

REFUGEES' EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES (RefER) PROJECT FINAL REPORT

November 2018



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Refugees' Educational Resources (RefER) project was carried out between June and November 2018. The aim was to provide an understanding of the learning resources offered by organisations working with refugees and asylum seekers in the UK, and to advise the Open University (OU) on how it might repackage existing resources, or create additional ones, to directly respond to the needs of these organisations and the individuals they support.

The research methodology was qualitative, and was based on data gathered from respondents working or volunteering in organisations that support refugees in the UK. Data was gathered from 26 organisations through the use of a survey, online interviews and follow-up emails. Participating organisations included national and local charities and universities in the UK. The services they provide include counselling, English language teaching, legal advice, and settling-in support. Their clients vary widely in terms of home countries, first languages, education background and knowledge of English. There is a clear need for lifelong learning provision across all levels, not just higher education.

One of the key outputs from the project is a [Resources Audit](#) in the form of a Google spreadsheet, which provides brief descriptions of, and links to, over 500 relevant free, online resources. For refugees and asylum seekers, these resources cover topics such as English language skills, digital literacy skills and study skills. For frontline staff, main topics include information about legal aspects of migration in the different nations of the UK, guidelines for working in the voluntary sector, and resources on inclusion and equality. Resources were found predominantly on [OpenLearn](#), the OU's free learning platform, but also on many other platforms and sites. Not all of the materials are openly licensed. The recommended learning duration is from five minutes to five months, with resources requiring up to 100 hours of study time. The vast majority of resources are in English. Some offer statements of participation or digital badges by way of recognition.

The online learning resources that are most helpful to refugees and asylum seekers are those that are mobile-friendly and multimodal (for example, including print, audio and video), that include multilingual support, and that contain content directly related to the daily needs of users. The main challenges for refugees and asylum seekers in accessing and using existing resources include the cost of getting online, lack of experience in learning online, lack of trust in the Internet, linguistic barriers, cultural barriers, technical barriers, scepticism about the value of online learning, difficulty in finding a suitable (physical) learning space, and sometimes the isolation of learning alone. Possible solutions proposed by the respondents include the provision of digital devices, facilities and support for refugees and asylum seekers, more human contact and interaction with people in the local communities, and English language learning resources specifically targeted at refugees and asylum seekers and set in recognisable local contexts. Pathways through the learning resources would also be valuable. Some respondents noted that ideally, refugees and asylum seekers should partner with support workers to co-create bespoke resources which are culturally sensitive and appropriate to their needs.

For staff and volunteers, barriers to accessing and using free, online learning resources include a lack of training and support, lack of time (since many are volunteers or work in multiple jobs), and a lack of awareness of the actual needs and living circumstances of the target audience. Possible solutions to these challenges would be better organisational support for staff and volunteers, organisational processes for partnering with refugees and asylum seekers to co-create bespoke resources, and more/better opportunities for collaboration with other support workers and sharing of useful resources.

There are five recommendations arising out of the study. First and foremost is to include refugees and asylum seekers in the decision-making and implementation of any solutions planned for the future. Secondly, it is recommended that the Resources Audit database be further developed: it should be reformatted in a more visually appealing and easily searchable format that is accessible by smartphone, and it should be hosted on an OU platform for wider dissemination. The third recommendation is for the OU to curate themed collections on OpenLearn Create, using content identified in the Resources Audit.

The benefits of this would be that OpenLearn Create would act as a framework for creating learning pathways through the resources for users, and OpenLearn Create would also offer the possibility for ongoing contributions to these collections by members of the public. The fourth recommendation is that the OU should offer a “Co-creation and Co-curation” MOOC (or “CoCo” MOOC for short), aimed at supporting local communities of refugees, asylum seekers and frontline workers to work collaboratively on identifying needs and creating or adapting resources to meet these needs. One learning outcome of this MOOC would be for groups of participants to submit collaboratively developed resources to OpenLearn. The CoCo MOOC would complement and augment other MOOCs aimed at the same target audience. The final recommendation is to provide recognition of the skills and achievements of staff and volunteers, in the form of badges and certificates.

In conclusion, the OU is in a unique position to take a leading role in the development of a support structure for collaborative, inclusive learning between frontline workers in organisations and the refugees and asylum seekers they serve. The provision of collections of resources for developing key skills, a MOOC supporting co-curation and co-creation of resources, and a verifiable range of credentials to recognise achievements, will contribute significantly to a coherent national approach to refugee integration.

INTRODUCTION

1.1 RefER project background

The Refugees' Educational Resources (RefER) project was conducted between June and November 2018 by a team from Art of E-learning, in partnership with The Open University in Scotland. It was funded as part of the OU's [Year of 'Mygration'](#) in the lead-up to the institution's 50th anniversary in 2019. The RefER project team was tasked with conducting an evaluation of the free, online learning resources that are available to refugees and asylum seekers in the UK, in order to help the OU identify how it can support gaps in resources.

1.1.1 Project aim

The aim was to provide an understanding of the learning resources offered by organisations working with refugees and asylum seekers, and to advise the OU on how it might repackage existing resources, or create additional ones, to directly respond to the needs of these organisations and the individuals they support. The outputs of the RefER project should enable the OU to plan for the development of a bespoke, online learning package to meet the identified needs. (Full terms of reference for the project are reproduced in Appendix A.)

