INNOVATIVE TECHNOLOGIES AND DIGITAL EQUITY

Supporting Unaccompanied Asylum-seeking and Refugee Children to Achieve Digital Proficiency

Roxanne Nanton, Giorgia Doná and Chiara Cestaro

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Acknowledgements

Research Team

Giorgia Doná is co-director of the Centre for Research on Migration, Refugees and Belonging at the University of East London. She has researched with refugees for over three decades, including on social and digital technologies among forced migrants. Recent publications include: *The Marginalised in Genocide Narratives (2019)*, *Forced Migration: Current Issues and Debates (2019,* edited with Alice Bloch), and *Child and Youth Migration: Mobility-in-Migration in an Era of Globalisation* (2014, edited with Angela Veale).

Roxanne Nanton is a part-time Children's Adviser on the Refugee Council's Age Dispute Project. She is the designated Research Assistant for this project. Roxanne has experience of conducting research with unaccompanied children at the University of East London where she graduated with distinction in the CMRB-affiliated master's degree in Refugee Studies. Her dissertation titled '"Far Away There in the Sunshine…": A Study of the Aspirations of Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking and Refugee Girls', documented the life aspirations of unaccompanied girls through art-based research methods and interviews.

Chiara Cestaro is a full-time Youth Worker in the Refugee Council (RC) Children's Section, where she supports the programming and delivery of educational classes and psychosocial activities for unaccompanied children on digital platforms. Chiara is an Early Career Researcher, having graduated with distinction in the CMRB-affiliated master's in Refugee Studies with a dissertation titled "Child Laundering and Illegal Intercountry Adoptions: A Socio-legal Perspective on Present Ethiopia".

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Introduction

As a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, many charities shifted to delivering services online to ensure the needs of their beneficiaries continued to be met. This was innovative for charities who previously had little experience of delivering projects remotely. According to the Charity Digital Skills Report, 83 percent of charities adapted their models of working due to high demand and 78 percent took advantage of working online to reach new audiences (Skills Platform, 2021). A recent study found that there were clear benefits to delivering services online: it increased access to service users living in remote areas; it sped up operations; and it facilitated communications (Nanton and Doná, 2022).

Whilst there are clear advantages to this new way of working, the charity sector identified some challenges: building trust and strong relationships, digital literacy, maintaining boundaries between personal and professional life and digital poverty (Ibid). Among them, the issue of digital (in)equity became apparent.

Digital equity can be defined as 'equal access and opportunity to digital tools, resources, and services to increase digital knowledge, awareness and skills' (Davis, Fuller, Jackson, et al., 2007). The term 'equity' is used instead of 'equality' as equity recognises that each individual has different circumstances and thus requires different tools, resources and services to achieve the same outcome (GoGuardian, 2020). In this report we use the term equity to emphasise the specific circumstances relating to unaccompanied asylum-seeking and refugee youth.

The Charity Digital Skills Report stated that 50 percent of charities are concerned about creating inequity by excluding people by offering services online as over 10 percent of charities themselves have had issues with basic access to technology (Skills Platform, 2021). These concerns are well founded given that over 11 million people in the UK lack basic digital skills (Kinglsey, 2019). Charities working with asylum seekers and refugees face further obstacles when providing services as refugees are more likely to be disproportionately affected due to varying levels of literacy and a lack of continuous education (Neag and Berger, 2019).

There are additional challenges for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children namely because of their age and dependence on social services to support them in all aspects of their lives. Moreover, the Covid-19 pandemic has exposed specific obstacles in accessing digital care (Nanton, 2020).

The transition to digital service delivery (psychosocial, asylum and welfare) is challenging for unaccompanied refugee youth who are uniquely positioned at the intersection of the care and asylum systems. With the majority of UK statutory systems now operating some hybrid form of online and in person services (NHS apps, telephone GP appointments, remote Home Office asylum interviews, online Universal Credit ap-

plications) digital literacy and access to digital resources are essential for unaccompanied children. Therefore young asylum-seekers and refugees need multiple tools and resources if they are to reach digital equity and successfully integrate into a digitally networked culture (Neag and Berger, 2019).

This report documents the findings of three projects on digital service provision with a focus on (in)equity. It aims to address the issue of (in)equity in the provision and use of digital technologies by unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.

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 was externally funded by the DEAS Network Plus Call, ESPRC via Exeter.

