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Utilising the hidden human capital of refugees on the Dutch labour market

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Abstract

This research aims to connect the 'given' potential of the refugee population in the Netherlands to the increasing shortages on the Dutch labour market by finding an answer to the main question '*Can the labour market potential of refugees be utilised more by uncovering their hidden human capital?*'. Both the factors determining the disadvantaged position of refugees, the so-called refugee-entry effect, and the host countries considerations are described. Based on the literature I find three important mediating factors: 'Mapping qualifications and skills', 'bridging' and 'employers' investment' are considered as mediating factors in the labour market performance. By means of desk study is the policy approach regarding the mediating factors described for the Netherlands, Germany, Sweden and Denmark, and the practical consequences are elaborated. Finally, stakeholders in the Dutch labour market integration process of refugees are questioned on their perspective on the issues and opportunities regarding this subject.

Main findings point out that the Dutch institutional setting results in both short- and long-term negative consequences for the utilisation of refugees' human capital. Main factors are the extended duration of the asylum and integration process, limited employment possibilities during both the asylum procedure and the integration programme and the ease with which one can claim welfare benefits. Initiatives addressing the issues are often fragmented and lack structural support. Even though the Integration Law (Dutch: Wet Inburgering) 2021 addressed part of the issues, it still lacks flexibility and connection to the labour market. Looking at the other countries there are promising practices focussed e.g. on putting efforts in recognising foreign qualifications in Germany, filling shortages with fast-track programmes in Sweden and strengthening the connection to the labour market with the Danish internship programme. Although promising developments are happening on both the local and national scale, cross-border learning and collaboration is not utilised enough in the process. Successful practices from other EU members should be adapted and applied to the Dutch context, so that the wheel does not have to be reinvented again and again.

Keywords: *Human capital - Refugee-entry effect - Integration - Bridging*

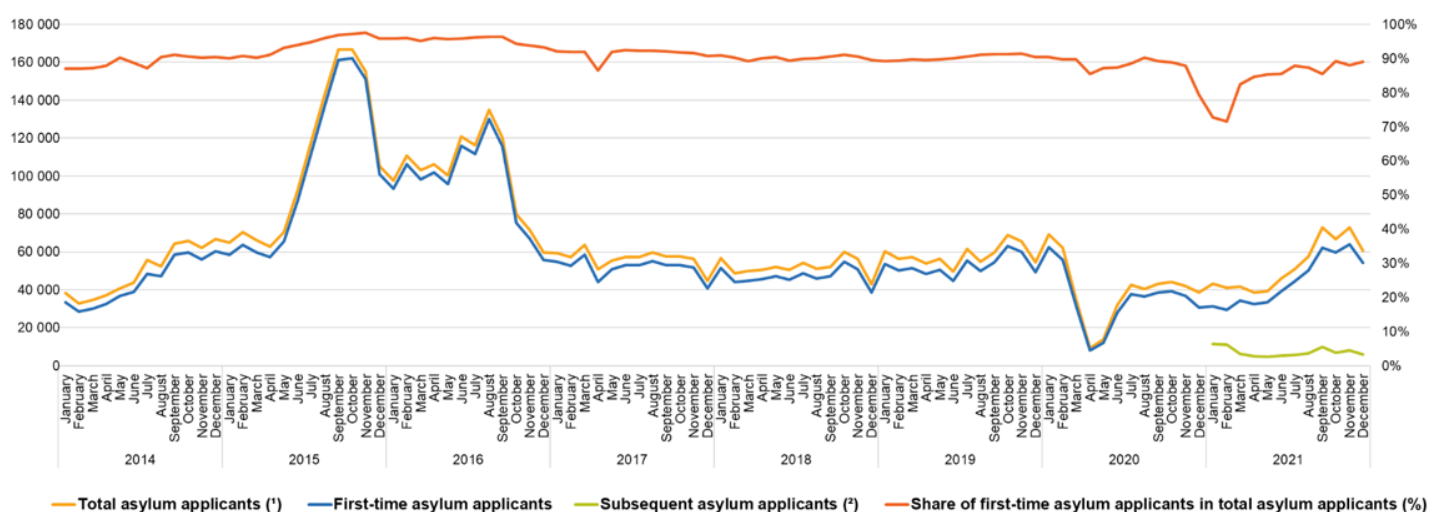
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1. Introduction

Between 2014 and 2016, Europe experienced a large influx of migrants from the Middle East and African countries due to persistent conflicts and unrest in countries like Syria, Afghanistan, and Sudan. This has had a big impact on many aspects of society in a lot of EU countries. Although immigration was nothing new, especially in countries like Sweden and Germany, the 2014-2016 inflow of refugees was unprecedented (OECD, 2015). Figure 1 shows that the number of asylum applications in Europe was roughly 3.2 million between 2014 and 2016 as compared to around 400.000 in 2013. Germany received the most asylum applicants in absolute numbers. However, countries like Italy and Greece were also heavily involved in the so-called refugee crisis, due to their location on the 'front line' and their role as a transit country (Collet & Le Coz, 2018).

Figure 1: Asylum applicants (non-EU citizens) in the EU 2014-2021



Note. From *Asylum quarterly report*, 2022, by Eurostat, (https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Asylum_quarterly_report). Copyright 2022 by Eurostat.

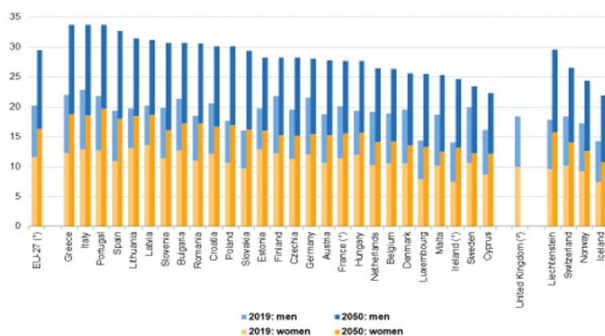
1. The category 'Total' includes first-time and repeated applicants.

Before continuing it is important to differentiate between undocumented migrants, asylum seekers, refugees, and status holders. Undocumented migrants are those who did not file asylum claims, for example, because they are transiting a country, or they expect to be rejected. Asylum seekers have formally applied for asylum and are awaiting the results. The terms 'refugee' and 'status holder' are both used to refer to one who has applied for asylum and has been granted refugee protection (OECD, 2015). The term 'migrant crisis' might thus seem more applicable, because not all people claimed asylum and a small group actually obtained a status. However, an OECD report (2015) stated that the term 'refugee crisis' or 'asylum crisis' is used to stress that the crisis is specifically concerning the EU asylum system. This research will focus asylum seekers and refugees from outside the EU. Due to the Schengen agreement and the transboundary character of the refugee crisis, the EU played an important role in solving the issues. Whereas the response of the EU and Northern European countries was initially focused on providing first aid to the countries on the frontline, this changed when migrants travelled to the North of the EU and could not return to their country of origin on a short-term basis.

An EU action plan in 2016 stated that making use of the 'given' labour market potential of refugees is essential. However, several member states wanted the policymaking to remain mostly on the national level, for that reason the policy approach has been highly diverse within the EU (Collet & Le Coz, 2018). Factors that played a role in the call for action are issues concerning social exclusion and skill mismatches on the regional labour market, issues that are widely present in the global economy of today (Van Dijk & Edzes, 2016) and are highly applicable to refugees. In an inclusive labour market, everyone should have the opportunity to participate, and the position of vulnerable groups should be

improved. Therefore, it is essential to gain insights into the determinants of their under and over-qualification (Van Dijk & Edzes, 2016). Another motivation for the EU Action Plan are the increasing levels of ageing in the European labour market as visualised in Figure 2. These are expected to increase and cause tension in the future, in terms of pressure on the welfare system and increasing shortages on the labour market, as visualised in Figure 3 (De Beer, 2022).

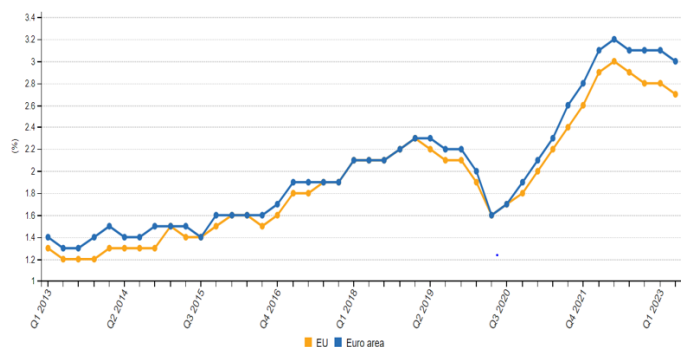
Figure 2: People aged >64 by sex, for 2019 & 2050
(% of total population)



(*) 2019: estimates and/or provisional
(**) 2050: not available.

Note. From *Ageing Europe – statistics on population developments, 2020*, by Eurostat, (https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Ageing_Europe_-_statistics_on_population_developments#Older_people_.E2.80.94_population_overview). Copyright 2020 by Eurostat.

Figure 3: Quarterly vacancy rates, seasonally adjusted, 2011-2022
(%)

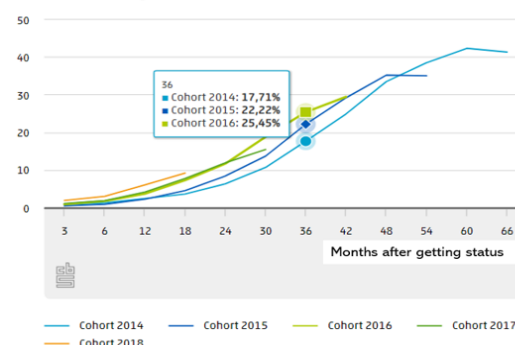


Note. From *Ageing Europe – statistics on population developments, 2020*, by Eurostat, (https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Ageing_Europe_-_statistics_on_population_developments#Older_people_.E2.80.94_population_overview). Copyright 2020 by Eurostat.

Next to increasing the productivity, extension of the retirement age and/or increasing the labour market participation, migration is mentioned possible solutions to counter these issues (Baarsma et al., 2023). De Beer (2022) states that for migration to initiate this positive effect, it is essential to provide better long-term opportunities for migrants of permanent residence. For refugees specifically, the 2016 EU action plan called for a tailored approach based on background, education level and work experience. In this process, collaboration with and learning from other EU Member States has been advised (EC, 2020). I come back on this later.

The continued importance of this call to action in the EU Action Plan is for example affirmed by looking at the participation of refugees on the Dutch labour market. In Figure 4, CBS data (2021) shows that after three years of being granted the refugee protection, about 20% of the refugees participated in the Dutch labour market. Most of this group still relies on welfare benefits, which also has a negative impact on integration. An issue which is underlined in the Letter to Parliament by the Minister of Social Affairs and employment, Van Gennip in July 2023.

Figure 4: Employed status holders
% of status holders aged 18-65



Note. Adapted from *Statushouders met werk*, by CBS, 2021, (<https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/nieuws/2021/15/arbeidsparticipatie-statushouders-stagneert>). Copyright 2023 by CBS.

“There are a whole range of people coming in, because when a war breaks out it is just not one segment that will flee - from lawyers, doctors, and university professors to people with no education at all.” (Kaabel, 2018, p.37)

In his research titled ‘Losing human(itarian) capital’, Kaabel (2018) showed that, despite the widespread view of a homogeneous group of vulnerable people, the inflow of refugees was highly diverse in terms of educational background. He found that many refugees do not want to sit around and wait but are motivated to work. However, they run into structural barriers. Two remaining barriers for the efficient use of human capital, as pointed out by the 2021-2027 EC action plan (2020) are the

lack of attention to and utilisation of the qualifications and competencies of refugees on European labour markets. This research focusses on the policy approach regarding labour market participation, and more specifically on the attention and utilisation of hidden human capital of refugees. Therefore, the main question of this research is: *'Can the labour market potential of refugees be utilised more by uncovering their hidden human capital?'*

To find an answer to the main question, the theoretical background will focus on answering the following questions:

1. *What factors explain the position of refugees in the labour market of the host country?*
2. *What are the considerations of host countries on the utilisation of refugees' human capital?*
3. *Which factors can counter the disadvantaged position of refugees in the labour market?*

This will be followed by a cross-country comparison which elaborates on the diverse policy approaches regarding the attention for and utilisation of refugees' human capital. Both the theoretical approach and the labour market position of refugees is researched, answering the questions:

4. *What are the approaches of the Netherlands, Germany, Denmark, and Sweden in theory regarding the refugees' integration on the local labour market?*
5. *What are the reasons for the labour market position of refugees in Netherlands, Germany, Denmark, and Sweden?*

Following a mixed methods approach, the literature and the results from the cross-country desk study will be used as input for interviews with stakeholders in the refugee entry process in The Netherlands. The last question will gain insights into their perspective on the Dutch approach and what can be learned from other countries.

