Enhancing Digital Participation Amongst Refugee and Migrant Background Youth Project:

Key Findings and Recommendations for Policy and Practice

Team: Anita Harris, Kim Lam, Amanda Third, Philippa Collin, Sherene Idriss, Soo-Lin Quek, Edmee Kenny, Louisa Welland, David Cao, Komal Grewal, Alexandra Lee, Michelle Lim, Hiruni Walimunige

CRIS

DEAKIN UNIVERSITY

ADI
ALFRED DEAKIN INSTITUTE FOR CITIZENSHIP AND GLOBALISATION

WESTERN SYDNEY UNIVERSITY
W

YR YOUNG & RESILIENT RESEARCH CENTRE

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PROJECT SUMMARY

What is the role of the digital for young Victorians from refugee and migrant backgrounds? What initiatives do young people want, and what can be learnt from their everyday digital practices? How can organisations, governments and industry better engage with young people to support their digital participation?

This project investigated what helps and hinders the digital participation of young Victorians aged 15-24 from refugee and migrant backgrounds (YPRMBs). In partnership with talented young researchers and change makers from refugee and migrant communities, the project:
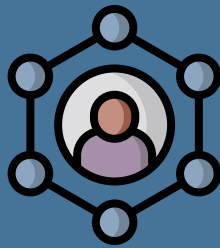
Explored how YPRMBs experience the use of digital technology in relation to their education, employment, social and civic connection, and wellbeing.
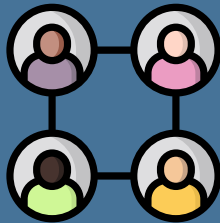
Identified what communities and youth-serving organisations need to support YPRMBs' digital participation.

Supported young people to devise and implement initiatives to improve digital participation.

In doing so, the project aims to facilitate changes in communities and youth-serving organisations that support YPRMBs' digital participation.

WHAT WE DID

'Understanding and enhancing digital participation amongst young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds (YPRMBs)' (August 2021-August 2023)

JULY 2021 – SEPTEMBER 2021

Clarifying partnership structure; design and commencement of landscape review; mapping of youth-led and youth-serving organisations; ethics application; development of project website

OCTOBER 2021 – DECEMBER 2021

Data sharing: landscape review, co-design with YPRMBs to refine methodology and research questions

DECEMBER 2021 – MARCH 2022

Recruitment; YPRMB survey (n = 346); interviews with YPRMBs (n = 20), 4 x focus groups with parents and community leaders from Pasifika, Somali, South Sudanese and Afghan communities (n = 47), interviews with representatives from youth-serving and youth-led organisations (n = 20)

APRIL 2022 – NOVEMBER 2022

Data collation; coding and analysis; co-design of stakeholder workshop to share preliminary findings and seed ideas for youth-led mini-projects

NOVEMBER 2022

Stakeholder workshop co-facilitated by young people to review findings from the combined data sets. Generate ideas for youth-led mini projects and form teams. Young people mentored by representatives from youth-led and youth-serving organisations

DECEMBER 2022 – JUNE 2023

Review 2x mini project pitches; implementation of 3x youth-designed mini projects; development of publications plan and timeline

JUNE 2023 – AUGUST 2023

Co-design of youth and stakeholder dissemination finale event; co-authoring initial project report with key findings and recommendations for research, policy and practice

AUGUST 2023

Launch of initial project report and showcase of youth-led mini projects at youth and stakeholder finale event

WHAT WE FOUND:
KEY INSIGHTS

» **Young people say that the role of digital technology in their lives is crucial** to enable study and employment, to provide access to online support services and resources, and to foster positive mental health and civic and social connection and wellbeing by facilitating connections to friends, family and community, both in Australia and overseas.

» **Inequalities exist in digital access, inclusion and proficiency for YPRMBs, and addressing these challenges and understanding opportunities requires an intersectional approach**. Disadvantage is especially evident for those experiencing financial stress, and newly-arrived/less established communities. YPRMBs in these groups are more likely to experience financial and other barriers to their routine access to reliable and robust internet services and devices. They often share devices with family members and also often lack suitable spaces in which to use those devices. At the same time, they are very likely to use digital media for a broader set of purposes, including activism; volunteering; community building; making money from content creation; online learning; sharing resources with peers; and professional networking. **In short, the most disadvantaged young people are also the most digitally resourceful.**

» **YPRMBs rate their digital skills highly, often act as digital brokers for older family members and others, and already use digital media extensively** for education and employment, accessing health and wellbeing resources, job seeking, staying in touch with people, gaming and streaming, creating and connecting with communities, and following positive social media accounts. However, there are also gaps in their digital skills and knowledge and they have a desire to learn more, especially about digital entrepreneurship; finding groups with shared interests; using platforms to learn new skills; and navigating online systems. **Policy makers and educators are sometimes missing opportunities to leverage young people's everyday digital cultures and nuanced proficiencies because of common either/or approaches that stereotype YPRMBs as either suffering 'digital deficit' or being 'digital natives'.**

