

# **The effects of COVID-19 on young refugees' education and wellbeing**

**Insights from practitioners**

July 2021

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# Executive summary

This report presents practitioner-based insights from REUK's experience supporting over 550 refugee and asylum-seeking children and young people through the COVID-19 pandemic. Qualitative consultations took place with 10 frontline staff members, who shared their observations on the educational and wellbeing challenges facing refugee students, aged 14-25. The report aims to highlight the experiences of refugee students to ensure that their needs are prioritised as the UK Government implements their education recovery package.

## COVID-19's effect on refugees' education

COVID-19 has had a significant impact on the education of the young people REUK supports. Key educational challenges have included:

- The reliance on technology to access and progress in education
- Language-related barriers to education and learning
- Asylum system delays and the impact on education
- Limited access to additional educational support

As a result of these challenges, many young refugees and asylum seekers have fallen behind with their learning. Their task of 'catching-up' on learning may be particularly challenging, as many do not have access to the same resources or support available to other children and young people, whether through families or tutoring.

## COVID-19's effect on refugees' wellbeing

COVID-19 has exacerbated mental health conditions and psychosocial wellbeing challenges faced by many refugee and asylum-seeking young people. Key wellbeing challenges have included:

- Increased safeguarding concerns
- Isolation and loneliness
- Protracted asylum claims and living in limbo
- Exam-related anxieties and stresses
- Challenges for the protective function of schools

Multiple stresses have accumulated over the course of the pandemic, triggering a greater overall negative effect on young people's mental health and wellbeing. Concurrently, schools, colleges and universities and other key systems on which young refugees most often engage (including the NHS, local authorities and the Home Office) have experienced severe capacity challenges as a result of the pandemic and have been limited in the care and support that they have been able to provide young refugees.

# Key cross-cutting issues

**The reliance on technology presents barriers to young refugees' education and wellbeing.** Refugee students have been affected by deep technology inequalities, both in terms of accessing devices and the internet, and digital skills. Many have been unable to access or navigate online learning and social activities on an equal footing to their peers. Those affected have fallen behind with their learning and have felt isolated from their support networks.

**Education and wellbeing are intrinsically linked.** The closures of education settings confirmed how important attending school, college or university can be for young refugees' psychosocial wellbeing. The closures also highlighted the educational value of the social capital that young refugees build at school, college or university.

**Support networks are of paramount importance for young people's wellbeing and education.** Whether a young person has been able to cope and adapt during COVID-19 – both in terms of their education and wellbeing – has been shaped by the support networks that they have around them, including from families, friends, schools and the voluntary sector. But access to support networks has been inconsistent, and many young people – particularly those newly arrived in the UK – have lacked or have not had the opportunity to build up these networks during COVID-19.

## Recommendations

### Central government should:

- Ensure that refugee students are specifically identified as a priority group.
- Extend the age range of the National Tutoring package to those aged 16-19.
- Fund mental health and wellbeing support that is accessible to refugee students.

### Local authorities should:

- Provide refugee students with adequate access to data and digital technology to enable online learning.

### Education institutions should:

- Provide comprehensive technology support for refugee students.
- Ensure summer 'catch-up' programmes prioritise refugee young people's education and wellbeing.
- Make online enrolment more accessible to refugee students.

### The voluntary sector should:

- Prioritise access to mental health and wellbeing interventions for refugee young people.
- Develop initiatives that create opportunities for refugee young people to catch up on lost learning.

### Funders should:

- Prioritise the funding of comprehensive and holistic mental health and wellbeing interventions for refugee young people.
- Support initiatives that create opportunities for refugee young people to catch up on lost learning.

# Introduction

## Background

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to unprecedented educational disruption for children and young people across the UK. Schools, colleges and universities were required to close their doors to the vast majority of students first in March 2020, and then in January 2021. During these closures, the vast majority of teaching took place online.

Even when schools, colleges and universities remained open, students have experienced ongoing sporadic disruptions to their education, including having to self-isolate and stay at home if family members or classmates have tested positive for COVID-19. Exams and assessments at all levels have been affected by COVID-19, with GCSE, A Level and BTEC exams cancelled in 2020 and 2021.

This disruption has been challenging for all students across the UK. For refugee and asylum-seeking pupils however, this educational disruption has compounded the educational challenges they are already likely to have faced.<sup>1</sup>

## Purpose of the report

This report provides an overview of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on refugee and asylum-seeking young people's education and wellbeing, with the aim of ensuring that their needs are prioritised and addressed by interventions supporting education recovery. It is grounded in the experiences of children and young people supported by Refugee Education UK (REUK) between March 2020 and May 2021. It particularly focuses on the experiences of refugee young people during periods of social distancing and online learning.

