

ARTICLE

# Administrative Literacy in the Digital Welfare State: Migrants Navigating Access to Public Services in Finland<sup>‡</sup>

Nuriiar Safarov 

Social policy, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland

Email: [nuriiar.safarov@helsinki.fi](mailto:nuriiar.safarov@helsinki.fi)

The digitalisation of public services brought challenges for their access and use. This article looks at the migrants as claimants of the public services to analyse the problems with the digital delivery of public services. The previous research recognised the various resources, such as digital skills and administrative literacy, needed for the successful use of digital services. However, the role of administrative literacy has not been studied in linguistically and culturally diverse contexts, such as migration. This article draws on the qualitative study of Russian-speaking migrants in Finland. By analysing the perspective of the service users, it describes in detail the requirements that people with migrant backgrounds try to meet to gain access to social protection. Findings demonstrate the multiple obstacles that burden or prevent access to entitlements.

**Keywords:** Administrative literacy, public services, digitalisation, migration, digital skills.

## Introduction

During the last twenty years, advanced welfare states such as Finland have gradually implemented digital solutions for public institutions changing the form of delivery of its citizen services. Social policy scholars have studied how this change has affected the allocation of public services and inequalities related to it (Pors, 2015). The existing research on digital public encounter has been primarily focused on the practices of front-line workers, increasing the understanding of the impact that digital reforms have on the organisational level (Buffat, 2015; Pors, 2015; Schou and Pors, 2019). On the street level, studies viewed how the recent transformations have affected the discretion of bureaucrats and the decision-making generally (Lindgren and Van Veenstra, 2018; Ratzmann and Sahraoui, 2021). This article complements these studies by examining the perspectives of the service users and their experience of claiming the social benefits, which have previously received less attention (Madsen and Kræmmergaard, 2016; Hansen *et al.*, 2018).

Numerous researchers recognised the range of resources, such as digital skills, required to be afforded equal access to the services (Deursen *et al.*, 2006). In this vein, Grönlund *et al.* (2007) introduced the notion of administrative literacy (AL) which refers to the ability to navigate and understand bureaucracy effortlessly. The aim of the concept that has also been adopted by other researchers (Döring, 2021), is to bring attention to the complexity of the capacities required in such digital encounter. People in vulnerable social positions tend to lack sufficient skills and literacies for accessing digital services that seldom have invested in user-friendliness (Gillingham, 2015). However, the role of AL has not been much studied in linguistically and culturally diverse

<sup>‡</sup>The original version of this article was published without the funding statement, and Figure 1 was incorrectly placed. A notice detailing these has been published and the errors rectified in the online and print PDF and HTML copies.

contexts, such as migration. Acknowledging the importance of AL, in this article I have examined migration as a particular social context that influences the ability to access and use digital services. Thereby it increases the understanding of complex and rigid requirements of successful public encounter, that have largely remained focused on digital skills. The study aims at revisiting the concept of administrative literacy to consider how the context of migration shapes it.

Finland provides a specific context as it has extensive public social and health services that have already undergone digitalisation. The empirical analysis draws on a qualitative study of the experiences of Russian-speaking migrants in Finland. Research participants were seeking support with digital systems in Finland as they lacked some of the key capacities required for their successful use. This study adds to the understanding of the problems many Russian-speakers face when trying to make sense of the system of social protection.

The article examines the use of digital public services, focusing on the capacities such as AL and digital skills and their roles for the public encounter in the particular migration context. The central objective of the article is to analyse the experiences of migrants who have problems with access and use of public services online. To reach this objective, the study attempts to answer the questions of which resources do migrants need to use digital public services successfully, and what facilitates and inhibits access to the entitlements.

## Theoretical background

### *Migrants and the digital public encounter*

Migrants' access to the welfare systems of the host countries is a long-debated issue (Ratzmann and Sahraoui, 2021). Many studies have examined how non-citizens' entitlements are differentiated based on their legal and residential statuses, rendering particular groups of migrants excluded from the social protection system (Könönen, 2017). Even being entitled to public services, migrants often find themselves in disadvantaged positions (Buchert and Wrede, 2021). For example, it has been demonstrated how street-level bureaucrats may deem migrants illegitimate of receiving public services through discriminatory practices (Ratzmann, 2021). Migrants' limited language skills and knowledge of the welfare system also may impact access to public services negatively (Holzinger, 2019; Safarov, 2021).

Researchers paid less attention to such issues in the digital context (Barth and Veit, 2011; Aaltonen, 2019; Safarov, 2021). Existing studies on e-government and digital citizenship commonly perceive the migrant background as a participation barrier in digital society (Mossberger *et al.*, 2008; Jamal *et al.*, 2019). Digitalisation often creates barriers for vulnerable groups, especially for those who are already disadvantaged in other ways (Moynihan *et al.*, 2015; Schou and Pors, 2019). Many studies examining information practices of migrants see their wider social inclusion as largely dependent on access to information (Schuler, 2010; Lloyd *et al.*, 2013; Alam and Imran, 2015; Nedelcu and Soysüren, 2022). Caidi and Allard (2005) argue that information needs must be met in the first place for them to be able to navigate the local citizen services.

Existing studies on electronic public services in US and European contexts demonstrate that migrants were disadvantaged in accessing the internet for health (Zhao *et al.*, 2019; Samkange-Zeeb *et al.*, 2020) and for e-participation (Jamal *et al.*, 2019). In the context of e-government, poor language skills appear to be a significant barrier to finding and understanding the information on the services (Brazier and Harvey, 2017). Aaltonen (2019) demonstrated that migrants found the employment-related e-services difficult to access because of compound barriers related to AL, language and digital skills.

