

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies

ISSN: 1556-2948 (Print) 1556-2956 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/wimm20

Supporting Refugee Education in Regional Australian Areas with Underdeveloped Arrival Infrastructures: Towards the Concept of Education Pioneer Migrants

Anna Xavier & Sally Baker

To cite this article: Anna Xavier & Sally Baker (21 Nov 2025): Supporting Refugee Education in Regional Australian Areas with Underdeveloped Arrival Infrastructures: Towards the Concept of Education Pioneer Migrants, Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies, DOI: 10.1080/15562948.2025.2581847

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/15562948.2025.2581847

Published online: 21 Nov 2025.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 163

View related articles

View Crossmark data

Full Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at
https://www.tandfonline.com/action/journalInformation?journalCode=wimm20

JOURNAL OF IMMIGRANT & REFUGEE STUDIES
https://doi.org/10.1080/15562948.2025.2581847

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Check for updates

Supporting Refugee Education in Regional Australian Areas with Underdeveloped Arrival Infrastructures: Towards the Concept of Education Pioneer Migrants

Anna Xavier[a] and Sally Baker[b]

[a]Centre for Refugee Employment, Advocacy, Training and Education (CREATE), Deakin University, Melbourne, Australia; [b]Kaldor Centre for International Refugee Law, University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia

ABSTRACT

The recognition of education as a key domain of refugee integration and the recent emphasis on regional refugee resettlement by the Australian Government have led to a growing scholarly interest in refugee education in regional Australia. There has, however, been a paucity of research on the experiences of new resettlement areas in building educational opportunities for newly arrived refugees in areas with underdeveloped infrastructures. This paper aims to introduce and expand the concept of 'education pioneer migrants' through an ethnographic case study in 'Rolling Hills', a regional Australian city. Drawing on fieldnotes, interviews and focus groups with refugee-background students, their parents, educators and community stakeholders, this study explores how one regional Australian city developed arrival infrastructures to support the educational needs of newly arrived refugees, and the impact of these infrastructures (or lack thereof) on their educational experiences. Following a reflexive thematic analysis, key findings from the study highlight the delayed establishment of arrival infrastructures to support the needs of education pioneer migrants, and its detrimental impact on students and educators, who are 'forced' to become educational arrival brokers in new resettlement areas. The findings thus emphasize the importance of considering education in settlement planning for refugee communities in regional spaces.

KEYWORDS

Refugee resettlement; integration; arrival infrastructures; education pioneer migrants; refugee education

Introduction

Education is a core marker and means of integration for refugees and other forced migrants (Ager & Strang, 2008; Olliff et al., 2023), creating opportunities for language learning, social connections, and future employment. Education is also a highly valued integration outcome by refugee communities (Naidoo et al., 2018; Watkins et al., 2019), and a needed opportunity for individual growth, the re/development of (squandered) skills, nation rebuilding, and—most importantly—hope for people who have experienced forced migration and displacement. In resettlement contexts, school education is offered to people with both permanent and temporary protection, but while it is a right, it is fraught with challenges relating to refugees' often complex learning needs (Watkins et al., 2019) and competing settlement priorities (Author 2, 2022). Therefore, attending to the diversity of experiences (in terms of refugee cohorts, educational contexts, resettlement journeys, gender, age, location) is necessary to build a deeper understanding of what facilitates and complicates education as a marker and a means of integration.

CONTACT Anna Xavier anna.xavier@deakin.edu.au Centre for Refugee Employment, Advocacy, Training and Education (CREATE), Deakin University, Melbourne, Australia
© 2025 Taylor & Francis Group, LLC

Most research focuses on metropolitan or urban contexts, with little empirical attention paid to regional or rural areas. In resettlement countries like Australia, Canada, and the USA that are characterized by significant distances and huge disparities between metro and regional areas, the opportunities and challenges for resettled refugees can be wildly divergent. In the case of Australia, regional areas constitute massive land areas with uneven and hyper-dispersed services and amenities. Consequently, the infrastructures needed to support refugee resettlement are often underdeveloped in regional resettlement sites compared to those in cities (Colvin, 2017).

Given the geographic diversity in Australia, investigating refugee students' educational experiences in the regional context is critical, as they are likely to vary significantly from their metropolitan peers (Brown, 2024; Colvin, 2017). This paper therefore aims to extend the concept of 'education pioneer migrants' to describe the experiences of new resettlement areas in building educational opportunities and supports for newly arrived refugees in areas with underdeveloped arrival infrastructures, and the consequent educational access and experiences of these refugees.

Refugee resettlement in regional Australia

Although Australia is often described as one of the most multicultural countries in the world, the cultural landscape of regional and rural Australia remains deeply shaped by its colonial history. This history has entrenched a cultural narrative characterized by predominantly white, European settler-backgrounds and monolingual English-speaking populations (Colvin, 2017). This phenomenon, often framed as "white rurality" (Moreton-Robinson, 2015), is a direct product of colonial relations that not only established and normalized settler dominance but also systematically marginalized Indigenous communities. Recognising the colonial underpinnings of regional "white rurality" is crucial for understanding the socio-cultural dynamics that shape contemporary regional Australia.

Newly arrived refugees are mostly resettled in metropolitan cities in Australia, mainly due to greater education and employment opportunities, services, and social networks (Brown, 2024). However, due to the rising refugee population and the consequent difficulty in meeting the increasing demands for services, humanitarian policy has shifted to resettling refugee communities in regional locations with the Australian Department of Home Affairs (DoHA) aiming to redirect the resettlement of up to 50% of refugees to regional areas (Brown, 2024).

