Migrants and digital technologies for learning and education: recommendations for governments

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Migrants' wives in Nepal discussing the impact of migration (Source: Anita Ghimire)

SUMMARY

Digital technologies can be a valuable means through which migrants can access diversified and relevant learning opportunities in new contexts, and four key recommendations for host countries are suggested. However, such initiatives must be crafted "with", and not "for", migrants. Mechanisms must also be put in place to mitigate the potential harms of such usage.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

1. There is no one-size fits all "solution" through which digital technologies can be used to support effective learning by migrants.

2. Migrants know best about migration. All research and practice related to their learning must be developed in partnership with them and not imposed on them.

3. Migrants are particularly susceptible to the security and privacy risks associated with the abuses of digital technologies, and these must be mitigated before effective learning can happen.

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UKRI UK Research and Innovation

GCRF Global Challenges Research Fund

MIDEQ Migration For Development & Equality

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Migrants, learning and technology

The COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021 has been an opportunity for all those involved in the field of digital technologies dramatically to increase the pace of their efforts to recreate the world in their own image. Change processes already in place, such as the introduction of digital identities and the increasing use of online learning methods, have been dramatically speeded up. However, this has largely benefitted those who have had access to and were able to benefit from such usage. Digital technologies at the best of times have increased inequalities; this is even more true at the worst of times. Migrants are often among the potentially most vulnerable, and increases in the use of such technologies can have significant negative impacts for them.[1]

This policy brief provides guidance on how digital technologies can best be used to empower migrants (and their families) through education by combining the findings of our research on migrant uses of digital technologies[2] with recent guidance for governments on creating resilient education systems that use digital technologies to support the poorest and most marginalised.[3]

It is crucial to emphasise three main contextual issues at the beginning:

- **There is no such person as a typical migrant**. Migrants are rich; migrants are poor. Migrants exploit and are exploited. Migrants are well educated; migrants have never received formal education. Whilst emphasising this diversity, this brief's main focus is on the ways through which some of the most disadvantaged migrants may be able to benefit from the learning opportunities that can be provided through digital technologies in host countries.
- **Learning is of many different kinds**. In particular, this brief emphasises the importance of both formal and informal learning, the increased shift towards both life-long and life-wide learning,[4] and the crucial role that employment-focused learning can play in empowering migrants.
- **Digital technologies are merely tools; it is how they are used that matters**. Digital technologies do not have any power by themselves. They are created for specific purposes by people and organisations that have certain interests. They are never inherently good; they can be used to do harm a well as improving the lives of the poorest and most marginalised.

Guidance for governments on supporting displaced persons to learn using digital technologies

The recent FCDO and World Bank funded report on how governments can best use digital technologies to increase equity in education systems, includes very specific guidance developed in collaboration with UNRWA and UNHCR on their use by displaced persons.[5] Whilst this focuses especially on forced movement, many of these principles apply more widely to the use of digital technologies by migrants in other contexts. We have adapted this guidance to indicate the most important priorities for host government action with respect to the use of digital technologies to reduce the learning inequalities associated with migration.[6]

> **Guidance for host governments in providing resilient education systems to enable migrants to learn effectively and appropriately**
>
> 1. **Governments should prioritise migrants within their national education policies and strategies**.
> 2. **Governments should accurately assess the levels of infrastructural provision in areas with large numbers of migrants, and support the design of relevant and diverse approaches to the use of digital technologies for their learning needs**. Low-resource technologies, such as radio, can play an important role in some contexts.
> 3. **Safety and security of all learners, including migrants, should be prioritised** when designing and implementing digital technologies for education initiatives.
> 4. **A coherent and feasible approach to remote learning should be created to support migrants both academically and psycho-socially**. This should be in place prior to any anticipated large-scale migration or displacement, so as to help build resilience into education systems.
> 5. **Governments should work on an equal basis with partners to provide zero-rated[7] education platforms** that enable marginalised migrants to download and use relevant educational content at no cost to them.
> 6. **Systems should be in place to ensure that migrants can obtain relevant qualifications, degrees, certificates or badges on completion of online training and courses**.
> 7. **All those involved in helping migrants (and especially their children) to learn should be provided with appropriate training in the effective and safe use of digital technologies for learning**. This involves parents, community workers, teachers, and relevant civil society staff.