### **Administrative literacy and digital skills**

The literature on e-government, which is a use of digital technologies to improve the delivery of government services (Silcock, 2001), has previously considered multiple factors that affect its adoption and use, with digital skills often viewed as the central (Deursen *et al.*, 2006; Bélanger and Carter, 2009; Helbig *et al.*, 2009; Rodriguez-Hevia *et al.*, 2020). As governments across developed countries have rapidly digitalised the welfare systems, the lack of skills related to internet use may result in the exclusion of people in vulnerable positions (Schou and Pors, 2019). Digital literacy has been considered to be a new kind of literacy, essential for operating in the twenty-first-century society, comparable to literacy and numeracy (OECD, 2001; Ferrari, 2012). In this study, digital skills are understood as a combination of operational skills necessary to use the digital hardware and information-related skills that are the abilities to find, process, and produce information on the internet (van Deursen and van Dijk, 2009, 2011).

Governments have introduced programmes on enhancing digital inclusion by the digital skills training through the community-based, third sector organisations, libraries, etc. (Buchert and Wrede, 2021; Suchowerska and McCosker, 2022). However, evidence suggests that digital literacy is not enough for the successful use of the e-government (Cestnik and Kern, 2014; Döring, 2021). Being able to use e-government services requires an understanding of how the system works (Pollitt, 2012; Madsen and Kræmmergaard, 2015; Pors, 2015). Grönlund *et al.* (2007) demonstrated that digital services may reduce the burdens such as extra paperwork yet impose a higher requirement for knowledge of the services. For example, Simonsen *et al.* (2020) showed in their study of chat-bot use that users need high-level knowledge of the domain to receive the help needed. Several studies claim that citizens' AL is essential for the successful use of digital public services (Grönlund *et al.*, 2007; Cestnik and Kern, 2014; Döring, 2021). Analysis of the relationship between AL and digital skills has received limited attention with a few exceptions (Cestnik and Kern, 2014; Simonsen *et al.*, 2020; Döring, 2021). The common understanding is that citizens' digital skills have to be sufficient for the use of electronic services (Heponiemi *et al.*, 2021). Grönlund *et al.* define AL as:

The ability to navigate bureaucracy, which includes having a good idea of how society's institutions work, the terminology involved and hence being better able to know where to go to find the forms, procedures, contact information etc. necessary, and indeed understand the information once found and being able to act upon it (Grönlund *et al.*, 2007: 217).

In his recent study, Döring (2021) breaks the concept down to different types of literacy by analysing it against the health literacy concept. He defined it as a combination of competencies that are required to use the digital public services, including understanding the technical vocabulary and complex sentence structures of bureaucratic texts (functional literacy); basic negotiating skills (communicative literacy); knowledge of the structure and procedures of public organisations (structural, processual literacies); understanding the context of interaction with the bureaucrat (civic literacy); media literacy. Döring (2021) describes the latter as encompassing the internet and media literacy, such as the ability to search, assess and process information on public services online.

User encounters with public bureaucracies differ vastly between traditional and digital contexts when it comes to the responsibilities of the different parties (Pollitt, 2012; Henriksen, 2015; Pors, 2015; Lindgren and Van Veenstra, 2018). In a traditional public encounter, the bureaucrat typically is responsible for a proper process. Lindgren *et al.* (2019) argue that digitalisation of public services altered the nature of the public encounter, changing where and how it happens, adding the higher need in a diverse set of competencies and skills. When governments shifted the responsibility for the communication to citizens, several prerequisites emerged for the self-service to be performed (Lindgren *et al.*, 2019). To access a service, the citizen must know that the service in

question exists, and how to search for it. They also have to be able to use electronic identification to access online systems independently of offline support (Lindgren *et al.*, 2019). In line with the arguments of Grönlund *et al.* (2007), this requires both digital skills and AL.

The bureaucratic encounter comes with administrative burdens that mean ‘the individual’s experience of policy implementation as onerous’ (Burden *et al.*, 2012: 741). This concept helps to dismantle the costs that public services impose on citizens, such as learning about the public services, or the need for continuous reporting to the governmental agency (Moynihan *et al.*, 2015). Including the administrative burdens in the analysis in this article improves the understanding of access to public services by demonstrating the efforts that migrants need to exert to gain AL.

Based on the introduced conceptualisations (Döring, 2021; Grönlund *et al.*, 2007) the forthcoming analysis of the data builds on understanding of administrative literacy as a combination of literacies: (1) bureaucratic literacy, which is understanding the bureaucratic vocabulary and the ability to communicate with authorities both digitally and in person; (2) structural knowledge of public organisations, which includes knowledge of the institutions’ structure, names, and what they are responsible for, understanding and being familiar with the entitlements that are available; (3) welfare system navigation, which is knowledge of how and where to find information on social services and how to apply for them, which forms to fill. This article also draws attention to digital (4) and language skills (5) as relevant resources. The existing conceptualisations are further discussed and specified for the context of digitalisation and migration in light of the analysis presented.

### **Transformation of social protection in Finland**

Russian-speakers form the largest foreign-language group in Finland, accounting for 20 per cent of the total migrant-background population in Finland (Statistics Finland, 2021). The Russian-speaking migrants are those who moved to Finland permanently from the countries of the former Soviet Union and whose native language is Russian. Earlier research showed that a considerable proportion of them confront multiple exclusions, with poverty, unemployment, discrimination often being in place (Mannila and Reuter, 2009). Using social protection services is common for the group, as 42 per cent of the working age Russian-speakers received basic social assistance which is significantly higher than in the general population of Finland (7 per cent) (Kuusio *et al.*, 2020). The Finnish constitution grants residents, including permanent migrants, full access to necessary social protection (Könönen, 2017). As equal access to entitlements increasingly relies on digital technology, several scholars consider digital government to be a threat to the universalistic principles of the welfare states and the equality of social rights (Schou and Pors, 2019; Buchert and Wrede, 2021). This is because digitalisation of the public health and social services in Finland (as elsewhere) implies a radical reduction in the traditional in-person services (Schou and Hjelholt, 2019; Buchert and Wrede, 2021), that jeopardise the access to services for those who are unable to use the digital means. The expectation associated with digitalisation is that users of public services take more responsibility for their individual situation, replacing the role that the public front-line workers and bureaucrats previously carried out (Landsbergen, 2004; Breit and Salomon, 2015; Buffat, 2015; Hansen *et al.*, 2018). Finland has been among the leaders in government digitalisation in Europe during the last decade (European Commission, 2020), and digitalisation has long been one of the priorities of the Finnish government, with *Social and Health Services Strategy 2020* (STM, 2014) and *Strategy 2030* (STM, 2019) giving a pivotal role to active citizens in the acquisition of services. The strategies present citizens as informed participants capable of producing information related to public services (Kyytsönen *et al.*, 2021).