Resettlement in regional/rural Australia can be a "double-edged sword" for refugees (Major et al., 2013, p. 101), as they present both challenges and opportunities for successful integration into Australian society. However, the challenges of refugee resettlement are often amplified in rural and provincial settings (Colvin, 2017), as there are additional constraints that limit access to settlement and other related services (Boese & Moran, 2025). Furthermore, limited cross-cultural connections in regional areas creates discriminatory conditions, with such behaviors a "compelling feature" of many refugees' resettlement journeys in regional Australia (Boese & Moran, 2025, p.11). Other specific challenges to regional resettlement include systemic discrimination, which hinders their access to resources and services for successful resettlement, and the limitations with affordable housing, public transport options, specialist health care, and digital connectivity (Brown, 2024). Therefore, although the regional resettlement of refugees aims to provide employment opportunities while developing the economic landscape of regional towns (DoHA, 2023), regional resettlement can be more disadvantageous than beneficial to refugee communities.

Educating refugees in regional Australia

The gaps in educational access and outcomes between urban and regional areas have long been acknowledged as a crucial issue in Australia (Brown, 2024; Colvin, 2017; Major et al., 2013). For example, while all new arrivals should be able to access Intensive English Language support on arrival, this provision is not evenly distributed across the country. Regional areas have limited

resources because regional resettlement is a reasonably recent policy intention. As such, language learning remains the most significant challenge for both new arrivals and schools (Naidoo et al., 2018; Author 2 et al., 2019). Additionally, educators in regional and rural schools often feel unprepared to address the diverse academic and socio-cultural needs of RBS (Major et al., 2013; Naidoo et al., 2018).

This unpreparedness is often a result of limited experiences of cultural diversity, due to the limited multicultural education training received (Wilkinson, 2018). Moreover, Wilkinson (2018) and Colvin (2017) contend that prior to the recent shift in refugee resettlement policy, regional and rural locations in Australia have been largely homogenous (Wilkinson, 2018), despite the nation's evident multicultural landscape. The limited exposure to cultural diversity in rural and regional areas also lead to arguably magnified racist attitudes towards RBS (Baak et al., 2024; Colvin, 2017; Uptin, 2022). This, coupled with challenges in adapting to practices and routines in their educational settings also lead to difficulties in developing friendships and social connections, which hinder students from integrating in their schools and local communities (Molla, 2021).

However, the spatial disparities in educational access are not unique to RBS. Previous studies have examined how geographic and socio-spatial factors—such as urban development, gentrification, and socio-economic segregation—impact educational inequality across rural and regional Australia (Randolph & Tice, 2014; Smith et al., 2019). However, these studies primarily focus on broader population groups. This paper contributes to and extends that body of work by focusing specifically on RBS in new regional resettlement areas, where infrastructures are underdeveloped, and where refugee communities are both spatially and socially marginalised. By applying the concepts of education pioneer migrants and arrival infrastructures, this study foregrounds the intersection of resettlement policy, refugee-specific educational needs, and the realities of rural and regional educational systems.

Conceptual framework

This paper employs ideas first presented in Ager and Strang's (2008) foundational framework, which recognizes education as a key marker and means of integration. The framework conceptualizes integration as an ecology set on a pyramid, with foundations (such as rights) at the bottom, facilitators (including language, cultural knowledge, safety), social connections (bridges, bonds, links), and markers and means at the top: employment, housing, healthcare, and education (Ager & Strang, 2008). Later iterations of the concept added 'leisure' to the markers and means, and 'digital skills' to facilitators (Ndofor-Tah et al., 2019), and talked about opportunity structures and locality (Phillimore, 2021). Additionally, Olliff et al.'s (2023) analysis of Australian refugee literature provided an Australian-specific reworking of the integration framework, adding 'transport' as a facilitator, in recognition of the critical role of transport in large countries, which determines access to people and services. In addition, they included 'mediators' as an additional category, which includes contextual and demographic factors such as age, gender, ethnicity, visa type, location, sexuality (LGBTQI+), religion, disability, and time.

Building on this foundation, this study brings together Ager and Strang's integration pyramid with three key concepts that offer a more grounded and infrastructural view of regional resettlement: pioneer migrants (Wessendorf, 2018), arrival infrastructures (Meeus et al., 2019; Wessendorf, 2022), and arrival brokers (Hanhörster & Wessendorf, 2020). These concepts allow for a deeper exploration of how the lack of pre-established facilitators (such as language support or cultural knowledge), social connections, and limited access to physical and human infrastructures shape the educational and integration experiences for newly arrived RBS in regional contexts. Notably, they highlight how schools, educators, and learning spaces function not only as education providers, but as essential arrival infrastructures and integration mediators in their own right. This study also uses these concepts to understand the experiences of new resettlement areas in building educational opportunities for newly arrived refugees in areas with underdeveloped infrastructures.

Pioneer migrants

Pioneer migrants are individuals who arrive at their new settlement site with limited social contacts and networks, and "might not be able to draw on the support of people with whom they share the same national, religious, linguistic, ethnic and socioeconomic background and who have preceded them in undertaking the same migration journey during a similar time period" (Wessendorf, 2018, p. 18).

Arrival infrastructures

The concept of arrival infrastructures (Meeus et al., 2019; Wessendorf, 2022) captures the organisations, institutions, social spaces, and actors that play a role in facilitating the arrival of migrants, and takes a process rather than product view, with a view to exploring refugees' integration experiences from arrival to "find[ing] a foothold" (p. 175) in the social, economic, and cultural aspects of their lives. Wessendorf (2022) contends that the infrastructural approach to integration is advantageous, as it recognizes the importance of specific spaces while also expanding the notion of infrastructures beyond what Schrooten & Meeus, 2020) call the "territorial approach of the neighbourhood to all parts of the fabric of society that matter for newcomers" (p. 5). The two infrastructures crucial to integration are 'soft infrastructures' (Boost et al., 2019), including people, and 'hard infrastructures' (Saunders, 2011)—physical sites that have critical roles as "information hubs" (Wessendorf, 2022, p. 176) and places for the development of social connections (Wessendorf, 2022).