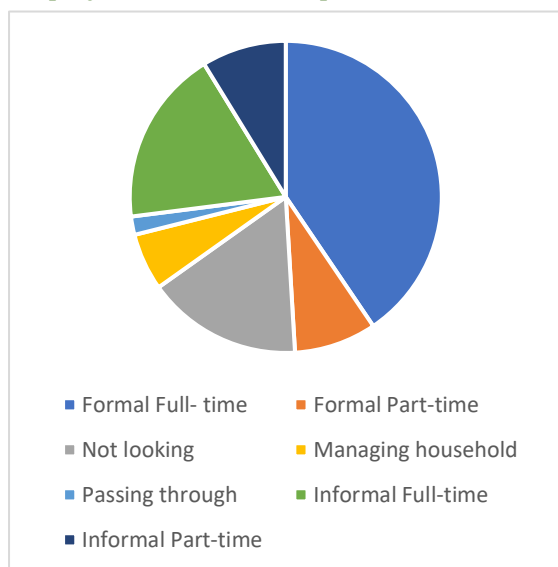**Migrants and digital technologies for learning and education**

Our MIDEQ research provides further detail with respect to ways through which migrants are already using digital technologies and thus how such guidance can be refined in different contexts.

Migrant use of digital technologies for learning

Before designing interventions with migrants, it is essential to understand better how they and their families are already using existing digital technologies. During the 2020 and early 2021 we conducted online surveys with 444 migrants and their families in Ghana, Haiti, Malaysia, Nepal and South Africa.[8]

These reinforced the point that there is no such thing as a typical migrant. Respondents in each of these contexts came from many different countries and backgrounds, 37% were women and 63% men, and while many claimed to be in formal full-time employment just over a quarter were in informal employment (either full- or part-time) (see chart below).
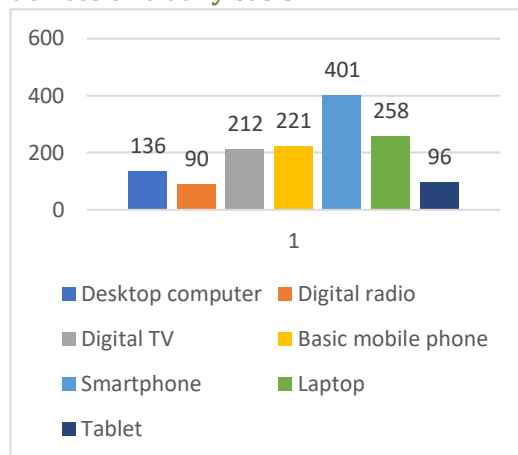
Employment status of respondents

- Formal Full- time
- Formal Part-time
- Not looking
- Managing household
- Passing through
- Informal Full-time
- Informal Part-time

The unusually high percentage of people in full-time employment mainly represented Nepalese and Haitian migrants, as well as migrants in South Africa from a range of countries, some of whom were well educated.
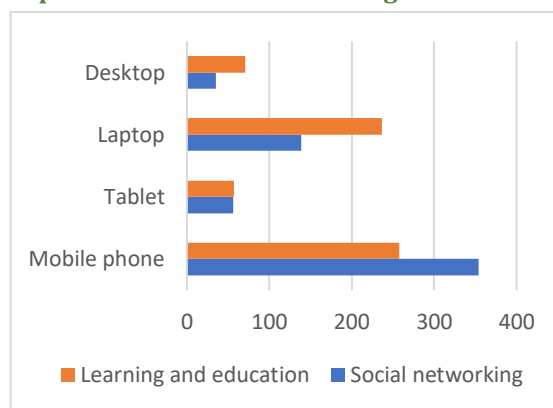
Migrants used a wide variety of different digital devices, but the most frequently used were smart phones (see chart below); 82% of them also claimed to access the Internet daily,[9] although many could not afford expensive data packages, and "access to the Internet" often meant just access to apps such as WhatsApp.

Numbers of migrants using different digital devices on a daily basis

- Desktop computer
- Digital radio
- Digital TV
- Basic mobile phone
- Smartphone
- Laptop
- Tablet

What was of particular interest was that different groups of migrants used contrasting types of digital technologeis for specific purposes. In particular, laptops were used more extensively for learning, than they were for other purposes such as social networking. This has important ramifications if migrants are to be encouraged to use digital devices of any kind for learning and to improve their own skills, as well as those of their children in cases where these have migrated with their parents.

