A decorative background pattern of a circuit board, consisting of black lines, dots, and various colored diamond shapes (orange, red, green, blue) on a light gray background. The pattern is oriented diagonally from the top-left to the bottom-right.

Empowering Young Refugees through Digital Skills: Key Insights from a Policy Roundtable Discussion

Verónica Donoso



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Table of contents

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	3
INTRODUCTION	4
1.1 THE ySKILLS PROJECT.....	4
1.2 THIS REPORT	5
KEY FINDINGS	6
WHAT URGENT MATTERS ARE NEEDED TO EQUIP YOUNG REFUGEES WITH ADEQUATE DIGITAL SKILLS?	6
HOW CAN SCHOOLS ENHANCE DIGITAL SKILLS OF YOUNG REFUGEES?.....	7
WHAT ROLES SHOULD LOCAL, NATIONAL AND EUROPEAN GOVERNMENTS ASSUME IN FOSTERING DIGITAL SKILLS	10
FOR YOUNG REFUGEES?.....	10
FINAL THOUGHTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS	10
REFERENCES	11

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Introduction

On June 19th, the ySKILLS project organised a policy roundtable to present the [key findings from our qualitative study with young refugees in Belgium, Greece, and the UK](#). This gathering served as a platform for collaborative contemplation on potential avenues **to support young refugees to take full advantage of the opportunities that the online world can offer to them**. The roundtable was attended by members from civil society, practitioners and academics who engaged in thoughtful deliberations on issues such as digital inequalities, online experiences, opportunities and risks, as well as overall wellbeing. This roundtable served to inform policy recommendations elaborated by our project and can provide a useful basis for discussion at both the EU and national levels.

1.1 The ySKILLS project

The ySKILLS (Youth Skills) project is funded by the European Union (EU's) Horizon 2020 programme. It involves 16 partners from 13 countries to enhance and maximise the long-term positive impact of the information and communications technology (ICT) environment on multiple aspects of wellbeing for children and young people by stimulating resilience through the enhancement of digital skills. Starting from the view that children are active agents in their own development, ySKILLS examines how digital skills mediate the risks and opportunities related to ICT use by 12- to 17-year-olds in Europe (see <https://yskills.eu>).

The overarching aim of ySKILLS

To enhance and maximise long-term positive impact of the ICT environment on multiple aspects of wellbeing for all children and adolescents by stimulating resilience through the enhancement of digital skills

ySKILLS will identify the actors and factors that undermine or can promote children's wellbeing in a digital age. The relations between ICT use and wellbeing will be critically and empirically examined over time.

