syrians and Kurdish Syrians living in Gateshead, with a total of 550 pledged to be resettled by 2020.

## 4.3 Youth artist-researchers

Twenty-four 15-24-year-old refugee-background young people participated in the study as artist-researchers. They were primarily recruited through partner organisations, with some subsequent additions through youth networks.<sup>2</sup>

Eight Karen young people (5 female, 3 male) commenced the study in Bendigo, with five (3 female, 2 male) participating the final presentation event. Youth artist-researchers had lived in Australia for between one and nine years, arriving aged between 7 and 20 years.

Sixteen Syrian and Kurdish Syrian young people (4 female, 12 male; 4 Kurdish) commenced the study, with fourteen participating in the final presentation event. They had lived in Gateshead for between three and fifteen months, arriving aged 14 to 24 years.

<sup>1</sup>While Burma was officially renamed Myanmar in 1989, the young people and their community continue to use its former name, Burma.

<sup>2</sup>This study is based on deep engagement with a small number of referred/self-selected young people. Findings cannot be taken as representative of ethnic groups/localities/resettled refugee youth more generally.



## 4.4 Approach

The project was a collaboration between the researcher, local governments and arts, ethnic and resettlement organisations, 24 refugee-background young people, and seven community artists.

The approach centred on a participatory arts project in which young people were mentored by, and in some cases collaborated with, local artists to produce works exploring their sense of (non)belonging – locally and beyond.<sup>3</sup> Mentorship groups ranged in size from 1:1 to 1:7 depending on youth interest and artist approach. Young people participated in 8-12 arts/music sessions over approximately three months.

The participatory arts component of the study was augmented by

- In-depth semi-structured interviews with young people (x24), conducted prior to and following the arts component of the study
- Participatory evaluation activities, including, in Bendigo, a participatory video evaluation
- Ethnographic observation
- Artist mentor diaries
- Semi-structured interviews with artist mentors (x7) and project partners (x 5)

In Gateshead, research was conducted with support from interpreters.

This participatory arts-based approach was designed to explore, communicate and support belonging among youth artist-researchers.

## 5. Spheres of (non)belonging

### 5.1 Family

Family can play an important role in refugee youth resettlement, providing a sphere of (non)belonging that, in turn, supports or impedes young people in establishing belonging in wider communities, places, activities and institutions (Correa-Velez et. al 2010). Most young people in this study resettled with one or both parents and at least some siblings. Family, both local and diasporic, was widely identified as an important source of safety and comfort and functioned as a key sphere of belonging.

#### ***Responsibilities and expectations***

Refugee-background young people often take on significant family responsibilities in resettlement. This can include caring for older family members and taking the lead in engagement with the wider community, such as shopping, liaising with service providers, and translating for appointments.

*[My parents] are old. They don't know how to buy what they need... They don't speak English and everything that you need here and you don't have, you must speak English. (Syrian male, Gateshead)*

Additionally, in some families, young people embody family hopes for a better future, and particularly socioeconomic mobility. This can at times be experienced as pressure to succeed.

*I want to become a nurse, so I try really hard getting there. And, I don't want to work in a hard place, like my parents did in Thailand. Yes, I want my future to be good. (Karen female, Bendigo)*

*I feel like my brother is going to be successful in his life. Me too. And then we can pay back our mum for what she did for us. I'm also planning to help my grandparents, because they live in a miserable condition now and I would love to help them. (Syrian female, Gateshead)*

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<sup>3</sup> While the initial focus of the study was on local belonging, the young people expanded this through their practice to engage with other spheres of (non)belonging.

### ***Cultural maintenance and change***

Family is often the primary sphere through which young people experience cultural belonging, and also confront its limits. This takes on particular importance in later settlement as young people begin to adapt to the local sociocultural environment.

*...sometimes I would forget my culture and try to fit in with my friends. I just have to be reminded about my family and my past... Every night my mum would tell me to light up the candles because it was part of the Buddhism thing and then pray. And to celebrate stuff like Karen New Year and the Water Festival and the Wrist Tying Festival... (Karen female, Bendigo)*

### ***Transnational relations***

While resettlement often enables families to migrate as complete nuclear units, it frequently involves separation from adult siblings and extended family. In many cases these relatives continue to provide an important source of belonging, playing a role in daily life via telephone and information and communication technologies (ICTs).

Especially where family members remain in precarious situations in countries of origin or asylum, young people can experience high levels of fear for their safety and wellbeing, which can inhibit their ability to establish belonging in local communities and activities.

*We are so exhausted psychologically... We are all thinking about our brothers who are in Lebanon and in Syria. We don't know what's going on with them. (Syrian male, Gateshead)*

One way in which young people and their families seek to secure the safety of loved ones is through family reunion in the resettlement country. While many Karen young people have been successfully reunited with family members – and indeed several young people in this study arrived in Australia via this process – it is as yet unclear whether Syrian young people will experience success in the UK context.

*I love [my grandfather] and I lived with him when I was in Lebanon. He was very close to me. When I talk with him now... he start[s] crying, so I always tell him "don't worry, my grandfather. I have done your application form for reunion and you'll be with us soon". (Syrian male, Gateshead)*

A sense of isolation from family members is further compounded for Syrian young people by travel restrictions that prevent them from visiting family members in other European locations.

## **5.2 Ethnic community and culture**

Community and culture are intertwined spheres of (non)belonging. Their importance is heightened for refugees, for whom community and culture have often been undermined prior to and during displacement.

The nature of ethnic community and cultural maintenance and change in each setting is strongly informed by communities' pre-settlement experiences, as well as the duration of settlement. The Karen, having lived in refugee camps for more than a generation, are well-practiced in community and cultural maintenance. Further, in the ten years since resettlement began in Bendigo, they have had time to establish community organisations and events. In contrast, Syrians/Kurdish Syrians are only recently displaced and were dispersed across multiple countries before being resettled. They are comparatively new to the processes and politics of maintaining culture and community in exile.

### ***Ethnic community***

As small and emerging communities, both the Karen in Bendigo and Syrians/Kurdish Syrians in Gateshead are dynamic – in make-up, values, practices, self-representation and more. This compounds prior differences across religion, ethnicity, class, and life stage. This is a complex terrain for negotiating (non)belonging in which young people must navigate what is acceptable, desirable and possible.

Ethnic community can be a valuable resource for refugee young people, providing initial resettlement information and advice, as well ongoing practical and emotional support.

*...there are other Syrian families who helped us. ...They have shown us where is the Halal shops, where is the cheapest place to buy from, the stores that you could go and buy your stuff that you need. (Syrian male, Gateshead)*

For some, ethnic community evokes a sense of belonging, providing comfort and commonality.

*I choose to be with Karen people because they just understand me more (Karen female, Bendigo)*

However, geographic distance can impede relationships – especially for young people who have limited mobility (parents who don't drive; infrequent or expensive public transport).

*From primary school to high school...I didn't really have much contact with the Karen people because there's no other Karen in [my neighbourhood], and I don't really go out to Bendigo much. The only time I see them is probably at New Year's. (Karen female, Bendigo)*

On the other hand, the closeness of the community can lead some young people to feel surveilled by community members, including in relation to norms and practices of gender and religion.

*...if someone sees you touch [a girl], he's going to speak to another person, right. He's going to say that you hugged her. The other person is going to tell the other, other person that you hugged her and kissed her. ...Then it gets bigger and bigger and bigger, and you're going to get in trouble. (Syrian male, Gateshead)*

Most young people in the study participate in some form of community activity, such as attending informal drop-in sessions or major celebrations, and participating in community organisations and events.

Some young people have a strong desire and commitment to contributing to their community in voluntary and/or paid capacities. In Bendigo, this includes providing informal support to community members, participating in ethnic organisations and working for settlement service providers.

*...there's a lot of elderly leaders in the community. Their English skills are a bit low, so they are not comfortable, not confident enough to communicate with...the services, things like that. So, if we don't support that, no one will. So, that's why I want to support the community. That's what drives me every day to support the Karen community. (Karen male, Bendigo)*

Young people also participate in translocal ethnic communities with which they also – digitally and through visits – maintain relations of support and solidarity and share beliefs and practices. This can include fundraising for community members in need (for example in refugee camps), communicating with friends and family, consuming diasporic media, and visiting community members in other resettlement locations. For the Karen community, there are also events such as football tournaments between Karen teams across the state.

