

Summary of Digital inclusion user insights — Former refugees and migrants with English as a second language



1. Introduction

Digital inclusion can be defined as an end-state where everyone has equitable opportunities to participate in society using digital technologies (Digital Inclusion Research Group, 2017).

This user experience (UX) report for former refugees and marginalised migrants is part of the digital inclusion user insights report series commissioned by Te Tari Taiwhenua Department of Internal Affairs (DIA). The purpose of the series is to understand the lived experience of the groups that are most often digitally excluded.

Former refugees and marginalised migrants are also one of the target groups that received less support from government initiatives compared with others as reported in the government's report on target demographics.

Read section 2 of the report: [Digital inclusion stocktake: What digital inclusion looks like across government.](#)

The research sets out to:

- identify barriers, challenges and pain points of former refugees and marginalised migrants' digital inclusion journey
- understand how digitally included this group is on the digital inclusion framework.

The research takes into account this group's settlement experience in Aotearoa New Zealand at these time periods — the first 3 months and first 3 years.

The research was conducted from April to June 2021 in 6 locations across New Zealand. In total, there were 41 participants representing 20 ethnicities. In-depth interviews with participants were in the form of one on one and face to face. There was support from in-person or phone interpreters when required.

Acknowledgement

DIA extends their warmest thank you to everyone who shared their stories and participated in this UX research project. The Digital Inclusion team also would like to acknowledge the Ministry for Ethnic Communities for working with the researcher to engage with communities including local non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to organise the interviews and to provide guidance and feedback.

DIA would like to note that the information and findings featured in this report reflect the views of the individuals who were interviewed and the various groups that they represent.

Report information

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2. Key findings

This section summarises the key findings from the literature review and research undertaken, and other factors affecting the digital inclusion of former refugees and marginalised migrants.

Access and skills are the 2 main barriers to digital inclusion for former refugees and marginalised migrants.

Other factors forming impediments to digital inclusion for this group are:

- lower English language proficiency
- cultural barriers
- low socio-economic status.

2.1. Summary of literature review

Five databases were searched for existing literature on digital inclusion for former refugees and migrants with English as a second language (ESL) in New Zealand and other countries around the world. Initial filtering on the abstracts produced 36 records. From there, each record was reviewed to determine the relevancy to the research scope.

The insights were also used to inform the research plan.

Differences in definitions and experiences between ‘refugees’ and ‘migrants’

There are clear legal distinctions between refugees and migrants, which was acknowledged by the United Nations General Assembly in the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants (UN General Assembly, 2016) and United Nations High Commission Refugees (UNHCR).

Refugees and migrants go through different experiences when they arrive in a new country. In New Zealand, these groups receive different settlement support provided by Immigration New Zealand (INZ) in partnership with other government agencies and third-party providers.

Suggestive similarities between ‘refugees’ and ‘marginalised migrants’

There exists a group of migrants who face challenges similar to those faced by former refugees during their settlement journey. These include social, economic, cultural and political challenges. This group is described as ‘marginalised migrants’ by Belong Aotearoa and other NGOs in New Zealand. (Belong Aotearoa, UMMA Trust, RASNZ,

NZ Red Cross, Asylum Seekers Support Trust, Aotearoa Resettled Community Coalition, Family Action, 2020).

In conclusion, there is a high level of commonality between former refugees and marginalised migrants needing to access support services for their settlement. There is less commonality between former refugees and other groups of migrants, such as skilled migrants. In this research, former refugees and marginalised migrants are the main focus.

Key themes identified from the literature review

- There are barriers to using online information from official sources by recently arrived refugees and migrants.
- Digital technologies enable refugees and migrants to meet one of their key needs: affordable communication with their social networks. However, barriers still exist to using digital tools to their advantage.
- Digitally included people achieve better social inclusion and wellbeing.

Identified in the literature review, these 3 key themes help to partially answer questions in the [digital inclusion research agenda](#) as well as inform the scope of this research.

Barriers to digital inclusion for former refugees and migrants are compounded by other factors including social, cultural, economic and political challenges that arise when settling in their new host country.

It is hypothesised that enhancing the digital inclusion elements — motivation, access, skills and trust (MAST) — will improve this group's digital inclusion and therefore factors associated with their settlement journey.

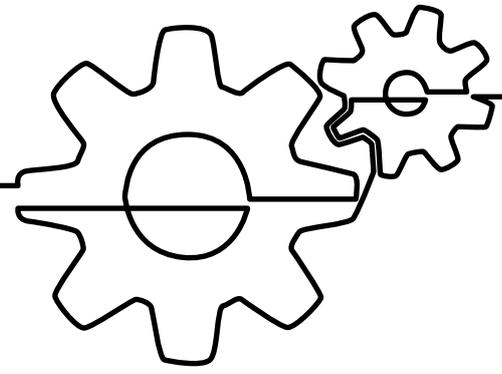
2.2. Summary of research findings

The research findings were analysed against the MAST framework, which includes the following 4 interdependent elements: motivation, access, skills and trust.