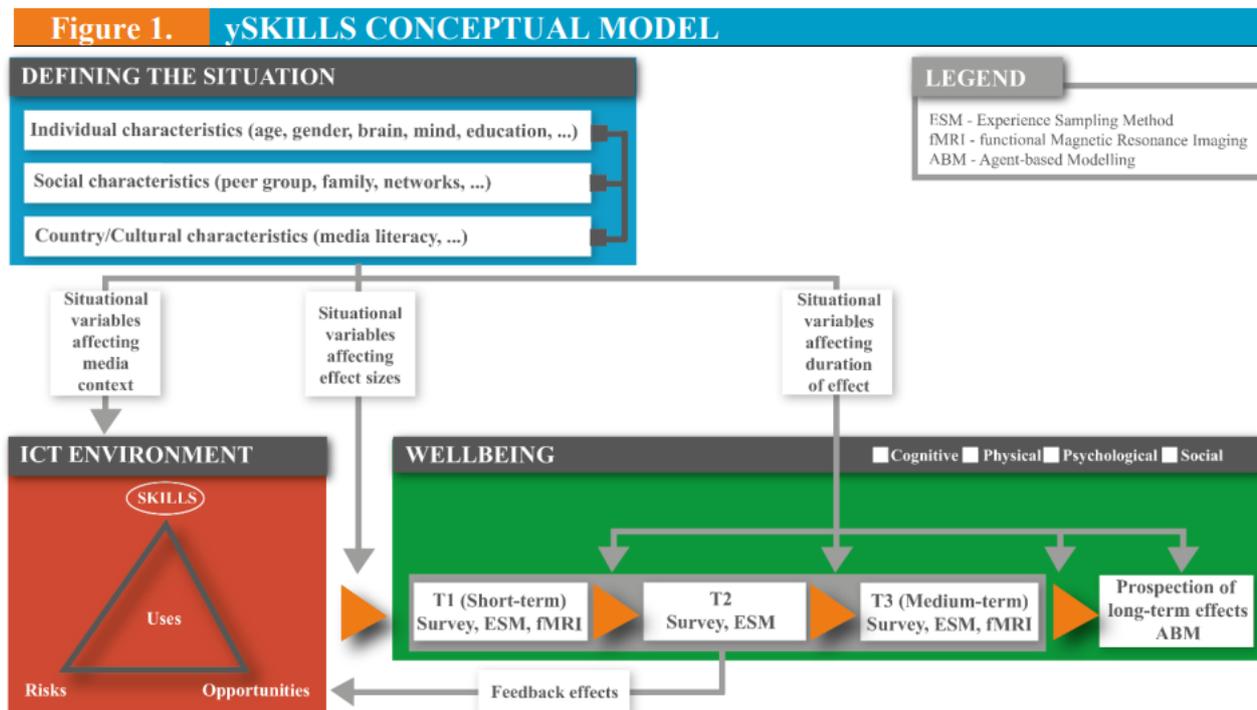
ySKILLS' research objectives

- *To acquire extensive knowledge and better measurement of digital skills.*
- *To develop and test an innovative, evidence-based explanatory and foresight model predicting the complex impacts of ICT use and digital skills on children's and adolescents' cognitive, psychological, physical and social wellbeing.*
- *To explain the ways in which at-risk children and adolescents (in terms of mental health, ethnic or cultural origin, SES and gender) can benefit from online opportunities despite their risk factors (material, social, psychological).*
- *To generate insightful evidence-based recommendations and strategies for key stakeholder groups to promote digital skills and wellbeing.*



This report contributes to achieving the second objective of ySKILLS by focusing on how ICT use and skills impact children’s wellbeing.

ySKILLS has proposed, and will continue to develop, its conceptual model (see Figure 1):



1.2 This report

ySKILLS focuses on studying vulnerable children, including young refugees, within its research scope. Refugees, a distinct subset of immigrants, are defined by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 1996, p. 16) as individuals who, “owing to well-founded fears of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion” are outside their home country and unable or unwilling to seek protection within it. In 2021, 535,000 people applied for asylum in the EU, almost a third of which were minors younger than 18.

While widespread internet access exists, inequalities in digital access, digital skills levels, support networks, and, most importantly, outcomes of digital engagement are pronounced among disadvantaged people. According to [ySKILLS findings](#), some young refugees have never used smartphones or computers before migrating, others have grown up with them. **Young refugees acquire various digital skills through use** (by doing). Learning by doing is crucial for fulfilling needs tied to their complex circumstances such as finding safety, adapting to new societies, sustaining existing and making new meaningful connections, and more.

In our research we observed that **many young refugees have developed high levels of digital skills, particularly in communication and information retrieval**. Others revealed **obstacles to digital literacies** associated with precarious lives, interrupted educational experiences and social exclusion more broadly. While many **young refugees developed skills to seek information for education and for learning** languages or to support schoolwork, in some cases, social media compensated for weak or failing structures of educational support. As regards their socio-emotional and cognitive development, **many young refugees use digital technologies to support the development of identity-related skills**, as well as **to navigate their transnational lives**. In this sense, they tend to use digital technologies to meet fundamental needs. For example, they report self-representing themselves and communicating with others on social media to gain social validation or social control, but also to establish and sustain digital relationships with different people



in different countries. **Most young refugees are active and engaged communicators**, often across different social media platforms. However, due to their limited digital literacies, general literacy deficiencies, and/or a different understanding of risks compared to other groups, they can sometimes be exposed to a broader range of online risks such as violent content, hate speech or disinformation which make them sad or anxious. Nonetheless, many kids have also learned to develop mechanisms to cope, although not always successfully, with these types of risks.