Arrival brokers

Arrival brokers are individuals who play a fundamental role in facilitating the integration of newly arrived migrants (Hanhörster & Wessendorf, 2020). Wessendorf and Phillimore (2019) note that these individuals are often long-established migrants who have specific settlement knowledge, enabling them to support the settlement trajectories of new migrants by providing both practical and emotional support (Wessendorf, 2022; Wessendorf & Phillimore, 2019). Hall and Smith (2015) refer to these forms of support as "infrastructures of kindness" (p. 11)—everyday acts that support migrant integration in a progressively hostile policy and discursive environment. The role of arrival brokers thus highlights the centrality of social connections and networks in facilitating migrant integration.

Physical infrastructures

Publicly accessible physical infrastructures also play an instrumental role in facilitating resettlement, especially for pioneer migrants who lack pre-existing social connections upon their arrival (Wessendorf, 2022). Such infrastructures provide access to critical information, as well as opportunities to develop social connections. These sites include schools, pharmacies, libraries, and religious sites, including churches and mosques. However, while schools are recognized as physical infrastructures for educational access, they are often not recognized as *arrival* infrastructures that provide access to critical information and opportunities for social connections, which facilitate integration for newly arrived RBS.

Working with these concepts, this article responds to three framing questions that seek to explore how education (as an existing infrastructure) facilitated arrival for RBS in one regional city:

1. What arrival infrastructures existed before the new arrivals, and what was developed post-arrival?

2. How do local educators *broker* the educational access and experience of newly arrived refugee students?
3. How do newly arrived refugees act as *education pioneer migrants* when they are resettled in regional areas that do not have established arrival infrastructures?

Methodology

An ethnographically oriented methodology frames this study, as it facilitates the generation of rich data and the blending of the insiders' (RBS families, educators, settlement workers, and community members) views with the authors' interpretations. To maintain confidentiality and protect the identities of participants and the research setting, pseudonyms have been used throughout this article, and all identifying details have been altered to ensure anonymity while preserving the integrity of the data and findings. The paper presents findings from a study situated in the regional city of Rolling Hills, which has often been cited in the media as a success story of refugee integration in regional NSW.

'Rolling Hills'

Rolling Hills, a regional Australian city has been recognized as a Refugee Welcome Zone[1] for over 10 years (at the time of writing). Recently, it has been selected as a regional refugee resettlement site[2] by the Australian government, as a result of advocacy by the local city council. The primary industries in Rolling Hills include agriculture and education, and during the study period, the city's residents are predominantly Anglo-Australian, who make up over 70% of its population. At the time of data collection, Rolling Hills had more than 600 refugees.

Research design

This paper draws on data collected through semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and the collection of fieldnotes and artefacts (photographs) during Author 1's ethnographic fieldwork. Originally envisioned as a shorter study, the data collection was conducted over a period of two years (2020–2022) due to disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, including lockdowns and border closures, which limited Author 1's ability to visit the field site. Additionally, social distancing measures resulted in a halt of all activities in the refugee community, resulting in limited opportunities to engage and build rapport with potential participants. The prolonged data collection period reflects the need to work within these constraints while ensuring ethical and meaningful engagement with the study's participants. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with educators and community stakeholders, while focus group interviews were conducted with RBS and their parents, with one student and two parent focus groups. The behaviors in the host community were also observed and recorded through fieldnotes and photographs during fieldwork.

Participants

This paper primarily draws on the data collected from 12 participants in the study, including RBS, their parents, educators and community stakeholders from NGOs and education institutions in Rolling Hills. Participants were selected based on the following inclusion criteria: individuals of refugee background who had resettled in Rolling Hills for at least six months, educators who had worked directly with RBS, and local settlement workers and volunteers actively involved in support services. Individuals who had not engaged substantively in community or educational settings were excluded. The participants in this study were opportunistically recruited *via* snowball sampling. The participants' and their pseudonyms are described in Table 1.

Table 1. Overview of the participants.

Participant	Pseudonym	Role
RBS	Maher	Student at the local high school
	Aisya	
RBS parents	Tia	Parent of RBS at the local high school
	Jehan	
Educators	Meghan	Teacher union representative
	Lisa	Ex-principal of a school with a high refugee population
	Alice	IEC teacher
	Esther	Mainstream high school teacher
	Bianca	
	Sam	
Community stakeholders	Ian	Staff member of a local service provider
	Jonathan	Staff member of a local NGO
	Linda	Retired tertiary institution educator
	Rachel	Current tertiary institution educator

It is important to note that the fieldwork was conducted during the pandemic in 2022, which constrained opportunities for in-person engagement and may have influenced participants' experiences and responses.

Data analysis

For the analysis of interview and focus group data, an interim reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) was conducted (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The collected data were analysed in a cyclical process following the six stages outlined by Braun & Clark. The transcripts, fieldnotes and artefacts from the fieldwork were coded together; Author 1 undertook the first layer of coding, before meeting with Author 2 to discuss patterns and refine broader thematic categories. These categories were refined in dialogue with the conceptual framework of arrival infrastructures, as well as reflexively sense-checking with our own knowledge of (1) the literature and the field, (2) our experiences of teaching refugees in different settings, (3) our observations based on our own migration experiences.

Researcher positionality and reflexivity

Our biographies inevitably shaped the collection and our interpretations of the data. Author 1 is a Malaysian-Tamil cisgender woman who migrated to Australia on a student visa; she has previously worked as an English teacher in regional Malaysia, and is now an academic at an Australian university researching refugee education and employment. Author 2 is a British cisgender woman who migrated to Australia on a partner visa; as a teacher in adult migrant English programs in both the UK and Australia, Author 2 has significant experience of teaching new arrivals; Author 2 is now an academic and advocate for refugee education. Our biographies influence our positionality, especially for Author 1 whose self-identification as an ethnic and racial minority likely influenced how she was perceived during data collection in Rolling Hills. We drew on this awareness in our interpretations of the data.