6. *What is the perspective of stakeholders on the Dutch policy approach, and can we benefit from cross-country learning & collaboration?*

I will start by doing a literature review in chapter 2, followed with an outline of the methods for acquiring the results in chapter 3. Chapter 4 includes both a policy comparison between the four included countries and some figures and graphs about the actual labour market position of refugees in these countries. Chapter 5 builds on the findings and elaborates on the perspective of relevant stakeholders in the integration process of refugees in the Netherlands. The insights gained from answering the sub-questions will result in an answer on the main question in the conclusion and discussion part of this research. The final chapter will also include limitations and ideas for future research.

2. Literature review

“We will make sure that people who have the right to stay are integrated and made to feel welcome. They have a future to build – and skills, energy, and talent.”

President von der Leyen, State of the Union Address (EC, 16-09-2020)

The UN Refugee Agency stated in 2022 that there were over 100 million people forcibly displaced worldwide, of which about 30 million were internationally displaced. Despite most refugees being internally displaced or fleeing to neighbouring countries, the EU received well over 6.5 million refugees between the start of the refugee crisis in 2014 and 2022 (The WorldBank, 2022).

Kaabel (2018) states that a large share of international refugees will not return to their country of origin due to long-term conflicts and failure to reorganise the country. This is why both scholars and the European Commission call for an efficient integration system, with labour market participation as a crucial factor (OECD, 2022; EC, 2020; Kaabel, 2018; OECD, 2015; Bakker et al., 2014). Despite the tragedy of the crisis, the OECD (2022; 2015) and the European Commission (2020) also identify opportunities. As compared to the general population in the countries of origin, the people applying for asylum in the EU were relatively rich and had higher skill & education levels (Kaabel, 2018; OECD, 2015). For the investments to be mutually beneficial, EU Member States have to offer opportunities to integrate and participate in the labour market, while migrants themselves have to try to become integrated into the host society (EC, 2020). In this process, early investments have long-term outcomes (Bakker et al., 2014). A 2015 OECD report states that the essential areas of investment are language proficiency, recognition of educational and professional qualifications and providing complementary training to match the skills to the host labour market. Migrants should not only be employed to fill vacancies in the short term; this group has to be resilient in the economy of the future. It is therefore essential that refugees develop their knowledge and competencies and increase their chances in the Dutch labour market of the future (De Beer, 2022).

However, despite academic history showing that efficient labour market integration of refugees with permanent residence will benefit both the migrant and the receiving labour market, the participation rates remain low in many host countries, leading to high dependency on the welfare system. Furthermore, a report from the European Commission in 2020 shows the lack of labour market participation of refugees in Member States and high levels of overqualification for the forced migrants that do participate in the labour market. The EC report states that Europe cannot afford the ‘waste of this potential’. Kaabel (2018) confirms this and makes a distinction between the perspective of the refugees and the considerations of the receiving country.

2a. The refugee entry effect

As mentioned before, it would not be representative to make statements about refugees in general, because this group is very heterogeneous; it consists of people coming from different countries with different cultures, characteristics, socio-economic backgrounds, expectations, and motivations. Considering specifically the cohorts of refugees arriving in the EU between 2014 and 2016, the EC (2020) report shows a relatively educated and skilled group, though with high unused potential in terms of lacking participation rates in the host countries and lack of attention for foreign acquired human capital. Considering the development and use of human capital in the host labour market, Brell et al. (2020) state that it can go two ways. On the one hand, investing in human capital presumably has a high return, because many refugees start at a low level on the labour market and for that reason can climb relatively quickly, especially considering the high ‘hidden potential’ (EC, 2020). ‘Hidden’ in

this sense means that it might require effort to uncover it, transfer it and use it in the new labour market context. On the other hand, having to deal with uncertainty regarding their status, which is often temporary, may reduce the incentive for refugees to invest in the host economy (Brell et al., 2020).

Bakker et al. (2017) call the combined set of disadvantages the 'refugee entry effect'. Apart from factors like mental/physical illness, trauma, and discrimination, there are a few factors that relate specifically to the human capital and the utilisation of competencies in the receiving labour market. These factors are conceptualised as '*migration motive*', '*skills transferability*', '*skills gap*' and '*inefficient integration process*' (Bakker et al., 2017; Brell et al., 2020). Related to the motivation, an important difference in theories on the integration of refugees, as compared to migrants in general, is that migrants can choose a country of destination based on opportunities, while refugees are forced to migrate, often unexpectedly. They do not come to a host country in the first place to work and are presumably less prepared to participate in the host labour market (Bevelander, 2016). Upon arrival in the host country, most refugees experience difficulties regarding the validation of their formal qualifications, but especially the recognition of soft skills and work experience. Furthermore, because refugees are not economically selected, they are less likely to have skills that match the needs and standards of the receiving country. They possess country-specific skills, education, and work experience. These two issues relate to 'skills transferability' and 'skills gap'. Inefficiencies in the integration process are found in both the duration before a decision is made about the asylum application and the temporality of the first residence permit. Lengthy asylum & integration procedures without access to the labour market are negatively correlated to future employment because they reduce for example human capital, readiness for work and attractiveness to possible employers (Marbach et al., 2018). Whereas the temporality of the residence permit results in insecurities about the future and affects the motivation to invest in the receiving labour market (Brell et al., 2020). The combination of these factors called the 'refugee entry effect', consists therefore of 'a lack of resources, rights, and security about the future' (Bakker et al., 2017), and can lead to marginalisation, segregation, and dependency on the welfare system. Brell et al. (2020) elaborate on the disadvantaged position of refugees in Western countries by showing a lack of participation rates and consistently lower wages until up to 15 years after getting refugee status. Their research furthermore shows that the difference between the performance of refugees and natives is not in the first place related to demographic characteristics or educational achievements, but more so due to the inefficient integration process, lack of validation of qualifications and/or mental health issues. Despite differences between sub-groups within the refugee population and between EU Member States, research shows that human capital and education which is acquired in, or recognised by, the host country is positively related to labour market opportunities (OECD, 2022).

2b. The receiving labour market's considerations

To develop a successful labour market integration strategy, it is important to outline the incentive for the receiving labour market (Marbach et al. 2018; EC, 2020). However, the response of EU Member States to the 2014-2016 refugee crisis was not as clear-cut. Policymakers responded either in the form of more restrictions or with greater leniency in migration and integration regulations. The most important factor in this dilemma is the economic costs and returns involved. These costs are related to the effect of migration on job availability, wages, human capital, and the welfare system (Kaabel, 2018).

Restrictive approach

Governments opposing integration argue that this will make it more difficult to send people back once the situation in the country of origin is safe again. Furthermore, they state that making it possible to quickly access the labour market might attract more people applying for asylum and that it might disfavour the position of natives in the labour market (Kaabel, 2018).

Utilising approach

Governments in favour of integration argue that it is not only ‘a right and a duty for all’ (EC, 2020), but that the situation can be beneficial for both sides (Kaabel, 2018). Language skills, social network and material resources, factors that closely relate to labour market integration, play an important role in the socio-economic situation, cohesion, and resilience of EU society (Bakker et al., 2014). Apart from the effects on the refugees, it is expensive for the host country when it comes to welfare benefits, a loss of money in the form of tax contributions and a waste of potential to counter the ageing demography (Marbach et al, 2018; OECD, 2022). In this process, learning from the past and from other EU Member States is highly advised by the European Commission (2020).

National governments play an important role in the process of labour market integration and the utilisation of human capital. The following factors with which the government can influence the process are identified by the literature:

1. *Temporality of residence status*: This results in possible insecurities from the migrant perspective. But also from the perspective of potential employers because there is the risk that someone could lose their status, which takes away the return on investment (Bakker et al., 2014).
2. *Employment rights*: Accepting migrants for humanitarian reasons often comes with exclusion from the labour market and results in refugees being dependent on welfare. This has a negative consequence on their image as being a burden or a freeloader (Bakker et al., 2014).
3. *Complicated human capital transfer*: Limited understanding and attention to previously acquired human capital leads to high levels of hidden human capital, this comes with high amounts of wasted potential (EC, 2020; OECD, 2022). The 2022 OECD report states that early recognition of foreign qualifications will result in a quicker and more befitting entry into the labour market.

“Everyone has the right to qualitative and inclusive education, training and lifelong learning in order to maintain and acquire skills that enable them to participate fully in society and manage successful transitions in the labour market.” Principle 1 of the European Pillar of Social Rights

The next part will elaborate on the policy tools that can be implemented to increase attention to the hidden human capital and foster its utilisation.

2c. Essential factors in utilising foreign human capital: interventions

The OECD, the European Commission and scholars have shown that the integration of refugees into the labour market, and the utilisation of their competencies is a long-term investment (OECD, 2015; OECD, 2022; EC, 2020; Bakker et al., 2017). An investment that can lead to economic benefits for both sides and supports social cohesion. The OECD report (2015) states that for the best integration prospects in the long run, labour market access must be granted as quickly as possible. The report furthermore emphasises that the returns will be significant in the future, but that the investment will be costly. To utilise the competencies, a personal approach at the local or regional level suits best, which is also emphasised by Bakker et al. (2017). This approach gives attention to personal circumstances, to design an integration route that fits best for every individual. In this process, it is

essential to look at the factors that play a role in the refugee entry effect, as visualised in Figure 5, consisting of the migrant's characteristics and the policymaking in the host country.

To counter the negative consequences of the refugee entry effect on the labour market performance, a broad range of literature reports (Kaabel, 2018; Degler et al., 2017; Meer & Dulk, 2019; OECD, 2015), suggest looking into factors that can be grouped into four concepts.

1. *Language proficiency*

Being able to speak the language of the host country is widely recognised as one of the most, if not the most, important factor determining whether integration will be a success (Kaabel, 2018; Bakker et al., 2017; Meer & Dulk, 2019). However, there is already a significant amount of literature present on this topic, and for the sake of the length of this research, the focus will be on the remaining three factors.

2. *Mapping qualifications and skills*

As mentioned in the refugee entry effect, the qualifications and skills of refugees are often not directly transferable and/or applicable in the host labour market. One of the main constraints when it comes to utilising the potential is the complicated recognition of both formal and informal qualifications (Kaabel, 2018). Kaabel states that integration policies often stick to traditional methods of validating formal qualifications, ignoring relevant work experience, and disregarding soft skills. He argues that despite the large investment it takes, a more personal approach including interviews and matching between employers and status holders is more efficient. This qualitative approach is especially relevant for uncovering the hidden human capital of refugees without valid qualifications. Cuadrado et al. (2017) and the OECD (2016) recognise the pitfall of overqualification when refugees settle for survival jobs, due to uncertainty and limited agency. They emphasise the need for a balance between quick and sustainable integration. Whereas low-skilled jobs might come first, there should also be attention to the utilisation of competencies in the long-term career of refugees.

Although Member States are free to choose their approach, the EU wants to play a key role in this investment by supporting and coordinating projects and establishing partnerships (OECD, 2022). Examples of this are the European Skills Agenda and the EU Skills Profile Tool for Third Country Nationals, supporting the validation, utilisation, and development of the skills of asylum seekers. In this process, the Commission keeps emphasising the importance and benefits of cross-country cooperation and the exchange of successful measures and projects (EC, 2020).

3. *Bridging*

When the mapping of qualifications and skills has successfully happened, research shows that it is very likely that the skills are country-specific and a skills gap exists (Bakker et al., 2017; Kaabel, 2018). To prevent wasting the potential by making status holders start at the bottom of the labour market, they must bridge the gap in their knowledge and competencies to match the vacancies in the host labour market (De Beer, 2022). This can be done through e.g. extra schooling and learning in the workplace.