1.1.2 Project coordination

The work was carried out by Art of E-learning and associates, with guidance and direction from the OU's RefER project team. Six joint online meetings were held during the course of the project to keep all team members informed of progress, and to plan collaboratively for the workshop that was held at the end of September 2018. Google Drive was used for the sharing of live documentation amongst team members throughout the project.

1.1.3 Ethical approval

The RefER project was administered under the OU's general data protection policy guidelines, and ethical approval was obtained to carry out the research (OU Reference no: HREC/2969/Gibson).

1.2 Methodology

1.2.1 Data generation and outputs

The research methodology was qualitative, and was based on data gathered from research participants working or volunteering in organisations that support refugees in the UK. As can be seen from the Terms of Reference (see Appendix A), the sample was intended to be small and selective: the project team was asked to carry out interviews with between six and ten individuals from selected organisations that support refugees and asylum seekers in the UK. As it happened, the team carried out nine interviews and also gathered significantly more data via a survey (N=26) and follow-up emails with respondents (N=7).

Table 1 below outlines the data-generation methods used, and provides links to the outputs from each one.

	Data-generation method	Output
1.	A list of relevant organisations was drawn up, along with their respective contact details obtained from their websites, or via personal connections with individuals known to project team members from previous projects.	Organisations Consulted
2.	All contacts on the list were emailed with a request to complete a short survey. 26 people responded.	Anonymised Survey Responses
3.	Of these survey participants, seven responded to a request to provide further information via a follow-up email, and a further eight agreed to give a 35-minute interview to elaborate on their survey answers. One further person participated only as an interviewee, bringing the total number of respondents to 27.	Anonymised Interview and Email Responses
4.	Based on the data gathered from the survey, interview and email responses, as well as a review of all the websites of organisations on the original list, a Resources Audit was created, itemising all online resources aimed at refugees and at frontline support workers.	Resources Audit
5.	Respondents were then invited to attend a day-long workshop in Glasgow (28 September), at which the interim findings were presented and critically discussed, with a view to identifying the best course of action for the OU to take to address needs and gaps that had been identified. Approximately 16 people, including both OU staff members involved in the RefER project team and invited participants, attended the workshop.	Workshop Slides Blog post by Gabi Witthaus: Day 204, Year of #Mygration: Developing a model for open learning by refugees and refugee-support organisations Blog post by Heidi McCafferty: Day 205, Year of #Mygration: OU research project highlights the barriers stopping refugees & asylum seekers from learning

Table 1: Data-generation methods and outputs

1.2.2 Analysis

Alongside the data gathering process, the authors carried out a continuous thematic analysis to identify themes that seemed to characterise the data. Since this was a small-scale, qualitative study, no attempt was made to apply numerical values or allocate weight to any of the themes identified - rather, the authors attempted to capture the full spectrum of themes emerging, and then to present these themes for critical discussion at the workshop in Glasgow on 28 September.

2. REVIEW OF FREE, ONLINE LEARNING RESOURCES

This section gives an overview of the resources collated in the [Resources Audit](#). The Resources Audit was created in a spreadsheet, using two separate sheets to itemise and categorise all the online resources aimed at, firstly refugees and asylum seekers, and secondly, frontline support workers. The key characteristics of resources identified are summarised below.

2.1 Topics and levels of resources

The topics of the resources in the audit cover key areas mentioned by respondents, such as digital literacy and English. The word clouds in Figures 1 and 2 below show the range of topics covered, with the most common ones enlarged. A substantial portion of the resources reviewed seem to have been designed at an “introductory” level but with university entrants or undergraduates in mind (although in many cases this is conjecture on the part of the reviewers, as the level is not always explicitly stated). While the purpose of the resources might be relevant, they might be unsuitable for people with a lower educational level or basic English skills.

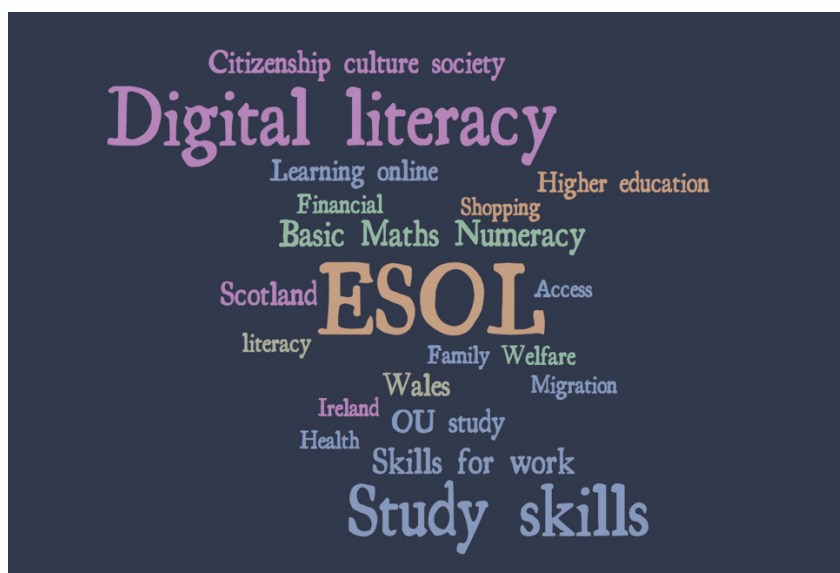


Figure 1:
Topics of resources recommended by respondents for refugees and asylum seekers



Figure 2:
Topics of resources recommended by respondents for staff and volunteers

2.2 Platforms and institutions hosting resources

Different platforms host online resources to support refugees. OpenLearn and the OU website have a vast set of relevant articles, activities, podcasts and free courses. City of Sanctuary, a charity with local chapters all across the UK, also collates useful materials, mostly to cater to practitioners working with refugees and asylum seekers. Other resources can be found in MOOC platforms such as FutureLearn and edX, social media and well-known sites like YouTube. Institutions hosting the resources are predominantly universities and charities.