Devices used for learning and education compared with social networking
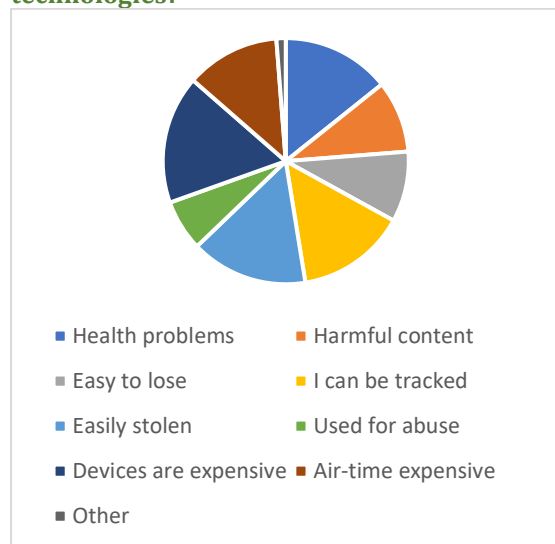

- Learning and education
- Social networking

One of the most significant findings is that very few migrants ever use, or even know about, applications specifically designed for them by external agencies or companies. This implies that delivering resources for learning that use technologies with which they are already familiar is more likely to lead to successful learning outcomes. Only 7% for example had ever used a "migrant app" (the majority of these migrants being from Nepal). Interestingly many of those claiming to use such apps then named apps such as Facebook, Viber, Keku or Rebtel,

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none of which are actually designed specifically for migrants, but are instead generic apps which they, as migrants, happened to use.

Migrants also have serious concerns about the potentially negative impacts of using digital technologies, as summarised below:

What don't you like about using digital technologies?

- Health problems
- Harmful content
- Easy to lose
- I can be tracked
- Easily stolen
- Used for abuse
- Devices are expensive
- Air-time expensive
- Other

This highlights not only that the potential health problems and the cost of devices were disliked, but also that substantial numbers of migrants (35%) have concerns over the ways in which such devices can be used to track or monitor them.

Based on our wider survey results, three other specific findings relating to the use of different types of digital technology for learning by migrants are pertinent.

- First, **mobile devices** (and especially smart phones) are the most important type of device used for learning (but by only 58% of the sample). Migrants nevertheless prioritise other uses of such devices over education; 80% thus use them for social networking.[10]
- Second, **laptop and desktop computers** are in contrast used more for learning and education than for most other purposes apart from work (53% used laptops for learning and education).
- Third, migrants in the **informal sector** (and presumably from poorer backgrounds) tend to use digital devices such as desktop computers and laptops much less frequently than they use mobile devices for any purposes.

Unsurprisingly, this seems to confirm that migrants in full-time employment generally have better access to learning and educational resources and activities through laptops and desktop computers than do those engaged in less-remunerative part-time or informal employment. The use of digital technologies would therefore appear to be increasing the potential for greater educational inequalities to be created between different migrant groups, let alone between migrants and indigenous populations. There are two alternative implications of this for learning by migrants:

- Either, poorer and less economically secure migrants should be provided with access to laptops for learning (interestingly, tablets did not appear to be very popular for this);
- Or, better quality provision of learning resources needs to be made available on mobile phones for the lesser advantaged migrants.

A further striking observation it that when asked what they would like to use digital technologies for that they are not doing at present, fewer than 1% said that they would like to use them for education. This surprisingly, but clearly, indicates that many migrants do not see further use of digital technologies for learning as a high priority, and therefore that initiatives to encourage such usage may face unexpected challenges.

Whether or not host or destination countries should provide education and learning opportunities for migrants and their families is contentious, and clearly depends on both moral and also political judgements. There are also difficult questions to be answered about the kind of learning opportunities that might be made available for migrants. The final section of this brief nevertheless provides policy recommendations for host governments who do wish to support migrant learning.

Using digital technologies to ensure an appropriately-educated migrant workforce

Ultimately, education serves to sustain a culturally and economically sound basis for the stable maintenance of any society. Where such sustenance requires or involves migration, it is essential that those seeking to improve their lives either through internal or international migration are able to do so safely and successfully. This invariably generates additional learning requirements for them, not least to gain new cultural understandings (such

as language and behaviours), as well as new technical skills (evidenced through certification).

Digital technologies can provide valuable opportunities to gain these, providing that they are made accessible and available to those who most need them. The use of digital technologies for vocational training is often less well developed than it is in traditional classroom training,[11] but has considerable potential both in destination countries and in countries of origin. The key for the development of such training, whether it is by governments or by civil society and private sector training agencies, is that it is designed to be inclusive and accessible for all. If digital learning systems are made available for indigenous employees (from whatever background), then it is essential that they can be readily adapted and repurposed so that migrants can also have access to and benefit from them.[12]

Building on the boxed guidance summarised in the second section of this policy brief, four main **policy recommendations** can be made:

