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THE IMPACT OF E-SKILLS ON THE SETTLEMENT OF IRANIAN REFUGEES IN AUSTRALIA

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ABSTRACT

Aim/Purpose	The research investigates the impact of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) on Iranian refugees' settlement in Australia.
Background	The study identifies the issues of settlement, such as language, cultural and social differences.
Methodology	The Multi-Sited Ethnography (MSE), which is a qualitative methodology, has been used with a thematic analysis drawing on a series of semi-structured interviews with two groups of participants (51 Iranian refugees and 55 people with a role in assisting refugees).
Contribution	The research findings may enable the creation of a model for use by the Australian Government with Iranian refugees.
Findings	The findings show the vital role ICT play in refugees' ongoing day-to-day life towards settlement.
Recommendations for Practitioners	The results from this paper could be generalised to other groups of refugees in Australia and also could be used for Iranian refugees in other countries.
Recommendation for Researchers	Researchers may use a similar study for refugees of different backgrounds in Australia and around the world.
Impact on Society	ICT may assist refugees to become less isolated, less marginalized and part of mainstream society.
Future Research	Future research could look into the digital divide between refugees in Australia and main stream Australians.
Keywords	e-Skills, ICT, settlement, refugees

INTRODUCTION

Our society encounters many changes over time and, as a consequence, demands new skills of its members. The Internet is one of those changes that, because of the massive increase of digital in-

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formation available, plays an important communication role. As a result, our digital society has become more dependent on the information provided by the Internet, so computer and Internet skills (digital literacy) are of vital consideration (Rana, 2017; Scarcelli & Riva, 2017; van Deursen & van Dijk, 2011; Yu, Lin, & Liao, 2017). However, while digital literacy is important for society as a whole, it is particularly crucial for refugees settling into a new country and thus removed from their previous communication channels. It is, therefore, appropriate to study how modern technology assists refugees in the establishment and maintenance of social relations across the boundaries of homeland and hostland (Wahlbeck, 2002).

Defining human migration is a complex undertaking. The study of human mobility has caught the attention of scholars in social sciences, including the study of migrants' and refugees' settlements in their respective host countries (Tsagarousianou, 2004). According to Sinha (2005), there has not been an explanation of migration that is capable of covering all aspects of the scales of local, regional, national, and international migration and that could be acceptable universally. Lee (1966) defines migration as a change of residence, whether this change is temporary or permanent, regardless of any limitation in distance or whether the move has been forced or voluntary. Eisenstadt (1953) defines it as the physical move of an individual from one society to another. Bernard (1976) divides humans' movements into two sections, depending on the reasons for their movements. While he believes that moving from one place to another is humans' "age-old characteristic," those who move by choice are voluntary immigrants while those who move because they are forced to are refugees. According to Bernard, immigration as individual movements has only been a recent phenomenon; immigrants decide by themselves to plan and move, whereas involuntary migration is based on terror and fear. What is important to note is the distinction that voluntary immigrants make a confident choice of moving to a better country, with plenty of time to plan their migration "practically, psychologically and systematically" and therefore have time to gain such skills as competency in the language of the hostland as well as other skills that may help them to settle faster (Tribe, 2002, p.241). However, involuntary immigrants flee their home country in a hurry and do not have time for any immigration planning.

As part of a satisfactory settlement, refugees want to have opportunities to establish themselves in their new country. This is greatly dependent on the host country's tolerance of other cultures and whether it is a homogeneous or a multicultural country. Although refugees' backgrounds and their "cultural preferences" along with "social, political and personal factors" play significant roles for their satisfactory settlement (Colic-Peisker, 2009), refugees' level of satisfaction does not solely depend on these, as the host country also has a part to play at both the government and social level. For example, if the community is hospitable, it is much easier for refugees to integrate. The hospitality of the host country is seen to empower the refugees' sense of self-worth and dignity, assist them in finding housing and employment, become financially independent from governmental assistance, and gain full control of their own destiny.

Australia had a "white" policy since the establishment of its federation on 1 January 1901; that is, it effectively banned non-European immigrants. However, this policy was gradually phased out after World War II and the Racial Discrimination Act of 1975 ensured that migration selection based on race was unlawful. As a result, multiculturalism has become a central element of the country's identity (Bouma, 2016). According to the Refugee Council of Australia (RCOA), Australia's refugee intake is now 20,000 per year (RCOA, 2017).

The research reported in this paper is part of a larger study that aims to shed light on Iranian refugees in Australia. According to Gifford and Wilding (2013), ICT can play a significant role in refugee settlement due to the additional opportunities it provides. Thus the study examines the impact of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) on the settlement of Iranian refugees' who reside in Australia. This paper focusses on e-skills as one component of ICT impact.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In addition to studies focussed on migration in general, research about refugees is an important topic among academia and policy makers (Allen & Morsink, 1994; Simich, Beiser, Stewart, & Mwakarimba, 2005). There are ample statistics about refugees (e.g. Crisp, 1999; UNHCR, 2014); however, while it is important to know the statistical data, they do not communicate the human experience of refugees fleeing their country of origin to escape persecution. A greater understanding is needed of how refugees are able to find a country to provide shelter, to settle and reconstruct their identity there, be able to reunite with their families, and to raise their children. There are significant differences between the two groups of immigrants; refugees have stronger political ties to their homeland which are different from the ties voluntary immigrants have to theirs (Wahlbeck, 2002). That is why e-skills are important to refugees, who are concerned about their homeland and the wellbeing of the people they left behind including their family, extended family, and friends. By the same token, the refugees' families and friends are equally concerned about the wellbeing and safety of those who managed to flee. Kunz (1973) shares a similar view by stating that the refugees' relationship with their homeland and the hostland, in which they have settled involuntarily, is distinctive as they did not want to leave their home. This relationship, therefore, contributes to the distinction between refugees and immigrants.