## **Culture**

Young people's community-based activities often contribute to cultural maintenance. For Karen young people this includes organising, emceeing and performing dance and music at traditional celebrations. In these ways, young people play an important role in representing their culture and community.

*It's our culture, so we must not forget. So, we must celebrate every year too. (Karen female, Bendigo)*

In addition to community activities, young people in this study maintain cultural belonging through language, food, clothing, and traditional practices, and through consuming cultural production such as films and music.

At the same time, many young people – and especially those who have lived for longer in the resettlement country – are negotiating multiple cultural realms and exploring new, hybrid forms of cultural expression and belonging.

*...it's good to maintain the cultural opinions and ideas from home, but also to...have an open mind that we can use the old traditional way, we can adapt to different ways of life here... (Karen male, Bendigo)*

This reflects the critical role that young people play in emerging communities: in providing support, mediating relations with the wider community, and transforming relations and practices in response to the resettlement context.

### 5.3 Religion

Religion can provide an important source of continuity for refugees in the context of significant changes wrought through forced migration (McMichael 2002). Most young people in the study observe a religion – though with differing levels of engagement and commitment.

#### **Faith**

Throughout the study, personal faith emerged in a number of ways, including through embodied practices of wearing hijab or a cross, eating halal food, and observing Ramadan. It also emerged in several interview accounts through discussion of the role of God in determining one's journey, and of faith in guiding one's actions.

*I'm open about religion, I don't really mind. It's just that religion helps keep someone straight in line and walk the right path. And that's all I care about, walking the straight path' (Karen female, Bendigo)*

*When I arrived at the airport...it seemed to me that God has opened a door to us... Especially for me, who has been injured...' (Kurdish Syrian male, Gateshead)*

**My Life (song)**  
(Translated from Karen)

Remember my life in the past  
Like a poor person  
I think back, my life experience, so much hardship  
I've lived in the jungle

I've fled  
Step by step, can I escape and be safe?  
I thank God 'Hallelujah' you have risen up my life  
If I check or counting my life

CHORUS  
Hallelujah, praise the Lord, for taking over my life  
And my life has become new  
I think my life is a dream  
Everything God is planning for me

I'm joyous, happy because I'm getting back to peaceful  
I'm feeling care in my life  
I really enjoy and feel full in my life  
I can see many things in my new place now

There is travel, house, livelihood, etc.  
Everything is different for me  
I feeling in my life

REPEAT CHORUS

*My Life, Wah Doh, with Ruth Kennedy*

## **Community**

For many, and particularly for Karen Buddhist young people, religion is an important source of community. Religious activities and events, as well as religiously affiliated organisations such as youth groups, provide opportunities to gather, gain and offer support, and to build and maintain friendships and networks. Common activities include music and dance, fundraising, religious celebrations, and worship.

Translocal religious communities are also maintained, including through visits by religious leaders and fundraising for religious charities in Thai refugee camps.

However, religious communities can also engage in practices of exclusion, surveillance, and discipline. Notably, in the context of negotiations of religion and culture among regionally, ethnically, and socioeconomically diverse Syrians and Kurdish Syrians in Gateshead, young people – and especially young women – can feel themselves surveilled in relation to performances of piety, such as wearing hijab.

## **Social identity**

Religious identity mediates young people's relations with non-co-religious community members both within and beyond ethnic groups in positive and negative ways.

Notably, Syrian young people have experienced hostility and exclusion on account of their religion (see 'Local community and place').

*They think that Islam is terrorism* (Syrian male, Gateshead)

In contrast, Christian Karen of varying denominations are welcomed into Bendigo's religious communities. Indeed, they are often already affiliated with local churches through earlier settlers, as well as the presence of religious aid organisations in refugee camps.

Reflecting historical hierarchical and political relations in Burma and the border camps, religion can be a source of division within the Karen community. Most acutely, several young people have experienced family tensions caused by Christian conversions – and pressures to convert – within Buddhist families.

*Once my brother told me to become Christian, and I say I couldn't do it... So my brother was mad at me and said that if you don't want to be siblings then we can't be siblings anymore* (Karen female, Bendigo)

At the same time there were accounts of people bridging religious difference, particularly in relations with local communities.

*There was a neighbour who is Shia...but he was so nice. He used to take us by bus and show us where to go* (Syrian male, Gateshead)

*Our sponsor was Catholic...but she understood our religion.* (Karen female, Bendigo)

## **5.4 Friendship and recreation**

Friendship and recreation are key spheres of (non)belonging in which refugee-background young people can play an active role in selecting their own communities and activities. They can offer respite from more constrained and challenging spheres of (non)belonging (such as school and ethnic community), provide opportunities for identity negotiation, and help alleviate the isolation often experienced in early resettlement. In addition to providing connections in the settlement location, friends and recreation can also be important sources of continuity with past practices and relations of belonging.

### **Friendship**

Friends are an important community of belonging for all young people. For refugee-background young people they can be a key source of support and fun as they navigate their new sociocultural environment.

### *Co-ethnic friendship*

Many young people in the study had strong networks of co-ethnic friends in their settlement location. Some young people feel that it is easier to belong with those from the same background, who share language, culture, and refugee experiences.

*With Syrians, there's no issue because we're all Syrians and we have the same problems so we're all friends. It's easy to build friendships with Syrians.* (Syrian male, Gateshead)

Common spheres in which friendships are established and maintained include family networks, education settings, community and religious activities, local neighbourhoods, and online. Online communication is particularly important for several Syrian young women who are unable to meet regularly in person.

*I like to spend most of my time with [my friend] because I love her and she loves me. Even now, we communicate with WhatsApp most of our time.* (Syrian female, Gateshead)

Many young people also use social media to form and maintain friendships across the diaspora – in homelands, countries of asylum and other resettlement locations.

*When I'm lonely, [I can] be happy because I know how to use the internet. I talk to friends on Facebook.* (Karen male, Bendigo)

Though others have lost contact or have chosen to let friendships go.

*We arrived at the same time as other Syrian families who have girls who are the same age as me. So I have built a relationship with those girls ...You could say that I have filled the gap that has been caused by missing my friends over there in Lebanon.* (Syrian female, Gateshead)

While many young people experience loneliness in early resettlement, there is also awareness that building new friendships takes time.

*I was upset about missing my friend in camp, living there. Then, when I came here, I don't have any friends to hang out and I couldn't speak English and it is impossible.* (Karen female, Bendigo)

*As a young man I mostly miss my life and friends in Egypt, but I think that everything at the start is very hard and things get easier over time.* (Syrian male, Gateshead)



*Friendship, Nivine & Nina*

### *Cross-ethnic friendship*

In early settlement, differences in language, culture and experience can impede cross-ethnic friendship formation.

*It was hard to make friends because we didn't know the language and other people didn't know what our culture was. (Karen female, Bendigo)*

Nonetheless, over time, friendships emerge between more established refugee youth and young people from long-term local and other migrant and refugee communities, often based on shared interests. Education and employment settings, sporting activities, and local neighbourhoods are the most common sites of cross-ethnic friendship formation.

*[With my school friends] I feel like our personalities match each other's, and the interests that we have... The types of TV shows that we watch, and boys, and the food that we eat. (Karen female, Bendigo)*

In many cases, however, these friendships do not transcend the boundaries of the context in which they are formed.

*[If] he thinks, I will go with [you] or I will go with my other friend, he'll go with his old friend. And that's what I will do. If I will go with my same language friend or I will go with my English friend, I will go with my same language friend. (Syrian male, Gateshead)*

However, where these cross-ethnic friendships become deep and sustained they can provide valuable opportunities for cultural exchange. In Bendigo, this has even included Anglo-Australian young people performing traditional Karen dances at community events alongside their Karen friends.

For those who establish friendships with local peers, new challenges emerge when they feel torn between two social groups.

*I like hanging out with both, but with my Karen friends... I felt like I wanted to help them, so it was really hard for me to leave them. I wanted them to have friends out of their social group because they're not used to that... I tried to pull both groups as one, and then they hung out with each other a couple of times and got used to it. (Karen female, Bendigo)*

Young people who are more established, literate and confident often take on this role of facilitating belonging across difference. While many enjoy this role as what Amanda Wise's (2009) terms 'transversal enablers', it does require a significant amount of practical and emotional labour.

Resettlement can also foster opportunities for friendship formation across ethnic groups that may not necessarily socialise together in their shared country of origin (such as Syrians/Kurdish Syrians, Karen/Karenni).

