Online education for refugees - barriers and opportunities

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Abstract
The influx of refugees into Europe in the last five years has lead to a wide range of educational initiatives in order to help refugees gain a foothold in their adopted homelands and gain access to formal education and employment. Online education in the form of mobile apps, open educational resources and open online courses such as MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) offer flexible learning opportunities for many people This is especially true during the asylum-seeking process that can sometimes take up to 2 years and during which access to formal education is usually denied. This article examines the use of online education with refugees and asylum seekers, mostly in Europe, discusses the barriers and opportunities of this approach and suggests some future developments.

Keywords: refugee, MOOC, online education, inclusion, accessibility

1. Introduction
The rapid rise in the numbers of displaced people, refugees and asylum seekers in the world, due to conflicts, poverty and persecution has lead to considerable disruption as countries struggle to provide these people with security, homes and a future. Statistics from UNHCR show that in 2017 there were 68.5 million people forcibly displaced worldwide, of which 25.4 million are refugees, 40 million are internally displaced people, and 3.1 million are asylum-seekers. This number is increasing daily and there is little or no evidence to suggest any reversal of this trend in the near future.

The challenge of integrating refugees and asylum seekers into society and helping them learn the local language, gain an education and find employment demands new approaches, innovative solutions and a willingness to adapt existing structures and practice. Education is the key to successful integration but often access to the formal education system is denied to refugees and asylum seekers until they have been granted asylum and then received a

1 http://www.unhcr.org/5b27be547.pdf
residence and work permit; a process that in many cases can take 2-3 years. During this period they often have limited access to formal education or employment opportunities and the resulting gap is filled by volunteer organisations, NGOs and religious communities who provide basic language training and integration activities.

To speed up the integration process there would seem to be great potential in offering online education in the form of mobile apps, open educational resources and open online courses such as MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses). This article examines the use of online education with refugees and asylum seekers, mostly in Europe, discusses the barriers and opportunities of this approach and suggests some future developments.

2. Some key initiatives

Many innovative projects and initiatives have emerged in recent years to respond to the influx of refugees to Europe. Some of the most noteworthy are the following:

Kiron Open Higher Education\(^2\) is an NGO, based in Germany, offering MOOC-based course clusters for refugees and asylum seekers with the option of getting credit recognition at a partner university, thus opening the path to university admission. They offer a flexible combination of online self-study, live online collaboration and local support groups. This solution has proved popular at least for refugees and asylum seekers with academic experience and good independent study skills.

University for refugees\(^3\) is offered by the Italian International Telematic University UNINETTUNO providing scholarships for refugees and asylum seekers to study their online degree programmes. Similar offers are available from several other European universities.

Moocs4inclusion\(^4\), *Mapping and analysis of MOOCs and free digital learning for inclusion of migrants and refugees*, is an EU study commissioned by the Directorate General Joint Research Centre (DG JRC). It represents an inventory of relevant resources and initiatives on all educational levels and recommendations for future use (Colucci et al 2017).

EUA (European Universities Association) launched the Refugees welcome map\(^5\) in order to make an interactive inventory of universities offering solutions aimed at refugees and asylum seekers. Institutions can fill in an online survey with details of their initiative and this is represented by a pin on the interactive map. At present (January 2019) there are 323 participants from 32 countries represented on the map.

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\(^2\) [https://kiron.ngo](https://kiron.ngo)

\(^3\) [https://www.universitaperrifugiati.it/en/default.aspx](https://www.universitaperrifugiati.it/en/default.aspx)

\(^4\) [http://moocs4inclusion.org](http://moocs4inclusion.org)

\(^5\) [http://refugeeswelcomemap.eua.be/Editor/Visualizer/Index/48](http://refugeeswelcomemap.eua.be/Editor/Visualizer/Index/48)
3. Opportunities

The use of online educational resources, tools and courses has numerous advantages for refugees and asylum seekers in their process of adapting to their new home country. The resources are always available and can be reviewed at any time and as often as necessary. The one digital device that most refugees and asylum seekers have access to is the smartphone and so learning resources must be designed with this in mind. Recent studies (Witthaus, ed, 2018) show that mobile learning apps for basic language learning are particularly popular, allowing learners to practice vocabulary and pronunciation wherever they are. YouTube is another extremely popular source of educational content, often produced by refugees themselves, and this too is easily accessible on a mobile device.

Curated collections of teaching resources offer teachers relevant, high quality material that can be used both in the classroom and as self-study. Many collections also include lesson plans, assignments, quizzes and tests enabling teachers to include multimodal digital resources in their lessons. Thus classroom teaching can be complemented by online resources enabling learners to practice whenever they want as long as they have internet access.

The broad range of online courses in the form of MOOCs or other course forms offer an opportunity to study even before access to the formal higher education sector is available. For refugees and asylum seekers with good language and study skills as well as the necessary digital literacies this has offered a pathway towards formal studies, especially if there are institutions who can offer recognition of non-formal learning.