2.3 Content licences

Although all the resources checked are freely available online, roughly half of them are copyrighted under standard copyright law or have an unspecified licence, in which case a standard copyright has to be assumed. Therefore, not all can be shared or adapted as open educational resources.

2.4 Format of resources

Resources are available in the form of:

- Articles with text and images
- Brief videos (under 3 minutes)
- Podcasts, sometimes with transcripts
- Activities
- Courses with learning objectives, activities and evaluations

2.5 Duration and study time

Some resources provide guidelines around expected duration of study (overall time required to review the resource, including pauses) and actual study time recommended (specific amount of time required to meet the goal of the resource). The resources identified last from five minutes to five months, and some require up to 100 hours of study time. It all depends on their format and purpose.

2.6 Recognition of learning achievements

Some resources include information about the kind of acknowledgement or validation of completion learners will receive; this could be statements of participation or digital badges upon completion (some for free).

2.7 Language of resources

Most resources audited are available solely in English. Only a few have an Arabic version, and a very small number of resources identified also had French, German, Welsh or Gaelic versions. (This may simply be a reflection on the search method used to identify resources and organisations, which was limited to English.)

3. KEY FINDINGS FROM SURVEY, INTERVIEWS AND EMAILS

In this section, we provide an overview of the key findings from the survey responses, interviews and follow-up emails received from respondents.

3.1 Organisational profiles

Twenty-seven individuals from 26 organisations responded to the request for information. Just over two-thirds are based in, or have a presence in, Scotland, and just over a third are based in, or have a presence in, England. Two (approximately 8%) are based in Wales, and unfortunately no organisations from Northern Ireland responded. The predominance of Scottish organisations probably reflects the fact that many of those respondents were personally known to members of the OU's RefER team, and thus responded to a personal request for information.

3.1.1 Participating organisations

1. A Better Welcome to Swansea Project (Swansea City of Sanctuary) (Wales)
2. Aberdeenshire Council (Scotland)
3. Asylum Welcome (England)
4. Bradford Immigrants and Asylum Seekers Support and Advice Network (BIASAN) (England)
5. Bridges Programme (Scotland)
6. British Red Cross (England, Scotland and Wales)
7. City of Glasgow College (Scotland)
8. Clackmannanshire Council (Scotland)
9. Community InfoSource (Scotland)
10. Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA) Migration Team (Scotland)
11. East Hoathly and Halland Village of Sanctuary (England)
12. Forth Valley Welcome (Scotland)
13. Glasgow Clyde College (Scotland)
14. Glasgow ESOL Forum (Scotland)
15. Inverclyde Council CLD (Scotland)
16. New College Lanarkshire (Scotland)
17. Perth College, UHI (Scotland)
18. Refugee Action (England)
19. Safe Passage/Refugees Welcome Glasgow/Scotland (Scotland)
20. Saheliya (Scotland)
21. SHP (Single Homeless Project) (England)
22. University of Glasgow (Scotland)
23. University of Leicester's English Language Teaching Unit (ELTU) (England)
24. University of Wolverhampton (England)
25. West Lothian Council (Scotland)
26. Workers' Educational Association (Scotland and England)

3.1.2 Target groups supported by research participants and nature of support provided

The target groups of these organisations vary considerably, but in general the focus for the staff and volunteers who participated in the RefER project is on refugees, asylum seekers and migrants from many different countries, including detainees. Within these groups are people without basic literacies and with no English language learning experience, who need extensive support in getting settled in to their new environment. At the same time, there are others with professional skills and university education, who are proficient in several languages, including English.

“Some learners have never been in an educational environment before, while others have completed both undergraduate and postgraduate education in their home countries.” (RP14)

3.1.3 Nature of support services provided

The organisations that responded offer a wide spectrum of services, providing everything from the most essential language and awareness training for new arrivals to courses specifically aimed at university admission. English language skills are a common thread. Many provide counselling services helping refugees and asylum seekers deal with trauma and anxiety, and offer legal advice and services to assist them through the asylum application process. Other support activities include lifeskills training, family support, healthcare advice and helping refugees apply for benefits, housing and education. Many organisations rely heavily on volunteer workers to run such activities and there are also community support groups that offer refugees social opportunities.

3.2 Free, online learning resources for refugees and asylum seekers

Many respondents cited a wide range of useful resources being used and named specific websites offering course material, cultural orientation and practical guides, as well as videos on YouTube and mobile apps. Despite the existence of these popular resources, however, some respondents stated that they did not think the refugees and asylum seekers they work with are aware of any online resources, or that they use their mobiles for learning.

3.2.1 Popular sources of free, online learning resources for refugees and asylum seekers

Sites typically used by respondents' organisations are BBC Skillswise, the British Council's ESOL Nexus, Headway Online (OUP), and some OpenLearn material (mostly for advanced learners). YouTube material is used and shared, and many learners are very familiar with YouTube; however, it was felt that the use of YouTube is generally not managed in a systematic manner.

