Are Syrian refugees a potential solution to an aging Dutch labour market?

Timo Holtland
Supervisor: A. Remund
University of Groningen
Faculty of Spatial Sciences
Human Geography & Planning
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Abstract

We live in both the 'age of migration' and the 'age of ageing'. As a result of a permanent decline in the fertility rates and an increasing life expectancy, the old-age dependency ratio in many countries keeps increasing. This has a structural impact on the labour market and will result in an increasing burden for future taxpayers. Since scholars do not expect a natural increase in the future fertility rates, and the effects of this would only be felt in a few decades, solutions on the short-term are required. An increase in productivity, labour market participation of underrepresented groups, and raising the retirement age are potential solutions, though in light of the recent 'refugee crisis' (2014-2016), migration also needs to be looked into as a potential solution.

Based on previous research, it can be stated that migration can be part of the solution, however the connection and integration of migrants to the labour market are essential. Since the group of Syrian asylum seekers makes up for more than halve of all cohorts arriving in the Netherlands during the "refugee crisis", this is the most relevant group to look into.

'Age' and 'resident intentions' are investigated to determine the potential of this group in countering aging and dejuvenation. With only 3% of the Syrians above the age of 60 and more than 50% of the Syrians intending to stay in the Netherlands forever, a high potential is presumed. However, the actual number of Syrians being employed is only 10% in 2017 and 33% in 2019. These numbers can be (partially) explained by factors considering 'age', 'gender', 'education' and 'public opinion'. Each of these factors has its own challenges, with the last two being highly influenced by policymaking. Regarding education, a major part of the unused potential, and a reason for inefficient integration to the labour market is present. In the integration process there is little attention for education, skills and experiences acquired in Syria. Syrians are relatively highly educated, though they often have to start at zero and are stimulated to take jobs way below their potential and ambition.

Regarding the public opinion, data from the European Social Survey shows significant differences between natives and Arabic minorities when asked whether they feel discriminated against, or if they feel they have/had a fair chance on getting the job they wanted. The interviewees emphasize that an effective integration process requires effort from both sides. Immigrants need to learn the language and get to know their new country, while natives need to be open and put an effort in getting to know the newcomers. This mutual understanding will help status holders to form a social network, something which is essential in a successful integration process.

Furthermore, it is underscored by status holders that attention to their perspective is essential in policymaking and that policy must be adjusted accordingly.

For integration policies to be effective and for immigration to be a potential solution for the aging and dejuvenating Dutch labour market, the integration program must change its focus to increase mutual understanding and take into account the individual's capabilities and competences.

Keywords
Aging, migration, refugee crisis, labour market, integration, competences, discrimination, insiders perspective, policymaking, social network, mutual understanding

Table of contents

1. Introduction

The ageing and dejuvenation (opposite of rejuvenation) of the Dutch population and its labour market raise major issues which policymakers are currently increasingly dealing with. Since the 20th century, and especially after the Second World War, the life expectancy in many countries increased significantly. In the Netherlands for example from approximately 72 in 1950, to 83 in 2019 (CBS, 2019). The same trend is visible in Sweden, where Bengtsson and Scott (2011) pointed out that these developments at first did not cause a significantly aging labour market, because the increasing life expectancy was at first the results of a decline in infant and child mortality. However, an increasing life expectancy, a baby boom generation in the first decades after World War 2, combined with a significant decrease in birth-rates from the 70's onwards, did result in a rapidly increasing old-age dependency ratio in many Western countries (Bengtsson & Scott, 2011).

Another trend that is visible since approximately 2014, is an increasing number of asylum seekers entering Europe. Although most of the refugees were received by neighbouring countries, in 2015 more than 1.3 million refugees asked for asylum in Europe, more than a quarter being from Syria. Since the EU countries could not handle this large influx, this is commonly known as 'the refugee crisis'. The approach of the EU countries towards the flow of undocumented migrants differed a lot, from restrictive or even hostile, to welcoming and hospitable. Although the number of asylum seekers in the Netherlands has been lower than the numbers in Germany and Sweden, the Netherlands is regarded as an open and tolerant country of residence for refugees, because of their relatively hospitable policies (André et al., 2019).

Both the issues regarding aging and the ones considering migrant flows have gained political attention, because of the recent retirement of the baby boom generation and of the unprecedented number of migrants during the 'refugee crisis'. A number of theories about the consequences of aging and migrant flows are present and some papers even combine the two phenomena. However, most of the literature is centred around general theories, which are not put into practice, or which describe the situation in other countries. Furthermore, most of the literature is written before the refugee crisis, where other migrant characteristics played a role.

This research will combine both the issues regarding the aging and dejuvenating Dutch labour market, and the issues that rose during and in the aftermath of the 'refugee crisis' (2014-2016), by looking at the latter not as a threat, but as a possible solution. The main question will be:
- *"Is the refugee flow from Syria since the 'refugee crisis' a possible solution in countering the increasing dependency ratio – due to aging and dejuvenation – on the Dutch labour market?"*
In the literature part of this research, the general theories and the situation in other countries are compared to the approach of the Dutch government. The efficiency of the Dutch approach is tested by investigating data on migrant characteristics and answering the questions:
1. *"Does the cohort of Syrian refugees after 2014 have the potential to partly offset the negative consequences of the aging Dutch labour market?"* and
2. *"Can the differences in labour market participation between the Syrian cohort after 2014 and the natives be explained by the composition of the former in terms of 'gender', 'age', 'education' and 'public opinion'?"*
'Public opinion' relates to the attitude of the natives and factors like prejudices, discrimination and openness thus play a role.

If inefficiencies are found and there is an unused potential, this paper will conclude by providing advice for policymakers concerning the integration process.

2. Literature review

1.1 Aging
While an increasing life expectancy is a positive societal development, it also has negative consequences for, among others, the economy (De Kruijf, 2017). Together with a fertility rate below replacement level, which is the case in almost all Western countries, an increasing life expectancy characterises the latest phase of the demographic transition model and leads to population ageing (Franklin & Plane, 2017).

The existing demography is heavily influenced by demographic developments of the past. In this respect, the 'baby boom generation' heavily influences the Dutch case. It describes the extreme peak in births after the Second World War (1946-1955), due to the increasing wealth and safety in the Netherlands. From then onwards the life expectancy almost continuously increased, tough the birth rate decreased with almost 50%, from over 3 births per women, to 1.59 in 2018 (CBS, 2019).

Furthermore, when the baby boom generation reached their retirement age around 2010, the 'dependent' population aged 65+, relative to the population between 15 and 64 (Blien, 2018) increased significantly, from about 22% in 2010 to about 32% in 2020. Calculated predictions state that this 'old-age dependency ratio' will increase to about 50% in 2035, where it will remain stable, also after the baby boom generation will pass away (CBS, 2019). This because the life expectancy keeps increasing and the birth rate is likely to remain low. Although the Netherlands follows the same trend as other Western countries, they are not 'on top', because Japan and Spain are expecting an old-age dependency ratio of over 70% by 2050. This trend is described by some as an approaching tsunami, because of the size of the cohort and their influence on the political and economic structure of countries (Frey 2001).