4. *Employers' investment*

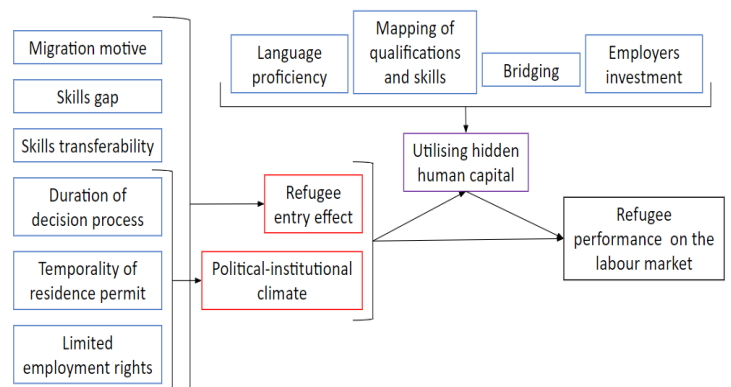
Meer & Dulk (2019) researched the employers' side of the issue and argued that the willingness of employers to invest in the labour market integration of status holders is crucial. The consideration of the employers is summarised by the Rational-choice theory and the Institutional theory. The Rational-choice theory argues that employers will hire status holders if they think the investment will be beneficial. Employers consider the expected productivity of the status holders. To illustrate this, Meer & Dulk (2019) show that employers are more inclined to hire status holders with sufficient language proficiency and recognised qualifications and/or work experience. This shows the importance of points 1 and 2 on the employer's willingness to invest. Uncertainty regarding residential and work permits

has a negative impact because this makes it unclear if there will be a return on investment. The Institutional theory shows that the environment also influences the choices of employers. This can happen in three ways, by force, imitation, or normative pressure (Meer & Dulk, 2019). Influencing the employer using force happens e.g. by implementing a quota for the number of status holders an organisation needs to employ. Influencing by imitation happens when employers see the successful integration of status holders in similar organisations. Normative pressure occurs when an employer operates in a network that pays attention to e.g. diversity or employing 'vulnerable' groups.

In both theories, the support from the government plays a role. Examples mentioned by Meer & Dulk (2019) are fiscal benefits in terms of subsidies, extended probationary periods and the presence of extra guidance on the work floor by a job coach. Both Degler et al. (2017) and Meer & Dulk (2019) give attention to the ease at which the process of hiring a status holder can be followed, the number of stakeholders, and the investment in time, which all influence the willingness of employers to invest.

The factors in the refugee entry effect, the political-institutional climate and the four factors that influence the utilisation of the hidden human capital are visualised in the following conceptual model (see figure 5). How the utilisation of hidden human capital takes shape in e.g. a policy context, determines the influence of the refugee entry effect and the political-institutional climate on the performance of refugees in the labour market. For that reason, it is visualised as a mediator in the conceptual model. In the empirical part of this research, the national policies will be analysed based on the concepts in this model.

Figure 5: Conceptual model based on literature



3. Methodology

For the empirical part of this research, two points of advice that were emphasised in the literature are incorporated. Firstly, the EU and OECD mention that EU Member States should benefit more from cross-country collaboration and that they should actively exchange their experiences and success stories on the integration and utilisation of refugee human capital (EC, 2020; OECD, 2022). The second piece of advice mentioned by scholars (Kaabel, 2018; Bakker et al, 2017; OECD, 2022) and the EC (2020), is that the policy approach requires looking beyond numbers, short-term profit, or political popularity. A more personal approach, where a long-term investment is made by looking at qualifications and capabilities individually, to uncover the hidden potential of this group is advised.

To investigate the question *'Can the labour market potential of refugees be utilised more by uncovering their hidden human capital?'*, a mixed methods approach is adopted. For this research, the 'Explanatory design' is followed and the results from the literature and cross-country desk study are used to inform the qualitative part, where participants are selected that can add depth and context (Almaki, 2016). This is in line with Kaabel (2018) who argues for a transformation in research on this topic. He states that a full picture of the issues can only be achieved by understanding the situation through first-hand experience.

For the cross-country part of this research, a comparison is made between the Netherlands, Germany, Denmark, and Sweden by means of a desk study. These countries were chosen because of their geographical and socio-economic similarities. The countries are demographically comparable in terms of ageing and population growth, and they have a relatively high economic position, with a high labour market participation, GDP per capita and functioning welfare system (The WorldBank, 2022). Apart from the comparable welfare position, an important similarity is that all the countries are within the Schengen area and are not located at the 'front line', like Greece and Italy. Countries on the front line and transit countries have presumably more to deal with providing first aid, housing and security and would be less comparable to the Dutch context (Cerna, 2019). The researched countries all adopted different approaches to handling the labour market integration and the recognition of the human capital of refugees (Solano & Huddleston, 2020a). The different approaches of the Member States in theory and their consequences in practice are compared.

Both the theoretical background and the cross-country comparison will inform the qualitative part of the research in the Netherlands by means of interviews. For this part, stakeholders from organisations in The Netherlands that deal with, or have expertise in the labour market integration of refugees were contacted. The main organisations that deal with this are the Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (COA), the semi-governmental organisation responsible for the reception, housing and guidance of asylum seekers when they arrive in the Netherlands. When a person obtains refugee status, he/she is assigned a municipality, which is then responsible for supporting the integration and labour market participation. VluchtelingenWerk Nederland (Dutch Council for Refugees) is an important advocate for asylum seekers and refugees in many areas. They provide information and try to influence national and local policymaking. In these matters, they are the advocates of the refugees. There are furthermore some expertise centres, like KIS (Knowledge platform Inclusive Coexistence) and SER (Social-Economic Council). In these institutes, experts and stakeholders investigate topics relevant to this research and advise local and national governments on issues related to refugees and the labour market. The following people were interviewed for research purposes:

Interviewee 1 (I1): An anonymous employee from Dutch Council for Refugees (VluchtelingenWerk Nederland) (interview conducted at 19-09-2023). She has been working for the organisation for ten years, currently as a legal advisor specialising in labour market access.

Interviewee 2 (I2): Prat Bertrams (interview conducted at 20-09-2023), who works for the municipality of Kampen and is one of the founders of 'Thuisgevers' (Homegivers). The organisation works together with municipalities and churches to make status holders feel at home, by providing reception locations, but also buddies and an informal network. Based on the successful reception of hundreds of Ukrainian refugees, the Dutch government wants Kampen's approach to be implemented nationwide for all status holders.

Interviewee 3 (I3): Remminga (interview conducted at 21-09-2023), works for the municipality of Groningen as a coordinator at 'Thuis in 050' (At home in Groningen). The department that supports status holders in the process of building a life in Groningen. She supports a caseload of status holders in their labour market integration.

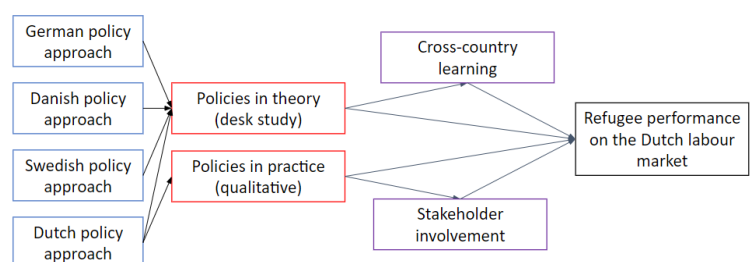
Interviewee 4 (I4): Korte (interview conducted at 22-09-2023), works for the Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (COA) in the Friesland region. His job mainly involves fostering cooperation between employers, municipalities, and other stakeholders.

Interviewee 5 (I5): Odé (interview conducted at 25-09-2023) works for the research agency Regioplan, where he conducts research into integration and migration. And for Socio-Economic Council Netherlands (SER), where he conducts research and provides advice on labour market, infrastructure, and vulnerable groups.

Interviewee 6 (I6): Geleijnse (25-09-2023), works as an advisor on labour market participation for Dutch Council for Refugees. She works on a national level as an advocate on several subjects. One of the main topics is providing sustainable jobs for refugees.

Interviewees one, four, five and six were found by approaching the Dutch Council for Refugees, the Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers, and Socio-Economic Council Netherlands via their website. Interviewee three was approached based on an article about the progressive approach of the municipality of Kampen when it comes to housing and integrating status holders. Contact with interviewee three was established after reaching out to the municipality of Groningen. Experts from other research institutes, like the KIS, were approached, but did not have time to participate. These six semi-structured interviews were performed, transcribed in Adobe Premiere Pro, coded according to the coding scheme in appendix 1 and included in the results section, to provide context for the Dutch policies in practice. In terms of the scientific value, it is noted that VluchtelingenWerk Nederland is an advocate for refugees and might be biased in the discussion. The other interviewees also indicated that personal and political opinion play a role in the discussions on this topic, but they were asked to try and be objective and representative for the whole organisation they work with. The combination of the cross-border desk study and qualitative part of this research is shown in the explanatory model in Figure 6. The policies in theory and practice are analysed based on the concepts in Figure 5, and cross-country learning and stakeholder involvement are visualised as mediators in the labour market performance of refugees.

Figure 6: Conceptual model for empirical research

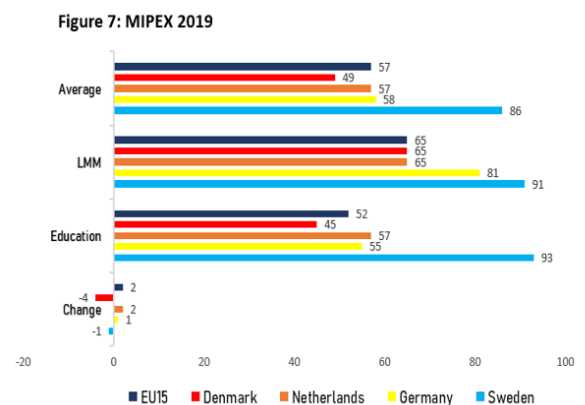


4. Results

4a. Policy comparison

This chapter will elaborate on a cross-country comparison, following the concepts as described in the literature review. Both at the national and the EU levels, policymakers struggled to deal with the large inflow of asylum seekers and refugees in terms of allocation, housing and providing basic needs. Although the initial crisis seems to be over, issues of a different character remain. While some of the Greek Islands are still struggling with the housing and provision of basic needs, other countries started to develop a longer-term integration strategy. Kaabel (2018) states that these integration policies are based on the aggregated position of governments towards economic, political, cultural and security concerns.

To get an overall view, the Migrant Integration Policy Index (MIPEX) summarises eight areas that form the integration policies across 56 countries. This tool is developed by a combination of international research institutes to show a multi-dimensional picture of the opportunity of migrants to participate in society. It is used by international policymakers and researchers to understand and compare integration policies (Solano & Huddleston, 2020a). The areas considering 'Labour Market Mobility' and 'Education' are especially relevant for this research. Conclusions in the index are based on laws, policy documents and research. A value between 0 and 100 is given to the national policy approach in certain areas, where 100 means completely equal treatment between migrants and natives (Solano & Huddleston, 2020a). Figure 7 shows how the EU15, and the individual EU Members perform on the index. Furthermore, the bottom row shows the changes in policy approach between 2014 and 2019.



Note. The data is from *Migrant integration Policy Index 2020*, by G. Solano & T. Huddleston, 2020, (<https://www.mipex.eu/>). Copyright 2020 by MIPEX.

The approach of Sweden (Solano & Huddleston, 2020e) in 2019 is characterized as 'highly favourable' towards newcomers, especially in the labour market and considering the long-term investments in education and skills. Germany (Solano & Huddleston, 2020c) and the Netherlands (Solano & Huddleston, 2020d) adopted an approach characterised as 'temporary integration'. This approach is focused on the short-term and still contains obstacles to integration in every aspect of society. Denmark (Solano & Huddleston, 2020b) has hardly any policies that invest in the long-term integration of newcomers, with their approach being characterised as 'equality on paper'.

Since 2019, a lot has happened, and policies have changed. The first part of the results will elaborate on the policy approach of the aforementioned EU Member States. The context and legislation relevant to labour market integration and utilisation of human capital are outlined, after which the factors '*mapping of qualifications & skills*', '*bridging*' and '*employers' investment*' are discussed more specifically. This is followed by a comparison of the labour market position of refugees in the four countries. The last section of the results elaborates on the perspective of the stakeholders that were interviewed about the Dutch policy making, the outcome on the labour market, and the possibilities for international cooperation.

4a.i The Dutch approach

Integration in the Dutch labour market should start as quickly as possible for these people, who overcame many obstacles, are often eager to get started, and have relevant work experience. In these times, the Netherlands can use all its manpower.

