

Investigating the role of English language proficiency on humanitarian migrants' economic settlement in Australia: A longitudinal study

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Introduction:

Over the last 20 years, there has been an unprecedented increase in humanitarian migrants worldwide. Currently, one in every 113 people globally is either an asylum-seeker, internally displaced or a refugee/humanitarian migrant. Nevertheless, the limited available evidence suggests that humanitarian migrants settle less successfully, both economically and socially, than other migrants. Understanding the factors that determine the economic performance of humanitarian migrants is crucial for supporting their integration process into the destination country. The role of proficiency in the host country's dominant language is crucial for the economic and social integration of humanitarian migrants. Past evidence is limited to qualitative studies of selected groups and to cross-sectional studies that are susceptible to unmeasured confounding bias. Using multiple rounds of the most comprehensive longitudinal survey of humanitarian migrants ever undertaken in the world and the Ecosystems Model of Refugee Resettlement, this study examines the role of English language Proficiency (ELP) in the economic settlement of humanitarian migrants in Australia. We hypothesise that humanitarian migrants with low levels of ELP would have a higher probability of being out of the labour force and employment after controlling for various confounders.

Methods:

Data from 2,277 participants who had at least one valid response to the two outcome variables at waves 1, 3, and 5 of the Building a New Life in Australia panel study were analysed using multilevel, multinomial mixed effects logit models. Labour force participation

and employment status were the outcome measures. The main exposure variable for this analysis was the level of functional ELP categorised as ‘Does not speak or understand English’, ‘Speaks and understands somewhat/well’, and ‘Speaks and understands very well’. The other independent variables included in the models were grouped as individual socio-demographic characteristics, pre-migration factors, and post-migration factors.

Results:

Overall, at wave 1, 22.9% of respondents were in the labour force. Of these, 29.2% were employed. By wave 5, 47.8% were in the labour force, of which 72.1% were employed. The proportion of those who did not speak or understand English declined from 27.9 in wave 1 to 13.6 in wave 5. After adjusting for all the time-varying confounders, those who were able to speak and understand somewhat/well and those who could speak and understand very well were 2.7 times (95% CI 1.94, 3.69) and 4 times (95% CI 2.5, 6.59) respectively more likely to be in the labour force compared to those who did not speak or understand English. However, higher levels of English proficiency were not associated with employment status. For both labour force status and employment status, gender and age were significant predictors of labour force and employment status.

Conclusion:

This longitudinal analysis confirms that English language proficiency significantly enhances humanitarian migrants’ labour force participation in Australia, though it has limited impact on employment attainment. The findings suggest that while language skills are essential for economic integration, they are insufficient in isolation. Persistent structural, social, and gender barriers constrain employment outcomes, underscoring the need for integrated

settlement policies that combine language training with broader labour market and equity initiatives.

Table 1: Results from full model (model 4)

Dependent variable: Labour force status

	Reference: not in the labour force				Reference: unemployed	
	Unemployed		Employed		Employed	
	RRR	95% CI	RRR	95% CI	RRR	95% CI
Fixed effects						
Functional English Language proficiency (ELP)						
Does not speak or understand (Ref 0)	1.000		1.000		1.000	
Speaks and understands somewhat/well	2.493***	[1.80, 3.45]	2.871***	[1.81, 4.54]	1.171	[0.71, 1.94]
Speaks and understands very well	3.564***	[2.21, 5.74]	4.398***	[2.37, 8.17]	1.231	[0.65, 2.32]
Individual characteristics						
<i>Sex</i>						
Male (Ref 0)	1.000		1.000		1.000	
Female	0.263***	[0.21, 0.33]	0.081***	[0.06, 0.11]	0.354***	[0.25, 0.50]
<i>Age</i>						
18-24 (Ref 0)	1.000		1.000		1.000	
25-34	1.054	[0.79, 1.40]	1.739**	[1.18, 2.56]	1.540*	[1.06, 2.24]
35-44	1.094	[0.79, 1.51]	1.528	[0.98, 2.38]	1.307	[0.85, 2.01]
45 and above	0.654*	[0.45, 0.95]	0.590*	[0.35, 0.99]	0.898	[0.53, 1.51]
<i>Marital status</i>						
Currently married (Ref)	1.000		1.000		1.000	
Never/ previously married	1.329*	[1.06, 1.67]	1.596**	[1.18, 2.16]	1.169	[0.87, 1.58]
<i>Country of birth</i>						
Iraq (Ref 0)	1.000		1.000		1.000	
Afghanistan	2.664***	[1.99, 3.57]	9.395***	[6.17, 14.32]	3.020***	[2.00, 4.56]
Iran	3.825***	[2.78, 5.26]	5.544***	[3.43, 8.97]	1.356	[0.87, 2.11]
Other	1.610036	[1.21, 2.15]	6.457***	[4.34, 9.61]	3.437***	[2.32, 5.09]
<i>Education</i>						
Never attended school (Ref)	1.000		1.000		1.000	
Primary education	1.055	[0.74, 1.51]	1.394	[0.86, 2.27]	1.251	[0.76, 2.05]
Secondary	1.273	[0.88, 1.84]	1.481	[0.89, 2.45]	1.092	[0.66, 1.81]
12 years or more	1.562*	[1.04, 2.34]	2.038*	[1.16, 3.59]	1.219	[0.70, 2.13]
Degree/trade qualification	1.465	[0.95, 2.25]	1.554	[0.85, 2.83]	1.038	[0.57, 1.88]
<i>Time (T) - continuous</i>	1.068	[0.94, 1.21]	4.266	[3.55, 5.13]	3.522***	[2.91, 4.26]
Pre-migration factors						
<i>Pre-arrival functional English proficiency</i>						
Did not speak or understand (Ref 0)	1.000		1.000		1.000	
Spoke and understood somewhat/well	0.933	[0.74, 1.18]	1.324	[0.95, 1.84]	1.369	[0.99, 1.89]
Spoke and understood very well	2.019*	[1.11, 3.68]	2.714*	[1.25, 5.90]	1.304	[0.67, 2.54]
<i>Employed before immigration</i>						
Yes (ref=0)	1.000		1.000		1.000	
No	0.567***	[0.45, 0.71]	0.338***	[0.25, 0.46]	0.640**	[0.47, 0.88]
<i>Experience of trauma</i>						