3.2.2 Examples of bespoke free, online learning resources produced by organisations for refugees and asylum seekers

Some organisations have produced or collated free online learning resources, such as articles and printable leaflets, to support refugees and asylum seekers; for example:

- The [Brighton and Hove City of Sanctuary](#) website contains an impressively long list of local services and cultural organisations - including the unique offer of “Penglish” lessons from the Brighton Table Tennis Club, which, according to the [website](#), “gives migrants and refugees the opportunity to learn English for free with the support of an experienced ESOL teacher whilst playing Table Tennis (also known as Ping Pong)”.

- The [British Red Cross](#) provides information about help available to meet the urgent needs of refugees, asylum seekers and other vulnerable migrants.
- The [Asylum Support Appeals Project \(ASAP\)](#) website offers leaflets and factsheets with information about asylum support. Topics include housing, welfare and human rights. ASAP also offers an advice phone line, which is available for voluntary agencies who are advocating on behalf of asylum seekers about their asylum support or asylum support appeals.

(The full list containing approximately 200 examples of resources suitable for refugees and asylum seekers is available in the RefER Project's [Resources Audit](#).)

3.2.3 Characteristics of free, online learning resources found to be useful for refugees and asylum seekers

The extreme diversity of the target group in terms of linguistic, educational and cultural background means that it is impossible to generalise about what resources are useful. However, several characteristics of online resources were mentioned repeatedly as being important for the resources to be accessible and useful to the target audience.

Mobile-friendly

Many online resources are designed to be viewed on computer screens, and are also bandwidth-heavy and therefore of no use to people with only an older mobile device running on top-up subscriptions with limited Internet access. Very few of the refugees and asylum seekers supported by respondents' organisations have access to a computer. Therefore it is critical that resources are mobile-friendly. Many refugees and asylum seekers find useful tools and apps on their mobiles to help them with language learning and everyday skills, and share these with friends and relatives, which leads to a considerable amount of informal learning. Language learning apps like Duolingo, where you can practise listening and pronunciation wherever and whenever you want and you can clearly see your progress from level to level, are popular.

Multimodal and multilingual support

Resources that tend to be favoured are those that offer multimodal support in the form of subtitles, transcripts and audio or video formats.

Relevant content

Resources connected to everyday situations (such as getting around, cultural orientation, health, local guides and housing) are particularly useful. However, it was felt that very few of the resources known to respondents address the direct needs of their target group, for example helping them to deal with a visit to the doctor or childcare centre.

“We need more resources to help people talk about their own experience, explain their stories, often traumatic experiences, to a doctor or lawyer [and] prepare people to benefit from therapy.”
(RP2)

In addition, some respondents lamented the lack of resources that reflect local accents, noting that many online videos of everyday situations use Received Pronunciation (RP) or southern English accents, and this is not relevant to learners in, for example, Glasgow or Bradford.

Cultural orientation modules with practical guides are appreciated, especially when they include multilingual support and the sites are mobile-friendly.

3.2.4 Challenges / barriers for refugees and asylum seekers in accessing and using free, online resources

Some respondents were impressed by the resilience and initiative shown by many of their clients in their efforts to find and use online learning resources. However, there were also significant challenges and barriers to more widespread use of online resources.

Cost of getting online

Many respondents noted that the refugees and asylum seekers they work with have only a mobile phone for Internet access and pay-as-you-go accounts with fixed levels of Internet use, making downloads and bandwidth-heavy websites impossible to access.

Lack of experience in learning online

Refugees and asylum seekers with a background in higher education tend to be able to access online resources and to navigate the platforms with ease once they find out what is available. These learners progress quickly to more advanced classes where virtual learning environments (VLEs) are used and online resources are integrated into the curriculum. However, a major concern of the respondents was that most of the refugees and asylum seekers known to them are not at this level and struggle with online learning.

The skills of learning how to learn online are often seen as a success factor for entry into education or employment. Some of the respondents' organisations offer training in the form of ICT skills training in a computer lab or one-to-one ad hoc support from a teacher or mentor. However, many do not, and even where such training is offered, technology support is generally only available in English, which makes it difficult for those with lower levels of English.

Lack of trust in the Internet

A fundamental issue when working with vulnerable people like refugees and asylum seekers is establishing and maintaining trust. Many suffer from trauma and are extremely suspicious of all people who might represent the authorities. Asylum seekers often live in fear of their application for refugee status being turned down and the prospect of deportation. Some respondents felt strongly that support must be given through channels that clients trust and feel comfortable with. For example, e-mail is often viewed as a channel for the authorities, while Whatsapp, Skype and Facebook groups tend to be both more familiar and perceived as more trustworthy.

“[The refugees and asylum seekers we support] need to be able to trust people who try to help them, sharing what is comfortable for them to share. We need to learn to live in their realities.”
(RP9)

Linguistic barriers

Even if clients can access online resources, they may not understand the instructions or the purpose of particular items because of their limited fluency in English. Translation of the metalanguage (e.g. activity instructions and grammatical explanations) used in online materials could help, but this is not straightforward, as decisions would have to be made regarding which languages to include - and which varieties of those languages.

“A majority of the sanctuary seekers on our project very rarely use online learning resources, firstly because they cannot afford computers; they do not have internet or WiFi in their properties. Also, because many people’s English language skills are very poor, they don’t feel confident or well-equipped to undertake online learning.” (RP16)

Few resources are subtitled in other languages, and the metalanguage of many sites assumes a very high level of English to understand what the point of the exercise is. Furthermore, a lot of material at beginner and lower intermediate level tends to be designed for children rather than adults.

