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**DIGITAL EDUCATION, ACCESS AND INCLUSION:
OPPORTUNITIES & CHALLENGES FOR
MIGRANTS AND REFUGEES IN
THE NETHERLANDS**



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Executive Summary

What are the key challenges and opportunities for digital education access and inclusion for migrants and refugees in the Netherlands?

This policy brief examines the role of digitalization in shaping learning opportunities for these communities, highlighting both barriers and potential solutions. Drawing on discussions from the November 2024 roundtable event *Inclusive Participation and Digitalization: Opportunities & Challenges for Migrants and Refugees in the Netherlands*, this analysis reflects insights from academia, civil society, and individuals with migrant and refugee backgrounds. It is part of the broader research initiative *Bursting Bubbles and Building Bridges: Empowering Refugee Women through Inclusive Education and Participatory Research*. Building on these insights, the brief offers targeted recommendations to Dutch national policymakers. It raises critical questions about the adequacy of current policies: Are existing financial and institutional frameworks sufficient to ensure digital inclusion for migrants and refugees? How can national and local authorities improve digital education access while balancing affordability and sustainability? Finally, how can cross-sector collaboration between policymakers, educators, and digital service providers lead to more inclusive and effective learning environments?

Problematization

The digital divide among refugees is shaped by multiple factors, including limited internet connectivity, lack of digital literacy, and socioeconomic constraints. Many arrive in host countries with little prior experience using digital tools beyond basic communication, making everyday tasks like filling out online government forms, booking medical appointments, or searching for jobs overwhelming. Language barriers further complicate the situation, as many digital platforms are not available in refugees' native languages.

The Dutch context is salient here as it ranks high in digitalization in provision of public services, at the top of the world ranking in are in the top of the world ranking of countries on the e-government development index (EGDI), an index with three components including: scope and quality of online services, development of telecommunication infrastructure and human capital score. Arguably, daily life in the Netherlands requires digital literacy. However, for example, the use of digital technologies is not referenced in the New Migration Act (cite act). Some scholarship has been exploring the digital practices of migrants and refugees in the Netherlands, albeit often related to social media use (Patterson and Leurs, 2020).

Within this context, broader literature speaks to the importance of both digital literacy, access and education not only in refugee and migrant journeys, but also upon refugee and migrant arrival in the host context. Evidence-based studies explain how ICT is shown to empower refugees, offering them greater control over their well-being and participation in society, and granting them access to programs, community resources, and health services (Pottie et al., 2020). Through information accessibility, refugees can engage in various social, economic, and political activities while maintaining a connection to their cultural identity (Ibid).

At the same time, refugee access, understanding, questioning, sharing, and creation of digital content can either facilitate or hinder connection with the host community (Emes and Chib, 2022). Digital literacy is a critical concept and practice for addressing the problems of inadequate information resources, social connections, and skills among refugees. It has been linked to power, privilege and inequality along lines of gender, but also remains inextricable from other dimensions of, inter alia, age, income, race, class, and ethnicity.

Part I: Designing Accessible and Affordable Digital Education for Refugees and Migrants

Digital education has the potential to provide refugees and migrants with invaluable learning opportunities, offering the flexibility needed for these communities to improve their skills, integrate into host societies, and achieve personal and professional development. However, to ensure that these platforms reach the intended audiences effectively, it is critical that they are designed with accessibility, affordability, and adaptability in mind. The challenges that refugees and migrants face, including technological barriers, financial constraints, and diverse learning needs, must be carefully considered when designing digital education solutions.

A primary consideration in the design of digital education platforms for refugees and migrants is device and operating system compatibility. Many refugees and migrants rely on smartphones as their primary device for accessing online education, and as such, it is essential that platforms are mobile-friendly and responsive across a range of devices, including smartphones, tablets, and desktop computers. This mobile-first approach is particularly important in resource-limited areas where access to more advanced technologies may be scarce.

Furthermore, platforms must be compatible with low-cost devices, such as basic smartphones and older laptops, which are more commonly available to refugees and migrants. To ensure that the educational content is accessible to all, lightweight designs that require minimal processing power and data usage are crucial. These platforms must be optimized to function on devices with limited storage, lower processing capabilities, and unstable or slow internet connections, which are often prevalent in refugee and migrant contexts.

An important consideration is offline capabilities. Refugees and migrants often face inconsistent internet access, and platforms must allow users to download educational content for offline use, enabling them to continue learning without interruption. These platforms should also support the ability to sync data once internet connectivity is restored, ensuring that users do not fall behind due to connectivity issues.

Given the linguistic diversity of refugee and migrant communities, it is essential that digital education platforms support multiple languages. This multilingual approach helps accommodate learners from various backgrounds and ensures that language barriers do not hinder their educational progress. Furthermore, accessibility features such as text-to-speech, subtitles, and screen readers are vital for learners with disabilities or those who are not proficient in the language of instruction.

Beyond technological considerations, navigating educational institutions and digital learning platforms can be a significant challenge for refugees and migrants, as they may be unfamiliar with enrollment procedures, course structures, and institutional expectations. To bridge this gap, it is essential to provide structured guidance, such as toolkits or step-by-step tutorials, that help students understand and effectively use online educational platforms. Additionally, mentorship programs, such as student buddy systems, have proven to be highly beneficial. These programs pair newcomers with experienced students who can assist them in navigating academic requirements, accessing resources, and adapting to the

educational environment. By fostering peer support networks, such initiatives not only enhance students' confidence and digital literacy but also contribute to higher retention and success rates.