This report draws on the findings of three interrelated projects. Project One was an evidence-based situational analysis of digital needs and experiences among service users (unaccompanied asylum-seeking children), staff and the organisation (RC) in the transition to online care and support during the Covid-19 pandemic. Based on the recommendations of the report '"*Life Is Not Just Normal As Before": Covid-19 and Digital Service Provision in the Charity Sector'*, the second and third projects were carried out to address digital inequities of staff and young people. Project Two was a research-cum-training project that supported staff on how to deal with complex emotions online, while Project Three enhanced digital literacy and skills among unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

The first project 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 Zoom or Microsoft Teams.

The second project on working with emotions in digital spaces was identified to be important in supporting unaccompanied asylum-seeking children to achieve digital equity. A pre-training questionnaire was designed and 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 Guide to Providing Emotional Support Online to Refugee Youth'* was published.

The third project promoted digital equity among young asylum-seeking children by upskilling service users on innovative technologies and involving young people in co-creating digital resources. Three group discussions were conducted by two research assistants (both practitioners within the RC) to identify digital training needs (digital skills, access, literacy, tools, content) with a group of eleven young people. This was followed by the co-creation among researchers and four unaccompanied refugee

youth of a digital multi-media resource '*Useful Apps for Young People'* in four languages (Amharic, Arabic, Kurdish Sorani and Pashtu – an example can be found in Appendix 1) to help new arrivals learn basic computer skills in their own languages.

Participation was voluntary, and anonymity and confidentiality were maintained throughout the research. 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.

Findings: Documenting and Addressing Degrees of (In)equity

This research found that overall, digital (in)equity exists among asylum-seeking and refugee youth to varying degrees due to pre-arrival experiences and challenging conditions in the UK. Age, education and knowledge of the English language significantly contribute to the ease and speed at which unaccompanied children are able to adapt to a highly digitalised society. Lack of financial support and tailored resources are also influential factors in increasing the divide between asylum-seeking youth and young people native to the UK. This research established that the charity sector has taken the initiative to support local authorities in addressing digital (in)equity by providing digital tools and resources to asylum-seeking children in both informal and mainstream education settings.

Levels of exposure to technology and use of mobile phones

There are wide differences in the level of exposure unaccompanied asylum-seeking children have had to technology which appear to be due to the varying social-economic backgrounds which they come from. For example, a young person from Albania who participated in the digital skills session remarked how he had once used a computer back home, whilst other young people from Sudan and Eritrea expressed that they had never used computers or laptops before.

However, as all asylum-seeking young people have experienced some form of a journey to reach the UK, it is often during this journey they become reliant on mobile phones (whether it is their own or they shared with someone on their journey). This might be to stay in touch with family members back home or people they need to contact enroute to their destination. Thus, it became apparent during the research that young people were more proficient at using mobile phones than laptops.

The majority of young people were confident in using mobile phones. They used different apps and could list many that they enjoyed, the majority of which were for social media e.g. Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, Snapchat. One young person stated: *"Nowadays, everybody uses social media"*. However, when asked whether he used it before arriving in the UK, he said: "*No, actually not. I know of things like Facebook or things, but I started here."* The young people used mobile phones to access Google services that are helpful to travel and communicate such as Google Maps and Google Translate and also websites where they could listen to the news.

For many, owning a mobile phone allows them to maintain relationships with families and friends back in their home countries. Mobile phones are also key to staying in touch with new friends as well as important contacts like social workers and solicitors. Young people also stated that they use technology for entertainment; to play games

or watch films, mostly in their native languages with English subtitles, and also to improve their English language skills.

Digital literacy: a range of skills and needs

The level of digital literacy and skills among unaccompanied asylum-seeking children differs depending on literacy, language skills, access to mainstream education in the UK and length of exposure to digitally-based care and education systems.

Unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people come from a wide variety of countries across the globe with varying levels of education; some arrive illiterate in their mother tongue, some will have only attended a Madrasa for Koran studies, while others have completed several years of primary and secondary education. A Children's Adviser noted:

"We expect that teenagers are going to know how to use technology because it's the era that they have been born but these young people, 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, even in their own languages".

As suggested by the Adviser, because of their age it is easy to assume that these young people will know how to use technology however there is a significant amount more to take into consideration.

Whilst all the young people who took part in the study were literate and knew how to use mobile phones, they had less experience using laptops. Most social services departments across the UK started to provide laptops to young people during the Covid-19 pandemic however they were of limited use to young people without offering any form of IT training.