Motivation

Some former refugees and marginalised migrants have no prior experience of digital devices, the internet or online services before coming to NZ. This creates gaps in their knowledge of what is possible to achieve with digital technologies.

A hierarchy of needs takes priority, and mental availability to learn is scarce. For those who understand the social and economic benefits of digital technologies, these benefits are not realised because of a lack of access to relevant devices and skills. Connecting with families and friends overseas is the biggest motivation and the most frequent usage of smartphones for this group.



“It took me a really long time, even though like friends or classmates where I used to study with, they already got the smartphones and they started to pop up. I didn’t have a smartphone straight away. But then again, I didn’t realise that was a challenge, because I didn’t know what a smartphone could do. And I was quite used to my lifestyle until my phone broke. And then I had to get a new one. And we ended up getting a smartphone for my mom and for myself. It took me 3 years.”

— Research participant

Access

Cost is the main barrier for this group to have access to larger devices such as desktops, laptops, mobile data and plans, and unlimited home internet. Connectivity to free public wifi is reported to be inconsistent, of low speed or time-bound, or all of the above.

For accessing government services, visiting in person is still seen as a more effective way to get important things done and to resolve issues and questions.

In the first 3 months, in-person appointments or phone calls with interpretation services are the preferred modes of service access. Support of social networks such as volunteers, settlement workers, family members or community members is key for this group to access the internet, devices and essential services whether online or offline.

Self-service online access is not possible due to an English language barrier, lack of resources in ethnic languages, limited digital skills, and unfamiliarity with how online systems work. This trend remains mostly unchanged for the first 3 years of settlement in NZ for the majority of this group.

For those who have the willingness to use online self-service, it’s time consuming because they need to use online translation tools to help them understand the content and applications. Despite those efforts, help is still needed with questions, requirements and technical terms.

“We didn’t know anything about New Zealand before we came. Basically, just before we came to New Zealand, we were given a little bit of information about New Zealand. Honestly speaking, we don’t know where New Zealand is. When I arrived here at the resettlement agency, they provide me [a] volunteer support worker, she pretty much did everything for me, like how to go shopping, how to use your bank card, how to go to Work and Income, or how to go to school, how to take [the] bus or everything is what this support worker helps me and to guide me and lead me and support me to settle in a new community.”

— Research participant

Skills

There is evidence that digital skills training provided in an ethnic language facilitates the process of acquiring digital skills independent of English language proficiency. However, there needs to be a clear separation in digital skill levels, so that the training can be effective. Trusted communities are best placed as intermediaries to help transfer knowledge, provide support, and facilitate digital skills training.

The top 3 most important areas of digital skills for this group are:

1. online transaction skills
2. online safety and security skills
3. skills to handle online information and content.

The top 5 specific digital skills that this group wants to improve on are:

1. storing information in the cloud and accessing that content from different devices
2. updating devices regularly to prevent viruses and other risks
3. managing their money and transactions online securely
4. accessing and using public services online, for example, vehicle registration, MyMSD
5. paying for goods or services online.

A lack of English language proficiency is a significant barrier to acquiring digital skills as most training offered is provided in English.

“Free class is very important for adults because I mean for adults, even though we have a computer, most people cannot open [it] up, don’t know how to use it, so this kind of computer course is very important for them. But the second problem is this course gives a lesson by English. There’s another big problem. So if we have someone who can teach in our language, this will be very appreciated. Because now, technology is everywhere. So at that point, everyone needs to understand at least the basic course. And as we said, the government or a lot of organisations offer these free courses, but it is still difficult for us. Because we don’t know, most people don’t know English. Computer terms are more difficult to understand.”

— Research participant

Low self-confidence and priority of meeting basic living needs affect the ongoing attendance of training classes.

Women in this group are at greater risk of digital exclusion due to lower levels of digital skills and lack of opportunities and support to attend training classes mainly because of domestic caregiving duties, followed by injuries and illnesses.

Trust

The fear of personal information — including credit card and bank account details — being tracked, trapped and collected for unrelated purposes is the biggest source of distrust. This creates barriers to conducting online activities such as online shopping, online banking and online payments for key services.

“The most worrying thing and most untrusted thing that I don’t like is identity theft and you know, for your information, be cautious because you don’t know if these people are going to take it and you’re not sure if you did the right thing when you fill out that form.”