Ethical considerations

To protect participants from any potential harm, crucial ethical issues were addressed: voluntary informed consent of all participants, and anonymity and confidentiality. To ensure informed voluntary consent, all participants were informed on the scope and aims of the study, the data collection methods, and the anticipated duration of interviews, both by letter and in person during the first interviews. To maintain confidentiality and protect the identities of participants and the research setting, pseudonyms have been used throughout this article, and all identifying details have been altered to ensure anonymity while preserving the integrity of the data and findings.

Findings

While Ager and Strang (2008) integration framework has been widely adopted to conceptualise the key domains of refugee integration—including education as both a marker and means—it often presumes the presence of foundational infrastructure, social connections, and institutional readiness. In new regional resettlement contexts like Rolling Hills, however, these assumptions do not hold. The concepts of *education pioneer migrants*, *arrival infrastructures*, and *arrival brokers* explore how refugee-background students and their communities navigate educational pathways in the absence or delayed establishment of such structures. These concepts provide a more grounded lens for analysing how integration unfolds in real time, in settings where educational support systems must often be constructed from the ground up. The findings that follow are organised around the research questions but are informed by this conceptual framework to illuminate the structural, institutional, and relational dynamics shaping educational access and experiences of RBS in new regional resettlement areas.

What arrival infrastructures existed in Rolling Hills before the refugee community arrived?

Before the arrival of the refugee community, there were limited arrival infrastructures in place to facilitate the resettlement of newly arrived migrants in Rolling Hills. Nevertheless, prior to the recognition of Rolling Hills as a regional refugee resettlement site, the Rolling Hills Humanitarian Settlement Group has been sponsoring and facilitating the resettlement of a small number of refugees. As Jonathan, a staff member of the NGO mentioned,

> Jonathan: …from 2003 and 2009, we brought about 60 people here and we helped settle them in. So, we knew what the needs would be, and [what] the problems would be…

Jonathan's comment highlights the impact of 'countrymindedness' (Aitkins, 1985), the interdependence and strong interest in the local community often evident in regional Australia, which led to the establishment of pre-existing support for the refugee community in Rolling Hills.

However, Jonathan added,

> Jonathan: We knew what needed to be done, but there weren't the large numbers. So, when the huge influx came, the town wasn't ready. Settlement Services International (SSI) was trying to use their urban models [of resettlement] in Rolling Hills.

Despite the NGO acting as an effective soft infrastructure, Jonathan's statement indicates the limited establishment of arrival infrastructures prior to the refugees' arrival in Rolling Hills, which led to the unpreparedness of the city in supporting the resettlement needs of this community. The underdeveloped arrival infrastructures are also evident in the education sector. Prior to the arrival of the refugees, the only form of additional educational support for migrant and refugee students was English as an Additional Language or Dialect (EAL/D) classes in the local public high school. However, the number of EAL/D teachers were limited as they were allocated to the school according to the number of EAL/D students (Watkins et al., 2019), which was significantly small in Rolling Hills before the arrival of the refugees.

What arrival infrastructures were developed after the refugee community arrived?

In response to the limited pre-existing educational arrival infrastructures, new ones had to be created. These infrastructures addressed both educational gaps and integration barriers, functioning as soft and hard arrival infrastructures (Wessendorf, 2022) that align with the 'facilitators', 'markers and means', and 'social connections' in Ager and Strang's (2008) integration framework.

An Intensive English Centre was established in Rolling Hills two years after the arrival of the refugees, to better support the language and literacy needs of a growing cohort of

RBS. Prior to its establishment, one local English as an Additional Language or Dialect (EAL/D) teacher taught intensive English classes at the public high school where the RBS were enrolled at, which grew from just two to more than 100 students within two years of the RBS' arrival.

The IEC in Rolling Hills is locally considered a success story of refugee education to promote positive messages about refugee resettlement in regional Australia, especially following the federal policy shift to regional refugee resettlement in 2016. As many regional refugee resettlement sites lack a centre to support the English language needs of school-going RBS (Naidoo et al., 2018), the establishment of the IEC in Rolling Hills reflects a significant milestone in regional refugee education.

In addition to the IEC, the local public high school also established initiatives to support the English language development of the RBS in Rolling Hills. Sam, a teacher at the local public high school, remarked that two years after the arrival of the refugees, the school established parallel English classes to provide "intensive English assistance" to students who recently transitioned from the IEC to the mainstream high school. The school employed four bilingual aides who spoke both the local language of the RBS and English to support the English language and literacy needs of the RBS:

> Sam: The other big thing has been around the employment of [these] people in the schooling system – we have four people at our school…two are ex-students, which is amazing.

Apart from the local high school, the local university in Rolling Hills also supports RBS through strategic use of existing equity funding. While RBS are not a formally identified equity group in higher education equity policy, the local university used the equity funding to develop programs that addressed the educational and language needs of the RBS, including outreach partnership activities, transition programs, and academic and language support to facilitate university pathways. As this outreach with the refugee community evolved, the university developed a science-based English course to support the number of RBS who expressed interest in health-science related careers. As Rachel, a tertiary educator, remarked:

> Rachel: … they're doing really well, but you know in year 11 and 12 … they're all aspiring to do these science-based subjects, so they're all in those difficult subjects. We found that they just didn't have the language capacity. So, we've been running this year … it's … English for the Health Sciences … they want to work in pharmacy, nursing or medicine, and psychology … so we run that on top of their [classes at] school … to bridge them as they transit from school to university …

In addition to language support, the data collected highlighted the development of new arrival infrastructures to facilitate employment pathways for RBS. To support their aspirations towards careers in health science, the local high school developed an additional science course in 2022, four years after the arrival of the refugee community. Sam explained that although many of the RBS are eager to pursue health science-related career at the university due to the high status of related careers in the refugee community, many of the students are unsuccessful due to their limited understanding of "fundamental concepts" in science subjects. Sam explained that the science course aims to develop students' foundational knowledge, consequently facilitating their successful educational outcomes:

> Sam: … the data was showing students who were pursuing that (science-related subjects) weren't successful. So… we've created our own science course … as almost as a bridging course to those other sciences because … they haven't got those fundamentals of science knowledge, basic principles, or concepts.