While young people attending ESOL programmes often build friendships with other migrant-background young people, they have few opportunities to build relationships with long-term local young people, impeding a wider sense of local belonging.

### **Recreation**

Recreational activities provide opportunities for resettled young people to pursue their individual interests and talents and to spend time with friends. Activities may be structured or unstructured, individual or collective. For the young people in this study, they include media and digital engagement, sport, creative activities, and hanging out.

There are, however, barriers. Particularly in early settlement, before strong connections to community, place and activities are established, young people can be quite isolated.

*In the first five months I spent all my time at home. So I don't go anywhere unless a friend of mine phones me and ask me to come and I might go to him. (Syrian male, Gateshead)*

Beyond early settlement, young people can face challenges accessing recreational programmes and sites due to limited literacy, local knowledge, mobility, and resources, as well as limits to mainstream organisations' awareness of how to effectively engage and support refugee-background youth participation.

*So if you don't know where to look then you won't know what is really going on... And the language they use in the advertisement and the brochure...it's always going to be a challenge for the community, because they don't know where to start from... (Karen male, Bendigo)*

### *Hanging out*

Most young people in the study engage in the common adolescent activity of 'hanging out' with friends and family. This includes spending time in shopping precincts and centres, eating out, visiting parks, beaches, and other natural environments, going to people's houses, and walking and cycling around neighbourhoods.

*Lake Weeroona. I think that's one of the best spots to hang out, go for a walk, or ride a bike, or walk your dog. We all tend to go, have a chat, get a few friends. If we're hungry we go to a restaurant. Sometimes, we do visit a friend's house. We'll talk and visit. (Karen male, Bendigo)*

Hanging out with friends is less common among Syrian and Kurdish young women, though they do engage in many of the same practices with family members. It is also less common among those who are more recently arrived and are yet to establish strong friendships and local knowledge.

While hanging out in public and commercial spaces is generally experienced positively, the visibility of these young people – especially given the less-diverse demography of the areas in which they live – can result in experiences of surveillance and discrimination (see 'Local place and community').

### *Digital and media engagement*

Digital and media engagement takes a range of forms – individual and collective, passive and active – that connect young people to valued activities, communities, and places.

Individual activities include listening to music and watching films, television and YouTube. For many, this involves consuming English language media as a tool for supporting language development, as well as engaging with content from other cultural and linguistic spheres, and particularly from their country or region of origin.

*I just watch the English music... and the English video. I strongly believe that if I do... it will help me with my English skill. And sometimes I understand, but not all... And sometimes [I listen to] Karen music, too. Because I'm Karen so I love my Karen music, too. (Karen female, Bendigo)*

Collective activities include the male-dominated pursuit of playing computer games with friends, and the wider pursuit of engaging with valued communities, local and distant, via social media. This latter activity can be an important source of belonging for those who, for a variety of reasons, are unable or unwilling to engage in recreation activities outside the home.

The importance of Internet access is emphasised by several young people, not as a luxury, but as a crucial resource for communicating with family and friends, and accessing news and information.

*A lot of friends, relatives as well, a lot of my childhood friends back in the camp and in the United States and some European countries...we keep in touch on social media. Having no Internet [when relocating to Bendigo] made it hard. (Karen male, Bendigo)*

*So, beside my bed, around my bed, the internet is so strong... That's the main reason [I feel at home in my room]. (Syrian female, Gateshead)*

### *Creative production*

Many young people are engaged in some form of creative production. This includes individual activities such as drawing, writing, taking photographs or playing music – variously for relaxation, fun or skill development.



*Well, when I'm drawing things, I like to be creative. I feel like it brings out my creativity on paper. When I'm drawing trees or nature it feels like I have to sit down and connect with how nature is going and I have to look really closely to the details of things. (Karen female, Bendigo)*

Particularly for Karen young people, creative production also involves participation in collective activities such as playing music in a church band, participating in the school musical, and performing traditional dance.

In some cases young people are independently producing material for public or online dissemination, such as posting music videos on YouTube, publishing a vlog on life in the U.K., exhibiting traditional weaving, and contributing to local art projects. These activities are particularly powerful as public expressions of identity and belonging.

### *Sport*

Sport is a key sphere in which many resettled refugee young people – and especially young men – negotiate (non)belonging (Spaaij 2015). Moreover, it holds a particular place in regional communities as source of local identity and pride and a site of community building (Tonts 2005).

In this study, sport emerged as a key aspect of youth recreational practice. Seventeen of twenty-four youth artist-researchers discussed engagement in sporting activities, including swimming, netball, tennis, and boxing. Football (soccer) is by far the most common, though with one exception practiced exclusively by young men.

For some, the opportunity even to play sport informally with co-ethnic friends is indicative of a degree of local belonging.

*In Lebanon... I didn't play football because I didn't have enough friends. And the Lebanese, they hate Syrians and they don't give us the chance to enjoy our time. (Syrian male, Gateshead)*

Many young people participate in co-ethnic and refugee-specific sporting leagues and programmes, while several, especially in Bendigo, have had positive experiences of participating in mainstream sporting clubs.

Sport can be valuable for building social connections through sharing resources such as soccer pitches and swimming pools, or playing a sport together, formally or informally.

*...all the young people in this street, all of them like football, so we always play football. If we didn't play football, I wouldn't see them. (Syrian male, Gateshead)*

Such interactions rarely, however, transcend the sporting activity.

*...we play together and then disperse (Syrian male, Gateshead)*



**"Football gives me a voice and sense of belonging" - Ammar Aljamal**

*The Love of Football, Ammar*

## 5.5 Local community and place

While the lives of resettled refugee young people are profoundly shaped by national and transnational forces, it is the local where everyday life is lived and through which these forces are experienced. Developing a sense of belonging to local place and community is a key aspect of settlement, with significant emotional and practical implications.

For the young people in this study, this process is shaped in part by the new-ness of these sites as resettlement locations. Both Bendigo and Gateshead are less culturally diverse than the nations of which they are a part, and communities and institutions have less experience in welcoming and supporting refugee-background settlers. At the same time – especially in Bendigo – there is significant community support and willingness to learn.

### *Local community*

Overwhelmingly, young people have positive perceptions of the communities in which they live.

*How would I describe Bendigo? I would definitely say very peaceful, compared to a few places I used to live in. Friendly, very friendly. (Karen male, Bendigo)*

*In general I can describe most of the people here as so friendly, so kind, and welcoming (Syrian female, Gateshead)*

The sense of safety, friendliness and respect in local communities is often experienced in direct contrast to countries of asylum, as well as metropolitan settings in the resettlement country.

*I feel safe and respected here, the opposite of in Lebanon. (Syrian male, Gateshead)*

There are, however, occasional racist encounters in public space and local neighbourhoods, such as being shouted at, called names and told to go home.

*Well, sometimes while walking on the streets, teenagers driving past would be like, 'go back to your country', or something like that. And they would like swear at us. My mom couldn't understand, but we did. It was kind of hard. (Karen female, Bendigo)*

Young people are also attuned to less overt forms of surveillance or exclusion and at times adjust their behaviour to avoid negative attention.

*I feel like, going out, when we talk in the Karen language, sometimes we get stares like, what are they saying? So then we have to change our language to English so that other people can understand what we're talking about and [we don't receive] comments on whatever they're thinking. (Karen female, Bendigo)*

### *Neighbours*

Especially in early settlement, neighbours are often one of the main sources of contact with the wider community, and relations with them can colour broader perceptions of in/exclusion.

While young people overwhelmingly feel safe where they live, there are accounts of both positive and negative engagement with neighbours. Most commonly relations are experienced as passively polite.

*They are nice. They don't communicate a lot, but if we are passing each other, they will say hello, and talk a little bit and then walk on. (Syrian male, Gateshead)*

Engagement with long-term local neighbours can provide opportunities to learn about and participate in local cultures and communities, including practicing English.

*They are so nice, they are so friendly, they are so helpful. When they visit us we try to communicate with them in English. They like to come and play with my younger sister... and some boys play football with my brother. (Kurdish Syrian female, Gateshead)*

Yet there are also negative encounters.

*...the people around my area who are the same age as me are not friendly. They spit [at me] so I ignore them... I was upset. I thought that I'm coming to this country, I am going to have new English friends...but I noticed that there are no friends. There is nothing. (Syrian male, Gateshead)*

#### *Settlement services and volunteer organisations*

Settlement service providers and volunteer groups can play a critical role in fostering a sense of local belonging among newly-arrived refugee young people through providing or facilitating access to institutions, communities, places, and activities. While formal resettlement services are often nationally funded and structured, they are experienced as local – and often personal – interventions.