(Baarsma et al., 2023, p.50)

From 2014 onwards, issues surrounding asylum immigration and integration have risen to the top of the Dutch political agenda (Kuppens et al., 2020). In the past, The Dutch approach has shifted a couple of times. From rather open and supportive towards multiculturalism, to more restrictive at the end of the 20th century due to growing anti-immigrant sentiments (Rast & Ghorashi, 2018). Figure 8 shows the refugees that were granted asylum, compared to the first asylum applications. Note that the permit is not necessarily granted in the same year as the application is filed.

The Dutch immigration approach is currently characterised as highly institutionalised and restrictive. A report from Denkwerk (Baarsma et al., 2023) even talks about methods that are purposefully applied to scare refugees off. Due to a long period of financial cuts, the COA could not manage the large inflow, resulting in longer waiting periods. The Denkwerk report states that the backlog is caused by intentional under-provision of resources by the government. Talking specifically about the utilisation of human capital in the labour market, the Dutch Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment (SZW) recognizes that people with a migration background have a structural disadvantage. This results in lower participation, lower wages, and more dependency on welfare benefits (Ministerie van SZW, 2021).

Laws and regulations

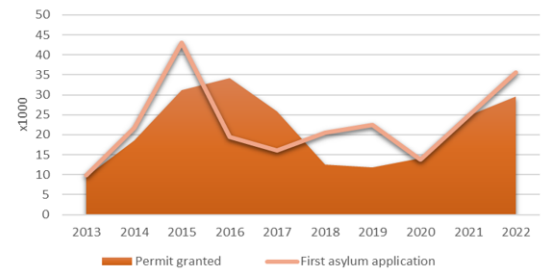
In 2022 an important change in policies was made with the new Integration Law 2021 (Wi2021), which replaced the former Wi2013. It should be noted that people who received a status before 2022 fall under the old Wi2013. The new law recognises the shortcomings of the former and aims to integrate status holders as soon as possible through participation (Razenberg et al., 2022). The five core points of the new system are (Cornielje & Kruisbrink, 2021):

1. Starting earlier with the integration process
2. Shortening the integration process
3. Combine learning the language with labour market participation.
4. Customization of the integration trajectory
5. Focus on quality over quantity.

In this process, the municipalities have been assigned a key role, instead of the prominent role that status holders had under the Wi2013. The municipalities receive guidelines and financial means from the national government but have to organise the process themselves.

For having employment, a difference is made between asylum seekers and status holders. The asylum procedure can take up to 15 months due to understaffing at the IND. If successful, a residence permit of 5 years is granted, which can be made permanent after 5 years (Rast et al., 2020). After receiving a residence permit, refugees have the same rights and duties as Dutch citizens, though they need to follow the integration programme in the first few years. Without a residence permit, asylum seekers are allowed to work for a maximum of 24 weeks a year, starting 6 months after the procedure has started. The employer furthermore needs to acquire a work permit. If asylum seekers have paid work,

Figure 8: Asylum statistics for the Netherlands



Note. The data is from *Hoeveel asielzoekers komen naar Nederland?*, by CBS, 2023, (<https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/dossier/dossier-asiel-migratie-en-integratie/hoeveel-asielzoekers-komen-naar-nederland>). Copyright 2023 by CBS.

they must report this to the COA, after which they must contribute to their procedure. This is called the REBA scheme (COA, nd).

Most status holders are on welfare benefits and fall under the 'Participatiewet', which means that they have to make efforts to find a job. The municipalities are responsible for offering jobs and supporting status holders. Some municipalities provide arrangements to incentivise employers to hire status holders. Examples of these are temporary wage subsidies and expense reimbursement for the additional costs companies make (Yetsenga, 2022).

Letter to Parliament Van Gennip, Minister of Social Affairs and Employment

In the Letter to Parliament on 11-07-2023, Van Gennip presented the outline of her plans to get more status holders into employment. This is because finding a sustainable job that fits one's competencies leads to quicker integration into all fields of society (Van Gennip, 2023). In this letter, she indicates that several policy intensifications will be implemented. Integration should start from the asylum centres; this will be fostered by offering language classes and opening 'meedoenbalies' (participation desks). At these desks, a wide range of (voluntary) work and other activities are offered. The initiative called 'startbanen' will make sure that status holders are offered paid jobs when assigned to a municipality, this will foster participation and learning the language on the work floor. So-called 'regional connectors' are deployed to share knowledge, spread good examples, and explore opportunities for scaling up integration activities. Extra regulations and helpdesks are established to support employers with information and financial means. Subsidies from Europe through the European Asylum, Migration, and Integration Fund (AMIF) are used in several, mostly local, projects.

1. Mapping of qualifications and skills.

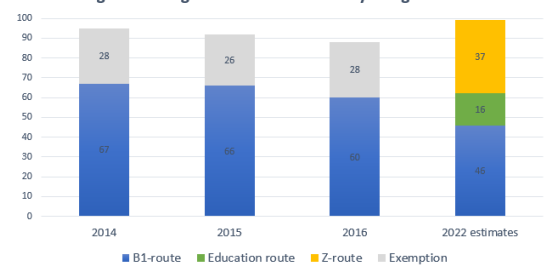
An important development in the new system since 2022 is visible in the integration routes. This used to be a 'one-size-fits-all' track, which was doable for only $\frac{2}{3}$ of the refugee population, as visible in Figure 9. The other share could not get to the right level or was exempted from the obligation for different reasons. The new Wi2021 offers three routes, summarised as follows (Cornielje & Kruisbrink, 2021):

1. B1-route: Achieving language level B1, or in special cases A2, in combination with (voluntary) work.
2. Education route: Aims at achieving a valid Dutch qualification after getting language level B1. This route targets people who learn easily and are aged below 30.
3. Z-route: For people who cannot handle the first two routes, this route helps them to be self-sufficient in society.

The new system seems to put more effort into looking at the potential of the newcomers, both on the lower and the higher end in terms of human capital. However, inequalities and issues are present with this improved system running next to Wi2013 (Razenberg et al., 2022). Under the new law, the COA and the municipalities are responsible for mapping the qualifications and skills. At the COA the skills mapping starts with conversations about hard and soft competencies, which are put in a personal file and are transferred to the receiving municipality (14). Razenberg et al. (2022) show that many municipalities offer personal conversations and connect stakeholders in the process. Although there are major differences between municipalities.

The government also started some pilot programmes in 2021, to support integration on the labour market. One program focuses on shortages in the Dutch labour market and tries to connect status

Figure 9: integration routes divided by refugee cohort



Note: Adapted from *Schatting percentage statushouders per leerroute*, by I. Razenberg; M. De Gruijter; T. Nijs & M. Sikkema, 2022, (<https://www.kis.nl/publicatie/monitor-gemeentelijk-beleid-arbeidstoeliding-en-inburgering-statushouders-en-gezinsmigranten-2022>). Copyright Verwey-Jonker Instituut, Utrecht 2022.

holders with a specific set of skills for these jobs. The pilots are implemented on a small scale, with possibilities to upscale when successful. The evaluation of the pilots shows a high return on investment (Walz et al., 2021). It is noted that the initial investment is quite high and long-term, so it requires a permanent supporting and facilitating role from the national government.

2. Bridging

After finishing one of the integration routes, which has to be accomplished within three years, the integration process continues with a training course on labour market and participation (MAP). This course elaborates on the relevance of valid qualifications. For almost all status holders this requires bridging education. In this process, there is attention to the hidden human capital, but the emphasis is on achieving a Dutch qualification (Cornielje & Kruisbrink, 2021). This is also elaborated on in the report by De Jong et al. (2018) who conclude that despite the potential of status holders, they lack formal qualifications and need a personal approach and bridging courses to match the host labour market. The Dutch Organisation for Internationalisation in Education (NUFFIC) deals with the validation of foreign qualifications. They work together with representatives from similar organisations from the EU, France, Germany, Denmark, Lithuania, Ireland, Italy, and Latvia on the European project 'STREAM: streamlining Institutional Recognition'. This project deals with the recognition of foreign qualifications and is funded by the European Committee (OECD, 2017). The validation process is free for refugees but can only be followed if the integration programme is passed. The uncertainty about the outcome of the procedure and the costs of the bridging courses afterwards can present a barrier to participate (OECD, 2017).

3. Employers' investment

In the Netherlands, municipalities are responsible for supporting status holders in finding a job and getting into contact with possible employers. Hiring status holders is not obligated by law, however, municipalities stimulate employers to hire status holders, e.g. by information markets (De Jong et al., 2018). This can be classified as normative pressure. Furthermore, societal trends, like the call for a diversified work floor, are adding to this pressure (Meer & Dulk, 2019). De Jong et al. (2018) show that an increasing number of employers are willing to hire status holders, but they require extra support from municipalities in the long-term. Research from Meer & Dulk (2019) adds that the decentralisation of integration policies to the local level makes it more difficult for employers to navigate the system. Organisations have to deal with a variety of municipal policymaking, which makes the investment time-intensive and difficult. Meer & Dulk (2019) state that the presence of job coaches, an extended probation period and financial compensation for hiring status holders, policies which are present in some municipalities, have a positive effect on the willingness to invest in the human capital of status holders.

4a.ii The German approach

“The aim of our policy of integration is to ensure that everyone who lives legally in Germany is able to exercise their numerous freedoms and make the best use of their skills and abilities.”

Horst Seehofer, Federal Minister of the Interior, Building and Community (BAMF, 2021)

Continuing with Germany, as the main country of destination

for asylum seekers in the EU. When Angela Merkel became chancellor in 2005, policies were shifted to make Germany a welcoming country for refugees. This was mainly done to counter demographic issues like the rapidly ageing labour force. Germany's attitude during the refugee crisis was characterised by the statement ‘Wir schaffen das!’ by Angela Merkel, where she called for more solidarity and a fair distribution of refugees among EU members (Kaabel, 2018). Figure 10 visualises this approach by showing a major increase in the number of people being granted asylum between 2015 and 2017. However, this attitude shifted in 2016 after reports of many sexual assaults throughout the country, where male immigrants were assumed to be the culprit. Policies were tightened by for example excluding certain groups, like males from North Africa, from the welcoming integration agenda (Mushaben, 2017). The dominant idea at the time was that humanitarian assistance had to be provided temporarily. The lack of labour market integration resulted in long-term dependency on the welfare system. More recently, however, Germany has taken a more utilitarian approach. In a governmental brochure titled ‘Welcome to Germany’, refugees are motivated to participate actively in the working and cultural life in Germany. Information about the integration procedure, rules & regulations, and tips on how to find a job are offered in the document. In this process, mutual responsibility is emphasised. The aim is to utilise the skills and abilities of everyone in the country, according to the Federal Minister of Interior, Building and Community at the time; Horst Seehofer (BAMF, 2021).

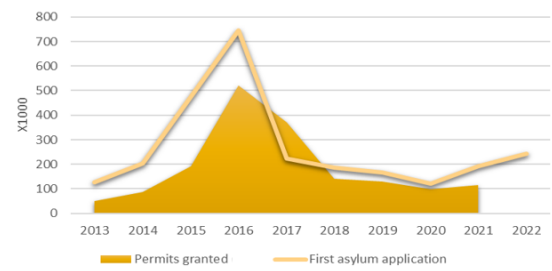
Laws and regulations

In 2016 a new Integration Law had been accepted which portrays refugees as a potential benefit, rather than a burden for Germany's labour market (Kaabel, 2018). The objectives of the law were to speed up integration by offering more integration classes and improving employment and training opportunities (Gesley, 2016). Asylum seekers with high prospects of obtaining refugee status, mainly people from Syria, Eritrea, Iran, Iraq, and Somalia, could from now on participate in the integration courses as early as possible and are granted earlier access to the labour market. For the decision about a residence permit, the government aims to decide within 6 months under normal circumstances (Bevelander, 2016). Permanent settlement permits can be granted within three years to refugees who made visible efforts to integrate into Germany. On the other hand, benefits can be reduced if someone is not willing to integrate. When after five years someone has passed the integration classes, got a sufficient language level, and can mostly support him- or herself, a permanent residence permit will be granted. The permit is made permanent to ensure that well-integrated people can fully benefit from the opportunities in Germany and no longer have to deal with insecurities about their status (Bevelander, 2016).

1. Mapping of qualifications and skills

Early research by the German government brought attention to the heterogeneity of the newcomers and efforts were made to diversify the integration routes for specific target groups (Kaabel, 2018).

Figure 10: Asylum statistics for Germany



Note. The data is from *Applications and granting of protection status at first instance*, by Asylum Information Database, 2023, (<https://asylumineurope.org/reports/country/germany/statistics/>). Copyright 2023 by AIDA.