— Research participant

Previous first- or second-hand experiences of cybercrimes such as online frauds, scams and hacks also lower the trust in the digital world.

Social networks are the most trusted, followed by government websites, channels and well-known brands of banks, telecommunications and news outlets. Social influence is also an important factor facilitating digital technologies adoption.

2.3. Other factors that affect this group’s digital inclusion

Besides the 4 elements in the digital inclusion framework, there are other factors that affect digital inclusion of this group.

Lack of English language proficiency and awareness of service availability

A lack of English language proficiency and resources in ethnic languages are long-term barriers to digital inclusion of this group.

This is exacerbated by a lack of awareness or understanding of how things work in NZ, and what government information and services are available, especially for those who are not eligible to go through government resettlement programmes.

“I mean, compared to the technology available now, everything was very difficult. But back then, because I was not totally aware of what the key services are, because you’re not totally aware of what you don’t have at the time, so you kind of just make do with what you have and not even think ‘oh this is difficult’, you just do it.”

— Research participant

Cultural barriers

Cultural characteristics need to be considered when raising awareness or delivering government services, or doing both — especially if it’s online. Some cultures consider it shameful to ask questions or for help. Some people do not want to come across as troublesome to others. This leads to a lack of feedback to service providers, especially when the services are not well-delivered online or offline — for example, by phone or at a service centre.

“Like asking questions for help or something like that ... because the culture is kind of a bit of a shame to ask: can you help me? [In hindsight] I would do it differently, I would ask even if I didn’t understand.”

— Research participant

Socio-economic status

Lower socio-economic status forms another barrier to digital inclusion of this group, specifically in accessing digital devices, mobile data and plans, and unlimited home internet. This affects the motivation, access and skills elements in the MAST framework because it takes time to improve socio-economic conditions.

Education attainment

Higher education attainment seems to be associated with a higher level of digital inclusion especially in the skills element. This is observed in former refugees who pursued or are pursuing higher education in NZ and in some migrants with higher education backgrounds.

2.4. Digital inclusion and wellbeing

Access to social services

Digital inclusion partially influences this group's access to social services in the longer term, especially with the move to more online self-service. For this group, the difference in social services access and the modes of access between their previous country and NZ is reflected. This is compounded by lacking previous experience accessing the internet and digital devices, and lower English language proficiency for the majority of former refugees and migrants. This makes accessing online social services challenging.

In their first 3 months in NZ, the support of volunteers, settlement workers, family, friends and community members is key to accessing essential services. The preferred modes of access are in-person appointments and phone calls. This trend remains unchanged for the first 3 years.

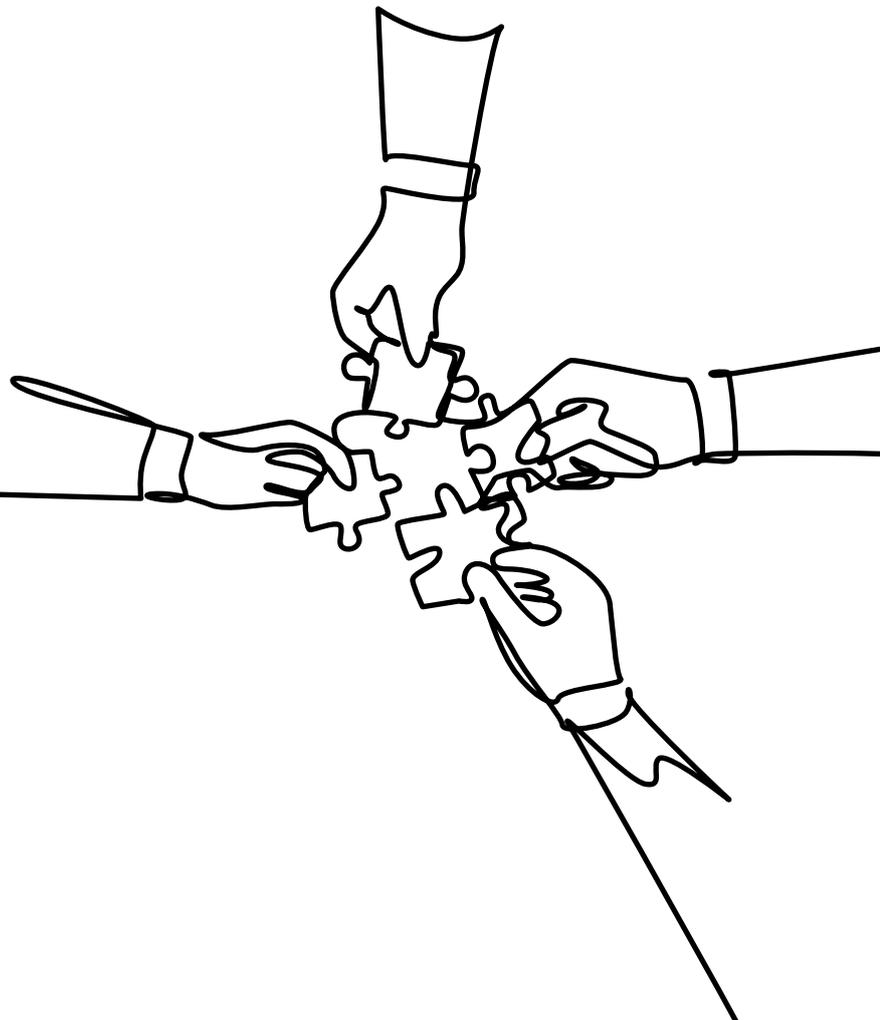
Social connection and subjective wellbeing