The implications regarding the developments of the old-age dependency ratio are not one-to-one transferable to the labour market, because they do not consider the actual labour market participation. Although the trend of an aging labour force is clearly visible, there is for example an increase in the participation of females, and people aged over 55 in the labour force. However, these factors cannot prevent the aging trend of the labour force.

The consequences of the aging labour force on the productivity, the social welfare system and the healthcare system, will presumably lead to a decrease in economic growth in the future and a smaller labour force will furthermore be required to support the older population (Blien, 2018). This trend will result in problems for developed nations, though they are often relatively well prepared for the aging population. Emerging countries on the other hand spend in general much less on social welfare and health programs and they are depending strongly on their economic growth (Sohn, 2009).

1.2 Possible solutions
If the participation rate in the labour force remains the same, there will only be two potential workers per retiree by 2050. Leaving the changes in consumption and investment patterns aside, this will result in major problems for the economy. On the long term, these issues can perhaps be countered by an increase in birth-rate, however, on the short-term an increase in fertility will lead to an even less desirable dependency ratio, because the 'new' generation will not join the labour force for at least 15 years. Furthermore, there is the question of how this would be put into practice, since scholars do not expect the fertility rate will increase significantly in a natural way in the future (Bengtsson & Scott, 2011).

There are some potential solutions for the short-term. An increase in productivity (Park & Hewings, 2007) or further increases in the labour market participation of certain groups, like people over 55 or women in general, can potentially make up for (part of) the issues (De Kruijf, 2017). Another solution is increasing the pension age, while this might sound undesirable, it is important to keep in mind that the life expectancy is way higher than the pension age and the 'young-old' people, between their 65 and 75, are relatively healthy and often able to continue working, depending on the sector.

If the workforce is not being replaced or the productivity is not increased, the burden for future taxpayers and the government will increase, because it can be assumed that at least the same number of services are required, though an increase seems even more likely (Park & Hewings, 2007).

1.3 Migration as a solution?

Another potential solution, which is ignored by De Kruijf (2017) but elaborated on by others, is migration. The United Nations (2001) state that for immigration to provide a complete solution for aging, the immigration flows need to increase tremendously and remain high, something which is not considered a possibility. Other authors also emphasize that migration can only provide part of the solution, but that it is something that needs to be looked into, certainly in the aftermath of the refugee crisis.

Blien argues that, although the trend of decreasing fertility rates and increasing life expectancies is something that took shape over a very long time, migration has the potential to partly change the demographic profile of regions and countries in a very short time. The crucial condition for a positive impact on the labour market, is that immigrants acquire skills and experience to connect and integrate into the labour market.

The reason for considering migrants as a possible solution for the issues regarding aging, is because they are overrepresented in the lower working ages, they tend to arrive in their childbearing years and they often experience a higher fertility rate, at least in their countries of origin (Bengtsonn & Scott, 2011). Because there is no scientific consensus about post-migration fertility (Newsham & Rowe, 2019), this research will focus on the short-term possibilities.

Beckers Human Capital Theory (1964) provides an explanation for the migrant characteristics mentioned before (Teixeira, 2014). When someone's age increases, it becomes more costly and difficult to migrate, because when people get older, they are more physically and emotionally attached to their location. This can be through investments, family ties, status and so on. Young adults on the other hand have a long career time ahead of them to gain back the 'cost' of migrating. This is also visible within the Netherlands itself, where many young adults move to the Randstad because of the better career opportunities, while the 'older' people stay behind (Schnabel, 2009). Apart from 'age', differences between the labour market participation of natives and non-Western migrants can further be explained by the composition of the migrant population in terms of gender, education and public opinion, through respectively traditional gender roles, background in terms of education, and the attitude of the receiving country towards migrants (Tinnemans et al., 2020).

Both domestic and international migration did not emerge in the past decades. Entire countries, like the United States, more or less emerged because people were looking for better opportunities or were driven away due to push-factors like poverty or war. Though in the past decades the flows of migrants affected almost every country and there has been a significant increase in international migration (World Bank, 2010). This could increase even further due to climatological changes.

Until the Second World War, Europe used to be a big 'sender' when it comes to international migration. However, factors like political stability, cultural diversity and an advanced welfare system make Europe, or at least part of it, currently an attractive destination for international migrants (Blien, 2018).

Apart from the positive impact migration can have on both the migrant and the receiving country, it also has negative sides. The country of origin for example experiences a brain-drain effect, while the receiving countries often struggle with the costs of integrating migrants, and tensions when it comes to housing and security issues, especially when talking about migrants from developing countries (Nijkamp et al., 2012).

The refugee crisis showed that the European migration system is vulnerable and inadequate in many areas. Issues surrounding illegal migration, motives for migration, and integration into the receiving society gained attention in society and on the political agenda in the Netherlands.

1.4 Dutch approach towards integration
1.4.1 The Dutch government
Within the European Union, countries developed different approaches when it comes to the integration of refugees on the labour market. Countries like Poland, Hungary and Denmark try to appear less attractive to refugees to discourage them from asking for asylum. While countries like Germany, Sweden and the Netherlands try to create an inclusive labour market to improve participation. Consequently more asylum seekers want to settle there.

Policies regarding integration and participation of migrants in the Dutch labour market were first created at the end of the 70's, as a response to the influx of guest workers from countries like Morocco and Turkey. The main purpose was to reduce socio-economic inequalities. Language skills played (and still play) the main role in these policies. Since 2007 migrants from outside the EU, who want to stay in the Netherlands, are obliged to pass the Civic integration exam on several topics considering mainly language and culture.

In the current policies regarding migration, the government acknowledges the issues that rose due to the refugee crisis, but also emphasize the possibilities that the influx of migrants has for the Dutch economy. The policies are focussed on a balance between the challenges and possibilities of migration. Apart from a focus on safe and controlled migration, the policies try to align migration to the supporting base and needs of different areas in the Dutch society. Collaboration between different government layers and organisations is necessary to increase efficiency.

There is a set of specific policies, like the 'Participatiewet' (Rijksoverheid, 2018), considering the integration of migrants in the Dutch labour market (Rijksoverheid, n.d.). With these policies the Dutch government want to quicken the process of integration, by improving the language level of migrants, more support for municipalities and better access to housing and education.

1.4.2 Other organisations
A report from the Dutch CPB and SCP (Jongen et al., 2020) is more critical towards the current approach by the government, especially considering the participation of non-western asylum seekers. The Netherlands is currently, or at least prior to Covid-19, going through economically fortunate times. Though even in this situation the difference between unemployment of non-western migrants and the rest of the population is significant, also compared to other European countries.