Cultural barriers

Some respondents noted a tendency for online resources to reflect a European/North American cultural bias, particularly items found by searching on Google or YouTube which were not designed with refugees and asylum seekers in the UK in mind. References to cultural elements that are completely unfamiliar to the target group (e.g. Western popular culture) risk confusing and alienating users even more.

“We assume so much when we design online platforms - and the resources are [often] useless in the field. Links don’t work, no bandwidth to upload the resources etc. Most situations do not represent the lives [refugees and asylum seekers] lead; they don’t recognise themselves in the resources. We create lovely resources, but they are our creations based on our experience and assumptions.” (RP9)

Technical barriers

According to respondents, the refugees and asylum seekers who seek support from their organisations generally have very low levels of digital literacy, and very few have access to a computer. Many refugees and asylum seekers rely on the computers at a community centre or school in order to pay bills and access local government websites, since they are unable to do so on their mobiles with the associated limited Internet access. For some clients, using a keyboard and mouse are new skills, and the Roman characters on the keyboard are unfamiliar. Furthermore, some respondents voiced concern that their organisation’s computers were outdated and had limited bandwidth capacity, making it difficult for their clients to access online resources even from the centre’s own devices. The lack of technical support staff in some centres compounded this problem.

“Technical accessibility is a big issue. Devices that don’t work or are not set up properly, old devices, poor wifi, no IT support. Never underestimate the gap between aspirations and accessibility/ reality. Refugees use smartphones to access course material, but these are not so good for writing documents and other activities.” (RP2)

The design and feel of a website or app can prevent users from benefitting from the services they offer. Is registration required, and if so, is the process easy to negotiate? If resources are available for downloading, are they available in open/ accessible formats (or at least, formats compatible with the software on the device), and does the process require any special digital literacy skills? Such barriers may be insurmountable for some users.

Scepticism about the value of online learning

Attitudes to online learning in general are an additional barrier, with many clients of the organisations represented in the study expressing negative preconceptions of online education. Respondents stated that for many refugees and asylum seekers, the use of apps, quizzes and other online lessons is not seen as “real learning”, and they feel more comfortable with a traditional classroom setting and the chance to interact with a teacher in person. In addition, online games and quizzes are often aimed at children, and this alienates adult learners.

Difficulty in finding a suitable learning space

A further issue is finding a suitable learning space where it is possible to concentrate. Many refugees and asylum seekers in the UK live in crowded hostels and have young children to care for, and therefore have little, if any, time for uninterrupted study. Digital devices may be shared with other family members, and this further restricts any individual’s learning time.

“Clients are sometimes time-poor, especially women with caring responsibilities, so finding time to study online is difficult and [it’s] easy to be interrupted, unlike being physically in a class. If there is a perception it’s not as “good as” classroom learning, they are more likely to be interrupted or lose concentration with competing demands on their time.” (RP6)

Isolation

Finally, many individuals lack any kind of social support for online learning, and struggle to maintain their self-motivation and resilience.

3.2.5 Possible solutions to these challenges/ barriers for refugees and asylum seekers

The respondents’ views on possible solutions to the challenges and barriers enumerated above are outlined in this section.

Provision of digital devices, facilities and support

Organisations would be able to better support their clients if they had up-to-date laptops and tablets that users could borrow, as well as faster Internet access, and ICT support staff who could offer practical support and run workshops. Several respondents would like to organise drop-in ICT support sessions, but at present have no budget for this. One avenue being explored by some was to collect second-hand devices and offer them to refugees and asylum seekers as home computers. Increased cooperation with local libraries was another option under consideration, since many libraries already offer courses and support in digital skills for seniors.

“If we had time and resources, we could set up a computer skills time within our offices, offering support, with volunteers with different language skills to support clients to access online resources and manage things online (e.g benefits, bills, etc.). There are a number of clients who are not familiar with modern technologies and also battle with language barriers. Helping these groups of clients and putting them through a learning process side-by-side with their English language courses would be great.” (RP1)

Many wished for better equipment and connectivity at their centres with WiFi everywhere, interactive smartboards and training for all staff. Both support workers and refugees would benefit from access to computers with larger screens and reliable bandwidth rather than being restricted to mobiles as they are today. Many respondents also expressed a wish to be able to provide dedicated learning spaces for refugees to learn to use and work with online resources, preferably with support staff.

“A space where the refugees we support can access a list of free online learning resources and making sure someone is available through dedicated sessions (volunteers or staff) to explain to them how the platforms work.” (RP7)

More human contact and interaction

While acknowledging the need for better facilities and more resources, some respondents maintained that the main need was to offer more human contact and interaction - underlining the importance of better organisational support for staff and volunteers mentioned above.

A related suggestion was to form facilitated online communities of refugee and asylum-seeker learners.

English language learning resources specifically targeted at refugees and asylum seekers, set in recognisable local contexts

Respondents wish for more learning resources to help learners practise their English in everyday situations in contexts that they recognise. Ideally these would be interactive and mobile-friendly, and would be available from an online library of authentic audio-visual materials that are kept current and are graded in terms of language. The desired resources would also be multilingual with instructions in the learners' languages and include more use of text-to-speech for better accessibility.

Pathways to higher education

A suggestion was made that a clearer path towards higher education for refugees and asylum seekers, mapping what is available, would be beneficial.