Together with the participants we reflected on possible avenues to support young refugees, especially unaccompanied minors, to bolster digital. Attendees representing civil society, practitioners and academics reflected on these key questions:

- 1 What urgent measures are needed to equip young refugees with adequate digital skills?
- 2 How can schools enhance digital skills of young refugees?
- 3 Considering the current BIK+ strategy, what roles should local, national, and European governments assume in fostering digital skills for young refugees?

Key findings

What urgent matters are needed to equip young refugees with adequate digital skills?

The roundtable participants referred to several aspects which they considered crucial to foster the digital skills of young refugees. These factors ranged from ensuring access to adequate infrastructure to providing them with enough opportunities to develop their digital literacy and skills.

Access to working devices is needed. In the Flemish schools we have the [Digisprong](#)¹. Despite this, we sometimes have difficulties in accessing laptops. We don't know whether the young refugees have access to working devices at home. (Participant 1)

One participant, who had carried out research about the lived media experiences of unaccompanied refugee youth across European countries, emphasized that not all young refugees enjoy the same level of access to technological infrastructure and training opportunities in the European Union. Participants agreed that these access differences constitute a pressing political challenge.

There are quite different tools that the young people could access in the Netherlands, Sweden, the UK and Italy. In Sweden they would have access to notebooks and tablets in schools, which was not the case in Italy, for example. (Participant 2)

Another important need identified by the participants was the requirement for training and capacity building among adults working with young refugees, such as caregivers, social and youth workers. During the discussion, some participants emphasized the importance of creating 'safe spaces' for children and young people to discuss media and digital literacy concerns, particularly those related to online risks such as cyberbullying, hate speech or dis- and misinformation, among others.

Most important is having social workers who are media literate themselves and who have digital media literacy skills. So, it's difficult to find solutions that fit all. Unaccompanied minors turn to caregivers when they are bullied online, or for other issues. (Participant 2)

The significance of tailored media and digital literacy education for refugee youths was also emphasized. Different participants expressed that traditional media or digital education may be less effective due to the diverse backgrounds of this group and the many challenges they face, especially upon arrival in a new country where not only the mother tongue, but also local culture, religion, customs and even values may be different

¹ The Digital Leap ('Digisprong') is an initiative by the Flemish Government in Belgium that aims at investing in laptops and computers, as well as in ICT training for teachers and the development of digital teaching resources. The investment totals EUR 385 million for all types of education. See: <https://www.vlaanderen.be/en/authorities/flemish-resilience/the-digital-leap-digisprong>



or unknown. Therefore, participants proposed integrating media and digital education in different aspects of the young refugees' integration path.

I've seen they have been using digital media in education. Effective in a way. In Norway they have special programmes for young refugees, they gave education especially in biology and chemistry in different languages, the information aspect was very important. The social aspect were extracurricular activities organised by social workers or teachers and where young buddies can assist [young refugees] so they can contribute to their integration. We have to look at different bases of developing digital knowledge. They need to interact with different people, I think. (Participant 3)

Cultural and gender sensitivity as well as attention for the family situation were also underscored as fundamental to support the development of digital skills. Indeed, some participants pointed out that most unaccompanied refugee minors are male and that, on the contrary, most refugee girls arrive in new countries with family members. Depending on the family situation, some girls may not enjoy the same possibilities to continue developing their digital education as boys might. For this reason, it is important to offer enough opportunities for children to develop their media literacy and digital education in a variety of contexts, as illustrated by one of the participants below:

They do not always have access to the resources either. We need to look at family situations, and to the gender aspect as well. For example, teach media and digital education in a cooking class where young girls may be more likely to participate (...). They can also learn digital skills such as looking for a recipe online, and parents are more likely to encourage girls to attend a cooking class. (Luttine)

Being aware of the huge diversity within refugee children was deemed important. As observed in our own research, but also by the roundtable participants, even children coming from the same country or region may have different levels of general and digital literacy, some children have attended school before while others have not, some children may come from rural while others from urban areas, and so on and so forth. All these aspects can have a considerable impact in children's media and digital literacy levels as well as on their capacity to acquire new digital skills.