## Methodology

This current report builds on REUK's policy brief published in April 2020.<sup>2</sup> It is based on REUK's experience of directly supporting more than 550 refugee and asylum-seeking young people, many of whom are unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC) or former UASC, during COVID-19 in the UK. It is informed by consultations with ten REUK staff members, which were conducted in February and May 2021. These consultations are complemented by evidence from existing literature.

It should be noted that this report is based on the experiences of refugee and asylum-seeking young people who have accessed REUK's educational and wellbeing

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<sup>1</sup> Gladwell, C and Chetwynd, G., 2018. Education for refugee and asylum seeking children: access and equality in England, Scotland and Wales. London: UNICEF UK.

<sup>2</sup> Refugee Support Network. 2020. *COVID-19 crisis: emerging impact on young refugees' education and wellbeing in the UK. Policy briefing*. Refugee Support Network. Available at: <https://www.refugeesupportnetwork.org/resources/21-covid-19-crisis-policy-briefing-and-recommendations>

support services. One of the possible limitations, therefore, is that it does not shed light on the issues facing refugee young people who do not access voluntary sector support.

## Definitions

This report uses the terms 'young refugees' or 'refugee young people' to encompass the broad range of statuses allocated to young people seeking safety in the UK. It is not limited to those with refugee status. It includes individuals seeking asylum whose status is unresolved, or who are in an appeals process and those with status including, but not limited to, refugee status, humanitarian protection, UASC leave, and discretionary leave to remain.

# Key findings

This section first briefly outlines the resilience witnessed by REUK over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic. It then moves on to two subsections: educational challenges, and wellbeing challenges.

## Stories of resilience

Before outlining the challenges faced by refugee students, it is important to emphasise that refugee students, teachers, education institutions and other key actors have demonstrated significant resilience in the face of unprecedented educational instability. By the time schools, colleges and universities were required to close their doors for the second time in January 2021, many were able to adopt strategies that benefited a number of the young people REUK supports, including by widening physical access to education spaces for vulnerable students. REUK has observed and worked alongside teachers and school staff who have gone above and beyond to ensure students receive high levels of support and care. In addition, REUK has witnessed persistent support towards young people from the voluntary sector, and remarkable resilience from refugee students.

### Box 1: Refugee students share their advice on how to cope with school closures and lockdown

Feelings of loneliness and disconnection and experiencing school closures and lockdowns are not new for many young refugees: they are often the hallmarks of conflict and forced displacement. At the start of the pandemic, young refugees shared their advice, informed by their experiences of forced displacement, with children and young people across the country on how to cope with the challenges of the pandemic. They shared their advice on a range of issues, including how to cope when being away from school, how to keep fit when having to stay inside, and more. You can watch videos with young refugees' advice to other school children and students [here](#).

## Educational challenges

Evidence shows that the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated existing educational inequalities, disproportionately affecting disadvantaged learners.<sup>3</sup> Refugee children and young people are often among the UK's most disadvantaged learners<sup>4</sup>, and this section outlines the educational challenges that they have experienced.

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<sup>3</sup> Di Pietro, G., Biagi, F., Costa, P., Karpiński Z., and Mazza, J., 2020. *The likely impact of COVID-19 on education: Reflections based on the existing literature and international datasets*. Publications Office of the European Union. Available at:

<https://ec.europa.eu/jrc/en/publication/likely-impact-covid-19-education-reflections-based-existing-literature-and-recent-international>

<sup>4</sup> Manzoni, C. and D'Angelo, A. 2020. *How have migrant pupils been affected by lockdown and school closures?* Economics Observatory [online]. Available at:

<https://www.economicsobservatory.com/how-have-migrant-pupils-been-affected-lockdown-and-school-closures>

## The reliance on technology to access and progress in education

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to technology assuming increased importance in day-to-day life. This has, however, been a challenge for many refugee young people: findings from recent research by Breaking Barriers shows that limited digital access and literacy for refugees has affected their ability to take part in daily activities during social distancing.<sup>5</sup> This has extended to refugee young people's ability to participate in education.

### Access to technology

REUK staff emphasised how refugee young people's participation in online learning has been hindered by limited access to devices – particularly to laptops, tablets and smartphones. Despite increased government distribution of laptops to disadvantaged learners<sup>6</sup>, REUK has often had to rely on the support of other voluntary initiatives, such as Screen Share<sup>7</sup>, to ensure that young people access the equipment they need to continue learning. Twenty eight young refugees were provided with a laptop, PC or tablet through this partnership with Screen Share.

Access to sufficient internet connectivity has also been a significant challenge. Some young people have had to use their phones to participate in online lessons and even complete assignments, because they were unable to access WiFi to use their laptops for these purposes. REUK staff emphasised that this has been exhausting for young people, impacting on their motivation and ability to fully engage with their learning. Over the course of the pandemic, REUK issued data grants to a third of young people supported through our Educational Wellbeing programme<sup>8</sup>, and advocated for the local authority to provide data packages to many more who were looked-after children or care leavers.