In Bendigo, several young people and their families were sponsored to resettle by local community members. These sponsors often continue to play a role in young people's lives as friends and mentors.

*Normally, if I need help with anything, if I need a tutor or whatever, I go to our sponsor. She helps us. (Karen female, Bendigo)*

Young people generally appreciate the support provided by services and volunteers and feel confident in accessing them when required.

*[Our support worker] is doing her best with us. She is so nice, so helpful. (Syrian female, Gateshead)*

Some young people, in both locations, have at times felt frustrated with service provision where it doesn't meet their needs or expectations. However, it is also recognised that, in these emerging resettlement sites, services evolve over time and with experience. Indeed, one of the early arrivals in Gateshead describes himself as a 'crash test dummy' for settlement services and notes that later arrivals have benefited from this.

#### *Local knowledge and understanding*

Perceptions of what is required in order to fit into the local community include English mastery, following laws, adjusting to local norms, and being open and confident in engaging with people.

A key difference between the two sites is the level of local awareness of and understanding about the young people's ethnic group and migration experience.

*I know that the Bendigo residents knew about the Karen community, your background, which made it easy to open up to them, share your experience. Talk to them, ask for their assistance. They sympathise with you... I feel the warmth here. It's lovely for me. (Karen male, Bendigo)*

Syrian and Kurdish young people in Gateshead are more likely to hide – or at least not draw attention to – their refugee and ethnic background.

Regardless, in both places young people often perceive the local community to have little understanding of what they have been through and to have misunderstandings about their culture, religion and politics.

*...they don't know what the struggle is, the struggle in refugee camp... They are so lucky to be born here. (Karen female, Bendigo)*

*Most of the people think that we are – or Arabs generally are – terrorists, and we are not. (Syrian male, Gateshead)*

Asked what they feel is important for people to understand about their communities and experiences, young people identify: the hardships experienced by refugees, their communities' willingness and ability to settle and contribute, that Muslim does not equate with terrorist, and that they are their equals.

*Before the war in Syria, there was no difference between us. We are all peaceful people. (Syrian male, Gateshead)*

## **Local place**

Young people's experiences of Bendigo and Gateshead are shaped in part by their relation to place, inflected in both cases by the regional location. In a general sense both places are positively experienced as 'small', 'quiet' and 'safe'. Quiet is a particularly valued attribute in both sites, conceived as both an aural quality and as an absence of danger and drama.

Experiences of place – and of moving through space – are experienced in comparison to asylum locations: Thai refugee camps where movement was limited and monitored, and Lebanon, Egypt and Turkey, where movement was often risky.

*I have found it very good for my sisters to live in this country... It was stressful in Egypt. My sisters used to study in Egypt and they used to suffer from moving in the street and going to university... By living in the UK, I feel there is no stress, there's freedom to move... (Syrian male, Gateshead)*

For many Karen it is also contrasted with superdiverse urban Karen resettlement locations in Greater Melbourne. While young people frequently visit these places to see friends and family, participate in cultural activities, and purchase preferred foods and goods, most find urban places too busy, too dangerous and too loud.

Specific places identified as engendering a sense of belonging include homes and neighbourhoods, shopping precincts, education and recreation settings, and cultural and religious venues. These are variously sites of comfort, community, activity and desire.

*[The mosque] is a house of Allah. Our house of God. For sure it's a comfort to me. (Kurdish Syrian male, Gateshead)*

*Belonging is a place where you feel comfortable, and where you actually know the place, know the people... I have friends [at school], I feel comfortable around them. (Karen female, Bendigo)*

## **The natural environment**

A key dimension of young people's attachment to local place is their appreciation of, connection to, and engagement with natural and rural environments.

Engagement with these places is emotional, practical, and sociocultural and occurs across a spectrum of intensities of contact from admiring views of green spaces and nature, to visiting natural sites, to engaging with the environment in practical ways, such growing vegetables.

For some, natural landscapes, including local parks, can be experienced as therapeutic, providing a sense of calm and connecting people to their present location and also, at times, to their past.

*...when I come back at the evening, I stand at my window. I like to watch the nice views... because we do have nice views in our house where we live. It seems to me we have the same views [of a mountain] in Syria. (Syrian male, Gateshead)*

*When I feel the wind, or the fresh air, hitting my face, I feel like this takes me back many, many years ago to my home country... I mean, we don't see a lot of birds and ducks [in my country] because a lot of people will kill it, but all the trees, all the water, and fresh air...it just feels really peaceful and calm... I can really feel a connection here. (Karen male, Bendigo)*

At the same time, the environment can, at least initially, also be alienating – particularly the English weather!

There are practical challenges to engaging with these natural and rural landscapes. While many young people admire the views of these landscapes, their access to them can be circumscribed by limited mobility, resources and knowledge.



*Wings, Tethers and Anchors, NC*

### ***Mobility***

While young people are generally quick to master public transport and to confidently move between key sites such as home, school and shops, the costs and distances involved can stymie more extensive mobility across the local area. This can lead young people to feel ‘stuck’ at home – especially in early settlement and for those living further from the city centre.

Moreover, the regional nature of both locations means that public transport isn’t always efficient, and access to a car – and driver’s license – become highly desirable, though not always obtainable. For shorter commutes – particularly between friends’ houses – Syrian and Kurdish Syrian young men in particular are using bicycles.

The distance between these regional settings and major metropolitan centres can present financial and temporal barriers to accessing these centres. This also raises the future possibility of needing to relocate to pursue educational and occupational aspirations, despite a common desire to remain in the settlement site. Though for others there are more important considerations.

*...it doesn’t make any difference to live in London or far away from London, but to be comfortable with the people, that’s what matters very much (Syrian male, Gateshead)*

## **5.6 Education and employment**

Education and employment are widely recognised as both means and markers of integration (Ager and Strang 2004). Participation in one or both has the potential to facilitate opportunities for upward socioeconomic mobility and for engagement with wider communities and activities. However, where the form or level of education is inappropriate, the work unsatisfying, or the environment hostile, education and employment experiences can stifle aspiration and inhibit local belonging.

### ***Education***

Education is one of the most important spheres of (non)belonging for resettled refugee youth, providing skills and competencies to support economic and social mobility, and a key site of engagement with local peers, and the local and national sociocultural context.

In both the UK and Australia, school-aged resettled refugees have access to mainstream schooling or, if aged sixteen years and over, a period of funded English as Additional Language (EAL) education. They also have access to mainstream employment assistance and, in some cases, refugee-specific support.

As with resettled refugee young people more generally (e.g. Nunn et. al 2014), the young people involved in this study are generally aspirational and optimistic about their educational and employment futures.

*...after I have [come to] live my new life in Australia, I felt like somebody trusts me to be someone, and it make me so happy, because I can keep study here and begin my life here. (Karen female, Bendigo)*

Yet many young people have experienced disrupted schooling during flight, compounding the already significant challenge of adjusting to a new language and educational context and impeding success.

Language is the most widely cited challenge of resettlement for refugee young people, impacting all aspects of life and mediating attempts to belong beyond their ethnic community. Gaining fluency is an educational aim shared by all those yet to achieve it.

*Because, English is not my own language, it's my second language, so sometimes I feel like it's hard to achieve my goal...of going to university. (Karen female, Bendigo)*

School/college is also the primary site in which young people engage with both co-ethnic and non-co-ethnic young people. However, a significant presence of co-ethnic students can reduce interaction with the wider student community and inhibit the use of English beyond the classroom. Some young people and parents also believe it impedes learning and have moved schools accordingly. Young people attribute this limited interaction to both co-ethnic social preferences and exclusionary practices among local students.

Interaction with non-co-ethnic peers is often a positive experience, however, discrimination is a common feature of school interactions. While it is particularly severe in at least one Gateshead school, more casual forms of discrimination and exclusion in both settlement sites are also experienced as racism.

*'...there are some students who are not welcoming... For instance, if I'm walking with somebody they start staring at me. And it seems rude to me, to stare at someone for no reason'. (Syrian female, Gateshead)*

*Yes, and my friends called me, 'you little Asian c\*#t'. I just say, 'yeah, you're funny'... I don't take it real because I know that if I did, then it's going to get me in trouble or something like that. And I'm feeling scared because even when I live in Thailand, I'm scared of Thai people there. (Karen female, Bendigo)*

At its most extreme, discrimination has contributed to young people changing schools or transferring out of secondary education into ESOL programmes.