In addition to learning how to set up a laptop, the young people expressed a range of digital needs. During a group discussion on creating a computer training for young refugees, the young people stated that they had many queries regarding basic digital skills that they wanted covering in the session: *""[I] don't know how to copy and save",* *"I want to know how to write in the chat".* Young people also revealed an interest in understanding how to use Gmail to be able to communicate with professionals involved in their asylum process and education, for example through Google Classroom. They also remarked how beneficial it would be to learn more about Microsoft Office so they could be more proficient in college as they were struggling with basic tasks. A lack of experience using communication platforms was also highlighted by a Youth Worker: *"Some of them [...] don't have the knowledge to play around Zoom or unmute themselves or go to the break out rooms or, I don't know, turn on the camera".* IT training on basic computer functions as well as more specific software is essential for

unaccompanied children so they can improve their digital communicaton and fully participate in digital learning and activities.

Digital support and resources: the importance of culturally specific and multi-lingual resources

The research highlighted that there are tools available to young people to reach digital equity e.g., social services, colleges and some charities will either provide financial support or will buy mobile phones, laptops and tablets for young people. However, what is significantly lacking are resources targeted at unaccompanied children to enable them to become proficient in their use of these tools such as face-to-face trainings, guides, booklets.

A Children's Adviser explained that the lack of IT support has been an ongoing issue since the pandemic: "*They [social services] were being really slow to get them laptops and then they would just give them the laptop but no one was sort of like supporting them to understand how to access things.*" The lack of immediate financial IT support and resources results in young people waiting until they start school or college to access their first IT course which can be months and sometimes more than a year after arriving in the UK.

Delays in receiving laptops can impact on a young person's education. A young person explained: *"I have homework from school in website and I try in my phone but it doesn't work and I ask my friends they say it work only in computer or laptop."* Young people who use their phones to attend classes or activities are limited in what they can do which consequently affects their learning and participation.

Whilst many young people turn to their peers for support with technology, foster carers and practitioners are greatly relied upon to teach young people how to use digital tools. One young person highlighted, *"My foster carer is so good with me, like, she helped me with the things that I don't know. She tell me about the things, how things work."* Since the pandemic, foster carers and practitioners have assumed the roles of digital mentors due to there being a lack of support in this area.

In order to improve the digital learning experience for unaccompanied children, 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. Young people explained that another reason for needing support with setting up their laptops, choosing passwords, security questions, language input and so on was because all the instructions that were provided were in English.

Addressing digital (in)equity

The Covid-19 pandemic sparked a flurry of digital support for asylum seekers and refugees. The UK government and global corporations like Microsoft provided online guidance, free training and resources to help humanitarian organisations and individuals from asylum-seeking and refugee backgrounds gain digital literacy and computer skills (Department for Education, 2022). Many companies and charities partnered to collect and distribute unwanted mobile phones, tablets and laptops for young people to access remote learning, free courses on digital vocabulary, computer skills, coding and how to stay safe online. The Croydon Refugee Youth Network (charities and stakeholders working with unaccompanied children in Croydon and other London boroughs) came together to translate a guide on how to download and use Zoom so that young people could participate in online classes. Some charities such as CARAS, Refugee Action, Asylum Welcome and Kensington Community Learning Centre are now also providing digital skills workshops and computer classes appropriate to young people with limited English.

Practitioners working with unaccompanied children are taking steps to address digital inequity and multi-agency working has been key to newly arrived young people attending education. A Youth Worker explained: "*Usually we get in touch with key workers, foster carers, and they try and help them or we teach them […]. Because most of them they are young they learn quite quickly so after three weeks or so they get more independent*". Practitioners dedicate time to teach young people how to top-up their mobile phones, how to use Zoom and how to set up email accounts. They always ensure to use a person-centred approach to respond to individual needs in different circumstances. Without their support, it would take significantly longer for young people to access services and bridge the gap between unaccompanied children and British youth in digital equity.

Unique circumstances of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children

During the research it became evident that many young people were tired and overwhelmed with their daily lives and although they expressed an interest in learning more about technology, it was difficult to rely on their attendance when it came to arranging meetings and activities. In addition to the stress of a busy life (they juggle school/college/ESOL classes, youth activities and meetings with carers/social services/legal representatives), it was common to witness feelings of worry and fear related to their asylum case or family circumstances One young person was waiting for an update on her asylum case which was making her stressed: "*Month after month they [say they will] call, they didn't call me, like what is going on?*" The uncertainites in their lives often resulted in sleepless nights which influenced the availability and reliability of the young people to attend discussions and trainings.

Despite trying to schedule the project activities around their busy lives, the young people also had a limited amount of time to participate in online activities. Several young people missed the group discussions and trainings as they finished college later than usual. Some young people would sign onto the Zoom call almost an hour late or even join the call on their phones whilst travelling from college back home.