Refugees play a significant role on a global scale. According to Lee (1966), some people have powerful reasons for embarking on a migration process. Many migrate to another country because of changes in the political, cultural, or economic situation of their country of origin or even because of war. This is the case for Iranian refugees. A combination of these changes occurred in Iran during the 1979 Islamic revolution, followed by eight years of war between Iran and Iraq, which in turn destroyed Iran's economy and caused an Iranian diaspora around the world.

Historically, Australia has been a popular destination for immigrants. Australia facilitated the arrival of the European immigrants during the first half of the 20th century (Penman, 1979); recent immigrants, though, are from all over the world. There had been a minimal number of Iran-born immigrants to Australia prior to 1979. Those who did migrate were mostly related to the oil industries (DIAC, 2011). However, the Islamic revolution ignited an influx of refugees. Therefore, the timeline for this research covers Iranian refugees from the 1979 establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran based on strict Islamic law to the present time, as the political situation in Iran continues to deteriorate.

In today's modern society, online technology has made it easy to have access to knowledge (Halliday-Wynes & Beddie, 2009). This may be achieved through many different platforms on the Internet, including by the use of social media and browsing the Internet. Access to ICT and the knowledge of how to use them are some of the important issues, not only in local but also in global economic developments. ICT act at the core of accessing information and participating in social life and political events. It helps a nation's citizens to gather, diffuse and share information. It also allows for better communication and group interaction. According to Selwyn (2006), researchers could see the increasing benefits of ICT and were concerned about people who were excluded, resulting in a widening gap between those with access to information and knowledge and those without. These technological capabilities facilitate opportunities for marginalized individuals to participate in social and political life (Shirazi, Ngwenyama, & Morawczynski, 2010). Refugees are no exception as they might use these platforms to learn about their new homeland, promoting social inclusion in the community (Urquhart, Underhill-Sem, & Wilding, 2009). As one example, a study conducted by Healy et al. (2004) that looked into new migrants and their experience of the labour market in Australia, found a correlation between the migrants' earning and their level of satisfactory settlement. Those who could find employment matching their skills and who earned an appropriate income experienced more satisfactory settlement than those with jobs that did not match their skills and were therefore underemployed. This could be because forced migrants, who held humanitarian visas, were not selected to settle in Australia based on their skills and, therefore, experienced more difficulty in the labour mar-

ket. Judge and Watanabe (1993) also agree that there is a correlation between life satisfaction and employment.

As part of Australia's assimilation policy between 1945 and 1975, and the Nationality and Citizenship Act of 1948, voluntary immigrants who want to become Australian citizens are expected to have a good command of the English language and to assimilate (Pietsch, 2013). Being competent in English is not only useful for new Australian citizens, but also for involuntary immigrants, that is, refugees. Therefore, English competency must be given high priority for refugees' settlement in their new home. Also, providing refugees with information about health is beneficial and this is what the Integrated Humanitarian Settlement Strategy is hoping to achieve as information could be used as a preventative factor to maintain a good degree of health status. The use of ICT could also greatly help refugees to achieve this goal as they could access relevant websites to learn about the information provided (DIAC, 2009).

However, Al-Saggaf (2011) found that people are online for reasons other than information seeking, for example, joining online communities for socialising, relaxing, improving relationships, having fun or, for some, simply filling in time. Therefore acquiring computer and Internet skills provide opportunities for social inclusion as well as information (Riding & Rayner, 1995), which is particularly important for Iranian immigrants. The Iranian diaspora in Australia is made of heterogeneous groups as they stem from different political, religious, linguistic, educational, cultural, and social backgrounds within Iran. Although they have many differences, the Iranian refugees share a common country and a common enemy, that is, the authoritarian regime from which they fled. Therefore, they have the urge to establish a social relationship with other Iranians based on common grounds as well as a "cultural heritage and sense of ethnic honour" (Adibi, 2008, p 103).

These connections could be facilitated and maintained through the use of ICT, which may enable individual diaspora communities to become globalised. Furthermore, they can link to diaspora groups in other parts of the world. The Internet is therefore an important tool and a highly valuable framework for the diaspora's construction of identity and social networking.

METHOD

There is limited literature on the ICT practices of Iranian refugees in Australia and other regions in the world. Falzon (2004) claims that anthropologists, who were researching communities such as immigrants, could see that ethnography, in its classic form, was an inadequate methodology. The multi-sited ethnography (MSE) methodology was initially proposed by Marcus (1995) and since then widely accepted by researchers, as it facilitates interdisciplinary research. According to Marcus (1995, p. 96) MSE or "mobile ethnography," steps outside the single-site and goes beyond locality. It explores the distribution of "cultural meanings, objects and identities in diffuse time-space" and is an effective way to trace the formation of cultures by establishing connections among sites. Falzon (2016) explains what an actual multi-sited research is by having two conditions met. The first is spatial displacement: a precondition that means the research must be conducted in at least two or more locations. The second is that the sites must be scattered or separated from each other. He indicates that the sites do not need to be extremely distant from one another, as in different countries, but they could be multiple locations in one country. The difference between the sites distinguishes MSE from the original ethnography.