There are currently integration courses specifically for young adults, illiterate refugees, students, and parents with school-going children (Die Bundesregierung, 2021). However, the evaluation report by Karliczek (2019) stresses the complexity that the large inflow and the heterogeneity bring along.

Like the Netherlands, Germany puts great emphasis on the quality of their education, which is why it initially adopted a strict system for the recognition of foreign qualifications. This is normally done according to the Recognition Act, where foreign qualifications are transferred to German standards (BMBF, 2017). Governmental research showed in 2016 that being given good prospects to stay in Germany, increases the motivation to apply for recognition and invest in integration on the host labour market, something which is included in the new Integration Law of 2016 (Karliczek, 2019). Improving the recognition procedure was needed to fill the vacancies and to utilise the potential within the country. In this process, the German government makes a distinction between regulated and non-regulated professions. Whereas formal recognition is essential for regulated jobs in the healthcare, education, and social sectors, it is advised but not required for non-regulated professions. Everyone has the right to apply for a recognition procedure in Germany, irrespective of the country of origin or the current country of residence. It is even advised to start the procedure when still living abroad (Karliczek, 2019).

The European Social Fund + funds for several major projects in Germany that deal with integration and social inclusion (Die Bundesregierung, 2021). The leading programme that focuses on utilising the human capital of refugees on the national level is called 'Integration through Qualification (IQ)'. The programme finances local and regional recognition procedures, upskilling programmes and bridging courses. Successful practices are made public for other regions to implement (Karliczek, 2019). Under the IQ programme, about 400 local projects that deal with the mapping and utilising of both formal and informal qualifications are funded. Furthermore, it has locations that advise immigrants and stakeholders, and it tries to limit structural boundaries to match refugees to jobs on their level. Special attention is put on the recognition of occupations with a significant shortage in the German labour market, like in the IT or healthcare sector (Karliczek, 2019).

2. Bridging

Under the recognition law, in 2018 almost half of the applications were fully recognised and only about 2% were fully rejected. The remaining cases were partially recognised and compensation measures or bridging courses were required, because of limited transferability or skill gaps (Bakker et al., 2017; Kaabel, 2018). Therefore, there is a considerable need for bridging courses. These courses fit the ESF+ objectives and are mainly funded by the IQ funding programme. The Federal Minister of Education and Research emphasises the shared responsibility of the national & local governments and the businesses in this process (Karliczek, 2019). Under the IQ program, there were around 210 training projects, with over 16,000 participants nationwide. Because of the increased demand, the government wants to expand this offer significantly. However, the same issue arises when designing suitable bridging trajectories; the foreign-acquired human capital is highly diverse and country-specific. That is why the government motivates organisations to provide company-based training and education. Employers can then better analyse the quality of the participants and provide education that matches their demand. It will furthermore take pressure off the governmental institutes that currently deal with it (Karliczek, 2019).

3. Employers' investment

As identified by Degler et al. (2017) and Meer & Dulk (2019), a barrier for employers to hire refugees is the uncertainty about the prospects of their status. The German government counters this by

offering a residence permit of at least five years to refugees who are permanently employed. This also creates the incentive for refugees to finish their vocational training and keep their jobs. The need for long-term support is also pointed out as an incentive to hire refugees. This barrier is limited by the counselling centres that emerged as part of the IQ programme. Furthermore, familiarity with the possibilities under the Recognition Act increases the likelihood of employing someone with foreign-acquired qualifications. For that reason, the German government started the ‘Anerkannt’ projects, to provide employers and other stakeholders with information about these possibilities. For example, intercultural training programmes for management are organised and information on how to deal with the laws and regulations is provided (Karliczek, 2019). The underlying message of this programme is a call for diversity, which is a clear form of normative pressure (Meer & Dulk, 2019).

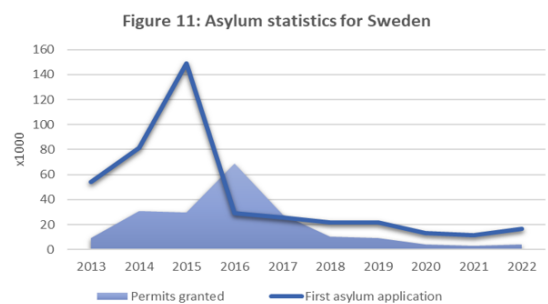
Another ESF+ programme that is especially relevant to this topic is the ‘WE’ programme, which focuses on creating networks to foster the integration of refugees into the labour market (Die Bundesregierung, 2021). To restore the employability of refugees and connect them to the labour market, support is given to employers and stakeholders. This entails skill-building activities, information meetings, job placements and training. Cooperation between stakeholders in the region, like employment agencies, businesses, refugee aid organisations, educational institutes and local institutes is promoted and the WE project team acts as contact persons during the entire process. Support does not stop when a refugee finds employment but will be available in the long-term, an important condition according to research by Meer & Dulk (2019). This programme is an example of influencing by imitation and normative pressure.

4a.iii The Swedish approach

“(25.11.2018) Prime Minister Stefan Löfven says that the decision has been heavy and painful to make, but that it has been necessary. – We have to act to safeguard that people trust the society and the welfare to work, he says”.

(Hagelund, 2020, p.9)

The Swedish approach to immigration and cultural diversity has for a long time been described as liberal, inclusive, and welcoming (Jakobsen & Tranæs, 2019; Hagelund, 2020). This was illustrated by granting refugees permanent residence and equal rights in most cases before the crisis. This attitude made Sweden a very attractive destination to apply for asylum, as visualised in Figure 11. In 2015 Sweden realised that the immigration and integration measures were insufficient, and the situation had become unmanageable, especially with a welfare system which only functions when employment rates are high (Jakobsen & Tranæs, 2019). For that reason, Sweden had to restrict the entry of new arrivals after 2015. Extra funds for housing and integration programmes were made available, while on the other hand, the border controls were tightened, and self-sufficiency requirements in order to get permanent residence were implemented. At a press conference in November 2015, the deputy of the prime minister, Åsa Romson, called it “a horrible decision which the government feels forced to make” (Hagelund, 2020). In 2018 the, initially temporary, measures were extended because the government stated that other European countries still needed to take more responsibility (Jakobsen & Tranæs, 2019). Hagelund (2020) describes the policy changes in Sweden as a race to the bottom, with



Note. The data is from *Applications and granting of protection status at first instance*, by Asylum Information Database, 2023, (Statistics - Asylum Information Database | European Council on Refugees and Exiles (asylumineurope.org)). Copyright 2023 by AIDA.

the government stating that it will do the minimum, which is required following EU laws, to get the situation under control and create a sustainable system.

Laws and regulations

In 2016 the Swedish government made, initially temporary, changes to the 2005 Aliens Act, however in 2021, permanent amendments were accepted (OECD, 2022). Under the new law, acknowledged refugees receive a temporary residence permit for three years, instead of permanent residence. The asylum decision should be taken within 6 months under normal circumstances. Permanent residence has been conditioned on financial independence and can only be granted after the 3-year permit. Family migration is only permitted when the relatives in Sweden can house and support the newcomers financially (EC, 2020; OECD, 2022). According to the 2016 OECD report, this new approach of conditioning the residence permit on self-sufficiency can lead to refugees adopting a survival strategy and taking jobs they have quicker access to but are overqualified for.

The main tool in the integration process in Sweden is the Establishment/Introduction Programme. The goal of this mandatory programme is that immigrants aged 20-65, with a residence permit, learn the Swedish language, find a job, and become self-sufficient as quickly as possible (EC, n.d.). With the help of an employment officer, a refugee can determine the contents of the trajectory. The programme offers a variety of courses to develop skills in many areas, traineeships in particular sectors, and support is provided for finding a job (SPES, n.d.). All tracks are designed following three steps: mapping, validation, and complementary training (Cuadrado et al., 2017). There are no language requirements for participation because language classes run parallel to the other courses (EC, n.d.).

Sweden also gets funding from the European Union through the European Asylum, Migration, and Integration Fund (AMIF). The 2021-2027 national programme aims, among other things, to enhance the efficiency and flexibility of the integration process. Furthermore, attention is paid to creating a sustainable and humane return process and limiting the incentives for refugees to come to Sweden without a legal basis (EC, 2022; SPES, n.d.). Jakobsen & Tranæs (2019), show that there is collaboration between the Scandinavian countries through the Nordic Welfare Centre, a place where the countries share ideas and knowledge about integration, despite their diverse policy approaches.

1. Mapping of qualifications and skills.

The Swedish Public Employment Agency is responsible for the mapping of the competencies for all refugees. This is done with an interview within the first month after a residence permit is obtained. The validation procedure is incorporated in the Introduction Programme (Jakobsen & Tranæs, 2019). However, Cuadrado et al. (2017) point out that the quality of this interview and the mapping of qualifications is highly diverse. The Swedish government is trying to speed up the validation process by starting the process before status is permitted. The importance of recognition is pointed out by the research of Cuadrado et al. (2017) by showing improved employment prospects and a better match to the Swedish labour market. The recognition procedure in Sweden can be followed for three purposes. The first one is to gain access to an education programme, the second one is to transfer qualifications for unregulated occupations and the third one is to get legal certificates to be able to apply for regulated occupations (OECD, 2016). Depending on the purpose, different organisations are responsible for the process (Jakobsen & Tranæs, 2019). Reasons for the long-term employment gap in Sweden are the high educational requirements for many occupations, resulting in a skill gap. Linked to that is discrimination against non-Swedish qualifications. Sweden furthermore has a very low percentage of jobs requiring minimum skills, which makes it difficult for refugees with both low and unrecognised competencies to gain work experience (Cuadrado et al., 2017).

2. Bridging

Fast tracks within the Establishment Programme were added in 2016 after negotiations between the government, trade unions and employer organisations. Participants learn the language more quickly and follow a full-time internship to speed up their labour market integration (EC, n.d.). Extra attention is put on fast-track programmes for sectors experiencing shortages (OECD, 2016; EC, 2017). These programs target refugees who have been granted a residency permit and have work experience and/or education in sectors with shortages (EC, 2020). The first programmes were initiated by the healthcare, education, and restaurant sectors (Westphal & Gustafsson, 2016). In 2021 programmes were running in 14 different sectors (Economou, 2021). The exact contents and requirements for the programmes are sector-specific and are determined by branch organisation.

3. Employers' investment

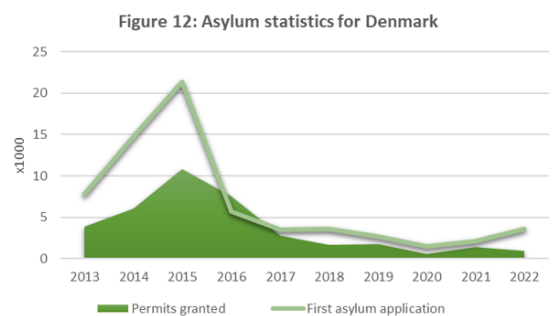
Contrary to the Netherlands and Germany, Sweden tries to connect the residential allocation of refugees to the regional labour market demand, to foster participation. Furthermore, there has been a continuous collaboration between the government, stakeholders, and employers about the contents of the fast-track programmes (Cuadrado et al, 2017). This takes away part of the uncertainty that is involved when someone has foreign qualifications, though Jakobsen & Tranæs (2019) state that Swedish employers would also like more certainty about the legal status of potential employees. These programmes however help to create awareness within industries about the possibilities, something which deserves more attention in Sweden according to Bevelander (2016). Following the Institutional theory by Meer & Dulk (2019) these measures are both 'influencing by imitation' and 'normative pressure'.

4a.iv The Danish approach

"(21.4.2015) Europe's politicians are co-responsible for what is going on because they maintain the perspective that refugees from poverty can succeed in reaching the promised continent. They have not been able to tighten immigration legislation in a manner where it would be clear even to the last human smuggler that you cannot get residence in Europe purely for economic reasons."