- First, **all online digital training designed for and by governments and their agencies for workforce development should be as inclusive as possible so that it can be accessed by migrants**. Those providing labour recruitment services for international migrants could readily repurpose such resources into culturally specific learning materials for groups of migrants that they are recruiting.
- Second, **learning resources and materials intended for migrants to use should be designed and developed through the close involvement of migrants themselves**. All too many well-intentioned digital "solutions" (both hardware and software) developed for migrants are simply not used. Any new initiatives need to involve migrants closely from the beginning in their design and development, and where possible should build on technologies already being widely used by migrants.
- Third, **experiences especially during the COVID-19 pandemic have made many migrants even more cautious about the privacy and security aspects associated with using digital technologies**.[13] It is essential that these concerns are prioritised if migrants are to be able to experience safe and secure lives in destination countries. It is all too easy for digital devices to be used to track migrants or to promote hostility towards them. Governments need to have legislation in place to prevent this, and to reassure migrants upon whom many of their economies depend that they can use digital technologies for learning without fear of harm.
- Fourth, **digital technologies can be used very effectively for managing assessment and certification of learning and training**. Governments need to work together to ensure effective and secure mutual recognition of digital certification mechanisms, especially for countries between which there are already well-established migration corridors.

Notes

[1] See IOM (2020) COVID-19 Analytical Snapshot #60: Disruptions to migrants' education
https://www.iom.int/sites/default/files/documents/covid-19_analytical_snapshot_60_disruptions_to_migrants_education.pdf
[2] This research forms part of the MIDEQ project that addresses migration and inequality in migration between countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America. It was undertaken collaboratively with MIDEQ partners in Ghana, Haiti, Nepal, Malaysia, and South Africa, and especial thanks are due to Louis Herns Marcelin, Faisal Garba, Joseph Teye, and Seng-Guan Yeoh and their teams for their assistance in distributing our surveys (https://ict4d.org.uk/technology-inequality-and-migration)
[3] Unwin, T. *et al.* (2020) *Education for the Most Marginalised post-COVID-19: guidance for governments on the use of digitsal technologies in education*, London: EdTech Hub, https://edtechhub.org/education-for-the-most-marginalised-post-covid-19/.
[4] UNESCO (2015) *Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action*, Paris: UNESCO, http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0024/002456/245656e.pdf.
[5] Pontefract, C., Strecker, J. and Unwin, T. (2020) Supporting the effective use of digital technologies for learning by refugees and displaced persons, London: EdTech Hub, https://edtechhub.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Education-for-the-most-marginalised-Report-Guidance-note-5.pdf.
[6] These guidance notes are primarily intended for governments of countries that have large numbers of incoming migrants. However many of these recommendations are also relevant for the governments of countries from which migrants leave, and are especially pertinent for migrant families that remain at home.
[7] Zero-rated means providing connectivity without financial cost for end-users
[8] This was a subset of the 12 countries in which the MIDEQ project is currently working; see https://mideq.org and https://ict4d.org.uk/technology-inequality-and-migration/.

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[9] This chart indicates any of the technologies that a migrant used. The dominance of these particular technologies was in part also an artefact of the fact that online surveys were used for this research, mainly because it was undertaken during the COVID-19 when face-to-face qualitative research was very difficult and in many cases impossible.

[10] This reinforces the wjdely recognised importance of mobile device use by migrants for psycho-social and other support, enabling them to remain connected with family at home.

[11] See Comyn, P. and Unwin, T. (2020) Using digital technologies effectively in support of learning and training for employment, London: EdTech Hub. https://edtechhub.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Education-for-the-most-marginalised-Report-Guidance-note-11.pdf

[12] For a wider discussion of some of these issues, largely from a European perspective, see Castaño-Muñoz, J., Colucci, E. and Smidt, H. (2018) Free digital learning for inclusion of migrants and refugees in Europe, *International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning*, 19(2), https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1051238ar; Colucci, E., Smidt, H., Dervaux, A., Vrasidas, C., Safarjalani, M. and Muñoz, J.C. (2017) *Free digital learning opportunities for migrants and refugees*, Sevilla: European Commission Joint Research Centre, https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/141667106.pdf; e-Migra (2009) *Study on projects and activities that contribute to migrants' digital culture in Europe*, European Commission, https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/?action=media.download&uuid=2A97458F-0D3C-1623-BE0911EC0D9649D4.

[13] Molnar, P. (2020), Borders and Pandemics: Human Rights Impacts of COVID-19 Technology on Migration, https://foundation.mozilla.org/en/blog/borders-and-pandemics-human-rights-impacts-covid-19-technology-migration/

Partners

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