Finally, the issue of software access must be addressed. Many NGOs provide devices to refugees, but these often lack the necessary software due to high licensing costs. To overcome this barrier, digital education platforms should provide access to free or low-cost alternatives, enabling refugees and migrants to fully engage with educational materials without the financial burden of expensive software licenses.

Part II: Funding and Financial Support for Digital Education

While digital education is a powerful tool for empowering refugees and migrants, financial barriers often prevent these populations from fully benefiting from online learning opportunities. In order to maximize the impact of digital education for these communities, it is essential to tackle the financial challenges they face. Strategies to secure funding and create financial support structures are key to ensuring equitable access to devices, internet services, and educational platforms.

A crucial component of bridging the digital divide is providing **subsidized access to devices**. Many refugees and migrants do not have access to personal devices such as laptops or tablets, which are essential for online learning. To address this gap, partnerships with telecommunications companies, NGOs, and government agencies can help provide subsidized or donated devices. Some organizations offer refurbished devices at lower costs, and systems for device lending or sharing within refugee communities can ensure that no one is left behind.

Internet access is another significant barrier. Many refugees and migrants cannot afford reliable internet plans, which are essential for accessing online education. To address this issue, funding should be allocated to support affordable internet plans or to collaborate with internet service providers to offer discounted data plans or free Wi-Fi access in refugee

shelters and community centers. Additionally, developing mobile hotspot programs can offer internet access to learners in remote or underserved areas, where fixed broadband connections are not available.

To facilitate the long-term sustainability of digital education for refugees and migrants, **government and NGO funding** should be sought through grants and other financial support mechanisms. Many international organizations, government bodies, and NGOs offer funding opportunities specifically aimed at supporting refugee education and digital literacy initiatives. Securing these funds can help subsidize the costs of digital platforms, devices, and training programs for refugees.

In addition, **corporate partnerships** through Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) programs can provide valuable support. Many tech companies, such as Google, Microsoft, and Apple, offer funding, devices, or software to support refugee education. Establishing partnerships with these companies can lead to financial support, discounted resources, and even donations of technology for educational initiatives.

Training and skill development are also vital to ensure that digital education is effectively implemented. Funding should be secured for teacher training programs to equip educators with the skills necessary to teach effectively within digital platforms. This can include support for professional development workshops, certifications, and capacity-building initiatives focused on digital pedagogy.

Finally, **community centers and social integration** support are important components of the digital education ecosystem. By establishing partnerships with local community centers, refugees and migrants can access not only the digital tools they need but also a supportive environment. Safe spaces for language classes, buddy

programs, cultural exchange, and community-building activities are essential to develop social networks, connect with local communities, and feel a sense of belonging, contributing to long-term integration.

Together, these funding and support strategies are essential to ensuring that refugees and migrants have equitable access to digital education opportunities, helping them overcome financial barriers and bridge the digital divide.

Policy Recommendations Based on Findings (For Dutch National-Level Policymakers)

Drawing from the findings of both research projects and roundtable discussions, which incorporated multiple stakeholder perspectives and analyzed various dimensions of digital life, it is clear that bridging the public-private divide is essential. While the insights gleaned do not directly translate into concrete policy recommendations for every facet, they do provide crucial context for policymakers to consider when developing specific measures. While Section 1 focused on parameters for funding schemes and integration programs, this section provides actionable recommendations on where targeted funding can offer the greatest added value, particularly in light of the limited resources available for inclusion-focused programs tailored to specific populations within the Dutch context.

1. Digital Literacy as a Minimum Requirement for Funding in VIA Program

The Dutch Ministry of Social Affairs facilitates pilot programs under the VIA (Voor een Inclusieve Arbeidsmarkt) initiative, aimed at improving labor market participation for non-Western migrant-origin individuals, including refugees. This program runs from 2022-2025 and is designed

to reduce disadvantage and promote equal opportunity (Ministerie van Sociale Zaken en Werkgelegenheid, 2021). Moving forward, it is recommended that digital literacy skilling be incorporated as a minimum requirement for receiving funding under this program. This will ensure that refugees and migrants have the digital competencies necessary to engage fully in the modern labor market and access employment opportunities that are increasingly reliant on digital skills.

2. Expanding Funding for Digital Inclusion Initiatives

To ensure the effective integration of refugees and migrants, expanding financial support for digital inclusion is essential. Establishing subsidized device programs through public-private partnerships will ensure that refugees and migrants have the tools necessary for digital learning. Additionally, offering free or low-cost software licenses can help reduce financial barriers to accessing digital education. Continued investment from both government and NGOs is crucial to sustain these efforts, ensuring that digital education initiatives are not only available but also accessible and sustainable for marginalized communities.

Conclusion: Empowering Refugees and Migrants Through Digital Education

To effectively overcome barriers related to platform compatibility and funding limitations, inclusive digital literacy programs must be designed with a focus on device accessibility, cost-effective solutions, and sustained funding. By prioritizing these areas, policymakers can create an environment in which refugees and migrants are empowered through digital education, improving their skills and enhancing their opportunities for successful integration in Dutch society. This approach will provide refugees and migrants with the tools necessary to navigate the digital landscape, fostering their inclusion and long-term success.

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