The addition of the science course four years after the refugee community's arrival indicates how the support provided for the RBS evolved as the local educational institutions gained a better understanding of what was required by this refugee cohort. Further, the university in Rolling Hills targeted RBS in their outreach work focused on developing aspirations and knowledge of future career pathways. Rachel (tertiary educator) highlighted how RBS often have a

limited view of future career options because of their unfamiliarity with Australian education and employment conventions and networks:

> Rachel…in our access courses (outreach with schools) as well, we do a little bit of exploring careers. We're working with the university outreach people to present specifically for [refugee] kids on the kinds of range of careers, so they don't keep in that medical kind of field because that's what they've been doing …

At the time of writing, 19 RBS have transitioned to university after their participation in the outreach career programs conducted by the local university in partnership with the local public high school. Rachel also added that several RBS were able to get into health science-related courses, commenting on the role of the programs in supporting the RBS' aspirations towards careers in the health sector.

While the educator data illustrates how the newly created arrival infrastructures facilitate the educational access and experiences of RBS, the timing of their establishment is significant to the capacity of education as an arrival infrastructure for the first refugees to arrive in Rolling Hills. For example, to support the English language and literacy needs of the RBS, the IEC was established in 2020, two years after the arrival of the community. The IEC was not initiated by the NSW Department of Education (DoE); rather, it was a response to advocacy by the teacher union. Meghan, a representative from the teacher union, described this campaign:

> Meghan: Well, [we told the NSW DoE that] … with this amount of refugee students, you now need to focus on the infrastructure – build an IEC, have the Intensive English Centre there so that this large cohort that you're settling in this area have adequate support … to successfully progress their outcomes so that the whole region benefits from having [the refugee] community there …

Meghan continued to remark on the "reverse order" of the infrastructures to support RBS who are education pioneer migrants in Rolling Hills:

> Meghan: … You should put the infrastructure systems in place, then bring them. But it's not happening that way. It's happening in reverse order … and it shouldn't be …

This observation of reverse engineering highlights the lack of planning from the state government and suggests a limited recognition of the complex needs of RBS in regional areas (Naidoo et al., 2018), and how the support provided evolved as the local education institutions gained a better understanding of what was required by the RBS, inadvertently making them education pioneer migrants in Rolling Hills. This delay in infrastructure provision highlights a critical gap in the foundational 'facilitators' of integration (Ager & Strang, 2008), such as language access and institutional support, underscoring how integration frameworks assume—rather than account for—the realities of regional infrastructure lag.

Local teachers as educational arrival brokers

The data collected points to educators as key arrival brokers in the Rolling Hills educational context, acting as 'facilitators' in the integration framework who bridge systemic and social gaps in the absence of planned infrastructure. The teachers' role as arrival brokers aligns closely with Ager and Strang (2008) emphasis on 'social connections'—particularly bridging ties—while also extending the role of teachers into the under-theorized space between facilitators and mediators, as they not only provided support but also actively shaped the structural conditions for integration. However, the findings from interviews with educators in Rolling Hills suggest that they face multiple challenges in acting as educational arrival brokers for newly arrived RBS, as teachers felt underequipped to address the educational needs of this student cohort. These findings align with previous studies highlighting the unpreparedness of teachers across Australian rural and regional schools in addressing the diverse academic and socio-cultural needs of RBS (Major et al., 2013; Naidoo et al., 2018).

A critical challenge described by educators was a persistent lack of cultural awareness and a feeling of unpreparedness to work with the complex needs presented by many RBS. Esther, a teacher at the local high school, described how her limited awareness of the cultural practices of the RBS at school could lead to classroom practices that are insensitive to the students' beliefs:

> Esther: … I feel like a lot of teachers might not actually know what the students' culture is…what their beliefs are … I didn't even know that [the RBS] can't shower on Wednesdays. I know roughly, but I think it'd be good to know all the details just so we're informed … as an example, so we've just had a PE lesson, we want all the students to shower, it's a Wednesday … if you don't know, then you're going to be, come on everyone shower … to respect their religion and their beliefs, you need to know what they're actually doing and the traditions … I guess we're probably not informed enough …

In contrast, another teacher, Sam, remarked how teachers now have a greater cultural awareness of the RBS, due to the professional development training provided at the local high school:

> Sam: I think yes [we have more cultural awareness] now; four years ago, definitely not. We have done a lot of work around professional learning within schools, so we have done a lot of programs around the UN's program, S.T.A.R.S,[3] for refugee resettlement. So, a lot of teachers have gone through that, looking at the refugee experience, trauma, the effect on the brain, and that idea of wellbeing comes first before learning …

Sam's comment suggests an improvement in the professional development training provided for teachers in the local public high school. However, according to Sam, this support was only available for the teachers a year after the arrival of the RBS. The data thus illustrates the delayed professional development training provided for teachers, which led to many educators like Esther feeling unprepared to provide educational support for the RBS.