There is a widespread perception of schools' inability to address discrimination – especially in its more subtle forms. In this context, common responses by refugee-background young people include avoiding perpetrators, ignoring racism, and laughing it off.

### **Employment**

As with education, employment provides a sphere of (non)belonging in itself as well as facilitating (or impeding) belonging to other spheres based on financial position, networks, and knowledge and skills.

The two groups of young people in this study come from very different employment contexts in their countries of asylum. For Karen young people growing up in Thai refugee camps, there were few, if any, opportunities for paid employment. In contrast, many Syrian young men had no choice but to work during displacement – in un/semi-skilled roles such as water carrying, sewing, mechanics, and house decorating – in order to support their families.

At the time of the study, only Karen young people were in work: one in full-time unskilled labour, one in part-time professional work, and two in conventional casual youth employment in the fast food sector. Longer-term aspirations for both groups include employment in health, community, engineering, building and automotive

sectors. In some cases, Syrian young men wish to continue in trades they practiced in asylum countries, while the few young people with university degrees obtained pre-migration seek to continue their education and/or find employment in their fields of qualification.



*Many Pathways, Htoo Gay*

For those already in employment, work settings provide a key site of encounter with colleagues and, in service sectors, with customers and clients.

*I spend time [with] all people, yes. In the workplace, Karen people and Aussie people, yes, we are all friends. (Karen male, Bendigo)*

Experiences are mediated by factors including the culture of the workplace, cultural and linguistic accommodation if required, and the attitude and aspirations of the young person. At its best, employment can be both a sphere of (non)belonging and a resource for wider belonging.

*Having that feeling [that] someone has my back, especially my boss... I know that they will support me, no matter what. So, it really gives me a sense of community in Bendigo. That feeling when you really feel safe and comfortable. (Karen male, Bendigo)*

Many young people demonstrate awareness of the barriers they face in the pursuit of employment, though with differing abilities and levels of confidence to seek and act on information about potential pathways to success. This is based, in part, on assessments of the likelihood of success as well as the perceived urgency of the need to work.

*I'm not used to not working. It's been a year now and I feel so bored... So I'm not planning to join college or university. As soon as my language is better, I'm going to start working... I don't want to take any [government] benefits, so I want to work. (Syrian male, Gateshead)*

*For now, with the limited options that I have, I'd like to continue my studies, like a post-graduate degree. What I dream about is to be a pilot, but I don't know if this is going to be easy or not as a refugee in this country. (Syrian male, Gateshead)*

Refugee experiences can also affect employment aspirations, motivating young people to succeed and directing them towards careers that allow them to contribute to their own and the wider community, including in community services, media, and health.

*...that's my ambition; to be a doctor here, because I have noticed that there are not that many doctors here, in this area. To help those people, to introduce something for this community and these people. (Syrian female, Gateshead)*

## 5.7 Homeland and countries of asylum

Young people arrive in resettlement countries with existing relations with at least two other countries: their country of origin and country of asylum. These relations may be positive or negative and may be based on lived experience and/or family history and narrative. Their ongoing role in the lives of resettled young people will vary based on a range of historical, practical, sociocultural, and emotional factors (McMichael et. al 2016).

### **Country of origin**

Due to the protracted nature of the conflict that triggered their families' displacement, some Karen young people in this study have never visited Burma. Others, both Karen and Syrian/Kurdish Syrian, left their country of origin pre-adolescence or spent periods of their childhood in other countries, impacting their sense of (non)belonging to their 'homeland'.

*I feel that [Gateshead] is home for me because I left Syria very young. The people there now have gotten used to war, blood, killing. So I can't talk to them and I can't be friends with them anymore. (Syrian male, Gateshead)*

*...when things go back to normal in Syria, I would like to go back home. (Syrian male, Gateshead)*

Yet despite varied levels of practical engagement, young people's familial connection to their country of origin is foundational to their refugee status. Moreover, for many, it remains – politically and emotionally – their homeland. It can hold significance in the past (memories, family history), present (home to family and friends, site of ongoing politically and emotionally resonant events), and future (potential future home, symbolic site of belonging).



Whatever the distance is, my country will still be in my heart

*My Country is Unforgettable, Mohamed*



## Country of asylum

Karen and Syrian and Kurdish young people had strikingly different experiences of displacement: the Karen contained in long-term camps in Thailand; Syrians and Kurdish Syrians dispersed across urban sites in multiple countries. Nonetheless, both groups share experiences of fear, lack of safety, constrained freedom, hardship, and lack of opportunity.

*I used to deliver water to houses...I started when I was twelve... When I returned home with my money to pay for the house rent...many times there were people that would stop me with weapons, guns, knives, to try to take my money from me. (Syrian male, Gateshead)*

*...when I was in camp, even I was willing to study but there were a lot of financial problems with me and my mother... She couldn't afford [to send] me to school... That's why I really was upset. (Karen female, Bendigo)*

At the same time, these places were 'home' – for several years in the case of Syrians and Kurdish Syrians, and, for some Karen, since birth. As such they also retain positive associations for many: friends, family, food, environment, activities.

*I'm 16 years old, and I'm a refugee. I come from Thailand, Mae La camp. (Karen female, Bendigo)*



*Mae La Rations, Htoo Gay*

Perceptions of the country of asylum are mediated in part by life stage (those who were younger were often able to attend school and engage in other childhood activities, while those who were older often had to take on adult responsibilities), and by gender (young women were more likely to experience constraints on their movement, young men more likely to work).

Contemporary relations are determined largely by the continued presence (or not) of family and friends in these sites. Several Karen young people have travelled back to camps to visit family members. One outcome of such contemporary encounters is that young people must confront the reality of their relation to this place and the ways in which it aligns with or challenges their imagined belonging there.

*I've gotten used to living in Australia. The environment was very different and it was kind of hard to get used to being back there again...sometimes I [would] break into English and they would just stare at me and I would be like, oh, yeah, I forgot. (Karen female, Bendigo)*

Along with young peoples' country of origin, countries of asylum also stand for many as a point of comparison to the resettlement country; it's politics, institutions, laws, environment, food, and culture – both favourably and unfavourably.

*When we were in Thailand we used to play with the kids in the street every day. When we come here there was no one. Yes, so it was quite a bit miserable. I'd stay in the house all day. (Karen female, Bendigo)*

## 5.8 Resettlement country

The young people in this study relate to the resettlement country as both a legal-bureaucratic state and a national sociocultural sphere. It is primarily experienced and understood through the local – including local manifestations of national institutions and practices – as well as through national media and, for some, travel.

Formally, the relation to the nation state differs between Australia and the UK. While Australian settlers are issued permanent visas and a pathway to citizenship, in the UK refugees seeking indefinite leave to remain after five years are subject to a 'safe return review' that presents the possibility of being returned to their country of origin if it is deemed safe to do so. While the Syrians/Kurdish Syrians in this study are not yet eligible to apply for permanent residence, several members of the Karen cohort have taken Australian citizenship.

Some Syrian young people and their families express dissatisfaction with their visa conditions, which limit their ability to leave the UK to visit family members elsewhere in Europe.<sup>4</sup>

*To be honest, when we were accepted when we were in Lebanon, we were so happy to come here. But when we moved here we found something different. We notice that we are here as in prison, so you can't move anywhere, you can't travel anywhere for five years, and at the same time you can't reunite with your brothers or the rest of your family. I don't know what we should do in this case? (Syrian male, Gateshead)*

Citizenship is widely experienced by resettled refugee young people as an important source of mobility, security and belonging (Nunn et. al 2016).

*My parents have moved from Burma to Thailand, but we are not citizens of any of those countries, so it would be a good opportunity to be naturalized citizens and make it easier to travel and stuff. (Karen female, Bendigo)*

The young people in this study are grateful for the support they receive from the government – both financially and through government-funded settlement and mainstream support programmes – though in the U.K. some struggle to fulfil their needs with the limited resources provided.

In both sites, young people note the legal and bureaucratic effectiveness of the state in comparison to countries of origin and asylum, though some find it challenging at times to cede control of situations such as interpersonal conflicts to state authorities.