Balancing a life which is uniquely positioned at the intersection of the care and asylum systems whilst also adapting to a digitialised society is challenging for unaccompanied children and requires ad-hoc planning, resources and support from practitioners involved in their lives.

Recommendations

Below is a list of key recommendations for charities and practitioners to promote digital equity among unaccompanied asylum-seeking and refugee young people, ensuring a participatory approach to the identification of needs and goals.

❖ **Youth Participation in Assessment of Digital Skills and Needs**

- Assess the digital skills of young people before they enroll in hybrid services to understand their digital literacy needs.

- Create digital spaces so that young people can share useful digital tools and tips with their peers.

❖ **Training and Resources to Promote Digital Literacy**

- Provide all unaccompanied children with equal access to digital training and technology to ensure disparities in digital skills do not exist.

- Develop a standard training for unaccompanied children to attend before they start school/college to ensure they have basic digital skills so they can study independently.

- Create resources in multiple languages to increase accessibility for unaccompanied children.

- Collate and share existing resources with charities and practitioners.

- Improve digital literacy to ensure digital integration of young people in society.

❖ **Funding and Equal Access to Technology**

- Source funding to ensure unaccompanied children (and all children in care) have equal access to technology.

- Standardise the approach to providing all unaccompanied children with fully functioning mobile phones and laptops with adequate data packages, software and internet access in a timely manner (soon after their arrival).

- Set targets on reducing digital poverty so that digital inequity does not become exacerbated for asylum-seeking and refugee children.

Conclusion

The key findings highlight that unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are keen to achieve digital literacy to thrive in society however they need to be appropriately supported, through statutory and non-statutory services. Resources need to be multi-lingual and user friendly and should be tailored towards different levels of digital knowledge and experience. Support from practitioners and peers can also contribute to improved levels of digital skills. Funding for digital skills workshops will also ensure digital equity is achieved among unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.

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Appendices

Appendix 1

About

- This project is funded by the DEAS Network Plus Call, ESPRC via Exeter University, and promotes digital equity among asylum-seeking young people in the UK.
- The content of this booklet has been informed by group discussions, questionnaires and digital skills training sessions with clients attending the Refugee Council.
- This booklet has been translated into 4 languages – Amharic, Arabic, Kurdish Sorani and Pashtu; all translations were done by young people who attend the Refugee Council.

Tips on using your phone

1

Save your number in your phone! You might need to share it with someone.

2

Don't share your name, address, telephone number with people you don't trust.

3

If someone calls you and you don't know them, ask for their name and where they work.

4

Save useful numbers in your phone – social worker, foster carer, solicitor.

5

Put your phone on silent when in class or in a meeting so it doesn't disturb other people.

Tips on using Apps

1

When downloading an app, check if it is free or if you need to pay.

2

Don't forget your login details and passwords.

3

Update apps when your phone tells you.

4

If you no longer use an app, delete it from your phone.

Communication

Apps for making wifi calls, messaging, emailing and translating

WhatsApp
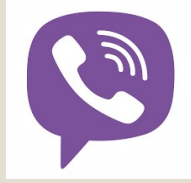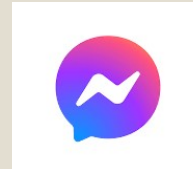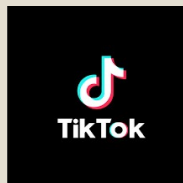
Viber

Google Translate

Microsoft Translator

Teams

Zoom

Gmail

Messenger

Social Media

Apps for making and watching videos, sharing and commenting on photos and discussing different topics
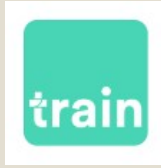
Travel

Apps to help you plan a journey, find what bus or train you need and how to get somewhere

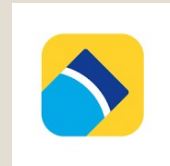|		
Google Maps	Trainline	Citymapper
National Express	Bus Times London	TFL Oyster App

Health and Wellbeing

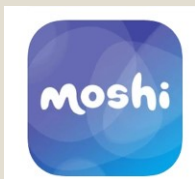Apps on fitness, nature, mental health, improving sleep and cooking

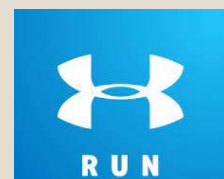|				
Mindshift	Nike Training Club	Yoga for Beginners	BBC Good Food	Sleepiest
Moshi	Map My Run	Body by Blogilates	iNaturalist	Food Network Kitchen