Since this study investigates the online behaviour of refugees in different locations in Australia, MSE is an appropriate methodology. Hine (2007) concludes that, for science and technology studies, it is convenient to use MSE. She suggests the researcher has to study the differences among individuals, institutions, and identified groups, withholding judgement about the impact of location. Therefore, MSE, complemented by a thematic analysis drawing on a series of interviews, has been selected as the methodology for this research as it offers a theoretical framework for a refugee diaspora study, which is not limited to the traditional localised and single-sited ethnography. Since participants were located in different sites around Australia, MSE can explain the experiences of refugees' unique so-

cial networking and the relationships they create within each site. This connection has been strengthened by the use of technology, specifically ICT, with a focus on what *e-Skills* support refugee settlement.

PARTICIPANTS

Although refugees in Australia are from a vast number of countries, in order to ensure that the research was manageable, it was decided to focus on one nationality only. Since the researcher is of Iranian background, is familiar with both Iran's and Australia's cultural values, and is bilingual (Farsi and English), Iranian refugees are the focus of this study. Dwyer and Buckle (2009) believe that a researcher with insider status would be more accepted by participants and make them feel more comfortable, open, trusting, and relaxed, which would provide a better opportunity for a richer data collection. Miller (2004) believes that developing trust is a prerequisite for the researcher to conduct effective interviews. Gummesson (2000) indicates that the researcher's existing experience and knowledge for the research topic is valuable; he refers to it as "pre-understanding". The researcher can use this insight when asking the questions, knowing which topics are considered taboo or not acceptable to bring up, and which topics are considered legitimate.

In order to cover ICT and refugee settlement from different perspectives, the research focused on two different groups of participants. The first group was comprised of 51 adult Iranian refugees in Australia who were able to relate their experiences first-hand. All these refugees came to Australia between 1979 and 2015. The gender ratio was 32 (63%) males and 19 (37%) females. The age of the group was diverse, ranging from 18 to 70+. However, there were not many in the higher age range, which may be due to lack of ICT skills among older refugees. The majority of the refugee group's age range was in the 30-39 bracket (n=20). Their level of education ranged from lower than high school to postgraduate (Table 1).

Table 1. Educational level of refugee participants

Educational Level	
<High School	5
High School	20
Undergraduate	22
Postgraduate	4

The second group was comprised of 55 participants who worked either as volunteers or in a paid role for a variety of organisations including government and non-government organisations (NGOs) that dealt with refugees from any background and assisted the refugees in their settlement process. Similar to the refugee group, their ages ranged from 18 to 70+. The majority of the non-refugee group was in the 50-70+ bracket (n=18). Twenty-nine (53%) of the non-refugee group of participants worked for government related organisations, while 26 (47%) worked with NGOs. Their number of years of providing a service to refugees ranged from 1 year to 35+ years with the average being 11 years.

INSTRUMENT

In this study, semi-structured interviews were used to collect data. Since the study was exploring e-skill issues from both refugee and non-refugee perspectives, separate questionnaires were developed for each group. The questions for the refugee group were about their perception of integration, issues using ICT, their ICT usage, and how ICT could help refugees with their settlement. The questions for the non-refugee group addressed issues such as whether refugees needed to have access to ICT, whether they had sufficient e-skills to use ICT properly and, if not, what kind of training they needed to assist them in their settlement journey (see Appendix).

The interviews were audio recorded where agreed to by participants and later transcribed. The non-refugee interviews were conducted in English while the refugee interviews were conducted in Farsi, with one exception where the refugee participant was confident with English.

Both questionnaires were based on the MSE framework by constructing a series of topics that would help the researcher to look into participants' experiences and their thoughts on satisfactory settlement and integration. All interviews began with demographic questions, while the remaining questions varied for the different groups. For non-refugee participants, questions were about the refugee organisation they worked for, followed by ICT related questions. For refugee participants, the questions were concentrated around technology background, Internet costs and usage. The duration of the interviews was approximately 30 minutes but varied depending on the participants' elaboration on responses.

DATA COLLECTION

The interviews were conducted between March and August 2015. The location of interviews varied due to the preference of individual participants (public locations convenient to participants or, rarely, by phone). At the end of each interview, the interviewer provided an opportunity for the participants to amend their responses and provide feedback if needed. In line with Falzon's (2016) recommendations, the selection of interview locations was based on the concentration of Iranians. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), three cities in Australia accommodate the highest number of Iran-born people (Table 2).

Table 2. Iran-born distribution in Australia

Location	Number	Percentage
Sydney, NSW	14,605	42.4
Melbourne, VIC	6,978	20.3
Perth, WA	3,397	9.9
Rest of Australia	9,475	27.4
Total Australia	34,455	100.0

Source: ABS (2014)

As is seen in Table 2, 24,980 (73%) of Iran-born migrants (whether forced or voluntary) reside in the capital cities of three Australian states (Sydney, NSW; Melbourne, VIC; Perth, WA), and therefore it was decided to collect data from these cities. Data was also collected from Wagga Wagga, NSW, a city well known as a regional settlement location that accommodates refugees from all over the world, including Iran. It also has numerous government organisations and NGOs working in the city. Table 3 shows the number of interviewees in each location by state.