» **Young people and adults share many views on digital technology, challenging simplistic assumptions about intergenerational differences**. Both groups identify similar **benefits** of digital technology: facilitating work and schooling; and enabling strong local and transnational social connections. They also **share similar concerns, but they define these differently**. Both are concerned about **overconsumption**, especially of social media, and technology's potentially negative effects on mental health and relationships; but adults worry about the loss of family time, while young people worry about low self-esteem and superficial relationships. Both are concerned about **online safety**, but while adults are concerned about exposure to inappropriate material or that which conflicts with cultural and religious values, young people raise the risks of untrustworthy information, data security, and racism online. Strikingly, awareness of these issues is particularly evident amongst the youngest people in our research – those aged 15-18, who are often imagined to be the least digitally literate and most at risk.

» Despite these continuities, **there is a genuine knowledge- and confidence-gap between the generations** when it comes to digital technology. Parents from newly-arrived communities with lower levels of English language and digital literacy skills are often reliant on their children's support to use digital technology, and many are unaware of other sources of support. They would like more guidance from schools, settlement services and other institutions and providers to better understand and support the digital needs of young people for the future world of education, employment, civic engagement and wellbeing. While many young people in refugee and migrant communities possess significant digital, language and cultural capacities, and a willingness to serve as digital brokers, there is significant variation in skills, experience, resources and needs across families and communities.

» **There is a need for more strengths-based initiatives that promote the digital participation of YPMRBs, and are closely aligned with their needs, interests and entitlements**. Formal and established services tend to reflect a deficit approach to youth; treat technology instrumentally, as a tool; and focus on top-down delivery to improve individual digital access and literacy. While some programs and initiatives effectively address digital access, online safety and technical skills, **young people themselves say they would like support to use digital media more for content creation; for work and wellbeing purposes; for learning new skills; and for connecting with supportive online forums and groups with shared interests**. Aligned with these needs and interests, some emerging, youth-led and lived experience-centred initiatives are supporting young people's digital participation in new ways and are often more responsive to and build on young people's existing capacities and practices. Young people say these initiatives are more likely to centre digital participation and citizenship, civic practice, social responsibilities and collective rights, as well as peer-to-peer learning.

» **There is a digital knowledge- and skills- gap in many youth-serving organisations** regarding young people's use of platforms and apps and how they engage with their own online communities for education, employment, connection and wellbeing. Formal online programs, digital content and resource provision are not effectively bridging to these other, informal, everyday digital practices. Nor are larger and more resourced organisations effectively connecting with smaller, youth-led groups to share knowledge and resources and address the digital needs and interests of YPRMBs at the grassroots level. **Youth-serving organisations require greater awareness of young people's digital cultures and need mechanisms for connection with smaller youth-led initiatives.**

» **Resources to support the efforts of grassroots, youth-led and small to medium sized enterprises** to provide initiatives and services that boost the connectivity and digital practices of YPRMBs require strengthening, in order to maximise the opportunities and benefits that digital technologies can bring to educational, work, community and wellbeing outcomes.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The research identified the following key recommendations for research, policy and practice:

Research

The project findings indicate that governments, NGOs and technology providers should invest in generating research about:

» Young people's motivations and practices in relation to digital participation, especially their everyday and informal practices that support learning, work, connection and wellbeing;

» The diverse, intersectional challenges faced by different groups of YPMRBs as well as their digital proficiencies and knowledge;

» The strengths and limitations of organisations' digital strategies for engaging YPRMBs in relation to mental health and civic connection;

» Which platforms and apps are used extensively by YPRMBs, and whether/how they support education, employment, social connection and wellbeing. This information can support the development of evidence-based policies to better support the digital participation of YPRMBs and their families in these domains

Policy

Governments should consider the following options regarding policy development:

» Provide dedicated resources to boost the capacity of relevant sectors (e.g. youth, health, settlement, social services, education, employment and training) to support YPRMBs digital inclusion in a sustainable way. This should include professional development and support for organisations to develop policies and strategies for embedding digital technologies into their initiatives in ways that the young people they serve value. Organisations can also build the capacity of YPRMBs by supporting them with staff mentorship and adequate resourcing to run youth-led initiatives;

» Look at ways to connect up relevant sectors and provide cross-sector learning and knowledge exchange on what works;

» Expand existing offerings beyond settlement (first five years), engaging young people to develop and deliver digital skills workshops to older members of their communities in ways that address cross-generational needs;

» Expand access to financial support to low-income families to access devices and data, offer grants for young people from low-income families, particularly for young people experiencing multiple forms of disadvantage who require access to digital devices and connectivity for their education, and engage community organisations to identify young people and families in need and connect them to this support and allied services;

» Expand policies on 'Digital Learning in Schools' beyond existing focus on cyberbullying, image sharing and mobile phone use, to better encompass issues young people are interested in: content creation, employment assistance, digital entrepreneurship, mental health and wellbeing, learning new skills, and connecting with supportive online forums and groups;

» Centre the needs and rights of young people in regulation of tech companies.