The extensive nature of this challenge is supported by research from Refugee Action, who collected data from 29 organisations in the UK who support refugee families with school-aged children. Eighty three percent thought no internet connection was a problem for children's education.<sup>9</sup>

### Digital literacy

While the distribution of laptops and other learning devices has been important in addressing technology barriers, challenges continue once refugees and asylum seekers access them. REUK staff reported observing refugee and asylum-seeking young people struggling to navigate laptops and tablets, preventing them from fully engaging with online learning. Some refugee young people have struggled with basic tasks such as finding their institutional email account, locating classwork and messages from teachers,

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<sup>5</sup> Breaking Barriers. 2021. *One Year Later: The impact of Covid-19 on the support needs of refugees and people of refugee background*. Breaking Barriers. Available at:

[https://breaking-barriers.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Impact\\_of\\_COVID-19\\_V10-1.pdf](https://breaking-barriers.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Impact_of_COVID-19_V10-1.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> See, for example,

<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/get-laptops-and-tablets-for-children-who-cannot-attend-school-due-to-coronavirus-covid-19>

<sup>7</sup> See <https://www.screen-share.co.uk/>

<sup>8</sup> This programme supports approximately 80 young people each year.

<sup>9</sup> Refugee Action. 2021. *Information and Data Hub Bulletin 8: 8 February 2021*. Refugee Action, p. 21. Available at:

[https://assets.website-files.com/5eb86d8dfb1f1e1609be988b/6020f0cc53ebc9e3e98bc427\\_BULLETIN%208.pdf](https://assets.website-files.com/5eb86d8dfb1f1e1609be988b/6020f0cc53ebc9e3e98bc427_BULLETIN%208.pdf)

and using Microsoft Office – tasks that teachers may not have realised were difficult for them.

Many of the young people REUK supports are UASC or former UASC, and so have not necessarily been able to rely on the support of parents, guardians or siblings to help them with such basic tasks. Instructions for setting up devices and for using online learning platforms provided by schools and colleges have often been in English, creating an additional barrier for the majority of young refugees - many of whom have not been able to follow the instructions provided.

### Technology support

REUK staff noted that, despite significant technological challenges, there has been limited technological support accessible to refugee and asylum-seeking students. Many schools and colleges have not had the capacity to help students with limited digital literacy and, as a result, REUK staff have been repeatedly asked to provide such support. Being unable to navigate or use devices or online learning platforms has meant that students repeatedly missed all or large parts of their lessons – negatively impacting on their educational progression.

### Missing out on enrolment

For some students, technological inequalities – both in terms of access to technology and digital literacy – have affected their ability to access education. REUK's experience of enrolment (for more information, see Box 2) is that several refugee young people were unable to successfully complete online assessments that were required in order to enrol on their course. Others struggled to access adequate technology to complete their online enrolment applications. REUK staff described how online enrolment was a frustrating process for affected young people, leading to some missing out on course places.

### Eroding motivation to study

With the struggles of online learning, young people have reported that education has become increasingly exhausting. With some of the key benefits of education removed in as a result of the pandemic – including being unable to attend school and extracurricular activities, separation from friends, lack of interactions with teachers – a number of young people have demonstrated increased education fatigue and a lack of motivation to engage and progress in their education – despite its many benefits on their lives and for their futures.

Some refugee students studying on vocational courses have not felt able to meet their educational goals through online study or have not had the opportunity to engage in the practical components of their courses, leading to them dropping out of their courses.

## Language-related barriers to education and learning

Young people with limited English language proficiency have experienced significant language-related challenges in the past year.

### English language learning

Learning English during periods of social distancing and school, college and university closures has been difficult for refugee and asylum-seeking students, particularly for those

newly arrived in the UK and at early stages of English language acquisition. REUK staff observed the challenging nature of learning basic English and engaging in ESOL beginners courses online, particularly when exacerbated by digital access and literacy challenges.

REUK staff emphasised how critical the face-to-face, informal, daily interactions are for refugee and asylum-seeking students when learning English – interactions that have been significantly reduced since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. In this way, the COVID-19 pandemic has thrown the educational value of social capital into sharp focus, particularly in English language learning.

## Engaging in online learning

Refugee and asylum-seeking students, particularly those who have recently arrived in the UK, already face significant challenges with their education as a result of language barriers.<sup>10</sup> These have been exacerbated by online learning. REUK's experience strongly supports existing evidence and analysis on the impact of COVID-19 and school closures on disadvantaged EAL students' learning.<sup>11</sup>

## Language barriers and online enrolment

The nature of online enrolment has presented significant challenges for refugee students with limited English language. A number of students struggled to navigate online enrolment systems on their own, and needed more support than usual from REUK to successfully enrol on their courses. For some, these challenges meant missing out on places. For more on REUK's experience of enrolment, see Box 2.