An increasing difference in employment rate during a period of recession was visible in the past and for that reason also expected in the future (Van den Berge et al. 2020). Differences in education level, (in)direct discrimination and the overrepresentation of non-western migrants in flexible jobs ensured that this group is already severely hit by the impact that Covid-19 has on the economy (Jongen et al., 2020).

Due to the apparent inefficiencies, several organisations and institutes wrote advice to decrease the unused potential of non-western migrants on the Dutch labour market. A number of these policy implications are already incorporated in the new policies, like the 'Nieuwe wet inburgering' (New integration law July 2021), though the effectiveness has yet to be proven.

The advice can be divided into three categories.

3. Firstly, there are changes proposed to *increase the incentive* to participate in the labour market.

These consist often of a set of financial means, like allowances and benefits.

4. Secondly, proposals are made to make sure non-western migrant *can participate, by better connecting* to the Dutch labour market.

The main factors that are influential here are language, taking into account individual capabilities, personal guidance and putting responsibility at the local level, not with the migrant (Jongen et al., 2020). Other blockages when joining the labour market are trauma's, the lack of a social network and uncertainties about family or the asylum procedure (Tinnemans et al., 2020). This is described as the 'Refugee entry effect.

5. Thirdly, changes in the policies are proposed to make sure non-western migrants have the *(legal) possibility to participate* in the labour force effectively.

The main critique is that asylum seekers get little support before they are granted a residence permit and they cannot start working or following education beforehand. Research by De Vroome & Van Tubergen (2010) show that the length of the asylum procedure negatively correlates with labour market participation and job opportunities. Another main point of critique is the fact that knowledge, skills, diplomas, and professional experience acquired in the country of origin is often not valid in the Netherlands (De Jong et al., 2020). De Jong et al. (2020) states that integration does not only require effort from the migrant, but also from companies and natives in getting familiar with each other's cultures and habits and creating an inclusive working environment. This to prevent unequal treatment, ethnic prejudices and conflicts.

1.5 Conceptual model

Based on the literature review, the following hypotheses are formulated, which will be tested in a mixed methods approach:

1. Considering migrant characteristics in terms of 'age' and 'residence intentions', the cohorts of Syrian migrants since 2014 have the potential to partly offset the negative consequences of the aging Dutch labour market.
2. The difference in labour market participation between the Syrian cohorts after 2014 and the natives could (partly) be explained by their composition in terms of gender, age, education and public opinion.

Both of these questions are answered to see if something could be done about the unused potential. As suggested, this could be through an incentive to participate, a better connection to the labour market and/or better legal possibilities to participate on the Dutch labour market.

The relevant concepts for the data collection are visible in the conceptual model in figure 1.
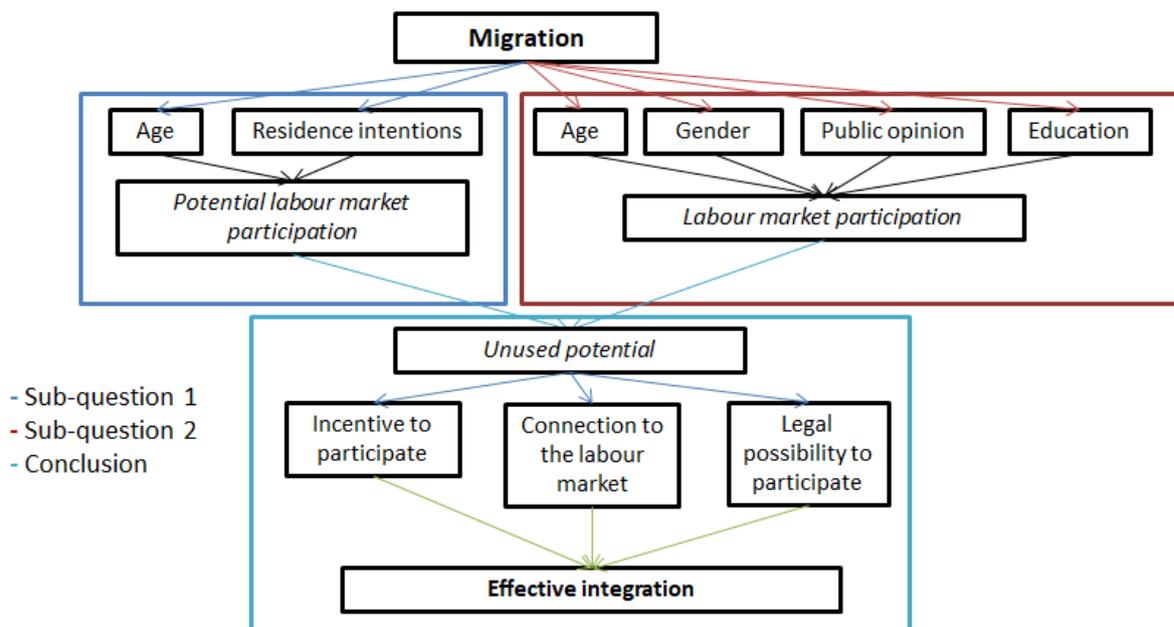

Figure 1: *Conceptual model*

3. Methodology

Sub-questions based on the hypotheses and tested using a mixed-methods approach. This approach is chosen, because with qualitative data, context and experience can be included to enrich the quantitative findings (Shorten & Smith, 2017).

> 4. *Sub-question 1*

Data on the composition of Syrian refugees by age and residence intentions is found through a combination of sources. The first source is aggregate data from the CBS, this institution has been commissioned by the Dutch government to monitor the developments of all asylum seekers and status holders. The data and some context is provided by a SCP report (2019). This data is supplemented by the results from a survey distributed by EenVandaag Opiniepanel. A research team from EenVandaag visited seven asylum seekers' centres and emergency shelters in a month early 2019, and asked people there to join a Facebook community. The profiles of the people were checked before admission, to make sure all are asylum seekers or status holders. The Facebook community has around 1800 members, of which 848 participated in this research, most of them coming from Syria. The survey can be completed in English, Dutch and Arabic and the results are weighed on age and gender based on CBS data. Beyond CBS data, this survey shows the perspective of Syrians on the integration process and their lives in the Netherlands.

> 5. *Sub-question 2*

For the second sub-question, the variables 'Gender', 'Age' and 'Education' are tested (Tinnemans et al., 2020). A comparison is made between the CBS aggregate data on Syrian status holders and other refugee groups. Furthermore, data from the European Social Survey (ESS) is used to explore differences between Dutch natives and Arabic minorities in general. Respondents on this survey were found by approaching a representative share of the Dutch population based on CBS data (ESS, 2018). The 1673 cases in the 2018 survey were split into groups based on ancestry. Because there were only 7 Syrian respondents, the choice was made to compare people classified as 'natives', 1496 cases, to people belonging to Arabic minorities from both the Middle East and North-Africa. This group has 52 cases and is considered relatively comparable to the Syrian population, this is visible in appendix 2. Ancestry is the independent variable in the tests.

