european student think tank

Working Group on Youth Employment

Digital Skills and Refugees: Towards a European Approach

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June 2020

Key Points

- *Refugees are expected to face socioeconomic inequalities during the digital transformation*
- *Access of refugees to digital skills will foster integration and economic empowerment*
- *A holistic European approach is needed to effectively achieve digital inclusion*

The 4th Industrial Revolution is upon us. Technological innovation is disrupting a series of critical industries such as finance, health and transportation. On one hand, automation and algorithms are expected to increase the number of jobs and improve the quality of work. On the other hand, certain types of employment are expected to become obsolete in the face of technological advancements. The number of jobs created will offset the number of jobs lost. However, we will most likely observe a qualitative shift. The jobs created will be high-skilled and many of them will require a wide spectrum of digital skills. According to the European Commission, the demand for ICT workers is growing at 4% each year. This poses a new kind of challenge for Europe which is the fact that demand is rapidly outpacing supply, with a shortage of around 1,000,000 ICT professionals already existing[1].

In this new reality, under-represented populations are expected to be particularly affected. This phenomenon is described by the term “digital divide”. Poor communities have limited access to digital technologies due to the lack of infrastructure. Moreover, these communities have limited opportunities to access digital skills training and to access digital employment opportunities. Last but not least, sociocultural norms further widen the digital divide. Digital skills provide the poor an important opportunity to break out of the cycle of precarity and empower themselves[2].

However, the aforementioned factors maintain and amplify the problem.

This is especially true for refugees, the focus group of this study. If the digital divide is not addressed, refugees are expected to face exacerbated socioeconomic inequalities, such as lower incomes and higher unemployment rates. Tackling the digital divide will not only help us uplift refugees. It will also help us foster integration. Since 2015, over 1.800.000 refugees have entered Europe. Around 73.000 of them reside in Greece. Their integration into the job market is vital in order to combat poverty and radicalization and foster interaction with the local community. Digital skills can also foster reintegration in the host country due to their highly portable nature[3].

To add to the list of benefits, digitally competent refugees will increase the diversity of the workforce. An increasing amount of research has repeatedly proven the casual relationship between diversity, productivity and innovation[4]. Therefore, the diverse cultural and religion background of refugees can greatly benefit any organization. Lastly, the access of refugees to digital skills will improve the competitiveness of Europe. In her political guidelines, Ursula von der Leyen, the President of the European Commission listed the importance of a Europe fit for the digital age and underlined how digital literacy has to be a foundation for everyone. This also means young refugees.

Unfortunately, we have not yet seen a unified response to this problem at the European level. Member-states can choose at their own will if they wish to address the issue. In the case of the Hellenic Republic, little to no work has been done. Refugee adolescents are not included in formal reception classes organized by the Ministry of Education in Greece. Certain

organizations at the sub-state level, such as the City of Athens and METAdrasi have created basic digital skills workshops. Other initiatives, such as Code+Create and REvive Greece, are offering free workshops on coding, design and other advanced digital skills.

Despite these admirable actions, State-run initiatives could offer scalability and improve efficiency. In October 2019, the Ministry of Citizen Protection of the Hellenic Republic announced the introduction of courses for refuges with a focus in sectors of high labor demand such as marketing and entrepreneurship. Although digital skills were not mentioned, this policy-shift on the education of refuges opens up the way for the introduction of digital skills. It is recommended however that any new initiative takes place in cooperation with the European institutions. In this way, we will be able to improve capacity-building[5] and mitigate the risk of inaction which has repeatedly stalled a series of educational programs for refugees. Thus, a need to formulate a European holistic approach for the digital inclusion of refugees becomes evident. The upcoming "Pact for Skills" is an ideal framework under which this strategy could be implemented.

So, what are the challenges that we have to overcome in order to provide refugees with access to digital skills? The first barrier is lack of awareness and sociocultural stereotypes. Refugees can sometimes be unaware of the benefits of digital skills. What's more, employers can sometimes be negatively prejudiced, which means that digitally trained refugees may lack access to job opportunities where they can apply the skills they have learned. The above-mentioned point applies especially for young refugee women who, from an intersectional approach, face double barriers and therefore are even less likely to have access to ICTs[6].