### Box 2: REUK's experience of 2020-2021 enrolment

REUK staff reflected on their experiences of supporting refugee young people with college enrolment in 2020, which was largely online. Challenges reported included:

- Difficulties for refugee students, especially those with limited or no English, navigating online enrolment systems and progressing applications.
- Seemingly fewer places available and more young people unable to enrol in courses.
- Challenges speaking to staff members when more complex enrolment issues arose (such as ID issues), because enrolment was online and staff were very busy.
- A lack of access to technology, which prevented young people from completing assessments needed to start their course or be put into the right class.

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<sup>10</sup> Gladwell, C and Chetwynd, G., 2018. *Education for refugee and asylum seeking children: access and equality in England, Scotland and Wales*. UNICEF UK; O'Higgins, A., 2019. Analysis of care and education pathways of refugee and asylum-seeking children in care in England: Implications for social work. *International Journal of Social Welfare*, 28(1), pp. 53–62.

<sup>11</sup> Curran, E. 2020. *Closing the gap: Supporting the most disadvantaged EAL pupils during the pandemic*. SecEd [online]. Available at: <https://www.sec-ed.co.uk/best-practice/closing-the-gap-supporting-the-most-disadvantaged-english-as-an-additional-language-pupils-during-the-pandemic-curriculum-catch-up/>

## Asylum system delays and the impact on education

Having an asylum claim being processed during COVID-19 has affected young refugees' access to education.

### Delays with processing asylum claims

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused well-documented delays to processing asylum claims in the UK.<sup>12</sup> These delays have had multiple negative consequences for affected young people (the negative impact on wellbeing is addressed in the proceeding section). However, the education-specific consequences of these delays have been overlooked.

Existing research shows that when young refugees and asylum seekers are required to send their passports and other documentation to the Home Office, their ability to access education is negatively affected: proof of identification – often a passport – is needed for enrolment.<sup>13</sup> REUK staff emphasised how COVID-19 has exacerbated this issue, with young people's documentation remaining at the Home Office for longer periods of time than usual.

REUK staff discussed how there have been significant delays with the Home Office issuing Application Registration Cards (ARCs) and Biometric Residence Permits (BRPs). This has affected some young people's ability to enrol in college, as ARCs and BRPs are often requested. At the higher education level, these delays have affected young people's ability to provide the proof of identity necessary to secure student loans from Student Finance. In some cases, Student Finance has not approved loans for otherwise eligible individuals because they have been unable to provide the necessary documents to prove their immigration status.

REUK staff and the young people they supported reported challenges in resolving these issues. The online and therefore impersonal nature of enrolment, combined with significant capacity issues within schools, colleges and universities, meant that it was often not possible to speak with a staff member when difficulties arose. As a result, a number of affected young people were unable to enrol or participate in courses.

### Housing insecurity

REUK staff described the impact of increased housing insecurity (including a spike in numbers of young people experiencing homelessness during COVID-19 ) on education. Staff have observed more mobile refugee populations in the UK during this time, especially through moves into Asylum Support initial accommodation – which is temporary. REUK staff have supported at least 9 young people who have been moved away from their school or college, sometimes with as little notice as two days, risking and (in at least two cases enforcing) their withdrawal from that school or college. Not only has this generated significant anxiety and stress for children, young people and their families, it has been highly disruptive to their education progression.

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<sup>12</sup> <https://righttoremain.org.uk/changes-to-the-asylum-process-due-to-covid-19/>

<sup>13</sup> Elwyn, H, Gladwell, C and Lyall, S., 2012. "I just want to study": access to higher education for young refugees and asylum seekers. Refugee Support Network.

## Limited access to additional education support

Research suggests that persistent and consistent support from others – including teachers, school staff, social workers and foster carers – is important for refugee and asylum-seeking children and young people’s educational progression.<sup>14</sup> Access to this support has, however, been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

### Support from schools and colleges

As previously mentioned, REUK has witnessed remarkable examples of school and college staff and teachers going above and beyond to support refugee and asylum-seeking students with their learning and education. While in no way diminishing the significance of this, REUK staff emphasised that this support is inconsistent and has been subject to the discretion of individual institutions – a finding supported by research from *Unleashing Refugee Potential*.<sup>15</sup>

REUK’s experience is that some schools and colleges have not provided additional educational support for refugee and asylum-seeking students, including because they have not had the capacity to do so or because they have not been aware of the distinct challenges that these learners face. Even when teachers are eager to support disadvantaged learners, recognising that a student is in need of additional support during online lessons has been difficult.

REUK team members have found that young people often do not feel confident enough, or do not have the requisite language abilities, to request support from their teachers when it is needed. REUK has undertaken advocacy on behalf of multiple young people to request additional educational support from their school or college. This highlights the importance of young people’s support networks outside of their school or college; not all young refugees and asylum seekers have access to this sort of support.