There is also the difficulty between Pashto-Dari-Farsi, they don't always want to listen to each other. Pashto is a big group, and Farsi and Dari is the smaller group. The last group is learning very quickly, compared to the Pashto group. I think they are richer and have more access to modern things. It is very difficult for the Pashto group to learn new things. (Participant 4)

How can schools enhance digital skills of young refugees?

In 2021, 535,000 people applied for asylum in the EU, almost a third of which were minors younger than 18. Given the high proportion of these youth, the right to education should be guaranteed as early as possible (European Council on Refugees and Exiles, 2023)².

The universal human right to education dictates that states must provide free primary education, alongside different forms of secondary education, including vocational and higher education. Within the EU legal framework, the Reception Conditions Directive stipulates that asylum-seeking children and unaccompanied children should have access to the education system. The Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion (the Action Plan) underscores inclusive education's role in refugees' integration and workforce participation³. However, despite these existing EU legal frameworks, many refugee children have limited educational opportunities due to stress and language barriers.

During our roundtable we discussed how formal education and in particular how schools can bolster digital skills for young refugees. During the discussion it became clear that education provision for refugee children

² <https://ecre.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Policy-Note-Accessing-to-Education-for-Asylum-Seekers-in-the-EU-March-2023.pdf>

³ <https://ecre.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Policy-Note-Accessing-to-Education-for-Asylum-Seekers-in-the-EU-March-2023.pdf>



differs from country to country. For instance, in Belgium, children of recently arrived migrants and child asylum-seekers are enrolled in classes with specially tailored lesson plans, referred to as OKAN ("reception classes")⁴ in the Dutch-speaking schools, and "bridging classes" in the French-speaking schools. After receiving a full-time language immersion course, students can move to regular education. Reception classes for newcomers with a different mother tongue are also provided in part-time secondary education (Learning and Working) where young refugees can further develop their language skills, integration, and self-reliance with the aim of supporting the transition to the labour market⁵. In the other countries studied in our ySKILLS research, Greece and the UK, the opportunities to access formal education seemed more limited, at least for the children who participated in the study.

Within this diverse landscape, the role of schools emerged as pivotal. Integrating digital education seamlessly into curricula and extracurricular activities was championed. Challenges like varying literacy levels and inadequate resources were underlined. As a matter of fact, participants stressed that refugee children are not a homogenous group and that even children of the same age or coming from the same country may have dramatically different educational experiences.

I worked for a while on a school project, a well-established OKAN programme in Mechelen, a city that is very active in the field of young refugees. When I stepped in with my activities, I worked with two cohorts for a while. One was a cohort that stepped in a while ago in the OKAN class, and another cohort with Ukrainian young people who had just arrived (...). Some of the kids were 14 or 15 years old and had only had 2 or 3 years of formal education at that point. (Participant 5)

Given the diverse backgrounds of young refugees, it is important to invest in the development of tailored educational programmes and resources. These initiatives must not only consider the contextual factors and available digital resources, but also prioritize the unique needs of refugee children. Reflecting on these challenges, participants underscored the important role that schools can play in offering dedicated educational programmes that target media and digital literacy, as well as digital skills. As one participant mentioned, rather than relegating digital education to isolated lessons such as "an 'ICT-hour'", seamless integration into existing curricula and extracurricular activities was advocated. This challenge was illustrated by a participant from an OKAN school, where diversity is pronounced:

There is high diversity in OKAN classes. In some schools in Leuven, they try to introduce digital media in all lessons, for learning Dutch, for mathematics, to create things such as a painting by using the laptop. Using the laptop for a lot of things is important because they are used to using their smartphone, but doing homework on a smartphone is very difficult. (Participant 6)

Participants not only referred to big differences in terms of formal schooling among refugee children but also to huge disparities in terms of their digital literacy and skills especially as compared to local children. Participants also highlighted the lack of access to equipment such as computers or laptops, affecting both schoolwork and future participation in the labour market. These impairments obviously add up to the educational challenges in this area.

