# ENSURING AN EQUITABLE DIGITAL SOCIETY: CHALLENGES OF DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION IN THE CHARITY SECTOR

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## Abstract

This paper examines the challenges of digital transformation within the charity sector by exploring the ways in which the digital divide affects young service users and staff. It provides an overview of the challenges and lessons learnt across three interrelated projects which were undertaken in partnership with the Refugee Council (RC), the leading UK charity supporting refugees. The key challenges to digital equity for young refugee clients pertain to their material and living conditions, digital literacy, and quality of personal relationships. In addition to technical obstacles, charity staff working with young people in difficult circumstances find challenging to set and maintain boundaries and to manage personal and interpersonal lives when working online. Two main organisational challenges are identified: fundraising and data protection. Charities need guidance on what services can be digitised successfully and need support with grounding their digitalisation in the above specific needs of the clients. In conclusion, a digital equitable society will be successful not only if charities adapt, but if digitalisation strategies also adapt to the specific needs and realities of the charity sector and to individuals who are often at the margins of digital innovations. It needs to be a two-way process.

## 1 Introduction

Innovative advances in information and communication technologies are being applied extensively across sectors and locations, profoundly transforming the world we live in. Digitalisation, with its increased availability and accessibility of mobile and cloud computing services, widespread use of social media and smartphones, faster broadband, and interconnected networks, is transforming society and business practices [1], [2], [3]. Covid-19 has accelerated the implementation of previously predicted trends in areas such as work, education, healthcare, entertainment and leisure, and online commerce [4]. However, it has also exacerbated existing problems of digitalisation [4] and has highlighted issues in achieving digital equity, which is defined as 'equal access and opportunity to digital tools, resources, and services to increase digital knowledge, awareness and skills' [5]. To ensure equity in digital knowledge, awareness and skills across sectors of the economy is a key challenge of the rapid digital transformation of most aspects of human life [6] as we adapt to the 'new normal'. Some sectors and companies, such as financial, industrial and media, have enhanced their digital capabilities and resources to become leaders of digital transformations [7] while others, most notably the non-profit sector, struggle to undergo digital transformation [8].

Yet, charities too have had to rapidly digitise their services during the pandemic, which has consequently disrupted their conventional models of providing face-to-face support. According to the Charity Digital Skills Report [9], the Covid-19 pandemic has encouraged charities 'to embrace digital to stay relevant', thus consequently 66% of charities are now delivering all services remotely. Charities are eager to digitise their services; they are keen to learn how they can help service users access services online; they want guidance on what services can be digitised successfully and they are also keen to support their colleagues in adjusting to working remotely.

The charity sector trails behind in the application of digitally advanced enhanced services (DEAS), yet it interacts with DEAS in other sectors. Consequently, the lack of integration of the non-profit sector has consequences for digital transfor-

mations in general. As the charity sector struggles to implement digital business models, understanding its barriers and challenges is informative for an overall adjustment of digital innovations, especially when working with clients who live in vulnerable circumstances, often at the margins of digitalisation.

To achieve digital equity, it is important to address the gap between those with and without access to computers and the internet. Van Dijk [10] identifies different digital divides - motivational, physical, skills and usage - and notes a shift of attention from physical access to skills and usage. In terms of physical access, the divide seems to be closing in the most developed countries while concerning digital skills and the use of applications the divide persists or widens. Whereas Van Dijk examines different kinds of digital divides, feminist scholars have brought attention to the gender inequalities that exacerbate the digital divide. Digital innovations impact genders unequally. No matter where they are in the world, women are less likely to be online; they are more likely to have low or no digital skills; and they are persistently under-represented among IT professionals [11]. Similarly, scholars in the field of migration and refugee studies have identified digital inequalities linked to immigration statuses, and the entitlements (or lack of) that accompany legal status, and participation in digital life, for instance online participation in education [12]. The digital divide continues to be one of the most significant development issues facing impoverished regions of the world [13].

Notwithstanding the increase in studies on digital transformations [1], the theme of digital equity remains to be unpacked [14]. The focus on the success of leading sectors has obscured the marginality of the not-for-profit sector, and its challenges to integrate to an increasingly global digital society. The impact of COVID-19 on vulnerable communities [15], particularly from an asylum-seeking and refugee backgrounds [16], [17], has been documented, with a focus on emerging needs [18]. However, there is a gap in understanding digital transformation in services, such as those supporting unaccompanied minors. This paper addresses this gap by examining digitalisation from the perspective of the charity sector and addresses the question: what are the key challenges and lessons learnt to achieving digital equity in the accelerated digital transition as a consequence of the global Covid-19 pandemic? The paper explores the specific ways in which the digital divide operates differently among service users in vulnerable circumstances, staff and the not-for-profit organisation (and researchers).