Refugees and asylum seekers partnering with support workers to co-create bespoke resources

Some organisations have created their own resources specifically relevant to their target groups, and have also developed websites with useful resources, links and guides. However, it was noted that these resources are often based on untested assumptions about what the users need and want to use. The possibility of frontline workers in organisations co-creating resources with the refugees and asylum seekers themselves was raised by some respondents as a solution. Involving the users from the start of the design process would be a way of recognising their skills, and would also offer both clients and support staff an opportunity to work collaboratively on resources that are meaningful and relevant to a wider audience of refugees and asylum seekers - and by extension also to staff and volunteers. In this way, resources with multilingual support could be developed and delivered via online platforms or apps that users trust and feel comfortable with.

3.3 Free, online learning resources for staff and volunteers

3.3.1 Popular sources of free, online learning resources for staff and volunteers

The same sites that were named as being useful for clients (e.g. ESOL Nexus, BBC Skillswise, Busy Teacher worksheets and the British Council) were said to offer excellent material for support workers, and these are used by many of the respondents.

3.3.2 Examples of bespoke free, online learning resources produced by organisations for staff and volunteers

Larger organisations tend to have bespoke introductory courses for new staff, but these are mostly classroom-based.

Some organisations have created guides to useful online resources, for example:

- Refugee Action produces free, online courses on issues around immigration legislation (<http://learn.refugee-action.org.uk>). So far, over 500 people have been trained using these completely online courses.
- Team up to Teach (<https://www.teamup2teach.org>) is a grassroots community helping volunteer teachers with resources and practical teaching advice.
- The City of Sanctuary website (<https://cityofsanctuary.org>) offers a vast range of resources for organisations who help people looking for a sanctuary. Topics include advocacy and campaigning, governance, fundraising and practicalities for running a group.

(The full list containing over 300 examples of resources suitable for staff and volunteers supporting refugees and asylum seekers is available in the RefER Project's [Resources Audit](#).)

3.3.3 Characteristics of free, online learning resources found to be useful for staff and volunteers

As with the refugees and asylum seekers themselves, the extreme diversity of this target group makes it difficult to generalise about what resources are useful. To some degree, the same characteristics mentioned in relation to refugees and asylum seekers above are equally relevant to support workers - this is because many support workers are themselves not native speakers of English. Indeed, some may themselves have a refugee background or be a recent migrant to the UK - putting them in an ideal position to mediate between service providers and service users.

3.3.4 Challenges/ barriers for staff and volunteers in accessing and using free, online learning resources

Lack of training and support for staff and volunteers

Staff are often aware of the existence of online resources, but are unsure about how to use them in a pedagogically sound manner. Some mentioned that their organisations lacked a structured approach to teaching and training. Digital literacy levels among support workers also vary considerably, and they often have to train themselves or help each other on an ad hoc basis. Many are volunteers or have several different jobs, and so there is no clear employer responsibility for competence development. Voluntary workers in particular may not have any formal teaching experience and would benefit from more structured support. Added to this are factors such as unreliable technology in terms of devices or Internet access at centres, lack of information about the most appropriate online resources available, and lack of confidence to use these resources in teaching.

Lack of time

In addition to the lack of staff development opportunities, the most common barrier mentioned by the respondents was the lack of time. Some staff with multiple employers spend considerable working hours simply travelling between different workplaces. Respondents all pointed to the lack of time and coordination to make effective and structured use of online resources for staff development.

Lack of awareness of the actual needs of the target audience

A few respondents expressed a feeling of regret or anxiety that they did not have a genuine understanding of the needs or living circumstances of the refugees and asylum seekers they were trying to support.

3.3.5 Possible solutions to these challenges/ barriers for staff and volunteers

Better organisational support for staff and volunteers

The obvious point was made that if the centres run by organisations for refugees and asylum seekers had more (or better) equipment and facilities, staff and volunteers would be able to do a better job of supporting their clients:

“If more groups could have access to laptops and projectors then more online resources could be used in class.” (RP14)

Beyond this was the simple wish for teachers to have more time and help for integrating online resources into their own teaching. Many respondents described the hectic schedules of many volunteer teachers having to move between different locations every day, dealing with a great diversity of needs and demands and not having any time to really plan their work or think about professional development. Having money to pay staff on a more stable basis was a concern since many are on short-term, part-time contracts. These employment conditions in turn make staff training extremely difficult to arrange even if the need for staff training is enormous. Staff (both employees and volunteers) would benefit greatly from “inspiration days” a couple of times a year, involving inclusion training as well as hands-on activities learning to use apps and online resources.

“Training that supports trainers who are skilled in classroom teaching to help them learn to teach online. ... Giving people the skills to teach well online and use the technology in a professional manner.” (RP25)

Collaboration with other support workers

Some respondents attempt to overcome the barriers noted above by using social networks or email to share useful tips and resources with their colleagues. In some places, staff use apps like Whatsapp to form communities where they can share ideas and resources quickly and efficiently. Some respondents wished for more structured opportunities for such collaboration:

“As I work in the community, I have to access resources and carry out photocopying in my own time (unpaid). Many venues have no access to Internet for the public or laptops/ projectors, which is a major limitation when teaching English. I am paid at an hourly rate and I often find that sourcing and preparing materials takes up a lot of time outwith my working hours. If we could have sessions where tutors come together to prepare classes and share resources, that would be helpful.” (RP14)

Partnering with refugees and asylum seekers to co-create bespoke resources

In relation to the need for a deeper understanding of the lives, needs and problems faced by clients, a few respondents noted that co-creation of resources with and for refugees would be a win-win situation, creating rich learning opportunities for both parties.