According to the latest report of the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare (Kyytsönen *et al.*, 2021), 83 per cent of the population used online public services independently – however, 79 per cent of the population reported that they experienced barriers or worries concerning their use. On

the one hand, this indicates that the digital social and health care services have become an essential part of the citizens' lives; on the other hand, it means that the high access to the internet and services does not guarantee their successful use.

## Methodology

### *Data collection and research participants*

This article is a part of wider research for which the overall aim has been to study the experiences of public service access and use by Russian-speaking people of various ages. The data were collected mainly in 2020 in the capital region of Finland. The research participants were recruited through the workshops where migrants sought to improve their general digital skills and received guidance for public services use online. Workshops were chosen from all those available in Russian that included such topics in the curriculum. They were organised by the municipal educational centres and third-sector organisations in the capital area of Finland. Participants found and enrolled in the workshops themselves, having recognised their need for assistance with digital services and being willing to learn more about them. The author conducted the participant observation (approximately 100 hours) during the workshops that were followed by interviews in Russian with attendants individually ( $n=20$ ). Such recruitment strategy responded well to the initial aim of studying Russian-speaking migrants as they tried to navigate the digital public services. The author made fieldnotes during the observations, recorded and analysed interview texts.

Participants were aged between twenty-eight and sixty-eight years old, with an average age of fifty-three, and stayed in Finland for an average of eight years. The recruitment strategy aimed at finding a specific group of migrants who needed digital support and who sought help with it. As the workshops were more popular with women, only three out of twenty participants were men. They joined workshops voluntarily, mostly to learn about running different errands digitally in Finland, such as paying bills, sending official emails, applying for benefits, checking the benefits situation, and using the personal health data repository.

This study did not determine which of the public services to study, but the data analysis revealed that the social protection services were the most important for the participants. Most of the participants were dependent on social benefits, as they were unemployed, caring mothers, studying, or pensioners, which underlines their low economic position. They used social protection such as basic social assistance, unemployment benefit, housing allowance, child benefits, or received a pension to support their subsistence. All those benefits are offered by the Social Insurance Institution of Finland (Kela – the Finnish abbreviation to be used further). The exception is the unemployment benefit that also involves the Employment Office. Participants all needed to maintain the benefits through the digital systems yet were unable to do so independently. There were workshops on each of those social protection benefits applications.

### *Data analysis and ethics*

Inductive thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998) was applied to reduce, describe, and interpret the data collected from the observations and interviews. The focus of the analysis was narrowed following the themes raised during the observation fieldwork. The recurring topics that were important for the research participants guided the focus and contributed to building the interview plan. Some of those themes were not related to the initial research questions, which also guided the research plan. In the whole data, first-level themes were united into broader second-level categories – for example, themes such as 'hard to find where to click', 'how do I scroll down to that button?', and 'everything disappeared once I clicked back' were merged into the category 'operational computer skills'. At the next stage of analysis, thematic categories were conceptualised and developed in dialogue with earlier literature (for example, 'operational computer skills', 'information search skills' were included into category 'digital skills'. Such analysis proceeded in a cyclic manner

reading and comparing the themes and categories several times and allowing categories to form. At the final stage of analysis, the concepts of administrative literacy, public encounter, administrative burdens, digital and language skills emerged as useful organising concepts.

The study was approved by the Ethical Board of the University of Helsinki (Statement 40/2019). The research was carried out strictly following the statement, to ensure the security of the data and identities of the research participants. The Data Protection Agreement was made with the Happy Scribe Ltd, which transcribed the interview recordings.

## Results

### *Findings in general*

Most of the research participants considered their language skills as intermediate or poor. Their digital skills were determined through questions on purposes and frequency of internet use. Participants all used the internet daily, yet the range of use was mostly limited to simpler tasks. Those tasks that were relatively easy and were appropriated by most of the research participants include: emailing, using social media, instant messaging applications, using maps, and searching for information. Some used digital technologies at an advanced level, but it rarely improved their use of digital public services.

In using the various public services digitally, users encountered various levels of difficulty, so they required different levels of administrative literacy. The only online form that participants referred to as an easy to learn was the form that unemployed people submit once a month to report on their occupation status. Nevertheless, none of the research participants managed to learn to use it independently in the first place. Many of the social protection applications are complex and required multiple meetings with a front-line worker. Overall, using the social protection services required migrants to have a strong AL with all its components that they were unable to gain by themselves. Most importantly, having digital and language skills did not guarantee successful use of digital public services.

Assistance for people who cannot use digital public services independently exists primarily outside the official services. For migrant-background people, third-sector organisations (such as the data collection sites) function as key providers of help with digital public services. The third-sector involvement in providing access to lawful entitlements may also be problematic as they may be expected to take broader responsibilities in the context of the hard to reach and over-burdened public services (Buchert and Wrede, 2021). In face-to-face services, migrants have an option of communicating with an interpreter, yet no support in languages other than Finnish or Swedish (Finland's two official languages) is offered digitally or by telephone. In a situation with inadequate support, research participants often turned to their social network to find assistance in dealing with public services. Social networks proved to be a valuable resource for getting information on digital health services and filling online forms. Relatives and friends were also providers of translation or interpretation in the public encounter that mediated the access to the public services.