### Support outside of schools and colleges

Recent research shows that children from socio-economically disadvantaged families spent less time learning at home during lockdown than children from better-off families.<sup>16</sup> REUK’s experience supports this. Families of refugee and asylum-seeking children and young people have struggled with providing the at-home support expected of them during lockdowns and school closures. They have often lacked the language or technical skills and knowledge to support their children’s at-home learning.

REUK staff discussed how engaging and thriving in education during the COVID-19 pandemic has largely depended on the support networks that young people have around them. This supports evidence suggesting that the ability to make the most of online learning is dependent on the role models that young people have, and the emotional

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<sup>14</sup> Ashlee, A and Gladwell, C. 2020. *Education transitions for refugee and asylum-seeking young people in the UK: Exploring the journey to further and higher education*. Unicef UK. Available at: <https://www.unicef.org.uk/policy/education-transitions-refugees-report/>

<sup>15</sup> Teklemariam and Tooley, n.d. *Home learning inequalities among refugees, asylum seekers and migrant communities*. *Unleashing Refugee Potential*. Available at: <https://www.sirius-migrationeducation.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/URP-Home-Learning-Inequalities.pdf>

<sup>16</sup> Andrew, A., Cattan, S., Costa-Dias, M., Farquharson, C., Kraftman, L., Krutikova, S., Phimister, A. and Sevilla, A. 2020. *Learning during the lockdown: real-time data on children’s experiences during home learning*. Briefing note. The Institute for Fiscal Studies. Available at: <https://ifs.org.uk/publications/14848>

support they receive from others.<sup>17</sup> REUK staff emphasised that these role models or support are not always available to young people, particularly UASC and former UASC.

## Wellbeing challenges

The stress of the COVID-19 pandemic, including time spent away from schools and inside homes, and separation from families and friends, has created significant challenges for children and young people's mental health and wellbeing across the UK.<sup>18</sup> This section outlines the wellbeing challenges experienced by young refugees and asylum seekers.

### Increased safeguarding concerns

In REUK's policy briefing at the start of the first national lockdown, a notable increase in safeguarding concerns among the young people REUK supports was reported. This has persisted over the last year. REUK staff have observed increased numbers of young people demonstrating: increased stress and anxiety; more difficulty maintaining healthy sleep patterns; very low moods; and, in some cases where an existing diagnosis of PTSD had been made, a greater frequency and intensity of flashbacks and nightmares. COVID-19's effects on refugees' wellbeing

The wellbeing and mental health challenges caused by COVID-19 – including the stress of education, isolation and loneliness, protracted asylum claims and separation from families – have intersected and compounded the overall negative impact on young people's wellbeing. This has, however, happened at a time when the key systems with which they most often engage (including schools, colleges, the NHS, local authorities, and the Home Office) have experienced severe capacity challenges as a result of the pandemic, and have been limited in the support and care that they have been able to provide refugee young people. Many young people have felt stuck, and some have reported feeling like they have regressed.

### Isolation and loneliness

Isolation and loneliness are among the primary concerns that REUK staff have had for the young people they have supported over this past year. Ahead of the January 2021 lockdown, REUK observed young people especially anxious about the months ahead and the requirement to stay inside and remain separated from friends and family. REUK has remained particularly concerned for unaccompanied young people who live by themselves and are required to stay in one room with limited space, those who live in overcrowded homes with as many as ten people living in a household, and those recently arrived in the UK and without support networks.

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<sup>17</sup> OECD. 2020. *Strengthening online learning when schools are closed: The role of families and teachers in supporting students during the COVID-19 crisis*. OECD. Available at: <http://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/strengthening-online-learning-when-schools-are-closed-the-role-of-families-and-teachers-in-supporting-students-during-the-covid-19-crisis-c4ecba6c/>

<sup>18</sup> Young Minds. 2020. *Impact of COVID-19 on children and young people's mental health: results of survey with teachers and school staff*. Young Minds. Available at: <https://youngminds.org.uk/about-us/media-centre/press-releases/school-staff-warn-of-the-extensive-impact-of-covid-19-pandemic-on-young-people-s-mental-health-new-survey/>

## Education institution closures

Overwhelmingly, the young people REUK supports have wanted to be in school, college and university to be surrounded by their peers, friends, teachers and wider support networks. Schools and colleges are spaces where young people can meet others, build friendships and support networks, and find a sense of belonging and purpose in their new community. This is important in helping young people integrate and settle into their new environments.<sup>19</sup> However, with social distancing and school and college closures, young people have had limited access to these benefits: their routines have been destabilised, and their support networks have been fragmented.

REUK staff also reported that students in their first year of university have experienced isolation and loneliness. University often represents a significant change: it may require young people to move away from existing support networks to a new location. Having limited opportunities to meet new people and build new support networks at university has exacerbated this sense of isolation.