The data also indicate how the limited cultural understanding among selected teachers in the local public high school is often compounded by the different expectations of teaching and learning practices between the RBS and the local teachers. Findings from previous studies suggest that these differences can impact the students' sense of belonging, and consequently their engagement in education and employment settings (Korpershoeck et al., 2019). Esther described the students' constant need for attention and support as challenging, as she is more accustomed to her role as a facilitator in the classroom:

> Esther: …in my Year 7 class, there are two Australian kids, and the rest are [RBS] so they (the RBS) are very needy… "Miss, what do we do now? Miss, what's next? How do we do this? Miss," like very constant… every minute asking … They want constant attention. Otherwise, they feel like they can't move on to continue the task or finish it…

Alice (IEC teacher) described a similar experience with her students, recounting how "as soon as you're like, "Right. Now you can start. Miss, miss, miss, miss, miss, miss. Help me, help me, help me." It's just like, "I just told you …"

The transition from facilitating classroom learning to providing intensive and continuous support for the newly arrived RBS appears to overwhelm educators in the study, who felt unprepared to address the distinct educational needs of this student group and were forced into becoming educational arrival brokers as they responded to the acute challenges of teaching a new cohort with inadequate training for either teachers or students (including the local students). The impact of inadequate teacher training to address the needs of RBS is particularly acute in regional areas, which are often characterized by limited cross-cultural contact in the community (Brown, 2024; Colvin, 2017). This sentiment was expressed by Bianca, another teacher in the local high school, as Author 1 wrote in this fieldnote:

> Today I chatted with Bianca, my next-door neighbour, who is also a teacher at the local public high school. Bianca mentioned how "cathartic" it was to speak to me about the challenges she was facing in teaching the newly arrived RBS, as she felt severely underequipped to support their educational needs. She highlighted how most of the teachers had limited contact with students and individuals from different cultural backgrounds as they have never left Rolling Hills: "… we grew up here, studied here, and now we work here".

Bianca's sentiments indicate the local teachers' unpreparedness in teaching students from multicultural backgrounds, highlighting the need for greater training to support teachers in regional areas who become educational arrival brokers for newly arrived refugees.

Newly arrived refugees as education pioneer migrants

While it is worth noting that the educational arrival infrastructures established for RBS in Rolling Hills far exceed that of many rural and regional areas across Australia, the delayed establishment of these infrastructures led to the RBS inadvertently becoming education pioneer migrants in Rolling Hills - they had to experience the gaps in provision—and the related hardship—to demonstrate how their needs were not being met. This challenging experience was evident in the contrasting perceptions of educators and students and their families on the impact of the IEC on the students' wellbeing and belonging. While several educators perceived time spent in the IEC as useful for building their language confidence and proficiency, and promoting students' sense of belonging, some of the RBS interviewed experienced this as an 'othering' from their local peers and preferred studying together with their local peers. For example, Maher, a Year 11 student, reported that being grouped with Australian students helped him feel like a "part of them"; similarly, Aisya (Year 7 student) remarked "Yes, of course it's better [to be in the mainstream classroom], it helps us … to know them better, and they know us better".

Two refugee parents expressed more serious concerns about their children's time in the IEC, perceiving it to be detrimental to their children's integration because they were grouped together and spent limited time with their local peers. Tia, mother of a Year 11 student, described not liking the IEC "at all; we wanted them to go mainstream from day one". Likewise, Jehan, father to two children, described the IEC as "a disaster" because it encouraged the students to communicate in their local language at the IEC, which the parents feared would affect their English language development. The timing of the IEC's establishment could lead to perceived 'othering' by both the RBS and their parents, as the RBS were initially grouped together with their Australian peers. Prior to the establishment of the IEC, the RBS were taught in an intensive English class at the local public high school by one EAL/D teacher for the first two years of their resettlement in Rolling Hills. However, the classes could not meet the diverse needs of the growing number of students and adequately prepare them for learning in mainstream classrooms. The IEC was thus established two years after their arrival in Rolling Hills in a separate building to the local high school, with its own entry and exit points. Hence, the separation of the RBS from their mainstream peers after two years of their arrival could be perceived as 'othering' by the refugee parents.

Further, the RBS had to take on the role of educational pioneer migrants when they experienced what they considered as inadequate support, Aisya (Year 7 student) described the lack of support from her teachers with her assignments at school:

> Aisya: … I wish I could get help with my assignments sometimes. But the other teachers, they are not available for us sometimes so they can't help us … they say they have their own classes, and they must help other kids too so a lot of times they can't help us.

Similarly, Tia described her daughter's frustration at the lack of support provided in the mainstream classrooms: "My daughter comes home really agitated and said nobody [is] helping us. I just need help, I need help, but nobody in school is helping me". Nevertheless, Tia reported improvements in the support provided, following feedback from the students.

The contrasting expectations of teaching and learning practices appear to lead to the local teachers' deficit view of the RBS. This deficit framing could impact teacher expectations of these students and consequently the students' educational outcomes. Teacher expectations act as "powerful self-fulfilling prophecies" (Johnston et al., 2019, p. 45) of students' educational outcomes as they impact students' self-concepts and their academic achievement (Rubie-Davies et al.,

2015). Therefore, the teachers' contrasting perception of their role could result in detrimental educational outcomes for the RBS. Additionally, the students' behaviors described by the teachers indicate the unmet educational needs of the RBS, which consequently led to them 'acting up' to get their needs noticed, as education pioneer migrants in Rolling Hills. The experiences of the RBS as newly arrived education pioneer migrants therefore highlight the importance of establishing adequate arrival infrastructures and preparing teachers, who are educational arrival brokers to support the educational needs of the RBS.

Conclusions

In this paper, we apply the concepts of 'pioneer migrants', 'arrival infrastructures' and 'arrival brokers' in conjunction with Ager and Strang's (2008) integration framework to understand the roles played by newly arrived refugees and educators in regional spaces with underdeveloped arrival infrastructures to build educational opportunities and supports. While Ager and Strang (2008) identify education as both a 'marker' and 'means' of integration, the findings in this article demonstrate that without adequate facilitators—particularly language support, cultural knowledge, and physical infrastructure—education alone is insufficient. Despite the significant development of arrival infrastructures in Rolling Hills and their eventual positive impact on the educational access of RBS, the timing of their establishment is significant to the capacity of education to act as an arrival infrastructure for the first cohort of refugees in Rolling Hills. In regional contexts, education is often the last sector to be considered as service providers focus on meeting the basic resettlement needs of refugee communities, including housing, health and employment (Boese & Moran, 2025). This is reflected in the delayed development of educational support for RBS in Rolling Hills, and training for teachers, who were 'forced' to become educational arrival brokers for these newly arrived RBS.