What I'm missing at school is the practice of regularly logging in at a computer, they have a login and password, but they forget how to do this. We have an ICT hour once a week, but this is not enough, they have to be able to do this daily. This is one of the problems we face. (Participant 1)

It would be good if they could bring their laptop from school to home. (Participant 6)

Notably, online risks emerged as one of the most problematic issues for young refugees who, due to lack of resources or adequate education, may be less resourceful to cope with them. Schools as well as other

⁴ This kind of education is intended for pupils who are new to the country and have a specific need being the absence of or insufficient proficiency of the Dutch (Flemish) language.

⁵ <https://www.onderwijsinbrussel.be/en/learning-and-studying/structure-education-and-training/reception-class-children-different-mother>



organisations working with children and young refugees were deemed as key partners in digital literacy education.

Kids who can afford to have a phone, they know how to get on YouTube, but they don't have the means to filter all that information. They do need to have some grounding on that field. They may have phones they use on their own time; they use social media similar to their peers, but in terms of educational resources it should be more the school to help them access certain tools or to watch out for grooming or to identify fake news. The schools don't always have the capacities, such as a computer room at school. A lot of these kids have or will face online risks at a certain moment. (Participant 5)

In Norway there are some organisations that provide support for homework, they could also assist. Teachers don't always have the capacities to support all students. We need to consider their different levels. (Participant 3)

Other aspects considered important among the roundtable participants included **a detailed and more comprehensive curriculum** on digital skills and literacy and **more time dedicated to these aspects at school**. In the participants' opinion, the current school offer is usually limited to specific skills sets, mainly operational or navigation skills and processing of information, while other types of skills, such as critical thinking or (digital) content creation tend to be left behind.

Some participants also stressed the need for **more meaningful learning opportunities** especially for older refugee children and young people sensitive to employment pressures. Increased **collaboration with relevant organisations such as non-profit or youth work** was also deemed vital due to young refugees' significant time spent there.

Increased funding for resources is very much needed! (Participant 5)

Participants further reflected on the importance of taking advantage of the (digital) experiences, knowledge, and survival strategies that unaccompanied foreign minors already possess, and which can be helpful to improve their digital literacy and skills.

It's difficult, we're fighting this fight for the last 20 years to get more media literacy in schools. There are a lot of skills we can build upon when it comes to refugee kids. What do we have and where can we build on? The incredible language skills these children have for example! They speak their own language and the language of their arrival country. I met young people who upload music videos from their own country on YouTube. There were children who were illiterate, and nonetheless they were able to use WhatsApp to keep in touch, to solve issues, to contact their football club, etc. for example by using audio messages, or by asking friends to read out loud the text messages for them. (Participant 2)

As illustrated in the quote above, participants agreed that educational systems and other organisations offering education or training to young refugees should focus on the children's resourcefulness and strengths such as their enormous resilience capacity, their advanced language and communication skills, their problem-solving abilities and the many other abilities and competences that, as pointed out by one of the participants, *are vital to pull out the strengths that all children need*.

Emphasising broader community support, participants suggested buddy (support) programmes and peer-led projects and activities. Furthermore, involving parents, relatives as well as guardians of refugee children in school was advocated, recognising language barriers, educational and cultural differences, and socioeconomic factors that can hinder parental engagement and school participation. Therefore, providing adequate guidance, resources, and support to school personnel was seen as crucial so that home-school communication and parental engagement can be enhanced, especially for vulnerable families.



What roles should local, national and European governments assume in fostering digital skills for young refugees?

