

COVID-19 crisis: emerging impact on young refugees' education and wellbeing in the UK

Policy brief

23rd April 2020

This document outlines the emerging impact of the COVID-19 crisis on young refugees' education and wellbeing in the UK, based on RSN's direct support work with young refugees in recent weeks. It also details recommendations to central government, local authorities and education stakeholders to help ensure that young refugees' education and wellbeing is not forgotten during this crisis.

Background

COVID-19 and the resulting lockdown has had an unprecedented impact on education across the world. As of 7 April, 1.5 billion children have been affected by school closures - 91% of the global student population¹. The UK government announced the closure of schools and colleges for an unknown period of time on 18 March and many universities had already closed by this time².

Education provides hope, a stabilising routine and a critical community for young refugees. The young refugees that RSN works with prioritise their education and tell us they are devastated by the closure of educational settings. Many young refugees have already missed out on significant periods of their education by the time they arrive in the UK, and have then waited months for the opportunity to study once here^{3,4}.

RSN has been working to ensure that young refugees do not face the COVID-19 crisis alone. Recognising the vital role of education in times of crisis, RSN is now providing educational support remotely, as well as offering additional emergency support to ensure young people have the resources they need to carry on learning.

¹ UNESCO, 2020. COVID-19 educational disruption and response (website). UNESCO, <https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse>

² DfE, 2020b. Schools, colleges and early years settings to close: press release [website]. Department for Education (DfE), <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/schools-colleges-and-early-years-settings-to-close>.

³ Gladwell, C and Chetwynd, G., 2018. *Education for refugee and asylum seeking children: access and equality in England, Scotland and Wales*. London: UNICEF UK;

⁴ Elwyn, H., Gladwell, C and Lyall, S., 2012. *"I just want to study": access to higher education for young refugees and asylum seekers*. London: Refugee Support Network (RSN).

RSN's direct support work and risk assessments in recent weeks have shown the far-reaching impacts of the COVID-19 crisis on all aspects of young refugees' lives. This document outlines the emerging critical impact of the crisis on young refugees' education and socio-emotional wellbeing.

A note on definitions: *This briefing uses the term 'young refugee' to encompass the broad range of statuses allocated to young people seeking safety in the UK. It is not limited to only 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.*

Impact

This section is divided into two subsections: continuing education and socio-emotional wellbeing.

Continuing education

Accessing online learning

In recent weeks, schools, colleges and universities have closed and moved teaching online. Many young refugees are among the estimated one million children in the UK who do not have access to laptops or adequate internet connectivity at home⁵. Almost half of the young people supported through RSN's specialist education and wellbeing support service do not have access to a working laptop or tablet, and many require additional phone data to be able to hotspot a device and get online. These young refugees are unable to access online learning and are held back from progressing in their education during this period. The government's new initiative to provide disadvantaged young people with technology to enable remote learning is welcome in this context and we will monitor the impact for young refugees in the coming weeks as this is rolled out.

There are also significant difficulties linked to navigating online teaching platforms, particularly for young refugees who do not have immediate family to support them or if they, or their parents/guardians, are in early stages of learning English.

Learning in a second or third language is already a significant challenge for young refugees in the UK - for young people RSN supports, these language barriers are now exacerbated by having to learn by distance.

The expectation that parents and guardians will have the English-language knowledge, technical skills and practical resources to 'help them educate their

⁵ IPPR, 2020. *Children of the pandemic: policies needed to support children during the COVID-19 crisis*. London: Institute for Public Policy Research), https://www.ippr.org/files/2020-03/1585586431_children-of-the-pandemic.pdf

children at home⁶, has been highly challenging for several families that RSN is working with.

Withdrawing from learning to access Universal Credit

Many young refugees who are exiting Asylum Support or who have lost employment are being transitioned onto Universal Credit because they are unable to find previously available part-time work in the pandemic. Young refugees in this situation have told RSN that they have been advised they must withdraw from their full time programmes of study in order to be eligible to receive Universal Credit. There is a risk that this will increase as the pandemic continues, with serious long term consequences for their education.

Accessing school places for looked-after children

Despite measures intended to keep schools open for looked-after children and care leavers, RSN has not experienced any young person under the care of local authorities being able to continue attending school or college. Online learning has been prioritised for young refugees in these contexts.

Socio-emotional wellbeing

Alongside our critical education support, RSN has also seen a severe spike in foundational needs - practical, psychosocial and emotional support needs. These needs are significant in and of themselves, and also in terms of their significant impact on young refugees' ability to continue learning in this challenging time.