Table 3. Interview locations and participants

State	Number of Participants
New South Wales	36
Victoria	34
Western Australia	36
Total Australia	106

DATA ANALYSIS

The data from 106 interviews were used for analysis. The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software was used for basic statistics on demographic data and NVivo was used for coding and thematic analysis. Thematic analysis finds patterns in data and provides detailed explanations (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This method helps to understand the ideas that emerged during the interview (Aronson, 1994).

All the audio data were transcribed and the names and other specific identifiers were removed. Several themes surfaced and were coded and used for analysing the participants' experiences, points of views and concerns that they had come across. Once the themes were sorted, sub-themes emerged that helped further understanding of the impact of ICT on Iranian refugees' settlement.

RESULTS

In this study, data were collected, transcribed, and analysed, with several themes being identified. One main theme that emerged that is relevant to this research was *e-Skills*, which refers to the competencies Iranian refugees require to support their settlement. Under this main theme, two sub-themes of *English competency* and *Acquiring computer and Internet skills* emerged (Figure 1).

Gaining these skills may provide the possibility for Iranian refugees to accelerate their journey towards satisfactory settlement. For example, acquiring English competency should assist with gaining employment in an English speaking country such as Australia. Although competency in English is not dependant on ICT, as the refugees could learn to read, write, and speak English through the traditional way of attending English language classes and reading hard copies of English language books, it can act as a facilitator.

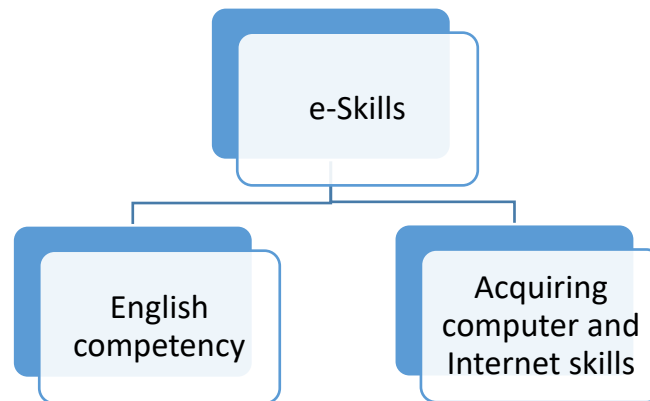


Figure 1. e-Skills theme and sub-themes

Prior to discussing the two sub-themes, it is essential to note the importance of *e-Skills*, acknowledged by both the refugee and non-refugee groups.

[Note: Participants are identified by a pseudonym: Iranian names refer to refugee participants; Western names refer to non-refugee participants. Location is identified by a letter (e.g., M refers to participants in Melbourne). Q refers to the survey question the comment addressed.]

If they can teach English language and Internet skills to refugees, it will be very valuable as everything these days are done through the Internet. All the offices are using the Internet. For example, if you want to buy a ticket you use the Internet, if you want to reserve anything, you use the Internet. ICT has made life very easy (Mahmoud_M, Q6).

Australia has everything online, anything such as applying for driver's license and anything else, you need to get online and therefore need to have skills to do it. Internet skills are always useful anywhere you are, and anywhere you go (Ahmad_M, Q6).

I need to take up some computer classes to improve my computer technical skills (Davood_P, Q2).

I still have a bit to learn [...] [to] improve on English language skills (Taleb_S, Q1)

The refugees must be given computer and Internet skills [...] also teach them the English language so that they could use the Internet efficiently. English language, computer and Internet skills and access are vital to refugees (Aidah_M, Q4).

The non-refugee participants highlighted different aspects of skills. Cherry_W believed that, among other barriers that refugees may encounter, “sometimes language is the biggest barrier”. Another non-refugee participant, who was working in a paid work capacity for Organisation A dealing with refugees, as well as working for Organisation B in a voluntary position assisting refugee clients, echoed these views:

With the online self-help and self-service that now comes with the job network agencies and other services as well, like public services, language is a real barrier to our clients accessing those services (Angela_W, Q5)

An academic participant mentioned an important point about social exclusion:

If you don't have skills, money or access, it is a serious barrier for refugees [...]. It is social exclusion in the community (Lily_P, Q1).

Furthermore, these skills should be continuously updated with advancements in ICT:

I don't think everyone [every refugee] has necessary skills [...] basic skills are required but also keeping up to date [with ICT skills] is also required (Cherry_W, Q2).

Therefore, the importance of skills is appreciated in both groups of participants and indicates the perception that skills are vital to refugees' settlement. The following section reports on the findings of data collected from both refugee and non-refugee participants relevant to *e-Skills*.

ENGLISH COMPETENCY

Refugees discussed the importance of English competency on multiple occasions in their interviews and it was perceived as fundamental to resolving other issues (e.g., understanding Australian laws) affecting satisfactory settlement:

The English language is also very important. This will be an investment for the country as a whole as who knows may be one day a refugee could become a Prime Minister. Look at Obama who is Muslim¹ and African American and now is the most powerful president in the world. The English language can be very influential for refugees (Mohtaram_P)

Although the questions these refugees were asked varied, they all related their answers to English competency:

It was very hard on first days as I did not know English language (Mahmoud_M, Q1).