A mean comparison of both groups on the following questions in the ESS is performed using an ANOVA test, in order to find significant differences between the two populations. The following dependent variables are included.

> 1. *Are you part of an ethnic minority in the Netherlands?*
> 2. *Would you describe yourself as being a member of a group which is discriminated against?*
> 3. *Compared to others in the Netherlands I have/had a fair chance in getting my desired education.*
> 4. *Compared to others in the Netherlands I would have a fair chance in achieving my desired job.*
> 5. *What is the highest level of education you achieved?*
> 6. *How many years of education did you have?*
> 7. *What is your total household income from all sources after taxes?*

These questions are also included in Appendix 1.

Question 1-4 are included to investigate a difference in the perception of 'public opinion' regarding discrimination and education/job opportunities. Question 5-7 are selected to look for a significant mean difference on the variable 'education' and the connected income differences. The tables with results are included in Appendix 2. The main reasons for the perception of unequal treatment and discrimination are elaborated on by the SCP report and the EenVandaag questionnaire.

Furthermore, interview data is used in order to get a clear and comprehensive overview of the perspective of Syrian status holders on the integration process and on their experience with 'public opinion'. The two sources for these interviews are: 1. Vluchtelingenwerk Nederland, a large NGO which supports refugees and asylum seekers from the moment they arrive in the Netherlands until they have found their way independently. And 2. Oneworld, a journalistic platform dedicated to addressing the world of injustice and inequality, by providing space for marginalized perspectives and voices. These qualitative interviews are not classified as 'academic', because only a summary and some quotes are available and not the entire transcripts. However, they prove to be precious in interpreting quantitative results, providing insights into the migrants' perspective. This form of data is listed separately in the bibliography.

It needs to be taken into account that the, especially qualitative, data can be biased due to the fact that the research was conducted by Dutch people and, although they did research with the best intentions, this can keep people from being completely open. Furthermore, participation in all researches was voluntarily, which can also bias the results.

4. Results

4.1 Age and resident intentions

The UN, among other, argues that migration can provide for part of the solution to an aging labour market. The potential impact is of course depending on the actual number of migrants. One might argue that the groups of asylum seekers are relatively small compared to the population of the Netherlands and for that reason the impact they might have is quite insignificant. However, (forced) migration remains a topical issue and is expected to continue or even increase due to factors like climate change and political tensions, adding to the fact that it becomes more and more easy to migrate. Apart from the (maybe small) effect on the aging labour market, improving the integration process of Syrian asylum seekers can thus also act as an investment for future refugee flows. Furthermore, an insufficient integration system leaves valuable human capital wasted, which will harm both the Dutch economy and the migrant.

The actual and relative numbers of the 2014-2016 cohorts of asylum seekers and people following relatives in the Netherlands are visible in Figure 2. As visible, Syrians make up for more than half of both the asylum applications and the people following relatives in all three cohorts, which make it the most relevant group in terms of their effect on the Dutch population structure

After an, often long, asylum procedure almost all Syrian refugees are granted a temporary residence permit for 5 years. When the permit is received, the status holders often focus first on bringing their family over from Syria, something which is particular to the Syrian asylum seekers compared to other refugee groups. This is relatively easy for Syrians, because of accurate documentation of family and relationship ties at Syrian governmental organisations (SCP, 2019). Only after this, the process of integration can fully start. This partly explains why Syrians from the most recent cohort are often only at the beginning of their integration process.

Figure 2: *Proportion of Syrians among both asylum seekers and people who followed family, in the Netherlands*
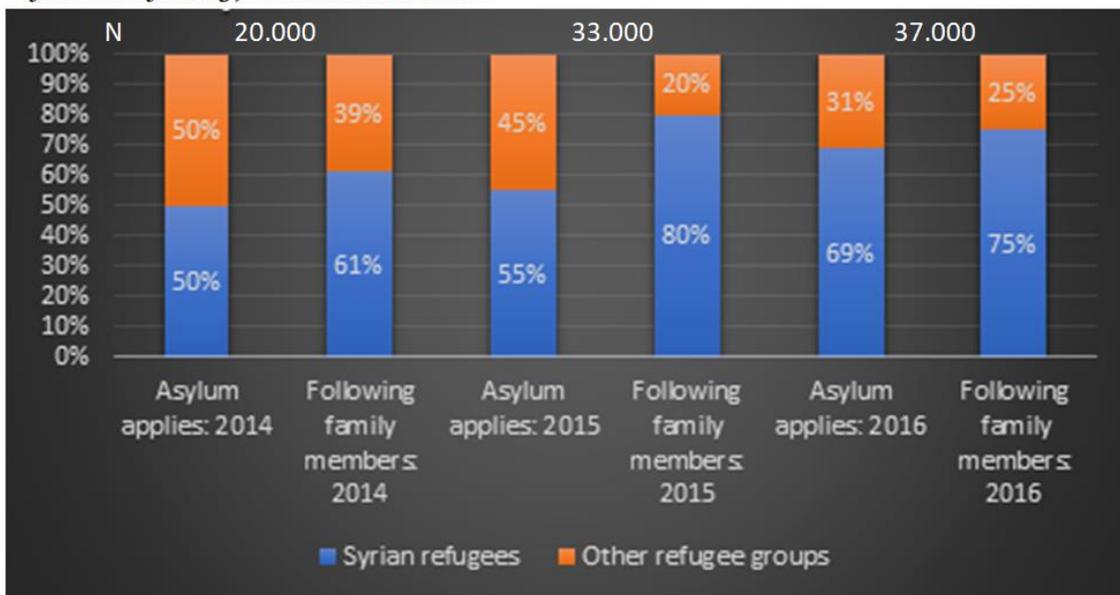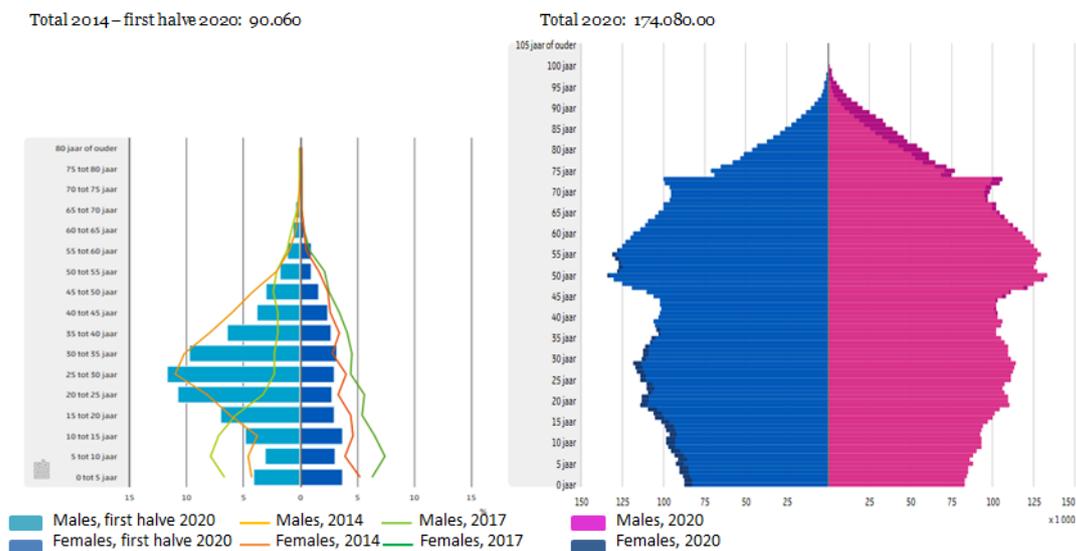
Source: <https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/publicatie/2021/15/asiel-en-integratie-2021-cohortonderzoek-asielzoekers-en-statushouders>