Worsening mental health conditions

Many of the young refugees RSN supports have serious underlying mental health conditions which, in this pandemic, are compounded by uncertainty, fear and re-traumatisation. Young people RSN is working with are experiencing panic attacks, high levels of anxiety, low mood and significant challenges with sleep - the latter often exacerbated where young people are living their lives in one room or in over-crowded homes, with as many as ten people living in a household.

School closures, lockdown and enforced distancing are often the immediate hallmarks of conflict-affected countries and communities. The measures taken in recent weeks, while absolutely essential, have been notably triggering for young refugees.

Existing mental health conditions are also now compounded by acute worry for loved ones living in low-income, conflict-affected countries, or in refugee camps

⁶ DfE, 2020a. Coronavirus (COVID-19): Closure of educational settings: information for parents and carers [website]. Department for Education (DfE), <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/closure-of-educational-settings-information-for-parents-and-carers/closure-of-educational-settings-information-for-parents-and-carers>

in host and transit countries, where there is a lack of healthcare and emergency services to deal with an outbreak effectively.

Exam-induced anxieties

Refugee students studying at university, alongside other university students, are facing additional pressures of completing assignments during a particularly stressful time. We are working with young people whose reported anxiety levels have increased to the point of panic attacks and yet are continuing to try to prepare assignments and/or prepare for exams. What would be a typically anxiety-inducing season of completing a year of higher education is markedly more so in this context with additional stressors.

Social isolation

Schools, colleges and universities are places where young refugees interact with their friends and receive important support from their teachers. But, with the closure of education settings, young refugees are missing out on these vital social interactions and their support networks have been disrupted. RSN is particularly concerned about the impact of lockdown on unaccompanied young people who live by themselves and are required to stay in one room with limited space, as well as those who have recently arrived in the UK and do not yet have support networks.

Increasing poverty

A number of young people are unable to survive on their current incomes - sometimes as little as 5 GBP a day⁷. Young people with underlying health conditions or who have been advised to self-isolate are struggling with paying for food in advance and keeping stocked up with essentials throughout this period. RSN has been supporting young people with extra food vouchers and have launched a hardship fund to ensure that young people have access to essential items - without which they will not have the foundation they need to keep learning through this crisis.

⁷ Freedom from Torture, 2020. Joint letter on increasing asylum support rates in response to the COVID-19 crisis. Freedom from Torture, <https://www.freedomfromtorture.org/news/joint-letter-on-increasing-asylum-support-rates-in-response-to-the-covid-19-crisis>

Recommendations

Young refugees' education is being disproportionately disrupted by the COVID-19 crisis because they do not have the same access to technology, learning resources, internet connectivity, support networks and/or language skills as their peers.

No young refugee should fall behind in their education during this crisis simply because they do not have the resources or financial means to access them.

It is vital that young refugees' practical, psychosocial and emotional support needs are addressed in order to stabilise the foundations on which they can re-engage with their education.

1. In order to ensure all young refugees are able to access their right to education, **central government** should:
 - Provide clarity for schools and colleges that young refugees and asylum seekers in education - both those in families and unaccompanied minors and care leavers in the care of the local authority - are eligible to receive devices and connectivity packages under the government's newly announced initiative to provide technology for remote education.
 - Ensure young refugees who are unable to obtain part-time work during the pandemic can access the financial support they need without having to withdraw from full-time education.
 - Add £20 per week to Asylum Support subsistence grants, in line with [Freedom from Torture's campaign](#) - bringing acutely vulnerable young people above the poverty line and matching changes to Universal Credit.
 - Support the voluntary sector to continue the provision of critical education and psychosocial support activities for all children at risk, including young refugees.
2. In order to ensure all young refugees are able to access their right to education, **local authorities** should:
 - Provide young refugees or asylum seekers still waiting for a school or college place with the technology and connectivity needed to enable children and young people to access online learning whilst they wait for a school or college place.
3. In order to ensure all young refugees are able to access their right to **education stakeholders, including those in the voluntary sector** should:

- Ensure that social and emotional learning and activities are embedded into online learning programmes wherever possible, to support the wellbeing of all children and young people, including young refugees, during school closures.
- All stakeholders transitioning education or psychosocial support activities online during the COVID-19 crisis should carefully consider safeguarding and child protection risks in the roll-out of online programming, enhancing online safety by operating in accordance with NSPCC guidelines.