Table 1 shows the breakdown of resources that participants mentioned as essential for access to digital public services. In the whole data, participants referred to the language skills most often; bureaucratic literacy and structure knowledge of the public organisations have been present in fifteen of the twenty interviews; twelve participants elaborated on navigating the welfare system, and only five mentioned that digital skills played a pivotal role in using digital public services. Most of the participants had multiple insufficient literacies at the same time which underlines the argument of the complexity of interrelated requirements. The importance of the social networks for the use of web services is emphasised by the fact that half of the participants reported that friends or relatives helped them learn to use digital services.

The following sections elucidate the results of analysis through the narratives of five participants constructed by the author. These participants represent the broader data and are most



**Table 1** Number of participants that identified each of the resources as important

Bureaucratic literacy	Structural knowledge	Welfare system navigation	Digital skills	Local language skills	Friends or relatives help
15	15	12	5	17	10

illustrative of the problems discussed in the article. The five participants are of different ages, genders and migrated to Finland from several former Soviet Union countries. They also possess varied levels of digital and language skills. Next, the stories demonstrate the complexity of interconnected literacies showing how different combinations of lacking resources inhibit the access to the entitlements in various ways.

***Navigating the complex welfare system***

Maria (in her late twenties) moved to Finland with her husband. She got pregnant soon after moving to Finland and explained that she ‘did not have to socialise or integrate here’. Her husband took care of all the ‘documents stuff’ meaning the bureaucratic aspects of the relocation to Finland. When their child started day care, Maria started to encounter difficulties with the public systems. Maria’s digital skills were at an advanced level as she used various software applications for work. She did not speak Finnish, but she used English for communication with official institutions. It was evident that she faced problems with accessing and using digital public services because she lacked AL. Maria ended up losing her unemployment benefit because ‘the system was too complicated’ to understand in a situation in which she wanted to opt for self-employment to end her unemployment. The authority responsible for financial support for new entrepreneurs was different from that paying the unemployment benefit, which created a confusing situation for Maria. Accordingly, at first Maria did not know that for being eligible for a start-up grant, she would have to register officially as an entrepreneur in another institution. Even after a face-to-face meeting with the employment office front-line worker, Maria did not know how to find information on the proper procedure nor on which digital forms to fill, or in which order. She turned to a third sector organisation that helped migrants with official documents, but they did not know how to help her in such a complicated situation. Accordingly, in her effort to employ herself, Maria ended up losing her social protection and faced the challenge of trying to either get back into unemployment or somehow find a way forward with starting her own business.

Nadezhda, who was in her mid-sixties at the time of the interview, moved to Finland from Ukraine with her family in the 1990s. Starting life in a new country was not easy for them, as neither Nadezhda nor her husband managed to find a permanent job in Finland. As a result, they were not eligible for employment-based pension when retired and received the minimal pension. At the time of the interview, Nadezhda participated in volunteer work and attended the workshops for her digital skills. She spoke Finnish at a fair level. She admitted that her digital skills were not very strong, yet her husband considered her to be the ‘computer genius of the family’. She used a smartphone for video calling, text messaging, emailing, reading news, for entertainment, or just for information search. Prior to the workshops, Nadezhda had never used digital social protection services. At the time of the workshop, she had an urgent need to access the services of Kela to check on her benefits situation. During one of the workshops about the Kela digital service, Nadezhda encountered some problems at the stage of electronic identification through the bank codes<sup>1</sup>. Eventually, Nadezhda managed to find her login information pen-written in her notebook. After typing it she realised that she also needed a passcode, she exclaimed: ‘Oh my God, the login is not enough?’ Frustrated comments and questions followed, as she was struggling with the system: ‘They are just making it too difficult’, ‘why should we use our banks for Kela?’, ‘where is this bank data going then?’. Reflecting on her digital capacities, she considered herself to

be 'illiterate'. She described herself as an 'Old Believer', a pleb, who did not know how to navigate the digital systems.

Neither Maria's nor Nadezhda's digital skills enabled them to be successful in using digital public services. Adequate language skills in Finnish or English did not reduce the difficulties as they lacked more than one type of AL to access public services. Maria's poor structural knowledge and bureaucratic literacies did not even allow her to initiate a search on the web. Searching for information about services requires knowledge of the institutional structure of public organisations as well as the terms used for specific benefits. For Maria, finding her way around the services entailed a long learning process by trial and error, because she was not able to find enough support. Seeking support from the employment office and the third sector organisation did not yield positive results and her needs remained unmet. Nadezhda, in turn, needed professional assistance to gain broader digital skills and welfare system navigation literacy to be able to use the online social protection services starting from the very beginning – the electronic identification. For both stories, taking digital services into use represented a considerable burden in terms of learning costs, while for Maria it meant also a loss of social protection.

### ***Comprehending the forms: vocabulary and language***

Anatoli, who was in his late thirties, moved to Finland more than five years before the interview. Anatoli could not find employment in Finland, mainly because he found the Finnish language difficult to learn. In the interview, he describes his financial difficulties, mentioning using the breadline. Anatoli uses a computer and a smartphone, describing his digital skills as good enough for everyday tasks. At the time of the interview, he was studying in Finland, but his limited language skills hampered both his studies and the use of social protection services. For Anatoli, it felt like a challenge to adopt the digital social protection services as everything was unfamiliar. Recently, he had to adopt digital services because it had become difficult to access them in person due to the waiting times for appointments that could take more than three months. Although it was more convenient to attach scanned documents online, the difficulties with the Finnish language have made it impossible for him to understand Kela's website properly and to fill a longer basic social assistance form. Anatoli reported that he had learned to fill the easier online application form in Finnish with the help of a friend, to maintain his unemployment benefit. He had also used an automatic translation for it, although, 'the translation is not exact', he stated. He reflected on the fact that some terms did not make sense when translated, so he had to seek assistance from friends.

For Anatoli, bureaucratic literacy and limited language ability prevented him from accessing the public services. The poor quality of automatic translations of bureaucratic texts did not offer an appropriate tool for him to improve his understanding of the content of the websites, as some terms were not translatable and only made sense in the system of social protection services. This underlines the interconnection of bureaucratic literacy, language skills and welfare system navigation. Regardless of the help from friends and his success in learning to manage some of the simpler forms, Anatoli could not manage the other more complicated services such as basic social assistance, which left him in a precarious situation. Long waiting times for the appointment and the requirement to use digital systems imposed a burden on Anatoli and put him at risk of losing his benefits for the next month.

