



United Nations  
Educational, Scientific and  
Cultural Organization



UNESCO Chair in  
ICT for Development  
Royal Holloway, University of London

# Guidance Note 5 Supporting the effective use of digital technologies for learning by refugees and displaced persons

From the Report: Education for the most marginalised post-COVID-19: Guidance for governments on the use of digital technologies in education  
**ACT THREE (OF THREE): GUIDANCE NOTES**

**Date** November 2020

**Authors** Tim Unwin  
Azra Naseem  
Alicja Pawluczuk  
Mohamed Shareef  
Paul Spiesberger  
Paul West  
Christopher Yoo

**EdTech** Hub

Clear evidence, better decisions, more learning.

**Report homepage** <https://edtechhub.org/education-for-the-most-marginalised-post-covid-19/>

# Guidance Note: Supporting the effective use of digital technologies for learning by refugees and displaced persons<sup>1</sup>

## Context

The increased acceptance of inclusion in national education systems provides an important opportunity for integrated approaches to education that include refugees and displaced persons to be implemented. As a principle underlying the 2018 Global Compact on Refugees,<sup>2</sup> new commitments by states should enable refugees to be included within national systems alongside their peers. This allows national initiatives around digital education to be extended to refugees, while also providing governments an opportunity to leverage interest from diverse actors to invest in low-resource communities that are hosting refugees.<sup>3</sup> In addition, these tools can be used creatively to assist refugees to adapt to their new learning environments.

Displaced populations, whether residing in remote camps, settlements, or urban contexts, tend to have more limited access to connectivity, devices and other vital infrastructure. UNHCR has thus estimated that refugees are half as likely as the general population to have an internet-enabled phone, and 29% of refugees have no phone at all.<sup>4</sup> Even if good quality online materials are available at the national level, there remains a real issue around the access that refugees have to them, and thus a significant equity challenge. This reinforces the importance of investing in offline and low-resources solutions, along with multimodal approaches, including radio and TV, to ensure that learning resources can reach all learners.

COVID-19 has reinforced the importance of ensuring that online or remote learning is complemented with guidance and mentorship from teachers, family members, or peers. In many displacement contexts, the need for continuous follow-up and support for education is vital as often caregivers who are expected to support learning have limited exposure to digital learning, or might have low education levels themselves. Therefore, refugee students can be further disadvantaged if they do not receive the additional support required to facilitate meaningful learning.

A more general point that is also pertinent in the context of refugees is that COVID-responses have demonstrated that it is extremely difficult for governments in crisis contexts to be critical consumers of technologies and products offered by international agencies or private sector companies. In the quick scale-up of solutions

---

1 Lead authors Caroline Pontefract (UNRWA), Jacqueline Strecker (UNHCR), and Tim Unwin.

2 UNHCR (2018) The global compact on refugees, <https://www.unhcr.org/uk/the-global-compact-on-refugees.html>.

3 Amnesty International thus estimates that in 2020 86% of all refugees are hosted in developing countries.

4 UNHCR (2016) *Connecting refugees: How internet and mobile connectivity can improve refugee well-being and transform humanitarian action*, Geneva: UNHCR.

several technologies may be untested or inappropriate to local contexts, and it may well lock governments or communities into such solutions long after a particular crisis is over. It is therefore important for quality assurance mechanisms or metrics to be shared widely among and between governments, to ensure not only that they do acquire technologies that are appropriate for refugees, but also that they can afford the long-term funding implications. Governments should be supported so that they are able to be critical consumers, and can use their assessed needs to engage on an equal level with other partners, particularly with the private sector.

## Guidance

Relevant guidance for governments in supporting the inclusion of displaced learners in national education systems through digital technologies includes:

1. **Governments should ensure that displaced persons are prioritised within their policies to include all learners in their national digital education strategies.**
2. **Governments should accurately assess the levels of infrastructural provision in refugee hosting communities, and then support the design of relevant and diverse approaches to the use of digital technologies in serving their needs.** Low-resource technologies, such as radio, can play an important role in some contexts.
3. **Safety and security of all learners, including refugees, should be prioritised when designing and implementing digital technologies for education initiatives (see also [Guidance Note on safety](#)).**
4. **A coherent and feasible approach to remote learning should be created to support refugees both academically and psycho-socially.** This should be in place prior to any potential displacements, so as to help build resilience into education systems.
5. **Governments should work on an equal basis with partners to provide zero-rated education platforms that enable refugees to download educational content at no cost for refugees (see also [Guidance Notes on OER and contextualised content](#)).**
6. **Systems should be in place to ensure that refugees can obtain relevant qualifications, degrees, certificates and badges on completion of online training and courses.**
7. **All those involved in helping refugee children learn should be provided with appropriate training in the effective and safe use of digital technologies for learning, including parents, community workers, teachers, and relevant civil society staff.**

## Examples

Good examples of digital technology use by refugees include:

- Queen Rania Foundation (2020) *Educational response to COVID-19 from Jordan and other Arab countries*, <https://www.qrf.org/en/latest/blog/educational-response-covid-19-jordan-and-other-arab-countries>.
- UNRWA's EMIS enabling students to register for school and obtain online certificates of completion, <https://emis.unrwa.org/Result/Index>.

- Jordan: Noorspace (<https://noorspacejo.azurewebsites.net>) and Darsak (<https://darsak.gov.jo/>) — the latter, with no log-in required was much more popular than the former during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Suggested further reading**

- McBurnie, C., Taskeen, A., Kaye, T. and Haßler, B. (2020) Zero-rating educational content in low- and middle-income countries, Cambridge: EdTech Hub Helpdesk Response No. 8, <https://docs.edtechhub.org/lib/F4PCMTZB>.
- Culbertson, S., Dimarogonas, J., Costello, K. and Lanna, S. (2019) *Crossing the digital divide: Applying technology to the global refugee crisis*, Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, [https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research\\_reports/RR4300/RR4322/RAND\\_RR4322.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR4300/RR4322/RAND_RR4322.pdf).
- GSMA (2019) *The digital lives of refugees: How displaced populations use mobile phones and what gets in the way*, London: GSMA, <https://www.gsma.com/mobilefordevelopment/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/The-Digital-Lives-of-Refugees.pdf>.
- UNHCR (2016) *Connecting refugees: How internet and mobile connectivity can improve refugee well-being and transform humanitarian action*, Geneva: UNHCR, <https://www.unhcr.org/5770d43c4.pdf>.

---

Developed in collaboration with UNHCR (The UN Refugee Agency), and with UNRWA (The UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East).



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons — Attribution 4.0 International License. <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

Any part of this document may be reproduced without permission, but with attribution to the EdTech Hub (<https://edtechhub.org>) and the authors. Please use this attribution statement when referencing this work:

*Guidance Note: Supporting the effective use of digital technologies for learning by refugees and displaced persons by Caroline Pontefract, Jacqueline Strecker, and Tim Unwin is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, except where otherwise noted.*

This guidance note is based on existing good practices, and advice received from participants in our consultations. Please feel free to use and share this information, but kindly respect the copyright of all included works and also share any adapted versions of this work.



United Nations  
Educational, Scientific and  
Cultural Organization



UNESCO Chair in  
ICT for Development  
Royal Holloway, University of London

# EdTech Hub

**Clear evidence, better decisions, more learning.**

Publication typesetting by User Design,  
Illustration and Typesetting  
[www.userdesignillustrationandtypesetting.com](http://www.userdesignillustrationandtypesetting.com)