More important help is to teach them English language (Mahmoud_M, Q4).

Mainly I have English language problem. Once I learn English properly, Australia will be just like my own country (Mamad_P, Q1).

My only problem is English language (Mamad_P, Q2).

If you have good command of English, it would be great (Mamad_P, Q3).

¹ NOTE: Obama is Christian

The technology has advanced and we should advance ourselves with it too. Iranian refugees could use YouTube and learn English there (Mamad_P, Q6).

Some English language issues (Rashid_S, Q2).

I have learnt English through Internet (Rashid_S, Q3).

Teach them [refugees] English (Rashid_S, Q4).

I want to improve my English language, so only browse English websites (Rashid_S, Q8).

Language can also be critical in the choice of host country. When they were asked about why Australia was chosen as a settlement destination, one refugee replied:

It is important that Australia has the English language. I had opportunity to go to Germany instead, but I chose Australia as I could speak some English and no German at all (Narges_S, Q5).

The above quotes indicate that refugee participants perceived acquiring English competency as imperative. The following illustrates the non-refugee group's thoughts about the importance of English competency, particularly when acquiring ICT skills:

I think we said age seems to be quite determinant and also language if you can't read English and things are available in English. And things about health materials, a lot of them are put on the Internet in pdf, and they're translated. Searched don't pick them if you google it and put a search in your own language, it won't pull out those resources. So it's lots of problems, with that as far as using the Internet as health resource and English skills (Carol_S, Q2).

I think wouldn't be a bad idea for the part of the settlement process and learning English language classes (Lesley_M, Q2).

Other comments from the non-refugee group about English competency included:

I know that a particular, the daughter is coming to do some training here and the father is totally illiterate in Australian language and is very isolated because of that (Louise_W, Q1).

Absolutely they need more training. They definitely need more time than what government now sets them up for TAFE level of going straight into an English program. There're so many people who slip through the cracks, they are not catching the language in the 12 weeks that's allotted to them. So where do they go for that, pretty much they have to pay and they can't afford to pay, so they become more and more isolated in the community (Louise_W, Q2).

They need more training. Simply because most of them are struggling with the English language (Adele_P, Q2).

The issues that I've seen have been more about their English language (George_M, Q3).

Yeah, so much easier. I think it also assist with their language, they can. Some of my Iranian friends say oh yes, I am teaching myself English on computer. Not quite the same as if they are going to class, but I think they can utilise that (Casey_M, Q4).

They can also improve their English and people can take study online (Tracey_M, Q5).

They will be English teaching, if they can do their homework on their computer at home. If they could link into their English teaching. Greater and quicker acquisition of the English language is very important with respect to your sense of success or merging in with the dominant society (Deb_W, Q5).

Learning English, learn what they want to study, find work (Kevin_P, Q5). Yeah I think it's a way for them to access information about Australia plus it's a way for them to practice English (Shirley_P, Q7).

Learning English give them satisfaction that Ok, I can speak English, I can be part of this life now, I can go to the shop without fear of people looking at me in a weird way because I can't express myself (Mary_M, Q8).

Therefore, English competency is a skill that is perceived to be vital to the settlement of Iranian refugees in Australia.

ACQUIRING COMPUTER AND INTERNET SKILLS

The computer and Internet skill levels of refugees may vary from non-existence to an advanced level, depending on their background and what happened to them from the time they left their country until the time they were accepted as refugees in Australia and continued from then on. Although some refugees have ICT skills, it is perceived as essential that all refugees be competent in these skills to assist in their settlement. The following are comments from two non-refugee participants in relation to the refugees' situation while being kept in a refugee camp. While one emphasises education, as well as the journey taken, the other focuses on the lack of facilities during that journey:

People who have been in the camps [...] come with a very limited ICT skill. It hardly depends on the country that they have come from, but the journey that they've made and their educational level (Jude_M)

A lot of the refugees that arrive here in Australia have perhaps been in refugee camps for several years before coming here [...] and in that time you've not developed any skills [...] many of the refugees who come, need training (Albert_P)

In response to encountering problems while using the Internet, participants said:

I only have basic computer and Internet skills, but I am busy with work. When I find some spare time, I need to take up some computer classes to improve my computer technical skills (Davood_P, Q2).

Lack of Internet skills (Taleb_S, Tahereh_S, Maha_S, Q2).

When participants were asked about how ICT could help them, these are some responses:

It helps [refugees] to brush up on their skills and become employable and regain their independence and become more confident. It bridges the gap between Iranian refugees and mainstream Australians (Zarrin_M, Q3)

Of course, it is beneficial to them, why not, although I cannot use the internet a lot due to my lack of knowledge, but many young Iranian don't even know what the internet is and what computer is and have never seen a laptop, but it takes time to learn about it (Hajar_P, Q3)

In response to a question about what ICT-related services should have been provided to refugees, 31 (60%) refugee participants agreed that they needed to be taught how to use computers and the Internet, as gaining such skills would contribute to their independence. Example responses include:

They should learn ICT, so that they could do their own stuff, pay their bills, easily communicate with their families at home and see them online (Saghi_S, Q4).

All of the above needs to be done for them to help them to become independent and settle (Zohreh_S, Q4).