### ***Being able to act upon information found***

Lidia was in her mid-forties at the time of the interview, and moved to Finland to be reunited with her husband. She tried to find employment in Finland but was only able to find short-term internships. Before the move, Lidia had used a computer in her work, and she was accustomed to using a smartphone. The workshops for her were 'more interesting for Finnish language and services' than



for digital skills, as she did not speak Finnish very well, and she mastered the digital skills taught at the workshops. Lidia liked the system with electronic identification to access public services, which she finds to be efficient. However, at the time of the interview, she preferred face-to-face services when she found the matter difficult. For example, she stated that she would not use the digital services for basic social assistance as 'I am afraid to make a mistake there.' Lidia was able to find the electronic forms and the information on how to apply for benefits, but she was not able to understand the details well enough for her to fill the forms. Accordingly, she maintained that when the matter was 'too serious' she was not able to use a digital form. She found the cost of a mistake to be too high, as she was dependent on the benefits. Losing basic social assistance would have been life changing.

Apparently, Lidia had enough structural knowledge and welfare system navigation literacy to locate and access the right forms and the information regarding them. However, this ability did not give her the capacity to act upon it. Her limited ability in Finnish does not entirely explain the difficulties Lidia faced. She couldn't fill out the application independently, as understanding the logic of the forms required significantly deeper bureaucratic literacy and higher language skills. Lacking such abilities meant that she was not confident enough to rely on her judgement. As Lidia was dependent on social benefits, the system's expectation that applicants use the digital self-service constituted an extra burden for her, as she perceived potential failure as a risk for her subsistence.

### **Learning burden**

Irina, in her mid-sixties, experienced problems in finding courses for her language skills level when she moved to Finland as she ended up not learning Finnish that well. At the time of the interview, she used a smartphone and a computer in her daily life for many purposes: social networks, email, banking, services. Regarding the pension system and other websites for public services, Irina had refrained from active use, describing her activities on sites like that as only 'reading'. Irina felt that she already had made a big investment in her digital skills, complaining that she had spent years learning to use services for public transport or internet banking. She described how visiting the official Finnish websites, such as the *Kela* for social security, the Employment and Tax offices was always very demanding for her. She described having become familiar with these online services but stated that she had applied a great deal of effort to do so. She found the present situation to be unreasonable for migrant-background people: 'My opinion is that, for migrants, it has to be simplified. There must be other versions of the webpages, like there should be a button for migrants at all the official institutions' websites.' She summarised that for migrants, learning to use the public services is a great burden, as there was too much information they had to learn. In Irina's view, bridging the language difficulties was central for helping migrants to use services, maintaining that 'simply translating them is not a big deal!'. In her experience, most of the time navigating the system was spent on translating, trying to find assistance with the forms as well as getting to know how the welfare system works.

Irina's story demonstrates how the requirements for AL and its components are intertwined in using digital social protection services. Her experiences underline the substantial effort in translating, learning digital skills as well as in looking for help to overcome the learning burden that the digital social protection systems impose on their users.

### **Discussion**

By studying how migrants access public services online, this article contributes to the public encounter research with a detailed examination of the hardships, risks, and exclusions they face in the process. These findings are in line with the previous studies on street-level bureaucracy arguing that digitalisation and simultaneous reduction of in-person services establish another

layer of barriers for vulnerable groups to access public services (Buchert and Wrede, 2021; Buchert *et al.*, 2022). Focusing on the personal resources, the current research demonstrated that language skills were among the most important for the participants, yet, good skills did not necessarily improve access to services, which challenges previous findings (Brazier and Harvey, 2017; Holzinger, 2019). It also showed that digital skills and age appeared to make up only indirect barriers to digital public services, as the difficulties in locating and understanding the information about them remained regardless of the age and various levels of digital skills. This contradicts previous findings that relied on the central relevance of digital skills for the access to e-government (Bélanger and Carter, 2009; Helbig *et al.*, 2009; Rodriguez-Hevia *et al.*, 2020). By that, this article showcased the distinctiveness of public services as a unique sphere of the internet use that requires a wider combination of skills and literacies for their successful use. Although people belonging to the national populations have also reportedly experienced learning burdens derived from the complexity of public services (Grönlund *et al.*, 2007; Döring, 2021), the problems migrants face are more complicated. In parallel with the findings of Aaltonen (2019), the study demonstrated that when moving to another country, migrants are several steps away from the national population, as they have to learn the local culture and language as well as to acquire AL in a new country, which represent a significant burden. Unlike digital skills, research participants had to build their competence in other components of administrative literacy from the very beginning, especially the structural knowledge and welfare system navigation. It means that there was no evidence of these literacies transferred into another country upon moving, as the Finnish system of social protection was completely unfamiliar for them.

The theoretical contribution of this study lies in revisiting the concept of AL in the context of migration that is relevant for contemporary diversifying and digitalising societies. This study complements the previous research on the AL by emphasising the interrelation and ordered structure of its types. The pyramid structure of the AL (see figure 1) represents the relation of literacy components, with the language and digital skills setting up the basis of it and the rest of the resources, such as bureaucratic literacy, structural knowledge, and welfare system navigation building on top of one another. As it deals with AL of migrants, it includes language skills as a necessary foundation of it, in addition to previously researched digital skills (Cestnik and Kern, 2014; Döring, 2021). The pyramid displays the ideal formulation of resources that migrants need to acquire to use digital public service independently – that is, disregarding the mediating factors. The social networks and third sector organisations may improve the access to services at least partly bypassing the requirement for a

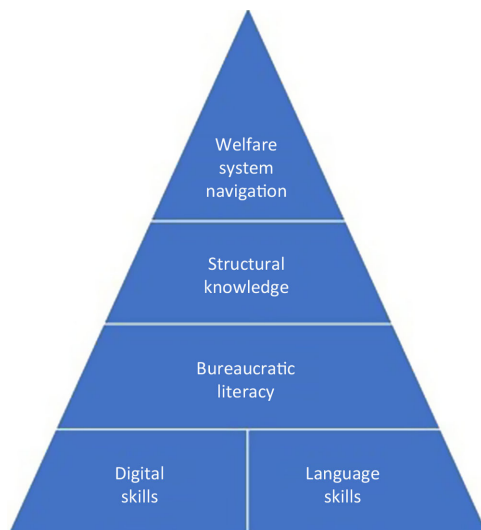


Figure 1. The pyramid of administrative literacy components.

broad span of literacies. Yet, when support was insufficient, research participants were required to acquire all the necessary personal resources from the bottom of the pyramid to the top of it to avoid losing access to entitlements.