While our findings affirm Ager and Strang's (2008) emphasis on the importance of language support, educational access, and social connections in refugee integration, they also indicate a key limitation of the framework—namely, the implicit assumption that infrastructures are already in place to deliver these domains. In Rolling Hills, such education infrastructures were significantly delayed, requiring RBS and local educators to broker or construct them in real time. This spatial and temporal lag calls for a supplementary conceptual lens that attends to the infrastructural and agentic labour of integration. By foregrounding the concepts of *arrival infrastructures*, *arrival brokers*, and *education pioneer migrants*, this study highlights the importance of analysing not only what facilitates integration, but how and when these facilitators emerge. These concepts offer a more situated, processual view of integration—one that better captures the realities of new regional resettlement contexts where educational support systems are not pre-existing, but gradually built through relational, institutional, and community-level negotiations.

This study thus extends existing integration frameworks by demonstrating that access to 'markers and means' like education depends not only on presence but on timing and preparedness of infrastructures. Integration in regional areas is contingent on how local actors—such as educators—are positioned and supported to act as arrival brokers, and how pioneer migrants navigate the gaps left by delayed service coordination. Policy responses to regional resettlement rarely consider existing arrival infrastructures (Infrastructure Australia, 2022), and this oversight impedes the educational access and consequent integration of education pioneer migrants in regional spaces. There are significant gaps in educational access and outcomes for RBS in regional spaces in contrast to urban resettlement areas (Brown, 2024; Colvin, 2017; Major et al., 2013). Regional settlement planning therefore must recognize the centrality of educational infrastructures—not only as a site of service delivery, but as a foundational component of integration. Teachers play a crucial role in reshaping the educational experiences of RBS and creating opportunities to develop their sense of belonging in the classroom and beyond (Rose, 2019). Consequently, education and humanitarian migration policies should consider the additional support and training for regional teachers who inadvertently become educational arrival brokers for newly arrived RBS.

Implications for policy, research and practice

We offer several recommendations for policy advocacy and practice. First, education should be considered a core component of resettlement planning in regional migration policies, meaning language learning support, professional development for teachers, and bilingual support staff should be in place *before* the arrival of RBS. Second, state education departments should provide targeted training on cultural competency and trauma-informed pedagogy to regional educators. Finally, recognising the role of teachers and local institutions as arrival brokers will create the levers to provide adequate funding, training, and structural recognition within policy frameworks.

For education to function as a meaningful 'marker and means' of integration, both physical and human infrastructures must be established proactively, rather than introduced reactively in response to emerging challenges. By recognising the unique needs of newly arrived refugees in new resettlement areas and developing the adequate arrival infrastructures prior to their resettlement—receiving communities will be better equipped to facilitate the educational access and experiences of education pioneer migrants, consequently supporting their integration into society. Finally, given these insights are generated from one ethnographic case study, future research should include comparative case studies across multiple regional resettlement sites and explore longitudinal outcomes for RBS over time, particularly in relation to post-school transitions and employment.

Notes

1. A Refugee Welcome Zone is a symbolic and voluntary declaration by a local government area in Australia committing to welcoming refugees, upholding their human rights, and promoting social inclusion.
2. A refugee resettlement site refers to a location where refugees are officially placed through Australia's Humanitarian Program, as coordinated by the Australian Government in partnership with international bodies like the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).
3. *S.T.A.R.S. in schools: Supporting students from refugee backgrounds* is a professional development program developed by the UNICEF and offered by the NSW Department of Education (DoE) to support school staff in responding to refugee students' potential behavioral issues in ways that acknowledge their trauma.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This research was supported by funding from the University of New South Wales, awarded to Anna Xavier for her PhD research project titled "Breaking Barriers or Building Walls? An Investigation into The Educational Support for Refugee-Background Students in Regional New South Wales".

ORCID

Anna Xavier http://orcid.org/0009-0008-8750-7088

References

Author 2, et al. (2019).
Author 2. (2022).
Ager, A., & Strang, A. (2008). Understanding integration: A conceptual framework. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, *21*(2), 166–191. https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/fen016
Aitkin, D. (1985). Countrymindedness—the spread of an idea. *Australian Cultural History*, *4*, 34–41.

Australian Government Department of Home Affairs (DoHA). (2023). *Australia's offshore humanitarian program: 2021–22*. https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/research-and-stats/files/australia-offshore-humanitarian-program-2021-22.pdf

Baak, M., Johnson, B., Brown, J., & Morgan, S. (2024). *Refugee students' views about how schools can foster resilience: What helps, what hinders and what needs to change*. Full report. Adelaide: University of South Australia.