(Hagelund, 2020, p.10)

Denmark is often described as the strictest within the EU when it comes to asylum and migration (Creton, 2018). When the crisis started, Denmark mainly wanted to discourage people from coming to Europe in the first place. In politics and the media, people were concerned with the consequences on the economy, security, and social cohesion of Denmark (Hagelund, 2020). The concept of 'welfare tourism', meaning that refugees take advantage of the welfare system, was mentioned frequently (Bredgaard & Thomsen, 2018). Due to its geographical location and the large flow to Sweden, Denmark was both a transit and a destination country. Early in the crisis, restrictive measures were implemented, like lower social benefits, stricter requirements for permanent residency and tightened border controls. This was done to make Denmark less attractive (Hagelund, 2020), but also to force refugees to prove they 'deserve' the services of the welfare state (Bredgaard & Thomsen, 2018). Despite the strict measures and unwelcoming image, there has been a significant increase in the number of refugees, as visible in Figure 12. Though the increase has been relatively low, and many



Note. The data is from *Asylum applications and refugees in Denmark*, by Worlddata.info, 2022, (<https://www.worlddata.info/europe/denmark/asylum.php>). Copyright 2023 by Worlddata.info.

refugees were initially trying to reach Sweden (Hagelund, 2020). During the refugee crisis and until this day, the Danish approach has been rather controversial. Examples are the authorised confiscation of possessions over 1340 euros without sentimental value, to fund housing and integration (Kvist, 2016; Hagelund, 2020) and an island for asylum seekers who have committed a crime (Creton, 2018). A recent report also stated that Denmark is starting to withdraw Syrians' residence permits because they consider it safe enough to return (Creton, 2022).

Laws and regulations

The Danish government recognised the importance of integration in the labour market and made efforts to support the refugees that are already in the country (Hagelund, 2020). Under the Act, there are mandatory integration programmes for refugees, consisting of skill-development courses, traineeships, counselling, and the possibility for subsidised employment. The goal of these policies is that at least 50% of the refugees are employed within three years after arrival (Jakobsen & Tranæs, 2019). In 2016, key stakeholders, such as employers, unions and local authorities were included in the process through tripartite agreements, resulting in more attention to competencies, improving employability and aligning the allocation of refugees to the labour market demand. This was done to ensure the sustainability of the Danish welfare system, fill the shortages in the labour market and avoid long-term unemployment and welfare dependency of the newcomers (Bredgaard & Thomsen, 2018). The 2016 Integration Programme has been shortened from three to one year, refugees are deemed 'job ready' within three months and employers take an active role in the contents of the programme. Furthermore, receiving integration benefits has been conditioned on being employed. Because policymaking is highly decentralised there are significant differences between municipalities (EC, n.d.). Although the integration law is still in force, in 2019 a law was accepted called the Paradigm Shift, which changed the focus from integration towards self-support & return as soon as possible. The Danish Immigration Service aims to decide on asylum cases within 8 months. During these months, asylum seekers are allowed to work, though if they do their right to benefits is revoked. After the decision, initial residence permits are valid for 1 year, after which an extension has to be evaluated every 2 years based on strict criteria. UNHCR responded to the changes by expressing its concerns and warning Denmark about the negative effect it will have on future integration (EC, 2021).

Because of the opt-outs on several EU policies, Danish legislation differs from other EU Members. Relevant to the refugee discussion is the opt-out from EU Justice and Home Affairs. To qualify as a 'refugee' each individual has to prove he or she is personally in danger. War in a country and sexual orientation do not necessarily qualify as good reasons to be granted asylum. Regulations for family reunification also vary significantly from EU regulations (Glorius & Doomernik, 2020). Because of the opt-out, Denmark cannot apply for the Asylum, Migration, and Integration Fund (AMIF). Though local authorities can apply for the European Social Fund (EC, n.d.).

1. Mapping of qualifications and skills.

The mapping process is carried out through interviews in the asylum centres. At these locations, so-called 'transfer schemes' are made which contain the qualifications, competencies, and work experience, but also norms & values and other personal characteristics. These schemes are transferred to the receiving municipality (Cuadrado et al., 2017). Caseworkers advise about comparable Danish qualifications and match refugees to jobs. Because the quality of the information must be guaranteed, actual validation and testing of the competencies happens at the receiving municipality, following the 2014 Assessment of Foreign Qualifications Act. Based on the transfer scheme and the validated competencies, a CV is created which is put on an online job board called 'Jobnet'. This happens quickly

because refugees are classified as 'job-ready' within three months after arrival. This is done to show that Denmark expects them to participate and contribute to their host country (Bredgaard & Thomsen, 2018). After a CV is put on Jobnet, refugees can be contacted by employers to join an IGU programme (Udlændinge- og Integrationsministeriet, 2017). Denmark aims to create an efficient programme to match relevant skills to labour market shortages in certain regions. In 2020 a list of skilled professions experiencing shortages was presented. Immigrants who have been offered a job on that list could apply for a residence permit for up to four years (OECD, 2022). Typical for the Danish context is that the success of the integration process is measured by the time it takes a refugee to become self-sufficient. As identified in the Swedish context, this urgency can easily result in taking on survival jobs (Cuadrado et al., 2017).

2. Bridging

Since 2016, the Danish government has offered a two-year course to improve the job opportunities of refugees aged 18-40 (Ramboll, 2019). The programme was initiated by the tripartite agreements and is comparable to following an internship in vocational education. Based on the CV on Jobnet, refugees are offered a job that matches their competencies. This is done to let refugees gain access to formal vocational training and education, and eventually formal qualifications (Cuadrado et al., 2017). Furthermore, refugees participate in language courses divided into three levels based on educational achievement. During the programme, people are paid the same as in regular apprenticeships and the remaining is covered by the government (Bredgaards & Thomsen, 2018). After finishing the programme, the refugees obtain a training certificate which makes it easier for employers to validate their competencies.

3. Employers' investment

As mentioned, since 2016 employers are expected to be actively involved in the labour market participation of refugees (EC, n.d.; Ramboll, 2019). The government tries to do this both through public campaigns and economic measures. To counter prejudice and provide an incentive for employers, hiring a refugee for six months yields a bonus of 2500 euros, which is doubled after another six months. Furthermore, municipalities that get a lot of the refugees into employment receive bonuses. The alignment of residential allocation to labour market demands is also meant to incentivise employers to consider hiring refugees (Bevelander, 2016). However, this success rate does not focus on the utilisation of competencies and skills, but mainly on self-sufficiency (Ramboll, 2019). Looking at the Institutional theory by Meer & Dulk (2019), Denmark mainly implements normative pressure. However, contrary to other countries, this is achieved by clear financial incentives for employers to invest in refugees, and for refugees to quickly integrate into the labour market.

4a.v Summary table

A summary of the policy context is provided in Table 1. The factors of the refugee entry effect, as described in the theoretical background, are used to summarise the different approaches.

Table 1: Summary of policy approaches

	<u>Netherlands</u>	<u>Germany</u>	<u>Sweden</u>	<u>Denmark</u>
<i>Skills gap</i>	Emphasis on Dutch qualifications.	IQ programme Programmes for sectors with shortages.	Emphasis on Swedish qualifications. High educational requirements. Low number of low-skilled jobs. Fast Tracks for jobs with shortages.	Internships in the IGU programme.
<i>Skills transferability</i>	Diversified integration routes. Pilot on jobs with shortages. Recognition after status.	Diversified integration routes Early recognition Large inflow with high heterogeneity	Establishment Programme Early recognition Pitfall of survival jobs	IGU programme focussed on labour market participation. Transfer schemes Pitfall of survival jobs
<i>Duration decision process</i>	Extended to 15 months due to insufficient capacity.	6 months Benefits for refugees with high prospects to stay	6 months	no max, goal 8 months
<i>First residence permit</i>	5 Years	3 Years	3 Years	1 Year
<i>Employment permit</i>	Before permit: 24 weeks a year, 6 months after application. After residency permit	After 3 months for refugees with high prospects of obtaining a permit.	Immediately (conditioned)	Immediately, but benefits revoked. 'Job ready' within 3 months after permit
<i>Employers' investments</i>	Normative pressure Bureaucracy Fragmentation	Normative pressure Certainty regarding status during employment WE Programme	Normative pressure Allocation based on demand. Cooperation with employers Uncertainty about legal status	Normative pressure Financial incentives Allocation based on demand. Cooperation with employers Matching through Jobnet

To summarize, until 2022 there has been limited focus on the mapping of qualifications, skills, and work experience in the Netherlands. However, with the Integration Law (Wet Inburgering) 2021, there is more attention towards the heterogeneity of refugees. There are some initiatives involving mapping and bridging, but they are local and fragmented, resulting in municipal differences. The employers' investment consists mainly of normative pressure and occasional financial incentives.

Germany has made efforts to change policies to support labour market integration, for example by speeding up the integration process for people with high prospects of staying and by focussing on the validation of qualifications. In policy papers, the mutual benefits are emphasised regularly—however, the large inflow and heterogeneity present issues related to capacity and resources.

Due to the large inflow of refugees during the crisis, Sweden had to renounce their welcoming attitude to maintain a sustainable, long-term integration system. The permanent amendments to the Aliens Act resulted in resident permits conditioned on self-sufficiency and the risk of overqualification. Due to labour market shortages, fast tracks are developed to utilise the potential of the new arrivals. However, issues considering skills transferability and skills gaps in the demanding Swedish labour market, and uncertainty regarding legal status, remain.

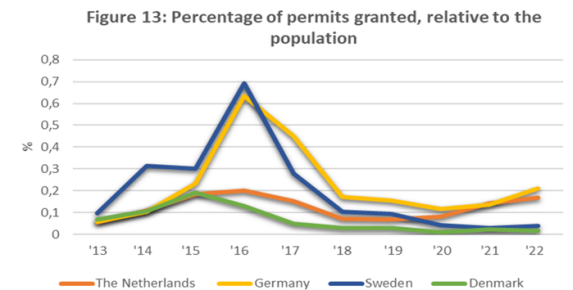
Denmark varies significantly from the other countries in their approach. They focus on self-sufficiency and mostly disregard long-term integration. In their race to the bottom to protect the welfare system and security of the country, controversial policies were adopted. There is however an advanced system in place focused on participation, although with limited focus on utilising human capital. In this process, financial incentives for both refugees and employers are in place.

4b. Labour market position

This section of the results will elaborate on the labour market performance connected to the diverse national policy contexts. This is done by elaborating on a number of figures and statistics that were available for most of the countries. The data seems to be comparable, though differences in definitions and measuring methods cannot be ruled out and therefore should be considered as a possible bias.

Relative admission rate

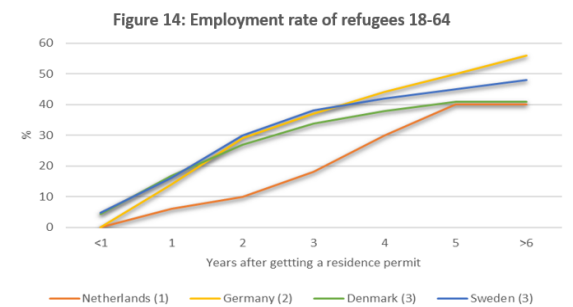
Figure 13 starts by showing the relative number of residence permits granted per country, excluding Ukrainian refugees. In line with Figures 8, 10, 11 & 12 there is an increase visible since the start of the refugee crisis in 2014. However, relative to the population sizes in the corresponding years, the numbers have been significantly higher in Germany and Sweden, as compared to the Netherlands and Denmark. In line with the shift in policy approach, there is a significant decrease visible for Sweden as compared to the other countries.



Note. The data for the Netherlands is from *Hoewel asielzoekers komen naar Nederland?*, by CBS, 2023, (<https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/dossier/dossier-asiel-migratie-en-integratie/hoewel-asielzoekers-komen-naar-nederland>). Copyright 2023 by CBS. The data for Germany is from *Applications and granting of protection status at first instance*, by Asylum Information Database, 2023, (<https://asylumineurope.org/reports/country/germany/statistics/>). Copyright 2023 by AIDA. The data for Sweden is from *Applications and granting of protection status at first instance*, by Asylum Information Database, 2023, (<https://asylumineurope.org/reports/country/sweden/statistics/>). Copyright 2023 by AIDA. The data for Denmark is from *Asylum applications and refugees in Denmark*, by Worlddata.info, 2022, (<https://www.worlddata.info/europe/denmark/asylum.php>). Copyright 2023 by Worlddata.info.