'Age'

When comparing the demography of the Netherlands to the demography of some of the Syrian cohorts, as visible in figure 3, there is an apparent difference visible. Apart from large differences regarding gender, there are also mayor differences considering age. A report from the SCP, which provided context to the demography, indicates that the number of people below 18 makes up for over 30% of the Syrian asylum seekers in the Netherlands in all cohorts. For people over the age of 60 this is only about 3% in all cohorts. These number can be explained by Beckers Human Capital Theory. The differences in the age and gender distribution between the 2014 and 2017 cohorts are due to a large share of people following relatives in the 2017 cohort. The 2017 cohort therefore consists of more women and the age is generally lower. Keeping in mind the relatively small number of Syrian asylum seekers (90.060) and therefore the small impact on the aging population of the Netherlands, the demography differs significantly and if these numbers are comparable to other refugee groups now and in the future, they could have a significant impact on the demography of The Netherlands. For that reason, migration is worth being seen as a possible solution counter the aging labour market, however an adequate connection and integration to the labour market are essential. Furthermore, it is crucial to know what the residence intentions of asylum seekers are, because in order to integrate and participate on the labour market, they have to stay here, at least for a while.

Figure 3: *Demography of Syrian asylum seekers by cohort, compared to the Dutch demography in 2020*

Source: <https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/publicatie/2021/15/asiel-en-integratie-2021-cohortonderzoek-asielzoekers-en-statushouders> and <https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/visualisaties/dashboard-bevolking/bevolkingspiramide>

'Residence intentions'

Research indicates that immigrants who expect to stay in their 'new' country permanently, often integrate better and are more motivated to do so. During the refugee crisis and today still, the situation in Syria is described as uninhabitable, however we cannot know what the future holds and how this impacts policies and residence intentions. Important to keep in mind is that the initial residence permit is temporary, and the situation will be assessed again after 5 years.

In their research, both the CBS and the survey by EenVandaag (Van Vliet, 2019), provide insights in the residence intentions that the status holders had in 2019. The outcomes of the EenVandaag survey show that 100% of the respondents were in 2019 not preparing to return to Syria and 75% even said that they intent to stay here for ever. In the CBS research, 93% expected to stay in the Netherlands on the short term and 55% intended to stay here forever. In both cases, the main reasons for staying in the Netherlands are that people can now live without fear, in a safe environment and with better opportunities. Resident intentions differed a bit based on characteristics like progressiveness and education level. Uncertainty about the residence permit, something which can hinder the integration process, is prevalent for 60% of the EenVandaag respondents.

4.2 Labour market participation

The actual labour market participation in 2017 and 2019 is visualised in figure 4. Both the 'employed' and 'unemployed' Syrians are part of the labour force. Under the category 'unemployed' are people who are actively looking for work and are available on the short-term. Between 2017 and 2019 there was a strong increase when it comes to Syrians in the labour force, this can be explained by two factors.

The first factor is the obligated 'civic integration exam' which almost every status holder must pass within three years. As visible in data from July 2018, the large majority of Syrian status holders is still working on this exam and are not able to participate on the labour market. The second factor, which is already mentioned, is the focus on bringing over their family before integrating completely and joining the labour force. Both the increasing number of Syrians passing their integration exam and the success in bringing over family are thus reasons for the increase in labour market participation.

Tinnemans et al. (2020) have suggested a couple of other variables that can provide an explanation for the differences in labour market participation between the Dutch average and the Syrian status holders. Though it needs to be taken into account that the Syrian status holders from the 2014-2016 cohorts are still in the starting phase of their integration.
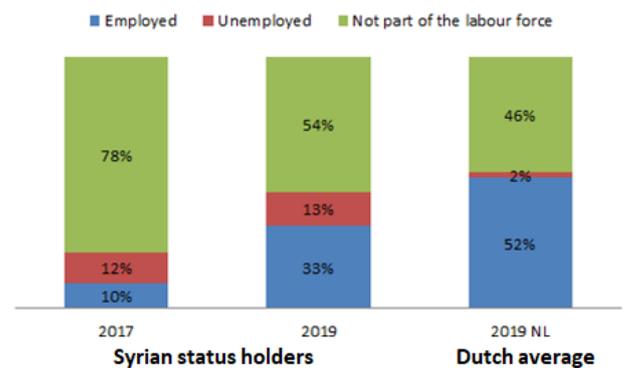
'Gender'

When looking at the migrant characteristics regarding gender, as visible in figure 6, there are significantly less women seeking asylum in the Netherlands. This can be because men are often less attached to a family and are more willing to bear the 'costs' of migration (Blien, 2018). The fact that the labour market participation of females is significantly lower in both 2017 and 2019, as visible in figure 7, can be found in the traditional gender roles in most of the Arabic countries. Men are often seen as the breadwinner and are for that reason more likely have a higher education and more job experience. In addition, municipalities often focus on one breadwinner and when (often) he has found a job, the support largely disappears (Tinnemans et al., 2020).