What's more we need to face up to the challenge of limited infrastructure. Refugees frequently reside in locations that lack digital networks. When they do have access to 2G or 3G, cost becomes a major factor[7]. According to UNHRC refugees often spend a third of their disposable income on staying connected. The effects of this phenomenon go beyond digital skills. Access to digital infrastructures could allow refugees to keep contact with loved ones and could also provide them with valuable information about their country of asylum. On the upside, smartphones are today an essential part of a refugee's toolkit, a fact that we should be able to harness in order to promote digital inclusion.

Last but not least, language is also an important barrier. We have to keep in mind that many refugees lack the necessary English language skills to follow existing education programs.

In order to effectively address these challenges, a need for a holistic approach becomes evident. Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) should be an important component of this approach. By leveraging mobile devices, we are able to offer affordable and high-quality training to millions of refugees. Early evidence has showcased that students from low-income backgrounds and low levels of educational

attainment can greatly benefit from such courses. Recent developments in Machine-Learning technologies means that we can improve the quality of these courses by incorporating Artificial Intelligence[8]. This would allow us to highly personalize massive online education and overcome the language barrier though AI-powered automated translation.

However, we should not think of MOOCs as panacea. A report drafted by the Joint Research Center of the European Commission

assessed the already existing digital learning opportunities for refugees and migrants[9]. One of the key findings was the need for an integrated approach. The refugees that were interviewed believed that online education should be complemented with face-to-face formal and informal training. Thus, instructors should be a key part of a holistic approach. Cultural background is a critical feature of an effective instructor. According to ITU's Digital Skills Toolkit, instructors that share the background of the target population can act as role-models and have been associated with better learning outcomes.

The evidence reached on the profiles of the instructors raises and important point about campaigning and awareness. Local campaigns that stress the importance of digital skills for refugees can motivate the target population to actively engage with the curriculum. Moreover, campaigns that combat gender stereotypes can help us include young women refugees into the process. Awareness raising should be complemented by concrete policy actions, however research on the digital inclusion of women is still poor. Emphasizing the benefits of e-commerce is one tactic to include women refugees, providing them with a way to work from home[10].

When describing the steps for a holistic approach it becomes apparent that governments in the EU will need to work closely with multiple stakeholders in order to optimize this process and maximize results. Therefore, the public sector needs to motivate and establish close partnerships with the private sector.

An ecosystem of companies engaged in the access of refugees to digital skills is already in place. Microsoft has created a curriculum for humanitarian organizations that wish to deliver training to refugees. Software company SAP has launched "Refugee Code Week" which has introduced over 37,000 youth to digital literacy and over 700 bootcamp participants to coding, in the MENA region. These are a couple of examples of private ICT companies that have chosen to engage through CSR in the digital training of refugees.

In order to establish effective public-private partnerships, government should aim at developing this ecosystem and providing coordination so as to avoid overlaps in skills training. To achieve this, the public sector should establish structured mechanisms for public-private dialogue and provide incentives for enterprises to engage in the training of refugees. Incentives could include supporting and promoting CSR and providing tax and financial incentives[11]. Besides, enterprises can benefit through engagement by improving the reputation of their brand and by increasing the diversification of their workforce.

Private enterprises can help us solve a number of issues when it comes to access to digital skills. Contribution to fundraising and providing essential know-how in the design of curricula are just two types of partnerships that can be established. More

importantly though, private companies can offer employment. As stated above, one of the key issues with the digital training of refugees is the lack of access to employment opportunities where they can apply and further cultivate their digital expertise. Private stakeholders are able to offer scholarships, mentorship schemes, internship positions and employment opportunities that will create direct links with the job market and will further motivate refugees in pursuing digital mastery[12].

A last point to be made is that a European strategy for the digital training of refugees must be agile enough to provide resources on the whole spectrum of digital skills. Being digital

natives, a large proportion of young refugees can start developing specialized advanced digital skills. Nevertheless, a curriculum that provides pathways to basic digital skills is essential to fill knowledge gaps and to provide other age groups a chance to acquire knowledge that will positively affect their lives. In a similar spirit, the curriculum must be complemented by related disciplines such as entrepreneurship in order to maximize its impact. Last but not least, the curriculum must be regularly adapted to the demands of the labor market through coordination with private enterprises.

Recent studies have suggested that climate change will increase asylum application by 28% in the European Union, by the end of the century[13]. At the same time, the societies and economies of Europe will undergo a major digital transformation. Taking both these realities under consideration, it becomes evident that traditional integration strategies won't be enough. A European digital skills approach for refugees is needed in order to avoid marginalization, promote inclusion, and empower displaced populations.

Notes

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