

Lighthouse Lates

Ed-tech, AI and the future of refugee education

Introduction

Tuesday 13th May marked the second of our '[Lighthouse Lates](#)', a new series of intimate, expert conversations on critical issues in refugee education, hosted in REUK's London home.

We heard from experts who drew on the international context and the UK, specifically looking at how **AI and technology can shape the future of refugee education**.

The chair for the evening, **David Hollow**, is the research director of [EdTech Hub](#). He works with governments, UN agencies and NGOs on the intersection of AI, technology and education, focusing on ensuring that advances in technology increase educational opportunities rather than exacerbate economic divides.

He set the context for the evening by noting that, as we think about AI and the future of technology, he holds three things in tension:

1. **Existential angst** about the future of humanity because of AI.
2. Significant curiosity about the **sector-agnostic ways** AI is transforming our world and leading to huge productivity gains and all kinds of opportunities.
3. A **technical commitment** to ensure that the changes we are seeing are leading to a future that is more just, fair, inclusive, etc.

He encouraged us to hold the first two in our minds, even as the discussions focused more on the third intention.



Summary of discussion



Access is the first step to providing opportunities through tech. True inclusion means delivering tailored devices and localised support.



AI holds the potential to improve understanding of complex UK education systems for refugee learners. It could also bridge gaps, such as delays in securing school places or adjusting to new curriculums.



Refugee learners must be co-creators when shaping education technology. Technology must be applied safely with the local context in mind. Technology should not diminish the importance of in-person support.



Panellist insights

Mylène Vellay

Digital Access Project Manager at Screen Share:



What are the biggest barriers to digital inclusion for young refugees in the UK?

- Digital inclusion isn't the goal - it's the gateway to education, healthcare, and employment.
- It's not just about access to *a* device, but the *right* device, reliable data, and digital skills.
- A one-size-fits-all approach doesn't work - needs vary greatly depending on prior experience.
- Screen Share tailors tech support to individual needs, from complete beginners to university-level learners.
- Looking ahead, they hope to launch a long-term study on the impact of tech access on refugee education, in collaboration with researchers and those with lived experience.



Refugee Education UK



George Kalibala
Lead Practitioner in Further Education at Refugee Education UK:



What are the biggest barriers to digital inclusion for young refugees in the UK?

- Biggest barrier: Misinterpretation of complex funding rules by colleges leads to young refugees being wrongly denied access to education. REUK's recent research identified this as a challenge and they have seen this issue surface on their current person-administered advice line.
- REUK is developing an AI chatbot to give accurate, location-specific guidance at scale.
- This tech can help education staff avoid guesswork during enrolment and ensure fairer access.
- "Duolingo"-like tools could be developed for language learning and ESOL, helping new arrivals gain essential skills from day one.



Sébastien Hine Education and international development specialist:



What can we learn from your research into EdTech use in conflict zones?

- Research in Gaza showed extreme inequities in tech access - some families share one device, or lack electricity entirely.
- Technology can't replace teachers, but in crisis situations, it can support learning when no other options exist.
- Security risks are real: shared smartphones can be used to track people in conflict zones.
- Offline content and coordination across organisations are key to avoiding duplication and ensuring safety.
- Case study: UNRWA used WhatsApp groups to deliver daily live education to 300,000 children - demand was high, with a 90% homework return rate. There is clearly a serious demand for education, and even in this kind of extreme situation, families will prioritise it.
- Lessons for the UK: There are inequalities in technical skills and needs for children arriving from a diverse range of contexts. We need to be mindful of refugees' diverse needs, especially around disability, trauma, and language access.



Barbara Bogomolova Youth Advocate with the Youth Educational Council



What's your experience using of AI in your own refugee education journey?

- Arrived from Ukraine and had 9 months to prepare for GCSEs - ChatGPT helped bridge the curriculum gap.
- Founded the Mini Silicon Valley youth initiative. Barbara worked with a group of peers to conduct research on 160 students exploring attitudes towards AI in education.
- 3 key features needed in AI tools for refugee students:
 1. Alignment with home curriculum for continuity, particularly for mid-year arrivals.
 2. Structured feedback, using official mark schemes to guide learning.
 3. Multilingual support for students who aren't fluent in English.
- Teachers were unsure how to support her, but AI could.
- One way to help facilitate this is by having digital skills training led by refugees themselves and AI tools designed by them.



Summary of Q&A

Q1: Were teachers supportive of students using ChatGPT?

Barbara:

- When she first arrived, her use of AI to help her understand the new UK education was independent - teachers weren't aware.
- In sixth form, things changed - one teacher allowed her and a group of students to trial fine-tuning ChatGPT for mock exam preparation. This was then reviewed with the students.

Q2: Are we losing vital social interaction in education as AI becomes more embedded?

Multiple reflections from the panel:

- AI shouldn't replace teachers or friends - it should complement them.
- There's a responsibility to teach young people how to use AI critically, not just casually.
- Concerns raised about AI being developed with Western biases and a lack of Global South input.

Q3: Could AI-supported models help refugee children on waiting lists for UK schools?

George:

- During the pandemic, many online education provisions became available, but most of these are private and unaffordable, and do not take into consideration the unique needs of refugee and asylum-seeking learners. However, these could be tailored to address the long waiting lists that newly arriving refugee students currently face.
- Gaps: Most current providers are expensive and not tailored to diverse refugee needs.
- AI could personalise learning based on student needs, helping to bridge the gap as they wait for school places, e.g. in ESOL learning.

Q4: Is there learning from the context in Gaza that we can apply to a UK context?

Sébastien:

- Learning from Gaza: The mental health and psychosocial support that's critical for children is very difficult to do through technology.
- Effective response requires prepared infrastructure (like digital teacher training and frameworks). Planning ahead for future crises is key — it's very challenging to improvise tech-driven solutions in emergencies.

The next **Lighthouse Late** will take place **Tuesday 1st July**, titled “**Refugee Education: Safe and legal routes - can education be a pathway?**” You can book [here](#).

Join us for an evening discussion exploring how education can serve as a pathway to safety and opportunity for refugees. Our speakers will examine the potential of safe and legal education-focused routes, drawing on global examples and innovative pilot programs in the UK. Discover the challenges, opportunities, and policy changes needed to make education a viable solution for displaced young people. Be part of the conversation shaping the future of education as a tool for protection and empowerment.