Many earlier e-government studies claimed that by erasing the time and space barriers, digitalisation leads to better accessibility of its services, reduced burdens and improved citizen participation (Silcock, 2001; Grönlund *et al.*, 2007; Bannister and Connolly, 2014; Wihlborg *et al.*, 2017). Digital public encounter studies mentioned that the demand for face-to-face services would continue, and the combined delivery of services was believed to solve the potential access issues (Reddick and Turner, 2012; Breit and Salomon, 2015; Tangi *et al.*, 2021). The results demonstrated that multi-channel delivery of digital and in-person services could not meet the needs of migrants in claiming the social protection. Multiple obstacles that burden or prevent access to services remain, regardless of the formal availability of face-to-face services, which also has policy implications.

## Conclusions

The aim of this article was to examine migrants' experiences of accessing public services online. The research questions asked which resources migrants need to use the digital public services successfully, as well as what facilitates and inhibits access to such services.

The qualitative data provided evidence of the burdening experience of learning to use the digital social protection services and challenges that migrants faced along the way. The central finding is that missing at least one of the resources research participants were unable to navigate the digital services independently. While trying to access the services, migrants faced administrative burdens, which means that they had to overcome significant barriers of the multiple required resources that they did not possess. They had to learn one of the local languages, get the necessary digital skills, bureaucratic literacy, structural knowledge of public organisations, and learn to navigate the welfare system. Social networks and third sector organisations were valuable facilitators of access to digital public services. However, after research participants had already received help, their service needs often remained unmet. This suggests that such assistance may not have been appropriate, especially in cases when the needs were complex. These findings are calling for more research into the third sector organisations and other ways of assistance with digital services. As studied participants were mostly women, more research is required to find out how men access and seek for help with digital services.

This study has policy implications, as it calls for attention to the diversity of digital public service users and their needs. It means that online public service delivery must be adapted to the needs of migrant populations. As the state-led interventions on the digital skills trainings did not solve the access issues for migrant populations, more personalised support and opportunities to get instant help in their language should exist to make access to services equally accessible to migrants.

The article has limitations of the specific case drawing on research participants recruited through the digital skills workshops. Findings do not necessarily apply to other migrants, as the study aimed at detailed examination of the phenomenon rather than generalisation of results.

**Acknowledgments.** Many thanks to the third-sector organisation and municipal education institutions who provided me with access to the research field as well as to the research participants who agreed to be involved in the observation process and interviews. I want to express my gratitude to Dr Sirpa Wrede, Dr Sakari Taipale, and Dr Ulla Buchert, for their support.

**Financial support.** The work was supported by the Strategic Research Council at the Academy of Finland under grants [327145, 327148, 352501 and 352504] for the Towards Socially Inclusive Digital Society project; and the Academy of Finland grants [312310 and 336669] for the Centre of Excellence in Research on Ageing and Care, RG 3 Migration, Care and Ageing; and Ella and Georg Ehrnrooth Foundation personal study grant.

## Note

**1** Finnish digital public services use internet banking as the most common way for electronic identification (for more, Vehko *et al.*, 2020).