Practice

Future practice and service delivery should:

» Enhance collaboration between young people, families, educational institutions and settlement support services regarding young people's technology use. e.g. schools could enhance the accessibility of information to parents about the use of social media and other unfamiliar technologies in learning, and there could be a more explicit focus on digital parenting in settlement services;

» Develop culturally-appropriate support services and educational programs for parents, family and older community members on how to use digital devices, programs and apps, and online safety skills, in visual formats and in diverse languages;

» Acknowledge that the digital is not always the preferred mode of engaging with diverse communities, and that digital exclusion may occur particularly for those experiencing issues of digital access and proficiency. Consider multiple modes for communicating, and delivering information, services and resources for those experiencing barriers to digital engagement;

» Bolster mechanisms for joining up and coordinating services and enhancing and sustaining connections across the youth sector, and adopt learnings from coordinated, community-led initiatives;

» Provide accessible support and funding for existent and emerging initiatives that upskill young people in digital content creation, building capacity for advocacy and adding to skillsets for employability;

» Build on local level capacities that are strong in specific areas, but are often only resourced for one-off projects – e.g. programs offered by libraries and other municipal hubs, and community/ youth driven initiatives;

» Provide accessible support and funding for smaller and newer lived-experience-led organisations that support young people and their digital technology use, especially in relation to young people's intersectional experiences of mental health, and their advocacy for safe, inclusive, and 'connected' digital spaces. This could include supporting smaller and newer organisations to collaborate and partner with more established organisations for capacity building, accessing funding and building connections;

» Raise awareness about available support options to enhance digital participation and increase help-seeking knowledge. Support young people to know where they can go for help and what they can do to support digital participation for themselves and their families. Communicate about available programs, initiatives and resources through diverse channels, including schools, universities, social media and local councils;

» Work with young people and their communities to co-design digital participation initiatives. One-size-fits-all approaches cannot address the different needs of YPRMBs, nor build on their diverse strengths.

WHO NEEDS
TO TAKE ACTION?

Young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds and their **communities** demonstrate significant aptitude, adaptability, entrepreneurship, and a desire to learn how to better harness digital technology for education, employment, social and civic connection, and wellbeing. They have a deep, lived understanding of the challenges and opportunities digital technology offers in the present and future, and want to be engaged in designing solutions to better meet their everyday needs.

Governments (including local amenity providers and spaces such as libraries and neighbourhood centres), **education providers,** youth-serving and youth-led **organisations**, settlement **support services** and **tech companies** can play a vital role in working with YPRMBs and their communities to support their digital participation. Moving forward, it is important to engage YPRMBs and their communities beyond one-off or gap-filler initiatives responding to crises and, instead, to develop long-term, sustainable and collaborative uplifting of capacity across sectors and in communities.

ACTION INSIGHTS: SUPPORTING YOUNG PEOPLE ACROSS KEY DOMAINS

Employment

» 'All recruitment happens online' - employment assistance for young people should focus on the skills required to navigate online job seeking more effectively;

» YPRMBs have significant interest and capacity in digital entrepreneurship skills, which can be supported through small grants and sustaining programs that deliver skills training workshops.

Education

» Education providers can consider targeted support to enhance the digital proficiencies of young people at greatest risk of exclusion, including those experiencing financial stress and from newly arrived communities;

» Schools and settlement support services can partner with parents to negotiate the use of digital tech in families in ways that meet educational and cross-generational needs.

Connection

» YPRMBs are less concerned about reputational risks arising from their practices of online connection, and are instead calling for tech companies to be held accountable for the responsible management of their data. They also want more ownership and control of their digital labour, data and output. The needs and aspirations of YPRMBs to access safe and inclusive digital spaces should be centered in the design and ongoing refinement of policies, products and platforms;

» Better intergenerational connections and understanding can be facilitated across generations by building collaborations between trusted sources such as schools and community leaders and organisations.

Wellbeing

» Accessing appropriate telehealth is critical for young people, but the role of digital self-care needs to be better understood and integrated into digital health care delivery (e.g. young people are using apps, participating in youth-led online communities and curating their social media feeds to manage mental health);

» Harness the potential of digital technology to support wellbeing by facilitating connection and belonging through social media communities, and through online mental health support services, resources and information that are relevant, representative and appropriate for diverse YPRMBs. Support young people to balance their use of social media in ways that feel right for them.

Contact

Acknowledgements