## Online support activities

The transition to an online format of activities and events organised by the voluntary sector (including REUK) and other organisations and institutions has played a critical role in maintaining connections and support for young people. However, REUK staff facilitating such sessions reported some young people struggled to engage in online activities because of a growing fatigue with online sessions and Zoom meetings – particularly during the third national lockdown starting in January 2021. This has meant that some young people have missed out on critical support and interactions with others.

## Separation from families

UASC and former UASC have faced COVID-19 in the UK separated from their families. Even as social distancing restrictions eased in the UK and many were able to meet those close to them in-person again, the majority of UASC and former UASC remain far away from their loved ones.<sup>20</sup> Additionally, many young people have experienced high levels of anxiety for the health of family members remaining in low-income, conflict-affected countries or in refugee camps in host and transit countries.

## Protracted asylum claims and living in limbo

### Prolonged anxiety

As previously mentioned, Home Office delays in processing and issuing outcomes on asylum claims has had a negative impact on young people's lives. In addition to the impact on education, these delays have had a detrimental effect on young people's wellbeing. Recent research has clearly shown the devastating extent of this emotional

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<sup>19</sup> Ornnert, A. 2020. *Interventions to promote wellbeing of refugees in high- and middle- income countries*. Institute of Development Studies; Elwyn, H, Gladwell, C and Lyall, S. 2012. "I just want to study": access to higher education for young refugees and asylum seekers. Refugee Support Network.

<sup>20</sup> Omar, M. 2020. *Effect of the coronavirus pandemic on refugees' lives*. Mental Health Foundation [online]. Available at: <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/blog/effect-coronavirus-pandemic-refugees-lives>

impact.<sup>21</sup> REUK's experience over the past year supports this, with staff reporting severe delay-induced anxiety and stress amongst the young people they work with.

### Lockdown-exacerbated anxiety

REUK staff emphasised how lockdown has exacerbated the anxiety that young people have felt about their asylum claims. Because they have spent so much time on their own with few distractions, young people have spent a lot of time thinking about their asylum claims. This has increased their levels of anxiety and stress - and the compounded effect of lockdown, COVID-19 and asylum system delays has triggered or worsened mental health conditions for many young people.

Recent research highlights how being in a state of limbo waiting for outcomes on asylum claims can become all-consuming and significantly affects young people's ability to participate in other aspects of their lives.<sup>22</sup> In the past year, REUK staff have seen how affected young people have become disengaged from other aspects of their lives, including from their education and their social support networks.

### Box 3: Housing insecurity

REUK staff reflected on increased housing insecurity affecting refugee young people's wellbeing and education. Key issues raised included:

- Some young people have experienced housing instability and an increased risk of homelessness, which has been highly stressful and creates significant uncertainty.
- Temporary/ emergency housing has created uncertainty about longer term housing arrangements and whether they will be able to remain in close proximity to their school or college. Some refugee students have received very short notice about having to move to locations far away from their school or college.
- Some young people have experienced lockdowns in a room within a house, hotel or hostel, which has significantly undermined wellbeing, particularly when they have had to live, study and 'rest' in the same space.
- The conditions of or context to accommodation provided during the pandemic has not always been suitable for survivors of trauma.

## Exam-related anxieties

### Exam cancellations

Exam and assessment cancellations last year affected a number of young people that REUK supports. The uncertainty of not knowing whether exams or assessments would take place was particularly stressful. Additionally, a number of refugees and asylum

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<sup>21</sup> Greater Manchester Immigration Aid Unit. 2021. *Wasted childhoods – the impact of COVID-19 asylum delays on children*. GMIAU. Available at: <https://gmiau.org/new-report-wasted-childhoods-the-impact-of-covid-19-asylum-delays-on-children>

<sup>22</sup> Allsopp, J and Chase, E. 2021. *Youth Migration and the Politics of Wellbeing: Stories of Life in Transition*. Bristol University Press; Gladwell, C. 2020. The impact of educational achievement on the integration and wellbeing of Afghan refugee youth in the UK. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*.

seekers – who place great importance on their education<sup>23</sup> – reported feeling disappointed that they did not have the chance to complete formal examinations and assessments to demonstrate their hard work. REUK staff noticed that some young people felt they had not met their educational goals as a result which has, in turn, negatively affected their wellbeing.

## BTEC uncertainties

A number of young people that REUK supports are studying vocational courses, including BTECs. The hesitancy and indecisiveness from the government about cancelling vocational exams was detrimental to the wellbeing of these young people.<sup>24</sup> While there was certainty regarding GCSEs and A Level exams when the decision was made, REUK staff noticed how the uncertainty and lack of clarity around BTEC and other vocational course assessments was anxiety-inducing and stressful.