“Working with the refugees and designing for them. Too many middle class European assumptions. We need to put ourselves in their situation, know how it feels to use a language you hardly understand etc.” (RP9)

4. RECOMMENDATIONS

This section provides recommendations for possible actions that the OU could take based on the findings discussed above.

4.1 Include refugees and asylum seekers in planning, development and implementation of solutions

The RefER project was limited in scope in that it focused on ascertaining data from staff and volunteers, rather than from refugees and asylum seekers themselves. The starting point for any follow-up work must therefore necessarily be to consult refugees and asylum seekers on the findings from the project, and to include members from these groups in the planning, development and implementation of any follow-up interventions. In line with this recommendation, one valuable suggestion made at the RefER workshop was to identify frontline workers in organisations who themselves have refugee backgrounds, and who would be willing to act as “brokers” between the refugees/ asylum seekers and their supporting organisations.

4.2 Develop the Resources Audit database further

The Resources Audit has already been publicly disseminated in its current Google Spreadsheet format, and has received some attention via social media (for example, retweets on Twitter and visits to the respective blog posts where it was first shared). It is therefore clearly already meeting a need for information about relevant resources for the audience. To get the maximum benefit from this output from the project in future, it is recommended that the Resources Audit spreadsheet be repackaged in a more user-friendly format and made more widely available. Some suggestions for doing that follow.

4.2.1 Reformat the database

The Resources Audit would play a greater role in supporting the sector if it were reformatted in a more visually appealing and more user-friendly way, modifying the database to ensure that:

- It can be accessed and viewed with ease on a smartphone;
- It can be searched by filtering based on the different categories available;
- Tags are added to every item, so that a single resource can be categorised in different ways;
- A more granular breakdown of topics is provided;
- Levels of difficulty are clearly stated using a single, consistent measure (for example, the PEARL website’s “[Levels of study](#)”).

4.2.2 Host the database on an OU platform

The database would obviously have greater reach if it were to be hosted on a platform with a wide community of users, such as OpenLearn.

4.3 Curate themed collections on OpenLearn Create

The Resources Audit demonstrates that there is a very large body of free, online resources in existence which have been found to be relevant to refugees, asylum seekers and frontline support workers in the UK. However, it is easy for users to feel overwhelmed when trying to find the right resource for a specific situation. Collating some of these resources into themed collections on OpenLearn Create, in partnership

with their creators, would have two key benefits: the creation of meaningful learning pathways for all users, and the possibility for individuals and organisations to contribute further relevant resources in the future, as discussed below.

4.3.1 OpenLearn Create as a framework for creating learning pathways

Several respondents in the study expressed a desire for learning pathways that incorporate different resources, activities and courses, delivered using a range of different media. Learning pathways created in the form of collections on OpenLearn Create would make it explicit where the learner should start, what they should learn first, and what they will be able to do as a result of their learning. For refugees and asylum seekers, these learning pathways might be organised around topics such as rights and responsibilities in the UK, how to cope with a new setting, language learning skills, how to learn online, etc. For staff and volunteers, the learning pathways could address topics such as counselling techniques, language teaching skills, cultural awareness, and essential soft skills for all involved in refugee support. Since there is already so much material in existence, it may not be necessary to create new material. Where existing resources are not published under an open licence, negotiation would be needed with those providers; alternatively, those resources could simply be hyperlinked to as additional/ supplementary materials.

It may also be possible to follow the example from [Kiron Higher Education Organisation](#) of creating a series of “Study tracks”, which was done by mapping the stated learning outcomes of selected free, online courses against those of programmes offered by typical German universities. In the OU’s case, the learning pathways would need to map onto adult basic education and further education as well as higher education in the UK - ideally leading to credits which would be recognised by institutions and employers.

4.3.2 Possibility for contributions from members of the public

Through OpenLearn Create, members of the public could contribute additional materials or updates to existing materials. Members of the wider community of refugees, asylum seekers and organisational staff could submit resources that they have created themselves or that have been created by others. Users could upload clips of people speaking in accents typical of their local environments; items could be translated; additional media added, and so on, addressing the need for localisation, translation and adaptation. This could become a catalyst for refugees and asylum seekers to proactively go out into their local communities to find or create source material, for example capturing short audio recordings of senior citizens speaking in the local dialect.

4.4 Offer a Co-creation and Co-curation (“CoCo”) MOOC

One way for the OU to support both the refugee/ asylum seeker community and the frontline workers in the sector simultaneously would be to offer a MOOC on co-creating and co-curating free, online learning resources, which could be branded the “CoCo” MOOC. The aim of the CoCo MOOC would be to help build communities of practice, where refugees/ asylum seekers and frontline workers learn skills and techniques for collaboratively developing and adapting online resources to meet specific needs of local community members. These communities of practice would be primarily local, with participants meeting in the learning centres of their organisations or at local libraries, and would also include the element of virtual support and networking amongst the wider community of participants. The CoCo MOOC would be pedagogically driven by team-based project work, and supported by the provision of guidelines, checklists and models of good practice from the OU. A key learning outcome would be the submission of jointly created/curated, openly licensed resources to OpenLearn Create. This would have the added benefit of increasing the pool of resources that are directly relevant to refugees and asylum seekers in specific local contexts in the UK.

