

How can we engage young Ukrainian refugees in education, nearly two years on from start of the war?

Millions of people had to leave Ukraine since February 2022. They left their homes to seek refuge in the EU and neighbouring countries, leaving millions of children without education, disruption to their lives and estrangement from their friends and family.

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In an Education Policy Brief from UNHCR, titled 'Education on Hold', it's reported that while 30 to 50 per cent of some 5.9 million Ukrainian refugees across Europe are children, only about half were enrolled in schools in host countries for the 2022-2023 academic year.

Now as we near two years on from the conflict, it's critical that we review not only the progress we've made providing education, skills-based programmes, and social opportunities for young refugees but also the ongoing challenges and factors behind why we don't have higher enrolled rates or engagement in education and how we can address this.

According to findings from the 'Education on Hold' report, factors contributing to low enrolment rates for refugee children include language barriers; a lack of information on available education options; a hesitancy among parents to enrol their children in host countries as they hope to soon return home to Ukraine; and uncertainty about eventual reintegration into the Ukrainian education system.

After 2 years of conflict and displacement, it's understandable that education may not be at the forefront for young Ukrainian refugees, but the onus is on us, governments, schools and organisations to engage Ukrainian youth, to help secure their futures.

At JA Europe, we quickly worked to ensure educational support to young people and make sure that the consequences of the disruption to education would be mitigated. Through doing so, we partnered with UNICEF, from September 2022 to deliver 'UPLIFT', a project focused on delivering work readiness programmes, digital education, and support with social cohesion in 14 countries across Europe, to displaced Ukrainian youth. This will further support them with their own personal economic outcomes, enabling them to set up wherever they choose to stay.

For instance, as part of UPLIFT, we deliver innovation camps, entrepreneurship workshops and soft skills training. And in host countries such as the Czech Republic and Romania, we've also seen positive results from engaging Ukrainian teachers displaced in the country too. Not only does this help create a sense of home for Ukrainian students but it's an opportunity for teachers to continue their skills development and training.

Online resources are undoubtedly helpful and increase accessibility. In the 'Education on Hold' report, it was found that half of displaced Ukrainians are not enrolled in local schools but study online with their teachers back home.

Accessibility to educational resources is another challenge we face when engaging youth Ukrainian refugees, therefore, it's critical we shape our programmes so that no child is left behind. That's why we've prioritised making our content available online and creating a digital network for students. We've also worked closely with out of school organisations to support those who have found it difficult to attend local schools.

And for those displaced children who want to learn in-person, we also deliver in-person innovation camps and face to face programmes. It's vital to consider that each child learns in a different way and a challenge we face is children feeling valued and listened to by the education system. By making education, skills-based programmes and resources available in different ways but accessible by all – we ensure to cover all bases.

Social cohesion is also a massive factor at play when we discuss the challenges that refugees face when first moving to host countries. They've been stripped away from environments they're familiar with and friends they've made, and the impact socially, as well as mentally, is intense.

It's critical that refugees are made to feel comfortable and supported in their host countries, to prevent the long-term consequences of social exclusion. This requires investment in both policy and practice and continued support of programmes like the ones that JA delivers.

As part of UPLIFT, we also engage local youths in the in-person programmes we deliver and try to offer as many bi-lingual workshops as possible. Not only does this help ease language barriers but it goes a long way to foster integration and social cohesion amongst peers.

Young people have the talent to become the next leading generation and contribute positively to our European economies. This shouldn't be any different for Ukrainian youth, but they need opportunities and the right support to seize them. Most importantly, they should not be forgotten or bypassed by other pressing news.

We need to focus on tackling the major factors behind Ukrainian youth engaging in education, such as social cohesion and accessibility. And by continuing to deliver entrepreneurship, real-life skills-based programmes that are available online and in-person – we will do so, as well as help

secure their future.

Salvatore Nigro is the CEO of *JA Europe*.

Article by Salvatore Nigro