## Challenges for the protective function of schools

### Role of teachers and school staff

Schools play an important role in providing protection and promoting wellbeing for children and young people, including refugees and asylum seekers. Being largely out of school for prolonged periods of time has disrupted this function in the lives of many.

REUK staff highlighted how health and safeguarding issues have sometimes fallen through the cracks because they have been hard to identify when the primary form of interaction between school staff, teachers and students is online. This mirrors research from Denmark showing how teachers' care for newly arrived migrant and refugee children has been undermined by COVID-19 school closures.<sup>25</sup> Additionally, research by Unleashing Refugee Potential also found inconsistencies in the welfare checks that teachers carry out with refugee pupils.<sup>26</sup> As a result of signs and indicators of mental health conditions being overlooked by schools – ordinarily important sites for protection in this way – issues have accumulated and become more severe.

### Absence of protective factors

Additionally, one of the key psychosocial benefits of attending school cited in the literature is its ability to provide refugees with a routine and restore a sense of normalcy after likely periods of upheaval, traumatic experiences, and difficult journeys. However, during COVID-19, attending school, college and university has been inconsistent and

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<sup>23</sup> Elwyn, H, Gladwell, C and Lyall, S., 2012. "I just want to study": access to higher education for young refugees and asylum seekers. Refugee Support Network; Stevenson, J. and Willott, J., 2007. The aspiration and access to higher education of teenage refugees in the UK. *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*, 37(5), pp.671-687.

<sup>24</sup> See

<https://news.sky.com/story/covid-19-anger-as-government-scraps-gcse-and-a-level-exams-but-allow-s-btecs-to-continue-12180262>

<sup>25</sup> Primdahl, N., Borsch, A., Verelst, A., Smith Jervelund, S., Derluyn, I. and Skovdal, M. 2021. 'It's difficult to help when I am not sitting next to them': How COVID-19 school closures interrupted teachers' care for newly arrived migrant and refugee learners in Denmark, *Vulnerable Children and Youth Studies*, 16(1), pp.75-85. Available at:

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17450128.2020.1829228>

<sup>26</sup> Teklemariam and Tooley, n.d. *Home learning inequalities among refugees, asylum seekers and migrant communities*. Unleashing Refugee Potential. Available at:

<https://www.sirius-migrationeducation.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/URP-Home-Learning-Inequalities.pdf>

uncertain. The marked absence of protective factors ordinarily facilitated by schools, college and university has compounded the lack of protective factors that many refugees and asylum seekers face elsewhere, including insecure housing and uncertain futures.

# Conclusion and recommendations

## Concluding comments

Remarkable stories of resilience and positivity have emerged through the COVID-19 pandemic. REUK has seen teachers, school staff, support workers and others going above and beyond to ensure refugee students are supported to progress with their education. Refugee students have been resilient, and have persevered with their education. It is important, however, to be honest and clear about the significant challenges that refugee students have faced in order to ensure their needs are adequately prioritised and met as the UK Government implements their education recovery package.

### COVID-19's effects on young refugees' education

REUK's experience of supporting refugee young people through the COVID-19 pandemic is that they have experienced multiple disadvantages that have undermined their education. For a significant number of refugee students, the pandemic has affected their ability to access and remain in education, particularly at further and higher education levels. Young refugees without support networks around them, including those recently arrived in the UK who have not had the opportunity to build such support networks, have disproportionately fallen behind with their learning. In addition, some refugee and asylum-seeking young people's motivation to engage in their education has been negatively affected by COVID-19, with many of the factors that make education a positive, enjoyable and rewarding experience diminished during periods of social distancing and lockdowns.

### COVID-19's effects on young refugees' wellbeing

The stresses of the COVID-19 pandemic have exacerbated pre-existing mental health conditions, and REUK has seen a stark increase in safeguarding concerns. The increase in uncertainty and instability - with destabilised routines and fragmented support networks - have seemingly contributed to this, along with the increase in isolation and loneliness, particularly when young people are living their lives in one room or in over-crowded homes, with as many as ten people living in a household. However, this has happened at a time when the key systems with which they most often engage (including schools, colleges, the NHS, local authorities, and the Home Office) have experienced severe capacity challenges as a result of the pandemic, and have been unable to provide the support and care that refugee young people need. Many young people have felt stuck, and some have reported feeling like they have regressed.

### Key cross-cutting issues

#### The increased reliance on technology

As a result of social distancing policies and measures in the UK, technology has assumed increased importance in young people's everyday lives. Young people have been

dependent on technology to continue their education, to maintain connections and interactions with others, and to access support.

However, there have been deep technology inequalities experienced by refugee and asylum-seeking young people, both in terms of access to digital devices and in knowledge and support to use technology. While some refugee students have been able to navigate online learning and learn new digital skills, others have struggled to remain engaged with their learning and education, and have felt isolated from their peers and support networks.