*I admire how organised this country is. This is the main difference I can see. I think we need many, many, many years in Arabic countries to become this organised. (Syrian male, Gateshead)*

*The law is different. For example if something happened to you here you need to report it at the police station, but over there if there's something wrong you could go, for example, to his family, the one who has caused the problem. They could solve it without interference from the government. (Syrian male, Gateshead)*

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<sup>4</sup> Syrians arriving through the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme are granted Humanitarian Protection. This status confers fewer rights than Refugee Status, including in relation to travel. However, Syrians on Humanitarian Protection are entitled to switch to Refugee Status, which will improve their access to international travel.

### ***I Belong (poem)***

Pieces of me are thinking about the future.  
When I sing, my body knows I feel happy.  
It is safe.  
I don't feel scared.  
I'm free to go everywhere.  
My body knows...  
I am scolded by some people.  
Sometimes I feel scared,  
And amused.  
It is a language barrier.  
My body knows...  
When I get on the bus, I can choose to sit anywhere,  
But I sit at the front.  
It is hard for me to speak fluently.  
A piece of me is getting a fine from a bus inspector.  
I did not have the words.  
Pieces of me are in Bendigo,  
In school, pronouncing English.  
Looking after my siblings.  
A piece of me is bamboo.  
I belong in this country.

*I Belong, Lwe Pree, with David Cuong Nguyen*

The rights and freedoms provided in the resettlement country are also highly valued.

*In Bendigo, I know that I can travel when I want to. No one can stop me. The police officers won't come and question me. (Karen male, Bendigo)*

These rights and freedoms, as well as equality and opportunity, are more broadly understood as constitutive of the national culture in both countries.

The most widely identified challenge for refugee young people in integrating into the settlement country is, as discussed elsewhere, mastering the language. This is critical not only for education and employment but also sociocultural belonging.

*If you don't speak the language of that country, or those people, you can't communicate with them. So you have to learn that language. (Kurdish Syrian male, Gateshead)*

## **6. Participatory arts & (non)belonging**

In addition to using participatory arts-based approaches to research (non)belonging, this study functions as a case study for how such approaches – in research and beyond – can explore, communicate and support belonging.

### **6.1 Supporting belonging**

*Dispersed Belongings* sought to support belonging among youth artist-researchers both within and beyond the project sphere. In doing so, it produced – and, at times problematically, reproduced – relations of (non)belonging.

Of the twenty-four young people who commenced the project, five discontinued; all but one at the very early stages. We do not know the reasons for all of these, but those provided include competing activities such as education and sport, and personal factors relating to family and relationship stresses.

Those who continued maintained, for the most part, consistent attendance and produced or contributed to works for dissemination in presentation events. Several went beyond this to engage in creative production outside of project sessions and/or to contribute to other aspects of the project, such as presenting at academic seminars and conferences.

Young people generally displayed increasingly active belonging throughout the project, and feedback at its conclusion reflected broadly positive experiences, ranging from having fun to experiencing some level of personal transformation.

### ***Recruitment***

The project had its own politics of (non)belonging that began with recruitment of youth artist-researchers.

Collaborating with settlement service providers in both settings and an ethnic community organisation in Bendigo enabled targeted access to young people who had an interest in or ability to benefit from the project – though this was limited to those young people already networked into these organisations.

A key difference in approaches in the two sites was the provision of interpreters in Gateshead. This was necessary due to the more recent settlement of Syrians/Kurdish Syrians and low levels of English literacy. This made the project more inclusive. In Bendigo, a number of interested young people did not have sufficient literacy to enable participation.

In Gateshead, a key difficulty was accessing young women. Despite support worker outreach and the offer of alternative modes of engagement (such as women-only sessions), only four took part. In contrast, the number of young men interested in the project led to its expansion, with consequences for the mentorship process (discussed below).

Existing relations of (non)belonging mediated participation in several ways. Spending time with friends was a motivation for some to participate, while the lack or surplus of existing activities for young people also affected recruitment. Notably, the paucity of activities for the emerging Syrian/Kurdish Syrian community meant that there was a strong appetite for participation. In contrast, Karen young people were commonly juggling multiple other commitments alongside the project.

### ***Accessibility***

An important foundation for supporting belonging to the project was making sessions accessible for young people. Key aspects of this were:

- Providing clear project information, and revisiting it as young people's understanding of the project developed. This was a key challenge given both language barriers and a common lack of understanding of research processes.
- Implementing an iterative consent process through which young people could continue to change or confirm their preferences relating to how their work was captured, used, and credited.
- Being responsive to young people's scheduling needs (accommodating, for example, travel time, community events, safety issues). In Bendigo, sessions were arranged at the convenience of young people and their mentors, while the Gateshead sessions were at regular times set in dialogue with young people. The degree of flexibility in Bendigo meant, however, that sessions weren't integrated into young people's routines, at times impacting attendance, while ad hoc scheduling placed an administrative burden on artist mentors.
- Creating clear and simple communication channels between the young people and the rest of the team, including via a Facebook group (set to 'secret' for young people's protection).

- Providing a support worker and an interpreter at sessions (in Gateshead), to give practical and emotional support to young people and the project team.
- Providing transport support such as reimbursing bus tickets.
- Working in accessible, safe venues reachable by public transport and welcoming to refugee-background young people.
- Providing food and drink at sessions.

Central to all of this was the collaboration with local settlement, arts, and community organisations, each with strong local knowledge, networks and resources that ensured a supportive and supported project environment.

### Relationships

In order for young people to take risks in exploring their ideas and experiences, develop new skills and competencies, and share their work in a public setting, the establishment of a supportive community of belonging was critical.

A key aspect was building a positive group culture that was sensitive to divisions and inequalities relating to, for example, gender, language, class, and age. This was particularly important in Gateshead, where there were bigger and more diverse groups working with mentors. In Bendigo, the greater challenge was building a shared sense of project belonging across mentorship groups that, for logistical reasons, rarely worked alongside each other. The project Facebook groups were one attempt to do this.

For many, the opportunity to gather with co-ethnic/national young people was an important feature of the project.

*For a Syrian to be here it's like you feel lonely, but when you gather with people from Syria you feel like you're not lonely anymore. (Syrian female, Gateshead)*

*For instance, one other participant; we not really friends... Now we get to talk more, which is fantastic. So yes, I did create definitely a nice stronger relationship with the participants and create more network with the broader community... (Karen male, Bendigo)*

أجمل أيام		Most Beautiful Days (song)	
و بأجمل مكان أشخاص في الحياة وفاكلاً	بأفضل مكان كنت مع أجمل تظنكلاً	In the best place I was with the best We learned a lot	and in the most beautiful place people in life and we made music a lot
	عزلاًبجلاً بأجمل الأصوات	We all sang With the most beautiful voices	
طقيرثورة أمصعجيد عرلألقء و بأجمل مكان و أفضل مكان و كانت أعلى رحلة في الحياة في الحب وفاكلاً	تظنكلاً	We had a wonderful time with all our friends And in the most beautiful place, in the best place It was the most beautiful journey in life, in love We learned a lot and we made music a lot	
	بأجمل الألحان وفاكلاً	With the most beautiful melodies We made music together	

*Most Beautiful Days, Nina*  
(translated by Rana Alhussein Almbark and Sam Hellmuth)

However, the fact that informal communication among young people often occurred in their first language – and was thus inaccessible to the project team – at times enabled unsupportive comments and behaviours. While, in the music programme in Gateshead, a skilled and invested interpreter assisted in addressing this, it at times risked undermining some people's sense of belonging.

*This is something that didn't change from the beginning: laughing at each other and being judgemental. Especially when someone wanted to speak English...everybody started laughing... This put me off. (Syrian female, Gateshead)*

At the same time, in both contexts, young people were empowered to use their first language to control the boundaries of communication with the non-co-ethnic project team, choosing what to share and when.

The project at times challenged existing relations of (non)belonging among young people and their communities, such as supporting Syrian young women to question more conservative perspectives on how they engage with project activities. It also – at times problematically – reinforced relations, in particular privileging English as the dominant language of the project.

The mentorship structure, in which small groups of young people had the opportunity to work closely with an artist in their chosen art form, facilitated some strong relationships between artist mentors and young people.

*...you're not from the same country, don't speak the same language, and maybe a different religion. I still from the beginning felt that you're so kind – all of the team – and you can understand me. Even with the language barrier, you still can feel what I'm feeling and help me. So that's why I felt very comfortable. (Syrian female, Gateshead)*

More generally, project belonging was supported through shared rituals and practices that included both young people and artist mentors and created a sense of familiarity, trust, collaboration, and collective achievement. This was centred on art making but also included, for example, reflective circles at the end of group sessions.