The affordability of smartphones, aided by relatively stable internet connection in NZ, such as wifi at home, creates an economical and consistent way for this group to be in contact with their families. Therefore, digital inclusion enables this group to maintain family and social connections overseas that would otherwise be impossible. This directly benefits their wellbeing by reducing feelings of loneliness and isolation, especially for the newly arrived.

When internet connections are disrupted, there is a negative effect on their subjective wellbeing if this group loses contact with their overseas families about their situation. A disruption in NZ may be due to a data cap being reached or an internet outage. In their original country, network infrastructure or connectivity may be disrupted by socio-political events or high internet costs.

“I have my parents, my brother and 2 sisters back at home as well. Unfortunately, they are not in a good situation because there is an ongoing war in that region. It’s stressful to think about. It’s very hard because the network keeps going down. So I do call them just directly. I use a different application to call them, because the normal services wouldn’t work or connect me. Yeah, so I just installed the app. We charge it and call them directly if that works. And it’s currently not working.”

— Research participant



3. Conclusion and recommendations

For the majority of this group, there is not much progress in their digital inclusion when comparing the first 3 months and first 3 years of settlement periods. However, there is a sense of improvement of digital inclusion for those that settle in NZ for a longer time — for example, more than 10 years.

This creates an opportunity to accelerate this group’s digital inclusion journey by addressing the access and skills elements early on in their settlement journey.

Social networks such as volunteers, settlement workers, community and family members are the most trusted sources, followed by official government channels and websites. Therefore, these networks should be further utilised, and channels and websites should be designed inclusively to help improve this group’s digital inclusion.

The recommendations below are based on research findings, not government policy recommendations.

Opportunities to solve the access issues

To help solve the access issues, measures that would help include providing:

- devices such as laptops through different finance options and internet connections where it has been evaluated as an effective approach. The Ministry of Education’s Equitable Digital Access programme is an example of a successful approach
- zero-rated data to access key online services including essential governmental and non-governmental services
- community spaces such as public libraries and places of worship where digital skills training and device stations can be accessed.

Opportunities to solve the skills issues

To help solve the skills issues, measures that would help include providing:

- digital skills training in ethnic languages through trusted intermediaries to reduce the time this group stays digitally excluded
- targeted and holistic support for women in ethnic communities, especially around domestic care-giving duties so they can attend training classes
- digital skills training with clear achievement levels so that it’s effective and empowering, for example, smartphone-specific digital skills training as a starting point before progressing to more complex digital skills training on larger devices such as laptops

- focused training on the top 3 digital skills areas identified as important for this group: online transaction skills, online safety and security skills, and skills to handle online information and content. This should include training on accessing key online services such as MyMSD, myIR, an online immigration account, and online banking.

Other considerations

To help increase the digital inclusion of former refugees and marginalised migrants settling in NZ, consider:

- continuing to prioritise English language proficiency training
- making resources available in ethnic languages online, especially for key services
- making digital inclusion training part of the resettlement programme for former refugees and marginalised migrants with ESL
- more investment in increasing digital inclusion support for the first 3 to 5 years of settlement
- using longitudinal studies to understand the impact of early digital inclusion support on settlement outcomes
- measuring and tracking the digital inclusion position of this group in the context of their settlement and settlement outcomes in NZ.

“I’m coming from overseas, you teach me English, and I learn his language, and I work here, I pay tax, I help the government. So I’m not going to be useless, I will be useful.

When you teach me math plus English, I will be more useful. I can do something greater than ever.

When you teach me computers, so I’ve got the basics of IT, English and math. I will be an expert in the future and I will help New Zealand to grow faster and faster.”

— Research participant



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