

Tech Inequality for Refugee and Asylum Seeking students

Ahmed Noori, August 2020

Introduction

The global Covid-19 pandemic has exposed the disparity of the digital divide. On one side we have the affluent communities, while on the other there are a collection of disadvantaged groups including refugees and asylum seekers. Internet, Wi-Fi, laptops, and other smart gadgets are essential in today's world and to maintain a semblance of normality. Not having access to digital devices creates social distance among these groups, facilitates an environment for unpleasant isolation, and shackles them in their own bubbles. Despite efforts from the [government](#) and the charity sector, there has not been a significant narrowing of the tech inequality gap. There remains a lot to be done.

Digital Exclusion

The 2019 UK Consumer Digital Index Found that 11.9 million people in the UK lack basic digital skills; this includes elderly people, and other marginalised communities, including refugees and asylum seekers. The lack of access to smart devices makes young people from refugee and asylum-seeking backgrounds more isolated.

A [recent report](#) from the All Party Parliamentary Group on Social Integration report stated that, "39% of 18-24 years olds reporting they now feel more lonelier." While underprivileged groups have often struggled to make ends meet efficiently in so-called 'normal' times, this unprecedented time, typified by uncertainty, life has become extremely difficult for them. They have lost physical contact with their social and support networks, and maintaining remote contact comes with a financial consideration. Asylum seekers operate on a limited budget of [£39.60](#) weekly. This is utterly inadequate to live a dignified life, particularly in an expensive city like London or Bristol. Asylum seekers - and refugees, who are often reliant on similarly tight budgets - must budget very carefully, with limited funds to cover basic necessities, and as such may struggle to purchase tech hardware, Wi-Fi or data packages in order to study, socialise, or access vital services. Many refugees, students and asylum seekers encounter this challenge every single day.

Raising awareness on the issue of tech inequality is imperative so as to highlight the struggles people face to access something that not only many of us take for granted, but indeed are essential in a post-covid world.

The Department of Education has allocated a sum of £85 million to combat tech inequality, including a promise of purchasing 200,000 devices. This blueprint has allowed local authorities to help care leavers, disadvantaged pupils, and children aged 0-19 with laptops or tablets, although there are reports of shortages for particularly needy schools and local authorities. Furthermore, this scheme does not cover destitute asylum seekers, refugees who have left care homes and disadvantaged students over 19. Some asylum seekers do not have any network support once their asylum cases are refused by the government, and need to create a network of support for themselves. The policy of banning asylum seekers from working means that they are not allowed to provide for themselves, and use further education as a way to 'tide themselves over'. Many refugees and asylum seekers have trauma

experiences from their journey into exile, and connecting to adults and peers could help them to overcome those issues over time. Therefore, having the internet, smartphones and laptops are crucial for them and their education.

Education is paramount for asylum seekers and refugees to integrate into society through learning skills and trades, integrating into British society, and learning about the culture and values of this country. [One study](#) suggests that disadvantaged pupils lag 18 months behind classmates, meaning that refugees and asylum seekers are further penalised by the digital divide.

What Is Being Done

Charities have tirelessly worked to fundraise and raise awareness about this crucial issue. You can see a more exhaustive [list Of charities](#) here, but they include:

- **Refugee Support Network** - managed to raise £12,834 to help refugees with their needs during lockdown including access to technology.
- **British Red Cross** - has been awarded a lump sum of £610,000 by the government to help young people and other disadvantaged groups.
- **Livery Schools Link** - has launched a fundraising campaign to help buy devices and connections for disadvantaged students in schools. This charity has raised a sum of £47,000 so far, short of £13,000 to hit their target of £65,000.
- **Ready Tech Go** - clearing and collecting tablets to donate to people including refugees.

The work of these organisations and other charities are invaluable. It is important to build on this momentum by involving local, grassroots campaigners and STAR groups across the country, joining up these tech inequality campaigns into a concerted national movement. Where possible, this should combine the interests of young asylum seekers and refugees (that STAR focuses on) with those of others who are affected by tech inequality, such as housing associations and others.

Costs Involved

While new laptops, tablets and smart gadgets may be a bit pricey, they are a long-term investment. The right suite of hardware will help these disadvantaged students, refugees, and asylum seekers to have a reliable internet connection and a device. An Amazon tablet can cost £90, and a £100 donation would secure a tablet and 30GB data for a month, which would change an asylum seeker's life for the better. Similarly, a £20 donation would have the purchasing power of unlimited internet for a whole month for a refugee.

A fundraising campaign is about helping as many as possible of these underprivileged groups and reduce digital divide significantly. The benefits of this campaign significantly outweigh the costs involved, it will improve people's standard of living, reduce isolation and related mental health issues, improve access to education, and allow people to stay connected with their families, friends and support network.

Recommendations

To bridge the digital divide, I recommend that STAR groups and partners **campaign** and **fundraise** on the issue of tech inequality at a local level. It is vital that these projects involve and empower the voices of these underprivileged groups at every level.

A locally-driven campaign that would seek to:

1. Push the Department of Education to increase support for these deprived groups. 200,000 devices are not sufficient in any way.
2. Ensure that local authorities that house asylum seekers, refugees, and care leavers, equip their accommodation with internet and Wi-Fi.
3. Provide hardware to asylum seekers who do not have any income or support, so that they have contact to their families, friends, schools and essential services.
4. Make a joint plea to phone providers and tech companies to provide Wi-Fi dongles, internet packages and phones in kind or at a discounted rate
5. Encourage charities, schools and advocacy groups to raise more awareness about the impact of Covid-19 and digital disparity on refugees education.

A fundraising drive that would seek to:

6. Work together with local charities and grassroots projects to provide digital devices for refugees, asylum seekers and destitute students.
7. Gain local support for match funding from local businesses and benefactors.

If you work with asylum seekers and refugees, [please fill out this short survey on tech inequality](#).