Figure 3: *Status 'Civic Integration Exam' July 1, 2018. Comparison between cohorts and ancestry*
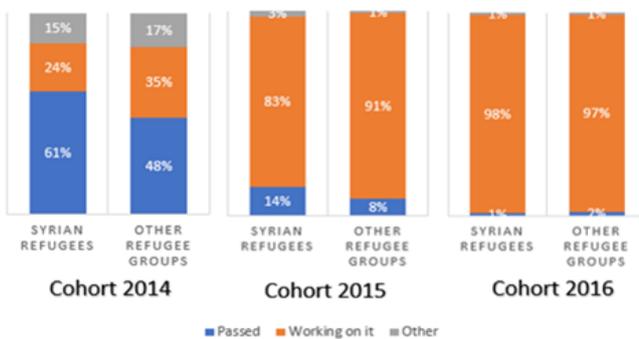
Source: <https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/publicatie/2021/15/asiel-en-integratie-2021-cohortonderzoek-asielzoekers-en-statushouders>

Figure 4: *Labour market participation of Syrian status holders, compared to the Dutch average*

Source: <https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/publicatie/2021/15/asiel-en-integratie-2021-cohortonderzoek-asielzoekers-en-statushouders>
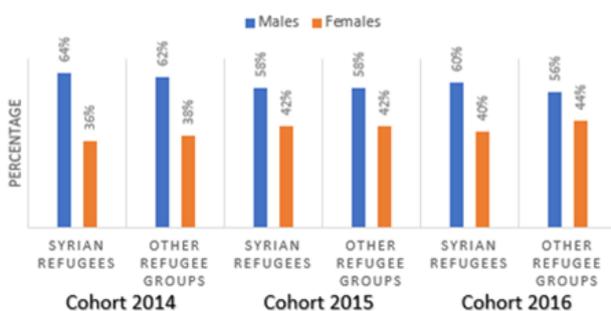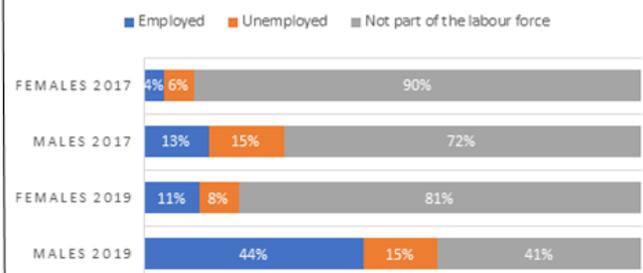

Figure 6: *Refugee population by gender*

Source: <https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/publicatie/2021/15/asiel-en-integratie-2021-cohortonderzoek-asielzoekers-en-statushouders>

Figure 7: *Labour market participation of Syrian status holders by gender*
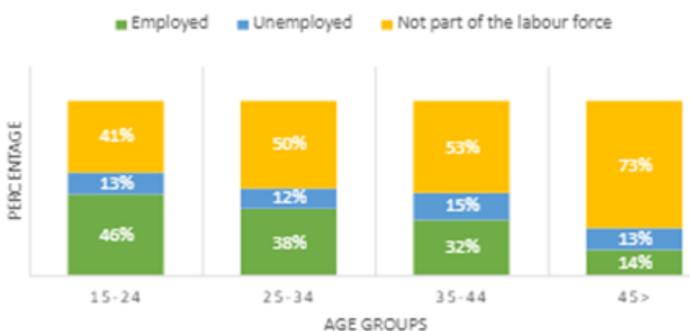
Source: <https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/publicatie/2021/15/asiel-en-integratie-2021-cohortonderzoek-asielzoekers-en-statushouders>

'Age' & 'Education'

Two other explanatory variables, which are closely interlinked, are 'age' and 'education'. Figure 8 seems to confirm the assumption made by Tinnemans et al. (2020), that age and labour market participation are negatively correlated. As indicated in previous research (SCP, 2019) language remains one of the most prominent factors in successful integration. Figure 9 shows how different age groups perform when it comes to language, which seem to correlate with the labour market participation of the different age groups. Another disadvantage is related to 'education' and visualised in figure 10. Syrian status holders between the age of 12 and 18 start in a switching class and are guided to complete an education, while the level of status holders completing an education is significantly lower for the older age groups. The ESS data showed that the mean of both the number of years in education and the highest level of education differed significantly between the native and Arabic respondents (Sig. ,008 & Sig.<,001).

The fact that diplomas acquired in Syria are often not valid in the Netherlands plays a vital role here. Compared to other groups of status holders, Syrians are well educated (12 years in general), with 32% of all Syrian status holders having acquired higher education. Many of them therefore have previously worked in the middle and upper class professions (SCP, 2019). This is underscored by the respondents in both the EenVandaag survey and the interviewees by VluchtelingenwerkNederland. Most of them indicate that they had a good education and a matching job in Syria, though it is rarely possible to continue this in the Netherlands. This results in a decrease in status and income, which is very demotivating and sometimes depressing for, mainly highly educated, status holders. The status holders indicate that in the current integration system they feel forced to take the first job available, because the integration process is 'successfully' finished if someone has a job, without taking into account someone's competence and ambition. Countries like Norway and Sweden try to reduce the unused potential by connecting the education level of the migrant to an education or a specific job. These programmes have been implemented in 2013 and 2015 and have proven to be highly effective (Tinnemans et al.,2020).

Figure 8: *Labour market participation of Syrians by age group*

Source: <https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/publicatie/2021/15/asiel-en-integratie-2021-cohortonderzoek-asielzoekers-en-statushouders>

Figure 9: *Grade obtained for the Dutch language exam in 2019, by Syrians from different age groups from the 2015-2016 cohorts*
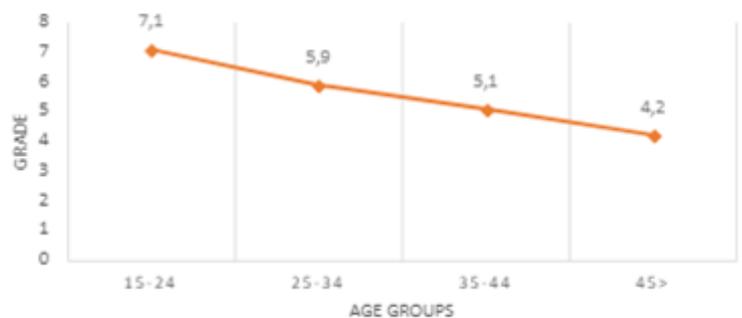
Source: <https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/publicatie/2021/15/asiel-en-integratie-2021-cohortonderzoek-asielzoekers-en-statushouders>

Figure 10: *Education level of Syrians and 'other refugees' after 4 years in The Netherlands, divided by two age groups*
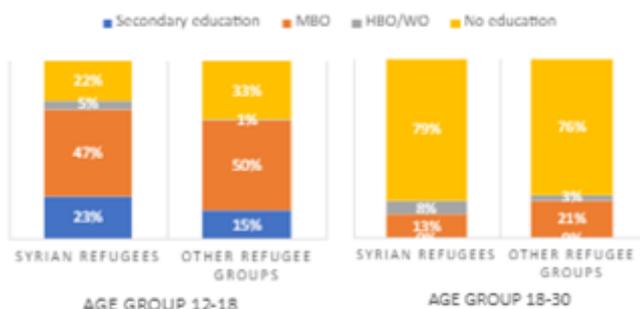
Source: <https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/publicatie/2021/15/asiel-en-integratie-2021-cohortonderzoek-asielzoekers-en-statushouders>