The analysis is based on the case study of the Refugee Council's Children's Section, which supports unaccompanied and separated children in the UK. In 2018, the Children's Section supported over 3,000 unaccompanied children by providing asylum and welfare advice, psychosocial activities, and therapeutic services. The pandemic has exacerbated not only general challenges faced by unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in all areas of their lives, e.g., asylum, accommodation, education, resettlement, and health, but also exposed specific challenges in accessing digital care as well as emerging opportunities in the use of digital technologies [19]. The transition to digital delivery of services (psychosocial, asylum and welfare) is challenging for refugee clients who are uniquely positioned at the intersection of the care and asylum systems.

## 2 Methodology

This research was carried out in partnership between the Centre for Migration, Refugees and Belonging (CMRB) at the University of East London (UEL) and the Refugee Council (RC), the leading charity supporting refugees in the UK. It is externally funded by the DEAS Network Plus Call, ESPRC via Exeter. The paper draws on the findings of three interrelated projects. Project One was an evidence-based situational analysis of digital needs and experiences among young clients, staff and the organisation in the transition to online care and support during the pandemic. Based on the recommendations of this evidence-based study [20], [21], the second and third projects were carried out to address digital inequalities of staff and clients. Project Two was a research-cum-training project that increased digital literacy among staff when dealing with emotions online, while Project Three enhanced digital literacy among separated and unaccompanied asylum-seeking clients from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. The first evidence-based situation analysis adopted a mixed methods approach. Data mining of RC policies and strategies was carried out. Participant observation was undertaken over five months by a research assistant, a part-time practitioner. In-depth, semi-structured interviews with five RC practitioners specialising in asylum and welfare advice, therapy and youth work were undertaken. Furthermore, in-depth interviews were carried out with five RC service users on accessibility, feasibility, and their usage of digital services. All participants were interviewed over Microsoft Teams.

The project on emotional digital literacy among staff was identified to be important as one in five charities demonstrated low skills in this field [9]. An essential area of training is on providing emotional support and empathy through digital services as practitioners believed this to be difficult to replicate online. A pre-training questionnaire was designed, whose findings were used to develop the content of the training. The training was provided by a psychotherapist who works closely with RC practitioners. There were two formal training sessions which lasted 90 minutes each. Ten members of staff attended the first session and nine the second. A post-training questionnaire was sent to all participants. Ongoing support was given during regular supervisory meetings by the psychotherapist. Based on the

findings of the research and training, a booklet titled *A Practitioner Guide to Providing Emotional Support Online* [22] was compiled.

The third project promoted digital equality (gender, nationality, age, …) among young asylum seekers by upskilling service users on innovative technologies and involving young people in co-creating digital resources. Three group discussions were conducted to identify digital training needs (digital skills, access, literacy, tools, content) with a group of eleven young clients by two research assistants (both practitioners within the RC). This was followed by the co-creation among researchers and four young refugees of a digital multi-media resource in four languages to help new arrivals to learn basic computer skills in their own languages.

Participation was voluntary, and anonymity and confidentiality were maintained throughout the research. Across the projects, the ethics of care standpoint [23] was adopted. Young service users were compensated for their time and involvement, and when needed they were signposted to relevant services. Ethical issues were carefully addressed through the UEL Research Ethics Committee process and negotiated with participants.

## 3 Results

Digitalisation of the charity sector presents opportunities for equity, diversity and inclusion. As outlined in the evidence-based report for the Refugee Council [21], there are clear benefits to delivering services online: it increases access to young people living in remote areas; it speeds up operations; and it facilitates communications. Access to online services gives young people the opportunity to connect with others from similar backgrounds and cultures which improved their wellbeing during lockdowns. Notwithstanding these opportunities, the research identified key challenges for digital equity for young asylum-seeking clients, staff, the organisation, and researchers.

### *3.1 Challenges for asylum-seeking children and youth*

The key challenges to digital equity for young people pertain to their material and living conditions, digital literacy, and quality of personal relationships.