## References

- Aaltonen, S.** (2019) 'The digitalization of migrants' labor market integration services', in S. Poutanen, A. Kovalainen and P. Rouvinen (eds.), *Digital Work and the Platform Economy: Understanding Tasks, Skills and Capabilities in the New Era*, New York: Routledge, 142–58.
- Alam, K. and Imran, S.** (2015) 'The digital divide and social inclusion among refugee migrants: a case in regional Australia', *Information Technology and People*, **28**, 2, 344–65.
- Bannister, F. and Connolly, R.** (2014) 'ICT, public values and transformative government: a framework and programme for research', *Government Information Quarterly*, **31**, 1, 119–28.
- Barth, M. and Veit, D. J.** (2011) 'How digital divide affects public e-services: the role of migration background', *Proceedings of the 10th International Conference on Wirtschaftsinformatik (WI)*, February, 3–14, <http://www.wi2011.ch> [accessed 01.05.2022].
- Bélangier, F. and Carter, L.** (2009) 'The impact of the digital divide on e-government use', *Communications of the ACM*, **52**, 4, 132–5.
- Boyatzis, R. E.** (1998) *Transforming Qualitative Information Thematic Analysis and Code Development*, Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications.
- Brazier, D. and Harvey, M.** (2017) 'E-government and the digital divide: a study of English-as-a-Second-Language users' information behaviour', *ECIR 2017 - 39th European Conference on Information Retrieval*, 8–13 April 2017, Aberdeen, UK.
- Breit, E. and Salomon, R.** (2015) 'Making the technological transition – citizens' encounters with digital pension services', *Social Policy and Administration*, **49**, 3, 299–315.
- Buchert, U., Kemppainen, L., Olakivi, A., Wrede, S. and Kouvonon, A.** (2022) 'Is digitalisation of public health and social welfare services reinforcing social exclusion? The case of Russian-speaking older migrants in Finland', *Critical Social Policy*, DOI: [10.1177/02610183221105035](https://doi.org/10.1177/02610183221105035).
- Buchert, U. and Wrede, S.** (2021) 'Bridging' and 'fixing' endangered social rights in the digitalising welfare state: the ambiguous role of third-sector organisations in supporting marginalised older migrants in Finland', in H. Hirvonen, M. Tammelin, R. Hänninen and J. M. E. Wouters (eds.), *Digital Transformations in Care of Older People: Critical Perspectives*, London: Routledge, DOI: [10.4324/9781003155317](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003155317).
- Buffat, A.** (2015) 'Street-level bureaucracy and e-government', *Public Management Review*, **17**, 1, 149–61.
- Burden, B. C., Canon, D. T., Mayer, K. R. and Moynihan, D. P.** (2012) 'The effect of administrative burden on bureaucratic perception of policies: evidence from election administration', *Public Administration Review*, **72**, 5, 741–51.
- Caidi, N. and Allard, D.** (2005) 'Social inclusion of newcomers to Canada: an information problem?', *Library and Information Science Research*, **27**, 3, 302–24.
- Cestnik, B. and Kern, A.** (2014) 'Administrative and digital literacy: the legend or myth in e-government', *Innovation and the Public Sector*, **21**, 216–23.
- Deursen, A., van, Dijk, J. van and Ebbens, W.** (2006) 'Why e-government usage lags behind: explaining the gap between potential and actual usage of electronic public services in the Netherlands', in M. A. Wimmer, H. J. Scholl, Å. Grönlund and K. V. Andersen (eds.), *Lecture Notes in Computer Science*, vol **4084**, Berlin: Springer, 269–80.
- Döring, M.** (2021) 'How-to bureaucracy: a concept of citizens' administrative literacy', *Administration and Society*, **53**, 8, 1155–77.
- European Commission.** (2020) *The Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI)*.
- Ferrari, A.** (2012) 'Digital competence in practice: an analysis of frameworks', *Joint Research Centre of the European Commission*, Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, DOI: [10.2791/82116](https://doi.org/10.2791/82116)
- Gillingham, P.** (2015) 'Implementing electronic information systems in human service organisations: the challenge of categorisation', *Social Work in Action*, **27**, 3, 163–75.
- Grönlund, Å., Hatakka, M. and Ask, A.** (2007) 'Inclusion in the e-service society - investigating administrative literacy requirements for using e-services', in M. A. Wimmer, J. Scholl and Å. Grönlund (eds.), *Electronic Government. EGOV 2007. Lecture Notes in Computer Science*, vol **4656**, Berlin: Springer, 216–27.
- Hansen, H. T., Lundberg, K. and Syltevik, L. J.** (2018) 'Digitalization, street-level bureaucracy and welfare users' experiences', *Social Policy and Administration*, **52**, 1, 67–90.
- Helbig, N., Gil-García, J. R. and Ferro, E.** (2009) 'Understanding the complexity of electronic government: Implications from the digital divide literature', *Government Information Quarterly*, **26**, 1, 89–97.
- Henriksen, H. Z.** (2015) 'Scrutinizing open government data to understand patterns in eGovernment uptake', in I. E. Tambouris, M. Janssen, H. Scholl, M. A. Wimmer, K. Tarabanis, M. Gascó, B. Klievink and P. P. Lindgren (eds.), *Lecture Notes in Computer Science*, vol **9248**, Cham: Springer, 144–55.