'Public opinion'

Probably the most influential variable is related to the 'public opinion'. An (inter)national investigation (Van den Berg et al., 2017) shows the influential role of direct/conscious and indirect/unconscious discrimination. Both direct and indirect discrimination consist of prejudices about things like trustworthiness and competence. The ESS data shows that discrimination is still perceived more often by people belonging to Arabic minorities then by natives (Sig. <,001). This can be maintained when companies do not want to take the effort of hiring a Syrian status holder, something which the instruction manual of De Jong et al. (2018) tries to change. The relevance of this instruction manual is emphasized by the significant mean difference between natives and Arabic minorities when asked if they feel they had/have a fair chance in getting the job they are looking for (Sig. <,001). This difference was not significant when asked about the chance of achieving the desired level of education (Sig. ,766), which indicates some level of unequal treatment or inadequate integration perceived on the labour market, but les/not present in the education system, at least it is not perceived that way by the respondents of the ESS.

Although Syrian status holders need to learn the language and be motivated to participate in the labour market, their motivation relies on the opportunities they are offered and the 'openness' of the Dutch society in letting them participate. 40% Of the respondents on the EenVandaag survey indicate for example that they do not feel 'at home' due to cultural differences, prejudices, distrust and discrimination. According to the interviewees from VluchtelingenwerkNederlan, the reason for this is a lack of understanding about their backgrounds. They emphasize that they had a great life in Syria, a nice house and a job they were satisfied with. Although Dutch people are often hospitable and the interviewees are grateful they can live in peace now, they feel like people see them as opportunity seekers, with a negative connotation. A better understanding of their background and motives for migrating could change the public opinion and openness towards status holders, which has a substantial influence on the integration process. In current integration policies however, there is only focus on language and jobs, not on a social network and the individual ambitions.

The general main point of critique made by the interviewees, is that in the current policy-making process there is no place for the perspective of status holders. Although probably with the best intentions, people with limited experience decide what is important, without taking into account the insiders perspective. In Syria there is a lot of distrust against the government and with the current aloof integration system this is continued in the Netherlands, with a negative impact on integration. Organisations or refugees with this insiders perspective should be included in policy-making, because they know the barriers and obstacles when it comes to effective integration and the full use of the potential of the status holders.

Although there is still criticism on the integration policies and many Syrians often feel desperate or insecure about what the future holds, they are grateful for living without fear and they work hard for a future for themselves and their children, here or in the 'new' Syria.

'Hope and ambition to get a good life for my family is what keeps me going.'
(Ahmed, 36)

5. Conclusions

First of all, it is important to note that although the number of Syrian asylum seekers is relatively big compared to other refugee groups, it is quite small compared to the population of the Netherlands. However, research into this group can be useful in order to improve the integration system for all groups now and in the future. Furthermore, all wasted human capital is disadvantageous for both the Dutch economy and the migrant, so even if the impact on the aging labour market is small, it is still relevant improve the system.

Regarding the findings on sub-question 1, it can be stated that although the impact of the Syrian status holders is relatively small, there is a lot of potential within this group. Over 50% of the refugees in the cohorts between 2014-2016 came from Syria and they are in general significantly younger compared to the Dutch average, with only 3% older than 60. Furthermore, over 50% indicated they want to stay in the Netherlands forever, while over 90% intent to stay at least on the short-term. Although these cohorts are only in the starting phase of their integration process, there are some variables that can explain why this process is lacking results on the labour market. Part of it can be found in the first focus on family reunion, traditional gender roles, and the required civic integration exam. These factors are relatively difficult to change, so for a more effective integration to the labour market, other components must be investigated.
Policy implications can be made corresponding the three categories in the report by Tinnemans et al. (2020).
- Not much is found considering the first category '*increasing the incentive*', though the highly educated Syrian status holders more often emphasize the influence of a decrease in income, status and living conditions.
- On the '*connection to the labour market*' a few things are lacking in the current system according to the Syrian status holders. Their main point is the lack of attention for the social network. Language and understanding the Dutch culture are essential, though the program is aloof and want status holders to take the first job they can get so the integration can be called a 'success'.
- The main points of critique fall under the last category: '*making it (legally) possible to participate*'. A negative correlation between 'the time before a resident permit is granted' and 'labour market participation' shows the importance of speeding up this process. Furthermore, the aloof system and the lack of attention for skills, experience and ambitions of individuals leaves a lot of potential unused. Add to this that Syrians are relatively highly educated, it means that a lot of potential is neglected.

Another vital point made in the previous literature and emphasized by interviewees, is the influence of the public opinion. The openness and acceptation of status holders by the Dutch population, and especially companies, is crucial for a successful integration process. ESS data shows that migrants in 2018 felt significantly more discriminated against then the natives. Although they feel they have about the same educational opportunities, this is significantly different when it comes to finding a job.
The main critique of the interviewees is the lack of understanding between Dutch people and Syrian status holders. People seeing them as opportunity seekers, who want to take advantage of the system, is an obstacle for expanding their social network, something which is extremely important in the integration process.
Valuing the perspective of status holders is brought up as the most important solution. Despite having many organisations and people who know the obstacles and have an insiders perspective, current policymakers do not take this into account and only focus on employment rate and language skills.

Based on the results on both sub-questions, the answer to the main question is that migrants, and the population of Syrian refugees to a smaller extend, can in theory provide for a partial decrease in the trends of aging and dejuvenation on the Dutch labour market. Though as emphasized, the connection to the labour market is essential and has proven to be insufficient so far. This results in a lot of unused potential and thus calls for policy changes.

As a concluding advice on the process of policy making, I would like to tie to some arguments of interviewees. There is currently a lot of unused potential and while many Syrian status holders want to participate in the labour market and find a job they are satisfied with; they often cannot achieve this in the current system. As an outsider, one can make policies with the best intentions, though presumably less effective as one who has experienced the process and knows the people affected. Involving stakeholders would benefit both the status holders and the Dutch economy.
Another advice is based on the fact that mutual understanding and commitment from both sides is crucial in the process of integration. While most Syrians would like to expand their social network and get to know Dutch people, it is necessary for the Dutch people to know the background of 'newcomers'. This can for example be done by educating children, but also companies who want to be inclusive, on the background of large ethnic minorities. The 'toolbox' by De Jong et al. (2020) is an important step in the right direction.