The government should provide teaching Internet to refugees to help them settle easier in Australia (Bahram_P, Q4).

Computer and Internet skills and access are vital to refugees (Aidah_M, Q4).

Therefore, refugees perceive that, once they learn how to use computers and the Internet effectively, they would be able to do 'their own thing', independent of others. These comments show that refugees insist on the need for ICT skills in order to use the Internet effectively, which in turn would help them with their settlement.

When non-refugee participants discussed their views about whether refugees had sufficient ICT skills or needed more training, 18 (35%) expressed a need, for example:

They need more training. [...] if I went to Iran, I'm sure I would need training, some systems are the same, but some are not (Adele_P, Q2).

A lot of them need more training on how to use the laptop; there are people that they haven't even seen a computer. (Wilma_W, Q2).

When asked about their thoughts concerning the ICT training types that would help refugees, several different suggestions were made, but the majority agreed on one thing, that is, refugees need to be taught basic Internet skills:

Probably the basic, we do a basic keyboard skill, something like that. Understanding the Internet. (Karen_W, Q3).

Training on basic skills on how to use the PC, how to use the internet and the search engine, how to create email address and write emails (Sue_P, Q3).

If you are talking about basic skills, being able to browse, use the Internet to be able to access to information and also emails. Also the use of Facebook and social media things (Lily_P, Q3).

May be some basic computer training, in terms of how to use programs like word and excel perhaps but social media is a really important one, Skype to connect with family, email is very important, those kind of things (Cindy_P, Q3).

One non-refugee participant said that all those refugees who contacted her already had ICT skills due to the type of assistance she was providing to refugees and a few believed that whether refugees had ICT skills or not, it did not make any difference to the nature of their jobs as the ICT skills were irrelevant. However, 51 (91%) non-refugee participants agreed that, if the refugees had ICT skills, it would have made their job easier to help refugees. The following are some examples of those positive responses:

Would probably allow them to feel more valued because it's fairly well everyone is up with smart phones and technologies these days, for those people who are a bit older, I think they feel very left out. And not confident in coming to a training facility like this because of language barriers and lack of technology skills (Louise_W, Q4).

Absolutely, look, community leaders who are good at accessing Internet, quite a lot they can do with them. They can send me documents and let me review. If they know how to use track changes, I can do track changes and send the document back to them. So the use of email and use of Microsoft Office is quite useful, in terms of community development work. Also if they know how to use social media to promote their community, I think that's the next level as well. It's

about connecting, when you think of yourself as a community leader, you need to know how to use social media to promote the work of your community (Julie_S, Q4).

Additionally, some interviewees explained how else ICT could help refugees:

[ICT skill] has been very valuable thing [asset] for them [refugees] coming and learn [ICT skills, e.g.] learn to Skype with their grandchildren (Louise_W, Q5).

So I think if there's some way they can research Australia, look at things, find out the local area. If they have those researching skills, they can find good answers to their questions [...] Probably just to help them assimilate, it would be better (Karen_W, Q5).

Finding out about the opportunities available, finding out about the skills and how you develop the skills. After all, a lot of what we actually use computers for is to help people develop their knowledge and their skills simultaneously (Albert_P, Q5).

As it could be seen from the quotes above, obtaining both English competency skills and ICT skills are seen as central to the settlement of Iranian refugees in Australia.

CONNECTING ENGLISH COMPETENCY AND ICT SKILLS

Although most of the non-refugee interviewees' organisations did not directly teach English to refugees, a number of non-refugee participants linked the acquisition of English competency to services (specifically ICT skills) provided by their organisation. One participant responded to the question as to whether their organisation taught ICT to refugees by explaining:

We are going to teach them English using the iPad. A lot of men and women in the community are illiterate. We are going to use games and applications uploaded to the iPad and will show them the pictures so that they can match the picture with words (Tracey_M, Q6).

Many refugees also linked English competency to the acquisition of ICT skills. The first element of this relationship addresses ICT as an aid to learning English. In response to a question regarding their thoughts and feelings about the experience of settlement and the use of ICT, 18 (35%) refugee participants referred to the importance of learning English; for example:

The technology has advanced, and we should advance ourselves with it too. Iranian refugees could use YouTube and learn English there. The Internet is unlimited; refugees could use the Internet to advance their lives. The refugees could stay connected with their family in Iran and their friends in diaspora around the world. They could watch movies with English subtitle to learn English (Mamad_P, Q6).

The refugees at first need to use ICT to learn the English language so that they could start communicating with people in the new place (Maher_P, Q6).

The first and most important thing that will help to connect with mainstream Australians and also find job is to learn the English language through the Internet (Nasim_M, Q6).

The Internet makes refugees socialise with Australians, and it helps refugees to learn English (Ramezan_M, Q6).

The Internet helps refugees to find employment, learn English (Zohreh_S, Q6).

The second element of the English competency and ICT relationship refers to English in the use of the Internet. When asked how language deficiency impacted their daily lives, 24 (47%) refugee partic-

Participants mentioned it being a factor in not being able to fully use the Internet. This was also evident when they were asked about common problems they had experienced while using the Internet, for example:

My only problem is English Language (Mamad_P, Q2).

English language, have to use translator online (Ahmad_M, Q2).

English language issues and lack of Internet skills (Tahereh_S, Q2).