No (Ref=0)	1.000		1.000		1.000	
Yes	1.145	[0.82, 1.60]	1.162	[0.75, 1.81]	1.023	[0.66, 1.58]
<i>Whether time spent in refugee camp</i>						
No (Ref=0)	1.000		1.000		1.000	
Yes	1.396*	[1.08, 1.81]	1.077	[0.76, 1.52]	0.794	[0.57, 1.10]
Post-migration experience						
<i>Household financial hardship</i>						
No (Ref=0)	1.000		1.000		1.000	
Yes	1.621***	[1.33, 1.97]	0.700**	[0.54, 0.91]	0.442***	[0.34, 0.57]
<i>Completed study/ job training in Australia</i>						
No (Ref=0)	1.000		1.000		1.000	
Yes	2.218***	[1.73, 2.84]	2.035***	[1.49, 2.78]	0.897	[0.66, 1.21]
<i>Participation in English training programme</i>						
Yes (ref=0)	1.000		1.000		1.000	
No	1.142	[0.88, 1.49]	1.370	[0.96, 1.95]	1.175	[0.83, 1.66]
<i>Knows how to find job in Australia</i>						
Yes (ref=0)	1.000		1.000		1.000	
A little/not at all	0.380***	[0.31, 0.47]	0.232***	[0.18, 0.30]	0.650**	[0.50, 0.85]
<i>Self-assessed settlement experience</i>						
Good/very good (ref=0)	1.000		1.000		1.000	
Hard/ very hard	1.399*	[1.06, 1.84]	0.927	[0.62, 1.40]	0.695	[0.47, 1.03]
<i>Perceived discrimination</i>						
No (Ref=0)	1.000		1.000		1.000	
Yes	1.719**	[1.21, 2.44]	2.989***	[1.92, 4.65]	1.622*	[1.08, 2.44]
<i>Self-assessed health</i>						
Excellent/ very good/ good (ref=0)	1.000		1.000		1.000	
Fair/ poor/ very poor	0.706**	[0.57, 0.88]	0.328***	[0.24, 0.45]	0.495***	[0.36, 0.68]
<i>Ethnic/religious community support</i>						
Yes (ref=0)	1.000		1.000		1.000	
No	0.819	[0.65, 1.03]	0.928	[0.69, 1.25]	1.126	[0.83, 1.52]
<i>Other community support</i>						
Yes (ref=0)	1.000		1.000		1.000	
No	0.871	[0.69, 1.10]	0.856	[0.63, 1.16]	1.007	[0.74, 1.37]
<i>Sense of belonging in Australia</i>						
At least sometimes (ref=0)	1.000		1.000		1.000	
Hardly ever/never	1.091	[0.74, 1.60]	0.494*	[0.27, 0.91]	0.473*	[0.26, 0.86]
Random effects						
Individual variance 1 (and standard error)	0.33(0.17)	—	—	—	1.52(0.28)	—
Individual variance 1 (and standard error)	2.17(0.39)	—	—	—	1.3(0.34)	—
Model fit statistics						
Akaike's information criterion	6685.591	—	—	—	6631.154	—
Bayesian information criterion	7319.003	—	—	—	7264.566	—
Number of observations	5,421	—	—	—	5,421	—
Number of individuals	2,276	—	—	—	2,276	—