Limitations and weaknesses
The current situation considering the target population and Covid-19 resulted in some limitations and weaknesses. Because it has been only approximately 7 years since ago since the refugee crisis started, many things about the future of this specific group are still unclear. Especially since most Syrians are only at the beginning of their integration process. Based on comparable groups, predictions can be made and targeted policy changes are essential, though the future of Syria and impact of Covid-19 need to be taken into account. Furthermore, there was only individual data available with a sufficient number of cases for Arabic minorities in general, without regards to the length of their time in the Netherlands. For this reason the interview and aggregate data were included to give specific context and substantiation to the findings.

Future research
For future research, if not already done, it would be interesting to investigate comparable group of asylum seekers from the past or in other countries, to learn from them when it comes to effective policies. Since a substantial share of the Syrians indicated that they see their future here, it is also relevant to investigate the developments regarding their integration on the labour market.
By giving status holders a voice in their own integration process and by stimulating mutual understanding, the integration process can hopefully be rightfully labelled 'successful' in the near future.

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Appendix 1: ESS Questionnaire

The questions that were used for the statistical tests:

F61 *How would you describe your heritage?*
Answer:
Specific numerical code attached to countries. Furthermore, the codes are listed based on continents.

Refusal: 777777
Don't know: 888888

C18 *Would you describe yourself as a member of a group discriminated against in the Netherlands?*
Answer: 1: Yes
              2: No
              7: Refuse
              8: Don't know

C26 *Do you belong to an ethnic minority in the Netherlands? By this we mean ethnic groups like Turkish, Moroccan, Surinamese and Antillean people, who are not from the Netherlands by origin.*
Answer: 1: Yes
              2: No
              7: Refuse
              8: Don't know

F15 *What is the highest education level you successfully passed?* (What 'passed' means is explained)
Answer:

Basisschool niet afgemaakt 1
Alleen basisschool afgemaakt 2
LBO, VBO, LEAO, LTS ambachtsschool, huishoudschool, LHNO, VMBO (niveaus 1-3 3
basisberoepsgericht, kaderberoepsgericht, gemengd) afgemaakt
MULO, ULO, MAVO, VMBO (niveau 4; theoretische leerweg), HAVO jaar 3-4; VWO jaar 3-5 afgemaakt 4
MBO niveau 1 afgemaakt (duur <2 jaar) 5
HAVO, MMS, MSVM afgemaakt 6
VWO, HBS, atheneum, gymnasium afgemaakt 7
KMBO, leerlingwezen, MBO, MEAO, MTS afgemaakt (duur 2-3 jaar) 8
MBO niveau 2 en 3 afgemaakt (duur 2-3 jaar) 9
MBO niveau 4 afgemaakt (duur 4 jaar) 10
MBO-plus voor havisten 11
Propedeuse WO, OU-certificaat 12
Korte HBO-opleiding einddiploma (2 of 3 jaar) 13
Bachelor HBO, kweekschool, PABO, conservatorium, MO-akten afgemaakt 14
Bachelor universiteit afgemaakt 15
HBO: Master's degree, tweede fase opleidingen, Post HBO- opleidingen, pre-master onderwijs voor HBO 16
WO/universiteit: Master's degree, tweede fase opleidingen, ingenieur, meester, doctorandus 17
Doctoraat / gepromoveerd 18
(Anders) 5555
(Weigering) 7777
(Weet niet) 8888

F16 How many years of full time or part time education did you finish? Considering part time education, try to calculate this to full time years. (Round this to complete years).
Answer:
Number of years: ...
Refuse: 77
Don't know: 88

F41   *Using the cart below. Can you tell me which letter corresponds with the total household income from all sources, after taxes and other social contributions? If you don't know the exact income, make an estimation. Use the part of the map which is the most convenient for you: week-, month- or yearly income.*

KAART 44

	Ongeveer PER WEEK	Ongeveer PER MAAND	Ongeveer PER JAAR	
J	Minder dan €250	Minder dan €1.100	Minder dan €13.000	**J**
R	€250 tot €325	€1.100 tot €1.400	€13.000 tot €17.000	**R**
C	€325 tot €400	€1.400 tot €1.700	€17.000 tot €20.000	**C**
M	€400 tot €450	€1.700 tot €2.000	€20.000 tot €24.000	**M**
F	€450 tot €550	€2.000 tot €2.400	€24.000 tot €28.000	**F**
S	€550 tot €650	€2.400 tot €2.790	€28.000 tot €33.000	**S**
K	€650 tot €750	€2.800 tot €3.300	€33.000 tot €39.000	**K**
P	€750 tot €900	€3.300 tot €3.900	€39.000 tot €46.000	**P**
D	€900 tot €1.100	€3.900 tot €4.800	€46.000 tot €58.000	**D**
H	€1.100 of meer	€4.800 of meer	€58.000 of meer	**H**

UW NETTO HUISHOUDINKOMEN

Refusal: 77
Don't know: 88

G4   *To what extent does this statement apply to you? Compared to others in the Netherlands I have had a fair chance in achieving my desired education level.*
Answer:

Totally not applicable								completely applicable		
0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

Still working on my education: 55
Refusal: 77
Don't know: 88

G5   *To what extent does this statement apply to you? Compared to others in the Netherlands I would have a fair chance in getting my desired job.*
Answer:

Totally not applicable								completely applicable		
0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

Refusal: 77
Don't know: 88

Appendix 2: Table with test results

ESS respondents based on ethnicity

		FREQUENCY	PERCENT	VALID PERCENT	CUMULATIVE PERCENT
VALID	'NATIVES'	1496	89.4	96,6	96,6
	'ARABS'	52	3,1	3,4	100,0
	TOTAL	1548	92,5	100,0	
MISSING		125	7,5		
TOTAL		1673	100,0		

ANOVA

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Belong to minority ethnic group in country	Between Groups	33,134	1	33,134	913,093	,000
	Within Groups	56,028	1544	,036		
	Total	89,162	1545			
Member of a group discriminated against in this country	Between Groups	2,580	1	2,580	37,318	,000
	Within Groups	106,385	1539	,069		
	Total	108,964	1540			
Highest level of education, Netherlands	Between Groups	4203103,806	1	4203103,806	19,564	,000
	Within Groups	331704332,192	1544	214834,412		
	Total	335907435,997	1545			
Years of full-time education completed	Between Groups	128,128	1	128,128	6,944	,008
	Within Groups	28266,255	1532	18,451		
	Total	28394,384	1533			
Household's total net income, all sources	Between Groups	172,029	1	172,029	22,881	,000
	Within Groups	9661,073	1285	7,518		
	Total	9833,102	1286			
Compared other people in country, fair chance achieve level of education I seek	Between Groups	2,520	1	2,520	,089	,766
	Within Groups	43322,373	1527	28,371		
	Total	43324,893	1528			
Compared other people in country, fair chance get job I seek	Between Groups	53,084	1	53,084	8,499	,004
	Within Groups	9306,447	1490	6,246		
	Total	9359,531	1491			