Some language problems that I will check the Internet to look up for English words that I don't know the meanings (Bahareh_P, Q2).

When asked about what languages they use when browsing the websites, 42 (82%) refugees used both English and Farsi and some used a third language. However, although 4 (8%) wanted to use English websites, they were restricted to Farsi language websites:

Persian (Farsi), as my English is bad (Parvin_P, Q8).

Persian (Farsi), I tried English sites but have English language problems (Davood_P, Q8).

There was just one participant who preferred English websites due to the issue of accuracy of information provided on Persian websites:

English, I don't believe that Iranian websites provide accurate information (Mostafa_S, Q8).

When the questioned about how ICT could help Iranian refugees, these are some of the responses:

It is very good for refugees. The use of Internet can help refugees fix their own problems and have less dependency on government, and it saves government money as for example I have learned English through the Internet and didn't need the government provides translation services for me. So this saves government money (Rashid_S, Q3).

Learn English language, look for employment and settle in Australia (Jafar_P, Q3).

It is a very good tool to learn the English language when I have any problems; I look it up on the Internet. English is very important to refugees (Tahereh_S, Q3).

The English language is the most important thing for refugees that ICT can help them learn (Sadaf_S, Q3).

When asked about any ICT assistance that should be provided to refugees, 29 (57%) refugee participants specifically mentioned 'English language' learning:

Teach them the English language so that they could use the Internet efficiently. English language, computer and Internet skills and access are vital to refugees (Aidah_M, Q4).

The most important thing that is useful to refugees and asylum seekers is learning English and Internet can help them to learn English (Jafar_P, Q4).

Everything that other people need such as language and Internet skills, the refugees need it too (Zohreh_S, Q4).

Others provided a variety of answers similar to the above, such as technical skill problems and also a lack of language skills that added to their technical problems:

As much as I want to use all the facilities on the Internet, but due to my bad skills, I can't do a whole lot (Hajar_P, Q7).

This section showed the findings of the data from both groups of interviewees to address the main theme *e-Skills* and its two sub-themes *English competency* and *Acquiring computer and Internet skills* and their interrelationships. Both groups of participants appreciated the importance of these skills on refugee settlement.

DISCUSSION

The aim of this qualitative study using MSE was to gain a better understanding of Iranian refugee settlement by exploring the impact of *e-Skills* on their settlement in Australia. This theme emerged from data gathered through interviewing 106 participants. The theme included two sub-themes of *English competency* and *Acquiring computer and Internet skills*. Through different lenses (by interviewing two different groups of interviewees), the research found why it was so important for the refugees to learn and use e-skills to support them in their settlement. The study found that the majority of refugees admitted to their lack of e-skills and realised that it was more of a necessity than a luxury. The non-refugee group also stressed the usefulness of *e-Skills* in a refugee's settlement journey.

The results indicate there was a consensus of both groups of interviewees about the positive impact of e-skills on refugees' settlement. Both refugees and non-refugees fully understood the advantages of having the knowledge and skills of using ICT and that English competency could speed up the refugees' path towards their settlement. E-skills provide opportunities on many different levels, such as education, employment, and housing, and contributes to the refugees' feeling of social inclusion.

As part of a satisfactory settlement, refugees wanted the opportunity to establish themselves in their new country. According to Gifford and Wilding (2013), their study of youth refugees showed that ICT provided opportunities for some of this population for a positive settlement. While it is hard for new immigrants to find employment and accommodation as they settle in Australia, it is even harder if they are from a non-English speaking background (NESB) and unable to communicate with mainstream Australians due to the language barrier (Penman, 1979). Therefore, both ICT and English competency are critical for refugees in Australia. This demonstrates that e-skills could provide many opportunities for all refugees, including Iranian refugees.

As was seen in the research, both refugee and non-refugee groups appreciated the role e-skills played in the Iranian refugees' settlement journey. If Iranian refugees could gain English competency and acquire computer and Internet skills, they could learn about the new cultural values of the hostland that would bridge the cultural gap between their own community and Australia's. According to Toolo and Shakibae (2000), Iranians experienced hostile feelings from non-Iranians, due to cultural and behavioural differences. E-skills enable them to stay in touch with their families in the homeland, which in turn assists them to cope with the discomfort caused by separation and being able to better focus on their association of values and achieving their new goals in the journey of their settlement.

The study showed the refugees' desire to narrow the gap between themselves and mainstream Australians and see themselves as equals in Australian society. If the Australian government and NGOs realised the impact of e-skills on the settlement of refugees in Australia, they could consider facilitating teaching e-skills as soon as refugees arrive in Australia so they could settle and quickly become part of the Australian community. These skills would also benefit them in areas such as housing, employment, education and health by being able to communicate effectively with all the entities that are involved.

The Internet is not all about written information; it has many more usages, such as exchanging photos, sounds, songs, videos, and "face-to-face" chats that make it real time communication. ICT could be used to encourage refugees to participate in communities. It seems to be a "significant untapped resource" to help people from refugee background to be socially included (Urquhart et al., 2009). The use of ICT allow refugees to move away from a stagnating status into a more active status

“across diverse contexts” (Gifford & Wilding, 2013) and of course provide them with a tool to communicate with family and friends elsewhere.