Labour market participation

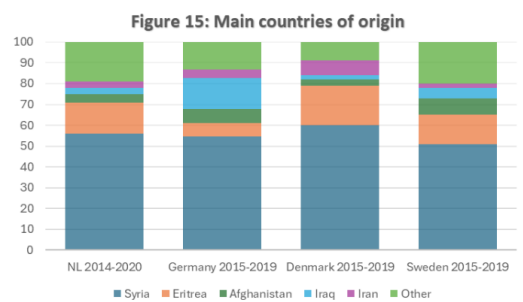
Disregarding the human capital, Figure 14 addresses part of consequences the refugee entry effect by showing the employment rate of working-aged refugees over time in the different countries. For all countries it shows relatively steep increase in the first 5 years, after which the participation stagnates around 50%. Which is lower from the average national labour market participation rate, which was on average over 80% in all four countries in 2023 (Eurostat, 2023). Figure 14 furthermore shows a noticeable, long-lasting backlog of at least 5 years in employment rates between the Netherlands and other countries. While the employment rate in the Netherlands is barely 10%, two years after obtaining a residence permit, the other countries have an employment rate of around 30%. After 5 years the backlog is less significant, but the participation in the Netherlands remains the lowest of all four countries, at 40%.



Note. The data for the Netherlands is adapted from *Statushouders met werk*, by CBS, 2021, (<https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/nieuws/2021/15/arbeidsparticipatie-statushouders-stagneert>). Copyright 2023 by CBS. The data for Germany is adapted from *Erwerbstätigenquoten nach Geschlecht und Aufenthaltsdauer*, by H. Brücker, P. Jaschke, Y. Kosyakova & E. Vallizadeh, 2023, DOI: 10.6027/Nord2019-024. Copyright 2023 by IAB. The data for Sweden & Denmark is adapted from *Employment and education enrolment*, by V. Hernes, I. Bolvig & L. Liljeberg, 2022, ("SCANDINAVIAN INTEGRATION POLICIES FOR REFUGEES" (norden.org).) Copyright Nordic Council of Ministers 2022.

Motivation and self-selection

As mentioned in the refugee entry effect, migration motive is in theory an important factor. This factor is already partially overcome by the conditions set for obtaining refugee status. A permit is granted if there is reason to fear becoming a victim of armed conflict, persecution, execution, or torture, because of race, religion, social group, nationality, or political opinion (IND, 2023). However, many different, individual factors also affect motivation. Even if it would be possible to measure these factors, there is a lack of representative data. Figure 15 tries to address part of the 'motivation' factor, by showing the main countries of origin. Despite the variety of individual factors, general reasons for migrating can differ between countries, e.g. natural disasters,



Note. The data for the Netherlands is from *Verleende verblijfsvergunningen asiel, nationaliteit*, by CBS, 2023, (<https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/dossier/dossier-asiel-migratie-en-integratie/hoewel-asielzoekers-komen-naar-nederland>). Copyright 2023 by CBS. The data for Germany is from *Applications and granting of protection status at first instance*, by Asylum Information Database, 2023, (<https://asylumineurope.org/reports/country/germany/statistics/>). Copyright 2023 by AIDA. The data for Sweden & Denmark is adapted from *Participants in Scandinavian Integration programmes*, V. Hernes, I. Bolvig & L. Liljeberg, 2022, ("SCANDINAVIAN INTEGRATION POLICIES FOR REFUGEES" (norden.org).) Copyright Nordic Council of Ministers 2022.

war, a lack of economic opportunities or a combination of more factors. Major differences among the refugee populations between countries with respect to this migration motive might lead to differences in outcome which can bias the cross-country comparison. Considering factors like ‘country of origin’ and self-selection of people with specific characteristics into certain countries or regions is therefore essential to limit the bias in the results. Figure 15 shows that in all countries the share of Syrians is over 50% and that there are smaller, but significant, populations from Eritrea, Iran, Iraq, and Afghanistan. Despite the fact that the distribution of the countries of origin shows similarities, it does not rule out self-selection based on factors like educational achievement or other characteristics. Although previous research does not seem to indicate this, there is no data to prove otherwise, therefore it should be considered in the conclusions.

Mapping and bridging

This section addresses the skills transferability and skills gap. Figure 16 shows the foreign-acquired education level as acknowledged by three host countries. For Germany, no comparable data was found. However, German data shows a significant increase of applications for recognition, from 804 in 2013, to 4000 in both 2017 & 2018 (Karliczek, 2019). Around 35% of these applications resulted in full equivalence, 60% needed bridging (regulated jobs) or were partially recognised (non-regulated jobs), and not even 5% were fully rejected. Despite the fact that no statements can be made due to the relatively small numbers, it shows potential for uncovering hidden human capital.

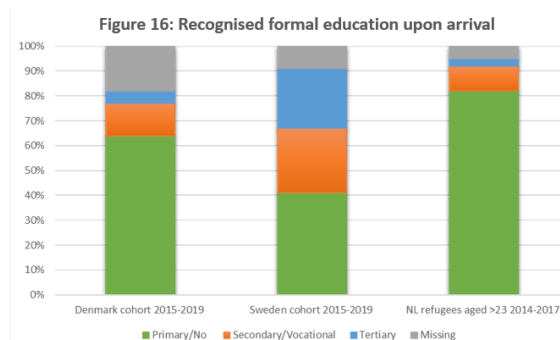
For Denmark and Sweden, integration activities are visualised in Table 2 (Jakobsen & Tranæs, 2019). As mentioned, most refugees under the Danish system participate in unpaid job training as soon as possible, with limited attention to the hidden human capital. In Sweden on the other hand, the fast-track programmes make it possible to develop the human capital in jobs where shortages are present. This focus on bridging seems to result in a significant percentage of refugees participating in educational activities on a high level.

4c. Stakeholders’ perspective

The last part of the result will elaborate in the Dutch policy approach and the labour market position of refugees in the Netherlands. During the conversations with the stakeholders, questions were furthermore asked about international collaboration and cross-country learning.

General policy approach

In the debates and conversations about asylum seekers and refugees, several interviewees mentioned the influence of media and politics (I1; I2; I4). The fear of attracting more refugees to the Netherlands when favourable asylum and integration policies are in place, ‘aanzuigende werking’ in Dutch, is strongly questioned by the interviewees. In line with Figure 13, all interviewees denied the suggestions,



Note. The data for the Netherlands is adapted from *Asiel en integratie 2021; onderwijs*, by CBS, 2021, (Statushouders huisvesting en integratie - Asiel en integratie 2021 | CBS), Copyright 2021 by CBS. The data for Sweden & Denmark is adapted from *Participants in Scandinavian integration programmes*, by V. Hernes, I. Bolvig & L. Liljeberg, 2022, ("SCANDINAVIAN INTEGRATION POLICIES FOR REFUGEES" (norden.org).) Copyright Nordic Council of Ministers 2022.

Table 2 Percentage of refugees participating in integration activities within 3 years after settlement

	Denmark cohort 2011-2014	Denmark cohort 2015-2017	Sweden cohort 2011-2014	Sweden cohort 2015-2017
Education low level	20	23	3	9
Education high level	2	2	29	35
Subsidised employment	12	22	28	35
Unpaid job-training	58	75	5	4

Note: The numbers can exceed 100% because refugees can participate in more activities
 Note. Adapted from *Participation in different activities within the introduction programme in Denmark, Norway and Sweden, 2008-16 (Denmark and Norway) and 2011-16 (Sweden)*, percent. V. Jakobsen & T. Tranæs, 2019, (DOI: 10.6027/Nord2019-024). Copyright 2023 by Nordregio.

that the Netherlands has favourable asylum and integration policies compared to neighbouring countries. Geleijnse (I6) states that the relative admission rate has been way higher in the past and the share of asylum migrants makes up for 'only' 10% of the total migrant inflow but dominates the political debates. Geleijnse (I6) argues that it is mainly the shortage of housing, capacity and structural support that distorts the image of the situation. Korte (I4), employed by the COA, underlines this by pointing to the financial cutbacks at both the COA and the Dutch Agency for Immigration and Naturalisation (IND), resulting in the shortage of reception capacity and a backlog in many stages of the asylum process. Prat Bertrams (I2) states that the steps in the integration process are designed to pass quickly and do not consider the long waiting times that are currently present. 'Making the process unattractive does not make sense, because the people are already there'. Under the Integration Law (Wet Inburgering) 2021, some positive changes have been made in terms of speed, however, with the municipalities being responsible there are major differences in practice. According to all interviewees, the initiatives are fragmented, and structural policies are hardly present. Especially the policies in the phase before obtaining refugee status are inadequate and cause damage that needs to be fixed after people get a permit (I6). Both Geleijnse (I6) and Odé (I5) refer specifically to the Letter to Parliament of Van Gennip (2023) and are expecting positive changes due to e.g. the 'Meedoenbalies' and 'startbanen'.

Migration motive

Talking about migration motive and self-selection, interviewee 1 & 4 mentioned that people arrive in the Netherlands due to things that happen on the other side of the world, and not because they like the policies in the Netherlands. However, according to an employee of the Dutch Council for refugees VWNL (I1), there might be a form of self-selection present when asylum seekers 'choose' a country to apply for asylum. People from French parts of Africa for example might come to France more often. However, a lot of them are not permitted refugee status, because they are said to migrate for economic reasons. The Netherlands receives many people from Syria, Yemen and Turkey, countries with a high compliance rate. Despite having one of the strictest asylum policies in the EU, the acceptance rate in the Netherlands is therefore relatively high. Although obtaining a refugee status explains the reason for fleeing, self-selection based on a variety of characteristics cannot be ignored in the conclusions (I5).

Duration decision process

According to the Dutch policy papers, the goal is to have the asylum decision ready preferably within 6 months, but due to the understaffing at the Dutch Agency for Immigration and Naturalisation (IND), it can be extended up to 15 months. However, the participants indicated that there is a significant number of cases that take even longer (I1; I6). Korte (I4) furthermore points out that before applying for asylum, many refugees have been on the run and in refugee camps for many months, if not years. This period of absence from the labour market and the insecurity when waiting for a decision have its consequences, mentally, but also in terms of skill loss (I1; I2). This is cause for concern because the foundation of successful integration is laid in this period, because from then onwards, people need to be activated, self-reliant and build a social network (I2; I3; I4; I6). Despite the difficulties, Korte (I4) sees more attention to the first stage of the asylum process in Dutch policy making. Furthermore, Odé (I5) states that the Integration law (Wet Inburgering) 2021 can potentially speed up the process.

'It is actually very strange that you are not allowed to do anything for two years and that as soon as you get a permit you suddenly have to do everything and get off your welfare benefits as quickly as possible.' (VWNL, 19-09-2023)

Temporality of the residence permit

Following Dutch regulation, residence permits are valid for five years, after which a permanent permit can be obtained. The participant from VWNL (I1) argues that the temporality in the first years can cause uncertainty. However, together with all participants she questions if it influences people's motivation to invest in the host country and themselves. No one is familiar with this argument to, for example, not learn the language or participate in the labour market. Although Odé (I5) indicates that it might be a consideration for employers in the hiring process. Compared to other countries, Geleijnse (I6) points out that she thinks it is a good thing that refugees only have to apply for a permit once, which can eventually be made permanent.

'I think the five years provide enough opportunity for people to make plans. Also, for the guidance in the integration process, this is enough time to get some things done.' (Korte, 22-09-2023)

Employment rights

Six months after applying for asylum in the Netherlands, refugees can start working 24 weeks a year until they obtain their permit. Looking at EU regulations, the Netherlands is doing quite well when it comes to the six months, however, the limit of 24 weeks is strongly criticized (I1). However, many comments were made that limit participation during the asylum period. This considers both the possibility to work, as well as the supporting infrastructure that enables it (I5). Firstly, asylum centres are often relatively isolated from the labour market and public transport is quite expensive (I1; I2). You have to be lucky to end up in e.g. the city of Groningen (I3). Secondly, before being able to take up employment, you need a citizen's service number, which can take a very long time due to the backlog at the IND (I2). Thirdly, to work you need a work permit, which takes quite some effort to arrange. Most employers do not want to go through the hassle, because they need a return on their investment and the uncertainty is too big. Remminga (I3) furthermore indicates that most asylum centres hardly encourage people to find work, the COA offers voluntary work onsite, but that is by far not enough for all people. Prat Bertrams (I2) sees a positive change because the conversation about activities for asylum seekers has started. The participation desks (meedoen balies) from the COA are an example of this. In this process, Geleijnse (I6) states that, because people do not know the language and culture, we need to accept that the first jobs might be below their level.

Matching the allocation to labour market demands, like in Sweden and Denmark, hardly happens in the Netherlands. Initially, this happened more, but due to understaffing at the COA and a shortage in housing, this has been abandoned (I4). Korte (I4) and Odé (I5) state that the Netherlands is relatively small, and it is easy to travel to most places, for that reason, it is less relevant. More important in this process is the involvement of employers (I3; I4; I5).