When discussing the role of governments, participants highlighted the need for specific policy recommendations tailored to the needs of refugee children. At present, the competence to regulate, and therefore to act, largely resides within national jurisdictions, primarily focusing on formal education systems. However, as suggested by the participants, there are many actors, beyond Ministries of Education, who can and should support the many efforts needed to ensure that refugee children's transition settlement, and development opportunities in the new country are successful. Because the re-settlement opportunities and the contexts in which this takes place vary from country to country, better guidance, policies, and comprehensive initiatives on a national level are important. Without this solid basis, participants fear that efforts to support the development of specific skills and literacies, including digital ones, will be meaningless and hardly successful. Participants also stressed the importance of granting sufficient time and support for refugee children to get used to their new country, learn about the local customs and culture and gradually adapt to their new lives. As research shows, refugees must overcome the challenges of re-building their lives and re-establishing their identities and relationships in the new country (Mikal & Woodfield, 2015). Unfortunately, despite the assistance provided to refugees through various support agencies, evidence suggests that many refugees feel unprepared to face the challenges of integrating and adjusting to unfamiliar cultural environments (Barnes & Aguilar, 2007).

Participants further urged governments to contribute to developing accessible awareness resources such as websites and apps, while also ensuring non-digital and multilingual possibilities for those lacking basic levels of digital skills or consistent access to digital tools. Visual resources were suggested for children and adults who have not yet learned to read or write, or whose host language proficiency is still deficient.

Lastly, participants suggested the crucial importance of forging “*allies*” with different political constituencies who are willing to act as “ambassadors” who support this cause. To achieve this, stressed the need to map out children and young refugees' exceptional qualities and skills, which can help portray them in a positive light and as valuable assets to the community. As one participant mentioned, “*young refugees are seen as a failure, but we are also failing at recognising young refugees' abilities and skills.*” At the end of the roundtable there was a consensus that raising awareness about young refugees' strengths and virtues is crucial for a successful integration process. Besides, participants agreed that local school children can learn a lot from young refugees, underscoring the importance of facilitating opportunities for shared activities with their peers so that both refugee and local children can exchange knowledge, experiences and learn from each other.

Final thoughts and recommendations

During this roundtable, the participants gathered to contemplate potential strategies that could bolster young refugees' capacities in an evolving digital landscape, enabling them to take full advantage of the many opportunities offered by digital technologies. The discussion revolved around several aspects which they considered important for nurturing the media and digital literacy and skills of young refugees. These ranged from adequate infrastructure to providing enough opportunities for education and training. This is fundamental due to the existing evidence of stark discrepancies in the outcomes of digital engagement among refugee children and disadvantaged populations. Consequently, it becomes imperative to extend increased support to marginalised groups like refugee children and young people, ensuring they have the opportunity to access the same benefits as other groups in society.

During the discussion, participants proposed the following ideas:

- Create ample opportunities and **incentives for refugee children to attend formal education** and to take advantage of existing learning and professional training opportunities.



- **Avoid undue pressure on newly arrived young refugees, prioritising their mental health and general wellbeing** and allowing them time and support to adjust to the new country, its customs, and culture.
- Offer adequate **media and digital literacy training for adults working with young refugees**, enabling them to address related queries and concerns confidently.
- **Tailor media and digital literacy education to the special needs of refugee youths**, aligning with their interests to foster motivation. **Emphasize** formal education and life-long learning to cultivate (digital) skills vital for societal integration and future professional lives.
- **Acknowledge the significant diversity among refugee children**, accounting for variations in general and digital literacy levels, which can considerably impact the acquisition of new digital knowledge and skills.
- **Offer varied opportunities for developing media literacy and digital education**, addressing potential language barriers, cultural and gender aspects.
- **Establish effective plans of action for upskilling and reskilling of digital skills**, preparing young refugees to tackle current and future technological challenges.
- **Promote peer-to-peer activities** within schools and local communities, facilitating knowledge exchange between refugee and local children, enhancing integration, and providing skill development opportunities.
Strengthen home-schools collaboration, inviting parents and relatives of refugee children to engage in school activities, while also offering necessary resources and guidance to support communication and engagement.
- **Forge partnerships** beyond governments, schools, and refugee centres, **collaborating with national and local bodies** to ensure young refugees acquire the necessary digital skills for success in society.

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