4. Limitations of online education for refugees

Although there is a wealth of online educational resources that are relevant to refugees and other displaced people, they are not as widely used as might be expected. A report from the Open University in the UK (Witthaus, ed, 2018) investigated factors that affect the use of online resources and courses from the perspective of refugees and asylum seekers and support organisations in the UK. A major factor is that most refugees and asylum seekers have little or no experience of online learning and even if nearly all of them have mobile devices they are not aware of how they can be used for educational purposes. Classroom teaching is preferable since it allows them to socialise and widen their contact networks, an essential part of gaining a foothold in the adopted homeland.

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6 [https://moonliteproject.eu](https://moonliteproject.eu)
Many lack the digital skills to find and use educational tools and resources and many have limited access to computers or even mobile devices. Limited internet access can also be a barrier since most people use pay-as-you-go mobile subscriptions and can only access educational content when connected to a free wireless connection. Many resources assume a basic level of English and there is generally a lack of translation options to the most common refugee languages.

In support organisations there is often a shortage of computers and other devices that refugees and asylum seekers can use. Many support organisations rely on volunteers or part-time teachers and it is hard to find the time and resources to provide them with adequate training in how to use online resources in their teaching. Finding relevant online material is also time-consuming and few staff have the time to do this even if they would like to.

The uptake of MOOCs has been relatively limited, despite the success of the initiatives named above. Even if there are many courses available in a wide variety of languages and the majority have been free of charge with only a small fee for certification, the fact remains that MOOC certificates are not widely accepted (Traeger ed, 2018). This is the challenge that institutions like Kiron are trying to solve, by allowing refugees and asylum seekers to study MOOCs with added support and then partnering with universities who can offer opportunities to gain university credits from these studies.

Witthaus (2019) examines the experience of open online courses among refugees and asylum seekers and relates that to a community of inquiry framework; examining the courses in terms of teaching presence, social presence and cognitive presence. In the study the element of teaching presence was particularly important:

_The key findings show that learners particularly desired teaching presence in terms of facilitation and feedback on their progress; they viewed online social presence as being important but generally not well managed in MOOCs; and they expressed cognitive presence mainly in terms of the selection and use of information sources. Learning presence (the additional element of the “augmented” CoI framework) was described primarily in terms of the importance of goal-setting and planning._

MOOCs and other online courses can certainly play a role in helping refugees and asylum seekers gain access to higher education and employment in their adopted homelands but local face-to-face support is an almost essential element of support. Since the online learning environment is unfamiliar and the students have not yet developed the necessary study skills and digital literacies, it is all too easy to feel inadequate and drop out. The addition of local support groups (Meetups), study buddies and online chat groups play a major role in motivating the students and keeping them on track (Witthaus, ed, 2018).
5. Conclusions

Although there are many success stories of refugees and asylum seekers who have used online courses and educational apps to help them learn a new language and gain access to higher education or employment, the vast majority lack the skills and experience to benefit from this option. The relevance of online resources and courses for refugees, migrants and displaced persons relies very much on the following factors.

5.1 Local support

Many studies identify the need for human contact and local support structures, in the form of local libraries, learning centres, NGOs and volunteer groups, can play a vital role by organising study groups (face-to-face and online), mentors and study buddies. Studies of the Kiron initiative indicate that such face-to-face support contributes positively towards course completion (Suter & Rampelt, 2017; Witthaus, 2019).

Learners can benefit from practical advice, moral support, guidance and the opportunity to discuss the learning process in their native language. Indeed these local structures are crucial to create a safe and trusted environment from which educational activities can grow. Online education can then complement the local activities rather than the reverse.

5.2 Design and accessibility

Online resources must be primarily adapted for mobile devices since these are the digital devices that the learners have access to. The digital resources should also have subtitling both in the target language but also, as far as possible, in the learners’ native languages. This is especially important in texts that explain a learning activity where it is most important to understand the purpose of the activity rather than trying to understand the often complex instructions in the target language. Since many refugees and asylum seekers have only limited internet access due to subscription costs there should always be low bandwidth options for as many resources as possible as well as alternative formats, e.g. offering a text manuscript as alternative to viewing a video.

An obvious but often forgotten aspect of course and resource design is the involvement of the refugees themselves in the design process (Witthaus, ed, 2018). Co-creation of resources allows the learners to make sure that the resources are adapted to their everyday reality and thereby become more relevant. Developing courses and educational resources together with members of the target group can also create a sense of empowerment for those involved in the process.

5.3 Teacher support and development

Teachers and volunteers need coordinated support and competence development in order to make use of online resources. This is extremely difficult due to the financial and organisational
constraints on the organisations active in this field where many teachers work part-time and at hourly rates. To address this need many NGOs, universities and authorities have developed online resource sites with curated and quality assured resources for teachers including course material, collections of related material, lesson plans, and short self-study course modules. A detailed review of such repositories is available in the Open University UK’s report (Witthaus ed 2018). An example of free and open online teacher development is the MOOC developed as part of the MOONLITE project, The value of developing and using MOOCs for refugees and asylum seekers in the European context⁷.

Online educational resources can clearly make a valuable contribution to helping refugees and asylum seekers establish themselves in their adopted homelands but they have very limited relevance if not combined with face-to-face support and activities in the local community. The main priority for most refugees and asylum seekers is to develop a safe social network in the new community and online self-study can only be a useful complement to that process.

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6. References


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⁸ https://moonliteproject.eu