## The intrinsic connection between education and wellbeing

Young people's education and wellbeing have been intrinsically linked during COVID-19. The closures of education settings shone a light on how important attending school, college or university can be for young people's psychosocial wellbeing, and the critical role that teachers and school staff play in supporting young people.

COVID-19 has also thrown into focus the educational value of the social capital that young people access and build at school, college and university: education and learning opportunities extend beyond the classroom walls, and participating in school, college or university life is critical for young people's education.

## The importance of support networks

Whether or not a young person has been able to cope and adapt during COVID-19 – both in terms of their education and wellbeing – has been shaped by the support networks that young people have around them. This includes families, foster carers, voluntary sector organisations, social workers, key workers, friends, mentors and others. However, access to this support is inconsistent, and many young people – particularly those newly arrived in the UK – have lacked or have not had the opportunity to build up these support networks during COVID-19.

The government aims to ensure that all students can 'catch-up' on lost learning; however, this task is likely to be particularly challenging for young refugees as many do not have access to the same support networks available to many other children and young people.

# Recommendations

The following recommendations are based on REUK's experience of supporting refugee and asylum-seeking young people during COVID-19, and are made to ensure that refugee students do not miss out on education recovery plans.

Central government should:

- **Ensure that refugee and asylum-seeking students are specifically identified as a priority group.** Any initiatives resulting from the Department for Education's education recovery package<sup>27</sup> should include refugee students as one of the

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<sup>27</sup><https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-education-recovery-package-for-children-and-young-people>

priority groups, recognising the intersection of inequalities they have experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic.

- **Extend the age range of the National Tutoring package to those aged 16-19.** The National Tutoring programme, where schools can obtain tutoring from approved providers for disadvantaged children at highly subsidised rates, only encompasses children aged 5-16. But many of the young people REUK supports, including unaccompanied children, are over the age of 16. Despite their need for this vital support, as outlined in this brief, they will miss out on valuable tutoring opportunities.
- **Fund mental health and wellbeing support that is accessible to refugee students.** Adequately fund the mental health sector to support the wellbeing of students from disadvantaged backgrounds, including refugee students, who have been significantly isolated during the COVID-19 pandemic, or who have experienced a deterioration in their mental health and wellbeing. This should include prioritising a range of wellbeing resources and approaches, including talking-based therapies, trauma-informed support for those who choose not to engage in therapies, and alternative, community-based forms of support, including arts-based therapies and befriending initiatives.

### Local authorities should:

- **Provide refugee students with adequate access to data and digital technology to enable online learning.** Local authorities should ensure that students have sufficient access to data and digital technology during periods of school and college closures, or when students are required to isolate if a family member or classmate tests positive for COVID-19. The onus should not be on young people to arrange their own access to education and to ensure their ability to participate in social activities.

### Education institutions should:

- **Provide comprehensive technology support for refugee students.** Ensure that the distribution of devices to refugee students is accompanied by comprehensive support to navigate the device and access key functions – including emails and learning platforms. As far as possible, instructions for setting up devices should be translated.
- **Ensure summer ‘catch-up’ programmes prioritise refugee young people’s education and wellbeing.** Summer catch-up programmes should be accessible to refugee students, including by ensuring adequate EAL support is embedded in provision. They should also allow sufficient time and space for socio-emotional wellbeing interventions and learning.
- **Make online enrolment more accessible to refugee students.** Extra support should be prioritised for refugee students attempting to enrol at college or university, recognising the challenges they may face with providing ID, language barriers, and lack of access to technology. A member of staff should be a dedicated focal point for refugee-background students.

### The voluntary sector should:

- **Prioritise access to mental health and wellbeing interventions for refugee young people.** This should include prioritising a range of wellbeing resources and approaches, including talking-based therapies, trauma-informed support for those

who choose not to engage in therapies, and alternative, community-based forms of support, including arts-based therapies, gardening, cooking, and befriending initiatives.

- **Develop initiatives that create opportunities for refugee young people to catch up on lost learning.** This could include tutoring, intensive summer courses and educational mentoring. Where possible, these initiatives should integrate wellbeing components by providing space for a range of extra-curricular activities.

Funders should:

- **Prioritise the funding of comprehensive and holistic mental health and wellbeing interventions for refugee young people.** This should include prioritising a range of wellbeing resources and approaches, including talking-based therapies, trauma-informed support for those who choose not to engage in therapies, and alternative, community-based forms of support, including arts-based therapies and befriending initiatives.
- **Support initiatives that create opportunities for refugee young people to catch up on lost learning.** This should include supporting schools, colleges and the voluntary sector to provide additional academic support, including but not limited to tutoring, intensive summer courses and educational mentoring.



## Refugee Education UK

Refugee Education UK is a charity registered in England & Wales under charity number 1132509 and company number 06879651 at 1st Floor, 32 Manor Park Road, London NW10 4JJ.