The CoCo MOOC would complement existing MOOCs aimed at the same audiences (e.g. [Volunteering with Refugees](#), [Migrants and Refugees in Education: a Toolkit for Teachers](#), [Working Supportively with Refugees: Principle, Skills and Perspectives](#), and [Aim Higher: Access to Higher Education for Refugees and Asylum Seekers](#), as well as those offered by the [PADILEIA project](#), [Kiron](#) and other programmes), and may even contribute to ongoing development of resources for those MOOCs, thus amplifying the OU's impact.

4.5 Provide recognition for the skills of staff, volunteers and learners

Many teachers and volunteers lack time and encouragement to spend on professional development, even if some spend a great deal of unpaid time learning how to use digital tools and resources in their teaching. Recognition and incentives for teachers and volunteers in terms of badges and certificates that can be used in job applications would provide a welcome contribution to professional development. One way of doing this could be a development of the [badges concept](#) already in place in some OpenLearn courses and OpenLearn Create. A series of professional development courses could be offered on OpenLearn, as proposed above, with verifiable badges as recognition. Where refugees and asylum seekers themselves contribute to course curation and creation, they would of course also be eligible for such recognition. The badges would be meaningful additions to recipients' CVs and would enhance their opportunities for further employment. If possible, there should be pathways towards converting these badges into credits recognised by educational institutions or employers.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Many of the concerns voiced by respondents in the RefER study do not relate specifically to online resources, but focus instead on the working conditions of teachers and volunteers, and the basic lack of time for professional development. Organisations generally work on extremely tight budgets and resources are simply not available for staff training or investments in equipment and infrastructure. These issues are beyond the scope of this project to resolve, but are important to bear in mind as the context in which frontline workers and learners access and use online resources - and therefore also the context in which any future interventions offered by the OU will be experienced.

Free, online learning resources, particularly those that are mobile-friendly, multimodal, multilingual and context-specific, can help address the wide range of learning needs of refugees, asylum seekers and support organisations in the UK that were identified in the RefER study. However, while there is already an abundance of content in existence, there are significant barriers to its effective use. Some of this content is culturally inappropriate or reflects inaccurate assumptions on the part of content creators. Many potential users lack awareness of the full range of resources available. There is a need for themed, sequenced pathways to help users access and navigate resources effectively, and a demand for more specific, localised content. The OU could help address all of these needs, by prioritising the inclusion of refugees and asylum seekers in developing solutions; by reformatting the RefER Resources Audit database in a more user-friendly way and disseminating it via the OU's communication channels; through the curation of sequenced collections of resources on OpenLearn; through the delivery of a MOOC supporting co-curation and co-creation of resources to meet locally determined needs; and through the promotion of a verifiable range of credentials to recognise achievements. Such interventions would complement and amplify the efforts of other organisations and educational institutions in the sector, while also building and strengthening communities of practice among frontline workers, refugees and asylum seekers throughout the UK. The OU is in a unique position to take a leading role in the development of a valuable and credible support structure for sustainable, inclusive learning as part of a coherent national approach to refugee integration in the UK.

APPENDIX A: TERMS OF REFERENCE

Evaluation of open source learning resources in the UK

- The objective of this consultancy piece is to conduct an evaluation of the free online learning resources (everywhere, including the OU) that are available to refugees and asylum seekers in the UK, to help The Open University identify how it can support gaps in resources. We aim to understand the learning resources offered by organisations working with refugees and asylum seekers, which are the most useful and why? The final report will advise the OU on the learning resources currently unavailable, yet urgently required.
- This will require qualitative data collection through interviews with between ideally 6-10 key organisations working with refugees and asylum seekers in the UK. Support will be provided by the OU to source these contacts, with input from the consultant (depending on the strength of her/his network)
- An online review will also be required, to see what current offerings there are (if any) from other organisations
- We aim to identify which key learning resources are missing, and how The Open University can re-package current, or create additional resources, to directly respond to the needs of these organisations and the individuals they support
- The consultant will also be asked to review OU Open Learn offerings and help identify elements of various courses that could be lifted, developed and re-packaged into a bespoke, concise learning resource for organisations working with refugees
- These findings will then be written into a report, and shared in advance of a practitioner workshop in September (Glasgow)
- Once we have a clear understanding of what is needed, we will be applying for additional funding to develop a bespoke, online learning package that is developed in direct response to organisational need in the UK

APPENDIX B:

LINKS TO RefER PROJECT DOCUMENTS

Organisations Consulted

https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1YVceBYbecssebGSs3qRoMhucgBtmDzWqRo-R7e_3Mo/edit#gid=1299433754

Anonymised Survey Responses

<https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1NJalcOgxZ3c6nlqtLHMaSzPwjelCn5ToutmWrU7tMPc/edit#gid=0>

Anonymised Interview and Email Responses

https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1LcxRMW99228jD9ig1_Awj46lIAi7Y13GB_05PIMj2F8/edit?usp=sharing

Resources Audit

<https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1fKj-r8mM5KrNuF6edbLvwoAUNymEjRLJSQgr9b8p8ys/edit#gid=0>

Workshop Slides

<https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1DIHvx0zOlgjJdMXbllu3G25T2eS03hJIAYXuLVS09mk/edit>

Final Report

https://docs.google.com/document/d/16Nx4uJ8C74XdRi_uvCAS63EXwH9pPMCnhKYSxviE6ds/editx

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