#### *3.1.1 Material and living conditions*

- The socio-economic status of unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people inhibits their participation in the digital world. Due to a disparity in funding and resources across local authorities, many young people in care of social services did not have access to laptops and used their mobile phones to access education and other services. A senior adviser noted: “It's pretty unequal which is a shame. It's just a few different lottery systems that young people are in.”
- The increase in use of smart phones needed to be sustained by bigger data packages or additional phone top ups. During the pandemic young refugees were expected to attend meetings with social workers, lawyers and other professionals online, as well as attend English classes and other activities. Yet many young people, especially those living in shared accommodation, did not have a quiet or private space to do so. Also, many young people did not have a strong WIFI connection in their accommodation.
- Managing multiple demands is another challenge, especially for young people attending college, who may have to travel far due to limited availability of spaces. Young asylum-seekers juggled multiple appointments with social services, charities, solicitors, etc. They also spent a substantial amount of time on buses (as travelling by bus is free in London for all children under 17) to and from school or appointments. Sometimes, they were overburdened to attend services online, especially when these are in the evenings (including for research purposes).
- Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children struggled to stay motivated due to lack of contact with others during the pandemic. Young people who were in college pre-pandemic found it challenging to adapt to their online classes and consequently missed out on a significant amount of education. One young person explained why he found it difficult: “I couldn't focus online [...] it was really hard to focus on all these studies and I didn't learn anything to be honest because I just, I just attended a few classes, but it was really boring for me. [...]. I would have done anything to go to my college to attend my classes. But online classes were like it was your choice. So, it was this. For that reason, I wasn’t able to focus on my studies. It was a bit hard”.

### *3.2 Culturally sensitive digital literacy and support*

- A lack of education may limit the ability of unaccompanied refugee children to access digital services. One of the children’s advisers working on the asylum and welfare project stated: “Most of them come from places where they didn’t even have a mobile phone, or they didn’t go to school, so they don’t know how to read”.
- These young people often have high educational needs, and therefore learning how to use technology, often in a new language, is particularly challenging and requires specialist support. While it was positive that some social services provided laptops to young people during the pandemic, it is of limited or no use to new arrivals without any form of training or IT support.
- As the digital world predominately operates in the English language, a greater emphasis needs to be placed on the

translation of materials, guides and programmes into multiple languages as well as audio and video products.

*3.3 Building and maintaining trusting relationships online*

- In the transition to online service delivery, it was challenging for staff to be able to build and maintain trust without face-to-face interaction and not become just a voice over the phone or an anonymous interlocutor. Staff believed that relationship building and creating trust with young clients is much more difficult when working digitally. For instance, the Senior Children's Adviser said: "When you meet someone face to face it's obviously easier to build a relationship […], and you're not just a voice on the end on the phone and you can see the demeanour of young people."
- Building trust is about being able to listen but also read non-verbal behaviours, which is key for communication when language skills are limited. This is important for safeguarding as the Adviser explains: "Often a lot of things like safeguarding issues are much easier to spot in person because you can see someone's behaviour as well as what they're telling you because people don't…you know the first time you speak with someone they're not usually just gonna share lots of stuff off the bat. I do find that when I visit people in the past and then I give them my card, I explain what we can do it is quite often they get in touch with me about things, whereas when you just phone someone up and introduce yourself then perhaps they are more likely to not follow things up."
- Staff want to ensure that young people are in a safe space, where nobody is listening. However, in the transition to online delivery, there were challenges in ensuring privacy. The Youth Worker explained how trust can be put at risk "because they need[ed] to be in the common room, others were coming to the common room and going out and it was really horrible".

*3.4 Challenges for staff working with young refugees*

Challenges for charity staff working with young refugee clients include technical obstacles and difficulties in managing personal and interpersonal lives when working online.

*3.4.1 Technical difficulties*

- Technical difficulties and limited IT support for staff can result in young people missing out on important services. The Therapist reported feeling helpless when technological issues arose: "When your technology breaks down, when your Wi-Fi goes haywire, when you spend 55 minutes out of a 50-minute session not being able to see each other and ending up going 'Oh well, look, let's not worry about this let's just meet next week'".
- Digital illiteracy among refugee young people can result in practitioners teaching service users how to use technology if they want to ensure digital services are well attended.