### ***Skill development and personal development***

Youth artist-researcher skill development was facilitated by artist mentors trained in both their art form and in community arts practice, supporting young people to develop both artistic and personal capacities. The expertise of Project Partners also ensured that the project was designed and implemented with sensitivity to the complexity of the lives of refugee-background young people.

Young people reported a variety of outcomes, including the development (though differing widely) of artistic and music skills, as well as increased confidence, independence, and other personal capacities.

*I am so confident now about myself. I learnt not to be shy, not to worry about how people are looking at me. If I love something, I will do it straightaway. I met more people and made more friends. I have now learnt how to play guitar, and I am getting better at it. (Syrian male, Gateshead)*

*It was actually pretty nice because [my mentor is] really an incredible artist. She helped me with a lot of things, like if this can't happen, maybe this could happen, like replacing equipment and objects so that it can come out the same way. (Karen female, Bendigo)*

These developments were also observed by the project team.

*The satisfying part of the project was seeing the young people grow and begin to be comfortable. Even messing around with instruments, having creative ideas and putting them forward and sharing them with people. But also how, at the end, they were like a band. They would talk about their ideas and they would be able to tell each other what they thought sounded better creatively to aid the creative process. Those last few sessions felt like they were led by the young people, really (Artist mentor, Gateshead).*

The encouragement and support provided by the project team was widely experienced as instrumental to young people's artistic and personal achievements.

*I am a very, very shy person, and I thought at the beginning I wasn't doing a lot. But then when you started encouraging me, this is something that helped me a lot, and now I don't feel as shy as before.*  
(Kurdish Syrian female, Gateshead)

Many young people had never been involved in a formal arts programme before and most were new to the art form they elected to work in. Moreover, there were a wide range of motivations for participating, including hanging out with friends, having fun, developing artistic skills, developing personal capacities, and communicating ideas and experiences to an audience. These gave rise to a variety of needs and interests that were accommodated with occasionally mixed results.

*I felt like when I joined the music programme, that the participants are not taking things seriously. This is something that I didn't like. I think because they are all young, very young, they are not taking things seriously.* (Syrian male, Gateshead)

It was also important that young people could elect not to engage in particular activities that made them feel uncomfortable or unsafe.

*All the professionals were understanding... Even the stuff that we didn't want to do, nobody put us under pressure or anything. It was easy and they gave us the choice all the time.* (Syrian female, Gateshead)

The learning that could be achieved was constrained by modest financial resources that limited the number and nature of sessions. The short duration of the project, and associated limitations in the skills that could be attained and the quality of the artwork produced, was youth artist-researchers' most common critique of the project.

Nonetheless, the progress made was highly valued by young people – especially in the context of previous lack of opportunities and experiences of exclusion.

*I was so proud because we went to different countries after moving from Syria, and in all of these countries, nobody gave us this chance, and we never thought we had the skills. ...if we didn't have this chance, nobody will know that we can write songs or we can do pictures or anything. It was a shock for us...that we have the skills. It was amazing.* (Syrian male, Gateshead)

As a space that was open to multiple languages and forms of expression, as well as different motivations and perspectives, the project also supported young people to play with and perform different identities and relations of (non)belonging: a critical aspect of refugee youth resettlement.

Importantly, the project also facilitated the development of skills and competencies among artist mentors and other team members. This reflects the reciprocal relations that emerged through the project, and contributes to capacity building in the local arts sectors.

*I loved that this project was started with a really thorough briefing about things... I thought about those documents that we were given...for weeks after and talked about them. That was a really important part of it for me.* (Artist mentor, Gateshead).

### **Towards youth leadership**

While the project was structured by a set research design, young people were supported to assume a degree of 'governmental belonging' or leadership – especially in relation to their artworks, and how and to whom they were presented. Young people nominating the project art forms was a key aspect of this, as was consultation on presentation venues and invitation lists.

However, working towards genuine youth leadership is an ongoing educative process, requiring recognition of – and attempts to address – a number of challenges:

- Youth artist-researchers were inexperienced in asserting authority in a project space and challenging adult members of a project team.

Building trusting relationships, providing opportunities for shared critical reflection, and using iterative consent processes were all key strategies to build towards youth leadership.

- The young people in this study lead complex lives and many have significant responsibilities. In this context, taking on responsibility and leadership in the project risks being experienced as a burden – especially if motivations for participating are more focused on fun than achievement.

This challenge was addressed by providing diverse opportunities for sharing ideas, engaging in activities, and assuming leadership roles without imposing responsibilities on those who preferred to maintain a more casual relationship with the project.

- The limited time and resources and the inexperience of many young people in art and music meant that there were varying levels of autonomy in creating artworks for presentation.

While it was preferred that young people solely author their own works, co-production was recognised through giving mentors and young people the option of being co-credited for works. However, there was no strict measure of this and this crediting process could have been more rigorous.

- The pre-established topic of the project limited young people's agency to determine the subject of their artwork.

While the study was focused on local (non)belonging, young people in many cases reoriented the work to their own interests. While ongoing reflection on the local was encouraged, these alternative explorations were supported as representing the complexity and diversity of refugee youth (non)belongings. They also reflected young peoples' confidence in asserting belonging in the project.

### ***Belonging beyond the project***

Many of the resources young people gained through participating in the project are transferrable to other spheres of (non)belonging.

- Access to and familiarity with local venues, transport, and services

Through the project young people got to know representatives from collaborating organisations and become familiar with their services; to visit, work and exhibit in local cultural and community venues such as galleries and libraries; to gain confidence in navigating public transport; and to link into programmes and organisations in the local areas.

*We now feel like we are more confident about going around in Gateshead because we know more.*  
(Syrian male, Gateshead)

In these ways, belonging in the project provided young people with practical resources for belonging in the local area more generally, as well as to specific places, communities, and institutions. However, attempts to link young people into youth arts activities beyond the project met with limited success, suggesting that young people require more support to pursue opportunities that rely on greater independence.

- Skills, knowledge, and competencies

The skills, knowledge, and competencies that young people gained through the project are directly transferrable to other spheres of (non)belonging. Most notably, young people regard increased confidence and improved communication skills as highly valuable resources.

*When we first came, we were total strangers. We didn't know anything. Now we can cope with everything and we have learnt more stuff... so it's getting better. I think this project is one of the main reasons I feel better in the country.* (Syrian male, Gateshead)



- Communities and networks

The relationships built through the project transcend it in multiple ways. Friendships have been formed or strengthened, and connections with artist mentors and organisational representatives can contribute to wider networks of belonging, including through providing references and sharing information about opportunities.

*You remember when you met me, I was so bored at that time. I didn't know people, I didn't know where to go. I needed more activities. Now with the project, I have met lots of people that I get along with. We go together and do activities and play football. (Syrian male, Gateshead)*

- Symbolic belonging

Through displaying their artworks, young people contributed to trans/forming representations of their ethnic communities, and of refugee-background young people. In doing so they have claimed a symbolic space of belonging as both representatives of their communities and as members of the wider local community.

- Collaborating organisations and artist mentors

Collaborating organisations and artist mentors have a key role to play in supporting refugee youth belonging beyond the borders of the project. This includes:

- Supporting individual young people, including linking them into other programmes or services;
- Addressing opportunities and challenges for the group, including providing opportunities to access places and institutions, and pursuing funding for ongoing activities;
- Supporting belonging for refugee youth more generally by pursuing changes to policies and practices that negatively impact them;
- Carrying forward learnings from this project into future work;
- Continuing cross-sector collaborations that facilitate sharing resources, knowledge and experience; and
- Responding to the needs and interests of refugee young people and their communities

## 6.2 Exploring and communicating (non)belonging

The project created space and support for young people to reflect on their feelings and experiences of (non)belonging. This was achieved through structured and unstructured arts and music activities, and formal and informal communication with other young people and the arts-research team. Crucially, it was achieved by fostering a supportive but critically engaged environment for exploration, inquiry, and play.

*[Through the project] I can talk about belonging more openly with my family and friends. It gets me thinking more than I used to about belonging. (Karen female, Bendigo)*

The presentation outcome in each site, and subsequent presentations and events, provided opportunities to share the resulting artworks – and the ideas and experiences of (non)belonging that they represent – with audiences.