"The question: 'What do you want to be?' Implicates that there are a lot of possibilities, while in this phase, there are sometimes not that many things possible." (Geleijnse, 25-09-2023)

Labour market participation

The factors in the refugee entry effect are mentioned by the interviewees as explanatory elements for Figure 17. An important factor for the relatively low rate in all countries is the traditional culture most refugees come from, with the women often staying home (I2; I3). An explanation for the Dutch statistics is the strong focus on language under Wet Inburgering 2013. Furthermore, a significant number of people were exempted from following the integration course. With the new Z-route, these people are forced to participate in the programme and hopefully keep doing so when they see the

possibilities. In the beginning, it is primarily about activation (I3). Another important difference is the role of labour market participation in the integration programme. Korte (I4) explains that the mandatory integration programme in the first 3 years leaves little room for employment and is also not primarily meant to get people into paid labour. Status holders can get welfare benefits with little strings attached, unlike the other countries, which takes away the incentive to work (I5). Looking at Figure 17, Korte (I4) states that a strong focus on self-sufficiency, like Denmark and Sweden have, will probably lead to a steep increase, but stagnation and possibly decrease in the long term. Utilising and developing competencies will result in a slower increase, but eventually a higher and more sustainable outcome. Because current policies in all countries are not in place for a very long time, it is difficult to make conclusions.

“One of the explanations is that people are not allowed to do anything for a long time, and all of a sudden, they are obliged to do a lot of things. However, in the meantime, the distance to the labour market has grown.” (VWNL, 19-09-2023)

Mapping of qualifications and skills

According to all interviewees, the reasons for the differing Dutch statistics in Figure 15 as compared to the other countries, are the high quality of the education in the Netherlands, the unclarity about foreign educational systems, and the overall lack of formal qualifications. All factors that harm the skills transferability. Furthermore, the recognition procedure can only start when someone has a status and has been assigned to a municipality, which has been shown to take a long time (I6). Odé (I5) also states that the process itself involves a lot of bureaucracy and takes significantly longer than in neighbouring countries. If the qualifications are eventually recognised, employers also have to be willing to work with foreign qualifications, something which is often not the case (I1; I3; I5). Remminga (I3) states for example that her caseload of 45 individuals is highly diverse in terms of educational background, with maybe 10 having no education at all. Although many interviewees state that much should be done about this situation, there is no easy solution according to Odé (I5), because the skills gap cannot be ignored, especially in e.g. the healthcare or construction sector.

“A man from Syria said that he did not know what he was good at, so I asked his son, who responded. ‘Sorry madam, but I have no idea who is sitting next to me, I have not seen my father in years, because he was in the army. I now first have to get to know him myself.’ I think we need to offer people more opportunities to discover where they are good at.”
(Remminga, 21-09-2023)

Bridging

Closing the skills gap is an important step after the human capital is mapped and recognised. By investing in this, you can get refugees into sustainable jobs that fit their competencies and fill the numerous vacancies in the Dutch labour market (I1). As previously mentioned by Geleijnse (I6), someone's first job does not necessarily have to be what they ultimately aspires to do, because it is first and foremost about activation after a period of being off the labour market. However, current policies lack a long-term vision and throw away potential, because refugees cannot utilise their competencies (I1). Looking at the fast-track programs in Sweden and the IGU programme in Denmark, all interviewees see the potential for implementing this in the Netherlands. Although there are Dutch initiatives that share similarities, the main problem is that they are local and fragmented, due to decentralisation of the integration process. This causes insufficient support base and a lack of structural financial resources (I2; I5). VluchtelingenWerk Nederland is responding to the demand with

a work-study programme, where bridging courses are offered on a lower language level. However, they run into the demand of employers for formal qualifications and the lack of structural investment of municipalities (I1; I6). Efficient policymaking is only possible if investments in people are made, without expecting immediate returns. This process needs efforts both from the municipality and the employers (I6).

(After someone finishes a fast-track) 'Then it is like employing an MBO student with more life experience' (Prat Bertrams, 20-09-2023)

Employers' investment

In line with previous research, the role of employers is recognised by all interviewees. Odé (I5) and VWNL (I1) welcome the increasing awareness for employing refugees, however, this process currently requires a lot of flexibility from all stakeholders. The mandatory integration programme lacks this flexibility at the moment, and especially employers of SMEs often do not have the required resources (I5). VluchtelingenWerk NL makes efforts to inform employers to increase awareness about the possibilities (I1). However, it is important to keep in mind that refugees do not come here to work, but in the first place to seek protection. Remminga (I3) thinks that involving employers in the integration process, like in Sweden and Denmark, would foster the credibility of the competencies of refugees and their connection to the labour market. She recognises the investments required in terms of time and money, but together with Korte (I4), she is reluctant to provide financial incentives, fearing it would attract wrong intentions. If financial means are provided, they agree that it should be conditioned on obtaining a sustainable job, also after the subsidy is gone. Apart from that, Remminga sees potential in providing more normative incentives, like success stories, information gatherings or trial periods at companies. Prat Bertrams (I2) states that the support base in this issue is very important. Investments for the refugee population should therefore go hand in hand with investments in work and education for other people in the lower end of society.

(Inter)national cooperation.

Finally, all participants were asked about the advice from the EU and the OECD about international learning and cooperation considering integration policies and successful practices. All respondents mentioned that the Netherlands should benefit from investigating successful policies in other countries, like the fast-track programmes in Sweden. Remminga (I3) states that much more should be invested into this, especially looking at the major municipal differences. Currently most countries and municipalities still have to reinvent the wheel or choose to do so (I3). Large organisations, like VluchtelingenWerk NL and the COA, share knowledge (inter)nationally, but the transferability is limited because contexts in terms of e.g. legislation and labour market characteristics are highly diverse (I1). Regarding cooperation within the Netherlands, Odé (I5) expects a positive impact from the regional connectors, who will be deployed by Van Gennip (2023).

Despite the lengthy process of achieving policy changes, Korte (I4) emphasizes learning from others on both national and international levels. Even though changes are made mostly on a micro level, they impact individuals, can cause a butterfly, and sometimes even lead to major changes.

"I always find statements like 'control over migration' very funny, because you just can't get a grip on people, they are always adrift." (Prat Bertrams, 20-09-2023)

5. Conclusion and discussion

Western countries are ageing rapidly, causing increasing numbers of vacancies in many sectors. Countries compete over human capital, while on the other hand having to prevent the social exclusion of vulnerable groups. Since the refugee crisis in 2014, refugees and their position in the labour market gets increasing attention. While status holders bring foreign acquired skills & work experience and have the potential to fill vacancies, they also form a vulnerable group that has a disadvantaged position in the labour market in European countries. In 2016 the EU called for action to utilise the 'given' potential, encouraging cross-country collaboration in this process. Therefore, the main question of this research is '*Can the labour market potential of refugees be utilised more by uncovering their hidden human capital?*' The disadvantaged position results both from the refugee's characteristics and the institutional climate in the host country. The combined set of disadvantages, resulting in a lack of resources, rights and security about the future is called the refugee entry effect. Regarding the Dutch institutional climate, both the statistics and the interviewees state that the situation has been difficult to manage due to laws & regulations, and shortages in reception capacity, supporting staff and structural financial support at the COA, IND and municipalities. This resulted in an extended *duration of asylum and integration process*, which imposes barriers for labour market integration and has a detrimental impact on human capital. The limited *employment possibilities* in the asylum centres, due to regulations, isolated housing locations and a lack of employment possibilities, further increases the distance to the labour market. The five-year *residence permit* on the other hand seems to offer enough certainty to integrate. Considering the refugees' characteristics, *migration motive* plays a big role. Although it is partly captured in the fact that people obtain refugee status, self-selection based on other characteristics is important to consider, though at the same time difficult, if not impossible, to capture.

In recent years, EU Member States started forming a long-term integration strategy with a variety of restrictive and utilising elements. Apart from language proficiency, literature shows three policy tools that influence the labour market performance of refugees: *mapping of qualifications & skills*, *bridging* and *employers' investments*. Considering the mapping process there are major international differences. Germany has a promising recognition programme, though it is currently too small-scale to make statements about. Denmark primarily focuses on getting people out of welfare benefits, and Sweden offers fast-tracks to recognise existing competencies and close the skills gap through bridging courses. All these countries emphasize the possibilities of filling shortages on their labour markets and adapted their integration programmes accordingly. Interviewees in the Netherlands state that the high standards, a focus on obtaining Dutch qualifications, unclarity about foreign education systems and the overall lack of education among newcomers explain the relatively low number of recognised foreign qualifications. Furthermore, the procedure can only start after obtaining a status and can take a couple of years. Current policies regarding bridging are often very fragmented and lack structural investments from municipalities and employers.

Where the poor labour market participation statistics for all countries are explained to a certain extent by the refugee entry effect and cultural differences, the Netherlands shows the lowest results. Interviewees claim that this is mainly the result of the old Integration Law 2013. Under this law, the focus was on language rather than participation, and a significant group of people were exempted from the integration programme. Although promising changes have been made, the current integration programme also leaves little room for employment, and getting into welfare benefits is still relatively easy, which takes away the incentive to work. Apart from that, the programme lacks the

flexibility and structural support that employers need. Involving them in the process, like in Sweden and Denmark, fosters credibility and overall connection to the labour market.

Despite differences in context, scholars and stakeholders agree on the benefits of more international and national collaboration. This research shows that the Netherlands can learn from successful practices & programmes and exchange knowledge with e.g. comparable EU Members. It showed the outcome of different combinations of policies and tools, which can be used to fine-tune the Dutch integration programme. Examples of tools that support the utilisation of (hidden) human capital, and might be transferable to the Dutch context, are the German IQ programme and the Swedish Fast Tracks. Collaboration is currently lacking, resulting in a wide variety within the EU, but also among Dutch municipalities. A first step for smaller organisations and municipalities might be to look at successful practices within the Netherlands and start getting inspired by the practices of other countries. Fortunately, the Letter to Parliament by Van Gennip (11-07-2023) addresses several issues by introducing participation desks, starting jobs and regional connectors. Stakeholders are eagerly awaiting the outcome of these promising developments.

Limitations and future research

As mentioned, the 'group' of refugees consists of individuals who share similarities, but also a lot of different characteristics, motivations, and reasons to apply for asylum somewhere. Although the results give attention to the conditions for obtaining a refugee permit and show similarities when it comes to countries of origin, other characteristics are not considered due to the length of the study, the lack of large-scale data and the unclarity regarding relevance. However, agreeing with interviewee five, self-selection based on certain characteristics, which can impact the results, cannot be ruled out and should be considered. For future research the call from Kaabel (2018) for a more qualitative perspective is advocated. Research on self-selection among asylum seekers in transit countries like Greece and Italy might provide interesting insights on the perspectives and expectations that they have about a country and the reasons they want to apply for asylum in a certain country. Researching a significant population of status holders in a certain country on characteristics like educational background or work experience can show insights about the practical reality that is often not visible in the statistics. This type of research is also relevant when the consequences of certain policy changes are investigated. This research showed the complexity of connecting results to specific policy changes and tools, because every situation depends on many different factors in time and space. To be able to make statements about the impact of certain measures, qualitative research which acknowledges the contextual factors is required. Future research can for example look specifically at how (self-reported) higher educated refugees can utilise their human capital in specific policy-contexts like in Sweden or Germany. Qualitative research can highlight the shortcomings and possibilities for this specific target audience and can provide context to the statistics. In order to for this type of research to have practical implications, it is best to limit it to a specific country or municipal context, depending on the level of government at which decisions are made.

A final direction for future research is looking into the approach of European countries regarding Ukrainian refugees and investigate successful practices for refugees in general. Under the Temporary Protection Directive in the EU, the OECD (2023) reports for example significantly higher labour market participation rates for Denmark and the Netherlands, countries that experience relatively low on participation as visible in Figure 17.

Further research on the utilisation of hidden human capital, and improved international cooperation is required in order to make use of the ‘given’ potential of refugees on the labour market. Not only because EU labour markets, like the one in the Netherlands, will increasingly need it in the future, but also because it will counter social exclusion and foster long-term integration.

‘By definition, you cannot put a human life on pause. Even if you assume they will go back, please let them do something and learn things that they can use in their country of origin.

Developing yourself will help you, whether you stay here or go back.’

(Prat Bertrams, 20-09-2023)

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7. Appendix 1 Coding scheme interviews