*3.4.2 Setting and maintaining boundaries*

- The digitalisation of services also resulted in longer working hours for practitioners. A children's adviser stated "[if] there's an infinite amount of work to do and if you're working from home there's almost an infinite capacity to do it."
- Digital interaction with refugee youth presents novel challenges for practitioners in dealing with stressful situations. Young people who have experienced trauma can suffer from the online disinhibition effect, the oversharing of information in an uncontrolled way, due to a sense of being 'invisible' or behind a screen.
- Although RC Practitioners adapted well to working remotely, they stated that they missed informal conversations and socialising with colleagues: "I think it's a sort of a shame that we did have one period, I think when we all used to meet in the lunch hour or something then that stopped happening and I think that's a shame". Socialising at work was important to practitioners and opportunities to do this online were lacking.

*3.5 Organisational challenges*

Two main organisational challenges are identified: fundraising and data protection.

- Funding to support asylum seeking young people to access phone credit along with laptops, data and other essentials were vital to keeping young people connected to services. One of the Children's Advisers highlighted*: "*A lot of young people were running out of phone credit right at the start of lockdown [...]. Local authorities aren't providing Wi-Fi or aren't providing remote access for education so young people were relying on their phones to hotspot. If they've got a laptop or not got a laptop, they are relying on their phones entirely. So, we were running a phone credit scheme which was just top-ups for young people that really needed to contact a solicitor, really needed a therapist, and didn't have any other way of doing it".
- The RC Database Manager explained that all data is currently inputted manually, and it is a continuous process of adding and updating information about the client whilst they are engaging with the service. Manual entering of data highlights the possibility for inaccuracy, which could undermine the trust in the relationship between client and staff, and client and organisation.
- Another issue is the transportation and mobility of personal data. At the RC, it is safe to share information and

send documents internally as they operate through a secure virtual desktop. When transferring data externally, the mapping of RC policies indicates the need to use secure data portals or encryption. While sharing data digitally is widely considered to be a safe method for the transportation of data, it is not always as trustworthy as assumed.

*3.6 Challenges in conducting research during a pandemic*

We encountered technical and administrative challenges as well as delays.

- The partner institution only permitted interviews to be conducted via Microsoft Teams but not all young people or staff knew how to use the platform or were given access. Ethical approval for research with young people in difficult circumstances involved discussions on data protection and storage, which delayed the start of data collection.
- Covid restrictions, lockdowns and changes in regulations called for readjustments in the mode of delivery of the research and training activities, which transitioned from online to hybrid format and then online again.
- The participatory project with young people had to be moved from summer to autumn. This meant that the circumstances of the young people changed, especially for those attending college. The planning of the content, frequency and intensity of activities needed to take place over a longer period and with a revised frequency of targeted support.
- The digital skill set of the young people changed during the course of the research. Some colleges provided trainings on how to use computers and educational platforms. Thus, students attending college and those who were not in formal education had different digital needs.

# 4 Conclusion

The literature on digitalisation mainly focusses on the successful ways in which digitisation is changing societal and business practices [1], [2], [3]. This paper has addressed a less researched dimension of digitalisation, namely the challenges that exist in promoting digitalisation. Whilst many organisations in the charity sector are aware of the opportunities that digital service provision creates [9], there are several obstacles to overcome if the charity sector is to achieve digital equity and inclusion. The findings of this paper contribute to the emerging literature on the digitalisation of the charity sector [8], [16], [17] by showing that charities are struggling to implement digital business models. They are resilient and adaptive, yet they lag other sectors in the digital sphere. This raises questions around the inclusion of the charity sector into the digital society. The paper has contributed to unpack the theme of digital equity in the charity sector [14]. An equitable, inclusive integration of the charity sector will be dependent on maximising opportunities, implementing changes, and overcoming barriers. It is taken for granted that digitalisation is successful at improving lives but when there are multiple intersecting disadvantages (social care, education, asylum systems), it can become yet another strain to navigate. There is an awareness within the sector that digital services can be advantageous to service delivery, yet they are not sufficient as a standalone method of service delivery. Considering that young asylum seekers come from other countries, there are specific elements to consider in the aspiration to achieve digital equality and integration of the refugee sector [12] into the digital society. This paper has highlighted some of these issues. They include interpreting language, reading emotions, cross-cultural communication online and involving young refugees in peer-to-peer digital support. Charities need guidance on what services can be digitised successfully and need support with grounding their digitalisation in the above specific needs of the clients. In conclusion, a digital equitable society will be successful not only if charities adapt, but if digitalisation strategies also adapt to the specific needs and realities of the charity sector and to individuals who are often at the margins of digital innovations. It needs to be a two-way process.

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