- Heponiemi, T., Gluschkoff, K., Leemann, L., Manderbacka, K., Aalto, A. M. and Hyppönen, H. (2021) 'Digital inequality in Finland: access, skills and attitudes as social impact mediators', *New Media and Society*, DOI: [10.1177/1461448211023007](https://doi.org/10.1177/1461448211023007).
- Holzinger, C. (2019) 'We don't worry that much about language': street-level bureaucracy in the context of linguistic diversity', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, **46**, 9, 1792–808.
- Jamal, A., Kizgin, H., Rana, N. P., Laroche, M. and Dwivedi, Y. K. (2019) 'Impact of acculturation, online participation and involvement on voting intentions', *Government Information Quarterly*, **36**, 3, 510–9.
- Könönen, J. (2017) 'Differential inclusion of non-citizens in a universalistic welfare state', *Citizenship Studies*, **22**, 1, 1–31.
- Kuusio, H., Seppänen, A., Jokela, S., Somersalo, L. and Lilja, E. (2020) *Ulkomaalaistaustaisten terveys ja hyvinvointi Suomessa: FinMonk-tutkimus 2018-2019*, <http://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-952-343-034-1> [accessed 05.09.2022].
- Kyytsönen, M., Aalto, A.-M. and Vehko, T. (2021) *Sosiaali- ja terveydenhuollon sähköinen asiointi 2020–2021: Väestön kokemukset*, Helsinki: THL.
- Landsbergen, D. (2004) 'Screen level bureaucracy: databases as public records', *Government Information Quarterly*, **21**, 1, 24–50.
- Lindgren, I., Madsen, C. Ø., Hofmann, S. and Melin, U. (2019) 'Close encounters of the digital kind: A research agenda for the digitalization of public services', *Government Information Quarterly*, **36**, 3, 427–36.
- Lindgren, I. and Van Veenstra, A. F. (2018) 'Digital government transformation: a case illustrating public e-service development as part of public sector transformation', *ACM International Conference Proceeding Series*, **18**, 38, 1–6, DOI: [10.1145/3209281.3209302](https://doi.org/10.1145/3209281.3209302)
- Lloyd, A., Kennan, M. A., Thompson, K. M. and Qayyum, A. (2013) 'Connecting with new information landscapes: information literacy practices of refugees', *Journal of Documentation*, **69**, 1, 121–44.
- Madsen, C. and Kræmmergaard, P. (2015) 'The efficiency of freedom: single parents' domestication of mandatory e-government channels', *Government Information Quarterly*, **32**, 4, 380–8.
- Madsen, C. and Kræmmergaard, P. (2016) 'Warm experts in the age of mandatory e-government: interaction among Danish single parents regarding online application for public benefits', *Electronic Journal of E-Government*, **14**, 1, 87–98.
- Mannila, S. and Reuter, A. (2009) 'Social exclusion risks and their accumulation among Russian-speaking, ethnically Finnish and Estonian immigrants to Finland', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, **35**, 6, 939–56.
- Mossberger, K., Tolbert, C. J. and McNeal, R. S. (2008) *Digital Citizenship: The Internet, Society, and Participation*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Moyinhan, D., Herd, P. and Harvey, H. (2015) 'Administrative burden: learning, psychological, and compliance costs in citizen-state interactions', *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, **25**, 1, 43–69.
- Nedelcu, M. and Soysüren, I. (2022) 'Precarious migrants, migration regimes and digital technologies: the empowerment-control nexus', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, **48**, 8, 1821–37.
- Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2001) *Learning to Change: ICT in Schools*, Paris: OECD.
- Pollitt, C. (2012) *New Perspectives on Public Services: Place and Technology*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Pors, A. S. (2015) 'Becoming digital – passages to service in the digitized bureaucracy', *Journal of Organizational Ethnography*, **4**, 2, 177–92.
- Ratzmann, N. (2021) 'Deserving of social support? Street-level bureaucrats' decisions on EU migrants' benefit claims in Germany', *Social Policy and Society*, **20**, 3, 509–20.
- Ratzmann, N. and Sahraoui, N. (2021) 'Conceptualising the role of deservingness in migrants' access to social services', *Social Policy and Society*, **20**, 3, 440–51.
- Reddick, C. G. and Turner, M. (2012) 'Channel choice and public service delivery in Canada: comparing e-government to traditional service delivery', *Government Information Quarterly*, **29**, 1, 1–11.
- Rodriguez-Hevía, L. F., Navío-Marco, J. and Ruiz-Gómez, L. M. (2020) 'Citizens' involvement in e-government in the European Union: the rising importance of the digital skills', *Sustainability*, **12**, 17, 6807.
- Safarov, N. (2021) 'Personal experiences of digital public services access and use: older migrants' digital choices', *Technology in Society*, **66**, 8, 101627.
- Samkange-Zeeb, F., Borisova, L., Padilla, B., Bradby, H., Phillimore, J., Zeeb, H. and Brand, T. (2020) 'Superdiversity, migration and use of internet-based health information - results of a cross-sectional survey conducted in 4 European countries', *BMC Public Health*, **20**, 1, 1–12.
- Schou, J. and Hjelholt, M. (2019) 'Digitalizing the welfare state: citizenship discourses in Danish digitalization strategies from 2002 to 2015', *Critical Policy Studies*, **13**, 1, 3–22.
- Schou, J. and Pors, A. S. (2019) 'Digital by default? A qualitative study of exclusion in digitalised welfare', *Social Policy and Administration*, **53**, 3, 464–77.
- Schuler, D. (2010) 'Cultivating society's civic intelligence: patterns for a new "world brain"', *Information, Communication and Society*, **4**, 2, 157–81.
- Silcock, R. (2001) 'What is e-government', *Parliamentary Affairs*, **54**, 1, 88–101.

- Simonsen, L., Steinsto, T., Verne, G. and Bratteteig, T. (2020) 'I'm disabled and married to a foreign single mother'. Public service chatbot's advice on citizens' complex lives', in S. Hofmann, C. Csáki, N. Edelmann, T. Lampoltshammer, U. Melin, P. Parycek, G. Schwabe and E. Tambouris (eds.), *Electronic Participation. ePart 2020. Lecture Notes in Computer Science*, vol 12220, Cham: Springer, 133–46.
- Sosiaali- ja terveystieteiden ministeriö (STM). (2014) *Tieto hyvinvoinnin ja uudistuvien palvelujen tukena - Sote-tieto hyötykäyttöön - Strategia 2020*, sosiaali- ja terveystieteiden ministeriö, <https://julkaisut.valtioneuvosto.fi/handle/10024/70321> [accessed 01.10.2022].
- Sosiaali- ja terveystieteiden ministeriö (STM). (2019) 'Strategia 2030 - Sosiaali- ja terveystieteiden ministeriö', <https://stm.fi/strategia> [accessed 01.10.2022].
- Statistics Finland (2021) 'Foreign-language speakers', [https://www.tilastokeskus.fi/tup/maahanmuutto/maahanmuuttajat-vaestossa/vieraskieliset\\_en.html](https://www.tilastokeskus.fi/tup/maahanmuutto/maahanmuuttajat-vaestossa/vieraskieliset_en.html) [accessed 01.10.2022].
- Suchowerska, R. and McCosker, A. (2022) 'Governance networks that strengthen older adults' digital inclusion: the challenges of metagovernance', *Government Information Quarterly*, **39**, 1, 101649.
- Tangi, L., Benedetti, M., Gastaldi, L., Noci, G. and Russo, C. (2021) 'Mandatory provisioning of digital public services as a feasible service delivery strategy: evidence from Italian local governments', *Government Information Quarterly*, **38**, 1, 101543.
- van Deursen, A. and van Dijk, J. (2009) 'Using the Internet: skill related problems in users' online behavior', *Interacting with Computers*, **21**, 5–6, 393–402.
- van Deursen, A. and van Dijk, J. (2011) 'Internet skills and the digital divide', *New Media and Society*, **13**, 6, 893–911.
- Vehko, T., Lilja, E., Parikka, S., Aalto, A.-M. and Kuusio, H. (2020) 'Self-reported strong electronic identification varies between population groups in Finland', *Finnish Journal of EHealth and EWelfare*, **12**, 3, 187–97.
- Wihlborg, E., Hedström, K. and Larsson, H. (2017) 'e-Government for all - norm-critical perspectives and public values in digitalization', *Proceedings of the 50th Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences*, 2017, 2549–58, DOI: [10.24251/hicss.2017.308](https://doi.org/10.24251/hicss.2017.308).
- Zhao, X., Yang, B. and Wong, C.-W. (2019) 'Analyzing trend for U.S. immigrants' e-health engagement from 2008 to 2013', *Health Communication*, **34**, 11, 1259–69.