Boese, M., & Moran, A. (2025). Regional resettlement of refugees: Rethinking 'secondary migration'. *Australian Geographer*, *56*(1), 37–55.), -. https://doi.org/10.1080/00049182.2023.2199509

Boost, D., & Oosterlynck, S, (2019). Soft' urban arrival infrastructures in the periphery of metropolitan areas: The role of social networks for sub-saharan newcomers in Aalst, Belgium. In B. Meeus, K. Arnaut & B. van Heur Eds.), *Arrival Infrastructures. Migration and Urban Social Mobilities* (pp. 1–32). Palgrave Macmillan.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2019). Reflecting on reflexive thematic analysis. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, *11*(4), 589–597. https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2019.1628806

Brown, J. L. (2024). Educating in the context of 'Dispersal': Rural schools and refugee-background students. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, *28*(9), 1968–1982. https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2022.2041112

Colvin, N. (2017). 'Really really different different': rurality, regional schools and refugees. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, *20*(2), 225–239. https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2015.1110302

Hall, T., & Smith, R. J. (2015). Care and repair and the politics of urban kindness. *Sociology*, *49*(1), 3–18. https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038514546662

Hanhörster, H., & Wessendorf, S. (2020). The role of arrival areas for migrant integration and resource access. *Urban Planning*, *5*(3), 1–10. https://doi.org/10.17645/up.v5i3.2891

Infrastructure Australia. (2022). *2022 Regional strengths and infrastructure gaps*. Australian Government. https://www.infrastructureaustralia.gov.au/publications/2022-regional-strengths-and-infrastructure-gaps

Johnston, O., Wildy, H., & Shand, J. (2019). A decade of teacher expectations research 2008–2018: Historical foundations, new developments, and future pathways. *Australian Journal of Education*, *63*(1), 44–73. https://doi.org/10.1177/0004944118824420

Korpershoeck, H., Canrinus, E. T., Fokkens-Bruinsma, M., & de Boer, H. (2019). The relationships between school belonging and students' motivational, social-emotional, behavioural, and academic outcomes in secondary education: A meta-analytic review. *Research Papers in Education*, *35*(6), 641–680. https://doi.org/10.1080/02671522.2019.1615116

Major, J., Wilkinson, J., Langat, K., & Santoro, N. (2013). Sudanese young people of refugee background in rural and regional Australia: Social capital and education success. *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education*, *23*(3), 95–105. https://doi.org/10.47381/aijre.v23i3.694

Meeus, B., Arnaut, K., & Van Heur, B. (2019). *Arrival infrastructures: Migration and urban social mobilities*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Molla, T. (2021). Educational aspirations and experiences of refugee-background African youth in Australia: A case study. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, *25*(8), 877–895. https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2019.1588924

Moreton-Robinson, A. (2015). *The white possessive: Property, power, and indigenous sovereignty*. University of Minnesota Press.

Naidoo, L., Wilkinson, J., Langat, K., Adoniou, M., Cunneen, R., & Bolger, D. (2018). *Case study: Supporting pathways for refugee students' access and participation in tertiary education*. University of Western Sydney.

Ndofor-Tah, C., Strang, A., Phillimore, J., Morrice, L., Michael, L., Wood, P., & Simmons, J. (2019). *Home Office Indicators of Integration framework 2019*. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/805870/home-office-indicators-of-integration-framework-2019-horr109.pdf

Olliff, L., Block, K., Baker, S., Edwards, C., & Tran, J. (2023). The Australian Research on Refugee Integration Database (ARRID): A platform and conceptual framework to map, connect and share knowledge. *Journal of International Migration and Integration*, *24*(1), 403–423. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12134-022-00949-y

Phillimore, J. (2021). Refugee-Integration-Opportunity Structures: Shifting the Focus From Refugees to Context. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, *34*(2), 1946–1966. https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/feaa012

Randolph, B., & Tice, A. (2014). Suburbanizing Disadvantage in Australian Cities: Sociospatial Change in an Era of Neoliberalism. *Journal of Urban Affairs*, *36*(sup1), 384–399. https://doi.org/10.1111/juaf.12108

Refugee Council of Australia. (2024). *Offshore processing statistics*. https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/operation-sovereign-borders-offshore-detention-statistics/2/

Rose, A. (2019). The role of teacher agency in refugee education. *The Australian Educational Researcher*, *46*(1), 75–91. https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-018-0280-0

Rubie-Davies, C., Peterson, E. R., Sibley, C. G., & Rosenthal, R. (2015). A teacher expectation intervention: Modelling the practices of high expectation teachers. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, *40*(C), 72–85. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cedpsych.2014.03.003

Saunders, D. (2011). *Arrival city: How the largest migration in history is reshaping our world*. William Books.

Schrooten, M., & Meeus, B. (2020). The possible role and position of social work as part of the arrival infrastructure. *European Journal of Social Work*, *23*(3), 414–424. https://doi.org/10.1080/13691457.2019.1688257

Smith, C., Parr, N., & Muhidin, S. (2019). Mapping schools' NAPLAN results: A spatial inequality of school outcomes in Australia. *Geographical Research*, *57*(2), 133–150. https://doi.org/10.1111/1745-5871.12317

Uptin, J. (2022). Trying harder than everyone else; examining how younger former refugees reconstruct new identities and navigate belonging. In R. Fielding (Ed.), *Multilingualism, identity, and interculturality in education* (pp. 181–196). Springer.

Watkins, M., Noble, G., & Wong, A. (2019). *It's Complex: Working with students of refugee backgrounds and their families in New South Wales public schools*. NSW Teachers Federation (NSWTF). https://www.westernsydney.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0004/1504588/Its_Complex_Working_with_Students_of_Refugee_Backgrounds_and_their_Families_in_NSW_Public_Schools.pdf

Wessendorf, S. (2018). Pathways of settlement among pioneer migrants in super-diverse London. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, *44*(2), 270–286. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2017.1341719

Wessendorf, S. (2022). 'The library is like a mother': Arrival infrastructures and migrant newcomers in East London. *Migration Studies*, *10*(2), 172–189. https://doi.org/10.1093/migration/mnab051

Wessendorf, S., & Phillimore, J. (2019). New migrants' social integration, embedding and emplacement in superdiverse contexts. *Sociology*, *53*(1), 123–138. https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038518771843

Wilkinson, J. (2018). The role of schools. In L. Naidoo, J. Wilkinson, M. Adoniou, & K. Langat (Eds.), *Refugee background students transitioning into higher education: Navigating complex spaces* (pp. 67–88). Springer Nature Singapore. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-0420-0_4