However, in Gateshead, due to the programme's popularity, the higher ratio of young people to mentors in the music group meant that not everyone produced their own representation of (non)belonging, but instead contributed to group works.

As illustrated throughout this report, the artworks youth artist-researchers produced drew on a range of visual and aural art forms: music, spoken word, photography, installation, painting, and digital media. The works engaged with themes including homeland, refugee experiences, resettlement, religion, friendship, and sport, and reflected feelings of possibility, love, and hope, as well as of ambivalence, nostalgia, and sadness. Many dealt – implicitly or explicitly – with both the 'the past and the present...the there and the here...presence and absence' (Thomas 1999:181), reflecting the complexities of refugee lives.

Many young people demonstrated a strong understanding of the ways in which art and music can communicate (non)belonging, including by expressing things that are difficult to articulate:

*I can't until now understand how did I dare to do it, or where I got the courage from. All that I remember is I started writing everything that happened to me in my life, every feeling that I'd got. And I gave it to [my mentor]... When I was writing the letter about my life, I felt so relieved. I felt that lots of things that were inside me came out. So it was really good. (Syrian female, Gateshead)*

Holding multiple meanings:

*I will put on my artwork, this is my definition of belonging. But another person may interpret it a different way. So just one thing can be interpreted in many different meanings. (Karen male, Bendigo)*

Communicating messages:

*I wanted to deliver a message to people here about the situation in Syria. (Syrian male, Gateshead)*

And their capacity to touch people:

*Sometimes a song can be your story... And maybe somebody else will listen to it, and he's living the same story. And it will touch him in this way. Or maybe teach him about something new that he never expressed before (Kurdish Syrian male, Gateshead)*

In their artworks young people drew on the diverse vocabularies of art and music to express their feelings and communicate their messages.

*...the colours represented different emotions that I went through when I wanted to belong here in Australia. (Karen female, Bendigo)*

While there were divergent perspectives on some individual works, young people generally felt that the collection of works presented in each site provided a nuanced representation of their ideas, experiences and possibilities.

*I think it explains how each person has a different perspective of belonging. It's different for each person. (Karen female, Bendigo)*

*All the works together show that Syrian people can do something. I wanted English people, foreign people, to see the work together... We know how to do things and we hope to do lots of things. (Syrian male, Gateshead)*

### **Presentation outcomes**

There was a major presentation outcome in each site. In Bendigo, ***Belonging in Bendigo*** was presented in a community exhibition space at Morley's Emporium, a social enterprise run by a disability service provider, during Refugee Week in 2016. It ran for one week after an initial launch event. More than 100 people viewed the exhibition.

***From Syria to Gateshead*** was launched at a one-night event at BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art in Gateshead in October 2017, and then remounted in the Shipley Art Gallery community space for a week during *Platforma Festival for the Arts by, about and with Refugees and Migrants*. More than 150 people attended the launch event.

In both sites, the initial launch event was targeted at audiences that included family and friends, refugee service providers, arts sector workers, ethnic community members, and government workers and representatives. Subsequent exhibitions in community spaces were then accessible to members of the wider community. However, the nature of both venues meant that they were most likely to be accessed by 'friendly' audiences rather than those hostile to refugee settlers. This was both protective for young people and limiting in terms of widely sharing their experiences and perspectives.



*From Syria to Gateshead, BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art, Gateshead*

The Bendigo exhibition also hosted a researcher-facilitated visit by ESOL students from the local TAFE.<sup>5</sup>

Subsequent presentations involving youth artist-researchers presenting and discussing the artworks and project included:

- A video about the Bendigo project: <https://vimeo.com/183021948>.
- A presentation involving nine Syrian and Kurdish Syrian young people at the 2017 Manchester Migration Lab conference at Manchester University.
- A presentation involving three Syrian young people and an artist mentor for Durham University's Centre for Social Justice and Community Action.

### **Audience responses**

In Bendigo there was no formal audience evaluation process. Instead, attendees were encouraged to contribute to the project by adding to a participatory map of belonging in Bendigo (see below). Contributions included: 'You make Bendigo a better place'; 'I think there is a place for me here'; and 'Sense of community and freedom'.

Some attendee responses were captured in field notes. For example, a Ukrainian woman responded to the (collaboratively produced) *Nests of Belonging* by explaining how she had flown to a new country and how in the Ukraine she would have built a comfortable nest, but in Bendigo she must do it differently.

In one instance an encounter with an audience member transformed a youth artist-researcher's reading of her own work.

*I was explaining how it represents the different pathways, and one of the ladies said the pointy bits can represent how opportunities are not always smooth. I was like, that makes sense. (Karen female, Bendigo)*

In Gateshead, audience responses were captured more formally on evaluation forms provided in Arabic and English.

People reported learning about

- Young people's love for home and country but also their desire to make a new life
- Sadness and trauma of experiences
- Youth artist-researchers' passion, talent, 'resilience, creativity and hope'
- The warmth and importance of the Syrian community

Syrian attendees emphasised determination and hope: 'Ambition, hope and there is nothing impossible in this life'

<sup>5</sup> 'TAFE (Technical and Further Education) is a form of tertiary education available throughout Australia which specialises in providing nationally recognised qualifications in vocational education and training' (Nunn et. al 2014).



Audience members contributing to *Mapping Be-longing*, Julie Andrews and *Belonging in Bendigo* youth artist-researchers and attendees

The feelings evoked by the artworks and presentation event included:

- Happy, touched, impressed, 'I was overwhelmed, humbled and amazed'
- 'They have a sense of belonging at this event'; 'a lovely, uplifting event'
- '...glad that the young people were keen to express themselves'
- Sense of connection: 'I felt more connected to the lives, experiences and feelings of the young Syrians involved because there was a sense of hearing directly from them rather than hearing about them via the media'

Syrian attendees emphasised pride: 'It made me really proud of young Syrians', and sense of community: 'Happiness and nostalgia for our country because we saw Syrian people gather in that place.'

### ***Youth artist-researcher experiences***

Active promotion of the presentation events in their own networks, including family, friends, mentors, and wider community, reflected young people's investment in the project.

These events provided opportunities for young people to assert their role as active, critical agents in their own and the wider community, and to receive confirmation of this from attendees, as demonstrated above.

*I feel like we're taking the next step in our community and representing our culture as well* (Karen female, Bendigo)

*[The project made] our voice reach some people, to listen to us, see what we can do.* (Syrian male, Gateshead)

Most young people had a positive experience of participating in the presentation events.

*It was satisfying because all the work that I've done is now on display and everyone can look at it.* (Karen female, Bendigo)

Performing, presenting and speaking to the large numbers of (often unfamiliar) attendees made some people feel nervous.

*...before the actual exhibition I really felt a little bit nervous and also very excited too because I haven't performed [at] any other exhibition in Australia after I arrive here. (Karen female, Bendigo)*

In one case this had challenging results, where a young Syrian woman's belonging to her community was unsettled when she and her family were critiqued by other Syrians for her involvement in the performance.

*They are thinking because I am wearing a scarf, I am limited [in what I do]. Although my parents are supporting me, we still need to pay attention to the community. (Syrian female, Gateshead)*

The project team's inability to prevent Syrian audience members from videoing the performance additionally threatened this young woman's sense of belonging in the project.

*I lost trust in you that day...because you promised me that there would be no photos and no videos. I am aware that this was not your problem, because I can see some people were hiding their phone under their hands. But I lost trust in you that day because you didn't control it as much. (Syrian female, Gateshead)*

This forces us to consider the risks inherent in participatory arts projects and particularly how different audiences may have different expectations of, and responses to, the works produced.

For most young people, however, the presentation events were experienced as celebratory.

*I felt like the last phase was a reward for everything we did in the beginning, because there was an audience and they can see what we have done. (Syrian male, Gateshead)*

## **7. Conclusion**

Belonging is foundational to refugee youth resettlement. It is critical that we understand how refugee-background young people understand and experience it, and how we might productively intervene to support it. What emerges in this project is the complex, uneven terrain navigated by refugee-background young people as they negotiate relations of (non)belonging – and the politics that govern them – across local, national and trans/international spheres. But also the determination, optimism, and hope with which young people undertake this navigation in the pursuit of positive futures.

Regional refugee resettlement presents particular challenges but also great possibilities for belonging among refugee-background young people and the communities into which they settle. Engaged in with care, participatory arts-based interventions can play a productive – though uneven and unpredictable – role in producing and transforming spheres of (non)belonging and the relations within them in these settings.

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