Traditionally, learning was linked to educational institutions such as schools and universities; however, learning at home is now recognised as equally important as it is at the work place. So is the use of the Internet (Halliday-Wynes & Beddie, 2009). Individuals can actually grow and become more successful in their lives if they learn how to use ICT and online networking effectively (Rainie & Wellman, 2012). Therefore, excluding refugees from the use of ICT equates to a social exclusion in the host community and across the globe. On the other hand, access to ICT connects people from a refugee background, not only with their host community, but also with the “transnational community” (Gifford & Wilding, 2013). Since the Internet plays a vital role for diaspora refugees by enabling them to sustain a relationship with one another (Wahlbeck, 2002), it is equally vital to understand how the Internet could act as a tool to improve a satisfactory settlement.

While refugees need to learn as much as they can about Australia and the way of life here that could better enable them to make a satisfactory living in Australia, equally the Australian government, the policy makers, and Australians themselves need to understand and acknowledge the differences between the Australian culture and that of refugees to achieve harmonious living and to share a community. The Australian Government’s Department of Social Services (DSS) believes that providing assistance to humanitarian entrants as early as possible is important; these include English language, employment and education (DSS, 2014).

The number of immigrants, whether they are forced or voluntary, is increasing in Australia and in other parts of the western world. If their experiences could be heard, recorded, and converted acceptably for the Australian people as well as for the policy makers so that a better understanding of them could be achieved, then their settlement issues would be more likely to be resolved. As a result, a more satisfied community of “majority and minority population” would be mustered (Colic-Peisker, 2009).

The findings of this research clearly showed the importance of e-skills for refugees in Australia and suggest how the Australian Government may implement a systematic plan of action towards ensuring that refugees have access to ICT and the skills to use them. Acquiring these skills will minimise the gap between the ‘haves’ and ‘have-nots’ in the Australian community.

CONCLUSION

This research explored the impact of *e-Skills* on the settlement of Iranian refugees in Australia. The study looked at the data from two different groups: refugees and non-refugees. The refugees provided insight into their experience of e-skills used towards their settlement. The non-refugee group provided insight about the experience of those who had a role in the settlement journey of refugees in relation to their e-skills.

Since the focus of this study was on ICT, the interview questions were designed towards this topic and less focus was given to English competency. However, the gathered data about e-skills identified the importance of this sub-theme, particularly among the refugee group. Another limitation of this study is that the participants were from only three Australian states and therefore the findings are not necessarily representative of all Iranian refugees around Australia.

If the findings of e-skills are acknowledged as useful for the Iranian refugee population, then they may enable the creation of a model usable by the Australian Government for the benefit of all other refugees in Australia. Practically, the Australian Immigration Department could then amend their practices and policies to make e-skills training a must for refugees. Furthermore, providing the necessary training to enable refugees to use ICT efficiently may result in bringing them into the job market and minimising the digital divide between refugees and ordinary Australians. When refugees gain employment, they gain independence from government services, such as unemployment benefits, housing, and healthcare. This independence contributes to a satisfactory settlement and contributes

to the Australian economy in general. Thus, the research could provide greater understanding of the unique relationship that Iranian refugees have established between the home country and host country through the use of e-skills, as well as benefiting their settlement in Australia.

This research investigated Iranian refugees' e-skills towards their settlement in Australia only. Future research could investigate different aspects such as digital division and marginalisation of refugees without e-skills in comparison to mainstream Australians, or even a comparison to non-refugee immigrants. Furthermore, researchers could look into other groups of refugees' e-skills in Australia. Additionally, the e-skills of refugees from Iran and other backgrounds in other parts of the world could be studied as well. Although this study draws on Iranian refugees in Australia, the findings could be generalised to other refugees in Australia and could apply to Iranian refugees as well as other cultural backgrounds in other industrialised countries.

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APPENDIX

NON-REFUGEE SURVEY QUESTIONS

1. Do you think refugees need to have access to Information and Communication Technologies (ICT)? Yes/No? Explain ...
2. Do you think refugees have the necessary skills to use ICT properly or need more training?
3. What kind of ICT training do you think would help refugees most?
4. Would it make your job/assistance to refugees easier if they could use ICT properly? Explain ...
5. How else could ICT help refugees apart from successful settlement?
6. Does your organisation facilitate teaching ICT to refugees?
7. Do you think that if refugees are provided with a computer and internet access at home, it would be beneficial to them? Explain ...
8. Do you think that the use of ICT could help refugees to a satisfactory settlement? Why/How?

REFUGEE SURVEY QUESTIONS

1. What is your perception of your degree of integration into Australia on a scale of 1 to 10? (1 being the lowest level of integration and 10 being the highest level of integration). Because ...
2. What common problems do you experience while using the Internet; for example, technical, language, etc.?
3. How do you think Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) could help Iranian refugees?
4. In your view, what ICT related services should be provided to Iranian refugees in Australia, to help them with their integration; for example, ICT classes to boost their computer and Internet skills, computer hardware or SIM cards to connect to the Internet, English language classes to help refugees understand Australian websites that are mostly in English language, etc.?
5. Why did you choose Australia as a destination; for example, had relatives or friends living here, Australia is multicultural country, Australians are hospitable, etc.?
6. What are your current thoughts and feelings about the experience of Integration and the use of ICT; for example, could ICT help with your integration experience, etc.?
7. What do you usually use the Internet for?
8. Do you mostly browse Persian language websites, English or other languages websites?

BIOGRAPHIES



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